

Eternal Hope in Norway: A Film Review

by Phyllis Chesler



What would you do if you were told you had only three months left to live? That is the subject of Maria Sodahl's riveting new Norwegian film, [Hope](#). Nicole Kidman has purchased the rights to this story and will star in an English-language series remake for Amazon.

Anja, our feisty, volatile, heroine, is facing an imminent death sentence. *Hope* is, at first, a low-key film, quiet, subdued, "domestic," but it manages to become so much larger as it encompasses life, love, family, modern medicine, as well as a possibly fatal cancer diagnosis. The story is the director's own story and it took Sodahl nine years to write and direct it.

The film takes place over a period of only eight days— from Christmas Eve to January 2nd—and yet it manages to introduce us to an entire world, a large, blended family, life in Norway

with its lovely lighted candles at meals, Norwegian hospitals and doctors (the doctors are all played by real doctors, we accompany Anja to her tests and her medical consultations), and it does so in ways that speak to our hearts. Condensing time in this way, limiting it, is precisely the film's subject, namely, Anja's diagnosis of brain cancer and a suddenly and radically shortened life.

Anja (brilliantly played by Andrea Braein Hovig) and Tomas (also brilliantly played by Stellan Skargard) have lived together for twenty years without benefit of clergy. Anja has three biological children and three step children—all of whom are exceptionally beautiful. Anja is a small, petite, brunette, a funny, demanding, woman, capable of emotional explosions; Tomas is at least a foot or more taller, and is much older, slower, gray-haired. They are both artistes, modern, bohemian, professionally successful. Facing an imminent death sentence (which all living beings face), leads to a decision to marry in a church and to unusual demands for honesty.

High on medication, nauseous, hungry, always hungry, Anja worries about the children: what will they do without her? She now wants to know whether Tomas has always been faithful to her or not—and when he admits to a long-ago “fling” in Germany, (“it meant nothing,”) Anja stuns us when she tells him that she had fallen in love and wonders why she had not left Tomas. She says: “I should have left you but I was eaten up by you and the kids.”

The film is magic. It is dramatic, serious, but not depressing. We become part of this family. We care about them, about what will happen. Days later, and I am still thinking about Anja and Tomas, and about their world. Tomas looks at Anja with such tenderness that his gaze lingers to this very moment.

The film ends before Anja's potentially life-saving brain

surgery. We are left “hoping” but not knowing. Just before she goes under the anesthesia, Anja believes that Tomas is with her, right there on the operating table.

This film is, deservedly, Norway’s official entry for the 93rd Academy Awards, where it has been shortlisted for Best International Feature Film category. The film opens on April 16th at the Film Forum in New York City, either digitally or in person.