

Werner Herzog Introduces You to ‘Happy People’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on February 22, 2013 - 2:07pm

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – In an age increasingly dominated by electronics and man-made comforts, it can be difficult to remember that there are still parts of this spinning planet that are driven by mother nature. One documentarian long-fascinated with the way man interacts with nature is Werner Herzog and he brings his latest, “Happy People: A Year in the Taiga,” to the Music Box Theatre this weekend. It’s a minor film from a major director but it’s still a strong one for those interested in its subject matter — how people can still co-exist with and live off the land instead of ignoring or abusing it.

Werner Herzog & Dmitry Vasyukov present the story of the indigenous people of an area of Siberia so distant that it can only be reached by helicopter or boat, and the latter is only possible for the less-than-half of the year that the river is not frozen. We sometimes forget in a city like Chicago of the vast expanses of non-industrialized parts of the world, including most of Siberia, which is one and a half times the size of the entire United States.



Happy People

Photo credit: Music Box Films

Deep in the Siberian tundra lies Bakhtia, a village on the river Yenisei that is home to 300 people, most of who spend their time trapping, hunting, and doing the various chores often required to keep them alive. “Happy People” is a very low-key film, a work in which we watch a man make skis out of a tree, another build a trap for hunting, and spend seasons with men who live off the land. With some very beautiful cinematography, “Happy People” captures a part of the world in a unique way — a part of humanity that is not often seen any more in any form, much less on the big screen.

Herzog is listed as co-director here although he really just took footage shot by Dmitry Vasyukov, also listed as co-director, over a year in the Siberian Taiga and edited it and narrated it. To say, as some have suggested, that this makes it not a Herzog film is just silly. Yes, it was not conceived as one but Herzog's choices as an editor and his narration very much marks the work as his own. And the film fits so snugly into his non-fiction filmography. In many ways, it is an interesting counterpoint to "Grizzly Man," a work that illustrated who man should not live with nature. The people in "Happy People" build their lives around the cycles of nature, the seasons that allow hunting & fishing, the trees that allow them to build canoes, etc. These are themes that should be familiar to any fan of Herzog's work and he definitely puts his thumbprints all over this one, even if he didn't do so from day one.



Happy People

Photo credit: Music Box Films

And Herzog's narration and editing are so clearly his own. He says the word "epochal" in ways that only Herzog can he lovingly notes that the lead hunter's dog never rides on the snowmobile, covering the entire distance running behind it in a way that only Herzog could. There's also the trademark unique sensibility of Herzog, such as in when he spends time with a politician who has come to the village via boat complete with a singing trio. Many editors would have lost this material. It fits Herzog's sense of humor.

Admittedly, "Happy People" is a very low-key piece, even more so than most Herzog films. It doesn't have the lyricism of something like "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" nor the fascination of the story of "Grizzly Man." It feels slight even for its 90-minute running time, as if there might have been a stronger TV special here than a feature. However, I'll take low-key work from a major-key filmmaker, especially at this time of year when interesting movies are so few and far between. Everything Werner Herzog does (or, in this case, half-does) is interesting.

"Happy People: A Year in the Taiga" was directed by Werner Herzog & Dmitry Vasyukov. It opens today, February 22, 2013 at the Music Box Theatre in Chicago.



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