

A filmmaker “drawn to social realism”

A conversation with Ísold Uggadóttir, director of *And Breathe Normally*

David Walsh
5 February 2021

In December, we reviewed a film from Iceland, *And Breathe Normally*, directed by Ísold Uggadóttir, that spoke revealingly and movingly to problems that exist all over the planet. The American filmmaking community, a somewhat larger pool, has rarely, if ever, in recent years produced such an accurate picture of the relentless, “everyday” pressures of working class life.

Lára (Kristín Thóra Haraldsdóttir), an economically hard-pressed young woman on her own with a son, becomes involved in the life and difficulties of Adja (Babetida Sadjo), a refugee from Guinea-Bissau. Adja, forced to leave her own country because of her sexual orientation, finds herself in a crowded, chaotic refugee detention center near the airport while her application for asylum in Iceland is considered. She has become separated from her daughter, who has traveled on to Canada.

Lára, who has begun a job with the border police, and her child have to leave their apartment and now live in their car. As we wrote, “Adja comes to realize that Lára and Eldar [her son] are homeless. In a touching and also amusing turn of events, the refugee makes room for the pair in her room at the detention center. In certain ways, they are worse off than she is. Adja begins taking Eldar to school, although their communications are very limited.”

Uggadóttir has made a work with its feet, so to speak, firmly planted on the ground. She expresses a lack of interest in the picturesque and romanticized vision of Iceland to which we have often been subjected.

The WSWs recently spoke to Uggadóttir, who makes her home in Reykjavík, Iceland’s capital and largest city.

David Walsh: Can you tell me something about your background, and how the idea for *And Breathe Normally* originated?

Ísold Uggadóttir: I moved to New York City in 2001, and I went to New York University, originally not to study film. I was apprehensive about the title “director,” about not succeeding in that competitive world, so I started in something called Interactive Communications, which is multimedia, and I did a lot of editing and so forth. From there, I got a job in New York editing documentary films.

It was a way for me to feel like I was part of the scene, while I was educating myself and getting to know myself and which stories I wanted to tell. Four years after I moved to New York I finally decided that it was time to direct my own film. That was a short film shot on Super 16 mm, which to me was a big deal, because I wanted it to be a film that was properly made. That was film about a lesbian, who travels to her hometown of Reykjavík, carrying a secret, only to have other secrets revealed to her. It was a bit of a dark comedy, with a serious undertone. Much to my surprise it got into the Sundance festival. This was early 2007.

That gave me the courage to continue. It was almost as though I had to

prove to myself that I had something to say. This short film did not really receive any official funding. It was made on a shoestring budget. I knew that the second short film would likely be funded, because the first one traveled to over 100 film festivals. I was very diligent. I would sit there non-stop, licking envelopes, sending the film all over the world.

The second short film was funded, it was a film about troubled youth, about a troubled young couple, with some level of abuse involved. And then I made two more short films after that. Eventually, I applied to Columbia University film school in New York, where I completed my Master’s degree. It was kind of a turning point. I thought now, this is what I will do with my life. My thesis there was a narrative about the economic crisis in Iceland, which did affect my studies at Columbia.

As I was beginning in 2008, we were in the midst of an economic crisis, so all of a sudden everything changed. The Icelandic currency became quite worthless, I would monitor the exchange rate and it was out of control. I would be online watching the protests; I watched the collapse of one government and a new government come to power. I would follow all the Icelandic talk shows, and I became very economically aware, because I had to be. My Icelandic króna had become something of a joke.

When I finished Columbia in 2011, I had lived in New York for 10 years, studying and working in the film field. I felt that I was so aware of the economic situation that it did influence the feature film, *And Breathe Normally*, that eventually developed. I expected that it would be more influenced directly by the financial collapse than it proved to be. When I moved back to Iceland and started living here again, I noticed something I had not noticed before, and that was the presence of refugees who had fled to our country. Their stories sometimes made it into the local press and caught my attention. So, I started attending a lot of talks, becoming involved in the world of refugees and getting a better grasp of the background of those who ended up in Iceland. I knew now my feature film would involve the economic situation and also refugees.

It was an organic development, because I did not move to Iceland and set out to tackle stories about immigrants or refugees. It was a bit funny; I came back after 10 years. I had been a student, and I was quite poor. We have these dark winters, and I could feel my own First World level of poverty, which of course is not comparable to that of anyone truly struggling with poverty, but I wasn’t a 20-year-old anymore. I was in my late 30s, so a lot of my peers had their lives together. And here I was not having it all together, and also feeling the darkness quite strongly. I decided to write a script, so I did not get a conventional job with a regular income. I spent that year developing a story about a mother and a child, and a cat, and their losing their home, living in their car.

I was invited to some workshops, both in Mexico and Los Angeles, to continue with the material. The Americans said, it feels very European, which was sort of a compliment, but also something of a dig. In other

words, this is not very commercial, if you will. Something stuck with me when the adviser said, you might consider having more characters in your film, not just this simple sort of skeletal story of this struggling mother. So this remained with me—let me think about more characters. I also thought, oh, what does she know, she wants me to turn this into some Hollywood picture.

I came back to Iceland, with notes from many people. As I was thinking about new characters, that is when I became aware of the refugees around me. I thought I should become involved; I became a volunteer at the Red Cross. I got to know a woman from Uganda, who had fled the country due to her sexuality. Of course, I was there as a volunteer, but to be entirely truthful, I was also researching at the same time. I wanted to know things, I wanted to understand more.

We are still friends; it has been almost 10 years. It is shocking, because we live in a country where no one would have to fear for their life because of their sexuality. I wanted to treat this in some way. So, I knew that I would use this element in the film. I had the two ideas, an Icelandic mother with a child and a cat, and a refugee. What is logical? How can they meet? Perhaps at the airport. It becomes like a puzzle.

I also spent time in an airport town, and it happens to be a poverty-stricken area. It is the area that has the most social problems in Iceland, and it is only an hour away from Reykjavík. I would drive around the town. I knew that a lot of the people there worked at the airport, which is the biggest employer. Now there is much more unemployment, of course, due to COVID, because there is no more travel or tourism.

It was logical that I would have a character who worked at the airport. Then, through connections, I met people living in this town. Some of them had histories of drug addiction or some other issue, and they would tell me their stories. I was collecting stories, trying to inspire myself, trying to keep it interesting. It is a bit of a lonely job, to sit around and write a screenplay from scratch. It is not like going to work, with colleagues. I found every distraction I could, and tried to make every connection I could, which involved hanging out at the refugee asylum in the airport town and trying to gain the trust of those I met.

I also had a fear of not knowing the stories, of making something up that did not feel authentic. So that was also part of the motivation. If I am going to do this, it has to be truthful, accurate. Eventually, I wrote to the border patrol at the Keflavík Airport, and they were impressed to begin with—a film! I became acquainted with policemen there. They view the situation from their own perspective, like they are guarding the borders. ‘We arrest these people, and they’re released and suddenly they’re at the local swimming pool with our kids.’ Our politics were not always in synch, but I was trying to learn. I took notes. I needed their side of things too, for my own purposes.

The lead actors [Kristín Thóra Haraldsdóttir and Babetida Sadjo] did their work. Babetida is from Guinea-Bissau, living in Brussels, and she had some familiarity with people being persecuted for their sexuality. I had to trust that the actor would be able to do her homework, make her preparations, also knowing that she could feel and look authentic. Even at the first audition, Babetida showed up in character. In real life, she is a very glamorous woman, but in the audition she totally fooled me. She knew what we were going for.

Both actresses put in a lot of preparation and were excited about the story. Kristín did a lot of listening to podcasts and researching people’s personal stories, doing her own research. We had limited time, the three of us together, because one was living in Belgium, while we two were living in Reykjavík. We used our time as wisely as we could. The rehearsals did not entail so much playing scenes, but discussing the material and understanding where the women were coming from, and coming to know these characters.

Perhaps because neither actress had had any huge role in films thus far, they even put in extra effort, they really did a lot of homework and put

themselves out on the set itself. It was a difficult set, we had limited time because of limited funding. We were outdoors, in all kinds of weather. It was often windy and cold. Then we had a cat, and a child, and groups of refugees, who were non-actors. So, it was challenging, draining.

DW: As I said in the review, I thought there were a number of unusual aspects to the film. The actress, Kristín, who played Lára expressed throughout the film a level of everyday social pressure that you do not normally find. Did she understand your intentions and begin with that, did you direct her in certain ways, or was it a combination of your efforts?

ÍU: It is probably a combination of factors. Of course, when I was casting in Iceland and met a number of actresses, she was the one with the most intensity. One of the scenes we auditioned with was a scene in the car, the moment of truth, where the African woman calls Lára out, asking the truth about her life. I felt that it was a delicate moment, which could slip into something contrived. Kristín did it so well that I forgot it was my own writing, I believed it, I felt for her. She would hold something down, creating a situation where the emotion you do not show is more interesting than the emotion you do show. She came in very capable, each day very prepared, intense.

Of course, we did more than one take of a given scene. We wanted to push it, but we did not want it to be overly dramatic, we wanted it to be just at that point ... where you feel it, without going over the top. It is hard to tell you right now why something works, but I think the key is to bring on the person who has the talent and emotion and intensity.

DW: Her face communicated a great deal.

ÍU: Sometimes when you are writing a script, you tend to write more than is needed, so sometimes, as we would rehearse, I would say, forget that line, all we need is a reaction, a facial expression. When you are writing, it feels like you have to have more explanation, but often you don’t need it, you realize that on the set.

DW: Especially with a performer who contributes something more, who adds.

ÍU: I am of the school that less is more. That is something I’m drawn to.

I have been drawn to social realism in general, events and things feeling authentic and true, I’m not attracted to fantasy, to *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, that doesn’t do much for me. Real life does.

DW: The women are from very different backgrounds, but, again, unusually, the film brings their situations together and creates a certain equality or equivalence. This was presumably a conscious decision on your part?

ÍU: We get close to both of them. They are both mothers. They both have a tendency to be proud, to be unwilling to ask for help or reveal that they are in dire straits. So, they have this toughness about them. Perhaps on the inside they are breaking, but they are trying to save face. Only through happenstance, by which they are thrown together, they get to witness one another in delicate moments and open up to reveal what is really going on.

DW: The question of their sexual orientation is dealt with discreetly, or quietly. Was that a deliberate choice?

ÍU: I always have this fear of things being too overt. Producers and others asked me, does the Icelandic woman have to be gay? And I would say, there is no particular reason, it is just that she *is*. It is not a statement about that. I did want to isolate her to a certain extent, so that she did not have a fulltime partner. There was an on-and-off lover, which can happen when things are chaotic. Financially, she is in trouble, there is the housing situation, her love life, everything is chaotic. It was a way of keeping her a bit alone.

The sexuality of the African woman was a more important element, because it is what propels her to leave her home country, and it is part of her back-story. I wanted to reveal that through the course of the film. In the early stages of development, I did envision that perhaps they would become lovers of sorts. I thought that might be interesting, but I thought, I

am just going to write this and see what happens. Because they had so much going on, if there had suddenly been this grand affair, it would have been too much.

One of the women is trying to reconnect with her daughter, who has flown to another country, and the other is in the midst of trying to secure a new home, new job. They could bond as humans, there might be some attraction or fascination, but not an affair that we would recognize as a Hollywood affair.

DW: I think it was the proper choice, artistically and dramatically. It is suggested, but it does not become the center of things. Under those desperate conditions, it could not be the center of things. They would be very different people. You and I both know that there are people who would launch into a soap opera drama even in the midst of such circumstances, no matter what the cost. These women are not that self-indulgent or selfish.

ÍU: I had to take turns being in each one's head. I would ask myself: whose movie is this? If there had been a real proper moment where I could have made it work, that is one thing. But I was not going to push it.

DW: If I may ask, what is the situation with the pandemic in Iceland? I know the death total is low.

ÍU: We are happy with the official response; it has been well-managed. They have let the specialists run the show. On the other hand, there is a lot of unemployment because of the collapse of tourism. Tourism is our great industry, what we survive on in many ways. It is dead at the moment. There has been government support for people in the most dire straits, but it feels like the true effects have yet to be felt.

People are barely getting by, they are getting unemployment benefits, but we will see. Iceland will be a different country, because we were such travel destination for a while there. For some of us, it had gotten way out of control. So, there is a bit of, thank the lord, we have a little peace. But we will see. The US situation is a complete disaster, so we are grateful to have it a bit better than those across the pond.

DW: What has been the reaction to the January 6 coup attempt in Washington?

ÍU: People are in disbelief. But then people were in disbelief for the four years that Donald Trump was in office. They are relieved that he is gone, and that we will not have to see this man anymore.

DW: Well, we will have to see what the new government brings.

And Breathe Normally will be screened, along with a Q&A session with Ísold Uggadóttir, in early March at an online event, Nordic Women in Film: <https://www.wifti.net/event/nordic-women-in-film-2021/>



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