

musings

Entertaining Thoughts



Puppets in Paradise

Filmmaker Dane Neves has his hands full with the production of his latest online series.

By James Charisma

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY in Hawaii when gigantic creatures suddenly emerge from Waikiki Beach, breathing fire, throwing cars into skyscrapers and trampling through the city. But this isn't a scene from the latest "Godzilla," it's the first few minutes of "Giant Monsters Attack Hawai'i!," an award-winning short film by local filmmaker Dane Neves, who uses a mix of human actors, computer-generated imagery (CGI) and originally designed hand puppets.

"I've always loved puppets," says the Oahu native. "Everything from the muppets on 'Sesame Street' to ventriloquism to the super realistic ones used in some Hollywood films. Growing up, my favorite movie was 'Jurassic Park,' which featured a great blend of CGI and puppetry."

Neves attended the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Academy for Creative Media. The films he made while in school stood out from his peers: every one of them featured

puppets. And while most of his fellow students moved immediately to Los Angeles to try and break into the film industry upon graduation, Neves was determined to make films in Hawaii.

"[The students who went to LA] get steady work as production assistants or other regular jobs on different sets," says Neves. "If you want to work in 'the industry' here, we only really have 'Hawaii Five-0.' But Hawaii is my home; I think it's possible to succeed here."

When he finished school in 2007, Neves began working with 'Ōlelo Community Television, training people on how to use camera equipment and editing software. His first film out of school, "The Green Tie Affair" in 2009, revolved around a tie-wearing puppet whose identity fades when people begin to imitate his fashion style. Two years later, he created "Giant Monsters Attack Hawai'i!"

On a budget of just \$10,000, raised mostly through an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign, the movie was created by filming Hawaii locales, such as Aloha Tower and Waikiki Beach. It premiered at more than a dozen film festivals locally and around the world, winning awards including Best Family Film at the Honolulu Film Awards and Official Finalist at the Las Vegas Film Festival in 2012.

Also in 2012, Neves finished shooting his second film, "Poison Apple," telling the story of Snow White — but from the point of view of the apple. Modeled after traditional Disney animated musicals, the film also features five original songs. Neves considers "Poison Apple" his most successful short film to date. Although completed in 2012, it is still in circulation at film festivals around the country. He attributes much of

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both films' popularity to being high concept movies, yet with familiar premises and being easy to explain.

"I think part of it comes from the fact that puppets aren't often taken seriously even though they can be critical parts of films when they're done well," Neves says. "Look at Yoda, Alien or E.T."

Neves' latest project is "Not Another Puppet Show," an episodic web series featuring local celebrities poking fun at and sharing jokes with a puppet. His end goal is to develop the series into a Hawaii version of "Sesame Street," complete with puppets, celebrities and a humorous education on local culture. Ultimately for Neves, the genre is flexible.

"Could be a comedy, action, or even horror," Neves notes. "As long as there are puppets."

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