

The image is a vertical composition. On the left side, there is a close-up profile of a human face, showing the forehead, nose, and lips. The skin is aged and wrinkled, with a warm, orange-brown color palette. On the right side, there is a profile of a stone sculpture, likely a Viking longship prow, showing the eye and the curved prow. The stone is grey and has a rough, textured surface. The background is a plain, light grey color. The title 'half elf' is written in a white, cursive script across the top, overlapping both the human face and the stone sculpture.

half elf

a film by

JÓN BJARKI
MAGNÚSSON



A lighthouse keeper prepares for his earthly funeral while trying to reconnect to the elf within.

HULDA AND TRAUSTI have shared a roof on Icelandic shores for over seventy years. Her love of books is matched by his love of stones. When he bursts out singing, she begs him to stop screaming. When he tells her he wants to change his name to "Elf", she warns that his family will abandon him. Now, as Trausti's hundredth birthday approaches and he senses the hand of death upon him he is on a quest to find the coffin that can carry this elf back to the mysteries beyond.... Meanwhile, Hulda retreats into a world of poetry with the help of an electric magnifying glass. Half Elf is a modern Icelandic fairy-tale where life is celebrated - despite everything, despite ourselves and despite the reality that awaits all of us in the end.



Director

JÓN BJARKI MAGNÚSSON is a filmmaker with a background in anthropology, journalism and poetry. He studied creative writing at the University of Iceland and graduated with an MA in Visual and Media Anthropology from Freie Universität, Berlin in 2018. His works include award-winning journalism on the conditions of refugees and asylum-seekers in Iceland, a book of poetry, and a short film on friendship in cyberspace, *Even Asteroids Are Not Alone* (2018), which was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute's (RAI) & Marsh Short Film Prize for 'the most outstanding short film on social, cultural and biological anthropology or archaeology' in

2019. Jón Bjarki's journalistic work has appeared on various international media platforms such as Slate Magazine and the German investigative centre of Correctiv. He is a regular contributor to the Icelandic bi-weekly newspaper *Stundin*, and does project work for *Filmmaking For Fieldwork (F4F™)*, an educational project offering training in audio-visual research methods, ethnographic and documentary filmmaking. He is the founder of *SKAK BÍÓFILM*, a small Icelandic production company dedicated to making anthropological and artistic films. Jón Bjarki shares his time between Athens, Berlin and Reykjavík.



Hulda

the book gorgier

and



Travis

the stone lover



TRAUSTI BREIÐFJÖRD MAGNÚSSON (b. 1918) and HULDA JÓNSDÓTTIR (b. 1921) were born in the isolated area of Strandir in the western part of Iceland in the early 20th century. The country was a very different

place back then, still under Danish rule and one of the poorest in Western Europe.

Theirs was an area of great distances. The only way to travel between farms and villages was on

foot, on horseback or by boat. People mainly survived through subsistence fishing and farming and survival depended on knowing the signs of nature, and being able to read the ever-changing weather and fuming

waves. This is where they first heard about the existence of hidden people, elves and their dwellings in the hills, rocks and cliffs all around.

With the industrialization of the Icelandic fishing industry at the beginning of the 20th century came factory jobs that brought money. As other children of that time, Trausti and Hulda started doing hard labor early on. Trausti would sail with his father on an open row boat from Gjögur whilst Hulda would help her father salting herring in the herring factory in Ingólfssfjörður.

This did not stop her from learning to read even before starting school. She fell in love with books and learned to recite poetry by heart. Trausti, on the other hand, stuck to reading stones. He never cared much for school, perhaps understandably so: His left hand would be tied behind the stool to stop him from being left-handed.

After working various jobs as adolescents in different parts of the country, they married and settled in the village of Djúpvík in the Strandir region. In 1959, however, they sailed away for good, taking their five children with them. The herring was gone and the factory had shut down.

Looking for means to support the family, Trausti got a position as a lighthouse keeper in Sauðanes, an isolated (and then roadless) place in Northern Iceland. The Icelandic state supplied housing and pay to cover necessities. They had sheep for meat, cows for dairy products, and fish from the sea to feed the family. Books and stones for pleasure. There they lived for thirty-nine years, before moving to the capital of Reykjavík in 1998.





Iceland went through a drastic social transformation in the course of their lifetime, from being an agricultural society with around 90 percent rural population to an industrial one with a mere 10 percent living in the countryside. As Trausti prepares for his own funeral and

hundredth birthday, themes from their past start surfacing.

Hulda gives little for the existence of elves and hidden people while Trausti's connection to these supernatural beings seems only to grow. Old Iceland was a place where people needed to read into nature's forces in order to survive, while

the new society that emerged relied on education, technology and business to drive its forward momentum. Belief in supernatural forces was strong in the former, but came to fade away in the latter.

Hulda the book gorgon and Trausti the stone lover embody a clash of

two fundamentally different worlds. While one set both feet on her route towards the new society the other one has always kept (at least) one foot in the old one.



Directors Statement

CURIOSITY has been a driving force in my life, ever since childhood. I was born in a small fishing village in the north of Iceland, far away from the skyscraper world on television. I remember looking at the midnight sunset next to my grandparents' lighthouse in northern Iceland and dreaming of exploring distant lands and otherworldly cultures.

Years passed and I travelled the world, only to realize how similar we all are at the crux; Russian sailors, Mongolian nomads or Pakistani farmers were constant reminders of my people back home. A deep fiery

feeling was born; a way of seeing the world.

I have spent much of a decade-long career in journalism depicting the marginalized and voiceless in society; the alien, the outcast, the asylum-seeker and refugee. When pursuing an MA degree in Visual Anthropology, I decided to turn the lens towards my own tribe. My first feature film would be about my grandfather's preparations for death.

The making of Half Elf represents a sea change in my career in many respects. It is by far the most

personal work I have ever done. One which sprung from urgency. My grandparents were 99 and 96 years old at the time and I knew that if I didn't follow up on this idea right away, it would probably never be done.

By exploring aging and death through the fragile lens of a grandchild learning to use the camera, I wanted to portray common human notions and shed light on the last stages of life, something I feel is underrepresented in our culture.

But who was I to do that? How could someone with little experience in filmmaking hope to portray such a profound subject matter in a meaningful way? The answer to that question came from my grandparents themselves. It was with their love, humor and endless patience that this film came to fruition. They performed their own life in such an extraordinary way that the only thing I had to do was to turn the lens in the right direction.

The result is an observational account of an elderly couple going through the last stages of life, a modern day fairytale where elves and hidden people make their presence known, a film where life is celebrated in spite of the reality that awaits us all, death itself.

This has been an extraordinary journey, one which I am deeply grateful to have ventured on. My grandfather was so enthusiastic about the project that he put on the performance of his life. My grandmother had a harder time understanding what I was actually doing. Why us? What is it about us that is so special? I hope the film itself will be enough to answer her question.

SKAK

B Í Ó F Í L M

SKAK BÍÓFILM is a small Icelandic production company dedicated to making anthropological and artistic films for TV and Festival broadcast. We don't think it is necessary to sail a big ship to make a good film. SKAK is an old Icelandic word that means

„line fishing out at sea in search of food“ - JÓN BJARKI MAGNÚSSON and HLÍN ÓLAFSDÓTTIR, the people behind SKAK, can usually be found fishing for stories in their little rowboat.

half elf

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