

NO ONE'S LAZY IN LAZY TOWN by Eddie Cockrell

An overview of the Icelandic film industry in 2008

The year began with writer-director Baltasar Kormákur's much-anticipated follow-up to the global hit **Jar City** (*Mýrin*), **White Night Wedding** (*Brúðguminn*, or, literally, “the bridegroom”). An emotionally vigorous adaptation of Chekhov's first play, *Ivanov*, it tells of a brooding professor who must overcome the suicide of his first wife to marry a headstrong student. The film showcases the breathtaking scenery of the southwestern island of Flatey, as well as Kormákur's nimble approach to storytelling: with five features as director and many more as actor and/or producer, his strengths place him in the same league as Fatih Akin or Alexander Payne as an astute judge of narrative impact.

First time writer-director Valdis Óskarsdóttir's mid-year release **Country Wedding** (*Sveitabréðkaup*) follows the comic misadventures of a bridal party that strikes out from Reykjavik in a pair of coaches for a rustic tying of the knot. “This is going to be a lot of fun,” says one of their number, and local audiences agreed.

Country Wedding was shot in a breakneck seven days with multiple cameras supervised by *Slumdog Millionaire* cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle. An award-winning editor, Óskarsdóttir's resume includes the lauded Dogme production *The Celebration* (*Festen*). *Country Wedding* is cut from the same cloth, though it's funnier and more deeply resonant.

The big-screen directorial debut of lauded television helmer Óskar Jónasson, **Reykjavik-Rotterdam** is a sturdy, morally complex blue collar thriller starring Kormákur as an ex-con average Joe who must leave his young family to run one final smuggling scam onboard a mammoth container ship. Co-scripted by Jónasson and prominent Icelandic crime novelist Arnaldur Indriðason (on whose immensely popular novel *JarCity* was based), the film opened strong on seven screens in early October and is primed for high-profile festival exposure.

Alongside *White Night Wedding*'s seven end-of-year Edda awards, including best film and cinematography, *Reykjavik-Rotterdam* won in five categories, including director and screenplay. Tellingly, both films were produced by Kormákur's Blueeyes Productions.

The end-of-an-era retail meditation **Cornershop** won the feature documentary award, with the emotionally brave coming-of-age drama **2 Birds** taking shorts honors. Beyond those, **At the Edge of the World** (*Breidavik*) impressed as an unflinching look at the brutal practices at a mid-20th century boys' reformatory, while the short film **Wrestling** (*Bræðrabylta*), the thoughtful story of middle-aged athletes grappling with their mutual affection, could well have been called *Brokeback Floorboards*—and has at this writing travelled to 19 international festivals after winning the best short Edda in 2007.

Combining documentary elements and sexual identity, **The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela** was the year's most unclassifiable film. Executive produced by Kormákur and described as a “visiomentarie” by director Olaf de Fleur Johannesson, this improvised, scripted documentary profiles a Filipino transsexual “ladyboy” who realizes her dream of visiting Paris via a working stint at an Icelandic fish factory (“it's freezing and Björk is from there” represents the sum of her geographic knowledge). Dazzlingly assured, the film won the best feature Teddy at the Berlin festival.

Rounding out the year's feature roster: the whimsical, critically praised stoner comedy **Back Soon** (*Skrapp út*), winner of the Sevilla festival's main prize; the rural community comedy-drama **Small Mountain** (*Heidin*), which plays like Kevin Smith's *Clerks* without... well, without New Jersey; and Johannesson's *Queen Raquela* follow-up, the more dramatically straightforward criminal underworld comedy **The Higher Force** (with former Sopranos cast member Michael Imperioli imported for a small role).

Though the global economic crisis has hit Iceland particularly hard, the local film business immediately found the cloud's silver lining. "Shooting in Iceland today is an outstanding option," film commissioner Einar Tomasson told trade paper *Variety*, "since our currency is so weak that producers are getting much more value for their money."

And it's true. Recent visitors from Hollywood included Brendan Fraser with *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (aka *Journey 3-D*), Clint Eastwood for *Flags of Our Fathers* and the big budget fantasy *Stardust*.

The future looks equally bright. Kormákur is finishing **Run for Her Life**, which was shot in New Mexico and features playwright-iconoclast Sam Shepherd (now there's a meeting of the minds). Also in English is **The Good Heart**, from **Noi the Albino** director Dagur Kari, and co-starring Brian Cox and Paul Dano. On the genre front, **Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre** leaves little doubt as to its intentions.

And in a nod to Iceland's recent film history, the traditional honorary Edda Award went to Friðrik Þór Friðriksson, whose 1991 drama *Children of Nature* put Iceland on the movie world's map. That Friðriksson is the executive producer of *Reykjavik-Rotterdam* and is finishing a documentary, *The Sunshine Boy*, on the global reactions to autism suggests that less than 20 years later, in Reykjavik, laziness is the last thing that can be said about the Icelandic cinema.

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