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The Linguists

Bottom Line: Exciting, well-paced tale of Great White Hunters who hunt down nearly extinct languages.

By Kirk Honeycutt

Jan 18, 2008



Bold academics plunge into the jungles and backwater villages of the world to rescue living tongues about to go extinct.

Sundance Film Festival

PARK CITY -- Indiana Jones' spirit certainly infects the intrepid heroes of "The Linguists." These are bold academics who plunge into the jungles and backwater villages of the world to rescue living tongues about to go extinct.

There are more than 7,000 languages spoken in the world. Yet we lose a language every two weeks thanks to colonialization, globalization and indifference.

David Harrison and Gregory Anderson are scientists in a race against time. They trek deep into sometimes dangerous territories to record nearly dead languages, a thing that is at the heart of culture and knowledge.

Clocking in at a little more than an hour, director-producers Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller

and Jeremy S. Newberger's "Linguists" watches three of these fascinating and at times treacherous linguistic expeditions. The film should perform marvelously on television once it completes a festival run that begins at Sundance.

In Siberia, the linguists search fruitlessly for speakers of the Chulym language only to discover their driver, who at first won't admit he speaks Chulym, is fluent. This speaks volumes of a tyrannical Soviet regime that tried to suppress much of native culture and languages.

In the Indian state of Orissa, tribal children attend boarding schools where they learn Hindi and English. This is practical, of course, but a disaster for native languages.

In Bolivia, the men seek the less than 100 speakers of Kallawaya language in the Andes, a language tied into the rituals and practices of medicine and not a language learned as a child. They also find themselves in a sticky situation when they botch an act of gift-giving.

The film has a perhaps unintended subtext of cultural misunderstandings where well-meaning but sometimes impatient and naive Westerners confront ways of thinking and behaving totally antithetical to their own. For instance, when Harrison insists on spending a night in a remote Indian village where bandits lurk, he not only endangers himself but also embarrasses his disapproving middle-class Indian hosts. Yet guileless bravery and full-throttle enthusiasm see the linguists through these scrapes.

Jumping from one expedition to another while throwing in an excursion to an American Indian reservation in Arizona causes the viewer to lose the thread of the individual quests. But this does help identify patterns in language disuse and subsequent extinction. The film certainly makes a compelling case for this particular kind of academic derring-do.

THE LINGUISTS

Ironbound Films

Credits:

Director-producers: Seth Kramer, Daniel A. Miller, Jeremy S. Newberger

Writer: Daniel Miller

Director of photography: Seth Kramer, Jeremy S. Newberger

Music: Brian Hawlk

Editors: Seth Kramer, Anne Barliant

Running time -- 64 minutes

No MPAA rating

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