Shirley Cheechoo
Truth and Vision in Filmmaking

Reconciling fact with fiction is a constant struggle for filmmakers. Even with historical or biographical films liberties are taken, with the typical rule of thumb being not to let fact stand in the way of a good story. There are, however, exceptions to every rule. Filmmaker Shirley Cheechoo (James Bay Cree) strives for the truth in her storytelling. Whether recounting her own true-life experiences or depicting her Native culture, Cheechoo’s foremost ambition has always been authenticity.

“Once I finished the first draft of which was a third-person title Bearwalker, among others. She then re-released the film under the studio, among others. She then re-released the film under the title Bearwalker. “The new version was very well received.”

Cheechoo’s foremost ambition has always been authenticity. “Before my first performance of the play, I discovered that I was hiding behind this character, Cactus Rose,” she said. “I decided to give her a real name - my name, actually - and to just tell my story to the audience.” The play was really well received by audiences and was a therapeutic venture for Cheechoo, allowing her to let go of a lot of feelings and memories that she had kept inside for many years. “When I wrote the play, it was a like a new discovery. As I wrote more, I discovered other hidden things that I never realized were there.”

After filming Silent Tears, Cheechoo went to work on the screenplay Backroads, an adaptation of her stage play Ob Just Another Indian. “Larry Lewis, the artistic director of De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group, told me the play would work better as a screenplay,” said Cheechoo. “I didn’t know how to write a screenplay, so I went out and bought all these books on screenwriting, including How to Write a Movie in 21 Days. I thought, ‘I can do this in 21 days!’ About five years later, I was still working on this screenplay.”

Once Cheechoo finished the script, Heather Rae, who had a role in Silent Tears, encouraged her to submit the work to the Sundance Institute. Cheechoo was accepted and was called in to work with professional screenwriters from Hollywood who gave her feedback on her script and helped her develop it further. “It was a wonderful experience to work with these people, including Robert Redford,” she said. “They were role models for me and to have them look at my work and help open it up was an amazing experience.” Cheechoo was invited back for a producer’s conference where she connected with a company that picked up the script and helped produce it.

Backroads premiered at Sundance, but Cheechoo still had a lot of things she wanted to do to the film - she just lacked the funding to do them. “When it finished at Sundance and a couple of other festivals, I listened to people’s reactions and thought of ways I could make the film better,” she said. She went back and re-edited the film with a lot of support from the studio, among others. She then re-released the film under the title Bearwalker. “The new version was very well received.”

Cheechoo was accepted to the Canadian Film Centre, founded by Academy Award winning filmmaker Norman Jewison, with her film Bearwalker, entering into an extremely intense six-month program focused on directing. “I was just...
overwhelmed by all of the material, resources and mentoring that I received,” she said. “And getting the chance to meet Norman Jewison himself was something that a lot of Canadian filmmakers want to do.” The project Cheechoo undertook in the program was *In Shadow*, written by a student in the writer’s program, a short film shot in 35mm. “This was a time in my life when I really grew as a filmmaker.”

In 2002, Cheechoo began a journey to found her own film school, called Weengushk Film Institute. “Weengushk” is Ojibwa for “sweet grass,” which is used in ceremonies for purification. “The institute is designed to help clear a path for our film students,” she said. Cheechoo has been struggling to get the institute off the ground for five years and it has only been during the last year that it has been receiving the necessary funding. “We would like to develop courses that will introduce our students to the industry. We would also like to set up a mentorship program as well as place our students in actual production companies to gain real experience.”

The goals of Weengushk Film Institute perfectly align with Cheechoo’s latest directing project, which is being produced by the Native American Producers Alliance (NAPA), a non-profit organization of independent producers and directors. The project, titled *Superior*, is a contemporary love story touching on familiar topics that impact everyday life for many tribal people across the country. *Superior* will provide mentoring and training opportunities to emerging Native filmmakers in every facet of the film’s production, from acting, technicians, to post-production positions.

“The film’s production will ensure experience to young filmmakers and will give new voices to telling our stories in film,” said Ava Hamilton, president of NAPA. “A Native American film industry is emerging and Native filmmakers can use support from our own people.”

Superior, which is still in pre-production, is slated to begin shooting this August.

Though an accomplished artist with an impressive resume as an actor, writer, producer and director, Cheechoo still finds that the one thing she struggles with as an artist is the funding for her projects. “It seems, at times, very difficult for our organizations to support the arts,” she said. Yet she doesn’t allow this to dissuade her from inspiring artists of younger generations. “You have to work hard to do it, but set yourself a goal because those dreams can sometimes come true.”

Shirley Cheechoo can be via email to spokensong@hotmail.com. For more information about the Native American Producers Alliance, visit http://members.aol.com/napa4go/napa4.html