



Monday, June 10, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Jay Weissberg / Variety Not Rated 101 Mins.

Is there anything rarer than an intelligent feel-good film that knows how to tackle urgent global issues with humor as well as a satisfying sense of justice? Look no further than “Woman at War,” Benedikt Erlingsson’s gloriously Icelandic (for lack of a better adjective), near-perfect follow-up to “Of Horses and Men,” featuring an environmental activist modestly taking on the world, one electric pylon at a time. Commentators will be tumbling over themselves trying to define what kind of movie this is: comedy, musical, social drama, politically correct issue film. It’s all those except the last; political correctness implies one-dimensional preaching that narrowly cuts off conversations, whereas, whereas “Woman at War” deftly centralizes a profound humanity from which vital issues are comfortably suspended. Bound to be one of the hot sellers at this year’s Cannes, the film is likely to do bang-up business worldwide.

“Of Horses and Men” deliciously played with narrative conventions even as it astonished with pictorial surprises that continue to induce smiles five years later. Erlingsson’s sophomore feature tells a more straightforward story yet here too he invents unexpected visual pleasures, in the form of three musicians (Davíð Þór Jónsson, Magnús Trygvason Eliassen, Ómar Guðjónsson) and three Ukrainian singers (Iryna Danyleiko, Galyna Goncharenko, Susanna Karpenko) who appear in key moments on screen as melodic commentators, fellow conspirators, and sympathetic bystanders offering accompaniment to some of the action. Their appearances pierce through the fourth wall in ways that respect both the characters and the audience, which is just one of numerous delightful feats in this mature crowd-pleaser.

In town, Halla (Halldóra Geirharðsdóttir) is a popular 49-year-old choir director, her sun-filled smile warming everyone she meets. In the countryside, she’s what the press have nicknamed “Mountain Woman,” an anonymous figure using a potent bow and arrow to bring down power lines in a one-woman crusade against heavy industry. The only one who knows her identity is Baldvin (Jörundur Ragnarsson), a chorus member and official in the ministry who’s been helping out with information but is getting extra nervous as the government backlash grows now that the Chinese are reconsidering their investment in Iceland.

It’s just now that a letter arrives telling Halla that her application for adopting a child from Ukraine has been accepted, and while it’s not an ideal moment, she’s overjoyed that her dreams of motherhood will finally be realized. Identical twin sister Ása (also played by Geirharðsdóttir) is delighted for her sibling, though she’s just agreed to join an ashram in India for two years. Pairing these two together seems like such an obvious script gimmick, yet apart from the eternally amusing conceit of identical twin sisters on film, the yin-and-yang works perfectly: Both idealists, Halla looks to save the world, while Ása looks for inner fulfillment.

After Halla drops leaflets around town declaring her environmental motivations, the government begins a spin war to win public opinion, unleashing commentators on the media while increasing the manhunt. Worth singling out among many marvelous sequences is a scene when Halla walks down the street, glimpsing TVs through one window after another, all of them blaring official propaganda that then melds into chatter-like music as she quickens her pace, becoming all the more determined to take a final stand against industry before heading to Ukraine and picking up her adopted daughter. Helping her escape capture is sheep farmer Sveinbjörn, a classically Icelandic character whose gruff exterior can’t disguise his compassionate nature.

Thematically, “Woman at War” sounds so easy: a righteous topic, a sense of solidarity for the things that count, a satisfying stand by one woman against the powerful forces of industry. Erlingsson’s genius lies in how he puts it all together with such witty intelligence, arranging beautifully shot picaresque episodes around a central figure who lives the ideals of the heroes she has hanging on her wall, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. The adoption subtheme is a crucial element in it all, as it concretizes her role as mother and caretaker, one small country, one small child at a time.

Grounding everything is Geirharðsdóttir’s splendid performance(s), fleshing out Halla’s character as a grassroots Robin Hood with warmth and quiet determination. Juan Camillo Roman Estrada makes a welcome comeback from “Of Horses and Men” as a luckless Spanish-speaking tourist whose foreign-ness makes him a target of police suspicion in the insular Icelandic countryside. All three musicians, playing piano, accordion, trumpet, tuba and percussion, contrast detached yet supportive glances with an almost organic presence in each of their scenes, while the Ukrainian singing trio, on the one hand out of place, lend a sense of global cohesion with their distinctive harmonies.

As he did with Erlingsson’s previous feature, Bergsteinn Björgúlfsson again proves himself a master of capturing the tranquil beauty of the Icelandic landscape, ultra-sensitive to lighting and the joys of the unexpected. When Sveinbjörn gently immerses Halla in a hot spring, shown from above on camera, it’s hard not to have a similar feeling of relief, and when she lies her face down in the flowering undergrowth, we enjoy a similar connection to nature. Sound design is also flawless. In English, Spanish, Ukrainian, Icelandic with English subtitles.

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ask dr. Ruth

Monday, June 17, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Sheila O'Malley / RogerEbert.com Not Rated 100 Mins.

In the early 1940s, Jewish teenager Karola Siegel, experiencing the first surge of puberty, wrote in her diary: "Everything in nature is so fantastically well-organized. One can't possibly think that anything about it is dirty." Born to Orthodox Jews in Germany, Siegel was sent to Switzerland in 1939 (two months after Kristallnacht), in a train filled with children, all of whom were thrust out of Germany by their parents to safety (it was hoped). The children were all placed in a Swiss orphanage to wait out the war. Siegel stopped receiving letters from her parents in 1941. Terrified of what had happened to them (they were both killed), uncertain about her future, she was still a teenage girl, wondering about sex, writing about it in language far ahead of her time. It should be no surprise that Siegel, after a twisty journey through many countries, ended up in America, eventually becoming a licensed sex therapist known the world over as "Dr. Ruth Westheimer." The philosophy of "Dr. Ruth" was there in a diary entry written by a teenage Jewish refugee. Ryan White's wonderful documentary "Ask Dr. Ruth" shows us how Karola became Ruth, how a "Holocaust orphan" (as she calls herself) became a radio and TV star, still trucking at 90 years of age.

If you didn't experience Dr. Ruth's omnipresence in the '80s, the documentary may seem like it emerges from an alternate universe. Westheimer had a radio show and TV show, and she was a beloved guest of late-night talk show hosts (watching her mortify David Letterman by saying "penis" or "vagina" on air was one of her many charms). She was on the covers of magazines. Full-page spreads in the The New York Times were devoted to her. She was controversial, she was hilarious.



When critics inform readers, trying to be helpful, "This story takes place before cell phones" I always think, "The majority of human history occurred before cell phones." It shouldn't be that difficult to put yourself into an era other than your own. Nevertheless, "Ask Dr. Ruth" is a necessary reminder of the ways people got information "before the Internet." Dr. Ruth strolled into a world where you learned about sex from reading Judy Blume's *Forever*, from sneaking a peek at your friend's parents' copy of *The Joy of Sex*, or, disturbingly, from the dog-eared copy of *Flowers in the Attic*

secretly passed around your middle-school (as Sofia Coppola portrays in her film "Lick the Star"). In a society both puritanical and salacious, Dr. Ruth's approach was refreshingly frank.

When asked about her popularity, Westheimer hazarded a guess: "I think it has to do with me not being tall and blonde and gorgeous." Under five feet tall, she is a comfortable grandmother-type, speaking with a brisk German accent, wearing conservative suits. She is totally nonjudgmental. People would call into her show with explicit questions about arousal, masturbation, vibrators, you name it. She would launch into her answer, using words like "insert your penis" and "clitoris" without any hesitation. The audience would laugh, or squirm with embarrassment. She never did. One of her favorite things to say is, "There's no such thing as normal."



White follows Westheimer around for a year (her pace would exhaust someone 50 years younger), accompanying her to personal appearances, family gatherings, a trip to Israel and back. She's an endearing narrator, and a good guide to the extraordinary arc of her life. After Switzerland, she lived on a kibbutz in the brand new state of Israel, eventually training as a sniper in the underground Israeli army. She came to America in 1956, and then moved to France to study at the Sorbonne. Her first marriage broke up, and she moved back to America. A second marriage followed. Then a third. She got a graduate degree. Then another graduate degree, focusing on sex therapy and relationship counseling. The use of animated sequences to represent her early years is jarring (especially since the device isn't established from the jump), as is the use of actresses to read her teenage diary entries in voiceover. Westheimer's own voice is so distinct, with those clipped cadences, the accent, the intermittent giggle, and her storytelling is far more vivid than a literal representation. For the most part, though, White stays in the present, and lets Westheimer do her own talking.

The film does a great job of contextualizing the phenom of Dr. Ruth. It's filled with clips (including one of a guy rushing onstage during a talk she gave at Oklahoma State University, an attempt at citizen's arrest for obscenity). During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, she was a formidable and vocal figure, determined to counteract the often-homophobic misinformation out there about the disease. She was very vocal about abortion rights, although she never discussed politics (she still doesn't). She doesn't call herself a "feminist" ("I'm too square for that," she tells her horrified granddaughter) but her advocacy for women—especially to take ownership of their bodies and sexuality—has been a constant.

Early in "Ask Dr. Ruth," Dr. Ruth appears as a guest on a New York radio show. A woman calls in to say, "I listened to your show in the '80s and I can honestly say you saved my life." She's not the only one.

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Monday, July 8, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A. O. Scott / New York Times Not Rated 136 Mins.

Back at the turn of the millennium, in the northern Chinese industrial city of Datong, Qiao and Bin are an underworld power couple. Not quite Bonnie and Clyde — too disciplined, too businesslike — but with more than a hint of old Hollywood gangster style. In the provincial dance halls and gambling parlors where Bin holds court in the first chapter of “Ash Is Purest White,” he and Qiao carry themselves with glamour and authority.

Bin (Liao Fan) gazes through a permanent haze of cigarette smoke, his handsome poker face occasionally betraying a hint of amusement or surprise. Qiao (Zhao Tao), from a more respectable background, amplifies her lover’s charisma with her own. They are the brightest stars in a constellation of hustlers, sycophants, tough guys and wannabes, whose admiration is streaked with envy and fear. Nobody is cooler.

Packets of money change hands, and eventually a gun is fired, but “Ash Is Purest White,” Jia Zhangke’s enthralling new feature, isn’t really a crime drama. The aura of romantic, outlaw chic that hovers around Bin and Qiao soon dissipates, replaced by the clearer, grimmer air of reality. Jia, an essential figure in China’s “sixth generation” of filmmakers and one the most inventive and engaged directors of the 21st century, has long concerned himself with the effect of enormous social and economic forces on the intimate experiences of individuals. His movies, fictional and nonfictional alike, document the transformation of cities, landscapes and ways of life as those upheavals affect families, couples and groups of friends.

Viewed from one angle — from the ground level of its plot — the scale of “Ash Is Purest White” can seem modest. It’s the story of two people whose love collapses under the weight of bad luck and betrayal but who can’t manage to quit each other. When Bin is attacked by members of a rival gang, Qiao saves his life. Rather than rat him out, she accepts a five-year prison sentence, after which she goes looking for Bin, who has left their home province, Shanxi. Earlier, he had told her about traditional criminal code of “righteousness and loyalty,” but she seems to be the only one committed to upholding it.

On her way to find him — it’s now 2006 — she takes a ferry down the Yangtze River, through the area soon to be inundated by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Later, she will find herself on a train heading west, striking up a friendship with a man bound for the province of Xinjiang. Even without a detailed knowledge of China’s geography or its recent history, a viewer feels the

dislocation and momentum of accelerating change — and something of the country’s sheer vastness and density.

There is always something new. By the time “Ash Is Purest White” returns to Datong, in the present day, the city is almost unrecognizable. But Jia’s perspective is neither nostalgic nor optimistic. His movies don’t imagine a stable past to be mourned or longed for. (Since 2000, his non- or semi-documentary features, all essential, are “Platform,” “Unknown Pleasures,” “Still Life,” “The World,” “A Touch of Sin,” “24 City” and “Mountains May Depart.”) Nor do they project a happy future on the horizon. His world is in constant motion, and his refusal to hurry through it — the grace of his camera movements, the sometimes agonizing slowness of his scenes — can be understood as a kind of protest, a reminder of the ethical necessity of paying attention.

The most consistent focus of Jia’s attention is Zhao Tao, who has appeared in nearly all of his works since the 2000 film “Platform.” (They have been married since 2012.) At once delicate and indomitable, down to earth and otherworldly, she has come to figure in his filmography as both an Everywoman and a quasi-mythic being, a woman whose heroism resides in her refusal to disappear. From film to film, playing a variety of characters, she moves through industrial wastes and high-rise developments, night life and factory work, love and crime, wielding her individuality as a shield and a weapon.

Qiao’s resourcefulness in “Ash Is Purest White” is a source of both pathos and encouragement. She is a survivor, and perhaps because of that she endures more than her share of suffering. But the film as a whole is too rich with incident and surprise to be bleak. Jia has always had a sly sense of comedy, and an appreciation of spectacle. He lingers at drunken parties, appreciates the solemn ridiculousness of ballroom dancers performing at a funeral and revels in the full-throated emotion of a cheesy love song. The high point of Qiao and Bin’s relationship may be when they dance together to the Village People’s “Y.M.C.A.” — a pop-culture cliché that Jia embraces even as he mocks it.

The strangest moment in “Ash Is Purest White” is surely the appearance of a U.F.O., an event that is all the more astonishing for being without any particular consequences. The lights streak through the night sky, and down below life keeps going. This may be a reminder of the vastness of the universe, a symbol of mysteries beyond reckoning, or a bit of mischief on the director’s part. It’s not the first time the possibility of extraterrestrial life has popped up in one of Jia’s movies, which are in every other respect the opposite of science fiction. Except, perhaps, insofar as the truest human feeling he recognizes is alienation.

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"Not to get all alliterative about it, but 'Woman at War' is something wonderful."
Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times
 Monday, June 10 at 7:30 pm

"This biopic of the Goddess of Good Sex is heartbreaking and unsurprisingly candid. It's a must see!"

Carla Renata, The Curvy Film Chick
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"Fierce, gripping and emotional."
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