

# THE · G E O R G I A **STRAIGHT**

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## **PuSh Festival: Tanya Tagaq wrestles with feelings about Nanook of the North**

By Jessica Werb | January 15, 2014

**COORDINATING A TIME** for an interview with a working mother is a tricky affair. Even more so when that mother is internationally renowned Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq, who is in the midst of wrangling her two-year-old daughter into a Vancouver café with the help of a friend when reached by phone by the *Straight*.

“Her name is Inuuja,” Tagaq—who now makes her home in northern Manitoba—shares, in between orders for breakfast sandwiches and smoothies. “It means ‘humanlike’. And her middle name is Kavik, and that means ‘wolverine’.”

A powerful name for a powerful child, she acknowledges with a laugh. In fact, one of Tagaq’s most disarming characteristics is her tendency to laugh and giggle while relating profound thoughts and opinions. Other artists with a CV like hers would be excused for taking themselves a bit too seriously—after all, she’s toured with Björk and the Kronos Quartet, and charmed countless music critics along the way.

And yet, ask the mother of two (she shares custody of her 10-year-old daughter, Naia, with her Spain-based father) about her PuSh International Performing Arts Festival *Nanook of the North* show, and her responses are devoid of pretension. Recalling the first time she saw the 1922 silent film—a controversial quasi-documentary by Robert J. Flaherty purporting to depict the daily life of an Inuk man, Nanook, and his family—she describes a barrage of conflicting emotions.

“When I was a small child in school, I saw it, and I remember when I was a kid kind of laughing and feeling embarrassed, and feeling sad,” she relates. “You know, it’s a beautiful film, but it was 1922, so it’s pretty stereotypical—like kind of ‘happy Eskimo’....You know when you’re 12 years old and a kissing scene comes in a movie and your parents are there and you feel weird? There are some scenes in that film where I feel like that.”

In particular, she cites a staged moment in which Nanook appears baffled by a phonograph, and bites the record. Yet, she adds, “Of course, there’s all the pride involved with it too, with the amazing fact that my ancestors were basically superhuman to live in that environment, you know? It’s just astounding.”

In the PuSh screening of the film, Tagaq will be improvising alongside violinist Jesse Zubot and drummer Jean Martin to an original electro-acoustic soundtrack by her frequent collaborator, New Brunswick-based composer Derek Charke. The project was commissioned by the 2012 Toronto



International Film Festival, and has toured consistently since. Asked what she hopes to bring to the film, Tagaq laughs off the question.

“What am I trying to bring? I don’t think I’m trying to bring anything. It’s just happening,” she quips. Suddenly, there is loud caterwauling on the line—her daughter is in the throes of a full-on toddler meltdown. The chat comes to an abrupt end. Then, five minutes later, the phone rings. It’s Tagaq again, giggling. “I just wanted to let you know that it turns out my daughter was totally covered in poo! That’s why she was freaking out.” It’s utterly unexpected and disarming—a little like her art.

***Nanook of the North* is at the York Theatre from January 31 to February 1 as part of the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival.**