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## **Under the Tree (15)**

*dir:* **Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson**

*Starring:* **Sigurður Sigurjónsson, Edda Björgvinsdóttir, Torstein Bachman, Selma Björnsdóttir,**

*Sponsors:* **eira consulting Ltd**

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**Synopsis:** Reykjavik, the present. Atli's wife Agnes catches him watching a sex tape of himself in bed with Rakel, his ex. She throws him out. He goes to the house of his parents, Inga and Baldvin, who are involved in a row with their neighbours, Konrad and Eybjörg, over a tree. Atli is denied access to his daughter by Agnes. He tries to mend his relationship with Agnes. Baldvin finds his car tyres slashed. Inga's cat disappears. She blames their neighbours and installs CCTV to monitor their property, while Atli pitches a tent on their front lawn. Inga has the neighbour's dog put down and leaves it on the doorstep. In retaliation, Konrad chops down the tree which falls on the tent and Atli, who is hospitalised. Baldvin attacks Konrad. They fight, inflicting potentially fatal injuries on each other. The cat reappears.

A vast tree creates neighbourhood conflict in this Icelandic drama: its branches block out the light, claims the prickly and highly strung Eybjörg (Selma Björnsdóttir). If she seems like the enemy to the tree's possessive custodians Baldvin (Sigurður Sigurjónsson) and Inga (Edda Björgvinsdóttir), we are about to discover that Eybjörg's own mood is darkened by an inability to conceive a child with older husband Konrad (Thorsteinn Bachmann). Baldvin and Inga, meanwhile, carry around a tragedy of their own; and their son Atli (Steinþor Hróar Steinþorsson) is facing gathering marital strife with his wife Agnes (Lára Johanna Jónsdóttir). Everyone, in short, has something vast, many branched and deeply rooted hanging over them.

Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson's third feature - he previously directed *Either Way* (2011) and *Paris North* (2014) - begins as an uncomfortably bitter drama, bereft of a single character who isn't horrible, before letting in sunlight and some human warmth during its second act, and finally lurching into coal-black comedy and bloody vengeance. A spectacularly capable cast manage this changing tone without faltering, helping to ensure that the emotional inconsistency feels more like a facet of life than a failure of the filmmaking.

The melodrama that builds between the characters is sometimes emotionally punishing and often straightforwardly irritating, but never uninvolved. It can feel somewhat dated, its claustrophobic focus on the petty woes of well-off suburbanites recalling the fashion for domestic malaise that briefly gripped Hollywood around the millennium. If this film has its own overhanging tree, it might be *American Beauty* (1999), for here too we find men driven to horny doofusness or caveman rage by the unfair demands of marriage and

respectability; women driven unreachably mad by grief and frustration; and neighbour-on-neighbour sniping hitting homicidal heights.

The weaknesses of *Under the Tree* resemble those of *American Beauty*, too, though the performances here are far more nuanced: at its worst, it plays things both too silly and too sour to merit the emotional investment it's asking for. This problem is embodied in the character of Inga: though Björgvinsdóttir plays her with sludgy coldness that is painfully convincing as the wine stains on her lips, both the excess of cruelty that Inga displays and the punishment she's subjected to feel awkwardly pitched between emotional truth and misogynistic parody of postmenopausal witchiness. It's a shame the film wasn't guided more by its best scenes, in which it sums up entire long-standing relationships in brief interactions and defies expectations without sacrificing credibility. When Agnes finds Atli masturbating to an old sex tape of his ex Rakel (Dóra Jóhansdóttir), their exchange is at once absurd, agonizing and utterly persuasive: his hopelessly blatant lies, which are also partially true; her mix of pain and contempt; the appalling, all too predictable appearance of their small daughter at the door. Subsequently, when Atli reconnects with Rakel, we might predict either ill-advised sex or a moralistic dressing down. Instead, Rakel suddenly supplies him with what none of his family has seemed able to give: generosity, wisdom and good advice. It's a disarming moment, and a reminder that narrative shifts can come from characters being unexpectedly kind, as well as some actions growing inexorably more cartoonishly extreme.

Balance is the key in the film's technical presentation as well, with Monika Lenczewska dim-hued cinematography alternating pushy sunshine with glowering cloud, and Intelligence sound work adding adding edginess.

### **Credits**

<b>Asa</b>	Sigríður Sigurpálsdóttir Scheving
<b>Rakel</b>	Dóra Jóhansdóttir
<b>Eybjörg</b>	Selma Björnsdóttir
<b>Konrad</b>	Thorsteinn Bachmann
<b>Agnes</b>	Lára Johanna Jónsdóttir
<b>Baldvin</b>	Sigurður Sigurjónsson
<b>Inga</b>	Edda Björgvinsdóttir
<b>Atli</b>	Steinþor Hróar Steinþorsson

*See over for technical credits*

## Credits (cont)

<b>Director</b>	Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson
<b>Screenplay</b>	Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurdsson, Huldar Breidfjord
<b>Story</b>	Huldar Breidfjord
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Monika Lenczewska
<b>Editor</b>	Kristján Loðmfjörð
<b>Production design</b>	Snorri Freyr Hilmarsson
<b>Music</b>	Daniel Bjarnason
<b>Sound</b>	Björn Viktorsson, Frank Malgaard Knudsen, Sebastian Holm
<b>Costume</b>	Margrét Einarsdóttir
	<b>Iceland 2017. 89 mins</b>

## Another View

There's one incontrovertible truth in this world, it's that people love cats. And they do so with a passion and intensity that is all-consuming, perhaps to the level where it might corrupt their ability to live normal, relatively sane lives. Icelandic director Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurðsson offers a weird riff on 'Romeo and Juliet' in his third feature, *Under the Tree*, which follows the lives of two families, both alike in indignity.

The Romeo of the set-up is Atli (Steinþór Hróar Steinþórsson), a tattooed dolt who is caught red handed by his wife (and mother of his toddler daughter) masturbating over an archive sex tape in which he canoodles (and more) with an ex-girlfriend. She descends into an understandable rage, booting him to the curb and sending him back to the family nest. While Atli tries and fails to patch up his relationship, his parents meanwhile are in the midst of a tit-for-tat battle with their neighbours, who have kindly asked for them to trim back the tree in their garden.

Sigurðsson appears fixated on the notion that most people are too quick to act on negative impulse, and that human compassion is little more than an idyllic myth. These characters get a kick out of confrontation, and while that helps to retain a satisfying sense of hair-trigger tension, it also ends up making the eventual outcome feel a tad predictable. That said, the film does work in that the ways in which the neighbours devise to torture one another are at least creative and amusing, if not always entirely believable.

The film's key combustible element is the eternally intractable Edda Björgvinsdóttir's Inga, the chain-smoking, wine-quaffing mother of Atli who thinks nothing of insulting her neighbours to their face. She is a cat lover, and this whole mess winds back to a cat-based loss in her life – one which seems to have tipped her entire existence on its head. Indeed, there's a sense that she loves cats more than she loves her kindly doormat of a husband, Baldvin (Sigurður Sigurjónsson).

It's a funny, silly yarn that weaves together the comic and the tragic without ever really tipping things over the edge. And it's interesting to see an Icelandic film which is entirely urban and domestic in its settings – there are no gorgeous natural vistas or captivating, tourism-stoking landscape money shots, just lots of boring, dimly lit houses and flats, and lots of people with little more to do than start unnecessary arguments

**David Jenkins: Little White Lies**

## Our next screening; Friday May 10th, 7.30pm Summer 1993 (Spain 2017. Cert 12a)

Our final film this season is a debut feature by Carla Simón, and based on an incident in her own past. It's a meticulously observed study of 6 year old Frida coming to terms with the death of her parents and having to get used to a very different life with her aunt and uncle, in the countryside outside Barcelona. While such a story might be considered sombre, depressing even, Simón avoids those pitfalls by concentrating on presenting it from Frida's point of view, as she learns to come to terms with her feelings. The result is beautifully crafted, with a great sense of time and place and totally anchored by a stunning performance by Laia Artigas as Frida. Summer 1993 won Best First Feature at the Berlinale, 2017 and Carla Simón Best New Director in the Spanish Oscars.