

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Movie Review:

# Burying and Praising New Foreign-Language Flick From Canada, 'Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner'

By **PETE BROOKS**  
Times Movie Critic

Some movies you go see because you want to, and some you go see because you reckon they'll be good for you.

Next week's review, "Blue Crush," is one I want to see. Pretty Southern California girls in bikinis frolicking on the beach. Mmmmm. *That's* entertainment.

This week's film, "Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner," falls squarely into the "good for you," category, however. At three hours long and subtitled — not a Southern California girl in sight — we're doing this one for our soul. "Say three Hail Marys, two Our Fathers, and go down to the art theater and see 'The Fast Runner' six times."

Outside the U.S., this movie's had just about every award there is thrown at it, and has already been entered as Canada's selection in the foreign film competition at next year's Academy Awards.

A period piece, "The Fast Runner" takes place in the wintry wonderland that is Canada's Arctic wasteland at the dawn of the first millenium.

It opens on a vast, white plain ... and stays there.

The movie begins some 20 years before the main "action" starts, and seems to unfold in real time.

We watch the locals build an igloo.

We watch them bring home frozen dead things.

We watch one of them, Tulimaq (Felix Aralarak) by name, get dissed by his homies in the men's locker room.

Frankly, a lot more stuff may have occurred early on there that I just wasn't able to follow.

Because underneath the layers upon layers of furs and pelts — and the similar facial hair on most of the men — it's hard to tell the players without a scorecard.

After awhile, the easiest way to tell the characters apart is by what performer is missing which teeth — kind of like spotting "celebrities" in Branson, Mo.

A crafty fellow named Sauri (Eugene Ipkanak) is the new leader of a little group of Inuits (the local people), and he's a stinker. He's already deposed former leader Tulimaq, and proceeds thereafter to amuse himself by making him the tribe laughing-stock.

Tulimaq has two baby sons, however, from whom greatness is apparently still expected, even in light of their father's disgrace.

Cut to 20 years later.

Sauri's son Oki (Peter-Henry Arnatsiaq) establishes himself right away as his father's slimy son. In addition to pretty much every one of the seven deadly sins, he eventually adds rape, murder and patricide to his resumé, too.

One of Tulimaq's sons, Atanarjuat (Natar Ungalaaq), is the tribe hunk, and has his eyes on the girl, Atuat (Sylvia Ivalu), long-promised to Oki.

He wins her in a quick round of supervised fisticuffs with Oki. He later goes on to aggrieve Oki even further by marrying Oki's sister, Puja (Lucy Tulugarjuk).

Eventually — finally! — Oki is pushed over the edge and things begin to happen. Bad things.

Specifically, Oki and a couple thug buddies attack Atanarjuat and his brother Amaqjuaq (Pakak Innuksuk) with pointy elephant tusks while they sleep, killing Amaqjuaq.

Atanarjuat the fast runner escapes the cowardly assault, though, and the chase is on.

How slowly is this story spun out? Literally, at about the two-hour point, the plot kicks in, and for a few glorious minutes, it's "Die Hard" on the Tundra. Other than that, all the action in this movie could be fit into the pre-opening-credits sequence of your average "A-Team" episode.

Moreover, let's be honest: If it was Vin Diesel being chased across the frozen wasteland by only three guys armed with sticks, he'd just turn around and bust a few caps in 'em, movie over.

But this film has a more liesurely timetable, and proceeds to wrap up its drama at the same stately pace in which it lays it out.

Gentlemen, start your watches!

As in any good art film worth its salt, there is copious nudity in "The Fast Runner." Unfortunately, most of it is of the male variety ... and let's not forget that the Inuit's indigenous environ is a cold, cold place. There's not much to see.

On the other hand, PETA is definitely not gonna like this movie. The Inuits are meat eaters, and they don't waste a lot of

time cooking their kills, either. If they're not chopping dead critters up and tearing the meat off the bones with their teeth, they're skinning them for their pelts or cracking them with whips to make them move quicker through the snow. Ugh. This movie could make Ted Nugent a vegetarian.

What art-film life lesson did I learn from this surprisingly watchable three-hour epic?

Although based on an ancient Inuit legend, this story is deeply familiar already.

From Genesis to Shakespeare to Tom Clancy, it seems human drama has had many faces and cultures, but only one storyline: Man starts out perfectly happy just killing the lower order of species, till lust for women and/or power riles them up and they start killing each other, too.

I did not find this film the transcendent masterpiece I had read that it was, nor did I find it the torturous ordeal I had worried it might be.

Having been warned ahead of time that it's a slow-mover, and being prepared for a long, tedious slog through the snow, I was pleasantly surprised at how agreeably the three hours passed.

It's a good story, well told; I learned about an ancient, foreign culture (insert second Branson, Mo. joke here), and I was unexpectedly entertained as I was being educated.

If a date absolutely insists on dragging you to an art film, make sure it's "The Fast Runner."