

Hello everyone and thank you for joining us. My name is Samuel Powless, I work for The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario, and recently had the privilege of speaking with Shelley Niro, the Kanien' kehá:ka artist who in March won the Career Achievement Award from the Ontario Arts Foundation. Our conversation centered on her 2009 film *Kissed by Lightning*, a contemporary adaptation of the story of Peacemaker, the legendary man who united five nations into the Haudenosaunee confederacy through the Kaianere' kó:wa [or, 'Great Law of Peace']. If you have not yet watched *Kissed by Lightning* I would highly recommend that you do so before reading this interview; a link to the film is above.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Samuel Powless:** Shelley, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

**Shelley Niro:** Thank you very much for asking me, Samuel.

**SP:** I'd like to begin by talking a bit about the production of the film. I know you had worked with film prior to *Kissed by Lightning*, but what drew you to take on making a feature length film?

**SN:** Well I think the story itself, the story of the Peacemaker, is such a great story. Traditionally it's told over a ten day period, and I thought there's no way I could make a film with that capacity, but I wanted to touch on the themes of the Peacemaker and what he was trying to do in his time. I was doing my MFA at Western and I read many different variations on the story, and I sort of came up with what the story was 'about'. What I came up with is that it's about looking after yourself so you can look after other people.

Tobacco is always in the stories, and tasting food, or like how to use deer in your meals. Singing is always in there —wiping away the tears of grief so you can think with a clear mind, and there was one more... so it's all the five senses. And then one of the things about the Peacemaker story is 'wiping away the tears of grief' because people from our community had been going through this huge period where everybody was in grief because so many people had died and people had perished through acts of violence against one another and through and disease. So I think that they were mentally just really unstable... and they didn't know what was going on, they couldn't really see with a good light. He came into the territory and He sort of instructed them how they could make their lives better, and wiping away the tears of grief is a really big part of that story.

So as I started working on *Kissed by Lightning*, the philosophy of the Peacemaker contributed to the story. But I didn't want it to be like *The Ten Commandments* or anything like that, I wanted it to have a contemporary setting. So I had to figure out how can I tell the story in a contemporary setting and bring all these characters into it. I always like to put artists in my film because I just believe that if you're an artist, or anybody really, if you can keep creating then you are going in the right direction, 'cause you're using your own mind to make something and hopefully it'll bring happiness to somebody else. So I created the character of Mavis, and she was an artist who lost her husband through lightning, and she didn't know how to make her life with joy, she couldn't see herself going to the next stage in her own life so, through her paintings she would remember what her husband would tell her about the Peacemaker and then she would use the stories to create these paintings.

**SP:** You painted those paintings, correct?

**SN:** Yep.

**SP:** Did you create those as you were making the film or did those come beforehand?

**SN:** I had to make them before the film, they had to be prepared so that when we shot they would be there.

**SP:** How long were you working on the film for?

**SN:** Quite a few years, I finished my MFA at Western in 1997 so I started working on the script in '99; I worked on it until about 2003 and then at that point I thought I should take it to a story editor and start finding other people to produce stuff for the film so I got an Ontario Arts Council grant, and with that I was able to pay the story editor and the soundtrack composer, because to me music is such an important part of the film. After getting that I was able to move slowly ahead – my films always seem to take so much time – I was able to find a producer, then it was about 2005 and in 2010 we shot it, so it was a long, long process.

**SP:** So *Kissed by Lightning* is almost an 'allegory' for the Peacemaker story, it's a bit more abstracted whereas the paintings seem to be a little more literal, so how did the creation of the paintings function into the production of the film?

**SN:** Well, those paintings were done so fast- some took me a day, some took me a week. I think by making the paintings it just made it more clear what Mavis was going through, you know she had to deliver these paintings for a show and so they had to sort of appear. I was just so filled with love for the Peacemaker, they came out pretty fast.

**SP:** Were you familiar with the peacemaker story before entering your MFA?

**SN:** I was. I grew up on the Six Nations Reserve so people were quite aware of the Peacemaker but I really wanted to just sit there and read as much as I could, and really try to understand what the story was about. Because before it was like 'Yeah I know that story', but I wanted to study it and find out all the little stories within that story

**SP:** So is *Kissed by Lightning* a retelling of a specific part of that narrative, or is it meant to encompass the entirety of the Peacemaker story?

**SN:** Well, I wanted it to reflect the connotation of romantic love, although it's not really about romantic love... I don't think it really reflects the Peacemaker story, although her husband dies and suddenly she's alone, and she is going through the sort of thing that our people had gone through 500 years ago, so I wanted it to be a shake-up of that theme.

**SP:** How did you decide on the actors that appear in the film? Famously you use a lot of friends and family in your work, so what was the casting process like and do any of your friends and family appear in this film?

**SN:** No! [laughs!] We went through casting agent.

**SP:** Did you have a say in that process?

**SN:** Yes I did, I had final say. It was a great process.

**SP:** I really liked Eric Schweig in the film, he does a great job. Everyone does a great job, but I really liked his performance.

**SN:** I think so too, he was really great.

**SP:** Shooting a film requires a lot of input- casting agents, story editors, musicians- but was the creation of the story as collaborative as some of your past films? I remember reading that Honey Moccasin had a lot of input from different people, was this more of a singular vision that you had?

**SN:** I think the story comes from me but it represents a certain territory of people. I didn't want to insult anyone and I wanted it to be seen by many people from many territories, but I know I wanted Iroquois people to see it and say, "This is our story" so it went through a few hands- not a lot of hands- but I wanted to get their 'OK' on the script. And that was with *Honey Moccasin* too. I had the story and I more or less just wanted approval, you know like *you're not going to be treading on anybody's toes* so after I got a few okays I thought 'Great I'm going to carry on.'

**SP:** What inspired you to take on telling this story? Like you said there a lot of different variations that exist, different tellings of the story, so why create this version?

**SN:** I think showing it in a film version is very important for this day and age 'cause we are all very modern people, we all watch TV and we all have access to different types of media. I just feel that telling Haudenosaunee stories and making it personal...

People always say, "Is that your personal story?" and I say "No it's not my personal story but I want people to relate to it in a personal way." I think that's why we're here now. Look at all the stuff we have around us, shouldn't we be using this technology?

**SP:** Absolutely. In fact I did want to share a story with you, which I can do now... years ago, maybe 2011 or 2012, when I was starting to learn more and do my own research about the Peacemaker, kind of like you did, I was reading all the books I could find and talking to my uncles and I looked up if there was a film version of this, because I really wanted to see a visual representation of this that wasn't just an illustration in an Iroqrafts book. I found out about *Kissed by Lightning*, but I could not find anywhere to watch it, which was brutal! I knew it existed and I never had the opportunity to find it, I scoured the Internet looking for it. And so when we started talking about doing a film screening [at the Gallery] our curator said we should look up something by Shelley Niro, and of course there's *Kissed by Lightning*. I was so happy to watch it and like you said you have this medium, and are able to tell the story in this way and engage people in a way that is familiar to them. So I just wanted to thank you for that because it is an excellent film and it really meant a lot.

**SN:** That is so nice, thank you.

**SP:** There are a lot of really fantastic moments in this film, but there is one scene that I want to talk more about, and that is when Mavis and Bug encounter the singers in the diner. Can you talk a bit about this scene – what it was like to shoot, and where it came from?

**SN:** You know I get asked a lot about that one particular scene, which I find kind of funny [laughs]. I had written the script and in that one part I had Mavis and Bug sitting in the restaurant, and they are kind of

giving them sideways glances, kind of being not nice to them and she reacts by throwing coffee cups. I put it in there just so it would hold a place in the script, but I never liked that. So it was really cold one day, like -30, and I thought, 'I'm going to sit here and I'm going to finish this piece of the script, today.' But then my dog was like, 'Will you take me for a walk?' and I thought "OK". So I got all dressed and went outside, took the dog for a walk and as I am walking through this cold winter day I had two memories come to me:

One of them was being at the Smithsonian in New York, and this busload of high school kids came, and a big percentage of them were black. And one kid asked me, "Are you mad?" So I say "Mad about what?" and he goes, "You know, for the history of America" and all this sort of thing. And it kind of stuck with me, but I didn't want to tell the kid, yeah I'm mad. I thought that was pretty cool.

And then another memory came from when I was living on the reserve; we were kids I must have been about 12 years old and my parents went to many churches on the reserve, they would take us all over the place – I guess it was their way of entertainment. One of these churches was a Pentecostal church, and on that day this busload of young Black kids showed up and they were so full of the Lord, singing and clapping, and they were so happy. So those memories stuck with me.

So I came back and rewrote the scene where they are sitting in the restaurant and then – we were supposed to have a busload, but we couldn't afford it – a quartet shows up and they started talking to them and everything. One of the funny things about that scene is because we were afraid of copyright and we couldn't afford to pay for a song I just said, "Sing 'Hallelujah', or 'ooh-aah', or something". But they went into their trailer and they composed that song, "Thank the Lord for the Mohawk People" because the leader comes in and goes "Wow, you're Mohawk!" [laughs] "We're just so grateful!" and all that sort of thing. So then they said, "thank you lord for the Mohawk people." It was so cool, and I was just so happy that they did that, it fit so well into the scene and we didn't have to pay copyright.

**SP:** The first time I watched that scene it felt so long because I felt like I was feeling every moment, and then when I watched it last night and I knew what was coming I realized that it is not a very long interaction, it's a relatively short scene but there is so much in there. And "Thank the Lord for the Mohawk People" is an excellent little song, I enjoyed that quite a bit [laughs].

**SN:** [laughs] I know Mohawks love it!

**SP:** I think one of the things that was so interesting to me is that as the scene begins you are expecting it to go one way- they walk in the diner and they are right next to the cigar store Indian and they are being stared down – and then these friendly faces come in and they are singing and they're jovial and they are happy as heck to see Mavis and Bug and to talk with and learn about them. And yet they still end up having some of the same misconceptions that people have about Indigenous people. But it was almost innocent, like a misreading of history on their part, and I thought it was so lovely how Mavis and Bug just gently correct them, that there isn't hostility between, they aren't offended. And I think it plays into the Peacemaker side of it, where Bug was so happy and lovely to them and there wasn't a confrontation, this misunderstanding it just sort of smoothed out.

Now this was about ten years ago, have you seen any changes in the world to the attitudes that might have informed that exchange? Or that exchange you had with the kids at the museum years ago, have you seen any changes or progression in the ways people view Indigenous peoples?

**SN:** Well I think Indigenous people are working really hard to make that change happen, and it really comes from the young artists, the young spokespeople. So I think there must be a change happening. I'm not so involved in being with young people but I know there's a lot of energy out there, a lot of positive energy. Something's got to be happening.

**SP:** I do have another questions about the production of the film: why did you decide to shoot during the wintertime? Was it a story consideration, or some other reason?

**SN:** Well, Telefilm said "If you want to have your money you need to have this shot by a certain date" and it just so happened that it was wintertime. And so, that's what we did. It was three weeks of shooting, and we went through every kind of weather during that time. We went through freezing cold, and then there were major winds- when we're in the trailer, outside there were huge windstorms happening. And then we went through a major thaw, everything got so, so muddy and rainy. I think it kind of lends itself to the story as well, you know being in winter and having to travel to New York but they have to go through all these obstacles, to try and get through that border. I think the weather really lends itself to the journey Bug and Mavis go on.

**SP:** Definitely, I felt it was kind of a quiet film, so the weather really lends to the pacing, it worked really well.

**SN:** And the scene when she is saying goodbye to Jessie, across that little creek, you know where the geese are flying? That was magic, that was like the Hand of God coming along and saying, "I'll give you some geese" [laughs].

**SP:** Yes I noticed that on my second watch, the geese flying up of the pond which I thought was perfect- couldn't have planned that better.

Do you revisit this film a lot? Or does it come and go in your life?

**SN:** It does come and go... maybe not so much now, but before it was quite a steady stream of questions.

**SP:** Is there anything else about the film that you would like to share with anyone listening? Any fun memories?

**SN:** Fun memories? [laughs] Well, we had a great crew, and we had a lot of fun. If you can have a great crew that's half the work when you're making films because like I say we were filming, there's a scene where [Bug and Mavis] are sitting in the van and you can see the snow flying sideways- it was really cold that night, super cold. If not for the spirit of the crew you'd just be like "okay let's pack up and go home now" but everybody just really hold son and sticks together and just ventures forward. They contribute, a lot.

**SP:** Did the shooting take place on Six Nations and New York, did you shoot on location?

**SN:** We shot in the Dundas Conservation Area, and some of the city stuff we shot in Hamilton. It's such a low budget film.

**SP:** I didn't feel that! I will say, having come to it very recently I felt that it was actually very polished.

**SN:** That's really good, thank you.

**SP:** That just about does it for me Shelley, thank you very much for being with us today.

**SN:** Okay Samuel, thank you for asking me.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*