



PREVIEW

War Pony

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Directed by: Gina Gammell, Riley Keough

©: LLC Beast Productions

Production Companies: Felix Culpa, Caviar, Caviar

In association with: Quickfire Films, Ward Four,

Couscous Films, Kaleidoscope Entertainment

International Sales by: Protagonist Pictures

Executive Producers: Pte San Win Poor Bear,

Jonas Carpignano, Michael Sagol, Daniel Sbrega,

Dickey Abedon, Vanessa McLean,

Valerie Steinberg, Todd Traina, Dan Reiner,

Stella Schnabel, Wally Hall, Ben Kahn,

Jacob Tierney, Michael Clofine, David Bishop,

Jan Pace, James Atherton

Produced by: Willi White, Bert Hamelink,

Ryan Zacarias, Sacha Ben Harroche, Riley Keough,

Gina Gammell

Producers: Elaine Thomas, Sergey Shtern,

Valeriy Abel, Bear Damen, Salim El Arja,

Michael Manasseri

Co-producers: Eléonore Hendricks, Lizzie Shapiro

Line Producer (LA Unit): Ben Narich

Line Producer: Lizzie Shapiro

Unit Production Manager: Maggie Ambrose

Unit Production Manager (Additional Photography):

Scott Davidson

Production Supervisor: Nathan Harrison

Production Accountant: Elizabeth Reeve

Location Manager: Pierre Barrera

Post-production Supervisor: Corentin De Saedeleer

Casting by: Eléonore Hendricks, Abby Harri

Written by: Franklin Sioux Bob, Bill Reddy,

Riley Keough, Gina Gammell

Script Consultant: Daniel Kitrosser

Director of Photography: David Gallego

Additional Director of Photography: Ivan Suzzarini

2nd Unit - Director of Photography (LA Unit):

Steven Breckon

Visual Effects Lead: Corentin De Saedeleer

Edited by: Affonso Gonçalves, Eduardo Serrano

Additional Editor: Ernie Gilbert

Production Designer: Scott Dougan

Production Designer (Additional Photography):

Terry Watson

Art Director: Dan Branciforti

Set Decorator: Aimee Athnos

Property Master: Gino Fortebuono

Costume Designers: Miyako Bellizzi, Alex Lee

Hair and Make-up Artist: Lia Parks

Title Designer: Corentin De Saedeleer

Music by: Christopher Tracey, Mato Wayuhi

Music Supervisor: Andy Ross, Ben Sokoler

Music Consultants: Charles Barsamian,

Meghan Persons

Sound Mixer/Boom Operator: Galen Milender

Re-recording Mixer: Sean Higgins

Supervising Sound Editor: Jeremy Emery

Sound Effects Editor: D. Chris Smith

Cast:

Jojo Bapteste Whiting (*Bill*)

Ladainian Crazy Thunder (*Matho*)

Jesse Schmockel (*Echo*)

Wilma Colhoff (*Mama*)

Iona Red Bear (*Auntie*)

Woodrow Lone Elk (*Elias*)

Ta-Yamni Long Black Cat (*Donny*)

Jeremy Corbin Cottier (*Baby Worm*)

Steven Yellowhawk (*Steven*)

Manuel Garcia (*Manny*)

Xavier Big Crow (*Xavier*)

Anjeliq Aurora (*Carly*)

Jessica Poor Bear (*Coltina*)

Calista Rae Cottier (*Kaya*)

Two stories interweave in this coming-of-age drama set on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. In one, charming young father Bill acquires a poodle in his latest money-making scheme, while the other finds Matho, a pre-teen also looking to make some cash, attempting to navigate an abusive domestic environment. This beautiful and blistering portrait of young Native American life was developed out of co-directors Keough and Gammell's involvement on Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*, during which they connected with extras Franklin Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy, whose own lives informed their screenplay for this film.

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Winner of the Camera d'Or for best first feature at Cannes, *War Pony* came to the festival trailing some conflicted expectations for any portrayal of Native American experience – not least given the scepticism that comes with seeing a well-known actor's name as a first-time co-director at a festival that's had its share of well-intentioned projects. But a few seconds into this assured, fleet-footed debut, co-directed by Gina Gammell and actor Riley Keough (*Zola*), it was easy to settle into the film's playful flow through the eventful lives of two Oglala Lakota residents of the Pine Ridge Reservation.

War Pony trapezes through the days and nights of Bill, a young guy with a lazy charm who's trying to stay one step ahead of unemployment and romantic entanglements, and Matho, a restless 12-year-old we mostly see hanging out with his crew of friends. Gammell and Keough, co-credited on the screenplay with Pine Ridge locals Franklin Sioux Bob and Bill Reddy, deftly forge a picaresque style that keeps up with Bill and Matho making the rounds in their community, idling in cars or cluttered dens, bargaining and bantering with women they may have exasperated. This is a film that runs at the speed of palaver, Bill and Matho just rolling along, talking themselves into and out of situations, trading amused glances.

Early on there's an antic quality as Bill (Jojo Bapteste Whiting) finds a faintly ridiculous poodle and dedicates himself to a plan to breed and sell puppies, reading up on poodle Instagrams. Matho (Ladainian Crazy Thunder) and his pals meanwhile find his dad's stash of meth and set about unloading it onto an older dealer. All of them could use the money, and at home they face overburdened relatives (Bill keeps pawning off one of his kids on others to take care of) and, in Matho's case, a rough relationship with his surly dad. But while recognising these realities and constraints, the filmmakers don't let them define the characters. It's a strategy that Sioux Bob summed up aptly in an interview I encountered later during the festival: 'In a lot of Native films, it's either the poverty porn or it's about one topic. It's about one dilemma, it's not about everything, and that's what this film gives you: everything.'

Wasose Garcia (*Mason*)
Ezekiel Pourier (*Zeke*)
Ashley Shelton (*Allison*)
Sprague Hollander (*Tim*)
Franklin Sioux Bob (*Arnie*)
Stanley Good Voice Elk (*Dusty*)
Jen Mesteth (*Jen*)
USA/UK 2022
115 mins

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The story enters some intriguingly fraught territory when Bill stops to help a stranded driver, Tim (Sprague Hollander), the white owner of a turkey farm. It's a deliciously played moment when the tables of need are momentarily turned, and Bill wangles a job at Tim's ranch estate. That exposes him to their wealthier circles as well as increasing responsibilities, along with a condescension that's clothed as respect. (There's an absurd moment when Tim's tipling wife offers him a dreamcatcher pendant.) For Matho, the charms of his free-roaming independence fade away when his father dies suddenly, and he simply needs a safe place to sleep.

Keough met her co-writers Sioux Bob and Reddy during a lull in shooting her role for Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*, in which the two were day players. The rapport carried over into a mindfully collaborative process of writing, casting and storytelling. It's possible to see something of Arnold's naturalism and her faith in the brash energy of young performers in *War Pony*; and however incongruous the comparison might sound, the skatehead mischief of films by Larry Clark and Harmony Korine also come to mind. Much credit must be laid at the foot of Colombian cinematographer David Gallego, whose enchanting images galvanised *Ciro Guerra's Embrace of the Serpent* and *Birds of Passage*. Here Gallego and his crew match the energies of Bill and Matho with a fluid camera that also sees Pine Ridge through the eyes of the characters. Likewise, editors Affonso Gonçalves (frequent cutter for Todd Haynes and Jim Jarmusch) and Eduardo Serrano find nimble switch-ups in rhythm (launched by an early needle-drop of XXXtentacion's 'Look at Me').

While superior to the glum, dutiful reheat of neorealism in *The Rider*, for example, the directors' approach has its missteps. A recurring vision of a bison feels like a throwback to a sentimentalizing kind of movie about Native Americans, rather than the culturally specific spiritual detail that might have been intended. But *War Pony's* formally skilled achievement, aspiring toward the 'everything' Sioux Bob describes, is both admirable and vital in the landscape of American indie film.

Nicolas Rapold, *Sight and Sound*, [bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk), 2 June 2022