Berlinale 2026 review: Four Minus Three (Adrian Goiginger)

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"While Four Minus Three *doesn't tread any new ground in the grief subgenre, the performance at its center still makes it a moving portrayal of grappling through life after a great loss."*

★★★☆☆

Adapted from Barbara Pachl-Eberhart's autobiographical bestseller of the same name, Adrian Goiginger's *Four Minus Three (Vier minus drei)* recounts how Barbara (Valerie Pachner), a professional clown working in the children's ward of a hospital, has her world shattered when her husband and fellow clown Heli (Robert Stadlober) and their two children are killed in a car accident. With her world torn apart, Barbara is unsure of how to move forward, and as she flashes back to the highs and lows of her relationship with Heli, she attempts to establish a new normal despite having lost her sense of self. Through her love of clowning and tentative relationships old and new, Barbara slowly finds a way out of the darkness of grief.

Four Minus Three definitely follows the traditional beats of a melodrama about grief and loss of a family. Barbara struggles with the great absence in her life, she becomes increasingly isolated from her loved ones, and she awkwardly attempts to submerge her grief in clubbing and a failed hookup. The use of non-chronological flashbacks stands out as the principal stylistic choice to highlight the psychological effects of grief, as we become privy to a vicious fight between Barbara and Heli shortly before his death. Their differing levels of success – she has steady work as a hospital clown, while he struggles to make ends meet with more artistically focused clown shows, and he dreams of leaving Austria for France – reveal hidden resentments, and we later see how the pair first fell in love through clowning. Eventually, Barbara is introduced to Friedrich (Hanno Koffler), a seemingly arrogant actor who slowly becomes her lifeline to the outside world, as their friendship allows her to take the steps to forge a new path in life.

Even following an overly familiar grief drama template, the film still proves affecting thanks to an impressive central performance by Valerie Pachner, who always remains grounded and heartbreakingly human even in moments where it would be tempting to emote to the cheap seats. This is most apparent in the early moments when Barbara becomes aware of the severity of the crash and the medical impact on her young children. Pachner perfectly pitches Barbara's sense of deep shock and sadness, which makes her outburst of grief after her daughter's unexpected death all the more moving. She successfully straddles the tonal tightrope between being too sullen or too maudlin in key moments, and she is ultimately the primary reason to watch the film. The rest of the cast also capably fills in smaller roles, particularly Stefanie Reinsperger as the best friend who refuses to let Barbara lose herself in grief, and Margarethe Tiesel as Barbara's religious mother-in-law. One of the intriguing conflicts that is raised by the film but quickly peters out is the discord between bohemian Barbara and her traditional in-laws in the wake of the tragedy. Also notable is a cameo from

Austrian filmmaker Markus Schleinzer, in competition at Berlin this year with *Rose*, as the kindhearted mentor who unwittingly isolates Barbara even further in a misguided act of pity.

The film also pays respectful homage to the traditional clowning art form which Barbara and Heli are both deeply passionate about, although whether the viewer will feel the same may be a case of mileage varying. The clowning aspect is at its best in the final moments of the film, as Barbara uses her art to make peace with her grief and her new life. While *Four Minus Three* doesn't tread any new ground in the grief subgenre, the performance at its center still makes it a moving portrayal of grappling through life after a great loss.

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