

Making History in Icelandic Cinema: Guðný Halldórsdóttir

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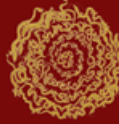
Icelandic Filmmaker Guðný Halldórsdóttir

Source: MUBI (All images for Reference)

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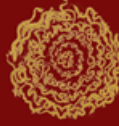
Guðný Halldórsdóttir is one of the most renowned directors in Icelandic cinema. She has earned the reputation of “a prolific arthouse filmmaker” (Würmann, 2016) and “one of the main poets of Icelandic cinematography” (Háskóli Íslands). Although she is known as the daughter of the 1955 Nobel Prize-winning writer Halldór Laxness and famous textile designer Auður Laxness, Guðný is also just as renowned as an accomplished and talented director. She was the recipient of the esteemed Edda Award for Best Director in 1999 (which was also the first year that the awards were conducted) for the film *Ungfrúin góða og húsið*.



Posters for *Stella í Orlofi* and *Stella í Framboði*

Source: IMDb





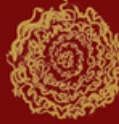
After studying filmmaking at the London International Film School, she wrote the screenplay for *Stella í Orlofi* (lit. *Stella on Vacation*) in 1986. This comedy film was directed by Þórhildur Þorleifsdóttir, a renowned theater director who also served as artistic director of the Reykjavik City Theatre from 1996 to 2000. The English title of *The Icelandic Shock Station* describes the film as a “deceptively antic farce about a housewife accidentally bringing a Swedish alcoholic to a summer cottage” (Würmann, 2016). Although this film was not particularly known internationally, it quickly became quite beloved among Icelandic film audiences. The film’s discussion of the juxtaposition between rural life and values against the emerging modern urban consumer culture made it quite relatable to the audiences, catapulting it to the status of a veritable cult classic. Guðný wrote and directed the sequel to the film in 2002, which was titled *Stella í Framboði* (lit. *Stella in Office*), with popular actor Edda Björgvinsdóttir reprising her role as the protagonist.



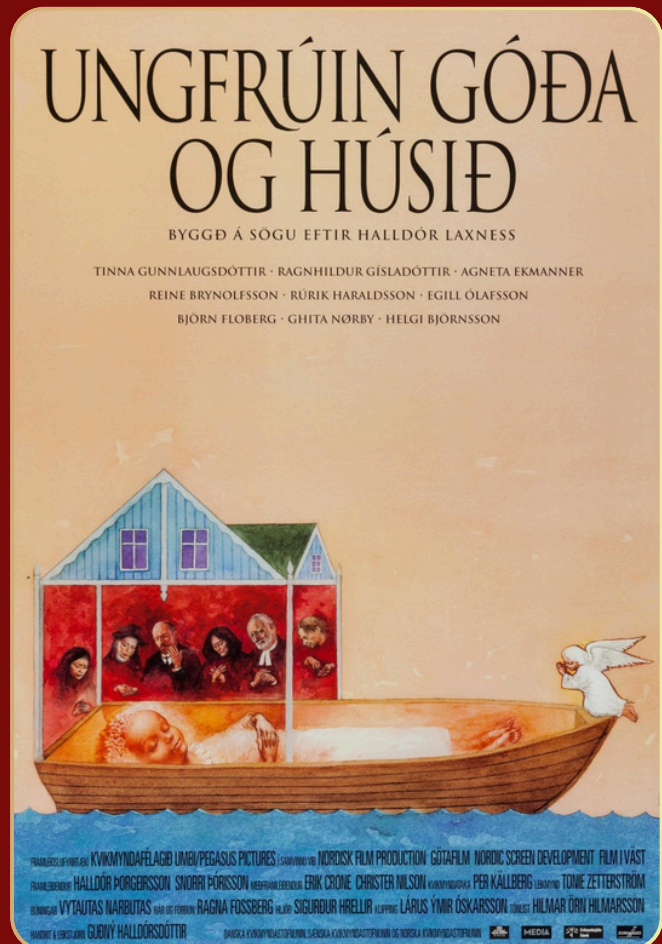
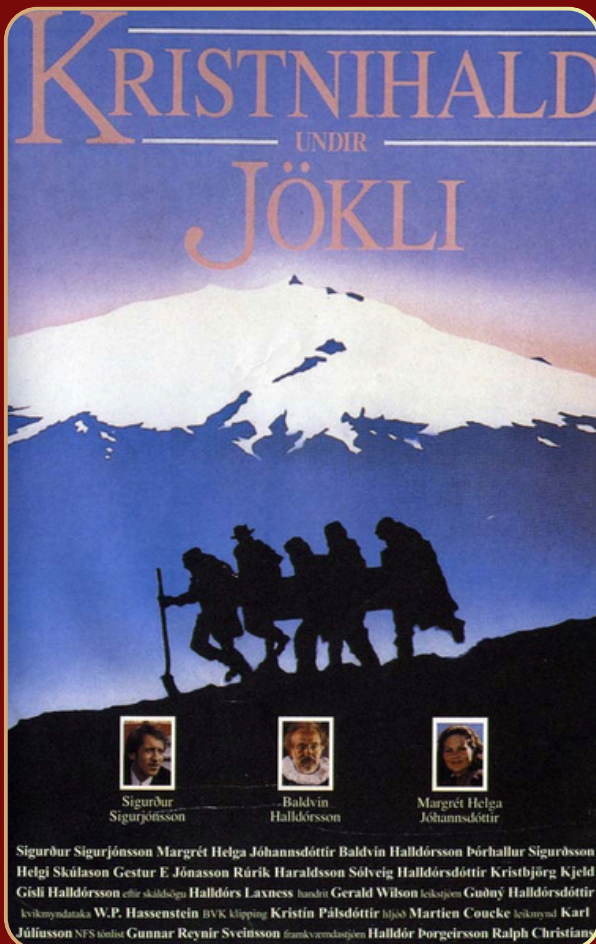
Popular Actor Edda Björgvinsdóttir

Source: Filmmakers. eu





One of Guðný's most well-known films is the 1989 drama *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (English title: *Under the Glacier*). Based on Laxness' novel *Christianity Under the Glacier*, the film narrates the tale of a Christian divinity student sent to investigate a remote parish and why it has not been sending out any information in a while (The New York Times, 2016). This film was selected as Iceland's entry for the Academy Awards but was not nominated. However, this was a historic moment for Icelandic cinema. Guðný had earned the reputation of being the first female filmmaker to be selected as the Icelandic representative to the Academy Awards. Her 1999 film, *Ungfrúin góða og húsið* (English title: *The Honour of the House*), was also selected as Iceland's official submission for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards in 2000, but was not nominated.



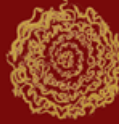
Iceland's Academy Award Entries: Posters for *Kristnihald undir Jökli* and *Ungfrúin góða og húsið*

Source: IMDb

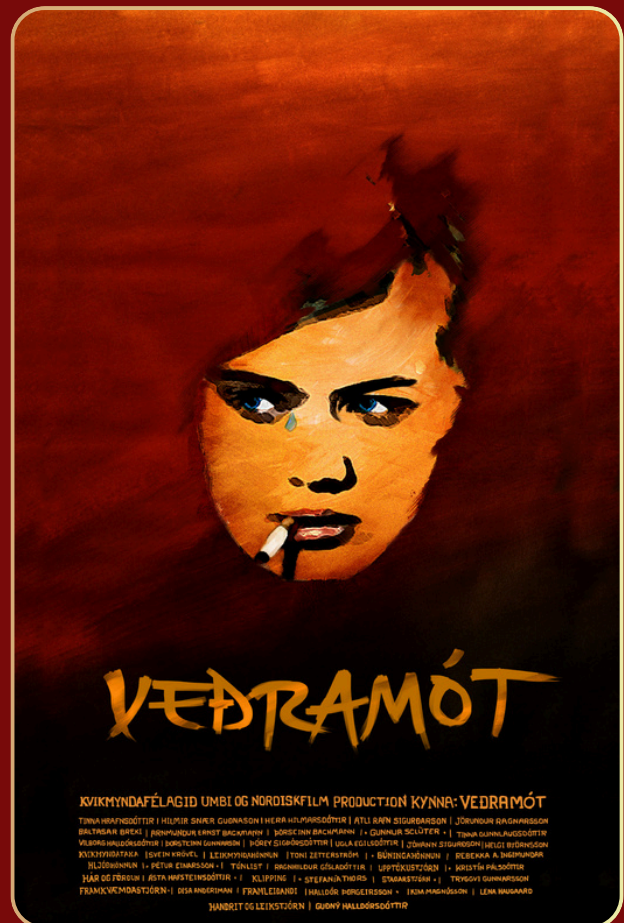
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She wrote and directed the film *Karlakórinn Hekla* (English title: *The Men's Choir*) in 1992, a comedic take on a men's choir going on a tour of Germany and Sweden. The film enjoyed much popularity in not only Iceland but also Ireland and Norway (Klapptré, 2023). The screenplay was reportedly inspired by a former neighbor who narrated his experience traveling on a men's choir tour to her. Guðný also wrote and directed the 2007 drama *Veðramót* (English title: *The Quiet Storm*), which competed at the Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF, 2008). This film depicts the story of a young girl breaking away from her sheltered life to work at an institution for juvenile delinquents. Set in a remote part of Northern Iceland in the seventies, the film includes several motifs inspired by the 'hippies' subculture of the decade, like sitar music, a focus on nature and flowers, and countering conventional societal norms.



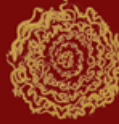
Posters for *Karlakórinn Hekla* and *Veðramót*

Source: Amazon

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Guðný's filmography boasts of an almost equal mix of drama and comedy films, all of which have been received quite well. Even within these films, she likes to explore a range of emotions. As she shared in an interview, she finds "the balance between smile and seriousness" to suit her well, and enjoys "making sad films and crazy comedies" (Klappré, 2023). She also shared that this balance is especially important when it comes to the financial aspect of it: "You usually lose on the serious films, and then you make a comedy to pay off the debt" (Klappré, 2023).

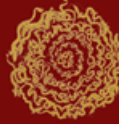


Guðný Halldórsdóttir Speaking at an Event

Source: Klappré

She has also openly spoken up about how local Icelandic film productions still need a lot more support. Despite Icelandic films winning big at international festivals recently, a large proportion of funds still go to foreign productions over domestic ones, which Guðný called "an extremely strange policy" (Heimildin, 2023). She has shared that, despite the international success of Icelandic films, "there is little domestic appetite for Icelandic cinema" locally (Daly, 2015). In an interview, she ponders over whether this could be because these films represent the experiences of a very narrow and limited section of society onscreen.





Guðný also Served as a Member of the Town Council of Mosfellsbær for the Swedish Confederation from 1994 to 2002

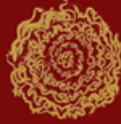
Source: Samfylkingin í Mosfellsbæ

This prolific filmmaker's role in impacting the skewed gender balance in the country's film-making populace cannot be undermined. She shared in an interview that the industry was entirely male-dominated when she began her career, and "it was three women in the theater who inspired her to go to film school" (Daly, 2015). She finds the situation to not have changed that much, and although there are more women in the industry now, many do not last. Those who do manage to hold on often "end up working in an administrative capacity or as actors", which Guðný describes as "always "something less than features" (Daly, 2015). She remains one of the very few female filmmakers who have had much success in Icelandic cinema. Having inspired many women with her bold steps forward in the Iceland film industry, she has spoken out urging aspiring young female filmmakers to follow their dreams and help contribute to the cause of women in cinema. Guðný Halldórsdóttir thus remains an important and inspiring figure to aspiring film-makers and enthusiasts, not only in Iceland but across the globe.



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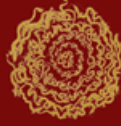
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