

March 27, 2009

'Before Tomorrow' beautiful Inuit drama

By BRUCE KIRKLAND - Sun Media

The Inuit drama *Before Tomorrow* is the fascinating third instalment in a series of authentic films about traditional life and mythology in Canada's Arctic lands.

Made by the Inuit from the Isuma cooperative in Igloolik, Nunavut -- along with their Quebec-based collaborators -- these films are being shot in the Inuktitut language.

They tell stories that are re-interpretations of old or even ancient sagas passed down through the Inuit oral tradition.

They are unfiltered and pure expressions of a culture.

The first in what is now a loose trilogy was Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, a Canadian film classic.

It dealt with a complex revenge story that pre-dated European contact in the north.

The second production was Kunuk's *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen*, a film that dealt directly with European incursions.

It was an honest but awkward, unsatisfying film.

This third film -- known as *Le jour avant de lendemain* in French -- is a rebound in quality.

That augers well for *Exile*, now in development.

Before Tomorrow, like the others, shows how Isuma's cooperative approach creates art that has substance and meaning, as well as style.

The new film was executive produced by Kunuk and Norman Cohn, two of Isuma's co-founders.

Cohn produced both of Kunuk's films.

He helped photograph and edit *Before Tomorrow*.

This third film was co-directed by Nunavut's Madeline Ivalu and Quebec's Marie-Helene Cousineau.

They also co-wrote the screenplay with Susan Avingaq, working from a novel by Jorn Riel. Avingaq is also the production designer. And Ivalu plays one of the film's lead characters. It takes a village both to raise a child and make a film, especially in the challenging milieu of the far north.

The story is deceptively simple. One summer, hunter Apak (Peter-Henry Arnatsiaq) takes three people to a remote island where they will lay up winter provisions for their village.

The grandmother (Madeline Ivalu) is there with her grandson (Paul Dylan-Ivalu) and a frail, elderly woman (Mary Qulitalik) who may not survive the ordeal.

The three go about their laborious daily chores while waiting for the return of Apak.

When Apak's boat does not return, something must be done to find out what tragedy has befallen the village.

Before Tomorrow chronicles daily chores which are as ancient as the Inuit peoples, who migrated into what is now Alaska and northern Canada more than 12,000 years ago.

The film carefully shows how things are done, how people relate to a land that sustains but also could kill them, and how people interact both for survival and for the nourishment of familial love.

This is a hardscrabble, basic existence that shapes individuals and the community. There is elegance in the way the film illustrates the harsh realities without getting maudlin and sentimental.

The film is beautiful to behold: The Arctic tundra is a wondrous spectacle, especially in summer. It is well acted, with a naturalism that lends a documentary feel. It is thoughtfully dramatic, albeit in a subtle way.



Some may find it slow, even boring, although the film runs only 93 minutes.

That may be a cultural hangup (in relation to cinema, not aboriginal culture).

Before Tomorrow moves slowly because daily existence does just that when living off the land. So don't expect the pace of a Hollywood action picture. That would be an absurd violation of Inuit lifestyle.

(This film is rated PG)