



BWW Review: Inuit Throat Singer Tanya Tagaq Reclaims The False Images of NANOOK OF THE NORTH

By Michael Dale | January 19, 2016

There are times when a theatre piece goes beyond what is physically presented on the stage and the concept and intentions of the artists involved are so powerful that a complete understanding of the performance isn't necessary to hold you emotionally. Such is the case when Inuit throat singer Tanya Tagaq creates a soundscape that reclaims nearly 100-year-old images on behalf of those who came before her.

Like D.W. Griffith's 1915 silent epic *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 silent documentary *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* is considered both a landmark work of filmmaking and an embarrassing display of early 20th Century racism.

A prospector by trade, Flaherty got the idea to extensively film the Inuit people of northern Quebec while exploring the area for the Canadian Pacific Railway. The footage he shot from 1914-15 was almost completely destroyed by a fire caused by a cigarette, so, after raising the money to return and reshoot, he arrived again in 1920.

This time his aim was to add a narrative by focusing on a year in the life of the hunter Allakariallak, who he renamed Nanook, and his wife, who was played by a woman who wasn't his wife.

With titles that described the Inuit people as simple, kind and happy-go-lucky, the director staged scenes like a visit to a white merchant's trading post where Nanook displays a child-like fascination with a gramophone, and a walrus hunt where the men used harpoons instead of their usual rifles.



Tagaq's performance, as part of the Public Theater's Under The Radar Festival, begins with the singer describing her embarrassment when she first saw the film, bringing back familiar feelings of being regarded as "the other." This improvised performance, which she premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012 is a response to an attitude that regulates indigenous cultures to being museum pieces. "But I am still here, a modern Eskimo," she demands.

As the full film is played above her, the vocalist is joined by musicians Jean Martin (drums), Jesse Zubot (violin) and Jeffrey Zeigler (cello). Laptop computers give them a view of the movie, but you may get the sense that Tagaq can feel the entire drama embedded within her.

Throat singing requires a vocalist to produce a primary tone and simultaneously sing one or more overtones. Tagaq counts electronica, industrial and metal among her additional influences and the sounds and rhythms she voices are evocatively abstract interpretations of the film's environment and actions. She sings no discernible words but her writhing body and unpredictable vocals thrillingly mix the political and the spiritual.

The question of displaying art that was heralded in its time, and may have significant creative value, but contains qualities that offend contemporary sensibilities, often produce heated debate. In this case, Tanya Tagaq provides a fascinating context that makes viewing NANOOK OF THE NORTH a more enlightening experience.