

STAGE REVIEW
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Theatrical 'Waikiki' high tech, done well

The producers of "Waikiki nei" were clearly thinking big. The production has its own 22,000-square-foot theater on the fourth level of the Royal Hawaiian Center.

In it, Roy Tokujo and Roger Parent - who also created Maui's "Ulalena" - are staging an 80-minute multi-media show with a Las Vegas vibe and a Hawaiian soul.

The Vegas vibe comes from collaboration with Todd Dougall and is realized in plush semicircular stadium seating for 750 and a circular, rotating stage flanked on each side by triple decks for musicians. Fusing live performers with front and rear projections in a 60-foot-tall space is always theatrical and sometimes very effective. In a show that must play across a 180-degree visual arc, the images and sound are remarkably well-blended.

The Hawaiian soul eventually permeates through a collection of more than a dozen scenes created by committee to appeal to both tourist and local audiences and to offend no one. Despite a "happy valley, smiling tutu" conception, the show has moments of genuine Hawaiian sensibility.

A chorus of mostly male dancers creates the strongest images. They beat out a rhythm with sticks to accompany themselves in an ancient-hula prologue, then repeat the percussion with metal pipes when confronting high-rise construction later in the show.

The "Surf" number effectively blends dance and stagecraft as a dancer rides his surfboard on a rotating platform that rises out of the stage floor to tilt and rotate like a carnival ride. Crashing waves thunder in the background, and 30 feet above the audience, another wave-rider traverses the theater on nearly-invisible wires.

The same "tilt-a-whirl" stage is used again to support a canoe full of paddlers as it noses over the audience on a cresting wave of parachute silk.

Those action scenes punctuate a simple and linear action line that follows the visit of a group of tourists. They arrive by air and sea, floating in large open suitcases, to be warmly met by the Island people whose main purpose is to show them a good time during their vacation. They pose for pictures, learn Hawaiian dances and vocabulary and generally immerse themselves in the abundant sunshine and good will.

But several unexpected vignettes are inserted to raise the level of what could otherwise be a promotional travelogue.

There is a look back at Queen Lili'uokalani's captivity in 'Iolani Palace where she quilts, composes music and reads forbidden newspapers smuggled in as flower wrappings. A kupuna passes on his fishing net and knowledge to a grandson, who becomes entangled, then is rescued only through the help of his friends.

If the piece has a villain, it is overdevelopment, personified by a proliferation of construction cranes that the islanders are helpless to stop and represented by skyscraper silhouettes that appear on stacks of luggage, uprighted surfboards and unfolded newspapers.

The show also has some intended silliness as tourists dance in swim fins and chase after a moving sun to catch its best rays. There is also a pause for pure movement when a pair of aerialists performs a convincing "underwater" ballet.

Eventually, the visitors' stay in paradise comes to an end, bringing about some tearfully short-lived farewells, before the islanders - looking somewhat relieved - return to their own devices.

"Waikiki nei" is an excellent demonstration of how state-of-the-art technology can enhance a live performance. Given its venue and the composition of its intended audience, it is also remarkably sensitive to its material.

Joseph T. Rozmiarek has been reviewing theater performances in Hawai'i since 1973.