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PROUDLY CALGARY SINCE 1883

Alberta-shot Discovery Channel miniseries, Klondike, mixes history and melodrama

By Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald January 17, 2014



Richard Madden in Klondike.

Photograph by: Dan Power, Dan Power/Discovery Channel

Given its rugged nature, it's not surprising that much of the chatter around the Discovery Channel's Klondike has dealt with the more physical aspects involved in filming the six-hour miniseries last year in Alberta.

Actors climbed mountains, plunged into rivers, dodged (fake) avalanches, fought and shot each other and generally did their best to look gaunt, desperate and dishevelled when sloshing in the muck of a recreated Dawson City of the 1890s.

But star Richard Madden insists there was a more scholarly side to the shoot.

In fact, to hear the 27-year-old Scottish actor talk about it, the set could become positively nerdy when it came to comparing notes on their characters.

“We have so much material to pull from because this was a period that did happen, a lot of these people were real people,” says Madden, in an on-set interview west of Calgary last year. “Although we aren’t making a documentary, we’re making a drama, there were so many things to pull on and interpret. So many of the actors were bringing so much to the story: their interpretation, their facts. We were always sharing stories, saying ‘Oh I read this story that this person did this.’”

It’s true, Klondike is far from a documentary. Historians may be clucking their disapproval when it comes to some of the dramatic licence taken with its tale of two childhood friends who come to Dawson City with gold-rush fever. But Madden’s character of Bill Haskell is based on a real person. Author-adventurer Jack London (Johnny Simmons) is a character. So is resourceful businesswoman Belinda Mulrooney (Abbie Cornish) and saintly Father Judge (Sam Shepard). And while Madden, best known for playing the doomed king Robb Stark on Game of Thrones, may be exaggerating when he says he read “1,000 books” to prepare for the role, there is no denying he did his homework. He read Charlotte Gray’s Gold Diggers: Striking it Rich in the Klondike, the non-fiction book on which the miniseries is loosely based. The tales of London, Mulrooney, Haskell and Father Judge all intertwine in Gray’s historical account. But Madden also read Jack London novels to prepare and even tracked down a copy of Haskell’s obscure memoirs, which had been out of print for 100 years.

“There’s so much of it that was almost like a manual,” Madden says. “He lists exactly the items that he took on the journey with him. And also there’s the amazing stories in there of him and the other people on the same journey and what happens when someone stole from him, for example. I found out a lot about the man by how he reacts to those situations.”

Granted, the situations Haskell faces in Klondike, which begins its three-night run on Monday, have been heightened for dramatic purposes. A romance with Mulrooney was thrown into the mix, as was a murder-mystery to add a revenge element to the narrative. Tim Roth plays a fictional character named The Count, a ruthless villain and rival to Mulrooney’s bid to take advantage of Dawson City’s gold-fuelled boom.

It was shot over 54 days at the CL Ranch near Springbank and in Canmore and the Kananaskis last spring, with Alberta winning out over Romania when it came to choosing a location to sub in for the wild Yukon frontier. Eighty-three Alberta actors and ten stunt performers were cast, including a meaty role for local character actor Greg Lawson (Heartland, Blackstone). Veteran Alberta talent also worked behind the scenes, including Emmy-winning makeup artist Gail Kennedy, production designer Ken Rempel and art director Trevor Smith. Co-produced by Calgary’s Nomadic Pictures, Klondike is a perfect showcase for Alberta’s well-tuned skills when it comes to creating authentic looks for period pieces.

But focusing specifically on this period and the inherent drama of gold-rush fever was a mandate from the beginning for Discovery, which has found great success with similarly-themed non-fiction programming such as *Jungle Gold* and *Gold Rush*. Discovery teamed with iconic British director Ridley Scott's Scott Free Productions, where executive producer David Zucker quickly zeroed in on Gray's book as a rich starting point and "ultimate survivor story."

"There is an incredible primal element to it," said Zucker. "There were extraordinary obstacles, some were naturally formed obviously, but also the human horror that these people confronted. They were all motivated either by inner demons or inner desires in pursuit of something that could, in a turn, alter their lives."

Klondike actually starts its six-hour run like an earnest, Disney-esque buddy picture, with Haskell and fictional best friend Bryon Epstein (Augustus Prew) deciding in an impromptu fit of adventure-seeking to make the treacherous trek to Dawson City. But it soon takes a darker turn into violence, murder, disease and all sorts of misery as it becomes clear that most who set out to find their fortunes were staggeringly ill-prepared for what they find. It's all interspersed with a good deal of pontificating in voice-over narration about greed and the nature of man.

"It's complex and it's deep and it's beautiful and poetic and tough and harsh," says Cornish, the Australian actress who plays Belinda Mulrooney. "But it's very heart-to-heart."

Like Madden, Cornish did a good deal of research on her character beyond how she is portrayed in Gray's book. Mulrooney was decidedly ahead of her time as an entrepreneur and businesswoman.

"There was no gender divide for her," says Cornish. "She didn't live in a man's world or woman's world, she just lived in the world. And she was really great with establishing businesses and building them from the ground up and making them successful."

While Cornish did not have to slog up Fortress Mountain like Madden, Prew and dozens of extras, she did get a chance to engage in some adventures, including dogsledding in Canmore.

The physical challenges of the shoot were part of what attracted both Cornish and Madden to the project.

"I'm not looking for an easy life, never have done and I'm not getting it," says Madden with a laugh. "I'm always searching for things that is something I don't know if I'm good enough to do. *Game of Thrones* was no exception and this was no exception. If I pick up the script and I really love it and question auditioning for it or talking to the director because I don't know if I'm good enough to pull it off than that's the script I'm going to pursue."

evolmers@calgaryherald.com

Klondike premières Monday at 7 p.m. on the Discovery Channel.

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