



Iceland Eddie Cockrell

In the wake of Iceland's financial meltdown and the volcanic eruptions that once again brought the country to the world's attention for all the wrong reasons, it would be difficult to point to another national cinema that has been more resilient in the face of economic uncertainty.



Gaukur Úlfarsson's **Gnarr**

The year's films, consistent with the country's recent output, were strong in theme, execution and local reception. Though a late 2010 release, director Gaukur Úlfarsson's **Gnarr** is a genially cheeky feature-length documentary, charting the unlikely rise of comedian Jón Gnarr to mayor of Reykjavik. The film distinguished itself at New York's Tribeca and Toronto's HotDocs film festivals.

2011 began with writer-director Marteinn St. Þórsson's challenging and ambitious **Stormland** (*Rokland*). Perhaps best encapsulated as a determined cross between Eliseo Subiela's *Dark Side of the Heart* and Barbet Schroeder's *Barfly*, the film follows the shambling Böddi (Ólafur Darri Ólafsson), a bitter romantic determined to tame the world. The film was invited to screen at the 2011 Hamburg festival.

March brought two local features. Screenwriter-lead actor Thorsteinn Guðmundsson's **Our Own Oslo** tells of the combustible relationship between a straight-laced engineer and the scatter-brained single mother he takes up with following an impulsive one-night stand in the Norwegian capital. Prolific writer-director Olaf de Fleur's **Polite People** is the fish-out-of-water story of a conniving businessman who takes on more than he can handle when he becomes involved in small-town politics and peccadilloes.

Confidently performed and impeccably photographed in Iceland's northern wilderness, writer-director Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson's **Either Way** is a slyly funny two-hander about a couple of mismatched highway maintenance

ICELANDIC



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Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson's *Either Way*

men in the 1980s, whose hostility turns to genuine affection as they help each other out of off-screen romantic jams.

Only a week later came the inevitable third installment in the immensely popular *Sveppi* series. **The Magic Wardrobe** finds the gaggle of man-children led by the curious and resourceful Sveppi (TV personality-turned-franchise-founder Sverrir Thor Sverrisson) freeing one of their number from the title dresser.

Rúnar Rúnarsson's *Volcano*

The very end of September saw the much-anticipated release of writer-director Rúnar Rúnarsson's immensely assured and deeply affecting feature debut and Cannes Film Festival entry **Volcano**. Veteran actor Theodór Júlíusson is magnificent as a recently retired school custodian whose gruff ways are tempered considerably when his wife suffers a severe, coma-inducing stroke. Rúnarsson's Bergmanesque approach to his protagonist's tortured existence and elusive redemption announces him as a filmmaker of insight and gravitas.

Deserved winner of awards at festivals in Chicago, Reykjavik and Transylvania, *Volcano* is Iceland's official submission to the Best Foreign Language Film category of the 84th Academy Awards in 2012.

Also in late September came the independently produced family film **L7: Hrafnar, Sóleyjar og Myrri** from directors Eyrún Ósk Jónsdóttir and Helgi Sverrisson, in which a 13-year-old girl keeps her recently-deceased father's memory alive by joining the local theatre company he so loved.

October saw the simultaneous release of two very different films: the long-in-gestation animated epic **Legends of Valhalla: Thor** and de Fleur's third film of the year, the hard-boiled crime drama **City State** (his second is **Adequate Beings**, a documentary about the economic struggles of a small Icelandic town). Neither feature was made available for review, and will thus be covered in next year's edition.

Back on firm footing after a delay in the 2009 edition, the Edda Film and TV awards bestowed their Film of the Year award on director Árni Ólafur Ásgeirsson's **Undercurrent** (*Brim*) in a gala ceremony in late February. Nominated in 12 categories, the intense drama set largely on a fishing boat won a total of six awards.

Árni Ólafur Ásgeirsson's *Undercurrent*

Dagur Kári's English-language drama **The Good Heart**, written about in the 2010 edition of the IFG but not released in Iceland until the following year, won five of the 11 categories

in which it was nominated, including director and screenplay. *Stormland* earned awards for Ólafur Darri Ólafsson as Actor of the Year and Elma Lía Gunnarsdóttir as Actress in a Supporting Role.

Demonstrating once again the Icelandic film industry's reverence for its recent past, the Icelandic Film and TV Academy's Honorary Prize went to veteran director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson. His *Viking Trilogy*, fondly referred to by some as 'cod westerns' and encompassing the features *When the Raven Flies* (1984), *In the Shadow of the Raven* (1987) and *Embla* (1991), helped put Icelandic cinema on the map for an entire generation of film buffs and genre aficionados.

On the business side of things, the domestic box office remained durable in the face of adversity. The nine Icelandic features released up to November 2011 were one off the pace of 2010, with the possibility of Baltasar Kormákur's **The Deep** opening at Christmas. The total box office for Icelandic films screened in those months was US\$1.07million – roughly nine per cent of the US\$11.17million recorded by the domestic box in this time, and just a little less than the US\$11.13million from 2010.

Admissions themselves were down 4.5 per cent, from 1,346,389 in 2010 to 1,285,644 in 2011 – a remarkably small dip considering the ongoing struggle for disposable income and the increasing attractiveness of alternative forms of media and entertainment.

During a typically candid question-and-answer session during the resurgent Reykjavik International Film Festival in late September, Hungarian master Béla Tarr, recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Awards, could have been describing the dedication and resilience of the Icelandic film industry itself when he advised young filmmakers to 'be yourself, find your style, your way... Don't forget what you really want to say. There is no recipe, the recipe is you.' Seen through the prism of that metaphor, Icelandic cinema is holding steady on a slow simmer.



Marteinn St. Thórsson's *Stormland*

The year's best films

Volcano (Rúnar Rúnarsson)

Either Way (Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson)

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