

CANADIAN CINEMATOGRAPHER

CANADIAN SOCIETY OF CINEMATOGRAPHERS

\$4 February 2019 www.csc.ca

THROUGH BLACK SPRUCE

WITH
DOUGLAS KOCH csc

Michael Jari Davidson: *SuperGrid*



South *BY* North

THROUGH BLACK SPRUCE

By Trevor Hogg, Special to
Canadian Cinematographer

Photos: Sophie Giraud
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WITH
**DOUGLAS
KOCH** csc



An elective English course on film and literature caused a Vancouver high school student to discover his love for making Super 8 movies and resulted in him attending film school at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute in Toronto. Decades later, the subject matter still remains pertinent to Douglas Koch csc who reunites with frequent collaborator, filmmaker Don McKellar (*The Grand Seduction*) to bring the 2008 Scotiabank Giller Prize-winner *Through Black Spruce* by Joseph Boyden to the big screen, with the world premiere taking place at the 43rd Toronto International Film Festival in September 2018. Seated at the hospital bedside of her comatose uncle, Will Bird (Brandon Oakes), Annie Bird (Tanaya Beatty) tells him about leaving Moosonee, Ontario, to search for her missing sister, who works as a model in Toronto. “I didn’t read the book until after we had made the film,” Koch reveals. “What was neat and unusual is that it has two narrators. Sometimes when a chapter starts, you are not sure if you’re following Annie or Will. In the film, you’re seeing each of their stories.” The Canadian Screen Award-winning cinematographer first worked with McKellar when the director was cast in the 1995 Patricia Rozema film *When Night is Falling*, and they got together again when the thespian made his feature directorial debut *Last Night*. “What has been always super handy is Don also being a writer and actor. We might have something planned and he would

Above: DP Douglas Koch csc

Left: Tantoo Cardinal in a still from *Through Black Spruce*.



Douglas Koch csc on the set of *Through Black Spruce*.

say, 'There's no way that these guys are going to want to sit down and do this. They'll jump up and move around.' We would go through this exercise of videotaping stuff and trying different things. It's so great to do that without the pressure of having a crew standing around," Koch says.

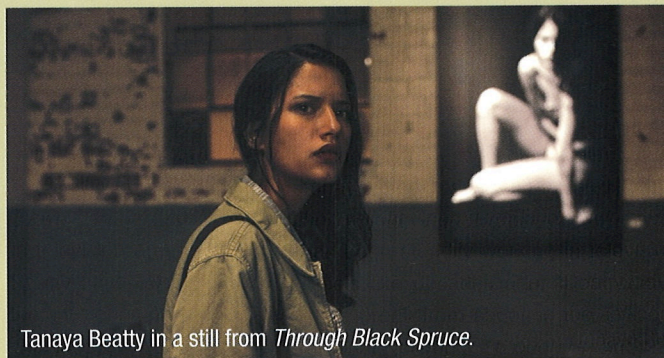
Principal photography on *Through Black Spruce* lasted up to 24 days between August and September of 2017, with the

“*Don is a good visual director. He's always aware of what we've just come from and what it's going into.*”

three main settings in the story being Moosonee, James Bay and Toronto. "What is funny is that we were not shooting in any of the places we're supposed to mainly because of the Northern tax credit that was involved in the making of the film," Koch says. "We filmed mainly in Sudbury and the environments around there. We were only allowed to shoot in Toronto for three days, even though 40 per cent of the movie takes place there. Those three days were packed full of stuff with the CN Tower and Gardiner Expressway being in every shot. All of the interiors of the apartments, loft spaces and nightclub had to be found and/or converted in Sudbury.

"There's a scene where Annie has been taken out by a new friend and a bunch of her gang to this crazy nightclub that is frequented by models and beautiful people," he recalls. "We found this club. You could see that the bones were in there somewhere, but it was going to be a lot of work. It was an enormous pressure on [production designer] Ian Hall, who had a huge worry of turning this place into something

that looked cool. I was worried about it and so were my gaffer Fast Eddy Mikolic and key grip Jason Lenoury, as they had a thousand little things to do in this place. LED strip lighting needed to be hidden, and intelligent strobe lighting needed to be produced on the dancefloor. Ian put up these interesting globular chandeliers. We had to shoot there at night, and there were all sorts of windows in the place. It had everything



Tanaya Beatty in a still from *Through Black Spruce*.

Dream Role

By Trevor Hogg

After graduating from the Vancouver Film School in 2010, actress Tanaya Beatty was cast in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (2011) and ever since has been steadily working in television and film. "*Breaking Dawn* feels like decades ago," Beatty says over the phone while taking a break from shooting the TV series *Yellowstone* for the Paramount Network. "*Through Black Spruce* was the



going against it. Even Don was concerned about filling this with all of these people who look like big city glitterati. The more everyone worries the better it goes because they bring their A game.”

When shooting in Moosonee, Koch says, the crew attempted to control the fairly modest main street with a 1st AD and some PAs. “You could fit all of us in a van and it seemed like the crew,” the DP recalls. “But we managed to get a lot of stuff done in one day and then did some drone shooting. In the mornings, I would go by myself and walk around and see if I could get any additional second

Above: Annie joins Leo (Graham Greene) and his friends under the Gardiner Expressway.
Right: Jesse (played by Kiowa Gordon) and Annie (played by Tanaya Beatty)



first project where I was getting to be the lead character, and she has so much depth and interesting things to explore. Being an Indigenous woman, and given my family history, it felt like I had a lot of personal experiences that I could use to portray Annie Bird.” The strong connection with her cinematic persona was not easy to leave behind for the actress. “It was a little surprising. I thought I had fig-

ured out how you get rid of these roles when you go home,” she says.

Controversy erupted when producer Tina Keeper (*Falls Around Her*), who also stars as Lisette Bird, chose Don McKellar (*The Grand Seduction*) to direct the adaptation. “I have two lenses to see that view from,” Beatty notes. “On one hand, I’ve been dreaming about Indigenous people being involved with

all parts of filmmaking; that’s what I hope for. But I also recognize that it’s a process and is something that we’re working towards. When Tina made the decision to bring Don on this project, she did that thinking this is the best director who is going to lead the team through this. I don’t doubt her decision-making. I also witnessed firsthand how Don was using his talent and privilege to try to get a story like



Tina Keeper and Brandon Oakes in a still from *Through Black Spruce*.

unit shots that we might use with my Sony a7S II. We had a ton of stuff to work with, so they just used a couple of shots, but I enjoyed the process and meeting hilarious local people.”

A tricky location to find was the remote island in James Bay that Will uses as his hideaway. “In the book and script, the cabin was located on Akimiski Island, which is gigantic and extremely flat,” Koch says. “On our budget, we had to go all in or nothing. At some point, the idea of Killarney Provincial Park came up. There are these amazing almost-pink rocks by the shore, and it sits on the north shore of Georgian Bay so you can’t see the other side. We wanted to make it feel like Will is off in the middle of nowhere.”

Video clips shot in actual locations were placed in a Dropbox folder so the cast and crew could see what the production was doing the following week. “Don is a good visual director,” Koch notes. “He’s always aware of

what we’ve just come from and what it’s going into.”

The cinematographer favoured a classical shooting style for *Through Black Spruce*, and the opening and closing of the film feature dream-like flashbacks. “We wanted to be more observational than right there with the characters,” he says. “I had my trusted Sony a7S II with me and a defunct Canon L series 50 mm f1.0 lens. It’s a soft, weird and shallow focus. Andreas Evdemon was on the main camera with a Steadicam getting a lot of great stuff, but every once in a while I captured a cool little moment.”

The aspect ratio chosen on the film was 1.85:1, and footage was primarily captured with a single ARRI ALEXA Mini, with an extra camera body available to be used if needed. The lenses ranged from 18 mm to 135 mm. “It was all shot with the Zeiss Master Primes,” Koch states. “They’re super reliable. I know if I have to shoot wide open or shoot T16, these

this told. I have only gratitude and respect for somebody who is doing that.”

Beatty originally read the novel almost a decade ago. “I had read *Through Black Spruce* several times from when I was 18. I read it in a different way when I knew I was going to be playing Annie,” she says. “It was awesome seeing a lot of other Indigenous actors in the room, people I have known and come

up with in this industry. It was normal in a lot of ways, which speaks to the fact that Indigenous voices are being heard and their stories are being told. When I got the audition, I didn’t even think it was real at first because I had dreamt of being able to play Annie.” A key big screen relationship is between Annie and her Uncle Will Bird, portrayed by Brandon Oakes. “We clicked instantly. Brandon is somebody

whom I admire and look up to in this industry,” Beatty says.

A memorable nighttime scene has the actress performing alongside Graham Greene under the Gardiner Expressway cooking a goose. “It was really cool! I have dreamt of working with somebody like Graham Greene and Tantoo Cardinal. They have been sharing their voices and paving the way for so



The flashbacks have a surreal quality compared to the rest of the movie.

things are going to work. This is a harsh story. There were a couple of scenes that were going to be incorporated in low light levels. There were other times when we needed a longer lens and I would bring an Angenieux Optimo 24 mm to 290 mm zoom if we needed to do shots of the float airplane. Then there were a couple of times we deliberately wanted a wider lens, so we might bring in a 16 mm Master Prime.”

Camera, lighting and grip gear came from William F. White, with gels being provided by Rosco Canada. “I like to use Fresnels when creating sunlight effects. We had a 6K and 4K Fresnel, as well as a mix of HMIs and tungsten. I can think of all sorts of neat things to do with LEDs, but I’m careful with them,” Koch says.

A customized colour correction method was developed by the cinematographer in Photoshop. “When Don and I were initially talking about this project, I realized that it was going

many Indigenous artists, so I was honoured to be able to work with them,” Beatty says. Since Annie and Suzanne are twins, the actress plays both roles. “It felt strange to think of two people. Suzanne is missing, and Annie is trying to find her. Annie is from the bush, entrenched in traditions, and has never experienced life in a city. Whereas Suzanne has always been interested in that outside world

and even the way she moves is different. It’s like having to portray somebody who might move like a model versus somebody who is about to shoot a gun and kill a moose,” she says.

The nightclub sequence where Sudbury doubles for Toronto has a surreal quality. “It’s sort of like Alice goes down the rabbit hole and finds herself in a landscape that is dif-

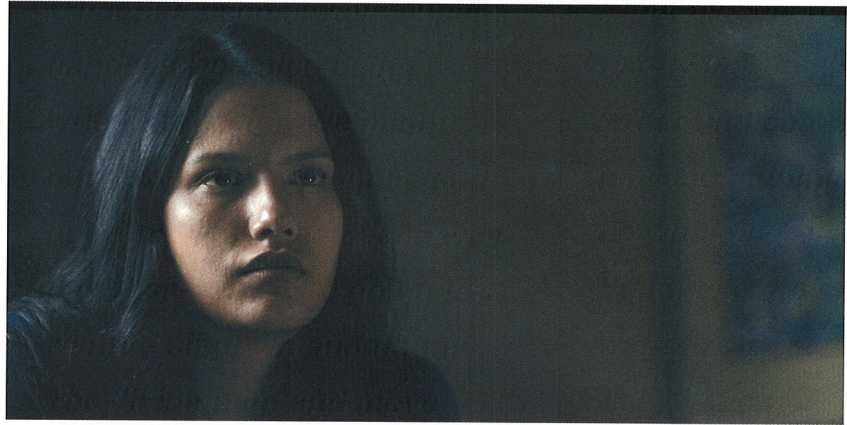
ferent from anything she has experienced,” Beatty notes. “They pulled it off in terms of it seeming like a nightclub in Toronto. For me, as an actress, it was such a fun scene to play. You sometimes don’t get a lot of leeway as an Indigenous actor. Either you’re meant to be represented in a specific way or the character is back in the 1800s.” The red sequin dress she wore in the scene was created by

“**I don’t think there’s a movie made now that doesn’t utilize visual effects in some way. It can be as simple as getting rid of things in the frame that we don’t like, such as hydro poles. In our case, we did a poor man’s process for a float plane from the 1940s in which Will flies. We had to do bluescreen for that scene and shot plates with a drone up in Moosonee.”**

to be a largely Indigenous cast. I thought back to Edward Curtis, who took portraits of Indigenous people in the late 19th century, and there’s a cool sculptural quality to the skin tone. I felt this was something I could accomplish with my crazy Photoshop process and got excited when I found out that Bill Ferwerda at Deluxe Toronto was going to be our colourist. To my total glee, Bill was able to do the effect in DaVinci Resolve. My DIT Rany Ly and I set the look in advance. We made a few different LUTs and ended up coming back to one that became like our filmstock. Highly saturated colours like reds were affected the most. The black hair of our actors would sometimes get this amazing blue sheen and our process would exaggerate it, so you had to be careful that it didn’t get removed.

“I don’t think there’s a movie made now that doesn’t utilize visual effects in some way,” Koch observes. “It can be as simple as getting rid of things in the frame that we don’t like, such as hydro poles. In our case, we did a poor man’s process for a float plane from the 1940s in which Will flies. We had to do bluescreen for that scene and shot plates with a drone up in Moosonee. Another one that I’ve seen come up lately is blood splatter. There is one scene that had a neat touch that we hadn’t even thought of when we were doing it. You get how hard Will was hit in the head with a golf club. To have coordinated that in camera would have been a super pain in the ass. But it

“What has been always super handy is Don also being a writer and actor. We might have something planned and he would say, ‘There’s no way that these guys are going to want to sit down and do this. They’ll jump up and move around.’ We would go through this exercise of videotaping stuff and trying different things. It’s so great to do that without the pressure of having a crew standing around.”



Annie Bird (played by Tanaya Beatty). Annie watches over her comatose uncle, Will Bird (Brandon Oakes). A still from *Through Black Spruce*, featuring Brandon Oakes and Tantoo Cardinal.

was done in the visual effects and you don’t even question it. We had a great visual effects supervisor named Geoff Scott.”

The cast features Tanaya Beatty, Brandon Oakes, Kiowa Gordon, Graham Greene, Tantoo Cardinal and Tina Keeper. “All of our main actors were great,” Koch says. “Tanaya Beatty is an experienced and lovely actress; she was extremely fun to light.” Other key crew members were 1st AC Paul Steves, 2nd AD John Baxter, best boy electric Jason Poole, rigging gaffer John “Chops” Hall, key grip Jason Lenoury and dolly grip Richard Leko.

“There are a lot of moments in the film that I was pleased with how they turned out in the end,” Koch muses. “In one scene, Annie is with Graham Greene and his gang of merry pranksters, and they’re cooking this goose at the bottom of the Don Roadway under

the Gardiner. What follows afterwards when she leaves is creepy. Then there’s the amazing beauty of the island that Will runs off to with these amazing rocks at Killarney.” 🍷

an Indigenous fashion designer. “That was made by Lesley Hampton and was special to be able to wear, especially given the social movement where red represents missing Indigenous women. It was a serendipitous thing,” she says.

Collaborating with crew members such as veteran cinematographer Douglas Koch csc left a lasting impression on the Vancouver

resident who hails from the remote mountain village of Midway, B.C. “Anytime you get to work with somebody at that level of talent it changes you as an artist. I grow and learn in different ways,” Beatty says. “I was a big fan of his work on *Sensitive Skin*. Don has worked with Douglas before so that was also really helpful. The director and cinematographer have much more of a direct relationship

and communication on set than an actor and cinematographer, so knowing that the two of them were on the same page was great. The look and feel of a movie is so contingent on the cinematography, so to feel like you are in really good hands is very freeing as an actor. The way Douglas set the tone with the whole camera crew was very clear and masterful every step of the way. •