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## **Sherpa (15)**

**Winner: Best Documentary, London Film Festival 2015**

*dir:* **Jennifer Peedom**

*sponsors:* **Richard and Linda Hall**

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Few relationships stand as such vivid emblems of racial one-upmanship as that between the white Western adventurer and the native guide who undertakes the same challenge for none of the same glory. For reaching the summit of Everest in 1953, Edmund Hillary and his expedition leader John Hunt were knighted; their guide Tenzing Norgay was fobbed off with a George Medal.

As is eloquently expressed in Jennifer Peedom's clear-eyed and discipline documentary, Sherpas have a completely different conception of the mountain they call 'Chomolungma', and don't relate to it as a challenge to be overcome. Sherpa guides climb in exchange for wages, albeit mean ones, while tourists pay handsomely for the privilege. Yet the famous model of inequality set up by Hillary and Tenzing still resonates among Sherpa people, and today's interconnected culture gives them access to more awareness of their historical and current subjugation.

Peedom was inspired to make a film on the empowerment of the Sherpas after an angry confrontation occurred between a guide and a European mountaineer on Everest in 2013. As it happened, she and her team were at the base camp filming the preparations for the 2014 ascent at the time of the worst accident in Everest's history: an avalanche that killed 16 Sherpa guides. In its aftermath, the angry and traumatised Sherpas organised to stop the climb until the government agreed to better pay and compensation for them.

Garnering opinion from the guides, the expedition leaders and the climbers, and presenting it in compassionate and unsensational terms, Peedom creates a subtle portrait of an extraordinary dispute, beautifully offset by intimate scenes of the family of Phurba Tashi Sherpa as he debates whether or not to undertake his 22nd trip to the summit. "It's shameful to God," declares Phurba's mother. "If he were a famous monk, at least we could get blessings. The fame he gets from climbing the mountain is useless." Phurba's wife is more sober and sad: "He loves the mountain more than his family."

While cinematographer Renan Ozturk captures dazzling footage of the mountain, Peedom displays a superb eye for revealing human moments: the impatient climber who asks that the striking Sherpas be dealt with by their "owners", the ambiguous position of expedition leader Russell Brice, who deeply sympathises with his own Sherpas but recoils from the militants he says are "spoiling their reputation" as cheery helpers; the Sherpa who cuts through the stalemate by simply telling the camera: "A lot of our friends died up there and we're scared."



The resulting film is a quiet, complex account of the gradual fracturing of an outdated set of arrangements and attitudes, the setting for which commands a particular kind of respect. "You don't conquer the mountain," says Jamling Tenzing Norgay. "You crawl up, like a child into its mother's lap."

**Synopsis:** *A documentary about the Sherpa people, focusing on the relationship between Sherpa guides and western climbers attempting the ascent of Everest.*

*In Khumjung village, Nepal, in April 2014, mountain guide Phurba Tashi Sherpa is preparing to summit Mount Everest (called Chomolungma by the Sherpa people) for the 22nd time, which will make him the world record holder. His wife and family are resistant to his dangerous work. Journalist and climbing expert Ed Douglas contextualises the history of the Sherpa people's history as mountain guides. The children of Tenzing Norgay, who reached the summit of Everest with Edmund Hillary in 1953, explain the place of Chomolungma in the ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism as representing "the mother god of the Earth." On the mountain, expedition leader Russell Brice prepares his team of 25 Sherpas for a mission to the summit. He and other contributors detail the expansion of the mountaineering industry, the Sherpas' crucial place in it, the dangers they face and their increasing awareness of the credit they are due.*

*As Brice's climbers are acclimatising, a huge avalanche on the hazardous Khumbu icefall kills and injures numerous Sherpa guides. Sherpas react with anger and agitate for the climbing season to be cancelled, out of respect for the dead and until the Nepalese government agrees to better pay and compensation for mountain guides. Government representatives visit the workers but make no commitment to their cause. Russell reluctantly cancels his climb, citing the rumour that his Sherpas have been threatened with violence by their more militant colleagues. Phurba tells his family that he will not go up the mountain again.*

*End captions relate that the government finally acceded to the Sherpas demands, but that the climb had to be cancelled again in 2015 due to the Nepal earthquake*

### **Credits**

<b>Director/writer</b>	Jennifer Peedom
<b>Producers</b>	John Smithson, Bridget Ikin
<b>Cinematography</b>	Renan Ozturk, Hugh Miller, Ken Sauls
<b>Editing</b>	Christian Gazal
<b>Music</b>	Antony Partos
<b>Sound</b>	Sam Petty

## Another View

*Sherpa* is certain to appeal to international audiences on multiple levels, a fact underlined by its Universal pick-up for all territories excluding Australia and NZ (where Footprint Films will launch in 2016). The film's subject is topical and its timing is opportune, given fresh memories of the deadly avalanches which have blighted the Everest season for two years running. When Peedom started shooting, Phurba Tashi Sherpa's 2014 trek was her primary focus. A successful trip to the summit would mark his 22nd ascent, a world record feat pursued not for glory, but to make a living. Like many inhabitants of the area, transporting the equipment essential to wealthy Westerners' attempts to scale the world's highest peak is his most lucrative line of work. Phurba oversees a team of 25 who work for commercial tour operator Russell Brice, though he does so with the disapproval of his wife and family, who contend that no amount of money is worth the ever-present risk of death.

Their fears are given frightening context when tragedy strikes, a cruel stroke of fate changing the course of the film. April 18, 2014 remains the blackest day in Everest's history, with 16 Sherpas killed at Khumbu Icefall. The documentary dives into the impact, implications and aftermath, and while it presents perspectives on either side, those who profit from local labour and lives aren't afforded much sympathy, the Nepalese government included.

Dissecting the historical situation, the current-day circumstances and the hopes for a better future, the film favours the workers who strike for their rights to better compensation and insurance – but *Sherpa* is not a standard crusade for a cause. British journalist Ed Douglas voices the film's historical narrative, which traces the image inspired by Tenzing Norgay six decades ago when he scaled Everest with Edmund Hillary and the stereotype of the smiling, helpful Sherpa was born. Now, aware of their marginalisation and mobilised by social media, those who follow in his footsteps strive to shake this reputation.

Initially motivated by another news-grabbing incident – a brawl between climbers and Sherpas in 2013 – Peedom's aim was to call attention to the mountain's unsung heroes, and she achieves her goal in breathtaking fashion. She knows the area – she shot *Miracle on Everest* there in 2008, and was the high altitude director on *Everest: Beyond The Limits*, while her most recent credit was co-directing *Solo* with David Michod. The camerawork on display here from Hugh Miller, Renan Ozturk and Ken Sauls, whittled down from 400 hours of footage, is jaw-dropping, even as the human rights issues at Sherpa's centre will inspire exasperation. The canny combination of the two elements, with editor Christian Gazal seamlessly switching between time-lapse, snow-capped vistas and the faces of those affected, never lets viewers forget the perilous surroundings or the human cost.

In fact, scaling such heights has rarely felt so intimate and personal, both in the handheld footage and in the plight of the people that, in most other films, are left on the cutting room floor.

Later in 2015, the fictional Everest will take an all-star cast to the mountain's perilous peak; however when it comes to high altitude hijinks, *Sherpa* is the real deal.

**Sarah Ward: Screen Daily**

### **Our next film: Friday November 4th, 7.30pm**

#### **Our Little Sister (Japan 2015. Cert PG)**

Our Little Sister is a family drama directed by the Japanese master of this genre Kore-eda Hirokazu, who has delighted audiences with films like *I Wish* and *Like Father, Like Son*.

The setting is contemporary Japan where we find ourselves caught up in the lives of the 3 Koda sisters - Sachi, Yoshino and Chika - who share the family home after their estranged father's death. The film explores the dynamics at work when the sisters discover the existence of a half-sister - Suzu - they knew nothing about.

This is up there with Hirokazu's best work. He allows the story to develop unhurriedly, but it's never dull as he shows the consequences of Suzu's arrival on them all. Small secrets are revealed, old wounds are closed and new ones opened in ways that feel perfectly believable. Hirokazu's direction draws subtle performances from the principle actors, while the cinematography is a delight - a cycle ride through a grove of cherry trees in full bloom is just one indelible image that remains as the credits roll.