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Woman at War (12a)

Dir: Benedikt Erlingsson

Starring: Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir, Jóhann Sigurðarson

Sponsor: Katy Taylor

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Synopsis: Iceland, present-day. A woman strides across the landscape and attacks an electricity pylon with a bow and arrow, cutting off the electricity supply to the local smelting factory. Running from police helicopters, she is later revealed to be 40-something choir director Halla who is on a one-woman mission to bring down the aluminium industry threatening the local environment. With Chinese investment hanging in the balance, the government grows increasingly determined to catch the unknown vigilante, and her quest becomes more dangerous. An added complication is that her years-old application to adopt a child from the Ukraine has just been accepted, and she is torn between motherhood and activism. As her attacks grow increasingly audacious, she is finally caught and imprisoned, all hopes of adoption seemingly lost. She is visited in prison by her identical twin sister Asa, who takes her place and tells Halla to go to the Ukraine and unite with her daughter.

A woman strides across the lush Icelandic landscape, confidently brandishing a bow and arrow. Despite being dwarfed by the scenery, she cuts an imposing figure; a drum beat intensifies in pace and volume as she stalks her prey – a huge electricity pylon. Shooting a cable over the lines, she pulls with all her might and the pylon sparks ominously. Nearby, activity in the local smelting plant grinds to a halt.

It's a striking introduction to one of the most original and exciting characters to emerge from recent European cinema: Halla (Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir), a middle-aged choir director with a secret identity. She is also fearless environmental warrior "Mountain Woman", whose mission is to disrupt the country's aluminium industry before it completely destroys the local environment. With huge Chinese investment on the horizon, however, the government is determined to track down this unknown vigilante, and the net begins to tighten.

Things become even more complicated for Halla when, after years of waiting, she receives a letter informing her that her application to adopt a child from the Ukraine has been accepted, and there is a little girl, Nika (Margaryta Hilska), waiting to meet her. Halla is now torn between her maternal instinct and her moral imperative to fight for her country; if she's caught, she knows that any hope of becoming a mother will be lost.

In less adept hands, *Woman at War* could have become something of a blunt-edged diatribe about the way in which irresponsible commerce is destroying our planet or a worthy David and Goliath tale about one individual taking on an entire society. But there is a lightness of touch both in direction, from Benedikt Erlingsson (*Of Horses and Men*), and performance that instead makes this an intelligent, intriguing character study. It is particularly marvellous to see that this woman's war is not one taking place within herself, an oft-used trope when it comes to female focused

narratives. Halla is a resolute and confident in her goals and abilities and, if the possibility of impending parenthood gives her pause, it never threatens to derail her.

As Halla, Geirharðsdóttir is phenomenal, showing a flair for both drama and comedy. She is a character firmly grounded in thought and deed - despite the film's idiosyncrasies, most notably its use of music. Halla's various pursuits, physical and mental, are underscored by an evocative soundtrack – a three-piece band for determined moments of action, a traditional Ukrainian vocal trio for quiet self-reflection. These musicians not only appear in the background of the film - sitting in a field, at the side of a road or in Halla's apartment - but also interact with their surroundings, turning on the TV, playing her piano, running from a falling electricity pylon. It's a visual quirk knitted into the fabric of the movie, effectively underlining the fact that, like the rest of us, Halla is motivated as much by her personal emotions as by her sense of social injustice.

Geirharðsdóttir also plays Halla's identical twin Asa, who in contrast to her sister is a yoga instructor striving only for inner peace. While these seemingly dichotomous personality traits could have been given a narrative convenience, giving Halla someone with whom to have spiky discussions about maternal instinct and personal responsibility, they work well, allowing her to voice her turmoil to a person who knows her inside out. (What Asa doesn't know until the film's end, however, is that Halla is responsible for the havoc in the countryside.) And, after Halla is finally, inevitably captured and imprisoned, it's Asa who comes to her rescue with a selfless, flawless identity-switch scheme that allows Halla to travel to the Ukraine and finally meet her daughter; it's a happy ending to which she is thoroughly entitled.

The cinematography, from Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson is exquisite. Capturing Iceland's stunning topography in expressive, vividly coloured, perfectly lit wide shots, often with Halla ant-sized in the centre, it makes clear exactly what she is fighting for. Everything is expertly framed, from moments in which Halla is contemplative in her apartment, scheming in front of portraits of Mandela and Gandhi, to the scene where she rides her bike past a never-ending row of windows from which a legion of television newscasters decry her activism. An exquisite shot of Halla aiming her bow and arrow at a drone hovering above her head encapsulates the film's beauty and raw power. Both score and sound design reference everything from the natural tranquility of the landscape to the mechanical rumble of the factories and the insistent buzz of the drones that follow Halla's every move.

Writing the screenplay with Ólafur Egilsson, director Erlingsson widens out *Woman at War*'s focus in neat, understated touches. A hapless bike riding foreign tourist (Juan Camillo Roman Estrada) becomes the prime suspect for Halla's actions, a nod to Iceland's insularity. The government's plan to use the media to paint the Mountain Woman as a criminal, solely responsible for the economic hardships that will befall every Icelander if Chinese investment is lost, speaks to the modern scourge of fake news and the insidious nature of harmful political propaganda.

Yet such messages are never overbearing, merely part of the world that Halla is railing so fiercely against. and, as every blockbuster season is traditionally dominated by armies of lycra-clad marauders and avengers, there can be no doubt that she is one of the year's strongest, most inspirational heroes.

Credits

Halla/Asa Sveinbjörn Baldvin Juan Camillo Nika	Halldóra Geirhardsdóttir Jóhann Sigurdarson Jörundur Ragnarsson Juan Camillo Roman Estrada Margaryta Hilska
Director	Benedikt Erlingsson
Screenplay	Benedikt Erlingsson, Ólafur Egilsson
Director of Photography	Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson
Editor	David Alexander Corno
Music	David Thór Jónsson
Sound Design	François de Morant, Raphael Sohier, Aymeric Devoldère, Vincent Cosson,
Costume	Sylvia Dögg Halldórsdóttir
Stunts	Reynir A. Óskarsson
	France, Iceland, Ukraine, Denmark 2018. 100 mins

Another View

The pop cultural landscape has pined for an eco-warrior since Captain Planet was cancelled in 1996. Choir teacher by day, green renegade by night, Halla (Halldóra Geirhardsdóttir) takes up this vital mantle on her quest to rid the Icelandic highlands of a Rio Tinto aluminium plant. When her long-forgotten application to adopt a child is suddenly approved, the down-to-earth insurgent must reconsider her notions of motherhood, civic duty and herodotom.

Woman at War spins gold from several contemporary fixations. One thread explores the modern woman's quest to Have It All (in this instance: a choir, a crossbow and a Ukrainian orphan). Another strand examines the commercial chokehold on Earth's diminishing natural resources; how big business disrupts farming families who've cared for their land over many millennia. A third critiques government surveillance and its by-products, such as the fear-mongering propaganda churned out by mass media, stoking a toxic news cycle.

These themes could easily make for a middling rom-com, or a gritty political pot-boiler, but director Benedikt Erlingsson isn't here to cash-in on the zeitgeist's lowest hanging fruit. He weaves a captivating dark comedy from these urgent, quite chilling issues, grounding them in Geirhardsdóttir's staunch performances (she doubles as Halla's pacifist yogi twin Ása).

Halla is the perfect Robin Hood-type renegade. At 49, she's barely noticed, let alone suspected of domestic terrorism. More fool the feds, because 'The Mountain Woman' – as she signs her manifesto – is whip-smart, meticulous and determined. It's a thrill to watch her master plan in action, as Erlingsson rolls out the spiciest how-to hijinks of a heist film. Halla uses every trick up her sleeve, including one that whiffs of Han and Luke's tauntaun sleeping bag.

As per the director's previous drama *Of Horses and Men*, from 2013, *Woman at War* surveys Mother Nature's role in Icelandic culture. Both films are tinged by a pastoral palette of green, brown and grey, with a similarly dry sense of humour. Bucolic panoramas take in the rolling countryside, only to be interrupted by vision from heat-sensing drones, hot on Halla's tail, to bizarrely comic effect. When farmer Sveinbjörn (Jóhann Sigurdarson) screams "Woman!" at the vigilante on his property, it's not entirely clear whether he's addressing Halla or his sheepdog. Turns out, it's the latter.

But the most enchanting element of this odd, mischievous film is the on-screen presence of a three-piece band. The pianist, drummer and

sousaphonist – later complemented by a trio of Ukrainian folk singers – create a stark tonal contrast to Halla's serene choir. These curious musicians serve as something of a Greek chorus, appearing at each high-stakes juncture to belie the heroine's calm exterior with their staccato rhythms, refugee melodies. Sometimes they even gaze at the camera, catching the viewer's eye as if it to say, 'I know, right.'

Big budget superhero flicks are a dime a dozen. *Woman at War* takes a sidelong glance at what it means to look, sound and act like a fighter – one hellbent on serving the world's greater good.

Aimee Knight: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday, January 10th, 7.30pm Dawson City: Frozen Time (USA 2018. Cert tbc)

"If cinema is the place where dreams meet reality, then *Dawson City: Frozen Time* is a cinematic reverie that takes us on a mesmerizing and deeply moving journey through history," (Matthew Lucas)

Our film next week centres around the 1978 discovery of 533 reels of film in Dawson City. These works had been sealed within a swimming pool and tell the story of Dawson City, the dawn of 20th century America, and Hollywood in the silent era. Expertly restored and pieced together by Bill Morrison and Madeleine Molyneaux, the film is, in the words of critic Tara Judah, "so much more than just a lesson in Dawson City's own history, and extending further still than the bounds of film history, Morrison's approach to archive film offers us an experience of the past that is unwaveringly contemporary.."

Please note: *the film contains many flickering images, as might be expected given its age and the circumstances under which the original footage was found, while the subtitling is small and may be difficult to read for some with poor eyesight. Please check the trailer on our website for further detail.*