

CHELMSFORD FILM CLUB

An Independent film society based in Chelmsford

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Of Horses and Men 2013

Iceland 81 min

Director: **Benedikt Erlingsson**

Writer: **Benedikt Erlingsson**

Cast:

Ingvar Eggert Sigurosson - Kolbeinn,

Charlotte Bøving - Solveig,

Stein Armann Magnusson - Vernhardur,

Kjartan Ragnarsson - Grimur,

Kristbjörg Kjeld - Hildur



While we're leery of the kind of cultural stereotyping that might lead us to infer that Iceland's greatest natural resource is quirk, hand drilled by **Bjork** and **Jonsi** from the country's plentiful quirkmines, it's a reputation that their submission for the Foreign Language Film Oscar doesn't contradict... and that's not necessarily a bad thing. "**Of Horses and Men**," written and directed by actor-turned-director **Benedikt Erlingsson** is a gently off-kilter ensemble movie set in an isolated Icelandic community that, even by the standards of this faraway island, feels removed in geography, and almost in period too; while it's set in contemporary times, the environment feels untouched or simply uninterested by the trappings of modern life, or the context of Iceland's current economic troubles. It could all feel a little insubstantial, a kind of **Kaurismaki-Lite**, as the various villagers embark on quixotic adventures or amorous strategies with often tragicomic results, but the charming, unforced nature of its quirkiness, that seems to come from within rather than being layered upon it afterward, and some really terrific, surreally beautiful shotmaking, rescue the film from disposability. The simple premise about the close, interdependent relationship the people here have with their horses (the smallish, pony-like animals of Iceland can seem comedically small for the men and women who ride them, especially when their short legs are at a fussy gallop) also canters along quickly, and, coming in at a slim 81 minutes, the film doesn't have a chance to overstay its welcome.

Divided into a series of six interrelated vignettes, each introduced by a close-up of a horse, we first meet Kolbeinn (**Ingvar E. Sigurdsson**), the unlikely heartthrob of the tale, as he trains his prize white mare to take a bit and bridle. Having succeeded, the dapper chap rides over to visit with his neighbour, Solveig (**Charlotte Boving**), with whom there seems to be a flirtation in progress, until he is humiliated when her stallion mounts his pretty white mare and proceeds to hump away, with Kolbeinn still in the saddle. This image is just the first in a series of startling, grotesque and yet oddly gorgeous shots that pepper the film and that provide it with its visual richness and depth. Then we meet Vernhardur (**Steinn Armann Magnusson**) who ride his swimming horse out to a Russian trawler in a quest for vodka that goes wrong; Grimur (**Kjartan Ragnarsson**) who is blinded by the recoil of a barbed wire fence through which he is indignantly snipping; Joanna (**Sigríður María Egrisdóttir**) a young Swedish woman earning her stripes amongst the men as she goes off in search of four horses that have escaped; Juan (**Juan Camillo Roman Estrada**) a cheerful Spanish tourist who falls hard for Joanna at first sight and joins a horse trekking expedition which takes a turn for the survivalist; before we return to the starcross'd couple from the beginning as Solveig makes a play for her man in the face of competition, while the villagers drive the horses to market.

There are deaths and funerals, both human and equine, and while the tone is clearly ironic and slightly crooked, there aren't exactly jokes per se. In fact, Erlingsson elects to keep dialogue in general to a minimum, allowing certain scenes to play out almost like silent films, with Solveig, for example, noticing that she has a love rival simply by glimpsing some worrisome body language. The ineffectiveness of language, in a remote, edge-of-the-world place like this where your actions, and especially your horsemanship, are really what you will be judged on, is hinted at further by the complications that ensue because of Juan's poor grasp of Icelandic, Joanna's repeatedly stressed "Swedishness" and the sailors' Russian. It's an economical approach that also lets the excellent, odd score, by **David Thor Jonsson**, that is by turns rhythmic and folksy, then abstract and grandiose, then even occasionally choral, come into its own.

And the actors, both human and equine, deserve praise, with the horses all turning in brilliantly un-self-conscious, naturalistic performances(!) and the people doing a completely authentic job of seeming practiced in the horsey way of life, and totally at home amongst them. Still, in among these sparkly elements, the MVP has to be cinematographer **Bergsteinn Bjoergulfsson** whose immaculate, pictorialist framing elevates the film and occasionally made our breath catch a bit, with Iceland's unspoilt hillsides and silty turquoise waters forming a glorious, ancient backdrop. There's very little in the way of grand overarching ideas -- for a while we wondered if, with the close ups of the horses' eyes, and the way everything comes across as ever so slightly west of normal, we were watching human behaviour as viewed from a horses point of view, but that idea is undercut by Erlingsson's gradually sharpening focus on the interactions of his human characters, while the horses, more individuated to begin with, fall a little into the background (which to be fair provides another terrific money shot, this time of the roiling mass of the herd at the final horse market). Still, if it's hardly the deepest or most thought-provoking film you'll see, its surface pleasures are manifold. Erlingsson has delivered an attractive slice of Icelandic oddness that confirms many of the clichés about that country's offbeat outlook, but in a *good* way.

Jessica Kiang (The Playlist) January 30, 2014

Our next presentation:

Stations Of The Cross will be shown on 18th February, starting at 8:00pm.

We will be holding our second 'Discussion' of the season, in the foyer of the Cramphorn Theatre, following the screening of this next film; please feel free to join us. We will be sharing our thoughts on the five films screened since our last, highly successful discussion.

Please do hand in your **Reaction Slip** at the end of each film. They provide extremely useful and valuable information. Thank you.