New film tracks dying languages

THE LINGUIST

One tongue disappears every two weeks

BY ADAM MCDOWELL

Seth Kramer knew he had to make a film about dying languages when he witnessed people blithely treading (in a sense) on the grave of his ancestral tongue.

He was in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius shooting a Holocaust documentary for PBS. "Vilnius at one point was the cultural heart of the Yiddish language and culture," explains the filmmaker over the phone from his home in New York state. "By the time I got there my crew there was almost no trace of Yiddish. In fact, the only place I saw Yiddish was in an area of the city where tombstones had been used to pave the sidewalk. This was emotional for me because this is the language that had been spoken in my family for generations and no longer was."

Kramer's research revealed that, despite its retreat, Yiddish is actually relatively healthy compared to thousands of other languages around the world. One of humanity's 7,000 odd tongues disappears every two weeks or so, says K. David Harrison, one of two linguists featured in Iremboid Films' documentary The Linguists.

"We're losing something like half of humanity's linguistic knowledge and we don't even know what's there. It hasn't been documented," Harrison says. "Of all of this, we had no idea. How did we get to be into my thirties without being aware of the great diversity of languages in the world? wonders Kramer.

The issue is not as widely known as say, species extinction or climate change, perhaps in part because there's never been a movie about language loss until now. Kramer and his partners and co-creators, David A. Miller and Jeremy Newberger, have four people to help having spent about four years chronicling the globe-trotting efforts of thirty-something U.S. linguists Harrison and his colleague Gregory D.S. Anderson.

Harrison is attending a luncheon screening and discussion of the film at the University of Toronto today. What viewers will see is more of a road movie or a buddy picture than a talking-heads doc. "It's sort of like an adventure movie," Kramer says.

To hear endangered languages, one often (though not always) must travel far from major centres into isolated pockets where minorities tend their weakening fumes. The Linguists follows Anderson and Harrison as they study the Siberian language Chulym (fewer than 25 speakers remaining), the Bolivian tongue Kallawaya (fewer than 100 speakers) and Sora (with fewer than 300,000 speakers, a blip in its home country of India).

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The comedy *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* repeated as the top film in U.S. and Canadian theatres for a second weekend, earning $17.5-million and beating out the debuts of a horror film and spy drama, according to box office tracker Media By Numbers LLC. *Quarantine*, a horror film starring Jennifer Carpenter, was second with $14.2-million, while *Body of Lies*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, pictured, and Russell Crowe, earned $13.1-million to take third place. Rounding out the Top Ten were: *Eagle Eye*, $11-million; *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*, $6.5 million; *The Express*, $4.7-million; *Nights in Rodanthe*, $4.6-million; *Appaloosa*, $3.34-million; *The Duchess*, $3.32-million; and *City of Ember*, $3.2-million. *Bloomberg News*

**Great Gatsby Again**

Leonard Cohen's next month album will be highly evocative of his earlier work, bringing about the German photographer John Maloof to create images at Jamie Bell's London home on Church Street. Cohen sends word to Maloof that he quite admire the photographer, honest.

**Molecule and Molecules of the Week**

El Bulli, in Spain, is more than a cooking school; it is a talk the molecular gastronomy movement has given rise to. The restaurant was opened in a college classroom by the two professors, who use the menu to explore scientific concepts. The menu, which changes every week, is based on the latest scientific research in the field.

**DNA**

Who's Daniel Libeskind? It might just have been a question last week when Alex Trebek materialized at the Royal Ontario Museum just a few days back. My spies tell me that the CBC-cahooting quiz-master was there filming "clues."