STAR-GAZING in South Maui the maui film festival is cinema at its best

Photography by RACHEL OLSSON

Last year the Maui Film Festival surprised filmgoers with the charismatic Lupita Nyong'o—in person, larger than life, a million watts of glamour. Just weeks after the talented rising star walked away with the 2014 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, she arrived at the Maui Film Festival to receive the Rainmaker Award for her stunning performance in "12 Years a Slave." The film won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Such is the magic of the Maui Film Festival.

Surprises such as Nyong'o are the reason the festival stays fresh, drawing film enthusiasts from all over the world year after year. The Maui Film Festival has been compared to the popular Telluride Film Festival, which has gained its mystique by never announcing its film program or guests until festivalgoers arrive in the tiny Colorado mountain town. The Maui Film Festival has achieved an equally stellar reputation because of the one-of-a-kind experiences it offers.

The festival's "secret sauce," if you will, combines life-affirming, inspired films, the unparalleled natural beauty of this south Maui coastline, and world-class resorts. In this environment comes the cinematic gem known as the Celestial Cinema, glittering with stars and powered by the sun. In a unique solar-powered projection system, a 50-foot screen is stretched out on a golf course with "ear-boggling" Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound. Thousands of people can pull up a beach chair or blanket under the starry Maui sky and share some of the best first-run feature films the world has to offer, with Mt. Haleakalā ever present and the Pacific Ocean at your back.

Food lovers have their day, too. Among the renowned culinary events is Taste of Wailea, where diverse tastings of Pacific Rim cuisine are served in a top-of-the-world outdoor setting above the Celestial Cinema site. At Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea, the decadent Taste of

Chocolate is a culinary giant, an extravaganza of ice carvings, chocolate sculptures (such as the chocolate leaves seen on the previous page) and the brilliant dessert creations of Hawai'i's finest chefs.

As compelling as the Wailea environment may be, the strength of the Maui Film Festival is its programming, largely determined by festival founders Barry and Stella Rivers. "We look for powerful cinematic storytelling," Barry Rivers says. "By that I mean visually arresting, artfully engaging and with a unique 'voice.' In short, show me something new. And better still, knock me out with it."

Year after year the founders deliver, with powerhouse films defining quality cinema in a movie venue many consider unparalleled.

Massaging all the pieces to pull it off every year, and at the transcendent level audiences expect, can be a challenge. But, says Barry Rivers, "You realize it's all worth it" at times such as last year's opening night. That's when the ESPN 30 for 30 film, "Hawaiian: The Legend of Eddie Aikau," about the legendary Hawaiian lifeguard and surfer, was screened. Says Rivers: "Directed by Sam George and produced by Paul Taublieb and his wife, Susan Cooper, the Eddie Aikau film opened

the festival to a Celestial Cinema sell-out crowd of more than 3,000 people." So successful was this documentary that a feature film on Aikau's life is in the works.

The director also has high praise for this event. "I've shown my films at a lot of festivals around the world," says Sam George. "Cannes, Sundance, smaller festivals. The Celestial Cinema really defines the Maui Film Festival. It is certainly the most extraordinary experience I've ever had as a filmmaker. The spectacle of sitting amongst an audience of 3,000 people, dead quiet absorbed in your film, feeling their emotion, hearing them cry, is a feeling unlike any other."

Taublieb agrees. "The Maui Film Festival and the showing of our film were extraordinary," he says. "The film felt so alive—a Hawaiian story, featuring Hawaiians, with the Aikau family and their extended 'ohana pres-

ent. It was like a home movie, not just for the family but for all of Hawai'i, in this amazing outdoor setting. It felt natural, making it not only a movie experience but an immersive one too.

"For a filmmaker to share his work in that environment is a pinnacle moment—all the effort feels rewarded. Every film has its home for its launch into the world. No better place than the Maui Film Festival."

Barry Rivers could not have been prouder. "Without exception, it was the most special night at the Celestial Cinema ever," he says. "For those few hours the *mana*, or spiritual power, of Eddie Aikau and [Master Navigator] Nainoa Thompson deeply touched [the audience] in ways they will remember for a lifetime."



