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'Princess' sparks heated debate

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The 29th annual Hawaii International Film Festival launched yesterday at the Sheraton Waikiki's RumFire with a spirited news conference that included Q'orianka Kilcher, star of the much-debated "Barbarian Princess," a feature film premiering to a sold-out Hawaii Theatre tonight.

"She's my role model, and I think she's an amazing role model for all young women," the 19-year-old Kilcher said of Princess Kaiulani, whom she portrays in the movie. "It was very close to my heart because I did grow up in Hawaii."

The Peruvian actress acknowledged the challenge in presenting a beloved historical figure was "to do the memory of Princess Kaiulani justice; I was deeply humbled and honored to portray such an amazing woman that I look up to."

A question from filmmaker Vilsoni Hereniko, a director and professor of the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawaii, about why the word "barbarian" was included in the title sparked ardent responses from Kilcher and writer/director Marc Forby.

"The title was meant to bring in, and then challenge audiences from, say, middle America who might be expecting something like sexy dances at a luau," said Forby. "We wanted to draw attention to how Hawaiians were treated in the 1800s; this has never been about exploiting the Hawaiian people. I never knew it would get so heated. I thought the irony would be obvious." He also apologized for the controversy and any offense the title has caused.

Producer Nigel Thomas hundreds of possible titles were considered.

"It's very hard to come up with a title that doesn't sound like a cruise line," he said.

But it's a topic that continues to rankle some native Hawaiian leaders.

 World Debut For Film On Princess Kaulani



The Honolulu Film Festival kicks off with the film "The Barbarian Princess" already sold out.

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"We take serious issue with the title of the upcoming film 'Barbarian Princess,'" Abigail Kawananakoa said in a statement. "It is a perpetuation of the wrongs and hurtful aspersions cast upon our people for well over 200 years." Yet she went on to note that after viewing the movie, she will "neither condemn nor celebrate it."

The world premiere is only one aspect of the 10-day festival packed with international fare, a special "Lost" celebration all day tomorrow and local talent.

"For all the 'Sturm und Drang' over 'Barbarian Princess,'" producer and Academy for Creative Media founder Chris Lee wrote in an e-mail message, "the real story of this HIFF is the coming of age of an entirely new generation of local filmmakers -- some of them from ACM -- who are now positioned to create a sense of Hawaiian cinema."

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