

Driving Mum [12A]

2022 Iceland / Estonia 112mins

UK released	1 March 2024
Director	Hilmar Oddsson
Screenplay	Hilmar Oddsson
Cinematography	Óttar Guðnason
Music	Tõnu Kõrvits
Cast	Þróstur Leó Gunnarsson (Jón); Kristbjörg Kjeld (Mamma, Jón's late mother); Hera Hilmar (Bergdís)

Hilmar Oddsson's first feature film since December (2009) is an enjoyably dark and dour comedy road movie and a belated coming of age for a man whose mother has systematically squashed all opportunities for joy in his life. *Driving Mum*, which won the Grand Prix in the Official Selection Competition in Tallinn, takes a familiar storyline – previous corpse transportation road movies include *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Swiss Army Man* and *Weekend At Bernie's* – and dresses it in Icelandic knitwear.

The comedy here, drawn from the son's abrasive character and from his late mama's acerbic commentary from beyond the grave, is sandpaper dry; the black and white cinematography captures the majestic indifference of Iceland's sparsely populated northwestern reaches.

Already at the cantankerous and disappointed end of middle age, Jon (Þróstur Leó Gunnarsson) lives with his elderly and overbearing mother (Kristbjörg Kjeld) at the furthest, most isolated fringe of Iceland. Their main connection with the rest of the world is a small boat that putters across the fjord every couple of weeks. It's a penance of a life, which Mama regards as her punishment for previous bad decisions, and which Jon adopted because his mother decreed it. When Mama dies, dictatorial to the end, she leaves a set of instructions. Jon must drive her across the country to bury her in Eyrarbakki, the village of her birth. With his dead mother propped up in the back of his car, and the family dog, Bresnef, shooting worried, sidelong

glances from the front passenger seat, Jon sets off on a journey that will teach him about himself, his lost love and his relationship with his mother. Jon and his mother knit traditional sweaters for a living – a pointed shot of strands of wool from their respective balls hopelessly entwined is a neat visual metaphor for their co-existence. For entertainment, they listen to cassette tape recordings of radio broadcasts. Jon takes photographs as a hobby, predominantly of landscapes empty of human life. As his journey progresses, his lens starts to be drawn to other people, triggering memories of his younger, less antisocial self.

Having spent so much of his life in the company of just his mother, Jon is not attuned to the basic rules of human interaction. Intractable and immovable as the volcanic boulders which punctuate the landscape, he is gloriously rude to fellow drivers and to the hitchhiker (Tomas Lemarquis) he encounters in the middle of nowhere. A second chance meeting with the man reveals just how far Jon has come, both geographically and personally.

The disreputable and discordant score is as angular and unwieldy as Jon's personality. But as the film progresses, he is haunted, in a bold and surreal device, by an imaginary Greek chorus of theatrical players, featuring the lost love of his life, Bergdis. And Jon starts to soften, opening up to the world around him and finally standing up to his mum. And as for Mama, the fact that she is dead doesn't stop her from always getting the last word.

Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*, 28 November 2022 (abridged)

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