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Video Review

Arctic Son. 2006. By Dallas Brennan Rexer and Elizabeth Mandel. 76 min. DVD format, color. (Arts Engine, Inc./Big Mouth Films, New York.)

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It is not self-contradictory to state that extraordinary stories can be found anywhere. The information in such narratives lies in the dramas that people enact every day; the art lies in presenting that information in compelling and universal ways. In the case of the film *Arctic Son*, the extraordinary story in question was found when director Andrew Walton flew to Old Crow, Yukon, in 1995. Among the people he met there was Johnny Abel, the Chief of Old Crow in the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. Near the end of his life, Abel asked Walton to make a film about Old Crow and the struggles it faced in integrating the ancient and the modern. When Walton met Stanley Njootli Sr. and his son, the focal point of the story became clear. Stanley Sr. lived in traditional ways, hunting and learning from the land. Stanley Jr. lived with his mother in Seattle, immersed in the world of hip-hop music, the video game *Grand Theft Auto*, and the kind of binge drinking that passes for impressive partying in some circles. When the father brings the son to Old Crow to learn some traditional alternatives to a self-destructive and wasteful lifestyle, the son is left with a choice between two worlds.

Arctic Son is presented as a documentary, in that it shows the lives of actual people going through real struggles. No narrator intrudes upon the scene; the only voice-overs come from the father and son themselves. The action is direct and undeveloped, and the director demonstrates great faith that audiences will grasp the significance of scenes and the shifts between them without explanation. The pace is slow, meshing well with the setting and the theme.

The film begins in the outskirts of Seattle, where Stanley Jr. lives with his mother. He loves to draw and paint, and his art shows impressive talent. But he also likes to drink—a lot—and he has spent time “couch surfing” when he has not had a steady home of his own. Just a few minutes into the movie, he explains that his father has talked him into going up to Old Crow, and he is quickly on board the plane that will take him there. After an awkward greeting in the tiny airport—the father clearly does not know how to respond to his son—the two of them go to the father’s house. They live there for a while, talking a little and trying not to bother each other. The son discovers that although Old Crow, like many Arctic towns, is officially dry, there is an illegal homebrew industry that provides Stanley Jr. with the booze he thinks he craves. He drinks, he declares that the town is boring, and he misses his previous life in Seattle.

Much of the center of the film is given to a snowmobiling trip to a hunting cabin, where the father hopes that traditional values and hard, outdoor work will help his son choose a healthy path. They string a thirty-foot gill net under the ice, they snare rabbits, and they try (without success) to hunt caribou. A particularly engaging scene involves the skinning of a rabbit they catch; the father is able to remove the hide, bloodlessly, with no tools beyond a sharp fingernail. The son assists, holding the rabbit as his father pulls the skin off like a sheath, and he is clearly impressed at his father’s understated skills. Eventually, they head back to Old Crow, and after living there a while, the son accepts his mother’s invitation to return to Seattle.

Back in the city, he falls in with his old friends and his drinking. He hits the bars and clubs, heavily drinks beer and liquor, and stumbles around with the same slack-lipped expression he displayed at the beginning of the film. But he also finds the return odd. The city holds

memories for him that are not all pleasant—he points out places he slept when he was homeless—and one day, while quite drunk, he says he doesn't seem to enjoy drinking the way he used to. Ultimately, he decides that Seattle is boring; there isn't much to do besides drink. He misses the hunting, chopping wood, fishing, and other activities that the North offers.

Shots of an airplane, some caribou, and the houses of Old Crow, and Stanley Jr. is back in the Yukon. The movie closes with a scene showing him working as a DJ at the Old Crow radio station, wishing all the hunters out there safe travels and then popping a hip-hop CD into the player. He has chosen to live in the North, and he is finding his own way of making it work.

Arctic Son offers much to discuss. The film lacks the kind of clashes and arguments that southern audiences might expect from the situation; Stanley Jr. says that he is angry at his father for not being around while he was growing up, but little of that anger is seen. Instead, the son comes across as earnest and eager to do well in the new world of Old Crow. He struggles with his lack of experience and skills, but he tries hard to catch rabbits, repair snowmobiles, and fit in with the Arctic crowd. He succeeds at times (the rabbit snare that his father said would succeed only accidentally produces a good-sized hare), and he sticks with the challenges that do not fall so easily. The snowmobile that he is given is cursed with failing parts, and he works with his father for hours trying to figure out the problem and get the machine running. Eventually, the snowmobile works

once again, but the hunting trip taken by the father and son is primarily devoted to small-engine repair.

Arctic Son does an excellent job of showing what life is like in the Arctic of today: snowmobiles and dog teams, iPods and impromptu singing to pass the time; an easy pace when things are going well and patience when the world turns dangerous; and an underlying acceptance of things beyond one's control. As a glimpse into the modern-day Arctic, this film is both accurate and valuable.

As a teaching film, *Arctic Son* demands much from the instructor. Students will likely find their attention wandering due to the slow pace, the long stretches of unnarrated action, and the lack of a plot-driven story arc. Much of the subtlety and nuance of the film will be lost without explanation and context. And the central point—that a simple life in the outdoors beats a complex but superficial life in the city—will meet with resistance from some younger viewers. Properly presented, however, this film can offer a great deal to southern audiences who want to understand the rhythms of life in the Arctic.

It should be noted that the title carries significance beyond the surface meaning. Old Crow is eighty miles north of the Arctic Circle—so in the summer the sun gyres around the sky without setting, and in the winter it disappears altogether. The cycle of full light and total darkness echoes the journeys depicted in the film as the characters grapple with ways of thriving in the worlds that they are given.