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Before Tomorrow: A lifestyle fast running out of time

Presented by



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Film Review: Before Tomorrow (3 stars)

There is a majesty in the Great White North, but it doesn't seem that majestic when you're standing by an opening in the ice waiting for a seal to emerge while your grandmother, the only other living person in sight, stomps her feet, trying to scare some lunch up through the breathing hole. The North is more than an idea and more than a place: It's an obstacle course that takes a

village to conquer.

And the village goes missing in *Before Tomorrow*, an Inuit drama set in the dangerous isolation of the High Arctic. We've been there before, thanks to Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, who previously presented it as *Shakespeare in the snow* (in *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* in 2001) and *vanishing culture* (in *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* in 2006). In *Before Tomorrow*, it's a story of sheer survival.

The movie was produced by Kunuk and directed by Marie-Helene Cousineau and Madeline Piujuq Ivalu, two members of a women's video collective dedicated to a creative process "in harmony with the lives of all the women depicted as well as those creating the film." It is also about a vanishing culture, and while it is more modest than *Atanarjuat*, it shares the unspoken notions of an unforgiving world.

Based on a novel by Danish writer Jørn Riel and set in 1840, it tells the story of Ningiuq (co-writer and director Ivalu) and her 12-year-old grandson Maniq (Paul-Dylan Ivalu, her actual grandson). They spend a summer on a remote island drying fish; when they return to their village, everyone is dead, victims of contact with the white man. The old woman and the young boy are on their own in a place too remote to live on your own.

Like the previous films in what amounts to a trilogy, it is based on a slower notion of storytelling that is at once charming and confounding. "Grandmother, tell me another story," Maniq says in the film's opening sequence - grandmother and grandson swathed in furs, walking across the vast horizon of snow - and she tells the one about the raven that is swallowed by a whale and meets a girl with an oil

lamp. Things don't work out very well in the folk tale, and the story has no real arc beyond what the listener can put in there. It helps to be on familiar terms with ravens and whales.

There's not much middle ground in *Before Tomorrow*: We're either standing on the wide shores at the top of the world or sitting inches from an ancient face in a tent as it talks and smiles by firelight. There are several stories to tell before the plot begins, and the most chilling comes from Kukik (Tumasie Sivuarapik), an elder who relates how a big boat came to shore bringing men who greeted by taking the hand, and who offered metal needles in exchange for a night with the native women. This brings much hilarity - the films of Kunuk's Igloodik-Isume Productions have an unabashed sense of ribaldry - but it foreshadows a tragedy to come.

In the film's quiet pace, we are insinuated into a world of patient work, dreams, and most of all stories: When a boy kills his first seal, the tale of the hunt is as important as the meat it provides, and while *Before Tomorrow* becomes a fairly straightforward saga of Arctic perils, it also takes on a mythic quality, a sense of symbolism and spirits that seem to rise from the tundra. "That's the end of that story," the grandmother says when her tales of ravens and owls are over. *Before Tomorrow* is about the end of the end.