

MAKING CONTACT: WORKING WITH THE WHITE MOUNTAIN APACHE ON *INDIAN SUMMER*

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This article is a chronicle of my experience working with a group of Apache actors and cultural experts on the production of a feature-length narrative entitled *Indian Summer*.¹ Although this story is primarily personal and anecdotal, some of it may be of interest to other producers seeking to collaborate with individuals from cultural backgrounds different from their own.

When I moved to Tucson in 1987, I noticed something that never seemed so present in other environments. I know now that in this one respect Tucson is no different from any of the cities in which I have spent significant time. Tucson stands on what was once American Indian land, as do El Paso, Austin, and Chicago. But in each of those cities, some more acceptable element of myth has grown over the story of the natives. Not so in Tucson, where the myth of the American Indians of the Southwest pervades the city. Yet, after a year there, I had never come in contact with native people in my classes, among my university colleagues, or in the fairly middle-class neighborhood I had moved into. I became interested in working on a film with native Americans as a way to meet and get to know native people.

Preproduction

I began by admitting that I had very little reliable knowledge of native people. And from my ignorance sprang fear. I was afraid

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of attempting to represent what I did not know. I was afraid of somehow participating in the exploitation of an oppressed group. And because I did not know them, I was afraid of the people themselves, of their difference and of how they would react to me as a white male of privilege. I knew that to overcome these fears, I had to educate myself. And although I sensed that the best education would come from spending time on a reservation, I did not feel comfortable making contact with individuals there until I had completed significant library research.

Background Research

I read a great deal about the Apache, including some history, anthropology, folklore, and information about the contemporary economy and sociology on the reservation. The work of Keith Basso, a linguistic anthropologist, proved to be the most productive, giving me a sense of the environment. His *Western Apache Witchcraft*, concerning the use of traditional healing rituals versus modern medical practices, was especially useful in my scripting. His discussion of the grammar of the Apache language in *Western Apache Language and Culture* helped me to glimpse the underlying worldview of the Apache that their language represents. In addition, the extensive quotes in his books gave me a sense of Apache spoken English, rhythm, cadence, and word choice, which helped with writing dialogue. I also spent some time examining Edgar Perry's *Western Apache Dictionary*.

A second and equally important part of the research was investigating motion picture representations of the Apache and of native Americans generally. Gretchen Bataille's

The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies helped identify films that had a reputation as being "positive" representations. I also looked for films with contemporary representations, but in 1989 there were very few.

Scripting and the Initial Contact

The first draft of the script was based only on library research. At that point it became clear that personal meetings, interviews, and observation would be required to represent the Apache people, their culture, and the landscape. To identify whom to contact on the reservation and the proper way to initiate contact, I interviewed other professional non-Apache people who had interacted with the Apache. Keith Basso gave me the name of an Apache university student in Tucson. The staff of the Arizona Historical Society and other media producers suggested contacting Edgar Perry, director of the White Mountain Apache Cultural Center in Fort Apache, Arizona, identified as a "bridge" individual or cultural ambassador who had extensive knowledge of Apache culture and language and experience explaining them to non-Apaches.

My initial meeting with Mr. Perry took place over lunch at the motel restaurant in Whiteriver, the largest town on the White Mountain Reservation. I had mailed my script to him in advance and was interested in his feedback on the construction of the story and the Apache characters. I invited Edgar to guide the representation of the traditional Apache ceremonies, as a consultant and in the role of Nolen, the Apache healer. Edgar agreed and was very willing to educate me about the culture and the language and to suggest a number of elements to work into the story. His decision to participate also gave a certain credibility to the undertaking. I was able to secure a \$1,000 grant from the Arizona Humanities Council to cover Edgar's consultant fees.

What I did not know, and did not know even to ask, is that Edgar Perry is Christian. And

while he is respected on the reservation for his work as a cultural conservator, he is not a practitioner of traditional Apache ways. Edgar's extensive knowledge of Apache culture played a key role in the making of *Indian Summer*. At the same time, his participation limited the possibility of working officially with the tribe, since the tribal council might have questioned the authenticity of having Edgar in the role of a traditional healer.

Casting and Rehearsals

When I went to cast the lead Apache roles, I was fortunate that a local producer, John Crouch, had worked with two excellent actors in his production *Apache Mountain Spirits*.² After seeing his tape, I contacted Midnite Ethelbah and Mike Minjarez about working on *Indian Summer*. Again, I sent a letter and a script and followed this with a phone call and then a personal meeting. As in my meeting with Edgar, I tried to emphasize that I wanted to work together as collaborators and that I would be relying on them for their ideas about representing their culture, both contemporary and traditional. Midnite contributed a great deal to my understanding of how to develop and deepen the character of Grant by relating elements of the story to his own life, and he and Mike and Edgar often interpreted some academic information that I had read in an anthropology paper into an example from lived experience.

All of the supporting Apache roles except one required the ability to speak Apache. Casting for these roles was especially difficult. Ultimately, one part was cut out and one changed to an English-only part because native actors who were also native speakers were never discovered for them.

The most difficult role to cast was that of the mother. Finding an elderly Apache woman willing to act in the film was not especially difficult, but almost all the women who might have been cast were uneasy with the



Oppressed by his well-meaning but overbearing father, Sal (Caesar Del Trecco), 16-year-old Kyle (Caleb Smith) would rather dream than work. Surrounded by the waste and carnage of his father's junkyard, Kyle builds a motorcycle from scavenged parts and escapes to the open road and freedom. Photo by David Sabal © 1992.

content. Three actors who agreed to participate changed their minds after learning that they would have to portray a character who dies. A compromise of sorts was reached with Judy Verdugo, the actress who appears in the finished piece, when I assured her that I would not film her dying or being dead. In fact, she was not even on the set during the filming of the scene in which her character dies.

Once the casting was completed, rehearsals began. I thought it was especially important for the two lead actors, Midnite, who plays Grant, and 15-year-old Caleb Smith, who plays Kyle, a non-Apache character, to interact before production began. A rehearsal was set up on the reservation for just the two of them, which was really nothing more than a read-through and discussion of the characters. The time spent working together helped to establish a common goal and allowed the actors to develop

trust. In addition, Caleb got a chance to see the reservation, which was an important educational element in the development of his role.

More important than any rehearsal in developing a spirit of trust and collaboration was a potluck brunch for the full cast and crew on the day before shooting began. It had become evident that the Apache had had a lot of interaction with white people, but very few of the crew—mostly white, mostly students—had interacted with native people.

This party allowed the white crew to get a sense of the Apache as real individuals and to let go of their projections and assumptions about what the Apache would be like. Some students, for instance, assumed that the native actors would display a bitterness or distrust of all white people and were antimaterial and antitechnology. Other stu-



Besides helping to explain Apache traditions during production of *Indian Summer* (released as *Escape to White Mountain*), Midnite Ethelbah plays Grant, who rescues Kyle when his bike breaks down in the desert. Grant is returning to the White Mountain Apache Reservation to participate in a healing ceremony for his dying mother. Photo by David Sabal © 1992.

dents held on to the image of the Apache as “noble savages” who were more spiritually enlightened and attuned to nature than white people. It is fair to say that there was a great deal of excitement mixed with anxiety about the cross-cultural dimension of the production. Because of the informal socializing that had taken place at the party, the Apache actors seemed to be more comfortable on the set, since they were not seen as oddities or curiosities but simply as other contributors to the project.

Production

Even though many discussions took place during preproduction about the Apache language and how to represent different elements of the culture and ceremonies, much of the actual decision making took place on the set as Edgar, Midnite, Mike, and Judy discussed and subsequently arrived at an agreement about how a line

should be said or a movement made or what song should be sung.

Authenticity

Generally, Edgar designed most of the sets used during the Apache ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge and the windbreak, and supervised construction. He also supplied many props for the scenes depicting these ceremonies. Good communication between Edgar and the art director about sets, props, and wardrobe was required so that appropriate materials could be gathered. This communication needed to be extended to Mike, Judy, and Midnite in order to achieve consensus among the Apache actors.

For example, in a scene in which Grant hires Nolen to sing for his mother, as is traditional, Grant initiates the transaction by handing Nolen an eagle feather. Edgar had brought a turkey feather dyed to look like

an eagle feather, and when we began to rehearse on-set, Midnite would not use the turkey feather. We had to find an actual eagle feather to proceed with shooting. We could not simply run out and buy one. Eagles are a protected species; unless one is a member of a native tribe and a participant in traditional ceremonies, it is illegal to possess eagle feathers. Fortunately, Midnite supplied the eagle feather hanging from the rear-view mirror of his truck, but this was a breast feather rather than a wing or a tail feather—so a particular look of authenticity was sacrificed in the name of authenticity. The best way to avoid these kinds of conflicts was by promoting communication among the Apache actors, since all of them were invested in the representation of their culture.

Language

Featuring the Apache language in *Indian Summer* was certainly one reason all of the Apache actors were interested in getting involved. At the all-cast read-through, one non-Apache actor asked me what was important about *Indian Summer*. Edgar answered: "In a hundred years, no one will be speaking the Apache language. Every record of it will be important."

Since the script was written in English, the translation into Apache was usually handled by the actors appearing in the scene. They would work out the dialogue, rehearse it, and tell me when they were ready to perform.

Once I had completed a rough cut, I worked with Edgar to translate the Apache back into English for subtitles. The subtitles, it seems, communicate what is being said, but lost in the process is a great deal of the subtle meaning of the Apache language. For example, when Nolen sees Kyle for the first time, the line "He looks like trouble" ends up being an enormous understatement. The line draws a huge laugh from Apache-speaking viewers, who tell me that there is

simply no way to convey the idea in English. Clearly, Edgar, Midnite, Mike, and Judy chose their readings artfully, knowing how to evoke responses in an Apache audience and leaving an important example of the Apache language for future generations.

Ceremonies

The representation of the Apache ceremonies posed special challenges. Actual healing ceremonies are specific to the illness being treated and participation is limited to the family, so knowing what kind of ceremony to re-create was difficult. Here I relied on Edgar to set the general parameters and then communicate with the other Apache actors to achieve consensus. The Apache are fairly open with their ceremonies, and while there was no special concern for secrecy, there was a general concern that the ceremonies be represented respectfully.

Midnite, whose father is a traditional healer, was especially concerned that the ceremonial cycle being filmed was completed. In Apache ceremonies, songs are sung in sets of four. The story time of the film could not accommodate a four-song cycle, however, so only one or two songs were usually sung. Allowing song cycles to be completed after shooting the scenes eased discomfort and was a way to show respect for the Apache actors and their religious practice. Similarly, after the scene outside the sweat lodge was filmed, the Apache cast insisted that the director and assistant director join them in a short four-song sweat bath to complete the ceremony. Another example of this respectfulness was the decision not to subtitle the Apache songs.

Creating a Good Working Environment

Separate from questions of representation was the issue of how best to provide a good working environment in Tucson for the Apache from the reservation. Several situations evolved during production that I had

not considered during preproduction planning. Loneliness and isolation became an issue for Mike, Midnite, and Edgar, who had traveled about 250 miles to Tucson for production and, because rooms were donated, were staying at different motels. Putting them up at one hotel would have helped to reduce their feelings of isolation.

It had also seemed like a good idea to encourage Mike, Midnite, and Edgar to come onto the set during production, even if they were not needed for the entire day. My sense was that they preferred to be part of the group rather than on their own in town. This decision had a potentially destructive downside, however, since a fair amount of cast and crew socializing took place after hours, and Mike and Midnite were showing signs of exhaustion just a few days into the shoot.

What improved the environment most dramatically for Mike, Midnite, and Edgar was having their families with them. On the days that provisions were made to bring family members to the set, attitudes were more positive, the boredom on the set was reduced, and preparation improved. The Easter Sunday shoot turned into a very large cookout, with extended family and friends coming from the reservation and joining up with the production group. The necessary film work was accomplished almost effortlessly, and I remember this as one of the easiest and happiest production days for the entire cast and crew.

Transformation

In the years since shooting was completed, I have been back and forth to the reservation many times. I have been to gigs with Midnite's band, Apache Spirit; I have gone swimming in Diamond Creek with Mike and Midnite and his family; I have participated in the sunrise ceremony of Midnite's daughter Amanda; and I have screened *Indian Summer* as a benefit for the Apache community center. As a result of my work on

Indian Summer, I have made some good friends on the reservation.

Making contact across cultural boundaries is full of uncertainties for all participants. Recognizing and addressing these uncertainties is a special responsibility that comes with the privilege of creating a representation of a culture different than one's own. In the case of *Indian Summer*, the process of cross-cultural collaboration was successful in uniting different people from different cultures in a common purpose.

Notes

¹ Subsequent to the production of *Indian Summer*, Buena Vista released a film with the same title. To avoid confusion, Stardance Entertainment retitled my film *Escape to White Mountain* for home video release.

² John Crouch, *Apache Mountain Spirits* (1985), Silvercloud Video Productions. I believe this tape is distributed by the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium. A copy is in the collection of the University of Arizona Library.

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