



Q&A with Director/Producer Charlie Soap of *The Cherokee Word for Water*

How would you describe your style as a director/producer?

I would describe my style as being very involved. This was my first time directing and I was nervous and intimidated. When I was asked to direct, I thought it was way above my head. After thinking about it a couple of days, I thought I can do this. This film is based on the true story of our lives. The last couple of years, while Wilma was alive, I was more involved in the script. Once I realized the director's job was to coach and direct the actor then actually giving directions to Mo and Kim. They helped me realize they welcomed my advice. The more I did it, the easier it became. It did not take long to actually realize how important it was for the actors to understand what each particular scene was about and the emotions involved. I was able to interject my experience(s) to the actors and to the particular scenes.

How long did it take you to find a team and get the script finalized?

The script took about 20 years because the scriptwriters had no idea what the life of a Cherokee was like in rural communities back then. I assume that the trouble was the writers did not know our culture, language of our people and certainly not the Bell community/people. The team came together over 20 years.

What was the casting process like? Who was the most difficult for you to cast?

We wanted to have an Indian casting person so that took some work. We insisted on only auditioning Indian actors who could prove their Tribal membership so that added an additional challenge, plus we were hiring local people, many had never acted before. We also needed lots of local extras for community scenes.

Wilma was the most difficult to cast, Wilma had such a strong personality, character, and was smart. There was a finesse about her which not many people possess. Yet personality that one can feel comfortable but the same time a solid well grounded person and nobody to mess with. Wilma was easy to be around and very polite while she could be direct and challenging. She was quick and witty and great sense of humor. She could be in a very controversial situation but she was very diplomatic respectful to both sides. She was aware of all involved and looked at both sides of the situation and gave her honest opinion with respect. So finding someone who could play Wilma was a tough job. Mo Brings Plenty who plays Charlie was a natural Charlie.

Where did you film?

We filmed in the Tahlequah area. We also used the Mankiller Flats where Wilma and I lived.

What was the most challenging part about making this film?

In my opinion, all aspects of making the film had its challenges. Raising the money, filming during bad weather, right equipment not available and/or not on site. Editing was challenging and occasionally not having the right footage requiring a reshoot later. Distribution has its challenges



of getting it in the theaters across the country and marketing.

During the production of this film, can you describe a moment that stood out or really meant a lot to you?

There were two moments that stood out. The community meeting scene where Wilma and I had to deliver a strong speech convincing the community they could install the water line with volunteer labor. Many people were making negative comments about the people in Bell saying they were lazy and would not ever build the waterline. This scene is where we had to motivate, inspire them to meet the challenge. That scene conveyed to the people, we believe in you, we trust you, you can do this project, you can meet the challenge. After that meeting we knew the community people were on board and ready to take on the challenge of laying the water line for their community and families.

At the ending where the "Oak Ridge boys" coming over the hill ready to work because a lot of people were skeptical about them showing up for work. Familiar comments were buzzing around "they're not going to do it, they're lazy and they won't show up". To everyone's surprise they performed the work beyond everybody's expectation.

When the audience leaves the theater, how do you want them to feel?

With an understanding of the history and hope still alive in Indian Country, we want people everywhere to appreciate the contributions and potential of contemporary Native people.

What can the audience do to help?

The audience can support the film by telling their friends about the story and encouraging them to organize a screening, they can also help by donating to the Wilma Mankiller Foundation and by getting involved in helping their communities.