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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

The Horse Boy

a film by Michel Orion Scott and Rupert Isaacson

How far would you travel to heal someone you love? An intensely personal yet epic spiritual journey, *The Horse Boy* follows one Texas couple and their autistic son as they trek on horseback through Outer Mongolia in an attempt to find healing for their son. When two-year-old Rowan was diagnosed with autism, Rupert Isaacson, a writer and former horse trainer, and his wife Kristin Neff, a psychology professor, sought the best possible medical care for their son—but traditional therapies had little effect. Then they discovered that Rowan has a profound affinity for animals—particularly horses—and the family set off on a quest that would change their lives forever.

Directed by Michel Orion Scott, *The Horse Boy* is part travel adventure, part insight into shamanic healing and part intimate look at the autistic mind. In telling one family's extraordinary story, the film gives voice to the thousands who display amazing courage and creativity everyday in the battle against this mysterious and heartbreaking epidemic. The filmic companion to Isaacson's best-selling book of the same name, and a festival favorite, this ravishing documentary odyssey gives insight into how, in life's darkest moments, one can find the gateway to joy and wonder.

LONG SYNOPSIS

The horse bunches its muscles for the final steep ascent of the high mountain pass. The rider leans forward to help him, trying at the same time not to crush his five-year-old autistic son, Rowan, sitting in the saddle in front of him. Before them stretches a vast wilderness of high tundra. Somewhere in there is the shaman the father is seeking. “Will he heal my son?” the father asks himself. “Will he even know how?”

In *The Horse Boy*, filmmaker Michel Orion Scott captures a magical journey into a little known world. The documentary feature chronicles Rupert Isaacson and Kristin Neff’s very personal odyssey as they struggle to make sense of their child’s autism and find healing for him and themselves in this unlikeliest of places.

A complex condition that dramatically affects social interaction and communication skills, autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability today. With more children diagnosed each year than with cancer, diabetes, Down syndrome and AIDS combined, it is estimated in the U.S. alone, cases of autism could reach four million in the next decade. While theories on its origins abound, there is no consensus in the medical community on either causes or treatment.

Rowan Isaacson was diagnosed with autism in April 2004, at age two and a half. The charming, animated child had ceased speaking. He retreated into himself for hours at a time, screamed inconsolably for no apparent reason, flapped his arms and babbled. For the Isaacsons, as for so many other parents, autism seemed to have snatched away their child’s soul.

Rowan’s parents, Rupert Isaacson, a human rights worker, author and former professional horse trainer, and Kristin Neff, a psychology professor, sought out the best medical care for him. But orthodox therapies had little effect on Rowan.

Then came the day Rowan ran away from his father, got through the fence of their neighbor’s horse pasture, and in amongst the hooves of the horse herd. Rupert had stopped riding since Rowan’s autism had kicked in, thinking it unsafe for his son to be around horses. Now he froze, heart in mouth, praying Rowan would not get trampled. Instead, the herd’s boss horse, a notoriously grumpy old mare named Betsy, pushed the other horses away, bent her head to Rowan, and began to lick and chew with her lips: the equine sign of submission. Rupert had never seen a horse voluntarily make this obeisance to a human being before. Something direct, something beautiful, was clearly passing between boy and horse.

So Isaacson began to ride with Rowan on Betsy every day, and Rowan—amazingly—began to talk, to engage with the outside world. He asked himself, was there a place on the planet that combined horses and healing? He did some research: the country where the horse was first domesticated, where the nomadic horse life is still lived by most of its people, is also the one country where shamanism—healing at its most raw and direct—is the state religion. Mongolia.

What if he was to take Rowan there, thought Rupert, riding on horseback from shaman to shaman? What would happen?

The Horse Boy follows Rupert, Kristin and Rowan through the summer of 2007 as they traverse Mongolia on their quest. From the wild open Steppe to the sacred Lake Sharga, and deep into Siberia, they are tested to their limits individually, as a couple, as a family. They find their son is accepted, even treasured for his differences. In a world steeped in mystical tradition and hardscrabble reality, Rowan makes dramatic leaps forward, astonishing—the film reveals—both his parents and himself.

The film also includes interviews with some of the foremost experts in the field of autism including Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen (cousin of comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen) of Cambridge University; anthropologist and researcher Roy Richard Grinker of the George Washington University; and Dr. Temple Grandin, who is a professor of animal behavior at Colorado State University and who herself has autism. She is also the author of *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*, and, more recently, *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals*.

The Horse Boy is part travel adventure, part insight into shamanic tradition and part intimate look at the autistic mind. In telling one family's extraordinary story, the film gives voice to the thousands of families who display amazing courage and creativity everyday in the battle against this mysterious and heartbreaking epidemic. Above all, it gives insight into how, in life's darkest moments, one can find the gateway to joy and wonder.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first met Rupert Isaacson, the producer of *The Horse Boy* and father of Rowan Isaacson, at a book talk he gave on the Kalahari Bushmen of Botswana. Rupert spoke passionately about the past, present and future of a people who many anthropologists believe to be the first human society, and who are now on the brink of extinction.

Immediately, I felt a stirring to help. I had just finished working on a large-scale Hollywood film shot in Austin, Texas, and was burned out by the frantic pace of the previous three months. I wanted desperately to spend more time with nature and to work for a cause I believed in. I took a bold step forward and told Rupert, "I want to help. I work in film and want to offer my services to the cause, paid or not."

We began to talk about the possibility of creating a film about the Bushmen, one that would help them in their fight for survival.

A few months into pre-production, I was sitting with Rupert in his kitchen. Our conversation paused for a moment and then he said, "Michel, there is something else I would like you to consider."

Rupert told me about his son Rowan, who had been diagnosed with autism two years earlier. He and his wife Kristin Neff had tried virtually every form of treatment known to either traditional or alternative medicine. All of them produced disappointing results. Finally, Rupert had decided to take Rowan to Mongolia and travel on horseback throughout the country in search of the mysterious shamans he was somehow sure could help heal his son.

He asked me to come with them and record their trip. With a gulp, I said, "Yes, of course." How could I pass up such an opportunity?

The Horse Boy, the account of the Isaacsons' incredible journey, is a piece of real life magical realism. It has been my dream as a filmmaker to be able to work with such material. At the same time, because the concept of the film was so powerful, I spent many nervous moments wondering how I was going to capture the real story.

Just the logistics of the shoot seemed overwhelming. Would I be able to ride with a camera in one hand and reins in the other across the rugged and isolated Mongolian landscape? How, on our shoestring budget, would we manage to put together a film as inspiring and beautiful as the idea for the journey itself?

I would also be taking on the responsibility of exploring one of the most challenging medical issues of our time, the complex and puzzling disorder that is autism. What a task—to try to explain what seems unexplainable even to the experts in the field! To say that I didn't know what to anticipate is an understatement, but, of course, no one could.

So off we went—Rowan, Rupert, Kristin, our crew members Jeremy Bailey and Justin Hennard, and I—into the magnificent, unknowable land of Genghis Kahn, where horseback riding started, where the word Shaman (“one who knows”) originated and where shamanism is, even today, the official state religion.

As I galloped across the countryside, lurching from side to side and back to front, attempting to keep up with the family while holding the camera as steady as I could, it all seemed surreal and impossible. I was thrown from my horse, contracted giardia and faced each day with a level of aching soreness beyond what I had ever experienced.

And all of this for a film? Yes, but even more for the sake of an autistic boy whose parents were willing to go literally to the ends of the earth to find healing for their son. To me, this is the true beauty of the story. The mysterious shamans, incredible landscapes and harrowing ascents on nearly wild horses are all a backdrop for the story of a family willing to transcend logic and science in order to find a way into their son's world.

As I realized when the Isaacson family took their first step onto that plane bound for Mongolia, this was the most important message that we could share with the world, no matter what the outcome of our trip. That knowledge allowed me to relax and let the story unfold as it would and did, in ways that I would never have predicted.

As I reflect on the night that Rupert and I first spoke about travelling to Mongolia, it still amazes me that this profound and transformative journey all started in a kitchen, with a little boy who seemed beyond help, and his father's gut feeling.

—Michel Orion Scott

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

MICHEL ORION SCOTT (Director and Cinematographer) spent most of his youth exploring the thick wooded areas of central Texas where he was born and raised. The son of a cowboy father and a Jewish hippie mother, his life has always reflected his eclectic upbringing. After earning a degree in film from the University of Texas at Austin, where he also studied modern dance, Scott took on a diverse range of projects ranging from set construction and design on Hollywood features to abstract experimental work and documentaries.

Scott soon began to search for ways to use his career in film to deepen his relationship with the earth. *My Father in the River*, the first film that began this journey, took him to the heart of the Bolivian rainforest, where he worked with the indigenous Mosesten Indians of the region, using them as actors, extras and crewmembers in a truly collaborative effort.

Since that project, Scott has been studying and drawing inspiration from the study of wilderness survival through indigenous skills and crafts and has recently created promotional films for companies such as The Indigenous Land Rights Fund, Sol Education Abroad, and MAPAJÓ, an indigenous rights organization and eco-tourism company.

Scott's films reveal how affected he is by simple human relationships and family dynamics, while his background in dance is reflected in the extreme focus on how movement and framing creates metaphor in film. Also intrigued by the study of science and politics, Scott continues to explore the ways that ancient knowledge and wisdom can inform and advance the current state of society. He draws much of his inspiration from the study of native cultures, indigenous crafts and a desire to connect with the root of humanity through wilderness studies.

The Horse Boy marks Scott's debut as a feature film director.

RUPERT ISAACSON (Producer) was born in London in 1967 to South African parents. He has worked as a journalist and human rights activist in Africa for many years. In addition to writing for the British and American press, Isaacson has authored several guidebooks to Africa and India as well as the nonfiction books *The Healing Land: The Bushmen and the Kalahari Desert* and *The Wild Host: The history and the Meaning of the Hunt*. The first tells the story of his time spent living with the San Bushman hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari Desert, and their traditional healers; the second is an account of man's relationship with hunting. His book *The Horse Boy* was published by Little Brown in the U.S. in May 2009. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife Kristin Neff and their son Rowan. *The Horse Boy* is his first film.

RITA K. SANDERS (Editor) began her career editing television news on tape-to-tape machines and has since worked on five feature films and many shorts, industrial videos and music videos. Her work includes *Slam Planet: War of the Words*, which garnered an audience award at SXSW 2006, and the narrative feature *Fall to Grace*, winner of the Best Narrative prize at the New Orleans Film Festival. Sanders has also edited video extensively for many non-profit groups including Grrl Action, The Austin Browncoats and the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities.

LILI HAYDN (Composer) is an internationally known violinist, singer and recording artist. She has released three critically-acclaimed major label albums, and has collaborated with such legendary musicians as Pink Floyd, Herbie Hancock and George Clinton. This lush and emotionally honest film score she created in collaboration with Kim Carroll, the award winning composer and guitarist, is her first.

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a film by Michel Orion Scott
and Rupert Isaacson

Director **Michel Orion Scott**
Producer **Rupert Isaacson**
Narration **Rupert Isaacson**
Original Music **Kim Carroll, Lili Haydn**
Cinematographer **Michel Orion Scott**
Editor **Rita K. Sanders**
Location Sound **Justin Hennard**
Sound Re-recording Mixer **Matt Ludwick**
Second Camera **Jeremy Bailey**
Additional Camera **Alex Daboub**
Assistant Editor **Michelle Green**

Songs:

“That Home”

Performed by The Cinematic Orchestra

“To Build A Home”

Performed by The Cinematic Orchestra

“A Beginning”

Written by Peter Broderick

“Evolution”

Performed by The Cinematic Orchestra

“En Gallop”

Performed by Joanna Newsom

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Press materials are available at www.zeitgeistfilms.com/horseboy

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