

An Interview with Native Filmmaker Chris Eyre and Producer Scott Garen

by Christine McDonald



For families will not be broken.
Curse and expel them, send their
children wandering, drown them
in floods and fires, and old women
will make songs out of all these
sorrows and sit in the porches and
sing them on mild evenings.
Every sorrow suggests a thousand
songs, and every song recalls a
thousand sorrows, and so they are
infinite in number, and all the same.”

—Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (pp. 194–5)



Real-life Quechuan healer Honorato Ninantay as Don Santos
Condori in *A Thousand Roads*.

On January 25, 2005, at the Sundance Festival, I interviewed Chris Eyre, director of the film *A Thousand Roads*, and Scott Garen, its co-writer and producer. The film was commissioned by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., to be their signature film shown at the museum. Eyre, the director of *Smoke Signals*, *Skins*, and *Edge of America*, studied filmmaking at New York University and earned his master's degree before making the critically acclaimed *Smoke Signals*, his first major work. Eyre is Cheyenne/Arapaho by birth; he was adopted and only later found his birth family.

Christine McDonald: *When did the film idea start, and how did the museum choose you and Scott?*

Scott Garen: The film actually started two and a half years ago when I met with the directors of the museum and started brainstorming the ideas for a signature film, which they

wanted to be an emotionally engaging dramatic film—not a documentary and not something that dealt with the history of Native people or the desecration of Native people or any of that. They wanted something done with contemporary life, so we went through a process of downloading everything that the museum didn't want to see in the film, stereotypes that they wanted to avoid, certain symbols that were important, important aspects of Native life that they wanted to see included in the film. We spent hours and hours, days, downloading from all the key players in the museum and the consultants to the museum, and then out of that began to weave the concept of doing four, five, or six contemporary stories. We didn't know how many we were going to fit in 40 minutes.

I knew from the beginning—I co-wrote the film—that I wanted to bring in a Native American writer. When we knew that it was going to be a lot of narration, I knew it would be a really good idea to bring a poet on, because that would complement my strengths to help create a poetic narration track. At the same time I wanted someone with deep resonant qualities, so that the stories we ultimately wrote would be appropriate.

I had read Joy Harjo's poetry, was bowled over by it, and went to see her perform. She was great in performance, but it was her rap in between performances that really got me, because she was so humble and self-effacing and funny and had a beautiful way with words, a phenomenal way with words. We met and just hit it off and brought Joy in. Then, once we had the script and had the go-ahead with production, Rick West, who has known Chris for years, sent Chris the script. I was really excited about the potential of Chris directing this film, but when he called after reading the script and said, "You know this script is a prayer to Native people," I thought, "Wow, that's the best thing he could have said." He couldn't have said words more in keeping with my vision, with what I had done on the script, where Joy was at, where we were all at. Once you know that you're in sync, that's the key. Once you know that you are working together on a heartfelt level and you share the same vision, then you know it's going to be a great collaboration, which it has been.

You saw it as poetic? And, visually, how did the script come across to you?



Riana Malabed as young Inupiat girl
Dawn Nageak in *A Thousand Roads*.

Chris Eyre: When I read the script, like Scott said, I did feel like it was striving for being a blessing, striving to be something good for people. It was about Indian people, and I didn't think about the script visually. I thought about it in terms of what the stories meant, what they added up to, and what the emotional value of those stories was. Just in the story form. I don't really think about the visual part of it until much later, because you can have the great visual elements, but if you don't have a story, you really don't have a lot. I was so excited by the fact that there was a great story here. I don't mean a great <http://www.fonts.com/Assets/images/trans1x1.gif> story; I mean a great series of stories. There are a lot of subtleties and shades and fabrics that I really felt added up to a prayer or a blessing.

This is a very moving film.

CE: The little girl is great, in Alaska.

And that's a true story?

CE: Well, I'm sure it's happened.

SG: We kind of wove these things from fact and fiction.

CE: Actually, you know, the little girl's story for me resonated in a very truthful way, in that when I saw that little girl I was reminded of Lori Piestewa, the Hopi woman who was the first Native American woman killed in combat in Iraq. She was Jessica Lynch's roommate. That was heavily on my mind when I read about this little girl, who was going away from home. Scott, Joy, and I talked about it, and we felt like it would be interesting to ascribe the fact that the mother was going to serve in a war, and that's why the little girl had to be sent to her grandmother's to live. It was in the spirit of Lori that that for me really resonated.

SG: That actually wasn't in the script to begin with. The mother was just going away. I don't think we said what the mother had to go away to do initially. Then Chris came to us and said, "What if the mother goes away to serve overseas?" and both Joy and I liked that a lot. It was also important to make that point on the level that more Native American people have served in the wars over the past century than any other group per capita.

CE: Those are the kind of fabrics that I think are the brushstrokes and idiosyncrasies that we talk about. We don't ever explain where the father is, because it's not that uncommon. This woman probably isn't wealthy, and she's a single parent.

She's going to serve in the war, which is real truthful with Indian people, so there are those fabrics that we don't totally draw, but we sketch. I think that that's some of the strength of the movie, that you could see the movie over and over again and start picking up on the cultural observations.

SG: It also raises the stakes for the little girl. Not only does she have to go there, but she doesn't know if her mom is ever going to come home.

Her grandmother says the most beautiful things to her. I loved how her grandmother talked about the history that she had with them, and that she was returning to where she came from. This would resonate for the rest of her life. I know that when she was looking at the Northern Lights, I thought, "She will never forget this."

CE: Those are the things that are in the script, and once we get there, then visually they start to come together. The little girl's story felt very close to me.

What I liked about the film was the fact that you challenged people to think about Native Americans. Some people think Native people should dress in Native costume and fulfill the outsider's idea of who Native Americans are. The fact that you have a Native woman stockbroker and . . .

There are a lot of subtleties and shades and fabrics that I really felt added up to a prayer or a blessing.

CE: The whole thing for me was about those idiosyncrasies. I keep talking about fabrics, even to the point where in the Navajo gang-bang story, you have the Navajo kid pull up, you have a Chicano gang-banger pull up next to him, and I don't think that eighty percent of the audience will realize that there's a fabric there, which is that these aren't two Indian kids. I think some Native people, Navajo people especially, will be able to tell, or people who are familiar with Albuquerque. Those are the little things that make it a joy to work for me, because when I was casting I thought this was an interesting little piece that I don't know how many people are going to navigate or see, but I think some people will.

SG: That was very truthful to the situation in Albuquerque. A lot of the gang conflicts in Albuquerque are between Native gangs and Hispanic gangs.

Gangs are the subject of a lot of documentaries now. The whole racing of cars has been in a lot of films too.

CE: The other thing that I've spoken about before, and I hope that this makes it, is we've woven different fabrics related to the performances. Some are actors, but most are not actors. Some of the scenes are set up, and some of them are shot in a documentary style, like the whale. There's no way we could set that up. We literally had to hop on snowmobiles and get out

there as quickly as we could. We were able to shoot two hours before it was just red blood on the ice floe.

We'd planned on shooting a seal to represent a scene where this girl goes, "Wow, I'm really out of my element here. I've never seen a frozen seal." We had agreed that if the people whaled while we there, we were going to try and shoot it. The morning we were going to start shooting after being there two and a half weeks prepping, we got a call that they had just whaled. Right then it was like, things are gonna happen in a good way. We got on snowmobiles and took off, and we had two hours as a documentary team to pick this up—even to the point at which a polar bear came up behind us trying to take the whale. The fabrics in this movie meld together pretty seamlessly with the actors, the non-actors, the documentary stuff, the time-lapsed stuff, and the way that we shot scenes like a regular feature.

SG: I'm thinking about your audience for *MultiCultural Review*, the fact that it goes into the schools. I think there is some real value in this film for creative writing classes particularly, because if you look at the way this was woven, there's a larger story, an overarching story, that's illustrated through four microcosmic stories. And within each of those stories it's not resolved, yet there's a larger resolve in the overall arch of the story. In the writing process, one of the things that Joy and I did was to ask, "How can we say it with fewer words?" which is something you do when you write poetry. So in a way, we kept looking at the story as a haiku, the haiku of filmmaking.

That's why after saying this whole philosophical thing to the girl, the grandmother says, "Come eat some pizza." What she's really saying in those four words is, "We're not so different from you. You're okay. You're welcome here. You'll connect. Everything will be okay."

You don't have to eat the blubber every day.

SG: And you don't have to eat the blubber.

I don't know if the film will be distributed in classrooms, but it'd be terrific with a study guide. Four million people visit the museum every day. The opening day was amazing. There's corn growing [at the museum]. And I think sorghum, too. I was up at dawn, and I just went out for the beautiful parade where they had all of the speakers, and everybody was taking snapshots. Charlie Hill said in his monologue that evening, "I want every Native American to take a picture of a tourist now."

SG: I was there for the opening.

You seemed extremely taken with the whale hunts. I was curious if you had any more thoughts about that.

CE: The whale hunt for me was exciting for all the obvious reasons, but I was very proud of being able to experience a traditional way of life with these people, who are considered brothers and sisters of mine. To be out there and see them hunting in a traditional way and getting their sustenance from the whale, which is part of their whole essence and being, for me was a real connectedness in my own spirit. So I was happy to see that, and to be there, and to be part of it. It can take you a lot of different places, because it's sacred. It's something

they've been doing for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. It's their way of life, and it's who they are. It's a rite of passage, in a sense.

How did you find Don Santos?

CE: He was an actual healer. We brought in healers, and I rehearsed and auditioned them. With Don Santos, just like with the girl in Alaska, there's a certain point in the audition when you know that this person can do it. We just kind of earmarked him and kept seeing healers. Once we got down to our short list, Scott and I landed on Don Santos just because there was that gut feeling that he could do it. He had such a wonderful presence in that he wasn't overbearing. He was very humble. He was a real healer. I mean, that's what a healer feels like. He feels like a servant of the people, not a person who is held like a politician, or somebody who has self-importance. He's somebody who actually is a servant of the people.

I sensed that he had gathered the herbs and things he was using in this healing ceremony. He's connecting his healing with the earth. I thought, like you said, a Western doctor might not key in on what's wrong with that little boy any better than he would.

CE: One of the greatest things about the script is the fact that he was not able to save the boy, because it rings true to the cycle of life and the great mystery, and the fact that Indian spiritual guides are not nobles, are not infallible. Western medicine fails, and it doesn't change the doctor's thought, or his method, or his ideology. I thought the most profound thing about the little boy's death is the fact that it's not going to change the healer's ideology of how to heal. What he does there is he goes to Macchu Picchu, to the temple, to the place of his ancestors, and it's very subtle. He has this look that everything is going to be okay, and he doesn't waiver from who he is. He's sad, but that's one of the stronger points of the story. That part had gone through a lot of deliberation, which happened before I came aboard. It was a brave choice, and I thought it was totally the right choice to make a provocative cultural movie.

The whale thing may also offend some people, but this is really a cultural movie. It's not a movie about judgment; it's a movie about facts. These are facts put in a narrative form.

Western people see things in a certain way. They're going to make judgments about healing, or they're going to make judgments about killing a whale, but they're not in that culture. They're not in that society.

SG: That's why also, when the whale hunt happens, we say, "Up here food doesn't grow on trees, and most of it doesn't come wrapped in plastic." We're saying, "Hey, folks, wait a minute. You're eating meat; you're just letting someone else do the killing for you." This is actually much more in tune with the act of eating meat, if you have to go kill it yourself.

They take what they need.

SG: Yes. The whole community is—they divide up all that whale meat, and I remember I was wandering around while Chris and the crew were filming certain sequences. I was wandering around with my video camera and shooting

a bunch of stuff. There was one guy who was poring over the intestines of the whale, and I went over and said, "Who are you?" He said, "I am the drum maker from the village." He uses the skin of the intestines. Every element of that whale gets used and distributed free to the whole community.

Between Edge of America and Smoke Signals, you made Skins, a very brutal and difficult film, and I had wanted to interview you the year it screened at Sundance. I was just curious about how you got involved in that project. I remember, when the blood was spilled over Mount Rushmore, it shook me up. I just wanted your reaction.

CE: Well, you know, one of the things that I was really happy with were the reviews, some by people like Roger Ebert, who said the desecration of Mount Rushmore was one of the most haunting images he'd seen at the end of a movie. For me, *Skins* was really about purging myself or hopefully a group of Native people of this affliction of alcoholism and bringing it to the surface. Indian people here and there would say to me, "How come you portrayed Indian people like that, in a derogatory way?" And I'd say, "That's what most non-Indian people think of you anyways." If you go to border towns, if you understand that there were laws in Nebraska that you could shoot at an Indian if five or more of them were congregated on a bridge in the last century. If you understand the pervasive racism and stereotypes that exist.

matter if they win; what really matters is how the girls bring the people.

How they brought the outside in.

CE: Yes, and in *Skins*, it was really just about recognizing that this drunken icon is a human being. Although you don't want to hang out with him all the time, he has an extended family that cares about him. It was my personal tribute to all the people that have gone in that way. That's why the movie was really important to me. It's hard for me to watch that movie, because it's personal and a little painful. I understand Native people not wanting to see it, because maybe they're not ready for it, you know? It's an honoring, that's basically it—the movie's an honoring for Mogie Yellow Lodge. And there are a lot of people in many cultures who have gone that way.

For me, one of the most interesting things about that movie is what Rudy Yellow Lodge does. He's shaming us. In the old ways, because they didn't kill people like they do now with guns, they would shame their enemies by going up and hitting them with their lances. Basically, when Rudy throws the paint over, he's doing a very wise thing and a very stupid thing. He's the trickster. He's wise and he's stupid. In reality he's stupid, because he's going to be arrested and charged, but in terms of the discourse and the dialogue and what that shame means, and how these things are connected—the fact that Pine Ridge is one of the poorest communities in the United States and

**I was very proud of being able to experience
a traditional way of life with these people,
who are considered brothers and sisters of mine.**

Skins was an effort to be honest about an affliction that has a history in Indian country, and one that has true faces to it. One of the things that I feel isn't as strong as it should be in this country is our sense of community. We have towns and cities, but our sense of community as Americans has been lost. With the Native community, the thing that people really don't understand is that as Indian people we don't leave each other. We sink with each other. That's some of the dysfunctional attributes to connectedness in community, but it's also some of the strength. When people get together and they pray, when people go to ceremony, when people worship, it's as a tribe, it's as a community, and it's as a people. I use that all the time.

With *Edge of America*, it's about unity. There is a saying, "He who brings the people," and that's a sacred thing, any time you bring people together, focus their heart and their mind, whether it be a screening or a story, or a song, it's sacred because you draw the people together. And in *Edge of America*, that's what the end arch of the movie is. It doesn't

the conflict that Pine Ridge and the United States government have had, and that these figures are busted onto the sacred Black Hills. There's a strange connectedness here and a lack of reconciliation between Americans and Native Americans, in which Rudy says, "My brother's affliction is part of the whole." He throws the paint over the forefather's heads, and George Washington is literally crying at the end in red paint. Rudy becomes the trickster. Rudy becomes the coyote. That's what change takes sometimes—people stepping outside bounds.

You have an impressive work, and I suppose both of you realize that A Thousand Roads will probably be shown for generations. Thank you for doing it.

CE: This is our Native American *Cats*, our Indian *Cats*, because this may be the longest-running production that I ever have. Just without the costumes and without the cats. 