

Yokwe Bartowe: reactions of a European

by Peter Sutoris

Europeans. Americans. Asians. Africans. Australians. Each has developed cinematic traditions that help define their cultural identities and build a sense of national identity. Though Marshallese film did not keep up with them for more than a century, Jack Niedenthal's latest movie shows that the Marshallese are eager to use this medium to teach both themselves and others about what the Marshall Islands have to offer to the world.

Yokwe Bartowe must be the most honest film I have ever seen. Raw, down-to-earth and true to reality, it becomes a statement about the Marshallese identity: humble, yet charming; troubled, yet smiling; magical, yet believable. Jack Niedenthal's ability to weave the problems facing the Marshallese society (poverty, alcoholism, the need to leave for the United States to seek employment, apathy of the younger generation) into the fabric of human suffering (child abduction, broken hearts and stolen flip-flops) while keeping the audience smiling is truly remarkable. All these elements turn the movie into a mosaic of moments characteristic of the Marshallese way of life, torn between traditional culture and forces of Western globalization.

Despite its fictional nature, there is something documentary about this piece. When I watched Bartowe and his girlfriend talk about their relationship, I could not help feeling that they were not acting out their roles as much as truly being themselves. When I watched Bartowe's mother mourn the loss of her daughter, I sensed the strength of Marshallese family ties. When I listened to the sound of the ukulele, I felt the tranquility of Majuro on an early Sunday morning. When I saw the rainbow over the lagoon, I immediately thought of "Yokwe." In fact, every aspect of the movie captures the uniqueness of Majuro, making it possible for future generations of Marshallese to look back at this film and see what life was like in the Marshall Islands in 2010.

Yokwe Bartowe is a proof that a good movie does not require a multi-million dollar budget, an all-star cast or even a professional camera. A creative idea and a sincere effort to enrich the audience's perception of the world is all a filmmaker

needs to be successful. Many Hollywood directors indeed have a lot to learn from Jack Niedenthal and his crew.