

envisioned the film as a much longer work and, in earlier versions, had expanded on the notion of contemporary Islander travel to include modern vehicles that connect Islanders, such as computers. Because funding sources dictated a 28-minute length, so the film would fit the format required by the Public Broadcasting System, *Sacred Vessels* had to be reconceptualized and edited a great deal. In an article discussing the “post” postproduction phase of the film, Diaz wrote, “I am amazed at the remarkable number of revisions that are required in the industry, and the even greater circuits of travel that a film project must travel. The process of revision is constant. And the script kept transforming as it sailed the virtual seas of e-mail . . . or by air and boat . . . or by hand, telephone, word of mouth, and pickup truck” (*Storyboard: The Quarterly Film and Video Journal of Pacific Islanders in Communications*, Sept 1997).

The long process of making and remaking *Sacred Vessels* underscores the highly collaborative nature of filmmaking, a process that draws on the artistry and technical skills of writers, directors, film editors, and production assistants. It also involves the desires and motivations of individuals and organizations providing funding. As Donald Rubinstein has suggested, when evaluating a film it may be as valuable to critically consider issues of imposed form and medium upon content and representation as to focus solely on the fixed, final product. After all, the remarkable and fascinating aspect of Micronesian navigation is not only the reaching of a certain destination,

but the complex journeying and routes that people take along the way.

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Flight of the Albatross, 90 minutes, 35 mm, color, 1996. Director, Werner Meyer; producer, Vincent Burke; screenplay by Riwia Brown, from a novel by Deborah Savage. Awarded Best Film 1997 at Berlin Kinderfest. Distributor: Portman Entertainment, London.

Flight of the Albatross is ostensibly about growing up and falling in love for the first time; it is also about dysfunctional families and the coming together of two cultures, Maori and European. The film's opening shot follows the graceful flight of an albatross over a wild blue ocean. A keening *karakia* (incantation) leads into the next shot of an old Maori woman, complete with *moko* (facial tattoo) walking along a wild and deserted beach, clutching a *patu pounamu* (greenstone weapon). The opening sequence locates the film firmly in beautiful and remote (from Germany, that is) Aotearoa and introduces significant objects, places, and themes: the albatross, the sacred island of Pukeroimata, the *patu pounamu*, and the *tohunga* (priest) Hatai.

The plot follows Sarah (Julia Brendler), an aspiring young German flautist, from Berlin to New Zealand's Great Barrier Island—about as far from civilization as a German can imagine. “Welcome to the other side of the world” says Sarah's mother

(Suzanne von Borsody) by way of greeting. Sarah has been sent to the Barrier by her father for time out with her distracted ornithologist mother, Claudia, who lives and works on the island. Here, Sarah meets Mako (Taungaroa Emile), a young Maori recently released from prison. Mako is struggling with being abandoned by his father and learning to accept his stepfather, Mike (Jack Thompson). Sarah and Mako's relationship develops around the story of Pukeroimata.

Pukeroimata is cursed by Hatai, a *tobunga* and Mako's *kaitiaki* (guardian), for the desecration of an ancient burial site. All who venture onto the island, or fish in the waters around it, meet with either death or some form of disability, and everyone on the Barrier has been, or continues to be, affected by it. The albatross is a *tohe* (sign), heralding the arrival of a *rangatira* (chiefly person) with the power to lift the curse by finding the *patu pounamu*. Mako fulfils this role, while Sarah rescues an albatross entangled in a fishing net, nursing it back to health—all highly symbolic. So, Sarah, who arrives from Germany, and Mako, returning to his island home, become linked in their shared problems and in lifting the curse.

Sarah, the outsider, knows how to *hongiri* (press noses), how to say *kia ora* (a greeting), and believes the stories about Pukeroimata, while Mako has no respect and ignores advice not to fish near the island, an act that draws the ire of the *tipuna* (ancestors). Mako, whose name means shark, is stalked and almost taken by one, and his act of defiance brings the local fishing industry close to ruin

when large numbers of fish start dying. When Sarah throws her precious flute into the ocean in a fit of pique, she also seems to shed a little of her German stiffness and instead, learns to play the *koauau* (nose flute) carved for her by Mako. In an allusion to the Arawa love story of Hinemoa and Tutanekai, it is Sarah's flute-playing that initially attracts Mako and later guides him to where she lies hurt and disabled on Pukeroimata.

The word *melodrama* came to mind as I watched, half-heartedly, the coming together of two very immature and somewhat shallow characters, each absorbed with their own problems. Surly, self-centered young people are not attractive or interesting, and it is difficult to become emotionally involved with unfinished and inexperienced teenagers. It is a little incongruous that when Mako is introduced he is being released from one of New Zealand's most notorious prisons; he is far too young. What is interesting, and what saved me (and the film) from sinking too far into apathy, is the story of the *patu*, the comb, and the curse.

Hatai's curse is lifted when a comb, made from gold found on the island, and the *patu pounamu* find their rightful places: Sarah returns the comb to Pukeroimata, and Mako finds the courage to claim his true inheritance and fulfill his destiny.

The film comes together nicely at the end, but is a little too pat, too tidy, to be convincing. The couple are left finally atop Pukeroimata. They have risen above the problems of the past and gaze confidently into the

future. Hatai's curse has been lifted by their actions alone, suggesting an emerging maturity. The film lacks real drama, however, because the areas of conflict, between parents and children, belief in the curse, and the teenage love story, do not warrant such close attention. For my taste, the characters take themselves far too seriously. However, *Flight of the Albatross* is targeted at young adults, and perhaps my view reveals more about my age and distance from adolescent preoccupations than any flaw in the story.

The beautiful and virtually untouched Great Barrier Island supports a small population, so the story takes place in a village-like setting with everyone knowing everyone else and their business, in contrast with metropolitan Berlin. Like villages everywhere, the Barrier sports its share of interesting and quirky characters, all of whom find their way into the story: the eccentric old-maid sisters, whose niece Catherine died on Pukeroimata; Digby, the village mute who loved her; Huka (Pete Smith), the village barman and amateur psychologist; and Mako's mother, Mari (Diana Ngaromutu-Heka), and her husband Mike. Perhaps a little idealistically, Maori and Pakeha accept each other and the Maori mythology of Pukeroimata without question, the drastic effects of the curse having dispelled any disbelief.

The script is by Riwia Brown, who made such a brilliant job of changing Jake's story into Beth's in *Once Were Warriors*, contributing greatly to the success of the film by the same name. In *Flight of the Albatross*, however,

the dialogue is thin, sometimes awkward, with the film relying heavily on stunning land and seascapes to give power and energy, all of which no doubt reinforces the remoteness and strangeness necessary to woo European audiences. One redeeming aspect of the script is that the Maori language is used in a realistic and unselfconscious way.

The soundtrack is good enough not to intrude, but adds to the atmosphere, especially when the camera focuses on Pukeroimata. The whirring sound of cord or rope being spun around at high speed, similar to that used in *Once Were Warriors*, is used to good effect, suggesting mystery and things *tapu*. All of which adds to the influence of the island and the people who once occupied it.

German director Werner Meyer draws somewhat wooden performances from the actors and, although he takes some risks in using Maori mythology, on the whole it works. His treatment of Maori beliefs and values is sympathetic. *Flight of the Albatross* is one of several New Zealand films with links to Germany: *Te Rua* and *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* are other recent examples. It may be because Aotearoa is on the opposite side of the globe to Germany, or is it the civilized contrasted with the primitive, or the worldly wise with the innocent and childlike? It is nonetheless interesting to see one's culture, one's place on the planet, viewed from outside. The familiar and normal become the exotic and strange. Perhaps Meyer plays a little too much to the stereotype of Maori—primitive spirituality, crea-

tures and objects heavy with symbolism such as the shark, the albatross, the shark-tooth earring, the comb, and the curse—but no doubt these elements have appeal for teenagers.

The film improved on a second viewing and I felt more sympathy for the characters than at first. As a film

targeted at young adults *Flight of the Albatross* fulfills the criteria but would probably leave a wider, more mature audience unsatisfied.

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