



## Iceland Eddie Cockrell

There is confidence that Icelandic cinema will survive, and thrive,' concluded last year's overview. While the latter is true, at least aesthetically, the former is a troubling question still very much up in the air and, agonisingly, just out of the industry's own control.



Ragnar Bragason's **Bjarnfreðarson**

The year began with a bang: the keenly anticipated spin-off feature of a remarkably successful TV trilogy. Director Ragnar Bragason's **Bjarnfreðarson** surfed the local zeitgeist with its deadpan saga of three very different misfits, led by the oblivious blowhard and self-proclaimed 'trained pedagogue' of the title (played by local comedian Jón Gnarr, nearly unrecognisable in the role). The film is a

near-perfect storm of exaggerated grotesquery and social unease, tapping as it does into the modern, volatile Icelandic mix of economic fear and can-do spirit. Though perhaps too local in its focus to travel much overseas, it is nevertheless set to be remade for American television.

So popular was comedian Gnarr – the film defeated *Avatar* during its holiday weekend bow – that in June his satirical political machine, Best Party, promising 'sustainable transparency', won Reykjavik's municipal elections and he was installed as mayor; locals now call the town 'Gnarrenburg'. Can-do spirit indeed.

On a more serious, bittersweet note, New Year's Day saw Friðrik Þór Friðriksson unveil his latest drama, **Mamma Gógó**. The film is a quiet triumph of autobiographical storytelling, as the mother (Kristbjörg Kjeld) of a successful film director (Hilmir Snær Guðnason) struggling with cash flow finds herself receding into Alzheimer's disease. Infused with a love of cinema and life, the film speaks eloquently to Friðriksson's commitment to his art and ranks alongside *Children of Nature* as one of his finest achievements. Like the earlier

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film, it screened at numerous international festivals and was selected to represent Iceland in the Best Foreign Film category at the next Academy Awards.

Speaking of prizes, the delayed Eddas were finally held in late February and, to no one's surprise, *Bjarnfreðarson* swept the night, winning best film, director, screenplay, cinematography, lead actor and costume design. *Mamma Gógó* won for best actress, musical score and set design. By the time of the ceremony, it is estimated 25% of Iceland's 300,000 inhabitants had seen Bragason's film.

Then, disaster: as they had vowed to do in late 2009, the embattled Icelandic government slashed domestic film funding by just over a third. The offshore producer tax credit remains at an industry-leading 20%, but the blow is nevertheless a crippling one. 'The year we reached the goal of being a small industry it all came crashing down,' a clearly frustrated Bragason told icelandonscreen.com's Ben Hopkins. 'I'm hoping the government sees the errors of their actions. They still have a chance of correcting their mistake.'



Baltasar Kormákur's *Inhale*

Coincidentally, the bulk of the year's domestic releases occurred in September and October 2010. Such was the domestic logjam that, in late October, four of the top 10 films at the local box office were Icelandic. Amongst those were *Jitters*, debuting director Baldvin Z's confident ensemble drama about a teenaged boy's sexual indecision; *Jar City* director

Baltasar Kormákur's gritty, English-language thriller *Inhale*; Árni Ólafur Ásgeirsson's thoughtful fishing-boat drama *Brim*; and director Bragi Thór Hinriksson's *The Secret Spell*, the second outing in the immensely successful, kiddie-oriented Sveppi series.

Perhaps the year's most well-rounded and satisfying feature doubles as a cautionary reminder of why the funding of short films and documentaries is so critical to any successful industry. In 2007, young director Grímur Hákonarson won the Edda award for his short film *Wrestling*, which subsequently travelled to over 20 international film festivals. Hákonarson's first feature, *Summerland*, fulfils the promise on display in his short. To save the haunted house he's made of his home in order to attract the tourist trade, husband and father Oskar (Kjartan Gudjónsson) sells the elf stone in his back yard to a German art collector. Traumatized by this, his medium wife, Lara (Ólafía Hrönn Jónsdóttir), lapses into a coma that sends the hapless Oskar into inept damage control. The mellow comedy and warm humanism on display is reminiscent of Bill Forsyth at his finest, as these local heroes try to get along in a mysterious world.

Also screening, with various degrees of success, were: *Country Wedding* director Valdis Óskarsdóttir's sophomore feature, the quirky but ill-conceived trailer-park comedy *King's Road*; the agreeably low-rent concert documentary *Backyard*; the independently produced supernatural thriller *The Messenger*; and Gunnar B. Gudmundsson's coming-of-age drama, *Hullabaloo*.



Valdis Óskarsdóttir's *King's Road*

In all, business was brisk. The nine full-length domestic dramatic features released in 2010 nearly doubled the previous year's five. The domestic box office for all releases between January and October was approximately US\$11.3 million, up significantly from the 2009 total of US\$10.2 million and well within shouting distance of 2008's US\$13 million take. Not bad for an industry struggling with so much adversity and unease.

The government's evisceration isn't immediately fatal, as almost a dozen films are nearing completion. Kormákur is finishing the Icelandic survival drama, **The Deep**, while *The Amazing Truth About Queen Raquela* director Olaf de Fleur has three films in post-production (the action-drama **City State**, the dramatic comedy **Polite People** and, as producer, the documentary **Adequate Beings**). The long-in-production animated epic, **Legends of Valhalla: Thor** – now in 3D! – is slated for late 2011.

Mindful of its precarious position, yet sincere in its commitment to cinema, the industry awarded a special honorary Edda to 'the Icelandic nation, for its strong support of Icelandic films through the years'. Now, more than ever, that support is vital. It is hoped the government will recognise this need and reverse its decision, allowing the Icelandic film industry to get back to the serious – and seriously successful – business of entertaining both its own loyal citizenry and audiences the world over.

### The year's best films

**Summerland** (Grímur Hákonarson)

**Mamma Gógó** (Friðrik Þór Friðriksson)

**Bjarnfreðarson** (Ragnar Bragason)

### Quote of the year

'I don't know if we can teach the world anything new but we can try to keep up a conversation with it... I think we are pretty good at making films look more expensive than they are. I am sure someone could learn something from that. It is a very small industry which can be both a strength and a weakness

at the same time.' **BALTASAR KORMÁKUR**, speaking with icelandonscreen's Ben Hopkins.

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Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's *Mamma Gógó*