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PHOTO: DAVID CROXFORD

Swing Time

➔ IT'S 1945 AS THE EVENING—AND WORLD WAR II—WINDS DOWN ON HOTEL STREET IN **LAST TAXI DANCE**, writer-director Brayden Yoder's film about when martial law ended, but thousands of service members still filled Chinatown looking for companionship. There's tragedy in the air, but right now swing is everything for Helen (Cyndi Mayo-Akeo) and Sailor 1 (Scott Francis Russell)—dancing to the music of Hawai'i Theatre Center president and CEO Greg Dunn on 'ukulele, Stephen Inglis on slack key and Pierre Grill on bass (with Abraham Williams on Steadicam). For more on the film and its HTC red-carpet premiere, see page 24.

Meet Market

Last Taxi Dance reignites the sexual and racial tensions of the last days of World War II in Honolulu—while celebrating Hawai'i's filmmaking community.

BY DON WALLACE



RAIN IS SHEETING DOWN ON HOTEL street when I push through an unmarked doorway and step into 1945: a sea of sailors in shore whites, soldiers in khaki, a sextet on the bandstand and local women in '40s dresses twirling with their uniformly Caucasian partners. The only contemporary note is a man, wearing a body brace that supports a camera, filming as he weaves through the jitterbugging couples.

In a period when 250,000 military men a month paid for three minutes at a legal Chinatown brothel, the taxi-dance hall supplied less invasive affection for 10-cent tickets. But after the brothels were closed in 1944, the dancers were the only game in town—and pressured accordingly. That explains the sad eyes of top dancer and Hawaiian beauty Mahea (played by Danielle Zalopany) as she waits to take the stage and sing. She's also spotted trouble in the form of jut-jawed Soldier (Max Holtz), who's determined to have her, one way or another.

Zalopany was writer and director Brayden Yoder's choice a year ago, but most of the cast, and all the filming, is

coming together in one weekend. He auditioned his actor and dancer extras on Friday, rehearsed them on Saturday and now is letting them loose on Sunday for a marathon of all-night filming. "Now I get to stand back and watch," he says, nodding along as choreographer and Punahou classmate Ahnya Chang calls out dance sequences by number. Some of the women dance for a living at shows and lū'au, others are serious moonlighters; all hit their marks.

Packing the collision of races, sexes and military and civilian cultures—and hormones—into a single giddy 15-minute short isn't easy. But then, Yoder managed a bigger project in Iraq for 15 months after 9/11, as a supply officer working in sandstorms and 140-degree temperatures. From there he got a master's degree in writing, then went to India's national film and television school, skipping those in the U.S. to make his savings last. This also allowed him to make his first short, 2014's *Breakdown*. Set in a garish Indian sex district and dealing with similar issues as *Last Taxi Dance*, it's in discussions for a feature Yoder will direct for India's Netflix.

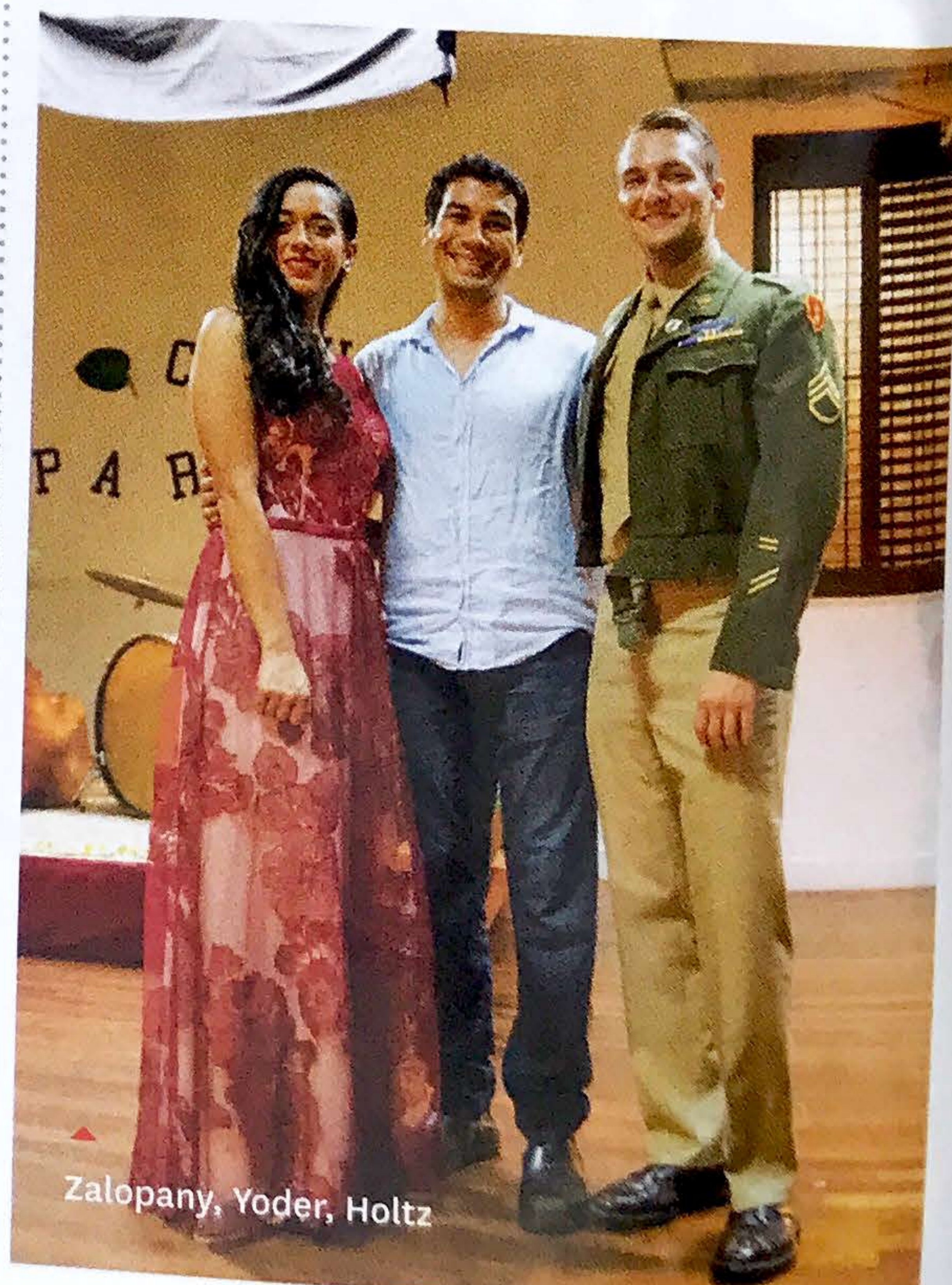
dance fundraiser and August red-carpet premiere at the Hawai'i Theatre Center go to taxidancefilm.com

Yoder's also had help. The space, formerly the Indigo restaurant, was lent by the Hawai'i Theatre Center—whose president, Greg Dunn, is on 'ukulele. "This film is a really unique opportunity for us to show the community our commitment to the arts, including stage plays, performing arts and dance," Dunn says between takes. "We've provided the venue, introductions to funders and eventually a home for the premiere."

First on board, though, was Ciara Lacy. "None of this would have happened without her," Yoder says of his executive producer, whose own film, the documentary *Out of State*, won the Made in Hawai'i Feature prize last fall at the Hawai'i International Film Festival. She was introduced to Yoder by Chapin Hall, his cinematographer, who's worked on Oscar-winning films. In turn, Lacy helped secure seed funder Pacific Islanders in Communications.

The cause of so much fervent buy-in, everyone seems to agree, is Yoder and his script. "A lot of screenplays are underdeveloped," says co-producer Robert Bates, a veteran director, producer and writer, who met Yoder at Creative Lab Hawai'i. "But Brayden Yoder is a writer."

Adds Zalopany, a Native Hawaiian actor who played Princess Ka'iulani in a Kumu Kahua Theatre production and a homeless woman in the forthcoming film, *Waikīkī*: "The story goes deep—my grandfather had a restaurant on Kekaulike during the war. Those years, '41 to '44, had such an impact on everyone."



Zalopany, Yoder, Holtz

PHOTOS: DAVID CROZIER