

# Polaris

Yukoners bring frozen wasteland and its inhabitants to life in a post-apocalyptic film

By Amy Kenny

If you think you recognize a pair of pants on the silver screen this season, you may be right—provided you're watching *Polaris*.

Not only was it shot in the Yukon, the dystopian movie, currently making its rounds at film festivals, relied on several Yukoners (and their pants) to bring its post-apocalyptic world to life. One of them, Whitehorse-based artist Leslie Leong, was likely the one who cast your discarded trousers in her role as armour builder.

"The thrift store was great," says Leong about sourcing articles. Sitting at her kitchen table, she scrolls through wardrobe shots from the film's costume department. "They just let me go in there and go through everything, and so a lot of the stuff—like the pants [actors] wore, the shirts [actors] wore—were from the thrift store, but just roughed up to look old."

To armour the cast of the futuristic film based in 2144, which bills itself as "an all-female eco-action fantasy set in a frozen world," Leong went dumpster diving or turned directly to the community with requests that would help her realize the Arctic survivalist garb. She asked for helmets, furs, muskox horns, and more. It was amazing what the community came up with, she says.



Photo: GBP Creative

Max Fraser agrees, for more reasons than just the muskox horns. The Yukon-based producer of *Polaris* says the cast and crew, many of whom were locals, persevered through the long process of securing funding, pandemic delays, and bitterly cold filming conditions.

"Everyone who worked on this was a frickin' hero," says Fraser. "They really rose to the occasion. I think Yukoners really proved themselves with this production, and I think it really bodes well for future productions."

Yukoners got the chance by coincidence. In 2018, at an event in Berlin, Fraser ran into Yellowknife writer and director Kirsten Carthew, whom he had met a few years earlier. They spent time discussing their current projects, which included Carthew's idea about a young girl who's kidnapped by a crew of women (called Morads) and has to escape in order to reunite with her mother, a polar bear, using the North Star (*Polaris*) for guidance.

"I usually do documentaries," says Fraser, whose previous work includes *Never Happen Here—The Whitehorse 9/11 Story*, "but I was captivated by this."

Fraser suggested a partnership with Carthew. A plan formed to film in the Yukon, in 2019, but it took a while to secure the \$2.5 million budget. In the meantime, Fraser started reaching out to Yukoners he wanted to include in the crew.

In the finished product, some are easier to spot than others. While the lead cast members are all from Outside, locals, including singer Fawn Fritzen and restaurateur Antoinette GreenOliph, may be spied in their roles as Morad women. The

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influence of others on the film is only recognizable if you're familiar with their work.

If you know Leong's jewellery and fine art, for example, it's no surprise to see her name in the costuming credits. Much of Leong's practice relies on reclaimed and recycled tech materials. You can imagine her fingerprints on the rusted-out helmets of the Morad women and the rustic, sculptural jewellery pieces that double as weaponry.

And if you've ever admired the set design at Whitehorse's The Guild Hall, you might recognize the influence of Donald Watt, who talked himself down from the role of art director on *Polaris* to a position where he could get his hands dirty.

"Basically [the art director] spends the whole time worrying about budgets," Watt says. "I just like to be given a challenge of, 'We need all this and we need it to look like that and how are you going to do that?'"

Watt signed on as first assistant art director, which gave him license to handpick a crew he knew could get the job done. One of those was Leong. He also tapped Guild carpenter Al Loewen and local artists Scott Price, Michel Gignac, and Guillaume Riocreux. Local artist Asia Hyde worked as a costume assistant, and Sourdoughnuts founder Fiona McTaggart, who moonlights in fashion design, came on as a seamstress. They were all people Watt knew could puzzle out the problems unique to a film set in the North as well as actually filmed in the North.

It's not like working on a period piece in Vancouver, where if you realize you have a telephone of the wrong vintage, you can have it delivered from a thrift shop in short order.



Left to right: Director Kirsten Carthew, Kaori Torigai, Aimee Dawn Robinson (standing), Karen Hanna, Dinah Gaston (front row), Roreigh Eftoda (standing), Fawn Fritzen (standing), and Rebecca Roberts.



Photos: courtesy of Little Dipper Films of Whitehorse

"Nothing is 30 minutes away," Watt says laughing. "So that's always a big challenge. It's making do with what we have locally."

Fortunately, he says, Yukoners are used to working with what they have. Set design is more expensive here and items take longer to get. In the North, you have to be flexible and creative on a good day.

That approach of relying on what you can scavenge translated well to this film, not only because it saved time and money, but also because the "MacGyver" aesthetic worked for the dystopian atmosphere of *Polaris*. Old machinery could be easily repurposed as a musical instrument or snowmobile adornment.

"That's kind of the fun and the challenging part of making movies up here," says Watt. "You have to think on your feet as to how you're going to make that particular thing that the production designer wants. But it's also the great part of it. It really makes your imagination go."

## POLARIS AT A GLANCE

**Yukon premiere:** Feb. 11, 2023, as part of the Available Light Film Festival ([alff.ca](http://alff.ca)).

### Awards:

- Sydney Science Fiction Film Festival: Audience Award, Best Actress (Viva Lee), and Career Achievement (Agee, Mama Polar Bear).
- Whistler Film Festival: Best Cinematography (David Schuurman).

**Local actors:** Lindsay Caskenette, Fawn Fritzen, Antoinette GreenOliph, Lea-Anne McNally, Telek Rogan, Aimee Dawn Robinson, Charlene Abraham, Sarah Sternbergh, Jennifer Jay, Karen Hanna, Veronique Boileau, Rebecca Roberts, Roreigh Eftoda, Kaori Torigai, Delle Feb Diala, and Luann Baker-Johnson.

**Agee news:** "Mama Polar Bear" retired after filming *Polaris*. She has been relocated from her trainer's facility in B.C. to the Leatherdale International Polar Bear Conservation Centre, in Winnipeg.

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