

SYNOPSIS

Lost Face is a classic story by legendary writer Jack London about a man out of place and out of time. Subienkow is a Polack, who in mid-1800's Russian America finds himself the second-to-last survivor of a group of Russian fur-thieves who have just been defeated by liberators from the local tribe they have enslaved as forced labour. Now Subienkow faces a long, protracted and painful death unless he can come up with a plan for escape.

Subienkow calls over the tribe's chief, Makamuk and he begins to barter. What follows is a power play between the two men, and Yakuga, a recently freed slave, who doubts the legitimacy of Subienkow's offer even as he begins to question the wisdom of his tribe's chief.

STATEMENT

Jack London wrote the original short story for Lost Face some time before 1910, when it was first published, and it is very much a product of its time – that said, it is also quite progressive. The mastery of London's storytelling aside, what initially drew me to Lost Face was the dramatic tension, the subtle dark comedy and the many layers within a simple framework. This is also a human story, one without a traditional Hollywood protagonist (I absolutely subscribe to the idea that every character is the hero of their own story).

Subienkow is a complicated man in a desperate situation, and he has undoubtedly made some very bad choices along the way to have ended up bound and planted in the snow awaiting his turn to die. Makamuk is perhaps not the right leader for his tribe in the long term, but given their treatment by the slavers, he may have been the best choice at the time. Yakuga, the just-freed slave, is clearly an intelligent and capable man, who as I see it, also has the best intentions of his tribe at heart, but differs in opinion with Makamuk about how it needs to be led.

The last thing I'm interested in shooting is a one-dimensional story about good white men dying at the hands of bad Indians, and that isn't the story London has written. Rather, he embraces ambiguity. There are no clear winners here. It could be said that the Russian fur-thieves are getting exactly what they deserve. Some may view the slow deaths of the slavers as torture. There's no doubt that revenge plays a part in what is unfolding, but I also see an argument that killing the white men in such a graphic way is a warning to others who might seek to enslave them in the future. Indeed, such brutal acts across many besieged cultures are often just that – a caution to others.

I'm also very concerned about getting the details right. There's no place for a clichéd raiding party. I would very much like to make a balanced film (dark as it is) that feels historically accurate and is culturally sensitive. I'm not so concerned about the violent and graphic nature of the story. Bad things happened in history. They are a part of who we all are (not that we should revel in graphic detail). I would be delighted if everyone involved in making this short film is comfortable with how they are being represented.

London's story is about the Nulato people of Alaska. However, it isn't practical for us to shoot there. So we have a few options open to us: try and re-create a version of the Nulato tribe, switch the indigenous people in the story for a Canadian tribe, or come up with a fictional tribe for our story. For me, a big decider is what language we have Makamuk, Yakuga and the tribe speaking. I think it should be a single dialect, but again, I'm open to other opinions.

For me, the best films take us somewhere we wouldn't ordinarily go and put in us situations we might never find ourselves in. The cultural dynamic and the raw beauty of the wintry Canadian landscape will certainly give our viewers a unique cinema experience.

My method of filmmaking is very collaborative and I'm always keen to solicit the thoughts of everyone involved in a project. I think this is a terrific story that is absolutely worth us telling and I look forward to bringing it to life to the best of our abilities. I'm sure we'll have fun doing just that. Please feel free to contact me with any thoughts or concerns.

Thanks,
Sean.