

2014 CSAs: Aboriginal production makes its mark



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Judging by this year's nominations for Canadian Screen Awards, 2014 will be a vintage year for aboriginal film and TV shows.

"After having been to 15 or 20 award shows over the last 20 years, this is the most well-represented year for aboriginal people, across the board. I'm pretty surprised," said Jennifer Podemski, producer of Peter Stebbings' *Empire of Dirt*, nominated for best picture.



It has taken many years for aboriginal filmmakers to become an overnight success, says Podemski, but signs point to a burgeoning aboriginal creative industry, with TV at its core.

"In many ways, since the onset of APTN 15 years ago, the introduction of a career in film and TV has increased accessibility," she says. "People who watch APTN, who see their own stories being told, are inspired and a lot of young storytellers, actors and producers have been working at their craft. This is the first year to see the result of that effort," Podemski added.

Empire of Dirt, a film about the lives of three First Nations women, earned five CSA noms, including the aforementioned best picture, best film actress for Cara Gee and best supporting film actress for Podemski.

The best film competition also includes another aboriginal film, Michel Poulette's *Maina*, a love story that stars Tantoo Cardinal, Eric Schweig and Graham Greene and which received six nominations.

On the TV side, *Blackstone*, an APTN drama shot in Edmonton and set around the politics and corruption of a First Nations reserve, will contend in five CSA categories, including best TV drama.

"It's very humbling to see *Blackstone*, which has been a long time in the making and has gone through different challenges, to be mentioned with the top shows in Canada," said Ron E. Scott, *Blackstone* creator, writer and director.

APTN does not release ratings for *Blackstone* – the network says it does not believe BBM Canada's sample accurately reflects its primarily aboriginal viewership – but a study conducted by the channel amongst Aboriginal People (18+) found 11% of APTN viewers cite *Blackstone* as the program they watch most often on the channel, says Jacqueline Jubinville, manager of communications, APTN.

Scott echoes Podemski, saying APTN and other avenues have allowed aboriginal filmmakers to exercise their craft. And it's paying dividends.

"There's a lot of fruit that comes from that," he says.

Another CSA nomination in the best film actress competition has gone to Kawennahere Devry Jacobs for her star-turn in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.

In Jeff Barnaby's debut feature film, Devry Jacobs plays a young woman who runs drugs to escape a feared residential school for aboriginal youth.

As in *Blackstone* and *Empire of Dirt*, the dark legacy of the Canadian residential school system forms a backdrop in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.

But key to these projects' wider appeal is universal storytelling, in which audiences can go beyond dark subject matter and be captivated by rich characters and engaging storylines.

"I didn't want to make a sob story. I didn't want to make pity porn or poverty porn," Barnaby tells *Playback* about *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*.

Barnaby's work on *Rhymes* has found resonance with critics and festival programmers alike, earning praise and recognition from the Vancouver Film Critics Association, the Toronto Film Critics Association, TIFF (through its Top 10 Canadian films list and festival programming) and the Vancouver International Film Festival.

The residential school subject matter is similarly explored in *Blackstone's* upcoming fourth season, which includes a major arc about Canada's prison system and its disproportionately high population of Aboriginal Peoples. "It's an echo of the residential schools," Scott insists.

By contrast, *We Were Children*, which aired on APTN and received four CSA nominations, takes a more direct route to capturing residential school survivors' experiences: emotionally wrenching documentary.

"From one minute into that movie, I was balling my eyes out," Podemski recalls.

Other aboriginal CSA nominees include The 20th Annual Indspire Awards, which spotlights gifted aboriginal artists and will contend in the variety or sketch comedy categories, including best direction and performance.

And there are three CSA noms for *Untamed Gourmet*, an APTN series that explores the link between food and the land, while veteran Canadian documentary maker Alanis Obomsawin will receive the Humanitarian Award at the Canadian film, TV and digital awards.

Obomsawin also received CSA nominations for best director for her *The People of the Kattawapiskak River*, and best feature documentary for another of her films, *Hi-Ho Mistahey!*, which chronicles a struggle for First Nations education in Attawapiskat.

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