

Hula on an Island, but Hawaii It's Not



Kah Leong Poon

Students in a hula class met in Central Park during the summer to prepare for the World Invitational Hula Festival in Honolulu.

By TANGO TANNER

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THE 15 women stood clustered, in supplication. Their feet were bare, their faces somber, their voices somewhat uncertain. Finding courage in congregation, they sent forth their request in a lilting chant: "The mountain stands steep in the calm. ... Kaipuha'a is lost. ... Do not hold back your voice."

The response returned to them, low, as if from the earth, in a steady, clear voice, stronger and wiser than that of the group: "Eat, until your mouth is full. My gift to you is my voice."

And so began another class of the Halau Hula 'O Na Mele 'Aina 'O Hawai'i, or Dance School of the Songs of the Land of Hawaii, on a patch of grass just inside the entrance to Central Park at 72nd Street and Fifth Avenue. The group meets twice a week as it prepares to represent New York at the World Invitational Hula Festival, Nov. 11 to 13 at Waikiki in Honolulu.

Paulie Jennings, organizer of the festival, sees nothing inherently odd about the squad's origins, though this is the first time the city will be represented at a major hula competition. But then, she has previously served as host to teams from Namibia and Iran. "Hula is global," Ms. Jennings said, though she was quick to add that teams from outside Hawaii compete only against one another, sparing them from competition with the Hawaiian hula juggernaut.

The New York group will travel to Honolulu three days before

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HALAU HULA 'O NA MELE 'AINA 'O HAWAI'I

Luana Haragushi, instructor
Call (845) 359-9214 for class information.

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the festival to make the flower leis, bracelets and anklets they will wear in competition. In June the group held a fund-raiser, netting \$1,000, half the cost of the flowers.

Their kumu hula, or teacher, is Luana Haraguchi, a small, spry woman whose strong features and black hair, worn in a long braid, give her a serious look, but whose manner gives the impression that mischief is just around the corner. Ms. Haraguchi moved from the island of Kauai to the island of Manhattan when she was 10. She missed the ocean - the mention of Coney Island and the Rockaways draws a pitying look - but returned often to Hawaii to study hula, which means simply dance.

She cites the legendary hula dancer and teacher Iolani Luahine, who died in 1978, as her greatest influence. "When she danced, she floated," Ms. Haraguchi recalled. "Sometimes when she taught, she would just tell us a story, about the people, the types of rain and vegetation in a certain song. It could last two or three hours. That was the dance class." In 1968 Ms. Haraguchi started her own halau, or school, to teach kahiko, or traditional hula.

At the recent class, the students sat on the ground, stretching their legs as Ms. Haraguchi beat out a rhythm on the ipu heke, an hourglass-shaped drum made of two gourds joined at the neck. A single tap on the gourd signaled the students to rise to one knee. Another tap, and they placed both feet under their bodies. Another tap, and they stood straight up, some quicker than others. (They ranged in age from their 20's to their 70's.)

The students then chanted the "E ho mai" three times, imploring their teacher, "Bring me the little bits of knowledge from above." Ms. Haraguchi called back, "Ekahi elua ekolu eha." The women repeated the words, swaying slightly, reaching to their left, then their right. I asked Frank Bryant, Ms. Haraguchi's husband, the meaning of the mystical chant. "That's Hawaiian for 1-2-3-4," he said. "It's an arm stretch."

Mr. Bryant called the dancers together for group business and a motivational speech. "The important thing at the festival is that you have a good feeling when you dance," he told them. "We have no thought of winning. If you have that thought, get it out of your head."

The dancing started. "No shoulders, no pelvis," Ms. Haraguchi called out, her smile met by other smiles. "Can we get a little swaying of the hips in there?" The dancers' hips undulated, the movement emphasized by their deep-green pleated skirts, many sewn by Ms. Haraguchi.

Like many of the women, Kaina Quenga, originally from Hawaii, wore a flower in her hair: a small white Tahitian gardenia over her left ear. Mary Virginia McNeill, from North Carolina, had a red and white bougainvillea over her right. Ms. Quenga explained that a flower over the right ear meant "I'm available"; the left meant "I'm taken."

"You're not taken!" Ms. McNeill exclaimed.

"I know, I'm just left-handed," Ms. Quenga said.

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Lotus Wong, another member of the squad, uses hula to escape the stress of managing litigation paralegals at the firm White & Case. A halau is different from a studio where "you go, you pick up and leave," Ms. Wong said. "Here, we learn about the legends, gods, people, animals, land, plants and water, how sacred these things are. It isn't aerobics, it's a cultural background."

She also spoke of "a spirit in the halau," which she described as a feeling that "we're there to help each other."

The class continued. Passersby stopped to watch, while tourists snapped photos, surprised to encounter a piece of the 50th state on their trip to the 11th. Between songs, Ms. Haraguchi reached into her bag and produced a nose flute. More improbable than the instrument itself is that she was able to coax a haunting melody from it. But the small sound of the flute was all but drowned out by funk and hip-hop coming from a nearby concert - by Oahu's own Jack Johnson, with Donavon Frankenreiter, G. Love and Special Sauce, stars of the surfer music scene. It was a clash of old and new Hawaii, played out in Central Park, of all places. Ms. Haraguchi, who seems to inhabit her own pacific world, took no notice.

The dance ended, and the students circled their teacher. "I want you to relax," she told them. "That's the beauty and the grace of hula. Hula is not stiff. Get into your knees. When you dance to

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the Hawaiian gods, you must be in a humble position."

Mario Changco, from the Philippines, was the lone man in a class of 30 women. "It's kind of weird, actually," he said. He has tried unsuccessfully to recruit male friends, unable to overcome negative associations with what he called "hotel hula." Mr. Changco left the halau to take classes in the 'auana, or modern, style but soon returned.

"This is more like family," Mr. Changco said. "The studio was good for learning the steps, but Luana teaches why we do what we do." He paused, then shook his head. "I've been studying hula almost two years, and I never knew until now why it's danced in the knees."

Night had fallen on Central Park. The class ended with the students kissing one another and their teacher aloha before moving off in groups. No one left alone. Last to leave was the kumu hula. As she walked across the grass, darkness revealed that the straps of her flip-flops lighted up with every step.

Tango Tanner is a writer who lives in New York.

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