

FILM REVIEW

***Pow Wow Trail*. 2004. Directed by Jeremy Torrie, based on a series of treatments by Jim Compton.**

I.C.E Productions Ltd. Originally created for and broadcast on APTN.

© 2000-2002. 11 DVDs + CD-Rom (Teacher's guide). Colour. 1.78:1. Arbor Records Ltd. 49 Henderson Hwy, Winnipeg, MB, R2L 1K9. 1-888-663-0651. www.arborrecords.com.

BY JANICE ESTHER TULK

*Pow Wow Trail*¹ originated as a documentary television series broadcast on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in 2001 (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0822639/>). In 2004, eleven 48-minute episodes were released on DVD and make widely available through Arbor Records.² Each episode combines vibrant new footage of powwows throughout North America and extensive oral history interviews with archival materials from institutions such as the Smithsonian.

In episode one (*The Drum*), viewers are introduced to powwow and its origins through the Anishnaabe story of Omaamikwe, who brought the drum to Aboriginal people. In *The Songs* (episode 2), the concept of oral tradition is introduced and issues of technology in transmission are addressed. Aspects of commercialization and the role of creativity and artistry in dance are considered in episode three (*The Dances*). The American Indian Movement (AIM) is discussed in episode four (*The Grand Entry*), and the relationship between powwow and the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill is addressed. *Grass Dance and Men's Traditional* (episode five) focuses specifically on two men's dance

styles, while the sixth episode, *The Fancy Dance*, centers on both men's Fancy Dance and women's Fancy Shawl. *Pow Wow Rock* (episode seven) presents a variety of musical styles and introduces the genre of protest song. Episode eight, titled *The Women*, is devoted primarily to Women's Traditional and Jingle Dress Dance styles. The Pequot nation and their famous Schemitzun powwow are the focus of *The Grand Exhibition* (episode nine). As the largest competitive powwow in North America, issues of casino culture and commercialization move to the forefront in this episode. *The White Man's Indian* (episode ten) focuses primarily on the representation of First Nations in film and the image of the "Indian" created in European culture. Concluding the series is *Pow Wow Fever* (episode eleven) which engages with issues of tourism and hobbyist powwows created and run by non-natives in North America and Europe.

The relationship between episodes is fairly straightforward. The first three episodes focussed on *The Drum*, *The Songs*, and *The Dances* could be considered the core of this set and serve as an introduction and overview for subsequent episodes. The remaining episodes unfold in a (mostly) logical manner: the episode on Grand Entry (the opening ceremony at a powwow) is followed by episodes devoted to specific dance styles (first men's and then women's, separated by a brief popular music tangent). The set then broadens out again to a more general consideration of powwow and a focus on specific histories and issues. It should be noted that given the interrelated nature of many of the elements of powwow, there is overlap or duplication of information to greater or lesser degrees across the series. For users picking

and choosing episodes and segments, this point is somewhat irrelevant. However, after watching the entire series, it becomes obvious through the reuse of interview clips across multiple episodes.

Two “tangents” stand out in the overall series. The episode on *Pow Wow Rock* introduces an important musical trend and the concept of the protest song; however it is not made clear if or how this music might be incorporated into the powwow event. Episode ten (*The White Man’s Indian*) initially seems out of place, given its focus on representation in film. However, by the end of this episode, it becomes clear that powwow is seen by some to be a way to repair the damage done by such stereotypical representations.

The production quality of this series is impressive; the cinematography is striking, capturing the spirit of powwow. Long shots of hundreds of dancers in colourful regalia are interspersed with close-ups of individuals and their footwork, as well as stunning overhead shots at large powwows – a bird’s eye view of the event that is not normally possible. Skilled camera work and lighting is combined with extensive oral history documentation to produce one of the best audio-visual powwow resources available. The sheer breadth of topics covered in this series makes it valuable for study and instruction, as it demonstrates the many inter-related aspects of culture, tradition, history, and innovation. However, breadth is not accomplished at the expense of depth. Rather, specific issues are selected for deep interrogation. A particularly good example of this is the discussion of the origins of Fancy Dance. Several individuals are interviewed on the creation and emergence of this dance, sometimes detailing complementary versions and sometimes suggesting alternative sources.

That said, the many variants of powwow itself are missing in this collection. There is a focus on competition powwows with little consideration of traditional powwows, and regional and local variations in the powwow event itself are largely not addressed. For those teaching Aboriginal students or teaching in an area with Aboriginal populations, it will be productive to encourage students to compare what they are seeing and the stories they are hearing with those of their own (or the local) First Nation. Indeed, many issues of recent interest in academic study of powwow, such as distinctions between northern and southern singing styles (see, for example, Hoefnagels 2004; Goertzen 2005; Keillor 2006; Browner 2009), distinctions between contest and traditional powwows (Desjarlait 1997; Tulk 2006; Scales 2007), layout of powwow grounds (Browner 2002: 96-98; von Rosen 1998: 24), regalia styles (Browner 2002), or the role of the emcee (Gelo 2005; Mattern 1998, 1999; Tulk 2007) are not directly addressed in this series. However, topics such as commercialization (Aldred 2005), hobbyist powwows (Watchman 2005), and casino culture (Laylor 2006) are represented in this set.

With each episode running forty-eight minutes in length, these videos can be easily programmed into most classes. Further, because these documentaries were originally made for television (which has commercial breaks), it is possible to choose shorter segments for use in class that are relatively self-contained (these “breaks” are obvious by the appearance of a *Pow Wow Trail* banner at the bottom of the screen to indicate the lead out to and return from commercial). However, there is no scene selection built into the menu for each DVD. Consequently, it can be difficult to navigate to the particular clip you want to use. A teacher’s guide (CD-Rom) is

available for *Pow Wow Trail*, which includes a 5-6 page guide for each of the eleven DVDs (provided in both .pdf and .doc formats). Each guide includes a description of the episode, new vocabulary list (usually 2-3 words introduced in the episode), discussion questions appropriate to junior and senior high classes (though likely applicable in undergraduate courses), suggestions for class or term projects or activities, a short list of internet resources, a list of questions to guide the viewing of the episode (with answer key), and some sort of activity sheet that is usually word-based (crossword puzzle, word search, or word scramble). Of all of the material included in the teacher's guide, the most valuable is likely the list of questions to guide viewing. Given the broad scope of topics covered in each episode, this sort of handout can help to focus students' viewing. While I personally am a fan of word puzzles, and the crossword puzzles may have some pedagogical value, word searches and scrambles are perhaps better suited to a younger audience.

The suggested extensions and recommended resources sections, however, could be greatly improved. The extensions tend to be very general, directing students to conduct further research and present on a particular area of history or culture, to watch and discuss another film, to dress a doll in regalia, or to write an essay or story on a particular issue/topic. While these suggestions could be useful in compiling a list of possible term paper topics, it does not provide short in-class creative activities that could supplement learning objectives. Further, little information is provided in terms of execution. So, while the first suggestion in the teacher's guide to "Have students make their own drums (make sure to consult a local elder first)" is a good one,

there may not be anyone available with this specialized knowledge. Further, there are no instructions included for the construction of drums or idiophones (such as rattles) using traditional and/or found materials.

Nevertheless, with some creative thinking, some suggested projects could be reworked to stimulate intriguing conversation. For example, the final suggestion (from the teacher's guide for episode eleven) was to, "Have the class organize a Pow-wow for their friends and families, schoolmates." While organizing and holding a powwow would likely be outside the realm of feasibility for most courses, inviting students to brainstorm through the planning process could be a valuable activity engaging them with issues presented throughout the series: commercialization (to have prize money or not, the type and number of vendors to permit), competition (verses traditional powwow), promotion of the event (issues representation, the presence of tourists), and participation in hobbyist powwows (depending on the composition of the class).

All of the resources listed for each episode are internet-based. While this may improve accessibility for some, we still need to be careful about assuming that everyone has reliable internet access in his or her schools and communities (as well as computers available in classrooms). Certainly, in remote and/or economically disadvantaged areas this may not always be the case. Further, given the ephemeral and interactive nature of webpages, resources may quickly disappear or be replaced on the internet. (At the time of writing this review, four of the sites listed in the guide no longer exist, one has a new URL, and one requires a passkey for access.)

There is no doubt that the *Pow Wow Trail* series is a valuable resource for the study of

powwow and First Nations musical expression more broadly. Though the teacher's guide is limited in terms of usefulness, the overall collection achieves its goal of "[exploring] the true meaning, beyond the feathers and beads," of powwow (DVD case). This series will appeal widely to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, educators, and scholars, as well as powwow practitioners. As a whole, it will be of significant value to disciplines such as ethnomusicology, anthropology, folklore, cultural studies, and Aboriginal studies; however, individual episodes will also appeal to popular music studies (episode seven) and film studies (episode ten). As the area of powwow studies continues to develop, *Pow Wow Trail* will provide a much-needed audio-visual component that complements scholarly publications (such as Diamond 2008; Ellis et al 2005; Ellis 2003; Browner 2002). ❁

NOTES

1. Powwow is spelled multiple ways throughout this series, including pow wow (as in the title), pow-wow (on the DVD case), and a combination of the two throughout the teacher's guide. Powwow is also a common spelling used in recent publications (such as Ellis et al. 2005).

2. According to Internet Movie Database (IMDB), the original series consisted of thirteen episodes; however, the Arbor release of the DVD set includes only eleven. I was unable to determine whether information on IMDB was accurate or what the subject of the other two episodes might have been.

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