

Quiet drama finds beauty in the North

QUEBEC-NUNAVUT CO-PRODUCTION OFFERS IMPRESSIONISTIC VIEW OF THE 1950S

By: Jill Wilson

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This quiet film is based on Manitoba writer Gabrielle Roy's novel *La rivière sans repos* (or *Windflower* in English) and set in northern Quebec's Nunavik region.

The story opens in 1945, at the tail end of the Second World War. American GIs are stationed at Fort Chimo (now known as Kuujuaq), a Hudson's Bay Company outpost at the mouth of the Koksoak River.

Elsa (Malaya Qaunirq Chapman) is a smiley-faced young Inuk woman who loves attending movies in town with her friends. She catches the eye of a blue-eyed soldier, whose flirtation leads to violation.

The resulting pregnancy wipes the joy out of Elsa's eyes, but when she gives birth to a blond, blue-eyed son she calls Jimmy, her family embraces him, and her sunny disposition returns.

However, she is torn about how to raise her between-two-worlds child. Influenced by Mme. Beaulieu (Magalie Lépine Blondeau), for whom she works cleaning house and babysitting, at first she adopts a white woman's style of parenting, diapering Jimmy, putting him in a playpen and dressing him in store-bought clothes. Her mother Winnie (Taqriliq Partridge) disapproves, but she also doesn't want Elsa raising him on the land.

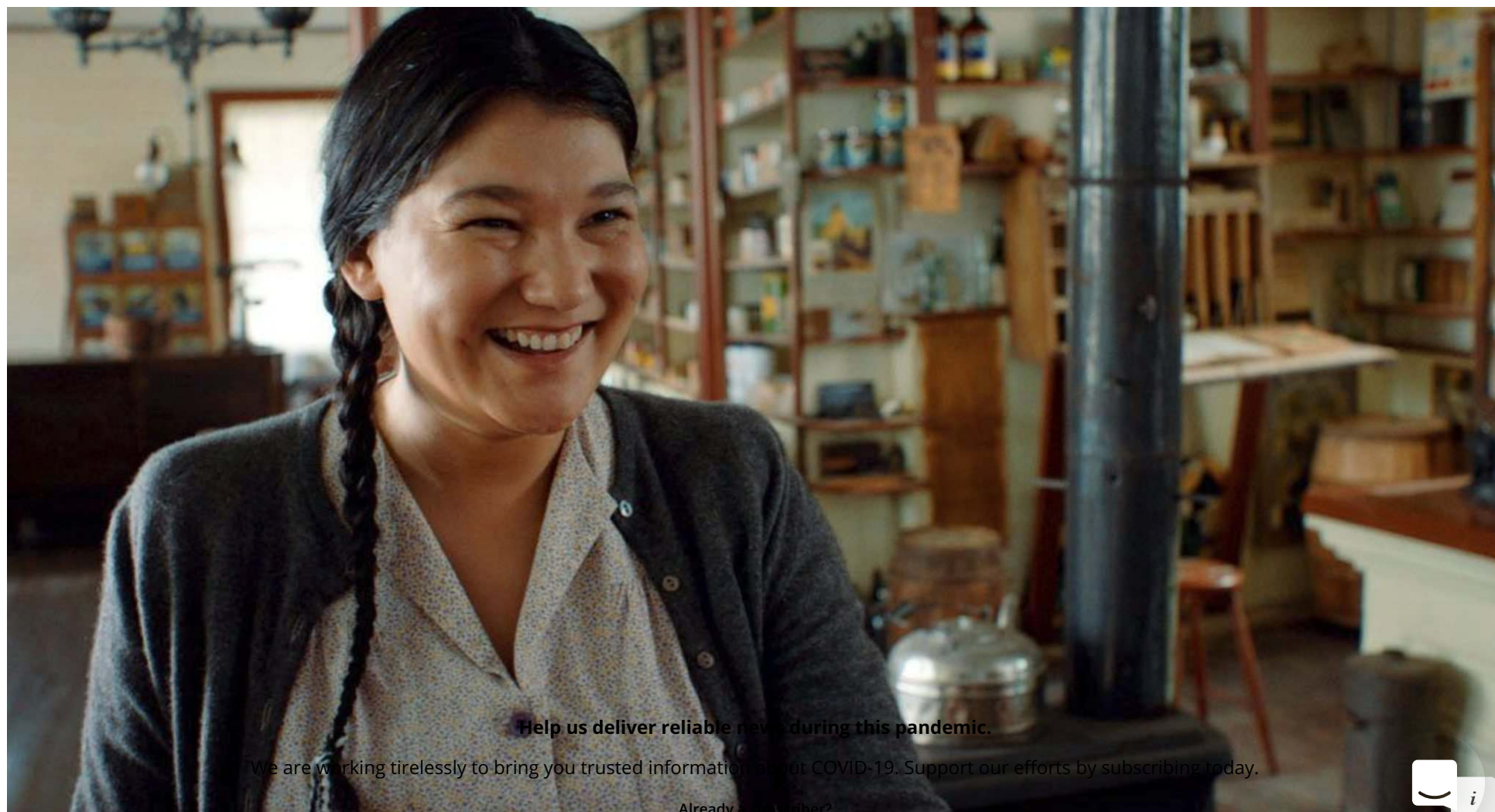
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With charming period detail, the film — in English and Inuktitut (with subtitles) — captures a pivotal time in Inuit history, when people were torn between the old ways and the new, and when white culture was beginning to dominate.

Elsa's parents were born on a remote camp; they have since moved into a humble cabin that is still lit by a qulliq, or oil lamp, but they use it to read comic books or hymnals the kindly pastor brings them. Her father still hunts and fishes but they also buy groceries at the HBC store.



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The Beaulieus treat her well, but they have little respect for her culture or her personal life.

When Elsa meets Isaki (Etua Snowball), her father's cousin, she is tempted by his lifestyle. Isaki considers her father a slave, beholden to the idea of money and belongings, while he is free, providing for himself the way his people have done for centuries.

Co-writers/directors Marie-Hélène Cousineau and Madeline Ivalu (who also stars as Elsa's grandmother) are better with silence than they are with dialogue. Roy is a poetic writer, but the characters' exchanges here are mostly cursory and stilted; the acting could kindly be called naturalistic (Chapman is lovely to watch, and there are faces full of character), but it's often just wooden.

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The sense of place in this Quebec-Nunavut co-production is where the poetry comes in. The camera lingers on winter landscapes so bereft of colour they could be sketched in pen and ink, and finds beauty in the bright dresses of girls set against the brief greens of summer and the low-burning hues of fall that are so specific to the region.

Elsa's time with the taciturn but kind Isaki doesn't romanticize the traditional way of life but shows us its appeal, allows us to wonder at the comforts that can be wrested from such a barren-seeming landscape (though her eventual romantic relationship with him is bound to make viewers uncomfortable).

As an impressionistic view of 1950s life in the North, *Restless River* is endlessly watchable, but when it comes to telling a story, the film is frustrating. There are too many pregnant pauses that reveal nothing, too many time-jumps that leave character development in the dirt, too many scenes that have been designed with significance but go nowhere.

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It's not often you want more tell and less show, but more insight into Elsa's mindset would be welcome. Though her past and that of her son are shaped inexorably by the forces of white influence, she's far from passive. By the film's end,

however, we're left wondering if she's found contentment or is merely resigned to her fate.

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Jill Wilson writes about culture and the culinary arts for the Arts & Life section.

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MOVIE REVIEW**Restless River**

Starring Malaya Qaunirq Chapman

Cinematheque, to Oct. 19

★★★ out of five

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