

## Media Reviews

*Wayfinders: A Pacific Odyssey*, 60 minutes, 1998, 16 mm and NTSC-VHS. Writer/Producer/Director: Gail Evenari. Distributor for 16 mm: Maiden Voyage Productions, PO Box 3285, Half Moon Bay, California 94019. Distributor for video: PBS Home Video, \$19.98. Curriculum guide, \$25 plus \$3 shipping, available from Maiden Voyage Productions.

Polynesians throughout the Pacific are embarked on an epic voyage to rediscover and revive their past. As Gail Evenari's new film—*Wayfinders: A Pacific Odyssey*—shows, this is a voyage both literal and metaphoric, partly but powerfully by the rediscovery of ancient seafaring arts. At the heart of the movie is the story of the voyage of a fleet of ancient canoe replicas from the Marquesas to Hawai'i—the first time that such a fleet has assembled in over a thousand years. The film's dramatic culmination is the canoes' safe arrival in Hawai'i, all of them navigated by men and women who use only the stars, waves, and flight of birds to find their way across thousands of miles of trackless ocean. But a far more important drama, woven throughout the film's story, is the passing on of ancient skills to instill pride in a Pacific people that Captain Cook once called “the most extensive nation on earth.”

Although this film is Evenari's first hour-long documentary, she has produced films for which she has been awarded a CINE Golden Eagle, a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival,

and an Award for Creative Excellence at the American Industrial Film Festival. She graduated summa cum laude from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974 and received a master's degree in education from San Francisco State University in 1980. While working on her first film in Hawai'i—*The Adze of Tane: The Building of Mauloa*—Evenari became fascinated with the canoe *Hōkūle'a*. She was later invited to sail from Tonga to Samoa as a crew member on the Voyage of Rediscovery in 1986. In 1988, Evanari and Dr Ben Finney from the University of Hawai'i wrote a grant together to the National Endowment for the Humanities to fund *Wayfinders*, so it might be said that Evanari has been making the film for thirteen years.

In *Wayfinders*, Evanari has set an ambitious goal for herself—to tell a wide-ranging saga that weaves together anthropology, archaeology, noninstrumental navigation, and Pacific history with the personal stories of the men and women who created and sailed the canoes. She succeeds admirably, creating a film that will be both exciting viewing for a general television (it debuted on the American Public Broadcasting System in May 1999), and extremely useful in the classroom.

*Wayfinders* presents Cook's voyages, recreated through skillful use of still images and Cook's own words, to provide an introduction to both the staggering geographical extent of Polynesia and to the first formulation of the film's central question by Cook

himself—“how shall we account for this Nation having spread itself to so many detached islands?”

In the 1940s, theories abounded, including Thor Heyerdahl's hypothesis that the Polynesians were drifters, not sailors, who rode prevailing winds and currents on primitive rafts from South America. Later, when the overwhelming weight of scientific evidence pointed to a Polynesian origin in the archipelagoes of Southeast Asia, Andrew Sharp could not slough off his own ethnocentric vision of the ability of Polynesian sailors, calling them “orphans of the storm.” For Sharp, Polynesia was settled by castaways, lost and at the mercy of gale-force winds from the west that occasionally replaced the normal easterly trades.

But how did the Polynesians manage to purposefully navigate over such vast distances? The rest of the film answers this question, a pathbreaking one in Polynesian research, by demonstrating ancient navigational techniques, such as the use of the star compass and the waves to set a course and an understanding of other natural signs to find land. *Wayfinders* also clearly demonstrates the sea-keeping capability of ancient canoes by showing them being tested experimentally—by sailing canoe replicas along ancient sea routes.

But for the general public, it is perhaps the film's human stories that will dwell in mind the longest. One watches as Mau Piailug, one of the last traditional navigators in the world, passes on his skills to Nainoa Thompson, captain of the Hawaiian canoe *Hōkūle'a*. It is an act of generosity that opens a door for Nainoa into not just an ancient technology

but a way of life—“a way of conducting yourself,” as he puts it. In later scenes, the film follows Nainoa as he repeats Mau's unselfish sharing by passing on his understanding to navigators throughout the Pacific.

To document the amazing spread of the Polynesian seafaring revival, Evenari and her crew traveled to the Cook Islands and to Aotearoa/New Zealand to talk with the men and women building canoes there for the upcoming voyage from the Marquesas to Hawai'i. Viewers meet Tua Pittman who conquered his fear of the ocean (his father and grandfather were lost at sea when he was only five) to learn navigation in order to guide *Te 'Au O Tonga*, the Cook Island canoe. They are introduced to Hector Busby, who built the New Zealand canoe *Te 'Aurere*, and Jacko Thatcher, who trained to be its navigator. In Hawai'i they join Bruce Blankenfeld, Pi'ikea Miller, and Chad Babayan as they learn the skills of wayfinding from Nainoa. “The elements of navigation are fairly simple,” Pi'ikea explains, “It's the practice of it that's so hard.” Indeed. Consider that when clouds obscure the sky noninstrument navigators must rely on their sense of motion, using the prevailing swells as signs of direction; and that they must remember how far they have traveled each day, factoring in the unseeable deflection caused by wind and currents; and that they must do all of this when they are cold and exhausted.

In Hawai'i viewers are present as a new canoe, *Hawai'iloa*, is built from traditional materials. The builders intended to construct the canoe from koa, a traditional hardwood, but because Hawaiian forests

have been so massively devastated in the last century, they could not find a single tree large enough. Another gift saved the day—two massive logs of spruce from the Tlingit and Haida people of Alaska. In a dramatic scene, one of these trees is felled, and as it tumbles groaning to the ground one feels the reason why both Hawaiians and Native Alaskans propitiate spirits of the forest whenever taking life.

The drama of the voyage carries one along. Will Tua overcome his fear to find land? Will all the canoes make the perilous voyage safely? There is poetic writing here to guide viewers through what could have been a clogging sea of detail. There is also ample and venturesome use of the words of the voyagers themselves to allow viewers to enter their own personal worlds, more so than is common in television documentaries. If this reviewer has a caveat it only that this strength is occasionally a weakness—in a few cases difficult concepts might have been better explained by the more precise words of a narrator.

In the end, though, it is the power of naturally spoken words that conveys the meaning of the film. "I think," says navigator Tua Pittman in the last scene, "our children need to know who they are and where they come from. So when they grow up, they can talk about Karika and Tangiia first and then Columbus later. And that a lot of them when they do grow up, hopefully will look back at us and what we do and say thank you. Thank you very much for letting us know who we are. That's why we're here."

SAM LOW  
Natick, Massachusetts

*Sam Low is a Hawaiian anthropologist and filmmaker. He produced the PBS documentary The Navigators: Pathfinders of the Pacific in 1983, and is working on a book to celebrate Hōkūle'a's twenty-five years of voyaging.*

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#### OTHER PEOPLE'S NOSTALGIA, OTHER PEOPLE'S PRIDE

*Lieweila: A Micronesian Story*, 58 minutes, VHS, color, 1998. Filmmakers: Beret E Strong and Cinta Matagolai Kaipat; distributor: First Run/Icarus Films. Sale, \$390; rental, \$75.

Cinta Matagolai Kaipat, a lawyer and filmmaker, has made an interesting video, presenting the history and present circumstances of her family and her people, the Refalawasch (also known as the Carolinians) of the Northern Mariana Islands. Probably it is too long and too richly detailed for easy classroom use (at least outside the Marianas), but after all it is the first such documentary (so far as I know), just as Ms Kaipat is the first Refalawasch woman to become an attorney (so the film states). But what to make of it?

First things first. Two people are listed as producers of *Lieweila*: Beret E Strong and Cinta M Kaipat. Beyond this, though, Strong's role is not made at all explicit. The film is narrated by Kaipat in the first person, highlighting her story, her family, her people. Rather than trying to sort out the relative contributions of each, I will simplify matters and focus on Kaipat as the creator of this work.