

mately comes from empowering individuals (256).

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Hawai'i Nei: Island Plays, by Victoria Nālani Kneubuhl. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8248-2539-X; xxviii + 227 pages, bibliography. Paper, US\$19.00.

Distinguished playwright Victoria Nālani Kneubuhl's newly published collection, *Hawai'i Nei: Island Plays*, comes during a time when the Hawaiian Renaissance is flourishing. The movement has engendered a sustained interest in Hawaiian culture and history. Kneubuhl's plays dramatize, in exciting and intriguing ways, some of the birthing pains inherent in the attempts of contemporary Hawaiians to find our place in this redefined world. The plays are a welcome means to celebrate our culture, arising as they do from our own backyards, relating our history, pondering our choices. This is unquestionably good drama as well, living up to the substantial burden of being designated a "distinctly Hawaiian theater."

We have spent the last few decades in Hawai'i building a new identity, which remains inexorably linked to the past. So, too, all three of the plays in *Hawai'i Nei* center on connections to things past: historical figures whose choices shaped Hawai'i's religious climate (*The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu*, which premiered in 1988); our obligations to kūpuna (ancestors) to maintain both the land and cultural practices (*Emmalehua*, which pre-

miered in 1986 and was revised and restaged in 1996); and reverence for the mana found in the bones of those who have gone before us (*Ola Nā Iwi*, which premiered in 1994). The plays embody the very pulse and ideas that drive the Hawaiian Renaissance. They reflect a very Hawaiian way of thinking, with the past boldly maneuvering into the present, affecting the actions of Hawaiians today. Kneubuhl makes no apology for this, for she is Hawaiian, and she knows that for our people, this is how events, and those embroiled in them, will find their way.

In *Hawai'i Nei*, the past resonates with present concerns to make the issues contemporary and vital. Moreover, the themes of respect for the past, reverence for the wisdom of kūpuna, and the need to preserve cultural fragments take on new depth and shape. This is because Kneubuhl writes from a woman's perspective, full of nuances about each character's nature, the importance of relationships, and the ability of women to have one foot in this world and the other in a sensual, spiritual, and emotional realm. Sometimes they battle that duality, but most often, the women at the core of each drama come to recognize how important it is to acknowledge influences beyond the temporal plane. We are asked to share their experience at a raw level, because these people—some royal, many quite ordinary—are trying to fulfill their daily lives even when faced with extraordinary influences.

Kneubuhl knows her history and can make the stale and overworked details breathe again with an alluring immediacy. Yet her plays are utterly contemporary in style, episodic,

breaking from western traditions of cause-and-effect narrative. The story is of utmost importance to Kneubuhl, yet it is woven in a nonlinear way that keeps the reader involved in exploring each strand, then delighting at the ways in which they eventually entwine into a colorful skein. Those strands are further heightened by the use of Hawaiian language and local Creole English (Pidgin) to replicate the sounds of people in today's Hawai'i. Those tongues, and the ritualistic use of oli (chant), add a lilting timbre to the overall sound of her dialogue.

Kneubuhl writes with passion and humor, turning the wry phrase at precisely the right moment. Her intelligence is not trumped-up by attempts to impress. It lies right below the surface, appearing when characters speak with a clarity that makes them accessible. Kneubuhl humanizes her characters by showing their foibles and struggles, so that our preconceptions about historical figures or clichés about modern Hawaiians are cast to the wind. These people are not predictable and never preachy, even when addressing the audience directly. Rather, their reflective moments afford a glimpse at their inner lives and motivations.

Just as Hawaiians today are not isolated from the rest of the world, Kneubuhl's characters in *Hawai'i Nei* respond to the influence of forces outside Hawai'i, are aware of global issues, and commune with other indigenous cultures, specifically Native American and Samoan. Hawai'i may be their locus, but the plays include locales, personalities, and cultures beyond the Hawaiian chain. There is even occasion to laugh at the mythi-

cized version of Hawai'i popular in other parts of the world. Several characters in *Emmalehua* rave about a Las Vegas casino show complete with hula, conga drums, mist, and a dark-haired maiden waiting for the shipwrecked sailor, on a stage framed by a waterfall with shimmering colors!

The published collection begins with an informative, detailed introduction, evidently put together in a loving manner by one who knows the playwright. University of Hawai'i-Mānoa Professor Craig Howes captures Kneubuhl's forthright manner, her humor, her discerning eye, utilizing quotes that hint at her unaffected, plain-talking, often charming personality. One can ascertain from the introduction that Kneubuhl writes what she knows, since history is one of her fortes and museum work has filled her life.

The journey Kneubuhl invites the reader to take is varied, full of curves and unexpected peaks—all of which speak to the fact that Kneubuhl is not saddled by one way of writing. She changes styles as deftly as she uses the stage fluidly. Quoted in the introduction as “never imagin[ing] anything other than an open space loosely defined by a light,” Kneubuhl freely devises unique visual frameworks for each play, which allow her to transform a dais into an altar, a chorus of psychologically stirring voices into Waikiki mavens at a cocktail party, or a lauhala mat into the simple yet important abode of a kuhina nui (regent).

The age-old conviction that “plays must be seen, not just read” may hold true for a number of works, but holding Kneubuhl's plays in the palm of

one's hand allows the reader to return often to some of the more poetic passages that Kneubuhl weaves into both her human and supernatural characters. "Poetic" does not mean "excessive" in Kneubuhl's way of writing. Her images are clear and manifest a pronounced sensitivity to the natural world.

This is not to say that the plays in *Hawai'i Nei* fall short in production: quite the opposite. The performances of *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu* and *Emmalehua* at Kumu Kahua Theater in Honolulu were etched into my mind as I reread the dialogue attributed to Ka'ahumanu and Emmalehua. Those powerful etchings still reverberate in memory because the productions were well cast, expertly directed, and met all expectations.

The first play, *The Conversion of Ka'ahumanu*, takes a very human, very feminist perspective (one and the same?) of kuhina nui Ka'ahumanu's head-on clash with the first missionary women to arrive in Hawai'i. Change entered Hawai'i on ships bringing goods and religion, just when the kuhina nui had decided to spurn all gods. Issues of class and race entwine with the newcomers' unwavering prejudice toward the dark-skinned natives. The latter is challenged when the staunch missionary woman, Lucy Goodman Thurston, who can barely tolerate the Hawaiians, is stricken with cancer and is nursed by the heathens she detests.

Ka'ahumanu, true to history, is a towering figure, and in Kneubuhl's hands she is revealed as a complex woman caught in the collision of progress and tradition. We are shown many sides of Ka'ahumanu: she is at

once compassionate leader; visionary; loving mentor; insistent disciplinarian; stubborn reformer; and sage. Wanting to "steer the canoe" as the new wave of ideas is introduced, she questions the new religion because "their god is a man, and their men are gods." (35) Ka'ahumanu's skepticism comes from the very fact that Kamehameha chose her because she did not fear him. She wrestles with inevitability, knowing that "our islands are in the midst of a storm, blown every which way by the white men who come here. Laws. These ladies speak of laws, and perhaps their laws are good. The old laws—many of them were foolish and unjust. But perhaps it is good to have the laws, which protect the people from harm. As in the old days, if the people see their ali'i [chiefs] doing good things, they will continue to love and follow us. It would be easy to take this new god and make him steer our canoe through this time, but I can't do it. I can't trust this haole [foreign] god" (37).

The Ka'ahumanu created by actress Nyla Ching-Fujii in the 2002 Kumu Kahua revival was compelling because of the surety of purpose that kept the kuhina nui forging ahead in stormy waters. Her Ka'ahumanu was not an unwieldy controller, but a woman caught between culture and instinct, who sensed the dawn of a new era, but hesitated, not knowing from moment to moment what path to choose.

Emmalehua on stage at Kumu Kahua is remembered for the psychological underpinnings of the chorus of three men and three women. Their commentary—a ritualized, choreographed counterpoint to the main

action—gave voice to Emma’s dreams and had a visceral effect on the audience. I recall nearly swooning with the intensity and cadence of their emotions. The chaos in Emmalehua’s soul was made tangible through vocalizations and rhythmical, writhing movements.

Reading *Emmalehua* again brings swirling, layered emotions to the surface. The Hawaiian concept of *koho ‘ia*, of being predisposed by heritage and family to carry on traditions, is amplified by Emma’s attempts to sublimate her calling. The hula goddess Laka reaches out to her in her dreams, just as her progressive engineer husband Alika plans to develop the family’s ancestral lands and fishpond. Spurred on by contact with another drifting soul, one of the Cheyenne people, she communes with her heritage and accepts her responsibility. There is a price—her marriage—but healing can occur elsewhere, particularly with her father, who always accepted her calling, and with her sister, a rival for her gifts.

Lastly, I came to know *Ola Nā Iwi* very well when I directed the play at the University of Hawai‘i–Hilo in 1999. It was an exciting “whodunit,” complete with flashbacks that took the audience on a joyride through phrenological history. The play was an important dramatic event on the UHH campus, where the preservation of Hawaiian language and culture is given top priority. One of the University’s outstanding drama majors, Pili-aloa Nathaniel, created the lead role of Kawehi with sensitivity and an energy that spoke to her identification with her Hawaiian ancestry. The production was politically important, as

well, coming as it did right after the *ka‘ai* (sennit casket) that had been removed from Bishop Museum was purported to have been returned to its rightful resting place—a real-life coincidence echoing the very essence of *Ola Nā Iwi*.

The heavy drama in *Ola Nā Iwi* was tempered by Kneubuhl’s decision to make the play a tribute to the theater and its lively types. The dilemma of reuniting ancestor’s bones with the homeland in this postcolonial, highly scientific society sounds heavy-handed, but Kneubuhl allowed the mocking of outdated scientific ideas to be encircled by light-hearted, almost circus-like sideshow episodes. The repatriation of ancestral remains drives the part-Hawaiian heroine in ways even she does not understand, since she is being “led” by the very spirit inhabiting the bones. Complicating the matter is her relationship with a haole boy who tries hard to understand forces that are quite foreign to him.

Again, Kneubuhl brings another culture into the mix, breaking stereotypes with a savvy detective, Fatu, who charmingly belies his Ivy League education—a kind of Polynesian Colombo. Better yet, the bumbling German detective whose job it is to find the thief and return the goods to a German museum is persuaded to appreciate the cultural mores of the Polynesians, who are simply trying to do what is right.

As in many detective mysteries, mistaken identities are resolved and the bad guys are tricked into cooperation. But Kneubuhl ends the play on a poignant note, returning to the core drama, closing with reflections uttered by Liliha, whose bones finally return

home: “Hide the resting place with rocks and branches, hide it so only the birds know where I am, and then leave me. Leave me. Leave me in the breathing, beating heart of my beloved ‘āina. I will lie there quietly in the darkness, and in the darkness I will hear them coming. I will hear the long slow sound of the conch, the steady beat of the pahu [drum], and then the creaking of the mānele [palanquin], swaying back and forth and back and forth. I will feel their footsteps shaking the air, and stretching out, I will see the endless, winding procession of torches, and then the faces of every loved one gone before me. And one will leave the great line and slowly come toward me, and, bending over so softly she calls back, ‘Stop and wait, for here is one of our own, come home to us at last’” (226).

The impact of seeing all three productions returned when rediscovering *The Conversion of Ka‘ahumanu*, *Emmalehua*, and *Ola Nā Iwi* on the written page. But what cannot be done in the theater could occur with the text in hand; with great pleasure, it was possible to revisit the feverish dreams of an ancient ali‘i, the mumbled guidance of a troubled father after he’d imbibed his home brew, and the turmoil of a young woman who must weigh the responsibility and danger of honoring sacred artifacts.

It seems right to take one of Kneubuhl’s own characters out of context to explain why her work is so very important to us in Hawai‘i today. Alika, the progressive husband in *Emmalehua*, addresses the gathering of engineers with these words, “We are a new generation, with a new style and a new breadth of view. We will

create a new tomorrow” (90). Victoria Nālani Kneubuhl is the dramatic voice of the new generation and has been an important player in helping to forge the new Hawaiian tomorrow. In ironic contrast to the character Alika, she will carry out this noble task with a determination to celebrate the Hawaiian culture and preserve the ways that serve our people well.

Victoria Nālani Kneubuhl will always find a home for her work on the experimental boards of Hawai‘i’s Kumu Kahua, but it is high time that her works are available to an eager readership beyond the intimacy of that stage.

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Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women’s Kastom in Vanuatu, by Lissant Bolton. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8248-2535-7, xxxv + 232 pages, figures, map, photographs, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. US\$39.00.

Unfolding the Moon, the title of this book, is taken from a textile design and suggests the poetic resonance of women’s agency as it is expressed through kastom practices embedded in the fabrication and exchange of textiles. In this book, women’s textiles provide a route to understanding the gendered production of knowledge and women’s kastom practices. This beautifully written book has much to say about the relationships between material objects and cultural practices; the articulation of gender and kastom practices; and the inclusionary