

Dances with Wolves

By Angela Aleiss
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The success of Kevin Costner's "Dances with Wolves" in 1990 surprised many. "The Hollywood Reporter" called the movie "a technical marvel" and the "Los Angeles Times" designated it "the best Western since John Ford left us." "USA Today" added that "of all the Westerns that have treated the Indians sympathetically, 'Wolves' ranks near the top." Even skeptics who prematurely dubbed the project "Kevin's Gate" (a reference to the 1980 disaster, "Heaven's Gate") were impressed. Costner, the movie's co-producer (along with Jim Wilson), director, and star, simply proved the cynics wrong. His three-hour epic Western was nominated for 12 Academy Awards (including three nominations for Costner himself) and picked up seven Oscars including best picture, director, and screenwriter. In addition, Graham Greene's Academy Award nomination for Best Actor in a Supporting Role was the second time a Native North American actor had received the honor since Chief Dan George for "Little Big Man" (1970).

Among Native Americans, however, the reaction was mixed. "But no matter how sensitive and wonderful this movie is, you have to ask who's telling the story. It's certainly not an Indian," filmmaker George Bordeaux (Blackfeet) told the "San Francisco Chronicle." But Michael Smith (Sioux), founder and president of the American Indian Film Institute in San Francisco, surveyed Hollywood's long history of Native American images and recalled how the movie deeply affected audiences. "I don't think 'Dances with Wolves' is ever going to be topped," he told "Indian Country Today Media Network."

In addition to its many accolades, "Dances with Wolves" brought the Indian-as-subject back to the American movie screen. Sympathetic Indian images had previously appeared in "The Silent Enemy" (1930), "Broken Arrow" (1950), and "Little Big Man" (1970), and a few notable Native American ac-



Stands With A Fist (Mary McDonnell) weds Lt. Dunbar (Kevin Costner), whom the Indians have named "Dances With Wolves." Courtesy Library of Congress collection.

tors like Will Rogers, Jay Silverheels, and Will Sampson had achieved screen prominence long before Costner's epic. Native North American people even spoke their own language (with translated English titles) as early as 1933 in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's "Eskimo." Still, with the release of only a few low-budget movies like "War Party" (1988) and "Powwow Highway" (1989), the previous decade had been sparse for Hollywood's Indians.

"Dances with Wolves" is the story of Lieutenant John J. Dunbar, a Union Civil War hero, and his life among the Lakota Sioux. While serving in a remote military outpost in the Dakota Territory, Dunbar encounters Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) and Wind In His Hair (Rodney Grant). He visits the Sioux camp and meets Stands With A Fist (Mary McDonnell), a white woman captured by the tribe. The Indians name him 'Dances with Wolves' and Dunbar becomes an honorary member of the tribe and marries Stands With A Fist. Meanwhile, the Army captures Dunbar and prepares for his execution as a deserter. The Sioux rescue Dunbar, but he realizes that as a deserter and a fugitive, he will jeopardize the tribe's safety. Dunbar

and *Stands With A Fist* eventually depart into the wilderness and fend for themselves against their white enemies.

The movie's conclusion was a source of conflict. In the 1988 paperback novel "Dances with Wolves" (published by Fawcett Books), author and screenwriter Michael Blake had Dunbar and his wife remain with the Indians. But Blake said that Costner was "adamant" about leaving the tribe because the filmmaker never fully embraced the idea of "going Native." Blake had read the 1970 best seller "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee" (Dee Brown's poignant Native American version of Western settlement) and discovered that compared to portrayals in Hollywood Westerns, Indians were "real people." When Costner convinced Blake to write a novel about Plains Indians, the author gave up his job and wrote "Dances with Wolves." "The Holy Road" (2001), Blake's sequel novel, takes place 11 years after "Dances with Wolves" when white rangers capture *Stands With A Fist* and her infant daughter.

In the novel "Dances with Wolves," Dunbar lives among the Comanche rather than the Lakota Sioux. Apparently, the Comanche tribe in Oklahoma offered only a small talent pool whereas South Dakota had many Sioux Indians who knew the Lakota language. South Dakota also boasted a large herd of approximately 3,500 buffalo needed for the panoramic hunting scenes, which were shot on the scenic 22,000-hectare Triple U Ranch. Native American educator Doris Leader Charge portrayed Pretty Shield, the wife of Chief Ten Bears (Floyd 'Red Crow' Westerman) and gave the cast a three-week cram course in the Lakota language.

The movie's non-Indians—along with the evil Pawnee warriors—create a sharp contrast to the Sioux. But Blake believed that these portrayals were realistic: The character of Major Fambrough (who shoots himself in the head) was based upon a real army officer who committed suicide. *Stands With A Fist*, the white captive woman who marries Dunbar, was a literary device: Blake described her as a "bridge" for Dunbar to communicate with Native American society. Her life with the Sioux was based upon the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, the white girl captured

by the Comanche and mother of Quanah Parker (a Comanche tribal and spiritual leader and a respected statesman).

But the marriage of a captive white woman to a Caucasian man carefully avoids any issue of Indian/white miscegenation. Yet 33 years before "Dances with Wolves," Sam Fuller's "Run of the Arrow" (1957) had shown how a disillusioned Confederate veteran (Rod Steiger) joined the Sioux and even married a Lakota woman. Both movies told a similar story as Steiger becomes a Sioux warrior, but he and his Lakota bride must also depart the Indian village.

Costner no doubt had a huge winner on his hands. "Dances with Wolves" cost approximately \$19 million but raked in a stunning \$424 million at the worldwide box office (and a \$184 million in North America). The movie was the directorial debut for Costner, who financed it through his own Tig Productions. Meanwhile, studios scrambled to create a cycle of sympathetic Indian-themed movies. "The Last of the Mohicans" (1992) and "Geronimo: An American Legend" (1993) were revised stories casting Indians in a favorable light while "Thunderheart" (1992) offered a contemporary look at tensions on a South Dakota reservation. Even Walt Disney Pictures pitched in with its widely successful animated feature "Pocahontas" (1995). But none could match the box office success of "Dances with Wolves." Years later, the filmmakers of both "The Last Samurai" (2003) and "Avatar" (2009) reportedly admitted that they had lifted their stories from Costner's blockbuster movie.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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