



## Iceland Eddie Cockrell

When national crises strike, artists can rally a country. During 2009, as the abrupt failure of Iceland's top three banks threw one of the world's most admired societies into unprecedented social tumult and personal strife, this is precisely what transpired.

In fact, the year's story arc couldn't have been scripted to greater dramatic effect. January began on a note of enlightened optimism with the release of **The Sunshine Boy**, acclaimed veteran Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's first documentary in nearly three decades. Taking its name from the term of affection producer Margret Dagmar Ericsdottir has for her autistic son Keli, this is a focused, inspiring global inquiry into alternative treatments. Following the film's North American premiere at the Toronto festival, trade paper Variety correctly anointed it 'a mystery replete with miracles'.

In April, the government bumped the all-important offshore producer tax credit from 14% to 20%, keeping Iceland on pace with Hungary, the Czech Republic and France, in the forefront of such schemes. Sadly, at the time of writing that same government was proposing a 34% cut in domestic film funding – a margin

greater than all other proposed arts cuts combined.

The year's fourth month also saw the release of **Dreamland**, a probing documentary by Thorfinnur Gudnason and Andri Snaer Magnason charting the country's difficult passage in building a massive aluminium smelter in the east fjords. Perhaps reflecting the activist anger of the populace, Dreamland played for a remarkable 11 weeks in local cinemas and subsequently premiered in competition at the International Documentary Festival Amsterdam.

Following a summer given over to dependably attractive Hollywood product – The Hangover became the year's top-grossing import, following Mamma Mia! in 2008 – October opened with the debut of perhaps the year's strongest and most cautionary film.

A mere eight months after the violence that greeted the government's stonewalling of the economic crisis, filmmaker Helgi Felixson had assembled visceral footage of the unrest and valuable background material into the meticulously probing documentary **God Bless Iceland**. The personalities may be of little

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interest to those outside the country, but the emotion on display as citizens gathered to express their anger and anguish is universal.



Julius Kemp's *Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre*

Early September also saw the release of the bluntly titled **Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre**, which did just what it said on the tin as a group of tourists succumb to a demented fishing family. Despite genuinely gory genre thrills and the appearance of native Iclander Gunnar Hansen – Leatherface in the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* – *RWWW* had the great misfortune to open opposite both *Up* and *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*.

The holidays approached, and in the manner of audiences the world over, Icelanders seemed far more interested in comfortable escapist fare than horror films or documentaries.

Thus came director Bragi Thor Hinriksson's **The Big Rescue**, which built on the man-child personality of small-screen comedian Sveppi (Sverrir Thor Sverrisson) to tell a family-skewed adventure story massaged with agreeably cheesy special effects. Following close on Sveppi's heels was first-time director Thorsteinn Bjarnason's low-key comedy **Johannes**, which proved such an effective showcase for popular comedian Thorhallur Sigurdsson, as a put-upon art teacher and good Samaritan, that it immediately took top place in the box-office chart.

At the time of writing, critics were praising the newest local release, veteran filmmaker Hilmar Oddsson's **December**. Set during the holidays,

the film follows selfish musician Jonni (Tomas Lemarquis from *Noi Albino*) as he returns home from a mysteriously abrupt three-year hiatus in Argentina. He has no choice but to put aside his own ambitions in order to help his family and friends as they cope with emotional and economic uncertainty. In both subject matter and approach, *December* is perfectly timed to entertain at home and illuminate abroad.

Speaking of *Noi Albino*, missing from the year's release roster, but already acquired for American distribution, is Dagur Kari's English-language drama, **The Good Heart**. There *Will Be Blood*'s Paul Dano stars as a fragile, homeless New Yorker taken in by Brian Cox's abrasive and unhealthy publican. Though dismissed at Toronto as 'arthouse hokum' by *Variety*, the film's affectionate grunge lingers, in much the way the ensemble passages of *Million Dollar Hotel* and the whole of *Barfly* give a scruffy dignity to the downtrodden.



Dagur Kari's *The Good Heart*

Of special note amongst the year's dozen long documentaries is the immensely atmospheric 45-minute essay film, **The Mysteries of Snæfellsjökull**. French filmmaker Jean Michel Roux's satisfying follow-up to his 2002 full-length investigation into the Invisible World is another nature-documentary-as-otherworldly-thriller about the mysteries of the eponymous volcano in western Iceland, selected by Jules Verne as the gateway in *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

On the business front, the five home-grown dramatic features unveiled during 2009 are down from eight the previous year. The

domestic box office for all releases totalled approximately USD\$10.2 million from the period January–October 2009, a USD\$2.8 million dip from the same period in 2008.

The annual Edda awards, which bestow honours on worthy Icelandic films, was delayed from late 2009 to the first quarter of 2010. There were assurances that the reasons for this were only partly financial.

No less than a dozen promising feature-length dramas and documentaries are in the pipeline. Highlights include Children and Parents director Ragnar Bragason's **Bjarnfredarson**; Valdis Oskarsdottir's Country Wedding follow-up, **Kings Road**; and Fridriksson's **Mamma Gogo**, which addresses his mother's debilitating Alzheimer's condition.

Conspicuous by his low profile in 2009 was Jar City director Baltasar Kormakur. While finishing the English-language **Inhale** (previously known as Run for Her Life) with Dermot Mulroney, Diane Kruger, Rosanna Arquette and Sam Shepard, he has also been tipped as director of an American remake of Reykjavik-Rotterdam. Mark Wahlberg will produce and star.

Thirty years after the creation of the contemporary Icelandic film movement, the industry faces some of its toughest challenges. Yet with the talent of its artists, determination of its proponents and proven support of its domestic fan base, there is confidence that Icelandic cinema will survive, and thrive.

### The year's best films

**God Bless Iceland** (Helgi Felixson)

**The Sunshine Boy** (Fridrik Thor Fridriksson)

**December** (Hilmar Oddsson)

**The Mysteries of Snaefellsjokul**

(Jean Michel Roux)

**Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre**

(Julius Kemp)

### Quotes of the year

'If the currency devalues, then the grants and investments we receive from abroad will be

more valuable to us. And sales abroad are worth more too. It's like the fishing industry, which is very happy as they effectively get double for their catches.' **Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre** producer/director JULIUS KEMP on the silver lining of currency devaluation.

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Jean Michel Roux's **The Mysteries of Snaefellsjokul**