

FILM: Adaptation of book has garnered acclaim

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Normandy combat zone as a D-Day paratrooper and dancing with Marilyn Monroe, and acting in films (see *The Bunkhouse Chronicle*, page 19). Neither *Wolf Nor Dog* was his final role, and it spoke profoundly to his heart.

“He saw it before he passed and said it’s the only film he’s been in about his people that told the truth,” director Steven Simpson said.

Simpson is Scottish, but he had unique credentials to bring Kent Nerburn’s novel to the screen. Simpson has made three films in South Dakota and the Pine Ridge Reservation, including “Rez Bomb” and the documentary “Thunder-Being Nation.”

Nerburn approached Simpson to bring his beloved story to life “from the reservation out, rather than from Hollywood in.” The filming of *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* is nearly as extraordinary a story as the one the film depicts. Crowd-funded, it was shot by a crew of two, with Simpson handling almost all of the technical duties, on a short schedule that had to accommodate for the limited

physical capabilities of a then-95-year-old lead actor.

If audience and critical reaction is any indication, Simpson succeeded at every level. The film has garnered critical acclaim and — more importantly — has deeply moved audiences.

In an interview with *The Nugget*, Simpson noted that *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* may be one of the rare films where it is best to see the movie before reading the book. That’s thanks to Dave Bald Eagle’s performance as Dan.

“Dave Bald Eagle was beyond perfect for the role,” Simpson said. “With anyone else it would just be a fraction of the film.”

It is delightful, the director said, to read the story with the actor as your image of the character of the Lakota elder.

“He left a piece of his spirit with the film,” Simpson reflected. “He goes to an incredibly deep place in the last scene at Wounded Knee.”

Wounded Knee, in the Dakota Badlands, was the site of one of the most devastating actions of the long conflict between Americans and the Lakota Nation, on December 28, 1890.

Some 200 Lakota Sioux men, women and children were gunned down in the snow on that day, in a scuffle that turned into a confused

firefight, which became a massacre that stained the honor of the United States Army and ripped the heart out of the Lakota Nation.

Simpson said that he threw out the script for the scene set at that sacred place, and David Bald Eagle improvised a heartfelt monologue that touched on the lasting scars of that tragic day. At the end of the long take, Simpson recalled, “he turned to Chris Sweeney (who plays Kent Nerburn) and said, ‘I’ve been holding that in for 95 years.’”

Wounded Knee has reverberated across a century and more. In 1973, armed activists of the American Indian Movement initiated a takeover of the site in protest of the conditions under which Indian peoples continued to live. That inaugurated a weeks-long siege, which included significant long-range gunfire from police and government officials surrounding the AIM encampment. Simpson notes the irony of the fact that Bald Eagle, who fought in World War II, and Sweeney, who was awarded the Silver Star for combat actions in the Persian Gulf War, were actually under fire for fewer days than their fellow actor, Richard Ray Whitman, who was never in the service, but spent days under fire during

the 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee.

The subject matter of the film is fraught — the injustices perpetrated on the native peoples through a long and tortured history, and the intractable problems that continue to plague the contemporary Native American experience. Yet audiences have connected deeply with the story.

“People fall so madly in love with Dave Bald Eagle on the screen that by the time he tells those hard truths, their heart is open,” Simpson said. “They’re listening in a different way.”

Limitations of budget pushed Simpson both technically and in the effort to distribute the film. Somehow, all obstacles have been overcome to create an intimate independent film that has seen remarkable success on an exceptional number of screens for a film of this type, sometimes outperforming



PHOTO PROVIDED

Chief David Beautiful Bald Eagle plays a Lakota elder in “Neither Wolf Nor Dog,” which starts at Sisters Movie House September 15.

big studio blockbusters at the multiplex down the street.

“Budget becomes irrelevant,” Simpson said. “It’s all about the heart on the screen. You can have a half-a-billion-dollar budget — you can’t buy heart.”

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