

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Edge of America</b>
Author(s)	Scott Foundas
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2004 Feb 02
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	80
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Edge of America (On the edge), Eyre, Chris, 2003

## EDGE OF AMERICA

A Red House Entertainment production. Produced by Willy Holtzman, Chris Eyre. Executive producers, Tim Daly, Steve Burleigh.

Directed by Chris Eyre. Screenplay, Willy Holtzman. Camera (Fotokem color), Clark Mathis; editor, Paul Trejo; music, BC Smith; production designer, Mark Hofeling; set decorator, Kenneth J. Kirchner; costume designer, Alexis Scott; sound (Dolby Surround), Douglas Cameron; line producer, Robert F. Phillips; assistant director, Matias Alvarez; casting, Rene Haynes. **Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres)**, Jan. 17, 2004. Running time: 105 MIN.

Kenny Williams ..... James McDaniel  
Annie Shorty ..... Irene Bedard  
Leroy McKinney ..... Tim Daly  
Cuch ..... Wes Studi  
Carla McKinney ..... Delanna Studi  
Shirleen ..... Misty Upham  
Franklin Tom ..... Eddie Spears  
Dwayne ..... Cody Lightning  
Mother Tsoie ..... Geraldine Keams  
Homer Horton ..... Michael Flynn  
Francie ..... Fraya Aspaas-Montoya  
Baby ..... Trini King  
Marissa ..... Deanna Allison

By SCOTT FOUNDAS

**P**urportedly inspired by actual events, "Edge of America," the latest pic by Native American filmmaker Chris Eyre ("Smoke Signals," "Skins"), echoes films like "To Sir, With Love" or "Hoosiers." Story of an African-American English teacher coaching the girls basketball team at an all-Native-American high school is formulaic to a fault. That said, this Showtime production (which screened as Sundance's Salt Lake City opening night film and will air on the cabler later this year) is more compelling and touching than it has any reason to be, thanks to sensitive execution and excellent performances from reliable screen veterans and spirited newcomers.

Having relocated from Texas to fill a mid-semester job opening at

2/2-8/04

Three Nations High School, English teacher Kenny Williams (James McDaniel) isn't like anything the locals have seen before. For starters, he's black, which causes even the school's seemingly unflappable white principal (Michael Flynn) to do a double-take at their first meeting. Beyond that, he's completely ignorant of — and, at first, more than a bit insensitive to — local customs.

Still, the obvious set-up by Pulitzer Prize-nominated playwright Willy Holtzman, who contributed pic's script, contains at least a spark of originality: The new black teacher on campus is a fish out of water not because he isn't white but because he isn't red.

By-the-numbers plotting includes Williams earning the respect of his students — a moody, sarcastic bunch of slacker Indian teens, most of whom have never seen a black man before — though at least one, hip-hop-spouting tough Franklin Tom (Eddie Spears), seems to think he is black.

Challenged soon thereafter by beautiful fellow teacher Annie (Irene Bedard) and colorful local auto mechanic Cuch (scene-stealing Wes Studi), among others, to turn around the fate of Three Nations High's winless Lady Warriors basketball team, Williams reluctantly accepts the coaching role and begins to assemble his team.

Of course, it turns out class "bad girl" Carla (Delanna Studi, cousin of Wes) can shoot hoops like nobody's business (and is also really smart, but plays dumb so as to fit in with her friends). Meanwhile, the equally promising Baby (Trini King) must

convince her traditionalist mother (Geraldine Keams) that the sport is not an affront to their way of life.

"Edge of America" soon becomes an inevitable countdown to a championship-game finale, complete with rousing speeches and lessons about how it's not winning or losing that matters, but rather what one learns along the way.

Too often, Holtzman opts for the easy way out, particularly during the Lady Warriors' two encounters with rich, seemingly all-white (and presumably Mormon) Zion High, depicted as underhanded and racist. Entire pic, in fact, boils down to a generic metaphor for racial harmony and finding one's place in the world — with only a precious few scenes committed to providing a sense of those identity issues unique to Indian cultures.

But the clichés are rendered more than tolerable thanks to Eyre's genuinely heartfelt direction, coupled with the cast's ability to give performances that subdue (if not quite transcend) stereotype.

McDaniel, late of "NYPD Blue" (where he was Emmy-nominated), is particularly forceful as a man whose tough-love philosophy is both his greatest strength and his most blinding weakness. The students also impress, particularly Delanna Studi, who has a spunky, full-bodied charisma.

In the end, pic manages to lift spirits without leaving the audience feeling manhandled.

Tech package is pro, albeit suggestive that the film was never intended for more than the small screen.