

[November 11, 1992]

Some years before he became a household name, Kevin Costner, upon learning that he had Cherokee ancestry on his father's side, went on a trip with a friend to visit famous Indian landmarks. Eventually, they wound up at Little Big Horn. His directorial debut "*Dances With Wolves*" (Orion, 1990) gave the actor the opportunity not only to explore his heritage, but make a film in keeping with his views: "There have been films that show how the Indians were cheated," he told *The Los Angeles Times*. "This shows how they felt being cheated. It deals with a very big issue in a very intimate way."

In telling how Army Lieutenant John Dunbar (Costner) assimilates into a tribe of Lakota Sioux during the Civil War, "*Dances With Wolves*", based on the novel by Michael Blake, who adapted it for the screen (ironically, Bake wrote "*Dances With Wolves*" as a spec script; Costner convinced him to rewrite it as a novel) attempts to incorporate several themes as in its version of, as Costner puts it, "how the West was lost." Despite Dunbar's assertions that the Sioux are "just like us," they are not, as the audience is reminded time and again. Every conflict is designed to show how truly uncivilized the "civilized" white world is. Ultimately, Dunbar must choose between the life he has known and the life that he has come to know. But one senses from the film's opening that Dunbar is questioning his role as a soldier (a professional killer) and his place in a "civilized" society where men commit atrocities in the name of vague concepts (God, Country). Thus, his integration into the Sioux is neither traumatic or surprising.

The film opens in 1864 during a standoff at Saint David's Field, Tennessee. Badly wounded, Dunbar decides that he would rather die than have his leg amputated, so he mounts his horse, Cisco, and makes a suicidal charge. Yet instead of being killed, he unwittingly engineers a Union rout and becomes an instant hero. Given his choice of posts, he requests the frontier, wanting to see it "before it's gone," and is sent to Fort Hayes, South Dakota. As a muleskinner named Timmins (Robert Pastorelli) takes him to his post, Fort Sedgewick, Dunbar begins a journal. The fort turns out to be an abandoned shack, but he dutifully stays, and wait for reinforcements. With only Cisco for company, Dunbar makes friends with a lone wolf whom he names Two Socks.

One day, Dunbar catches Sioux medicine man Kicking Bird (Graham Greene) trying to steal Cisco. A few days later, Sioux warrior Wind in His Hair (Rodney A. Grant) steals Cisco, but the horse finds his way back. Fed up after yet another attempt is made to steal the horse by a group of Sioux children, Dunbar heads out to their camp. En route, he sees a white woman in Sioux garb, Stands With a Fist (Mary McDonnell) mutilating herself; he subdues her and returns her to the suspicious tribe. That night, the tribe's chief Ten Bears (Floyd Red Crow Westerman) decides that they may be able to use Dunbar to express concerns over the

increasing number of whites and sends Kicking Bird and Wind in His Hair to Fort Sedgewick. Dunbar happily welcomes them, to their surprise. A dialogue is struck, and the visits become regular. Dunbar is eventually invited to the camp, and Stands With a Fist (whose real name is Christine) interprets between Dunbar and Kicking Bird. Dunbar alerts them to buffalo. The first herd they encounter have been massacred by white hunters, who are tracked down and killed. But they find a second herd, and Dunbar participates in the hunt. He has not only secured a place with the tribe, he is nearly-fluent in their language, Lakota. He has also begun to court Stands With a Fist. After the tribal elders leave camp to meet with their arch-enemies, the Pawnee, the Pawnee ambush the camp. Dunbar organizes the women, children, and old men, and repel the attack with the rifles that he brought with him to Fort Sedgewick. What reservations the tribe may have had about him are now gone: Kicking Bird marries Dunbar and Christine and he becomes a fully accepted member.

Dunbar warns that more whites are coming, and suggests the tribe move to their winter camp. When he returns to Fort Sedgewick, he is captured by a newly-arrived Army detail (Cisco and Two Socks are killed), who beat him. It is then decided to send him back to Fort Hayes, where he will be shot as a traitor. But the warriors tracked Dunbar down when he failed to return, and they ambush the detail. Telling the elders that he must go or the Army will wipe out the tribe, Dunbar and Christine leave into an unknown future.

Costner raises a host of issues that need to be explored in depth:

\* Colonialism: When Dunbar announces that he must leave, Ten Bears shows him the helmet of a Spanish soldier, making the point that others have tried to conquer the frontier and failed. Ten Bears is convinced that the Europeans will leave the Sioux alone. But Dunbar knows full well the whites have the superior technology (the rifles). What is more, Dunbar, as an Army officer, knows the whites will not leave the Sioux alone nor will they relent in their expansion. Yet he has hesitated to tell Ten Bears and Kicking Bird just how bad the situation really is. Either he doesn't want to believe it himself or he is displaying some ambivalence that is never explained. He also knows full well he will not find "[whites] who will listen [that the Sioux are not to be feared]," as he promises Ten Bears.

\* Values: "So eager to laugh, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other," Dunbar writes in his journal after the buffalo hunt. "The only word I can think of is 'harmony'." Thus, the difference between whites and Indians: whites fight against everything while Indians have the wisdom to do just the opposite, underscoring how "civilized" the Indians are and how "uncivilized" the whites are. But the fact remains that two distinct and complex cultures were coming into conflict, and one was about to annihilate the other. Yet there is no hint of the tragic nature of this clash. And the cultural issues becomes thoroughly cheapened when Dunbar renounces his "evil" white ways to become an adopted Indian.

\* Family: Dunbar is a blank slate. We never learn where he came from or anything about his life before the Army. Thus, it is only natural that he responds with such childlike enthusiasm to the Sioux. In the film, the Army is anything but a family: the doctor who decides to amputate Dunbar's leg is so apathetic about it, he doesn't even discuss trying to save it; the rank-and-file are treated as stupid and expendable. When Dunbar is reached by a General after his charge, he orders his personal surgeon work on him: "He [Dunbar] is probably the only one of them [the soldiers] worth saving." Dunbar naturally compares his own experience as a white man to how the Sioux relate to themselves and to each other. When he awakens at the campfire one night to see Kicking Bird and his wife engaged in foreplay - in full view of everyone - he is struck by their lack of shame. His reaction (a smile) is an indication that he is rejecting his "unnatural" heritage. When he is given his Sioux name, Dances With Wolves, Dunbar says: "I had never really known who John Dunbar was. Perhaps because the name itself had no meaning. But as I heard my Sioux name being called over and over, I knew for the first time who I really was."

\* Race Relations: The views of the Sioux and the whites toward one another are not only not favorable (this is, after all, a revisionist Western), but they can be seen as racist -- and not just in the way Costner wants us to see them. En route to Fort Sedgewick, Timmins says Indians are "nothing but thieves and beggars." Dunbar writes in his journal that Timmins is "quite possibly, the foulest man I've ever met." Every white person with the exceptions of Dunbar and Christine is insane or stupid or obscene or all three. Leaving the journal at Fort Sedgewick is an obvious ploy to further hit us over the head with this: one of the soldiers who beats him sneers Dunbar has "turned injun." That the soldiers meet grisly fates at the hands of the Sioux is a not-so-subtle act of divine retribution. Yet, for all the nobleness Costner attributes to the Sioux, they, too, are just as narrow-minded as whites. At the first tribal council, when Ten Bears says Dunbar may be different from other whites, Kicking Bird and Wind in His Hair disagree vehemently: "Whatever he is, he is not Sioux. And that makes him less... [Whites] are dirty. They don't shoot well. They don't ride well. Their soldiers can't live through one winter." Adds Kicking Bird: "Whites are a poor race and are hard to understand." Mute on the subject until Dunbar is about to leave for good, Ten Bear tells him that Whites, Mexicans, and Texans "take without asking," not only furthering the idea whites violate the principles of brotherhood and the laws of Nature, but so does every non-Sioux. Christine tells Dunbar she received her Sioux name after she hit a Sioux woman who had beaten her for years. Though the film incorrectly implies the Sioux beat their children, that they beat the white children they took in is not beyond imagining. There are further hints of racism when Kicking Bird learns that Dunbar and Christine are dating: "It makes sense. They are both white", the insinuation being if she were Sioux, he would oppose the match. Has Christine, despite her assimilation, never been fully accepted? Were the Sioux against interracial relations as they felt whites and other Indians were inferior, or as a matter of principal? We are left to guess.

\* The White Redeemer: Having pegged whites as evil, the film patronizingly plays up the idea of Dunbar as a Christ figure through which the white race can redeem itself. As he makes his charge, Dunbar says, "Father, forgive me," and stretches out his arms in crucifixion. He even saves the Sioux from certain starvation by leading them to the buffalo (how he stumbles across the herd that eluded the expert Sioux trackers is never explained). There is even an allusion to the Creation, with Dunbar as Adam and the frontier as Eden. Cisco and Two Socks are the animal equivalents of Dunbar in how each possess a nobility the whites do not; their deaths at the hands of the Army can be seen as the Christ-like expression of martyrdom Dunbar halfheartedly attempted.

\* Good Indian, Bad Indian: Critics and historians blasted Costner for saddling the Pawnee with every degrading stereotype ever associated with Native Americans. In the film, the Sioux are friendly, curious, respectful, and loyal. The Pawnee are fierce, cold-blooded, and have no regard for life. The Sioux kill for food or as a last resort. The Pawnee kill for the sheer sadistic pleasure of it. The Pawnee ambush Timmins for no reason. Christine was orphaned by a Pawnee massacre. The Pawnee raid the defenseless Sioux camp. The Pawnee help the Army track Dunbar after his rescue. Costner's imagery is designed to emphasize the serenity and enlightenment of the Sioux while underscoring the moral and spiritual vacuum of the Pawnee and the whites: the buffalo herd, skinned and left to rot; the amputees at St. David's Field and the bloodied instruments; the formal military garb Dunbar wears and American flag he carries to put the fear of God into the Sioux when he sets out to their camp; the full Sioux garb Dunbar wears when he returns to Fort Sedgewick and speaking Lakota to his captors (interestingly, he and Christine speak to each other in English); the beads Kicking Bird gives him; the purity of the snow at the tribe's winter camp. Although the Pawnee and the Sioux were traditional enemies, each did not attack the others' villages. Warriors who killed women, children, and elders were dishonored. Plains Indians' combat was more like civilized jousting matches than the all-out bloodletting of European combat, and raids were usually conducted to steal horses or to take brides. The Sioux and the Pawnee, as did every tribe, cooperated in one form or another with the government, either for money or as a way to retaliate against old enemies. While Red Cloud schmoozed with politicians, Sitting Bull was a featured attraction in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

\* Social Class: It appears at first that Sioux women had more influence than white women in, what was also a patriarchy. When Kicking Bird complains he can not understand why Christine has a problem with his request that she try to recall her English so that he can communicate with Dunbar, his wife suggests it is he who has the real problem. But when Dunbar and Christine leave the camp, she dutifully rides behind him, a suggestion the Sioux also expected their women to be subservient. Yet we are given a real hint of the true status of tribal women when Dunbar returns the unconscious and badly-injured Christine to the camp. Instead of handling her with care, Wind in His Hair grabs her by her mutilated arm, drags her across the ground, and dumps her at the feet of the others. This raises disturbing

questions with regards to the misogyny of the Sioux and the tribe's true feelings toward Christine: Would Wind in His Hair have done this to a Sioux woman? Why did not any of the Sioux come to her aid or confront him? Why did Dunbar not stop Wind in His Hair (chivalry, a European concept, demands that his concern for her override any thoughts about his own safety)? And why does Kicking Bird ask Christine about how her arm is healing instead of lecturing her on the futility of her act?

\* Interaction: For an Indian to snoop around a white settlement was a fatal mistake, and he certainly would not have done so alone. Yet rather than kill Kicking Bird when he tries to steal Cisco, Dunbar chases him away. Later, Wind in His Hair charges at Dunbar, but Dunbar does not shoot, nor does Wind in His Hair not throw his lance. This frontier version of "chicken" simply defies everything known about the interactions between whites and Indians. Further, as Kicking Bird had been humiliated, Wind in His Hair was obligated to avenge his honor. Dunbar's interaction with the tribe also raises the question: If the Sioux have always been receptive to outsiders, why was Fort Sedgewick abandoned? While some Indians and whites did forge friendships, would a Kicking Bird have entrusted a Dunbar with the welfare of his family? Would a Ten Bears have entrusted a Dunbar with the safety of his people? Would any tribe have even considered asking a white man to take part in their hunts or any of their rituals, much less, accept him as a full member? Not likely.

Costner tries to engage the audience by making Dunbar somewhat of a buffoon (fainting after his encounter with Wind in His Hair; hitting his head on the doorway as he investigates a disturbance; pretending to be knocked out by Christine) while humanizing the Sioux (Ten Bears's dignity; Kicking Bird's openness; Wind in His Hair's sexually-charged aggressiveness). Despite its flaws, "*Dances With Wolves*" succeeds in showing Native Americans as fellow human beings worthy of respect rather as hostile Others.

## SOURCES

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