

SHOWRUNNERS
STACEY AGLOK
MACDONALD (LEFT)
AND ALETHEA
ARNAQUQ-BARIL
AT THE RED BOAT.





>> The good news made them... panic. Since 2019, Inuit filmmakers Stacey Aglok MacDonald and Alethea Arnaquq-Baril had been developing a sitcom, *North of North*, about a single mother trying to push herself into a better life, in a small Nunavut community where everyone is keen to push back. The duo had dug deep to make it funny, yet true to the obstacles their community faces. CBC had signed on, then APTN and Netflix. By January 2023, not only was their series finally officially a go, it had become the biggest film or television project ever to come out of Nunavut. But how the hell were they going to shoot it?

“The show we wanted to make—spectacular landscapes, 100 Inuit extras—we just couldn’t see it happening in a studio in Toronto,” Arnaquq-Baril says. It’s now October 2024; she and MacDonald are in CBC’s Toronto headquarters, in a grey meeting room with a grey sofa whose greyness inadvertently illustrates their point. Both women wear long beaded earrings; Arnaquq-Baril’s forehead is tattooed with a traditional V. When they sit down, they immediately kick off their shoes and tuck up their legs and laugh their way through the next 45 minutes.

Both live and have worked in Iqaluit for years: MacDonald produced seven seasons of *Qanuqli*, a APTN show about a madcap group of friends trying to create an Inuktitut-language comedy. Arnaquq-Baril directed the award-winning 2016 documentary *Angry Inuk*, about the controversies surrounding international seal hunting. “Stacey and Alethea have an excellent reputation for being women who get things done, built on hard work and a community-based approach,” Kerry Swanson, CEO of the Indigenous Screen Office, says. “They’re fearless,” agrees Trish Williams, executive director of CBC Scripted Content, English Services. “They’ve overcome a lot in their careers. You can feel their honesty. You just want to spend time with them.”

As a team, there’s no stopping them. They produced two successful features together: *The Grizzlies* in 2018 and *Slash/Back* in 2022. In 2019, the duo launched their production company, Red Marrow Media. They even, they admit amid more peals of laughter, share the same therapist.

FUNNY THINGS HAPPENED WHEN TWO IQALUIT WOMEN—AND 100 CREW MEMBERS—MADE *NORTH OF NORTH*, A SITCOM SHOT IN THE NUNAVUT CAPITAL. BUT THERE’S HEART, RESILIENCE AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE BEHIND THE COMEDY
> BY JOHANNA SCHNELLER

Sometimes You Have to Laugh

Photo by Mac Pavia



ANNA LAMBE
STARS AS SIAJA, WHO IS
AWKWARD, SMART AND
GOOD-HEARTED (ABOVE);
LAMBE WITH MAIKA HARPER,
WHO PLAYS NEEVEE (RIGHT).

\$4 MILLION

THE COST OF THE
STUDIO THEY'RE
BUILDING IN IQALUIT

But they knew their city's capacity would be taxed by a four-month shoot with a crew of 100. For season one, they made a deal to build their sets and create office space in the local curling rink, but they couldn't monopolize that vital resource forever. So Arnaquq-Baril asked MacDonald, "Would it be crazy if we built a studio?"

"Yes," MacDonald replied. "Let's try." As it turned out, raising \$4 million to

build a 20,000-square-foot studio wasn't even their toughest challenge. "CBC has made a lot of series," Williams says, "but this was unlike anything we'd been through before." However, Arnaquq-Baril and MacDonald believe in the North and the urgent need to create infrastructure so that more Indigenous people can tell their own stories there. Call it *Snowfield of Dreams*: if you build it, the industry—they hope—will come.

***North of North's* characters** have been swirling around MacDonald's brain for years: Siaja (pronounced see-ah-ya), the lead, a combination of herself and her friends, 26 years old, awkward, but smart and good-hearted. Ting, her self-absorbed, local-hero husband,



whom she spontaneously—and publicly—ditches. Neevee, her mother, whose free spirit masks dark secrets. Helen, her boss, a white southerner who fervently believes she's a Northerner.

MacDonald and Arnaquq-Baril, as the showrunners, initially pitched CBC on a workplace comedy. They didn't want to do a trauma drama, a harrowing tale of injustice and mayhem, along the lines of *Little Bird* and *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Though those stories are necessary, there's been a move lately among broadcasters and streamers toward optimistic, funny series like *Don't Even* and *Reservation Dogs*. But their first pitch was too light; after two years of soul searching, they came back with more heart and depth.

"Stacey told us that when she was Siaja's age she realized there was a gap between the person she was and the person she wanted to be," Williams, who attended both pitch meetings, recalls. "She was terrified because she knew she'd have to blow up her life. But she didn't want her daughter to see her not living the life she wanted. She brought all that to Siaja. That personal connection is what we look for to make a fantastic show. It's rare that I break into tears during a comedy pitch, but I did."

"They said it was one of the strongest pitches they'd ever heard," Arnaquq-Baril says. "I started crying, too. It was embarrassing. But I spent so many years in documentary work, passionately arguing for people to hear, see and feel for us. Grinding to get the world to see us as human beings. To see that comedy—this roundabout way of being honest about who we are, joyful and fun—opened people's hearts up to, to..." She pauses. "Why am I struggling for this basic English word? Oh! To relate to us. It was this light-bulb moment for me."

I tell Arnaquq-Baril that if I were her therapist, I'd point out how she stumbled on the word relate. She and MacDonald howl.

March 1, 2024. Production begins with a full-on blizzard: 20-plus centimetres of snow, 117 kilometre an hour winds, schools and government offices closed. It blankets the landscape with thousands of set-design-dollars' worth of pristine whiteness, but crew members burn hours digging out entrances to their locations.

The showrunners tried to reserve every hotel room in Iqaluit for their cast and crew—about 70 per cent are southerners because a show this size demands experienced technicians—but the an-

nual Nunavut Mining Symposium has booked a week smack in the middle of their shoot. "I guess that'll be our hiatus," MacDonald recalls thinking.

The next challenge: build a dump. In the fictional community of Ice Cove, where the series is set, the dump is the nexus for gossip—despite its unfortunate tendency to catch fire. MacDonald hoped to shoot at Iqaluit's dump, "but it's also been a fire hazard, so they said no," she says, giggling. Some of the network executives are reluctant to film a dump at all—they want the series to look beautiful, aspirational—"but have you seen our dump?" MacDonald asks. "The view is gorgeous."

They find an equally stunning site; now all they need is garbage. The crew drives around picking up whatever they can find on people's driveways: rusted car parts, dented appliances, other junk. Arnaquq-Baril's phone blows up. "Our neighbourhood is so clean now!" people text. "Don't bring the stuff back."

For Ice Cove's grocery store, the production chooses DJ's Convenience. But it has the cheapest cigarettes in Iqaluit, so every time they shoot there, they turn away a string of disappointed smokers. When the power goes out—which happens frequently, taking cell and internet service with it—the southerners freak out, but the locals just chat, confident it will flip back on in 10 or 20 minutes.

They shoot exterior scenes first for maximum snow. Though it's spring, it's still -30°C; on their days off, the southerners go to craft fairs and buy local clothing. "By the end of the shoot," Arnaquq-Baril says, "our director of photography, Jackson, was so well dressed, in his wolf fur mitts and fox fur hat—"

"—He looked like he had an Inuk wife," MacDonald cuts in, chortling.

Their insurance company won't allow actors to ride snowmobiles without helmets, but Inuit don't wear them unless they're racing. "You want to wear your hat and hood," Arnaquq-Baril says. "It's more important to stay warm than it is to protect your head from a fall when you're driving to the grocery store"—she rolls her eyes—"on flat ground."

"Inuit would have made so much fun of us," MacDonald adds.

They work out a compromise: other vehicles pull the snowmobiles. "It felt absurd, they were moving just as fast," Arnaquq-Baril says, "but we're so far removed from

"IT FELT ABSURD": TO SATISFY THE INSURANCE COMPANY, OTHER VEHICLES PULL SNOWMOBILES



Photos courtesy of APTN/CBC/Netflix; photo by Jasper Savage

the places that make these decisions, they just don't understand the reality of the North. Hopefully they'll see the show and cut us some slack next time."

They don't schedule crowd scenes that require local extras for weekends or particularly beautiful days; everyone will be out hunting. With no space to store costumes, the wardrobe people fill their hotel rooms with racks, and sleep surrounded by furs and skins. There aren't enough trucks or rental cars to transport crew and cast to the locations, so a local taxi company fills in. A shawarma restaurant does the catering. "Everyone pitched in," Arnaquq-Baril says. "The entire town was touched by this production and vice versa."

Growing up in Iqaluit, Anna Lambe, who stars as Siaja, knew many young women like her. "My cousins, friends, the older girls in school who were so cool," she says in a video chat. "Siaja is every person I've ever admired but thought was maybe a bit chaotic and wild, who's in a process of figuring herself out."

Lambe went to the University of Ottawa. She basked in applause when her first film, *The Grizzlies*, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. She earned a Canadian Screen Award nomination for that and for her next role, in the CBC series *Trickster*. She shot HBO's *True Detective: Night Country* in Iceland, opposite Jodie Foster. Siaja, on the other hand, hasn't made it out of Ice Cove. ("Of course, I have a kid. I'm 26!" she scoffs to a newcomer in an early episode.) But both are modern Inuk women, with all the complexities that entails.

As a child, Lambe went clam digging, berry picking and hunting with her father.

Her great-grandmother sewed traditional clothing from the seals they skinned. "I was grounded in the warmth, culture and identity," she says. "Still, there is no degree of separation from the colonial trauma that exists in our communities. Addiction, violence, food insecurity, hous-

ing insecurity." Fed a steady diet of media that implied Inuit were problematic, Stone Age alcoholics, she internalized the racism and "felt ashamed, felt that we deserved less," she says. "It's a horrible, horrible feeling."

Working on *The Grizzlies*, which didn't flinch from the hardships of the North, while also showcasing its resilience and beauty, helped the 15-year-old begin to break down that self-loathing. "I was able to connect with so many people who had similar experiences," Lambe says, "and start to find pride in who I am."

The challenge of *North of North* is to take Siaja on that journey, too, but make


it funny. A character like Helen, Siaja's boss at the community centre, helps. (She's played by Mary Lynn Rajskub, who's appeared in a score of sitcoms including *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.) Helen is not a "Karen" exactly, that painfully entitled, huffy white lady archetype. But "every single one of us knows someone like Helen, who heads our programs or companies, who thinks she knows what's best for us because she's spent a few months or years here," Lambe says. "While the Inuit around them just go, 'Mm-hmm.'" "Helen's so invested," MacDonald says. "She wears the local clothes. But she loves it a little too much. She's taking



ON THE SET
ANNA LAMBE (ABOVE);
BAILEY POCHING
AND ZORGA QUANAQ
(ABOVE RIGHT); MAIKA
HARPER (RIGHT).



“EVERYONE CRIES WHEN THEY SEE IT,” SAYS ARNAQUQ-BARIL, “BUT THEY ALSO LAUGH”




NORTHERN INDUSTRIAL CONSTRUCTION

in f @


COLLABORATIVE SERVICES FOR COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING PROJECTS

Photos Courtesy of APTN/CBC/Netflix; photos by Jasper Savage

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sensual. You can shoot scenes in a place like Apex Beach, where the old red boat and the Hudson’s Bay Trading Post will remind some of your audience of the days when Iqaluit was a military base off-limits to most Inuit, while others will just see its beauty.

And it will be relatable. “A lot of people feel trapped by decisions they made when they were younger and don’t know how to change without hurting the people around them,” Lambe says. “I hope that people watching *Siaja* feel emboldened to take risks and prioritize their independence, and also see that sometimes people do stupid things and it’s important to give them grace to learn.”

Shooting where you live lets viewers root for people they wouldn’t otherwise meet and see them for who they are. When the series arrives on CBC and APTN, in January, then later around the world on Netflix, “I hope people see we exist in this modern time, in every dimension there is, not just in tragic news clips,” Arnaquq-Baril says. “When people relate to *Siaja*, I’m going to feel seen.”

Building a studio in Iqaluit is crucial to all that—and to luring others north to do the same; to showing Northerners they can stay; to creating and sustaining local jobs. Thanks to the ingenious contract that the Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) negotiated with Canadian Heritage, which means it can fund capital investments (most funders can’t), the ISO was able to put \$1 million into the studio. Cody Dean, an Inuk entrepreneur from Rankin Inlet, who began his career as a power line technician with Qulliq Energy Corp. and went on to found Dean Utility Services and Canadrill, put in another \$1 million. The governments of Nunavut and Canada kicked in as well. They broke ground in summer 2023. “Other communities are already coming to us about building studios in their home territories,” the ISO’s Swanson says. “That’s exciting.”

The studio doesn’t have a name yet, but it will have two accoutrements: an espresso machine and a disco ball, the first office purchases the showrunners made when they started their company. “We had no salary or staff, but we had the disco ball,” Arnaquq-Baril says. “Then we ran out of money and had to go back to working from home. Now we’ll have the space to bring the disco ball back.”

MacDonald laughs. “We’re going to need a bigger disco ball.” ❧





OLIVIA PATTERSON PHOTO

Olivia
PATTERSON PHOTO

Studio Portrait
Photography