

Ideal Of North

Kunuk and Cohn's "Interior Thriller" Meditates On Time's Collision With Culture in the Arctic

September 28 2006

BY JASON ANDERSON

THE JOURNALS OF KNUD RASMUSSEN

Starring Leah Angutimarik, Pakak Innuksuk. Written and directed by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn. (14A) 112 min. Opens Sep 29.

Greeted with collective astonishment in 2001, *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* was unlike anything most audiences had ever seen. The first full-length feature to be made by an Inuit team in Canada's Far North and the winner of the Camera d'Or at Cannes and the Genie for Best Picture, the movie told an ancient legend by employing the same non-didactic, show-don't-tell methodology traditional to the culture. Director Zacharias Kunuk, his long-time collaborator Norman Cohn and their crew brought outsiders into this world without explaining it. As Cohn told me, *Atanarjuat* had to teach viewers "how to watch."

Complemented by the movie's visceral thrills and unprecedented views of the north, the strategy presented a challenge that was unique, enthralling and richly rewarding. The novelty of that first encounter can never be repeated. Yet five years later, the filmmakers return with a challenge that will startle even *Atanarjuat*'s admirers. "This is like going to a graduate school," says Cohn of *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* in an interview with him and Kunuk the day before their movie opened the Toronto International Film Festival. "A lot of people will come to this film believing they've already been there and therefore know what to expect. But our goal was that you should have the same level of challenge and surprise this time as you did last time."

One reason the new film is a more demanding experience is that it lacks its predecessor's propulsive narrative. Cohn calls *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* "an interior thriller." The story is more elliptical in nature, the intentions and themes not becoming fully clear until the quietly devastating final scenes. Set in the 1920s, the movie subtly charts the cataclysmic shifts in Inuit culture after whites from the south arrive toting new goods and a new religion. Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen (Jens Jorg Spottag) spends time with the family of Avva (Pakak Innuksuk), a revered shaman. His daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik) helps her father stick up for the old ways, though she's distracted by the prospect of having sex with her dead husband's ghost. (The film will, one can only hope, inspire more examples of Inuit spirit erotica.)

Though partially based on the accounts of the real Rasmussen, the movie is rooted more in the conflict Kunuk felt growing up, torn between indigenous and imported belief systems. "I was born to an Anglican family," says Kunuk. "The only time you were lucky enough not to go to church was when you were sick. The Anglican minister would tell you, 'Forget Inuit legends, don't dance -- that's all the work of the devil.' In an Anglican family, everybody's preparing to die and go to heaven. When I began interviewing elders, it was a different story."

Coming after 4,000 years of shamanism, the last 85 years of Christianity created an

"imbalance," says Kunuk, shattering the equilibrium between the three main components of Inuit life: people, animals and spirits. In one scene, Apak says that it's not death the Inuit fear, but suffering, and with the whites came promises of its relief. Rather than paint the newcomers as villains, Kunuk and Cohn illustrate the reasons why Inuit society was so susceptible to outside influence and why the songs and spirits were abandoned when the Inuit joined the march of history.

"Time has force," says Cohn. "We made a film about the Inuit who lived in a timeless universe. They were totally independent, totally self-reliant and mostly joyful. But when you meet time, time takes you with it. Someone might ask, 'Well, couldn't they have stayed behind?' But who stayed behind the 20th century? Everybody had to move into it - Inuit, white people, Africans, people in Papua New Guinea, lizards and snakes. Everybody goes where time goes."

For Cohn, the story is poignant because "it's about the walk out of Paradise -- Paradise was when there was no time and you celebrated life in balance with your world. Of course, there was pain and suffering and death. But it all made perfect sense. When you walk out of Paradise, you're into time, modernity. For Inuit and other native people, that was a trip from the top of the food chain to the bottom, from feeding yourself to letting Jesus feed you. And that's where they are now."

But despite its tragic nature, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* contains many marvels. Since the movie presents an era in which "the supernatural and the natural world were equal," magic is a very real part of the story. Spirits manifest in human form not only to the Inuit but to the shocked whites. "It's not in their imagination," says Cohn emphatically. "The spirits are there, man. The next question is: where'd they go? Just because you kick them out doesn't mean they disappeared."

Perhaps they're out on an ice floe somewhere, waiting to return. "I'm not worried about them," says Cohn, laughing. "I'm more worried about us." *EMAIL LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM*