

Annabella Piugattuk's acting debut earned her a Genie nomination.

So why is she dodging Hollywood?

The Accidental Actress

By Heather Camlot



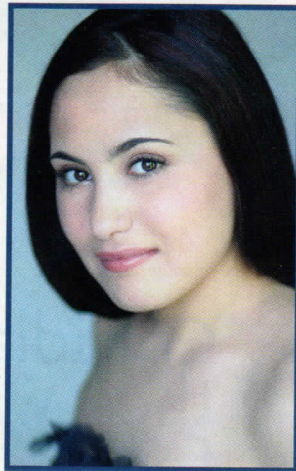
ANNABELLA PIUGATTUK
(NATHAN BARBOUR)
HAIR AND MAKE-UP
(GIGI DELEON)
SNOW WALKER
(LIONS GATE FILMS)

Glamour goddess Lana Turner was discovered while sipping a milkshake at a Hollywood drugstore. Raquel Welch earned her big ticket after being spotted poolside at the Beverly Hills Hotel. And Vancouver native Pamela Anderson's rocky road to success started when she was picked out on a bigscreen crowd cam at a B.C. Lions football game.

But Annabella Piugattuk? The Nunavut native's climb is more admirable: discovered while at a teen dance with friends, starred in a film with Canadian Hollywood heavyweights, nominated for a Genie in her first—and only—performance.

Piugattuk debuted in last year's *The Snow Walker*, a story of two people struggling to survive in the high Arctic. Piugattuk played a young Inuit woman named Kanaalaq being airlifted from her remote village to a Yellowknife hospital by bush pilot Charlie Halliday (Barry Pepper). En route, an engine explosion leaves the two stranded, forcing them to fend for themselves in the barren, wintry terrain.

Piugattuk, the middle child of six, was born in Iqaluit, Nunavut, and raised in the town of Igloolik, on a small island off the coast of Baffin Island. For her, life in northern Canada was not exactly full of excitement—fewer than 1,200 people call Igloolik home.



"There's something about Annabella that jumps out on screen," he explains. "She's remarkable in that she's so interested in the old ways. She talks to her elders, she hunts with them, and she has authentic traditional skills. She represents that time still, and yet she has a natural affinity for acting."

He recalls a sewing scene, where Piugattuk was handed a bone needle and thread.

"She looked at it and said, 'This is wrong.' And I thought, 'This is a lot of nerve.' But I loved that about her," he says. "She added a spunkiness, a little bit of cockiness and attitude."

Piugattuk helped "fix" other scenes that were not written according to traditional Inuit culture.

"Charlie asked me how they would caribou hunt in the old days. I'd tell him how my Grandpa told it to me," she says. "For wardrobe, I told them how clothing is supposed to be cut and sewn in a certain way, how I saw my grandmother do it."

During actual shooting—including some 16-hour days on the frozen tundra in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut—Piugattuk kept to herself most of the time. "I felt like Kanaalaq. I didn't know who these people were or what they were doing," she explains with a laugh.

She enjoyed learning the craft—being dropped into the middle of a major motion picture—and working with Pepper and Smith, but the long waits for her scenes were arduous.

"I learned patience when seal hunting because you're standing in front of a seal hole for hours. You can't even move your toes. But trying to have patience waiting to see if it's my turn yet...you have to be there even though you're going to wait five hours."

But the long waits, not to mention enduring -30C temperatures in Rankin Inlet and mosquito infestations in Churchill, Man., paid off for cast and crew. *The Snow Walker* was nominated for nine Genie Awards this year, including Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role for Piugattuk.

The first-time actress was at once shocked, dismayed and ecstatic. "I thought it was unfair," she says. "So many actresses worked for so long. It's their passion. It's their dream. But at the same time it's a great feeling."

Her film debut has paid off in another way, too—Piugattuk met her fiancé, a lighting technician, on the set. While no date has been set for the nuptials, Piugattuk is determined to create a new life for herself outside of Igloolik.

She has since moved to Vancouver and plans to return to school. The 21-year-old actress concedes that her break into the movie business has been amazing but, incredibly, she doesn't really see acting in her future.

"If there's another role that's made for me out there, it will happen," she says. "But I want to be an elementary school teacher."

"I feel very different, I feel much older now, even though I got the role at 19 and I'm now 21," she says. "I feel like I know what I want to do. I want to be a role model to my sister and my family. Sort of like an icon, like Jordan Tootoo for hockey."

To the young women who dream of one day gracing the big screen, Piugattuk is already an icon.

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She began acting “out of boredom” at age 16, after being chosen for a local community troupe. While she clearly enjoyed acting, traditional Inuit throat-singing was her true passion—a dream she hid from her peers.

“My people are so drawn in to the modern world that nobody cares about the traditional ways, so I never tried to do anything.”

In May 2001, a scout headed to Igloolik looking to cast a young woman for a new film based on Farley Mowat's short story *Walk Well My Brother*. Piugattuk was at a community dance with friends when casting director Jared Valentine noticed the 19-year-old beauty. He gestured to her and asked if she'd like to audition.

Piugattuk's mother urged her to take a look, but she initially wanted nothing to do with it.

“My mom...actually forced me for a week and a half. I [auditioned] for her. I did it for fun.”

Two weeks later, she was flown with five other women to Vancouver for screen tests.

The neophyte actress and her down-to-earth attitude captivated director Charles Martin Smith. He says many of Kanaalaq's qualities that came to life onscreen were because of Piugattuk.

The Snow Walker premieres Aug. 15 on Pay-Per-View