



Kautokino Rebellion

100 minutes, 2008, NorwayDenmark/Sweden

Director: Nils Gaup

Cast: Anni-Kristiina Juuso, Asiat Mahtte Gaup, Mikkel Gaup, Nils Peder Gaup

Synopsis: Norwegian film Institute

For centuries the windswept mountain plateau of northern Scandinavia has been inhabited by the native sami population and their reindeers. But modernisation is about to enter the desolate village of Kautokeino where the authority is held by the prosperous and ruthless liquor dealer Ruth, starring Mikael Persbrandt. One of the native tribes, led by the young woman Elen, refuses to pay their unjust debt to Ruth. Without a trial, Ruth manages to imprison most of Elen's tribe, leaving Elen alone to take care of the reindeers. Elen gets help to set up a trial in which the men are released, but Ruth claims ownership of the tribe's reindeers to cover the cost of the trial. Loosing the basis of their lives, Elen and her tribe have little choice but to oppose to Ruth's claim, leading to one of the most dramatic episodes in northern Scandinavian history.

Review: Jay Weissberg, Variety

A seminal battle of wills between Norway's indigenous Sami people and their carpetbagger exploiters has tragic results in Nils Gaup's earnest but ultimately disappointing Nordic epic, "The Kautokeino Rebellion." Since 1852 a rallying cry for the Sami, tale is part of their ethnic consciousness -- their Wounded Knee in a sense (with far fewer lives lost). However, the film reduces characters to stock good vs. evil types, jettisoning nuance with a resulting loss of texture. Biggest budgeted picture (some \$10 million) to come out of northern Norway, "Kautokeino" is cresting on a major national push.

The uprising has already figured in two operas and a number of theater works, but the project, 10 years in the making, is an especially personal one for Gaup, who was born in Kautokeino and is a descendant of Aslak Haetta, one of the major players in the story. Largely shot at the Holmen Film Camp in the Arctic town of Malselv, the film rallies an array of known Scandinavian thespas along with Sami actors and vast herds of reindeer; but despite impressive visuals and Gaup's special credentials, the film has an airless quality.

In Kautokeino, Swedish entrepreneur Ruth (Mikael Persbrandt) owns a trading post-cum-pub, the only game in town for the semi-nomadic Sami who come to him for supplies and a tipple. Over-susceptible to alcohol, the native population is neglecting its reindeer herds, forcing the women to attempt a job that's too big for their depleted numbers. Strong-willed Elen (Anni-Kristiina Juuso) refuses to purchase goods from the outfit that keeps husband Mathis (Aslat Mahtte Gaup) intoxicated, dragging him and others to a neighboring town for their supplies.

While in Karesuando, they hear charismatic preacher Laestadius (Michael Nyqvist), whose ministry is sweeping the Sami lands with fire-and-brimstone sermons decrying alcohol and vice.

Mathis is converted (much too easily), and Elen becomes Laestadius' proxy back home, emptying the bar and filling her revival tent.

Furious at his loss of income and control, Ruth goes to "the authorities" -- an oddly nebulous, blandly nefarious duo -- to stop the fanaticism, and a new pastor, Stockfleth (Bjorn Sundquist), is called to keep the Sami in line. The climax has Elen and others heading to Ruth's for a bloody showdown.

The systematic government suppression of Sami culture has easy parallels with the situation of Native Americans, and at times the picture has an old-fashioned horse-opera feel. Story itself should be gripping; but bland script turns everyone into one-dimensional characters, whittling down motivations and smoothing out the fanaticism.

Audiences unfamiliar with the impact Laestadius had on the northern Scandinavian territories will be hard-pressed to understand why Elen's revivalist preaching was seen as such a threat to the status quo. Also difficult for non-Scandi viewers will be the subtleties of language. Four are used in the film, each signaling an important hierarchical division; but unless it's understood who's speaking Northern Sami (and to whom) and who's speaking Danish, these nuances are lost. Distinction should somehow be conveyed in subtitled prints.

Performances are generally in keeping with the stripped-down roles. As Elen, Juuso ("The Cuckoo") is meant to be the heart of the story, acting as narrator as well, but her character calls for greater depth. Director Gaup's affinity for his home territory, already reflected in his earlier "Pathfinder" and "North Star," is clear in the sweeping panoramas and magnificent snowbound landscape, handsomely lensed by Philip Ogaard ("Kitchen Stories").

The film's release is to be followed by a four-part TV series, presumably filling in many of the missing details.