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## 'Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom' a gem from high altitude

By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

It is the first time that Orinda's International Film Showcase presents a film from Bhutan. The small country known for measuring its people's happiness rather than its GDP was not known for its movie production. This is changing with the emergence of this lovely gem, "Lunana" -- almost a docu-drama, set in the most remote school in the world. We follow the main character, Ugyen, in his discovery of a most beautiful place on earth, steeped in natural beauty and in simple yet profound spirituality. He will discover himself and his true nature as he let himself gradually be immersed in the purity of the place. What he will do with this discovery may be left as a mystery.

Ugyen is a spirited and impatient young Bhutanese man who wants to become a singer. His plan is drawn out: a visa for Australia is on its way; he just has to complete a last assignment as a teacher to extinguish his obligation toward his government. This time, he is sent to Lunana, a Himalayan village of a few hundred people sitting at 11,200 feet above sea level. It is said to be the most remote classroom in the world. Ugyen reluctantly leaves for a long bus voyage followed by a five-day hike in the mountains. When he arrives in the village with no electricity, no internet and extremely rudimentary accommodations, his first reaction is to tell the welcoming villagers that he cannot stay. In an interview with IMDb, first-time director Pawo Choyning Dorji explained that Ugyen personifies the youth of Bhutan. He said that thousands of young people are leaving the country for the U.S., Australia, or London. As a

Bhutanese, he is wondering where a country that is losing its educated and capable people is going. He wanted to take his main character in the opposite direction, to the most remote place.

There is something of a miracle about this movie. Filmed on a shoestring in Lunana, a real place that does not have electricity, with a cast and crew of first-timers, some of whom had never seen a movie, the film is now an Oscar contender.

All along the feel of authenticity is overwhelming. This is what Dorji wanted. He wanted the crew and cast to go through this experience and live the life of the highlander. He also incorporated into the script elements of the lives of his actors, so the script was constantly evolving. He decided to shoot in a linear fashion so that the actors could grow with their characters. The result is both endearing and moving. Ugyen's spiritual journey as he meets and connects with different villagers is also well depicted. From a disrespectful non-believer, he starts to question and reconnect with the ancient belief system that has shaped Bhutan as a Buddhist nation deeply respectful of all living creatures.

Bhutan is a very small country with a population of only 700,000, landlocked in the Himalayas between China and India. In 1971 it decided to measure its progress in terms of Gross National Happiness (GNH), not in terms of Gross National Product (GNP). The four pillars of national happiness when creating legislation are good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and environmental consideration. It is said to be the only country in the world with a negative carbon footprint.

Bhutan was isolated for centuries. Dorji explains that his country looked at Tibet gone to China and Sikkim gone to India, saw that countries like theirs lost their independence and as a result closed up to protect their way of life. It was only in 2000 that television and internet entered Bhutan. The impact of globalization was drastic and overnight. This movie is about that, the transition from traditional to modern and the question of keeping one's belonging and meaning.

"Lunana" is a nominee for Best International Feature Film at the 94th Academy Awards. It opens for one week on March 25 at the Orinda Theatre. For tickets, visit [orindamovies.com](http://orindamovies.com).

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