

Aidan Quinn: 'Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee'

by Eirik_Knutzen

An impressionable lad, Aidan Quinn devoured Dee Alexander Brown's 1971 nonfiction novel "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" as a high school student and was totally blown away. It chronicles the United States' relentless westward expansion and its disastrous impact on American Indian culture

Aidan Quinn stars in HBO's "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" "Truthfully, I was obsessed a little bit by the book," he said, recalling his youthful zeal. "I've always had a fascination with Native Americans, First Nation people, and their very serious issues. When I heard that 'Wounded Knee' was to be made into a movie by HBO, I immediately got on the phone with my manager and asked him to get a script. I needed to be in it and would play any part at all."

In luck, Quinn's enthusiasm for 'Wounded Knee' reached the ear of its director (whom he had worked with before), Yves Simoneau, and his fate was sealed as Massachusetts' Republican Sen. Henry Dawes (1816-1903), who in 1897 authored the Dawes Act while chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. Soon found inequitable, the law authorized the U.S. president to divide Indian tribal lands into 160-acre parcels for the individual Native American. It was amended several times - and subverted as well as perverted - by the white man's greed and avarice, until tribal jurisdiction of Indian land was abolished by the Curtis Act of 1908.

"Dawes was essentially the author of the U.S. government's policy on Indian affairs and he was genuinely devoted to his cause," said Quinn. "He was a strict Christian with almost radical ideas in those days, believing that Indians were human beings who deserved their individual rights and their agreements honored. But he was no fool and soon had to adopt a pragmatic approach, not always to his liking." Ultimately, the noble savage has to be assimilated in the white American culture through education and learning to coexist with foreign influences.

A sprawling, tragic drama, the "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" epic is launched with the bloody Sioux victory of Gen. George Custer and the 7th Cavalry at Little Big Horn in 1890 and the harsh reprisals thereafter - also involving sacred lands in the mineral-rich Black Hills of the Dakotas (actually filmed all over Alberta, Canada) by heavy business and political interests.

The story is told through the eyes of three participants: Sen. Dawes, the legendary Lakota chief Sitting Bull (August Schellenberg) and Ohiyesa, a Sioux doctor educated at Dartmouth better known as Charles Eastman (Adam Beach). The cast is rounded out by Anna Paquin as an idealistic school teacher on the Sioux reservation, today's actor/potential Republican presidential candidate Fred Thompson as President Ulysses S. Grant and professional Indian Wes Studi as Wovoka, the leader of a messianic movement known as the Ghost Dance. Since wrapping the huge project, Quinn has been on the film festival circuit promoting "Dark Matter," a story "loosely inspired" by the bitter experiences of Gang Lu (Liu Ye), a brilliant Chinese Ph.D. physicist with hopes for a Nobel Prize at the University of Iowa. Feeling betrayed by faculty politics - and his mentor/adviser, Dr. Reiser (Quinn) - Gang Lu shot and killed five persons on campus.

Written and filmed long before the Virginia Tech mass killings by a Korean-American student, the movie was directed by Chen Shi-Zheng with a sterling cast that also includes Meryl Streep, Greg Kinnear and Val Kilmer.

Come July, Quinn is off to a film festival in Ireland in order to hype "32A," a girls' coming-of-age flick shot in Ireland written and directed by Dublin-based Marian Quinn, his only sister.

Playing the father of a girl whose first bra size is 32A, the movie also features Glynis Casson, Orla Brady, Kate O'Toole and Jared Harris.

His half-dozen other motion picture credits include "Song for a Raggy Boy" (2003) and "This is My Father" (1998) - which happened to be written and directed by his brother Paul Quinn while another brother, Declan Quinn, served as the cinematographer.

Born in Chicago to Irish parents, the former star of the controversial 2006 TV series "The Book of Daniel" ("we only shot six episodes and only half of them aired; a coalition of right-wing Christian organizations boycotted the show and left the NBC network with no advertisers") spent years bouncing between the U.S. and the Ireland as his father taught English literature at various universities and colleges.

Laboring as a roofer in Rockford, Ill., after high school, Quinn soon tired of the dull profession and decided to become an actor through the Piven Theater Workshop in nearby Evanston, run by the parents of "Entourage's" Jeremy Piven and followed it up with modest roles on Broadway. It paid off with dozens of films and telefilms, including "An Early Frost" (1985) and "Legends of the Fall" (1994).

The 48-year-old father of two daughters by actress Elizabeth Bracco (the real-life sister of Lorraine Bracco - Dr. Melfi on the recently departed "Sopranos" - who also had a recurring role in the show as mob wife Marie Spatafore), is looking forward to the foreign film festival circuit and more work. It shouldn't take long.

NOTE: premiere is May 27; Sun., 9-11:15 p.m., HBO

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