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Searchers (Maliglutit) has mythic intensity

Zacharias Kunuk's Arctic-set reworking of the John Ford classic is immediate and compelling

BY **NORMAN WILNER**, JANUARY 18, 2017 1:51 PM



SEARCHERS (Zacharias Kunuk). 94 minutes. Subtitled. Opens Friday (January 20). See [listing](#). Rating: **NNNN**

Zacharias Kunuk's *Searchers (Maliglutit)* arrives fresh from its screenings in Canada's Top Ten Film Festival and bearing two major Canadian Screen Award nominations for best picture and best original screenplay.

It also opens in the middle of a weirdly warm January, which kind of works against its Arctic brutality. This *Searchers* is an experience best served cold.

A striking reinterpretation of John Ford's classic 1956 western, the story has been relocated from the American West to the frozen North. And, of course, it's told from a radically different perspective.



Set in 1913, Searchers follows an Inuk man named Kuanana (Benjamin Kunuk) who returns from a hunt to discover his village has been raided and his wife and daughter abducted. Assembling a small posse of fellow hunters, Kuanana sets out to rescue his family or avenge them, depending on what he finds.

The material is culturally relevant and the mirror-image storytelling ingenious. But this would be little more than a thought experiment if the filmmaking weren't so immediate and compelling.

As in his breakthrough epic Atanarjuat, Kunuk – working once again with co-director Natar Ungalaaq and co-editor Norman Cohn – uses the tundra to powerful effect in expansive widescreen frames that dwarf his characters amidst their merciless environment. An opening track from Tanya Tagaq sets an eerie tone of lurking malice. Dialogue is minimal, and faces are shrouded within fur hoods or hidden behind beards caked with ice. Motivation is simple: survive or die.

Indeed, in its last third Searchers is almost a silent film, its images packed with almost mythic intensity. It's taking place 100 years ago, but it could just as easily be 1,000.

Tags Natar Ungalaaq, Maliglutit, Benjamin Kunuk, Zacharias Kunuk, NNNN 2017



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