

Eden Robinson's 'surreal' 2020 continues as *Monkey Beach* adaptation opens VIFF

MARSHA LEDERMAN >

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Monkey Beach tells the story of Lisa, a rebellious young woman who returns from Vancouver, where she has been living a troubled life, to her Haisla territory up north to be with her family.

REUNION PACIFIC ENTERTAINMENT

This has been a pretty rotten September, I think many of us can agree, but for Eden Robinson, there has been a lot to celebrate. The Haisla and Heiltsuk author is watching – from a distance – as major film festivals in Vancouver and Toronto fete her work. The Vancouver International Film Festival opens Thursday with the world premiere of *Monkey Beach*, Loretta Todd's adaptation of Robinson's bestselling 2000 novel. This follows the screening at the Toronto International Film Festival of the first episodes of *Trickster*, the Michelle Latimore-directed adaptation of Robinson's trilogy, which is headed for CBC next month.

"I keep saying [it's] surreal and wild," says Robinson. "That is what it feels like: 2020 has been alternately terrifying and boring, which is not what I thought the apocalypse would be like at all. And for me it is kind of a gonzo September, but it's gonzo in such a good way. And at the same time I know how hard Loretta and Michelle have worked to get to this point. It took a lot of grit."

In the film, Lisa (Grace Dove) returns from Vancouver, where she has been living a troubled life, to her Haisla territory up north to be with her family. Lisa has had visions since childhood about her brother Jimmy (played by Joel Oulette, who also stars in *Trickster*). When there, she comes to the realization that she has been summoned supernaturally to save him.

It has felt at times like this project has been guided by something otherworldly as well.

Todd was attending a literary festival years ago when she was approached by producer Gillian Darling-Kovanic, who suggested to her that she option Robinson's book because they seemed to be on the same wavelength. Your filmmaking is like her writing, she told her.

Todd bought *Monkey Beach* and – would you believe – saw that Robinson, whom she had never met, had named her in the acknowledgements, citing her film *Forgotten Warriors* in a list of source material she had tapped into.

“Of course, I read the book and loved the book and set out to option it,” says Todd, who jumped through many hoops to acquire the project that would become her first feature film.

Initially, Todd asked Robinson to try to adapt the book herself.

“I banged my head against it for a couple of years, and I was basically rewriting the novel, but with more dialogue. So I fired myself,” Robinson says, breaking out into her huge, trademark laugh.



Upon returning home, Lisa discovers she's been summoned by something supernatural to save her brother.

RICARDO HUBBS/RESONANCE FILMS INC VIA THE CANADIAN PRESS

“The wonderful thing about screenplays is the formatting makes it easy to write ten pages a day, but you do have to squish a lot into a page, and you do have to keep in mind that it's visual. And I couldn't do it. So I found it incredibly frustrating,” Robinson adds.

“She tried,” says Todd, in a separate interview. “She couldn't revisit it. As a writer, she had already lived through it, and to write the script was to already live it again. But she tried; she tried really hard.”

The project took years to make, in part because Todd was determined to film it in Kitimat and Kitamaat Village, where the Haisla Nation is located, where Robinson lives and where the story is set.

“I probably could have made it in Vancouver. We scouted locations all around Vancouver that could have potentially looked like Kitimat. We looked at other

First Nations closer to Vancouver. We looked at beaches that could be Monkey Beach, so we did our homework,” says Todd, who is Cree, Métis and white. “But it just never felt right. It always felt like it had to be made in Kitimat. The story is connected to the land, and so it was really important to be where the story originated, where the experience was.”

The film was shot in September, 2018. Locals were cast in some roles and employed as crew members and extras; the weather – generally not great in September – somehow cooperated.



The film was shot in Kitimat and Kitamaat Village, where the Haisla Nation is located.

RESONANCE FILMS INC

Robinson was touring her book *Trickster Drift* that fall, the second in the trilogy, but was able to come home and visit the set for a few days.

“It was just so moving. It’s one thing to see it on the page; it’s another to see actors do it in person,” she says.

The film is dedicated to the author’s father, John Robinson, who died in 2017. He was an enthusiastic cheerleader for the project and read some of the early scripts. He laughed at one version that saw the characters drive to remote Monkey Beach, rather than travel there by boat.

“Eden said her father was my No. 1 fan,” says Todd. “That still breaks my heart that he didn’t get to see the film before he passed away.”

Monkey Beach is one of the select films at VIFF getting in-person screenings, which have sold out. There are also physically distanced screenings scheduled for some independent theatres across the province, including in Terrace, B.C., about a 45-minute drive from Kitimat. That is where Robinson plans to be on Thursday night, close to home.

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