Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 17
Issue 2 *October 2013*

Article 11

10-2-2013

Chasing Shakespeare

Brady DeSanti
University of Nebraska at Omaha, bdesanti@unomaha.edu

Recommended Citation
DeSanti, Brady (2013) "Chasing Shakespeare," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17: Iss. 2, Article 11.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss2/11

This Film Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Chasing Shakespeare

Abstract
This is a film review of *Chasing Shakespeare* (2013), directed by Norry Niven.

Keywords
Native American films

This film review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss2/11

Director Norry Niven's first feature-length film, *Chasing Shakespeare,* debuted at the April 2013 Dallas International Film Festival to positive reviews. With a script by James Bird (Ojibwe), Niven depicts a timeless tale of love, in this case, between a Native American woman with an affinity for Shakespeare and an African American man. Niven and Bird are to be commended for focusing their film on an intimate relationship between a Native American and African American, a theme all too often ignored in cinema and literature. The film succeeds in showing how difficult romantic relationships can be for individuals from vastly different cultural backgrounds. The filmmakers also do a good job of demonstrating how these difficulties can be exacerbated when two people, from different minority racial groups, reside among a white majority.

When viewed as a love story, in which two marginalized people are able to reconcile their own different backgrounds and overcome the restrictions and stereotypes society holds for them and fall in love, *Chasing Shakespeare* can be seen as a good, family-oriented film. However, when examined for its depiction of Native American culture and spirituality, *Chasing Shakespeare* is a flawed film that offers up romanticized concepts about indigenous people. Specifically, *Chasing Shakespeare* employs the stock "Noble Savage" motif when addressing the religious aspects of the main character's family and culture.[1] And while it is refreshing to see a depiction of a Native person in film break the bonds of non-Indian expectations—in this case excel at acting and auditioning in plays in lieu of how Native peoples supposedly lived two hundred years ago—problems remain. In particular, a well-deserved indictment of the assemblage of films like *Chasing Shakespeare* over the past twenty-five years is the insistence of using an actor with questionable ties to a tribal nation as the lead Native American character.

Here, the actor in question is Chelsea Ricketts, who plays the younger version of Venus Red Hawk.[2]

The film opens with beautiful sequences of nature and horses running free, then shifts to a house on a dark and stormy night, as William Ward (played by Danny Glover), tends to his dying wife, Venus Red Hawk (played by Tantoo Cardinal). As the two lovers quote Shakespeare back and forth, it is apparent that Venus is ready for her imminent death, but William's agony is clearly evident. As the storm rages on, an angst-ridden William wheels Venus' bed outside to greet the storm's ferocious lightning, fulfilling a promise he made to her years ago. Venus hails from the "Lightning Clan" and greets the lightning as a relative. William's difficulty accepting Venus' death and need to find closure remains a major theme throughout the rest of the film. Intermittingly, William's grieving in the present gives way to scenes of reminiscence of his and Venus' experiences as youths who found love together.

After the moving opening scene, the circumstances behind how William and Venus met are dealt with. Venus is auditioning to play Juliet in high school and William happens upon her while she is reading her lines. Here the audience witnesses the first of many displays of racism directed towards Venus, as she stands out among her white peers in their small town in Arkansas**.** Venus' white competitors ridicule her for being an Indian with the audacity to transcend the expectations they hold about Native people. She does exceptionally well for the part, but is denied the role of Juliet by the director due to her ethnicity. Despite the hammy insults deployed by Venus' peers, the scene is useful in that it illustrates that Native people are not caricatures frozen in time and possess interests as diverse as any other group of people. Each slur is met with a rebuttal by Venus that demonstrates the ignorance of her fellow aspiring thespians.

Unfortunately, the next scenes that introduce Venus' sagely caretaker, Mountain (played by Graham Greene) and her family, give way to the less helpful, romanticized portrayals of Native American cultures and religions. Graham Greene (Oneida) is a remarkable actor and has shown an ability to play a variety of roles, some that play upon his Native heritage, and others that do not. However, in *Chasing Shakespeare*, Greene is reduced to playing the stock Indian wise man that remains mostly silent until choosing to dispense his wisdom to an uninformed outsider. In this case, the role of outsider is assumed by William, the would-be suitor of Venus.

The role of Mountain is not entirely without merit, as he eventually reveals himself to be the originator of the "Lighting Clan." His oral narratives help William begin to understand Venus' culture and beliefs better, a perquisite for not only marrying her, but coming to terms with her eventual death and his own mortality later on at the film's conclusion. But just the same, Greene's role is indistinguishable from the same function so many other Native actors have served in American film, which is a shame because there existed a real opportunity to broaden Mountain's character.

Another major oversight of *Chasing Shakespeare* is the lack of any sort of tribal specificity. The viewer is never told what tribal nation Venus and her family comes from. This may be intentional on the filmmakers' parts, as referencing a particular historical tribe opens up the possibility of tribal representatives attacking the film for inaccuracies. This generality is a weakness, as is the depiction of Venus and her family residing in a kind of timeless exoticness, apart from their community. The majority of the film takes place in the early 1970s, not the nineteenth-century. For example, Venus' and her younger brother's mysterious illness seems like an attempt to play upon the very real plagues that devastated Native communities throughout

the Americas with the arrival of Europeans centuries ago. However, portraying such illnesses impacting Native people in the latter-half of the twentieth century seems glaringly out of place.

There may also be a lightning clan somewhere in a North American tribe, but this reviewer could not locate one. The lightning theme remains paramount throughout the film, but is taken to absurd lengths. The family's roof contains an assortment of lightning rods to maintain good relations with their clan relatives. The script writer, James Bird, is Ojibwe, though the film does not make use of many Ojibwe traditions. The closest it comes to doing so is a scene in which Venus' younger brother thanks a rabbit for giving its life before eating it for dinner.[3] The scene further establishes Venus' family as existing in a kind of indigenous vacuum that ignores the complexities of contemporary Native life.

The last criticism of *Chasing Shakespeare* is a touchy one, given what a loaded affair identity politics are within "Indian Country" and the field of Native American Studies. There are a plethora of Native actors eagerly awaiting their chance to showcase their talents to audiences. While some films, including *Chasing Shakespeare*, use Native actors in supporting roles, there remains an entrenched pattern of using actors with tenuous tribal heritages as lead Native American characters. Native people understand their identities in a variety of ways, usually through cultural, legal, and political definitions. And while it not a perfect method of determining one's Native ancestry, possessing legal citizenship in one of the over five hundred federally recognized tribes in the United States remains the gold standard for many Native individuals. Chelsea Ricketts is a talented actress but the role should have gone to a Native actress, whose tribal ties are indisputable. Ricketts claims to possess a distant Blackfoot heritage through her great-grandfather's side, but she does not seemingly hold any standing in a Blackfoot community, reservation or urban.[4] Given the film industry's ugly history of using

non-Indian actors as leads for Native parts, there is really no excuse for continuing to do so, given the talent that exists in Indian Country.

How one feels about *Chasing Shakespeare* depends on the perspective of the viewer. If one is looking for a meaningful love story about two people from different backgrounds that eventually find love and the freedom to be with each other, then the film will likely be appreciated and seen as a success. On the other hand, if one is looking for a film that showcases contemporary Native people interacting with the world around them without falling into romanticized stereotypes, then the verdict is not likely to be as charitable. The ingredients were there to make a film that succeeded on both fronts. A generalized, inaccurate depiction of Native spirituality and culture unfortunately limit *Chasing Shakespeare*'s appeal for Native and otherwise informed audiences.

---

[1] Since contact with Europeans over five hundred years ago, indigenous people throughout the Western Hemisphere continue to suffer cultural marginalization and social tribulations wrought through colonialism. Much of the inability for progress to be made in these matters stems from the centuries-old tendency of Western cultures and institutions to place Native people into "Ignoble Savage" or "Noble Savage"divisions. In terms of cinematic representations, Hollywood early on opted to utilize the "Ignoble Savage" stereotype, whereby Native people suffered the indignity of being portrayed as barbaric heathens standing in the way of progress and "civilization." By the 1970s, however, filmmakers turned entirely in the other direction. Native people became the wise sages and nature wizards courageously defending a more peaceful, egalitarian way of life. They also remained on standby to offer up mystical advice to the non-Indian leads. Instead of approaching Native Americans as comprised of unique and diverse nations and cultures with dynamic, ongoing histories, these two extreme stereotypes render Native Americans as simple, ahistorical entities. They are either subhuman obstacles standing in the way of "civilization" or cartoonish "nature mystics" beyond human relatability. Understandably, films under the creative control of Native people more often than not avoid such extreme distortions. For example, see Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, which examines contemporary aspects of Native life in an engaging and humorous fashion. Billy Luther's *Miss Navajo* also does a good job of avoiding clichés and stereotypes in examining contemporary Navajo life.

[2] A few examples from the past twenty five years of films that utilize Native American cast members but use non-Indian actors or those with nebulous tribal ties for leads meant for Native American characters include the following: *Young Guns, Young Guns II, Chasing Shakespeare, Crooked Arrows, Thunderheart, Twilight, The New World*, and *The Lone Ranger*.

[3] Traditionally, in many Ojibwe and other Algonquian-speaking tribes, hunters followed protocols in which they thanked an animal they had just killed for having "given itself up." Many Great Lakes tribes believed that each animal species ("other-than-human-persons") enjoyed the protection of a spiritual overseer referred to as an ogima. If an animal species was overhunted or disrespected, the ogima could take vengeance upon the human community

by withholding game or sending diseases their way. See Christopher Vecesy, *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983), 76-77.

[4] Lynn Barker, "Chelsea Ricketts: Rising Star," http://www.kidzworld.com/article/26971-chelsea-ricketts-rising-star [accessed May 25, 2013].

References

Vecesy, Christopher. *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and Its Historical Changes.* Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1983.

Barker, Lynn. "Chelsea Ricketts: Rising Star." Accessed May 25, 2013. http://www.kidzworld.com/article/26971-chelsea-ricketts-rising-star