



White Island becomes red planet

MIKE MATHER

WHAKATANE has been used as the departure point for a top-secret mission to the planet Mars.

Well, sort of.

The Eastern Bay's White Island has been used as a filming location for the makers of a short science fiction film.

Last Flight features the exploits of a lone female astronaut on the red planet. It stars upcoming actress Kassie Watson and is directed by comic book creator and animator Damon Keen.

The volcanic island is one of a handful of locations being used by the filmmakers. Like the Tongariro Crossing, where the majority of the film is being shot, the barren environment doubles perfectly for the arid Martian landscape.

Special effects will see Whakaari's grey rocks taking on an appropriately rusty tinge in the completed film.

The two day shoot on the island was a complete success, Keen said.

"It went really, really well. We got some amazing shots when we were out there and we worked our actor really hard."

Watson, who has starred in numerous short films, television series and music videos, had handled the rigours of the shoot well – not least the hot and claustrophobic spacesuit costume she wears throughout.

"Kassie is a great actress. She has a real intensity to her. We chose her because it was obvious that she understood the character really well.

"As the story progresses her character is physically and emotionally put through the wringer to the point of exhaustion and collapse. And we are doing the same to her through the filming process really.

"It's a real ordeal, but she has handled it really well, really professionally and the results are just outstanding. I am certain she will go on to big things."

Keen also had glowing praise for the staff at White Island Tours, who had transported the crew to and from the island and assisted with the two-day shoot.

"They were fantastic. It was great to be dealing with people who obviously really enjoy what they do. It is one of those old-fashioned family-run businesses that you just don't see anymore. Really good people. We are not the first film crew they have had out there.

"They get a few kids' TV shows and a lot of tourist productions, but I think this is the



first time someone has shot a science fiction production on the island."

Last Flight is a labour of love for Keen and the others involved in the production. It is based on his comic *The Sparrow*, which was published in *New Ground*, the comic book equivalent of the New Zealand literary journal *Landfall*.

Keen's day job is as a graphic designer for the Auckland Regional Council and he has created the popular Eco Kids website, which encourages children to be proactive in protecting and enhancing the natural environment.

"This production has grown as more and more passionate, creative and talented people have come onboard, mostly donating their own time and energy."

The short film, which is wholly not-for-profit, is also being partially funded by Screen Innovation Production Fund, a joint initiative by Creative New Zealand and the New Zealand Film Commission.

Following the visit to the Eastern Bay, the crew were heading to the central North Island's volcanic plateau, where the bulk of filming was to be done.



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“We are exhausted now. That is probably going to destroy us mind, body and soul,” Keen said.

About two months of post-production work was to follow before the film was released early next year.

“What we are trying to achieve is intelligent science fiction. A lot of people who like SF are not impressed by what they see on the big screen. This will be the kind of film that keeps your interest, but hopefully makes you think afterward.”

Among the many inspirations and influences for *Last Flight* were the science fiction novels of Kim Stanley Robinson and Ray Bradbury, as well as the numerous missions to Mars in recent years by various robotic probes.

It was also influenced by the dark themes of many other New Zealand films, a recurring trait the actor Sam Neill famously described as “our cinema of unease”.

“Many New Zealand films have quite a dark, oppressive streak. *Last Flight* is certainly not a pick-me-up film. It has a real moody feel to it. But at heart it is still a positive story with a positive message.”



SOURCE MATERIAL: A page from Damon Keen's comic *The Sparrow*.

GOING PLACES: Up-and-coming actress Kassie Watson plays the



FINAL FRONTIERS: Kassie Watson, in a scene from *Last Flight*, the short science fiction film partially shot on White Island.

Photos supplied



LIFE ON MARS: The crew prepare for another scene. Pictured are director Damon Keen and producer Sarah Butler making last-minute adjustments to actress Kassie Watson's costume, while at rear assistant cameraman, Jonathon Drew, jib operator Heath King and soundman David Hogg get ready to get rolling.