

The Rocket

Australia/Laos 2013
Director: Kim Mordaunt
Certificate 12A 95m 49s

Reviewed by Catherine Wheatley

Echoes of Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) haunt documentarian Kim Mordaunt's debut feature, an energetic coming-of-age tale set half a world away from New Orleans but infused with a similar atmosphere of wetness and wonder. *The Rocket's* action takes place in present-day Laos, though at times it looks like a fantastic sci-fi land – *Avatar's* Pandora revealed to be Earth after all. As it begins, ten-year-old Ahlo's home is about to be flooded for the building of a second dam to match the existing futuristic structure that looms over the verdant landscape, and his family is to be relocated. An underwater sequence sees Ahlo swimming in the dam lake, skimming over roofs and rafters, the homes of the last locals to be moved on.

In Laotian superstition, Ahlo (sweet, strutting street kid Sitthiphon Disamoe) may be a 'cursed child', a twin whose sibling was stillborn. When tragedy strikes en route to his family's new home, the predictions seem to be borne out. Then the "new house, good land and generous cash payout" that Ahlo's father has been promised via a noxious corporate video turns out to be a squalid shanty made up of corrugated tin and torn sheets. Electricity is promised but is available only to company employees. Ahlo's incandescent Fury of a grandmother (the marvellous Bunsri Yindi, best known to international audiences from 2003's *Ong-Bak*) pronounces him responsible; their neighbours, seeking a scapegoat for their misery, run him out of camp.

The subsequent Disneyesque odyssey, in which a grief-stricken and guilty child wanders the wilderness before restoring his good name, is lent freshness and edge by the setting in present-day Laos, a country perched on the brink of industrialisation yet still haunted by the legacy of war. Dormant bombs lie scattered across its gorgeous landscapes, "sleeping tigers" that lend the film its most potent and surreal imagery – such as an elephant's trunk wrapped around the thick, phallic husk of an unexploded missile. Guiding Ahlo and his family on their precarious journey is rice-wine-soused, James Brown-obsessed Uncle Purple



Flower child: Sitthiphon Disamoe

(Thai actor Thep Phongam), named for the livid suit he wears in tribute to his idol – a gift, we learn, from the Americans with whom he collaborated during the war. Purple is the ghost of Laos's past, but whether he's a good spirit or a bad one is not always clear. His parting gift to Ahlo is to pass on the bomb-making techniques the Americans taught him, so that Ahlo can enter a rocket-making competition.

The Rocket builds on Mordaunt's 2007 documentary *Bomb Harvest*, which followed an Australian bomb-disposal specialist working in Laos and featured the children who collected bombs to sell as scrap. Its fable-like quality is both offset and redoubled by the documentary techniques Mordaunt employs, while the child's-eye perspective captured by DP Andy Commis through the use of a mostly handheld camera lends both adults and objects an off-kilter disproportion.

The combination of *vérité* and fairytale calls to mind Clio Barnard's recent *The Selfish Giant*, another film in which scrap metal holds a dangerous allure for its child protagonists. *The Rocket* lacks that film's nuanced performances and packs a far softer punch, but the dogged optimism offered by this glimpse of a country caught between opposing forces is nonetheless exhilarating. Ⓢ

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by

Sylvia Wilczynski

Written by

Kim Mordaunt

Director of

Photography

Andrew Commis

Film Editor

Nick Meyers

Production Designer

Pete Baxter

Original Music

Caitlin Yeo

Sound Design

Sam Petty

Costume Designer

Woranun Pueakpun

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Screen NSW, Ton

Enterprises Pty

Ltd, Ecoventure Pty

Ltd, Colin & Karen

McCumstie and Red

Lamp Films Pty Ltd

Production

Companies

Screen Australia

presents a Red Lamp

Films production

in association with

Screen NSW

in association with

Curious Film, LevelK

ApS, Ton Enterprises

& Triphet Rookachat,

Ecoventure,

McCumsties @

Margaritaville Fund,

Milsearch Pty &

Milsearch Lao

Principal investor

& production

Screen Australia

Executive Producers

Bridget Ikin

Michael Wrenn

David Macfarlane

Triphet Rookachat

CAST

Sitthiphon Disamoe

Ahlo

Loungnam

Kaosainam

Kia

Thep Phongam

Purple

Bunsri Yindi

Taitok

Sumrit Warin

Toma

Alice Keohavong

Mali

Dolby Digital

In Colour

[2.35:1]

Subtitles

Distributor

Eureka Entertainment

8,623 ft +8 frames

Laos, the recent past. A woman, Mali, gives birth to twins but one of them is stillborn. She ignores her mother's advice that she should kill the survivor (according to Laotian superstition, one twin is cursed and one lucky) naming him Ahlo. Some ten years later, Ahlo's family are to be relocated due to the construction of a dam that will flood their ancestral home. Ahlo's grandmother Taitok suspects that he is the cause of this bad luck, and when Mali is killed en route to their new home she declares him evil. The relocation camp turns out to be a wasteland without electricity or running water. Ahlo befriends nine-year-old orphan Kia and her uncle Purple. His dodged attempt to route electricity to their home results in his family being driven out of the camp. With Kia and Purple they travel across a countryside littered with unexploded bombs to a village where a rocket-building competition is to take place, with a cash prize for the winner. Ahlo enters the competition and, with help from his father Toma and Purple, he triumphs. As his rocket explodes, long hoped-for rain falls on the village. Ahlo is declared not only the winner of the competition but also a bringer of luck.

The Stag

Ireland 2013
Director: John Butler
Certificate 15 94m 19s

Reviewed by Anna Smith

"I don't enjoy being in all-male company," says groom-to-be Fionan (Hugh O'Connor) in this Irish comedy. It's a refreshing twist on the frat-boy antics of the likes of *The Hangover*, and some laughs ensue as Fionan and his relatively sensible group of friends try to enjoy a stag weekend without the interference of the bride's macho brother 'the Machine' (co-writer Peter McDonald). A standout scene sees Fionan's best man Davin (*Sherlock's* Andrew Scott) trying to dissuade the interloper from joining the gang, leaving a voicemail claiming that the weekend will be a sober walking retreat. But the idea of the Machine proves funnier than the reality: his reckless alpha-male antics are essentially a series of so-so sketches involving the usual suspects: nudity, drugs and farmers with shotguns (debut writer-director John Butler being best known for TV sketch show *Your Bad Self*).

The dialogue is fitfully unconvincing but *The Stag* is better when tackling dramatic subjects, including the Machine's soft side, a gay character's relationship with his father and Davin's attachment to the bride. As Davin, Scott is by far the most interesting character, and neither the script nor the performances help us understand why Amy Huberman's Ruth would choose the drab, self-absorbed Fionan over him. It's a problem from which this well-intentioned film never recovers. Ⓢ

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Rebecca O'Flanagan
Robert Walpole

Written by

John Butler

Peter McDonald

Director of

Photography

Peter Robertson

Film Editor

John O'Connor

Production

Designer

Ferdia Murphy

Music

Stephen Rennicks

Hugh Drumm

Sound Recordist

Hugh Fox

Costume Designer

Kathy Strachan

©Treasure

Entertainment Ltd

Production

Companies

Bord Scannán na

hÉireann/Irish Film

Board in association

with Windmill

Lane Pictures

present a Treasure

Entertainment
production
Produced with
the assistance
of Bord Scannán

na hÉireann/
Irish Film Board

Made with the
assistance of

Windmill Lane
Pictures

In Colour

[1.85:1]

Distributor

Arrow Film

Distributors Ltd

8,488 ft +8 frames

CAST

Andrew Scott

Davin

Hugh O'Connor

Fionan

Brian Gleeson

Simon

Andrew Bennett

Large Kevin

Michael Legge

Little Kevin

Amy Huberman

Ruth

Peter McDonald

The Machine

Marcella Plunkett

Uli

Justine Mitchell

Linda

Ireland, the present. At the insistence of his fiancée Ruth, metrosexual Fionan reluctantly agrees to have a stag do prior to their wedding. Ruth also insists that he invite her notorious brother, known as 'the Machine'. The men go hiking and camping, and Fionan and his friends gradually warm to the initially obnoxious Machine. After taking MDMA, the Machine reveals that he has separated from his wife. Fionan's best man Davin, who is Ruth's ex, confesses to Fionan that he is still in love with her. Fionan reacts angrily. The Machine reconciles with his wife. Davin and Fionan make amends and the wedding goes ahead successfully.