

Obomsawin tells the stories of her people's history on film

PHOTO BY A. WILLIAM KIBSTON



Above: (L to R) 2004 IDA Pioneer Award recipient Alanis Obomsawin and award presenter Mr. Bird Running Water at the 20th Annual International Documentary Association Distinguished Documentary Achievement Awards Gala Benefit.

Alanis Obomsawin has focused on the lives of Aboriginal people in Canada for nearly 40 years. The documentarian has made more than 20 films, beginning with **Christmas at Moose Factory** in 1967. Obomsawin was the recipient of the 2005 International Documentary Association Pioneer Award, which is periodically presented to individuals who make unique and important contributions to advancing the art of non-fiction filmmaking. *InCamera* spoke to this talented filmmaker:

Please tell us about the history of your people?

OBOMSAWIN: Abenaki means people of the dawn or the East where the sun comes up. Originally, there were many of our

people spread across what is now called New England and parts of Quebec. I learned my nation's history through stories and songs. During my days on the reserve, there were 1,800 registered members, but there are only about 400 people living on there today.

What led you into filmmaking?

OBOMSAWIN: I decided I was going to fight for changes in the educational system to include our history. I began to sing at parties for friends and was invited to perform at a folk festival in New York City in 1960. That created an opportunity for me to tour elementary and high schools, and universities in Canada, and also prisons. I was singing songs and telling stories about our history. During the early 1960s, Ron Kelly made a short television film (**Alanis**) about me. In 1967, Joe Koenig and Bob Verrall, producers for the National Film Board, saw the film ... and that led to opportunities for me to write and direct 16 mm films for CBC.

Did you have any formal training?

OBOMSAWIN: I was pretty much alone at the beginning. The old people were concerned that because we were putting their oral stories into another form, I was taking their spirit away. Many children were no longer listening to the stories told by their elders. They watched television instead. I was afraid elders would die and leave nothing behind. Eventually, the older people became more comfortable with what I was doing. I believe most of our people now realize the value of these films. I feel very fortunate to have been somehow chosen to do this work. Right now, film is the only true way we can preserve our stories.

Do you think most people are sensitive to that issue?

OBOMSAWIN: During the 1970s, I made six films as a co-production with the CBC. They were half-hour films that were shown on television in classrooms. They finished in video format. The color is gone. It's awful. The people of the next generation will not see those films the way we finished them. That part of our history is lost.

How about the original film and audio that the images and sound were recorded? Are they properly archived?

OBOMSAWIN: They are in the archives at the National Film Board of Canada. I think it is one of the best places in the world to preserve our heritage. They have all of my films and the outtakes. I think it must be more than a million feet of film.

Many of your films are records of oral histories, but some of them are based on events that are happening in current time, right?

OBOMSAWIN: When I'm documenting something that is happening in the present, it is always related to the history of our Nations. I made a film in 2000 called **Is the Crown At War With Us?** In 1999, the Superior Court in Canada ruled based on the treaty of 1752, the Mi'gmaq people had valid rights to hunt and fish all year. It's necessary for their survival. Many commercial fishermen were angry about that ruling. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Department of Fisheries confiscated the traps that the native fishermen had in the water. Commercial fishermen were also destroying the nets. They also burned people's houses. The film documents the current events along with the oral history of the native people.

To read more of this interview with Alanis Obomsawin, go to www.kodak.com/go/motion. ■