

SFR Talk

WITH ADAM HOROWITZ



JULIA GOLDBERG

NUCLEAR RAVAGE

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US nuclear testing occurred in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958, during which time the US detonated 67 nuclear bombs, including the 1954 "Bravo" test, which was larger than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Artist and documentary filmmaker Adam Horowitz first went to the Marshall Islands in 1986 and made a 16 mm film, Home on the Range, about nuclear testing in the area. He is in the final stages of completing a second documentary, with funding from Public Broadcasting Service national, about the environmental and human health consequences to the people of the Marshall Islands. He can be reached at primordialsoupcompany@gmail.com.

SFR: How did this project start in 1986?

AH: I was living here and I was working in the film business, in feature films, and I was fascinated and horrified by the fact of living next to Los Alamos [National] Laboratory...I became obsessed with the bomb and its implications in so many realms of society. I started researching the lab and the history of the bomb and found out they had tested 67 nuclear bombs in the Marshall Islands. And I looked into the Marshall Islands and the results of this testing and thought, 'I should go make a film there.' It is fascinating to me because the Marshall Islands is paradise. It's our idea of what paradise looks like: white sand beaches and coconut palms and islanders in outrigger canoes. The idea of blowing up hydrogen bombs in paradise is a symbolic metaphor and a microcosm of what we have done to the Earth.

You first interviewed numerous survivors while making your first film, Home on the Range?

Yes, I met many survivors of nuclear testing who told me they thought they had been experimented on and they had been exposed to radiation from these bombs on purpose, but...there was no documentary proof at that time. [When I returned in 2005], they had documentary proof that they had gotten in the '90s under the [President Bill] Clinton administration—Clinton ordered the release of classified documents about nuclear testing—and among them were a bunch of documents that seemed to be the smoking gun that proved people were deliberately exposed in the Marshall Islands to see the effects of radiation. And the more I looked into it, I was convinced this was an important and untold story.

The film's working title, Nuclear Savage, is taken from a government propaganda film?

It may not be the final title, but there are a lot of documents and government films I made use of that refer to the islanders as savages, and kind of shocking, racist government newsreels that refer to them as happy, amenable savages and comparing them to laboratory mice.

The footage you showed me, the interviews with survivors, is brutal.

It's horrendous what happened to these people. One woman says her first child came out looking like a bunch of grapes and her second child had no bones and, she said...looked like a jellyfish. There are stories of babies they couldn't tell if they were boys or girls, but the babies had a tail... here in paradise, these science fiction horror stories that are just beyond belief, beyond imagination. One of the reasons the US used them as experiments is because they had no voice; they had no political power; they were islanders in the middle of the pacific with no political status. A lot of them have been going to Washington for years trying to get some kind of disclosure, trying to get health care and clean up of their contaminated islands. They have some allies in Congress, but mostly they have lost their battle, and a lot of them have given up fighting because they have been fighting for so many years [that], at some point, they just have to move on with their lives.

Has it been surprising to have radiation poisoning become part of the national discussion as a result of the tsunami in Japan?

It's surprising and it's horrifying, and yet maybe what's happening now in Japan will help us wake up and look at things we haven't wanted to look at. For the last few years, Los Alamos has been in the process of building a new plutonium processing facility...to build new pits for new nuclear weapons, and it's built on top of earthquake faults...and just like everything the lab does, it sails right through. The environmental impact reports say, 'Well, the earthquake danger is small, and that's not a factor.' That's just what they said in Japan about those nuclear reactors: 'Oh, it's safe; nothing can happen.' And of course, in their hubris, they have been proven disastrously wrong.