

ON FILM



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 "Only the Brave" is the final chapter in director- writer Lane Nishikawa's trilogy on the Japanese- American experience during WWII.

Real-life heroes

A movie about a legendary Nisei unit will be featured in Waikiki

By Tim Ryan
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It's been 60 years since the end of World War II. One of its most decorated units was the all-Nisei 100th/442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up of predominantly Japanese Americans who volunteered for duty. Many of their loved ones were detained in internment camps and prisons back in the States while they served in the European theater.

On Saturday, the day after Veterans Day, the popular Sunset on the Beach in Waikiki event will screen "Only the Brave," inspired by the real-life heroism of the men of the 100th/442nd. Director-writer Lane Nishikawa will be present, as well as some of the renowned cast of Asian-American

'Only the Brave'

Saturday at "Sunset on the Beach," Queen's Beach, Waikiki

Program: Introduction of Mayor Mufi Hannemann and Sen. Daniel Inouye, and of

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actors, including Jason Scott Lee, Mark Dacascos, Oscar nominee Pat Morita, Yuji Okumoto and Tamlyn Tomita.

Nishikawa based the story on the actual experiences of his four Nisei uncles who served in the 100th/442nd and MIS (Military Intelligence Service), as well as those of other veterans who shared their memories with him over the years.

"Only the Brave" captures the poignant personal stories of five members of the 100th/442nd during its most audacious campaign, the historic rescue of the Texas "Lost Battalion" in France's Vosges mountains, after earlier attempts by larger Army units failed to break through enemy lines. (This particular event is now regarded as one of the 10 most significant battles of World War II.)

Nishikawa's film has screened to packed houses in Honolulu (specifically the just-completed Louis Vuitton Hawaii International Film Festival); Las Vegas; Los Angeles; Seattle; San Francisco; Austin, Texas; and Stockton, Calif. The San Diego Asian Film Festival had to book a second screening when tickets sold out in advance.

The film is the final chapter in Nishikawa's trilogy on the Japanese-American experience during WWII.

"Only the Brave" has been endorsed by U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye (himself a soldier with the 100th/442nd and a Medal of Honor recipient), Sen. Daniel Akaka and Rep. Ed Case, and the 100th/442nd Veterans Associations of America, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Organization of Chinese Americans, the Japanese American National Museum and the Go For Broke Educational Foundation.

"Only the Brave" was funded in part by grants from the California Civil Liberties Public Education Program and donations from families of veterans who served in the 100th/442nd and the MIS, spearheaded by the National Japanese American Historical Society.

The Star-Bulletin caught up with Nishikawa by phone from his San Diego home:

Question: Is the film actually finished?

Answer: The last piece of the puzzle is for us to go back in and transfer it from digital to a 35 mm print that can be used in theaters. The last thing we will add in is what we call a Valor Roll, which is a kind of a thank you to all those people who donated to us to make the film. There will also be a spot with Sen. Inouye to introduce the Valor Roll. We should be done at the end of this year.

Q: What's your dream for the movie?

A: I want to see it in some kind of limited theatrical release in the U.S. We understand it is not going to be an easy film, but the response (so far) has been great. At the Austin film festival, all these (Caucasian) Texans attended. We got through the toughest part, which was getting the film done.

Q: How long was filming and where?

A: We shot it in Los Angeles for 18 days last May, with 10 days on the Universal Studios' back lot, then did editing over the summer ...

Q: Why were you compelled to do this film?

active-duty military VIPs and veterans groups; screening of one-hour Inouye biography; introduction of producer/director Lane Nishikawa and film's cast members; and screening of "Only the Brave"

Sunday at Sunset: Movie is "Step Into Liquid"; music by Tiki Taboo. Event starts at 4 p.m.

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A: My four Nisei uncles served in the 100th/442nd and Military Intelligence Service. And my dad's brother served and we lost him at a very young age. I know he had suffered from post-stress syndrome. He died too young. The more I researched after I lost my dad's brother, I learned what these men had done. And then veterans would talk with me and I wanted to learn even more.

But one major thing happened when I went to this town in France in the mid-'80s because I had heard that it was an area the 442nd had liberated. When we pulled in, we saw this monument dedicated to the Nisei, the Japanese Americans who liberated the town from the Nazis.

Some of the soldiers are buried in the town's graveyard and the name of the road had been changed to Rue de Honolulu.

I knew that people back home in the States had to know the full story.

Q: What is different about your film?

A: Probably all the films about these guys, except for 1951's "Go for Broke," have been documentaries. "Only the Brave" is a dramatic story. We do take liberties, but we try to tell the story through the eyes of the soldiers and their families, and as we lose these men during the film, we see how it impacts everyone back home.

Q: And its overall message?

A: Healing -- and doing the film was very rewarding for me (as well).

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'Brave' is a war movie heavy on storytelling, not special effects

Review by Burl Burlingame
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Is there a more American legend than the exploits of the Nisei soldiers of World War II? Underdogs and scapegoats, they overcame racism and cultural prejudice and triumphed in the pure meritocracy of the battlefield, hot-smelted in the "brotherhood of smoke and fire."

The war against fascism was so consuming and desperate that differences were set aside for the duration, and Americans from all walks of life were thrown together as a team. Based on this experience, the American military led the way in integration and anti-discrimination measures following the war, and one of the striking things about the American military, compared to others, is the cosmopolitan nature of the fighting force.

Naturally, it wasn't always that way, and the Nisei boys of the 442nd and the 100th had to fight twice as hard as anyone else to gain respect. Medals for bravery are nice, but they won't get you a management job.

Hawaii-born, Bay Area-educated actor and writer Lane Nishikawa has been chewing on the legacy of the Nisei soldiers for some time. His efforts included two short films -- "When We Were Warriors" and "Forgotten Valor" -- and now we have "Only the Brave," a

handsome and thoughtful feature film.

It's a true independent production, cobbled together outside the Hollywood mainstream, written, produced, directed and starring Nishikawa. Although his character of Sgt. Jimmy Takata is front and center, the film is an ensemble effort, dipping into the lives and motivations of a half-dozen Nisei soldiers. Their stories are based on debriefings of real Nisei vets.

ONA technical level, you have to cut "Only the Brave" a little slack. It's a small film about war, and that means pretty much that the blowing up of stuff takes place off camera. The Nisei GIs have non-regulation haircuts and they're a bit too ginger with their weapons, as if the prop master had just yelled at the actors not to drop them. The gnarly Vosage woods are too park-like. The Germans appear to be Wehrmacht instead of SS.

(The Hawaii GIs, however, signal each other in the night by going "Hui!" That's the sort of detail that makes a film true.)

"Only the Brave" does, however, try to get at the heart of things, and does so more successfully than big-budget war movies in which the spectacle overwhelms the story.

The storytelling is not linear, and takes a little while to sort itself out for audiences. Essentially, Nishikawa's Takata is a weary NCO who takes the deaths of his soldiers very personally, so much so that, after a concussive head wound, he starts hallucinating the hometown memories of the other men, a power that seems to be enabled by the death of his own father.

It's not a stagey or showy power. Nishikawa directs the hallucinations as if they are real flashbacks, and they have an elegiac, reflective glow. He's also a writer who understands the power of metaphoric imagery.

(Some nitpicking: Tighter editing might improve the rhythm of banter between the men -- there are awkward gaps between sentences. There's a bit with an engagement ring that could use an establishing window. And Nishikawa's Takata has a sense of humor that's a hair too dry.)

In smaller parts, big names like Tamlyn Tomita (as a lovely supportive wife) and Pat Morita (wise old man) are luminous, and Jason Scott Lee in a cameo part is terrific. Other actors who make lasting impressions include Ken Anrasaki as the squad corpsman and Mark Dacascos as the sergeant's second.

"Only the Brave" is a little movie, but a good, powerful, haunting feature nonetheless. And it's way overdue -- the last 442nd/100th movie was "Go For Broke," back in 1951.

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