

WOMAN AT WAR

ICELAND (2018) 101 minutes

Director: Benedikt Erlingsson

Cast: Halldóra Geirhardsdóttir (Halla / Ása)

Jóhann Sigurdarson (Sveinbjörn)

Juan Camillo Roman Estrada (Juan Camillo)

Jörundur Ragnarsson (Baldvin)



Screening 4 March 2020 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

Behind the scenes of a quiet routine, 50 yr old singing teacher Halle leads a double life as a passionate environmental activist, secretly waging a one-woman-war on the local aluminium industry. As Halla's actions grow bolder, she succeeds in pausing the negotiations between the Icelandic government and their international industry financiers. But just as she begins planning her boldest operation yet, she receives an unexpected letter that changes everything. Her application to adopt a child has finally been accepted, and her decisions must now encompass both desires.

Reviews



We open amid the breath taking beauty of rural Iceland, as a woman fires an arrow over a power line, thus short-circuiting government plans to build a new aluminium smelter. This is Halla, who combines the athletic physicality of Tom Cruise's Ethan Hunt with the character depth and subtlety of Liv Ullmann or Greta Garbo.

Erlingsson's story has a mythic feel, casting Halla as Artemis, goddess of the wilderness. This is brilliantly emphasised by his adventurous use of on-screen oompah band, who serve as a kind of Greek chorus, mediating between the action and the audience. In contrast, a keening Ukrainian choir offers a melancholy counterpoint, dramatising the different elements of our heroine's divided soul.

Geirhardsdóttir receives significant support from Jóhann Sigurdarson as Sveinbjörn, the gruffly avuncular sheep farmer. In a country where practically everyone is a cousin, Sveinbjörn forges a unexpected bond with Halla, one that is as moving and embracing as this weirdly beautiful film itself.

The unusual but uncomplicated plotline is not what makes ***Woman at War*** stand out from other tree-hugging environmental awareness films. Beautifully photographed against magnificent landscapes, the film cleverly breaks through the 'fourth wall' of cinema by having a three-piece band and a choral folk trio incongruously provide the film's soundtrack. In this case, the musicians are not playing for Halla, they are playing directly to us. We are as much the subject as what we are observing on screen, and it is 'we' who are invited to take a stand on the existential threats posed by human-caused environmental degradation. If an ordinary woman like Halla can rise to the challenge, so can we.

Another way this film stands out is how it balances and integrates several competing femininity stereotypes. Halla teaches singing for the joy of music and is a ruthless industrial saboteur. She is passionately committed to saving the environment but must stay clear of the law if she is to satisfy her deep yearning for motherhood. Strong, defiant, politically aware, she is soft, vulnerable and loving.

She is an androgynous heroine, totally devoid of feminine conceits, single-minded, yet quintessentially a woman. Viewers will walk out of this with a variety of lingering thoughts; that is the mark of a good film.

Cinemusefilms.com

Film Facts

- For a fascinating interview with director Benedikt Erlingsson go to seventh-row.com/2018/09/01/
- Two of the earth's tectonic plates meet in Iceland, and it is possible to go snorkelling in the gap, which increases by 2 cm a year.

Mark Kermode, The Guardian

swindonfilm.org.uk