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ON SCREEN



A long ride through 1840 iglooik: set the canoe to cruise control

Before Tomorrow

BY JASON ANDERSON March 25, 2009 21:03

No one who's ever seen *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* can shake the memory of the naked hero running for his life across the frozen sea. But at least he had somewhere to run to. In *Before Tomorrow* — the third feature by Isuma Productions, the same Iglooik-based team who radically expanded the traditional parameters of Canadian cinema with *Atanarjuat* and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* — the situation is more grave when an elderly woman and a boy become the last survivors of their community. Even by the standards of the Far North, their isolation is profound and terrifying.

Thankfully, *Before Tomorrow* is remarkable more for its joy and beauty than its notes of tragedy and despair. The winner of the CTV Award for Best Canadian First Feature from TIFF last September and a selection for Canada's Top Ten, the film may be the most moving of Isuma's three features to date. Co-directors Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu — who wrote the script with Susan Avingaq, adapting the story from a novel by Danish writer Jørn Riel — emphasize the value of the community that is lost and the importance of preserving its memory in story and song. Equally touching is the resilience of Ninioq (Madeline Ivalu) and her grandson Maniq (Paul-Dylan Ivalu) after their loved ones are wiped out by disease brought by white traders.

Since *Before Tomorrow*'s principal makers are also key members of the Arnaït Video Collective, the Arctic's first women's independent film and video group, it's tempting to consider the movie a

more feminine counterpart to its male-centric predecessors. In a recent interview from Montreal (where she lives when not working in the north), Cousineau says that this wasn't their intention so much as a result of the nature of its creation.

“We didn't decide, ‘Let's do a women's movie,’ though a lot of people are telling us that,” she says. “That said, we actually did take that decision when we created our collective. Women said they felt freer to express themselves when there were no men around so we thought it was important that we made [work] just between women.”

Having made many documentaries for Arnait and collaborated on the other Isuma features (Cousineau was a stills photographer on the set of *Atanarjuat*, in which Ivalu starred), the collective grew interested in developing a full-length fiction film. Though *Before Tomorrow* transplanted Riel's story from Greenland to the vicinity of Igloolik circa 1840, Cousineau felt an immediate connection when she read his novel *Før Morgendagen*. “I thought, ‘This is perfectly the kind of story we should be telling because we're looking to show women's stories and give them voices,’” she recalls. “Giving the voice to an old Inuit woman, to have her talk in the film and have her as a central character, it's something not really done. She's not sexy and cute and she's not rich and powerful — she's not the heroine of *Sex and the City*! But she's powerful in another way and she has something to say and to teach. People are tired of seeing and hearing the same shit, I think. They want to see another reality.”

While the contents of *Before Tomorrow* reflect the fact that it's a film made by women about women — one that's accompanied by some splendid music by Kate and Anna McGarrigle — Cousineau adds that “we didn't sit around every day deciding how he could make this more or less of a ‘women's film.’”

Perhaps the difference between *Before Tomorrow* and *Atanarjuat* has less to do with gender than the new film's interest in people who are anything but strong, strapping heroes. Though the film's early sequences show the important contributions of Ninioq and Maniq when the community is healthy, they are clearly its most vulnerable members when disaster strikes. Yet tragedy also forces them to reveal their inner strength, especially in the scenes of Ninioq sharing the stories and legends with her grandson.

“Storytelling is what they have to link them to this community when it's gone,” says Cousineau. “They use storytelling to recreate their community. She uses stories to teach him, and not just to survive but to stay dignified and hopeful though she knows that the odds are really against them.”

Nor are Ninioq and Maniq unaware of the threat of the coming cold and darkness. In its starkest scenes, *Before Tomorrow* is a potent reminder that we too cannot always rely on the protections we've come to expect.

“That's part of our culture,” says Cousineau. “We believe there's always something that can happen. You can always go to the doctor or take out your credit card or use your cellphone or satellite phone. That might be true in our culture but it's not like that for most people. We refuse to

look at that moment. A lot of people who've seen the movie tell me they've wondered what they would do in this situation. But nobody wants to think about that!"

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