

LEHUA FILMS presents

A film by LISETTE MARIE FLANARY



MĀHŪ

A Trans-Pacific Love Letter



LOGLINE AND SHORT SYNOPSIS

MĀHŪ: A Trans-Pacific Love Letter is a short documentary about an innovative theater production by master hula teacher, Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne, which aims to reclaim and celebrate the traditional place of honor and respect given to māhū (transgender) people.

The film explores the history of the Hawaiian term māhū by interweaving the multi-media stage performance featuring the hula dance, chant, and contemporary music around intimate interviews with the artistic collaborators of the show who are all acclaimed Hawaiian transgender artists. As they prepare to open the MĀHŪ show in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, we meet Kumu Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, a revered community leader, kumu hula, and filmmaker known for her activism in the field of kanaka maoli language and cultural preservation; Iwalani Ho‘omanawanui Apo, a revered loea, or expert, of Hawaiian music and master falsetto singer in the beloved Hawaiian music trio, Kuini; and Kaumakaiwa Kanaka‘ole, a multi-award winning performer and great-grandchild of esteemed Kumu Hula Edith Kanaka‘ole who was one of the seminal figures of the Hawaiian Renaissance. These contemporary artists share intergenerational stories from both older and younger māhū experiences that highlight the difficulties of navigating their transgender identities. In showcasing the talent of the ensemble who are expressing themselves artistically with openness and confidence, in a genuine and culturally connected way, *MĀHŪ* embraces the wide spectrum of gender rooted in the strength and validity of Hawaiian queer and transgender identities.

The term māhū itself is one of the most controversial words in all of the Hawaiian language, and one that has been used in the derogatory and pejorative sense which is now being reclaimed in this creative showcase to bring it out of shame. Māhū is the traditional Hawaiian term for



transgender or the “expression of the third self which embodies both male and female aspects within while acknowledging and embracing both.” Māhū were an integral part of Hawaiian culture before the arrival of missionaries in the 1820s, respected as cultural standard bearers, artisans and healers. Today, in many Pacific Islander communities, māhū still face discrimination and unequal treatment due to their gender identity. *MĀHŪ* serves as a reminder to the Native Hawaiian community and the world that before colonization, before Western concepts of gender and colonial prejudice, there was an indigenous sensibility of queer culture that celebrated cultural truths based on inclusivity, diversity, and aloha.

Lead featured artist Patrick Makuakāne is a creative force in the hula world whose innovative art springs from an avowedly queer and socially conscious perspective. Patrick Makuakāne is a kumu hula, or master hula teacher, known for blending traditional hula with contemporary music and subject matter. Since 1985, he has forged his own unique form of hula — *hula mua*, or hula that evolves, with his San Francisco-based dance company, Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu. With his work, Patrick continually reaches beyond the Hawaiian community to present hula to larger and more diverse audiences, within a format that is progressive, provocative, and yet still genuinely Hawaiian.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For over 25 years, I have dedicated my entire filmmaking career to sharing stories from Hawai‘i that celebrate a modern renaissance of the hula dance and Hawaiian culture for a wide audience. Documenting dance with the camera is a challenge but capturing the beauty of the hula dance on screen is an art form. I personally believe that my experience as a hula dancer informs my visual and artistic approach to creating documentary films that incorporate hula, storytelling, and Hawaiian music. Ultimately, I endeavor to capture the essence of this rich native tradition while telling a compelling and visually appealing story through a distinct cultural lens. As with my completed trilogy of films which showcase the impact of hula on a trans-continental scale, I believe exploring the concept of māhū in a film will help raise awareness and promote understanding of diverse gender identities and expressions from a Hawaiian context.



As the director of the short documentary *MĀHŪ*, I feel that now more than ever, it is important to amplify voices that have been historically marginalized and overlooked. *MĀHŪ* ventures into uncharted territory, exploring the lives and experiences of individuals who identify as māhū, a concept deeply rooted in Hawaiian culture but often misunderstood or misrepresented in mainstream discourse. The timing of this film is crucial. We are at a pivotal moment in history where conversations surrounding gender identity, sexuality, and cultural diversity are becoming increasingly prevalent and necessary. *MĀHŪ* delves into themes of resilience, acceptance and the pursuit of self-empowerment in the face of societal expectations and cultural norms. At its core, the film serves as a poignant exploration of Native Hawaiian identity, tradition and the complexities of gender. Through immersive storytelling through the hula dance and Hawaiian music, I hope to elevate the voices of the māhū artists, offering a platform for them to share their stories, struggles and triumphs with authenticity and dignity.

While I am not Native Hawaiian but my family has lived for generations here in Hawai‘i, I have always worked in close consultation with key creatives and subjects in my film work to ensure the cultural integrity of the storytelling. For me, collaborating with my kumu, Patrick Makuakāne, on this film has been the highlight of the journey of making *MĀHŪ*. I have known Kumu Patrick Makuakāne since 1998 when I began working on my first feature documentary for public television, *American Aloha: Hula Beyond Hawai‘i*. Though Patrick was first a subject in this documentary project, we developed a long friendship and he also became my kumu when he invited me to join his first papa‘ūniki class in 2004. I have been deeply honored to be his haumana, or student, for over twenty years. Inspired by his creative genius in developing the stage production, I hope our artistic collaboration in making the film *MĀHŪ* brings this important story to communities beyond our island shores.

PRODUCER'S STATEMENTS

We have been partners in life, filmmaking, art, and activism for nearly 30 years, dedicated to telling stories that emanate from the voices of those on the outside, that arouse compassion and understanding, and that inspire and compel people to act. From our first documentary about the struggle for dignity and respect for LGBTQ+ folks in small town America to the series of films we made about gender diversity in Hawai‘i, Samoa, and Tonga, we have seen the ways in which stories that reveal deeply personal experiences and perspectives can have resonance and impact across a broad cross-section of our communities.

Our connection to *MĀHŪ* began a decade ago when we were working on a documentary about Hinaleimoana Wong Kalu that included a brief animated segment, titled “The Meaning of Mahu,” which described the historical honor and respect for mähū as healers and teachers of ancient traditions. When the film was invited to Frameline, the LGBTQ film festival in San Francisco, we were fortunate to have Kumu Patrick Makuakāne deliver an opening oli (chant) for the screening, and for Hinaleimoana to share her own oli in response. It was an electrifying moment for the diverse audience of queer folks and Pacific Islanders, one that has always stayed with us as an example of the power of stories to build bridges between cultures and communities.

Our interest in the histories of gender and sexual diversity in Hawai‘i continued with Kapaemahu, a nearly lost story of four legendary mähū who brought healing arts from Tahiti to Hawai‘i. Our discovery of the original handwritten manuscript of the mo‘olelo led to an animated short film, PBS documentary, children’s book, museum exhibition, and a reunion with Kumu Patrick, who was working on the stage piece that became *MĀHŪ*. The synergy was palpable.

It is an honor and a privilege to have the story of Kapaemahu included in *MĀHŪ*, and to see and hear the unique hula and musical compositions that Kumu Patrick has created to illuminate this timeless mo‘olelo. It is also a thrill to help amplify the work of director Lisette Flanary, whose trilogy of films about hula in Hawai‘i have influenced us greatly over the past decade. Now more than ever, as mähū and other gender fluid people are being used as political scapegoats and told they shouldn’t even exist, *MĀHŪ* provides a much-needed window into Hawai‘i’s deep and long traditions of diversity and inclusion.

— Dean Hamer & Joe Wilson

My mähū education began at an early age. In the 70s my uncle Emile worked at a female impersonation bar called the Glades in downtown Honolulu. When the bar closed at 2 AM he’d bring the gang over to our house to play cards and mahjong. The house would light up with their kindness, raucousness, and a surprising vulnerability that made everyone laugh and feel at ease. I realized this same effect occurs at our show *Māhū*. In our Native Hawaiian community our mähū have been leaders — fighting for our civil rights and uplifting us through their artistry and teachings. Our show *Māhū* is a chance for everyone to see what I see — beauty, despite adversity, and a culture that is infused with mähū vibrancy. And how much better the world would be if we let individuals define what is the best version of themselves?

— Patrick Makuakāne

CREATIVE TEAM



PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN COMMUNICATIONS

Co Producer

Established in 1991, Pacific Islanders in Communications (PIC) is the only national public media organization that supports media content and its makers to work together to promote a deeper understanding of Pacific Islander history, culture and contemporary issues that define our communities. PIC addresses the need for media content that reflects America's growing ethnic and cultural diversity by funding independently produced media, and by providing hundreds of hours of innovative media by and about Pacific Islanders to American public television including its flagship series Pacific Heartbeat. For more information about Pacific Islanders in Communications, visit www.piccom.org.



LISETTE MARIE FLANARY

Director / Producer

Independent filmmaker, educator, and hula dancer, Lisette Marie Flanary creates films that celebrate a modern renaissance of the hula dance and Hawaiian culture. She is the writer, producer and director of Lehua Films and her award-winning documentaries, *AMERICAN ALOHA: Hula Beyond Hawai'i* (P.O.V. series 2003–2004), *Nā Kamalei: The Men of Hula* (Independent Lens series 2006–2007), and *ONE VOICE* (NPT 2010–2011) have broadcast nationally on public television and shown in film festivals around the world. Her last feature film, *TOKYO HULA*, the final film in a trilogy of hula documentaries exploring the explosive popularity of hula in Japan, was awarded the Best Moana Whārahi Films from the Pacific Award at the Doc Edge Film Festival in New Zealand in 2020. All three documentaries in the Hula Trilogy were broadcast on the Pacific Heartbeat Season 10 from Pacific Islanders in Communications in 2021. Lisette is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and after having lived in New York City for over 20 years, she moved to Hawai'i in 2011 and is currently a Professor at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She also continues to support the local filmmaking community in Hawai'i through her work with Good Pitch Local Hawai'i, Hawai'i Women in Filmmaking, and 'Ohina Labs.



PATRICK MAKUAKĀNE

Executive Producer

Patrick Makuakāne is a 2023 MacArthur Fellow, kumu hula, choreographer, dancer and raconteur. Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, he studied with two of Hawai‘i’s most revered hula masters, Robert Uluwehi Cazimero and Mae Kamāmalu Klein. He is the founder and director of the Hawaiian dance company and cultural organization, Nā Lei Hulu i ka Wēkiu of San Francisco, and is known for his creativity and ground-breaking theatrical performances. While a passionate preserver of tradition, his artistry also crafts a provocative treatment of tradition that leaps forward in meaningful and surprising ways. He appreciates how dichotomy can be a powerful tool to create work, especially as it relates to upending misconceived notions regarding hula. This has resulted in productions exploring colonization and the current US occupation of Hawai‘i, native Hawaiian transgender artists, hula as community builder in San Quentin State Prison. In 2022, Kumu Patrick was given a special Lifetime Achievement Kulia i ka Nu‘u Award from the Honolulu Chamber of Commerce of Northern California. Makuakāne is a passionate advocate for equal representation and he currently serves as the spiritual and cultural advisor for the Native Hawaiian Religious Spiritual Group at San Quentin State Prison.



NĀ LEI HULU I KA WĒKIU

Founded in 1985 by Director/Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne, the company of dancers is known for its unique contemporary style called hula mua, or “hula that evolves.” The style blends traditional movements with non-Hawaiian music like opera, electronic, dance, alternative, and pop. Both hula mua and authentic, traditional pieces are showcased in the company’s visually captivating stage productions. Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu has enjoyed tremendous national success, dazzling audiences and critics alike.

Makuakāne has won extensive recognition and numerous awards for his choreography and direction, including several Isadora Duncan Dance Awards (“Izzies”) and a lifetime achievement award from the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. The dance company holds annual home season performances in the fall in iconic San Francisco locations such as the Presidio Theatre and the Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, and has performed throughout California and in other locations including New York, New Orleans, Las Vegas, and Honolulu.



DEAN HAMER

Executive Producer

Dean Hamer is a New York Times Book of the Year author, Emmy and GLAAD Media award-winning filmmaker, National Institutes of Health scientist emeritus, historian, and curator whose work focuses on sexual and gender diversity. He formed Qwaves Kanaka Pakipika with partner Joe Wilson to produce an insightful series of films that have opened the eyes of the world to the lessons to be learned from Polynesia's unique approach to diversity and inclusion. Their feature documentary *KUMU HINA*, which followed a year in the life of māhū teacher and cultural icon Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, won the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Documentary, the Documentary Jury Award at Frameline, and the Audience Award on the PBS television series Independent Lens. *LEITIS IN WAITING*, about gender fluidity in the Kingdom of Tonga, became the centerpiece of a campaign to decriminalize sexual and gender minorities across the Pacific. Hamer's research for *THE HEALER STONES OF KAPAEMAHU* led to the discovery of the earliest recorded version of the story and documented the trail of post-colonial censorship that suppressed the role of māhū for many generations. Hamer is also the author of several best-selling nonfiction books and his research has been featured in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Frontline* and *Oprah*.



JOE WILSON

Executive Producer

Joe Wilson is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker and long-time human rights advocate dedicated to telling stories that emanate from the voices of those on the outside. His feature and short films combine live action with animation to explore pressing social issues through innovative storytelling. Wilson's work has screened and won awards at festivals including Berlin, Toronto and Tribeca, been viewed by millions of viewers on PBS, Netflix, and international broadcasts, and has been supported by Sundance, Ford, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Mellon Foundation. He is especially interested in using film for education, and his documentary shorts *A PLACE IN THE MIDDLE*, *LADY EVA*, and *THE ROGERS* and animated legend *AIKĀNE* have been used in classrooms across the United States. *KAPAEMAHU* began as an animated short that was shortlisted for an Oscar, then expanded to a nationally broadcast PBS documentary, children's book, Bishop Museum exhibition, and permanent display at the Hawai'i Convention Center.



KELI'I GRACE

Director of Photography

Keli 'i Grace is a talented cinematographer and director who is best known for his short film work including *The Ala Moana Boys* (2021) and *Reverence* (2019). He recently directed the first boy love film shot in Hawai 'i entitled *My Partner* (2023) which was nominated for Best Made in Hawai 'i Feature Film at the 2023 Hawai 'i International Film Festival. Deeply passionate about telling stories rooted in Hawaiian culture, Keli 'i is an exceptionally talented director of photography who has worked on everything from music videos, commercials, film and television through his production company KSG Films. Since 2023, he has also directed the live broadcast of the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival.



GERARD ELMORE

2nd Unit Cinematographer

Gerard is an Emmy award winning writer, editor, producer and director who has a range of experience varying from television production, film, music videos and TV commercials. His TV commercials have won multiple local Peles (ADDYs) and a national Gold ADDY award. Gerard is the Lead Producer at NMG Network and a former lecturer at the Academy for Creative Media at UH Mānoa. He also serves as the Executive Director for the `Ohina Short Film Showcase that is designed to help local filmmakers promote and screen their films in Hawai 'i. Recently, his NMG produced short film, *RED HOUSE*, was winner of the Emerging Artist award at the Tao Shortz Film Festival, and the NMG original film, *Ka Huaka 'i: The Journey to Merrie Monarch*, that he shot & directed continues to screen at film festivals around the world. In 2022, Gerard was selected to participate in the Sundance Producers Intensive Lab Fellowship and he recently premiered the 'Ohina supported short film, *KŪKINI*.



JHANTE HŌKŪLANI IGA

Editor

As a video editor, Jhante is committed to crafting narratives through an indigenous lens. Born and raised in the small towns of Hilo and Pāhala, Jhante is a third-generation diver who grew up on the shores of Punalu'u, a place that nurtured her profound connection to home. She left the Island of Hawai'i in 2018 to pursue higher education at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. She graduated with honors from the Academy of Creative Media, earning recognition for her Indigenous films *Lifeline* and *Life as a Hula Dancer*, as well as her capstone project, *Bird's Eye*.

In 2022, Jhante joined NMG Network as a video editor, where she has edited over 30+ editorial videos for in-room hotel entertainment across Hawai'i and beyond. Her team won two Pele Awards for the webisode series *Halekulani Living TV* and *In FLUX*. That same year, she edited *Women of The Air*, a Hawaiian Airlines documentary about the first woman to fly the skies in Hawai'i, which premiered at the historic Hawaii Theatre. Jhante has also contributed to several upcoming films, including *The Liliu Project* and *Massagers for Sale*, winner of the 'OHINA Greenlight Award (produced by Chris Lui, starring Tzi Ma).

Of Native Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, and Filipino descent, Jhante remains dedicated to telling stories of Hawai'i, ensuring that each narrative she crafts stays true to its original essence.



FEATURED ARTISTS



HINALEIMOANA WONG-KALU

Kumu Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu is a hula master, cultural practitioner and community leader whose passion for open dialogue on issues of sex and gender has garnered media spotlight and community engagement for years. Known for her work as a filmmaker and leader in the field of Kanaka Maoli language and cultural preservation and cross-cultural alliances throughout the Pacific Islands. She was a founder of the Kulia Nā Mamo transgender health project and cultural director of a Hawaiian public charter school. She also served as Chair of the O'ahu Island Burial Council, which oversees the management of Native Hawaiian Burial sites and ancestral remains. She was the subject of *Kumu Hina*, a highly-acclaimed feature documentary, which won several awards including best documentary at Frameline Film Festival and the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Documentary. She also received a National Education Association Human Rights Award, Native Hawaiian Educator of the Year and White House Champion for Change for her groundbreaking impact campaigns for her film work. *Kumu Hina* also produced the award-winning *Lady Eva*, *Leitis in Waiting* and the award-winning short animated film, *Kapaemahu*. She is also the composer of *Kū Ha' aheo E Ku' u Hawai' i*, the internationally known anthem for the protection of Mauna Kea.





KAUMAKAIWA KANAKA'OLE

Chant composer and performer Kaumakaiwa Kanaka 'ole is the great grandchild of Edith Kanaka 'ole, who was one of the seminal figures of the Hawaiian Renaissance which helped bring Hawaiian culture back into the central life of the islands. Since birth, Kaumakaiwa has dedicated her life to her illustrious family's practice and passion for hula and Hawaiian culture. A charismatic dancer and singer, with an impressive vocal range from tenor chant to Hawaiian falsetto singing, she is a five-time Nā Hōkū Hanohano Award winner with 3 solo CDs to her name. Her vocal performances are an outgrowth of the Hawaiian art of chant and songwriting, with roots in rhythms and metaphors of hula. A modern transgender Hawaiian (māhū wāhine), Kaumakaiwa is a vibrant keeper of culture and an authentic innovator who engages indigenous thought to address today's issues through music, chant and sharing of spirit.



IWALANI HO'OMANAWANUI APO

A respected and revered lo 'ea of Hawaiian music, Iwalani "Ho 'o" Apo has had extensive traditional cultural and musical training from family elders and renowned Hawaiian singers and musicians. As a part of the musical trio, Kuini, Ho 'o is a gifted transgender musical artist who specializes in leo ki 'eki 'e, or Hawaiian falsetto. Their musical repertoire is an encyclopedia of traditional Hawaiian music, as well as a contemporary expression of traditionally influenced song and poetry.

CREDITS

Written, Produced and Directed by
Lisette Marie Flanary

Executive Producers
Patrick Makuakāne
Dean Hamer
Joe Wilson

Executive Producer for PIC
Cheryl Hirasa

Supervising Producer for PIC
Keoni Kailimai

Production Manager for PIC
Ha‘aheo Auwae-Dekker

Director of Photography
Keli‘i Grace

Editor
Jhante Iga

2nd Unit Videography
Gerard Elmore
Romeo Lapitan

Location Sound Recordist
John McFadden

Post Production Intern
Nanea Ah You

Colorist / Online
RDA Color

Sound Mix
IMRSV Sound

Graphic Designer
Omnivore

Featured Artists
Patrick Makuakāne
Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu
Iwalani Ho‘omanawanui Apo
Kaumakaiwa Kanaka‘ole
Keola Kamahele

**Dancers of Nā Lei Hulu
I Ka Wēkiu**
Kahala Bishaw
Jerome Borjal
Chris Brodie
Kaila DeFries
Julia Unaloto Diskin
Isabel Fazio-Siu
Ryan Fuimaono
Jason Laskey
Janella Leano
Marleen Lopez
Heather Meacham
Edna Cabcabin Moran
Jason Ogao
Tanisha Reshke
Neil Romabiles
Rachel Melia Smith
Lehua Zane

Music Performers
Kuini
Iwalani Ho‘omanawanui Apo
Lina Robbins
Ikaika Blackburn
Kaumakaiwa Kanaka‘ole
Sean Pimental

Stage Manager
Sonia Pina

Costumes
Koa Johnson

Dresser
Malia King

Make-up Artist
Sarah Gomez-Akamu

Photos Courtesy of
Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu
Iwalani Ho‘omanawanui Apo
Qwaves

**Archival Footage Courtesy of
*Kapaemahu***
Directed & Produced by
Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu,
Dean Hamer & Joe Wilson
Courtesy of Qwaves
& Kanaka Pakipika

Holo Mai Pele
Directed & Produced by
Catherine Tatge
Courtesy of Catherine Tatge

Remembering The Glade
Directed & Produced by Dean
Hamer & Joe Wilson
Courtesy of Qwaves, Kanaka
Pakipika & The Bishop Museum

Māhu San Francisco Show 2022
Videography by Wally Murray
Courtesy of Patrick Makuakāne

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Leeward Theatre
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Shirley Thompson

MĀHŪ is a co-production
of Lehua Films, LLC. and Pacific
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MĀHŪ is produced by
Lehua Films, LLC. who is solely
responsible for its content

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Running time: 29 min 46 sec.
Image: Color
Sound: 5.1 Surround Stereo
Aspect Ratio: 1.78 (16:9)
Screening Format: DCP
Original Shooting Format: Red HD 8K/Sony FX3
Year of Completion: March 2025
Production Country: USA
Languages: English/Hawaiian
Production Company: Lehua Films, LLC.

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<https://letterboxd.com/film/mahu-a-trans-pacific-love-story/>



FESTIVAL SCREENINGS

Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival (LAAPFF)
 May 1–4, 2025 / Director’s Guild of America

FRAMELINE: The San Francisco International LGBTQ+ Film Festival
 June 18-28, 2025 / KQED The Commons Theater

Seattle Asian American Film Festival (SAAFF)
 June 20-21, 2025 / Broadway Performance Hall

Doc Edge Film Festival
 June 25-August 24, 2025/ New Zealand
 July 5, 2025 / The Capitol Cinema / Auckland
 July 7, 2025 / Bridgeway Cinema / Auckland
 July 22, 2025 / Wellington & Christchurch

OutSouth Queer Film Festival
 August 14-17, 2025 / Durham, North Carolina

Cinema Diverse: Palm Springs LGBTQ+ Film Fest
 September 18-21 & Sept 25-28, 2025

Pacific Island Film Festival of New York
 September 18-21, 2025 / NYC

Oslo/Fusion International Film Festival
 September 19-28, 2025 / Norway

Out on Film

September 25-October 5, 2025 / Atlanta, Georgia

Bend Film Festival

October 8-12 / Oregon

Native Spirit Film Festival

October 12-18, 2025 / London, UK

Silicon Valley Asian American Film Festival

October 17-19, 2025 / Sunnyvale, CA

Hawai‘i International Film Festival

October 16-30, 2025 / Honolulu, Hawai‘i

San Francisco Dance Film Festival

October 24-November 9, 2025

Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

November 6-16, 2025 / Pennsylvania

