

The Pā Boys. Feature film, 93 minutes, DVD PAL, color, 2014. Written and directed by Himiona Grace; produced by Ainsley Gardiner and Mina Mathieson. Distributed by Whenua Films Ltd and New Zealand Film Commission. www.paboys.net. NZ\$39.95.

When I showed *The Pā Boys* to my undergraduate film students at the University of Hawai'i in November 2014, many students clapped spontaneously at the end of the screening. This type of response had not happened during the semester's previous screenings of indigenous films from Hawai'i, New Zealand, Australia, and North America.

Based on my students' reviews, *The Pā Boys* illustrated most clearly to them what we had been studying all semester about indigenous aesthetics in filmmaking. Here is a film that is accessible to them and yet unashamedly indigenous. Most importantly, they could see clearly how cultural values and sensibilities can be successfully integrated into a screen story that is entertaining, soulful, and important.

The Pā Boys had its US premiere at the 2014 Hawai'i International Film Festival (HIFF) alongside Taika Waititi's *What We Do in the Shadows*. At previous HIFF festivals, films dealing with Māori issues and representations such as Barry Barclay's *Te Rua*, Geoff Murphy's *Utu*, Merata Mita's *Mauri*, Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors*, Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*, Don Selwyn's *The Maori Merchant of Venice*, and Taika Waititi's *Boy* (to name a few) had been screened, some to overflowing crowds and rave reviews. *The Pā Boys*, however,

made a relatively quiet appearance at HIFF. There was no fanfare, no media hype, or award. And yet, even though each of the Māori films mentioned above is a significant achievement in Māori filmmaking, none of those films thrilled or moved me as deeply as this low-budget film.

The Pā Boys is about three "boy" musicians who form a reggae band under that name. The band's leader Danny (Fran Kora) is also the guitarist, while the other boys are the drummer, referred to as Cityboy (Tola Newbery), and the bass player Tau (Matariki Whatarau). They are joined on their road trip by two girl friends, Jo (Roimata Fox), the manager, and Puti (Juanita Hepi), the estranged girlfriend of Danny and mother of his little boy. All five are talented actors whose subtle performances never distracted me from the story itself.

Feminists may take issue with the emphasis on the male characters in the film, although the title underscores the film's focus on the boys, rather than the girls, in the band. Māori men, after all, are usually portrayed on screen as violent and uncaring, incapable of holding the family together; the focus on masculinity and contemporary young men's experience in *The Pā Boys* is therefore both a timely and important intervention.

Writer-director Himiona Grace wanted to tell a story about "young Maori men from the inside, as opposed to outsiders' views." He says he grew up "knowing our people, the passion, talent, and aroha we have and show for each other" (pers comm, 6 Jan 2015). We see this in Danny and Tau's love for the same woman (Puti), which complicates their affection for

each other. When Danny spontaneously belts out his deep love for his woman in an improvised song, the passion and the desperation in his voice is so authentic it is heartbreaking. We feel his pain if for no other reason than the knowledge that it is only through his music that he can be so articulate and revealing—and so vulnerable. The reconciliation scene between the two men is so tender and sympathetic it drew attention to its novelty on screen. Their affection for each other culminates in Tau's request and "gift" to Danny before his final breath—and this gift allows Danny to breathe in his Māori identity as well as find love again.

The character of Uncle Toa (Calvin Tuteao), who mentors the Pā boys on their life-changing journey, is the most dignified and compassionate representation of any Māori male I have ever seen in a film or read in a work of fiction. It is reminiscent of Patricia Grace's character Hemi in her profound novel *Potiki*, as well as Himiona Grace's late father, Kerehi Waiariki Grace, to whom *The Pā Boys* is dedicated.

As the minibus journeys along the meandering road that takes the Pā boys and their two female companions from Wellington through Hastings to the East Coast, the Bay of Plenty, and finally to the Northland, the boys strum their guitars and croon soulfully about the union and separation of earth mother and sky father (from Māori mythology); Māori struggles to remain connected to their ancestors and their sacred pasts; lost love and new beginnings; world peace; as well as fast-disappearing Māori values and ways of life. The Pā boys

are gifted musicians, with voices that enchant and enthrall. As viewers, we also see what they see: the beauty of the North Island's flora and fauna, its majestic mountains shrouded in mist, its sprawling landscapes, its rivers, its sandy beaches, as well as the deep blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, beyond which is Hawai'i, the original homeland of Polynesians.

As the young travelers traverse the physical terrain of the North Island, they also journey inside their own internal landscapes where cultural and personal loss, bitterness, anger, confusion, and jealousy reside. By journey's end, their deepest and innermost thoughts, feelings, and fears have been exposed, examined, and turned inside out, and their lives will never be the same. One of the boys is called into the spirit world, and his death binds together more tightly than ever the surviving members of the group. Most important of all, Danny, who at the journey's beginning is the most rootless and confused member of the group, discovers within himself the courage to do the unthinkable (and for what that is, you will have to see the film) in order to access his true identity and (symbolically) that of every rootless Māori.

Filmmaker Himiona Grace is the son of Patricia Grace, one of New Zealand's finest writers. Influenced by the work of Barry Barclay and Merata Mita, Himiona Grace has created a film that embodies the wisdoms and the fearlessness of his mentors. What distinguishes the films of Barclay, Mita, and now Grace, is their refusal to let the marketplace dictate the kinds of stories they tell on screen. They insist on creative control over their

work, and the end results are films that embrace and promote Māori values and sensibilities. Cultural signifiers in their films are not there for window dressing but serve as central plot points in their films' narratives. In fact, Grace acknowledges that the unwavering support of his Māori elders and mentors made it possible for him to resist pressures from certain funding sources to mainstream his film.

Perhaps because Grace is a younger and more contemporary filmmaker (and photographer and musician), his film is about the urban world of young people today as well as about the ancestral pasts that they need to access in order to be whole. However, instead of rejecting urban life, they find themselves most at home in the city. This is indeed the reality for many young Māori and Pacific Islanders today, making this film more realistic and believable than some other Māori films that advocate a return to the village or marae as a solution to urban malaise.

The Pā Boys, like many films that are culturally specific, will appeal less to a mass audience because of the challenges of understanding a very different culture (and sometimes subtitling is also a hindrance, though this is not an issue here). And yet, it is precisely because of their cultural specificity and nuanced portrayal of indigenous interactions that these low-budget independent films are so valuable: they provide us with insights into indigenous cultures and they provide us with alternative ways of telling stories. And because they are made with smaller budgets (NZ\$650,000 in the case of *The Pā*

Boys), they can afford to take more risks, some of which include a fierce determination for cultural accuracy and dignified portrayals of indigenous ways of being and knowing.

Screening in December 2014 at the Ward Theaters (and during the writing of this review) is a mainstream movie with a similar theme to *The Pā Boys*; the main difference between these two films is revealing of the different impulses that inform mainstream cinema compared to indigenous filmmaking. Set on the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to the border with Washington State, the Fox Searchlight feature film *Wild* is about a woman who heals herself by hiking 1,100 miles on her own. Starring Reece Witherspoon, her character Cheryl views the difficult and torturous terrain as necessary obstacles to be overcome in order to recover from a recent trauma in her life. It is all about the self winning over the elements.

In *The Pā Boys*, the journey is made with a community of five friends whose lives intersect and influence one another. The healing comes primarily through interactions with each other, experiences with the mana of the land, and the counsel of Uncle Toa, a Māori landowner and fisherman knowledgeable about the ocean, the unseen world of ancestral spirits, and the winged guardian (a hawk) soaring eternally in the sky. Unlike *Wild*, however, true healing includes a necessary connection with the natural and supernatural worlds that surround the characters.

Although I was moved by Reece Witherspoon's award-worthy performance, my emotional response to

Wild felt familiar. I had experienced the same feelings in countless other mainstream movies. In *The Pā Boys*, however, my emotional responses emanated from the deep recesses of my being, which very few films have been able to touch. Rotumans call this place *huga*, which literally translates as “inside of the body, esp. of the abdomen”; Hawaiians call it the *na‘au* while Māori call it the *ngakau*.

It is in one’s gut that the truth of the ages resides. This kind of knowing cannot be explained logically or rationally. It is a knowing that is activated when one experiences a universal truth, which in *The Pā Boys*, is this: For these Māori young people to be truly healed, they needed to reconnect with and learn about their ancestral pasts in order to become more humane, more compassionate, better human beings. This is the universal message, told not through a sermon but through a musical story about boys and their girlfriends, going away together on what they thought would be a fun journey but instead became a transformational one for all concerned.

Himiona Grace and his producers, cast, and crew have made a film whose truth is as old as the mountains, as vast as the sky, and as deep as the Pacific Ocean. This is a film that deserves our respect not only because of its inherent wisdoms (and there are several) but also because it is fearlessly culturally specific.

In most films made by indigenous filmmakers thus far, nuance and specificity are often compromised to cater to the tastes of a global and mainstream audience. Not so with *The Pā Boys*. The result is an extraordinary

film, disguised as an ordinary road movie. As such, it is a film that is easy to overlook, even at film festivals where it might be possible to discover a fearlessly independent voice.

When you accidentally stumble on an authentic voice, like I did, you know you’ve finally experienced the film you have always hoped to see when you go to the movies but thought the day would never come! This was how it was with me.

VILSONI HERENIKO
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Jonah From Tonga. 2014. Television series, 180 minutes, DVD, color, in English. Written by Chris Lilley, produced by Chris Lilley and Laura Waters, and directed by Chris Lilley and Stuart McDonald; distributed by HBO. US\$19.99.

The television series *Jonah From Tonga* was released to low ratings and accusations of racism. Originally presented in Australia, where it was produced, it later premiered on HBO in the United States. It features Australian comedian and show-runner Chris Lilley, who is white, as Jonah Takalua, a fourteen-year old Tongan high school student. Lilley’s use of makeup and a limp frizzy wig—what might charitably be called “Polynesian face”—are easy targets for criticism, if not outright dismissal, of the apparent minstrelsy that at first glance seems to characterize the six-episode series. And if one looked no further than the phenotype of the main character, certainly this show would not be