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# Late Shift

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Heldin

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**VERDICT:** You can't look away from nurse Floria as she races around an understaffed hospital to check on 25 seriously ill patients in Petra Volpe's breathless, high-stress salute to the nursing profession.

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Deborah Young

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**Switzerland – and the world – are in the midst of a nursing crisis, and after watching *Late Shift (Heldin)* there is no need to wonder why 36% of trained nurses quit in their first four years on the job. It is simply a profession out of hell, even in the modern Swiss hospital where the dedicated heroine works under the best of conditions, with every medicine, bandage and high-tech gadget known to the healing arts. The clever and effective *Late Shift* depicts nursing as a permanent emergency that finds its equivalent in a breathless, anxious rhythm designed to jangle the staunchest nerves. For audiences who are into job-horror with a stranglehold, it qualifies as one of the most engrossing films in the festival. It bowed in Berlin as a Berlinale Special Gala.**

Writer and director Petra Volpe has worked in television, but she is best known for her 2017 film *The Divine Order* about a Swiss housewife who joins the fight for women's right to vote. *Late Shift*, too, features women at the center of the action as nurses, doctors and surgeons, and their professionalism and dedication go beyond the call of duty.

Shot on the move and edited at the speed of an electric drill, it is simple, unpretentious, but riveting entertainment, closer in spirit to an adrenaline-packed actioner than *Grey's Anatomy*. Unlike most hospital dramas, it skips the interpersonal relationship entanglements amongst the medical staff to concentrate on one character: a nurse who has to hold down her shift on a surgical ward on an understaffed night.

Volpe smartly trains her laser on the 30-something, ultra-competent nurse Floria Lind. She is a portrait in heroism who never wavers as she gallops through her shift constantly on the edge of collapse, burnout or some other disaster. Accomplished and engaging actress Leonie Benesch conveys the mental strain Floria is under behind her caring smile, at first lightly as she tries to juggle conflicting demands on her time, then later with hands that visibly tremble as they load a hypodermic needle full of painkillers for her patients.

One feels sure the story is heading for some huge mistake on Floria's part that will have catastrophic consequences, but that would be to underestimate the message about nursing that Volpe seeks to convey. Floria does lose her cool dealing with the abusive businessman who demands a cup of peppermint tea at her busiest moment because he is a paying private patient. But above all, the errors she makes signal the strain nurses work under, and when tragedy does strike, it becomes a test of Floria's mental resilience and faith in her own work.

On this particular day, presumably a typical one, Floria arrives at the hospital by bus. She has just had a day off and taken her daughter Emma to the zoo. This is practically the only hint at her private life, apart from a phone call to Emma and a short exchange with a patient about having broken up with the girl's dad. Otherwise, Volpe keeps the story focused on the present moment in the hospital. Whatever her personal problems, Floria keeps her mind on her work – in fact one suspects she uses its unforgiving rhythm to take her mind off her problems. The late shift begins with only two nurses instead of three, a fact that Floria takes unflinchingly like a true soldier, and whose dismaying significance becomes apparent as the story unfolds. There is just a student nurse doing the shift with them and Floria cuts her no slack.

As she is briefed about the 25 patients on the ward – it is almost at capacity – most of them seem to be recovering from cancer operations, or waiting to be operated on. She already knows a few of them, like the seedy and needy Mr. Leu, from previous encounters; others, like a fragile old woman with dementia symptoms and the obnoxious businessman, are new on the floor. Floria treats everyone with courtesy and professionalism, which sometimes extends to deep compassion and caring. But despite all her ministrations, she can't escape becoming the target of anger for some frightened patients and their worried families. She returns this injustice with a tight smile that gets tighter as the shift wears on.

All this happens at the speed of light, in which the pace is heightened by devices like a constantly moving camera and the nearly subliminal sound of a ticking clock. The editing by Hansjorg Weissbrich is so relentlessly frenetic in the first hour of the film that it seems mechanically speeded up, were it not for the patients who are moving normally. D.P. Judith Kaufmann keeps it simple with muted hospital lighting that, in other circumstances, would be calming. Not here. And Gina Keller's stressful sound design up the ante.

*Director, screenwriter: Petra Volpe*

*Producers: Reto Schaerli, Lukas Hobi*

*Cast: Leonie Benesch, Sonja Riesen, Urs Bihler, Margherita Schoch, Jurg Pluss, Alireza Bayram, Ridvan Murati, Urbain Guiguemdé*

*Cinematography: Judith Kaufmann*

*Production design: Beatrice Schultz*

*Editing: Hansjorg Weissbrich*

*Music: Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch*

*Sound design: Gina Keller*

*Production companies: Zodiac Pictures (Switzerland)*

*World sales: TrustNordisk*

*Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Berlinale Special Gala)*

*In German*

*87 minutes*