

Registered Charity: 1156478. Patron: Jim Broadbent

Friday October 14th, 2016

Rams (15)

dir: Grímur Hákonarson

starring: Sigurdur Sigurjónsson, Theodór Júlíusson

sponsor: Andrew Howard

this review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

In one widescreen frame in *Rams*, we see two sheep farms stretching side by side across a gently sloping valley, the properties divided in the middle by a road heading straight towards the camera position. The poised symmetry of the composition is almost too good to be true: but this is Iceland, where sheep farming is a traditional component of the local economy, so there's every reason to believe it's a real location. That tension between authenticity and contrivance is absolutely at the heart of Grímur Hákonarson's second narrative feature, which takes the evident dramatic construct of two brothers who are neighbours, rival sheep breeders and - most significantly - haven't spoken to each other for 40 years (for reasons the film takes its time revealing) and sets it against the plight of a very real farming community whose pride in its sheep stock provides no protection against today's tough market realities.

The antics of the warring siblings play out as a sort of bitter comedy, especially when one very clever collie is pressed into service to carry letters between the two when they have no choice but to communicate with one another. However, the crisis that brings this to pass is only too serious: the presence of scrapie in the ram that has just won best in show for Theodór Júlíusson's Kiddi (the embittered, hard-drinking, slightly unhinged brother), prompting Sigurdur Sigurjónsson's seemingly more responsible Gummi to sound the alarm and bring in ministry vets to slaughter all the sheep in the area. Suddenly, the fraternal friction is set in a wider context in which livelihoods and maybe even lives are at risk, and Hákonarson's *Un Certain Regard* prizewinner sustains the tension supplied by those escalating stakes while never sacrificing the story's in-built wit and quirkiness.

Events move with such a smoothly inevitable logic that the film's trajectory appears almost effortless, making it easy to miss the skilled craft shaping the director's screenplay. Of course, there's something endearing about the woolly capriciousness of the sheep themselves, somehow loveably benign yet exasperatingly stubborn, and fortunately that engaging charm extends to the two central characters, with Kiddi's utterly unrepentant orneriness only bringing out Gummi's clear headed decency - and the latter's anti-establishment streak makes him even more of an audience favourite. To find another film whose straightforward, almost homespun simplicity masks a director in truly confident control of his material, you'd probably have to go back to David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999). While the subject matter is very different here, Hákonarson's achievement, like Lynch's before him, is ultimately to leave us with a sense that



Synopsis: A remote sheep-farming valley in Iceland, present day. At the local farming association's annual awards, elderly landowner Gummi is delighted to win silver in the best ram competition, but his joy is short-lived when the top prize goes to Kiddi, his neighbour and rival - and the brother he hasn't spoken to for forty years. On the way home, Gummi checks Kiddi's winning animal and detects early signs of the contagious disease scrapie. The agricultural ministry is forced to slaughter all the sheep in the area - a disaster for the local farming community, which is already under economic pressure. Gummi kills his sheep before the authorities arrive and co-operates in the sterilization process but an angry Kiddi fires shots through Gummi's window and refuses to take part. However Gummi has secretly kept his best ram and a handful of ewes to continue propagating the flock, and Kiddi's discovery of this subterfuge sees him falling into line with the authorities. Bereft at the loss of his animals, Kiddi takes to the bottle, and Gummi takes him to hospital after he almost freezes to death. Kiddi returns just in time to stop the police uncovering Gummi's hidden stock of sheep. In order to preserve the flock, the two siblings drive the remaining sheep up into the mountain. A heavy snowstorm rolls in and Kiddi digs a survival tunnel. Years of conflict over a disputed inheritance are forgotten as they cling together for warmth, their future uncertain.

Credits

Gummi	Sigurdur Sigurjónsson
Kiddi	Theodor Júlíusson
Katrin	Charlotte Boving
Runolfur	Jón Benónýsson
Grimur	Gunnar Jónsson
Bjarni	Sveinn Ólafur Gunnarsson
Director	Grimur Hákonarson
Writer	Grimur Hákonarson
DoP	Strula Brandth Grøvlen
Editor	Kristjan Lodmfjörd
Production Design	Bjarni Massi Sigurbjörnsson
Music	Atli Órvarsson
Sound design	Huldar Freyr Arnason, Bjorn Viktorsson
Costume design	Margrét Einarsdóttir, Ólof Benediktsdóttir

Iceland/Denmark/Norway/Poland 2015

93 mins

universal themes are thrumming through an extremely localised and specific scenario. In the case of *Rams*, you won't spot it coming, but late circumstances and brilliant film-making deliver a final image that not only sets individual conflict within the broader realm of human brotherhood but somehow also prompts a surge of emotion from an outcome on the very tipping point of exquisite uncertainty. A minor classic, no less.

Another View

A story of filial rivalry in a remote valley in Iceland, Grímur Hákonarson's second narrative feature Rams (Hrútar, 2015) begins as an oddball comedy about sheep farming and grows slowly into a tale of elemental and moving power, deservedly winning the Un Certain Regard sidebar at Cannes. The film focuses, and initially sides with, Gummi (Sigurður Sigurjónsson), an unmarried solitary sheep farmer, whose affection for his flock is obvious and heartfelt, sniggering aside. Like a long term dog owner, he's even grown to resemble them with his woolly jumpers and woolly beard. He lives one hundred yards from Kiddi (Theodór Júlíusson), his elder brother with whom he hasn't exchanged a word for forty years.

The two glare at each other occasionally, and can't help but interact, but when they do it is in a brusquely comic way. A stray ram is simply thrust through the offender's front door, or a note is hastily pencilled to be delivered via sheep dog. The depth of sibling rivalry becomes evident when Gummi takes second place and Kiddi takes first in a ram competition. Neither brother takes it well. Sore loser Gummi storms off, and sore winner Kiddi gets hammered and takes pot shots at his brother's windows with a shotgun by way of celebration. The victory, however, proves pyrrhic, when Gummi finds the winning ram has actually got symptoms of a dreaded disease called scrapie. The disease is incurable, highly infectious and, if confirmed, will lead to the slaughtering of not only the flock but endangers all the sheep in the valley and the news in fact is not good.

With all the sheep to be slaughtered and the sheep pens thoroughly disinfected, anything wooden or used in the pen has to be burnt, the two brothers react in markedly different ways. The wiser Gummi once the emotional shock is over takes matters in hand and gets it over with, whereas Kiddi rebels hopelessly and descends into full blown suicidal drinking, constantly being found in the snow in a stupor. However, Gummi's apparent obedience is not total and in his basement he has saved some sheep and his favourite second prize-winning ram. In a way the strategy has all the elements of hopeless farce. Inopportune visits and distracting stratagems suggest it is only a matter of time before Gummi is found out, but meanwhile the community of the valley is falling apart as all farmers are banned from sheep farming for two years, many decide to simply abandon the valley and the already fragile community is on the verge of extinction. Even if sheep farming does survive, there is no guarantee that the scrapie won't return, and the sheep they will be breeding will no longer be the indigenous rare breeds that won prizes.

When Kiddi discovers Gummi's secret, finally the brothers will have to come to some kind of compromise to save the way of life they both love. Indeed, way of life isn't even the right term: without the sheep the valley is truly desolate and lifeless. The snow locks the mountain tops in their grip and darkness encroaches for the long

winter. Hákonarson frames his characters with sympathy and a wry wit, but he never mocks them. Nor does he take ordinary life as an excuse for endlessly long shots, keeping his narrative tightly focussed and the film relentlessly entertaining and in its latter third incredibly moving. The absurd comedy of men loving their sheep dissipates as we realise how their animals were not just a livelihood but were a deep connection to their own identity and the land around them, beside which their long cherished enmity will seem insignificant. Rams is a truly remarkable, eccentric work.

John Bleasdale: Cinevue

To read another review of this film, by film students at the University of Lincoln, go to their blog page at <https://eyesonscreen.wordpress.com/>

Don't forget to visit our website to take a look at our blog page: it has articles about the rise of community cinema and the film society movement, the likely impact of Brexit on the film industry (with possibly consequences for us) and the Toronto and London film festivals. Here's the link: <http://www.lincolnfilmsociety.com/category/blog/>

Our next screening - Friday October 21st, 7.30pm The Lobster (Ireland/UK 2015. Cert 15)

Greek director Yorgos Lanthimos has established a reputation for himself as a film-maker of singular vision with films like *Dogtooth*, *Attenberg* and *Alps*, which explore less-than-perfect aspects of society and human behaviour, and where comedy and tragedy are never far away from each other.

In *The Lobster*, he dissects obsessions with couple-dom and the need to 'be in a relationship', in a typically idiosyncratic way. In the world he imagines, single people are taken to a hotel and are given 45 days to find a partner - or be turned into an animal and released into the wild. With an impressive cast including Colin Farrell, Rachel Weisz and Olivia Colman, Lanthimos's first English language film is guaranteed to provide plenty of talking points and some very interesting opinions!