

## 'Blood Red Sun' launches at last with isle-heavy cast - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

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### 'Blood Red Sun' launches at last with isle-heavy cast

By Mike Gordon

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Finding the right actors is a priority for any filmmaker, but there was a lot riding on the casting of the two lead roles in "Under the Blood Red Sun," the indie film based on the popular young-adult novel set in World War II Hawaii.

The characters Tomi and Billy are central to the story's theme of friendship under fire.

They're best buddies whose lives are changed by the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.

When Tomi's father and grandfather are sent to an internment camp, the boy worries that his pal Billy will stop being his friend.



Kyler  
Sakamoto

Producer Dana Hankins and the book's author, Graham "Sandy" Salisbury, searched for eight months before they found what they wanted in a pair of newcomers: Kyler Saka-moto and Kalama Epstein.

"If we hadn't found one or both of these boys, we would have postponed the film," said Hankins, who optioned the rights to the story not long after the book came out in 1995. "Those performances are central to what makes the story, what makes the film."



Kalama  
Epstein

The young actors are roughly the same age as the book's audience.

"Under the Blood Red Sun" has been popular among 11- and 12-year-olds and is required reading in many middle-school classes nationwide. More than 3 million students have read it.

Kyler, a 13-year-old Punahou eighth-grader, has local stage experience but it's a family trait. His father, Circuit Court Judge Karl Saka-moto, is part of the ensemble of "Les Miserables" at Paliku Theatre.

Kyler stood out from the 35 young actors who auditioned.

"I think it is safe to say there is something of an old soul in Kyler," Hankins said. "I worry about labeling him, but something is going on deeper in him."

Kalama, who is also 13, is a Hawaii boy who recently moved to Los Angeles with his mother to help further his acting career. He's had a variety of recent TV roles, including a spot on "Hawaii Five-0."

Kalama has entertainment in his blood, too. He's the great-grandson of Hawaii carnival entrepreneur E.K. Fernandez.

Hankins said Kalama stood out among the 50 other boys who auditioned — and his audition was done via Skype.

"For the role of Billy you have to get that sense of compassion in that he feels for the situation that Tomi and his family are in," she said.

"He feels the injustice. I go back again to gravitas. You can see that Kalama is feeling it a little deeper."

"Under the Blood Red Sun" looks to be a boon for Hawaii actors. Fourteen of the 15 principal parts were cast locally, and all of the 10 smaller parts as well as the background extras are from Hawaii.

The exception to the casting is actor Chris Tashima, who won an Oscar for the 1997 short film he directed, co-wrote and starred in, "Visas and Virtue."

When filming starts Saturday morning, it will be a milestone. Hankins has tried and failed twice in the last 15 years to get the film made. This time she has a 15-day schedule already set and a second shooting schedule set for January.

There's no turning back now, said Hankins, whose Hollywood credits include "The Tempest," "Picture Bride," "Bird on a Wire," "Blue Thunder" and the indie film by Brett Wagner, "Chief."

"I am relieved that the day is finally here," she said. "Yes, there is a lot of work, but more importantly, I feel the burden of responsibility. It's not a bad burden. It's a good burden to meet the expectations of all those kids who have read this book."

AND that's a wrap ...

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