

EDGE OF THE KNIFE

(dir. Gwaai Edenshaw & Helen Haig-Brown, 2018 – 100 mins)

Gwaai Edenshaw's four-years-in-the-making labour-of-love *S̱Gaawaay H'uuna* (*Edge of the Knife*) has drummed up international headlines for being made in a language only spoken fluently by 20 people. Haida is the language of the Haida Gwaii, an Indigenous first nations community based in an archipelago off the west coast of Canada. Edenshaw, who is Haida and speaks the language but not fluently, enlisted language mentors to ensure that his cast and the English subtitles were accurate. Set in the 19th century, the film is shot through with a tactile integrity as a result of using real Haida people's talents to create costumes, props and the sound design.

A carver by trade, Edenshaw made several props himself, staying up all night to make a mask, a cane, a headdress and a dagger in order to use them on the next day's shoot. "Rather than being tired for the loss of sleep I actually would feel more invigorated in those times," he says to me over the phone, "I had been missing carving so much it helped my own mental health to be able to get some done." This holistic approach to the nature of creativity is found elsewhere with the production enabled by a combination of the conventional – funding secured with help from Inuit production company Isuma – and the traditional practice of pot-latching aka trading and gifting.

The story is a magical realist period re-imagining (in the vein of *Ciro Guerra's Embrace of the Serpent*) powered by Shakespearean themes of tragedy, revenge and family. At the centre of the film is one man's transformation into a Gaagiid, or Gaagiixiid (the pronunciation is respectively different according to northern and southern dialects) in the wake of a terrible event at sea. The previously fine figure of a man Adii'sii (Tyler York) disfigures himself with sharp objects (like sea anemones) and his ability to speak is lost with communication reduced to primal howls. Meanwhile his brother Kwa (Willy Russ), sister-in-law and the wider community are tasked with how to process both the tragedy and the transformation.

Rather than 'Gaagiid/Gaagiixiid' serving as a term for a mythological creature, it is a term for a state of being that Haida people have witnessed and know well. Edenshaw first heard stories through his father. He shares with me two tales by way of examples. "Most of the things that have happened are near misses. I wasn't there to witness it – I was on the west coast – but a guy had fallen and hit his head. Then when he tried to walk home he went up to the ridge but he walked the wrong way and so wound up, probably with a concussion, spending the night cold and wet and alone in the woods. By the next afternoon when the search party finally found him he couldn't even recognise his own brother. It took them about an hour to talk him down and bring him home. He was brandishing an axe and very afraid of them. That's the state of mind that is Gaagiid, or Gaagiixiid."

"There was another one in the mid-century where a guy was actually killed. They found him in the wild and somebody had shot him. They recognised him only because he was the first guy to get dental work, so they recognised him by his gold teeth."

Edenshaw opted to root his first feature film in a character's transformation for a number of reasons. One is the cultural accessibility within his community: "Every Haida person will have their own stories around Gaagiid or they'll connect to it on quite a deep level." The second reason relates to the wider messaging regarding the Haida language: "One of the things that occurs in the context of our film is the Gaagiid loses his voice which, as a language project, has potency. This idea of finding voice is an idea of him literally finding his voice but also of us finding our voice, finding our language."

Finally, there is something in the mix about learning how to accept loved ones at their unrecognisable worst. To give Edenshaw the last words: "When our loved ones become difficult, and they're plagued by issues of mental health or addiction or anything like that, what is our responsibility? Our inclination is to push them away, but I think that is when the responsibility becomes even higher for us to be holding them close to us. Sure, it makes your life harder and you want your life to be easier and better, but one of the realities of being a part of a small community is you have to own those connections."

– **Sophie Monks-Kaufman**