

Northern Exposure

THE
FAST RUNNER
OFFERS
A NATIVE
PERSPECTIVE

BY KARIM M. TIRO

In 1922, director Robert Flaherty produced the first documentary film, a movie called *Nanook of the North*. It was so successful that even if you've never seen *Nanook*, you've probably encountered a nugget of information it helped put into wide circulation: that the Inuit express affection by rubbing their noses.

In the summer of 2002, the Inuit returned to American screens in a three-hour epic titled *The Fast Runner*. The movie is a work of tremendous narrative power and ethereal, high Arctic beauty — so effective, in fact, that it was awarded the Camera d'Or prize at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival. What makes *The Fast Runner* all the more remarkable is that the director, Zacharias Kunuk, his cast, and nearly all the members of the crew are Inuit. So is the tale they tell: It's an ancient, archetypal oral tradition about jealousy, betrayal, revenge, and family rivalry.

It's become a cliché that Native peoples don't draw any hard and fast boundaries between life and art. It's been used to explain why Native objets d'art so often take the form of baskets and clothing. But if art infuses the practical, the relationship runs the other way as well. As Natar Ungalaaq, who plays the lead role, said, "It's important for them to make films to create more jobs at home." Even more importantly, the makers of *The Fast Runner* also wanted their film to be a counterweight to the media deluge from the south. *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* Lots of Inuit, apparently. As Kunuk put it, "Kids don't listen to stories; they're watching TV, so we have to get at them that way. Seeing our story made into a movie, they feel it's something to be proud of." He chose to tell this particular story because it has "all the elements of an action film." For his part, Ungalaaq hopes to produce films aimed directly at children, because he wants

the next generation of Inuit to recognize that "we have good legend stories too."

Besides, as Kunuk said, "Too many southern filmmakers, even if they get the stories right, get the setting wrong. They turn a seal oil lamp into an Olympic torch." He shrugged when asked what he thought of *Nanook*. He was mostly put off by the scenes that were staged, such as that which depicted an Inuit hunter's exaggerated amazement at a trader's gramophone.

The differences between *Nanook* and *The Fast Runner* highlight distinctive features of Inuit filmmaking. Flaherty's film reflected the values of 1920s America, when the tide of capitalism was rising. *Nanook* is all about one man's fight against the harsh environment in which he lived, seemingly against all odds. Flaherty said his aim was "to take a single character and make him typify the Eskimos as I had known them." As he had known them. In Flaherty's world, individual will was all-important. This was, to say the least, a radical departure from Inuit reality. To survive — let alone prosper — in the high Arctic, is by necessity a collective enterprise. The contrast between the moral of Flaherty's film and that of *The Fast Runner* could not be more striking. As actress Lucy Tulugarjuk said of *The Fast Runner*, "The most important lesson, from my point of view, is that your family comes first and if someone does something wrong, the elders are the ones who have the say of punishment."

This collectivist ethic guided the film's creation as well. Although director Kunuk had already accumulated an impressive list of critical accolades, the cult of the director had no place on his set. As Tulugarjuk put it, "From my perspective, I think Inuit style of filmmaking is communicating with actors and elders. He asked them how we should do it." When I asked Ungalaaq about what happened when there was a disagreement between himself and the director, he crossed his arms, rocked back on his heels and smiled. "I had a good few discussions with our director. But if we didn't cooperate, we tried both [ways] to see which was best. And it works!"

Karim M. Tiro is a postdoctoral research associate at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and assistant professor of history at Xavier University. He is presently writing a book on the Oneida Indian Nation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His articles and reviews have appeared in *American Quarterly*, *The Historian*, and *New York History*.

Director Zacharias Kunuk.

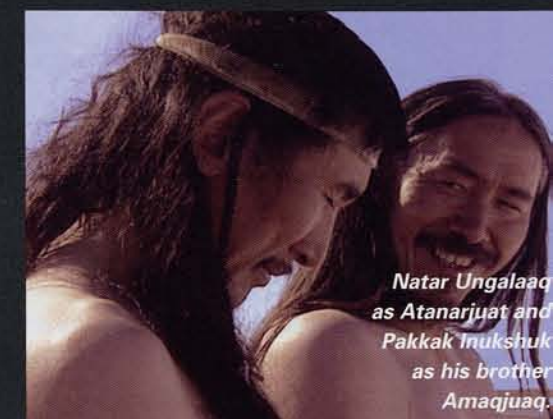
COURTESY OF THE FAST RUNNER AND IGLLOOLIK ISUMA PRODUCTIONS INC.



Sylvia Ivalu as Atuat.



Oki (Peter-Henry Arnatsiaq) and his henchman Pakkak (Luke Taqaugaq).



Natar Ungalaaq as Atanarjuat and Pakkak Inukshuk as his brother Amaqjaq.