

[washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

'Thousand Roads': Paved With Good Intentions

By Ann Hornaday

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, April 12, 2005; Page C02

The National Museum of the American Indian has produced a slick, high-end short film to play in its state-of-the-art auditorium. And from the looks of the 43-minute movie's pedigree and production values, it has spared no expense. "A Thousand Roads," which loosely connects a series of vignettes of Native life, not only looks great but hews faithfully to the museum's overarching ethos of celebrating the contemporary Native experience throughout the Western Hemisphere.

According to some of the museum's critics, that emphasis on celebration has often been at the expense of history, especially those chapters that have been less than happy. The same criticism applies to "A Thousand Roads," whose earnest attempt at interweaving its characters and stories too often succumbs to contrived, didactic romanticism.

Directed by Chris Eyre ("Smoke Signals") from a script by Scott Garen and Native American poet Joy Harjo, "A Thousand Roads" tells the stories of characters who are presumably meant to be emblematic: a New York stockbroker of Mohawk descent; an Inupiat girl living with relatives in Alaska while her mother is on military duty; a teenage Navajo gang member in New Mexico; and a Quechuan healer who travels across a South American mountain range to treat a sick child.

There's nothing particularly objectionable about "A Thousand Roads," which will be shown several times a day at the museum. But neither is there much that is memorable. Of course it's impossible for one film to do justice to the breathtaking breadth of the American indigenous experience. But in reducing such a storied and diverse reality to a brief survey, the filmmakers have created a portrait that either glides superficially over a complicated history or labors under too much symbolic weight.

Set to John Trudell's stentorian narration and filmed on digital video with dazzling scope and clarity by Claudio Miranda, each tale unfolds with monumental, mannered gravitas. Only one of the sequences, involving the young girl in Alaska, manages to tap Eyre's gift for conveying authentic, spontaneous emotion.

And although it's admirable that the museum and the filmmakers choose not to dwell in a lamentable past, a bit more history wouldn't be out of place here. (How many viewers, for example, will know the fascinating story behind the movie's brief reference to the Mohawks who helped build New York?) No doubt, the museum is justly proud of its new 320-seat theater, which opened Sunday. It features digital projection, surround-sound, an elaborately woven curtain and a simulated night sky.

As the 21st-century version of a centuries-long narrative tradition, "A Thousand Roads" succeeds, if unevenly, in providing a few pinpricks of light on the scrim of a rich and ongoing story.

A Thousand Roads (43 minutes, at the National Museum of the American Indian) is not rated.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company