

Thursday, June 9, 2011 - 06:49:15 AM ChST

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Thousands flock to view new Marshalls film

THURSDAY, JUNE 09, 2011 12:00AM BY GIFF JOHNSON - FOR VARIETY



MAJURO — A battle between a Marshall Islands demon known as a “mejenkwar” and a good fairy “noniep” played out on the big screen in Majuro, attracting nearly 2,000 viewers in the first series of showings earlier this month of the locally produced feature film, “Laninbwil’s Gift.”



The third film in a series that started in 2009 is a battle of good versus evil pitting Marshallese black magic in the form of the mejenkwar that possesses a pregnant woman to wreak havoc in Majuro against the power for good of a youthful noniep. Both are mythical characters of Marshallese legend brought to life in the 99-minute offering by Majuro residents Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro. Niedenthal wrote the script and he and Chutaro co-directed and produced the film.

“My first thought as it ended was, how Marshallese!” said United States Ambassador Martha Campbell after watching the film. “It’s bound to be a big hit with Marshallese currently living out of the country. And it highlighted some of the important social issues in Majuro, as did Yokwe Bartowe (an earlier film).”

Lañinbwil’s Gift is the story of Jacob, an elder with a complicated secret. When he was a teenager, a noniep transformed him from a homeless simpleton into a normal young man. This favor, however, was not without cost: The noniep made Jacob promise that one day in the future he must bestow this newfound intelligence upon another deserving person — the only instructions were that he would know Ow’ho when the time came. After a lifetime of pondering this otherworldly commitment to the noniep, Jacob discovers Laninbwil, a homeless teenager abandoned by his family and living in a cardboard box covered with newspaper cuttings in downtown Majuro.

Just when Jacob begins to get close to the troubled youth, Laninbwil unwittingly gets caught up in a war of mystical power between an evil mejenkwar and her archenemy, the gifted, shamanic old woman, Lijimu. The mejenkwar is enraged because Lijimu has been enormously successful in driving the demon away from her human victims. The vengeful mejenkwar launches a two-pronged attack that includes transforming Laninbwil into the Marshall Islands trickster of countless legends, Letao, whose sole purpose is to drive Lijimu’s beloved and beautiful teenaged granddaughter Miko insane to make her grandmother miserable, and possessing Kaila, who is the pregnant girlfriend of Bartowe, one of Lijimu’s most trusted friends. The lovely Kaila slips into an eerie coma that even doctors can’t comprehend.

Some watchers said the film was scary in parts, while they laughed uproariously at other scenes. Many of the scenes in the film — which follows the release of Ña Noniep in 2009 and Yokwe Bartowe in 2010 by the same directors — are filmed at Majuro Cooperative School, and many of the students appear as actors.

School principal Kathy Stratte, who appears in the film briefly, said the film “has been a great opportunity for (the students) to develop interests and talents in areas that often aren’t available in a small place like Majuro. I was struck by the growth of the student actors and musicians from the first movie to the third and realized what a great, unique opportunity this has been for them to grow creatively and to develop confidence in their talents. I think too, they all feel good about being a part of something bigger than their class or even the school.”

Niedenthal said he has already submitted the film to five international film festivals and is hopeful that it will be accepted for showing. Among the film festivals he is targeting are the Columbia Gorge International Film Festival in Washington State, the Moondance Film Festival in Colorado, and the Guam International Film Festival, which takes place in September.

“I feel that all three films have been great gifts to the Marshall Islands,” Stratte said. “Everywhere I go (around Majuro) someone asks me ‘Where’s Liki?’ (a lead student character in the movie) or ‘Aren’t you the one in the movie?’ And then they say ‘Thank you for the movie.’ I think the movies have built pride in many people, and I feel Majuro Cooperative School has been privileged to be a part of that.”

All the actors are from Majuro and all volunteered their time for the film, said Niedenthal, who financed the low-budget production from his own pocket.

Ambassador Campbell said she particularly enjoyed the comedy parts featuring local lawyers, government workers, and business people in acting roles. She said she “loved

the outtakes. And the special effects were very good for a low budget production and the music was great.”

While the movie is alternately hilarious and spooky, it also offers a deeper message about the changing patterns of life in the Marshall Islands.

The drive-by images that flicker through the film capture downtown Majuro in its rough, sometimes bombed-out looking urban ugliness of patchwork fences and half-built concrete structures. The taunting of a homeless boy by kids and adults presents a mirror of how Marshallese society has changed from the old days when the phrase ‘jouj eo, mour eo’ (kindness is life) governed people’s lives in this rapidly changing western Pacific nation.

Niedenthal said the film will be available on DVD in the early fall after it has completed film showings locally.



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