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A contemplative documentary to open our eyes

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Without Them I am Lost



Damon Falke is an American writer and poet who has found a new home in the dramatic landscape of northern Norway above the Arctic Circle. His story and the story of his new-found friends in the community there, past and present, told in the documentary film Without Them I am Lost from Square Top Theatre.

Lori Ann Reinhall
Editor-in-chief

The Norwegian American

In March 2020, Charles “Charlie” Pepiton and his wife, Rebekah Wilkens-Pepiton, and their little boy were putting the final finishes on their packing before heading off to northern Norway to live with the locals and make a new documentary film. But then, 24 hours before they were scheduled to take off, the borders closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their plans had to be changed, and the film they had envisioned also changed.

Charlie is a professor at the Gonzaga Department of Theatre & Dance in Spokane, Wash., and Rebekah is a cinematographer. Their new film, *Without Them I am Lost*, tells the story of their friend Damon Wilke, an American writer who has been transplanted to an unnamed village in Finnmark. In the new film, which premiered at the National Nordic Museum in Seattle last December, Damon contemplates what it has meant to migrate to a remote place in Norway above the Arctic Circle and how the landscape has shaped his experience and the lives of the local people there. It is a story about the power of place.



A model shows what life was like inside a German bunker from World War II, as memories of the war live on in history books and stories handed down.

Originally, the Pepitons had planned an extended stay in northern Norway to create a film about the memories and impact of World War II on the people living in this special landscape, a follow-up to their first documentary, *Koppmoll* (see [Koppmoll](#))

<https://www.norwegianamerican.com/koppmoll/> in the May 6, 2022, issue). The two films have similarities in terms of setting, and they are both about listening to the stories of the local people.

But the beauty of the second film is that it can stand entirely on its own. This quasi-sequel takes a closer look at what is happening with the people in this remote part of Norway, what is happening to their community and environment, and how their lives are both solidly grounded yet changing.



Damon Falke and one of the local residents go inside the remains of the real concrete bunker, as the walls tell them a story from the past.

Damon is a poet, and with his soft, soothing voice, he is the perfect person to transport you into another world. He is also the perfect person to connect with the people in a community where he is an outsider. His calm demeanor comes across as non-threatening and caring, and over time, he has earned the trust of the people he interviews in *Without Them I am Lost*.

One of the first questions I had for Damon and Charlie in a recent Zoom conversation was about the title. Who are the "them?"



Many families in northern Norway lived with the occupying German soldiers in their homes, and old photos show a human side of their occupiers.

Charlie was quick to answer that it is about “the objects and the actual material that each person brings to their story. . . . We started with that in mind, wanting to interview people about their individual lived experience in their places with their objects that hold their memories. So, a lot of this is about the materiality of remembrance and looking at artifacts as how they reflect who we are.”

As Damon explained, these objects can be both big and small. They are objects from real life, as opposed to icons in a museum. In one interview, a woman brings forth a serving platter that was gifted to her family by an Austrian soldier when he left Norway after the occupation. In and of itself, this platter may not hold any symbolic meaning, but to her, there is an entire history connected to it. Stories are preserved in these objects, many of which are still in use. It is precisely these stories that need to be told and preserved to truly understand the past and who we are today.



Damon Falke is part of a community where conversations often take place over a cup of coffee, both one-on-one or at more formal gatherings.

It's an important message in a society where consumerism runs rampant, societies where the emphasis is often on the new.

Damon explained: "It's our stories, perhaps it's our sense of connectedness to a place in the sense of a community. One of the challenges here in the village near where I live is trying to reestablish community, trying to rebuild community in such a way that community begins to nurture."

Nature also plays a very important role in the film, with the healing aspect of the silence and the solitude of the landscape. Many scenes were filmed outdoors: on the end of a fjord, walking along the shore, or in the quiet woodlands.



*The healing power of nature in the lives of people in northern Norway is a recurring theme in the sensitive documentary *Without Them I am Lost*.*

But then there is the threat that commercial development and tourism pose in a rapidly changing world. If the landscape is not protected and preserved, the safe shelter of home may be lost. There is a hypocrisy to a comfortable weekend in a cozy cabin to experience life in the Arctic; it imposes a threat to an entire way of life.

In the end, I believe that this documentary is about much more than a small community in the north of Norway. It's about how we all must cherish and preserve our own stories, with a love and respect for our homes, the nature surrounding them, and those who have come before us. There is magical power in all places—if only we can open our eyes to it.

Learn more at squaretoptheatre.org [<http://squaretoptheatre.org>].

All photos courtesy of Square Top Theatre

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