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Crooked Arrows

Abstract

This is a film review of *Crooked Arrows* (2012), directed by Steve Rash.

Author Notes

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Crooked Arrows (2012), directed by Steve Rash, tells the story of Joe Logan, a mixed-blood Native American from a fictional northeast USA Indian tribe (the Sunaquat), who is alienated from his tribe and family, but who is forced to reckon with them when the casino developer he works for asks him to wrangle permission from the tribe to expand the current casino into a luxury resort. Meeting resistance from the elders, Logan gets permission to expand the casino only if he reexamines his heart to the satisfaction of his father. Knowing that Logan had been a star prep-school lacrosse player in high school, and also that Logan had left the game after a disgraceful final prep-school game, his father assigns him the task of coaching a ragtag local reservation team. The reconnection to the game is intended to reconnect Joe to his Native American heritage and, perhaps, convince him not to expand the casino.

For American Indians from the Iroquois Confederacy (located mostly in New York state and southern Ontario), lacrosse is more than just a sport; it is the Creator's Game, a medicine, which, when played in the right spirit, becomes a vehicle for people to reconnect with the world and become whole again. We see this in the opening scene, an imaginative sequence that shows one of the reservation players playing the game as it was played in the past between two different nations. Sometimes called "little brother of war," the game could be used to solve problems in the community or between two different nations. Everyone worked together to play. Even now, the spirit of the games lives with every Native in the community; if they don't play, they support it. Thus, for these communities, lacrosse is one of the purest forms of connection with the Creator that everyone can take part in. Those who just see *Crooked Arrows* as a sports film could miss this perspective. And yet, the film is not just about the Creator's Game. As viewers, we learn this when the opening sequence ends with a hard check, and the player is called back to the reality of his team's impending loss.

This check, and the movement between the game of the past and the current game, is important because it seems to suggest that the two games do not mix. In this, the film recalls the story of the Two-Row Wampum, a story that describes a spiritual dilemma that still speaks to many Native Americans today. The story tells how a native cannot live in one canoe while his foot is in another, as one river flows faster than the other. At some point a choice must be made about what way of life to live; does one live in the past or live in today's world?

As if to exemplify the story of the Two-Row Wampum, *Crooked Arrows* has its own inner conflict: should the film treat lacrosse as a medicine, or simply as a sport? Does it rescue the Creator's Game from the hands of prep school "lax bros" (those for whom attachment to the game hides elite status beneath an otherwise laid back or irresponsible attitude) or does it appeal to them by allowing them to appropriate the Native tradition as their own (as the on-line publicity says, "Join the Tribe.")? With nods to lacrosse as the Creator's Game, *Crooked Arrows* primarily throws its lot in with the sports film genre. With easily recognizable riffs on classic "bad team makes good" sports films (*The Bad News Bears*, *The Mighty Ducks*, *Slapshot*), it also rehashes familiar sports redemption films (*Rocky*, *Karate Kid*, *The Rookie*) in which a mainstream Anglo concept of believing in oneself helps one transcend perceived limits. It seasons that mix with lacrosse "eye candy" like behind-the-back passes, hard checks and hundred-mile-per-hour shots; and it throws in stereotypical tropes about Indian spirituality and reservation life. At the same time, it is not fair to dismiss the film as simply the "lax bro's" fantasy. The film does focus on the game for its own sake: an on-line interview with the director makes clear a conscious decision to cast lacrosse players, and then teach them how to act, rather than to cast actors and teach them how to play lacrosse. Many cast members were drawn from Indian communities in New York state, and the filmmakers partnered with the Onondaga Nation

in making the film. And it also does show the game as a medicine; it does show something of the importance of the game to the Native American community; it does show the communal aspect of the game (in which everyone on the reservation shows up to watch the games, win or lose, and communal interaction is as important as the win or loss). Finally, it does show a community healed, and empowered, by the game. In the end, the problem is simply that the film is unsure about which canoe in which to live, and in reflecting that dilemma, the film speaks truth and is worth watching.

In a secondary way, the film is also the story of contemporary lacrosse and should be of interest to anyone acquainted with the sport. Joe Logan is alienated from his native background, but the team is also victim to its circumstances. It is not only that the team plays poorly, but rather that they get humiliated when playing ... humiliated at the hands of prep-school boys with the all of the right equipment, coaching and facilities. This is classic alienation: stripped of your own sacred possession, then beaten by it. And it is not just a fiction of the film: as lacrosse grows as a sport, it will continually have to wrestle with its mixed origins. It was born the Creator's Game, but it has been transformed into its current form through colleges, high schools, prep schools and, ultimately, professionalization. Some people feel that the game has become polluted with the idea of the "lax bro." Following media attention given to lacrosse in the Duke rape trial and the UVA murder trial, some people think that all lacrosse players drink, do drugs, and party all the time. This movie brings to light that lacrosse is more than just this. It shows the game has spirit and heart to a group of people. The film shows that, even now, for some people lacrosse is not just about playing the game, but also about honoring the Creator the way he wanted us to.

Though struggling with its own version of the Two-Row Wampum problem, *Broken Arrows* shows lacrosse as a central part of life in Native communities in New York and southern Ontario. It is accessible for students, fun to watch and, even when it does not intend to, provokes profound questions about spirituality, appropriation of traditions, and the many meanings of a game.