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OUTTAKES

Documentary depicts Tyke as tragic figure, not outlaw

When he decided to tell the story of Tyke, the circus elephant that rampaged through Honolulu in 1994, documentary filmmaker Stefan Moore knew the collective memory of that event was overwhelmingly negative.

Tyke had crushed her trainer to death on the floor of the Blaisdell Arena as parents and children screamed. And her dash for freedom ended in a hail of police gunfire in Kakaako. Cameras captured every moment.

"Up to this point, I think Tyke has been largely perceived as either a bad seed or an incomprehensible force of nature," Moore said.

But to his great surprise, the filmmaker discovered never-before-seen news footage that helps transform Tyke from an angry killer to a tragic figure.

Moore says his documentary, "Tyke Elephant Outlaw," is a redemptive drama filled with trauma, outrage, insight and compassion.

The documentary — which Moore is directing and producing with his wife, Susan Lambert, and co-producer Megan McMurchy — includes interviews with the trainers and handlers who worked with Tyke. But it sets the tone with unedited footage Moore found in the Hawaii News Now archives in 2012.

This time, the cameras captured Tyke's peaceful arrival at Honolulu Harbor and the Blaisdell as well as closeups of her dark, weary eyes.

"They are evocative, beautiful shots of Tyke, and that really allowed us to create Tyke as the protagonist, as the central character of the film," Moore said. "I almost couldn't believe what I was watching when the tape began playing. I just about jumped out of my chair."

Tyke was in Honolulu with Circus International and her Aug. 20, 1994, rampage occurred on the last day of the circus. It traumatized Honolulu.

After crushing her trainer, Allen Campbell, the elephant fled through Kakaako for half an hour. When police brought her down, firing at her with rifles, some on-lookers screamed at them to stop while others threw bottles. One officer wept.

Getting those who worked with Tyke to discuss what happened wasn't easy, Moore said. The filmmaker and his team repeatedly stressed they were not trying to make an animal rights propaganda film. They just wanted to tell what happened.

"Quite frankly, to most people in the circus industry if you mention the name Tyke, it is guaranteed to get the door shut in your face," Moore said. "The Tyke incident was the worst blemish in the history of the American circus industry."

The trainers and handlers described a troubled, strong-willed animal that rebelled in the face of what Moore called "rough and often brutal treatment."

The signs of impending violence ranged from Tyke rubbing a trainer with her tusk — until he cut it off — to the elephant bolting from two previous performances, Moore said. In Altoona, Pa., police were ready to gun her down. Months later at the North Dakota State Fair in Minot, Tyke nearly killed a man.



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Tyke, the elephant who rampaged through Honolulu, is pictured with former trainer Tyrone Taylor after escaping from a performance in Altoona, Pa. Police there were ready to gun her down but Taylor safely retrieved her.

One former elephant groom even recalls warning Campbell to be careful around Tyke.

"The people who agreed to participate in the film had all, to some degree, questions about what happened in the Tyke incident," Moore said. "They were either angry that she was allowed to perform — the owner kept sending Tyke out to make money — or they had some sort of awakening about the kind of training that animals received in the circus."

Moore submitted the 78-minute documentary to sev-

eral film festivals, including the Tribeca Film Festival and the Los Angeles Film Festival, and recently contacted the Hawaii International Film Festival with the hope of screening to an audience familiar with Tyke. He's also hoping for a TV audience.

The documentary includes multiple eyewitness accounts of Tyke's final outburst, but one of the most

remarkable interviews for Moore was with the city truck driver who was ordered to load Tyke onto a flatbed truck and take her to the Waimanalo Gulch Landfill in Nanakuli.

Moore wanted to film at the landfill, but the city said no, adding that no one remembered exactly where Tyke was dumped.

AND that's a wrap ...

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