

Eyre, Alexie premieres fill silver screen at Taos film festival

by: Tania Casselle / Indian Country Today

TAOS, N.M. – "Those teepees need Viagra," said comedian Drew Lacapa. He was watching an old black and white movie where a circle of whooping Indians hopped around Buster Keaton, tied to a stake in the center of a fire. "Do you know that dance?"

The live Talking Couch presentation by Lacapa and filmmaker Chris Eyre was one of the hottest tickets at the Taos Talking Picture Festival, April 11–14, which drew movie-makers and movie-lovers from all over the globe.

The Festival tempts even the brightest stars to come to northern New Mexico and get their boots dirty with some real desert dust. Susan Sarandon was on autograph hunters' hit lists this year. Rated one of the top ten film festivals in the world, Taos Talking Pictures has always featured a strong Native presence and some of the most popular items on the 2002 program were made by Natives, featured Natives or directly challenged the way in which Natives are portrayed by Hollywood.

Talking Couch was part of the Festival's Media Forum series of live presentations. Taking their inspiration from Beavis and Butthead, Chris Eyre of "Smoke Signals" fame and Drew Lacapa relaxed on a couch before a full house and took the opportunity to "talk back" to a reel of Hollywood films crammed with stereotypes of American Indians.

"No wait!" urged Eyre to a cartoon Pocahontas, as she ran nervously from the blond hero, John Smith. "I'd like to give you syphilis!" Eyre sighed as Pocahontas relented and took Smith's hand. "Oh shoot! Lost another one."

Targets for their commentary included the Lone Ranger, John Wayne and Peter Pan. Indians were represented mainly by "Squaw gettum firewood" dialogue and ridiculous make-up and costumes ("A horse with a headdress, now there's an Indian thing."). Even more disturbing were repeated images of Indians as either drunk or crazy, generally dishing out brutal violence or, more frequently, being the victims of it.

"Second to religion, I think movies have been the most damaging thing to Indians," said Chris Eyre. "In 100 years of cinema there aren't portrayals of Indians as people. Indians will watch bad images of Indians because they are so starved of images of themselves. It's not about looking at Hollywood studios and saying 'I hope they are going to get it.' It's about us

demanding it. I'm not against non-Indians making movies about Indians. It's just there's never a balance."

Romanticized New Age portrayals, such as "Dances with Wolves", also came under fire.

"It's manufactured. There's Indian country, and that I know. Then there are Native Americans wearing dreamcatchers. They're not people I know," commented Eyre.

While Talking Couch highlighted offensive Indian typecasting, the Festival's program of films included Chris Eyre's own long-awaited second feature, "Skins." Billed as "a new era in Native filmmaking", "Skins" tells the story of two brothers living on the Pine Ridge reservation, and leaves the viewer with the haunting message "Human beings don't control anything. Spirits do."

Residents of Taos Pueblo were invited to a free preview of "Skins" on the eve of the Festival.

"Taos Talking Pictures is always really good at showing Native films, but they sell out quickly and Natives don't always get to see them," said Robert Pokorney, co-general manager of sponsor Taos Mountain Casino. Chris Eyre was apparently so keen for the Pueblo to have the chance to see "Skins", that he "twisted the arm" of the movie's distributor to allow the special screening.

Both "Skins" and the other top billing Native film, "The Business of Fancydancing", describe the relationship between two Natives who have chosen very different paths in life. In "Skins," one brother is a cop, the other a rebellious alcoholic - lovable but lost.

In "The Business of Fancydancing," Sherman Alexie, who makes his directing debut and also wrote the screenplay, explores the friendship between two men who have sworn to be 'buddies forever'. This promise proves hard to keep when Seymour becomes a world-famous poet, and Aristotle remains on the Spokane Reservation, living a more traditional life. Seymour cuts his hair trendily short, wears sharp tailored suits and even manages to anglicize the way he carries his body. What's more, he's gay. Aristotle resents him for selling out and stealing stories from their life on the rez for his best-selling book "All My Relations."

"Every time I sit down to write a poem, I want it not to be about the reservation," mourns Seymour. "But the reservation won't let me go."

Both "Skins" and "Fancydancing" are intricately woven stories peopled with complex characters who defy easy labeling. There are no good guy/bad guy stereotypes here.

Other Native contributions at the Festival were "Earth, Wind, Water", a collection of short works exploring the lives of indigenous peoples in North America, and "Rocks With Wings", a documentary about the Lady Chieftain basketball team from Shiprock, N.M. "Rocks with Wings" travels back to the 1980s to follow the drama that unfolds when Jerry Richardson, an African-American male teacher from the South, arrives at a school in Navajo country and inherits a girls' basketball team that nobody else wants. The team is largely made up of girls from the reservation, and the relationship that arises between them and Richardson, who is experiencing his own culture shock in a land where black faces are rare, forms the heart of the story.

The Lady Chieftains are not taken as seriously as boys in sport, and are relaxed about the fact that they rarely win games. The ambitious Richardson, on the other hand, has survived life in the South through his toughness and athletic prowess.

"I didn't know how to lose," says Richardson.

A roller-coaster ride of conflicts and conciliations, as the team and the coach adapt to each other's styles, results in the Lady Chieftains triumphing as state champions.

"They think we're dumb and consider us as quitters," says one team member. "We're out to prove we can achieve things."

This touching, funny and heart-warming documentary will be aired on PBS in the fall.

Young Natives were also out in force at the Taos Talking Pictures' Teen Media Conference, where kids from around the country learn hands-on film and media skills. These are the filmmakers of tomorrow, and two students from the San Domingo Pueblo both found themselves behind the camera, creating a short documentary that was screened at the end of the festival.

"I think it's the way for us as Indian people to express ourselves," explained 16-year-old Amberly Pacheco, whose hero is Sherman Alexie. "There's not much information in books about my community. I'd like to talk about how great it is."

"It's what I want to do," said 18-year-old Joe Sanchez, "Produce. Direct. And maybe be a movie star too."

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