

Ginew Benton on the River of Life



Ginew Benton at LTV Studios, where he is a production technician

Mark Segal

By Mark Segal

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In his two most recent short films, “Looking Glass” (2020) and “Mirror Man” (2022), the Ojibwe filmmaker Ginew Benton makes visible the permeability of the barrier between the natural and the occult or spiritual.

“Looking Glass” is the story of a young Native American, played by Mr. Benton, who builds a time machine in an attempt to bring his dead father back

to life. In “Mirror Man,” a Native police officer is met by a supernatural entity when she is called in to investigate a possible burglary.

Shot in Southampton, both films were written, directed, and edited by Mr. Benton, who also oversaw the music, art direction, and costume design. They draw deeply upon his upbringing and culture, while combining tropes from science fiction, suspense, and horror films with astute social observation and commentary.

Born in Ojibwe territory in Canada, Mr. Benton and his mother, Sherry Blakey-Smith, moved to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area soon after he was born, and then to the Shinnecock Reservation when he was 8. He attended Southampton High School and Stony Brook University, graduating in 2002 with honors in theater and high honors in visual art.

“I was always interested in film,” he said during a conversation at LTV Studios in Wainscott, where he is a production technician. When he was young, his mother rented films from the local video store and used them as teaching tools, “showing me Native films, trying her best to show me accurate representations of us in cinema.”

Ms. Blakey-Smith was a member of a theater company while they were living in Minnesota. “They were all Indigenous women, Aboriginal women from Australia and Canada, and Native American women.”

Mr. Benton often cites his traditional upbringing. “I knew songs and I knew dances. My mother and I would do what we called ‘gigs,’ ” performing at schools and powwows, reciting the stories behind the songs and the dances.

While he was in high school, his mother founded the Shinnecock Indian Education Program and was the liaison between Southampton public schools and the Shinnecock Nation. She became friendly with Courtney Ross, who donated resources to the program. That led to her son's involvement with the Ross School's Media Center, where, during the summer of 1999, he was one of four young Shinnecock men who produced the short film “Crossroads.”

While the title refers to an actual crossroads on the reservation, it is more significantly a metaphor. “It’s not as true anymore, but back then it was a symbol of literally being on the crossroads as an Indian person -- whether or not you’re going to find your way out.”

After college, Mr. Benton continued making short films, but he had young children, and had to make a living too. He performed as a grass dancer and powwow singer at ceremonial events around the country, singing and composing, traveling for years with two Native drum groups, the Boyz and Warpaint, and made wampum, the jewelry created from purple and white quahog shells. He now performs primarily with the Youngblood Singers, who are based in Shinnecock but include members of other tribes.

The group has traveled worldwide and been invited to powwows across the nation, but Mr. Benton's traveling days are mostly behind him so that he can concentrate on films. “I’m going to have to learn every aspect” of the art, he said, to pursue his dream of filmmaking as a career. “If I can’t find somebody to help me, I’m going to learn and do it myself.”

The learning process demands persistence. Of submitting to film festivals, he said, “If you don’t get acceptances, then you know that there’s something you need to change to make it better. Don’t give up, and don’t get disheartened.”



Dave Sterling as a white American and Ginew Benton as Ben Looking Glass Jr. in a scene from “Looking Glass”

“Looking Glass” went through three iterations over a period of years before it earned him the best director award and the Russell Bates Indigenous Science Fiction Cinema Award at the 2021 Miami International Science Fiction Festival, and the award for Original Concept at the 2020 BendFilm Festival.

“Mirror Man” has been accepted by the 2022 Miami festival. Mr. Benton is hoping that “Looking Glass” and “Mirror Man” will be calling cards leading to a future feature film.

He recently applied to the IllumiNative Producers Program, a partnership between Netflix and IllumiNative, a nonprofit designed to challenge negative narratives about Native people. The program will support seven early and mid-career Indigenous producers, who will develop a current project, attend workshops, have access to network-building opportunities, and receive a \$25,000 stipend. Mr. Benton has elected to apply with “Mirror Man” because Netflix, he said, is “a great platform for horror films.”

He is also directing a half-hour promotional film for “Ajijaak on Turtle Island,” an Indigenous-themed stage play with puppets by Heather Henson, the daughter of Jim Henson, who created the Muppets. “The idea was to promote the play without giving away the plot, so my task was to create something completely new.” The film is being funded by the Henson Company.

“It’s my first contractual gig, and I’m grateful for it,” Mr. Benton said. He discussed his approach to the project, which was “to depict what we call the river of life . . . Living our traditional way gives the buffalo, who is the guardian of that, strength. And when we stop living in the way that the creator told us to, the buffalo gets weak.”

The ajijaak -- the Ojibwe word for the sandhill crane -- “represents the messenger of humankind’s songs to give the buffalo strength.” An image from the film shows the puppeteer’s buffalo and crane in the River of Life, depicted by rustling blue fabric and “shells of wisdom,” which give life to humankind, said Mr. Benton, “in our creation story.”

In addition to his job at LTV, which encompasses editing and videography among other skills, he has just produced the first episode of his own show for the station. It covered the Shinnecock Nation's Feb. 7 protest at 503 Montauk Highway in Shinnecock Hills, aimed at stopping the desecration of unmarked Native graves there.

Last month, Deb Haaland, the Secretary of the Interior and the first Native American to serve as a cabinet secretary, attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the South Fork Wind farm at LTV with Gov. Kathy Hochul. Mr. Benton was there, hoping to meet her, but did not have an opportunity.

He subsequently found his chance as part of a group of Native people who were sent to Fire Island to welcome the secretary there with singing and dancing. He shook her hand and told her, “You make us all very proud, and we’re happy to be able to welcome you in this good traditional way.”

“It’s important to encourage people who are successful as Natives, because it’s few and far between. We need to support each other.”

Mr. Benton lives in Calverton with his wife, Krystal Rose Looking Horse-Benton. He remains deeply involved with the Shinnecock community, but because he is not Shinnecock by blood, he had to leave the reservation at age 18.

“Because I am what they call 'a friend of the tribe,' meaning I’m a Native person who is well known and does work in the community, I could probably live there if I paid rent. But every tribe has its own rules and laws, and I respect tribal sovereignty.”