

# VARIETY

## ‘Nine Days’: Film Review

First-time director Edson Oda swings for the fences in this ambitious existential debut, which imagines just how hard it is for a soul to be born, and why the living should never take that gift for granted.

[Peter Debruge](#)



At the risk of overselling [Edson Oda](#)'s ultra-original, meaning-of-life directorial debut, there's a big difference between "[Nine Days](#)" and pretty much every other film ever made. You see, most movies are about characters, real or imagined, and the stuff that happens to them, whereas "Nine Days" is about *character* itself — as in, the moral dimension that constitutes who a person is, how he or she treats others, and the choices that define us as humans.

But Oda doesn't stop there. In a film of dizzying conceptual ambition — “No Exit” meets “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” — the Brazilian-born, U.S.-based writer-director wants to make audiences appreciate the little things, like the feeling of sand between your toes or the way your hand surfs the air when extended from the window of a moving car. To that end, Oda concocts an elaborate new metaphor for thinking about how souls are selected for the responsibility of life. And while no film can possibly be an antidote to suicide, this one poignantly reminds how lucky we are to be here: a planet full of lottery winners.

The movie unfolds not on earth as we know it, but in some other space — a parallel dimension invented by Oda, situated on what looks like a dry salt lake. It's kinda like purgatory, a place where people go to be judged, except none of these souls have ever lived, or died. Think of it as “pre-gatory,” a limbo-like state in which a handful of souls spend nine days in limbo, auditioning for the amazing opportunity to be born. During that time, they wander the wasteland, which looks barren except for a few small Craftsman style houses.

Will ([Winston Duke](#)) lives in one of these homes, although “lives” might not be the right word. He works as an “interviewer,” monitoring the activities of a few dozen humans — as in, real flesh-and-blood people over there in the “real world” — via a wall of vintage TVs. Each of the people being lo-fi live-streamed on those monitors is inhabited by a soul that Will singled out many years earlier. When one of them dies, it's his job to choose the next soul to be born.

Will's decision matters, since everyone responds to the joys and sorrows, setbacks and triumphs, of being alive differently. That's a truth that extends beyond the hermetic meta-realm of “Nine Days” and into the real world which, Oda believes, so many of us take for granted. The more truths you recognize in Oda's movie, the more profound it will be for you.

Remember the earlier remark about “character”? Well, “Nine Days” is that rare work of art that invites you to re-consider your entire worldview. Maybe it's cynical (Will's certainly is, for reasons that only gradually become clear). Or maybe religious beliefs are a factor in how you behave. There's room for that, too, within the scope of Oda's quasi-spiritual approach. The various souls vying for life here represent a range of philosophies, from romantic (Arianna Ortiz) to pragmatic (Bill Skarsgård). There are pleasure seekers (Tony Hale, bringing a welcome shot of humor to his scenes) and those who see themselves as victims (David Rysdahl).

Where Darwin theorized “natural selection,” Oda posits a prenatal filter instead. Different interviewers have different strategies for picking which of the souls they deem to be best suited for life on earth. Will’s might be described as an “Existence Aptitude Test”: He presents them all with a series of heavy hypothetical situations, and asks how they might respond. The exam is totally subjective, and yet, like the SATs you took back in high school, there seems to be a clear racial bias. Will’s assistant is Asian (by way of England, since Kyo is played by Benedict Wong), but among the predominately white candidates he’s tasked with evaluating, some kind of unspoken prejudice causes him to doubt the one audiences are sure to love most.

That would be Emma (Zazie Beets). For a soul who’s never stepped foot on earth, Emma sure seems grounded. She has by far the best attitude. Will initially resists her positivity, and yet, Oda treats her nine-day trial as a chance to challenge many of Will’s faulty assumptions about life. When asked to watch the TV screens and write down her thoughts, Emma fills an entire notebook with “things I like” — a thousand simple pleasures, like the epigrams collected in Joe Brainard’s “I Remember.” And while he’s busy evaluating her, Emma uses their sessions to study him back.

“Nine Days” takes its time to reveal that the “real world” (of the movie) is just a McGuffin. It exists, but for the sake of this existential exercise, what really matters is fixing whatever’s wrong with Will’s soul. Numb’s the word for his personality, and while the job is tough, and his baggage is real (Will was once alive), Emma has a stimulating effect. These two actors don’t share what we traditionally think of as “chemistry” (although one of the other souls develops a crush). Rather, Beetz represents that special kind of optimist who actually stands a chance at getting through to Will. She is that worthiest kind of soul — the sort that thinks of others before herself — and a welcome alternative to indie cinema’s “manic pixie dream girl” trope.

For those familiar with Oda’s previous work, his visionary shorts and music videos leave little doubt that he’d make a mark when it came time to try his hand at features, although “Nine Days” goes far deeper than most might have expected. Oda developed the project through the Sundance Labs, and partnered with gifted DP Wyatt Garfield and composer Antonio Pinto to create an alternate reality that glows and reverberates even more than the one we inhabit.

The production design of Will’s house, which includes an enormous soundstage-like room where he and Kyo re-create the losing souls’ last wishes, is on par with Michel Gondry’s more inventive work. One can only imagine the effort required

to assemble all the first-person experiences playing on Will's "Point of View" wall, which is nothing compared to the editing job it took to juggle between so many concepts and characters. Yes, "Nine Days" *does* have characters, and memorable ones at that. But it's the deeper inquiry into the human soul that makes it so special.