

Wes Studi visits the Gallup Film Festival big screen

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Actor emphasizes role of Native Americans in film-industry history

A star shot through Gallup for the opening night of the 2018 Gallup Film Festival at El Morro Theatre Sept. 13.

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Wes Studi, known for his roles in *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Dances with Wolves* and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

, among other films, attended the GFF screening of featured documentary

Defending the Fire

as the event's special guest.

The film, produced by Silver Bullet Productions, is narrated by Wes Studi and tells "the story of the Warrior, the importance of cultures in modern quests, and the lessons of war through the lens of these cultures," according to the film's website.

The film festival event began with welcoming remarks by GFF Director Knifewing Segura, and it featured a Q&A session and meet-and-greet with Wes Studi, who was joined by his wife and writer of *Defending the Fire*, Maura Dhu Studi, as well as Silver Bullet Productions writer and producer Lisa Lucas.

Native American film history

The trio addressed several topics pertaining to the film including its importance to those involved in the production as well as to the festival audience.

Wes Studi emphasized its significance for Native American viewers. He said Natives have been involved in various aspects of the film business since its inception, but have not fully taken the opportunity to share their perspectives with the world.

"We've always been a part of [the industry]," he said. "We haven't begun to throw our stories out there."

Wes Studi brought up early films like *Indian Day School*, which was produced in 1898 and showed a group of Native American children and their teacher filing out of and back into a Pueblo-style, one-room schoolhouse. While the scene was short, this was the first film shot in New Mexico territory.

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“They’ve opened up doors wherein we saw Native Americans as real people with roles in stories,” Wes Studi said, referring to actors like Chief Dan George from *Little Big Man* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* as influences on the big screen. “We haven’t been a real part of the industry of making film until back in the ’50s and ’60s.”

The next generation

When asked about filmmaking and what prospective filmmakers can expect, Wes Studi conceded it’s not an easy process.

“[It] needs a beginning, a middle, and an end,” he said. “[It] needs to talk about whatever your story is. It’s all in the writing.”

Lucas agreed the road of filmmaking is difficult, but not impossible. She praised the dedication of film students at Navajo Technical University near Crownpoint.

“They want to tell their people’s stories,” she said. “[A] documentary is all about passion.”

Maura Dhu Studi seconded the praise of the students.

“That’s the people who are going to be telling your own stories,” she said to the crowd.

Maura Dhu Studi spoke of the filmmaker’s workshop program offered by Silver Bullet Productions, where professionals visit schools and teach students about making films over the course of a few days.

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Students learn about writing a script, shooting the film, how to use the cameras and how to edit. Wes Studi teaches directing.

“[It is] a wonderful collaborative effort of consultants and filmmakers,” Maura Dhu Studi said of the program. “Our main thrust is to empower the youth to make their own films.”

On the dream screen

The final question of the evening came from Roger Willie, a Navajo educator, artist and actor from Thoreau.

Willie, who said he’d admired Wes Studi since first seeing him in *Last of the Mohicans*, asked the actor if he had a “dream location and audience.”

Wes Studi replied that he would take the Native tribes of the southeastern United States and incorporate them into the plot like the kingdoms in *Game of Thrones*, showcasing human nature within groups and individuals — he’d show the film in every theater in the world, he said.

Wes Studi told the audience he was once given a special painting by Willie at the Red Earth Festival in Oklahoma City.

“[I saw a] huge wonderful painting of [an] Indian woman sitting like a Mona Lisa look,” he said. “[Willie] saw me looking at the painting and had to give it to me one way or another.”

Maura Dhu Studi said the couple loves the painting.

“We have so many pictures of men in the house,” she said. “So I’m glad to have a painting of a woman in the house.”

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Willie chalked up meeting Wes Studi to good timing.

“When I came back [from a break], he was at my booth,” Willie said when asked about his experience of meeting the actor after the Q&A. “It was just the right moment.”

Despite Wes Studi’s refusal to take the painting for free, Willie said he insisted the actor have it.

“It was something to give back,” he said. “It said, ‘You’re an awesome man, thank you for what you do.’”

After the Q&A ended, the crowd moved to the Downtown Conference Center for the opportunity to get Wes Studi’s autograph and have their photo taken with him. Guests were treated to live music and food as they mingled in line.

Visit: www.silverbulletproductions.com

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