

Native American themed films feature star power

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Gallup Film Festival closes out 5th year

The Gallup Film Festival, held for three days at the El Morro Theatre, featured roughly 50 films from across the globe, Sept. 14 - 17.

Opening night was the highlight of the event, with the star-studded premiere of “The Watchman’s Canoe.”

A packed house of anxious fans attended the premiere along with cast members Adam Beach, Roger Willie, Kiri Goodson, Carter Jon, and director Barri Chase.

The Watchman’s Canoe is a story loosely based on the childhood of director Barri Chase, who at a young age found a totem pole in her home. She realized that she had to write a story about it and the indigenous impact it had on her. It also deals with the spiritual aspect of communing with nature while confronting the issue of bullying.

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“When I first found this totem pole I starting asking my mom questions, and I wanted to know more about who I was and what significance it had with this pole,” she said. “I’ve always felt I had a connection with plants, animals, and the whole nature realm.”

Chase began to write the story, and it took her only three weeks. Her mom served as an inspiration for this story, and she finished it in time to read it to her before she passed away.

“I wanted it to be a legacy for my mother and coming here to show it was a blessing,” she said. “It’s been such a joy to come here to Gallup. I’m so excited to share it with everyone.”

Scoring most of the music for the film was Gallup local Knifewing Segura.

“The big thing is having Adam (Beach) here and Roger Willie. We’re pretty excited,” he said. “We’re also pretty excited about having filmmakers come down here and view films from all over the world.”

Beach is best known for starring in countless films such as “Smoke Signals,” “Dance Me Outside,” “Wind Talkers,” and more recently comic book character “Slipknot” in the movie “Suicide Squad.” Beach wanted to promote indigenous views and show the deeper aspect of Native Americans in The Watchman’s Canoe.

“It’s who we are as natives,” he said. “I feel that a lot of people are living in a box. There is a lot of teaching out there. If you look into our history as native people, we had a connection with beauty before anybody that came to take it away from us. You can try to spank it out of us, blind us, but you can’t keep it from us. You can do anything to us, but you can’t take away our identity.”

He says this film addresses a young girl returning home to her ancestral lands, and getting bullied. But the spiritual essence of the area gets to her.

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“Everyone should have that connection with the Creator and the spiritual sense. We have to have respect for our other native peoples,” Beach said. “There are some natives who I call the ‘Token Indian,’ who will do it for the money, even though it discredits who we are. I say no a lot because it doesn’t represent us regardless of the money.”

Having done a role in the movie Wind Talkers, Beach had to get permission from the Navajo Nation out of respect.

“To participate in a field that has greatly misrepresented our native people, I don’t want to add to that by doing something without respect for other Native Americans,” he said. “I’m going to be the first to use my integrity. When you’re doing a film you’re giving of yourself. Who watches it is out of your control. When I look at a script, I have to look at it with my integrity.”

Beach says Native Americans have to figure out collectively how to stand together.

“There will be a time when we will not need the financial structure of Hollywood,” he said. “There will be a culture investment across America, and we will teach America who we are through movies, public service announcements, and radio. We have to tell the truth about who we are.”

Navajo Nation Vice-President Jonathan Nez said the movie was very inspiring and it shows native actors are excelling in the film industry.

“It brings the way of elements to our lives, the teaching of spirituality in the storyline,” he said. “I was very inspired to see the screening of this film, especially with Adam Beach being here; Roger Willie, our very own, being a part of this film. I see a lot of great opportunities for Navajo actors to be a part of this, and not only just Navajos but other Native Americans, it was a great movie.”

Willie, from Continental Divide, N.M., who played the character of Uncle Ralph, said the message of anti-bullying in this film serves as a great educational tool.

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