

CAMPBELLTON

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Listuguj filmmaker tackles big issues

ADAM HODNETT
THE TRIBUNE

CAMPBELLTON • People from all along the Gaspé coast came into Campbellton for the opening night of *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* at the North Shore Cinema on April 25.

The film – written, directed, scored, and edited by Jeff Barnaby of Listuguj – has been winning lots of awards, such as Best Canadian First Feature at the Vancouver International Film Festival.

At its most basic, *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* is a revenge story, but it incorporates much bigger themes.

Aila – played by Kawannahere Dev-ery Jacobs – is a 15-year-old Mi’gmaq girl who sells drugs with her uncle, after her mother’s death, and her father is sent to jail. She uses the money to pay off “Popper,” a sadistic Indian Agent who runs the local residential school. He has been abusing her father – and everyone else on the “Red Crow” reserve – for years.

It is filled with innovative filmmaking. Animation, hallucination and dream sequences, split screens and fresh takes on standard filmmaking devices. It is a dark, beautifully shot movie, with definite graphic novel influences.

The movie can be shocking. There’s even a point where Barnaby wondered if he had gone too far. There is a computer-generated scene inspired by the “mush hole” – a mass grave found at a former residential school in Ontario.

“I was genuinely shocked,” Barnaby said. “I was scared I had gone too far, when I first saw the CGI mockup.”

But he left it in the film. According to Barnaby, that scene is the “tipping point,” where it became more than a just a “fun movie to watch.”

“It kind of spoke to a much bigger problem, much bigger picture, much bigger tragedy and pain for the people involved,” he said.

The movie takes place on the fictional Red Crow Reserve in the ’70s. Barnaby says it was written with Listuguj in mind, just as the beachside scenes and autumn setting suggest.

With all the parallels to his own upbringing, the protagonist – a 15-year-old girl – seems a little out of place. Barnaby said the whole movie started as an exercise to prove he wasn’t a bad writer.

“I set the challenge for myself to do something I was totally uncomfortable with, and that was – for me – to write from the perspective of a 15-year-old girl,” he said.

Even though he can’t relate to the perspective directly, he drew from a lot of the personal experience.

“It was cobbled together from the women in my life – my stepmom, my mom, my sisters – all the female energy that I grew up around,” he said.

Aida is strong, smart, and funny. She realizes who stole her money, and she comes up with the revenge plan, which requires breaking into St. Dymphna’s, the local residential school.

The screenplay wasn’t planned as a “residential school movie,” said Barnaby, but it ends up being one.

The creation of St. Dymphna’s is influenced by Isabelle Knockwood’s accounts of the Shubenacadie residential school in Nova Scotia. She wrote about it in her book, *Out of the Depths*.

“(St. Dymphna’s) was kind of like a hodgepodge,” said Barnaby. “Of all the schools, and all the stuff that you hear about residential schools.”

Out of the Depths is not the first work



Rhymes for Young Ghouls is a revenge story, by Jeff Barnaby of Listuguj, set on the fictional Red Crow Reserve. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

by a First Nations person to influence Barnaby’s filmmaking.

In Barnaby’s mission statement, in the Prospector Films press kit, he writes about the profound impact *Incident at Restigouche*, by Alanis Obomsawin (online in full at nfb.ca/film/incident_at_restigouche) had on him as a child.

It is a National Film Board documentary about the Quebec Provincial Police raids in Listuguj in 1981. It opens with an old man telling a story in Mi’gmaq about how he drew a line in the dirt with his axe, and told the police not to cross it.

“From that moment on I equated film with social protest, pride and strength,” Barnaby wrote. “I was one of the rare Indians whose introduction to his heritage on film did not come from a misrepresented stereotype but from another native filmmaker whose subject was a member of my own community.”

He hopes his films could have a similarly empowering impact. He cites the high point in his career as, “when a young native girl slyly came up to me after a screening and told me ‘thank you for making being Indian cool again.’”

At the same time, Barnaby realizes that the film is not for everyone. It deals with some tough subjects, and he believes kids watching it need to have the capacity to know that it is “an art form to be interpreted, not to be mimicked.”

“They have to know how to look at things critically,” he said. “Particularly nowadays, where kids are being bombarded with images pretty much 90 per cent of their waking lives.”

The reality of low-budget, independent filmmaking has forced Barnaby to start working on new projects almost immediately after finishing *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.



Jeff Barnaby
PHOTO: JAN THUIS UNIT PHOTOGRAPHY

He’s been working on the pilot episode for a television series, potentially writing another feature film of a Thomas King novel, and editing a documentary film his wife is making about the expansion of the railroad through Arizona and Navajo land, called *Metal Road*.

With all the work, and critical acclaim, it hasn’t occurred to Barnaby that he should be feeling good about any of it, past or present.

“I’m not an excitable type, to be honest,” he said. “It’s hard to get excited when you’re staring down the barrel of a tremendous amount of work.”

Question and answer

TRIBUNE: Is there any direct link or parallels to Listuguj in this movie

BARNABY: Aside from language – which is kind of a specific Listuguj dialect – and the (woman) who plays the old lady is from Listuguj, not really.

I think if you grew up on that reserve, and you watch that movie, you’ll see

stuff everywhere, but nothing like an official reference.

The film itself was written specifically for that area. You see the beach scenes and all that, it was written specifically for Listuguj.

TRIBUNE: How big were residential schools in this area? Was everyone affected?

BARNABY: I don’t know, to be 100 per cent honest.

I know people from (Listuguj) have gone to residential schools. Because of the stigma attached to it, people don’t really talk about it. I think that’s why nobody knows whether or not there was a residential school, because everybody is so ashamed to talk about it, because of what happened there. Hopefully this will kind of spark some interest in the history of residential schools in our own area.

That’s really one of the problems – the lack of knowledge. And there’s so much left to paw through.

TRIBUNE: The realization of what the kid has gone through sort of takes away from the satisfaction at the end of the movie. Was that intentional?

BARNABY: How do you close out that chapter in native history? And you can’t, so it had to be open-ended. And that’s the exact question he asked at the end, ‘well, what do we do now boss?’ And Aila has no answer, and you get this impression that it’s still ongoing. It’s not even the impression – it is, it’s 100 per cent still ongoing. Everybody is still dealing with the legacy of what happened, one way or the other. It manifests itself – in my opinion – it manifests itself in a lot of different ways. Shame manifests itself in self-destructive behaviour, it manifests itself in suicide problems, alcohol issues,

sex issues, everything that you can think of that happened at these schools has a long lasting legacy that carries on from one generation to the next.

I think it’s films like this and the work that the peace and reconciliation council are doing, I think it needs to all be put into the light, so at least the people that are still alive and experienced this do not feel ashamed and realize that it wasn’t their fault. They were born Indian, and it wasn’t their fault that a policy of evil – basically in place – to destroy them. It wasn’t their fault.

TRIBUNE: With any movie that is violent, and has drugs in it, do you ever worry that kids glorify the wrong parts of the movie?

BARNABY: Oh, of course. I don’t think I portray the lifestyle of the people doing drugs in a way that would make anyone say, ‘boy, I wish I was living that life.’

I can see how people would interpret it that way for sure. But I think you cannot blame films for (bad) parents, basically.

I definitely think it could be an accelerant. It’s like saying violence in video games causes school shootings, but like, how do you make that connection? I think if you look at our culture in general, I think we have much bigger fish to fry than what’s going on in films.

I think one thing that gets lost in the mix of the film, is that Aila at no point drinks, and despises marijuana so much she wears a gas mask around it.

And that’s the thing; you’ve got to kind of swoop in in there that isn’t like an after school special. And that was a really fine line to walk, because it could have easily went that way. It would have easily gotten dismissed. You needed to see corrupted youth in that film, in all its capacity, I think.

Networking event looks at contradictions of job situation in Restigouche

ADAM HODNETT
THE TRIBUNE

CAMPBELLTON • While recent graduates can have a hard time finding jobs – which are often not advertised – employers struggle to find qualified employees even when they do advertise.

The Restigouche Entrepreneurship Centre Inc., tried to solve some of these problems with its networking event, *Restigouche, My Choice!*, which took place on the weekend of May 10 and 11 at the Quality Inn Hotel and Conference Centre.

The event was open to any post-secondary graduates under 35 years old interested in working the Restigouche area. There was a limit of 20 participants.

Anne-Renée Landry went to nursing school and eventually ended up with a job in finance. She’s happy with her career, but she would like to live back here. “It’s my hometown,” she said. “I need to see my homies and my family more often.”

She drove back to the area for the

event, and was struck by the mountains and rivers. She would love to stay here and buy a home if she could.

Luckily, she did find an employer in her field. She plans to keep in touch.

“Now I just have to call her, and keep in touch, and hopefully I can have a job over here,” she said.

Elizabeth O’Keefe, a human resources manager at AV Cell, said that typically, local employees tend to stay longer, which is a bonus in her business.

“Sometimes when you hire people from away, they’ll stay for a certain period of time, and then they’ll leave,” she said. “So I think it’s important to try to bring youth back to the area.”

O’Keefe is a transplant herself. She remembers graduating in Newfoundland, and everyone moving to Ontario for work.

“If they had these types of events when we were younger and graduating from college, then we wouldn’t have had to go away,” she said.

Like a lot of employers, AV Cell struggles to find the right candidates. O’Keefe

wonders if they’re not using the right recruiting techniques. They do put out ads, but it usually attracts people from away, who are hard to convince to move here, or if they are local, they’re not qualified.

“That’s the problem,” she said. “We only get a slim amount of applicants that are actually qualified to do the job.”

At Restigouche, My Choice! O’Keefe met a recent mechanical engineering student. They just filled a position for a mechanical engineer at the mill. And even though the connection may have been more fruitful a couple months ago, it’s still a useful contact.

“If we don’t have an open job, but we can find the right fit for the person, maybe we can look at hiring, depending on our needs,” she said.

O’Keefe said that the reality of small towns is that “80 per cent of the jobs is ‘who you know, not what you know.’”

The prominence of unadvertised jobs was a major theme during the events.

“I don’t think everyone thought about all the importance of networking,” said Marie-Peir Lagacé. “It opened our minds



Dany Émond speaking about the characteristics of the three different generations currently in the job market. PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT/TRIBUNE

a lot.”

Lagacé, from Atholville, will be graduating from a social work program this year and would love to work close to home.

“I don’t know where else I could find such a big opportunity,” she said, speaking about the events. “It’s given to us almost. And with all the tips they give that we don’t learn in school – we don’t learn in university or in college. They gave those tips today, which is going to serve, I’m sure, pretty much all of us.”

She said she had never thought about the ripple effect of networking. The people you meet may not have a job specifically for you, but they may know someone else who does, or may think of you for something else down the line.

“I never thought of it that way,” she said. “I knew (networking) was important,” but not that it could have that much ripple.”

The events included information sessions, and networking opportunities, but also guest speakers, like Dany Émond, who spoke after lunch on May 10.

Émond is a training developer with CB-DC Restigouche. His presentation was about the characteristics of, and differences between, generations in the workforce today.