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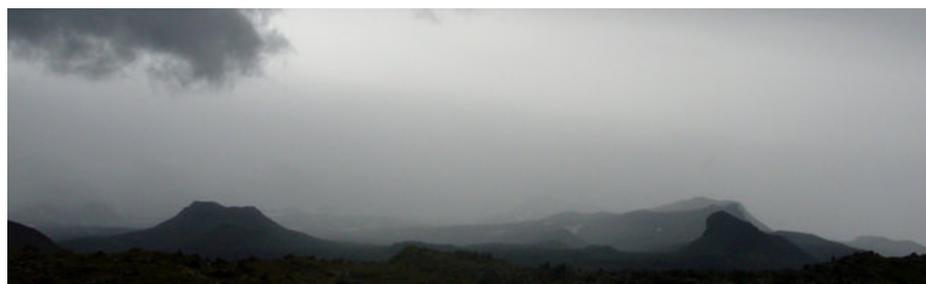
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# Iceland, Rising From Its Ashes With Films



Ulla Boje Rasmussen/Uprfront Films

A still from Ulla Boje Rasmussen's "Thor's Saga."

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN  
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REYKJAVIK, Iceland — Iceland is a country of upheavals, natural and artificial, literal and figurative, so it should be no surprise that the featured Icelandic selection at the eighth annual [Reykjavik International Film Festival](#) is "Volcano," directed by Runar Runarsson, which opens with spectacular scenes of the [Eldfell volcano](#) chewing the bones of a small island town in 1973.

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Revolution Reykjavik

Lilja Thórisdóttir as a woman who strives to retain her dignity after losing her job in "Revolution Reykjavik."

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Upfront Films

Thor Jensen, a subject of the

This country has experienced 125 volcanic eruptions since the Vikings first came here 1,100 years ago. Still, the volcano of Mr. Runarsson's film, which made its [debut at the Cannes Film Festival](#) this year, involves a very human eruption. It tells the story of Hannes, Viking-like with his white beard and weather-beaten visage, whose retirement as a high school janitor has prompted a deep early-old-age crisis, his life a void, his children alienated, his only pleasure solitary ocean fishing on a small boat that, like Hannes himself, has seen better days.

Then Hannes's wife, Anna, more patient and indulgent than he deserves, falls gravely ill, and this silent, private volcanic event gives back to Hannes the wisdom and humanity he had almost lost.

While Mr. Runarsson's work seems very Icelandic, the festival, which ends on Sunday, is an impressively large and international event, not only for so small a country (population, 300,000) but also for one that was financially prostrate just three years ago, having suffered a national bankruptcy during the global crisis of 2008.

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documentary "Thor's Saga."

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Uprfront Films  
Thor Jensen's great-grandson Bjorgolfur Thor Bjorgolfsson, a subject of the documentary "Thor's Saga."

The festival consists of some 140 films, most from abroad — like the focus on Romanian work and the Bela Tarr retrospective — as well as examples from Israel, Norway, Germany, the United States, Argentina and elsewhere.

The selections include "Habibi," the first feature by Susan Youssef, a Lebanese-American director who lives in the Netherlands, telling the story of an ill-starred couple from Gaza, as well as documentaries on John Lennon, the Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, and a Cambodian-Israeli couple living on the extreme margins in Phnom Penh.

In other words, this is not a festival of Icelandic films but a festival that takes place in Iceland, and in a country that has always taken its cultural life very seriously — an imposing postmodern opera house overlooking the harbor here opened just a few months ago — the event is a sort of affirmation that life will go on.

"People need diversion," said Jon Agnar Olason, the festival's chief spokesman. "They need to hear stories of someplace else to put things into perspective. We're not at war. We don't have any land mines. It's still a dire matter for a select few, but we're still alive, and then some."

Still, with films like "Volcano" and others, there's a strong local presence this year, so that the festival offers a sort of cinematic window on the country three years after the [crash that devastated it](#) financially and psychologically. It's also proof that Iceland, which, like other European countries, offers public subsidies for the arts, continues to produce an impressive number of movies.

"Iceland has the biggest film industry in the world, per capita," the comedian Ari Eldjarn said during the festival's opening ceremonies. Iceland leads the world in practically everything per capita, he continued, only partly tongue in cheek: volcanoes, rock stars, whales, puffins, sheep, glaciers, seafood restaurants, vistas of bleak magnificence, thermal pools.

"Iceland also had the biggest financial bankruptcy," Mr. Eldjarn continued, providing the punch line "but that one wasn't per capita."

The most ambitious direct focus on the catastrophe at the festival is the documentary "Thor's Saga," by the Danish director Ulla Boje Rasmussen. It tells the story of Iceland's two most celebrated entrepreneurs, the more recent of them not only the great-grandson of the first but also the man many Icelanders hold personally responsible for the crash.

The film portrays the saga of a great family little known outside Iceland, beginning with Thor Jensen, who emigrated from Denmark as a 14-year-old orphan and became the richest man in what was at the time the remote westernmost extreme of Denmark itself. (Iceland declared its independence in 1944.)

Jensen's great-grandson, [Bjorgolfur Thor Bjorgolfsson](#), is a very contemporary figure from the global culture who became Iceland's first billionaire (in dollars) before he was 40. He went to the former Soviet Union to make his fortune and then bought a newly privatized bank back in Iceland. That bank, after a prolonged bout of irrational exuberance, went bust, along with many of the rest of Iceland's banks and the government.

"They did remarkable things for Iceland," Ms. Rasmussen, in a phone interview from Copenhagen, said of the two men. "They saw opportunities where others didn't see them and took risks when nobody else took risks."

Mr. Bjorgolfsson is possibly the most hated man in Iceland now, though, unlike some

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people here, Ms. Rasmussen doesn't conclude that he was solely responsible for what happened, calling him instead "a main contributor to Iceland's bankruptcy."

Another film at the festival, "Revolution Reykjavik," directed by Isold Uggadottir, takes a harsher look at the crisis's private toll. Her film is an 18-minute fictional portrayal of a dignified, middle-class grandmother who loses her job and then strives stubbornly but unsuccessfully not to lose her poise and self-respect.

"That happened to a lot of women," said Ms. Uggadottir, who lives here. "Our concerns are so minuscule compared to people who are starving," she continued, "which is why I concentrated on my character's loss of dignity."

Then there was "Adequate Beings," a documentary about a fading farming community far from Reykjavik, conveying a very Icelandic sense of remoteness and demographic sparseness but also toughness and resilience. "It's hard to farm for 30 years," says one of the subjects, a man named Bjarni. "I'm going to farm until I go bankrupt."

"Adequate Beings" ends with a group of farmers, wind-burned, craggy, individualistic, singing a folk song in haunting two- and three-part harmony, a moving scene in a moving film about people clinging to an unforgiving land, refusing to give up.

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