



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 18 | Issue 1

Article 18

2-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

McDavid, Jodi (2014) "Drunktown's Finest," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/18>

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Drunktown's Finest

Abstract

This is a film review of *Drunktown's Finest* (2013), directed by Sydney Freeland.

Author Notes

Jodi McDavid is an instructor in Folklore and Gender & Women's Studies at Cape Breton University. She earned her BA at St. Thomas University (New Brunswick) and her MA and PhD from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her PhD dissertation was on anticlericalism in folk and popular culture. Her current research interests include vernacular religion, the folklore and folklife of children and adolescents, and gender and women's studies.

Drunktown's Finest
(2013)
Directed by Sydney Freeland
NEXT



Writer/Director Sydney Freeland

chose to create this dramatic film in response to a 20/20 news report about "Drunktown U.S.A.", a Navajo reservation in Gallup, New Mexico. The film centres on "Sick Boy," (compellingly played by

Jeremiah Bitsui) a young First Nations man who is at a crossroads. The inertia of reservation life is holding him back, but his new responsibilities as a guardian for his sister and father propel him forward. Felixia, a transgendered granddaughter of the local Medicine Man, suffers from similar tensions; her desires for acceptance push her outside of the reservation, but we're not sure at what cost.

A lack of available money, work, or emotional support and a history of alcohol abuse create a web of circumstances that are almost impossible for our characters to escape. As one character says in the film's opening, "They say this isn't a place to live, it's a place to leave... so why do people stay?" This question is explored throughout the film as we see what it takes for the characters to break free from the seemingly insurmountable oppressiveness of their situations. At the same time, we meet Nizhoni, a young woman who is struggling to find her roots and get back to the reservation.

The one opportunity for personal growth and security shown in the film is through native spirituality. This is illustrated best by the Medicine Man and his wife, Ruth. We watch as Max, Sick Boy's sister, embarks on her puberty rites with the help of these characters. But even this is

problematic: as with any rite of passage, it draws family together and shows where there are unmet expectations and rifts.

The film plunges us into the reality of the characters, to the point where we are hopeful that they will escape, despite the risks associated with trying to leave the reserve. Felixia (the transgender youth) is totally accepted by her grandparents. This character could be better developed, though, as we see her engage in prostitution--no doubt to pay for her gender reassignment surgery--but we're left to assume this. As the film progresses, Felixia takes some risks in order to leave the reservation, possibly for good. At this point we do not feel that concerned about her, as the level of risk she is engaging in is less than the unhappiness she may feel if she does nothing and remains on the reserve.

Spirituality provides strength for many of the characters. Sick Boy learns how to be a family tradition-bearer from his girlfriend and the Medicine Man, and at the same time, turns away from bad decisions. Nizhoni, who is looking for her birth parents, has a spiritual dream which leads to her reunion with her family.

Despite some of the subject matter, *Drunktown's Finest* is hopeful, and does not take us into the depths of despair, although the threat is there. There are strong female characters surrounding the character of Sick Boy. We see Max (the young girl) seeking traditional rites and learning more about her spirituality and traditions through her rites and language. Ultimately, the film is hopeful and a good depiction of many facets of Native American spirituality.

— Jodi McDavid