

New York

I Land

Reviewed By: [Dan Bacalzo](#)

Keo Woolford is a hula dancer. However, he doesn't fit the stereotypical image of girls wearing leis and grass skirts, undulating for tourists' amusement. In his solo show *I Land*, he presents an alternative vision of the hula, one that comes from a proud native Hawaiian tradition. The show -- directed by Roberta Uno and presented by the Ma-Yi Theater Company -- is a semi-autobiographical tale that is informative and engaging, albeit a little uneven.

The writer/performer chronicles his first exposure to the hula and how he came under the instruction of his idol, whom he dubs the "Hula god." He also describes his fleeting brush with fame as a member of a boy band that almost hits the big time; his subsequent descent into a world of drugs and partying; and his rediscovery of the dance that connects him to both his culture and to himself.



Keo Woolford in *I Land*
(© Matt Zugale)

Certain sections of *I Land* are complex and layered. Woolford doesn't shy away from some of his more unsavory behavior, including a time where he beat up a kid just because he was white. Other parts of the show feel like they just skim the surface of his life, marking out the big events, but leaving out the smaller details that could enrich his story.

For example, following the break up of his boy band, Woolford apparently finds some success as a solo recording artist, but the details are rather sketchy. We also never find out the specific circumstances that bring him back to traditional hula dancing. He does, however, make his disillusionment with the way he was living his life very clear, and delivers a hard-hitting performance poem that outlines his reasons for embracing his cultural heritage.

Woolford is a talented dancer, showing off his traditional hula as well as his hip-hop club dancing moves (the excellent choreography is by Robert Cazimero and Rokafella). One of the funniest and most effective sequences has him performing a routine from his boy band days that is both campy and athletic.

The set, designed by Clint Ramos (who is also responsible for the costumes), is dominated by a large, curved structure that suggests a tidal wave. Home movies and other images are projected onto its surface (projection design is by Zachary Borovay). Josh Bradford's lighting is effectively evocative, as is Elton Lin's sound design.

Ultimately, though, Woolford has to carry the show himself and is only partially successful at doing so. His acting is a bit wooden, and it takes him awhile to connect with his audience. Although he's telling tales that presumably come from his life, he doesn't always convey the emotions that would seem to go with the stories he recounts. He's most compelling when he's dancing, and, fortunately, the show provides plenty of opportunities for him to do just that.