

Keepers of the Water

Directed by Ayelen Liberona

Produced by Joseph Johnson Camí

Nominated for Best Emerging Filmmaker & the Fan Favorite Award at TIFF 2010

Premiere Theatrical Release at Cinema du Park, Montreal, October 3rd -10th, 2010

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RBC & TIFF cancel several components of their Emerging Filmmakers Competition due to unwanted controversy over the Alberta Tar Sands

A short documentary, "Keepers of the Water", has led RBC & TIFF to cancel several components of the RBC Emerging Filmmakers Competition. This short film was directed by Ayelen Liberona, who flew to Fort Chipewyan in Alberta and profiled through the eyes of children the impact of tar sands development on the Native community. Despite having chosen the competition's subject matter, "Water", RBC was apparently not expecting anyone to shed a critical light on the operations of Syncrude, a lucrative bank client who has received over 4 billion dollars in loans from them since 2002. Upon their discovery of Syncrude's inclusion in the short film, RBC and TIFF canceled a press conference, an advertising campaign and did not screen the film at the award ceremony. Given the manner in which all these events have unfolded, it would be fair to ask RBC if they were interested in promoting "Water" or their own public image after years of bad publicity as the leading financier to the Alberta Tar Sands.

The story behind *Keepers of the Water*

At last year's Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), 25 people were selected to take part in the coveted Talent Lab - a unique formative experience where emerging filmmakers are given the opportunity to meet and learn from world famous directors and producers. This wonderful opportunity would normally have ended with nothing but gratitude had the nature of last year's Talent Lab not taken on a somewhat Machiavellian dimension. A story that begins when these eager participants were asked to make short films on the subject of "Water" in what was coined as the Royal Bank of Canada's Emerging Filmmaker Competition.

That cultural events are increasingly making profitable alliances with corporations will probably not come to you as a surprise. But what might cause you some discomfort is how a sponsor like the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) can magically align its Public Relations' (PR) interests with the cultural output of festivals like TIFF. An alliance that did not slip by one of the lab participants, Ayelen Liberona, who along with other Talent Lab participants, suspected the subject matter for the competition, "Water", had hidden PR intentions.

Edward Bernays, the infamous father of the PR industry - also Sigmund Freud's nephew - stated, "We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of." It is with this attitude that the PR industry shapes how a client's image, or brand, is perceived in the public's mind. So when a corporation like RBC is continually attacked for, let's say, their financing of the Alberta Tar Sands - the most industrially polluting project to fresh "Water" in the world - a colony of PR workers will think of ways to "mold" the public perception of their client in a more favorable manner. But in today's highly volatile information age, a company's Greenwashing campaign can quickly turn against them, which is exactly what unfolded at this year's TIFF.

Had RBC known that Ayelen Liberona and her creative partner, Joseph Johnson Camí, were filmmakers engaged in what they like to call Tactical Media, they might have chosen a different subject matter for their first sponsored competition at TIFF. But the fact that this combative filmmaking duo seem set on taking up environmental battles by combining human stories, social media campaigns and Yes Men tactics, slipped right by the PR organizers of the competition. A fact that is somewhat surprising considering the duo's past tactical and environmental success. Their feature-documentary, *A Grain of Sand* (2009), helped save from privatization the famed Moyenne Island - worth 50 million dollars - and which now enjoys a National Park status in the Seychelles much to the disappointment of international hotel developers. This time around, they armed themselves with a short film and a little plan. Knowing that RBC was going to use the competition's top five jury selected films as part of an advertising campaign promoting the bank's newfound interest in the environment, the duo purposefully set out to make a film that shed's light on the Alberta Tar Sands, of which RBC has been the leading financier. But the competition's rules and regulations(here) clearly stipulated that the films could not directly criticize any of the sponsors, i.e. RBC, and the filmmakers were not willing to make a film if they could not somehow address the bank's involvement. The eureka approach came to them when they discovered the story of a group of 9-12 year old children who took it upon themselves to protest the polluting practices of Syncrude, one of RBC's main business partners and the world's leading producer of tar sand oil. Syncrude is one of the companies responsible for the pollution that has caused a dramatic increase in rare and deadly forms of cancer in the small Native community of Fort Chipewyan. (click here for latest study)

The filmmakers would not have to wait long to see the results of this inclusion once their film was selected by a thankfully independent jury as one of the top five films of the competition. The exact PR nightmare the filmmakers had expected then unfolded with the first immediately obvious result being that RBC was not mentioned alongside any of the films during the remainder of the competition. The on-line advertising campaign with VideoEgg that was written into the contract also never came into existence, a press conference was cancelled, and the bank did not show *Keepers of the Water* at what was initially supposed to be an award ceremony, but quickly became a tucked away announcement of the competition's winners at some other RBC event.

In revealing how all these events have transpired and the tactics that were used to expose the inherent hypocrisy behind RBC's sponsored competition at TIFF, Ayelen Liberona and Joseph Johnson Cami hope that these types of situations can be avoided in the future. The emerging filmmakers of the Talent Lab should be able to take part in an educational experience at what is one of the best film festivals in the world without being asked to Greenwash the actions of a corporation. They also hope that other artists will find inspiration in their actions by finding their own creative ways to infuse humanity and accountability into social and environmental issues.

***Keepers of the Water* is a Wandering Eye Production**

For more about the film and the issues visit <http://www.KeepersOfTheWater.com>

For more about the director Ayelen Liberona visit www.wanderingeyeproductions.com