

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Harrowing film 'The Revenant' broadens truths

First Nations people portrayed with dignity

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

The critical reaction to the work of Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu chronically illustrates how dominant culture bias affects what stories are told and valued on film. His most heralded work is "Birdman," which won him the Oscar for best director last year and is about a successful white Hollywood actor facing an identity crisis (and happens to be my least favorite of his films). Iñárritu is an inventive and original director, but his vision tends to be praised in relation to how closely it hews to Hollywood values -- for things like cleverness and ambitious technical feats (like the continuous shot in "Birdman") -- and criticized for ways it deviates (like the spiritual elements in "Biutiful," which were viewed as incoherent by many U.S. critics, but which made that film, for me, Iñárritu's best work to date).

The same problem is already evident in the critical reaction to "The Revenant," Iñárritu's latest film. It's inspired by the legendary true story of Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), a frontiersman who in the 1820s was mauled by a bear and left for dead, yet survived and traipsed perhaps 200 miles alone to reach the men who had left him behind.

The film has been praised for its ambitious and intensely realistic approach to telling a story that involves harrowing physical risk and extremely harsh conditions, yet it has been criticized for having a "threadbare" story (The Playlist) and for "blowing it" with its inclusion of mystical and spiritual elements (New York Times). Even in describing the story, many critics give short shrift to or even omit any mention of its First Nations characters and elements, though they are central to the main character's motivation and to the way this story is told.

So once again I feel compelled to give Iñárritu his due where others haven't. He has indeed crafted an ambitious, vivid, and visceral depiction of life in the Old West that plows new ground in terms of its realism and stark beauty. The cast and crew endured subzero



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OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN
ORTEGA



temperatures for months, filming in natural light under unusually harsh conditions and capturing like never before physical demands that we can scarcely imagine today. And you will never see anything like Glass's bone-crushing encounter with the mama grizzly bear, filmed in one long take; Iñárritu has captured the unendurable better than anyone ever imagined was possible.

But the best things about this film involve the care with which Iñárritu has imparted a vision of a world that Europeans (ancestors to most of us) destroyed. Never has the original way of life of First Nations people been portrayed with such specificity and dignity -- the clothes they wore, the houses they built, the languages that have all but disappeared. By filming in the wildest and most remote settings and duplicating so scrupulously the details of life during those times, the film captures the ingenuity it took to build civilizations that were destroyed in the name of -- well, civilized society and Manifest Destiny.

Little is known about the real Glass, and there is no historical record of his family circumstances. But Iñárritu and his co-writer Mark L. Smith took the guts of the known story and added real sense to it, giving Glass a marriage to a Pawnee woman and a son to whom he is devoted. This is more intelligent than the critical response would suggest; how else

might a white trapper have acquired the skills to traverse hundreds of miles alone while grievously injured except by spending years immersed in a culture that had equipped its people over centuries to survive conditions now so unimaginable? Many of the early white settlers were involved with First Nations women, and the history books don't necessarily account for those who made actual families with those women and learned their languages and loved their brown offspring. The filmmakers' decisions to ground this heroically resourceful white protagonist in an indigenous culture, to equip him with cross-cultural perception and intelligence, and to identify him with Pawnee family members and spirituality makes for a more interesting and believable story, and certainly one that we haven't had much opportunity to see in American

movies.

Those story elements also equip Glass with the motivation to make the inconceivably arduous journey at the heart of this film. His will to keep breathing, and moving, and surviving is not fueled by a mere desire for revenge for being left for dead (as many critics suggest), but rather by love for his son, by a determined quest for justice, and by a survival instinct implanted by a heart connection with his wife that continues beyond her death. For some cultures, including indigenous cultures, such a connection beyond death is vital to making sense of the world. The fact that Hollywood neither understands nor respects such connections does not render them "spectral banalities" (Variety).

I'm happy that the praise he

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