

T H E F A S T P I C T U R E

SHOWDOWN

TEXT BY CATHARINE LO PHOTOS BY CHRISTINA SIMPKINS

At 5 p.m. on a Thursday, 200 cell phones in Honolulu buzz. They all receive the same text message. “Topic: luck. Props: book and rock. Dialogue: ‘It’s not as easy as it looks.’” The starting gun for Showdown in Chinatown has been fired.



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Making the scene, the shot and the cut at Honolulu's foremost films-on-the-fly competition



THE END IS NIGH: At 3 p.m. Saturday and counting, Walrus (kneeling) and Staab make the final shots for their entry into *Showdown, A Stroke of Luck*. "I never look forward to winning," says Walrus. "I always think I'm coming in second place. I'm happy to be able to see progression. Every time it gets better and better and better. We learn from our mistakes." Walrus is just one of Honolulu's filmmakers enamored of the contest. "Showdown," he says, "gives people the ability to let their soul out."



Showdown is simple, fast, a phenomenon. The rules of this monthly quick-draw filmmaking competition are straightforward: Each participating team of filmmakers has forty-eight hours to make a movie of no longer than seven minutes that incorporates the three suggestions: topic, props, dialogue. (The suggestions change every month; they are designed to prevent pre-scripted or pre-shot films and to force the players to think creatively and unconventionally.) The final film must be turned in on a DVD by 5 p.m. Saturday, and the winners are announced that night at a public screening at Chinatown's urban-industrial club, Next Door.

Showdown began in November 2005, the brainchild of Tory Tukuafu, a towering six-foot-six cameraman and filmmaker who in a previous life was a University of Hawai'i Rainbows volleyball star. In the first Showdown, five teams competed; at that point, it was just a friendly wager among filmmaking colleagues. But by the first anniversary of the event, thirty-two teams were submitting entries and first prize was \$1,000. Ever more young, ambitious players are now employing their wits and their imaginations in Showdown. It may not be moviemaking in the realm of Stanley Kubrick, but it is a testament to the creativity and enthusiasm of Island storytellers.

THREE HOURS AFTER the text message goes out, Zac Heileson sits on a couch at a busy Starbucks on Ward Avenue. Heileson is a second unit video assist for the TV series *Last* by day, a two-time Showdown winner recognized by the other contestants for his tight camera and editing work. At Starbucks he's joined by four others: Aaron, writer; Shawn, producer; and Nate and Lynch,

actors. They've come to brainstorm and decide on their plot. Concept development is the first part of what is, generally speaking, a three-part Showdown process: story, shooting, editing. While some teams have dedicated writers and draw elaborate storyboards, others make up dialogue on the spot as they're shooting. Some start right away, others don't begin until Friday night or Saturday morning. Zac is starting on the early side but even he says he likes to wait a few hours and let the thoughts gestate before deciding on a storyline; otherwise, he says, "the ideas are so virgin."

"Here are the rules. No coins, no cards, nobody says 'luck' or 'lucky,' nobody's named 'Luck' or 'Lucky.' Let's stay away from using the word at all," announces Aaron, struggling to be heard over the loud background music.

Shawn begins to suggest a story about a homeless drunk in search of his mother, who happens to be a psychic.

Zac, chewing gum and looking sideways out of his spectacles, interrupts him. "Is this serious or a comedy?"

"It's serious," Shawn answers, clicking his pen nonstop. He underscores just how serious with a few technical terms, describing one of the scenes as a montage shot with a steady cam that would incorporate a voiceover. When he's done, he stares at his blank notebook.

Lynch offers his idea. "Okay, we're at a club, and there's a long line," he begins.

Zac, chewing more fervently, asks, "Is this a point-of-view cam?"

"Yeah, it's point-of-view," Lynch says, continuing with his story. Aaron scribbles on his notepad, not looking up. After a brief silence, Nate next shares his idea. Shawn stares at his

blank notebook. Some offer murmurs of understanding, but there are no enthusiastic endorsements. Zac tucks his gum in his cheek and launches into his own idea, a story of a guy who wins \$10,000 from a radio station and has 98.5 minutes to collect his prize. He imitates the voices of each of his characters, then, finished with his animated monologue, walks off to the counter to get a bottle of water. When he comes back, he asks, "What do you guys think?"

"It's a cool story," Shawn pipes up. "It covers everything."

Plot decided, the team talks a little more, then Zac stands up and everyone else follows. "Okay, 6 a.m. then," he says. "Everyone needs to be well rested. Tomorrow's going to be the longest day. Seriously. We're going to be eating while we're walking."

IT'S A LITTLE AFTER 10 on Friday night, now less than twenty-four hours before the submission deadline. In a covered parking lot at Ala Moana Center, Robert Poleki aims his camera at the driver inside a shiny black pickup. Ink peeks out from under Robert's short-sleeved T-shirt — it's a tattoo, a reflection of his roots: He, along with everyone else on his crew, is Samoan. Silau, who plays the stoic-looking driver, is dressed to look like a hit man, in black shirt and dark sunglasses. The lot is empty with the exception of a few randomly parked cars. It starts pouring.

In the middle of the shoot, two security attendants pull up on a golf cart.

"Do you have permission to film here?" one asks.

Robert says quickly, "All right, we'll go." He nods at the rest of his crew who are standing next to the truck. "It's okay. I got what we need."

"It's ever since 9-11," the security guard explains.

A police car pulls up.

"Is everything okay?" the officer asks.

"Yes, just a friendly chat," the security guard reassures her.

The authorities drive away, and Poleki's team tries to figure out where to shoot next. Ten minutes later, they've relocated to an alley behind the McKinley Car Wash. The rain has slowed to a light drizzle, dotting an enormous puddle that reflects the crew as they set up the shoot. There's Frank, the hero of the film; Robert's older brother Daniel, an actor; his girlfriend Whitney, the makeup specialist; and longtime high school friend David, an actor; others in the team include Robert's older sister Tracey, the soundtrack producer, and actor Jake. The group has a tight bond, a valuable asset in a job that demands constant cooperation. In fact, production expertise is only part of the formula for success in this sudden death moviemaking challenge. With only forty-eight hours to start and finish a film, everyone has to be resourceful and flexible to overcome any unexpected obstacles. Throw in sleep deprivation, and tempers really begin to flare. Event founder Tukuafu knows that filmmakers love drama — and where there is urgency, drama is never far behind. But Robert's group seems to manage to provide its own comic relief in the midst of it all.

Daniel, dressed in a white dress shirt and black slacks, crouches down and dips his finger into the puddle. He pretends to take a taste, stands up and points west. "That way!" he cries. He and David, who is clutching a bible, resemble Mormon missionaries, the look they're going for.

Robert positions his camera and

says, "Let's go. I want you guys to run. Wait 'til the wind stops."

"You want us to run funny?" Daniel asks. He grins at David and they practice different running styles a la *Chariots of Fire* and the Charleston.

"Eh, come back!" Robert calls. "I didn't tell you guys to run yet." He tries a few takes but doesn't get what he's after. "Okay," he directs. "Run kind of close. Ready? Go."

David tries another funny run. Frank cracks up.

"C'mon. We gotta get the shot," Robert yells, his patience waning. "Let's go. Together, together."

David and Daniel run down the alley several more times and Robert gets what he wants. "One more scene," he announces.

The crew moves across the street to a well-lit courtyard. The clock overhead says 11:49 p.m. They do more running. Midway through a take, Daniel breaks into the opening melody of *Deliverance's* dueling banjos. Without missing a beat, David joins in with his own air banjo. Robert stops filming and joins in the song, slapping the rhythm on his thighs.

After everyone stops laughing, he says, "We're missing some shots."

"What shots?" David asks.

"Some tequila shots," Daniel deadpans.

Robert looks over at Frank, who has been quiet for a while. "You're getting tired, huh?" Frank nods. "Imagine first place tomorrow," Robert says encouragingly. "Imagine first place."

FOLLOW HONOLULU'S young filmmakers around and it becomes clear that they are just as dynamic as the characters they create. On Saturday at 3 p.m., I find myself in a big production studio checking in with Walrus' team as they're

editing their movie. Walrus goes solely by Walrus — if he has any other name, he doesn't reveal it. And he doesn't match Walrus either: He's tall and lanky and sports a paperboy's cap. He's got a beard and a small silver hoop in his left ear. As Tukuafu's friend and co-worker (he's a second assistant cameraman for *Lost*), he has been involved with *Showdown* since its inception. His team has come in second at least nine times, he says.

This go-round, Walrus is serving as the film's producer. Spud, the director, and Staab, the director of photography, are also the film's editors; the actors are Terren, Scratch, Glen and Charisse. Spud and Charisse came up with the story idea around midnight Thursday and spent Friday night pinning together large swaths of fabric: robes for actors portraying stone throwers (remember the designated props?) in Jerusalem. The team began actual shooting Saturday morning at 10 — seven hours before deadline — at the hot and dusty Campbell Industrial Park on O'ahu's leeward side.

Here in the production studio as they gather the last shots, Walrus kneels on the floor, propping open a bible on a wooden podium. Staab is behind him, the camera focused on a passage from the Book of John that reads, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone ...". After they shoot the final scene, Staab and Spud head to two nearby editing rooms to begin hastily assembling scenes and adding a soundtrack; Walrus, meanwhile, waxes on *Showdown*.

"I never look forward to winning. I always think I'm coming in second place," he says as he eats beef curry with a plastic fork out of a Styrofoam box. "I'm happy to be able to see progression. Every time

JUDGMENT NIGHT:

Showdown founder Tory Tukuafu, himself a filmmaker, leads the competition's awards ceremony every month at Honolulu nightspot, Next Door. Entries are screened on a Saturday night after forty-eight hours of fast and furious moviemaking; the crowd is invariably appreciative of the contestants' efforts while the moviemakers themselves finally get a chance to relax, schmooze, stargaze and, if they're lucky, give an acceptance speech.





EUREKA! Director Zac Heileson (in visor) is a video assist for the TV series *Lost* by day and a two-time Showdown winner; here, he and his colleagues brainstorm plotlines for their Showdown entry after receiving the required topic, props and dialogue.

it gets better and better and better. We learn from our mistakes. Showdown gives people the ability to let their soul out.”

There are similar filmmaking contests in other U.S. cities, but the one in Honolulu is particularly close-knit given the small size of O’ahu’s nascent film industry. Plus, adds Terren, who’s just entered the room, “The fact that it’s in Hawai’i — there’s something about the vibe. People are content doing it here just for the love of it.”

“I don’t know a single contestant who does Showdown to win money,” says Walrus. “Drinks for the winner — that’s as serious as it should get, I think. That’s what keeps it fun. If I can work between seventy and eighty hours a week, and still do a Showdown in a few hours, anyone can.” He has a point — today’s affordable, compact, portable video-recording technology and user-friendly editing programs have

opened the indie film industry to the general public. What’s more, Internet sites like YouTube and MovieBaby offer a chance to showcase and distribute homemade movie projects all over the world. Movies have truly gone from something you watch to something you make.

After he finishes eating, Walrus heads in to the editing rooms to see how things are going. The clock on one of the three monitors indicates it is 4:21 — less than an hour to go. Staab is in front of one of the monitors, intently splicing the fresh-from-the-morning footage into an actual story; Spud is trying out different pieces of music against the imagery, looking for the soundtrack that will have the most resonance.

“This one might win,” Terren says, looking over Staab’s shoulder as Staab uses his editing skills to view and assemble shots and slowly

transform Campbell Industrial Park scenes into Jerusalem circa 30 A.D. “Second place, baby,” says Walrus. “That’s how I roll.”

IT’S 9:40 SATURDAY NIGHT. Showdown is going down at Next Door: It’s standing room only and films are showing simultaneously on two giant screens, one upstairs in the VIP suite, one on the main floor. Tukuafu watches from near the club’s entrance, a lei adorning his black dress shirt. He steps on to the stage to introduce each film.

Scattered among the crowd, Zac, Robert and Walrus are engaged in what Walrus calls “unglorified schmoozing.” There’s a little celebrity worship, too — Tukuafu publicly thanks *Lost* producer Jack Bender, who served as one of the judges, and introduces *Lost* star Evangeline Lilly, who waves from her seat on a couch in the corner.



BIKES, CAMERA, ACTION! Once the storyline is set, *Showdown* filmmakers head out to shoot all over the island. “I don’t know a single contestant who does *Showdown* to win money,” says Walrus. “Drinks for the winner — that’s as serious as it should get.”

Robert’s film flickers on to the screen. It’s called *Religious Payback* and the final story is this: A hapless gambler keeps unwittingly dodging the two bookies who are chasing him — and when they finally corner him, he mistakes them for Mormon missionaries. At the end of the six-and-a-half-minute film, loud whoops come from the back of the bar. The Samoan team orders a round of shots.

A few films later, Walrus’ film, *A Stroke of Luck*, plays: In an arid setting, President George Bush is about to be stoned. The subtitles spell out what he says in Latin: “Being president — it’s not as easy as it looks.” Jesus approaches just before the first stone is cast and takes it from of the stone thrower’s hand. The stone thrower looks down, ashamed. Then Jesus hands him a much bigger stone and crosses his fingers. The entire film is less than a minute long.

The crowd applauds wildly.

Zac’s film, *Steamy. Wet. Filthy.*, is one of the last to be shown: A contest winner hurries to get to the radio station to claim his \$10,000 cash prize, hitching a ride with a con artist who steals his wallet. He is denied when he arrives at the station with no identification. The deejay calls the runner-up — who turns out to be the con artist. The audience cheers enthusiastically at the impressive cinematic features of the six-minute-and-forty-seven-second film.

As midnight nears, the judges’ twelve top choices have been aired (the remaining five submissions — those that didn’t make the cut — will be shown on the upstairs screen). Tukuafu steps on the stage to announce the winner: This month, finally, it’s Walrus’ team.

AS ANYONE WHO GOES to the movies knows, what makes a movie great

varies hugely: That’s why both *The Godfather* and *The Sound of Music* can win an Oscar for best picture of the year. The same holds true at *Showdown*. Stories come from all directions and are told in all ways, reflecting the cultural kaleidoscope of the Islands. But whether at the Oscars or at *Showdown*, there are key components to every exceptional movie: a compelling plot, sharp writing, evocative acting, concise direction, arresting cinematography and seamless editing. Most participants at *Showdown* haven’t mastered those skills at the level needed to make a great film — yet. But they’re having a terrific time learning. Roll camera. 🌸

Showdown also has a screening room in cyberspace, which can be visited at www.ourfilm.org. There you’ll find all of the movies mentioned in this story, as well as many others.