



Of horses and men

Director: Benedikt Erlingsson

Country: Iceland

Date: 2013

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

Ronald Reagan used to say: "There is nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse." I wonder what the Gipper would have made of this short, sharp, startling little movie from Iceland: a rather bracing film in which the insides of humans interact with the outsides of horses. Humans' outsides feel the benefit of horses' insides, too.



It is a drama in which horse and human meet on equal terms. The original Icelandic title is *Hross í oss*: that is, Horse in Us. There is something very significant in its human-equine relations. The inter-penetration is largely spiritual, although interspecies sexual congress could be said to have taken place by proxy when a stallion unselfconsciously mounts a mare, on which a man is already, as it were, mounted. In

many ways *Of Horses and Men* puts me in mind of the subversive erotic tales filmed by the Polish director Walerian Borowczyk who, in 1975, got into big trouble here for a glimpsed horse erection in his robustly conceived film *The Beast*.

Almost everything in *Of Horses and Men* happens in the great Icelandic outdoors: a colossal and wildly beautiful valley plain that is, in effect, one single unbroken location. It is like a giant natural stage. The human inhabitants are smallholders and horse breeders who take a certain curtain-twitching interest in each other's business. This means patient surveillance using binoculars. The director is Benedikt Erlingsson, an actor-turned-film-maker who performed in Lars von Trier's Gervaisesque comedy *The Boss of It All* in 2006. He brings something of Von Trier's deadpan humour to this film.

The story is a Venn diagram of overlapping lives: at the approximate centre is Kolbeinn, played by Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson, an actor who – not counting Björk – could be the nearest thing we have to a famous Icelandic movie star; he was the grizzled cop in Baltasar Kormákur's tremendous procedural thriller *Jar City* in 2006.

Kolbeinn is courting Solveig, a widow (or conceivably divorcee) played by Charlotte Bøving; she lives a short horse-ride away with her elderly mother and small son. Kolbeinn is a tense, fastidious character who lavishes a great deal of unwholesome and possessive emotion on his dainty little white mare. The way he finally gets a bridle on it looks like seduction and conquest – and coercion. He looks faintly absurd, trotting over to see the object of his affections; she happens to be the owner of a black stallion that takes a very great shine to this gentleman's mare. The result is farce, violence and tragedy and the template is set down for the rest for the picture.

This is a world of roiling emotions that are natural and dignified in horses, but clenched and unhappy for their human masters. The horses, of course, are candid about what they feel: so honest, so calm, so unaffected, so unencumbered with any need to pretend, that they don't appear to be feeling anything at all. The humans are quite different.

One alcoholic, desperate for the kind of strong liquor that seems to be unavailable, uses a strong-swimming horse to ferry him out to a Russian trawler where he might be able to buy vodka: a purchase that ends in disaster. A neighbour dispute over a barbed wire fence leads to a similar catastrophe and two funerals produce two widows who compete with Solveig for Kolbeinn's affections. A Spanish horse-enthusiast falls in love with a Swedish woman: he can't keep up with her, in many different senses, and another calamity seems to be in the offing. The horses assume a tragic, almost sacrificial bearing.



Of Horses and Men is a hugely enjoyable film from the wild side of the wild side; it comes with an excellent musical score by David Thor Jonsson, and it really resembles nothing else around. I found myself thinking of Peter Schaffer's once shocking play *Equus*, about dysfunctional sexuality displaced into an obsession with horses. But actually this film makes that play's solemnity and shock value look self-conscious and silly.

Erlingsson gets up close and personal with horses in a way that is earnest and romantic rather than erotic or ironic; in particular, he has a montage of horseflesh surfaces, close-up shots that allow you to appreciate the texture and feel of a horse's hide – clearly the work of a connoisseur. It is a love story about horses, with horses, almost like a silent movie with words. Horses are the language that allow the human characters to speak to each other. This film deserves its cult status.

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