

**REVIEW**

## Review: Night, the moving Nunavut play, isn't all dark

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Is there a possibility of bright days ahead for the troubled territory of Nunavut? Even the question betrays a Southern bias - metaphors of light and dark lose their conventional meaning in the North, where a night or day may last an entire month.

Set during one 24-hour period without the sun, Christopher Morris's *Night* is an emotionally powerful play that skips over the Northern clichés to cast a frost-covered but unblinking eye on the problems currently faced by the Inuit inhabitants of Canada's newest territory.

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Anthropologist Daniella (a charming Linnea Swan) arrives in Pond Inlet with the bones of an Inuit man that have been stored at the Toronto museum where she works. She's secretly spirited away these remains after receiving a heartfelt plea that she believes was e-mailed by the deceased man's 16-year-old granddaughter Piuyuq Auqsaq (Tiffany Ayalik), but was actually sent by Piuyuq's best friend Gloria (Renelitta Arluk).

Since Piuyuq's mother died in an alcohol-related snowmobile accident the year before, her father Jako (Jonathan Fisher), who may have been responsible, has been deeply depressed.

Gloria sent her message to the museum hoping that the return of the elder Auqsaq's remains to Pond Inlet will set things right with the family; Daniella, racked by guilt over her own ancestors' actions, hopes so too. But as with many well-meaning gestures, their actions have many unintended consequences.

The characters' tragic story brought to mind what Cape Dorset bureaucrat Olayuk Akasuk recently told my colleague Patrick White in his recent eye-opening feature on the "failing state" of Nunavut. "Us Inuit have a different way of trying to forget," Akasuk said. "We keep it to

ourselves. You don't want to remind people, or it comes back."

Toronto-based director Morris developed *Night* over the course of several four-week creation workshops in Pond Inlet and Akureyri, Iceland. His initial impulse was to create what I imagine was a more abstract play about the effects of living in 24-hour darkness, but his time in Nunavut shifted the project's focus to the cultural crises there as well as the continuing clash between the Inuit and other Canadians.

Though dark, *Night* is not all gloom, thankfully. Morris's generous and humorous production also shines a light on the appealing idiosyncrasies of the place - the most laid-back call-in show ever coming out of a boom box, the eccentric Hungarian immigrant who operates a candy store, the way the entire community comes together when a polar bear wanders into town.

Then, there's the ethereal beauty of the Arctic captured by designer Gillian Gallow in her simple, haunting set - an ice-covered telephone pole, its wires strung out over the audience, bringing messages from the North to our Toronto ears.

Ayalik and Arluk give strong and heartfelt, if occasionally self-conscious, performances as the two teenagers struggling to survive in a society where half the population is under 25, the rate of child abuse is 10 times the national average and suicide is a constant concern. Fisher isn't quite as centred as Jako, who is fighting many demons and takes them out on his daughter.

While Swan floats through each scene like a dancer, Morris's production is more awkward in its shifts from scene to scene; the mix of poetic movement and straightforward dialogue is not always well integrated and, plot-wise, he leaves us dangling with regards to a couple of characters.

Performed in English and Inuktitut (with well-placed subtitles translating the latter), *Night* premiered at the National Arts Centre in 2010 and was the capital theatre's first co-production with arts organizations in the North; it has since toured to Iqaluit and Pond Inlet. In the final scene, Piuyuq speaks directly to the audience, telling them "there is a sickness in my community" and encourages Inuit teenagers to work toward healing it. I would love to know what the reaction to this was up North - down South, one can only root for them.

*Night* runs until April 24.

- Written and directed by Christopher Morris
- Starring Tiffany Ayalik and Reneltha Arluk
- A Human Cargo production
- At Factory Theatre in Toronto

