

# JACK NIEDenthal: GREETINGS FROM THE MARSHALL ISLANDS!



When it comes to once-in-a-lifetime film opportunities, Jack Niedenthal is in the right place at the right time. The Pennsylvania native is currently leading the effort to establish the film and video production industry in the Marshall Islands, a Pacific island republic. Niedenthal, who first arrived in the Marshall Islands as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1981 and serves as chairman of the country's Social Security Administration, served in a number of liaison positions for U.S. productions being shot in the country, most notably the Oscar-nominated "Radio Bikini." Last year, he directed his first film "Na Nonieep," and this year saw the premiere of the feature "Yokwe Bartowe," which he co-directed with Suzanne Chutaro.

Film Threat chatted with Niedenthal via e-mail to discuss his unique contributions to today's global cinema.

## What is the level of film and video production in the Marshall Islands?

Film production in the Marshall Islands is still in its bare infancy. "Yokwe Bartowe," our current 2010 release, is only the third full-length feature film ever produced in the Marshall Islands. The good news is that all three of these films have been released within the last three years, so there is momentum.

The first film in Marshallese, "Morning Comes So Soon," was released in 2008 and was directed and produced by Aaron Condon. This highly acclaimed film concerned the complicated issues of young love between a Marshallese man and a Chinese woman. The second film was our own, "Na Nonieep" ("I am the Good Fairy"), was released in 2009. All of these films have had a positive impact on the self-esteem and the pride of the people here. Imagine growing up never seeing a film in your own language, set in your own country, dealing with issues relevant to your own culture?

## What are some of the unique challenges in creating films in the Marshall Islands?

The challenges of filmmaking in the Marshall Islands have evolved as people here now have grown to understand the power, the consequences and, of course, the beauty of film. When we were in the midst of producing our first project, none of us had the slightest inkling as to how our film would be received. It was fascinating to watch as the popularity of "Na Nonieep" grew, especially after the DVD release, to the point where almost every Marshallese person on earth has seen the film. I wrote the screenplay in such a way that the story could be understood and accessed by people of any age, a family film if you will.

The music was a key factor in making "Na Nonieep" stick hard and fast in people's minds. I made sure that the Marshallese music in the film was strictly acoustical, i.e., acoustic guitar, ukulele and voice – as opposed to the electric organ/guitar/bass music that is so popular here today – so as to capture the mood and beauty of these islands. A common "complaint" from parents regarding the film was that their kids were watching the DVD three or four times a day, over and over again, to the point where they had all the words and songs of the movie memorized. A popular band in the Marshall Islands even wrote a hit song about the movie using lines from the dialogue.

I believe the phenomenon of "Na Nonieep" resulted from people – especially the children – in the Marshall Islands, who had grown up all their lives watching Hollywood movies about other cultures, suddenly, with our film, discovering that, indeed, their own lives – their culture, their country, their social issues – were worthy of exploration in film.

At first it was difficult to get people interested in helping us with our movies. Our company, Microwave Films, was founded on the principles of the community theater system in the United States. All the actors are volunteers, we fund the movies from our own pockets, we ask people to open up their homes and businesses for us to use, and we shoot the movie only in our spare time as most of us have other jobs or are students. In the end, all of the proceeds go to help fund a private school here in the Marshall Islands, the Majuro Cooperative School, which is in the process of building a new, fully accredited high school.

When you are working with volunteers, all of whom are only available during their spare time, coordinating schedules can be extremely taxing. For "Yokwe Bartowe" much of the filming was done at night to compensate for these "spare time" issues, i.e., I authored a good portion of this story with the schedules of the potential actors in mind, which I'm sure is an unusual approach to screenplay writing.

As directors, both Suzanne Chutaro and I had times when we felt guilty for driving the actors on to better performances knowing that they were volunteers. Suzanne has a tremendous vocation for knowing exactly what she wants to see and how to get it solid showing out of an actor, so no one left the scene until the two of us were completely satisfied. As one young actress said to us after a particularly trying day of shooting in the hot, tropical sun, "Making films is fun... but so challenging." Simply stated, but so true. In "Yokwe Bartowe," which has an avian theme running throughout the entire film, we had numerous people in trees for extended periods of time.

In one scene we had Nic Wase, a 50-year-old woman, in a tree dressed like a bird in the rain for 2.5 hours. Some of the outtakes were – well, I'll use the word "humorous" – as they involved recurring pleas for mercy that included excuses such as "Please, I have to go home to make dinner for my family."

Logistics and scene construction are a constant challenge. Gasoline is US\$5.35 at the pump in a country where most people are making the minimum wage of US\$2.00 an hour, and some of the locations were a slow and trying 45-minute drive apart. At times people were hesitant to let us use their houses as domestic privacy in this culture is treasured. Then there were the bystanders who, when they saw our camera rolling, instantly wanted to become part of the process. We had numerous issues with people pulling over in cars to park and watch (i.e., loud, intrusive engine noise), little kids, drunks, dogs, birds, kittens, and yes, even uncooperative worms.

There are technical issues that I'm sure are unique to filmmaking in the Third World. When a cable or a piece of equipment breaks in the Marshall Islands you can't just run to a store to buy a replacement: Everything grinds to a standstill as the production waits for the US postal system to deliver the needed item. There are unannounced power outages at the strangest of times. You struggle with the sound of the sea and the wind and the rain and the boom boxes next door and rattling tin roofs and babies crying and trucks without mufflers and spouses who want you home...now.

I should add that our sound person was my 12-year-old niece, Mommo, a seventh grader. Her professional training? "Here, hold the mic really still and point it in this direction..."

While behind the camera, the stress resulting from all of the above factors was at times unbearable. Because the work wore us down so quickly, my question to my co-director Suzanne on Monday morning of each week was, "How ambitious are you feeling this week?" The scheduling, which usually involved 3 or 4 days and nights of the upcoming week, would occur only after her answer.

## What were the inspirations behind "Na Nonieep" ("I am the Good Fairy") and "Yokwe Bartowe"?

The inspiration for "Na Nonieep" resulted from two events. One was the release and the success of the first Marshallese film, "Morning Comes So Soon." That film provided me with an immense amount of inspiration even though I had never made a movie before. The film dealt successfully with some weighty social issues and was highly acclaimed as a result. The second form of inspiration came from my 11-year-old son, Max (my wife is Marshallese, so that is his first language). We were in a video store one day surrounded by the typical Hollywood action genre, when he yanked on my shirt, looked up at me with his big black, pupil-less islander eyes, and asked, "How come there are no kids movies in Marshallese?" And I thought, "Okay, that does it. It's time to try to make a film." "Morning Comes So Soon" dealt with social issues that were a bit too mature for younger children. With "Na Nonieep" I wanted to reach down to include the children of the nation in the conversation. After all, this is a country where more than 50% of the population is younger than 15-years old.

The genesis of the story of "Na Nonieep" stemmed from my first 6 years in the Marshall Islands. I spent all of this time on distant outer islands, first as a Peace Corps Volunteer, then as a contract teacher. Because of the isolation (a boat would show up every five or six months with supplies, though most outer atolls now have airports), I was able to learn the Marshallese language, customs and culture. Marshallese social life revolves around storytelling because there are no TVs – or even electricity – on most outer islands. In my small plywood shack I kept three fully strung cheap guitars. As a result, I was constantly surrounded by people and music, which I came to enjoy immensely. These storytelling sessions and the resulting comradeship thoroughly shaped and enriched my creative life.

The mythical Marshallese creature that always managed to pique my curiosity was the *nonieep*. A *nonieep* is a fairy that is governed by some hard and fast rules. These fairies can only appear to one person at a time, and then that person is prohibited from telling another soul that he or she has a *nonieep* helping them. Indeed, a *nonieep*, once it has made contact with a human, is not supposed to be talked about at all. So that made for a huge discrepancy with regard to how a *nonieep* actually looked, what their powers were, where they lived, etc., which to me screamed out: CREATIVE LICENSE. As a schoolteacher, over the years as I listened to kids of all ages argue about the various aspects of the *nonieep*, I took copious notes, which later turned into a screenplay.

The inspiration for "Yokwe Bartowe" was simple. The profound acceptance and gratitude that came from the release of "Na Nonieep" made for such a positive experience that we decided our filmmaking endeavors had to continue. For the story I went to the heart of some of the basic instigators of human suffering, some of which are unique to people living on an island: The loss of a child from drowning; the loss of a lover who has gone to the United States; being falsely accused of something you didn't do; not being taken as a result; being a child and having an adult not believe you only because you are a child; a family squabble erupting over an untimely and unexplained death; the desire for an islander living in the US to go home; the issues surrounding alcohol abuse which impact almost every family in this country.

We tried to present these problems in a subtle though realistic way, and attempted to offer solutions only as they would occur in the course of normal every day life – as opposed to being preachy and cramming the obvious down the viewers' throats.

## How do the Marshallese people react to these domestic films?

Our films are heavily nuanced. I have watched our films with mixed audiences of westerners and Marshallese and have always found the differing reactions fascinating. The Marshallese laugh a lot more as the dialog is filled with vague references to events and issues that perhaps only an islander can understand and relate to. Some of the biggest roars of laughter in "Yokwe Bartowe" come when the one of boys involved in a burglary of an old woman's house walks off with her flip-flops. If you have lived in the Marshalls, trust me, as one point or another someone has made off with your footwear leaving you to brave the crumbled coral barefoot.

In the theater here, during this scene, I watched in amusement as a couple of Americans glanced around perplexed as to why this scene was so funny to the rest of the audience. When the young woman in the film sadly and with concern announces that she is pregnant – something that is usually done in a discreet and private way in this culture – the audience erupts in a roar of uncomfortable chorales. To an outsider, this event represented heavy drama, not high comedy. Via the subtitles, we tried hard to bridge these cultural understanding gaps. Translating and interpreting words and ideas from a language and a culture that is so unique is demanding. "Yokwe Bartowe" succeeded better than "Na Nonieep" in this regard, thanks in large part to my mother, who, after watching our first film, complained about the subtitling not being on the screen long enough and the translations not being as explicit as they should be.

While I know this may sound like an excuse for some of the slower parts in "Na Nonieep," a major part of what we were trying to accomplish in our initial effort was to provide face time for young people who have never seen themselves on a movie screen. A scene that may have seemed cumbersome and dragged out to an outsider, was probably an absolute delight to people here.

## What can the world learn from the Marshall Islands?

The Marshall Islands has a lot to teach the world. The people here are very kind, humanitarian souls filled with compassion, and moreover, they have a way of subtly converting you to their values. After 30 years of living here, well over half my life, surrounded by Marshallese people 24 hours a day (my wife's entire family lives in my house), I may walk, sound and give the impression of being a typical American, but I am an islander at heart and will always remain so.

I have worked for the people of Bikini Atoll for over 25 years. Their islands were used for nuclear testing by the United States from 1946-1958, including the most powerful weapon ever detonated by the U.S., the 15 megaton hydrogen bomb code-named Bravo, which showed highly radioactive fallout on many unsuspecting people in the northern Marshall Islands. Over 60 years later, the Bikinians are still not able to live on their homeland. It has been my job as a Liaison for the people of Bikini to seek justice for them and to help them administer their trust funds. I serve on several boards of directors of other institutions here in the islands that involve a lot of volunteer work. But even after a lifetime of toil in this country for numerous social causes, I know, in the end, when it is all said and done and the shovels are dumping dirt on my coffin, I will mostly be remembered for these films. I believe their impact has been that great.

The woman who has played the witch for both of our films, Netha Gideon, is now almost a folk-hero in her own right. While America may have Superman, Batman and Spiderman, the Marshall Islands now has "Lijima," a 55-year-old sorceress. Lyle Turkweh, the young man who stars as Bartowe in the film, is my next-door neighbor. I noticed him playing the ukulele by my house one day and realized how talented he was. I asked him to star in our movie. His response was to shrug his shoulders and say "Okay," probably not fully understanding what he was getting into. Even though his role was a demanding one, Lyle appeared poised and genuine on the screen. After the release of the movie, his life changed. Now everyone knows him and respects him for his talent. The uplifting of individual self-esteem represents our greatest achievement.

## Have your films been shown in other countries?

"Na Nonieep" was nominated for Best International Feature Film and was screened in August of 2009 in the United Kingdom. We have entered "Yokwe Bartowe" in four film festivals in the U.S. that are all scheduled for competition later this year. Hopefully our film will gain some traction this time around. We produce our films with the people of the Marshall Islands in mind. How the outside world judges our projects, while important, is vastly secondary to how our films are received here.

## What are your next projects?

Our company Microwave Films, being what it is (i.e., a volunteer, nonprofit making endeavor), have to go one project at a time and then upon completion reassess among ourselves to see if moving forward is still worth the effort. The most prevalent first reaction to the ending of "Yokwe Bartowe" has been: "When is the next movie?" so I'm hard at work on another screenplay.

As a result of my job, I do most of my writing on airplanes as I travel between the Marshall Islands and Washington, D.C., and other points in America. We hope to begin filming this summer, but these are flat, desolate islands – there are no mountains or even hills – that at a later date are only six inches above sea level, i.e., situations can change and change fast. We live on the edge here; we are at the complete and total mercy of Mother Nature. It is this exact same feeling of futility that gives meaning and power to our lives here in the Marshall Islands...and it makes for some great stories.