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Acknowledgements

This survey of Icelandic cinema concentrates on the extraordinary flowering of the past fifteen years. Close to fifty feature films are discussed here - films that have appeared in festivals and art-house cinemas, or on quality TV channels around the world. So I regret that I have not had space to pay tribute to the numerous documentaries, short films and TV movies that Iceland has also produced in the past three decades.

Among the many books and booklets released about Iceland, I have found the most valuable and comprehensive to be *Iceland, from Past to Present*, by Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakel Sigurdardóttir-Rosenblad (Mál og Menning, Reykjavik, 1993), and I have quoted from it occasionally in my text.

As Christian names are used to identify every-one in Iceland, I have mentioned a director's surname only in the first instance and refer, for example, to Hrafn Gunnlaugsson as Hrafn.

Many friends in Iceland have encouraged me to write this book, and to achieve its publication. They include nearly all the directors mentioned in the text, as well as Anna María Karlsdóttir, Bryndís Schram, Fridbert Pálsson, Gudbrandur Gíslason, Jakob Magnússon, Knútur Hallsson and Marín Magnúsdóttir. Special acknowledgement is due to Fridrik Thór Fridriksson, who suggested during a convivial evening at the Göteborg Film Festival that I should embark on this book, and to Thórfinnur Omarsson, who as head of the Icelandic Film Fund persuaded me to update the version that appeared in 1995.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Françoise, who herself has done much to promote the case of Nordic cinema, and to dedicate this book to my young son, Robin, who already loves westerns.

1

The Pioneers

Reykjavik, September 23, 1998. The premiere of a new Icelandic film, *The Dance*. A slender, bearded man in black tie ascends the stage of the huge University Cinema, to the applause of some 500 people. He reminds them that twenty years ago, almost to the day, he stood on this same spot, fidgeting, to accept a grant from the Ministry of Culture for his TV drama, *A Little Swelling*. The Icelandic cinema, as such, did not yet exist; the Icelandic Film Fund would be created only in April of 1979. Reykjavík did not yet boast either strip-clubs or 4-wheel drive vehicles. Now fifty, Agust Gudmundsson has completed his fifth feature film – yet his first in fourteen years.

Eighty-five minutes later, *The Dance* concludes, and Agust receives a standing ovation. He beckons his actors and technicians to join him on stage. The relief in his face is almost palpable. For years he has dreamed of shooting *The Dance*, based on a rip-roaring novel by the Faroese author, William Heinesen. Like anyone else aspiring to the profession of feature film-maker in Iceland, Agust has struggled not just with a screenplay (written by his wife, Kristin Atladottir, and himself) but with a hundred and one financial and logistical challenges. Even now, his joy is by no means

unalloyed, for an expensive camera was smashed by a freak gust of wind on location, and his own production company may be liable for the loss.

A premiere assumes major significance on the Icelandic cultural scene, for only four or five features are completed each year in this nation of 260,000 inhabitants. They receive loyal support from the Icelanders, who cheerfully shell out a dollar or two more for a local film than they do for their staple diet of Hollywood movies.

What has spurred this activity, this artistic and fiscal confidence in the last country in Europe to be inhabited - an island with a population of just 265.000?

Iceland, with its aggressive natural landscape, has fascinated film-makers for decades, just as it did writers like Victor Hugo and Pierre Loti. Victor Sjöström's silent film masterpiece, *The Outlaw and his Wife* (*Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru*, 1918), is based on a play by Icelandic Jóhann Sigurjónsson, but if you have been to Iceland you can tell instantly that the peaks and farms are not authentic - the film as shot in northern Sweden. Only in Iceland do you find the glaciers with their smooth domes of white against a changing sky, the steep, jagged mountains rearing up along the seashore or sweeping arrogantly beyond the valleys. There are some 4,000 farms in Iceland, and few of these are in the inhospitable interior. Undulating expanses of lava fields, covered in green moss during summer, stretch to the horizon in many regions of the country, like the slag from some Valhallan coal-mine. No "forests" as such exist, for the high winds and volcanic soil reject them, save for hardy types of fir, spruce and stunted birch. And, yielding to the dictates of the Icelandic climate, most farms devote themselves to animal husbandry rather than crops.

Iceland remains a cinematographer's dream, with its unpolluted light and its rare combination of lunar landscape and pastoral intimacy. It's the perfect background for Viking sagas, or for dangerous comic-strips like *Judge Dredd*. The oldest rock formations in Iceland date from only around 16 million years ago, compared to hundreds of millions for continental Europe. Visitors arriving at Keflavík airport for the first time seem captivated by what appears to be a lunar expanse, with black lava fields stretching away on either side of the road, and preternatural columns of rock that would not be out of place in Monument Valley.

Against this prevailing prospect, the Icelanders have turned to colours in their man-made architecture. In each town, the houses cluster in pastel profusion, each reflecting an individual taste: powder blue, primrose yellow, salmon pink, sea-green, beige, or just plain flaring white with window frames providing a chromatic contrast. Despite its name, Reykjavik (literally, "Smoky Bay") has been a smokeless zone for years, and few modern houses are built with chimneys save for ornamental fancy. Geothermal heating provides the energy required by all major communities in Iceland.

Gudbrandur Gíslason, former head of the Icelandic Film Fund, says that the arrival of a new film movement gave Icelanders a chance to show the country in all its perspectives. "Our aesthetic sense extended only to arable (in other words profitable) areas. The rest of the terrain was inhospitable, something that was unknown and a dire, unmentionable threat to the Icelander. There weren't even any railways, and never have been. 'You must fight the impossible force of Nature as it thrusts forward,' or so we believed." Thráinn Bertelsson, who would become one of the pioneers of the new Icelandic cinema, observes that "There is no history of the musical or visual arts until comparatively recently in Icelandic history, because we were such an impoverished nation, probably the poorest in Europe for some centuries. So literature became not just the opium of the masses but also the art of the indigent." Visitors to Iceland during the early 19th century found that children of nine or then could already read and write, and that literacy was widespread (see *Iceland from Past to Present*). Yet by the mid-20th century, the arts were in ferment in Iceland. One of the country's most distinguished poets and novelists, Thor Vilhjálmsson, maintains that "in few other places (if anywhere) will you find such a high percentage of people with the urge to save, if not the world, then at least their own soul through some artistic endeavour." Today, more books per capita are published in Iceland than in any other country.

Icelandic cinema begins in 1906, when a three-minute documentary was shot there by the Dane, Alfred Lind (Denmark having owned Iceland for some six centuries by that stage). The first movie theatre opened in Reykjavik on November 2, 1906. Not for almost a dozen years did native film production get under way. In 1919, a team from Nordisk Film

Kompagni in Copenhagen came to Iceland to shot **The Story of the Borg Family** (Saga Borgaraettarinnar, 1921). Filming took place in a small town just 10 km outside the capital, and excellent use was made of a local wool market, as well as the craggy rock formations. Based on a popular novel by Icelander Gunnar Gunnarsson and starring an Icelandic actor, the story adumbrated one of the themes that has percolated Icelandic cinema itself in recent years: the conflict between a desire to travel abroad in search of fame and fortune, and the need to remain home to tend the ancestral estate. Local film-makers remained in the shadow of the better-equipped Danes who visited the country regularly. Sometimes a collaboration occurred. Gunnar Robert Hansen and the gifted playwright and novelist Gudmundur Kamban together directed one of the most respected of Danish actresses, Clara Pontoppidan, in **Hadda Padda** (1923). Dangling on the end of a rope above a treacherous chasm in one scene, Pontoppidan's character tries to drag down the man whose love for her has now ended. After a frantic struggle with her emotions, she cuts the rope and plunges to her death in the foaming waters below. The sequence calls to mind Victor Sjöström's narrow escape while shooting a similar incident in *The Outlaw and his Wife*, and Clara Pontoppidan confirmed in an interview that a double was only used in certain shots.

Loftur Gudmundsson (no relation to Ágúst) forms a bridge between the silent and sound periods in Icelandic film history. In 1923 he made **The Adventures of Jón and Gvendur**, a short on 35mm, but then withdrew from the fray until 1948, when he resurrected some documentary footage he had shot on 16mm in 1924 and edited it into the country's first colour talkie, **Between Mountain and Shore** (Milli fjalls og fjöru).

This 19th century story is again reminiscent of *The Outlaw and his Wife*, describing the romance between Ingólf, son of an impoverished farmer, and a wealthy merchant's daughter. Some heads of slaughtered sheep are discovered, and the young man is arrested and flung into an open-air wooden cage. The real thieves are caught red-handed soon afterwards as they prepare to escape in a boat laden with more sheep (next to fish, Iceland's most precious living commodity). The film suggests that the merchant takes sides with the poor, which was certainly not always the case in real life, although *Between Mountain and Shore* was based on a true incident. Loftur may have been inspired to return to the cinema by the

activities of the British and Americans who swarmed over Iceland in the postwar years, photographing everything in sight with their 8mm cameras. Icelanders were stunned to find that their country was something that could be filmed.

The director whose work must have made the most impact on the earliest childhood memories of today's senior film-makers was Óskar Gíslason. Responding to the spirit of national pride in the arts that flowed from the achievement of independence from Denmark in 1944, Óskar could turn his hand to documentaries as well as dramas, to comedy as well as mime. **The Great Látrabjarg Sea Rescue** (Björgunarafrekid vid Látrabjarg, 1949) described the saving of life in terrible weather, while **The Bakka Brothers in Reykjavik** (Reykjavíkuraevintýri Bakkabraedra, 1951) was an all-out farce in the Marx Brothers tradition.

His most often-revived work was the feature-length fantasy adventure about children, **The Last Farm in the Valley** (Sílasti baerinn í dalnum, 1950). The film, shot in colour on 16mm, is out of focus, badly synched, and yet rather charming, with the flavour of the 1920's rather than the 1950's. Young Berg and his sister Sólrún enjoy their childhood on a remote smallholding, playing with the horse, the cow and their dog. But one day a stranger arrives at the farm, and soon reveals himself as a malevolent troll; Berg sees him move a mighty boulder, hammer out a series of horseshoes, and bend a red-hot bar with his bare hands. Berg enlists the unexpected aid of a dwarf troll who materialises beside the local brook, and proceeds to outwit the evil one - with the additional help of a fairy queen, who lives beneath the mountainside.

The film dallies too long on its special effects, and on set-pieces like the dance of the nymphs, but it remains interesting for the glimpses it gives us of farming life, and for the implicit belief in supernatural forces living a parallel existence beneath the hills and streams of rural Iceland.

Four years later, Óskar made **The New Role** (Nýtt hlutverk), the story of an old harbour worker who has nothing to do when he retires. Mixing documentary and dramatic scenes (the film opens with the old man attending his wife's burial), **The New Role** gives a lively impression of the Icelandic herring fishing tradition.

The critic Ingólfur Margeirsson has also pointed out the significance of two other directors of the period: Ásgeir Long and Ósvaldur Knudsen. "Long is

remembered for a number of children's films, while Knudsen remains the pioneer of Icelandic documentaries, primarily on the subject of volcanic eruptions." Visitors can view Knudsen's films every day during the tourist season, at a small cinema near Hotel Holt in Reykjavik. Indridi Thorsteinsson would provide the story for the first Icelandic film of the new wave (*Land and sons*), but already in 1962 his novel **The Girl Gógó** (*Sjötíu og níu á stöðinni*) was made into a successful film by the Dane, Erik Balling. Indridi's feeling for the pulse of pastoral life is evident in this story of a young man, Ragnar, who quits his family farm and becomes a cab driver in Reykjavik, selling liquor from his car window in the hope of getting rich. The city beckons with its promise of money, excitement and romance, but the appeal of the countryside in the end proves stronger.

Reynir Oddsson, later to make his name with the offbeat *Story of a Crime* (see Chapter 9), directed a three-hour, dramatised documentary about the war years entitled **The Occupation Years** (*Hernámsárin*, 1967) and using material from British American and Norwegian sources. A young Helgi Skúlason spoke some of the commentary, and Loftur Gudmundsson appeared before the cameras for once.

In the same year, the Danish director Gabriel Axel released **The Red Mantle** (*Den røde kappe*), which he had shot on location on the southern shores of Iceland. Spectacular in colour and scope, and sporting an impressive cast (Gunnar Björnstrand, Eva Dahlbeck), *The Red Mantle* sought to recapture the spirit of 11th century Iceland. Its romantic leads, however, were just too risible for belief and this co-production is an early example of the dangers of mixing actors from various nations.

The Icelandic co-producer of *The Red Mantle*, Edda Film, had earlier participated in a more successful venture - **Salka Valka**, based on the novel of fishing village life by Halldór Laxness and directed with magnificent brio by the Swede, Arne Mattsson, in 1954.

In April 1979, the Icelandic Film Fund was established. Its initial budget for production amounted to a paltry 300,000 krónur (or less than \$50,000 in the money of the day). This sum did, though, trigger a release of cinematic energy unequalled in the Nordic region since the launch of the Swedish Film Institute in 1963. Independent producers came forward; directors invested their salaries and arranged leasing of their films to the

country's various movie theatres (there is still no distribution system as such in Iceland). Technicians performed more than one chore. Actors came from the streets and hills as well as from the stage.

By the late 1970's, several of Iceland's brightest young artists were coming home from studies abroad and joined with friends who had been working in television (the first broadcast had taken place in 1966). They rejected the easy option - the cloning of the Hollywood commercial movie - and instead brought their talents to bear on local subjects, local traditions, and local cultural impulses. Although the Icelandic sagas have inspired three or four films during the past decade, the emphasis has been on modern topics, on themes that spring without affectation from the everyday lives and concerns of Icelanders. As Thráinn Bertelsson has said, "If the Icelandic cinema was to succeed, we knew we had to produce films that could not be made anywhere else."

Knútur Hallsson, by all accounts the benevolent godfather of Icelandic cinema, Gudbrandur Gíslason, Thorsteinn Jónsson, and Bryndís Schram have served as director of the Icelandic Film Fund. That role has developed dramatically during the past fifteen years. The board of the Fund consists of five individuals, representing the various sectors of the industry, and each elected for a four-year term. production subsidies are dispensed by a three-person committee (elected for a single year, although some members remain for longer than that). Prestige projects manifesting artistic merit seem inevitably to please the committee, which is not necessarily qualified to judge production values or the quality of a screenplay. The director of the Fund wields no real power as such, but can help to find ways for local producers to contact their peers abroad, to tap sources of support that might otherwise appear out of reach (e.g. the European Media projects). The director seeks extra money wherever it can be found. For example, Thorsteinn helped finance an additional film (*As in Heaven*) in 1991, the so-called Nordic Co-Production Year, when central Nordic funds could be trapped. The Oscar nomination for *Children of Nature* in 1992 helped to raise more money from government sources.

In its infancy, the Fund could offer scant help to most producers on the island. Kristín Jóhannesdóttir remembers pestering Knútur every second day to raise money for her first film, *Rainbow's End*, in 1982. She ended

by getting around 10% of the minuscule budget from the Fund. "It's a very perilous and very awkward situation, being for the most part our own producers here," says Kristín. By the mid 1980's, a crisis was imminent, with television refusing to join hands with the fledgling national cinema and the Icelandic Film Fund handicapped by an austere government who chopped the subsidies virtually in half. Little by little the situation stabilised, and in 1984 the imposition of VAT on all cinema tickets provided the Fund with a steady source of income. The opening of a second TV channel in 1986 also gave local film-makers more chance to hone their craft on documentaries and commercials as well as on TV movies.

Today the Fund is inundated with requests from foreign festivals to screen Icelandic films, and agrees to make an English subtitled print of each new film. As well as promoting the new releases it must, through the Icelandic Film Archive, preserve the heritage of the past. Its total annual budget presently runs at 100 million krónur [Thorfinnur: this must be updated!!].

2

The Breakthrough

As befits a land of individualists, the two primary figures in the renaissance of Icelandic film were as far apart as chalk and cheese: Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, fierce, courageous, and voluble; and Ágúst Gudmundsson,

well-mannered, sensitive, possessed of an ironic sense of humour akin to the British.

Their first feature films appeared within three months of each other in 1980: Ágúst's **Land and Sons** (Land og synir) in February, and Hrafn's **Father's Estate** (Ódal fedranna) in May. One cannot really claim pole position for Ágúst, since Hrafn's film was already in pre-production when Land and Sons began shooting.

Indridi G. Thorsteinsson's novels cover a wide range, both in period and theme. North of War, describing Iceland during the British "occupation" of the early 1940's, would be too expensive to make into a film without heavy overseas investment. But in 1979, Indridi and a television producer, Jón Hermannsson, discussed the idea of bringing Land and Sons to the screen.

Jón (a veteran of the very first days of Icelandic TV in the mid-1960's) and Indridi had already made a documentary on old-time farming, for the 1.000th anniversary of Iceland in 1974, and had established a production company, Ís-Film. Jón had also worked with Ágúst on a TV film, A Little Swelling, and felt that here was someone with the sensitivity to film Land and Sons. For his part, Ágúst had studied at the National Film School in Britain, receiving his diploma in 1977. Colin Young, founder and director of the School, selected his few, privileged students almost on instinct in those days. He like Ágúst's application in the form of a script entitled Love in a Supermarket, part of which was storyboarded with photographs. Ágúst recalls: "I was at the time acting in the City Theatre in Reykjavik (under our current President, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir), had the leading role in a children's play and got some of my fellow actors to pose for the pictures."

Raising the money for Land and Sons proved to be a stiff challenge, as it was for Hrafn's Father's Estate. On paper, a Film Fund existed. It was administered by a three-man committee, headed by Knútur Hallsson, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Culture. Much is owed by the fledgling Icelandic film industry to the enthusiasm and persistence of Knútur during the first decade. This first successful application for a government subsidy was probably helped as much by the reputation of Indridi Thorsteinsson as a novelist as it was by the eloquence of Jón Hermannsson's application.

Indridi was adamant in wanting Ágúst to write the screenplay without any interference from him. "He stood by his work," recalls the director, "with

the exception of his own sermon which he rewrote to great effect. I got him to appear as the local minister, a role that he was to repeat in Fridrik Thór's Movie Days, and that totals all the acting he has done in his life.

Made on the proverbial shoestring (around \$70,000), Land and Sons sold some 110,000 tickets in Iceland. To put this fact in perspective, it is as though Titanic had racked up 90 million admissions in the United States. "I was confident that we would attract 70,000 spectators," says Jón Hermannsson, while the others on the team felt that only 30,000-40,000 would come. "Jón pioneered the idea of charging higher prices for an Icelandic feature film, equating the experience and sense of occasion with a visit to the theatre. So Icelanders paid about two-and-a-half times as much as they would for a regular film - and did so gladly. Almost half the attendance came from the provinces; old folks' homes emptied as the pensioners turned out to see Ágúst's work. The film had been shot in Dalvík, and in nearby Akureyri the local cinema-owner grew irritable because the interminable popularity of Land and Sons caused a huge backlog of films to build up.

Ágúst himself had brought the prints from the lab in London to Reykjavík. "I almost missed the last flight before the premiere, and had to fly first to Luxembourg in order to catch a plane to Iceland," he remembers. "Sitting in the cinema with 750 guests gave me a tremendous kick. The people in the audience were not used to seeing films in their mother tongue on the big screen and somehow I could feel that the film was getting to them.

Indridi's story unfolds in 1937, when Iceland lay in the grip of poverty. Reykjavík has less than 50,000 inhabitants (compared to 100,000 today), and a majority of Icelanders still lived on the country's 4,000 farms. So Land and Sons has the tang of a pastoral Western. The smallholding on the lush hillside evokes Shane, but in place of marauding cattle barons there is penury and privation. Young Einar, introspective and truculent, wants to move to Reykjavík, abandoning the family arm. His father, Ólaf, who does not even possess a clock scorns the notion of selling up: "That's what everyone thinks will solve the financial crisis." To which Einar's response is that "our inheritance remains economic crisis and diseased sheep." It is certainly true that during the 1930's, scores of bankrupt smallholders fled towards the bigger towns, and especially Reykjavík.

By coincidence rather than intention, both *Land and Sons* and *Father's Estate* deal with the same issues: the relationship between the generations, and the migration from country to town.

The screenplay sparkles with gentle lyricism. When Einar's father meets an old friend who has become rich in the distant world beyond the mountains, he tells him wistfully, "We wait like birds in the wilderness." There's irony rather than cynicism in a neighbouring farmer's comment: "You shoot yourself or you get morose. Where's that bottle?" Liquor may not be so evident in the Icelandic cinema as it is in the Finnish, but it lurks like a salve in the background - witness the scene in the shelters on the fells, where local farmers drink and sing, and kip and squabble.

John Ford would have liked the tone of this film, in particular the dance sequence, and the funeral service, with its simple speech about Ólaf, "born in 1867 and lived in Gillsback all his life," and the tinny sound of a bell tolling in the white-walled, red-roofed church in a lush valley fringed with mist. *Hrafn's Father's Estate* opens in similar vein, with a dead man being extolled for his patriotism, as someone who believed in, and fought for, Iceland, but *Land and Sons* is set during the Depression, long before the co-operative movement had lost its momentum.

Death haunts the film. Einar discovers his father lying dead beneath a sheet in the hospital, and gazes out over the nearby lake in a remarkable image of desolation. When he tells the neighbour's daughter, Margaret, that his father has passed away, she takes his hands in silence, and rests her head alongside his in a gesture of sympathy and affection. After selling the farm, Einar digs a huge grave as the sun sinks behind the mountains. Next morning he takes his beloved horse, "White Glider," up the hillside and shoots him, looking the animal in the eyes for a last long moment as he musters courage to pull the trigger. Yet he cannot bring himself to kill his dog, giving it instead to the owner of the guesthouse where he stays overnight while awaiting the bus to Reykjavík.

The mood of studied melancholy emerges from Ágúst's sense of the elements and from Sigurdur Sverrir Pálsson's photography of the countryside. Shots of the hay being raked into piles, of horses gathering on the open, snowswept fells bring man and nature together in a symbiotic continuum. When Ólaf succumbs to a heart attack while working in the

fields, he is viewed from a distance, his body seeming to merge with the grass, ready to return to the soil.

Most poignant of all is the final scene, with Einar realising that Margaret has failed to join him for the journey south. He mounts the bus, and it lurches off along the remote, winding road in an image of guarded hope.

Land and Sons manages both to address tragic issues, and to inspire its audience with a cathartic experience. It never sinks into a morass of gloom. Hints of humour save many a scene, as does the jazz-cum-classical music of Gunnar Reynir Sveinsson - woodwind for the scenes of hay-making, choral singing over shots of an open-air sheep sale, and again for the final moments as Einar departs by bus. Ágúst's approach is unostentatious, allowing the theme to percolate into the viewer's subconscious, so that images and morsels of dialogue linger long after the film has ended.

Hrafn's *Father's Estate* reflects a more intense personal experience than Ágúst's film. Hrafn wrote it first as a novel, and then as a stage play; neither was accepted for publication or performance. The fundamental idea - that of a young man breaking away from his rural home and trying to establish himself in the city - stemmed from the summer holidays that Hrafn, like almost all Reykjavík youngsters of his generation, spent on the farms of the Icelandic interior. "I was sent by my parents to ten different farms," he recalls, "working for my keep through the summer." He witnessed the film's various incidents on more than one occasion, and another memory of those years he reserved for a later film, *The Sacred Mound* (see Chapter 7).

While Ágúst learned his craft in England, Hrafn enrolled first at the University of Stockholm (studying theatre and cinema), and then, from 1973 to 1975, at the Swedish Film School. From the start, he produced a flow of poetry, novels, and plays. All his work, and in particular his films, boils with a restless energy like the huge hot-water spring, Geysir, that figures in his second feature, *Inter Nos*.

Just as Ágúst found a friend and trusty producer in Jón Hermannsson, so Hrafn forged a lasting partnership with the Swede, Bo Jonsson, who ran the aptly named Viking film in Stockholm. "I met him at the Nordic House in Reykjavík in the late 1970's," says Hrafn. "He saw a film I'd made for Icelandic TV, entitled *The Crimson Sunset*, and he urged me to make a

feature based on my personal experiences. He liked the sound of Father's Estate when I told him the story. So, I went ahead and did some filming off my own bat. When Bo saw the rushes at the lab in Stockholm, he liked them so much that he paid the lab's invoice!"

Father's Estate is painted with broad, aggressive, angry brush strokes. The film opens at a wake. Hafsteinn, a smallholder, has died and his family has gathered for the occasion. Helgi, the elder of two brothers, comes from Reykjavík where he has been studying law; Stefán is the younger brother who people expect to take over the farm and its responsibilities. Their sister is retarded and relies on the mother, Guðrún, for support. After the funeral, the local Member of Parliament delivers a mealy-mouthed oration in praise of his late friend and colleague. "His motto was 'All for Iceland,' and he believed in a living countryside." Hafsteinn, like the MP, had been a founding member of the "Young League" and a staunch supporter of the Agrarian Party and the Co-operative movement. (These visits from the MP are important to the farming community, as we see also in Thorsteinn Jónsson's Dot Dot Comma Dash.)

When Helgi abruptly quits the room in the midst of the MP's homily, he is followed by young Stefán, and the brothers argue outside about the truth of the matter. "Dad was a romantic fool who was exploited," claims Helgi. He wants his mother to sell up and move south to the city. But selling up would not even pay off the farm's debts.

In one of those unexpected plot twists that mark Hrafn's cinema, Helgi drinks too much, climbs the roof of the farm, and suffers concussion and paralysis from an ensuing fall. Just as our attention shifts from Anna to Claudia in *L'avventura*, and from Marion to Norman in *Psycho*, so we must now focus on Stefán's quest for maturity. Coming to Reykjavík, he learns that his brother owed three months' rent on his apartment; back home, he inherits the financial mess left by his father. The Co-op chairman proves to be both coward and swindler, inveigling Guðrún to dispose of a 25-year lease on fishing rights on the farm, but then going bankrupt before he can pay over the money.

So the burden of debt and despair proves too much for Stefán to bear. His sister has been raped by a halfwit farmhand and is now pregnant, his brother lies comatose in hospital, and his dream of high school education evaporates. In an uncharacteristically headstrong gesture, he steals the Co-

op chairman's car and crashes it. So, unlike Einar in *Land and Sons*, Stefán cannot leave for Reykjavík; instead, the final shots of the film show the bus departing without him. Like his late father, Stefán too has been exploited and must remain a prisoner of the "ancestral estate."

Already in this first feature, Hrafn's instinctive skill as a director manifests itself in the cuts from Helgi's falling off the roof, to his mother's holding her head in despair, to a long close-up of a hospital drip beside Helgi's bed. Snorri Thórisson's cinematography does not match the luminous, pastel beauty of Sigurdur Sverrir's in *Land and Sons*, but like so many talents involved in these two path-blazing films, Snorri has gone on to better things, poised in 1994 to produce and photograph *Agnes* for director Egill Edvardsson. Jakob Thór Einarsson, who plays the role of Stefán in *Father's Estate*, matured into a fine actor in *The Raven Flies* just four years later.

Both *Land and Sons* and *Father's Estate* present a world in which the farmer's life is regarded by many city-dwellers as a sentence of death, and where country folk treat visitors from the capital with profound suspicion (two young women passing in a car must be "whores from Reykjavík," sneer some farm girls in *Father's Estate*).

Although *Father's Estate* did not attract such large crowds as *Land and Sons*, it stirred even more controversy, because of its contemporary context. Together, the two films jump-started the new Icelandic cinema. *Story of a Crime* (see Chapter 9), may have been the "first" new film (in 1977), but *Ágúst* and *Hrafn* took a more radical view of the country and the environment. When the following year, both Thráinn Bertelsson and Thorsteinn Jónsson made their debut, the future seemed assured. As with the Czechs in the 1960's, the Australians and New Zealanders in the 1970's, the Chinese "Fifth Generation" in the 1980's and the Iranians in the 1990's, success grew from a fierce desire on the part of several directors simultaneously to make films in a national idiom.

3

Living History

Few Icelandic filmmakers have dared to enter the world of the sagas, that immense treasury of medieval literature that has no equal in European history.

The sagas, most written in the 13th and 14th centuries, still grip a modern reader with the same beguiling force as a good thriller or detective story. At a first reading, they may present us with a confusing succession of characters, along with their full names, their kin and domicile. Once the story begins, however, the pace quickens to a gallop. A smattering of dialogue punctuates the narrative, and people address each other in a peremptory, assertive manner. Ágúst Gudmundsson writes that "some of the best sagas are told with surprisingly little personal involvement on the part of the 'author.' They are just precise, almost detached descriptions of the action, spiced with some memorable one-liners from the heroes. "Death and bloodshed occur on every page, and are recorded with dry, perfunctory efficiency. Yet paradoxically, an awareness of the laws of the island influences even the most simple of homesteaders, rather as the concept of chivalry sustained the continental European court. As Thor Vilhjalmsón has noted, "The saga writers were at their peak highly conscious artists, steeped in the cosmopolitan culture of their day, often in direct contact with the noblest spiritual centres of Medieval and Renaissance culture in the Christian world, and even reaching the Moslem one."

Icelanders in this medieval period had confidence in the law and in the decisions achieved at the National Assembly (the Althing, founded circa AD 930) during the summer months. A slighted woman could threaten her husband with divorce before witnesses; or plunge a dagger without hesitation into her husband's sworn enemy, sure in the knowledge that violence against her sex was regarded as the ultimate sin in medieval Iceland.

The sagas, like the myths of ancient Greece or the Hollywood Western, constitute a genre, with recurrent tokens and motifs. The precipitous steles and rocky outcrops remind us of the buttes in Monument Valley and the significance of fire and blood and water mark nearly every page. No saga is complete without a reference to sorcery and the supernatural, or an outbreak of arson, or a posse of horsemen in pursuit of an enemy, or to the capricious weather on Iceland. Underpinning every saga is the sense of families seeking security in a new and often-hostile land, which contributed in part to the frequency of arranged marriages.

For every director who is tempted, there is another who rejects the idea of Icelandic cinema being associated with the "cliché" of the saga and its epic form. Then there is the economic factor: historical epics are expensive to dress, design and shoot.

The example of Gabriel Axel's pan-Nordic production of *The Red Mantle* (see Introduction), with its babel of actors from different nations and its risible dialogue, deterred everyone until Ágúst Gudmundsson, flush with the prospective triumph of *Land and Sons*, embarked on a screen version of *Gísli's Saga*. Entitled **Outlaw** (*Útlaginn*, 1981), the film lost almost as much as *Land and Sons* had gained. Jón Hermannsson, the producer, had secured only a fraction of the total budget from the Icelandic Film Fund. With every week, the costs mounted, and only the raging inflation in Iceland (which virtually doubled the level of anticipated foreign income!) protected Jón and his colleagues from bankruptcy.

Outlaw was shot in a large garage in Reykjavík, which may explain the murky lighting, and on location in Hítardalur, Hergilsey and Bardaströnd. If the film has not reached the large audience it deserves outside Iceland, the reason may lie in Ágúst's meticulous adherence to the detail of the saga. *Outlaw* opens with a flurry of characters being presented to the audience, their names and faces are all too alike, and we are quickly tempted to forget about everyone save Gísli, who becomes embroiled in a blood feud within his own family. His sworn blood brother, Vésteinn, is murdered by night, and Gísli kills his brother-in-law who he believes to be the culprit. From this point he is swept off his feet by a wave of suspicion and intrigue. He flees into the mountains, as Berg-Ejvind did so long ago in Jóhann Sigurjónsson's play and Victor Sjöström's classic film, *The Outlaw and his Wife*.

Ágúst perceived the saga of Gísli as concerning ordinary people, dwelling on small farms in a tiny valley in the west of Iceland. "Their greatness or smallness lay in their heroic or unheroic deeds," he says. "I didn't want the protagonist to be an unapproachable superhero. He had to be a man of flesh and blood. The saga indicates that he was sometimes frightened and he was definitely always on the run." Outlaw endows Gísli with more courage than he possessed in the original saga. In Ágúst's screenplay, he makes an heroic final stand in the mountains, killing several men before plunging to his death from a high rock. Another embellishment stems from the more celebrated Njal's Saga, in which three Norns of Fate weave a bloody web before a great battle in Ireland. In Outlaw they appear to Gísli in his dreams, in the form of his wife, his evil sister, and his sister-in-law, "weaving his fate."

The film bristles with small-scale scenes and symbols that conjure up the nature of life in saga times. A simple burial beside a tarn that could have strayed from a John Ford movie, or Thorgrim's funeral pyre ablaze in the evening light of the fjord. A sorcerer slithering to his death in a hot-spring area, with sulphurous smoke engulfing him and his pursuers. The family and their thralls playing a primitive form of ice-hockey, or Gísli's wife refusing to disclose his whereabouts even as she is ducked in icy water by their pursuers.

Áskell Másson's music tries to embody the negative values that emerge from this family struggle, but its turgid chords deny the film any hint of idealism or potential liberty. The facial similarities of the men may be authentic (and indeed is turned to his advantage by Gísli in more than one crisis), but to the audience it is perplexing, Sigurdur Sverrir Pálsson's photography works best in outdoor scenes, and the interiors in Outlaw remain its weakest element. Had Ágúst made the film ten years later, it might have been more of a satisfying whole.

Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, unlike Ágúst, sought at once to impose a formal texture in his Viking films, what the Icelanders might term *lygisögur* (fictitious sagas), and to present medieval life in all its natural brutishness. "We looked at The Red Mantle and Outlaw and saw them repeating the mistakes of Hollywood, with the Vikings wearing dyed blonde hair and so

on," maintains Hrafn. "In my films you can smell the grease and you believe that these people really belong to their surroundings."

Hrafn himself departed from the spirit of the sagas, however, by introducing an epic dimension inspired more by Akira Kurosawa and Sergio Leone than by the anonymous writers of the middle Ages. This explains why his first Viking film, **When the Raven Flies** (Hrafninn flýgur, 1984) attracted such interest both within and beyond Scandinavia. It transcended the narrow confines of a national literary heritage and told a first-class story in bloodthirsty terms.

When the Raven Flies was shot in two main locations on the southern coast of Iceland, at Vík and near Eyvindarhólar. The barbarous shore-line, with breakers crashing over the dark, volcanic shingle and monstrous cliffs surging skywards, give the tale the dimensions of a Western, which in view of Hrafn's admiration for Leone, might be titled more aptly, *Once Upon a Time in the North*.

"Making that film was like a military campaign," said Hrafn afterwards. "It was madness. You gamble everything, your physical and mental well-being, all your money, to make a film. In the end it was like being cast ashore in a storm; you don't give a damn what happens to the ship, even whether or not it's smashed on the rocks." At times chaos threatened the film; the handler who was meant to give drugs to the ravens to make them docile ended up by taking the drugs himself! By the time of the premiere, he recalls, "I hated the film so much that I hoped someone would burn it so I could get the insurance!"

A small Irish boy, Gest, witnesses the kidnap of his sister and the horrific murder of his parents by two Norwegian Viking brothers, Thór and Erik. When he grows up, Gest resolves to take his revenge, and travels to Iceland to track down the killers. His sister stands between these two men: Thór the chieftain who ravished her (father of her now beloved son), and her brother who has also learned to love and who now wants to rescue her and avenge their parents' death. The Irish connection is not fanciful: many of the heroes of the sagas, such as Melkorka and Kjartan, have Gaelic names, suggesting that the Vikings had frequented the British Isles and blended their blood with that of the Celtic peoples.

As philosophy, *When the Raven Flies* may be closer to Conan the Barbarian than to Njal's or any other saga, yet despite its moments of blood

and thunder, Hrafn's film carries a profoundly pacifist message. Gest wants to bury his weapons once vengeance has been accomplished, but his young nephew digs them up again, assuming the mantle of responsibility for survival in a brutish environment. This is faithful to the spirit of the sagas: Brodd-Helgi in the *Vapnfjord Men*, for example, was only twelve years old when he first killed a man. The short sentences of the saga form are transmuted here into terse, abbreviated sequences and ejaculations of dialogue.

Hrafn aroused controversy with his idiosyncratic touches, such as the lethal metal bolts that Gest uses to despatch his victims, and the repellent leather mask worn by Thór that belongs more to the closet of Hannibal Lecter than to the villages of medieval Iceland. The soundtrack provides some of the liveliest moments of the film, teeming with the sibilant whir of arrows and the metallic resonance of clashing knives, all backed by orgasmic gasping and panting. Yet it is difficult to exaggerate when evoking the spirit of the sagas. Not even the audacious Hrafn has filmed a scene like the one in *Erik the Red* where Freyðís, menaced by Indians on the northwest coast of Canada, "pulled out her breasts from under her cloths and slapped the naked sword on them, at which the Skraelings [Indians] took fright, and ran off to their boats and rowed away."

Hrafn's film (and its sequel, *The Shadow of the Raven*) differs from Ágúst's concept of the medieval world in two important respects. The characters are resolutely primitive and outlandish; the acting of Helgi Skúlason and Jakob Thór Einarsson may have "camp" overtones, but it overwhelms the screen, forcing the audience to take sides in a life-or-death struggle. Secondly, Hrafn emphasises the crucial struggle between paganism and Christianity for social dominance in Iceland in the first centuries of settlement. This adds a spiritual tension to the drama that we do not find in *Outlaw*.

Gest and his sister cherish the fledgling religion of their native Ireland, but Gest knows how to exploit his foe's dependence upon pagan belief. Hidden in the lee of a mountainside, Thór's temple houses totems and statuettes that sustain him in time of battle. They cannot frighten Gest, however, who has no compunction in handling and scorning these heathen effigies. When, after vanquishing Thór and his brother, Gest gives his sister their father's manuscripts, he declares that "the pen will replace the sword." It is Hrafn's

way of equating Christianity with civilisation and paganism with bloodshed, as well as presaging the phenomenon of the sagas as literature - or it was the legacy of Irish monks and scribes that created that phenomenon.

The Shadow of the Raven (Í skugga hrafnsins, 1988) continues in the same vein, although the date specified at the outset is AD 1077, and the influence is perhaps more that of Ingmar Bergman than of Clint Eastwood. Like the Knight in *The Seventh Seal*, Trausti returns with his bedraggled crew after ten years' absence. He has been studying in Norway for the priesthood, and brings with him an Italian painter to create the altar-pieces for the church he will establish in his native community.

In the admirable opening sequence, set once again beside an anxious sea, Hrafn establishes that clash between the gentility of Christian dogma and the dictates of life in a harsh environment. As Trausti's boat approaches home, a dead whale is discovered on the beach. A fight breaks out over this unexpected gift from the deep, for a whale's carcass can provide nourishment for a village for months - and procedures for establishing ownership of stranded whales were already codified in 1281! As men struggle on and around the monstrous creature, the Italian covers with his hand the face of Jesus on one of the paintings he carries with him, as though to shield the innocent faith from the reality of violence.

Trausti soon becomes infatuated with Ísól (played with forthright conviction by the director's sister, Tinna Gunnlaugsdóttir) and finds his faith under threat in another memorable scene. Ísól, believing him to have killed her father, attacks Trausti in a small church. They struggle, Trausti disarms her, and starts kissing her. Trausti may be compassionate when it comes to slaying an opponent in a duel, but he cheerfully flouts the taboos of his religion where sex is concerned. To quote one of the film's pithiest lines: "Most of us are still completely heathen. We are only Christian when needs be."

And vice versa. Pursued by his enemies and presumed killed in a blaze at the farm, Trausti survives first by hiding in a vat of milk and then by hiding in a pagan temple and donning the ferocious mask worn by Thór in *When the Raven Flies*. Conversely, the dastardly Bishop and his followers intone their prayers around a Crucifix, but behave like barbarians as they hunt down their quarry. Indeed at the end of the film the church atop the hill is

set on fire by Trausti's most deadly opponent, Sigrid, who immolates herself in the flames. Hrafn offers a final image of Ísól's surviving daughter gazing at an altar-piece that speaks of love and kindness.

Although Hrafn's films may be pseudo-sagas, they pay homage to the genre in detail as well as concept. A longboat devoured by flames against the twilight waters of a fjord in *The shadow of the Raven*, or a bath-house in which men are suddenly boiled alive: these are images that mirror the settlers' rude yet inventive way of life.

In both these Viking films, Hrafn displays an assurance that carries his vision intact through one chaotic climax after another. His eye for composition enhances every scene. A favourite expedient places a character in close-up at the side of the frame, gazing out at riders in the distance. In *The Shadow of the Raven*, brilliant use is made of an authentic stone bridge rearing above a waterfall, so that it symbolises the passage between good and evil, past and present. There are scarcely any mid-shots. We see either an individual in close-up, or as a distant figure in the landscape.

Although the second film lacks the taut narrative line of *When the Raven Flies*, its sense of periods is no less persuasive. Animal skins serve as windows in the mud-and-turf dwellings, and the reconstruction of an outdoor meeting of the National Assembly (Althing) is extremely interesting. As always in Hrafn's work, ancient or modern, the human faces jut from the screen like fugitives from Bosch or Brueghel. The late Helgi Skúlason, dominant in both films, studied a video of ravens' behaviour before shooting commenced. "After a while," recalls Hrafn, "he started cocking his head this way and that, just like the bird!" Helgi, for his part, liked to express emotions through his features rather than through dialogue. Hrafn, he said, "tends to use too many words in his screenplays and so prior to shooting we met several times, and I told him, 'Let me think this sentence, not speak it.'"

The Shadow of the Raven ran to three hours in its first fine cut. Hrafn showed it to Ingrid Dahlberg, head of drama at Swedish Television and one of the co-producers, and she liked it in that version. But consensus prevailed and the film emerged at a breathless 120 minutes. It did not share the favour enjoyed by *When the Raven Flies*, which had won Hrafn the Gold Bug for Best Direction at the annual Swedish film awards and given

him an abrasive, coarse-cut version of Ivar-Lo Johannsson's story, *The Headsman and the Harlot*.

The less said the better about Hrafn's third excursion into Viking lore. Produced by the Norwegian production house, Filmeffekt, **The White Viking** (Hvíti víkingurinn, 1991) deals with the fearsome clash between Norway's efforts to convert Iceland to Christianity, and the islanders' refusal to abandon their pagan beliefs. "The title," says Hrafn, "is drawn from an original misconception held by some Vikings, that Jesus was a kind of white-clad Viking, who warred with the dark forces of paganism. His cross was often literally imagined as being a weapon, something like a mixture between an axe and a sword!" But the film fails to hold together, and its spectacular set-pieces lack force and motivation. "The White Viking should have been the story of Embla, the young woman going to a monastery, but the Norwegian producers loved the idea of huge scenes, and recut the film behind my back." The personality of seventeen-year-old Embla appeals to Hrafn because she embodies the vehemence of medieval Nordic women. That female forcefulness is perhaps the one common factor linking all of Hrafn's Viking films, *Ágúst's Outlaw*, and the original sagas themselves.

In 1999, Hrafn released what might be his most ambitious historical epic to date. *The Lord of Darkness (or Witchcraft, or Flames of Paradise)* is set in the 17th Century, and focuses on the contemporary belief in forces of evil and black magic. Shot during the harshest months of the Icelandic winter, the film captures the sheer difficulty of surviving in a hostile climate in primitive times. Always intrigued by the pictorial elements of his work, Hrafn has collaborated on this occasion with the renowned Norwegian painter, Odd Nerdrum, in an attempt to give a Rembrandtesque look and feel to the production. A promising young priest who yearns to conquer the Devil and establish the rule of God on earth is sent to a parish in a remote part of northwest Iceland, but at a price: he must marry an older woman. The film opens with the man, now in old age, being brought before the local Bishop; he has written a confession, alongside some some pornographic drawings... It's a tale ideally suited to the talents of Hrafn Gunnlaugsson!

The theme of would-be female emancipation emerges like a cry of defiance from **Agnes** (1996). This story (based on fact) of the last woman to be

executed in Iceland rises above sword-and-sorcery conventions to give us a memorable portrait of female courage on a par with Alf Sjöberg's Swedish classic, *Only a Mother*.

Natan (Baltasar Kormákur) and Agnes (María Ellingsen) play out an extraordinary *amour fou*, he the homeopathic healer at odds with the local sheriff, and she the servant-girl bent on drinking life's cup to the full. Here, in northern Iceland in the year 1828, a man is branded as a sorcerer if he allows himself even to think. "Narrow-mindedness and ignorance are killing this country," says the charismatic Natan, as he is outlawed after helping to save the wife and child of the county sheriff during labour. Agnes is fascinated by Natan's sloe-eyed arrogance, and allows herself to be dragged into a life of crime and cruelty. Their love scenes together have a tangible power and an uninhibited erotic fulfilment seldom seen on the Nordic screen.

But the sheriff, who has himself long coveted Agnes, enjoys his revenge at last, when he has Agnes executed for the murder of Natan (who in fact has died in a fire after a struggle with the husband of a new mistress). Director Egill Edvardsson creates a splendid setting for this climactic sequence. Agnes is led deep beneath the earth, into a huge vaulted cave, with a hole giving on to the sky. She is beheaded in this grotesque, church-like chamber while – in a real church – her little daughter lights a candle and prays for her mother. The cross-cutting, like the knelling of some dreadful bell, recalls the end of *The Godfather* in its obscene conjunction of the sacred and the profane. Refusing to the end to accept authority, Agnes asks her executioner (Nathan's younger brother) to behead her as she gazes up beyond him to the sunstruck sky.

Apart from one truly appalling scene of the lovers bathing nude in a sulphur spring, *Agnes* is a persuasive and engrossing achievement. The life of agrarian toil and the constant tussle for power at every level of a primitive society are captured in broad, confident strokes by Egill and his team, while the Mahlerian score by rock musician Gunnar Thórdarsson lends the saga of lust and savagery a kind of grandeur in keeping with the landscape. Nor is Agnes depicted as a slaughtered innocent. Her selfishness runs like a filigree through the drama, and her "farming out" of her daughter to the local priest smacks of modern life.

One of the most assured films of recent years resurrects an artistic giant in modern Icelandic history. Jón Leifs (1899-1968) produced a considerable output of orchestral and instrumental music. Its aggressive, yet often poignant masculinity recalls Shostakovich, but also the lyrical intensity of Sibelius. These contradictory traits are reflected in the life of the composer himself. His first wife, Annie, came from a German Jewish family and established herself as a pianist during the 1930's. Leifs found his own work recognised by German intelligentsia, but with the rise of Nazism his family's security became increasingly precarious. Refusing at first to compromise with the Third Reich, Leifs returns to his native Reykjavik. Then, concerned for the safety of Annie and their two young daughters, and spurned by his contemporaries and even the members of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, he decides to go back to Nazi Germany. There he must make personal and professional decisions that will wreck his life...

The paradox of Leifs, both the man and his music, lies at the heart of Hilmar Oddsson's **Tears of Stone** (1995). Most of the film unfolds in Germany, although the few sequences in Iceland are indelibly captured by the photography of Slawomir Idziak, with Leifs trudging along the dark volcanic sand, the rumbling, agitated sea his ideal muse. Hilmar cuts, memorably, from a train plunging through mist to a close-up of Geysir erupting and Leifs eating cheerfully in the snow. Ponies dash here and there through the icy fields as the music surges on the soundtrack.

Indeed, the direction is imaginative at every turn. Elaborate, snaking camera movements follow the characters from room to room, the claustrophobic mood enhanced by means of reflections in windows, and the use of dark, mysterious recesses in each set. Even Leifs' harshest, most relentless compositions are humanised by the presence of the composer himself conducting, and his younger daughter watching entranced in a pool of comforting light. The soundtrack, too, offers constant clues to the tensions of race and language that undermine Leifs' life. As he buys his daughter a violin, for example, we hear an ominous tapping off-screen. Only when Leifs leaves the shop does the source of the noise become evident: a handyman scraping the Jewish name "Waldstein" off the display window...

Tears of Stone never loses sight of the struggle between light and dark, ambition and family loyalty, that torments this brilliant composer. He

refuses at first to join the “Composers’ Council”, set up by the Nazis to control the musical establishment. Finally, however, he succumbs to the temptation to conduct an entire evening of his work before an invited audience in Potsdam. His wife fails to gain entrance, and remains alone and humiliated outside the hall. As he emerges surrounded by flattering comments, Leifs catches sight of Annie, shivering in the shadows across the street. They exchange a single, prolonged stare that contains the essence of their anguish. In that moment, Leifs recognises that he must abandon his career for the sake of those he loves. Yet his conscience has been sold forever...

Some of the acting is too stylised, notably by Benedikt Erlingsson as Krötschl, the unctuous functionary who pays Leifs for his conducting chores. Even the distinguished Heinz Bennent strays close to caricature in his portrayal of Annie’s father, while Thröstur Leó Gunnarsson makes a valiant if patchy attempt to communicate the repressed fury of Leifs, the man and the musician. The acting honours go to Ruth Ólafsdóttir as the long-suffering wife, her own loyalty compromised only by an implied affair with a Nazi admirer. *Tears of Stone* remains a director’s triumph, a delight to watch and thrilling to hear – as audacious a landmark in Icelandic cinema as Leifs’ music was in wartime Reykjavík. One hopes that Hilmar may one day make the sequel, tracing the composer’s middle and old age: arrested by the U.S. army on arrival in Iceland in 1945, interrogated as a likely spy, and rejected by audiences at concerts of his work. “Jón Leifs could be to Iceland what Grieg is to Norway or Sibelius to Finland, says Hilmar. “And his unbelievably dramatic life has all the elements of Greek tragedy.”

The modern history of their nation holds little attraction for Icelandic filmmakers. Directors often look back with nostalgia or regret at the town or country of their childhood, but the political issues at stake in the postwar world have been only tackled head-on by Thorsteinn Jónsson in his courageous screen version of the novel by Halldór Laxness, **The Atomic Station** (*Atómstödin*, 1984).

Laxness published his book in 1948, when the country still rumbled with controversy over the United States’ efforts to secure a base on Iceland. So forceful and prescient was the novel that one of its most powerful scenes,

showing a crowd demonstrating outside the Parliament House in Reykjavik, actually occurred the following year, when the Althing agreed to join NATO. Thorsteinn describes this (via a radio bulletin) precisely as it happened, with the crowds hurling stones and eggs at the building and being dispersed by riot police with tear-gas and truncheons so that the MP's could leave in safety.

In fact the American base at Keflavík, which is discussed in the film, only opened in 1951, but Laxness addresses the issue on a subtle if also rhetorical level, comparing the argument over Icelandic independence with the divisions between the rural north and the urbanised south of the country, and between the politics of capitalism and communism, right and left, bourgeoisie and intellectuals. How can a "defenseless" nation survive? By settling into the Americans' warm embrace, will not poverty be banished forever from Iceland? Even the late Gunnar Thoroddsen, one of the leading figures in the rightist Independence Party at the time, expressed his disgust for a pact with the Americans over the Keflavík base, and Laxness shares his view of Icelandic sovereignty. The Atomic Station embroiled the author in controversy when it appeared, and even in 1984, Thorsteinn's film suffered from the abiding bitterness felt in many quarters about the way the NATO question had been handled. Two years later still, the summit between Gorbachev and Reagan in Reykjavik crystallised the yearning for peace in independence.

The thoughtful, compassionate Edda (nicknamed Uglá) lives with her father in a remote mountain district. She is seen riding her horse through the unspoiled landscape, while her father builds a small church with his own hands. Meanwhile, in the capital, grim-faced ministers and diplomats meet furtively by night in the home of a prominent MP, Búi Árland, discussing plans for building an atomic station along with a military base (the superpowers are never identified in either book or film).

Thus dialectic invigorates the film from the outset. Edda joins Búi Árland's household as a maid, but in the tradition of Laxness' heroines she refuses to compromise her ideals and values in the face of withering hostility from the politician's wife, who accuses her of being a communist. Edda sets her mind on being an organ teacher, and takes lessons from an idiosyncratic old musician whose home is in relaxed contrast to the upper-class formality

of Búi Árland's family. The musician sleeps by day and works by night, in a wry rejection of the social round.

Prejudice and paranoia cloud the air in postwar Reykjavik. The sanctimonious housekeeper regards the "north" and its inhabitants with sneering distrust. To Búi Árland's daughter Gudný, the "countryside" is an uncharted territory. Riots erupt over the fear of an American takeover, while a national poet's remains are borne back to Iceland from Denmark in a symbolic assertion of independence.

Edda is courted by both Búi Árland and Gunnar, a young seaman she meets during a demonstration. For a while she declines their offer of a firm relationship, conscious as she is of the subservient role that women are still expected to play in the Iceland of the late 1940's. If in the end she opts for marriage with Gunnar (whose child she has borne), it is because he embodies a spirit of liberty rather than calculation.

Thorsteinn's *mise-en-scène* takes few risks, but he deserves praise for the period atmosphere, established with economy and little fuss, and for his fidelity to Laxness' sardonic wit. Búi Árland's martinet of a wife may harangue Edda with accusations of belonging to a communist cell, but she herself holds seances at home. The musician's acid remarks about Lutheranism give a tongue-in-cheek tinge to the church scenes involving Edda's father, and to the absurd moment when the poet's coffin falls open while being carried over a stream.

The Atom Station attracted 70,000 people in Iceland, but inflation was rampant at the time, and the money retrieved at the close of a four-month run was insufficient to save both director and producer from economic disaster. The film was the first Icelandic production selected by the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes in 1984, yet despite this accolade and the fact that the dialogue was recorded on an English-language as well as an Icelandic track, foreign sales proved sparse. It took Thorsteinn ten years to pay off his debts, writing screenplays and making sponsored documentaries. "Knowing that the nation was divided over the NATO base," he says, "we tried to be fair to both sides, and ended up pleasing nobody, as it were." Perhaps the only solution was to turn the novel into a stage musical, as Hans Alfredson did at Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1987!

It's ironic that Iceland should have endured such a shabby aftermath to World War Two, despite having been occupied not by the aggressive Nazi Germany but by the protecting powers of first Britain and then the United States. Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's **Devil's Island** (*Djöflaeyjan*, 1997) conjures up the years when American troops had gone home, abandoning Nissen huts and barracks that would soon serve as homes for the impoverished locals. The film begins with a wedding, the guests meandering home down mud-rutted streets, eager for a drink. Gógó has married a shy, balding GI, and invites her brother Baddi to come visit them in America. Baddi's inhibited brother, Danni, just watches furtively. Normal life resumes, with everyone trying to make ends meet. If the only car to hand is a battered hearse, then so be it. If the local strongman, Hreggvidur, must cheat to recapture his world shot-putt record, then so be it.

When Baddi returns from his trip to the U.S., the film accelerates in its condemnation of American influence on a vulnerable society. From Elvis Presley to Coke and gunfights, life beyond the ocean seems altogether more glamorous than being held fast in this armpit of the world that men called Camp Thule outside Reykjavik. Drinking steadily, draining his stepfather's meagre resources, Baddi lounges around in black leather jacket and Brylcreemed hair. His explosive acts of violence, and gathering disdain for his own family, undermine the neighbourhood. His haggard grandmother is the only one who dares withstand him. Chain-smoking, damning the Lord like some witch from *Macbeth*, she hurls abuse at Baddi and the contaminating influence of the New World, never afraid to call an American whore a "cock-trap!"

Baddi's own wedding, to a lovely local blonde, finds him strutting his stuff like a cut-rate Clark Gable, peppering his speech with American slang. All the while the younger Danni has been shedding his timid exterior. He trains to become a pilot, and serves as family protector when Baddi indulges his drunken rages. But his death in a plane crash stuns everyone. So Devil's Island, which began with a wedding, now concludes with a funeral. But Baddi's wife gives birth, and the barracks are razed, and the family begins the move to a new apartment block. While the others fetch and carry, Baddi lies in a frayed armchair in the middle of the street, his dreams of wealth and glamour long abandoned.

At first glance, *Devil's Island* sounds too crude and emphatic to match the subtlety of Fridrik Thor's best work. Then, beyond the rock 'n' roll, one

becomes aware of Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson's ethereal music, that transfigures even the most disgusting of scenes; and the acting, that clings to a key and holds it, throughout the film. Death may run through this director's work like a filigree of pain, but his wicked sense of humour redeems the everyday reality and enables him to create a wonderful closing shot, of the old stepfather (Gisli Halldorsson) trundling down the road to the sound of Verdi's "Il Pensero".

Devil's Island is based on a trilogy of novels, in turn inspired by real life. The "Baddi" who lived through that twilight period, died only a few years ago after setting fire to himself.

4

Flirting with the Supernatural

With so few film-makers active in Iceland, the critic may be tempted to regard their work in auteurist terms. This would be unfair to the inventive courage of the Icelandic director, who seizes any chance to tackle a fresh genre, even if part of that motivation may be prompted by expediency, the need to survive in a brutally small marketplace.

Egill Edvardsson resents the idea that films based on the sagas should represent Icelandic cinema abroad: "Sure, our literature is magnificent, and many of the sagas can be made into good films, but the most important point in the advancement of the Icelandic film industry is for us to come to grips with cinematic language as such."

The thriller, often laced with supernatural overtones, has attracted various writers and directors in Iceland. Indeed the first account of "haunting" occur in sagas like that of Eirik the Red and The Eire-Dwellers' Saga, where certain scenes resemble nothing so much as Night of the Living Dead or The Brides of Dracula. Egill Edvardsson himself made a spectacular and assured debut with **The House** (Húsid, 1983). Lilja

Thórisdóttir gives flesh and blood to the role of Björg, a young teacher in contemporary Reykjavík who is sucked into the past by gremlins in a villa she rents with her boyfriend. By relinquishing special effects, Egill makes the situation uncannier than the "Old Dark House" usually allows. The House shares with *Don't Look Now*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* a vivid sense of the spiritual world at work in everyday life.

A powerful subtext lends a further dimension to Egill's film. Björg's boyfriend, Pétur, is a gifted composer who devotes himself to this music at the expense of personal relationships. He shares an intimacy with a female violinist in the orchestra that arouses Björg's consternation, and when he goes to Germany on a scholarship he soon forgets the need to build a home with the pregnant Björg.

One man's image swirls repeatedly up from the past to haunt Björg. He seems to know her, and to have once inhabited the same house with a curious circle of people. When Björg finds photographs of the same man in her aunt's apartment she becomes obsessed with the mystery and with the visions that crowd in nightly upon her. What are her true origins, and why is there such a legacy of anguish in the house?

Snorri Thórisson's camera patrols the dim rooms of the villa with fluency and sinister authority, peering through frosted glass doors one moment and letting the sunshine glare into the kitchen the next. Lilja Thórisdóttir's innumerable close-ups contribute much to the film's mesmeric mood; most eloquent and toughing of all is the expression of death that she projects through her eyes and face at the end of the final lingering sex scene with Pétur before his departure. The climax of the film confirms the notion that dreams can exercise a stranglehold over people's destiny.

The House has no basis in literature. "Four of us decided that we wanted to make a film together", recalls Egill. "We were in a restaurant, and began thinking about our surroundings - an old house with modern Reykjavík going by beyond the windows." They may also have been inspired by the much chronicled haunting at Höfði, the elegant house on the Reykjavík shore that served as the rendezvous between Reagan and Gorbachev in 1986.

Only two days were spent filming outside the "house"; all other sequences were shot in a makeshift studio that served as a warehouse in the city

harbour. Still, it is remembered as being the first Icelandic feature film released in Dolby Stereo.

The suspicion that often divides the inhabitants of town and country in Iceland stems in part from topography. The majority of people live within easy reach of the coast for, like Japan, Iceland has rebuffed all attempts to settle its interior. There are no railways and the "ring road" around the island was only completed as late as 1974. Once off the main highway, the roads can degenerate quickly into rough-gravelled tracks, which explains the popularity of all-terrain vehicles and four-wheel drives.

So, when the young couple in Thráinn Bertelsson's **Deep Winter** (Skammdegi, 1985) drive along the coast in their truck, their journey acquires a metaphorical quality. The woman, returning to Iceland after a spell overseas, finds herself at odds not just with her relatives but also with the environment itself, with a perilous winter landscape that harbours malevolent forces. Ragnheidur Arnarsdóttir seems perfectly cast as the dark, sensual, guileful young widow who hatches a scheme for swindling her in-laws out of their share of the family fish-farm. *Deep Winter* was inspired by a genuine poltergeist incident in the Western fjords, and Thráinn marshalls his natural assets - the baleful climate, the loneliness of the farm - only to let the dramatic tension uncoil in scene after scene. Eggert Thorleifsson, an appealing comedian in other films, is miscast as the farm's resident halfwit, absurd where he should be sinister. When violence does break out (a snowmobile charging out of control, or a blaze at a shack beside the pool), the film exerts a weird intensity. It also shows how the "foreigner," the visitor from abroad or even from Reykjavík, experiences vibrations of hostility and deracination in the remote areas of Iceland. Ari Kristinsson's photography again deserves mention, capturing the menace of snow-masked roads, and the chill of winds that whip up whitecaps along the shore and send powdered snow whirling like smoke around the desolate house.

Psychological isolation also grips the neophyte novelist, Helgi, in Hilmar Oddsson's debut, **The Beast** (Eins og skepnan deyr, 1986), when he returns with a girlfriend to his childhood home out in the fjords. Helgi is possessed by the dream of shooting a reindeer, and the borderline between fantasy and reality crumbles as the film progresses. The "beast", like some ghost,

dwells within him, and from time to time reveals its claws as he explodes in anger. Hilmar's film, while deliberately a mood piece taking full advantage of the sullen environment of the misty fjord, suffers from problems similar to those that vitiate *Deep Winter*. Sinister openings to sequences sputter and die; long extracts from Helgi's manuscript are read out by the girl offscreen; tension fails to accumulate. The narrative line wavers and drifts into meditative confusion long before the brooding, narcissistic, and boring young anti-hero succumbs to his deep-seated anger. Hilmar studied at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen in Munich, with Mika Kaurismäki one year ahead of him at the same academy. Film and music have always been his primary interests (a subject reflected in his latest venture, *Tears of Stone* (see Introduction). Returning to Iceland in his late twenties, Hilmar was impatient to do a film, any film. But his lack of experience hampered him on *The Beast*, which has several glaring errors in continuity. "You think you can control nature," he says of the theme. "But of course you can't. So the film is against arrogance."

Like others whose first film failed to ignite at the box-office, Hilmar kept body and soul together by working in Icelandic television, on everything from documentaries to reportage. "My challenge is to be part of the new adventure in Icelandic cinema," he declares. "My poverty has taught me to find the essence of my film language."

Although **The Second Dance** (*Andra dansen*, 1983) takes place in Sweden, its mood of isolation amid a sinister, severe landscape could as well belong to Iceland. Two women meet outside Stockholm. Jo, the younger one, gives Anna a ride in her battered Citroën. While Anna is bold and assertive, shrewd and quick-thinking, Jo lingers in the background, recording incidents with her camera. Anna dreams of a father and the legacy that might be hers but, as in all classic road movies, the journey, not the arrival, matters. *The Second Dance* glitters throughout with flashes of inspiration so enigmatic, so magical, and so impish that they mark the director Lárus Ýmir Óskarsson as one of the most original voices of his generation. In a hotel worthy of Hitchcock or Polanski, an impromptu drinks party goes sour; an ugly raven watches balefully in a nearby room. In a bizarre, floodlit mansion, both Anna and Jo dress up in ball gowns and then flee from the distraught owner of the property. *The Second Dance* uses monochrome cinematography to transmute the virgin landscape of northern

Sweden into a dream zone, in which people become sombre shadows, of themselves and of their past and future.

The work of Kristín Jóhannesdóttir often shows a thrilling fusion of music, monologue, and alfresco imagery. Trained in France, she has made but two features during a ten-year span. The first, **Rainbow's End** (*Á hjara veraldar*, 1983), met with little approval from either critics or public, but **As in Heaven** (*Svo á jördu sem á himni*, 1992) revealed a director at the height of her powers. Had she been born in an English-speaking country, Kristín might well have achieved as much fame as Jane Campion, whose *The Piano* has spiritual affinities with *As in Heaven*.

Rainbow's End, like all experimental films, is good in parts and embarrassing in others. It veers from realism (political pressures on the farming community to accept heavy industry) to abstract visual reflections on the purgative powers of fire and water. At root the film concerns family guilt, and how conscience haunts a young man suspected of murdering a woman he loved. Between him and his sister stands a mother who regards her life as a failure, thirty years of serving in a shop and now knitting cardigans, when all she has ever wanted to do is to sing in the tradition of the great sopranos.

"I had the inspiration for *Rainbow's End* when I was listening to Puccini's *Tosca*," says Kristín, "with the mother dying and returning to the valley, and her past comes back in different portions. I was under Dreyer's influence at that period, and I loved the way his actors spoke and the way he made you suspend your feelings through his sense of space and time."

There is much to admire in the film. The crepuscular light of so many sequences, the dialectic between imagery and music (for example, when the son strokes a dead gull to the strains of Wagner's "Liebestod", or, most magnificently, the virtuoso helicopter shot racing through the lush countryside as we hear the aria "Love and Music" from *Tosca*). The supernatural provides a bass line for *Rainbow's End*, with a seance figuring in the drama as it does in so many Icelandic films: "The force spreads like a symphony. Each person is like a musical instrument, creating force for the manifestation of those who have been freed from their physical bodies." The distraught son, applying all his will, lights fire around a

chalked circle on the floor and summoning up the long-dead Anna in a tribute to Dreyer's *The Word*.

Rainbow's End fails to cohere, however. Its hieratic technique and its awkward moments of attempted humour deny our commitment to the theme, and the coupling of Italian opera and Icelandic poetic tradition does not often blend well. *As in Heaven* accommodates its myth and metaphor with altogether more panache and conviction. Perhaps it owes its resonance to the genuine tragedy on which it is based. In September 1936, the French exploration vessel, the "Pourquoi Pas?" with a celebrated polar researcher, Jean Baptiste Charcot, at the helm, was shipwrecked during a freak hurricane. The captain's last act was to release a seagull; then he went down with his boat. The bodies of the thirty-nine seamen who perished in the disaster were laid out on the shore for embalming, and this and other incidents are described in the film with poignant sensitivity. There is an uncanny link between the salvation of the gull and the death of the bird in *Rainbow's End*. Indeed the whole work speculates on the nature of isolation and in particular that of the Icelander. As the dead are retrieved the morning after the wreck, there is a sense of fragile contact lost between human beings.

The stroke of genius that sets *As in Heaven* apart from all other Icelandic films is its conjunction of two eras, the medieval and the modern, through the mind of a young village girl, Hrefna, who can project herself and family back to the 14th century, and whose fevered imagination foresees the disaster of the "Pourquoi Pas?" One wonderful cut, worthy of Alain Resnais, takes us from Hrefna sinking her head down into a tub of water in her farmhouse home to a shot of her medieval counterpart being pulled from a steaming bath by laughing women.

Kristín has a poet's eye for the subtle gesture of things and people. As the ship founders, she shows us shots of the debris - a trumpet, the ship's wheels, etc. - floating underwater as though in a dream, or an hallucination. These images address us with irresistible sincerity, unlike similar ones in *Rainbow's End*. Other visionary moments include the appearance of the white horse of Death like a bright, gleaming release while Hrefna swoons and spills her glass of milk on the table, and the extraordinary explosion of the farmhouse while Hrefna's mother and the village women gaze fixedly at the scene. "During the past decade," muses the director, "Latin American

magic realism has made this kind of film acceptable. I have never thought of a concept like this as supernatural or extra-sensory, but as natural and sensory. Nature in Iceland works heavily on the imagination."

The film took Kristín seven years to plan and finance. The budget was high (\$2 million or so, compared to a mere \$40,000 for *Rainbow's End*), and received help from the Nordic Co-Production Year 1991-1992, and funds from Eurimages. Kristín and her team found the isolated farm they wanted on the southeast coast at Hornafjörður. As in *Heaven* received good notices, especially from French critics, after its screening at the Cannes Festival of 1992. Kristín's next film, *Scented Words*, will be (in her own words), "a tragi-comedy about the sense of smelling the value of things and, as always with me, it's about communication, but this time through languages rather than through time." The main character is a girl who has locked herself up in a Carmelite monastery, because her lover apparently committed suicide. She decides to leave her incarceration to visit two rich, elderly women who have been studying exotic languages in a fishing village on the south coast of Iceland.

Kristín Jóhannesdóttir's comment about Latin American magic realism applies also to the novels of Halldór Laxness. As does the pithy description in *Iceland, from Past to Present*: "He is the student with a hunger for life and a thirst for knowledge who embraced Catholicism in the 1920's. He is the Catholic who became a socialist. He is the socialist who turned out at bottom a pragmatist, a humanist with a broad frame of reference and a marked sense of humour." The Nobel laureate's daughter, Gudný Halldórsdóttir, has a particularly dry sense of humour (see Chapter 6), and in 1989 brought her father's **Under the Glacier** (*Kristnihald undir jökli*) to the screen with mixed results.

"My father had been writing screenplays himself for ten years before returning to the novel form in 1968 with *Under the Glacier*," remarks Gudný. But this adaptation by Gerald Wilson is somewhat too literal, too descriptive, where it should be quirkish in the style of, for example Polanski's *Cul-de-Sac*.

To the Icelander, the supernatural is so embedded in the weave of everyday life and nature that its manifestation can be almost peremptory. When the bishop's emissary visits a remote parish in the lee of Snaefells Glacier, he

encounters a stream of bizarre, offhand folk who have apparently renounced Christian dogma without fuss or frenzy. At their centre dwells the elusive pastor Jón Primus, with his five marriages and a tendency to tarry before burying the dead. The emissary, stuffed full of cakes and liquor by his hosts, starts hallucinating himself, and recognising that "reality has a habit of slipping off the edge here at Snaefell." Not surprising, considering that Snaefell is one of only seven mountains in the world renowned for its restorative effects. As the Longwaterman comments in the novel "People with second sight have know for a long time that some places are more suceptible to spiritual presences than others [...] Iceland is one of the spheres for this special presence; people knew this even in the Middle Ages while Hell was still in Iceland. There are special spots here where the Allthought is manifest in the elements themselves; places where fire has become earth, earth become water, water become air and air become spirit."

Gudný handles the supernatural better than she does the humorous incident. What could be more impressive than the sudden materialisation of the long-vanished (even dead?) Úa on a balcony as her "coffin" is opened and the frozen salmon within is unpacked by the countryfolk? Or the matter-of-fact manner in which Úa revives a "dead" sea bunting by passing her hand lightly over it?

Truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, blur into one another in many of Laxness' books. As the pastor says, with a twinkling eye, "It's lovely to hear the birds singing; but it would be boring if they always sang the truth."

The Force of Nature

Hrafn Gunnlaugsson would become known far beyond Iceland for his Viking films (see Chapter 3), but his most thoughtful accomplishment as a director remains **Inter Nos** (*Okkar á milli - í hita og thunga*, 1982). Hrafn is fascinated by the force of nature in his native country, by the topography, the hot springs, the falls, the prehensile cliffs overlooking the barbarous shore. Underpinning *Inter Nos* is a belief that man achieves the impossible where man can only dream it.

Benjamín Eiríksson has reached a high plateau in his professional life as one of Iceland's foremost chartered engineers. He and his colleague Sigurdur Pálsson have designed dams and power stations across the country. Then, without warning, Sigurdur succumbs to a heart attack while taking a sauna. Benjamín must break the news to his friend's wife, and then hand over to his daughter the residue of a career - some photos, a gold medal from some congress or other, a bottle of Scotch...

The tragedy shocks Benjamín into questioning the orthodoxy of his established values, his family life, his condescending role as a designer and head of the energy authority. To his consternation, he finds himself infatuated with Sigurdur's daughter. When he goes to the theatre, he fantasises about the other woman, undressing her and seducing her in his mind as he watches his own daughter appear in the nude on stage, and then later "substituting" her in his thoughts while making love to his wife.

Benjamín is no more uptight than any successful professional in his early fifties. Hrafn treats him with sympathy, illustrating his dilemma in a deft sequence at the airport. Benjamín says goodbye to his son, who is flying to the States for a university course; he shakes hands stiffly, and mouths a conventional farewell. As he watches the plane taxi down the runway, however, he imagines doing a jaunty jig with his son, and embracing him warmly in the sunlight.

Benedikt Árnason seems at home in both sides of Benjamín's personality, sealed in the grip of the male menopause and yet able, like Hrafn himself, to give vent to a satanic cackle of glee as an antidote to the stifling, almost incestuous loyalties of a small community (a theme Hrafn had already tackled in his TV film, *Whiplash*). At the climax of *Inter Nos* the giant

Geysir, almost quenched by innumerable layers of silicon, spouts a gigantic cloud of steam and boiling water. This release of energy serves as a droll metaphor for Benjamín's own pent-up-frustrations, as well as suggesting a union with nature that lies at the heart of Hrafn's philosophy. Perhaps both director and character share a sense of being "a goldfish in a hot stream."

The film, to the director's delight, aroused furious debate in Iceland. In one scene, the national anthem is re-worked at a punk concert, with lines such as "I want to love my country, I want to make my country rich, I want to boost its sales, I want to keep its NATO base." This, allied to the flouting of sexual convention, prevented *Inter Nos* from attracting the older generation to the cinema. But it kept Hrafn in the forefront of controversy.

Some directors have a stronger affinity with nature than others. Kristín Pálsdóttir has made few films for the cinema, yet she has been active at every level in Icelandic television and cinema ever since returning from the London International Film School. Assistant director on *Under the Glacier* and *Children of Nature*, co-ordinator on Ágúst Gudmundsson's TV series *Nonni and Manni*, she is an accomplished editor of both sound and image.

She recalls the making of **Message to Sandra** (*Skilabod til Söndru*, 1983) with a wry smile. "We barely broke even on it." The author of the original story, Jökull Jakobsson, died before he could complete it and it was published posthumously. The screenplay for this film, and for Kristín's recent featurette, *This Horse Is Mine* (see below), was written by Gudný Halldórsdóttir. Its blend of social comedy and artistic self-reflection does not quite succeed, but the first section of *Message to Sandra*, observing a middle-aged writer's attempt to get to grips with a screenplay, while also coping with the disarmingly ironic remarks of the young woman he has employed as a housekeeper, manifests a satisfying interior rhythm. The uncertainties of the male menopause, however, tend to be obscured by the melodramatic development of the story, involving illicit sex-videos and a climactic flight to Greece, where the writer becomes a café-proprietor capable of writing naught but a letter to the girl he has left behind.

Less ambitious, more persuasive, Kristín's contribution to the portmanteau production *Northern Tales* was shot around Reykjavík and in the vicinity of Mount Hekla, where many of Iceland's horse roundups take place. **This Horse Is Mine** (*Módir hafsins*, 1992) recalls *The Last Farm in the Valley*

(see Chapter 1), with the youngsters exhibiting a ready belief in the "secret people" who dwell beneath the rocks and mounds. Siggí, a farmer's boy, loves horses and is promised a wild young bay colt if he can tame him. No *Black Stallion* this, but the film treats kids and adults alike with good humour and understanding, and the climax, as Siggí loses his bearings in the mountain fog, is quite gripping.

In Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's **White Whales** (*Skytturnar*, 1987), Grímur and Bubbi serve on one of the four custom-built ships for hunting whales off the west coast of Iceland. Prior to 1990, the harpooned mammals, lashed to the side of the ship, would be brought to Hvalfjörður, north of Reykjavík. Iceland has since bowed to the pressure of ecological arguments, and no whales have been caught in Icelandic waters for five years. "White whales" are different from the majority, and so tend to be attacked by others. Grímur and Bubbi suffer the same fate, as they come ashore from their ship and enter Reykjavík in search of fun, relationships, and some inchoate image of fulfilment. Their long nights ends, like some Hollywood road movie, in a shootout that leaves both men dead, ready to be hauled away like creatures from the deep. Fridrik Thór's compassionate eye convinces us to identify with these two raw-edged individuals who are flung from the wheel of life. "It's based on a true incident that occurred here in Iceland in 1976, and when they heard that I was preparing to make a film about it, the relatives and friends of the dead men tried to dissuade me," he says. "I adhered carefully to the contemporary reports, and the dialogue, for example, between the cleaning lady and the buys in the shop comes straight from an interview with the woman herself, published at the time."

The men's rejection is expressed in brutal, physical terms. They are bounced out of a restaurant after drinking too much. Grímur's grandmother rejects them because she loathes the smell of booze. Then Grímur's girlfriend has her new beau shove him out of the apartment. Most unnerving of all, the police mock and humiliate Bubbi, the country bumpkin who is an easy victim; then they toss both men into the street like garbage.

At the juncture something snaps inside Grímur. He jumps into a conveniently unlocked car, and crashes it into a shop window. Finding it to be a guns and ammo store, he and Bubbi got to work with a will, keeping

the police at bay until an unarmed Bubbi staggers out into a lethal burst of fire - harpooned, as it were, by the law. We hear the confident homilies of the Bishop of Reykjavík coming over the morning radio while the camera pans ironically over the wreckage inside the shop. Grímur survives to choose his ending in the drained, grimy deep end of Reykjavík's Municipal Baths. Cut down by police marksmen, he lights a last cigarette, and thinks back to his boyhood obsession with a goldfish bowl, and his yearning to seize just one of those elusive fish... Yet like all Fridrik Thór's work, *White Whales* is suffused with an abiding sense of melancholy, a feeling that outlasts the gunfire and coarse-cut language of its narrative. Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson's ethereal chords on the soundtrack contribute to this mood, as does the eloquent choice of camera position - from long shots as the pals trudge along the highway towards their City of the Plain, to extreme close-ups of objects and people. Grímur shoots a horse that lies by the roadside in agony after an accident; Bubbi loses his talisman, a toy troll, just after insulting a Salvation Army woman in the street, and the doll lies like an abandoned waif in the lamplight. Such moments owe much to the expert editing of Thomas Gíslason, a Dane who has worked frequently with Fridrik Thór. One of his most stunning transitions in *White Whales* takes us without warning from Grímur's pensive face in the taxi to a blue-wigged stripper standing motionless, about to commence her act. Dexterity of this caliber does not depend on big budgets or studio facilities. It comes from an innate sense of timing and juxtaposition.

The young Asdís Thoroddsen studied film-making at the Deutsche Film- und Fernseh Akademie in Berlin, and her first feature, **Ingaló** (*Ingaló*, 1992) suggested that she might well become the Icelandic Käthe Kollwitz. She has the same rough-edged, uncompromising approach to her art as the German painter and draughts-woman (although financial constraints obliged her to shoot on Super 16mm). Sensuality has no place in *Ingaló*, and Ásdís avoids even the faintest whiff of nostalgia, unless it lurks in the accordion music to which the locals dance. The sea and the coastal fishing village are equally inhospitable environments. *Ingaló* (Sólveig Arnarsdóttir) is an inhibited, truculent redhead. Eighteen years of age, she lives with her parents and younger brother in the small northern port of Nes. Her father, brusque and demanding, provides the spur for both *Ingaló*

and her brother to rebel and quit the family home. The boy signs up on board the "Matthildur," a fishing trawler, but Ingaló finds herself caught up in a brawl at the local dance-hall. Taken to Reykjavík with head injuries, she is given a clean bill of health, and has a one-night stand with a ship-owner, a suave married man who regards her as an insignificant diversion. And so Ingaló joins the "Matthildur" as chief cook and bottle-washer. Her picaresque adventures may be badly photographed, and the sound recording on the film may be grim, but Ásdís possesses an undeniable ear for the sardonic aside and the scatological insult (she herself worked in a fish factory). She also controls her extras well; the fisherfolk jostle and mix well in natural situations, whether on deck or on wharf, in a dance-hall or at a beauty contest.

The story flows along with a limpid, unpretentious candour, and at the heart of the film stands the watchful, combative, androgynous figure of Ingaló herself. Stunned by the death of her brother Sveinn when the "Matthildur" is scuttled by the unscrupulous owners, Ingaló retreats into herself. One night, at home with her parents, she imagines she sees Sveinn, and goes out into the dawn to wait for the boat to come in. Of course there is no boat, but some flicker of hope kindles behind Ingaló's wary features. She has suffered at the hands of man and nature alike, and has passed the test with a kind of bruised honour.

Ingaló was selected for the prestigious "Semaine de la Critique" at the Cannes Festival of 1992, and the following year won the top prizes at the Festival du Cinéma Nordique in Rouen, with Libération dubbing it "groovy." Perhaps the film does recall the spirit of the fishing novels of Pierre Loti and Victor Hugo, although in the intervening years it has found its spiritual home in Germany, where ZDF broadcast it frequently. According to Ásdís, every anecdote in Ingaló is authentic, and many actors were amateurs.

The director's second film, *Dream Hunters* (*Draumadísir*, 1996), seems light years away from the rough-hewn authenticity of *Ingaló*. Set in the city, this satirical comedy shows a young girl on the threshold of womanhood, torn between her home and her fantasies. She and a friend fall in love with the same man, attracted by the smell of "leather, whisky, and cigars." He, though outwardly sophisticated, proves a lousy businessman, and is as much a dreamer in his own sphere as his admirer is

in hers. But when a forged will enters the picture, the screenplay loses its way, and by the close of *Dream Hunters* a number of different characters are chasing one another around the capital without our caring much what happens to any of them. At the outset, as the girls gaze up into the starlit sky and muse on their future, there's a hope that Asdis can create a kind of Arabian Nights tale in contemporary guise.

The failure of *Dream Hunters* has kept Asdis in the wings for a couple of years (she served as script-girl on *The Dance*, and then assistant director to Gudny Halldorsdóttir on *The Honour of the House*). She plans a modern comedy, and then an intriguing subject, involving a poor farmer and musician who befriends some Basque whalers in the 17th Century. A third of these Basques were massacred because they were stealing the livelihood of the Icelanders, and indeed the farmer who wrote the original story was himself persecuted because of his friendship for the Iberian invaders.

The most glamorous moment in the youthful history of Icelandic films came in February 1992 when Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's **Children of Nature** (*Börn náttúrunnar*) received an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Film. There are just five nominations in each category, and some thirty nations had entered a film for the award, so Fridrik Thór could feel a justifiable pride on behalf of himself and his country's cinema.

"An old man who lives by himself decides to give up farming and move to the city, but there has a difficult time finding his feet and ends up in an old people's home. There he meets an old flame who dreams of being buried on the farm where she grew up, which has been deserted for years. One night they flee together in search of adventure."

This runs the synopsis for *Children of Nature*. But what riches those bald phrases conceal! Fridrik Thór's narrative is so direct, and his actors so unpretentious, that we slip into the story as though into a warm Icelandic pool. Only towards the end do the metaphorical gridlines of the situation come into focus, and by then we are ensnared...

In making a tribute to his own father (see also *Movie Days* in Chapter 7), Fridrik Thór has turned the traditional "rebel without a cause" scenario on its head. The old man, Thorgeir, is the one who rejects his family when they make it plain that his presence in their high-rise apartment is something of a nuisance. Then settling truculently into the prison-like

conditions at an old folks' home, he sees his room-mate pass away in the night and recognises, like the Knight in *The Seventh Seal*, that he has but little time to fulfil himself. When he meets his long-lost mistress, Stella, in the canteen, and sees that her indignation against the urbanisation of modern life matches his own, Thorgeir resolves to toss caution to the winds and indulge in one last meaningful gesture. Sluggish he may appear, but he is practical enough to buy fresh sneakers for Stella and himself.

Like the two fishermen in Fridrik Thór's previous film, *White Whales*, the elderly couple in *Children of Nature* remain outsiders in a lonely country, more "at home" in the severe and beautiful landscape of Iceland's countryside than amid the din of Reykjavík. In one of the most entrancing passages of the film, Stella recalls the vanished days of her youth beside the waters of the Western fjords.

The homespun mood and texture of *Children of Nature* render Fridrik Thór's subtle cinematic conceits more acceptable than they would be in a glossier picture. For example, the sudden disappearance of a jeep as it speeds towards a tunnel in the mountains. Or the fortuitous appearance of Bruno Ganz (an angel again, as he was in *Wings of Desire!*), to lay a soothing hand on the dying farmer's shoulder as the darkness closes in. No Icelander would be surprised by such incidents, or by the missing jeep's miraculous reappearance in a Reykjavík street the next day. In their excellent book, *Iceland Past and Present*, Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakel Sigurdardóttir-Rosenblad describe the Icelanders' respect for "enchanted spots." In 1987, there were plans to wide a road in Kópavogur (a town near Reykjavík) known literally as "Elf-Hill Road." According to reports, "the narrow section was occasioned by a huge rock sticking out into the road. The builders tried to remove the rock by boring through it with a pneumatic drill. The drill bit inexplicably broke. The roads department therefore decided not to disturb the elves who lived there. The rock...is still there today."

A belief in the supernatural, or perhaps even orthodox Lutheranism stands discreetly in the margins of *Children of Nature*, but never intrudes. The well-lighted church that stands foursquare in the fields overlooking the bay beckons like a talisman to the old man, but when he buries his friend he does so as though returning her to the gentle earth and not to the accompaniment of hymns and dogma. Just before Fridrik Thór's father

died, he prepared himself for his journey by walking barefoot over the jagged lava in the Icelandic wilderness. As Thorgeir does so in the film, the effect is of a spiritual encounter with nature rather than any reference to the Road to Calvary. And instead of Hollywood's heavenly choir, the serene, celestial music of Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson (a score for which he won the European Film Award in 1991) escorts the couple to their destiny. *Children of Nature* is an elegy for the art of dying, which has become almost an obscenity in the Western world, with the sick carted off to hospital to perish in shame.

Fridrik Thor Fridriksson's allusive masterpiece, **Cold Fever** (*Á köldum klaka*, 1995) failed to impress native Icelanders. Its vision of their country as an alien culture, in the relentless grip of snow and ice, exerted an appeal on festival and art-house audiences throughout the world. Indeed Fridrik's film presents Icelanders as a welcoming, humorous people, eager to embrace the foreigner in their midst. It also casts a caustic eye on the American influence at work throughout the country. Paradoxically, *Cold Fever* came about thanks to the generosity and ingenuity of American producer Jim Stark, aided by San Francisco philanthropist George Gund, and the encouragement of the Finnish maverick, Aki Kaurismäki.

Hirata is a young Japanese whose parents have died seven years ago in Iceland. Now their son wants to set their spirits to rest, and to do so he must visit the place where they met their mysterious end, and perform a ritual. After a rather hesitant prologue in Tokyo, the film bursts into wide-screen as Hirata's plane lands in Iceland. Ari Kristinsson's cinematography has never been better, the 'scope imagery perfectly conveying the eerie white vastness of the winter landscape. Hirata must come to terms with not only a hostile environment but also habits and antics that puzzle him at every turn. He observes the respectful singing of mourners at a graveside in Reykjavik. He is conned into buying an ancient Citroën from a working girl. He's invited to sample some sheep's eyeballs. Another woman presents herself as a photographer who "collects funerals." When his car breaks down, miles from anywhere, a small girl starts the engine with a controlled, high-pitched scream; she also shatters a distant clump of icebergs with the power of her voice.

These bizarre and unrelated incidents create a mood in which Hirata's own obstinate pursuit of his parents' fate acquires a logic and force of its own.

Like *Wild Strawberries*, *Cold Fever* is nothing less than a spiritual road movie (the American couple encountered by Hirata remind one of the Almans in Bergman's film). The more Icelanders he meets, the more Hirata recognises that their wild and wonderful country may be an appropriate resting-place for his mother and father. After all, he could not be greeted with greater warmth than he finds at a remote inn, where the locals gather to sing like raucous cowboys, and one old timer (Gisli Halldorsson) teaches Hirata to drink like a true northerner.

As the old man joins Hirata on his pilgrimage, and they trot on their ponies through the gleaming white landscape, it's hard not to think of Fridrik's other excellent film, *Children of Nature*. Here is the same sense of magic hovering around the next curve in the track, here is a legion of white-robed dead drifting through the tundra and through the fevered dreams of the Japanese visitor. As Gisli reminds him, "Only stupid people believe in things they can see and touch..."

Few locations yield the same sense of alienation as the Icelandic interior. Powdered snow stirs above the slopes like smoke, or will o' the wisp. Hirata can relax in a hot spring, surrounded by ice, and consume an egg boiled by Gisli in the same sulphurous waters. A half-finished suspension bridge across a river takes Hirata to his destination. There, according to the map reference, he must light his candles and perform the ceremony in memory of his parents. For the first time in the film, warm colours invade the frigid terrain. Hirata sets each candle on a tiny block of ice and launches it into the running stream, while Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson's Bach-like toccata soars on the soundtrack. "Sometimes," we hear Hirata telling his grandfather afterwards, "a journey can take you to a place that is not on any map." So the film concludes, like all Fridrik's best work, on a note of poignant harmony.

Ágúst Guðmundsson's *The Dance* depends for none of its impact on Hollywood conventions, invoking rather the best traditions of classical Nordic cinema. Its images of shipwreck, cliff-top rescue, and the struggle between religious fervour and physical passion, recall the work of masters from Sjostrom and Stiller to Troell and Mollberg. Above all, *The Dance* remains loyal to its source, a short story by William Heinesen, set in 1913

(the author himself was born in 1900). A wedding takes place on the Faroese island of Stapa. One of the guests, Peter, recalls the curious events that dogged that distant celebration. “Did the Devil himself gatecrash the wedding,” he asks himself with hindsight.

The tiny community finds itself swollen for a few hours by the arrival of guests from neighbouring islands. Only one blemish seems to mar the proceedings: the bride Sirsa’s old flame, Ivar, strides arrogantly among the rocks, eager to impose himself on the day and the groom’s dour formality. Other events conspire to release the inhibitions of old and young alike. A Scottish trawler founders in the surf nearby, and the wedding guests help to haul the survivors up the cliffs to safety. One of the crew dies, and the local deacon and the visiting Danish pastor try to stop the dancing that every Faroese regards as an essential component of the marriage day. During the night, some of the relatives steal down to the shore and relieve the wreck of its liquor. In the aftermath at dawn, Ivar persuades a disgruntled Sirsa to make love with him in a convenient barn. Discovered, each manages to survive real censure, Sirsa by weeping on the shoulder of her husband, and Ivar by holding his head high with the complacency of one who has enjoyed his roll in the hay at the expense of an orthodox man for whom he has no respect.

“It’s a romantic comedy,” says Ágúst, “whose ancillary themes all deal with love and lust. It’s the eternal battle between those who want to live life to the full and those who seek to put their trust in something else, and who are preparing constantly for the next life.” In contrast to the codified ceremonial of the church, the obsessive dancing within the tiny houses exemplifies an underlying need for togetherness in the face of a hostile environment. Joining hands, singing, and stepping forever two steps to the left and one to the right, the guests enact their own ritual. Sirsa’s scarlet wedding gown typifies a defiance of virtue for virtue’s sake. And when the deacon implores the guests to postpone their jollification in respect for the corpse in the next room, old Niklas (the late Gisli Halldórsson, in his final role) protests with good-natured conviction: “Surely it cannot be a sin to celebrate life?” The dance must go on, and next day it is to Niklas’s own home that the guests repair, knowing they can dance under his roof, as others might head for a speakeasy in the Chicago of Prohibition days.

Ágúst's film emphasises the role of the element: fire (the barn blaze), water (the storm and the shipwreck), air (the prancing winds that seize first Sirsa's scarf and then a guest's black coat), and earth (the peat roofs of each and every house). Working on a modest budget, he takes shrewd shortcuts to achieve his ends. The camera steals among the low-set dwellings, allowing the audience to spy on the comings and goings of guests as they seek their gratification. Despite just two weeks of shooting on location, he communicates the slithery danger of rocks along the seashore, the mists that hover around the cliffs, and the ribald connotations of sheep carcasses that dangle from the ceiling in the barn where Sirsa and Ivar have their fling.

A mischievous sense of humour, evident in almost every sequence, saves the film from sliding into melodrama or self-pity. Instead, *The Dance* has the flavour of an intimate John Ford Western, and the relish of a more recent Scandinavian delight, *Babette's Feast*. Evil omens, like the black raven that settles on the church cross after Ivar has rescued the bride's scarf, are viewed with tongue-in-cheek by Ágúst. Yet never for a moment does he patronise the credulous locals if, for example, they see a black coat turn into an eagle soaring on the wind. After all, if God inhabits the nearby church, then surely the Devil cannot be far off?

6

Laughter in Paradise

Every country has its own brand of domestic comedy. It can rarely be exported, but it sustains many talents, from actors and actresses to writers and technicians. The new Icelandic cinema tends to be serious about life, in the way that the sagas tend to be. But comedy enters even the gravest of situations, and the best directors add a handful of it to their blender with a sly smile. Only Thráinn Bertelsson, however, has established himself as a creator of straightforward screen comedy, with his trilogy made during the 1980's, **A New Life** (Nýtt líf, 1983), **Pastoral Life** (Dalalíf, 1984), and **A Policeman's Lot** (Löggulíf, 1985). The three films feature a couple of scoundrels, Thór (Eggert Thorleifsson) and Danny (Karl Ágúst Úlfsson), whose unconventional antics cause havoc in the traditional, and much respected, Icelandic professions of fishing, farming, and maintaining law and order.

A New Life begins like an episode of John Cleese's *Faulty Towers* TV series, with Thór and Danny as waiter and chef respectively in a prim and proper Reykjavík restaurant. Thór, like Cleese, is tall and overbearing, ready to insult any customer at the drop of a dish; Danny is smaller and not so aggressive, but plies his own wily craft in the depths of the kitchen, adding brandy to the soup and quaffing a glassful when backs are turned. Fired from the restaurant, Thór and Danny apply for summer work on Westman Islands, where they are taught to gut and sort fish on the assembly line of a freezing plant. They seize their first opportunity to swindle the system, and fall foul of the foreman, a lugubrious individual who voices the provincial dislike of the capital. "The Reykjavík people have no stamina," he sniffs. "They just want to get rich in a few weeks." The same foreman finds the pair reading during working hours, and comments waspishly: "If you want to be a writer you'll need an artist-grant - and we give those around here."

Further prejudices emerge at a dance-hall, where Thór makes an ill-judged attempt to pass himself off as a Canadian. As he drawls a greeting to some tipsy locals, they mistake his accent for an American's. "Is he a Yankee? From the NATO base? We'll bash him up."

Thus Thráinn smuggles many a barb into his ostensible farcical picture of life on the Islands, with Thór and Danny earning a respite by claiming they are conducting a clandestine inquiry on behalf of the Ministry of Fisheries. But there's a tender side to Thráinn, which reaches its full maturity in Magnús (see below) and introduces a certain wistfulness into the final third of *A new Life*. Thór meets a girl, Ella, from Ólafsvík, who like him and Danny is seeking a "new life!". Pregnant, but not sure by whom, Ella might have been a beauty queen; her former boyfriend prevented her from appearing in the contest, and now she is embarking on a new relationship, uncertain and wary of the future. Her long chat with Thór after he has failed to make love to her comes as a romantic surprise in an otherwise crude film.

A New Life brought 80,000 Icelanders into the cinemas, and its sequel, *Pastoral Life*, exceeded even that. "I found that I could make films that I liked, and that appealed to a broad section of the public," says Thráinn. "Let's face it, there are three kinds of picture we can do: mainstream Hollywood-style films, festival films, and local comedies and thrillers."

Thráinn feels an instinctive kinship with the coast and the countryside, and has made the hit TV series, *Ships of Heaven* (aka *Tales from Iceland*), about a shore-based shipping business in the Westman Islands.

Neither *Pastoral Life* nor *A Policeman's Lot* match the pristine humour of Thór and Danny's first assault on Icelandic values. In *Pastoral Life*, the dreaded couple volunteer to take over a farmer's estate during his absence abroad, and Thráinn makes much fun of the clumsy townsman's approach to animal husbandry. In *A Policeman's Lot* they return to Reykjavík and indulge in featherbrained schemes to track down criminals and drunkards alike. But the gags grow repetitive, and the acting seems coarser-grained than it was in the first of the comedies.

Magnús (1989) was nominated for the top European Film Award of 1989, and marks the peak of Thráinn Bertelsson's career to date. Not many directors could make such a personal, and consistently entertaining, often witty, film about a middle-aged man dying of cancer. Not many actors could perform such an unexpected role as well as Egill Ólafsson, who is fast becoming the Depardieu of Icelandic cinema.

Magnús adumbrates all the major themes in Icelandic art: the appeal of nature, the thrill of the supernatural, the opposition of town and country, and coming to terms with mortality. Thráinn, though, wraps his package in a beguiling sheen of satire. Magnús the lawyer leads a respectable prosperous existence with his wife and teenage children. But one morning he has a premonition: he tells his family that he has seen himself in a dream, and as we have watched the pale horse of death trotting through the water and scrubland of that dream during the opening credit sequence, it comes as no shock when Magnús's doctor tells him that he's dying of cancer. As has been recently pointed out by Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakel Sigurdardóttir-Rosenblad, "In the Icelandic sagas a dream or other form of premonition is often an expression of [the] belief that a person's life is guided by an inexorable fate."

Thráinn's skill makes the sequence in the doctor's consulting-room one of the finest in Icelandic cinema. The doctor chooses his words and his gestures with obvious care, skirting the truth and allowing Magnús to arrive at recognition of his fate without actually condemning him personally. Egill Ólafsson, so often typecast as a pop singer or comedian,

reveals an inner expressiveness that makes Magnús a truly sympathetic figure.

The other characters are drawn in brighter, more primary colours. Thórhallur Sigurdsson (Laddi) is a taxi driver and pal of Magnús's who persuades him to join in one last "meaningful act" (shades of the Knight in The Seventh Seal) - moving the municipal boundary line so that Jón Sigurbjörnsson's crusty, irascible old farmer can outwit the city bureaucrats. Jón's character contains the very essence of contradiction in Icelandic life. Like some homesteader from the old West, he wards off visitors with a loaded shotgun, while answering calls on a cellular phone kept in his horse's saddlebag.

Thráinn eschews naturalism, which spares his audience the visual ravages of cancer, and allows Magnús to retain his vigour and bonhomie to the end. It also opens the way for such felicities as Magnús being allowed a ride on the pale horse of his dreams - an image of liberation and also acceptance of death. The director himself plays a patient next to Magnús in the hospital ward. He dies calmly during the night, leaving only a laptop computer open before him on his bed, its screen flashing a large question mark as though reflecting the uncertainty of man on the threshold of eternity.

All but the most gifted film-makers tamper depart from traditional narrative structure at their peril. Thráinn Bertelsson's **Private Lives** (*Einkalíf*, 1995) **does just that. Alexander, a twenty-year-old student,** decides with his girlfriend Margrét to steal a Super Hi-8 camera and make a home movie about his family. This rash enterprise is a knee-jerk reaction to the Americanisation of Icelandic youth through kiss-and-kill movies like *True Lies*, and leads to a series of hand-held scenes involving domestic life, interleaved with snippets from old silent films made on Iceland. One of the problems confounding the film stems from its use of well-known actors (Ólafur Egilsson, for example), which diminishes the impact of the *cinéma-vérité* Thráinn is seeking to achieve. "Compared with films, people's daily lives are pretty crummy," says a student. "It's a bit monotonous to watch people eat, belch and fart," declares another. Saved for the foreign viewer by Thráinn's roguish sense of humour, *Private Lives* proved an unmitigated disaster at home. Navel-gazing seldom strikes a popular chord.

When Ágúst Gudmundsson was eleven years of age, spending his summer holiday on a farm in southeast Iceland, an entrepreneur from Reykjavík joined forces with a few local men to try to dig up a 17th century Indiaman from the sands where it is said to have stranded. Every summer they went on looking for what soon became known as the "Gold Ship." This entrepreneur had some connection with American officers at the NATO base, who lent equipment and even men to help with the search for the treasure ship. In the early 1980's the same men came together with renewed enthusiasm and a sizable grant from Parliament to dig up the ship. What they finally found, twelve metres below the surface, was a trawler that foundered there soon after the turn of this century - but no sign of the fabled vessel of their dreams.

Ágúst decided to make a film based on this fiasco, and the result was a trenchant little comedy entitled *Golden Sands* (*Gullsandur*, 1984). "I found the whole thing rather symbolic of certain trends in Icelandic society," he says, "especially after Parliament had awarded the diggers large sums of money in order to continue the search. I didn't want to make a film about the American presence in Iceland, the question whether they should be there or not, but rather about the attitudes of the Icelanders towards the armed forces, which seem to be, on the whole, more mercantile than idealistic."

In *Golden Sands*, Ágúst exhibits a flair for satirical film-making of the Ealing or *Clochemerle* brand, although the common threads linking all his work are an emotional warmth and an idiosyncratic outlook on life. On a remote stretch of Icelandic coastline, the local inhabitants are puzzled by the appearance of a tiny taskforce from the American base at Keflavík. The soldiers seem to be burrowing into the dunes for something or other, and the locals summon their own council of war. Their reaction remains quite lethargic until it suddenly emerges that the Yanks may be digging for gold. Ágúst takes a subtle dig at his fellow countrymen for their complaisant attitude to the military implications of the American presence, while at the same time applauding their natural response to the prospect of a gold rush on the neighbouring beach.

The film nourishes more ambitions than that, however. Ágúst draws a parallel between today's events on the sands and the volcanic eruption that took place some two centuries earlier in the same region, and one of this

main characters is busy writing a screenplay about the heroic parson who refused to abandon his church and halted the larva by sheer force of will. Less pretentious, and more amusing, are the director's sly glances at the contradictions inherent in Icelandic life: the farmer who listens to grand opera in his cowshed, and milks beneath the approving glare of a Karl Marx poster; or the running gag about a black stripper whose audience is whittled away by the lure of the Golden Sands.

The mid-1980's yielded other Icelandic screen comedies. Edda Björgvinsdóttir, so effervescent in *Golden Sands*, pops up again in Thórhildur Thorleifsdóttir's **The Icelandic Shock Station** (*Stella í orlofi*, 1986). Written by Guðný Halldórsdóttir, this loud and cheerful satire sends up Swedes and Icelanders alike, along with their differing attitudes towards liquor. "Salomon Gustavsson" arrives at the airport in search of a cure for his drink problem. Instead, he finds himself at the mercy of the lusty, invigorating, endlessly inventive Icelandic housewife, Stella. Even in such a crude and disjointed farce, the Icelandic propensity for exaggeration, taking risks and celebrating human clumsiness, acquires a seductive aspect.

Black without Sugar (*Svart og sykurlaust*, released in 1985) takes its title from the name of an itinerant Icelandic theatre group, whose director draws inspiration from the Snaefells Glacier to leave the wet and windy terrain of his native country for sunnier climes. Made by a young German, Lutz Konermann, and shot in black-and-white 'scope, *Black without Sugar* is, to quote Ingólfur Margeirsson in *International Film Guide 1987*, "a charming and ambitious film combining the road movie à la Wenders, with elements of comedy and romance. Beneath the story lies the director's requirement to make associations with different cultures, to draw social and historical parallels in order to understand the relations and connections that bind people together." As the troupe drift with their play through Italy, from the bustle of Rome to the tranquillity of Orvieto, Konermann manifests a distinctive skill at composing visuals and establishing a mood with the strains of a Verdi extract or the wistful dreaming tones of a tenor sax. It's a pity that he did not continue to work in Icelandic film.

In the other Nordic countries, few directors get the opportunity to make a feature film in their twenties. **Remote Control** (*Sódóma*, Reykjavík, 1992) marks the debut of Óskar Jónasson and his flair was recognised by the

Cannes Festival in 1993, where the film was screened in the official "Un Certain Regard" section.

The timid Axel works in a garage and lives with his mother, whose life is dominated by the TV set. When her "remote control" goes missing, and Axel's sister Maeja gets involved in some murky goings-on at the "Sodoma" night-club, the comedy starts to flow. Situations that begin as childish pranks are turned adroitly on their head to demand the audience's laughter. As in *Delicatessen* or the work of Aki Kaurismäki, nothing is too outrageous or far-fetched for inclusion in the serpentine plot. *Remote Control* may degenerate into schoolboy farce, with Axel's mother drifting downstream in a boat as a dam unleashes its waters and then, once rescued, lying comatose in her own home as a party takes shape around her. But linear construction does not come high on the list of Óskar's priorities. His free-wheeling fantasy and an impatient editing style are gifts that stem from his background as director of music videos for the Sugarcubes, and promise much for the future.

Óskar's second film, **Pearls and Swine** (*Perlur og svín*, 1997) tells a droll tale of rival bakeries in central Reykjavík. Lisa, a tubby blonde played with ample relish by Ólafía Hrönn Jónsdóttir, dreams of that vacation in the sun that appeals so much to the Nordic soul. To scrape up enough to buy a charter trip, Lisa and husband Finnbogi buy a disused bakery, only to find themselves up against a similar operation across the street. There's a merry, infectious quality to many of the scenes, especially the climax, when a christening reception degenerates into chaos as the canapés are discovered to be full of dildoes, condoms and other sex accessories. Beneath the banter lies the Icelander's traditional resourcefulness, turning his hand to anything to make ends meet. One feels that when Óskar teams up with a skilled screenwriter, he will take his career to the next step.

Gísli Snaer Erlingsson, another young director with a love of music allied to a sense of humour, enjoyed success at the domestic box-office with **Behind Schedule** (*Stuttur Frakki*, 1993). This amiable situation-comedy plants a naïve French music producer in the midst of an Icelandic pop concert - except that he only reaches the concert hall in the final reel. André's "schedule" goes awry from the moment he lands at the airport.

He hires a car, takes a leak beside and road and loses the ignition keys, hitches a ride from the appealing Sóley, finds that his hotel reservation has

not been made, takes the wrong bus in going to another hotel and ends up in the wilds again. Rescue this time comes in the shape of a passing truck-driver who plies him with cod-liver oil and then aquavit, proclaiming, "We Icelanders are the strongest, healthiest, and most beautiful people in the world," before passing out on his own doorstep and leaving André to fare for himself.

With Sóley's brother Rúnar as sidekick to the chief pop promoter at the concert, and Sóley herself nursing ambitions as a composer, there are just too many interweaving strands for Gísli to weave together. The film grows laboured in its second half as the basic situation runs out of with. But it is hard to dislike the shy, ingratiating, and romantically persistent Jean-Philippe Labadie as André. He looks somewhat reminiscent of the young Aznavour as he seeks to embody the spirit of cultural exchange between countries so satirically referred to in the film's opening sequence, with its newsreel footage of President Mitterand's visit to Iceland.

Through a Child's Eyes

The Nordic countries all have a commitment to making films for and about youngsters. Indeed in Denmark a sizeable proportion of government subsidy money is compulsorily reserved for children's films. In Iceland, the most talented directors have all essayed this genre. Some, like Ágúst Gudmundsson, have done so only in television, but Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, Thráinn Bertelsson, Fridrik Thór Fridriksson and Thorsteinn Jónsson have devoted entire feature films to those formative first decades of life.

Young Andri in **Dot, Dot, Comma, Dash** (Punktur punktur komma strik, 1981) grows up in the early 1960's and undergoes his rites-of-passage during the archetypal summer in the countryside. His father works at the U.S. base at Keflavík, and like Fridrik Thór's *Movie Days* (see below) the film includes an anti-NATO demonstration in the streets of the city, as well as a specific joke (the bottle of Pepsi in the classroom). Andri falls in love with the cinema like Thomas in Fridrik Thór's film, although his taste runs to the French Angélique rather than straight Hollywood fare.

Thorsteinn Jónsson's debut feature, based on a contemporary novel by the witty Pétur Gunnarsson, casts a satirical eye at the way Danes and Americans perceive Iceland, and also makes a subtle distinction between those Icelanders like Andri's parents who want to believe that hostilities are over, and others who see a chance of profiting from the prospect of yet another war.

Based on a novel by Pétur Gunnarsson, *Dot Dot Comma Dash* takes its baffling title from the first squiggles that make up a face in a child's drawing book; in other works, life's features appear simple and only experience fleshes them out. The mood is charming, but the narrative drive remains weak throughout the picture. Thorsteinn had studied at FAMU in Prague from 1968 to 1972. He wanted to make independent documentaries, but, he recalls, "there was no chance of that in Iceland, so I had to go to features as a bridge, almost, and so my story-line in *Dot Dot* was not very strong." He and his producer Örnólfur Árnason raised only 10% of their budget from the Film Fund. Between them they mortgaged four family houses to raise the rest of the cash. But *Dot Dot Comma Dash*, only the

third of the "new wave" Icelandic films to be released attracted 80,000 spectators, and the money flowed back.

As Fridrik Thór also suggests in *Movie Days*, there is a parallel between death on the screen and death in real life. The Kennedy assassination comes over the air just as the school headmaster is haranguing three boys for having brought a rubber penis into class. But in the final scene of the film, Andri's girlfriend Margarét drowns in a swimming pool, leaving him to ponder on what might have been.

After serving as head of the Icelandic Film Fund, Thorsteinn made a comeback with the admirable **Sky Palace** (*Skýjahöllin*, 1994). Emil, aged eight, loves his annual trips to see his grandfather in the north of Iceland. When grandad's dog passes away, Emil resolves to scrimp and save to buy a puppy for himself, to keep alive the memory of his favourite pet. He competes with other youngsters as a newspaper salesman on the streets of Reykjavík, and then wangles a part-time job with an elderly carpenter (the genial Gísli Halldórsson), who has a knack of wagging his ears. Emil charms a woman who runs some kennels, and she allows him to have a puppy for a modest price. Left alone by his working parents, Emil takes off with the little dog on a pilgrimage to his grandfather, by bike and bus through the daunting landscape of the interior.

As so often in Nordic kids' films, the youngsters themselves prove far more convincing on screen than the adults, who are ineffectual, soft-hearted, and rather obtuse. The exigencies of modern life, with both parents at work, and kids increasingly left to their own fantasies and devices, provide ample scope for film-makers like Thorsteinn. Through their eyes, we adults perceive the underrated sense and sensibility of even the youngest of children.

The Twins (Jón Oddur og Jón Bjarni, 1981) is based on the bestselling books of Guðrún Helgadóttir, and directed by Thráinn Bertelsson. Two blond twin boys grow up in a modern household on the fringe of Reykjavík. Mother is a nurse and father a teacher. Granny drives a jeep and goes under the nickname of "Grand-dragon"! Like all children, the twins cherish their fantasy world, and during summer camp they take off with a couple of pals. None of their escapades is too dramatic, but therein lies the appeal of this deceptively bland entertainment. Thráinn captures the everyday rhythm of childhood, and perceives adults through the refracting

gaze of boys whose thoughts are more quicksilver than their demure smiles might suggest. "If the Icelandic cinema was to succeed," recalls Thráinn, "We knew we had to produce films that could not be made anywhere else. I was lucky; I found I could make ones that I liked and that appealed to a broad section of the public." Attendance for *The Twins* reached 60,000, not as much as *Land and Sons* or *Dot Dot Comma Dash* but excellent for a film dealing solely with childhood.

The chivalrous young hero of **Benjamin Dove** (Benjamín dúfa, 1995) ponders a childhood experience from the perspective of adult life, when he himself is a father. In a small town in Iceland some 25 years ago, four boys form an Order of Knights to combat injustice in their neighbourhood. When an elderly spinster's cat is found hanged, the friends unite to punish the culprit. And when the same woman's house is reduced to ruins by arson, the "Knights" collect money from every flat and household until enough has been raised to build the cottage again.

The film concludes on a tragic note, but the gulf of years makes it palatable -- if also poignant. Director Gísli Snær Erlingsson gently demonstrates that in a small community like Iceland, individuals *are* society, and that they must be self-sufficient and resilient in the face of loss. He also uses the charming device of framing Benjamin's reminiscences within an 8mm film aperture at the start of each sequence. Were it not for the handicap of subtitles, films like *Benjamin Dove* would find a large audience throughout the world, for their susceptibilities touch a universal chord.

In *The Sacred Mound* (Hin helgu vé, 1993) Hrafn Gunnlaugsson brings his intensity of vision to bear on a childhood incident that he remembers as if it were yesterday. He was seven years old like Gestur in the film, when his parents sent him away to an island in the west of Iceland to stay with relatives. Gestur develops a deep-seated crush on a twenty-year-old girl, Helga. "He could have died for her," says Hrafn. "He loved her so much he was prepared to do anything, even kill if he had to, but he was only seven." Hrafn wanted to make *The Sacred Mound* immediately after finishing *The Raven Flies* in 1984. But then everyone wanted him to continue in the "Viking" vein, and so the project was put on ice - until one day in the early 1990's when, working after midnight in the sound studios in Reykjavík,

Hrafn passed a woman in the corridor. She was a nurse, and recognised him, for she was the woman with whom he had been obsessed almost four decades earlier. "She smiled with her eyes," says Hrafn, "not just with her mouth." The encounter spurred him to set up the picture, and *The Sacred Mound* was filmed on Gróttta (a slender isthmus not far from Reykjavík) in the early summer of 1993.

Gestur appears to be an only child, and his mother, a successful concert pianist, travels regularly. When Gestur arrives in the remote fishing village, with its lofty white lighthouse and its endless horizons, he is already in a mood of resentment - as well as deracination, far removed from his electronic gadgets and home luxuries. His mother has, he feels, abandoned him to his own resources, and so when he is shown the "sacred mound" that lies near the main house, Gestur allows his fantasy full rein. Local superstition asserts that the house will burn to the ground if the Viking chieftain is disturbed in his mound. For Gestur who revels in Viking lore like any healthy lad in Iceland, the path to retribution lies invitingly open.

When you visit Hrafn at his home near the water on the fringes of Reykjavík, he will gleefully lead you to a sacred mound nearby. Iceland is covered with them. They are places (*álagablettir*) that must not be disturbed, where the "secret mound" also possesses an erotic attribute, "but it is a woman's whole sexuality, not just her pudenda," says Hrafn. So that sacred mound suggests the mystery of the forbidden fruit, the savagery of heathenism versus the enlightenment of Christianity.

As film progresses, so the mound acquires a more ominous dimension. Fire and mishaps in the community appear somehow linked to this innocuous heap of turf. At the climax of the film, Helga marries her local beau, and a jealous Gestur attacks the mound with an axe and garden tools, intent on flouting the taboos attached to both Viking myth and his precocious love for Helga. If Helga (both love object and mother-substitute) must die with her new husband as a consequence, then Gestur's inchoate psyche has not thought beyond that moment of victory.

The most gratifying aspect of *The Sacred Mound* is Hrafn's triumph over the temptation to exploit the latest violence and eroticism of his tale. Instead, he approaches the matter with considerable affection and humour. Steinthór Matthíasson was selected to play Gestur from among seven boys during lengthy rehearsals with Hrafn; his restrained performance and

tough, observant look suit the role to perfection. Little Tinna Finnbogadóttir as his pal reduces the audience to laughter with her imitation of an adult orgasm, and Helgi Skúlason is a genial, latterday Viking in Gestur's eyes. Alda Sigurdardóttir as Helga treats her young admirer with gentle sympathy, and the scene in which he dries her back on the rocky shore is neither offensive nor salacious; indeed the image glistens with the warmth of adult nostalgia and just a hint of religious devotion.

that time-honoured habit of sending children away to the countryside for the summer also provides the slender narrative strand for Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's **Movie Days** (Bíódagar, 1994). Critics have compared it to *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso*, but that lends too much importance to the opening sequences of the film. In spirit and texture the film is closer to Terence Davies's *The Long Day's Dying*, and to the work of Danish directors such as Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Nils Malmros.

Thomas, the eight-year-old boy through whose eyes the world of the early 1960's is perceived, has, like Fridrik Thór, an elderly father. "Mine was fifty-six when I was born," observes the director, "but he died when I was older than Thomas is in the film."

The recreation of life in Reykjavík at the time is meticulous to the point of being studied. Crowds throng the much-cherished "Gamla bíó," the town's oldest cinema now converted into an opera house. American TV programmes beam into certain privileged households (the signals were jammed in 1974), and to produce a bottle of Pepsi in class becomes almost a sign of virility.

Yet while Icelanders marvel at the antics of Dick Van Dyke or the epic imagery of Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings* (reaching Iceland almost three years after its U.S. release), they also seethe with resentment at the presence of the U.S. military base at Keflavík, and there are protest marches in the otherwise quiet streets. According to *Iceland from Past to Present*, "Icelandic men were irritated by the sight of well-paid soldiers having shallow fun with Icelandic women." The lavish spending by the Americans has even been blamed for that most endemic of modern Icelandic woes, inflation.

This early segment of *Movie Days* is like one film unto itself, with a quizzical Thomas observing his family and friends through affectionate

eyes. When the boy departs for a distant farm in the north of Iceland, another, much more profoundly-felt film gets under way. These scenes tremble with authentic lyricism; there is no hint of pastiche in the portrayal of Thomas's aging, bizarre uncle or in the figure of the stranger who materialises on horseback and asks for a church, like some refugee from the Swedish or Finnish silent cinema, where such characters embodied the mysterious appeal of the unknown that lies beyond everyday experience. Long-shots of the farmhouse give off a spectral beauty.

At first Thomas scoffs at his uncle's yarns. They are "nothing compared to movies and TV," he declares disdainfully. But within a few weeks he has learnt to fish, to drive out demons, to deal with visiting Mormons in their black attire, as well as with the occasional passing motorist who seeks to seduce him.

In the film's most telling scene, Thomas is told without warning that his father has passed away. Fridrik Thór handles this difficult moment with absolute simplicity and directness, communicating the shock felt by Thomas and eschewing any hint of sentimentality. In all his films there comes a point of which the principal character looks deep into the camera as though into a mirror, coming without a word to terms with his destiny. The funeral scenes, however, are too protracted. The sequence starts with an extraordinary wide-angle shot of the father's coffin being carried in a tiny plane, surrounded by his relative, and the remote country church has a magical dimension like the similar one in *Children of Nature*. Fridrik Thór tips his hat to *Land and Sons* by using the novelist Indridi Thorsteinsson to play the pastor, just as he did in *Ágúst's* film a generation earlier. If a link is forged between the two parts of *Movie Days*, it lies in the treatment of death. As Thomas returns to the capital in the autumn, and queues up for the cinema once more, it is easy to recall the poignant significance of this father's shielding the boy's eyes from the Crucifixion scene in *King of Kings*. He may protect Thomas from the terrors of the silver screen, but nothing can aid his son when it comes to coping with real pain.

The cinematographer Ari Kristinsson lost a good deal of money quite undeservedly when he directed **The Adventures of Paper Peter** (*Ævintýri Pappírs Pésa*, 1990). Its blend of animation and live-action recalls *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, but Ari integrates a cut-out paper figure with his

children' escapades in the suburbs of Reykjavík. Set to jaunty music, and sweeping along at a lively pace, *The Adventures of Paper Peter* fulfils that familiar child's dream, of a character springing to life from the pages of a book - or, in this instance, from the random drawing of a little boy on a large sheet of paper. Very occasionally the strings manipulating the marionette can be glimpsed, but for the most part the images of Paper Peter soaring aloft with some balloons, or riding astride an amiable Labrador dog, are convincing enough.

Paper Peter takes part in a go-kart rally and wins; he also serves as an effective weapon in the boys' perennial struggle with a bad-tempered spoilsport of a neighbour.

Ari's film concentrates exclusively on the children and their mischievous fantasies. Not a parent hovers in sight, and the only grown-up - the stout, misanthropic neighbour - provides a convenient punch-ball for all concerned. Light as a soufflé, *The Adventures of Paper Peter* side-steps didacticism and easily transcends its Icelandic context.

Count Me Out (Stikkfrí, 1997) is an altogether more assured children's feature from Ari Kristinsson. Affecting, yet never sentimental, it describes a situation all too familiar in the 1990's: Hrefna, rising ten, lives with her mother and yearns to meet her father, whom she has never seen. Teaming up with her pal Yrsa, she tracks the man down, only to find that he has a new wife and baby - and fails even to recognise her when she appears at his front door. Hrefna and Yrsa promptly steal the baby girl, and try to look after her (with hilarious consequences) on their own, while virtually the whole of Reykjavík is out hunting for them. A child's profound wish to reunite his estranged parents underscores a film that can be appreciated by youngsters as well as adults. Based on an idea by distinguished director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, *Count Me Out* is marred by the often overbearing music, yet more than redeemed by the relaxed sincerity of the young actresses.

8

Rocking in Reykjavík

Literature may have served as always the prime medium, often the art, of Icelandic life, but music has matched it stride for stride in the 20th century. No other Nordic country experiences music at such a basic level as Iceland does. Choirs practice in every town and village. Rock bands such as The Sugarcubes and Mezzoforte, and charismatic lead singers like Björk, have assimilated the influence of American and British music and leapt on to the international scene. Modern composers as diverse as Jón Leifs (whose life in Germany during the 1930's is evoked in Hilmar Oddsson's film, *Tears of Stone*) and Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, responsible for some of the most haunting electronic scores for Icelandic cinema, prove that modern music in Iceland is subject to ever more daring experimentation. Kristján Jóhannsson has sung in the great opera houses of the world, and the Reykjavík Jazz Quartet is the country's leading modern band and can be compared favourably with any group in Europe.

Icelandic films have drawn on this rich source of indigenous art. The protean talents of Egill Ólafsson, actor, comedian, singer and composer symbolise the commitment to music on screen. He has starred in *On Top*,

Cool Jazz and Coconuts, When the Raven Flies, The Shadow of the Raven, The White Viking, The Men's Choir, Rust, Children of Nature and Magnús. The seedbed of inspiration for most of the musical films was an extraordinary documentary entitled **Rock in Reykjavík** (Rokk í Reykjavík), written and directed by the young Fridrik Thór Fridriksson in the winter of 1981-1982. Although the soundtrack is recorded in four-track Dolby stereo, the film itself is not a brilliant technical achievement. Its importance lies in the sheer profusion and diversity of talent it describes: nineteen rock and punk bands rehearsing, talking, performing, in the intimate clubs and theatres of Iceland. Björk, whose first solo album would sell two million copies a decade late, appears at the age of just fourteen, hurling the lyrics into her mike and wholly absorbed in the beat and thrash of the music. (She also sings on-screen in one sequence of Thráinn Bertelsson's *A New Life* - see Chapter 6).

In an attempt to bring the pop saga up to date, Ágúst Jakobsson's **Reykjavík Pop** (1999) is a semi-documentary that records sessions by all of Iceland's top bands during a three-day music festival organised especially for the film. The musicians themselves are interviewed, as well as visiting legends such as Damon Albarn of Blur. Shot with several cameras, *Reykjavík Pop* shows how much the music scene has burgeoned since the early 1980s.

In the same year as *Rock in Reykjavík*, Ágúst Gudmundsson directed what remains the most popular Icelandic film of all time, the effervescent **On Top** (*Med allt á hreinu*, 1982), which sold some 112,000 tickets on the domestic market. During the late 1970's Jakob Magnússon headed a band called the Merry Men. Their second album, "Tivoli," was successful and Jakob wanted to make a screen musical from it. After approaching directors like Egill Edvardsson, Thorsteinn Jónsson and Hrafn Gunnlaugsson, Jakob was persuaded by Knútur Hallsson to talk to Ágúst, and gave him some ideas scribbled on paper. They immediately established a close rapport. "I was interested in the Icelandic music scene," recalls Ágúst, "and got the boys to tell me stories from the music business, some of which later became scenes in the film. I was particularly interested in the tours the bands make round Iceland every summer."

The director was in London when he wrote the treatment, and one night he watched on TV an Australian film, *The Picture Show Man*, about the travelling cinemas of the silent period. The central idea concerned two rival "cinemas," and that gave Ágúst the concept of two rock bands in competition with each other as they toured Iceland. Soon it became clear that one of the bands had to be a female one, with the lead singers of both groups as lovers.

The best sequences in *On Top* concern this eternal battle between the sexes at a time of awakening female awareness. Ragnhildur Gísladóttir and Egill Ólafsson respond nimbly to the challenge of singing as well as slinging insults at each other. The music bounces along, the lyrics commenting shrewdly on the human relationships, and is performed with professional trio, not to mention "benign self-irony" (to quote the immortal Þór Vilhjálmsson). Apart from some over-emphatic emoting by the minor actors, *On Top* sustains a deftness of touch and gaiety of mood rare in world cinema - and virtually unknown in Nordic cinema. At the film's premiere performance outside Iceland, Ágúst and his fellow scribe, Valgeir Gudjónsson, literally "sang" a translation of the lyrics and dialogue over the headphones so that an audience unfamiliar with the tufts and thickets of the Icelandic language could appreciate the felicities of this satirical musical.

Jakob and his Merry Men band tried to capitalise on the success of *On Top* with their own pop satire, **Cool Jazz and Coconuts** (Hvítir Mávar, 1985). The film can be consumed in slices, for as a whole it does not function (due in part to Jakob's letting everyone contribute to the screenplay and to an excess of improvisation on the set and on location). The comic swipes at the Americans, as they experiment with a laser-type energy source in eastern Iceland, are in similar vein to Ágúst's in *Golden Sands* (see Chapter 6), and Egill Ólafsson -- who turned down the lead in *The House* in favour of Jakob's film -- and Ragnhildur Gísladóttir again strike sparks as the romantic duo. The landscape serves Jakob well, with a climactic sequence showing Egill, with head shaven to make him look like a poor man's Ben Kingsley, perched atop a precipitous escarpment, waving a huge gull before flinging it into the void below him.

"The plot was based on a true story, or at least a true legend," recalls Jakob, "and the backdrop of the sinister scientific experiment was intended to

suggest that maybe, just maybe, there were radioactive materials being stored in Iceland without the government's permission."

Gudný Halldórsdóttir crops up at every stage of the new Icelandic cinema's development. A catalyst for humour and invention, she has essayed various genres. **The Men's Choir** (Karlakórinn Hekla, 1993) may be classified as either comedy or musical and although it takes its characters out into the wider world represented by Sweden and Germany, its heart and its satire belong unmistakably to Iceland.

"There are so many choirs in the country, and so much interest in singing that I knew the film could have a wide appeal," says Gudný. "Besides, you are on safe ground with a comedy." Choosing the ubiquitous Egill Ólafsson for her lead, with his erstwhile partner in *On Top*, Ragnhildur Gísladóttir, as the sole woman accompanying the choir, ensured a degree of popular acceptance for Gudný's film.

The local scenes were shot in Hveragerði, a small town about one hour's drive from Reykjavík. The name "Hekla" has a satiric ring to it. As the country's most famous volcano, it suggests force and ready to erupt at any moment; it's also a feminine name and so Gudný found it rather amusing to link it with a male choir - and to embody its powers in the superficially shy character of Ragnhildur.

Tapping into funds from Germany and Sweden meant that Gudný had to set parts of the film in those two countries. She adroitly fashions her screenplay to describe the sentimental journey of a men's choir to the German birthplace of its leader Max - who dies of a heart attack just before departure. But she does not forget her habit of lampooning certain male attitudes in her native Iceland. One of the early gags, worthy of Monty Python, shows Gunnar, the choir conductor, obeying his pompous boss at the funfair where he works, and then ordering the selfsame braggart about during singing rehearsals. It communicates the division between professional and personal life, with the world of the choristers marching alongside the grind of daily work. Another splendid conceit involves Gunnar's habit of recording his every move on video, adjusting his hairpiece on camera and grinning out at the audience.

Antics aboard the ship to Sweden are almost as funny, with the choir replacing the ship's band. Only towards the end, during the scenes in

Blankenberg, does the tone change to an awkward bitterness, as Max's mother accuses the choir of bringing misfortune to her community. Still, as Derek Elley has remarked, "even that doesn't unnerve the plucky choristers: the film ends with their sailing home on an emotional high, belting out their favourite song (the Sigmund Romberg-Oscar Hammerstein evergreen, "Stout-hearted Men") and convinced that their cultural mission has been a success."

Júlíus Kemp juggles his genres in **Wallpaper** (Veggfódur, 1992) to such and extent that the film eludes classification. Not quite a comedy, not quite a musical, it smacks on occasion of the cock-a-snook attitude of the Kaurismäkis in Finland. On balance, however, it deserves mention at the end of this chapter because its setting is that of the Reykjavík club, where people dance to a succession of new bands and singers. Two young men, Sveppi and Lass, run such a night-club, and make a bet as to which of them will be the first to seduce the new bar-girl, Sól. Like her near-namesake in *Behind Schedule* (see Chapter 6), Sól has come from the countryside in the hope of landing a career as a singer and composer. Her response to the two men's advances is by turns gentle and naive. Sveppi prides himself on a long line of conquests, while Lass is more withdrawn and expresses himself in garish paintings. Both are ugly and macho in their attitudes, resorting to violence at the slightest excuse (the scene where they beat up an elderly "pervert" is especially repellent). Júlíus's direction belongs to the pop video school of Russell Mulcahy and Adrian Lyne, with its rat-a-tat cutting and raked camera angles. By the time that Sól has been almost raped by Sveppi, we scarcely care if she will find true love in the arms of Lass. But the music thunders on, assimilating the disagreeable elements of the plot and proving once again that Reykjavík breeds more musicians per square metre than any other town on earth.

This young director's second feature, **Blossi/810551** (1997), continues in the same vein. It's a hectic, hyped-up road movie, a would-be *Trainspotting* that ultimately fails because its characters are too stereotypical. The pairing of Stella, a Reykjavík teenager on the brink of addiction, and Robbi, a well-meaning alcoholic, seems at one point ready to freewheel off into a fantasy mode that might make for an engaging trip. But soon these children of the PlayStation era slip back into the grunge

twilight zone of junkies and violence. Júlíus sustains the momentum under the influence of Stallone and Van Damme action flicks, to the accompaniment of an original soundtrack seething with unnerving, metallic noise.

9

Crime Ration

Most foreigners became aware of Icelandic cinema only when Land and Sons and Father's Estate began popping up at film festivals during the early 1980's. Reynir Oddsson's **Story of a Crime** (Mordsaga) was released in early 1977, but for various reasons never achieved a breakthrough for its director. Shot almost entirely in the studio, Story of a Crime owes nothing

to the extravagant landscape of Iceland. Its sardonic dialogue, full of cultural references, restricts the film's appeal to a minority audience even at home. And it was made prior to the existence of the Icelandic Film Fund, and enjoyed no means of promotion abroad.

Still, *Story of a Crime* served as a harbinger of good things to come. Wickedly satirical, as dry as a good martini, and audacious in its use of long takes, this film is strongly influenced by the work of Claude Chabrol. Reynir (who is also credited with the production design and as co-photographer) takes delight in ridiculing the garish, American-style furnishings of the Icelandic bourgeoisie, just as Chabrol mocks the French. A young office worker listens to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* on record while his wife quaffs cognac furtively in the bathroom, and indulges in sexual daydreams. The film reaches its high point during a grotesque dinner party at which the guests pay lip-service to the chichi names of the hour, whether they be Haydn or Dean Martin. The gathering breaks up in disarray when one of the guests tries to seduce her host. The ensuing murder, and the bizarre attempt to dispose of the corpse, is filmed by Reynir with guile and professional skill. Not surprisingly, he left for Hollywood soon afterwards, and for a while worked in American television.

For Icelanders, the distant shore and abandoned valley hold the key to the unknown, tinged with menace and failure. The flight to the towns has left these once-thriving areas a spiritual wasteland where secrets and fantasies exert their sway.

At least these constitute the underlying premise of L arus  ymir  skarsson's **Rust** (Ryd, 1990), in which atmosphere unfortunately outweighs characterisation. The film opens on a windswept cape, with breakers unfurling along the desolate shore. The camera pans across fields to a house flanked by a decrepit garage. Here the aptly-named Baddi guards his tiny fiefdom. His son Haffi, mean-spirited, repressed, mends the occasional battered vehicle and expends his frustration in rifle practice and spraying garish, acrylic paintings on the walls of the workshop. Raggi, the garage foreman, tries to impress Baddi's daughter, Sissa, to little avail.

Into this fermenting brew steps P tur, fresh off a freighter from South America and bent on settling some ancient score with Baddi...

Yet despite the sinister tone of the first twenty minutes or so, *Rust* fails to involve its audience. In part the characters are to blame. None provokes empathy, while the motives of each are obscure and difficult to fathom. Pétur and Baddi, once bosom pals, share a dark complicity in the death of Baddi's wife years earlier. Pétur took the rap, and fled to Brazil. Little by little the truth brims to the surface, but its revelation is so obvious that by the time it emerges we are past caring. Lárus Ýmir's skill gives the film a formal interest, enhanced by the moody cinematography of Göran Nilsson, who has shot Lárus Ýmir's other films in Sweden. A scene typical of the director shows Pétur visiting the empty workshop, glancing down into the inspection pit and seeing, for a split second, a corpse drenched in blood. The plaintive piano music of Wim Mertens accompanies some of the more thoughtful sequences and counterpoints Pétur's comment to Haffi: "We are like great big lighthouses. We radiate pain and discontent." *Rust* suffers from a slumberous, cumbersome screenplay that handicaps the competent acting and the meticulous technique.

Jón Tryggvason's **Foxtrot** (1988) wastes no time in unspooling its loud and abrasive story. Even the bizarre configurations of the southern coast of Iceland lose their atmospheric quality as the film develops into a crude B-movie about two half-brothers driving across the country with a truckful of money. Both men, and the girl they meet en route, assume comic-book proportions, while the cliché-ridden dialogue, and the heavy lather of violence applied to scene after scene, only reinforces the American idiom. Perhaps it's condescending to dismiss *Foxtrot* because of its naked commercial instincts; Tryggvason's film may indeed have circulated to more countries than most Icelandic productions. But TV commercials have much to answer for, not least their insistence upon climax after climax that in a feature film amounts to absurdity.

In similar vein, Hilmar Oddsson's **No Trace** (1998) tells a hectic, occasionally ironic story of unexplained murder in the affluent circles of Reykjavík. As a comedy thriller it passes muster for the first hour or so, but then degenerates into pastiche and surrealist melodrama. *No Trace* might have struck the same nerve as Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave*, for example, but the screenplay is too clever for its own good. "One month prior to completion, the film was seventeen minutes longer than it should have been," says Hilmar. "So one night we decided to toss out all the

explanations!” The tongue-in-cheek approach works from time to time, but it’s easy to see that the director’s heart is not in this commissioned enterprise. Such offers of work are so rare in Icelandic film circles that one can hardly blame a talented artist like Hilmar from accepting them once in a while.

On the cusp of a fresh century, Icelandic cinema stands poised for take-off. A dramatic surge in the amount of government money available to the Icelandic Film Fund, an imaginative financial incentive scheme in favour of foreign productions shooting in Iceland, and a number of new directors jostling for the limelight – all this suggests that the lessons of the past twenty years have been well learnt.

By its very nature, the Icelandic film endeavour can never escalate into a Hollywood factory. Nor would its creators want it to. Iceland already produces more films in proportion to its population than any country in the world. It also happens to publish more books per capita than any other nation, and only Sweden and the United States own as many cars per inhabitant. Such statistics imply quantity, however, and not necessarily quality. For the first time in two decades, Icelandic film folk seem to be working for a common cause, rather than setting out in several directions at once.

Co-productions with foreign companies in Scandinavia, Germany, and even Japan and the United States, can swell the ranks of films bearing at least a share of Icelandic ownership. Under new legislation, foreign productions may recoup up to 12% of their expenses while filming in Iceland. Companies like Warners and Miramax Dimension Films have been actively planning to make pictures involving Icelandic locations and technicians.

A further hopeful sign is the trickle of European Community funds into Icelandic film talent via such bodies as the European Script Fund, Eurimages, and even British Screen and the Hamburg Film Fund. Another is the huge increase in subsidy money at the disposal of the Icelandic Film Fund, from \$1.9 million in 1998 to \$5.3 million by 2001. The Fund aims to back five features each year, as well as shorts and documentaries (compared to just two features annually up to 1996).

All this positive legislation pays implicit tribute to the success of Icelandic cinema, both artistically and commercially. The cottage industry is no longer stuttering from one year to the next. It's a fully-fledged environment that attracts skilled technicians and offers excellent facilities.

For at least a decade after Agust, Hrafn and their ilk made such a dramatic breakthrough in the early 1980s, there was little spare money to invest in

any younger talent. Those directors may technically be regarded as veterans, but remain in the prime of their careers. Now, however, the next generation has come to the fore, with talents like Ragnar Bragason, Baltasar Kormakur, and Johann Sigmarsson all readying films for the winter of 1999-2000, while Canan Gerede's **Split** was already selected for screening at the revived Taormina Festival in Sicily in July 1999. This family drama concerns a Turkish muslim who, after breaking up with his Icelandic wife, moves with their children to Turkey.

Jóhann Sigmarsson represents, at barely thirty years of age, a fresh voice in Icelandic cinema. He co-wrote and co-produced *Wallpaper*, and then struck out on his own in 1995 with **One Family** (*Ein stór fjölskylda*). Shot for a mere \$80,000, and with the crew fed on pizzas supplied by a sponsor, *One Family* spins an amusing variation on the theme of spending money that's not one's own. Joe can't bear his in-laws, and one day he takes off, along with his father-in-law's credit card. Joe's binge ends with his wife and various other girls in the family way... Now Jóhann intends to continue in the same freewheeling vein, with **Plan B – Report** (*Oskaborn Thjodarinnar*). This screenplay has received the support of the European Script Fund, and weaves a dramatic comedy around the antics of some smalltime criminals in Amsterdam and Reykjavík. Budgeted at less than \$300,000, *Plan B -- Report* mirrors its director's passion for off the cuff living and for shooting directly on video rather than 35mm stock.

The future of film-making in Iceland could well lie with talents like Jóhann -- and with Ingvar Thórdarsson, the energetic producer of *Reykjavík Pop* and *101 Reykjavík*. Ingvar established a new company, 101 Ltd., jointly with his director Baltasar Kormakur, in order to revive the **101 Reykjavík** project. He persuaded Victoria Abril, the Spanish star revealed by Pedro Almodóvar, to journey north to Iceland to take the leading part, and scurried around Europe to raise money for the picture, to the extent that the Icelandic Film Fund need only be a minority partner. As always in Iceland, wheels turn within wheels: Baltasar and Ingvar run the largest private theatre on the island, and, together with Damon Albarn, owns a cult bar called "Kaffibarinn" in Reykjavík. Damon, who enjoys global popularity with the British band Blur, has written the music for *101 Reykjavík* along with Einar Orn, a former singer with the Sugarcubes. Baltasar caught the

eye as an actor in *Agnes*, and then in *Devil's Island*, and during the late 1990s switched his focus to the stage, directing a dozen plays, including a *Hamlet* for the National Theatre that he also produced at Odense in Denmark. His new film, couched in a tone of irony, “portrays a Freudian nightmare,” he says, “an hilarious world in a city driven by sexual madness!” The central triangle is certainly offbeat: a young man who lives with his attractive mother, and who finds that she is in fact emerging as a lesbian, and taking up with a Spanish teacher, Lola (played by Victoria Abril).

The older generation continues to yield promising material. Ágúst Gudmundsson has been working on *The King of Iceland*, about a Danish adventurer who came to Iceland during the Napoleonic Wars, as interpreter to an English merchant, and managed to overthrow the Danish governor and take the reins of power into his own hands.

Thorsteinn Jónsson has written a comedy, as yet in development, about an Icelandic undertaker who goes to Italy to study his craft and gets involved with the Mafia. He returns to Iceland – in a coffin.

Gudný Halldórsdóttir has returned to her father’s fiction once more, with **The Honour of the House**, a novel written in 1933 concerning two sisters during the early years of this century. Now grown up, the older one is married with two children and the younger one finds herself sent abroad by her family. She returns to Iceland, pregnant by a man once loved by her sister. Jealousy breaks out between the siblings. It’s an ironic story, says Gudný: nothing can be allowed to go awry in this “house”, but of course deceit and malevolence can undo even the most pretentious form of “honour.” A nice touch is the fact that the family speaks Danish on Sundays, for Copenhagen was the de facto capital of Iceland in that prewar era. The sisters are played by Tinna Gunnlaugsdóttir and Ragnhildur Gísladóttir, with Reine Brynolfsson from Sweden and Bjørn Floberg from Norway as the men in their lives.

From film society organiser to neophyte mogul, the career of Fridrik Thór Fridriksson always attracts the headlines. Now the most active producer on the island, and with his own studio complex run in conjunction with his friend Ari (*Count Me Out*) Kristinsson, Fridrik Thór is not neglecting his

craft as director. **Angels of the Universe** (*Englar alheimsins*, due for release on the first day of the new Millennium!) is adapted from an award-winning novel by Einar Már Gudmundsson about an unhinged young man whose visions of the world from his mental hospital are both dramatic and hilarious. His companions in this Icelandic “Cuckoo’s Nest” include someone who claims to be in telepathic contact with the Beatles, and another who identifies first with an English aristocrat and then succumbs to an obsession with Hitler.

Until quite recently, Fridrik Thor appeared to be the only producer of any consequence on Iceland. Directors like Oskar Jonasson, Asdis Thoroddsen, and even Hrafn Gunnlaugsson on *The Lord of Darkness/Witchcraft/Flames of Paradise* (see Chapter 3), welcomed his role as producer on their movies. Now an even younger name has entered the lists: ZikZak Productions. The proprietors of Zikzak, Thorir Sigurjonsson (son of Propaganda Films’ founder Sigurjon Sighvatsson) and Skuli Malmquist, decided in their twenties that they wanted to produce rather than direct. They gathered about them a group of budding writers and directors, among them Ragnar Bragason, and authors Huldar Breidfjord and Mikael Torfason. Ragnar has written and directed **Fiasco** (1999). This lively comedy, marking Ragnar’s debut as a film-maker, recalls the Bergman comedies of the 1950s, with its strict time-span of twenty-four hours, and its interwoven stories involving three members of the same family. Karl, a frisky pensioner, finds himself chasing a 79-year-old former film actress and beauty queen who, just to complicate matters, can’t remember anything. Karl’s grand-daughter, Julia, wants to sustain the affections of both the men in her life, a sailor and a bank manager, and winds up telling each in turn that she’s expecting his baby. And Julia’s mother, Steingerdur, becomes obsessed with a preacher whose fondness for the bottle leads to some heady moments, including a romp in his jacuzzi with a local stripper. The fusion of these three escapades makes for a rousing finale, and should ensure that what may at first glance seem like a local comedy can in fact attract foreign sales.

The existence of ZikZak allows directors to concentrate on directing while someone else copes with the logistical and financial hassles. The enterprising Thorir and Skuli are based partly in London and have some English-speaking projects in the pipeline, including **Neutron**, adapted by

the writer Sjon from a screenplay by the late Derek Jarman, and due to be directed by Fridrik Thor Fridriksson. Another film in pre-production at ZikZak is *The Final Reel*, a wry tale of a young projectionist working in a cinema in a small Scottish town. Attacked by some incompetent gangsters, he wins their allegiance by screening an old French heist movie, and the gang decide to rob a Glasgow bank in identical fashion. But they find themselves at an impasse when it appears that the final reel of the film is missing!

In Iceland, as in the other Nordic countries, the role of the *auteur* director has been sacrosanct for decades. Now a sea change is occurring, and the future may lie with producers who have the talent to mount projects and to select promising directors. This new generation is also more accustomed than its parents to working in tandem with other countries, which enables Icelandic films to have a secure financial base.

Hilmar Oddsson has two intriguing films in the offing, both produced by Fridrik Thór Fridriksson. One, entitled *Cold Light*, concerns a young boy's efforts to come to terms with the loss of his entire family in a terrible avalanche. The other, *The Expatriate*, follows the fortunes of a Czech and his ailing wife, who had fled Prague in 1968 after their son had been killed. When his wife dies, the old man decides to travel to New York to see his sister, and stops in Iceland on the way. The main part of the film will unfold in Copenhagen, but there is an ironic epilogue occurring on Iceland. There remains an abundant amount of source material to be explored by local filmmakers. Hrafn may have written his own sagas, but apart from Gísli (in *Ágúst's Outlaw*), no hero of those literary masterpieces has yet been brought to the screen. Kristín Jóhannesdóttir may refer to the Eddas in her adventurous studies of time and communication, but there has been no formal attempt to adapt them for the cinema.

Twentieth-century fiction also conceals many treasures waiting to be filmed, including several more novels by Halldór Laxness, and such brilliant books as Indridi G. Thorsteinsson's *North of War* and Thor Vilhjálmsson's *Justice Undone*. Jón Sveinsson, who wrote under the pseudonym of Nonni, has been well served on the TV screen by Ágúst Gudmundsson's six-part series, **Nonni and Manni** (1987), but his other

children's books, translated into numerous languages, have not appeared as films.

Icelandic film-makers can never afford to relax. Otherwise they may find that, like wood, the best films will be imported from beyond the sea. As Hrafn, the most audacious of all Icelandic directors, exclaims with a barking laugh, "There's an old Icelandic proverb – 'You need strong bones to survive in the good times.' When you've been struggling so hard during the harsh years, you can easily snap when the moment comes to relax."

Yet these robust, obstinate, fanciful film-makers have already achieved wonders beyond what anyone could have dreamed twenty years ago. They have caught the attention at all the world's major film festivals, and they have steadfastly refused to be absorbed by the other Nordic nations, in either a creative or an economic sense. We can look back on a diversity of films, from the Viking sagas of Hrafn Gunnlaugsson to the domestic comedies of Thráinn Bertelsson; from the rough-hewn feminism of Ásdís Thoroddsen to the deep-throated comedy of Gudný Halldórsdóttir; from the pop-culture antics of Júlíus Kemp and Óskar Jónasson to the thoughtful studies of youth by Thorsteinn Jónsson; from the fey brilliance of dramas by Kristín Jóhannesdóttir and Egill Edvardsson to the dark yet compassionate elegies by Fridrik Thór Fridriksson and Lárus Ýmir Óskarsson; from the intensity of Hilmar Oddsson to the versatility and sensitivity of the first man over the ramparts, Ágúst Gudmundsson.

Their best work confirms the old adage that the most authentic films are those that spring from the texture of local life, honouring everyday incidents and extraordinary people -- because in Iceland even the ordinary becomes the extraordinary.

2263 words

Icelandic Film Directors

ARI KRISTINSSON (b. 1951) graduated from the Department of Visual Communication of the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts in 1979. he studied art from 1980-81 at the California Institute of the Arts. From 1980 he has been working in the Icelandic film industry as a cinematographer, editor, writer and director.

As a director he has made one feature film, *The Adventures of Paper Peter*, and some children's films for television, such as *The Football Kid*, *The Old Doll* and one documentary series, *The Sixties*. As a cinematographer he has shot then feature films, among them *Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's Children of Nature*, nominated for an Oscar in 1992 as best foreign film.

As a scriptwriter he has written the script of *The Adventures of Paper Peter* and *The Old Doll* and co-written, with Thráinn Bertelsson, *Pastoral Life*, *Deep Winter* and *A Policemans's Lot*.

Furthermore, Ari Kristinsson was the line-producer of *Movie Days* and *Cold Fever* produced by the Icelandic Film Corporation.

ÁGÚST GUDMUNDSSON (b.1947), a graduate of the National Film School of England (in 1977), is an established director of both full-length feature films and shorter TV productions.

Two short films earned Ágúst early recognition: *Lifeline to Cathy* (1977) and *a Little Swelling* (1979), which won prizes in Chicago and Reykjavík respectively. His full-length feature debut was with *Land and Sons* (1980), based on a postwar novel by Indridi G. Thorsteinsson. Drawing large audiences in Iceland and critical acclaim overseas, it won second prize at the Taormina Festival.

Outlaw, *The Saga of Gísli* (1981), set in the Viking Age and based on the *Saga of Gísli Súrsson*, was praised by critics and public alike.

The rock musical *On Top* (1982) was followed by *Golden Sands* (1984), a comedy with political overtones set in present-day southern Iceland, which won a gold medal in Lübeck in 1985. In 1987, he directed *Nonni und Manni*, a television serial in six episodes, with the German ZDF as principal producer. Based on stories by "Nonni" (Jón Sveinsson, 1857-1944), the series captivated the public with its young heroes fighting volcanic eruptions, whales and polar bears.

In 1989, Ágúst directed *Sea Dragon*, a four-part series for Thames Television of London, set in the Viking Age and based on a novel by Rosemary Sutcliff.

ÁSDÍS THORODDSEN (b.1959) got her first taste of filming at the age of twenty, as second assistant to the cinematographer on (*Paradise Reclaimed*), based on the novel by Halldór Laxness and directed for West German TV by Rolf Hadrich. After working as assistant programme editor with Icelandic TV in 1979-1981, she studied drama in Gothenburg, Sweden, and philosophy in West Berlin. In 1983, Ásdís Thoroddsen played the leading role in *A Message for Sandra* (director Kristín Pálsdóttir). The same year, she entered the Deutsche Film-und Fernseh Akademie Berlin. Ásdís Thoroddsen released her first full-length film in 1992: *Ingaló*, a character study of a rebellious girl and her brother from a typical Icelandic fishing village, which gives a colourful and detailed portrait of life on board a fishing vessel and on land. *Ingaló* was selected for the "Critics Week" at the Cannes Festival 1992.

EGILL EDVARDSSON (b. 1947) is one of the most versatile artists in Icelandic film today. He was co-owner of a company that produced films, televises programmes for Icelandic TV, he has composed music and lyrics and exhibited paintings both in Iceland and abroad.

After studying music in Iceland, Egill Edvardsson went to South Georgia College, USA, majoring in Fine Arts for a year, and graduated in 1971 as a drawing instructor from the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts.

He spent ten years as producer with Icelandic TV, which included a number of collaborations with leading director Hrafn Gunnlaugsson such as *Bloody*

Sunset and The Silver Moon, before co-founding the film company Hugmynd in 1981.

Egill Edvardsson directed and co-wrote the screenplay for his first full-length feature film, The House (1983). This psychological thriller was enthusiastically received by viewers and critics in Iceland.

Among Egill Edvardsson's TV films are The Deacon (1988), and Story of a Child (1989), based on an EBU award-winning screenplay.

FRIDRIK THÓR FRIDRIKSSON is Iceland's most celebrated and awarded film director internationally. He was born in 1954 and is self-educated in film-making, starting by making 16 mm short films while still at school. He ran the Icelandic University film club from 1974 to 1978 where he promoted and popularized film classics and art films. Fridrik was founder, editor and film critic of Iceland's first film magazine - but only wrote about films he liked. He was a driving force in establishing the Reykjavík Film Festival in 1978 and has been one of its leaders ever since. Fridrik's professional film career began with three striking and original documentaries; The Blacksmith (1981) about an eccentric inventor in rural Iceland, Rock in Reykjavík (1982) about Icelandic new wave Rock'n'Roll, and Icelandic Cowboys (1984) about leaders of a country and western fad in northern Iceland (!) He has directed two television films, Sky Without Limit and Pretty Angels, which both attracted attention for their originality and personal style.

His first full-length feature film, White Whales (1987), about the adventures of two whalers ashore in Reykjavík, was both a comic and stylish dramatic thriller, with great empathy for the pathos of the protagonists' lot. It was unanimously praised, both in Iceland and abroad, where it won awards including one at the Locarno International Film Festival.

His second feature, however, Children of Nature, was his big international breakthrough. Described by the director as "a road movie about old people," it tells a toughening love story of two old people's wish to return to their roots before they die. No Icelandic and few Scandinavian films have received the international fame and acclaim of Children of Nature. It has won no less than 23 international prizes, among them the award for Best

Nordic Film at the Nordic Film Festival in Reykjavík in 1993, culminating in its nomination for the best foreign film Oscar in 1992.

Fridrik's next feature, *Movie Days*, released in 1994, was a nostalgic celebration of the Iceland of the director's youth and the power of cinema. It has been acclaimed by international film critics as Iceland's answer to Fellini's *Amarcord* and Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*, and has gained a wider cinema release abroad than any other Icelandic film. *Movie Days* was awarded the "Nordic Amanda" prize as the best Scandinavian film of 1994.

Fridrik Thór Fridriksson's latest film, *Cold Fever*, released early 1995, is his most international production yet. Produced by and co-written with New York producer Jim Stark, it is a story of the adventures of a young Japanese businessman, forced to come to Iceland, according to a Japanese custom, to perform a traditional memorial ceremony for his parents who died there at a remote river seven years earlier. The film stars Japan's leading young film and recording performer, Masatoshi Nagase, and American film stars Lili Taylor and Fisher Stevens. Fridrik is presently working on a new film called *Devil's Island* to be released in 1996.

GÍSLI SNAER ERLINGSSON was born in Reykjavík in 1964. After matriculating from an Icelandic college he worked for a while with Swedish Television where he focused on TV drama production. In 1986 he worked with Fridrik Thór Fridriksson on his film *White Whales* and in 1987 he was the assistant director of Hrafn Gunnlaugsson's film *In the Shadow of The Raven*. During the years 1990-93 he wrote and directed six short films, both in France and Iceland. In 1991 he went to Paris and graduated in 1994 from F.E.M.I.S. Institut de Formation et D'Enseignement pour les Métier de L'Image et du Son. Among his teachers in Paris were Coline Serreau, Marcel Bluwal, Roman Polanski, Agnes Varda, Claude Chabrol and Peter Brook. In 1994 his first long feature film, *Behind Schedule*, was released in Reykjavík.

At the moment Gísli Snaer is directing a new film, *Benjamín Dove*, a children's film due to be released this summer.

GUDN† HALLDÓRSDÓTTIR (b. 1954) studied at the London International Film School from 1981-1983 after working in the field since

1957. After film school she founded her own production company, Umbi Film, and focused mainly on screen writing and producing. After her first feature screenplay and production, *Message to Sandra* (1983), director Kristín Pálsdóttir), she moved on to produce Ágúst Gudmundsson's feature *Golden Sands*. A year later she was back with her own company with a new script, *The Icelandic Shock Station* (1986), which she co-produced as well.

Her debut feature as film director was in 1989, when she directed *Under the Glacier* which was based on Nobel-prize winner Halldór Laxness's novel. The film was well received and won awards including the Filmlenese in Lübeck.

Her second feature, *The Men's Choir*, was shot in Iceland, Sweden and Germany in 1992 and premiered the same year. The film was well received and has established Gudnþ in many European countries. Currently she is working on the feature *Honour of the House*, based on her own script and scheduled for production in late summer 1995.

In between features Gudnþ has written a considerable amount of material for television, mainly comedy.

HILMAR ODDSSON was born in Reykjavík in 1957. He comes from a theatrical family and was the founder of the classically trained pop group "Melchior".

In 1980 he began studying film direction at the München Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film where he graduated in 1985. His most interesting short film from Munich was *In the Shadow of Scartaris on the Mysteries of Snaefellsjökull glacier* where Jules Verne had set his classic *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

After he returned from Munich, Hilmar Oddsson's first full-length film, *The Beast* (1986), was released. This psychological thriller dealing with the fate of the two young people in a remote and bleak landscape was well received by the public and critics. Hilmar Oddsson wrote the screenplay and composed some of the musical score as well.

Between major projects, Hilmar Oddsson has worked as a freelance producer for both Icelandic TV channels, and as a newspaper critic. He was a co-founder of Nþja bíó Film and Video Production Company in 1989.

He is currently engaged in his new film, *Tears of Stone*, which is based on the life of the Icelandic composer Jón Leifs and is a German, Icelandic and Swedish co-production.

HRAFN GUNNLAUGSSON (b. 1948), Iceland's most productive director today, graduated in theatre and film from the University of Stockholm in 1973 and studied film production techniques at the Swedish Dramatic Institute. In 1966 he produced and directed the short film *Lilja*, the first Icelandic film based on a work by Halldór Laxness. He has directed a number of modern plays for the theatre, and published poetry, a novel, short stories and one-act plays. Hrafn Gunnlaugsson entered full-length films with *Father's Estate* (1978), *Inter Nos* (1980) and *When the Raven Flies* (1984, a Swedish co-production). *The Raven* was the first Icelandic film accepted on the main list of the Berlin Festival and won Hrafn the Swedish Drama Institute's Best Director award in 1985 (The jury's verdict: "Simple, powerful, controlled"). Following its success, he was invited to direct *The Henchman and the Harlot* for Swedish TV, based on Ivar-Lo Johansson's story. In *The Shadow of the Raven* (1988), the first Icelandic movie filmed in Cinemascope, received two Felix nominations (Best Actress; Best Supporting Actor) at the first European Film Festival in Berlin in 1988, and won the Prix special du jury at Balenciennes in 1990. *The White Viking* (1991), a co-production by all the Nordic countries, was produced simultaneously as a cinema release and four-part TV serial. Three projects that Hrafn Gunnlaugsson will direct are now under preparation: *A Tale of Torments and Passion*, which he has co-scripted and has received a grant from the Icelandic film Fund; *Bellman Milk and Wine*, based on the life of the Swedish troubador, with Hrafn's own screenplay; and *Pan*, based on the novel by Knut Hamsun, co-scripted by Hrafn and planned for filming in Vietnam. Hrafn was appointed as a member of the European Film Academy in 1995.

JAKOB F. MAGNÚSSON (b. 1953) was a founding member of the multimedia group "Studmenn". Jakob's film productions include the TV documentary *From Iceland to Brazil* (which he also directed), the box office record-breaking *On Top and Nickel Mountain*, an Icelandic/

American production, featuring an American cast and part Icelandic production team.

After *Cool Jazz* and *Coconuts* Jakob co-produced two music documentaries: *Rocking in China* and *A Voyage to Greenland*, as well as a string of short films and radio and TV programmes.

Jakob has written music for stage, screen and records, including five solo LP's.

Jakob was appointed Cultural Attaché of the Icelandic Embassy in London in 1991.

JÓN TRYGGVASON (b. 1958), director, studied film-making and drama at New York University. He has been actively participating in the theatre art scene, directing and acting in various performances and films. His performances have been acclaimed at the Viennese art festival and at the Guggenheim Museum in New York

A director of numerous music videos and TV commercials, Jón has received awards for his directing of music videos, the best music video in Scandinavia 1987 and again in 1989, and several awards for TV commercials.

He has been a writer, director, editor and producer of TV films.

As an actor, he has appeared in both films and theatre productions.

He directed the Icelandic feature film *Foxtrot* which premiered in 1988 and was one of the four top-grossing films in Iceland that year. Portrayed in *Variety* as "A thriller that works on all levels".

JÚLÍUS KEMP (b. 1967) is the youngest film director to appear on the local scene. On finishing at the Commercial College of Iceland he worked freelance in film making from 1988-90, then studied film making at the West Surrey College of Art & Design, UK from 1990-1991. The short film *Happy Birthday* (16mm) was made in WSCAD/London in 1991. Júlíus Kemp has made a number of music videos and says it is thanks to his work on these that reached the point where he could make his first full-length movie, *Wallpaper*, dealing with music, fashion and the loves of young people in Reykjavík. *Wallpaper* was released in the summer of 1992. A new film, *Sweet Track*, is now in production and will be released in August 1996.

KRISTÍN JÓHANNESDÓTTIR (b. 1948) is one of the most individualistic and style-conscious film directors working in Iceland today. She studied at the Paul Valéry University in Montpellier, where she completed a degree in literature in 1974 and the first part of a doctoral degree in cinematography in 1977. She also took a practical course in television, video and film making at Vincennes Paris VIII and passed exams in film direction from the Conservatoire Libre de Cinema Français in 1978.

With two interesting short films to her credit after her stay in France, she returned to Iceland and founded a production company, with writer-director Sigurdur Pálsson.

She produced her first full-length film, *Rainbow's End*, in 1983. Kristín Jóhannesdóttir has also directed plays for the theatre and TV films for the Icelandic television, among them *A Purpose in Life* and *Broken Glass*, both very personal interpretations of modern-day themes interwoven with fairy-tale references.

Kristín Jóhannesdóttir's latest film, *As in Heaven* (1992), which is based on her own screenplay, was chosen to be Iceland's contribution in the Nordic co-production Year.

As in Heaven was selected in 1992 to figure in the official selection in Cannes (Focus on Nordic Cinema) and has won several prizes in various international film festivals. Kristín now has in preparation a long feature film project entitled *Scented Words*.

KRISTÍN B. PÁLSDÓTTIR (b. 1948) is one of the pioneers of modern Icelandic film production for both TV and cinema. Trained in the UK, she has directed a wide range of television programmes since 1974, including cultural material, music entertainment and variety, children's programmes, current affairs and TV drama. She was a co-funder of the Umbi film company in 1983.

Kristín directed *Message to Sandra* (1983), a full-length feature about a middle-aged writer who finds that the contract of a lifetime he is working on takes second place in his thoughts after he hires a young girl housekeeper.

Since 1982, Kristín Pálsdóttir has been involved with the production of many of the most note-worthy Icelandic films, in various capacities. She was assistant director on *Under the Glacier* (1989) and *Children of Nature* (1991), co-ordinator on the West German-backed TV drama series *Nonni and Manni*, and editor and sound editor on a number of other productions. In the joint West Nordic short film series *Northern Tales* (1992), Kristín Pálsdóttir directed the Icelandic contribution *This Horse is Mine* and was assistant director on two others, *The Mother of the Sea* (from Greenland) and *Hannis* (from the Faroe Islands).

LÁRUS †MIR ÓSKARSSON (b. 1949) worked as a teacher, journalist and filmcutter in Iceland before studying film history, philosophy and psychology at the University of Stockholm. He went on to the Swedish film school, *Dramatiska Institutet*, in 1976 and his diploma film *Caged Bird* (1978) won a gold medal at Oberhausen.

Returning to Iceland, he directed mainly for the theatre and television. His TV debut was *Our Daily Bread* (1979).

In-1982, he returned to Sweden and directed an all-Swedish film in black and white, *The Second Dance* (1982), which met with critical and public success, won a prize at Catania and was selected 6th best film of 1982/83 by Peter Cowie in the 1984 *International Film Guide*. His other Swedish work was *The Frozen Leopard* (1985) and a television serial, *The Eye of the Horse* (1986), where he again employed black and white photography, winning the *Prix Danube* in Bratislava and the best mini series prize in Banff, Canada.

Lárus †mis Óskarssonb directed his first Icelandic feature film, *Rust*, in 1989.

He is presently working on a script and preparations for a Feature film, *Birds of Paradise*, produced by Sigurjón Sighvatsson.

LOFTUR GUDMUDNSSON was born in 1892. He belonged to a farmer's family but around the turn of the century they moved to Reykjavík where he was raised and educated. Loftur was a talented young man. He could paint, he played the piano and composed music. For some period he was even the owner of the soft drink factory *Sanitas*. He travelled to Copenhagen to study photography. When he returned in 1924 he opened

his own studio under his own name. At the same time he started shooting the film *Iceland in Living Pictures* that was released on New Year's Day 1925.

For the rest of his life, Loftur divided his time between photography and filming. In 1948 he made his first all-Icelandic feature film, *Between Mountain and Shore*. Already ill, he finished his second, *The Dependant*, but died before he could start his third film which would have been based on a story by Indridi Einarsson on the 400 anniversary of the death of Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop of Iceland.

ÓSKAR GÍSLASON was a very well known photographer and a director of films. From 1920-1921 he studied in Copenhagen with the royal photographer and filmmaker, Peter Elfelt. After returning to Iceland he opened his own studio. Later on he became one of the pioneers of Icelandic film making with work including *The Látrabjarg Sea Rescue* (1949) and *The Last Farm in the Valley* (1950).

Photography and filmmaking were two main preoccupations of Óskar's life. When he was a young man studying with Ólafur Magnússon, the photographer, The Danish film *The Story of the Borg Family*, which was based on Gunnar Gunnarsson's novel, was being shot in Iceland. By coincidence it was Óskar Gíslason who developed the tests for the film, and the Danish cameraman taught him how to handle them. Later they became good friends. Óskar used the same method when he started making his own films and became the first film developer in Iceland.

For a whole decade Óskar Gíslason produced one film every year, until 1959, when he stopped for unknown reasons. Later when Icelandic TV was established he was appointed to reorganise the photo archive. Óskar Gíslason died in 1990.

ÓSKAR JÓNASSON (b. 1963) is among the youngest film directors in Iceland today. he studied painting and mixed media at the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts from 1980-85. Before beginning formal study of cinematography at the National Film and Television School in London in 1985-90, Óskar Jónasson had already made a number of 8 and 16 mm short films. Two of them stirred controversy in Iceland: *Planet of the Oxma* (1983), and *Suck me Nína* (1985), which at 70 minutes long is close to

being a full-length film. Óskar Jónasson has been closely involved in the world of advertising and has made a large number of music videos. He has directed and produced all the videos for Iceland's best known rock group, the Sugarcubes, along with a 60 min. Sugarcubes concert travelogue, *Live Zabor* (1989). Óskar Jónasson's first full-length feature film, *Remote Control*, a humorous thriller about young people deeply involved in Reykjavík nightlife, was released in summer 1992.

REYNIR ODDSSON was born in Reykjavík in 1936. He started off with an acting career in mind, played in various theatre works and musicals, but in 1961 he turned to film making with a documentary about a national gathering of Young People's Societies in Iceland. He continued producing documentaries during the following years, among them *Island on the Edge of the Ocean* and *Umbarumbamba*, a short pop-musical featuring the "Icelandic Beatles", Hljómar. His break-through was a two-part documentary about the Allied occupation of Iceland during World War II which was released in 1967 and 1968.

His first and only feature film was released in 1977. This was a low-budget film, *Story of a Crime* dealing with a Reykjavík middle-aged nouveau riche couple and their pretty 18-year-old daughter.

Story of a Crime was certainly a landmark in Icelandic film-production, based on private initiative and optimism two years before the Icelandic Film Fund was established. It broke all house records in Reykjavík at the time.

For the past decade Reynir Oddsson has been living in the United States.

SNORRI THÓRISSON (b. 1949). Having worked at the Icelandic State Television for 10 years as a senior cameraman, Snorri Thórisson established Saga Film hf. The company soon grew to be the biggest production company and facility house in Iceland. For several years Snorri worked in every field of the industry, as cameraman, director and producer. But as his company grew he concentrated more on management. In 1992 Snorri sold his 50% share in the company and established Pegasus Pictures which is currently producing the feature *Agnes*.

THORSTEINN JÓNSSON (b. 1946) graduated in film direction from the Prague Film Academy in 1971 and studied at the Film Faculty of Nippon University in Tokyo 1977-78.

He has worked in all areas of the profession and at all levels: in production, script-writing, directing, cinematography and editing. he was President of the Film Makers' Association of Iceland for a number of years and Director of the Icelandic Film Fund and Film Archive from 1990-1992.

The short films that launched Thorsteinn Jónsson's career had a great impact in Iceland, especially the controversial *The Fish Beneath the Stone* (1974), and uncomfortably candid examination of Iceland's cultural life. His documentary, *Farmer*, won first prize at the Reykjavík Film Festival in 1978. His feature debut was *Dot Dot Comma Dash* (1981) and his second feature film, *Atomic Station* (1984), was the first Icelandic film to be selected in an official programme in Cannes (Directors' Fortnight 1984). *The Sky Palace* was an official selection (the Childrens Film Fest) in the Berlin Film Fest 1995.

THRÁINN BERTELSSON (b. 1944) is Iceland's most prolific maker of feature films, having written, directed and produced six films, winning awards and critical acclaim abroad and enjoying exceptional popularity at home.

After graduating in film directing from the Stockholm Dramatic Institute in 1977, he worked for a short period as a producer at Icelandic TV, directing works including a historical film about medieval chiefain and saga writer Snorri Sturluson.

His feature film debut was with *The Twins* (1981).

Thráinn Bertelsson's most recent film, *Magnús*, proved the most popular film in Iceland in 1989, even beating James Bond and Indiana Jones for attendance figures. It received two major Felix nominations (Best Film, Best Screenplay) at the European Film Awards in Paris in 1989.

In the course of a colourful career, Thráinn Bertelsson has written, directed and produced a total of six feature films, besides his work for television. He is the author of various books for adults and for children, novels and essays, ex-editor of a Reykjavík daily newspaper and a popular radio personality. His latest work is a 4x60 min. TV series based on his own script for the Icelandic State TV and co-produced by Danish, Swedish,

Norwegian and Finnish TV. The series, Ships of Heaven, was filmed in location on the Westman Islands in summer of 1992. A new film, Private Lives, is in production.

THÓRHILDUR THORLEIFSDÓTTIR has a very colourful background in the theatre. She started off as a ballet dancer, went to London and studied with the Royal Ballet School and the Royal Academy of Dancing. In the following years she attended courses for dancers, choreographers, actors and directors all over Europe. Back in Iceland she performed as a dancer, actress, choreographer and director of a great variety of plays. Gradually she became one of the most renowned theatre directors in Iceland, specialising in opera and musicals. Among her best known productions for the Icelandic Opera are Otello, Ring of the Nibelungs, Don Giovanni, Carmen, Trovatore and The Magic Flute. In 1986 Thórhildur ventured into the world of films by directing The Icelandic Shock Station, a farcical comedy based on Icelandic real life.

Thórhildur is for the time being living and studying in Germany.

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