

MicroFest: Honolulu

Theater and Society in the Center of the Sea

by Sonny Ganaden

<i>E ala e</i>	Awaken/Arise
<i>Ka la i kahikina</i>	The sun in the east
<i>I ka moana</i>	From the ocean
<i>Ka moana hohonu</i>	The ocean deep
<i>Pi'i ka lewa</i>	Climbing (to) the heaven
<i>Ka lewa nu'u</i>	The heaven highest
<i>I kahikina</i>	In the east
<i>Aia ka la.</i>	There is the sun.
<i>E ala e!</i>	Awaken!



Photo: Michael Premo

So chanted several dozen Americans, as rain beat across their faces and the sun rose through swept rainclouds pushed by the tradewinds across the beach at Waimanalo along the Eastern edge of Oahu. After the dawn chant, *Kumu Hula* [Vicky Holt Takamine](#) and her *halau* [Pua Ali'i `Ilima](#) (*halau* meaning group in Hawaiian), who led in the chant, invited the Americans to jump into the chest high surf pounding on the shore. Nearly all of them did.

The dawn chanters were participants of [MicroFest: Honolulu](#), a four-day multi-venue event organized by the [Network of Ensemble Theaters](#) (NET) that consisted of artists, theater directors, community organizers, performers, funders, and *et cetera*: the innumerable ways in which those involved with theater in America describe themselves in both circumscribed and creative ways. Described as part festival, part think tank, the event was created “to look deeply at the role art and artists play in creating healthy communities in America.” Organizers of the event fulfilled this goal by engaging with those who create community-based art in four locations that represent “isolated communities” of America: Detroit, Michigan; Harlan, Kentucky and Knoxville, Tennessee; New Orleans, Louisiana, and Honolulu and the north shore of Oahu, Hawai`i.

There are two major differences between Honolulu—a city within the sea—and the previously visited sites where MicroFest occurred: many residents of Honolulu consider their home neither isolated nor American. As a primary hub of global trade and the home of a uniquely diverse populace—the result of immigration from eras of missionaries, a 19th century sugar economy, and American militarism—Hawai`i has not been even remotely isolated since the era of the jet. As Hawai`i was once a sovereign constitutional monarchy,

overthrown in 1898, and later used as the site of the American military’s Pacific Command Center, many residents, non-Hawaiians included (the term Hawaiians, used throughout, refers to the indigenous individuals of Hawai`i), continue to publicly question the validity of Americanism of the islands.

As the participants for the event welcomed the rising sun, they themselves were welcomed to Hawai`i with a spirit of *aloha*. To the passing tourist, the term could mean its dictionary equivalents: hello, love, and goodbye. To the participants of MicroFest however, it was experienced as something more encompassing, like the salt water on their bodies and the rain water on their faces. These American storytellers were greeted warmly because they spent the first half of their visit listening rather than speaking, hearing stories rather than reciting them. The stories they heard are not the ones recited on brochures. Rather, the State of Hawai`i remains a contentious hub in the center of the Pacific, a product of a tourism and military-dependent economy. There are specifics of place here in the middle of the Pacific Ocean—connected to America by law and culture though not by immediate logic—that Honolulu artists have taken as their subject matter. Many artists in Honolulu focus their work on a contentious history and history’s impact on our current relationships. As individuals involved with ensemble theater, MicroFest participants “get it,” and were introduced to the arts and cultural community in Honolulu, and a history that several artists have taken as their duty to interpret.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING AND THE MAKIKI FOREST: WHAT THE WORK LOOKS LIKE

Just over a ridge, and not far from the heart of urban Honolulu, is the Makiki forest. Most residents of Makiki would be surprised to know it still exists; 22,000 people live in Makiki’s haphazard clustering of apartments, schools, and small parks. A freeway bisects the district where President Obama once lived (in a drab apartment building), worked (at the local Baskin Robbins), and went to high school. Above the density of humanity in Makiki remains a forest maintained by the State and a primary school. That charter school, [*Hālau Kū Māna*](#), is attempting to restore the flora and fauna of the forest through the work of students and faculty who organized an immersive experience for the visiting MicroFest participants, one of many set up throughout the event.



After a century of assimilation, the founders of the native education movement sought to return to an

‘āina (earth)-based knowledge, to build an indigenous Hawaiian cultural base, said Auntie Mahina, director of *Hālau Kū Māna*. It’s a project of survival—*aloha ‘āina*, which translates as love of the land, but means so much more—nourishment, governance, procreation. Colonialism overlooked a history of self-education, so this movement looks back to a pre-colonial time for historical antecedents of self-education. Mahina continued, “As

contemporary Hawaiians we are reclaiming our history, we're finding our ancestors. *Aloha ʻāina* is the root of Hawaiian resistance to colonialism. It provides a foundation for an intellectually challenging and holistic system. *Aloha* is an active verb. It's a practice."

This practice of actively creating place both within the mind through theater and through the physicality of environment was not lost on the participants. From the NET [Manifesto](#), the organizers articulated a vision of the organization, and the event: "We exist to support those who have dedicated their life's work to creating theater through the ensemble process," says the website. "Some ensembles create original work; others work interpretively or with adaptations. Some ensembles are rooted in the community, whether that community is geographic, intellectual, aesthetic, or ethnic. Other ensembles consciously stand apart from community in order to critique and provoke. All of us create theater that is meaningful to each member and to our diverse audiences. We prize most highly the benefits that arise from artists working together over extended periods of time.... sparked by the vital and enduring international heritage of collective theater making. Our work is committed to the unique event of the living stage, where the imagination of artist and audience is linked in social communion and mutual creativity."



At a staged reading by the Kumu Kahua Theatre in the Kakaʻako neighborhood. Photo: Michael Premo

All this discussion of what ensemble theater means to the variety of participants who fit under its umbrella can detract from the actual work of creating art. But, one cannot do the actual work of impacting community in the most effective way without being cognizant of the theoretical underpinning and history inherent in the acts; to use what those in the academy have called "praxis." Both views, that of the artist making the work and the artist crafting the critique with others in community, is an underlying intention in the MicroFest events. The way that *aloha ʻāina* was described to attendees of MicroFest was a different, yet familiar version of the NET manifesto, and provided further "foundation for an intellectually challenging and holistic [or at least evolving] system" of place-based ensemble theater.

When Mark Kidd, communications director at [Roadside Theater](#) in Kentucky, wrote in his [essay](#) about the MicroFest that occurred in his own Harlan County, he described a term heard often during the Honolulu gathering: *creative placemaking*. "Nationally, a growing number of arts funders, researchers, and practitioners are adopting the term creative placemaking to bring attention to the ways that arts, culture, physical infrastructure, and economic development can be coordinated to change the demographic and economic composition of economically-distressed neighborhoods and communities," Kidd wrote.

Based on his own arts and activism experience, he knows what he's talking about. Moreover, to be a responsible guest of Hawai'i, prior to visiting the Makiki forest with the group, he gave himself a tour of Oahu by hitchhiking to see the sort of place where people are creatively, and not so creatively, making their lives. He brought some of this experience with him later in the event, when he hosted a session in a tent to discuss power dynamics in the world of theater.

"This is a gorgeous place, and I'm happy to be here with you," Kidd said as he engaged participants in a game of role playing, the most necessary tool in the actual practice of ensemble theater. Sitting in the round, participants were given various roles and backgrounds to present to the group: a theater director, an artist, an executive director, a stagehand, a member of the public, and a performer. The scene was precipitated by the not uncommon opportunity of a new source of funding, in this case "to bring a large theater, a smaller theater, and a community organization together to build audiences, new works, and civic engagement." This simple practice of stepping into others' roles, even for a moment, elucidated the power dynamics with which creating ensemble work in partnership and with community is fraught.



Photo: Michael Premo

The scene played out as if the power deck had been reshuffled. It quickly became apparent who was in power in creation of art and who was not under the tent. "I felt totally left out, voiceless," explained the woman assigned to play a community member. "I needed you guys to fall in line so that we could secure that funding," said the man assigned as the executive director. Neal Milner, a Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Hawai'i and theatre buff afterward evoked the never seen funding organization and its power. "At what point does chasing the funding become anathema to your vision of bringing art to the community?" he questioned, directing his gaze to all participants. "At

what point do you say no?” There was no response. Others commented on how power dynamics are exacerbated by the urgency of artificial time constraints like grant deadlines. Creating a place, even of the mind, through theater remains a challenging endeavor.

Kidd then shifted gears. Slightly adapting story circle methodology developed by [John O’Neal](#) and utilized by many community-based artists, he invited people in small circles to each tell a 90-second personal story about power. Then, with the backdrop of the role play and their own experiences resonating, the group shared observations, questions, and takeaways about power: “Whoever runs the agenda has the power.” ...“Power is at every juncture. It’s something we have. How do we use it?” ...“What are the results of not being aware of power?” One participant affirmed that the exercise “cemented my goal of using artistic methods [such as story circles] in community work” as a way to level power dynamics. Indeed, Kidd’s session, in its own reliance on creative techniques, succeeded in catalyzing a rich exploration of power.

HULA AND THE HAWAIIAN LANGUAGE: WHAT MAKES THE WORK WORK

The “community” part of the term “community organizing” can be as tenuous as the term “creative placemaking” that was discussed by MicroFest participants. To define oneself as a community organizer or a creative placemaker is tenuous inasmuch as trying to creatively make a difference in democracy is tenuous. In Hawai‘i, where an indigenous community was once discouraged from practicing forms of art inherent to ways of life passed down through centuries, and where American hegemony overtook a sovereign nation, that “community” being organized (i.e. Hawaiians) has a history that is about family, culture, pain, and politics. Referring to Hawaiians as the “Hawaiian community” as if it was a contiguous block is exceedingly perilous. (It must be noted that Hawaiian refers to a race of people, not an adjective denoting residency like “Californian,” or “New Yorker.”) What everyone in Hawai‘i seems to agree on, however, is the role of Hawaiian arts in local perceptions of place. Through *hula* and Hawaiian language, community organizing in Hawai‘i has a different historical context than the continental United States. Those who joined *Kumu Hula* Vicky Takamine Holt and her *halau* were made aware of these connections and the ways that *hula*, through dancing, chanting, song, and costuming, are an effective form of community organizing.

Those who heard Holt discuss her *halau*’s work also learned of songs written by a deposed queen, and the



Hula performance at a traditional laua presented by the PA’I Foundation and the Pua Ali’i ‘Ilima halau. Photo: Michael Premo

emergence of the Merrie Monarch festival, an internationally known *hula* festival held annually in Hilo on Hawai'i Island in the last several decades, as a gathering that celebrates both Hawaiian cultural heritage and political solidarity. Several participants noted what is taken for granted in the world of *hula*: that performers often do not think of themselves as artists. They instead have lives in which dance, music, language, and a Hawaiian world view are woven so intrinsically into a way of being that the western conception of "art" itself loses its necessity. "Of course we all make costumes," replied one dancer when asked by a participant. *Hula*, in the context of theater, is part ensemble work, part life itself.

Hula, as a tool to organize the Hawaiian community, would not be possible without the Hawaiian language. Once nearly lost, the Hawaiian language reemerged in the 1970s as part of what is now referred to as the "Hawaiian Renaissance," a period in which cultural activities were revived after nearly a century of oppressive loss. A major victory of the Hawaiian language movement has been the creation of several Hawaiian language immersion schools throughout the archipelago.

One of those institutions, [Ke Kula 'o Samuel M. Kamakau Laboratory](#) charter school, in the heart of peaceful Haiku Valley on the East side of Oahu, opened its doors to the visiting Americans. The site of the school is symbolic. It lies in a valley formerly used by the military, then bisected in the 1990s by the H3 freeway that connects the major military

installations of the island. Between the spans of the H3 freeway above them, with the American military's monument to the severance of land looming like something out of science fiction, participants were warmly welcomed.



The Samuel M. Kamakau charter school and student greeters. Photo: Pam Korza



Students greeted their visitors with songs, lei, and hugs, a protocol that touched MicroFest participants, grounding them as guests, and the action of invitation serving as reminder that they stood on occupied land. Participants saw a play directed by Tammy Haili'ōpua Baker (the first Hawaiian teacher in the [University of Hawai'i's Theater Department](#)) from *Ka Hālau Hanakeeka* and performed in Hawaiian by high school students; there were no English translations. Then Dr. Kaliko Baker, a linguist who teaches at both the University of Hawai'i and at the immersion school, discussed the importance of

language. “It defines a world view,” he explained. “It connects us to other peoples of Polynesia and to each other. Without language, our culture would die, or cease to be our own.” His message was reinforced by the banter happening in the hallways; students speaking mellifluous Hawaiian with each other in the lunch line.

AHUPUA’A IN TRANSITION: THE DIFFERENCE BEING MADE & HOW WE KNOW IT

In Kaka’ako, a mixed-use clustering of high rises, warehouses, and public parks in the center of Honolulu, a familiar transition is happening. The neighborhood is primarily owned by [Kamehameha Schools](#), an educational institution whose mission is to educate native Hawaiian students. Kamehameha Schools is also the largest nonprofit institution in the U.S., and has had its share of bad press over the last several decades. Some recent history: as the primary landowner reexamines the use of real estate in Kaka’ako, artists have been tapped to put murals on the walls. At the same time, legal wrangling over the neighborhood’s capacity for a future rail station and a dozen new high rise condominiums plays itself out in neighborhood board meetings and State Court. During this period, a cadre of young artists arose to fulfill both their personal desire to see artwork in a large format and introduce artists into the community, “the surest way to increase property values,” explained John Malpede, director of the ensemble theater group, Los Angeles Poverty Department, in passing.



Artist, John “Prime” Hina, in front of his mural in the Kaka’ako district depicting Kamanawa, a Hawaiian high chief and early supporter of King Kamehameha I. Photo: Michael Premo

A positive result of Kaka’ako’s impending gentrification has been the display of the work of [808 Urban](#), an organization that mentors “at risk” youth with old-fashioned, get-straight talking urban art (read graffiti) run by John “Prime” Hina and Sierra Dew, the program’s administrator. The youth whom Prime mentors are “at risk” of falling victim to the sort of life he escaped through art; a life without a valid creative outlet amidst the

ills of poverty in paradise, in an era when arts have been red-lined out of education except for those lucky few in private schools or in public schools with remaining arts programs. For the last four years, Prime and Dew have brought 808 Urban to several local high schools,

created over 50 murals, continue to do underfunded art workshops, and have a space in Kaka'ako that serves as a hub and storefront for the organization.

The type of against-all-odds work that 808 Urban is engaged in was recognized by Marcus Renner, a visiting playwright who has worked as an educator, community organizer, and youth development specialist. "We moved to a mural put together by the Junior Board of 808 Urban and one of their youth explained how working on the mural has helped her develop leadership and public speaking skills," wrote Renner of his tour. "The board draws on students from several high schools and it's helped her make friends. Prime [explained that] they opened this group up to private schools and at first the 'snobby, rich' kids and the 'ghetto' kids didn't want to work with each other. But after a year, they were like a family. They are looking forward to training the next generation of artists to take over this program and continue what they've started."

Community leader and arts advocate Maile Meyer joined the visitors for their tour. "Maile pointed to the fact that most of the artists using space in the neighborhood are on short-term leases so the developers can move them out as their development plans move forward," noted Renner. What interested several participants is the real-time view of gentrification in process, as opposed to its after-effects and the sociological implications typically analyzed years later. The response of socially conscious artists has been cautious. Though there has been ample art put on the walls of Kaka'ako, it has all been pre-approved by a landowner bent on razing the neighborhood for better or worse. The folks on the tour were quick to spot the introductory sociological questions: At what point do the arts become an agent of American capitalism's wealth divide? Where does morality fit into this? Is that what is happening in Kaka'ako? If MicroFest: Honolulu participants return in a few years, we may have answers for them. According to NET's Mark Valdez, NET affiliates worked with Dew and another neighborhood leader, Marisa Abidir after the MicroFest to offer facilitation training so that they can continue to actively have these conversations.

HOMELESS IN HAWAI`I: WORKING ACROSS SECTORS

There are many creative, place-made metaphors for teamwork used in Hawai'i. From the host culture, *laulima* is often used, literally meaning "many hands working together." From team outrigger paddling, the state sport, one often hears "paddling in time," in reference to a crew's ability to stroke in the water in unison to propel the *wa'a* (canoe) forward. Euphemisms abound from a life near the sea. Metaphors of teamwork are necessary when dealing with seemingly insurmountable societal problems. Homelessness is the issue many leaders seem most inept to address in modern Hawai'i. Teamwork, and working across sectors, is necessitated in the battles against homelessness as State and County governments have yet to implement actual substantive solutions to addressing the issues of residents without homes.

The fight against homelessness got pitched in Honolulu throughout 2012 and 2013. As the Occupy Movement was organizing on the continental U.S., its Hawai'i counterpart situated itself on the *mauka* edge of Thomas Square, calling itself [\(de\)Occupy Honolulu](#). Protesters,

activists, artists, and the homeless used the site to discuss Wall Street debacles with each other and passing motorists. In early 2013, Honolulu City and County, through the office of the mayor, installed haphazard wooden planters and fluorescent orange construction fencing along the sidewalk to remove the cohort of activists; the first time in which flowers were used as an offensive weapon against free speech. It didn't work. The (de)Occupy activists simply moved to the other side of the park, causing an arms race between planters and protesters.

The (de)Occupy protestors took a cue from the work of community activists like John Malpede of Skid Row's [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#) (LAPD). The (de)Occupy activists and LAPD understand the big take-away: change the language. John and his ensemble have made an active choice to use the terms that apply to those in the denominator part of the power fraction. They are calling Skid Row, made infamous during the urban deterioration of the Reagan-era trickle-down economy, the "Biggest Recovery Community Anywhere." LAPD publishes a regular newspaper, works with several nonprofits in the community, including those that deliver both housing and legal services, and actively has recovering individuals as players in theater work.

The presentation at [Catholic Charities Hawai'i](#) by the visiting LAPD performers was a showstopper. Speaking in first person, the narrator explains the drama. His friend, a homeless drug addict, a junkie, is going to die on Skid Row unless he receives medical attention. What is presented is a Cornelian dilemma: the option to let his friend die because of his addiction on the street, or bring him to the hospital to receive poor care and suffer withdrawals only to possibly die in a sterile environment. After an arduous decision to take the friend to the hospital, he cries out in the agony of addiction wanting another fix, knowing that he will die soon. The narrator gets the drugs and returns. In the frenzy of the fix, the needle breaks in his friend's arm, and the three stage actors at the bedside act as one, recoiling and descending upon the body in cascades reminiscent of the choreography of Pina Bausch and the content of Bertolt Brecht.

The excerpt was powerful to witness, its potency coming from the professionally guided participation of people who are neither actors nor directors but those who've lived the experience being portrayed; *and*, importantly, from the aesthetic decisions that resulted in something emotively engulfing.

During another breakout session, University of Hawai'i instructor Brian Shevelenko discussed how he lit the "stage" at Catholic Charities. In a nuts-and-bolts presentation, he



John Malpede (rear) with Los Angeles Poverty Department members. Photo: Michael Premo

introduced participants to the concepts of stage lighting, and how, even with a moderate budget, the visuals of light mean so much. “When you’re doing the lights and music, you must react to the action on stage, and remember that you are a part of it,” Brian told the group. The discussion was supposed to be about lighting a stage, but that’s not where the conversation ended up. Participants quickly diverted to questions of how to bring professional-grade lighting to remote places, and how to tell community stories in, literally, the best light. Where do we put a generator? How can I do this with hardware store items? Can we do this off-grid? All questions intended to bring theater to those who are ordinarily excluded from art, or who hardly see themselves as artists.

LAPD is the presentation of truth through theater, believing wholeheartedly in the capacity of art to develop community and community to develop art.

GENERATIONAL CULTURAL TRANSMUTATION THROUGH THE PARTY

MicroFest: Honolulu was a four-day event with numerous presentations, and though much was made of the breakout sessions, a clear crowd favorite was the Saturday night event at the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, i.e. the party. [Frank Waln](#) and [Samsоче Sampson](#) began the night with a fancy dance done to a hip hop beat and a battle rap. It was not art made for those with a preconceived notion of American Indian presentation, as Waln used the now-global dialect of hip hop to convey some very real messages. It was awesome. Sampson danced with twelve rings in a costume replete with both traditional feathers and cleaved compact discs. Waln rapped over a Mos Def beat. Instead of playing a version of their history for outsider consumption, these guys told their own story, in their own way, and looked good doing it.

Then, Cherice and Brian Harrison Nelson of [Guardians of the Flame](#), a New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian performing group, took the stage, and exploded the format. Taking seats as though they were at the dinner table, working on costumes, the performers practiced the traditional way that information and cultural tradition is passed from one generation to the other— through the spoken story.

[Scatter Our Own](#), an alternative rock duo of Oglala Lakota ancestry from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota, took a different approach to the party. It was as if they flipped the script on a few centuries of misappropriation of American Indian culture in pop America. By using the American art form of rock and roll (arguably our best invention), they sang and played about real life on the reservation, about what it’s like to be alive in a place marked by tragedy and resilience.



Samsоче Sampson (left) and Frank Waln.
Photo: Shyamala Moorty

To say that the folks living in Pine Ridge have experienced trauma would be to discredit the word; the poorest community in America has experienced more terrifying realities than most could relate to. They sound a bit like the Pixies, but Scatter Their Own delivers anthems decrying the loss of culture. They rock out. My favorite track of the night was their opener: a lovely, nearly a capella rendition of a song by Canadian sister duo Tegan and Sara about America.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?



Moses Goods, MicroFest Fellow performs with fellow MicroFesters. Photo: Michael Premo

And these are titles that we intentionally muddy anyways,” he said, treading to the director group. Intentionally muddying conceptions of power and what it means to be a part of theater in America, the participants labeled themselves creatively during their stay. As those who intentionally work with others to create art, they understand the words John wrote for the play performed at Catholic Charities:

I realize that,
I can’t do this alone.

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MicroFest:Honolulu ended with a sleepover and a *luau* on the North Shore of Oahu. Watching the performance of the dozen MicroFest participants that braved a *hula* performance for the event’s ending, I was reminded of something John Malpede said when the event opened, sitting in the sand with rain dashed across his glasses. When organizers attempted to corral participants into separate groups of organizers, directors, community advocates, and performers, John gave a cross look. “Being artists decrees and supports our existence.