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A Hunger for More Films Like This

The third on my list of the best films of 2018, “*Hochelaga: Land of Souls*,” didn’t have a U.S. theatrical release and is available for streaming only in Canada. I saw it at the Portland International Festival and actually had the DVD shipped to me via the Canadian branch of Amazon’s platform so that I could watch it again.

So why am I bothering to put it on my list of the year’s best films? Because I really want people to see it, even if it means ordering it from Canada (or maybe persuading Movie Madness to purchase it so you can rent it). Although it’s been a year since I saw it for the first time, this film stayed with me and impacted my perspective in profound ways. If nothing else, perhaps writing about it will awaken some hunger for more films like this one.

“Hochelaga” is the name of the Iroquois village that the French encountered when they first came to what is now Quebec. The conceit of the film is an archeological dig that uncovers pieces of the history of Montreal going back through time to the original indigenous people, to the early European explorers, and to rebels in the 1830s. Much more than we regularly see, the film prioritizes indigenous perspectives, rather than omitting them or presenting them as side notes to a story about white Europeans. In the story about early French settlers, we get a sense of how ill-equipped they were for life in a territory where indigenous people had been living for centuries, and yet we see also how the French somehow operate from an unfounded assumption of superiority. In the rebel story, a black woman and an indigenous man support a white household, yet they are portrayed in a way that conveys unnoticed power and multi-level awareness.

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA



The unearthing of a long-vanished Canadian village brings new reverence for Native American ancestors and connections across generations in Francois Girard’s ‘Hochelaga, Land of Souls.’

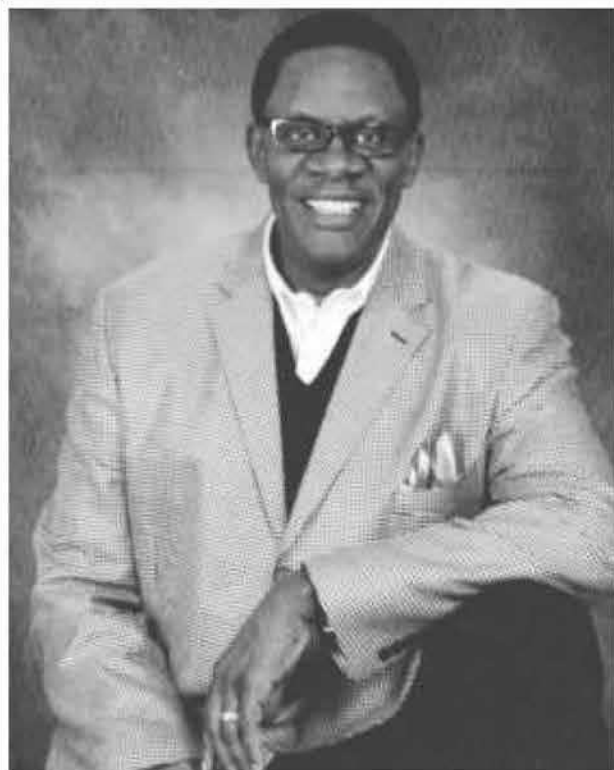
By the time we come to a final story of Hochelaga itself, we can see that it is a thriving village with a sophisticated leadership structure. The natives see the French as crude, smelly, and unsophisticated--and with good reason. Yet despite all that they encounter, the French feel qualified to respond as though they have discovered a wholly uninhabited place and to name it as though for the first time.

The film returns several times to a post-battle scene from 900 years ago, as a holy man grieving the carnage prays for wisdom and

prophesies a time when humans will make sense of the larger story. The film accords a reverence to indigenous ways of naming and processing reality that is all too rare. It was the first time I have ever seen a film evoke a sense that indigenous people have been on this content for many centuries longer than white Europeans, that the remnants of cultures that were nearly obliterated still live in our soil, that we are surrounded by these original caretakers of the land.

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