

# THE *Hollywood* REPORTER



**New York-based filmmaker Chloe Zhao takes a spell on a Badlands reservation, with an intimate focus on the lives of a fatherless teenage brother and sister.**

Chloe Zhao's plaintive first feature, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, is a heartfelt dramatized contemplation of life on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, experienced partly through the eyes of a 13-year-old girl steeling herself for the planned departure of her adored older sibling. A quintessential example of a particular kind of non-commercial Sundance movie, the project clearly was made with profound respect for its subjects, from families ravaged by alcoholism to daredevil young bull-riders to those who cling even through tough times to their belief in community.

The film begins with wiry Lakota high school senior Johnny (John Reddy) on horseback. In voiceover, he muses on the tricky process of breaking in an animal, retaining a part of the wild spirit that's necessary for survival in the Badlands. While that opening portends a lot of pointed metaphor, writer-director Zhao's approach is actually more restrained and observational, particularly in her delicate depiction of the bond between Johnny and his younger sister Jashaun (Jashuan St. John). The soulful naturalness of these two young screen-acting novices is what fuels the movie, even through long ambling stretches.

The other major character is the stark landscape, shot with an evocative sense of desolate beauty and solitude by Joshua James Richards, and complemented by Peter Golub's melancholy score. The frequent intrusion of sirens wailing as police cars speed across the plains points to the rate of domestic disturbances and other crime on the reservation, where the purchase and consumption of alcohol is banned. Johnny's older brother is in prison, along with many other brothers, fathers and uncles in a community where fractured family life is the norm.

Johnny earns cash by buying booze from Whiteclay across the Nebraska border to sell on the bustling clandestine local market. A cloud hangs over these transactions, at one point showing kids running around a shabby living room while their mother lies in a stupor on the couch. Johnny's sideline also puts him on the radar of another black-market distribution crew, who warn him to stay off their turf.

Zhao balances the somber realities of her portrait with signs of spiritual resilience and minor-key humor, such as a scene at school with a down-to-earth counselor encouraging the students to consider all their options while they casually handle a variety of live critters, from snakes to spiders.

News reaches Johnny and Jashaun of the death of their estranged dad, a rodeo cowboy who fathered 25 kids with nine different so-called wives. Their mother (Irene Bedard) remains a taciturn figure on the sidelines, mindful of her own past parenting mistakes. But Jashaun is particularly affected by the loss, as shown in a lovely scene where she collects mementos from the still-smoldering ashes of the house where her father was consumed by flames.

The funeral, too, is an emotionally stirring sequence, as half-siblings share reminiscences of a man some knew better than others. Later in the movie, a cheerful youth who greets Johnny, "Hey, brother from another mother!" shows his solidarity with an offer of work at his uncle's mechanic shop.

Native American song, dance and ceremonies are represented side by side with booze and pot binges. Most interesting is a subplot built around Travis (Travis Lone Hill), a tattoo-covered ex-con who hawks his hand-made "Rez Life 7" clothing and artwork off the front of his car. An unlikely friendship springs up between him and Jashaun, whose skill with math means she can keep track of purchases and inventory. And even when she's clearing up the mess after one of Travis and pals' all-night benders, Jashaun approaches the task without complaint, as a part of her extended family life. The same applies to gentle scenes in which she attends a rodeo, learning more about her father and his world from a friendly half-brother.

The other significant plot thread involves Johnny's romance with Aurelia (Taysha Fuller), a beautiful high school classmate with brains and ambition,

scheduled to attend college in Los Angeles. Johnny's desire to accompany her gives him a goal to work toward, even if neither of their families has been told about that part of the plan. But as her farewell approaches, the difficulties for him of leaving this place to which he is so inextricably tied become hard to ignore.

There's plenty of narrative incident, emotional depth and poetic imagery here, which makes Zhao's determination to hang back and let the storytelling unfold with minimal active shaping somewhat frustrating. It would be dishonest not to admit that the movie has its dull patches of monotonousness. But the balance of humanistic and ethnographic filmmaking with poignant, often seemingly unscripted drama has many rewards. And Johnny's closing voiceover wraps up the complicated yet binding relationships of the people, their families and their land with refreshingly simple eloquence. As harsh as the view often is, it's underscored by strong notes of hope and of bone-deep identity.