

N.W.T. LEGISLATIVE LIBRARY
FEB 27 1997
Yellowknife, N.W.T.

NWT LEGISLATIVE LIBRARY
3 1936 00045 638 2

Entertainment

EDITOR: Bob Remington, 429-5346

B6

The Edmonton Journal

TV from the true True North

Inuit can't get enough of a TV series about seal feasts, caribou hunts and igloo life

JANE GEORGE
Southam Newspapers

Igloolik, N.W.T.

The scene on the television screen is obviously from the Arctic: in a white, treeless landscape a group of Inuit feast on a seal, slit down its belly and served up raw.

In this episode of the Inuit television series, *Nunavut*, there is little conversation, lots of action and many lingering shots across the sea ice.

The plot is relatively simple: a group of Inuit are travelling by dog-team in search of good hunting grounds. Besides the seal feast, there are scenes of caribou being stalked, shot, butchered and eaten.

The camera never flinches. "I've gotten some complaints about these scenes," says producer Zacharias Kunuk, "but this is how Inuit used to live. You can turn on the television any time and see people's heads being blow off. Now that's violent."

Kunuk has been serving up a combination of action and tradition to an enthusiastic television audience in the North for more than ten years.

His recent 13-episode family epic, *Nunavut*, with a budget of nearly \$1 million, was three years in the making. The series has a huge following in the North, receiving the kind of attention usually reserved for soap operas.

The dialogue is always in Inuktitut, the Inuit language, and the actors in Kunuk's productions are all local residents. Kunuk says people in Igloolik, a community of 1,200 on the Melville Peninsula about 250 km north of the Arctic Circle, are eager to act. In 1989, he had to audition more than 40 hopefuls for the two lead roles in *Qaqqiq*, his first production.

Qaqqiq is the quintessential boy-wants-girl story, with a northern twist. It's set in an igloo during a traditional Inuit celebration called a "Qaqqiq". The year is 1945, and everyone wears the skin and fur dress of that period.

If the action seems to flow effortlessly, probably it's because almost all the script was improvised by the actors.

"Drama isn't new here," says Kunuk. "Back before we got into this modern world of living and eating pop and chocolate bars, our parents used to tell us legends, and that was like in the movies. It's always been here. We just visualize



Inuit film-maker Zacharias Kunuk: In the North, his shows are as popular as soaps in the South



Inuit actors on the set of Nunavut

it." To date, Kunuk has set his productions in the 1930s and '40s, the era when Inuit were first being introduced to new ways and new technology. To ensure accuracy, a cultural advisor and elders help with details.

But Kunuk says a lot of the staging is left up to the imagination and chance, and that has led to a few bloopers.

In one scene during *Qaqqiq*, as a dog team approaches from the distance, the small, indistinct form of a water truck can be seen inching along the horizon. Throughout a scene of drum-dancing inside the igloo, the performer wears a hat dotted with modern-day souvenir pins. And viewers may wonder whether Inuit women's hair back then was permed.

Kunuk has shown *Qaqqiq* and his other productions in festivals around the world. He has received several prizes, including the *Prix de la Recherche Ethnologique* from the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* in Paris and the Best Drama Award from the Canadian National Aboriginal Society. But Kunuk, who gets his funding from such organizations as Telefilm Canada as well as from the sale of broadcast rights, is mostly pleased that he is doing what he always wanted to do: make

videos. His company, Igloolik Isuma ("thoughtful") Productions, is busy developing new projects and helping to produce a daily news broadcast from Igloolik.

In 1966, when he moved from his parents' camp on the land to study in school, Kunuk had never even seen a television. He was nine years old.

At that time, Igloolik didn't have any television. The community actually held two referendums in 1975 and 1979 on whether to allow television broadcasts. The decisions to ban television changed only in 1983, with the arrival of Inuktitut-language fare from the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation.

By then, Kunuk had already been making home videos for a few years. Through the sale of soapstone carvings he had financed a visit to Montreal to buy himself a handi-cam and a 26-inch television.

At first, Kunuk did not fully realize the cultural importance of the action he was recording.

"When you videotape elders and then after five years they're dead and you still hear them talking, that's when I got it," he says. "It's very important to record now, because what they're saying is going to become very important later."

But mixing modern and traditional ways isn't always easy. Kunuk found it uncomfortable to have to ask elders to do and redo a scene in his staged docudramas.

He must also regularly deal with cold temperatures that freeze film and even ornery wildlife.

A polar bear once came onto the island where Kunuk's crew was filming. The animal attacked the camp and had to be killed. But this potentially dangerous situation turned out to be a bonus.

"I got all the actors into their costumes and we cooked the bear up," Kunuk says. "It became one of the best episodes in the *Nunavut* series. It was not play. It just happened. We made the best use of it."

But Kunuk says what makes his productions different is their Inuit point of view. Only one white man, a priest, appears in the series *Nunavut*.

In his black robes and long beard, this interloper looks scary and a bit unreal. His long-winded sermons about Moses in Egypt put most of his Inuit audience to sleep, although others listen seriously.

"I get offended that every time there's a movie about the North there's always a Qallunaag (non-Inuk) who steals the subject, who's in the centre of the action while the Inuit take the backstage," Kunuk says.

His next series might look at the North today, at how all the changes chronicled in past productions have affected Igloolik and its people.

