

Karl Emil Rikardsen about THE ARCTIC CAMELS

"Up North we have a different perception of time"

Did you know the two happiest camels in the world live on an island in Norway above the arctic circle, and they prefer an entire wholemeal bread loaf for breakfast? When Thorarin and his sister Svalin asked for a horse, they got two camels. But will they ever be able to ride them? The family embarks on an expedition to Mongolia to seek help. But little did they know about Mongolian training methods.

Two ECFA Doc Awards have already been taken home by Norwegian films (THE SHELTER and DANCING FOR YOU). Few children's documentaries raised more discussion than the Norwegian feature TONGUE CUTTERS. With THE ARCTIC CAMELS another Norwegian documentary shines a light on the relationship between humans and animals. *"Contradictions make you see things more clearly"* states director Karl Emil Rikardsen in the Film'on Festival.

Was this film from the beginning

conceived as a feature?

Karl Emil Rikardsen: In the earliest stage we considered making a series for television. But the interest was much bigger in a feature that broadcasters eventually could cut into three pieces, like a mini-series. We have three versions: a feature, a 3 x 25' version, and a 52' version. Too many things are going on to capture in one short film. I wanted to capture the culture and lifestyle on this specific island, as far North as you can go in Norway. This story takes time, you can't train a camel overnight. We knew we had to follow them for three years, which is a long period for a short film.

The film's profile is a story about camels. What initial concept did you have in mind?

Rikardsen: I considered something as weird as camels as a good vehicle to tell about life up North. When this family brought a Mongolian camel trainer to Norway, I was expecting a



culture clash. There were more than enough small conflicts that could mirror big scale cultural frictions in our society. Both the conflict between the kids and the animals, and the gap between the Mongolian trainer and the Norwegian expectations, say something about society nowadays.

Life in Northern Norway seems to be defined by ice and snow. People all the time have to adapt to the weather conditions.

Rikardsen: The climate is tough and windy. Inland, in the mountains, temperatures may fall to -40°. But living by the sea, the Gulfstream mitigates the temperature. In Mongolia winter is much colder. Mongolian camels are

not like dromedaries in the Sahara, with their 30 centimetres thick fur coat they are perfectly equipped to survive the Northern winters.

Did the weather conditions have logistical consequences for you as a filmmaker?

Rikardsen: Distances and weather conditions are two elements we always had to be prepared for. I live 300 kilometres above the arctic circle, but still it took me days to get to their place, which is more than going to Mongolia. When going by car, you depend upon the snow and the avalanches. I usually went by boat and then stayed for a couple of days at their place. Up North we have a differ-

ent perception of time, the nearest neighbour city for me is four hours by car.

Who are the people living there?

Rikardsen: In that small community, you will find few people who grew up there. The family in the film comes from Oslo, they moved North because they fell in love with the place. After 10 years of working in the advertisement industry, they left their jobs and moved to this island to build up something new.

The boy Thorarin calls it “the best place in the world”.

Rikardsen: He is free to do whatever he wants, and many things parents and children do together. There are five children in that family and all of them have artistic talents. One is even in film school – we brought him in as an assistant. The girl Svalin is currently preparing her art studies. In their teenage years, they all move out to other towns. Except maybe Thorarin. He is a talented musician, but his roots are anchored deep in the island.

He is your narrator.

Rikardsen: With him being 8 years old and Svalin being 12 when the project started, initially we planned to have two protagonists. But as the project



evolved, she became a teenager and lost her interest, she had other things on her mind. When I told her about Thorarin becoming the main character, that was a relief for her. Now that there was no more pressure on her shoulders it all became much easier. Her big dream was to have a baby camel, Thorarin's dream was to ride a camel. Very role confirming!

Those camels are such weird looking

creatures.

Rikardsen: They are huge! 1,000 kilos are not easy to control for a kid. The male one has a nasty bite. Once when I was filming the female, my back turned towards him, he wanted to protect her. Luckily I was wearing a hood, as suddenly he sneaked up on me and my entire head was inside his mouth. I had to punch him on the nose to free myself. But they are beautiful animals with a strong personality.

Still seeing a camel standing next to a Christmas tree is a weird anachronism.

Rikardsen: Camels in the arctic are a contradiction in itself. Contradictions are interesting to work with – they make you see things more clearly. Nowadays, people growing up far away from agriculture or nomadic societies might have romantic ideas about animals. Like this family in the film. As if you only may instruct a camel after asking for his permission. Mongolians have a deep respect for their animals, but their tradition is over 1,000 years old.

You went to Mongolia.

Rikardsen: Meeting Mongolian people was overwhelming. They were 100% friendly and polite. I've been around the world, but never experienced

something like this before. We had an excellent team of Mongolian fixers arranging everything. But filming in a desert, sometimes at -20° with the wind blowing up the dust, is disastrous. Afterwards we had the cameras immediately sent to the factory to have them cleaned.

How did you keep the tension throughout the narrative?

Rikardsen: I like to tell my stories slow, but there is a limit to how slow you can go. The story in itself is exciting, while the Mongolian sequences are beautiful, with a mesmerising atmosphere, but there isn't much drama to it. That is why they were shortened in the editing.

How are the camels doing now?

Rikardsen: They had a baby last year in February. The first camel born above the arctic circle.

–
Gert Hermans

World Sales: Outlook Filmsales, Austria

Production: [Relation04 Media](#), Norway, media@relation04.com