

# FALLS AROUND HER

## Ray Dumas CSC Embraces Mother Nature

**S**hooting *Falls Around Here* in Atikameksheng Anishnawbek First Nation and Sudbury was a homecoming for Ray Dumas CSC (*The Cello*). "I was born in Sudbury, and the theme of the film is somebody who left their hometown and comes back; that was one of the reasons why I wanted to do it," the cinematographer says. "I took it on as an opportunity to go back to my roots and also learn about a community that I lived beside but never knew much about. When I take on a project, one of the first things that I ask myself is, 'Am I going to learn anything?'"

The drama, written, directed and produced by Darlene Naponse (*Every Emotion Costs*), stars Tantoo Cardinal as world famous singer Mary Birchbark, who attempts to reconnect with nature and her community by returning to the reserve she had left behind. "I love working with a writer-director because they're so intimately involved with the script and there's no guessing where everything is coming from," Dumas says. "The bigger challenge is working with a writer-director-producer combination because sometimes when things are getting down to the wire, the director's hat gets replaced by the producer's hat, and those two roles are diametrically opposed. It's an enormous task for anybody to take on that many responsibilities, but Darlene handled it phenomenally well."

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By Trevor Hogg, Special to *Canadian Cinematographer*

Photos courtesy of The Film Farm

Tantoo Cardinal as Mary Birchbark in *Falls Around Here*.



Top and bottom: DP Ray Dumas csc and cast and crew shoot a snowy scene.

Born in Atikameksheng Anishnawbek, Ontario, Naponse was intimately familiar with her surroundings and wanted to capture the experience that she had growing up. "Darlene had primarily verbal descriptions of what the environment was going to be, and then there were curveballs that came along with it too," Dumas explains. "The film was originally intended to be shot in the fall colours and the title was going to be *Leaves Fall Around Her*. However, due to the typical pitfalls that you encounter in independent filmmaking, like budgeting and scheduling issues, we ended up shooting in the early spring instead. It made for a different tone. Despite spring in Sudbury being challenging in terms of the weather patterns, it turned out for the best."

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The cinematographer and filmmaker went through the script together deciding on what scenes were going to be day, night, interior or exterior. "Everything tends to change dramatically on a production that is depending on a tight schedule and a lot of exteriors. We had to be adaptable almost to a ridiculous degree. There were shooting days where it would start off in a full snowstorm, turn to freezing rain and then go to sun and cloud," Dumas says.

"This was a single-camera shoot so we spent a lot of time developing a language where scenes could be done on the move and as longer single-take shots when possible. When more characters were involved then we would fall back on more traditional coverage," he explains. Having a seasoned actress like Cardinal enabled the production to take full advantage of the background setting with the continuous long takes. "The addition of movement in landscape photography is important in my style, so we utilized a lot of handheld. I did Steadicam as well. I tried to keep things moving all of the time," he says.

Dumas arrived in Sudbury three weeks before the commencement of principal photography. The shooting schedule was tight – 21 days over the course of a month and a week. "What's impressive is that when watching the film you'll swear that Mary goes from the depths of winter to the beginning of a beautiful spring. It worked out quite beautifully

for the story," he observes.

*Falls Around Her* was shot on the ARRI ALEXA Mini, with camera equipment provided by Sim Digital. "I have some modified Cooke Mini S4s 18 mm to 100 mm, and then we carried a zoom as well," Dumas states. "I chose the lenses in terms of what showed off the landscape. For portraiture, I was using the 50 mm and 75 mm a lot." Lighting and grip equipment were supplied by PS Equipment Services. "The only augmentation from the exterior perspective was a bounce light or the addition of a source for night shooting. But it was kept as simple as possible. We did magic hour, sunrises and sunsets to full effect with scheduling so we could capture as many as we could. We carried one 18K that would act as the sun when needed. For interiors, if I wasn't able to do it entirely with practical lighting, such as fire or candles or lamps, I would supplement with small fixtures," he says. Key crew members were gaffer Sean Hearn, key grip Craig Coupal, 1st assistant camera Brent Craig, 2nd assistant camera Bradley A. Trudeau, camera trainee Ashley Binette, DIT James



Spurling, drone operator Ryan Mariotti and colourist Dave Muscat at Deluxe Toronto.

"To capture *ARRIRAW* is not in fashion, as Log C ends up being so good," Dumas notes. "We shot 3.2K, and this film was finished and pushed through in record time. We completed principal photography in May of 2018, the editing and colouring happened quickly, and *Falls Around Her* had its world premiere at the 2018 Toronto International Film Festival," he says, adding that the aspect ratio for the project was 1.85:1. "We wanted a wider aspect ratio because it was going to be shown on projected screens and you can get more nature into the shot." Not everything was ground based with the photography. Underwater footage was captured by Naponse. "The aerial shots were done on a drone using 4K DJI camera and it added a ton of atmosphere," Dumas notes. "Our shooting ratio was quite reasonable. We were averaging probably three to five takes."

Locations were chosen for spiritual and practical reasons. "The one scene that was going to be filmed in Toronto ended up being shot in downtown Sudbury, but the vast majority of the principal photography was in Atikameksheng Anishnawbek," Dumas states. "The only thing that made the scouting challenging was the vast amount of land that there was. The primary focus was the cabin that Mary moves into, and we ended up choosing a remote location that took our crew hours to get in and out of every day. By the spring thaw, it became almost impossible to come in and out of. There were arguments at one point over whether or not we should build the interiors



Top: Tantoo Cardinal as a world famous singer.  
Middle: Director Darlene Naponse and Dumas on location.  
Bottom: Actors Tantoo Cardinal and Johnny Issaluk.

elsewhere, but Darlene felt that to capture the essence of her vision – which was someone reconnecting – we had to get out to that spot. It started off we could get there in 4x4 trucks, and by the end, the only thing that would get us in and out were six-wheel amphibious vehicles called Argos. We finished the shoot by coming in and out of the set covered in mud. You would never know the hardships by looking at the film. The cabin looks like a serene and peaceful place, but it was like a warzone.”

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An extension was added to the pivotal setting that was essentially a shack converted into a rustic cabin by production designers Mercedes Cueto and Diana Magnus. “The original design was so small it would have been difficult to get more than four or five people in,” Dumas reveals. “It was like a 12 by 12 room. After some discussion and collaboration, we spent the time and money to build an extra wing onto it to allow for more camera angles and useable space. It would have been too difficult. They did a wonderful job in that respect.” Special attention went into the set details. “Normally, in film you would use your fireplace with special effects and natural gas, but for the feeling of authenticity we heated it with actual wood,” he says, adding that a custom lighting rig was devised. “We built an extensive firelight rig into the ceiling that would give the cabin an automatic nighttime feel.”

Mother Nature had a significant role in determining the various lighting schemes. “Because of the numerous exteriors, we had to embrace whatever nature would give us and try to augment rather than improve it,” Dumas says.

“By that I mean if we showed up and the day was going to be overcast, then I wouldn’t try to make it look sunny by bringing out the 18K. We would go with that clouded look and try to make it look even more overcast and oppressive and let that work thematically for the scene. Introducing graduated filters, playing off of the textures in the clouds, those were all things that were done intentionally.”

The theme of reconnecting with nature meant going for a naturalistic look for the colour palette. “It was taking what was given to us by Mother Nature and exploiting it to its best potential in terms of the colour grade. On set I used one general LUT and we tailored the grade for each scene,” Dumas recalls. The cinematographer has not forgotten about the original medium in which he began his career. “Having come from film, I’m always in my mind trying to take the digital image towards the look of emulsion. We did have to tone down and soften the aerial footage from the drone, which was so crisp and hyperreal that it was jarring,” he says.

*Falls Around Her*, which was released commercially this year, was shot chronologically as much as possible. “Shooting the violence was the most difficult part of the principal photography because by then we had all grown to love the character of Mary,” Dumas reveals. “We brought in stunt and fight coordinators, and when choreographing this elaborate violent scene, it was decided to be too much. We toned down our fight scene considerably and it was the right amount of jeopardy.”

Cast alongside Cardinal were Tina Keeper, Gail Maurice, Johnny Issaluk, Rob Stewart, J.D. Nicholson and Hope McGregor. “It was a dream. They were wonderful people, and I’m much richer for this experience, having gotten to live and experience their community, which was entirely supportive in so many ways,” Dumas muses. The closing sequence is a memorable cinematic moment. “The shot that I’m excited about is when Mary finds herself and you can see the light shining out of her; that was remarkable,” he says. 🍷

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