

John Topolinski

Mrs. Pukui told me that hula is not only for our people. It is for anyone who has the desire. You do not have to be Hawaiian to dance. If you want it to live, you must give it to everybody so that it can create a better understanding about Hawaii and the culture. The fact that non-Hawaiians want to learn the dance should be a compliment.

When I went away to college on the mainland, I was asked to dance at a "get together" of Hawaii students. And I couldn't. The remark was of course, I am Hawaiian but can't even do the national dance. That was the spark that told me to come back home and learn to dance. In 1971 I met Aunt Maiki Aiu Lake and she became my first kumu hula. I studied under Aunt Maiki for two and a half years and she was a very positive influence in my life. She was very strict in her halau but at the same time very giving. She would explain the dance out thoroughly, clarifying the abstract motions and meanings and giving us the background on the kauna of each mele.

I graduated traditionally (uniki) from Aunt Maiki in 1973 and I went on to study informally under Henry Pa, Sally Wood Naluai, and Kawena Pukui. Looking back I feel that all my kumu were equal in their influence on me because they each opened up a facet of the hula that I was unaware of. Maiki gave me the confidence that I was kumu hula material and she gave me my foundation in the hula. Uncle Henry showed me how to create variations in the dance by combining foot movements to make the dance more exciting. He would break down each foot movement to its most basic motion and then build it up again by adding other foot movements to create a nice balanced picture. Sally Wood Naluai trained me in the drum techniques of Pua Ha-aheo, and Kawena Pukui passed on to me an in-depth philosophy of the hula. Her daughters Pat and Pele taught me how to chant and create in the traditional framework using traditional Hawaiian motions as opposed to Western dance motions. Of my kumu I have been with Mrs. Pukui and her family for eight years which has been my longest training relationship, and my most memorable experience. There have been many times when I have been troubled and searching for knowledge and her family has always been there for me. My kumu taught me that in the hula you must treat everything, animate and inanimate, with respect or you will be defiling them. I saw the disloyalty of some haumana as they abused what had been freely given to them, and I don't think some of my kumu ever understood these changes of loyalties. It made them apprehensive of opening up and sharing their knowledge.

I began to teach in 1973 because I wanted to restore the male image in the hula that had been lacking for so many years. The greatest change in the hula had been the influence of Western ideas and dance movements on the traditional hula. Women were dancing like men and vice versa and that is the change that I strongly opposed. I had been taught that the Hawaiian traditional dance is based on the ethic that the male and female are opposites. They exist to complement each other like the Oriental Yin and Yang. In 1973 there were too many of these changes that were coming into the hula that were not Hawaiian, and I felt the traditional hula was becoming lost and unrecognizable for the generations to come.

Today we've reached a plateau in the Hawaiian culture and I foresee our future as being a battle between preserving tradition as opposed to its dilution. How can we keep the creativity of our young, individualistic kumu within the context of the traditional hula? The new kumu of Hawaii are no longer masters of their art. They are creating a new traditional hula that appeals to the appetite of the masses. Today the masters of the art of the traditional hula is the public.

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