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## REVIEW

# Missed opportunities abound in 'Princess' film

[By Burl Burlingame](#)

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 20, 2009

What one gets out of "Barbarian Princess" is going to depend on what baggage is dragged into the theater. There will be one whole group that sees this film as a respectful, loving tribute to one of the genuine icons of Hawaiian royalty and to one of the darkest periods in island history. Another group will view it as a rather meek after-school-special biopic with twisted history. Probably most will see it simply as a low-budget curiosity that might inspire some Googling. This last group is who the film is aimed at.

"Historical" films generally fall into three categories. One type seeks to acquaint audiences with the quite different worlds and societies of yesterday (think "Gladiator" or "Black Robe"). Another tries to accurately re-create a specific historical event as a primer ("Tora Tora Tora," "Baader-Meinhof Complex"). The most common type uses history as mythology, playing to what we think we know, reinforcing archetypal stereotypes. It's not just history as pop-culture propaganda; it's propaganda masquerading as history. "Barbarian Princess" pretty much falls into the latter slot. As does every Western ever made.

The movie means well. That much is apparent. The filmmakers are swept up in the events in Hawaii in the late 1800s and in the mysterious allure of a princess who died too young. Their respect, however, has translated into restraint, and the film misses many opportunities to make a real impact.

It could have been a kind of Victorian drama of manners, a brown-skinned "Sense and Sensibility," but that would have required tarter dialogue and a keener sense of social strata. Or a vicious comedy of manners in Kaiulani's English boarding school. It could have been a political thriller with the young princess stuck in the middle — which is pretty much what happened — but alas, the shifting politics of the period are obscured by throwaway exposition. (And certainly no mention of Kalakaua's scheme to marry her off to the Japanese royal family!)

One fascinating observation the film keeps making is also abandoned as a theme: Kaiulani was an attractive young woman, and whenever she appears in the movie, someone blurts out that rather obvious observation. The screenplay could have explored the notion that good-looking people are simply taken more seriously than the rest of us, particularly in an age of populist media. That's a hook we can relate to, and is true throughout history.

MUCH OF WHAT happens in the film is stuff and nonsense, or is a convenient screenplay hook for

exposition, like the princess's British boyfriend, likely a complete fiction. (Dramatically, auwe, there is no heat in the make-believe romance.) There are scenes showing U.S. soldiers with Gatling guns mowing down Hawaiian patriots; never happened. Or Kaiulani out-debating the movie's Snidely Whiplash, Lorrin Thurston, at a gala banquet; unlikely.

But against the moiling of political back-story, the movie gets the larger truth dead-on — the scheme to deliver Hawaii to the U.S. backfired on the revolutionaries, as every citizen — haole and Hawaiian — was given an equal vote.

As Kaiulani, Q'orianka Kilcher certainly looks the part, and is mostly required to look noble and long-suffering, although she occasionally breaks through and reminds us that the princess was also a girlish adolescent. It's an interesting acting problem, as the real Kaiulani was also a girl who had to "perform" as royalty.


Making an good impression also are Leonelle Anderson Akana as Liliuokalani, who, in short scenes, sizzles with the deposed queen's combative personality, and Will Patton as genial Sanford Dole, acting mostly with his eyes. As Thurston, Barry Pepper mostly twirls his mustachios and sneers.

Full marks to whoever did the costume design. The clothing not only looks period; it looks lived-in.

How one feels about "Barbarian Princess" will depend wholly about how one feels about Kaiulani herself. Clearly, for many the Hawaiian "royals" are emblematic of the entire race; for others they're a spoiled minority. Also, just as clearly, there is a good, insightful film still waiting to be made about this princess, barbarian or not.

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