

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2019

T H E C O U N T Y

by Grímur Hákonarson
Iceland, Denmark, Germany, France 2019

Set in a small Icelandic farming community, *The County* tells the story of Inga, a middle-aged dairy farmer who rebels against the all-powerful local Cooperative. Inga tries to get other farmers to join her in rising up against the Co-op's corruption, but encounters great resistance, forcing her to confront the community's dependence and loyalty to this single, dominant enterprise. Inga must use her resourcefulness and cunning to break free of the Co-op's grasp and finally live life on her own terms.



After *Rams*, once again you show people in isolated areas, with lives revolving around their farms or their animals. But this time, the scope is much bigger.

In *Rams*, the focus was on these two estranged brothers [living on adjoining sheep farms and trying to save their flocks]. It was a story about family, while *The County* is more about the society. It shows the political reality of a very specific region through this woman, Inga who lost her husband and, while going through all stages of grief, decides to fight against a corrupt establishment that is exploiting her and her community. In the northwest of Iceland, there is this area called Skagafljörður. That's where the only co-operative in the country still exists. It was a part of the movement that started in the 19th century, but all similar initiatives went bankrupt in the 1990s. Except for that one, which somehow managed to survive. It owns just about everything – even the only local paper. It echoes a bit all these closed-off societies, like the Soviet Union for example, holding everything in its powerful grip like some huge octopus. At the same time, I think that my film is about Icelandic society in general. We are small, so we tend to be very monopolistic. There are few people who control things and the rest is just being exploited.

Inga [played by Arndís Hrönn Egilsdóttir] doesn't really strike you as a typical activist. Which makes her decision to rebel even more surprising.

Inga is a very normal, rural Icelandic woman. She is not your typical strong gal, walking around saying: "I am a rebel!" She is a quieter presence. Icelandic agriculture is very male-dominated. But recently women have become more present and running their own farms. Some men still have trouble accepting that. I was interested in that conflict, and maybe at the same time inspired by the general discussion within the entertainment industry about the role of women in films. This is the second layer in the story – a woman finding her way within a masculine society. After all, the co-op directors and most of Inga's opponents are men.



It is often repeated in the film that it was her husband who really wanted to stay on the farm. So why is she fighting?

It is meant to be open for interpretation, but she certainly wants to make up for what happened to him. Or maybe make sure it won't happen to others. When people are abused or suppressed, sometimes they speak up because they don't want others to go through the same thing. She is bankrupt, she lost her husband – she has nothing to lose. She can't just give up and leave without doing anything. I know many couples like Inga and Reynir, living in the countryside. They love each other, but they are trapped – they are in debt, they're working 24/7, they haven't taken a vacation for a very long time. It's a very common Icelandic reality. Inga is still living there because she clearly loves her husband. Otherwise she would be long gone. But when she loses him, it gives her a chance to re-evaluate things.

How did you want to show the co-operative? It could easily come off as a shadowy organization straight from a John Grisham novel.

I didn't want to turn them into your typical baddies. There are two sides to every story and I think *The County* shows it quite well, even though we naturally sympathize with Inga. Maybe it's just the kind of filmmaker I am. Bad guys always have some kind of justification and they always fight for some cause. I wanted to show that they are human so I allowed them to speak. If this film was shot in another country, I can easily imagine these guys being surrounded by guns and bodyguards. But in Iceland, we don't have any guns! So instead, they are threatening people via text messages. I didn't want to betray our reality and drift too far away into this "mafia" direction. Still, they stand out: they are driving black jeeps, their offices are very dark and there is usually bad weather whenever they show up on the screen [laughter].

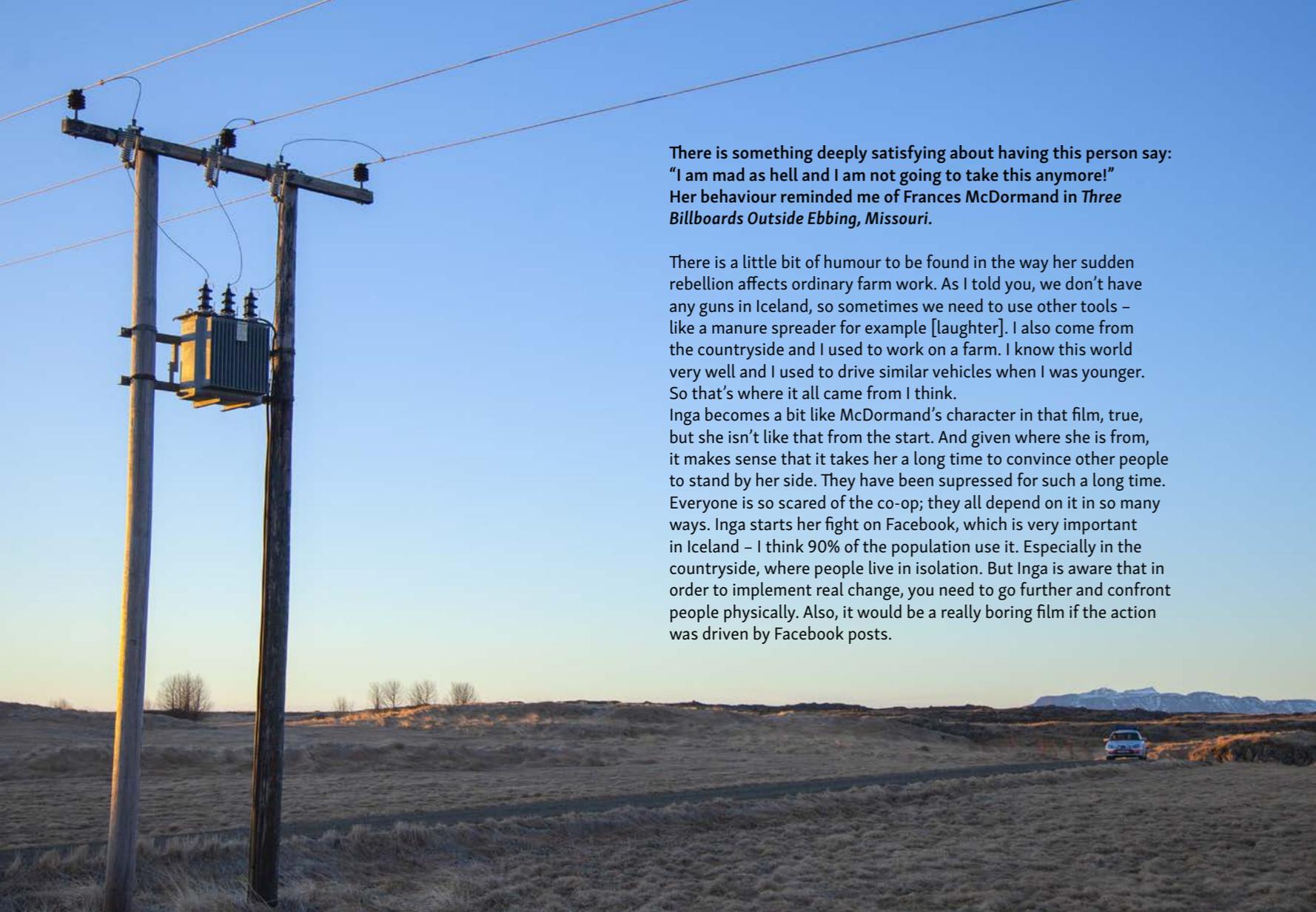




There is some light shining through all this darkness. But it comes relatively late in the story.

We used to say that the cinematography should follow Inga's soul and her inner life as she goes through all the stages of grief. It all starts in the winter and she is clearly not happy – they are in debt, then the accident happens. So the film begins in the darkness and then it gets brighter, because she gets stronger as the journey goes further. But generally, the visual style is similar to *Rams*, with the static wide shots, long takes.





There is something deeply satisfying about having this person say:
“I am mad as hell and I am not going to take this anymore!”
Her behaviour reminded me of Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.

There is a little bit of humour to be found in the way her sudden rebellion affects ordinary farm work. As I told you, we don't have any guns in Iceland, so sometimes we need to use other tools – like a manure spreader for example [laughter]. I also come from the countryside and I used to work on a farm. I know this world very well and I used to drive similar vehicles when I was younger. So that's where it all came from I think.

Inga becomes a bit like McDormand's character in that film, true, but she isn't like that from the start. And given where she is from, it makes sense that it takes her a long time to convince other people to stand by her side. They have been suppressed for such a long time. Everyone is so scared of the co-op; they all depend on it in so many ways. Inga starts her fight on Facebook, which is very important in Iceland – I think 90% of the population use it. Especially in the countryside, where people live in isolation. But Inga is aware that in order to implement real change, you need to go further and confront people physically. Also, it would be a really boring film if the action was driven by Facebook posts.





It's a very specific, demanding lifestyle you show here, and also before in *Rams*. Are you interested in portraying loneliness on screen?

Maybe that's how I experience the Icelandic countryside. You live alone or with another person, and people around you are just leaving all the time. They are moving to the city and it becomes even lonelier. I am interested in showing changes in rural Iceland. When I was young, my experience was completely different: there were more people and social events, more things to do. Now it has changed a lot. When you listen to the director of the co-op in the film, he is talking about the county becoming a place for tourists and their summer cottages. He is referring to that development, with traditional farming being under attack and rich people from the city coming over for vacation. In most of my movies, maybe that's the main subject: old Icelandic values versus capitalism and modern society.



People in the co-op keep referring to "the county" making it seem almost like some mysterious land – a philosophical idea rather than an actual place. Do you think this idea of putting the whole community before your individual needs is still alive?

In the northwest of Iceland it's certainly still very present. People talk about their county as some kind of independent unit that doesn't need any external help. These people are also against the European Union, they want to keep Iceland independent and avoid working with "bad" foreign institutions. In the film, they're afraid of the big chain stores in Reykjavik. It's the same ideology, but the fact that it's all about cooperation and collective ownership, even though it's not a democratic institution anymore, is really rather unique – in most countries these would be private companies. Here, at least they used to have some ideals. So yes, the county is a philosophical idea. But nobody knows what to do with it anymore.



ARNDÍS HRÖNN
EGILSDÓTTIR

Born in Reykjavík in 1969. After completing her theatre studies in Paris, she has performed in numerous roles in the Reykjavík City Theatre, the National Theatre and with various independent groups. Arndís has also taken on roles in a number of Icelandic TV-series and feature films such as *Sparrows* by Rúnar Rúnarsson, *Under the Tree* by Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurðsson, *Prisoners* by Ragnar Bragason and *The Press* by Óskar Jónasson. Arndís received nominations for Best Supporting Actress at the Icelandic EDDA Awards for *Sparrows* and *The Press*.



SVEINN ÓLAFUR
GUNNARSSON

Born in 1976 and raised in Reykjavík, Iceland. Sveinn was educated at the Icelandic Art Academy, graduating with a BFA degree in acting in 2006. He had previously studied philosophy at the University of Iceland. Sveinn works equally on stage and in cinema and has acted in films – international and Icelandic, TV-series and theatre productions as well as writing and directing.



SIGURÐUR
SIGURJÓNSSON

Born in 1955. He graduated from The Drama Academy of Iceland 1976. He is one of the most loved actors of his generation, a legend in Icelandic comedy, a director and a screenwriter. He has starred in numerous films and television series since the late 1970s, as well as being a regular at the National Theatre of Iceland, as an actor and a director. Internationally, Sigurður, is most famous for the lead role in the film *Rams*.

DIRECTOR AND SCREENWRITER
GRÍMUR HÁKONARSON

Icelandic director, Grímur Hákonarson, graduated from FAMU in 2004. His graduate film, *Slavek The Shit*, was selected to the Cinefondation section of Cannes Film Festival 2005. The film traveled widely and won 12 festival prizes, including the Silver Hugo at the Chicago International Film Festival. His next short film, *Wrestling*, premiered at Locarno Film Festival 2007 and won 25 festival prizes around the world. Grímur's previous feature film, *Rams*, won the Prix Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival 2015. The film has received more than 30 int'l awards and won 11 Icelandic Academy Awards.

DOP
MART TANIEL

Is an Estonian cinematographer born in 1976. He studied cinematography at the FAMU in Prague and also graduated from Tallinn Pedagogical University as cinematographer. He has been active in this field since 2005 and has shot over ten features, in addition to documentaries, short films, commercials and music videos. Taniel has won numerous awards internationally and in Estonia. Most recently, Taniel received the prestigious American Society of Cinematographers' Spotlight Awards for his work on Rainer Sarnet's film *November*. For the same work, he won the award for Best Cinematography at the 2017 Tribeca Film Festival in New York.



NETOP FILMS

Netop Films is an Icelandic production company created to produce and co-produce feature films and documentaries. It was founded by Grímar Jónsson who worked on a number of Icelandic feature films, including *The Good Heart* (2007) by Dagur Kari. *Rams* was the first feature film produced by Grímar Jónsson / Netop Films. It won Prix Un Certain Regard in Cannes 2015, as well as 30 other international awards around the world. Next up for Netop Films was the feature film *Under the Tree* which had its world premiere in Orizzonti / Venice 2017 and has since won 20 film awards.

PROFILE PICTURES

Profile Pictures is an award-winning Copenhagen-based production company founded in October 2011 by producers Thor Sigurjonsson, Jacob Jarek and Ditte Milsted. Profile Pictures' goal is to produce projects that can rock the boat, either in terms of genre or storytelling, while still keeping a firm eye on the audience on a national as well as international level. Profile Pictures is a small and flexible unit. Combined we have the experience in producing live action content in an array of different formats, on a Scandinavian as well as international level. Profile Pictures works with both Danish and International talent.

HAUT ET COURT

Haut et Court is a Paris based production and distribution company, founded in 1992, dedicated to creating international cinema of the highest quality. Haut et Court has worked with eminent filmmakers from across the globe such as Tsai Ming Liang, Lars Von Trier, and Paul Greengrass to name a few, and films produced by Haut et Court have been selected and awarded at countless international film festivals: Laurent Cantet's *The Class* (Palme d'Or 2008); Alain Berliner's *My Life In Pink* (Golden Globe Best Foreign Film 1998); *Coco Before Chanel* by Anne Fontaine. Haut et Court also coproduces ambitious European feature films such as *The Kindergarten Teacher* by Nadav Lapid, *The Lobster* by Yorgos Lanthimos, *A Ciambra* by Jonas Carpignano and *The County* by Grímur Hákonarson. Haut et Court is also an exhibitor, having opened the Nouvel Odéon in Paris' Latin Quarter in 2010 and Le Louxor in the north of Paris.

ONE TWO FILMS

One Two Films is a Berlin based production company run by Sol Bondy, Jamila Wenske and Christoph Lange. Our focus is feature films for the international market. With our director driven projects we provide our carefully selected directors with a home base. Working closely together, we produce high-class art house films. With our producer driven projects we develop scripts together with authors, packaging projects with the goal of finding experienced directors for high-quality feature films. There are aimed solely at the market for widespread distribution.

FESTIVALS

World Premiere: Toronto IFF

FILM INFORMATION

Original title: Héraðið

English title: The County

Genre: Drama

Country: Iceland, Denmark,
Germany, France

Language: Icelandic

Year: 2019

Duration: 92 min.

Picture: Color

Aspect ratio: 2.39: 1

Sound: 5.1

Available format: DCP

CAST

Arndís Hrönn Egilsdóttir
Sveinn Ólafur Gunnarsson
Sigurður Sigurjónsson
Hinrik Ólafsson
Hannes Óli Ágústsson
Edda Björg Eyjólfsdóttir

PRODUCER'S CONTACT

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CREW

Director: Grímur Hákonarson
Screenplay: Grímur Hákonarson
Cinematography: Mart Taniel
Editing: Kristján Loðmfjörð
Production design: Bjarni "Massi"
Sigurbjörnsson

Sound designer: Björn Viktorsson,
Sylvester Holm,
Frank M. Knudsen

Music: Valgeir Sigurðsson
Production company: Netop Films
Co-production companies: Haut et Court,
One Two Films

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Danish Film Institute,
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EURIMAGES,
Creative Europe,
Nordisk Film & Tv
Fond, The Icelandic
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And Innovation, SR /
ARTE, RUV,
Danmarks Radio,
Estonian Cultural
Endowment

Producer: Grímar Jónsson
Co-producers: Ditte Milsted,
Jacob Jarek,
Carole Scotta,
Julie Billy,
Jamila Wenske,
Sol Bondy

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