

## If Only I Could Hibernate [12A]

2023 Mongolia/France/Switzerland/Qatar

98 mins

UK released **5 April 2024**

Director **Zoljargal Puevdash**

Screenplay **Zoljargal Puevdash**

Cinematography **Davaanyam Delgerjargal**

Music **Johanni Curtet**

Cast **Battsooj Uurtsaikh** (Ulzii); **Nominjiguur Tsend** (Tungaa, the little sister of Ulzii); **Tuguldur Batsaikhan** (Erkheme, the little brother of Ulzii); **Ganchimeg Sandagdordorj** (Mother)

In the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, an impoverished teenage boy finds himself torn between his loyalty to his family and dreams of a better future for himself. This assured feature debut from Mongolian filmmaker Zoljargal Puevdash sees these personal experiences become a microcosm of the tensions felt throughout this developing country, where traditions are being abandoned in the march for progress — leaving many stranded well beneath the poverty line. This first Mongolian film to play in Cannes official selection is a drama which is rooted in the political but is never heavy-handed. Puevdash and her cast, particularly charismatic newcomer Battsooj Uurtsaikh in the lead, approach this subject with a gentle touch.

Ulzi, a gifted physics student, is training for a national competition with the prize of a scholarship to one of the country's best schools. Yet his focus is constantly being pulled away by the challenges of life in a yurt on the outskirts of the capital.

Ulzii shares this small space with his now alcoholic mother (Ganchimeg Sandagdordorj) and three younger siblings, his late father having moved the family from the countryside in search of work. Ariantugs Tserenpil's sensitive production design renders this space as cosy rather than rundown — this is a family home, after all, and there are photos on the wall, toys scattered on the floor and a television in the corner. Indeed, the whole film is careful to portray its

characters as dynamic individuals attempting to break free of economic shackles rather than victims of circumstance.

For Ulzii, that means balancing the pursuit of his dreams with caring for his brother and sister after his illiterate mother returns to agricultural work in the country (and deposits her youngest son with a family member). There's a genuine tenderness between these siblings that brings moments of laughter and warmth; the only kind to be found in the freezing Mongolian winter, which soon infiltrates the yurt. The endless need for coal and wood to fuel the small fire becomes all-consuming; if only, bemoans his brother, they could hibernate until summer, like bears. Too proud to ask for help — and further encumbered by his own outdated notions of masculinity — Ulzii is eventually forced to take logging work that jeopardises his academic prospects.

The dichotomy of daily life is often captured by cinematographer Davaanyam Delgerjargal in a single frame: Ulzii's adult sister undertaking a traditional remedy for her son's mouth infection in the luxurious confines of the high-rise apartment in which she now lives; Ulzii's box-fresh neon green trainers gleaming in the meagre light of his yurt. In the sparkling city centre, well-dressed protestors march against the oppressive air pollution which blankets the landscape — yet, posits Puevdash, widespread poverty is even more of a threat to life.

Composer Johanni Curtet combines the distinctive and culturally-specific sounds of throat singing with hiphop, beatbox and, occasionally, plaintive country-style strings, suggesting something of an identity crisis. Indeed, like Ulzii, Mongolia is a country struggling to find its place in a changing world.

**Nikki Baughan**, *Screen Daily*, 21 May 2023 (abridged)

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### Coming soon....

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April: *Io Capitano* (12A)

Monday 6<sup>th</sup> May: *The Teachers' Lounge* (12A)

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