

Gay City NEWS

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Hula Kahiko

By: David Noh

Memories of Hawaii swept over me when I saw Keo Woolford's one-man show, "I Land," on November 18 at Asia Society. Through dance and speech, Woolford sketched the story of his young life, as a performer who grows up in Honolulu, leaves for the "mainland," and is put through various vicissitudes before returning to his original love and life force-the hula. Hula kahiko is the ancient form of hula, performed only to the sound of chanting and the gourd drum (ipu heke), banned for years when the missionaries arrived, and revived by Hawaiian Renaissance King David Kalaukaua.

If you've never seen it performed, it packs a uniquely visceral, spiritual, and sensual punch unmatched by any other dance form, stemming from its mythical origins. Legend has it that hula was created by the Hawaiian goddess of dance, Hi'iaka, who performed it to appease her sister, the fiery volcano goddess, Pele. Also vital are the secret sexual messages contained in hula-watch the hand movements-which no doubt drove those Bible-bangers crazy.

Woolford's homoerotic reminiscences of gorgeous Hawaiian football players at his high school who, out of uniform, were transformed into bare-chested, loin-clothed "Hula Gods," displaying manly grace and power in their ka'o (the basic hula movement of weaving hips), was familiar to every gay kid growing up in the islands. Woolford showed stunning versatility in both the kahiko choreography by Robert Cazimero-Hawaii's preeminent singing entertainer, who also has his own halau (hula school)-and the hip hop style of Rokafella. He leveled a lengthy diatribe against outside influences, like Hollywood, which commercialized and vulgarized the sacred hula-not to mention Hawaii, itself-but I kind of wish, in the interest of audience empathy, that he had left out his nostalgic account of a dirty little cultural secret which, I suppose, must still occur in the 50th state-"Kill Haole (white person) Day," during which, at the end of school term, hapless Caucasian students were violently set upon by the locals.

Theatreworks/USA have done themselves proud with a brilliantly executed production of Dickens' "Great Expectations" (seen November 14). Ninety minutes long, sans intermission, this is theater the way I like it, and the clever economy and speed with which it spins this rambling tale makes you feel like you're speed reading with total comprehension. Will Pomerantz's direction, Bathsbeba Doran's adaptation, and wonderful design make this the kind of show you dream of seeing when you go to London. An enchanting cast of seven actors plays a dizzying number of roles with complete aplomb, character detail, and breathtaking virtuosity. Kathleen Chalfant is a compellingly imperious, yet unusually human Miss Havisham, and Christian Campbell, whom you'll remember from the film "Trick" is a wonderful Pip, far more appealing than John Mills was in the famous David Lean film.

Beginning December 1, Film Forum presents "Fox Before the Code," a mouth-watering array of films made before the Hays Code removed most adult elements from Hollywood movies. Many of these films haven't been shown theatrically since their original release and you can catch the rapacious gold-digger antics of Joan Blondell and Ginger Rogers in "Broadway Bad" and a surprisingly gritty Loretta Young in "Born to Be Bad." Lesbianism and sadomasochism rear their heads in "Blood Money," and there's a super-rare screening of Fritz Lang's 1935 French version of Molnar's "Liliom," with Charles Boyer, which inspired the musical "Carousel."

For me, the standout star of the series is the mesmerizing and ingratiating Clara Bow, represented by her final two films, which Fox wisely saw fit to handsomely mount.

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"Hoopla," her cinema swan song, is an irresistibly engaging carny story, which has her as a cooch dancer who, on a bet, seduces Richard Cromwell, the gay actor and artist who was Angela Lansbury's first husband. (Lansbury was evidently the only person in Hollywood who didn't know about him.)

"Call Her Savage" is the ultimate Pre-Code opus, rife with sex, prostitution, booze, and rather hilarious racism. Bow plays an heiress who is unaware that she is half-Native American, which is meant to account for her wild temper and violence, as she slugs and kicks her way through high society. (Funnily enough, A.R. Gurney recently used this identical theme to delightful effect in his play, "Indian Blood.")



"When your wounds heal, I'll whip you again!" she tells hunky farmhand, Gilbert Roland, who has just suffered the wrath of her lash. She has a wild, erect-nipple tussle with a rutting Great Dane, and visits a Village gay bar with drag queen entertainment and besuited dykes. "You're the most gorgeous thing that ever lived!" exclaims one admirer, and seeing her in her ebullient, barely bias satin-covered, tousle-haired glory, you'll have to agree.

There are all kinds of heroes in the Big Apple and, for me, one of them has always been Andrés Andrade, founder of Citywide Youth Opera, an after-school program that offers musical and dramatic training for young singers. The classes culminate in public performances and, on December 7, they are presenting "Belle Nuit: A Night at the Opera," featuring vocal music by Donizetti, Flotow, Handel, Lehar, Mozart, Purcell, and Rossini (212-539-3561). Andrade, a singer and vocal instructor, who was the director of the opera program at LaGuardia Arts High School, saw a vital need for such a program, and, under his tutelage, such singers you'll see as Sergio Mauritz Ang, Leora Covner, Francesca DiDomenico, Olivia Harris, Isabella Mingione, Bridget Rooney, Emma Teitelbaum, and Brooke Willig, may-like Adelina Patti and Plácido Domingo, who also were given the opportunity to perform opera as teenagers-someday command the world's stages.

Heap big divas recently appeared in benefits. Angela Lansbury, at 81, was jaw-droppingly vital at the November 5 Acting Company benefit performance of "This is on Me, an Evening of Dorothy Parker." She sang a sublime rendition of "Just One of Those Things," before joining the rest of the cast-Boyd Gaines, Harriet Harris, Lisa Banes, and Lynn Collins-to spout familiar Parker one-liners. It will be good to have Lansbury back on Broadway in Terrence McNally's "Deuce." Although she doubtlessly made a bundle and gained worldwide fans with "Murder She Wrote," that series only displayed the tip of her behemoth, versatile talent (and, really, did you ever truly fear for Jessica Fletcher's safety at the hands of criminals?)

Glenn Close appeared in York Theatre's benefit world premiere production of that never-made-it-to-Broadway opus, "Busker Alley" (November 13). Hers was really a cameo appearance, as the aged leading lady who opens and closes the show, but the night really belonged to Jim Dale who worked his tail off in the part of the busker who falls in love with a younger woman who leaves him to pursue stardom. This role, originated by Charles Laughton in the delightful 1938 film "St. Martin's Lane," was to have been played by Tommy Tune in 1995, when he broke his foot, aborting a Broadway opening. Designed and directed by Tony Walton who was determined not to let the project die, this one night only benefit performance was mighty impressive for its full staging, with all actors off book, a testament to the deserved devotion Walton, a true man of the theatre, always inspires.

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