
Coming from the US continent, I have encountered firsthand many inaccurate conceptions about Polynesia. I remember numerous individuals who confused hula with Tahitian dancing or thought that Māori poi was a Hawaiian dance form. I found that few people were aware of the existence of hula kahiko or realized that hula can have sacred and esoteric dimensions. And male dancers? Forget it. A friend’s sister, when she heard I was a student of hula, asked me a bit hesitantly, “But do the guys really dance? I thought they just stand in the back and spin that fire knife . . .” What surprised me more than these ill-informed comments and inaccurate perceptions was that they frequently came from people who had visited and vacationed in Hawai’i! They were basing their (mis)information on direct, personal experiences—the kind of experiences most tourists to Hawai’i will have. So when I saw Hā: Breath of Life, the latest nighttime production at the Polynesian Cultural Center (pcc), I could not help but be critical. As I glanced around the stadium during the performance, I could only envision the majority of the audience returning to their homes filled with the same kinds of misconceptions that I knew all too well.

Although located on the opposite side of O’ahu from Waikīkī, the pcc in Lā‘ie remains one of the most visited tourist destinations in Hawai‘i, offering a mix of entertainment and cultural education. Students from around the Pacific who attend Brigham Young University–Hawai‘i can earn scholarships by working, for instance, in the pcc “villages” of Hawai‘i, Tahiti, Sāmoa, Fiji, Tonga, and Aotearoa. To conclude a day spent strolling over shallow waterways from village to village—symbolically traversing Polynesia—tourists are encouraged to attend the “night show,” a large-scale production of song and dance that brings the six cultures together in a grand finale. Hā: Breath of Life is the first of the pcc’s many night shows to interweave all of the cultures into a single narrative, and made its debut on 14 August 2009, after $3 million and three years of production time (Mormon Times, 18 Nov 2009). Hā depicts the life story of Mana, a muscular and youthful Polynesian, tracing his own birth, his marriage to the beautiful Lani, the death of his father, and finally, the birth of his son. Each significant life event takes place in one of the six Island groups represented at the pcc.

Hā: Breath of Life certainly has its strengths. Like previous night shows, it successfully engages the audience with surround-sound and compelling visuals including waterworks with colorful lights and lots of fire. A new special effect, both impressive and innovative, is the narrated petroglyph animation projected onto large fabric sheets (vaguely reminiscent of tapa) used to facilitate transitions from one culture to the next. But, without a doubt, the dance sequences are the highlight of the show. One can see,
even feel, the joy expressed by the
performers as they sing and dance the
stories of the different Islands.

The trouble with Hā, I found, is
unfortunately the aspect that is also
most celebrated and marketed: the
plot. The use of a rudimentary plotline
designed to have universal appeal by
telling “every man’s story” (http://
www.habreathoflife.com/media-room/
press-kit.html) leaves no room for
cultural complexity. Whether inten-
tional or not, embedded in the series
of events that dramatize Mana’s life
are stereotypes that reify representa-
tions of Polynesia, and, in turn, of the
Pacific as a whole.

This begins in Tonga, where Mana
is born. His shipwrecked, non-Tongan
parents are immediately assisted by
Tongans in the delivery of Mana, fol-
lowed by song and dance to celebrate
his birth. Such a hospitable reception
is a fitting introduction to invite the
audience—also strangers to another
land—along on this journey through
Polynesia. Furthermore, locating the
warm reception in Tonga reinforces
the nickname, “the Friendly Islands,”
a moniker given by Captain Cook
after he was warmly invited ashore
by a great Tongan crowd in a fashion
similar to the greeting experienced by
Mana’s parents. Next, Mana spends
his youth in Hawai‘i, which per-
petuates the notion of the Hawaiian
Islands as a carefree and idyllic Island
paradise—an epicenter of “Native
laziness.” Onlookers see Hawaiian life
as easy, and watch the boy who plays
Mana literally dance the day away
in a solo performance. Mana’s rite
of passage into manhood takes place
in Aotearoa, where he must prove
himself as a great warrior. Themes of
strength and masculinity characterize
this chapter in Mana’s life, adding to
and building on similar preexisting
images of Māori culture, such as the
haka tradition of the All Blacks rugby
team. The plot finds its comedic relief
in Sāmoa, capitalizing on the culture’s
clowning traditions. This segment
features a humorous interplay between
Mana, his newfound love Lani, and
Lani’s protective older brother. The
story then moves to Tahiti, where
fantasies of an exotic wedding in a
tropical Island paradise are fulfilled:
Mana and Lani are united in the same
kind of “Tahitian wedding ceremony”
available to couples across the globe.
Last is a stop in the Fijian Island
chain. It is here that Mana’s father
is tragically killed in a battle with
marauders. While the battle is perhaps
the least relevant and essential event in
the complete life story, placing it in the
Fijian context—thereby characterizing
the Fijians as the most savage among
the Islanders—reinforces both the
traditional and contemporary general-
izations of political turmoil that com-
monly characterize this Polynesian/
Melanesian border nation. The story
shifts back to a positive tone, ending
with the birth of Mana and Lani’s son
and with Mana’s father watching over
from the otherworld.

In effect, Hā: Breath of Life offers
little to enrich cultural awareness or
re-present Pacific Island stereotypes.
But I don’t believe that the Polynesian
Cultural Center lacks the ability to
do so. Over its history, the PCC has
demonstrated both cultural integrity
and educational value. For example,
its hosted King Tāufa‘āhau Tupou
IV of Tonga, Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of Fiji, and others. Its cultural experts have shared knowledge with the Bishop Museum and Kamehameha Schools (Cy Bridges, pers comm, 11 March 2010). These specialists as well as the students working in the Island villages always take the time to answer questions and share additional insight into their cultures. My own instructors of Māori song and dance, from whom I learned much on the US continent and whom I hold in high regard, were former PCC employees.

Why, then, does the night show fall short? I believe the reason for the disparity between what the PCC is capable of presenting to visitors and what they actually do is based on a perception of tourists rather than an inability to offer a more substantial portrayal of Island culture. Delsa Moe, PCC Director of Cultural Presentation, compared PCC visitors to infants “receiving their first dose of Polynesian culture. To give them advanced, deep culture would not only bore them to death, but it may stifle any interest they have in learning more about our cultures” (pers comm, 5 March 2010). PCC Cultural Director Cy Bridges also suggested that outsiders need not receive the same degree of information as those more versed in the culture: “what you may share with [someone from] Minnesota may be slightly different from our presentation we would give to Kula Kaipuni o Hau‘ula, which is a Hawaiian immersion school” (pers comm, 11 March 2010).

But just as early explorers and missionaries were incorrect in assuming that Islanders were primitive and needed chaperoning to adjust to sophisticated Western lifestyles, it is equally erroneous to dismiss tourists’ ability or desire to understand Pacific culture at a deeper level. I believe Hawai‘i can challenge its visitors more, not only share with them the Hawaiian value of ho’okipa (hospitality) and the warmth of aloha, but also teach them the importance of reciprocity and kuleana (responsibility). In return for a gracious welcome, it is only appropriate that they, as guests, show respect by educating themselves. As visitors to a foreign land, as outsiders in an unfamiliar culture, it is their responsibility to learn a little about both.

And what about our kuleana as Island residents? To truly be good hosts, we must live up to our responsibility and dispel misconceptions about Hawai‘i and the rest of the Pacific. It is certainly the kuleana of a cultural center to do so. If we do not offer our guests productions that challenge their stereotypes or give them a more complex and accurate portrayal of Pacific Islanders, they will leave Hawai‘i the same as they arrived. Unless we offer performances that are as eye-opening as they are entertaining, we do a disservice both to ourselves and our guests. This is the unrealized potential of the Polynesian Cultural Center: a night show that will make tourists say “ah-ha!”

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