



Ode to Hula



East West Players Goes Hawaiian

by Jeff Favre

The concept of hula to most Americans involves women wearing plastic grass skirts and coconut shell bras, sashaying and waving their hands mindlessly in time to the music of a ukulele and drums.

That image, Keo Woolford makes quite clear in his one-man performance *I Land*, is not only inaccurate, but it's a mockery of a spiritual, historical and complex art form.

Though the singer/actor uses the standard, solid, chronological storytelling format to explain his personal journey, his use of several dance styles adds texture and emotional depth to *I Land*, which opened last week at East West Players' David Henry Hwang Theater. In just 80 intermission-less minutes, Woolford, with great assistance from director Roberta Uno and a pair of veteran choreographers, delivers a memorable ode to hula - and the shared need for humans to understand their roots.

Woolford's journey begins as a teen in Hawaii (or, as the show's program identifies it, Hawai'i). At the time, he's already into dance, albeit disco. A talented performer, referred to as "hula god," turns the impressionable boy on to traditional hula. For a while he performs with the hula god's ensemble, but soon he opts for other paths.

His most memorable non-hula venture is as part of a boy band, and a reenactment of the group's 'NSync-like moves and sappy hit song earns well-deserved laughs.

Woolford moves to Los Angeles and explores evangelical Christianity. He records some solo music, but much of his career is sabotaged by drugs and alcohol. His own arrogance also contributes to his downfall.

It is not until he returns to his roots - following a quite funny turn in a stereotypical Polynesian dance show - that Woolford connects to his true self. The climax, a hula dance performed in authentic attire, is deeply moving.

Woolford is in impressive physical condition, and his dance skills translate to a variety of styles, choreographed by legendary hula artist Robert Cazimero and New Yorker hip-hopper Rocafella. At one point, Woolford moves gracefully between hip-hop and hula, showing their many similarities, particularly the passion that drives them.

The coming-of-age tales, highlighted by Woolford's physical and emotional scars, are unremarkable. But he tells them with a gentle honesty that makes them interesting. His ability to portray a variety of characters adds color to the anecdotes.

At one point, Woolford strays from basic storytelling and adopts an almost Beat-poet style to express his anger over mainlanders bastardizing hula and other Hawaiian traditions. It's an effective, almost mesmerizing section, enhanced by a variety of statements about culture and genetics that are projected on the set (Zachary Borovay is credited with projection design).

Uno's direction is loaded with action, even during the non-dance segments, which keeps the piece from dragging. The simple, but elegant set designed by Clint Ramos - highlighted by a giant wave towering over the stage - serves as the ideal backdrop for the story. Josh Bradford's rich light design adds to the beauty of the dances, and Elton Lin's impressive, detailed sound design, including the voices of unseen characters, make this much more than a simple one-man show.

I Land will likely be the first proper introduction to traditional hula for many in the audience. The way Woolford dances, he's sure to create plenty of new hula fans.

I Land is at East West Players through April 8, 120 Judge John Aiso St., (213) 625-7000, ext. 20, or eastwestplayers.org.