



## **SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL APPLAUDS "THE RETURN OF NAVAJO BOY"**

*By MARLEY SHEBALA c. Navajo Times Staff*

PROVO, Utah - The private screening room was darker and smaller than most public theaters. But the sounds of people quietly crying clearly showed that "The Return of Navajo Boy" penetrated their hearts. And as soon as the credits started rolling to signal the end of The Return of Navajo Boy, applause filled the room. A standing ovation was given to the stars, who had to be coaxed to the front of the room by the co-directors, which was highly unusual behavior. Most of the actors and actresses attending their premier shows at the internationally renown annual Sundance Film Festival scrambled for attention.

But there was no rivalry among the stars of The Return of Navajo Boy because they were family. And so it was surprise that the cast photo included the brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and grandchildren of Elsie Cly of Monument Valley. The group, which included executive producer Bill Kennedy, co-producers Jeff Spitz of Chicago, Ill., and Bennie Klain of Tuba City and flutist Douglas Spotted Eagle, filled the stage. The audience immediately stood up and applauded. Throughout the showing of the Return of Navajo Boy, the crowd displayed its emotions, either through laughter, clapping, whistling and even tears. The scenes that drew the most emotion involved Elsie remembering her brother, John Wayne Cly, who was a two-year-old baby when he was taken away by missionaries, and her reunion with him. She said the missionaries told her grandmother, Happy Cly, that they would bring back John Wayne when he was six years old. But they never brought him back, Elsie said.

In the film, John Wayne learned about his family threw a news article about his brother, Bernie, who testified at a Congressional hearing about the U.S. Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. He testified about how he lost half his lungs because of radiation exposure he received when he mined uranium near his home in Monument Valley. The article also involved the production of the Return of Navajo Boy and the family's faith that their baby brother, John Wayne, would return one day.

The article about the dangerous health effects of uranium to his brother, Bernie, was not the only tie that John Wayne had to uranium. It was the nearby uranium mine that created breathing problems for his mother, Elsie Zina, and his grandmother, Happy. The film shows Elsie Zina, a young energetic mother of a large family. The film does not show how she died at an early age from lung problems, which left her baby, John Wayne, under the care of his grandmother. But the film tells of how his grandmother cried for the unexpected loss of his mother, her daughter. The story of how John Wayne got his name brought roars of laughter from the audience.

According to the film, John Ford, who made a name with the cowboy and Indian movies he made in Monument Valley, brought the actor John Wayne to the Cly's home. When Wayne learned that the baby did not have a name yet, he said he would give the baby



his name. Historical footage of Ford producing one of his westerns in Monument Valley and an unknown narrator announcing that with a little face paint the local Navajos could easily portray "bloodthirsty Comanches" had the crowd laughing loudly.

The film that started the Return of Navajo Boy, which was simply titled "Navajo Boy" and made in the 1950s, was a rare opportunity to look back at a time when the everyday dress of Navajo people included beautiful silver buttons adorning the collars and down the front of rich velveteen blouses. Navajo Boy showed a time when mom combed her family's hair, including her husband's, with the traditional Navajo comb and then tied everyone's hair in the traditional Navajo bun.

It also captured a time in Navajo life when beauty truly seemed to be in front, in back and all around the Navajo people. The gracious simplicity of a traditional Navajo family and their courageous endurance that came from their traditional Navajo faith was caught in Navajo Boy and again in the Return of Navajo Boy.

And then it came in a brief statement from Elsie. Elsie, who spoke in Navajo first and then in English, thanked everyone for coming to see the Return of Navajo Boy and then she said, "In my heart, I love you all. I'm blessed with you. Thank you." Klain said he wants to work on bringing the Return of Navajo Boy to the Navajo Nation, which was always his goal.