

Niedenthal's and Chutaro's Gift To The Marshall Islands

By Peter Sutoris

When I reviewed *Yokwe Bartowe* last year, I felt I was witnessing an important step in film history—a movie that enriched the cinematic medium by bringing in a unique perspective on life by a nation that has much wisdom to offer to the world. *Laninbwil's Gift*, the final movie in a trilogy directed by Jack Niedenthal and Suzanne Chutaro, is another proof that the history and culture of the Marshall Islands can teach us a lot about the human condition.

To my mind, every good film does not simply entertain its audiences, but enriches their understanding of the world by posing novel, challenging questions about what it means to be a human. *Laninbwil's Gift* is a true gift to humanity in this sense: it takes Niedenthal's and Chutaro's creative chronicling of life in the Marshall Islands we saw in their first two films to the next level by making us question our behavior and our values. How do the communities in which we live respond to the presence of people who do not fit our definition of a 'normal' human being? How important is appearance, glamour and material wealth in our judgment of others? Of course, these and many other questions raised by *Laninbwil's Gift* have been explored again and again throughout film history. However, Niedenthal's and Chutaro's skillful use of folk stories, elements of magic as well as the backdrop of Majuro, a community with many idiosyncratic yet universally relevant problems, make this film a unique and indeed important contribution to the debate on what it means to act morally.

While the cinematic craft of *Laninbwil's Gift* does not reach the levels of 'professional' films made in countries with a century-long tradition of cinema, the original and well-crafted screenplay more than makes up for this seeming deficiency. Jack Niedenthal's ability to weave many of the challenges faced by Marshallese Islanders—including alcoholism, violence, brain drain, a complicated relationship with 'ri-belles' and poverty into the fabric of a story inspired by traditional tales while keeping the audience amused—makes for a perfect blend of entertainment and question-begging reflection.

Other aspects of the film—including superb acting by Ioha Anjok in the role of Laninbwil and Letao, Lulani Ritok as Miko and Netha Gideon as Lijimu and original music by numerous Marshallese bands—not only provide the audience with a truly aesthetic experience, but they also highlight the tremendous artistic potential of the Marshallese community. Drawing on this potential and transforming it into an imaginative and beautiful film trilogy that became an instant cultural phenomenon across the Marshall Islands and beyond has indeed been Jack Niedenthal's and Suzanne Chutaro's gift to this small community of big people. May these filmmakers continue in their admirable effort and keep enriching our worlds!