Tales of the Waria

A film by Kathy Huang
PRODUCTION NOTES

Directed and Produced by Kathy Huang
Total Runtime: 56 minutes
2011 • USA • Color
In Indonesian with English subtitles
Exhibition Format: HDCAM, DigiBeta NTSC, DVD
Production Format: HDV

PRESS CONTACT

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This film is supported by:
SHORT SYNOPSIS

Indonesia is home to the world’s largest Muslim population. It is also home to a community of transgender individuals known as warias, biological men who live openly as women. Tales of the Waria follows four characters from this little-known community as they search for romance and companionship. At times comical and at times heartbreaking, the film uncovers a world that not only defies our expectations of gender and Islam, but also reveals our endless capacity as human beings to search for love -- whatever the consequences.

LONG SYNOPSIS

At a time when transgender communities around the world are largely ignored or misrepresented in the media, the documentary film Tales of the Waria intimately explores how the members of one such community confront issues of love, family, and faith. Traveling to Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim country, the film focuses on warias, biological men who identify as women. Though Indonesia’s tolerant form of Islam permits warias to live openly, they remain a marginalized community whose life choices are often constrained in significant and sometimes tragic ways.

Tales of the Waria interweaves the stories of four warias who encounter unique obstacles on their search for love. Suharni’s seemingly perfect relationship with her boyfriend is tested when she leaves town to find work. Mami Ria, a waria elder, struggles to revive her 18-year relationship with a police officer. “Ex-waria” Firman leads a quiet life with his wife and two kids, but still dreams of the past when he had long hair and danced with men. Guiding us through these stories is Tiara, a glamorous waria who performs triumphantly on stage but secretly harbors her own heartache.

Shot over several years with warias serving as advisors and film crew members, the film provides unprecedented access to a community that dares to live differently from the norm, despite what consequences may await them. Through their emotional journeys, our notions of love, gender, and Islam are forever changed.
DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

Back in 2005, when I was visiting family in Taiwan, I picked up a newspaper and was astonished to see a photograph of a gorgeous waria who had won a beauty contest in Jakarta. I knew about the “ladyboys” of Thailand, but I had no idea that transgender people could live so openly in Indonesia, a country with a predominately Muslim population. Like many Americans, I had this notion of Islam as being oppressive and particularly unforgiving toward sexual minorities. How could a community like the warias possibly exist?

Three years later, unable to shake my curiosity, I decided to take some Indonesian language classes and to travel to Indonesia to experience the lives of the warias firsthand. Under the counsel of Dr. Tom Boellstorff, an anthropologist with 20 years of field experience working with the queer community in Indonesia, I landed in Makassar, a coastal city in eastern Indonesia known for both its strong Muslim faith and traditional openness toward transgender individuals.

I quickly discovered that the warias of Indonesia are very different from transgender women in the United States. Because of religious reasons, they are usually not interested in sex reassignment surgeries. As one waria explained, they are born a certain way and need to return to God the same way. The transgender community in Indonesia is also much more visible than the transgender community in the United States. Warias can be found everywhere -- in salons, on television, at weddings, on street corners. Ask someone if they know a waria and they might reply, “Oh, my uncle is a waria.”

This is not to say that life is a cakewalk for the warias. In fact, they occupy a strange contradictory world in which they’re both accepted and marginalized. One of the largest TV celebrities in Indonesia, the country’s equivalent of Oprah, is a proud waria by the name of Dorce. At the same time though, families are rarely thrilled to discover that their son is a waria. Warias are often integrated into their Muslim communities; they pray in mosques, celebrate Ramadan, and have good relationships with imams. Yet, every so often, they find themselves the target of attacks by Islamic extremists. To be a waria is to lead a life of extremes— one full of both tragedy and heroism. This is the story I wanted to share with audiences.

As an outsider, I knew that any project I undertook would have to be a collaborative effort. I approached the warias with the idea of making a film; they were thoroughly enthusiastic and suggested I focus on the challenges they faced finding love. They were tired of seeing only negative, hypersexualized portrayals of themselves in the media. Waria elders gladly agreed to
serve as advisors throughout the project. A local health organization staffed by warias generously lent translators and story consultants. After I held introductory video workshops, several of their members also became the film crew.

With my small team, I traversed Makassar and its surrounding villages looking for subjects. There are warias who manage to find “husbands,” sometimes even sharing them with biological women. There are warias who opt to live alone. And there’s even a small segment of warias who decide to leave the fold and strike it out as “real” men -- taking on wives and having children. I kept an eye out for all these different archetypes. I wanted to tell the story of a community.

Four years later, the warias and I have completed a work that we can safely say we’re proud of. We hope the film will challenge a common misperception of Islam as monolithic and intolerant. There is room in Islam, as there is in any religion, for differences in appearances, lifestyles, and sexual preferences. We’ve also tried to give audiences a new glimpse into transgender life—one that foregoes the usual focus on sex change operations, prostitution, and estrangement. Our subjects search for love and try to forge meaningful human connections, despite whatever obstacles or heartache may lie in their path. Theirs is a universal journey—one that is both beautiful and inspiring.

Kathy Huang
New York, 2011
DIRECTOR / PRODUCER / CINEMATOGRAPHER

Kathy Huang first developed a passion for documentary filmmaking in the dusty fields of South Texas. Inspired by her experiences working with at-risk youth as a high school teacher, she produced *Scribble’s Creations* (2004), a portrait of a teenager coming of age along the US-Mexico border. Her subsequent works have continued to explore underrepresented communities confronting unique challenges. Her short documentaries *Night Visions* (2005) and *Miss Chinatown USA* (2006) screened at festivals such as Tribeca and SILVERDOCS, and aired on public television.

Kathy received a M.A. in Documentary Film Production from Stanford University and currently works in New York as a freelance shooter and producer. *Tales of the Waria* is her debut feature documentary.

FILMMAKING TEAM


Gil Talmi (Composer) has produced Emmy-nominated music for feature films, documentaries and television programs. His most recent work includes music for the Independent Lens documentary *Between the Folds* (2009), the award-winning documentary feature *New Year Baby* (2006), the Nova/PBS documentary *The Mummy Who Would Be King* (2006), and the Bravo series *TV Revolutions* (2004). Gil has also written music for Warner Bros., Paramount, BBC, CBS, NBC, HBO and various independent productions.
CAST

**Tiara** is a self-proclaimed diva working in the beauty and entertainment industries. She is proud to be a waria, insisting that God put warias on earth to make the world more beautiful. Despite her pride and fierce independence, we soon learn that her past is not without its own heartache.

**Mami Ria** is a successful salon owner and revered leader of the warias. She cherishes her 18-year relationship with police officer Pak Ansar—a man she shares amicably with his first wife, a biological woman. Recently, however, Pak Ansar’s attention has been waning and Mami Ria sets upon winning him back—even if it means taking drastic steps to change herself.

Young, attractive **Suharni** has found true love. Her boyfriend Madi accepts her despite her dark past as a prostitute and her HIV+ status. As financial concerns mount though, Suharni makes the fateful decision to relocate to the more lucrative island of Bali. Whether her relationship with Madi can survive the temptations of her new home is uncertain.

Pressured by his family to act like a “man,” **Firman** decided several years ago to abandon his waria lifestyle and to settle down with a woman. He loves his wife and two young daughters, but still yearns for the past when he had long hair and danced with men. As he begins to visit a waria nightclub with increasing frequency, conflict grows at home and Firman must confront his true destiny in life.
SELECTED REVIEWS & PRESS

MENISCUS MAGAZINE | AUGUST 10, 2011 | Tales of the Waria review
“Of the six features I prescreened for the festival, Tales of the Waria is by far the best. Directed by Kathy Huang, an emerging star in the documentary world, this hour-long film is an intimate portrait of four men who live as waria. Beautifully shot and edited, Huang brilliantly captures the humanity of the four subjects who courageously revealed not only their feelings about life as a waria, but also intimate details about their pasts and love lives. Despite the subjects’ hardships, Tales of the Waria is ultimately uplifting, giving audiences a glimpse of a thriving transgender community. I only wish that it were a bit longer.”

ARTCARDS | AUGUST 11, 2011 | Tales of the Waria review
“Filmed in the cinematic coastal region of South Sulawesi, this sumptuously shot narrative follows four waria — a mash-up of wanita, which means woman, and priya, which means man — in their respective quests for love… It’s a testament to Huang’s storytelling skills that Tales of the Waria gets us there. What, in lesser hands, could’ve been a hot filmic mess of politics, religion, and ugly –isms too obvious to name is instead a compelling documentary about the real lives of people not unlike you or me.”

FRUIT FLY LIFE | JULY 11, 2011 | Tales of the Waria review
“Kathy Huang’s purely intimate account of the community of transgender individuals in Indonesia reveals a lifestyle that challenges gender within the confines of Indonesia’s traditional, Islamic beliefs…. Nothing is assumed nor proposed. There is no moral or ethical agenda. Tales of The Waria is about life, family and finding love, regardless of gender.”
AWARDS & RECOGNITION

Recipient, Independent Television Service (ITVS) Open Call grant
Recipient, Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) grant
Recipient, Pacific Pioneer Fund grant
Selected Project, Tribeca All Access 2010
Audience Choice Award, Asian American International Film Festival
Audience Choice Award, Barcelona International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival
Best Documentary Feature, San Diego Asian Film Festival

2011 FESTIVAL APPEARANCES

San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival (San Francisco, CA)
Frameline (San Francisco, CA)
Outfest Film Festival (Los Angeles, CA)
Asian American International Film Festival (New York City, NY)
San Diego Asian Film Festival (San Diego, CA)
Barcelona International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival (Barcelona, Spain)
Starz Denver Film Festival (Denver, CO)
5 COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1) What does “waria” mean?

“Waría” is a combination of two Indonesian words -- “wanita,” which means woman, and “pria,” which means man. A waria is a biological man who believes he was born with the soul of a woman.

2) Is the waria community different from the gay community in Indonesia?

Definitely. Though individuals from both communities choose to date men, warias have, as one subject puts it, “the soul, instincts, and feelings” of a woman. Gay men in Indonesia may at times act effeminate and put on women’s clothing for fun, but they never see themselves as being anything but men at their core. Also, warias usually live openly. Many gay men date privately and never tell their families that they’re gay. It is not uncommon for gay men to marry women and have children.

3) How did you meet your subjects?

I found Mami Ria almost immediately. As she’s a leader among the warias, I was taken to her salon early on to pay my respects. Her poise and authority instantly impressed me. And when she started to speak about her unique relationship to her husband, a police officer, and his first wife, I knew I had struck gold.

I stumbled across Firman somewhat accidentally. I had been at a night café speaking with other warias when I noticed a waria sitting quietly in the back. Unlike other warias who were aggressively trying to get my attention in hopes of being cast in the film, Firman kept his distance. He also dressed more like a conventional man and kept his head shaved. When I learned of Firman’s backstory—he was an “ex-waría” who had married a woman because of family pressure—I asked for his permission to film. Initially hesitant, Firman eventually saw filming as an opportunity for others to understand the choices he had made in life.

Suharni was appealing to me as a character because of the loving relationship she had with her boyfriend Madi. Many of the warias had boyfriends who refused to be filmed. Madi, however, was utterly devoted to Suharni and had no problem with the camera capturing their time together. Suharni’s story grew even more important when I learned that she was HIV+. Her story was an opportunity to present a different side to living with HIV. Instead of
focusing on stigma and hardship, Suharni was a fighter, someone who chose to move forward and improve herself.

Though I had known Tiara since my earliest days in Indonesia, she didn’t become a film subject until my third and final year of filming. Tiara was the only waria who spoke some English and had been helping me to coordinate shoots. Whenever she begged me to cast her in the film, I resisted, thinking it would be difficult for her to both produce and be in the film. I finally realized though that Tiara could play a vital role in the film. She represented much of the glamour and humor inherent in the waria community that I had not yet managed to capture. As one of the few warias who had attained a high school education, she was also able to speak about their history in a way that no one else could. I broke the news to her and a star was born.

4) How did your status as a straight Chinese-American woman affect your relationship with your subjects?

I think being Asian helped people to relax around me. I didn’t stand out as much, and I was comfortable with a lot of elements of Indonesian culture. But at the same time, the Chinese in Indonesia have had a contentious relationship with other local Indonesians since the time of Dutch colonialism. De facto segregation between the two groups has led to recurrent anti-Chinese riots. When I traveled around with Tiara, she sometimes introduced me to others as being “Korean.” I usually just smiled and stayed quiet.

As for being a straight woman, I think that was a non-issue for the warias. I was one of the girls and could join in their small talk easily. In fact, the warias often took me to task for not being more of a woman. They teased me for being a “tomboy” and for not wearing makeup.

5) How have the warias responded to the film and has it played in Indonesia?

All the warias in the film have seen it and given it their blessing. Tiara was actually present at the film’s premiere at the San Francisco International Asian American Festival, where she quickly became an object of affection for audiences and festival staff alike. I’ll never forget the smile on her face when she was showered with bouquets, or when an eager fan shoved past me to take a photo with her. She was treated like the diva that she is.

Sadly, the film has not yet played in Indonesia. We had planned to submit it to Indonesian festivals, but decided to wait in light of recent events. In December 2010, shortly after I finished filming, the Islamic Defender Front (FPI), an Islamic fundamentalist group typically associated with the island of Java, disrupted a waria beauty pageant in Makassar (much like the one depicted early in the film). It was a big blow to the warias who believed they were immune to the bullying of these extremists. Though events such as these are few and far between, they gain a lot of media exposure. My subjects, worried about further FPI activity, have requested that we not screen the film in Indonesia for the time being. It’s unfortunate, but in some ways, the film has become a record of happier times, when the warias were able to exist more harmoniously with those around them.
CREDITS

Producer/ Director/ Writer: Kathy Huang
Cinematographer: Kathy Huang
Editor: Carla Gutierrez
Composer: Gil Talmi
Associate Producers: Tiara Tiar Bahtiar, Aldy Mardianus
Sound: Dimas Jaka Hartadi, Kathy Huang, Handi Ilfat, Aldy Mardianus
Post Supervisor: Kristin Lesko
Online Facility: Keith Roush, Roush Media
Graphic Artist: Steve Stanard
Sound Mix: William Levins, Green House Post
Music Clearance: The Rights Workshop
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