



JOE BUFFALO

director: **AMAR CHEBIB**

language: **ENGLISH**

country: **CANADA**

run time: **16 mins**

year: **2021**





LOGLINE

Joe Buffalo, an Indigenous skateboard legend and Indian Residential School survivor, must face his inner demons to realize his dream of turning pro.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Joe Buffalo is an Indigenous skateboard legend. He's also a survivor of Canada's notorious Indian Residential School system. Following a traumatic childhood and decades of addiction, Joe must face his inner demons to realize his dream of turning pro.

BIG SKY PROGRAMMER REVIEW

“This stunning portrait takes the viewer into the mind of Indigenous skateboard legend Joe Buffalo. With raw honesty and powerful storytelling, the film takes no shortcuts in exploring the generational trauma associated with Canada's Indian Residential Schools and the wounds brought on by white colonialism. Joe takes us through his own battles with isolation, anger and addiction, but his story is ultimately one of strength and resilience, woven together by his love of skateboarding. A powerful reminder that history does not simply melt away or get swept aside, but instead is ingrained in the bedrock of today challenging us to learn it. In his own words, “If I can make it happen given the circumstances of how I was raised, then there is hope out there.”

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

INSPIRATION

The inspiration for this project came when Joe became a professional skateboarder in the summer of 2019. We used to skate together in Montreal back in 2005 and he has since become a legend in Canadian skateboarding. While it was clear to me at the time that he had a rough past, I was shocked and amazed to learn that he was part of the last generation to attend residential schools, something which he never spoke about until very recently.

Joe had overcome tremendous obstacles to get where he is and I knew his story had the potential to touch very disparate audiences. While many Indigenous folks would be (and have already been) inspired by Joe's story, I knew skateboarding could also help make a more stylized film that appealed to younger viewers who may not ordinarily watch a documentary about a residential school survivor.





HISTORY

Most Canadians but few Americans are familiar with the history of Indian Residential Schools, even though the Canadian system was actually modelled after the US (specifically the Carlisle Indian Industrial School). They were essentially boarding schools for Indigenous children funded by the government and operated by various Christian denominations which sought to “Kill the Indian and save the man.”

Starting in the mid 19th Century, both the US and Canadian governments stripped hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children from their families and forced them to attend these schools to be given a eurocentric education. Children were forbidden from speaking their languages, practicing their culture, and rarely communicated with their parents. They were forced to speak English/French and become Christian. There was widespread mental, physical, and sexual abuse from the teachers and administration. Overcrowding and the lack of medical attention made diseases like tuberculosis run rampant. In the early 20th century, the mortality rate for children was approximately 50%. While conditions improved over the years, the abuse is well-documented to have continued until the last few schools closed in the 1990’s, something which even most Canadians are unaware of.

Needless to say, it is an extremely dark chapter of North American history that has had severe consequences for generations of Indigenous communities, such as high instances of suicide, mental illness, and addiction. In 2015, the the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission declared that the Indian Residential school system amounted to cultural genocide.

APPROACH

My approach to the film was first and foremost to support Joe and collaborate with him to tell his story. Although I am not Indigenous, as an Arab I am not a stranger to the impact of Euro-American colonialism on my own culture, and have experienced the quiet underbelly of racism in Canada. My experience working with Syrian refugees on my feature documentary has also informed my approach to working with people living with trauma. This background has given me a deeper context for how critical it is for marginalized subjects to have a hand in telling their own stories as a means of decolonization, healing, and empowerment.

We met many times over several months discussing what the film would be, taking copious notes about Joe's life, and how to best portray that onscreen. We decided on a very personal narrative approach with Joe's voiceover front and centre. This was constructed from a series of interviews I conducted with Joe as well as scripted sections that we co-wrote. It was a delicate process as Joe had never shared many of the things he spoke about. Joe has described the process as part of his healing and strengthening his voice. In his own words:

“...by doing this film and having those moments of vulnerability... the more I was able to speak about it, the stronger my voice became. And I speak from the heart every time I talk now.”





APPROACH

Once we were both happy with the voice over, I began the visual treatment of the film in collaboration with my cinematographer Liam Mitchell. Liam has been a friend of Joe's for over 26 years and Joe credits him to having introduced him to film acting. This reinforced a sense of intimacy onset and Liam's background in skate films was immensely valuable for obvious reasons. As the vast majority of the story takes place in the past, we wanted to avoid leaning too heavily on archival footage and to employ a stylized, cinematic approach that would blur the lines between documentary / narrative / skate video. This would not have been possible without Joe's acting experience, which enabled us to lean heavily on recreations. His courage to be vulnerable brought an incredible depth of emotion to the film.

Hayley Morin, our Indigenous producer, helped to ensure appropriate protocols as well as general cultural safety on-set. We also hired Indigenous crew wherever possible, including creating a paid mentorship for the sound design and mixing. Joe himself was involved in the editing process from the pre-rough cut stage all the way through to picture-lock. His notes on how he wished to be portrayed and what to include or not were always respected. We also sought feedback on the film from other Indigenous colleagues to ensure we had not overlooked anything from our blindspots. Finally, Joe shared the film with Elders from his reserve and received their blessing.



INTENTION

It is my sincere hope that we did justice to Joe's story and that the film inspires others to overcome their own inner demons. I hope it helps to generate empathy and understanding for those struggling with mental health and addiction issues stemming from intergenerational trauma, particularly those from Indigenous communities, and to encourage people to learn more about the history of residential schools in both Canada and the US. Furthermore, I hope that the film helps raise Joe's profile and further his own goals of pursuing a career as an actor and teaching skateboarding to Indigenous youth through his non-profit, Nations Skate Youth.

**“I just want to pass
on a message of
hope and healing.”**

- Joe Buffalo





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Syrian-Canadian filmmaker Amar Chebib began making videos in his youth while growing up skateboarding in the Middle East. He has since made various award-winning short films and commercials around the world.

Amar began his first feature documentary in Syria just prior to the revolution and subsequently followed three musicians over 5 years as they were forced to become refugees. In 2018, *Wajd - Songs of Separation* premiered at DOXA, won the audience award at Filmfest DC's Arabian Sights program, and screened at the US State Department, the Aga Khan Museum, and many international film festivals.

Besides his personal work, Amar has also directed branded films for Square, Airbnb, Beats by Dre, Casper, Bank of America as well as numerous tech start-ups and non-profits. He resides with his wife on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territory in Vancouver and continues to work globally.

amarchebib.com

CREDITS

Director & Editor **AMAR CHEBIB**

Writers **JOE BUFFALO & AMAR CHEBIB**

Producers **HAYLEY MORIN & MACK STANNARD**

Executive Producer **MOHAMMAD GORJESTANI**

Cinematographer **LIAM MITCHELL**

1st AC **SOLOMAN CHINIQUAY**

Swing **TRISTAN MATHARU**

Steadicam Operators **PETER PARK & DAVID TENNISWOOD**

Drone Operator **MAT L. MATTHEWS**

Location Sound **MAIRI TURNER & OSCAR VARGAS**

Production Assistants **KENNIDY FISHER & FRANK CARDONA**

Sound Design & Mix **MATT DRAKE**

Post-Sound Mentee **KAITLYN REDCROW**

Colourist **SAM GILLING**

CAST

Adult Joe **JOE BUFFALO**

Teenage Joe **QUINTON GEORGE**

Preteen Joe **GREGORY BIRD JR**

Mario **AVERY BEAR HEAD**

Skater #1 **JOSEPH MOORE**

Skater #2 **MATTY MOORE**

Priest **DUKE MURRDODGE**

Production Company **LUMINUS FILMS**

In Association With **EVEN/ODD**

With the Participation of **THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS**

A man with long dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt, stands in an urban setting. He is holding a skateboard vertically in his right hand. The skateboard deck features a detailed black and white portrait of a Native American man, identified as Joe Buffalo. The portrait shows the man's face and upper torso, with intricate patterns and shading. The background is a blurred city street with modern buildings and a person walking in the distance.

CONTACT

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