

Based on Nordic legends and shot in New England, "Killian's Chronicle" is an appealing and eye-opening look at the cultural interaction that took place a thousand years ago on the Atlantic coast of North America. Its title character is an Irish slave who escapes from his Viking captors and befriends a tribe of Native Americans in what is now New England. The film was made by Cambridge-based writer-director Pamela Berger, whose copious research on Native American life shows in the believable details of life among the tribe members. "Killian's Chronicle" also exhibits the we-can-all-learn-from-each-other humanism that has marked Berger's other works ("Sorceress" and "The Imported Bridegroom"), which also dealt with culture clash and the struggle against intolerance. But even people who don't walk into a movie theater to have their multicultural horizons widened will get something out of "Killian's Chronicle." We're not talking "Conan the Barbarian" here, but "Killian" does contain some satisfying elements of action-adventure, especially the brash performance by Robert McDonough as the bad-guy Viking Ivar, who seeks the coveted navigating stone that Killian possesses. Another winning element of the drama is the romance that develops between Killian and the young Indian woman Turtle.

An educated young man, Killian (Christopher Johnson) takes advantage of some turbulence among his violent captors and escapes after they have reached North America. He vows to return to his homeland a free man and to this end begins building a boat. He writes down his experiences in a journal. A curious little boy comes upon the stranger. Kitchi (the terrific Jonah Ming Lee) teaches Killian his language, and Killian teaches Kitchi chess. After he is bitten by a snake, Killian is nursed back to health in the village, where he befriends the hunter Contacook (Gino Montesinos) and is smitten with Turtle (Eva Kim). Killian accompanies a trading party to a settlement of Vikings, where he stays in the background for fear of being recaptured and enslaved. The encounter proves calamitous, leading to a battle between the Indians and whites. But the ultimate showdown is not between the two races, but between Killian and Ivar, in a test of brains over brawn.

Berger depicts the evolution of Killian's communication with the Native Americans in an interesting way. In his first encounters with Kitchi, the two rely on sign language. As Killian learns the tribe's language, that is what we hear and the film is subtitled. Then a slain Indian friend appears to Killian in a vision speaking English, so the rest of the film plays out in English... Johnson, who is in just about every scene as well as providing voiceovers, is sympathetic as Killian. Eva Kim shows a gentle assertiveness as the relationship between Turtle and Killian develops. And McDonough steals every scene he's in as Ivar.

The woodland and seaside locations are beautiful; it's almost astounding to see so much scenery untouched by modern life. A bit of text at the end of the film reminds us that the Native Americans lived another 500 years peacefully on these shores - then "in 1492, they found Christopher Columbus, who was lost."

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Beautifully shot tale of a confrontation between a European man and a New England Indian tribe has a twist that makes “Killian’s Chronicle” a true original – it’s set 500 years *before* Columbus reached the New World. Writer/director Pamela Berger has based her story on Viking legends as well as recent archeological discoveries.

Berger is an art history professor at Boston College with a second career as a filmmaker. She first wrote and produced Suzanne Schiffman’s 1987 directorial debut, “Sorceress,” and two years later made her own helming debut with “The Imported Bridegroom.” Although set in different locales and time periods, all three pix involved the theme of cultures clashing as individuals try to accommodate one another.

Here she relies on recent finds confirming legends of Viking visits to North America 1,000 years ago. Berger has created a story based on one such legend about a Celtic slave leaving his ship to explore the territory. Killian (Christopher Johnson) has been captured by Norsemen, yet hopes to win freedom and return to his homeland. Instead, he finds himself alone on the New England coast, where he is befriended by the local tribe who rescue him from a snakebite. Eventually he must decide if he is better off taking his chances getting back to Ireland or staying with Turtle (Eva Kim), the Indian girl with whom he has been trying to avoid falling in love.

Berger shows his growing identification with the tribal people through language. At first their speech is unintelligible to him and to the audience. Later, as he becomes more fluent subtitles translate the conversations. Finally, Killian and the Indians converse easily in their language, which comes across as English to the viewer.

Performances are on the mark, with Johnson an appealing hero and Kim a comely presence who keeps Turtle on an equal footing with Killian. Robert McDonough is a suitable frightening adversary as the Viking who vows that Killian will be recaptured, while Gino Montesinos and Jonah Ming Lee provide able support as the tribe members closest to Killian.

Among the selling points here are the simplicity of the tale and the effectiveness of John Hoover’s camera work and John DeMeo’s production design in making Massachusetts and Connecticut locales convincing as virgin wilderness. Tech credits are nearly flawless.

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