

What would the warrior woman do?

The Land Has Eyes

Directed by Vilsoni Hereniko

Produced by Jeannette Paulson

Distributed by Te Maka Productions

Showing at the

Hollywood Theatre

4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd., Portland

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By Josephine Bridges

The Asian Reporter

The *Land Has Eyes* begins with the words, “Once upon a time ...” and the tale of the arrival on Rotuma, 300 miles north of Fiji, of the island’s first resident, a woman abandoned there by her seven brothers. The assertion that the brothers, particularly the eldest, ‘cannot be trusted’ is one of the great understatements of all time. Their sister, who becomes known as the warrior woman, is a force to reckon with, and she adapts to, her lonely and then no longer lonely life on the island. It is her vow that “future generations of Rotuma women will carry her *mana* [life force] and her spirit.”

As this prologue ends we meet Viki, one of the warrior woman’s descendents, whose father Hapati is telling her the story. It is one of their last serene moments together before Hapati’s neighbor, who wants his land, accuses Viki’s father of stealing coconuts. When she learns about the neighbor’s allegation, Viki asks first, “What are we going to do?” displaying a responsibility to family that contrasts with the way the seven brothers dumped their sister like so much garbage, and then, “If



WARRIOR WOMAN. *The Land Has Eyes* has the distinction of being the first feature film set on and directed by a native of Fiji. Above is Viki, inspired by the Warrior Woman. (Photos courtesy of Te Maka Productions)

this were warrior woman, what would she do?”

When Poto, the court translator — who is not just an unethical interpreter, but evil personified — mistranslates Hapati’s testimony, a verdict of guilty leads first to tragedy but then to triumph, as her warrior woman ancestor inspires Viki to clear her father’s name.

Sapeta Sokag’aitu Taito makes her debut performance here as Viki, and what a performance it is. The young woman’s

scowl could freeze blood, and the way she swings a machete commands respect, if not dread. *The Land Has Eyes* also has the distinction of being the first feature film set on and directed by a native of Fiji.

Given the simplicity of the plot, it’s the details that bring this film to life. The Rotuman saying, “The land has eyes and teeth and knows the truth,” is repeated again and again. Viki, the warrior woman, and one of the island grandmothers are linked by the repetition of the red feathers

they all incorporate into their headdresses. The film is drenched in colors: so many greens of enormous leaves, baskets woven from these leaves, and globular fruits; yellow flower petals from Viki’s garden; and blues of the vast ocean and sky that stretch beyond the island. A birth, a wedding, and a funeral all take place in the film, reminding us that ordinary life goes on, though the rituals may differ from one country to another. The vocal and instrumental music that accompanies *The Land Has Eyes* is absolutely perfect.

But not all the details are delightful. There’s also a leak in Viki’s family’s roof, a church service in which everybody’s monetary contribution is read aloud, and a class where students learn English by copying platitudes like, “Only the hard workers deserve success.”

As a portrait of both a family coming to grips with personal injustice, and a culture moving out of colonialism and into independence, *The Land Has Eyes* is a strong film set in an extraordinary locale. In what feels like a purification ritual, the film ends with Viki’s brother carrying her to the boat that will take her to the land of opportunity. It’s easy to imagine the warrior woman, whose brothers unceremoniously discarded her on those very shores at the film’s beginning, looking out from behind a coconut palm and wishing her protégé well.

For information, including show times, call (503) 281-4215 or visit <www.hollywoodtheatre.org>.