

Bigger picture

Dystopian Arctic film *Polaris* brings Whitehorse community together, aims to raise the ante for Northern filmmaking



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The Saturday night audience at February's Available Light Film Festival in Whitehorse is pumped for this one: *Polaris*, a near-wordless dystopian Arctic sci-fi eco-thriller, shot locally, with 40 Whitehorse-ites among the 60-person cast and crew – all of whom seem to be here, bouncing in their seats. Yukon MP Brendan Hanley makes a speech extolling “the role arts play in a strong, diversified community,” and people whoop. Someone shouts out Karen, an actor in the [film](#) who's working as an usher tonight, and people whoop louder.

Polaris's producer, Max Fraser, who's made documentaries but never a fiction feature before, rhymes off a list of funders longer than the film's script: Northwestel, the community cable provider, in from the get-go; followed by Yukon Media Development; Screen Production Yukon Association; CanNor; Canadian Media Fund

Northern Incentive; Telefilm Vancouver; Crave; Ontario Creates; SODEC; plus Ontario and Quebec tax credits and grants from the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

At the Fantasia Festival in Montreal, Fraser continues, he and the film's writer/director, Kirsten Carthew, took 50 15-minute meetings over three days with international financiers, emerging with U.S. and world distribution deals. (It opens in select North American cities on Sept. 1.) Quebec's Mega Fun anted up, making *Polaris* a YK/QU co-pro. A Montreal effects outfit called Blood Brothers rigged the green-puke scene, burying long tubes in the snow so the actor could expel buckets. Tetra Tech helped with shooting on frozen lakes.

That's just a taste of the hustle required to scrape together a \$2.5-million budget in Canada. Which is barely enough to cover a shoot from March 1 to April 2 – with 99 per cent of it outdoors on snow a metre deep, in -20 to -40 temperatures (the rental cars wouldn't start), with 11 hours of daylight, plus COVID restrictions and a chunk of crew members who'd never set foot on a set before.

Especially if your stars are a rookie: Viva Lee, who was 10 during the shoot, discovered via a countrywide search of 300 girls; and a trained polar bear, Agee, now 27, making her final on-screen appearance before retiring to the Assiniboine Park Zoo.

The film begins. It's 2144, and a child raised by a bear brings hope from the stars to a frozen world brutalized by roving, tree-killing, all-female Morads (marauders) clad in apocalypse-chic ensembles

of distressed fabrics, rusted armour and horned helmets. (The costume department had a field day sourcing vintage clothes, fox stoles, elk antlers, dented sheet pans, pockmarked oil drums, musk ox horns and rabbit pelts from volunteers. A local with a belt sander frayed all the knees, elbows and pockets. The horned headgear is ingeniously mounted atop hidden bike helmets.)

There's a kidnapping, a beheading, a missing eye, snowmobile chases and runic tattoos. It's all very Arctic-Mad Max, a mashup of Greek mythology, Romulus and Remus and *The Jungle Book*, and the scenery is eerie, mysterious, snow-heaped, tree-carpeted splendour. The audience gobbles it up like a Bullet Hole bagel. (Though a shot of a junked orange-and-white Air North plane does elicit chuckles.)

The next day I have breakfast at the Burnt Toast Café with Fraser and three of the crew: Leslie Leong, a costumer who built 21 suits of armour in three weeks; Aimee Dawn Robinson, a dancer and actor, who plays Drunk Morad (she's the green puker); and Lake Pearson, who, among many duties, had to sew a decrepit polar bear hide back together after every shooting day. (The live bear scenes were shot in animal-safe fake snow against a green screen in an airport hangar in Abbotsford, B.C.; the "bear" that Viva interacts with is two crew members crawling under the hide, which is so old its newspaper stuffing dates from the 1950s.)

Everyone trades tales from the shoot. Karlee Morse, the makeup artist who created a realistic severed head – her first – would hide it in various trailers at night to scare the crap out of people (she's now teaching a special-effects makeup course).

Pearson, who also got roped into 3-D-printing a white space suit, the only pristine item in the film, dashed among six printers all night long for nights on end, and then spent the rest of the shoot repairing the pieces that shattered during combat scenes at -30. One actor who misspoke her guttural Morad dialect called "Cut" herself; Carthew gently explained why she shouldn't do that.

The toughest day occurred on frozen Schwatka Lake. It's a reservoir, and the hydro company decided that morning to suck up some water. The production had to retest the surface by drilling holes, which sent water slushing over the ice (overflow). The prop snow machines, heavy antiques loaded up with junk, kept getting stuck, and many of them didn't reverse. The actors' fur costumes got so wet. "We stank like wild animals," Robinson says.

But they're quick to stress that for [Whitehorse](#)-ites, overcoming adversity isn't some grand story – it's what they do daily.

"That's how it works here – we just do what needs to be done," Leong says. "And everyone does more than one thing."

Donald Watt, who outfitted the snow machines, is a snow carver and theatre production designer. Leong makes jewellery out of computer chips and pipes. Pearson borrowed armour from his medieval combat group.

"We know how to source our community," Robinson says. "We know each other's skills and strengths. The attitude here is, a rising tide lifts all boats. That's the *Polaris* attitude, too. Everyone rooting for each other, trying new things. Everyone had such an energetic desire to see this succeed."

The costumers kept running in with fresh socks. Everyone, no matter their position, stomped down snow. The camera operator learned to shoot while running in snowshoes.

“Each person in the Yukon is important because there are so few of us,” Pearson says. “We know we’re going to see each other again, so we have to be good to each other.”

Back in Toronto, I meet Carthew for coffee. She moved here in 2020, but she’s lived all over: Saudi Arabia, India, Kenya, Tanzania; as well as Hamburg, London, Dubai and Yellowknife. In the desert, mountains or sub-Arctic, she always feels connected to nature, and relishes the “profound, simple, authentic” communication between humans and animals. She brings all that to *Polaris* – along with the knowledge that the North is the canary in the coal mine for Earth’s climate changes.

I ask why every character in *Polaris*, including the bear and the dog, is female.

“I want to talk about human nature without gender,” Carthew replies. “How we form groups, and no matter what the iterations, we resort to the same things. You’re either with or against the group. When I look at how things are going politically around the world, that’s something we need to pay attention to.

“The young heroine offers hope and inspiration because she wasn’t raised on Earth. She represents a different way of being.”

Polaris, the north star, is fixed, but *Polaris* “conveys the feeling that the star is on the move, that we need a new north, a new direction.”

Carthew hopes her film – which has played festivals from Sydney to Reykjavik, Austin to Torino – raises the ante for filmmakers and filmmaking in the North.

“It’s rare in Canada to see a fantasy film with stunts and special effects,” she says. “We have so much talent in the North – nimble crews, great locations, just a two-hour flight from Vancouver. What we need are more production facilities, production companies, a steadier output, so people can have jobs in the industry, not just gigs.”

Currently, she’s developing a series about a community coroner in Yellowknife: “She’s a local, so she knows all the dirt.”

Back at the Burnt Toast Café, I ask the *Polaris* crew what they’d like to do next. Without hesitating, Robinson answers, “Prequel!”