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REVIEW

Evocative 'Princess' will likely find an audience

[By Katherine Nichols](#)

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To review a movie after many people already have formed an opinion about it — based on title, early drafts of the script or flat-out rumor, for instance — is almost an exercise in futility. After all, it's much more interesting to speculate and argue. But it's probable that after some of those critics see "Barbarian Princess," the independent film about Princess Kaiulani, screening as part of the Hawaii International Film Festival, the fires will die.

While not a perfect or even brilliant film, it is evocative and lovely, with accomplished and breathtaking cinematography (the stuff of big-budget epics) in Hawaii and England. The unprecedented shooting at Iolani Palace provides the finishing touches (really, it's hard to imagine the movie without the authenticity of the palace as another character, and I dare anyone to exhale when Kaiulani ascends the staircase to visit the imprisoned Queen Liliuokalani). There is something extremely powerful about seeing real Hawaiian faces speaking fluent Hawaiian on the grounds of the palace, and the filmmakers did well to take time with this representation.

Does "Barbarian Princess" provide an accurate blow-by-blow account of the overthrow of Hawaii's monarchy? No. But then again, it's not a documentary, and must take the liberty of condensing important incidents to fit its cinematic scope. Viewers with an intimate grasp of historical facts might deem it lacking; people on the mainland with little knowledge might find it slightly confusing. But that's to be expected when filmmakers are attempting a respectable — and respectful — balance. Ken Burns wasn't tackling this in 15 installments. There was no way to please everyone.

"Barbarian Princess"

» **Screening:** Dole Cannery Stadium 18

» **When:** 12:30 and 8:30 p.m.

» **Tickets:** \$15 general, \$12 for HIFF members

» **Information:** 548-5905

That said, Hawaii remains present in the background but is not always central. Rather, the movie offers a well-rounded glimpse into Kaiulani's life in Hawaii as a young girl, through her years in England where her father takes her to live after civil unrest begins in 1888, and back in Hawaii again as she steps into her destiny as a woman, a representative of her people and a leader.

The fact that her life is set against the dramatic demise of a monarchy and country raises the stakes and heightens the tension, but the movie also languishes over her experiences in school, her first love, her relationship with her Caucasian father.


NOTABLE PERFORMANCES are turned in by veteran actors Will Patton, who plays Sanford Dole, and Barry Pepper, who is Lorrin Thurston, the leader of the rebellion against the monarchy. Both are seasoned pros whose skill is especially apparent, and their subtle delivery adds another layer of complexity. But it is 19-year-old Q'orianka Kilcher who carries the film, and she hits just the right notes in her evolution from a 13-year-old girl to a regal young woman in her early 20s facing difficult decisions and self-sacrifice in her duties as a princess. Compelling and watchable — you can't take your eyes off her exotic beauty — Kilcher is one of few young actresses capable of making a long scene without dialogue come to life.

And the title that has caused such a raucous? It's astute. When people in England called Hawaiians "barbarians" and asked Kaiulani whether she could read and write, the movie illuminated just how dignified and generous and devoted she really was. Calling attention to that typical world view contrasts starkly against the truth, so beautifully portrayed in the movie. This is the irony writer/director Marc Forby has talked about. And it works.

Will "Barbarian Princess" make it into every theater in the country and teach Americans exactly what happened when Hawaiians lost their kingdom? Not likely. But will it appeal to an art house audience well beyond island shores, and move people to learn more about Hawaii's history and culture because the story of this young princess and her tragic, early death? Very likely. And that in itself is something everyone can feel good about.

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