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ISLAND-FILMED MOVIE PREMIERES

# 'LAST TAXI DANCE'

COVER  
STORY

COURTESY PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN COMMUNICATIONS



# KINSHIP AND CONNECTION

*“Last Taxi Dance” examines the relationship of a lonely soldier and a Hawaiian woman*

By John Berger  
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**T**he year is 1945. The place is downtown Honolulu. A lonely soldier, a combat veteran far from home, seeks refuge in a taxi dance hall — a place where a lonely man can dance with a willing young woman as long as he can pay her fee. The fee? Typically a dime a song, at a time when minimum wage was 40 cents an hour.

The soldier — we never learn his name — notices a Hawaiian woman singing with the band. The song she’s singing has a doleful melody.

Is he listening to the lyr-

ics? When the dancing is over for the evening, he confronts her with some unused dance tickets and tries to strike up a conversation — but for what purpose? The obvious one, or something else entirely?

Welcome to “Last Taxi Dance,” Hawaii-born indie filmmaker Brayden Yoder’s 18-minute look at a dramatic moment in Hawaii’s history. Yoder, who wrote and directed the project, hosts the film’s formal benefit premiere Thursday at the Hawaii Theatre — not far from where taxi dance halls once flourished.

Expected to join Yoder on the red carpet are his stars — Danielle Zalopany (Ma-

**Danielle Zalopany stars as Mahea, a singer, in “Last Taxi Dance,” written and directed by Brayden Yoder. The film, which also stars Max Holtz as a soldier, screens Thursday at the Hawaii Theatre.**

hea, the singer) and Max Holtz (Soldier) — and several of the Na Hoku Hanohano Award-winning recording artists who added their talents to the project.

For Yoder, himself a veteran, born and raised in Hawaii, the story grew out of his interest in history, storytelling and the ways people find points of connection.

“I wrote it in December 2015, when elections were getting started,” Yoder recalled. “With all the vitriol about the election ramping up — the presidential election — I wanted to do a story about connections. I was thinking about this clash of cultures between the local girls who ran (the

dance halls) and all the Caucasians who were coming into it. It seemed like a really great space to stage a story about connections, and that’s ultimately what the theme of this story is.”

Yoder has had plenty of experience with the process of making connections. After serving in Iraq he studied creative writing in Australia and filmmaking in India. The connection with Zalopany was made through mutual friends.

“Danielle had just been cast in this feature, ‘Waikiki The Film,’ and some of the filmmakers on my project had been on that project. They recommended her to me and that was it,” Yoder

**“LAST TAXI DANCE”**  
A benefit premiere

**WHERE:**  
Hawaii Theatre

**WHEN:**  
6:30 p.m.  
Thursday

**COST:**  
\$20

**INFO:**  
hawaii  
theatre.com,  
528-0506,  
lasttaxi  
dance.com

said. "I met her and I just knew that she was the one. Then we auditioned for the soldier character, and we ended up going with someone she had worked with before at Kumu Kahua — a fantastic actor named Max Holtz."

"It's basically a two-person play in one location done with cinematic tricks and things," Yoder said.

"The two of them are —"

He paused, leaving the conclusion untold, and said, "I can't wait for you to see it."

TAXI DANCE establishments catered to several generations of men in Hawaii: servicemen during World War II; bachelor plantation workers before and after. Younger generations of servicemen found other places to seek female companionship — paid or otherwise — and Honolulu's last taxi dance hall — aka ballroom — closed sometime in

the 1970s, with the passing of the last prewar bachelor plantation workers.

That posed some difficulty for Yoder in fundraising. "When we went to the foundations for some money, the older people on the boards knew what taxi dancing was and the younger people didn't," he said. "People 40 and under don't know."

Yoder got the support he needed from Creative Lab Hawai'i and the Pacific Islanders in Communications Digital Shorts initiative, both instrumental in getting the film made.

"What's great about Creative Lab is the state is putting up money to develop these incubator programs for talent," Yoder said. "I was the assistant in the first year of the Creative Lab in 2013. I got to see what it was all about. The idea is to build a community of like-minded creative entrepreneurs so that we can help each other

and we can market our work.

"Anything in film takes a long time, and it takes a village to pull it off. I've been to the Creative Lab twice — once for screenwriting in 2014, and once for producing in 2017. There's direct links to what we ended up doing from the contacts I made there."

Yoder says the film cost "in the \$50,000 range, funded by grants and foundations." Seed money came from Pacific Islanders in Communications, which is also the film's distributor. Yoder also acknowledges support from the Hawaii Theatre, which let him shoot the film in what used to be the Indigo restaurant, and the Ohina Film Festival, which provided



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**Brayden Yoder**  
Writer and director



production insurance.

"I wanted to show that there's a place for historical fiction, and we can do that here, and there's a big interest," Yoder said. "It's really a community effort, when you think of all the things that have been going on here in the last five years for film production."

Yoder also tips his hat to the Center for Oral History at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, where he found lengthy transcripts of interviews with a taxi dancer and a musician who had played in a taxi dance hall. The transcripts provided countless details that Yoder included in the production.

One of the most dramatic elements is Yoder's use of music to structure the experience in what he describes as "a symphonic suite."

The film opens with "Kalakaua After Hours," a newly

written hapa-haole song by Stephen Inglis and Gavan Daws. It concludes with a new Kit Ebersbach arrangement of one of the original mele ku'e (songs of resistance), "Kaulana Na Pua." (The song was written in 1894 by Ellen Prendergast and Jose Libornio to protest the overthrow of the Hawaiian government in 1893.)

"Each song represents something," Yoder explained.

"The journey of understanding begins with this hapa-haole song that's kind of subversive, because she's singing about all the vice that has come to the island from tourism, and it ends with this very rousing call to arms and the two characters understanding each other better through the music.

"They learn to see each other differently than when they started. That's what this story is about."

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