

GIGANTIC HORSEFLIES, SWARMS OF MOSQUITOES AND FROSTBITE:
T H E M A K I N G O F T H E
Snow Walker

IF he's not too busy, Rick is happy to tell you about all the movie stars he has met. As the bartender of Vancouver's Four Seasons Hotel, he sees a lot of celebrities. Today he has clearly recognized actor Barry Pepper, who has joined me at the wood panelled Terrace Bar to talk about his latest film, *The Snow Walker*. But Rick hasn't been tending bar for 27 years for nothing. He discretely delivers Pepper's espresso and bottle of sparkling water, careful not to interrupt the actor's account of the movie's gruelling northern shoot. "There were days it was so excruciatingly cold that you thought that your ears were literally going to crack off the side of your head," he recalls. "When I came home all the skin peeled off my ears like they had been sunburned. It came off like a lizard's skin, and they said it was from the frostbite."

The Snow Walker, based on Farley Mowat's short story "Walk Well, My Brother," was filmed in and around Churchill, Manitoba, and Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. The film is set in 1953 and tells the extraordinary story of two people struggling to survive in the High Arctic. Pepper plays Charlie Halliday, a brash young bush pilot who is bribed with two walrus tusks to fly a sick young Inuit woman to a Yellowknife hospital. When the plane's engine blows, they crash and are marooned in the middle of the tundra with only a handful of supplies.

Like his character, Pepper has a strong sense of adventure. When he was five, his family left their home in British Columbia to spend five years sailing the waters of the South Pacific. "It takes a lot of courage," he says, "for a mother and father of three little boys to build a 50-foot sailboat and say, 'We are going to sail halfway around the world by celestial navigation, the same way Columbus did. And we are going to teach you about life.' A kind of Robinson Crusoe meets *National Geographic*."

It was a similar spirit for adventure that propelled writer/director Charles Martin Smith to make *The Snow Walker* in the first place. In 1983, Smith starred in Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf*, which was adapted from a Mowat novel of the same name. The northern experience was such a remarkable one that Smith promised to return one day. "There is something about going north," Smith says on the phone from one of his homes, this one in Los Angeles. "For a lot of the people who worked on this film,

"the Arctic... gets under your skin"

BY DALE DREWERY

and a lot of the people I've talked to who've been to the Arctic, there's something seductive about it. It kind of gets under your skin, gets into your blood. It's a life-changing experience." So much so that in the mid-1980s Smith, an American by birth, decided to move to Canada. Vancouver has been his principle home ever since. He continues to act (his most notable past roles include "Toady" in George Lucas's *American Graffiti* [1973] and the ill-fated accountant Oscar Wallace in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* [1987]), but it's Smith's directing career that has brought him the greatest success. His 1997 Canadian film *Air Bud*, the story of a young boy drawn out of his shell by a basketball-playing golden retriever, won the Golden Reel Award and grossed over US \$30 million, making it one of the highest-grossing Canadian features ever made.

In the autumn of 2001, Smith kept his personal promise and returned to the North to start pre-production on *The Snow Walker*. Impressed with Pepper's performance as baseball slugger Roger Maris in the television movie *61*, Smith cast him in the lead role as Charlie Halliday; however, he had yet to find his female co-star. He needed a young woman who spoke Inuktitut and had a passing familiarity with traditional ways to play Kanaalaaq. "The financial people, somewhere along the line, were suggesting an Asian actor," Smith recalls, "but I wanted a genuine Inuit girl." The production team sent casting agents throughout the North to visit schools, dances and restaurants, anywhere that young people gathered. They posted flyers throughout the northern communities and took out ads in local papers. "I was confident that we could find somebody," Smith recalls, "but the difficulty was that they [the Inuit] are, generally speaking, a reticent people. I knew that if we were to go up there and contact the people in the villages in the Far North and say 'We're looking for an actor,' no one would respond because they don't answer those ads."

The search for an actress continued for months. Meanwhile, the girl who would eventually land the role argued with her mother. "I actually auditioned for it because my Mom bugged me to get the lines memorized and do the audition," Annabella Piugattuk admits. "For weeks she kept bothering me." At 4 foot 10 inches, Piugattuk is a mere slip of a thing. When I interviewed her, she was wearing boots with heels (something she confessed to sporting a lot since moving from Igloodik), tight black



Annabella Piugattuk

jeans and her small hands were covered in rings. She flipped her long dark hair back as she talked, her sentences, as is the case with most teenage girls, generously sprinkled with the word "like." "The first time I came to Vancouver," she recalled, "it was with five other finalists for the role. They [the production team] didn't want to put me up in a motel or hotel, cause they were scared. Like, 'Oh, a 19-year-old little Eskimo girl alone in the big city in a hotel room!' and stuff like that. So, they put me up in the casting agent's parent's place, which I thought was a better idea too."

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SNOWWALKER

Smith distinctly remembers Piugattuk's audition. "When we came to do the screen test," he says, "I wanted her to do a little bit of sewing on a hide just to see how she would handle the dialogue while she was stitching. Our production designer had done the initial stitches and apparently they weren't right. Annabella was so forthright. 'You people are doing this all wrong!' Maybe she thought we weren't going to hire her because she was so outspoken, but I liked that about her."

"Annabella is like an open book," says Pepper. "She doesn't have all the games, gimmicks and neuroses that seasoned actors in the industry have learned and use to protect themselves from being vulnerable or exposing too much. When you work with her, you feel like you're the bullshit artist because she was constantly busting you. Not consciously, but constantly. You just realize that you're the one looking like the fraud." It's a remarkable admission from any actor, but especially from one who has worked around the world with some of its best-known actors and directors. "Saving Private Ryan [Pepper played the Bible-quoting sniper] was a life-changing film for me. It was extraordinary to visit Ireland and film there, and to walk the beaches of Normandy with Tom Hanks, an actor that I have respected for years, and then to continue working with him in *The Green Mile*. So yes, these kinds of things are life changing, but not in the way that *The Snow Walker* was. It opened my eyes to my heritage, my six generations of Canadian cowboys. And it was wonderful to collaborate with fellow Canadian artists."

The transition, however, took a little getting used to. "We were doing our hair and makeup on the tailgate of a pickup," Pepper recalls. "And my dressing room, which I shared with props and all the other actors—in fact anybody who wanted to come in and warm up by the propane heater—was a tent in the middle of the tundra." He says what developed was a collective collaborative family, something he'd never experienced before on a set. "People would really go the extra mile to try and find the perfect prop," he says, "like the pocketknife that is the only one that my character would carry. They didn't just go out into the back of their truck and find you some piece of junk they used on another film. They'd really put some love into it because they cared about you as a person. When you have played crib all night, had a few Scotches and told a few lies, you'd exchange phone numbers, e-mail addresses and say let's work together again, and really mean it!"

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— Charles Martin Smith

“Make the movie. Live the movie,” is a saying that was used a lot on the set of *The Snow Walker*. It meant that since the harshness of the land and the climate was a big part of the story, it was inevitable it would be part of the shoot; including the gigantic horseflies, called “bulldogs,” and the infamous northern mosquitoes. “They were just awful,” Smith says. “We had to shut down one day because we literally could not film. The actors couldn’t work because the mosquitoes were everywhere; in their noses, in their mouths. It was terrible.”

“They took it hard,” Piugattuk says with a laugh. “Sometimes I’d have my hood off and everybody else was covered in bug nets, wearing gloves, with their sleeves and pant legs taped. I felt sorry for them.” Pepper recalls the Biblical swarms of locusts as far as the eye could see. “I’d never go back in the summer. You couldn’t drag me back there.” Charles Martin Smith goes one step further. “There is something about the Arctic that I wanted to get out of my system,” he muses. “But toward the end of the shoot I would stalk around saying ‘No more Arctic movies. Next time around, if I want to do one of these things, talk me out of it!’”

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