

# These rising filmmakers are finally bringing two-spirited stories to the screen

## Indigenous and queer identities intersect at this year's Vancouver Queer Film Festival

Chris Dupuis · CBC Arts

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Bretten Hannam's North Mountain. (VQFF)

29 shares

Canada has a rich tradition of Indigenous filmmaking. But many of the resources and much of the interest have historically been focused on documentaries. These films form a critical part of the processes of decolonization and reconciliation (particularly in relation to the Residential School system). But the lack of commercially-oriented projects can be a roadblock for up-and-coming artists in envisioning a space for their stories.

These challenges become particularly intense for [two-spirited](#) artists, who rarely find themselves represented in Indigenous or queer cinema, let alone the mainstream world. But a rising group of creators are intent on changing that. Presented as part of the Vancouver Queer Film Festival, ["Two Spirit REELness"](#) is a program aims to highlight the works of this burgeoning sector and the unique challenges they face.

Part of what sets this community apart from the rest of the LGBT spectrum is the relationship they have to civil rights and social acceptance. While other communities are aiming to expand what they have, the starting point

for two-spirited folks is about reclaiming what was already theirs prior to colonization.

"In that way, our dialogue is both more subtle and more radical than the broader LGBT movement and our stories pre-date the settler framework," says [Harlan Pruden](#), curator of the program (which includes [Adam Garnet Jones' \*Fire Song\*](#) and [Mark Kenneth Woods and Michael Yerxa's \*Two Soft Things. Two Hard Things.\*](#) both recently profiled on CBC Arts). "Within the broader struggles our communities face, artists can shine a light on those things and push us in visceral ways to where we want to be having those conversations."



Thirza Cuthand's 2 Spirit Introductory Special \$19.99. (VQFF)

Halifax-based filmmaker Bretten Hannam's [North Mountain](#) will appear in the program. The piece follows a young Mik'maw hunter in a remote area of Nova Scotia whose tranquil life takes an unusual turn when he stumbles on a mysterious stranger in the woods, bleeding from a gunshot wound with a suitcase of cash in hand.

Equal parts gangster movie, thriller, and coming out story, Hannam credits the genre-busting plot to his fantastical childhood tendencies. Never seeing native or queer characters on screen growing up, he would reimagine stories that came beaming through the family TV from different perspectives, sometimes latching onto a character in the background and crafting alternate narratives for them.

"I was lucky in that respect because I had an active imagination so I could envision different possibilities," he says. "At the same time, never seeing yourself on TV and film takes a toll. Being inundated with white heterosexual stories starts to make you feel invisible."

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The lack of representation and role models can incite some budding artists to create a space for themselves. For others, it simply stops them in their tracks. Artist and curator [Thirza Cuthand](#), recalls the challenges of trying to find works for queer Indigenous film programs.

"I wondered if it's because people thought there wasn't enough audience for their work so they just weren't making it," she says. "But I think two-spirited work can be interesting for Indigenous people, white LGBT people, and people outside those communities too. What we really need is greater opportunities to create our projects and spaces to present and promote them to a wider audience."

While she's found small levels of support through various government agencies, Cuthand self-funds the majority of her projects. Her short [2 Spirit Introductory Special \\$19.99](#) (which also features in the program) playfully mocks late-night infomercials at the same time it references the unique struggles two-spirited people face in their coming out process.



Bretten Hannam's *North Mountain*. (VQFF)

Just as limited representation may dissuade artists from telling their stories, producers can equate the lack of existing work with a lack of audience.

"I went to LA to pitch a script and the response was basically 'Oh, no one wants to watch a movie about Indians'," Hannam says. "Film is hugely market driven and the assumption is that stories about a specific community are only going to be of interest to that community. But if it was only gay guys who went to *Brokeback Mountain*, it would never have enjoyed the success that it did. Indigenous filmmaking has that potential, but we need a greater investment in resources and opportunities if we're going to get there."

While the sector lags behind in terms of money for production and promotion, as well as spaces for presentation, one area where they really excel is education. Though some artists (Cuthand and Hannam included) end up following a formal educational path, many others turn to alternative processes of knowledge exchange.

"We're actually really good at training and there's a big focus on helping each other and sharing what we know," Cuthand says. "Some of that is about being disenfranchised from the traditional university system or just not

having the background to get in. In other cases, it's a rejection of institutional learning and a desire to be in more community-based learning environments."

"I often have younger artists approaching me for advice and it's part of my job to engage the next generation and tell them their stories are worth telling," Hannam adds. "The more young people see that, the more they feel like they can take up space in the world."

**Two-Spirit Reelness at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. August 11-21, Vancouver.**

[www.queerfilmfestival.ca/spotlights](http://www.queerfilmfestival.ca/spotlights)