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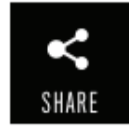
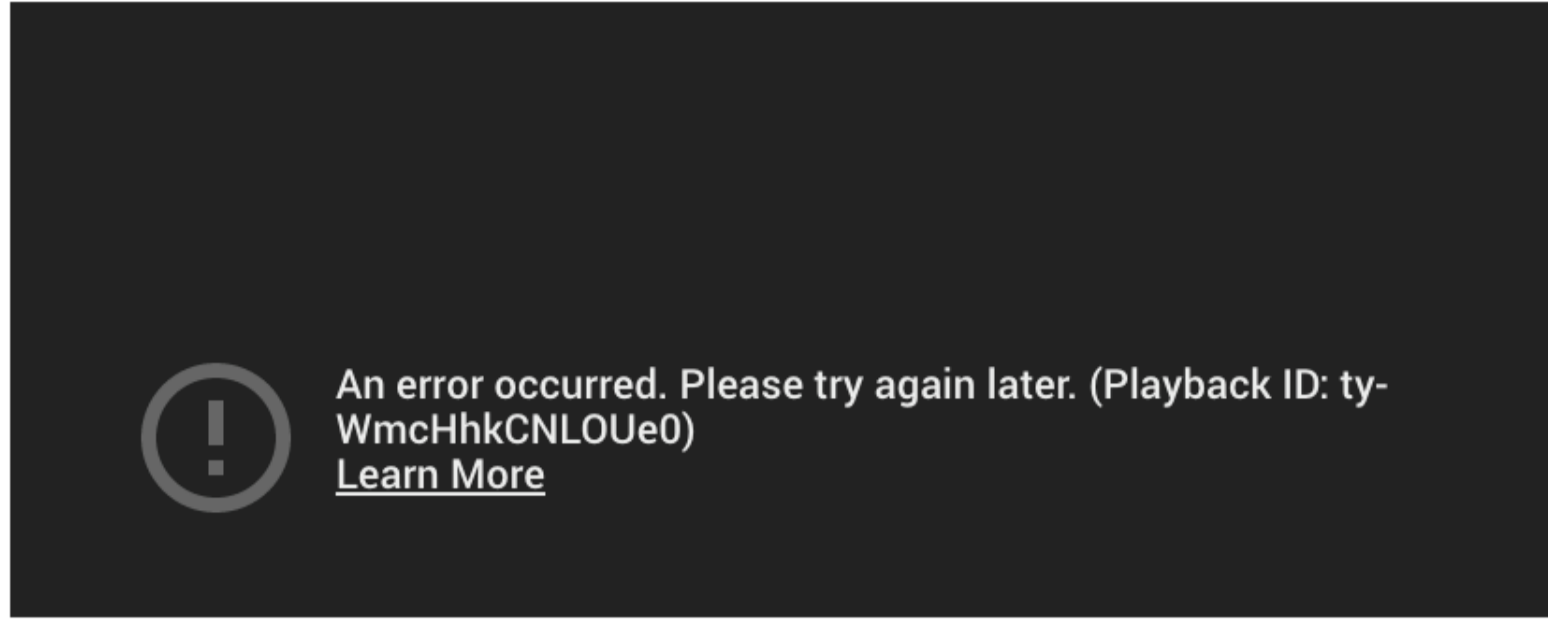
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Haida-based CBC pilot The Girl Who Talks to the Moon about fun and respect

FISH GRIWKOWSKY Updated: December 19, 2017



Ancient language traditionally spoken on Haida Gwaii off the coast of B.C. is facing extinction — but a new web pilot being made for CBC is helping turn the tide.



The Girl Who Talks to the Moon is a locally produced children's program combining live action, stop-motion animation and charming puppetry.



Aimed at a young audience, the first episode tells the story of a little girl named Harmony who seeks the help of an excitable raven named Xuuya to make a present for the personified Moon.



Filmmaker Heather Hatch is a fundamental creative partner in the project. She helped produce it, write it and was the living link between the story and the culture from which it draws inspiration.

"It was really important I was involved because the concepts needed to reflect Haida values," Hatch, 38, explains. Those values boiled down to a single word — "Respect."

Hatch's work included frequent consultation with Haida elder Diane Brown. Of the 20 or so fluent Haida speakers left on the planet, Brown is the youngest — she's 69.

"I would read the script to her and she would tell me if it was correct in getting values right and taking things from stories that I shouldn't.

"I learned if I'm going to tell Haida mythology, I have to tell it correctly."

Hatch traces her unearthed roots back to Skidegate on Graham Island's southeast side. Adopted, she didn't know she had Haida blood until she was 16, and has since been making up for lost time. "I've been going back to Haida Gwaii for 17 years. A lot of that was just to meet family I'd never met before."

Hatch's Haida birth father passed away five years ago. "I really felt a sense of loss and needed to understand where I was from."

Along this path, she directed an independent film — Woman Who Returns — about reconnecting with her clan. This included making a traditional coat, decorated with a beautiful raven her grandmother designed.

"I really love my grandmother — my Nanaay — Dolores Davis. I have a very close bond with her, and even (this CBC pilot) reflects that. Harmony's relationship with the moon is based on it."

Davis, 85, is also one of the handful of remaining Haida speakers.

"The more I learn," said Hatch, "the more I feel there's a lot of Indigenous people who don't have a way back home."



The five-minute pilot is being produced by Edmonton's Catapult Pictures, headed by Rebecca Campbell, instrumental to the concept. Local musician Dwayne Martineau composed and wrote the songs, which teach Haida words for thank you and let's play — Ha'waa and Hala t'alang naang. Local filmmaker Frederick Kroetsch was a big help, including behind the camera and working on the animation.

Comedian and writer Neil Grahn, 55, directed.

The well-known Edmontonian explains. "Haida Gwaii is this magnificent magical isle that many people have never heard of — they think it was this place called Queen Charlotte Islands discovered by some European guy in a boat. And they don't really know the stories.

"For us to get to tell the tales from that land — it's a gift."

The sets were inspired by the island's beauty, including mystical forests — and of course the ocean. Hatch explains. "Having the girl travel in a canoe was important because in my culture that was the main method of getting around.

"My Nanaay designed the raven (pattern) on the boat. She's a brilliant artist ... but she's losing her vision. I needed help for the design of the canoe. She did a rough sketch — because the artist's hands remember.

"I was able to help her with her barking instructions," Hatch laughs.

Harmony is played by nine-year-old Marika Gladstone, another resident of Skidegate — total population around 800. The entire island boasts less than 5,000 residents.

For her pitch video, Gladstone acted out a Dr. Seuss story. "I could tell she had that spark and creativity," said Hatch.

Grahn says of Gladstone. "Your star is a sweet little girl, so directing is a completely different beast. There were times when Marika was starting to flag a little with her energy, so with an adult actor I might say, 'Hey let's talk it over, go have a coffee.'

"With Marika, I'd get her to run all over and she'd come back with a big smile.

"Basically, we needed recess sometimes," Grahn laughs.

Hatch adds, "I've never seen a young girl be so calm and composed with all that attention on her. She's — I would say — a natural. To keep her going on set I taught her the Cadillac Ranch line dance.

"Remember being nine?" she laughs. "She just did it over and over again."

Gladstone recently acted in a \$1.8-million budget Haida-language feature entitled The Edge of the Knife, created by the producers behind the stunning Inuit film Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner. Expected in theatres next year, it has the same goal of cultural preservation.

Xuuya's puppeteer Danny Jaycock said filming was a joy. At one point Xuuya rises up, wings spread wide. "I was getting a little anxious, the raven was getting a little bit rowdy. His hair was in a sideways Mohawk, his wing was all bent, and he came up and the whole crew started laughing."

Xuuya, it seems, looked to everyone like he'd been partying all night. "That was a pretty fun moment," Jaycock laughs, Xuuya cawing in his hands.

The production filmed in a warehouse in Sherwood Park with a crew of about 15. The modest budget came from CBC, Alberta Media Fund and the Shaw Rocket Fund. Everyone involved hopes CBC picks it up as a series.

But for Hatch, the most important thing about the effort was the same lesson she was hearing from her culture — deep respect.

"I can't just say I respect the food from the ocean, I have to think about it.

"I'm definitely trying to convey this idea with the show, but with light, happy things, because kids want to be entertained. It's meant to engage a child's imagination.

"In the episode, they build a kite. But the toy is built because she doesn't have a toy for her Nanaay, so it's about gifting and respect."

Working with Xuuya, Harmony learns about conservation, co-operation and creativity. "It's sort of subtle, but it's how I was thinking about all the stories."

Hatch grew through the collaboration and consultation with Brown. "As I'm learning, it's really funny for me because I thought I was being respectful by telling a story about a crab that pinches the young girl on the shoulder because he can't hug anybody, so they learn a different way to show affection for each other.

"But (elder) Diane Brown said I can't do that because I'm not telling the full myth of the crab that pinches the shoulder of the Haida because they're not learning the Haida language fast enough."

Hatch is aware of the modern implications of the old story.

"For me it was motivation because, really, we're not learning the Haida language fast enough right now. The elders are dying."

These elders have often noted the future of their culture rests in the hands of the youngest playing among them.

Thus, said Hatch, "It's a show for Haida children first.

"But," she promises, "the universality of it will resonate across Canada."

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