

MICHAEL KEKAIMOKU TOSHI YOSHIKAWA

*Kumu hula of Kepōmākolekapuakāne, Michael Kekaimoku Yoshikawa is currently teaching hula at the Shriner's Hospital auditorium.*

For some reason, I was always interested in hula while I was growing up in Carson, California. Book reports or art projects were always done about Hawai'i. My younger sister was taking hula from Sissy Kaio. I kept asking my mother when Sissy would start a class for boys. I kept hanging around, and finally she created a teenage group<sup>for</sup>. Myself and three of my cousins.

At the age of fourteen, Sissy gave me a very good foundation of the hula, of humility or ha'aha'a, and of the enjoyment of hula. There was also various aspects of spirituality. It was not just a physical activity. I had wonderful feelings and I soon felt a strong attraction to hula kahiko but especially chanting.

Sissy saw that I remembered things quickly and that I made myself available because I wanted to learn and absorb as much as I could. She gave me duties such as making costumes. When our teenage group blended in with the men's class, she started to incorporate me as an alaka'i. I started running the classes, beginning with teaching basics. When I became <sup>eighteen</sup> 18, she let me become a kōkua kumu. Though I was very young to have a duty like that, I developed quite rapidly. Eventually the men's class became mine. She would just come in and watch me lead the class. She would also ask me to choreograph a mele or we would do it as a team. It was very enjoyable.

I was the nucleus of the halau because I was their only ho'opa'a with a voice. I had no training and Sissy herself was basically self-taught in oli. One summer, my mother returned from Hawai'i and she brought me a whole bunch of chanting records of people like Kanaka'ole, Kaha'i Topolinski, Keli'i<sup>more</sup> Taua and that very old one from the wax cylinder. I would listen to them day after day and I started to pick

up the mele. The records came with words so I would mimmick and pronounce them back with the record. That's how I developed my oli skills.

I stayed with Sissy for a total of eight years. We experienced a lot of things together as kumu and haumana but my yearning to learn more was great and I thought coming to Hawai'i would help me even more. I started contemplating who I would like to learn from. Eventually an opportunity came where I was invited to Palani Kahala's hālau. Palani was impressed by me but said I had to let Sissy know that I would be joining his hālau. I called Sissy and she gave me her blessings.

Palani refined me. As a very creative person he always had a new idea. He pushed himself to higher levels or goals. His costuming was always impeccable and precise. He stressed the importance of learning language which I am still trying to achieve. He opened my sense of creativity. He smoothed out all of my rough edges. All these things that he instilled in me, I still strive to do well and enjoy it at the same time.

I was in his ho'opa'a class when Palani was getting sick and our classes had to be stopped until he was in better health. Unfortunately, we were unable to finish because of his untimely death. But prior to his death, he gave four of us his blessings to go out and teach. He spoke to us as a group first and later he spoke to me in private. That was a very special time. He instilled in me nothing but positives saying that I should continue what I was doing and that I would be a good teacher. I think that was his way of letting me know that he would always be there for me.

Palani knew that I wanted to teach and to start a halau. One of the things that I didn't have was a name for the halau. He came over to my apartment and said that he had been dreaming of this Hawaiian name for three nights in a row. He believed that this name was for me. The name he gave me was

Kapōmākāle/<sup>o</sup>kapuakāne meaning the sacred night rainbow of Kāne. He advised me to have it blessed and I did.

A few of us from Palani attached ourselves to a school to get some teaching experience. I started teaching at Kawanānakoā Intermediate School's afterschool <sup>out</sup> program and took the girls to the hula kahiko competition.

My greatest accomplishment as a teacher is seeing my haumana perform a mele and as they walk off stage, you feel their joy and see their glow and pure love flowing through all of them at the same time. I tell my haumana that the highest achievements don't necessarily come as an award or trophy. Winning is nice like the icing on the cake. But feeling good about your performance is the real achievement.