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Sundance 2011: 'On the Ice' Spotlights Alaska

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Poster for "On the Ice"

Plenty of independent films that play the Sundance Film Festival can boast of being shot in remote and exotic locations, but Andrew Okpeaha MacLean's coming-of-age drama "On the Ice" is probably the only film this year that required an AK47-wielding guard to monitor the set for wild animals.

Having grown up in Barrow, Alaska, the setting of "On the Ice," MacLean knew that bears were going to around and had his production coordinator on polar bear watch. "I wasn't overly concerned about it because we were such a big group of people and normally they'd stay clear of us," he said. "But if you get a juvenile or one that's especially hungry, they can get a lot more aggressive."

Based on MacLean's award-winning short "Sikumi," "On the Ice" follows the story of Iñupiaq teenagers Qalli and Aivaaq, who accidentally kill their friend James during a seal hunt. Scared and worried, the boys decide to ditch their friend's body and pretend he died in an accident. Qalli, the college-bound friend who actually pulled the knife, must deal with his guilt as Aivaaq beats himself up, his father gets suspicious, and he decides what kind of man he wants to become.

We recently spoke to MacLean about his debut narrative film, premiering this week at Sundance.

The Wall Street Journal: Did you write your short with the idea of turning it into a feature film?

Andrew Okpeaha MacLean: My short was first written as writing exercise. I had a pretty bad case of writer's block when I was working on a different script, so I took those characters and put them in a weird situation and wondered what would happen if they stumbled on a murder. As I started working on the short and started showing first the script, and then edited cuts to people, a lot of them had the response of wanting to know what happens next, or if this could be part of a larger story. So, by the time the short was done, I was aware of the possibility of continuing the story.

Tell me about your background.

I was born in Fort Wainwright, an army base [in Alaska] and I grew up in Barrow and Fairbanks, the town near Fort Wainwright. It's a university town; my parents were both university professors.

When did you know you wanted to be a filmmaker?

About 10 years ago, I decided to apply to film school. I'd been living in Seattle for a few years after getting my undergrad degree at the University of Washington in theater. I was more in the theater world when I decided to move back home to Barrow. I moved for a number of different reasons, but part of it was that I wanted to reconnect and learn to speak Iñupiaq better because a lot my generation is losing the language skill.

When I was growing up there, there was no real system for teaching it — my generation is the first generation not to take it as our first language; we were the first generation to grow up with television and that might have been part of it. In fact, there was a pretty strong sentiment at the time that it was bad to teach kids anything other than English; my parent's generation was punished for speaking Iñupiaq at school.

So, I wanted to try to correct that and came home. While living at home, a cousin of mine who's very active in the community said to me, 'You've been doing theater, I did a play once in school — let's do plays together and let's do them in Iñupiaq. So we started adapting old stories and coming up with our own, and getting them translated with the help of our elders. Performing them was great — I felt really connected to my culture but we would put a lot of work into these shows and only four or five hundred people would come and then it would die. So I started thinking about film as something that has a lot more permanence and potential to reach people. I decided to apply to film school and looked for ones that didn't require film experience. I barely knew the front end of a camera from the back, and NYU is one of those schools and they accepted me and offered me a scholarship. Next thing you know, I was moving from Barrow to New York City.

Shooting in Alaska can be tricky given the absence and abundance of light, given the season. Did you have to shoot within a very specific time frame?

We shot in April and little bit of May... the timing was vital — that was one of the things that both caused us a lot of stress, but also propelled us into making it happen because we could only shoot during one season: spring. It was partly because of the temperature, but also for the combination of sea ice and light. In the summertime, the sea ice melts and the script called for a lot of ice — I mean, it's called 'On the Ice' — so we needed it. By the time the sea ice forms in the winter, it's completely dark all day long and remains dark out for several months. It's not until March that you start getting the 12 hours of sunlight, then darkness, so it shifts very rapidly from there. By the time we finished, we were in 24 hours in daylight. which was a lot of fun for the film crew.

Your cast consisted primarily of first-time actors — was it a challenge to find the right combination of players?

We did a fairly long casting process. My producer Cara [Marcous] and I flew all over arctic Canada and all around Alaska looking for potential actors, including Anchorage and Fairbanks and Nome and Point Hope and finished in Barrow — we went to at least 10 to 12 cities.

The actor who plays Qalli's dad is quite good.

We didn't even see him in the first round of auditions. Someone had told him about the auditions and we had casting information on our website. He sent us an email and I sent him a copy of the script — more specifically, the sides we were working from — and then called him and I directed him from the phone. He then taped himself and uploaded it to YouTube. I really liked what he did and I liked his look, and based on that, we flew him along with the top contenders from the casting process to Anchorage. We did a week-long intensive casting process that doubled as a basic acting workshop, so we were able to really put them through a lot of work and see how they would respond to different ways of working. At the same time, we able to start working on the characters with them. Everything really paid off later. That whole casting experience was key to getting the film done — we did casting before we had the money to shoot the film. Afterward, we got a grant from Princess Grace USA Foundation that allowed us to go and make the film.

There's a lot of original music in the film. Were the featured songs written prior to filming, or were they improvised?

No, that was written out. The dances at the very beginning of the film were traditional dances that are kind of in the public domain. There are a lot of those dances that are personal and owned by specific people and we would have needed permission to use those, but the two we used are fun dances for anybody to do. The Singspiration — a hymn that translated into Iñupiaq — was a song by the actual church choir up there, and the rap [the one of the characters performs at a party] was written pretty much by the actor and it's meant to be a moment of just freestyle improv — he's not supposed to be coming off as Lil Wayne. I just thought that that's an interesting aspect of the youth culture up there and was interested in how people express the culture through music. It's three very different ways of performing music and it's coming from three different sources — but they're all being kind of appropriated, being taken into the culture.