

A foreign film from our own backyard

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The Gazette

Friday, September 29, 2006

The Journals of Knud Rasmussen

Rating 4

Starring: Pakak Inukshuk, Jens Jorn Spottag, Kim Bodnia, Jakob Cedergren, Leah Angutimarik, Peter Henry Arnatsiaq

Playing at: AMC cinema (In Inuit, English and Danish with English subtitles).

Parents' guide: some sexual content.

Opening the recent Toronto International Film Festival with The Journals of Knud Rasmussen wasn't a good idea. It was a great one.

Corporate suits were squirming in expensive corporate seats for the premiere of the new Inuit film by the directors of Atanarjuat the Fast Runner, Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn.

That a film so quintessentially Canadian could be more profoundly "other" than anything else on the festival's extensive program says something about the cultural depth of this country, and its tragic divisions.

After the Cannes-winning Atanarjuat, set in a Far North mythological past, Kunuk's ravishing, intensely revealing yet unknowable new film addresses real events that took place in 1922, and turned his people away from their millennia-old shamanic tradition and into the stiff arms of Christianity.

We are plunged directly into the scenario and a tribal igloo. Pay attention, and relax.

The last great shaman Avva (Pakak Inukshuk) and his extended family are camped at some remove from Iglulik, his home community that has recently converted to Christianity.

The Danish explorer Rasmussen (Jens Jorn Spottag) comes to visit. He brings trader Peter Freuchen (Kim Bodnia, of the great crime trilogy Pusher) and

anthropologist Therkel Mathiassen (Jakob Cedergrén). Between them, and for different reasons, they want to know about Avva, his belief system, and how he survives in one of the planet's most hostile environments.

All in good time. Though, at 112 minutes, it is an hour shorter than *Atanarjuat*, *The Journals* unfolds at a rhythm alien to those of us huddled at our Southern border.

People laugh and sing, tend children and sled dogs, poke fires, tell stories, smoke, sleep and dream.

Avva's daughter Apak (Leah Angutimarik), in particular, is haunted by sexually charged memories of her late husband and by disquieting visions of the path ahead. If there is unease in the immediate community, however, it is difficult to read.

"We believe happy people should not worry about hidden things," Avva explains. "Our spirits are offended if we think too much."

And so it comes to pass. Avva's son Natar (Peter Henry Arnatsiaq) offers to guide the Danes to Iglulik. Rasmussen, however, bails toward the west. Avva, family and the remaining Danes point north, into terrible headwinds, for their trip to the future.

The Journals is a film shot with high definition cameras by a nomadic people with no written history, but a rich and ancient oral culture. Highly portable digital technology works for them; it cuts to the chase.

We may find the lack of formal film structure odd, but there is no mistaking its message.

In abandoning the old ways - in effect, the film states, being starved unto Jesus - the Inuit lost the crucial sense of community that afforded them a living in the snow and ice. They lost their way, and became refugees, on their own land, in one of the richest countries on Earth. No wonder Toronto's suits were squirming.

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