

THEATER REVIEW

'I Land' shows the influence of hula

Keo Woolford explores themes of heritage and assimilation in his solo show at East West Players.

By David C. Nichols
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Presentational motifs dance about "I Land" at East West Players. Writer-performer Keo Woolford's solo show pulls the traditional Hawaiian talk story into autobiographical performance art.

Kahiko, the ancient form of hula, began as sacred ritual. Woolford, his persona as engaging as his physicality is imposing, nails that aspect, with invaluable assistance from choreographers Robert Cazimero and Rokafella. First exposed to *kahiko* as a child at a backyard barbecue, Woolford began his studies under "Hula God" as an infatuated adolescent. From high school racism, boy band stardom, trek to drugged-out Los Angeles and return to the islands, Woolford understands that the *kumu* (source of knowledge) never leaves its possessor's soul, no matter how far he travels.

Like its sculpted star, "I Land" looks like a million bucks. Set designer Clint Ramos' sleek blue projection screen, curved like a headpiece ornament, and lighting designer Josh Bradford's dazzling array of rainbow hues work beautifully. Zachary Borovay's projections drop in digital titles and home movies with an HDTV edge, and sound designer Elton Lin provides adroit cues, including era-defining music to interior voice-overs.

This glossy scheme and Woolford's sincere intent almost mask the underlying inequities. "I Land" has plenty on its mind, and director Roberta Uno oversees Woolford's saga down to the last beat. Whether these impressive maneuvers add up to a definitive statement is less certain.

The hip-swiveling variations of Woolford's gradual mastery of *kahiko* and forays into social dancing punctuate the narrative more than build it. Though vivid, his characterizations, whether of Hula God's girlfriend, football crusher Bruddah or the stuffy religion teacher, are children's theater basic, sharply sketched but short on nuance.

His script similarly packs in the issues and terms without fully developing their most tantalizing elements. The outcomes of Woolford's peers, for example, or his riffs on Hawaiian stereotypes should elicit more than droll irony. Although his encounter with a white student is a chilling picture of imploding racism, its relationship to the whole is

isolated, typical of the decorative impulse.

Cultural comment — how mainlanders distort hula, the near-decimation of language — is often hilarious but doesn't always illuminate content. Woolford's path from Hollywood clubster to his epiphany at a black church service has the hasty contours of a storyteller wrapping up his tale. The finale, in which Woolford asks us to imagine a hula nation, ritually donning traditional garb and becoming a hula god before our eyes, should move us more than it does.

Even so, it's an admirable, entertaining piece, and Woolford's range of movement and humor is something to see. The overall reach will likely be subjective. It's not a bad idea to keep the *kaona* (deeper meaning) under wraps, and Woolford's story may hit home for Asian Pacific audiences, but "I Land" may not land the tourists as easily.

'I Land'

Where: East West Players, David Henry Hwang Theater, 120 Judge John Aiso St., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Ends: April 8

Price: \$30 to \$35

Contact: (213) 625-7000

Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes