



Lights! Camera! Fairbanks! TV pilot filmed at UAF features all-Indigenous cast

The recent filming of a TV pilot included a very special guest star: Fairbanks.

The Fairbanks community played the part of a live studio audience for the pilot of the TV show “Tumyaraq-qaa,” which was shot in Salisbury Theatre at the University of Alaska Fairbanks on March 31, April 1 and April 2.

“This has been 10 years in the making,” director and writer Kavelina Torres said of the project, which features an all-Indigenous cast.

“Tumyaraq-qaa” is an hour-long sci-fi comedy that centers around an Indigenous group of space travelers preparing to journey to a distant star. “They must come together to stall the federated Earth’s countries and kings government while their missing crew member races to the ship with the last part for near light speed travel,” is how the pilot is described.

“It is the privilege of a lifetime to be here and with an all Indigenous cast,” Torres said. “It’s been my dream for a very long time.”

Torres is an Indigenous media professor at UAF and was assistant director for the films “Mining for Ruby” (2017) and “The Messenger” (2012). She also wrote and directed the short film “Yugumalleq” (2013).

The cast and crew rehearsed consistently for “Tumyaraq-qaa” since the end of January in what Torres called a “very collaborative environment.” If an actor felt like a line didn’t sound right, they would fix it together, she said.

Actor Sean Asikluk Topkok, who’s an associate professor and chair for the Indigenous Studies master’s and doctoral programs at UAF, portrays a communications officer named Kaaktunga in the show.

“These people have really become my family,” Topkok said. “It’s been challenging, but we’ve built a really positive rapport with each other. I’m excited to see what the audience thinks and see if they laugh at all the things we’ve been laughing at these past few months.”

The project was a collaboration between UAF administrators, students and the Fairbanks community. All of the camera operations and film editing were done by students.

“I’ve always seen the backstage stuff and thought of it as magic, but now, to really be a part of the magic is just such an honor,” said Flyn Ludington, stage manager and sound engineer.

Now that filming has wrapped, Torres plans on sending the film to multiple film festivals and — fingers crossed — hopes to see it air on national television.

“If not national, it will at least go local,” Torres said. “There are barely any Indigenous comedies, so this one is special.”

“Tumyaraq-qaa” is family friendly and is meant to be enjoyed by Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike; there are

jokes targeted toward both groups. And now that the pilot is finished, Torres said she plans to start writing the second episode.

The set of the show was mostly handmade by cast and crew members and was a group effort. Also, there are multiple Native art pieces included in the set that were donated by community members.

“It looks so good on camera,” Torres said. “And it’s really just ... oh my goodness. This has been the highlight of my day for the past few months, and that says a lot.



From left, camera operators Eric Marshall and JB Brown set up shots while Donetta Tritt, David Leslie and Debbie Mekiana rehearse a scene in the TV pilot “Tumyaraq-qaa.” At right is writer and director Kavelina Torres. “Tumyaraq-qaa” was filmed before a live studio audience Friday, March 31, 2023, through Sunday, April 2, 2023, at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Photo by Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF



Sean Asikluk Topkok, left, portrays Communications Officer Kaaktunga and Kyle Moore portrays First Mate Atauiq in the pilot “Tumyaraq-qaa,” which was filmed before a live studio audience.

Photo by Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF

From left, Donetta Tritt, David Leslie and Debbie Mekiana rehearse a scene from “Tumyaraq-qaa,” a TV pilot filmed recently at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Photo by Kade Mendelowitz, Theatre UAF

