

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

I WAS A SIMPLE MAN

A FILM BY
CHRISTOPHER MAKOTO YOGI

*Starring Constance Wu, Steve Iwamtoto, Kanoa Goo, Chanel
Akiki Hirai, Tim Chiou, Boonyanudh Jiyarom*

PRESS NOTES

*OFFICIAL SELECTION
Sundance Film Festival*

Country of Origin: United States of America
Format: DCP/1.85/Color
Sound: 5.1 Surround
Running Time: 100 minutes
Genre: Drama
Not Rated
English

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SYNOPSIS

I Was A Simple Man is a ghost story set in the pastoral countryside of the north shore of O'ahu, Hawai'i. Revealed in four chapters, it tells the story of an elderly man facing the end of his life, visited by the ghosts of his past. Incorporating familial history and mythology, dream logic and surrealism, *I Was a Simple Man* is a time-shifting, kaleidoscopic story of a fractured family facing the death of their patriarch that will take us from the high-rises of contemporary Honolulu to pre-WWII pastorals of O'ahu and, finally, into the beyond.

DIRECTOR CHRISTOPHER MAKOTO YOGI ON THE PRODUCTION

Part ghost story, part family portrait, *I Was a Simple Man* is a unique cinematic experience of a place we all think we know but really know little about: Hawai'i, my home.

Jacques Derrida once said, "There is no world, only islands." Growing up in Hawai'i, this quote resonates deeply with me. I am constantly striving for a new way to look at these islands, one that both accepts and transcends the locale's natural beauty—one that explores the Hawai'i that I've come to know, a side rarely seen in media: haunted, heartbreaking, and ultimately full of spiritual beauty.

INSPIRATIONS

I am inspired by the filmmakers of the Japanese and Taiwanese New Waves, who intertwined history and dream to create a wholly new film grammar that was rooted in the ancestral conflicts and traumas of their homeland. In the same way, my films take the mythology and storytelling traditions of Hawai'i and use them to explore its details: the ghosts that haunted me as a child, the home that my grandfather built with his own hands, the crumbling Hawaiian gravestones a hundred years old. True beauty weighs heavy in Honolulu.

The film tackles the universal themes of time, memory, and death inspired by what it was like for me to sit next to my own father and grandfather at their deathbeds, feeling their entire lives closing in on them—that sense of fear mixed with profound beauty, and then letting go. Death is something that Westerners do not like to speak about, and my hope is that this film can give audiences the strength to come together and face the mortality of life itself, and to do what I believe cinema is best at: provide a devotional space for reflection, contemplation, and healing.

STYLE & AESTHETIC

As a child in Hawai'i, you grow up surrounded by stories of *obake*, or ghosts. Passed like treasured secrets between friends and family members, everyone has their personal *obake* story to share. Stories of the goddess Pele appearing to them on the highway at night; stories of Night Marchers, fallen Hawaiian soldiers, wielding flames, journeying down from the mountains behind someone's home; stories of faceless men and women roaming new development complexes; stories of old stones with unimaginable powers. These stories become the way in which culture and memory are passed on, casually intertwined with familial history and memory. The gods, the ghosts, the history—they are always present, it just takes a slight shifting of perspective to see. This ever-present spirit realm, revealed in short casual glimpses, inspired the formal approach to the world of the film.

I Was A Simple Man begins as a grounded family drama. The movement of time will be lyrical and spiritual, recalling life in the Hawaiian countryside, capturing the quiet in-between moments. Gradually, images of ghosts and nature will combine with a haunting sound design and score to create a visceral experience of time bending, of past and present converging, of our character's terror and, finally, elation. Time will be used as a passageway into magic. Like a symphony in four parts, each chapter will take us deeper, further, and by the end you will have had a fully immersive and expansive experience of a life lived.

The visual and sonic approach is to foreground Hawai'i. Whether it is the towering greens of the trees, the ever-present sounds of the shore, mysterious clouds against blue skies, or the grey

concrete covering the green of the land, we use compositions and sound design that do not favor the human subjects but instead always try to capture the entire world, interconnected. By doing this, I hope to emphasize that we are not necessarily the main characters in this play.

Furthermore, it was the natural world that inspired the overarching structure of the film. Specifically, the way in which waves crash in the Pacific: calm, then pulling, then building, then crashing, then calm once again. Then folding back, repeating, and crashing back onto itself in a beautiful, repetitive cycle. As we ride these waves, we begin to internalize the rhythms of the natural world: cinema carries us.

THE SCORE

The music was composed by Alex Zhang Hungtai (of Dirty Beaches) and Pierre Guerineau (of *Essaie pas*). Having previously worked with Alex as an actor and composer on *August at Akiko's*, we had established a trust and a working method that was extremely liberated and open. I have come to regard Alex as one of the most creative people I have ever met, and an inspired cinematic collaborator. Alex came to set to act in a couple of scenes (as Masao's friend "Jimmy") but then also remained on set, composing on location while absorbing the production, the scenery, the vibe.

Having grown up in Hawai'i, Alex was already familiar with the culture, the people, the stories. On-set and off, we'd have long conversations about life, death, memories -- or whatever was on our minds at the moment. And from these seeds of conversations and experiences, Alex and Pierre would compose and send me tracks recorded from wherever their travels took him. Our score was written and recorded in Hawai'i, Taipei, Los Angeles, and Montreal. I see sound as not just a post-production process but integral to the writing, development, and production processes, intertwining and informing one another: both Alex and Sung Rok, our sound designer, were creating work throughout pre-production, production, and post.

THE CAST

I first met Constance Wu through the Sundance Directing Lab in 2015, a month long workshop in Utah where fellows would cast, direct, and edit scenes on site. Constance came to set incredibly well prepared and all throughout the workshop I was consistently impressed by not only her talent but her commitment to the work. I still remember the first scene we shot with her--and the stunned silence after I called cut. People around the monitor were quietly weeping. It was at that moment that the character of Grace made sense to me.

About a year later, it was at a bon dance -- a Japanese summer festival honoring one's ancestors, where we eat, drink, dance -- that we spotted Steve Iwamoto flamboyantly dancing among the crowd. Dressed up in a Japanese summer *happi* coat, swinging his arms to taiko and old Japanese tunes, we thought: who is that? When we approached Steve to ask if he had ever acted in a film before, he said, simply: "it's been my lifelong dream to act in a film." Over the next few years, I put Steve through a crash course in acting school: every time I was home, we'd meet up and we'd do some exercises. He worked diligently over the years and it was a proud moment when a week before production he revealed to me that he'd started dreaming in character -- Masao and Steve had merged into one.

We always knew that the cast of *I Was a Simple Man* would consist of both trained and untrained performers: experienced actors to tackle specific roles and so-called "non-actors" to provide a lived-in sensibility. In all of my previous work, I have collaborated with

non-professional actors who were discovered through street casting -- exploring that ineffable, intangible spirit of someone who carries Hawai'i within them is one of the goals of the work. Because of my previous experience, we knew that the casting process would be a long one, so we started collaborating with our street casting director in Hawai'i way back in 2016. Together we all attended as many public events as possible: scouting malls, fairs, dance performances, concerts. Anywhere that local folks would gather. Our producer Sarah and I would attend local plays and only be looking at the audience! It was fun but arduous work. We found the majority of our Hawai'i cast in this manner.

ON THE HISTORY OF HAWAII

As an artist, I am invested in cracking through the surface image of Hawai'i, a nation occupied, a nation that is still fighting for its sovereignty. 1898, the year that Thomas Edison's camera first arrived in the islands is also the year that Hawai'i was annexed by the U.S. after the monarchy was overthrown. Since that year, the moving image and colonization have gone hand in hand: the moving image used as propaganda to reinforce the narrative that Hawai'i is the "paradise playground for the world," foregrounding outsiders' stories while backgrounding the people who live there. My work challenges this narrative not only in content but also in form and production processes.

I Was a Simple Man looks at the history of Hawai'i in the twentieth century, and in particular Hawai'i's transition to a U.S. state, and uses the life of one man to explore these complicated issues. The spine of the narrative takes us from 1930s pre-statehood up until the late aughts. Like my own grandparents, Masao is born in a tight-knit Japanese plantation community, one that he looks back on fondly because he fails to see the deeper undercurrents of darkness: his parents' feelings of homelessness and landlessness; his community's racism, which forbids his relations with a Chinese girl, Grace; the Western values that are slowly corrupting the land and silencing indigenous culture. And the generational shift of Masao's family is an important aspect of the story: although Masao is full Japanese and Grace is full Chinese, by the time we get to his grandchildren, Gavin and Ashley, they are both mixed hapa Hawaiian, portrayed by Native Hawaiian actors.

I am proud to be a part of a vibrant, diverse generation of independent filmmakers in Hawai'i who are excavating the stories of our home in a manner that is honest, creative, and formally unique. Most people only know one story of Hawai'i—"paradise"—and our goal is to present a vision of Hawai'i that communicates the complex weight of history that is often glossed over in commercial tourism and colonial histories. Like new wave cinema movements from all over the world, we see the future of the cinema of Hawai'i as one that is in dialogue with international cinematic and artistic traditions, using alternative grammar and processes to create a uniquely Hawaiian cinema that will both interrogate and commune with those universal truths that make us all human.

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

CHRISTOPHER MAKOTO YOGI | WRITER/DIRECTOR/EDITOR

Christopher Makoto Yogi (Writer/Director/Editor) is an artist and filmmaker from Honolulu, Hawai'i. His debut feature film, the award-winning *August at Akiko's*, had its World Premiere at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam in 2018 to critical acclaim. Richard Brody in *The New Yorker* named it one of the best films of 2019. *I Was a Simple Man*, his second feature film, has participated in the Sundance Screenwriters and Directors Labs, IFP Film Week, Film Independent's Fast Track, and received a Jerome Foundation and Cinereach grant. Chris' short films include the documentaries *Occasionally, I Saw Glimpses of Hawai'i* and *Makoto: or, Honesty*, and the fiction film *Obake (Ghosts)*. Chris is a Berlinale Talents, Visual Communications' Armed with a Camera, Kyoto Filmmakers Lab, and New York Film Festival Artists Academy fellow.

SARAH S. KIM | PRODUCER

Sarah S. Kim (Producer) is a creative producer originally from Busan, South Korea and currently based in Los Angeles. Her producing credits include the critically acclaimed feature film *August at Akiko's*, starring musician Alex Zhang Hungtai (fka Dirty Beaches) directed by Christopher Makoto Yogi, which premiered at Rotterdam and is currently streaming on the Criterion Channel. *I Was a Simple Man* has been supported by the Sundance Labs and Sundance Catalyst, IFP, Film Independent, the Jerome Foundation, and Cinereach. She's also produced several international co-productions including a North Korean period feature film called *The Other Side of the Mountain*, which is in the National Korean Film Archive. She is a Film Independent Producers Lab and IFP Cannes Producers Network fellow.

EUNSOO ROBIN CHO | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Eunsoo Robin Cho (Director of Photography) is an award-winning cinematographer born and raised in Seoul, Korea. Eunsoo's most recent projects are the South Korean feature film, *Love, Lies* which was praised by critics, one calling it a "feast for the eyes" and Christopher Makoto Yogi's independent feature film, *August at Akiko's*. She studied at the Korean National University of Arts and received her M.F.A. at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. Many of her works have garnered awards at film festivals around the world. She is a fellow of Project:Involve and Berlinale Talents.

SUNG ROK CHOI | SOUND DESIGNER/MIXER

Sung Rok Choi (Sound Designer/Mixer) is based in Los Angeles. He started his career as a sound editor for South Korean feature films including *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (dir. Park Chan-wook) and *Barking Dog Never Bites* (dir. Bong Joon-ho). He continued his work as a re-recording mixer focusing on dialogue mixing on various films including *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War*, *A Good Lawyer's Wife* and *The Classic*. In 2005, Sung Rok was the Supervising Sound Editor and Mixer for the film *Tale of Cinema* (dir. Hong Sang-soo) which was nominated for a Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. He began his MFA at USC's School of

Cinematic Art in 2006 and ever since, he has continued his career as a Sound Designer and Mixer on fiction and documentary films such as *Snowpiercer* (dir. Bong Joon-ho), *The Million Dollar Duck* (Animal Planet), *Who is Arthur Chu?* (Slamdance 2017), *Purdah* (Cinequest 2018), *August at Akiko's* (Rotterdam 2018), *A Woman's Work* (Tribeca 2019) and *37 Seconds* (Berlinale & Netflix 2019). Sung Rok was nominated for an MPSE Award in 2010, 2011 and 2020.

ALEX ZHANG HUNGTAI | COMPOSER

Alex Zhang Hungtai (Composer) is a musician who, after retiring his project Dirty Beaches, has been focusing on explorations of improvised music and Free Jazz. His newer work predominantly works with saxophone, synthesizers, percussion and piano, furthering his research on ritualistic music of liminality. Besides his solo work, he is also a member of a Free Jazz/experimental trio with Portuguese minimalist/architect David Maranha, and Free Jazz Drummer Gabriel Ferrandini in Lisbon. In 2018, Alex starred in Christopher Makoto Yogi's debut feature film, *August at Akiko's*. Alex is currently scoring independent films with his long time collaborator Pierre Guerineau as a duo team of composers.

PIERRE GUERINEAU | COMPOSER

Pierre Guerineau (Composer) is a French composer and producer living in Montreal. Besides his critically acclaimed work with *Essaie pas* and partner Marie Davidson, he has produced over thirty releases on international labels such as DFA, Ninja Tune and PAN Records, and collaborated with artists such as Bernardino Femminielli, Jesse Osborne-Lanthier and Yair Elazar Glotman. Described as “a stunningly varied and layered masterclass in wordless storytelling” 2020 saw the birth of *Feu St-Antoine*, his first solo effort, on Éditions Apparent, a promising new imprint co-founded by Guerineau.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

STEVE IWAMOTO | MASAO

Steve Iwamoto (“Masao”) was born in Hawai‘i and lived in the islands his entire life. He made his first on-screen appearance in Christopher Makoto Yogi's *August at Akiko's*. *I Was a Simple Man* is his first starring film role.

CONSTANCE WU | GRACE

Constance Wu (“Grace”) recently starred in Lorene Scafaria's drama, *Hustlers*, which was a Box Office smash hit! Based on the New York magazine article “The Hustlers at Scores” by Jessica Pressler, the film follows a crew of savvy former strip club employees who band together to turn the tables on their Wall Street clients. Constance can next be seen in Chris Makoto Yogi's independent film *I Was A Simple Man*.

Previously, Constance starred in Warner Brother's romantic comedy hit, *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by Jon M. Chu. The film follows Rachel Chu's (Wu) story who accompanies her longtime boyfriend, Nick to his best friend's wedding she discovers, much to her surprise, that Nick's family is extremely wealthy, and he's considered one of the country's most eligible bachelors. Thrust into the spotlight, Rachel must now contend with jealous socialites, nosy relatives, along with Nick's disapproving mother. For this role, Constance received a Golden Globe® nomination in the category of Best Actress in a Motion Picture in a Musical or Comedy and a Critics Choice® nomination in the category of Best Actress in a Comedy. The film itself received many accolades including a Golden Globe® nomination in the category of Best Motion Picture in a Musical or Comedy, SAG Award nomination in the category of Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture and Critics' Choice Award nomination in the categories of Best Acting Ensemble and Best Comedy, coupled with box office success which made it the most successful studio romantic comedy in nearly a decade. *Crazy Rich Asians* also made Hollywood history as the first studio movie in over 25 years to star an Asian American woman.

Additional film credits include Eric Darnell's *Crow: The Legend*, Jenée LaMarque's *The Feels*, Christopher Leone's *Parallels*, Zal Batmanglij's *Sound of My Voice*, Matt Tauber's *The Architect*, and Hilary Brougher's *Stephanie Daley*.

On the small screen, Constance starred for six seasons on ABC's comedy series *Fresh off the Boat*. The critically-acclaimed series is loosely based off of the life of chef Eddie Huang. For this role, Constance was nominated for a Critics' Choice Television Award in the category of Best Actress in a Comedy Series and was honored as part of the TIME 100 Most Influential People of 2017. *Fresh Off the Boat* also made Hollywood history as the first American Network TV show to center an Asian American family in over 20 years. As of this year, it will also mark another milestone as the first Asian-American led TV show ever to reach syndication.

Crazy Rich Asians and *Fresh Off the Boat* finds Constance in the unique position of being the sole actor to star in and lead both breakthrough projects for Asian American representation in Hollywood.

Constance holds a BFA in Acting from SUNY Purchase's prestigious Conservatory of Theatre Arts and Film where she trained in classical theatre.

KANOA GOO | GAVIN

Kanoa Goo ("Gavin") was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. Upon graduating from NYU, he relocated to Los Angeles to pursue television and film. Kanoa's feature credits include *Endings, Beginnings*, *I Am Michael*, *Other People*, and *Velvet Buzzsaw*. In television, Kanoa can be seen in *City On A Hill* (Showtime), *Hawaii Five-o* (CBS), and *Dwight in Shining Armor* (BYU TV).

CHANEL AKIKO HIRAI | KATI

Chanel Akiko Hirai ("Kati") was born and raised on O'ahu, Hawaii. She left Honolulu for Manhattan to study with Sanford Meisner, chosen to be in his last class. Upon graduating from The Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre, she relocated to Los Angeles to work in film and television and became involved with The East West Players, the premier Asian American

theatre dedicated to raising the visibility of Asian American narratives and talent on the stage. Mentored by one of EWP's founders, Mako, Chanel featured in productions such as *Heading East: The Musical*, *The Taste of Kona Coffee*, and *Stew Rice*. Particularly interested in supporting Japanese American stories and filmmakers from Hawai'i, Chanel was part of the ensemble cast in Donna Choo's debut short *Bus Story* and most recently took on the role of Kati in Christopher Makoto Yogi's sophomore feature, *I Was A Simple Man*, that premieres in competition at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. This last project is deeply personal to Chanel and she couldn't be more proud and grateful of the film and its entire cast and crew.

TIM CHIOU | ADULT MASAO

Tim Chiou ("Adult Masao") is an Asian-American actor who has played a number of television and film roles. In 2013 Tim won "Best Actor" at the NBC Short Cuts Film Festival which opened the door for an NBC pilot *Tin Man*. Since then Tim has appeared regularly in acclaimed television shows such as *Chicago PD* (NBC), *Code Black* (CBS), *iZombie* (CW), *Silicon Valley* (HBO) and *Interrogation* (CBS All Access) along with award winning independent films, including Sujata Day's directorial debut *Definition Please* and 2019's Tribeca audience award winning film *Plus One*.

NELSON LEE | MARK

Nelson Lee ("Mark") played the role of The Chancellor in Disney's live-action adaptation of *Mulan* opposite Jet Li, Liu Yifei, Donnie Yen, and Gong Li. He also had a supporting role in the Sundance nominated film *I Was a Simple Man* and a lead role in the Steve Pink directed indie film *The Wheel*.

He has worked with Geoff Johns as Dragon King on DC's *Stargirl* and as Shen in Spike TV's *Blade: The Series*. He has had memorable turns on TV including his recurring roles on HBO's award-winning drama *Oz*, Amazon's Giovanni Ribisi led-series *Sneaky Pete*, ABC's *Ten Days in the Valley* opposite Kyra Sedgwick and Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje and on TNT's *Claws* opposite Nicey Nash & Carrie Preston.

Additionally, Lee has been seen in *Madame Secretary*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Shooter*, *Superior Donuts*, *The Night Shift*, *Stitchers*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *NCIS: New Orleans*, *Bones*, and *Law and Order*. His additional film credits include *All Saints*, *Vacancy 2: Ring of Death* and the HBO film *Strip Search*. On stage he has appeared Off Broadway as "David" in Zayd Dorn's World Premiere of *Outside People*. He has also appeared in world premieres of Carla Ching's *Nomad Motel*, *The Two Kids That Blow Shit Up*, and *Fast Company*, as well as Heidi Schreck's *The Consultant*, and as Ryu in *Maple and Vine* at both ACT and City Theatre.

Nelson Lee was born in Taiwan and moved to New Brunswick, Canada at the age of 5. He graduated from the University of Toronto with a double major in Business and Philosophy and continued his studies at The University of Wales. After two years in Europe, he returned to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City, where he lived for 10 years. He is now based in Los Angeles.

KYLE KOSAKI | YOUNG MASAO

Kyle Kosaki (“Young Masao”) is an actor and Emmy award-winning filmmaker from Hilo, Hawaii. Throughout his life, Kyle has always loved telling stories and making movies. Previous to *I Was A Simple Man*, he has acted in a film called *Go for Broke* where he had the honor of portraying the late Hawai’i Senator, Daniel K. Inouye. He enjoys eating Korean food, reading poems, and spending time with friends, family, and his furry companion Scruffy.

BOONYANUDH (BJ) JIYAROM | YOUNG GRACE

Boonyanudh (BJ) Jiyarom (“Young Grace”) was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. Both parents are restaurant owners and are immigrants from Thailand. BJ grew up in Los Angeles playing an extensive amount of volleyball. While her interest was always in science and sports, she always finds time in artist matters such as performing in school plays. At 18, she moved to Honolulu, Hawaii to study Molecular and Cell Biology and continued to receive her Master's in Biomedical Science. *I Was a Simple Man* is her first film role.

ALEX CAPRI LEINANI BODDEN | YOUNG KATI

Alexa Capri Leinani Bodden (“Young Kati”), 11 years old, is a 6th grader at Punahou School in Honolulu, HI. She loves to act, model, dance, lift weights, and is a professional Tahitian dancer. Alexa’s first acting role was in *Hawaii Five-o* at age 6, she has since starred in a handful of independent films in Hawai’i.

AKIKO MASUDA | AKIKO

Akiko Masuda (“Akiko”) is a 3rd generation Japanese woman, born in Honolulu in the 40’s, long before freeways, shopping malls, email, and cell phones. Akiko is a writer of children’s books, a student of tai chi, and zen meditation, and makes some "mean" French toast. She is a storyteller, hostess, housekeeper, and loves using her weed whacker and a leaf blower to maintain the garden, citrus orchard and breadfruit grove in the backyard. She is also president of the Wailea Village Historic Preservation Community. Akiko has been living in Wailea Village since '91, the first person to buy in this quiet, peaceful country village in 35 years. Wailea is a wee, still-intact, plantation village, with about 12 households that have seen very little change, a fleeting flashback in time. She is the lead in Christopher Makoto Yogi's first feature film, *August at Akiko's*.

CAST

Masao	Steve Iwamoto
Grace	Constance Wu
Gavin	Kanoa Goo
Kati	Chanel Akiko Hirai
Adult Masao	Tim Chiou
Young Grace	Boonyanudh Jiyarom
Young Masao	Kyle Kosaki
Young Kati	Alexa Bodden
Mark	Nelson Lee
Akiko	Akiko Masuda

CREW

Directed by	Christopher Makoto Yogi
Written by	Christopher Makoto Yogi
Edited by	Christopher Makoto Yogi
Original Music by	Alex Zhang Huntai & Pierre Guerineau
Cinematographer	Eunsoo Cho
Sound Designer	Sung Rok Choi
Casting by	Eyde Belasco, CSA & Akemi Bischoff
Executive Producers	Ken Whitney, Elizabeth Reiko, Kubota Whitney, Ric Galindez, Roy Tjioe, Eric Nyari
Associate Producers	Cris Clatte, David Chan, James Michael Blackmore Josh Garcia, Jason Cutinella
Co-Producers	Daniel Patrick Carbone, Zachary Shedd, Anne Misawa Martin Dorsch, William Kwok
Produced by	Sarah S. Kim, Christopher Makoto Yogi, Matthew Petock, Yamato Cibulka

A TALK TREE Production
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