

INTERVIEW

WITH STURLA GUNNARSSON

>> JASMINE JOHNSTON

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Sturla Gunnarsson, Canadian nationalist and Icelandic tribalist, director of Beowulf and Grendel as well as an upcoming documentary on David Suzuki, visited the University of Victoria on January 14 and 15 as a Beck Trust speaker.

Sturla offered a screening of Beowulf and Grendel, with a question and answer period afterwards, and a lecture on the film with clips from his film and from Wrath of Gods, a documentary on the making of Beowulf and Grendel.

Following these events, Sturla generously met with me for a half-hour interview on Beowulf, Iceland, worldmaking, film, landscape, David Suzuki, and Haida Gwaii. The interview took place at the University Club, to the clink of flatware and the flap of linen as staff pottered about during the dining room's afternoon lull.

JASMINE JOHNSTON: I'm just going to jump right in, then. I really enjoyed the question and answer period last night, and your lecture today. In the lecture you had alluded to what you would have done if you had continued the film into a second film to complete your interpretation of all of Beowulf. So: what about the dragon? Would you have incorporated its fantastical nature into the world you were creating—or going back to—or would you have naturalized it in some way, the way you did with Grendel's Neanderthal family?

STURLA GUNNARSSON: I haven't quite figured it out because the next section I would have dealt with is Beowulf's rise to power as a king; I would have dealt with political power and affairs of men. That way I could have punted the question of the dragon to the third film, and at that point I would have had to come to terms with it. But I think I would have approached it in the same way as everything else, which is I would have done it in a way that made it feel just perfectly natural, so that the dragon was just a creature of the natural world. I would have had to use some computer-generated images to do that, but I would have stayed away from the mythological.

JJ: Whenever I get to the end of the poem I am always struck by Beowulf's familial solitude; he's totally alone, in terms of wife, lovers, children. Do you have any thoughts of what you would have done there, or what you would like to do there? You brought Selma into the equation, with Beowulf and Grendel, but...

SG: Yeah, I don't see a happy forever after with Selma, though.

JJ: No...

SG: No, I think that's kind of an archetype, isn't it? The warrior, the Ronan—the warrior always ends up alone, and the man of power always ends up alone. That's one of those archetypes of literature, and based in truisms. I think people who wield power usually end up alone.

JJ: Hm. And maybe also the monsters as well, although I really liked your move with giving Grendel a father, and a mother; it was a really interesting contrast, seeing that family connection between Grendel and his parents, compared to the totally decontextualized Beowulf, who's got nothing but his dudes for company.

SG: That's right. He's got his boys.

JJ: He does. His crew? His gang?

SG: Gerry and the Pacemakers. Team Geat, we used to call them. ...But yes, it's true: it's a male world, you know? Selma says, "warrior monk, not

many of those.” Although at the end he’s not quite the monk, is he.

JJ: No. You talked a little bit about how you encountered the poem: you read it to your kids. Do you have a favourite translation, or did you read it in the original to your children?

SG: No, I didn’t read it in Old English. My favourite is the Seamus Heaney; I love the Seamus Heaney. He was not a purist about it, by going with what worked, rather than trying to encumber it. Most of the other translations are more literal. The Seamus Heaney one—I used to read it to my son when he was young, and it would just trip off the tongue; it has this beautiful rhythm. He was a young kid, and he’d just sit there, spellbound.

JJ: In terms of your own childhood influences, what are some the earliest stories that contributed to the formation of your imagination, your creative processes, your worldview, your obsessions? I feel like some of these things, even if they’re not terribly remarkable stories in themselves, will often send us off in directions just because of the age we encounter them at.

SG: That’s true. That’s a tough question: Beowulf, certainly. I think of formative works of cinema that affected me. Some of the Kurosawa films, *Seven Samurai*, *Ran*; films by Peter Brook. I’d say probably Peter Brook was a tremendous influence on me, more than anybody else, I would imagine, in the early days.

JJ: Can you tell me a little bit about Peter Brook?

SG: Well, *Marat/Sade* I think, is the film that blew me away. I never realized that you could do that with a film. It’s a story that takes place during the French Revolution; it’s a play being put on by the inmates of an asylum during the French Revolution. It’s about Marat, and it’s about madness and it’s about layers of meaning. It moves in and out of layers of meaning. And Peter Brook did a lot of work in Africa; he did lots of work with studying movement and dance and primitive theatre, with peoples in Africa, and he brought it back into the English theatre. Very radical artistic voice.

JJ: Would you say that maybe some of your thoughts that you’ve shared about landscape and the pressure that it exerts on performance is connected to or inspired by a similar desire to create analogues between the experienced world and your films?

SG: Well, Peter Brook is much more a man of the theatre and of theatrical persuasion, and I think landscapes speak to me because of my

experience, first of all, of being born in Iceland, and having that very, very strong personal connection to that landscape, and then growing up in British Columbia—you know, I think my character is almost defined by this landscape, even though I don't live here anymore. It speaks to my heart in a way that's quite profound. So the idea of the use of landscape in film is something that comes more from experience than it does from other works of art. Although, if you look at Kurosawa, the film-makers I like are masters of the use of landscape. And masters at the use of putting the human experience in the context of the landscape, and how the landscape defines that.

JJ: You mentioned in your lecture that your first dreams were in Iceland. So do you see those landscapes still, in your dreamscapes, or is it some kind of blend of Canada and Iceland, and all the different places you've been?

SG: No, I think they're very different, they're all very distinct. And it's not so much seeing them as it is experiencing the feelings that they evoke; and they don't blend one into another. They're quite unique. And the Canadian north also has that effect. I've spent quite a bit of time on the Beaufort, up around Tuktoyaktuk and that area, and again it's an area that's—it's hard to explain. It's very, very affecting. My whole sense of self changes in that landscape.

JJ: In an interview on monstersandcritics.com, you mentioned that certain images of Iceland's elemental landscape have been in your consciousness as far back as you can remember. Can you share a few examples of things that you recall?

SG: Well that whole south coast. Standing out on those black sands with the glacier behind you, and underneath the glacier is a volcano that you can smell, and in front of you is the North Sea, and it stretches all the way down to Antarctica, and the power of that, the power of that ocean that spans the entire globe, pounding on the shore, and behind you a fire encased in ice—it's very powerful.

JJ: Ocean is a strong element in the poem itself, too, isn't it: the water, the turmoil of water. I feel like you really show that in the film. How intentional was that? Were you focusing on water as a particular element?

SG: Well, part of it is just being true to the translation. There is the sea-hag cave; he does swim through water, there is all that. But the presence of the ocean and the waterfalls and all that stuff emerged from the landscape. The big motivator for me was, I wanted to make a film there, and *Beowulf* fit the bill.

JJ: I've seen the film before, but seeing it again last night—the slant of light, the darkness, the mist, the rain, the bright green turf, the black sand—as you said, all these things just added up to this amazing feel. I've never been to Iceland, but I'd like to go, and part of that is because of your film.

SG: Oh good!

JJ: If you were to make another film that engages with the landscape with the same sort of passion, what kind of landscape, or film would you like to make, in terms of future projects?

SG: I want to make a film in Gwaii Haanas. South of Haida Gwaii Archipelago.

JJ: And would that be a documentary-type thing, or—?

SG: No, I want a big, epic film, but the landscape will play a big part of it.

JJ: And do you think maybe that time could be approaching?

SG: Yes, I'm working on a script.

JJ: Are you going to be working with a partner, writing it?

SG: Right now I'm working alone. It was a story that was told to me, and it blew me away, so I filmed the person who told me the story. I filmed the story being told to me, and now I'm rendering it. Once the story's rendered, then I'll decide who I'm going to bring on board to work with. So it's in its formative stages. But I know exactly what the story is: it's a story about Windy Bay. It's the standoff between the Haida and the authorities that led to the creation of Gwaii Haanas—the Haida standing up for themselves and winning. It's a story, as Miles Richardson says, who was the president of the Haida Nation Council at the time and the leader of it, about what Canada's capable of being. It's a big confrontation in which everybody in the end shows a kind of nobility, and the good guys win.

JJ: It'll make a nice contrast to the documentary about the Oka Crisis for sure.

SG: Yes, I don't want to do that. I'm not interested in victim stories. I've done my share of them, but I'm not interested in them anymore. I don't want to do anything that doesn't have love in it.

JJ: About Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson: I love his music. He performed an Ásatrú blessing in *Wrath of Gods*, and I'm curious: what are some of the ways his religious practices resonate for you?

SG: You know, truthfully, his music resonates with me more than his religious practices. I kind of like the idea of the Ásatrú because it's something that

is rooted in the elements, it's rooted in the pagan gods, which to my mind really are just manifestations of the elements. They're embodiments of those primal forces at play. So he resonates more for me as a human being because I'm very fond of him, and his music resonates for me. Religious practices—they don't do much for me, particularly, even the pagan ones.

JJ: Yes, his story is quite fantastic.

SG: Yes, and I listen to his music, and there's something there, and I go, "What is that?" And he says, "Oh, there was a gale blowing, and I stood on my balcony and held the microphone out and I recorded it." And he's sampled it, and placed it somewhere in a piece of music. Or his use of the stone marimba—the stones in the key of C and D—that stuff really moves me.

JJ: So he too is responding to the landscape, remixing it.

SG: Yes. And I like that he's ripping it: it's not folkloric. He's taking, sampling nature, and ripping it. That works for me.

JJ: Part of an ongoing use, or vital response to, the landscape and traditions. Will that sort of approach, the ongoing vitality of land and story be part of your new project?

SG: Oh, yes, because the central characters are Haida people, and for them, their relationship to the natural world is profound. As David Suzuki likes to say, their relation to the world doesn't end at their skin. They see themselves as part of the natural world—they're in it. They're of it. Their identity derives from the landscape, from the ability to catch salmon, and harvest seafood, and their ability to cut down a giant cedar and build a sea-faring vessel out of it.

JJ: Haida seem to have travelled every bit as far as any of the Vikings have.

SG: Yes, they're the Norsemen of British Columbia, that's why I like them.

JJ: I've been hearing the term, "diaspora" being kicked around a lot lately, as a way of expressing people's connexions to places that are away from here. Would you identify yourself as part of an Icelandic Diaspora, as well as a Canadian?

SG: I would say that I'm a Canadian by nationality and an Icelander by tribe. I identify on a tribal basis. I feel very much a part of Iceland, but my sensibility and political views and the world I'm engaged in is Canadian. I don't have those kind of issues. I suppose you could use that, but I don't spend a lot of time thinking about identity. I find those kind of conversations dead-end me a little bit. I don't think too much about

how to reconcile my Canadian and Icelandic identities. I think identity is dynamic; identity is doing. I'm more interested in the doing than the angsting. I don't have enough time left to angst. I've got too many films to make!

JJ: So, one other question to do with that: language. Do you speak Icelandic?

SG: Yes, I speak Icelandic fluently. And sometimes I dream in Icelandic. And I'm definitely a different character in Icelandic—not different, but there's a whole other dimension to my personality in Icelandic that doesn't exist in English. Icelandic is my first language: I'm an ESL!

JJ: Would you care to comment on the nature of the shift you make when you move into speaking Icelandic?

SG: It just somehow feels more strangely connected to something more ancient. I suppose it goes back to my earliest experience on Earth, probably before I was even conscious. There's something about those words and the way of those sounds that evokes that feeling that I had as a child.

JJ: Yes, those first synapses being formed. So, this is kind an off the wall question, but: it seems like the post-apocalyptic film is a really popular item right now. Does that work for you? Would you ever consider working in that kind of world—the human aspect of a situation like that?

SG: Possibly, sure. I loved *The Road*. I don't like cartoon films, you know? I like films that are really rooted in the human condition and that I learn something from, about myself or life on the planet Earth, not in a didactic way, right? So if I could find the humanity and the love, I would be thrilled to do a post-apocalyptic film. Sure, why not?

JJ: A post-apocalyptic saga, maybe!

SG: Yes! I used to, when I was younger, be really attracted to dysfunction and the dark side. I made the film about Evelyn Lau, Sandra Oh's first film, and I made quite a few films that really went there. Since I've been a father, I just don't have the stomach for it anymore. If I can't find some love in it, I don't want to do it.

JJ: Is that part of why you're doing this documentary about David Suzuki and the important points in his life?

SG: Yes. It's sort of an interrogation, an affectionate interrogation, trying to peel back the layers with him to understand what it is that goes into making somebody with such a fixed moral rudder, and so unyielding ,

which I see as both a positive and negative attribute.

JJ: I was trying to imagine it: it must be almost this dual worldmaking process, where he's constructing something for you, you're going to take that and represent that in some way.

SG: That's right, yes.

JJ: Is that quite an intense process?

SG: It is! It's very interesting. I've gone on pilgrimages with him to places of significance, and it's great. You do an interview with him, and the interviews are very intimate, and I find the sense-memory becomes a huge part of it. To the camera maybe one tree looks the same as the other and I could film him in Stanley Park, but in fact climbing to the top of the mountain that he last climbed with his father as his father was dying and wanted to see that lake one last time, and doing the interview there, evokes, it unleashes, it releases memories, and allows him to discover things that he wasn't aware of—the interview's happening on that level. It's really quite wonderful.

JJ: Powerful, yes. It makes me think of all the “trauma” the actors seemed to be going through as they were doing *Beowulf and Grendel* and how that translated so wonderfully to the film.

SG: Yes, it's the same thing with David. I remember I took him back to the lab that he used to work in, where he used to be known as Lord of the Flies, because he did fruit fly experiments. And that lab has been torn down, and there's a new lab there. But he had had a whole bunch of wooden shelves made, for the fruit fly samples, and somebody had put them back in. So we went to that corner of the lab, and I was filming him, and just as he was touching those shelves, that he had had put into the lab forty years before, you could see on his face the sense-memory. You could see him experiencing something that made him open and receptive to a conversation that he wouldn't have been five minutes before. Very interesting.

JJ: What a privilege. And it's going to be a privilege for us too, to watch that final project.

SG: I hope so!

JJ: Well, thank you so much for your time! I so appreciate it.

SG: Thank you. It's my pleasure talking to you.