

Features

Film about cult on Oahu designed to protect members, director says

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COURTESY HONOLULU RAINBOW FILM FESTIVAL

“Holy Hell” provides a rare glimpse into a “guru-based society” led by Jaime Gomez that originated in Southern California and relocated to Oahu.

Three films with Hawaii ties are among the 19 features and 22 shorts screening this month during the 27th Annual Honolulu Rainbow Film Festival, presented by the Honolulu Gay & Lesbian Cultural Foundation at the Honolulu Museum of Art.

27TH ANNUAL HONOLULU RAINBOW FILM FESTIVAL

>> Where: Doris Duke Theatre, 900 S. Beretania St.

>> When: Friday to Aug. 21 and Aug. 26-28

>> Cost: \$15 general admission (\$12 presale tickets available [HERE](#))

>> Info: hgicf.org

The documentary “Holy Hell” provides an inside look into the Buddhafield, a cult formed in West Hollywood, Calif., in the 1980s that relocated to Oahu about 10 years ago. The film premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival and counts Oscar-winning actor Jared Leto among its executive producers.

Director Will Allen joined the “guru-based society” led by The Teacher — real name Jaime Gomez and also known as Michel Rostand by his followers — when he was 22 years old and remained with the group for two decades as its de facto videographer and Gomez’s personal assistant before leaving in 2007.

“Holy Hell” includes interviews with other former members who discuss the cult’s brainwashing methods, “groupthink” mindset and alleged sexual abuse that happened under the guise of spiritual enlightenment. While followers comprised both men and women, Allen said Gomez singled out young homosexual men for sex.

The film also provides a glimpse of what life was like through footage from that period and includes an on-camera confrontation with Gomez in Waikiki.

Allen, who will be in Honolulu for screenings at 6:30 p.m. Friday and 11 a.m. Saturday, spoke with the Honolulu Star-Advertiser by phone from California last week as he prepared to return to Oahu, where he lived for two years in the 1990s.

Question: This is the first and only screening of “Holy Hell” at a LGBT festival, correct?

Answer: That’s right. We are really happy to be exclusive with the (Honolulu) Rainbow Film Festival. I never thought of this as a gay-oriented film, but it really is... When I worked on making the film, I never thought of that. But I’m gay, and there are so many of those themes (present). It’s just a natural part of it.

Q: What was your goal with this film?

A: The goal was to create a discussion and a platform of transparency and openness. So many things go on behind closed doors, and until someone is honest and open, we can’t talk about it. If we bring that conversation out, it’s the beginning of exposing things and healing things.

Q: What did you know about the Buddhafield before you were brought in?

A: Well, nothing. I didn’t know anything about it except people would take their shoes off and bow down at an altar and just enjoy themselves.

Q: What was filming like back then?

A: He didn’t like me picking up the camera. But he was an actor, so as soon as I turned on the camera, he was very aware it was on. He would act the way he wanted to be perceived.

Q: Making this film had to be a traumatic experience. Has the process helped or hurt you?

A: They say in therapy you don’t want to go back and open up old wounds. I’ve done that every day for four years. The process of making this movie and finding the emotional core, and listening to my brothers and sisters talk about it, I cried all the time. I had to put all that emotion into the film in order to sort through and find the truth.

Q: Do you feel you've been successful in telling your story?

A: I think the film has been successful in at least laying a groundwork where we can begin to talk about it. We had a five-hour cut, then we had a three-hour cut and then we had a two-hour cut. As you cut, you realize you have to take people through this 20- year story, so you lose some of the detailed explanations. But I'm so glad we did. Maybe the particulars aren't all there, but the emotional story that audiences can relate to is.

I would have been very upset if people walked out of the movie and said they got it, because we don't even get it. We're still processing it. We're all just here sorting through the mess. I wanted audiences to trust us enough to go on a journey, even though we look like idiots, to see things the way we saw them.

Q: Do you have a message for those who remain in the group?

A: First of all, I didn't make this movie to try and get them out. I made this movie for everybody else. The reason we're coming out there is not to attack, but to protect them. We have their back. He doesn't have their back. Nobody is protecting them from him.

We're coming to offer our story to help. It's our commitment and our duty to have a conversation about this because we never did, and that's why it's still happening. If the people in the group don't want to hear about it, we'll just talk to the general community so this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Get tickets to "Holy Hell" [HERE](#).