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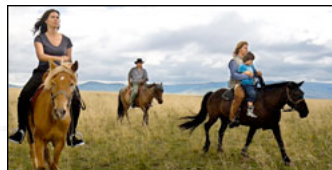
TALK BACK! DIGG EMAIL PRINT CONTACT RSS

Over the Hills And Far Away (Documentary)

By PETER DEBRUGE

A Horse Boy Foundation production. (International sales: The Film Sales Co., New York.) Produced by Rupert Isaacson. Directed by Michel Orion Scott.

With: Rupert Isaacson, Rowan Isaacson, Kristin Neff, Simon Baron-Cohen, Temple Grandin, Roy Richard Grinker, Tulga, Ghoste.



Over the Hills And Far Away All Sundance Coverage

When Western medicine fails to cure 5-year-old Rowan Isaacson's autism, his parents travel halfway across the world to seek assistance from Mongolian shamans in "Over the Hills and Far Away." Narrated by journalist father Rupert (whose companion book, "The Horse Boy," will be published in April), this compelling docu presents its story via multiple access points: the subject of autism, the notion of alternative healing and the simple travelogue appeal of an excursion to remote, untamed Mongolia. Pic has the nerve to be spiritual without entering the minefield of faith, and through careful handling, could resonate strongly with underserved auds.

Enlisted to document the Isaacsons' highly unusual trip, director Michel Orion Scott has the good sense not to suggest their extreme solution will work for others. No typical family would deal with autism in such a way, though even before Rowan was diagnosed, the Isaacsons' life was far from normal: Rupert and his wife Kristin Neff met in India. She works as a psychology professor; he champions the rights of bushmen in Botswana.

Their son's birth grounded their world-traveling ways, while the autism itself demanded even more of their attention: Rowan withdrew around others, refused to be toilet trained and suffered painful, extended fits. His only comfort seemed to be an uncanny connection with animals, so Rupert devised a plan to visit Mongolia, where they would travel on horseback across the country in search of shamans who might heal Rowan.

Because Scott's involvement began at this late stage, he efficiently lays out what background auds need through interviews and homemovie footage of scenes both good (Rowan bonding with an old mare named Betsy) and bad ("Exorcist"-worthy fits of screaming and convulsions). He then manages to maintain that same level of intimacy and access in Mongolia, capturing moments of extreme emotional and physical strain as well as rare breakthroughs when Rowan's condition appears to retreat. The first shamanistic ceremony appears downright brutal, but the "results" are striking, motivating the Isaacsons to continue their journey deep into Siberia.

Despite shooting much of the material either handheld or on horseback, Scott and his skeleton crew get remarkably clear sound and steady footage, which was then expertly edited by Rita K. Sanders. Rather than adopt a strictly linear format, she includes enlightening testimony from autism specialists and doubles back to the Isaacsons' Texas home throughout, innocuously seeding ideas that mature and bear fruit later (from the family's "Code Brown" nickname to the legend of a powerful shaman named Ghoste).

The trip itself could easily have gotten tedious, but Scott and Sanders strike a perfect pace, and their skepticism offsets whatever trite or mushy miracle-working Rupert is prone to impose on the experience through his narration (never on-the-nose, Kim Carroll and Lili Haydn's piano and strings score encourages further introspection from the audience). What we're left with isn't whether or not shamanism cures autism but a more allegorical example of what happens when people seek solutions beyond the boundaries of Western thought.

Camera (color HD, DV), Scott, Jeremy Bailey; editor, Rita K. Sanders; music, Kim Carroll, Lili Haydn; sound, Justin Hennard; re-recording mixer, Matt Ludwick. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 17, 2009. Running time: 94 MIN.

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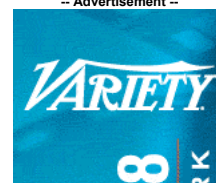
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