

Preview: Edmonton filmmaker screens ‘love letter to humanity’

Unclaimed has western Canadian première May 17

By Jamie Hall, Edmonton Journal May 16, 2013 2:07 PM

Recommend

0

Tweet

0

0

[Comment](#)

0

• [Story](#)

• [Photos \(4\)](#)



Cinematographer Allan Leader and filmmaker Michael Jorgensen set up a shot in Vietnam in 2012. As director of photography, Allan documented the emotional journey of a Vietnam War veteran seeking to help a man claiming to be an American MIA still living in Southeast Asia. The journey is chronicled in *Unclaimed*, a feature-length documentary written, produced and directed by Michael Jorgensen of Myth Merchant Films.

Photograph by: Myth Merchant Films

PREVIEW

Unclaimed, western Canadian première (Q&A with Edmonton filmmaker Michael Jorgensen to follow)

When: Friday, May 17, 7 p.m.

Where: Metro Cinema at the Garneau, with additional screenings May 18, 4:15 p.m. and 9:15 p.m.; May 19, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m.; May 20, 5 p.m. and 9 p.m.; and May 23, 7 p.m.

Tickets: \$10 at the door

EDMONTON - Emmy-award-winning filmmaker Michael Jorgensen often gets asked why he lives in Edmonton. It's his home, of course, he has

deep roots here that have been planted since 1990. And last fall he decided to share his considerable talent by taking a job teaching non-fiction storytelling at NAIT, so there's that, too. For Jorgensen, though, it's not about the where of it, so much as it is the what.

"I could live on the dark side of the moon as long as there was an airport," he says. "The story is always somewhere else."

In *Unclaimed*, which makes its western Canadian premiere May 17 at [Metro Cinema](#) in Edmonton, that "somewhere else" was Vietnam and the U.S., with a brief stop in Edmonton a week before Christmas for a heart-wrenching, joyful reunion.

The 49-year-old filmmaker calls his latest offering his "love letter to humanity."

Unclaimed tells the story of Tom Faunce, who, after enduring a traumatic childhood and two years in the U.S. army during the Vietnam War, makes an oath to spend the rest of his life helping those in need. Four decades later, on one of his many trips to Southeast Asia, he discovers a man who claims to be John Hartley Robertson, a Green Beret who was listed as killed in action after his helicopter was shot down over Laos in 1968. The film documents Faunce's struggle to prove the identity of the man.

Unclaimed made its world premiere in April at the Hot Docs International Documentary Festival in Toronto to sold-out shows and standing ovations. The U.S. premiere took place Sunday, May 12 at the GI Film Festival in Washington.

While the film has received critical acclaim, it has sparked controversy, too. U.S. officials claim the so-called MIA war vet is really a con man by the name of Dang Tan Ngoc, a Vietnamese citizen of French origin with a history of making false claims to U.S. authorities dating back as far as 2006.

In the end, Jorgensen says, that will be determined by the genetic testing Robertson's family is in the process of conducting. Regardless of the outcome, he says, for him, the story was never about Robertson — it was always about Faunce.

"I would hope that I could have the courage to be the kind of guy Tom Faunce is," says Jorgensen. "The kind of guy who will put himself on the line. There's a lot of self-sacrifice in what he did to make other people's lives better. As human beings, that's something we hold in high esteem — someone who's willing to sacrifice their physical and emotional well-being for someone else.

"It's really about the story of a soldier. It's not about instilling a willingness to kill, it's instilling a willingness of self-sacrifice, of putting yourself in harm's way for other people.

"Tom went to such lengths for people he didn't even know. I found that very compelling, very moving and very emotional."

When the grizzled war vet first reached out to him in early 2011, through an acquaintance familiar with Jorgensen's work, the filmmaker was reluctant to take on the project. He knew how emotionally charged the issue was. He had heard the stories about still-hopeful families financially and emotionally devastated by fraudsters who taunted them with false promises of proof that their loved ones were still alive decades on.

"I was very dubious," says Jorgensen, "but Tom seemed pretty confident this guy was a U.S. military serviceman just by the things he was able to learn from him. And Tom himself was very dubious of this guy at first, long before I came on the scene. He was pretty street-smart, and the more he spoke, the more I believed his story.

"Really, though, what convinced me was not the MIA part of the story, it was Tom's story.

"The story is about a character on a physical quest. That's the easy part of the narrative. The depth comes from the emotional journey, and Tom's story was amazing to me.

"Here was a man who had grown up on the streets of Detroit, had a rough childhood, been to Vietnam and then devoted the rest of his life to helping others, despite all he had been through.

"To me, no matter how it turned out, Tom's story was amazing — it was about what it means to be human."

Finding the human angle has always compelled Jorgensen, whose films have earned more than 80 international, national and regional awards for writing, producing, directing and cinematography. In 1998, he became the only filmmaker ever to be granted access inside a classified U.S. department of defence weapons competition, which he documented in the film *Battle of the X-Planes*. The documentary earned Jorgensen the 2003 Emmy for the Best Long Form News and Current Affairs Documentary.

Unclaimed, meanwhile, has been nominated for seven Alberta Film and Television Awards, known as The Rosies. The winners will be announced in a gala ceremony at the Winspear in Edmonton on Saturday, May 25.

Edmonton unexpectedly became one of the locations for *Unclaimed*, which was shot in the U.S. and in Vietnam between April and December, 2012. When Faunce located Robertson's last surviving sister, she and her family arranged to fly to Vietnam in December to meet him but three days before they were scheduled to make the trip, the venue changed to Edmonton when Robertson managed to get a visa to come to Canada.

The reunion ended up taking place in Edmonton a week before Christmas, in a meeting so wrenching Jorgensen actually stopped shooting.

"We only filmed four or five minutes of that reunion," he says. "We just left the room. There was such deep emotional crying, and such joy. I don't know that I'll ever experience something like that again. It was overwhelming."

Whether Robertson is who he says he is will be determined by the genetic testing. Jorgensen says the four family members who have met him personally, and the others who have seen his face, are all convinced it's him.

For Jorgensen, though, the story ended with Faunce's quest to reunite Robertson with his family.

"When that story ended, my story ended," says Jorgensen. "Now it becomes a family matter, in my mind."

With files from the National Post

jhall@edmontonjournal.com

twitter.com/@jamiejeanhall

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal

- [E-mail this Article](#)
- [Print this Article](#)
- Share this Article

More on This Story

- [Nominations announced for annual Rosie awards](#)
- [Movie preview: Edmonton filmmaker screens Magnetic Reconnection](#)
- [Committee supports tax relief for Edmonton film studio](#)
- [Film tax credit gets all-party support](#)

Story Tools

- [E-mail this Article](#)
- [Print this Article](#)

Font:

- *
- *
- *
- *
- *

Image:

- *
- *
- *
- *

Spotlights

- [Sign up for Journal email alerts](#)
- [Follow the Edmonton Journal on Twitter](#)
- [Some of our favourite things on Pinterest](#)
- [Download the Journal's Android app](#)
- [Follow the Journal on Facebook](#)
- [Follow all the Journal news writers on Twitter](#)

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Cinematographer Allan Leader and filmmaker Michael Jorgensen set up a shot in Vietnam in 2012. As director of photography, Allan documented the emotional journey of a Vietnam War veteran seeking to help a man claiming to be an American MIA still living in Southeast Asia. The journey is chronicled in *Unclaimed*, a feature-length documentary written, produced and directed by Michael Jorgensen of Myth Merchant Films.

Photograph by: Myth Merchant Films

