

Movie Review: A village in Bhutan learns about democracy and teaches us, too, in 'Monk and the Gun' - by Jocelyn NOVECK

“Why are you teaching us to be so rude?” the elderly village woman asks a Bhutanese election official in [“The Monk and the Gun.”](#)

It’s a question both poignant and biting, because the “teaching” this woman is resisting is something much of the outside world considers a basic human right: the right to vote.

For a piercing refresher lesson on democracy, one wouldn’t necessarily think of rural Bhutan as the first place to look. For one thing, democratic elections only came to the tiny, long-isolated Himalayan kingdom in April 2007, when the country held its first mock vote, leading to the real thing late that year and then the first constitution in 2008.

Writer-director Pawo Choyning Dorji, whose debut feature, “Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom,” went all the way to an Oscar nomination, centers his delightful, moving and clever new satire on a moment in 2006 when officials first fan out into the countryside to introduce this concept called “election.” TV and internet access are less than a decade old.

It does not go smoothly. “Is that a new pig disease?” asks one villager. Others arrive to register, only to discover they need to know their birthdate. Some do not. They’re told they need to leave and go find out. But really, many don’t see the point. They have a king. They like him. Why go to all this trouble?

But “The Monk and the Gun,” as you may have surmised, is not just about democracy. It’s also about guns, and their role in society, a particularly fertile theme for Dorji’s brand of wry satire and pointed comparisons.

We begin with a young monk, Tashi, attendant to a lama, or spiritual leader, traversing a peaceful field to a mountain village, Ura. He’s on his way to hear an unusual request: The lama needs a gun. Or two. Before the full moon comes in a few days. “Things need to be made right,” he says, cryptically.

What could the lama mean? Guns are not a normal part of this society. If there’s a gun lying around, it’s a big deal. Which leads us to Ron Coleman, an American (Harry Einhorn), and his visit to Bhutan.

“Tell people you’re here to see Buddhist temples,” Ron’s host and fixer Benji (Tandin Sonam) tells him when he arrives. But Ron is there to procure, for a collector, a prized 19th-century American gun that somehow resides with a Bhutanese farmer.

Dorji toggles between these two storylines: politics and guns, with the clock ticking to both the full moon and the mock election. It’s a tumultuous time, with news reports

suggesting the transition to democracy is unpopular. As one man says, “What’s the use? We already have His Majesty.” Another wonders why they’d want to be like countries where politicians throw chairs at each other. The chief organizer has to remind people — including a mother whose daughter is being bullied at school — that in some countries, people die fighting for the right to vote.

Back to gun dealer Ron (his name is a little nod to cinema buffs who may recall the actor Ron Colman in the 1937 “Lost Horizon”), who’s so eager to acquire the historic weapon, he offers the owner \$75,000. That is not acceptable to the farmer — it’s too much! So a deal is struck for much less. But while Ron is off collecting the cash, the monk shows up, seeking a gun for his lama.

Who’ll get the gun? The rest of the plot is best left unspoiled, but you can be sure Dorji finds a way to tie his threads together in a way both comic and biting, both entertaining and provocative.

A perfect example is that scene where election organizers are trying to educate the masses. With villagers gathered, they explain that different colors stand for different parties. But when they try to generate some obligatory back-and-forth — maybe just a little yelling — the effort falls flat. “Show some passion! You’re supposed to despise each other!” complains one official.

Also funny but queasy-making, too, is the way Ron is described by his Bhutanese cohort in an effort to gain respect for his knowledge of guns: “Mr. Ron is an expert. In his country there are more guns than people! “

The casting of the film is fascinating in itself. Most of the cast (including Einhorn, an academic) are making acting debuts here. One, Tandin Wangchuk as Tashi, is a Bhutanese alt-rock star. The villagers in Ura are mostly actual villagers of Ura. The lama is indeed the actual (and only) village lama, Kelsang Choejay.

And it is he who keeps us all wondering: What the heck does he want with these guns? Dorji holds the suspense and finds a way to surprise us in a deeply satisfying way.

The director has said he simply hopes his home country — population about 790,000, known for its beauty and its official imperative of Gross National Happiness— has something to teach the rest of the world. “It’s not who we are,” that elderly woman says about the rudeness. It’s clear Dorji is hoping we’ll be looking at her, then ourselves, and wondering just who we are and want to be.

“The Monk and the Gun,” a Roadside Attractions release, has been rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association “for some nude sculptures and smoking.” Running time: 112 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.