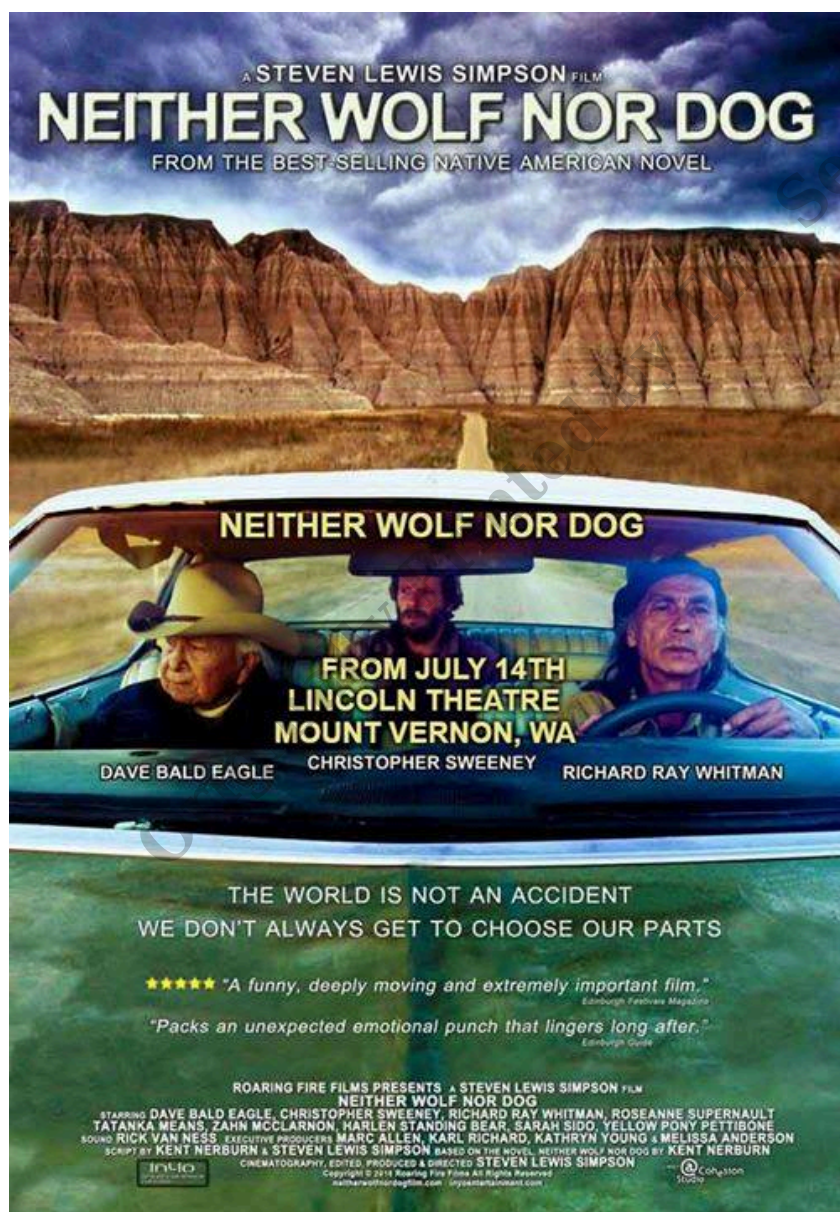




Long gone are the days when films like “Pocahontas” represent the imagery of Native American culture. In a new film, “Neither Wolf Nor Dog,” filmmaker Steven Lewis Simpson effortlessly captures the heritage of the Lakota Nation. Based on the 1996 Kent Nerburn novel, “Neither Wolf Nor Dog” tells the story of a white writer, played by Christopher Sweeney, who is suddenly whisked away on a road trip through Native American lands by a Lakota elder, played by the late Dave Bald Eagle, and asked to tell the story of the Lakota tribe.

Originally from Scotland, Simpson started out as the youngest fully-qualified stockbroker and trader in Britain at only 18 years old. After a few years in the financial world, he took a short trip to Los Angeles to learn the art of film from Roger Corman’s Concorde Pictures, soon after returning to the U.K. to shoot his first feature film, “Ties.” Since then, he has written, produced and directed 12 other films and documentaries around the world, including “Neither Wolf Nor Dog,” which he filmed in just 18 days in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The Tribune spoke with Simpson about his new film and he shared the good, the bad and the life-changing moments he experienced.

Q: You actually started out as the youngest fully-qualified stockbroker and trader in Britain. How did you make the transition from a stockbroker to an award-winning



Courtesy photo

filmmaker?

A: “I grew up in Scotland. For a while, I was a stock broker and trader. It was one of those stupid things you do when you’re young and then I grew up and decided to leave it. I metaphorically ‘joined the circus’ — I went to Los Angeles, worked for a little while for a studio of a legendary producer and came back to Scotland and started making films. ... Even when I started in financial service I knew it was temporary; it wasn’t something a grown-up should be doing. In my hometown nobody had ever made a feature film before, so it wasn’t a path anyone had known. I had to figure it out myself and have a day job in the meantime. It gave me a financial platform to be able to go spend time in the U.S. and learn the business. My job in this world is to communicate, and the way my towns converged, it’s best to do it in the visual medium.”

Q: Where do you currently reside?

A: “I’m based wherever. If you were speaking to me last week, then Poland. If you spoke to me over the weekend it would be Berlin and now it’s Bulgaria. I end up spending quite a lot of time in the U.S., but that’s pretty much all just because of the work. I have no home and I haven’t for a long time. I spend my time between as many places as possible to keep it interesting. I spend most of the time working so I need to be able to spend the time in different places to kind of break it up. ... We’re living in that day and age where we can travel for the most part. I’m working 16 hour days so my time pretty much crosses over with people from anywhere.”

Q: What drew you to document the Native American story with “A Thunder-Being Nation,” “Rez Bomb” and “Neither Wolf Nor Dog”?

A: “The important thing to me and humanity in general, is to bridge the gap between, and create understanding, with all of us in the world. The key places for that are where it is least exposed to or listened to or where the greatest injustice is. There are a lot of great injustices in the world in different forms, but the injustice perpetrated against Indian Country is multifaceted, and part of it is a narrative injustice. The history has been a pack of lies and the depiction has been a pack of lies. If you were to translate what a lot of classic Hollywood movies did — for example, almost scene-by-scene in German cinema, it was them looking back at Jewish ghettos and massacring people and having gleeful quips about it — it would be hard to imagine that existing in even the most abhorrent scenes. ... When you see that sort of situation and you have the skill set that I have, it seems that story telling within that sphere could have the most purpose to it. When I was starting out about 18 years ago, there was very little being filmed about it. It’s about deconstructing the myth and to humanize and put a face to the people who are ignored. ... For me, there’s a cultural apartheid until any story is told anywhere by anyone. There should be teen comedies in Indian Country; there should be horror movies and thrillers. It shouldn’t just be a film about somebody going back and trying to reconnect with their roots, but that’s what it gets cornered into.”

Q: Can you tell me a little about ‘Neither Wolf Nor Dog?’

A: “Narratively, this elder requests for a white author to come visit and distill down notes from his life and his perspective and put them into a book. The elder’s best friend persuades him to discard that and sucks the author into a road trip of his experience. [The author] isn’t getting a sanitized version; he’s getting to really experience what the elder did from a complete perspective so he can see everything from first hand. It’s interesting because a lot of times, people in the U.S. look at it as a dynamic between Native Americans and white people, but it’s not quite right; it’s the dynamic between white Americans and Natives and that’s a very important distinction. It’s something I’ve had the privilege of enjoying over the years. Particularly in Lakota Country, they embrace Europeans — I get embraced there more than anywhere else on earth and I’ve been in a ton of countries and some amazingly hospitable countries — but on Pine Ridge it’s like nowhere else for me. I could just reel off the most amazing experiences. The way this narrative is, it wouldn’t exist in my own experience in regards to when I would just turn up and meet the elders. We’d be cracking up jokes in the first five minutes and I’d be crashing on his couch that night and just getting engrained with

his family. The author talks about the shadow in the room between white people and Natives, whereas for me, I say no, no, no. It's white Americans that are sort of going in with the ghost of history and the funny thing is, within the separation dynamic, when I'm in South Dakota I feel way more at ease and embraced in Lakota Country than I do if I'm in a white border town, and that's as a white person. That's the sort of perspective that allowed me to understand what stands between those two sides because I was never really embedded in either one. It gave me more of a neutral perspective which was very useful and I think that's one of the interesting things. ... It's kind of interesting how some people form it all based on stereotype. It's something we're clearer of as Europeans because we didn't read your history books about the sanitized version of manifest destiny and that sort of thing. People in Europe typically watched westerns and thought 'This is absurd. We know who the invaders are here.' "

Q: How did you come across the opportunity to translate Kent Nerburn's novel into a film?

A: "The author approached me. I had been screening the movie 'Rez Bomb' in Pine Ridge, and he stumbled upon this little theater I was showing it in in a border town. He was intrigued because for 18 years he had been getting false promises from people in Hollywood saying they would turn it into a movie and he was just getting fed up. He just said, 'Here's a guy who gets things made,' and could do it from the rez-out, not from the Hollywood in. I was looking at it and about two years later I committed to doing it by any means necessary. That was almost six-and-a-half years ago. ... Nobody was going to finance us on a Hollywood budget with a 95-year-old star. I pretty much did everything — all I had was a sound person and someone running around helping out a bit. That gave me the creative freedom to go ahead and do the film. The intimacy allowed us to go to very deep places within the filming, Dave Bald Eagle, in particular, went to some very deep places in scenes that he probably wouldn't have if there was a crew of 40 people standing around. We managed to create a complete trust between us all and we became a type of family and that helped very much with us getting to where we needed to go."

Q: What was it about the author's approach and the novel itself that compelled you to translate this story onto film?

A: "I never figured that out. There was a part of it that, in a sense, was impulsive. I think it was a sense of being very familiar with the space and being able to see the difference between my realities on the reservation and seeing Nerburn's reality that allowed me to give it a perspective. The key thing was that when I look back on it, the whole purpose for making it didn't have so much to do with the novel but had more to do with Dave Bald Eagle, as far as when you try to figure out why something happened in the greater scheme of things. Bringing him to the world is what really is knocking the socks off the audience. ... The thing that made it work is that he was closer to the character than even the character. The climax of the film takes place at Wounded Knee and Dave's own family heritage and his links to Wounded Knee were more direct, even more so than the character he was playing. We threw away the script and Dave improvised the whole sequence. At the end of it, he turned to Christopher Sweeney, who plays Nerburn, and said, 'I've held that in for 95 years.' It was just remarkable. When he saw it he was so happy and said it was the only film he'd been in about his people that told the truth. "



Q:

Everyone has raved about Dave Bald Eagle's impromptu speech in the film. What was it like witnessing such an emotional moment for Dave? Was there a particular line in the speech that resonated with you?

A: "You were just there. It just tore us apart. There was another similar scene in advance that was similarly powerful, where at the end of it, you just don't know what to say. We all just look at each other and know what we just experienced. It's just one of those rare moments. I can never imagine filming scenes more powerful than the two I filmed with him in those moments. I'll also never film a more beautiful face. I'd line the shot up on him at times and it would almost just take your breath away. It was so breathtakingly interesting. The keynote in casting was that he had this twinkle in his eye. I've known a lot of elders over the years who have twinkles, but Dave's was the most spectacular. There wasn't so much an individual line as it was more of complete moments. When you would see him tearing up, you would see this remarkable man who had a life so layered with so many extraordinary experiences, good and bad, who had a lot of tragedy in his life and a lot of love. He shared that emotion so openly. It was quite amazing."

Q: How did filming on the Lakota Sioux Reservation enhance the film?

A: "That was my third feature there. To me, it's like a second home so it's a very easy place to film. The locations are so beautiful and that makes the life a lot easier. That was actually a great advantage of shooting so fast. The film looks lavish in many ways because with the Great Plains, you can't really get anything other than beautiful. It didn't take a lot of complex cinematography usually needed to make a dull place look good."

Q: What was it like experiencing the reservation first-hand and filming there instead of a place that just has a similar landscape?

A: "Filming there is easier. Because of the relationships I have with people there ... the tribe basically said welcome back, have a good time. With all three projects, I've never had anything but support from the tribe. They know that I'm not there for profit and I'm not there for any momentary accolades; I'm a friend. Eighteen years has proven that. If you just give up yourself completely wherever you are in the world, the chances are you'll have a good time and I think that's what people always appreciated there. I'm just showing up and hanging out with friends."

Q: Do you plan on furthering your film experience with Native American culture?

A: "For the most part, I'm kind of desperate to do something somewhere else in the world, but I do have a very exciting action TV show, which is based on something kind of real within Indian Country, where it's about something kind of amazing that they do that's the best of the best. It would be very mainstream and very exciting and it could be a big hit show. This would be unlike anything that's ever happened before. They think it would be very satisfying to do because it would be pure

entertainment, but also for non-natives watching it, they would appreciate cultural diversity, an incredible skill-set within Native American people. For folks in Indian Country, they'd be getting lost in seeing heroes on their screen that are from their nation. Folks in Indian Country could use heroes that resemble them, and that would be wonderful. There needs to be some highly successful commercial project that's more Indian Country-out than Hollywood-in to start getting the ball rolling for more things. A great thing with an all Native cast is it gives a greater chance to create a lot more household names that are then more bankable for more movies and projects thereon. That can be an exciting byproduct."

Q: If there was one thing you would want the audience to take away from this movie what would it be?

A: "I think by the end their hearts are completely opened up by Dave Bald Eagle and they're hit with the gravity of what happened at Wounded Knee in just an expanded form. The gravity of it and the fact that it's still rooted in the DNA of Native people today hopefully will help them learn to have greater empathy."

Q: Adam Beach recently commented about the whitewashing of Native American roles. Was this something you considered while selecting your actors? Why do you feel it's important to reserve cultural roles for people of that respective culture?

A: "It's a very important issue. For me, it's never been a problem in the films I've made. In 'Neither Wolf Nor Dog,' the biggest stretch we had was someone who's Cree playing Lakota. A majority of the characters are part Lakota and part of other tribes. Even in the film 'Rez Bomb' every Native actor, besides the lead, is from Pine Ridge. ... Accuracy is important. I try to be as close to the nationality of the character as I can be. The actors that I've had also had very deep connections to the places where we were filming. ... Ethnicity is one thing, but having that cultural weight adds so much more as well. I think that's an even deeper thing."

Though "Neither Wolf Nor Dog" only showed at Savor Cinema Fort Lauderdale from Sept. 15 to 21, the DVD is set to be available later this year. The film has drawn praise from audiences with 8.3/10 stars on IMDB and a 94 percent rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

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