

JUN 18 1982

TO: Alan Suemori & Wendell Silva, KPC&A
FROM: Māpuana de Silva
RE: excerpt for works-in-progress exhibition

"I hold true to the spirit of what I've been taught. With the traditional dances, I follow as closely as I can the motions that were given to me. But I can't make a dance exactly the way it was passed on to me because I am teaching it and putting myself into it. I am not able to simply serve up a dance like it is a museum piece because my dancers and I must find life and feeling in it. We try to touch the chant--the words-- and when we do, neither we nor our version of the dance is exactly the same again. [I think the beauty of hula and its continued good health come from just this interplay of interpretation and re-interpretation.] I don't call it "old versus new" or "traditional versus creative." All those elements are always present in hula, and the funny thing is that they're always changing roles. What might be new and creative today will probably be old had to the next generation of kumu, and for all I know, what they come up with may well be a return to the stylings of my kupuna. This is not important. I don't worry. I have faith in the vitality of hula: in its inviolate spirit. I apply myself to understanding the chants and expressing them; I strive to dance from the piko-- that, after all, is the only worthwhile criterion."

Māpuana de Silva

Mapuana deSilva

I hold true to the spirit of what I've been taught. With the traditional dances, I follow as closely as I can to the motions that were given to me. But I can't make a dance exactly the way it was passed on to me because I am teaching it and putting myself into it. I am not able to simply serve up a dance like it is a museum piece because my dancers and I must find life and feeling in it. I think the beauty of hula and its continued good health come from just this interplay of interpretation and re-interpretation.

It was after I graduated from college and returned to Hawaii that I began taking hula in a serious way. I had been taught hula by my mother as I was growing up but in 1972 I was introduced to Auntie Maiki Aiu Lake and I immediately felt she was the kumu I wanted to learn the hula from in a deeper way. I started my training in January of 1972 and I found Maiki to be a wonderful teacher. She loves the hula so much and she expresses this love to her students and makes them want to understand and feel the dance, and not just copy her movements. She explained the words and the stories of the mele and she got me excited about dances I didn't really care for at the beginning of class. Auntie Maiki was very open with her teaching knowledge and she gave me my foundation, a foundation that I keep and respect. But she didn't restrict us. She gave us the freedom to go out and create new chants and dances which not all kumu hula do for their haumana.

My uniki in 1975 with Auntie Maiki was very special because she made the graduation process so demanding. We were disciplined with five-hour practices because she wanted us to have good values and strong beliefs in the hula and in our life. She wanted us to find out for ourselves if we really wanted to become kumu hula. I began to teach in Kailua in 1976 through the encouragement of my mother and my family because I wanted other people to understand the Hawaiian culture the way Auntie Maiki had presented it to me. Hula is the only thing you can study in the Hawaiian culture where you will learn every aspect of Hawaiian life. There is a spiritual strength to it that I wanted other people to experience because it cannot be described.

There are certain dances like "Kaulilua", "A Koolauau", and "Auaia" that are the oldest dances that have been shared with me and they have been passed down from generation to generation. They are the foundation of my halau and my training and I will never change any aspect of the way I was taught them. But hula kahiko cannot be easily defined and compartmentalized. It is like a color in a spectrum can have many shades to it. Because it is an art form, I don't believe there can be a black and white, right and wrong definition for it. It is an art form and art is subjective.

I don't believe there are any boundaries to creativity but there are different degrees to creativity. It all depends on the origins of the chant. Where is the chant from, was it taken from a book, who was the author, who was the chant written for? The answers to these questions determine to what degree creativity is allowed in the dance. In the end you have to know why you are creating in such a manner because your creativity has to have a logic and a meaning to it. The youth have so much creative energy and the older masters are afraid the traditional values will be lost. We have to show the older generation that we can preserve the old values and be creative as well.

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I am learning to hold true to the spirit of what my teacher gave me. I think, now, that this spirit comes in two parts. 1. It is my duty to respect and preserve the traditional dances. If I inherit a holoku from my grandmother, I don't chop it into a mini-skirt just because fashions have changed. The same is true for the chants and hula that have been given to me. They are priceless gifts; I shouldn't be so presumptuous as to fiddle with them just to keep up with what is fashionable. Or look at it this way: I'm only the most recent flower strung on a long 'ilima lei--who am I to add a carnation...or cut the string? 2. It is also my duty to create. I am a keeper of the record of my own time and of my own place. With my husband, I create mele hula for my family, my dancers, and my Kailua home. And with my husband, I try to re-create a Kailua chant and dance tradition which for several generations has largely been hidden in books and Hawaiian language newspapers. Did you know that Kawainui Marsh was once a fishpond, and before that, a lagoon? Did you know that Hawaiians have lived on its banks for 1500 years? That Kailua was once immeasurably wealthy--an ancient center for the arts? It's my duty, and pleasure, to revive the chants which speak of those things, and to create new mele that remind us what was, describe what is, and ask what will be. So you see, I'm learning that I have two roles. I keep and honor what was passed on to me, and I work hard to build--through creation and re-creation--a tradition of my own.


It was after I graduated from college and returned to Hawai'i that I began taking hula in a serious way. I had been taught hula 'auwana by my mother as I was growing up, but in 1972 I was introduced to Auntie Maiki Aiu Lake, and I immediately felt that she was the kumu I wanted to learn the hula from in a deeper way. I started my training that January, and I found Auntie Maiki to be a wonderful teacher. She loves the hula so much. She conveys this love to her students and makes them want to feel and understand the dance--not just copy her movements. She explained the words and stories of the mele, and she got me excited about dances that I didn't think I would really care for. Auntie was very generous with her knowledge, and she gave me my foundation, a foundation that I keep and respect. And she didn't restrict us. She gave us the freedom to go out and create new chants and dances; this may not be something that all kumu do for their graduating haumana.

My uniki in 1975 was very special because Auntie made the graduation process so demanding. We were disciplined and tested because she wanted us to have strong values and beliefs in the hula and in our lives. She wanted us to find out for ourselves if we really wanted to accept the responsibility of becoming kumu hula. Through the encouragement of my mother and family, I began to teach in Kailua in 1976. I wanted people to understand our culture in the same way that Auntie Maiki presented it to me. Perhaps hula is the only thing you can study in Hawaiian culture that teaches you every other aspect of Hawaiian life. And there is a spiritual strength to hula that I wanted other people to experience because it can, in turn, strengthen their lives.

There are certain dances like "Kaulilua," "A Ko'olau Au," and "Au'iaia" that are the oldest dances that have been shared with me. They have been passed down from generation to generation. For me, these dances are the foundation of my halau and my training, and I will never change the way I was taught them. These dances are not for everybody; I hold them back; I think of them as uniki dances.

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I think that there are boundaries to creativity--common sense boundaries. If you're going to design a dress, you shouldn't wind up with a pair of socks. If you're going to write a sonnet, you shouldn't end up with a want-ad. If you're going to create a



hula, you shouldn't wind up with a square dance. To create hula, you have to do your homework and open your heart. You have to know your text, you have to feel the magic of the language, and you have to be well versed in hula's traditional vocabulary of motion. Only then can you conscientiously experiment and innovate. Only then can you explore the art without violating it.