

LUNANA: A YAK IN THE CLASSROOM

Bhutan (2019) 110 minutes

Director: Pawo Choyning Dorji

Cast: Sherab Dorji (Ugyen Dorji)
Ugyen Norbu Lhendup (Michen)
Kunzang Wangdi (Asha Jinpa)



Screening 6th September 2023 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

Ugyen has completed four of his five mandatory years of training as a teacher for the government. However, he does not enjoy teaching and wishes to move to Australia to become a singer. When he is assigned to teach in the very remote Himalayan Mountain village of Lunana, he considers quitting his job, but his grandmother urges him to complete his teaching assignment.

Reviews



With its gently paced narrative and a collection of vivid, often amusing characters, it's perhaps impossible not to fall in love with this movie. Big themes are handled with an unusually light touch, avoiding both clichés and the story structure. So, the focus falls refreshingly on interaction that continually breaks the surface. Watching Ugyen blossom from a sullen urbanite into someone deeply connected with his culture and surroundings is unusually inspiring because the script never cheapens his journey.

In the lead role, Dorji is thoroughly engaging, revealing how being separated from his electronic devices forces Ugyen to see what's right in front of him. As his curiosity and compassion are piqued, he begins to understand himself more clearly. And the villagers are also superbly well-played, investing real-life wit into each role. All of them are shameless scene-stealers. Even Norbu the yak wins us over.

Rich Cline, Shadows on the Wall

Contrasts abound between the modern and the traditional. At first, Ugyen burns paper to heat his primitive living quarters, only to find it's a rare resource in a school with almost none. Once his headphone batteries – and his dreams of pop stardom – power down, he's better able to hear, even learn, the plaintive folk song of herder Saldon, which honours the yaks that provide the community with meat, milk and, yes, fuel through their dried dung. When Saldon gifts Ugyen a yak in his new workplace, it seems a symbol that embodies the village's holistic worldview..

Dorji's unadorned, contemplative compositions and measured editing rhythms reflect an unhurried appreciation of the natural landscapes and Lunana's acceptance of its place in an ever-changing world. The inevitable, movingly understated climax doesn't judge Ugyen; yet the very first shot, long before Ugyen reaches Lunana, is of Saldon singing in the mountains. That's where the film's heart truly lies.

If teachers, or anyone, can 'touch the future', Dorji quietly insists that we hold on to the past too.

Leigh Singer, Sight and Sound

Film Facts

- The film was a nominee for Best International Feature Film at the Academy Awards in 2022, a first for Bhutan.
- The area is isolated even by the standards of this remote Himalayan kingdom. It was reached by walking eight days from the nearest village.
- In the national language, lunana means 'dark valley'.

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