

Bold educational portrait

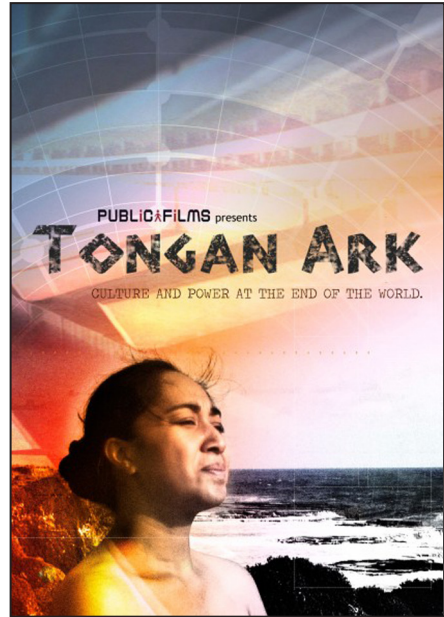
Tongan Ark, directed by Paul Janman.
Public Films, 2012. tonganark.net

TONGAN ARK tells a remarkable story, about a remarkable man, Futa Helu, and his one-of-a-kind, bold, unconventional university, called ‘*Atenisi*, the Tongan word for Athens. Ancient philosophy, opera and Tongan culture come together in this intimate portrait of a teacher, his school and his people as they navigate a sea of repression and doubt in a small but troubled Pacific Island kingdom.

At one stage in the film, Futa Helu says: ‘There are two kinds of education: One for criticism! And one for submissiveness! There is no third.’ Helu introduced a different set of teaching methods, educational ethos and curriculum, which he felt served Tonga’s needs and the aspirations of Tongan youth better.

The film is paced so you feel as if you are on Tongan time—relaxed, with the camera acting as an acute observer of detail. We watch and feel Futa Helu’s slow health decline, along with the university’s decline, but this is with a tender eye, which reveals filmmakers Paul and Echo Janmans respect and love for their subject.

The director, Paul Janman, spent seven years travelling back and forth



to Tonga to make the film. Janman, who studied social anthropology with Dr Okusitino Mahina at the University of Auckland, explains the film’s birth in the following way:

I was taken with the ideas of Okusi about critical education, the way that he managed to use the roots of Western thinking as a tool of understanding and preserving Tongan culture, which was a really surprising and interesting idea. The idea was the roots of Western culture had been neglected and that somehow by reviving those roots you were preserving the best of the West, and giving you a means to understand what needed to be preserved in Tonga, as well as criticising what the West had

become and criticising what Tonga had become. The fact that it came out of this ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus, was so fascinating, I had to go to the source.

He ended up going to Tonga where he taught for two years at ‘Atenisi Institute, with his partner Echo Zeanah, who later became producer of the film. At the end of their experience there they decided to make a film about this unconventional institution and, slowly over the years and with multiple trips to Tonga, he started creating a portrait of Futa and his students.

Peter Coxen, a former ‘Atenisi teacher and present at the premiere of the documentary in Auckland, commented on the film as ‘a wonderful tribute to a great thinker, a very humble and erudite man, multi-talented, very funny... Paul needs to be commended for his works.’

Professor Ian Campbell, a Pacific historian, who has published widely about Tonga, history and politics, as well as the Pacific Islands generally, thinks that ‘Atenisi was

a very bold experiment, if anything a little bit ahead of its time...Futa’s idea was to make quality secondary education and advanced education available to everybody, ... he was prepared to take people who had been rejected elsewhere...

Helu’s less authoritarian approach to education and dedication to inculcating a critical spirit marked a difference from the kind of rigidity of thinking in education that he thought typified a lot of the church schools.—
Karen Abplanalp is a research associate at the Pacific Media Centre.