

THE COUNTY (Héraðið)

Iceland (2019) 92 minutes

Director: Grímur Hákonarson

Cast: Arndís Hrönn Egilsdóttir, Hinrik Ólafsson



Screening 16th November 2022 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

A widowed farmer begins a new life on her own terms by fighting against corruption and injustice in her community.

Reviews



Rugged rural Iceland and organised crime don't seem like natural bedfellows, but the third film from native director Grímur Hákonarson (*Summerland*, *Rams*) crafts a taut and enthralling drama out of one woman's occasionally reckless attempt to take down a corrupt local co-operative.

The County opens slowly, matching the grey, agricultural landscape. We see middle-aged Inga (Arndís Hrönn Egilsdóttir) and gruff husband Reynir (Hinrik Ólafsson) quietly going about their business of keeping the remote family dairy farm afloat. When Inga suggests that they purchase fertiliser from a cheaper supplier instead of the local co-operative, Reynir replies ominously: "We belong to the co-op." He's not exaggerating: like other farmers in the area, Inga and Reynir are only allowed to buy supplies from the co-op, and only allowed to sell their milk to it. Their business is also heavily in debt to... you've guessed it: the co-op.

Stubborn, and occasionally slightly deranged, Inga is the beating heart of this dour but ultimately very compelling David and Goliath story.

Nick Levine, NME

The spirit of Elia Kazan lives on in this tough community drama from Icelandic film-maker Grímur Hákonarson, who won golden plaudits for his 2015 picture *Rams*, about two sheep-farming brothers, which struck a clever tonal balance between comedy and tragedy.

The County is dourer than that, though from the same world of self-reliant and pugnacious souls who have made their way in life against tough odds, thriving in solitude and hardship amid a vast, remote, beautiful landscape. The action centres on farmers: Inga (Arndís Hrönn Egilsdóttir) who is married to moody, careworn Reynir (Hinrik Ólafsson).

Their life is hard. They are fighting against mounting debts and must work harder and harder to stay afloat. Hákonarson shrewdly begins with a classic farming scene, which for Britons is like something from James Herriot: a calving that Inga handles herself without any outside help, using chains attached to the hooves, steadily, competently pulling. It's a scene that crystallises her approach to work: calm, professional and with an uncorroded sense that focused effort will be rewarded.

Reynir's worldview is bleaker. Like his wife, he has become embittered by his farm's relationship with the all-powerful local co-operative and its political adjunct, the Agrarian party. They're signed up to the co-op, like all the farmers thereabouts, and this body gives them a safe captive market for their milk and meat, a discount store and loans. But in return the farmers have to buy everything from the co-op itself, at inflated prices. The co-op has become an exploitative racket, a Carnegie-style company store, led by its sinister, desiccated chairman, Eyjólfur (Sigurður Sigurjónsson), who runs a menacing, Stasi-mafia organisation against any farmer who dares go outside the union – using a key informant who betrays his neighbours.

Peter Bradshaw, Guardian

Film Facts

- The director of this film, Grímur Hákonarson also directed *Rams*, shown at the film society previously.
- At a brisk 92 minutes, *The County* takes less time to watch than the average Monopoly game takes to play, while offering much the same grim lesson.