



Posted on: Sunday, March 20, 2005

A 'go see' movie that leaves you feeling good

By [Lee Cataluna](#)
Advertiser Staff



Audience members stood in line to shake filmmaker Vilsoni Hereniko's hand after the movie.

"And how did you hear about this?" he asked each one.

Every person said it was someone from work who told them they HAD to see this film, or a cousin who saw it and couldn't stop talking about it, or an auntie who laughed and cried and insisted every family member get to the theater.

Hawai'i is still small enough that word-of-mouth is the most trusted endorsement. It is also the most difficult honor an artistic effort can win. If people are telling their friends and family to go see a movie, that supersedes all hype. It's the real deal.

So pretend you're not reading this in the Sunday paper. Pretend you're hearing it in the "order here" line at Zippy's or at your kid's baseball game or at a family pa'ina.

Go see "The Land Has Eyes."

The story is about a girl on the island of Rotuma who finds a way to right an injustice done to her beloved father. The girl gets strength and guidance from the Warrior Woman, an ancestor and the first inhabitant of the island.

The film has been compared to "Whale Rider," but it was actually shot before the Maori movie came out. The films are similar in that the protagonist is a young girl connected to her spiritual ancestry. They differ in the culture, in the central conflict and in the message of the film. "The Land Has Eyes" is about justice. Hereniko quotes the ancient Rotuman belief:

*the land has eyes
the land has teeth
and knows the truth*

This was a grueling labor of love for Hereniko, his wife, Jeannette Paulson Hereniko, and his family in Rotuma. The movie was shot on the island over 40 days for less than a million dollars, money gathered here and there from dozens of sponsors and a number of achy credit cards.

Some days, the crew trucks had to be pushed, physically pushed, to a new location. At one point, they ran out of water. Hereniko's sister planted a garden, a crucial set piece, months in advance of shooting so that it would be just right for the scenes. A calf was brought over from Fiji and raised expressly to feed the cast and crew involved in the large wedding and funeral scenes. Cast members constructed the houses used in the film, and moved into them after the shooting was over.

It just doesn't get more homegrown than this.

All but two cast members were recruited from Rotuma. Most had never seen a movie before, much less acted in one. When the film was finished, Hereniko brought it back to Rotuma, borrowed a sheet from the hospital to use as a screen, and showed it eight times around the island.

"Oh, they loved it," Hereniko says. "They came back to see it more than once, because people were so excited laughing and talking the first time that they couldn't hear the movie."

This little movie shot on a little island premiered at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival last year. The lead actress, Sapeta Taito, accompanied the film to Sundance in Park City, Utah. It was her first trip off the island.

It also was screened at the Moscow International Film Festival, the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the Hawai'i International Film Festival.

'The Land has eyes'

What: "The Land Has Eyes"

Where: Dole Cannery theater complex

When: Daily noon, 2:30 p.m., 5 p.m., 7:30 p.m., 10 p.m. Held over through Thursday www.thelandhaseyes.com

Learn more:

www.thelandhaseyes.com

Right now, you can see it at the Dole Cannery theater complex on the big screen. It's not quite the same as seeing it projected on a hospital sheet, but the filmmakers are there during weekend showings and will talk story with you after the credits roll.

Hereniko is a professor at University of Hawai'i Center of Pacific Island Studies. He teaches literature, theater and film. He is also a playwright and author. He grew up on Rotuma, was educated in Fiji and went on to study in England.

Hereniko has taken his education, his talent and his steadfast work ethic back home to Rotuma to tell the stories of his people. In his biography, he wrote:

"In making this film, I was faced with great obstacles. If I know that fellow Pacific Islanders realize they, too, can be producers of their own images as a result of this work, I will feel that every challenge will have been worth it."

Go see this movie if you have ever cringed over an outsider's misinterpretation of island culture.

Go see this movie if you have ever cried over the systemic injustice visited upon poor, honest families.

Go see this movie if your heart needs to hear that justice can prevail and that a force greater than all of us is watching and keeping score.

Go see this movie if you want to be reminded that hard work leads to success.

Go see this movie.

Lee Cataluna's column runs Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Reach her at lcataluna@honoluluadvertiser.com or 535-8172.

[Back](#)

© COPYRIGHT 2005 The Honolulu Advertiser, a division of [Gannett Co.](#) Inc.

All materials contained on this site are protected by United States copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast without the prior written permission of The Honolulu Advertiser. You may not alter or remove any trademark, copyright or other notice from copies of the content.