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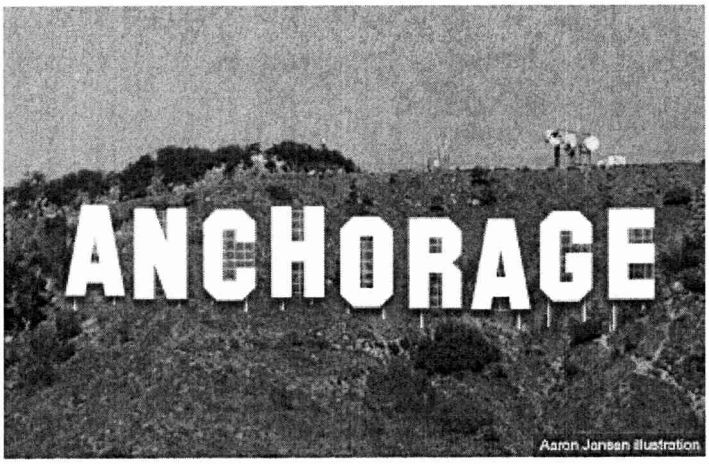
Behind the scenes as Hollywood meets Alaska

Joshua Saul | Oct 11, 2010



Early on a Saturday morning in early October, inside an Anchorage middle school dressed up to play Barrow's high school, 140 extras sweated in bunny boots, parkas, and kuspuks. Extras playing Alaska Native villagers sat facing the front of the room, where a half-dozen somber whaling captains sat with two huge Panavision cameras behind them. I stood among the virtually all-white press corps clustered in behind the villagers: an Alaska reporter dressed up to play an out-of-state photographer.

When Drew Barrymore breezed onto the set, the extras burst into applause. Barrymore hid her face in her hands, feigning embarrassment, then told the Alaska Native extras they wouldn't like her after we heard her character arguing against the head whaling captain.

She was right. The scene being filmed -- a pivotal plot twist in "Everybody Loves Whales," a $30 million movie that recreates a real 1988 event -- portrayed a community meeting in Barrow held to decide whether three whales trapped in the ice should be killed and eaten or freed. Barrymore played a Greenpeace activist fighting for the whales' release while the Alaska Native extras professed to like the taste of whale and said they hate being told what to do by white environmentalists from the Lower 48.

When filming began, Barrymore argued with a handsome young whaling captain in a red bandanna and Sorel boots. The press corps pretended to jot notes and take photographs of the confrontation. The extras playing villagers followed the director's instructions to "be a little impolite." When Barrymore's character said it would be wrong to kill the whale and its "babies," the villagers shouted her down. They cheered on the whaling captain as he replied that whales are what he feeds his family, what his whole village feeds its babies.

"What you're saying is ridiculous. You're a white girl. Go back to California. This is Inupiat country," the captain said, drawing the loudest cheers of the scene. But Barrymore's character wasn't finished. You don't need to hunt, she said, not when you all get big stipends from the oil companies and have enough money to buy all the food you need.

"Those stipends last just a few months," the young captain shot back. "We have to hunt. One day that oil's going to run out. And when that happens, who will feed our children? Will you?"

Real Alaska conflict comes to the silver screen

The scene reflected a real conflict between the subsistence lifestyle practiced by some Alaska Natives and the sometimes condescending environmentalism of urban and Outside interests.

Subsistence is a touchy issue in Alaska. Urban sport hunters and rural subsistence hunters clash over hunting quotas, the wanton waste of caribou on the tundra near Point Hope resulted in criminal cases that were covered by the Alaska media, and the decision of an Alaska Native state legislator to overfish his subsistence permit

became a high-profile court case.

Usually that conflict is misunderstood or ignored by the outside media and entertainment industries, so a mainstream Hollywood movie that appreciates the complexities of the conflict is something new. The film's directors did show at least some awareness of the divisions that sometime define Alaska. At one point, the first assistant director walked back to two white extras playing Barrow villagers. You don't have to be as angry as everyone else when Barrymore makes her points, he told them, adding that as white villagers, they wouldn't necessarily be agreeing with the Natives.

At the risk of drawing too broad a conclusion from one scene, "Everybody Loves Whales" does seem to have a clearer take on Alaska issues than most Lower 48 films and news reports. And it nailed the scene right down to the coffee urn and Sailor Boy Pilot Bread set up as props.

The movie's realism is only enhanced by its extras, many of whom brought their own kuspuks and fur-lined parkas instead of waiting to be outfitted by the wardrobe department. One of the extras playing a whaling captain is even part of a real whaling crew way out on Little Diomede, just two miles from Russian soil. Sylvester Ayek, a well-known Alaska Native artist who hunts walrus from his home in Nome, was scheduled to play another of the whaling captains but was "demoted," as he laughingly put it, when he showed up late for the shoot on Saturday.

A day in the life of an extra

Being an extra is harder than it looks; not like digging ditches in permafrost, sure, but tiring and monotonous all the same. During my stint on set the first weekend in October I was assigned, coincidentally, to play a press photographer. I was handed a dated Nikon with a big Speedlight SB-16 flash. To round things out, I was outfitted with black snowpants, black boots, a green pullover and a green down vest. It was easy to look the part, but more difficult to keep from sweating like a polar bear in a sauna. My press pass read "Dean Wilson, U.P.I." Positioned between a Wasilla medical biller playing a news reporter and an Arctic Slope Regional Corp. communications manager playing a cameraman, I had a good view of the room.

Actor John Krasinski, who plays Jim Halpert on the popular television show "The Office," was the tallest man on set, standing about 6 feet 3 inches with an impressive pompadour adding to his height and enormous brown boots on his feet that looked to be about a size 14. Between takes, he checked NFL scores on his iPhone and argued about "the best football movie ever" with co-star Tim Blake Nelson, who in 2000 put on a brilliant performance as the simplest-minded of the crooks in the movie "O Brother Where Art Thou." Actress Kristen Bell -- gorgeous, blonde, and the size of a middle schooler -- fanned herself with a reporter's notebook and laughed with Krasinski even while makeup artists were sponging foundation onto their faces.

There were local notables on hand to play reporters, too. Channel 2 weekend anchor Rebecca Palsha and Channel 13 anchor Natasha Sweatte were in the crowd, along with former Channel 2 reporter Julie Hasquet, now the spokeswoman for U.S. Sen. Mark Begich. Accepting high-fives from Krasinski before almost every take was Ahmaogak Sweeney, the 10-year-old son of Kevin Sweeney, campaign manager for U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski. Dressed in a blue track jacket and carrying a tape recorder slung over his shoulder, Sweeney appears to hold the substantial kid role in the movie.

After the morning filming broke for lunch -- which included chicken masala and orange roughy -- but before the

extras returned to the set, two men beat on traditional drums while four women in bright kuspuks danced a Yupik blessing for the people in the middle-school cafeteria. Many of the extras were Yupik or Cupik instead of the northern Inupiat they were playing in the movie, but it makes sense when you consider the realities of geography: Barrow is 725 miles north of Anchorage, while Bethel, the air hub of the Yupik regions, is just 400 miles west.

Elders among the extras treated with respect

The film crew seemed aware of the great respect with which Alaska Natives treat their elders. When the herd of extras was held up in the school's halls, elders were asked multiple times if they would like a chair so they could sit down for the few minutes it would take to get the group moving. And elders were shuttled to the front of every line, whether they were at lunch waiting to serve themselves or in wardrobe waiting to return their parkas and boots.

The elders, like most everyone else, seemed to be enjoying the shoot. As much as the extras shouted down Barrymore's character, it's impossible to stay mad at perky Drew. Sunday morning, on the second day of shooting the scene, an elderly Alaska Native woman sitting in the front row hollered for everyone's attention so she could organize a greeting for Barrymore. When the actress walked onto the set, carrying a copy of Jonathan Safran Foer's non-fiction book "Eating Animals," the crowd of extras boomed out "Good morning, Drew!"

Drew blushed again, then answered "That's the nicest good morning I've ever had in my life."

Then it was back to the filming. The director coached the extras on how he wanted them to react to the arguments made by the young whaling captain and Barrymore's character, telling them "It shouldn't feel choreographed" and "Try not to know where the scene's going."

While the extras playing villagers feign anger and the extras playing press snap their flashbulbs, the rest of Alaska waits to see whether the finished movie turns out to a realistic portrait of a complicated state and the people who live there or a shallow vehicle for a cheesy romance that sidesteps the pressing issues that bubble up in the 49th state.

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