

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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Jaws Camera Man Shares Screen Favorites

By COOPER DAVIS

Thomas Bena, founder of the Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, stood in front of a mostly full house at the Chilmark community center last Wednesday night, and shared an anecdote.

"I can remember one night a few years ago when a man approached me on his way out the door. He told me that he appreciated what we were doing here, but that the film we had just shown was repetitive and just generally not very good. I thanked him for his thoughts and was watching him leave when someone else came up to me and said 'Do you know who that guy was?'"



Michael Chapman tells arctic tales of *The White Dawn*.

It turned out that "that guy" was Michael Chapman, an award-winning cinematographer, director of photography and occasional actor, whose credits include such films as *Taxi Driver*, *Jaws*, *The Godfather*, and the music video for Michael Jackson's *Bad*. This night, Wednesday, July 9, Mr. Chapman was invited to show two of his films for the second installment of this summer's Martha's Vineyard Film Festival, now in its eighth year.

Mr. Chapman came up to the front of the room to give a brief introduction of himself and the second film to be shown that night, 1974's *The White Dawn*. Looking handsome and trim in a white shirt and a pair of cargo pants, he prefaced the following work by saying it was one of his favorites and reminded the audience that yes, it is based on a true story and yes, the supporting cast was entirely Inuit and none of them trained actors.

The film itself told the story of three whalers wrecked off of a New Bedford whaling ship in the Arctic in the 1700s. Their survival in the bleak wilderness was entirely dependent upon the Inuit population who rescued them and was good enough to take them into their society. However the European and Inuit values eventually collide, and not softly, with surprising results. The film defies

genre categorization, at times deeply emotional, and in other moments downright hilarious, and occasionally, terrifying. However, one thing that remained consistent was the snow-covered backdrop of Baffin Island, where the entire film was shot.

It was the technical aspects of shooting in such a remote and harsh climate that seemed to have the audience most intrigued during the question and answer period that followed. Mr. Chapman retook the floor and happily provided, in layman's terms, the knowledge that can only come from years of experience working on some of Hollywood's greatest creative teams.



photo by David Welch
Cinematographer's focus is now on Chilmark garden.

"I was a lot younger then," Mr. Chapman said, in reference to the experience of shooting *The White Dawn*. "I look back on it now absolutely stunned."

In order to shoot in the unforgiving cold of the Arctic Circle, Mr. Chapman recalled how the crew had to use a special kind of camera, an earlier form of Panovision that had a built-in heater. This heater was necessary to prevent the oil that lubricated the moving parts of the machine from freezing.

Because of how removed the shoot was from civilization, the dailies, (the raw, unedited film stock taken straight from the camera each day) had to be flown back down to Canada for review. Because of the time involved with this process, Mr. Chapman was unable to receive the regular

feedback from the postproduction department that is common in regular studio productions. This often times left him guessing. For example, he said, "It was difficult to know what the exposure was on a given day. I usually rated it by how much my eyes hurt."

Shooting from April to September, Mr. Chapman, who had spent a year previously in the Arctic, eventually suffered a nervous breakdown. "Looking back now I realized that what was guiding us was naiveté and ignorance," Mr. Chapman said of himself and the crew. "However, people often say that youth is wasted on the young. I would say the opposite is true."

The audience was also very curious about the film's Inuit cast members, who seemed to have stolen the show for many. Mr. Chapman said, of their innate ability to entertain, "because of the long dark winter months, they spend quite a lot of time in a very small area, with not much to do but amuse each other. I believe that because of this, they are far more socially advanced than we are. They were like a theatre group."

One member of the audience asked for Mr. Chapman's idea of what the real role

of a cinematographer is. “The camera operator follows the action. It’s the best job in the movies, because capturing the shot offers you an immediate gratification, and it requires a perfect blend of aesthetics and athleticism.”

The questions continued on late into the night, and finally it was time for the last question. “What are you working on now?”

The now fully retired Mr. Chapman smiled under his mustache and his eyes twinkled behind his glasses. “I’m working on my garden in Chilmark.”

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