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MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
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Orizzonti  
Competition

# UNDER THE TREE

BY HAFSTEINN GUNNAR SIGURÐSSON

OFFICIAL SELECTION

tiff

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL 2017





## LOGLINE

When Baldvin & Inga's next door neighbours complain that a tree in their backyard casts a shadow over their sundeck, what starts off as a typical spat between neighbours in the suburbs unexpectedly and violently spirals out of control.

## SYNOPSIS

Agnes throws Atli out and does not want him to see their daughter Ása anymore. He moves in with his parents, who are involved in a bitter dispute over their big and beautiful tree that casts a shadow on the neighbours' deck. As Atli fights for the right to see his daughter, the dispute with the neighbours intensifies – property is damaged, pets mysteriously go missing, security cameras are being installed and there is a rumor that the neighbor was seen with a chainsaw.



# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR



## **Where did the idea for the film originate, and was it based on any true incidents?**

Co-writer Huldar Breiðfjörð and I started talking about this idea around a decade ago. We both were fascinated by the idea of making a film about neighborly disputes. What excited me originally about the idea is that such conflicts can be absurdly funny since they very often revolve around minor issues, but then very often get blown out of all proportion. They can sometimes become very fierce, violent conflicts, in which normal, respectable people lose their dignity and self-control.

Stories of neighbours fighting over trees are actually quite well known in Iceland so, and in fact, the story was in some sense inspired by a real-life incident, although the script then developed into something completely fictional. What's also important to know is that trees are not all that common in Iceland, so if you have an old and beautiful tree standing in your garden, you're very unlikely to ever want to let go of it. But on the other hand, if a tree in the next garden is preventing any sun from shining into your garden, you are going to want to get rid of that tree. Especially since we don't get that much sunshine in Iceland. It's the kind of head to head dilemma that unfortunately is hard to solve in a diplomatic way.





**Was there something about the everyday nature of the conflict that attracted you?**

I have always been drawn to the mundane in my films and yes, I do feel it's a great source for cinematic material. Mainly because our lives are most of the time made up of the mundane, this is what we know best and I believe this is one of the elements that connects our human existence. I found it a great challenge to make a thriller-esque drama about something as innocent as a beautiful tree. To make a war film where home is the battlefield.

**How did you work to make sure all of the characters were convincing individually and as an ensemble?**

I guess you're always working with pre-existing qualities in other people, including yourself, when building your characters. For me a lot happens when the work with the actors begins, that's really when the characters that populate the film become tangible for me. The actors of course bring a lot to the table, and sometimes we use people we mutually know as a reference. Although that said I wouldn't say that the actors are imitating real people, or anything like that. Maybe they do? They just don't tell me.

I definitely find it really important to be specific in the characterization, to make all the key players in the story distinctive in a way that makes it possible for the audience to recognize and understand them, whether they agree or disagree with the actions of these people. I enjoy working together with the actors on that very much, really building the characters. I like to rehearse quite a lot before shooting. I've always tried to spend a few days before principal photography begins, rehearsing with the actors at the locations. This process has turned out to be very fruitful for everybody and usually the DOP is present for these rehearsals as well. The actors often tell me how valuable they find this process, to be able to spend time and discover the locations on their own, in character, but without the stress and chaos that tends to take over the location once the whole crew is in there.

**Were there any films that provided visual inspiration for *Under the Tree*?**

There are always other films and filmmakers who influence your creative process but the trick is to hide them so they don't become obvious. I hope I managed to do so on this one. There were some films I discussed with the film's DOP Monika Lenczewska, which included works by Michael Haneke, Joachim Trier, Ruben Östlund, David Lynch, Lynne Ramsay, Derek Cianfrance to name a few. As you can see from that list, it was a lot of very different filmmakers

and the influence on our film wasn't a direct one. What we did was use their work to find a common ground in our conversation as we defined our vision for the script.

**Music also plays a key part in defining the increasingly dark tone.**

I always knew that I wanted to approach part of the story as a thriller. It may not be that obvious when you read the script, so using music along with cinematography was a very important tool to create that feeling of unease and suspense. Especially since the narrative does take some unexpected turns in the latter half (which I don't want to spoil), the score turned out to be an essential and effective way to prepare this shift.

Composer Daniel Bjarnason and I are longtime friends and we had been looking for a project to do together. That project finally came with *Under the Tree* as I figured Daniel would be the perfect match for this script. What I told him in the beginning was that I didn't want a conventional score where the music is only there to support the image. I told him that I wanted the music to be a force of its own, a statement in a way. And he really nailed it.





**Do you see the film as a cautionary tale for our time, about what can happen when coexistence and compromise start to fail?**

There are some terrible things in the air these days and I think we've reached the point where it's seriously threatening our existence on this planet. If we look at the biggest narrative of our times, climate change, it's exactly about that. The whole world has to come together and let go of a certain way of living but it seems that we just can't. We all have the same objective, and really we all have to compromise in one way or another and be considerate of each other – and if we don't, we are risking the future of our children. But still we can't do it. How fucked up is that? It's this terrible individualistic way of thinking and living which is indeed encouraged by our capitalistic society.

What happened during the development of this script is that I tried to open up the narrative, making it receptive to different interpretations of those ideas. By the end it turns into sort of a fable where the larger metaphor is living in a community, in peace with other humans. In that sense you can also read this story as one about two different, conflicting nations, ethnic or religious groups – I think those stories share some things in common with the issues we can have with our neighbours.









**STEINÞÓR HRÓAR  
STEINÞÓRSSON**  
ATLI

Steinþór Hróar Steinþórsson (aka Steindi Jr.) was born in 1984. He is one of the most popular comedians of the younger generation in Iceland and has been incredibly successful on Icelandic TV. He has also appeared in a number of feature films and currently he is the host of the most popular comedy show on Icelandic radio. *Under the Tree* is his debut in a leading role in a feature film.



**EDDA BJÖRGVINSDÓTTIR**  
INGA

Edda Björgvinsdóttir was born in 1952. She graduated from The Drama Academy of Iceland with distinction in 1978. In the 1980's Edda became a household name, renowned for her comedic talent. Currently, Edda divides her time between being an actress, comedian, writer, director and a motivational speaker. In Icelandic cinema, she is best known for playing the titular role of the 1986 comedy classic *Stella í Orlofi* (*Stella on Holiday*).



**SIGURÐUR SIGURJÓNSSON**  
BALDVIN

Sigurður Sigurjónsson was born in 1955. He graduated from The Drama Academy of Iceland 1976. He is one of the most loved actors of his generation, a legend in Icelandic comedy, a director and a screenwriter. He has starred in numerous films and television series since the late 1970s, as well as being a regular at the National Theater of Iceland, as an actor and a director. Internationally, Sigurður, is most famous for the lead role in the film *Hrútar* (*Rams*).



**LÁRA JÓHANNA JÓNSDÓTTIR**  
AGNES

Lára Jóhanna Jónsdóttir was born in 1983. She graduated from The Drama Academy of Iceland 2010. Since her graduation she has appeared in numerous roles in both the National Theatre of Iceland and the Reykjavik City Theatre. Lára has done a number of films in Iceland as well as appearing on the original Netflix TV series *Sense 8*.



**ÞORSTEINN BACHMANN**  
KONRÁÐ

Þorsteinn Bachmann was born in 1965. He graduated from the Drama Academy of Iceland in 1991. Þorsteinn has an extensive career in theatre, both as an actor and a director, but in later years he has become one of the country's finest film actors. He is also a very experienced acting coach and was the president of Akureyri Theatre Company. Þorsteinn is known for his role as Móri in *Vonarstræti* (*Life in a Fishbowl*) and in 2015 he won an *Edda Award* (Icelandic Academy Award) for that same role.



**SELMA BJÖRNSDÓTTIR**  
EYBJÖRG

Selma Björnsdóttir was born in 1974. She is an actress, singer, choreographer and a theatre director, best known internationally for representing her country in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1999 (where she came in second). Selma has worked on numerous productions as a choreographer, assistant director, director as well as working extensively in television.



**HAFSTEINN GUNNAR  
SIGURÐSSON**  
D I R E C T O R

Hafsteinn Gunnar Sigurðsson was born in Reykjavik, Iceland in 1978. He is a graduate of the prestigious film program at Columbia University, New York. His first feature film *Á annan veg (Either Way)* screened at film festivals all around the world and was re-made in the US as *Prince Avalanche* (starring Paul Rudd and Emile Hirsch). Hafsteinn was selected as one of "Variety's Ten European Directors to Watch" in 2012.

F I L M O G R A P H Y

*Paris of the North*, 2014, Feature  
*Either Way*, 2011, Feature  
*Skröltormar*, 2007, Short

**MONIKA LENCZEWSKA**  
D O P

Monika Lenczewska graduated with a Masters Degree from the Department of Film and Television from the University of Silesia in Poland and completed an MFA in Cinematography at the American Film Institute. She is a member of the International Cinematographers Guild and Polish Society of Cinematographers. Monika's work has been selected in numerous film festivals including Sundance (nomination for best cinematography in 2014 for *Difret*), Cannes, Tribeca, Rotterdam and Camerimage. Her work experience includes feature films, shorts, and commercials.

F E A T U R E S

*Message from the King*, dir. Fabrice du Welz, 2016 (completed)  
*Park*, dir. Sofia Exarchou, 2016 (completed)  
*Obce Niebo*, dir. Dariusz Gajewski, 2015  
*Difret*, dir. Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, 2015  
*Imperial Dreams*, dir. Malik Vitthal, 2014  
*B For Boy*, dir. Chika Anadu, 2013

**PRODUCERS**

N E T O P F I L M S

Netop Films was founded in May 2013 by producer Grímar Jónsson. Netop Films focuses on quality European co-productions for the discerning viewer.

P R O F I L E P I C T U R E S

Profile Pictures is a Copenhagen-based production company founded in October 2011 by producers Thor Sigurjónsson, Jacob Jarek and Ditte Milsted, and joined by producer and partner Caroline Schlüter Bingestam in 2014.

M A D A N T S

MADANTS company was founded by Klaudia Śmieja and Beata Rzeźniczek to focus on independent, international film productions. Our ambition is to make art house cinema with festival as well as distributive potential.

O N E T W O F I L M S

One Two Films is a Berlin based production company, founded in 2010 by Sol Bondy, Jamila Wenske and Christoph Lange. The focus is feature films for the international market.

**SALES AGENT**  
N E W E U R O P E F I L M S A L E S

New Europe Film Sales is a boutique sales company based in Warsaw, founded in 2010 by Jan Naszewski. Company's catalogue includes the Icelandic hit *Rams* (Prix Un Certain Regard 2015), Swedish-Polish debut *The Here After* (Directors' Fortnight 2015), 2016 Silver Bear winner *United States Of Love*, 2017 Berlinale Best First Feature winner *Summer 1993*, Israeli black comedy *One Week And A Day* (Cannes Semaine de la Critique 2016), *Porto* starring Anton Yelchin and Polish arthouse hit *The Last Family* (Best Actor in Locarno FF 2016). NEFS works with many first and second time filmmakers and animation.



# UNDER THE TREE

## FESTIVALS

World Premiere:  
Venice IFF – Orizzonti Competition

North American premiere:  
Toronto IFF

## FILM INFORMATION

Original title: Undir Trénu  
English title: Under the Tree  
Genre: urban satire  
Country: Iceland, Denmark,  
Poland, Germany  
Language: Icelandic  
Year: 2017  
Duration: 89 min.  
Picture: color  
Aspect ratio: 1:2.35  
Sound: 5.1  
Available format: DCP

## CAST

Steinþór Hróar  
Steinþórsson Atli  
Edda Björgvinsdóttir Inga  
Sigurður Sigurjónsson Baldvin  
Lára Jóhanna Jónsdóttir Agnes  
Þorsteinn Bachmann Konráð  
Selma Björnsdóttir Eybjörg  
Dóra Jóhannsdóttir Rakel  
Sigríður Sigurpálsdóttir  
Scheving Ása

## CREW

Director: Hafsteinn Gunnar  
Sigurðsson  
Screenplay: Hafsteinn Gunnar  
Sigurðsson,  
Huldar Breiðfjörð  
Cinematography: Monika Lenczewska  
Editing: Kristján Loðmfjörð  
Production Design: Snorri Freyr Hilmarsson  
Sound Design: Björn Viktorsson, Frank  
Mølgaard Knudsen,  
Sylvester Holm  
Music: Daniel Bjarnason  
Production companies: Netop Films, Profile  
Pictures, Madants,  
One Two Films  
Producers: Grímar Jónsson  
Sindri Páll  
Kjartansson  
Þórir Snær  
Sigurjónsson  
Co-producers: Caroline Schluter  
Bingestam, Ditte  
Milsted, Jacob Jarek,  
Beata Rzeźniczek,  
Klaudia Smieja,  
Jamila Wenske,  
Sol Bondy  
With support of: Icelandic Film Centre,  
The Danish Film  
Institute, The Polish  
Film Institute,  
The Icelandic Ministry  
of Industries and  
Innovation, Eurimages,  
Nordisk Film & TV  
Fond, RÚV, ZDF/ARTE,  
Di Factory

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FILMS

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DANISH FILM INSTITUTE

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