

SAMANTHA 0:04

Hello, and thank you for joining me in this Q&A With KJ Edwards and Tigris alt Sakda, the directors of Meet the Sky and Orhoda, respectively; two of the films that we just watched in the generations program. Tigris and KJ, thank you so much for joining me for this. So both of your films struck me as these beautiful homages to the traditions and stories that have been handed down by generations of your communities. What does it mean to you to be able to hand down these stories in turn, now that you've created these films that you know can be watched forevermore?

TIGRIS 0:42

Did you want to go first?

KJ 0:46

I mean, it's a huge honor. For me, my family in Kahnawá:ke are predominantly Christian and don't follow a traditional lifestyle, in my nuclear family. And no judgment on that. I think that there's like, a lot of history there. And people's belief systems really vary in my family. And I have a lot of respect for that. And I do have some family who, who move in a traditional way. But my mom had always kind of wanted to learn more about that aspect of her culture, and she didn't have the opportunity to before passing. So my dealing with grief has been to pursue that myself. But I think it's like, a huge honor. And I hope to be more specific if we do produce another film with related content. But we tried to be a little less specific out of protocol.

SAMANTHA 1:33

Tigris, how about you? Yeah.

TIGRIS 1:34

It's, I guess it's kind of, we're in the privileged position to be able to, you know, kind of act as a bridge between something that's kind of belongs to a different world, and then the world that we're currently living in. So I kind of kind of speak to the experience of being an immigrant that came to Canada when I was a teenager, I kind of, it's almost like a transplant, I carry some of my heritage, and my culture was me when I came here. And then the pack—that, I guess, the package that I bring with me, it's also not part of the dominant culture from where I was born. So I was born in China. But as most people here probably not really aware, like right now we talk about other minorities, like Uyghur in the western China area. So within China, there's a lot more different ethnic groups, and I belong to one of the Nordic groups. It's just in the current cultural situation, I guess, similarly to Canada, where here we are very, like, there's a very good push, I feel for like non dominant, Indigenous and the First Nations, they start to tell their stories from their own perspective. So I guess there could be a equivalent in China, like where you have a lot of non-ethnic Chinese, or non culturally Chinese groups, who have their own stories and histories, but it's just not very, let's say, promoted, officially by the, by the current government. And if it's promoted, it's been done through a tourist and exotic perspective. So a little bit like a colonial attitude. So I feel like here living in Canada actually I have the freedom to speak for my own, and have my own interpretation of a story, ancestral story. So yet, it's an

honor to be able to do that.

That's really beautiful. And yes, I saw KJ nodding. Definitely sounds like some parallels and having to, you know, take that, that power back from colonial governments to, to tell those stories. And I really appreciate that both of you have done exactly that with these films. What about these specific stories spoke to you both and made you want to tell them in particular, on screen? And Tigris, let's start with you, give KJ a break.

Yeah, so I think the story, it wasn't a story that I invented. So it's a really old legend from the 13th century. And it talks about how people like the Nordic nomads, semi nomadic people and they go into the forest to search for certain plants or animals species, they always need to give a offering to the forest and the mountain in, not kind of in exchange or, in paying tribute to the mountain, so nothing is totally free. Like you have to be respectful and follow certain rituals and rules. So the idea of the film is penetrate, to emulate and reproduce it, but in a more imaginative fashion. So for me, it's something that's very relevant in today's environment where we talk about extinction of species, we talk about climate change and entire ecosystems being wiped out for industrial and mining industries. Yeah, manufacturers and like all that heavy, heavy machinery is. So the species in my story is Ginseng. And it's also endangered species, it's like in its natural environment, it's very hard to find. So it's kind of like, try to maybe use the story to, for me, think of different ways we can relate to other species like it can be animal, you can be plants, it can be something else, like nouns, physical beings, like spirits, or rivers and mountains and all that. So yeah, I think it's, I hope people can see some of the, like, final echo in the film. And there's a particular moment where I, I really enjoyed adding to the the script or the animation is when you take something from the mountain, so the group of people, they took a plant that they had to put a seed back in there. So it's not just you're digging out something and just run away with it, you also find something there. So for the future, like there's a continuity there. So I think planting trees and hunting in general for us, it's probably we should do more of those today. Anyway.

SAMANTHA 6:46

That's really beautiful. And what a great summary of exactly what this program is about: planting seeds, growing for the future, sharing stories about that generational exchange. Thank you. Like, KJ, how about you?

KJ 6:58

Yeah, before I answer, I just wanna say that that's amazing. Everything just spoke to you to Tigris. Like, that idea is also like really prevalent in a lot of Indigenous belief systems. Like, giving back not just being extractive. like it's a reciprocal relationship. So I'm excited for that answer. That was nice. I just think, this story in particular, mean, I guess, essentially, like, once my parents passed away, within two years of each other, and I didn't really have like a system to grieve, because I didn't grow up with a traditional belief system. And because I had grown up in the church, and I had left, my parents stopped going, when I was about five years old, I kind of was left without any, yeah, like system to grieve. And it was such a big loss that I I spent the

better part of a decade kind of in limbo. And I think I would have identified as an atheist at one point until my friend Victoria Anderson Gardner took me to my first sweat ceremony. And I won't get into it out of protocol about like, the details of what went on. But within one experience, I went from, like a sense of atheism to believing and to knowing, and knowing spirit, and it was so transformative that, like, I couldn't write about anything else. I just couldn't think about anything else. It's like, all that was on my mind. And I also wanted to, like, honor my mom with this story. And my friends who were kind of going through this rediscovery period. Yeah, so it's just such a huge part of my personal, like psychological and spiritual growth. And I really liked domestic dramas like I do that is my jam, would also fit well with the genre I like, I like to like daydream and think about conversations I wish would happen or could happen. So yeah, that's pretty much why.

SAMANTHA 9:00

That's so lovely. And I have to say, the big difference between a filmmaker and a non filmmaker, you dream about those stories and like, create a beautiful movie, I just, like have arguments in the shower with people who aren't there.

KJ 9:13

Wait, you do that, too? I do that too. There's also a lot that's cut from from films, like, there's lots of stuff I've written where I'm like, that doesn't sound right, or that doesn't work. But, you know, I was lucky to have really good performers who worked well together and were like, able to work with the dialogue really well.

SAMANTHA 9:30

Yeah, I 100%. They just felt so much like real life sisters, the two girls, it's really, really beautiful. It was beautifully done. And that actually sort of related to my next question. So what moment of filming, or animating for OrHoDa's, production has stuck with you the longest from this project? What do you return to when you think about this project and building it?

TIGRIS 9:59

Well, I think it's actually a pretty tedious project, it's like hand drawn animation and you have to do every single image. I do. It's like the most traditional low-tech way, I don't use like computer 3D CGI animation. And so I have to redraw every single image. So it's just when I think of it, it's probably the pain of trying to complete all the drawings. At some point, I felt I completed, like all the, the little characters and animals and plants like the drawings, that part of stackup drawing are done. But then I felt like Okay, time to move on to drawing all the background images, like forest and mountain and whatever, like all the background images you saw in the film, but it actually took longer than animating a lot of the characters just because the sheer amount of detail. And if I can think of it, it really taught me a lesson of how we look at something like for example, there's trees outside, and it's so nice to have spring and summer back after a long winter. But like when we look at the trees and grass is just like, okay, generic green, some sorts of plant shape, but you when you will actually have to draw them like, then you start to think, okay, there's actually this amount of detail and the way you draw it, if like, in my case, I use line

drawings. So I guess the amount of lines that on one single leaf, and then you have to redraw that, however many times that make it look more complete than the tree-like creature. So it's just yeah, like, the way we see there's so much detail in the world around us. And if you pay a little more attention, you start to become like, really kind of hit with the amount of, I guess, detail and textures and everything. And similar, similar was stories and histories. Like, we just tend to think of things like, Oh, we know it, but if you look a little more closely and carefully, then all those different layers and complexities start to jump to you. And sometimes it's it can be overwhelming, but a lot of times it's just totally like, transformative and eye opening experience. And I think a lot of really talented filmmakers that I met where I have the chance to watch their work. That's also how they communicate to me. So yeah, I think that's the part of the production, like the pain and then the actual amount of detail. That's, you can try to encapsulate in that. Oh, yeah.

SAMANTHA 12:46

What's so amazing about that answer is a I can't even imagine all of that work. But also just I know you talked about the pain, but the love you have for your process is so clear, just in hearing you talk about it, just the love and respect you have for art and for the world it is depicting, and it really comes through in your film. So it's really beautiful to watch. But it's also really beautiful to hear you just talk about it. Because it just fits together so well with, you know, that love I was picking up on while watching. So thank you. And KJ, how about you? A moment that sticks.

KJ 13:22

I'd say first same sentiment, I'm going to school right now with a bunch of people who are really capable painters, and they can draw, and I'm so in awe, because the amount of skill like training is incredible. So moment that stuck out. I think just production, I was just thinking about how, when you're in production, it's so much fun. And I had a lot of close friends work on this film. And my producer Levi Marshall, who's he's no longer producing now he's in law school. He's a amazing friend. And he's super cool. And we just had like a great time. Like at the end were like cleaning up the house because we had such a small budget were like on our hands and knees like scrubbing the floors singing along to music and like, just the amount of fun that we had, even though the story was so like, you know, intense and emotional, but we just had like a wild time. And I'm kind of missing that right now. Because I'm not part of a crew right now. So I kind of like alone working on the computer writing and just something that hit me was how it can be such a community experience or like

SAMANTHA 14:22

yeah, definitely. And we're so lucky in Canada to have such a tight knit film community. Like you're really as close. And it's so interesting. You're talking about all that joy because watching the film, as you say it's dramatic and it's intense, and it's like it hits you right in the stomach. But maybe this is just me being a weirdo but what it was done, I felt very uplifted and almost joyful from it because it's just such a beautiful story of reconnection and again, claiming one's agency, especially if it's the health care system, which we all know can be a bit of a mess.

KJ 14:59

Tha's cool. I'm glad it's uplifting! It should be. At the end.

SAMANTHA 15:06

Yes, exactly. At the end it was it was very uplifting. So it makes me happy to hear that it was an uplifting and happy set to be on. too.

KJ 15:13

It was. Like, when the cameras were rolling, we were joking around and stuff. And like Levi was also like cooking and like doing all kinds of stuff. And just ever. Yeah. And because we had also been in school together for four years, like most of us, we had developed all these relationships. And then the pandemic happened right after we finished filming. So we all got cut off from each other in a really big way. And a lot of people moved away immediately. So we've all been kind of like distanced. And I don't think we realized how lucky we were in that moment to have that time.

SAMANTHA 15:41

Yeah, that makes sense. And it kind of leads to the next question. You said, right now you're not on a set, you're sort of writing and thinking about future projects. Do we know what's next? It's okay if the answer's no, or you can't say, that's fine. But what is on the horizon for you both? Big shrug, that's okay.

TIGRIS 16:08

Who's going first? Yeah, I think for me, it's just Well, right now for the near future, I have had a chance to collaborate with a, Inuit video production company based in Kuujuaq that's in Nunavik, which is the Inuit territory, but within the Quebec Province. So there, they got commissioned to make a video about pollutants in the Arctic. So I think that's a very pressing and kind of depressing topic as well. So it's important to talk about it. And they wanted me to, they asked me if I could make like an animated version to explain how pollutants work their way to the Arctic, and the system and food of like country food consumed by the Inuit people. So yeah, that's for the near future, I think that will take up the whole summer. And then once I'm done from that, I do have some other personal projects, mostly, probably still using the classic animation, hand drawn style, just because keep it consistent. And that's the only way I know how to work. And yeah, I also have probably a live action project, but that's collaborating with some local filmmakers in Montreal, but we're still waiting to see whether the team will get the grant and funding to do that. But yeah, so a few a few small projects on the horizon.

SAMANTHA 17:53

Amazing. Sounds like you're not going to sleep for the whole next year. Very happy for you. And KJ, how about you?

KJ 18:00

So coming up, I'm going to be the Banff media conference, the big Banff one. And then, a little nervous, so I'm going to be pitching a feature version of Meet the Sky. So it's kind of what I'm writing right now. So I'll be pitching as part of the Indigenous Screen Office and Netflix pitch. And it's my first time pitching outside of a school setting.

SAMANTHA 18:23

You're gonna be great. You're gonna be amazing.

KJ 18:23

And other than that, I'm, I'm in school right now, I'm at Emily Carr, University where's I'm signed up for a master's, and I'm working in 16 millimeter right now. So learning all of the experimental processes, which is a rabbit hole that I'm happy to go down.

SAMANTHA 18:40

That's absolutely amazing. I'm so excited about the prospect of a feature length take on Meet the Sky, because I would love to watch that story for so much longer. And I'm, I'm just so impressed by not only what you've both done, and that, what we've seen at Breakthroughs, but also what you have coming. It's, it's such a pleasure to just see your careers happening. It's really, really amazing. So thank you so much. I appreciate you taking the time. It's been my, like I said, a true privilege to talk to you both. And thank you for participating in Breakthroughs. We really love your films.

TIGRIS 19:17

Yeah, thank you for having our work and I hope the audience enjoyed it. Thank you, everyone.

SAMANTHA 19:23

Sure.

KJ 19:24

Thank you. Thank you so much. And it was lovely to meet you. Thank you both.