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'Metalhead' ('Malmhaus'): Helsinki Review

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Courtesy of Helsinki International Film Festival

The Bottom Line

A surprisingly heartfelt story about familial grief

Venue

Helsinki International Film Festival, Just Kids

Cast

Thorbjorg Helga Thorgilsdottir, Ingvar E. Sigurdsson, Halldora Geirhardsdottir, Sveinn Olafur Gunnarsson

Director

Ragnar Bragason

Some kinds of despair can only be confronted with the help of Iron Maiden

A superficial glance at **Ragnar Bragason's** *Metalhead*, in which a troubled girl gives herself over to the gods of rock, might suggest the kind of winking teenage-outcast story one has seen plenty of times before. (Promo film stills of her in death's-head makeup at her square family's dinner table further the impression.) But *Metalhead* is uninterested in caricature or easy laughs, and its embodiment of guitar-hero obsession is one much more closely resembling someone you knew in high school, albeit someone who's had an exceptionally hard time dealing with childhood trauma. Sincere and well acted, the picture merits more attention than it has received on the fest circuit,

and may yet find its audience in a video afterlife.

Suffering somewhat from a hazy visual style that diminishes the beauty of its rural Icelandic setting and fills unfashionable interiors with a bit more smoke than is necessary, the movie may be trying to evoke the deadened senses of Hera (**Thorbjorg Helga Thorgilsdottir**), who witnessed the grisly death of her beloved teenage brother when she was 12 and, now on the cusp of adulthood, has not recovered. For years she has intended to flee to the city; for years she has let the bus leave without her. The only achievement she can claim is that she took up her brother's rock fandom with fervor, forsaking girlish things for black band T-shirts and becoming something of a farmgirl **Yngwie Malmsteen**, a furious bedroom guitarist with songs brewing inside her.

Carrying the torch is not cute, though. Bragason finds his protagonist routinely getting drunk and stealing tractors for bleak midnight joyrides (a tractor killed her brother) and disturbing villagers with her alone-in-a-crowd reveries. Though some viewers may find her years-long mourning unlikely, Thorgilsdottir is more than credible in the role, and her special brand of grief is echoed in the performance of **Ingvar E. Sigurdsson** as her father Karl.

If it envisions a longer-than-is-likely period of uninterrupted mourning for Hera, Bragason's script condenses three episodes that suggest ways out of it, each feeling at its moment as if it could be the one that will stick. A new priest in the parish bonds with Hera in unexpected ways, and a childhood friend who has always loved her seems at last ready to vie in an adult way for her love. But it is the third option — one that requires the inert girl to act finally on her own behalf — that provides the film's most satisfying moments, one of which reframes the hellish-sounding angst of metal into an expression of despair comprehensible to the farmers who have long looked at the girl with pity or fear. That scene alone might win the film a fan base among the alienated devotees of bands who, from Black Sabbath onward, have been nothing if not misunderstood.

Production company: Mystery Island

Cast: Thorbjorg Helga Thorgilsdottir, Ingvar E. Sigurdsson, Halldora Geirhardsdottir, Sveinn Olafur Gunnarsson

Director-Screenwriter: Ragnar Bragason

Producers: Arni Filippusson, David Oskar Olafsson

Director of photography: August Jakobsson

Production designer: Sveinn Vidar Hjartarson

Editor: Valdis Oskarsdottir

Music: Petur Ben

No rating, 95 minutes