



## BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

### **IF ONLY I COULD HIBERNATE (12A)**

Director: Zoljargal Purevdash

Starring: Battsooj Uutsaikh, Nominjiguur Tsend, Ganchimeg Sandagdordojr and Tuguldur Batsaikhan.

Mongolia, 2023, 1 hour 38 minutes, subtitles [Preview]

This is a breakthrough film for Mongolian cinema. It is the first Mongolian film to be screened in the Official Selection of the Cannes Film Festival when it premiered on 21 May 2023 in the Un Certain Regard section. It went on to win the Special Jury Prize at the Tokyo FILMEX in November 2023.

It was also a breakthrough for Mongolian Director and Screen Writer Purevdash. The film is her first feature, although she has made a number of well-reviewed shorts, of particular note *Stairs* in 2020. Her previous shorts and this feature have similar themes, which is how Mongolia deals with change and often unregulated industrialization. The rapid pace of change was brought about by the Soviet Union's collapse in the early 1990's. Mongolia moved from a communist one-party state to a multi-party democracy with a free market, but the transition has not been smooth and untroubled.

Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world with a population of around 3 million. Many communities remain isolated and the country's infrastructure is very underdeveloped with poor transport links. However, the capital Ulaanbaatar, which has a population of 1.6 million has seen rapid change and industrial growth. The film is set in the ger district of Ulaanbaatar which suffers from a lack of public services, and health provision, poor sanitation and life-threatening pollution. The city is at high altitude with freezing winters and the inhabitants need to burn whatever they can to keep warm and finding fuel is an overwhelming but also polluting activity. Joblessness, poverty and child mortality are all high. Those who live in Ulaanbaatar have to grab what opportunities they can but often at a personal and societal cost.

The plot, in its simplest form is about a poor teenager, 15-year-old Ulzii who has to choose between family loyalties and the opportunity of a better future. Ulzii is a gifted physics student who has a chance of winning a place at an elite school but success and material advancement could result in personal loss. Nikki Baughan, **Screen Daily**, 21 May 2023 writes; "This assured feature debut from Mongolian filmmaker Zoljargal Purevdash 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."

Purevdash own life has some echoes of Ulzii's dilemma. She grew up in poverty in Ulaanbaatar, but excelled in maths and physics before turning to filmmaking and being awarded a scholarship in Japan. However, the focus of her filmmaking remains in Mongolia. Speaking to Martha Balaga, (**Variety**, 22 May 2023) she said; "Every child should be granted that chance. I am speaking from personal experience, because I went to the best high school and got a scholarship to study in Japan. Now, I speak three languages and I am able to take care of myself. I came back, because all the stories I wanted to tell are right here. But my friends are stuck in the same vicious circle."

Notes compiled by Adrian Rhead

Preview courtesy of Conic