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SMOKE SIGNALS

A Miramax release of a Shadow Catcher Entertainment production. Produced by Scott Rosenfelt, Larry Estes. Executive producers, David Skinner, Carl Bressler. Co-producers, Sherman Alexie, Chris Eyre.

Directed by Chris Eyre. Screenplay, Sherman Alexie, based on stories from his book "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven." Camera (CFI color), Brian Capener; editor, Brian Berdan; music, BC Smith; production design, Charles Armstrong; art direction, Jonathon Saturen; set decoration, Dawn Ferry; costume design, Ron Leamon; sound (Dolby), Douglas Tourtelot; line producer, Brent Morris; associate producers, Randy Suhr, Roger Baerwolf; assistant director, Jo Shilling; second unit director, Suhr; casting, Coreen Mayrs. Reviewed at **Sundance Film Festival (competing)**, Jan. 16, 1998. Running time: 88 MIN.

Victor Joseph Adam Beach
Thomas Builds-the-Fire Evan Adams
Suzy Song Irene Bedard
Arnold Joseph Gary Farmer
Arlene Joseph Tantoo Cardinal
Young Victor Joseph Cody Lightning
Young Thomas

Builds-the-Fire Simon Baker
Velma Michelle St. John
Burt Robert Miano
Penny Molly Cheek
Grandma

Builds-the-Fire Monique Mojica
Lucy Elaine Miles
Junior Polatkin Michael Greyeyes
Lester Fallsapart Leonard George
Randy Peone John Trudell
Boo Darwin Haine
Police Chief Tom Skerritt
Cathy the Gymnast Cynthia Geary
Holly Perrey Reeves

By TODD McCARTHY

It's a good day to be indigenous," a radio announcer on the desolate Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation dryly intones at the beginning of "Smoke Signals," and the remark serves not only as an accurate indication of the quirky, self-deprecating humor to be found throughout the film, but as a sort of prophetic blessing on this evidently first fictional feature written, directed and co-produced in the U.S. by Native Americans. A light, entertaining treatment of serious themes that speaks with a distinctive, unusual voice and instinctively pulls back from the temptation to be solemn and pretentious, pic won both the coveted Audience Award and the Filmmakers' Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival. All the same, Miramax will have to use all its ingenuity and muscle to raise anything more than a core paying public for this eminently accessible work, due to perceived lack of interest among urban auds in stories about the modern West in general and contempo Indians in particular.

Film arrives with a notable pedigree, being an adaptation of four stories culled from acclaimed Native American writer Sherman Alexie's breakthrough 1993 collection, "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven." Director Chris Eyre put himself on the fest map with his short "Someone Kept Saying Powwow," based on the story that became the second act of the current feature, and project was developed in the 1995 Sundance Lab.

While subjects at hand include the

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poverty of life on the reservations, Indian stereotyping and the problem of coming to terms with an irresponsible, absent father, Alexie and Eyre's treatment of them is nearly always from a sly and humorous angle. Tale opens in 1976 with a frightening fire that kills the parents of the infant Thomas, and when it jumps ahead to the present day, the grown Thomas (Evan Adams) is revealed to be nothing short of the nerd of the Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho, a skinny, toothsome kid who sports oversize glasses, plaid shirts under three-piece suits and braided hair that makes him look like a girl. He also likes to tell elaborate stories that hardly anyone wants to hear.

Among those who mostly ignores Thomas is Victor (Adam Beach), an athletic, seemingly tough young man who keeps most of his feelings to himself. Nonetheless, he's unavoidably linked to Thomas since it was his father, Arnold (Gary Farmer), who saved the tot's life in the conflagration. A further flashback informs that Victor has not seen his father since the latter walked out on his family in an inebriated fury 10 years before.

When word comes of Arnold's death in Phoenix, Thomas offers to pay for the impoverished Victor's trip to collect the remains, provided that he can go along. Thus begins a picaresque road trip, one studded with off-kilter humor, that helps bring out latent aspects of each young man's personality.

Initial dynamic is one of an over-eager youngster desperate to impress an imposing and idolized young man, one who can scarcely disguise his embarrassment over being seen with someone so obsequious and physically maladroit. This tension is resolved in a very funny scene on the bus in which Victor upbraids the fawning Thomas by snapping, "Quit grinning. Indians aren't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic." Victor at least succeeds in goading his companion to discard his geeky garb for something a bit more normal.



FELLOW TRAVELERS: Adam Beach, left, and Evan Adams co-star in the Native American comedy-drama "Smoke Signals."

The guys arrive in Phoenix at the story's midway point, and find that Arnold lived and died in a small mobile home in a desolate desert area. They also meet Arnold's friend Suzy Song (Irene Bedard), who relates some disturbing information about the dead man that further complicates his son's feelings about him but nonetheless sets him on a course toward greater maturity and a form of emotional closure.

Breezy, often self-mocking tone proves fresh and invigorating; for a good while, the clamped-down Victor serves as a virtual straight man for Thomas' comic conceits, and latter's singsong delivery immediately calls to mind the Canadian "Eh?" style of humor.

But while "Smoke Signals" remains engaging, its novelty carries it only so far, and the straightforward narrative line has commenced to sag before a climax that will move some viewers but strike others as perhaps too prescribed in its inevitability. Eyre's direction is observant and responsive to Alexie's lively writing, but the film's very simplicity places significant limitations on the extent of its achievement.

What one carries away from the picture, then, are its fun-loving tone and unexpected insights rather than a feeling of much substance or com-

plexity. Adams has the showy role as the goofball Thomas and makes a strong mark with it, while Beach does reasonably well within the far more restricted bounds of his part as the wounded son. Farmer scores in his limited scenes as the frustrated, alcoholic father, and large supporting cast is sharp across the boards. Tech contributions are decent.

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