

Bartowe's blockbuster

By GIFF JOHNSON

Yokwe Bartowe, the second locally produced film by Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro, premiered Thursday to a full and appreciative house, and more than 600 residents paid to see the film over the weekend, according to K&K Theaters.

The high weekend attendance indicates the buzz created by this new film about the Marshall Islands. A combination of themes — black magic, adolescent culture, alcohol and family problems, religion as salvation, and a supply of slapstick humor — floated through the difficult love story of the lead characters, Bartowe (played by Lyel Tarkwon) and Kaila (Martha Horiuchi).

"(The film) depicts island life and the social issues people encounter," said CMI Executive Vice President Ellia Zebedy, who attended the premier. "Marshallese can relate to it, and for foreigners, it gives them an idea of the island life style and social issues."

"It was great entertainment with a message," said US Ambassador Martha Campbell. "Seeing people taking different approaches to their problems, not always the best choices, can inspire viewers to consider how best to confront their own challenges. The familiar Majuro sights and sounds draw the viewer into the story and add to the entertainment."

Zebedy said it "also



Bartowe (Lyel Tarkwon) and Kaila (Martha Horiuchi) in the new film *Yokwe Bartowe*, which will continue to be shown at K&K Theater through this weekend. Photo: Suzanne Chutaro

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— US Ambassador Martha Campbell

showed how people responded to issues and their ways of coping/addressing the issues in the island life style — using a 'black magic' person to solve problems, and the church as an instrumental organization that helps/sustains people who have reformed."

Dartmouth Professor Andrew Garrod, who is currently directing the Shakespeare play "Hamlet" with MIHS students, was equally enthusiastic.

"Niedenthal makes a compassionate and witty commentary on life in the

Marshall Islands," said Garrod. "Sociologists, anthropologists and anyone interested in capturing on film the world in remote areas will be interested (in this film)."

Garrod said he particularly liked the "less histrionic" parts of the play, many involving the acting of Bartowe and Kaila. "The less demonstrative parts are harder to play and were done exceptionally well," he said. The acting by Tarkwon and Horiuchi in the lead roles "gave total credibility" to the movie, he said. When Bartowe's girlfriend suddenly discloses her secret that she's pregnant, "it is totally believable," he said. He described their acting as "nuanced."

Garrod said he was equally impressed with the acting skill of young Magdelene Johnson, who played Lijiamao's best friend who refused to accept that her friend was dead, as everyone said.

There is plenty to entertain.

Zebedy noted the comedy high points: "Young boys doing the Michael Jackson dance; stealing of Lijimu's radio and zorries; the store scene in Arkansas (or Payless) with Joe Murphy; Lijiamao's scene with the baby bird; and Phil Okney's declaration of his love for his car and how he got a great deal."

But there were many

underlying messages in the film.

"I was struck by the positive message in the scenes in which Kaila, the girlfriend, was talking in a calm and sympathetic manner to Bartowe," said Campbell. "In the movie it was frustrating for her in the short term, since he was unresponsive, but eventually was probably part of what turned him around."

"Although the main actors, Lijiamao, Bartowe, and Kaila were in school, the film demonstrated how students may drop out of school because of girlfriend-boyfriend problems, a death in the family, and pregnancy, or not have the ability to cope with emotional issues and there are no organizations that help both young adults and their parents deal with the social issues," said Zebedy. "I had wished that Kaila and Bartowe went back to school in the last portion of the film."

She added: "My favorite part was of Tili (Magdelene Johnson) in the principal's office. She did an excellent job trying to explain to the principal that Lijiamao was not dead. The way she looked at Kathy Stratte, and her plea to have the principal believe her was very convincing. I think I cried watching this scene."

Campbell saw the film as "a great example of a community project. It showcased problems that people see around them and provided insights into potential solutions. It was an entertaining mix of serious issues and comic relief."

Outsider's view of Jack's movie

By PETER SUTORIS*

Europeans. Americans. Asians. Africans. Australians. Each has developed cinematic traditions that help define their cultural identities and build a sense of national identity.

Though Marshallese film did not keep up with them for more than a century, Jack Niedenthal's and Suzanne Chutaro's latest movie shows that the Marshallese are eager to use this medium to teach both themselves and others about what the Marshall Islands have to offer to the world. *Yokwe Bartowe* must



Peter Sutoris

be the most honest film I have ever seen. Raw, down-to-earth and true to reality, it becomes a statement about the Marshallese identity: humble, yet charming; troubled, yet smiling; magical, yet believable. Niedenthal's and Chutaro's ability to weave the problems facing the Marshallese society (poverty, alcoholism, the need to leave for the United States to seek employment, apathy of the younger generation) into the fabric of human suffering (child abduction, broken hearts and stolen flip-flops) while keeping the audience smiling is truly remarkable.

All these elements turn the movie into a mosaic of moments characteristic of the Marshallese way of life, torn between traditional culture and forces of Western globalization.

Despite its fictional nature, there is something documentary-like about this piece. When I watched *Bartowe* and his girlfriend talk about their relationship, I could not help feeling that they were not acting out their roles as much as truly being themselves.

When I watched *Bartowe*'s mother mourn the loss of her daughter, I sensed the strength of Marshallese family ties. When I listened to the sound of the ukulele, I felt the tranquility of Majuro on an early Sunday morning. When I saw the rainbow over the lagoon, I immediately thought of "Yokwe." In fact, every aspect of the movie captures the uniqueness of Majuro, making it possible for future generations of Marshallese to look back at this film and see what life was like in the Marshall Islands in 2010.

Yokwe Bartowe is a proof that a good movie does not require a multi-million dollar budget, an all-star cast or even a professional camera.

A creative idea and a sincere effort to enrich the audience's perception of the world is all a filmmaker needs to be successful. Many Hollywood directors indeed have a lot to learn from Niedenthal, Chutaro and their crew.

* The writer is a Dartmouth student in Majuro for 10 weeks who is making a film about the Dartmouth experience here.