

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
OPENING FILM

PRESS KIT

WHEN THE LIGHT BREAKS

a film by RÚNAR RÚNARSSON

Compass Films & Halibut,
in coproduction with Revolver Amsterdam, MP Filmska Produkcija, Eaux Vives Productions, Jour2Fête,
with The Party Film Sales
present

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RÚNAR RÚNARSSON

ICELAND – NETHERLANDS – CROATIA – FRANCE
FICTION / ICELANDIC / 2024 / 80'
FORMAT: 1.85 / SOUND 5.1

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Synopsis

When the light breaks on a long summer’s day in Iceland.
From one sunset to another, Una, a young art student encounters love, friendship, sorrow and beauty.



Interview
with Rúnar Rúnarsson

How long have you been thinking about exploring these ideas? Was this story inspired by any personal experiences?

Like all my films, this is a personal film. I've decided that I'm not going to say what is based on my reality or my interpretations of reality…. Other people might have a different interpretation of the same events. Everything that I write is based on first- and second-hand experiences and then it's put into a blender and men become women, and women could become something else. It's everything in between. But yes, these ideas are ones I've been thinking about for over 20 years.

It's important for me as an author to think, "Why I am doing what I'm doing?" I'm trying to understand myself better.

In this film there are a group of friends who are having private grief and yet it's a national event and the public wants to grieve too, what was interesting about that duality?

It's such a strange thing when something happens and on a big scale or on a small scale because in general people are good and compassionate towards others and want to show support. But life continues, nevertheless, nobody can really know how you feel or what you're going through. Our main character, Una, is to some extent an outsider in the events that are unfolding. She doesn't take the space that she fully deserves, because she carries a secret.

We are used to stories that are almost like Bible stories, there is only one message. But in real life most situations are neither black nor white, they are grey. We are moving on the grey scale of life all the time. The sphere the film is travelling in is grey. Things that at a first glance look black or white have another facet to it.

Something might be horrible but if you look further into it, there can be enormous beauty reflected from that. But at the same time maybe this is also quite a simple film. The film takes place over just one day. We are following our main character and the people around her dealing with this event that's unfolding, and the inner conflicts that come as a reflex to that.

Did you always know the timeline would be set between these two sunsets?

Yes, I knew it would be one day so that we have a sense of time. Many scenes are executed in one take. I wanted people to sense the day, to sense Una, and this day around her. Normally a day like this would be surrounded by buildup and aftermath. You could have the happiest day of your life or the worst day of your life, you can have the opposite feeling as well. I wanted to capture a sense of reality.



Una is our main character, but she's thrust into this close group of friends, some of whom she meets for the first time on this day. Why did you want to look at that group dynamic?

It's the secret that she carries – all of them have a relation to this event that unfolds, and very personal relations, but it's important to me that the others in this group didn't know exactly her position and perspective. Often relationships between people are being simplified so that people should be rivals – but we are all humans who are dealing with the same emotions.

Elín Hall plays Una – she's remarkable – how did you find her and how did you work with this young cast?

When we made *Echo* (2019) that was the first time I'd worked with a casting director, before that I did it all myself. I started working with Vigfús at Doorway Casting here in Iceland and it was a great collaboration, so a year before we started shooting this film we did the casting. Iceland is full of talented young actors. With Elín, I knew her when she was 15 she was on the radar in Iceland, in a theatre role. She almost had the Icelandic Eurovision song one year, which she composed herself. Baldvin Z cast her in *Let Me Fall* (2018). She had just graduated from theatre school when she came to our casting for *When The Light Breaks*. For actors I'm always looking for people who have ability to show rather than tell, which is easier said than done.

How did you prepare before the shoot?

I try to prepare as much as I can, to get the best out of the situation on set and reinvent ideas on set. We try to be thorough on locations – sometimes me and Sophia [Olsson, DoP] will act out scenes on locations, even if the actors aren't there. You get the sense for space and possibilities. We want to try to use these tools in a box to add something to the storytelling. So it's being told with time, light, framing.

The visual language of this film is very striking, you create some amazing visual motifs on a bigger scale. But there are also intimate moments with the characters.

When I write, I do think of restraints financially for what we can shoot. I was pushing this one in the writing, I knew as well that I didn't want this to be a kitchen sink drama. It is about a person and a core group dealing with the universe, but you need to sense that universe, that society. The scale is important to get a sense of reality, and the poetic, these visuals are representing of the inner life of the people we are portraying.

There are many ways of making films. I need to challenge myself and my collaborators by trying to elevate it so it's something more than just registering a story.

Una is on a roller coaster of this day. There can be moments of magic, there can be moments of horrors. When there is so much strain on the system, the same thing that can make you cry can make you laugh at the same time.



Sparrows (2015) was about a younger boy coming of age - why do you like telling stories about young people?

When you're 22, you're not a kid anymore. You're an adult, but you're on your first phase as an adult. It can be categorised as coming of age, but all character change is coming of age. *Volcano* (2011) was a coming of age for a 67-year-old.

In this film, they are facing the first big challenge of their adult life, and it's a time you sense you are invincible. And you're on the way to figuring out who you are, you're not totally formed as a person but you're not naive. They know the world is complicated.

For Una, she is extremely strong young woman – tough on the outside, but you can sense how small and fragile she is.



We feel such an intimacy between Una and Diddi almost instantly in the first two scenes – how could you communicate that so immediately?

We didn't have much time to introduce the premise between them. We had to be spot on. They are both really good actors and also amazing human beings – so they could relate to something within themselves to perform those real emotions. They were talking to me individually and mutually about their partners in life, and that can help them portray something they have experienced. They understand love.

The light is so extraordinary in this film, especially these two sunsets. And you even have light in the title. How did you think about the light in those moments?

These characters are at this stage of life that's like a beginning of adulthood, and it's late spring, early summer, when the sun is low on the horizon for a certain time, and it has a certain energy. It represents the promise of life and the promise of summer. It reflects well on their age and the future that lies ahead of them.

We were extremely lucky to get the right conditions on some of those scenes, especially down by the seashore.

INTERVIEW BY WENDY MITCHELL



Rúnar Rúnarsson

Rúnar Rúnarsson's feature career starts in 2011 when he presents his debut film *Volcano* at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. The film receives 17 international awards in a vast number of festivals. His second feature *Sparrows* (2015) also has an impressive festival run, with 20 international awards and la Concha Ora, the main prize at the San Sebastian Film Festival. Four years later, after being selected for the Cannes Atelier, his third feature film *Echo* premieres at the Locarno Film Festival, and wins 6 international awards.

Alongside those feature films, Rúnar Rúnarsson has also been acclaimed for his shorts. The crossroads trilogy *The Last Farm* (Oscar® nomination in 2006), *2 Birds* (Cannes Official Selection and European Film Awards nomination in 2008) and *Anna* (Cannes Directors' Fortnight) have received over 100 international awards.

Filmography

2019	*Echo*
2015	*Sparrows*
2011	*Volcano*
2009	*Anna* - short film
2008	*2 Birds* - short film
2006	*The Last Farm* - short film



Cast

Una	Elín Hall
Gunni	Mikael Kaaber
Klara	Katla Njálsdóttir
Diddi	Baldur Einarsson
Siggi	Gunnar Hrafn Kristjánsson
Bassi	Ágúst Wigum



Credits

Director and writer	Rúnar Rúnarsson
Producers	Heather Millard, Rúnar Rúnarsson
Co-Producers	Raymond van der Kaaij, Igor A. Nola, Mike Downey, Xenia Maingot, Sarah Chazelle
Executive Producers	Claudia Hausfeld, Lilja Ósk Snorradóttir , Þórður Jónsson
Cinematographer	Sophia Olsson FSF
Editor	Andri Steinn Guðjónsson
Sound Designer	Ranko Paukovic
Music	Jóhann Jóhannsson
Set Designer	Hulda Helgadóttir
Costume Designer	Helga Rós. V. Hannam
Hair & Make Up Designer	Evalotte Oosterop
Visual Effects	Jörundur Rafn Arnarson

