

March 31/90

Metis actress strives for

truth in life, films

By Gwen Dambrosky
Canadian Press

EDMONTON (CP) — Tantoo Cardinal is trying her best to be diplomatic about her role in Kevin Costner's new film *Dances With Wolves*.

Very happy for the work, she says, a little slowly. Wonderful opportunity, good for the career, etc. etc.

Uh-oh. The smile is weakening. She's starting to fidget.

The truth? Cardinal doesn't have a clue how *Dances With Wolves* — expected to be released later this year — will turn out. But she's not optimistic.

Games

It seems it's not in the Alberta-born actress's nature to play these little ain't-everything-grand Hollywood games.

Truth. Now that's a concept that means something to Cardinal, best known for her Genie-nominated performance as a hot-headed, proud Metis woman in Anne Wheeler's drama *Loyalties*.

She strives for it — to be true to herself, true to a role, true to her Metis heritage.

It's that last one that prompts her doubts about *Dances With*

Wolves, which stars Costner as a U.S. army officer in the mid-1800s who encounters a tribe of Indians on the fringes of the western frontier.

Cardinal plays the wife of the medicine man who becomes close friends with the army officer. The movie, which marks Costner's debut as a director, examines the difference in cultures as epitomized in the character of a young white girl who has grown up with the tribe.

Best Intentions

"They all had the best of intentions but they were ill-informed," Cardinal says with a grimace.

"They didn't know anything about Metis people, half-breed people. Did not know that such people existed. That we have the knowledge of how people combine cultures."

The truth is, she now knows, that truth isn't important to everyone: "It was really kind of frustrating to see it happening and realize you were limited in what you could do."

Cardinal, who appears in her mid-40s, moved to Los Angeles three years ago when she married

American television actor John Lawlor, whom she met when he was performing at a dinner theatre in Edmonton.

"I would never have gone to L.A. for a career choice," she says bluntly. "In fact, it was presented as an idea some years before, but I never felt it was the place for me."

It is a long way from her childhood home of Anzac, a remote village near Fort McMurray in northern Alberta.

Family abandoned

She was raised by her maternal grandmother; her white father abandoned the family just six weeks after Cardinal was born.

The old woman's entertaining and dramatic retelling of Indian legends was her first exposure to acting.

An excellent student, Cardinal was sent to Edmonton to attend high school. She boarded with a Mennonite couple and eventually married their son, whom she later divorced.

A chance meeting with Edmonton director Fil Fraser in 1979 led to her first feature film, *Marie-Anne*. In the years that followed

she worked with native cultural groups and performed in theatre.

Ironically, Cardinal's move to Los Angeles came just as *Loyalties* was making her a hot property in Canada. There's a hint of regret about that in her sharp, lyrical voice, but in another way, she's grateful for the respite.

"Going away let me get back in touch with myself," she says. "Things had been getting a little out of control. All of a sudden people were talking about projects and seeing me in a different light. I felt I had to be stronger than I was."

Come home

Now, more than anything, she wants to come home. All that's stopping her is a few commitments her husband has to finish and completing his paperwork for immigration.

In the meantime, she's temporarily back in Edmonton performing in Catalyst Theatre's production of *All My Relations*, the first full-length play by a young Cree playwright from Saskatchewan named Floyd Favel.



Alberta-born actress Tantoo Cardinal tries to be true to herself and her Metis heritage.

CP PH