

Exploring dark underbelly of native life

NEW SERIES: Cast, crew believe *Blackstone* will prove controversial but also promotes hope and understanding

BY ETHAN BARON
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For the first time on Canadian television, the sordid underbelly of First Nations life will receive a comprehensive airing, in a sure-to-be-controversial series starring a veteran Vancouver actress.

"I think we're going to ruffle a lot of feathers but at the same time I think there's going to be a lot of relief out there that someone's finally saying something," says Carmen Moore, who plays a crusading new band chief in the series *Blackstone*.

"The only people that are going to have a problem with it are the people that maybe have something to hide. They don't like to have a light shone on it."

Blackstone premieres Jan. 28 on Showcase and Jan. 25 on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network.

Early in the series, tribal elder Cecil Delaronde — played by prominent First Nations actor Gordon Tootoosis — presents a bleak view of the decline of Canada's First Nations.

"Culture isn't just . . . the old days, the old ways, the good stuff that makes us who we are today," he says. "It's also what goes on today: Family violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, incest, suicide, corruption. That's our culture now."

Blackstone's band politics frequently revolve around embezzlement of federal funds for the enrichment of such characters as Hummer-driving villain Andy Fraser. "The white people have the mafia," the grey-braided Delaronde says at one point. "We have chief and council."

Although the Alberta-filmed show focuses on pervasive stereotypes of the country's aboriginal people, the stories behind those disturbing portraits will help Canadians understand why such problems exist, Moore says.

"There's a reason that Main and Hastings is lined with native people. Those people are children of residential schools, and they're the



Leona Stoney (Carmen Moore) confronts the villainous Andy Fraser (Eric Schweig) in *Blackstone*, which debuts later this month. — SUBMITTED PHOTO



GERRY KAHRMANN FILE PHOTO — PNG

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"It's time to stop pointing the finger at what the white man has done to us for the past 500 years," she says.

"We have to start taking responsibility for ourselves. Change isn't easy. This stuff needs to be talked about, but I think it's going to get a lot uglier before it gets better. Things get really, really messy when you're trying to clean things up."

As in the real world, things get awfully messy in *Blackstone*. But the series carries a central message of a more positive future, says executive producer Ron Scott.

"The heart of *Blackstone* is that there is hope in any situation," Scott says. "There are a lot of great people in First Nations communities that are looking for this change that is

promoted in this show, that are looking for hope and reconciliation."

While *Blackstone* provides a window into the First Nations world, and many of its events are based on media reports, its themes transcend race, says Damon Vignale of Vancouver, a writer for the show.

"It's really ironic. While we were writing this show about corruption in this fictitious band office, at the same time governments were bailing out banks. Enron and Bernie Madoff taught us what goes on in the real world," says Vignale.

"The things we explore in the show can be found everywhere. They're not isolated to First Nations communities."

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