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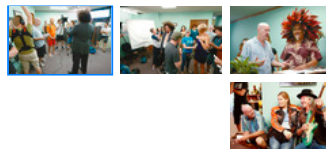
'Get a Job' in the movie biz

By RICK CHATENEVER, Scene Editor

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Energy on a movie set isn't normal everyday energy. Not only is it hurry up and wait, but it's orchestrated, pre-planned, group déjà vu — the same moment in time, repeated over and over again. Then there are all these people around. Even if there are only two actors in the scene that will eventually wind up on the screen, even if it's a closeup of just one of them, there's a veritable army of folks behind the camera — gaffers, grips, the guy holding the mike boom, the ladies spritzing hairspray and brushing on makeup, the cinematographer and somewhere in there, the boss: the director. As most of Maui knows, there's a big Hollywood comedy, "Just Go With It" starring Adam Sandler and Jennifer Aniston that began several weeks of shooting in Wailea this week. That's not what this column is about. This column is about the other movie that also began several weeks of shooting on Maui last weekend. It's called "Get a Job," it stars Willie K, Eric Gilliom with a who's who of island music stars and other local notables. It's basically everything that other movie isn't. It's a madcap comedy, a throwback to the zaniness of Hope and Crosby, Martin and Lewis, Abbott and Costello. Although Willie and Eric have performed together musically as the Barefoot Natives, this project written and directed by Brian Kohne, casts them in fictional roles —Willie as a harried employment counselor, and Eric as a career-impaired goofball. "His name is Merton," says Eric of his character. "He's a Hawaii everyman, a local boy raised by his auntie. He's that iconic character that we all know and have seen around Maui for years. He gets up in the morning and goes in one direction. He surfs every day at a spot where there are never any waves. He's a knucklehead ... with a big heart. He doesn't have care in the world. He's a man child." Willie K's "William," in contrast, is "an overly ambitious employment counselor who has to get Merton a job in a week," explains writer-director Kohne. In suit and tie — but with his hair all over the place and out to here — William's life and career are complicated by the ticking biological clock of his girlfriend Laura. After 12 years, she thinks it's about time for them to make it official. "Get a Job" takes place over one week of many changes. William starts the week as "pretty much a guy who's trying to save everybody's job," according to Willie, "no matter what kind of job. Especially one guy you might call unemployable. But the more I help him, the more he takes over ... my job ... my women ... my life." Co-starring as Willie's girlfriend, Laura, is Carolyn Omine. Born and raised on Oahu, she is returning to the islands for this chance to get back to her acting roots after an Emmy-award-winning stint as writer, vocal director and producer on "The Simpsons." Island connections run through the cast whose co-stars include comedian Augie T., Jake Shimabukuro in a comedic role and Maui radio favorites, Alaka'i Paleka and Kathy Collins. Writer-director Kohne, who was instrumental in creating the Barefoot Natives with Willie and Eric, describes the film as "a unique, outrageous and uplifting story, populated with characters and personalities the world has never seen but that we in Hawaii know to exist. It's actually a love story in which the characters must learn to first want what they have, in order to get what they want." He wrote the screenplay after finding himself on the Mainland, looking for work. "I realized I had to get a job ... or write a movie called 'Get a Job,'" he recalls. Getting the script into preliminary shape, he went looking for a producer in an unusual way: He put an ad on Craigslist. In New York, award-winning independent movie producer Stefan Schaefer saw the ad. Schaefer's wife is from Oahu, and they had been planning a move in this direction anyway. There's a certain "meant to be" thread of synchronicity running through this project. Schaefer, co-founder of the production company Cicala Filmworks, has numerous credits as writer, director, producer and actor. His films have won awards at festivals from Brooklyn to Berlin. "I thought this is something that hadn't been done," he recalled at seeing Kohne's script. "I hadn't seen a comedy about the underbelly of paradise. I thought it was a film that can absolutely do well in the islands, and will travel well." With Kohne, he says, "We talked about how to put it together, and finance it." Along with his producing expertise, he brought seven crew members, including cinematographer Dan Hersey. The resulting crew is "a great combination of New Yorkers and local hires," says Kohne. Along with contributing the setting for the story, Maui also provides its heart and

Article Photos



AUBREY HORD photo
Sound man Marcin Tvszka (from left) holds the boom mike, director Brian Kohne holds the script, Eric Gilliom holds a thought and Willie K holds his pose with cinematographer Dan Hersey behind the camera on the set of "Get a Job."

the tone of its humor. "It's the Maui we know, the Maui that's familiar to residents of Hawaii," says Kohne. "We don't seek to replicate the experience of being a tourist, but to show the struggle and inherent beauty found in the people." Made on a six-figure budget — a tiny fraction of the Hollywood norm, and a rarity in these times of dwindling independent productions — Schaefer says, "Everyone is working at modest rates, but if it does well, we'll all do well. Everyone's doing it for the love of the project, not the paycheck." His plan is to look for a good domestic film festival premiere, and then to take advantage of his experience with international festivals. Jake Shimabukuro has a huge following in Japan, he notes. Willie K, who just won three Na Hoku Hanohano nominations, has a new album coming out in Germany, where he has his own fan base. But at the same time, "Get a Job" is proudly a made-on-Maui project. "We're benefitting from being lifetime Maui residents," Kohne says. "It's a benefit outside film companies don't have. With friends and family, we're going to the favor bank, we're leveraging every connection. We couldn't take on something like this if it weren't in Hawaii." And it seems to be working. Musical artists like Henry Kapono, Amy Hanaiali'i and Ernie Cruz Jr. are making appearances, amidst a sea of faces in the supporting ranks that will be familiar to Maui audiences. Doobie Brother Pat Simmons shows up in the employment office, guitar in hand, looking for work. His wife, Cris, author and all-around motorcycle expert, is there, too, as — what else? — a biker chick. But to really get what "Get a Job" was about, I realized, I would have to get a job myself — as an extra. And so last Sunday in an office suite converted to a soundstage on Dairy Road in Kahului, I joined the ranks of the unemployed looking for work at the movie's "Challenger Employment Agency." In the script, it was the day Willie and Eric's characters first meet in the agency. Looking around, the room was full of familiar faces, like Charles Ka'upu, head haloed in ti leaves, ipu in hand, apparently an unemployed kumu hula. There was photographer Tony Novak-Clifford, Wailuku artist David Sandell and his wife, Virginia, moonlighting from her drama teaching duties. Producer Schaefer was there as a sharp-tongued out-of-work German transvestite. Alaka'i Paleka must have been an unemployed morning goddess. □ Slinky Chelsea Hill played a different kind of goddess, moving through the huddled masses in blond wig and tight poured-on wardrobes. She played William's secretary, Candy, who looked like she had other jobs after dark. Between various, bare chested "job applicants" and other interesting body markings, I realized the Challenger Agency was an only-on-Maui kind of place. "No Tattoo, No Apply" might be a better name for it. It felt familiar, but surreal — a strange, but not unpleasant, dream. Under Kohne's calm direction with savvy help from assistant director Jon Campbell, the mood on set kept getting giddier, as the takes kept getting funnier. Kohne acknowledges "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World" as a source of inspiration. But under that, is a different kind of message. "We've never seen Hawaiians portrayed this way. There hasn't been a film made in Hawaii by Hawaii people that the Hawaiian audience has cared about," he says. "That's what 'Get a Job' is about — creating opportunities for other filmmakers. We should have a way of telling our stories." So it really is about getting a job. "It's amazing that we have two feature films shooting simultaneously on Maui, which is affording our film community job opportunities during these trying times," notes Maui Film Commissioner Benita Brazier. Which reminds us of that other shoot going on, the Hollywood production, over in Wailea. They're not competing, says Kohne. Noting that his "Get a Job" has 35 featured players, 100 extras and a crew of around 30, he says, "It's to our benefit in any number of ways to have them on the island. We're providing work for those who didn't get selected to be on the Adam Sandler project." Eric Gilliom has a different take on the matter. Merton is ready to wrestle Adam Sandler, he says. But his co-star Willie K takes a longer view: "Any shirt tails we can hang onto are OK with me." * Contact Rick Chatenever at scene@mauineews.com.

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