

Marshalls film named 'finalist' in Guam festival

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 05, 2011 12:00AM BY GIFF JOHNSON - FOR VARIETY



MAJURO — A film made in the Marshall Islands has been nominated as one of four finalists in the Guam International Film Festival.



The festival, which runs from Sept. 29-Oct. 2, on Thursday named Lañinbwil's Gift as a finalist for "best feature narrative," according to Kel Muna, the program director for the Guam festival.

The film's finalist nomination in Guam follows it winning the "Best International Feature Film" award at the Columbia Gorge International Film Festival in Vancouver, Washington last month.

"Only four films out of over one hundred submissions from 18 countries around the world were chosen to be honored with this prestigious recognition," said Muna. Lañinbwil's Gift and the other three finalists will be screened at the Micronesian Mall Stadium Theaters Sunday October 2, the last day of the Guam International Film Festival.

It is the third film made over the past three years by Majuro residents Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro. When not filming and producing low-budget films, Niedenthal is the trust liaison agent for the Bikini Atoll Local Government, and Chutaro is the advertising manager for the Marshall Islands Journal, a weekly newspaper published in Majuro.

Lañinbwil's Gift, a 99-minute film, presents the story of Jacob, an old island man with a complicated secret. When Jacob was a teenager, a "noniep," a Marshallese fairy known for helping troubled souls, transformed him from a homeless simpleton into a normal young man. This favor came with a price: The noniep made Jacob promise that one day he must bestow this newfound intelligence upon another deserving person with Jacob's only instructions being that he would know "who" when the time came.

After a lifetime of pondering this otherworldly commitment to the noniep, Jacob finally discovers Lañinbwil, a homeless young man who has been abandoned by his family. Just when Jacob begins to get close to the troubled youth, Lañinbwil unwittingly gets caught up in a war of mystical power between an evil "mejenkwar," a demon that possesses young pregnant women, and her archenemy, the shamanic old woman, Lijimu. Black magic, intrigue and evil descend on Majuro as the film plays out.

Niedenthal, who wrote the original screenplay for the movie, said he thinks one reason the film has caught on with film festival judges and audiences is it "takes you through the whole Marshall Islands. There are scenes in the hospital, at businesses, with kids, at a kemem (first birthday party), of dancing, at a funeral, and in all parts of the island. What isn't in there?"

For people unfamiliar with the Marshall Islands, the film offers a completely new film environment, said Niedenthal.

"Anytime a filmmaker brings an alien environment to screen, it captivates the audience because they haven't seen it before," he said. "We have every little facet of Majuro. The film takes you around everywhere."

And, he said, the story line of the black magic battle between a demon and the shaman Lijimu makes it a "unique story, a story no one's heard before. That's the cherry on top."

"Our program committee is thrilled to include Lañinbwil's Gift into the Festival's programming lineup and in addition, felt that it is deserving of the nomination for this special award," Muna said of the Guam International Film Festival decision. "The judging of the films in this category will be made by our Grand Jury that is comprised of film industry professionals."