

Feature



Costuming for Nā Lei Hulu Patrick Makuakāne

The Kumu Hula (hula master) of one of the largest hālau (hula schools) in the United States describes what goes in to costuming a show,

My hālau (hula school), [Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu](#) (the many feathered wreaths at the summit, held in high esteem), located in the San Francisco Bay area, celebrated its 30th anniversary last year. The school is known for its unique, contemporary form of dance called *hula mua* or “hula that evolves.” The style blends traditional movements with non-Hawaiian music like opera, electronic, dance, alternative and pop. Both *hula mua* and authentic, traditional pieces are showcased in our company’s visually captivating stage productions.

Over the years we have amassed a large collection of costumes and adornments, which span the spectrum from traditional to urban contemporary, with stops in between paying homage to classically nostalgic ensembles from the early to late 1900s. I’ll be sharing with you some of my favorite costumes we’ve featured throughout the years.

First and foremost, I’d like to speak about what most people assume is the national costume for the hula dancer: the grass skirt. Let’s tell the truth about its seemingly ubiquitous role in hula. Ironically, the grass skirt didn’t originate in Hawai’i. It was brought by migrant workers from the Gilbert Islands in the late 1800s and possibly became popular when *hula* dancers traveled the vaudeville circuit on the mainland. It returned to Hawai’i and eventually insinuated itself as an authentic, traditional garb of the native hula dancer.

Dancers do not use the moniker, grass skirt, they call it by the natural fiber from

which it’s made: either *raffia* (a string-like weed found in tropical settings) or *hau* (made from the wild hibiscus tree inner fibers). Although it is used periodically, usually representing dances from the monarchy period in the mid- to late-1800s, it is not considered the national hula costume.

Below are two examples of costumes that use the material. At left, in a dance honoring King David Kalākaua from the previously mentioned monarchical period. At right in a modern co-opting for a *hula mua* piece, that is accompanied by a bass-laden electronic dance track.



Left: Dance honoring King Kalākaua. Right: Modern co-opting of *hula mau* piece accompanied by electronic dance track.

Traditionally, dancers wore material made from *kapa* (barkcloth). These bast fibers come from the inner bark of certain species and shrubs from the mulberry family. The process of creating a *kapa* piece was labor intensive, involving repeated sequences of wetting and beating the fibers on a *kua kuku* (polished stone tablet) with a *hōhoa* (rounded beater).

And that barely touches the surface of all that's entailed to create a relatively small piece. Traditional Hawaiian *kapa* makers were skilled artisans, crafting exquisite pieces, intricately designed with geometric figures and dyed in all manners of colorful hues. Fastened around the waist of a dancer it becomes a *pā'ū* (skirt), accentuating the hips as it undulates in dance.

Many hula schools use Pellon or other interfacing as an inexpensive substitute for *kapa*, since it has a similar texture and dyes brilliantly. We have used Pellon in many productions as costumes for both men and women. It looks more traditionally authentic than cotton or any other fabric and, despite its synthetic composition, has a rather organic look and feel. Best thing about Pellon? It's cheap! You can outfit an entire company rather inexpensively and it doesn't require a seamstress, just the patience and skill to wrap several yards around your waist to achieve a layered, traditional look.

Traditional pieces are commonly adorned with head and neck leis, as well as wristlets and anklets. These range from greenery, ferns or nuts gathered in the forest



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or shells found on the shoreline. Traditional accessories featured dog teeth bound on a meshed net wrapped around the ankles or animal tusks tied together as a bracelet.

No animals were harmed in the creation of the anklets and wristlets adorning the men in the picture on the previous page. To simulate boar tusks, we shaped oven-baked clay into tusks and sewed them together with thick cordage. The *hula* which the men are dancing honors Māui, the ancestral navigator, credited in myth for pulling the Hawaiian islands up from the ocean floor with his magic fish hook. Hence, the large fish hooks upon the men's necks, which are also made of clay.

King David Kalākaua ruled Hawai'i from 1874 - 1891. He was an ardent proponent of the arts, with a special affinity for the *hula*. He is credited with saying, "*Hula* is the language of the heart, therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." Most *hula* schools today honor him with a collection of dances and songs found in their repertoire. We are no exception.

In our home season of 2012, we dedicated an entire segment to his majesty, commemorating his 50th birthday jubilee in 1886. Costuming of the era, reflecting missionary influences, covered the



Above: Missionary influenced clothing of 1880s with high-collared peasant blouses, and skirts printed with stripes or calico. Below: Costumes for our 2012 show kept traditional look but used bold colors and fitted blouses.



dancers in high-collared peasant blouses. Gathered skirts around the waist could be printed with stripes, calico patterns or textured designs. For our presentation, we kept the traditional look intact, but freshened it up a bit with bold colors and fitted blouses.

The *holokū* was a dress that acquired its name in the mid-1800s. It was a loosely fitted garment worn by women with or without a train. Influenced by fashion trends from around the world, it eventually transformed into a fitted gown with a long train and was often used by hula dancers in the early to mid-1900s. The trains gracefully glided over the stage, adding length and drama to the dancer's silhouette.

In a 2003 show, "Songs of Old Hawai'i," we premiered a song called "Mī Nei," which was taught to us by my *kumu* (teacher), Mae Kamāmalu Klein. It is a beloved song choreographed by her teacher, the late, great Aunti Maiki Aiu Lake. Written in 1924, by Charles E. King, the song says, you are "searching for someone to fulfill the desire within, how bout taking a look at this beauty right here in front of you – *mi nei?*" The photo on the next page is of the long-trained *holokū* from the show.

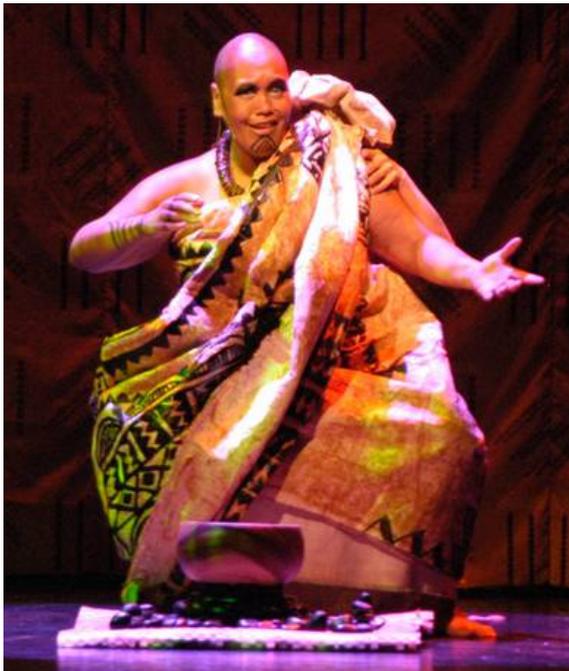
Our production in 2009 was called "Daughters of Haumea,"



Holokū, a fitted gown with a long train and was often used by hula dancers in the early to mid-1900s.

which honored the contribution of women in traditional Hawaiian society. One of the featured women was the *makāula* (seer). She is pictured below left, wrapped in traditional Polynesian *kapa*, folded and assembled to create an interestingly-shaped garment that adds a sense of mystery and power to her status as an oracle.

The *akua mo‘o* (dragon goddess) was another female entity honored in that same production. (below) A priestess is chanting over a newly born dragon. The egg was made with papier-mâché wrapped around an enormous balloon, which was then punctured, leaving an empty shell. The priestess and dragons have wristlets, *leis*, spines and tails constructed from colored



Makāula (seer). wrapped in traditional Polynesian *kapa*. Garment gives sense of mystery and power.



Akua mo‘o (dragon goddess) used papier-mâché egg made from giant balloon. Wristlets, leis, spines, tails, and men's loincloths were of non-traditional construction using braided colored parachute cords.

parachute cords. We needed a heavy cord that the dancers could whip as tails to produce an audible snap against the stage floor. We also braided the men's loincloths out of the same cords. Although cordage is not commonly used for traditional costumes, it is utilized for constructing nets and fastening implements together.

In 2013 we premiered a show called "Ka Leo Kānaka – Voice of the Nation." It was inspired by over a hundred years' worth of Hawaiian language newspapers spanning from 1834 - 1948. We actually designed and created our own fabric that incorporated the mastheads of several historic newspapers.



For "Ka Leo Kānaka – Voice of the Nation," inspired by over a 100 years' worth of Hawaiian language newspapers spanning 1834 - 1948, the company designed and created fabric incorporating historic newspaper mastheads.

Our traditional segment from that show featured chants and dances dedicated to Hi'iakaikapoliopole, the youngest sister of the volcano goddess Pele. Hi'iaka is considered to be a healer who uses foliage of the forest as medicinal cures. These *pā'ū* or skirts were hand-painted by one of our talented dancers, Marlo Lualemana. The designs are of plants, ferns and blossoms mentioned in the chants and tales found in the newspaper stories associated with the goddess, Hi'iaka. The waists of the dancers are augmented with various colors of dyed Pellon, twisted and tied in the back to form a bow. These bows are a contemporary



Lei hulu (feather lei), is part of our school's name, and plays an integral role in our costuming.

rendition of material tied around the waist to accentuate hip movement. A photo on the next page shows these costumes.

Christina Hellmich, curator for a recent exhibit at the de Young Museum, "Royal Hawaiian Featherwork," wrote a wonderful article featured in the [November 2015 issue of VC](#). She described many of the different feathered objects on display, one of which was the *lei hulu* or feather lei which is still popular today. Since part of our hula school's name includes the *lei hulu*, it plays an integral role in our costuming. It is also a challenging lei to craft, requiring hundreds or thousands of individual feathers being wound in a circular pattern around a string until the required length is completed.



Students in 2014 *Hō'ike Nui* (Grand Recital), made their own *lei hulu*.

In 2014, for our *Hō'ike Nui* or Grand Recital, 120 students made their *lei hulu* for that particular performance. Traditionally, feathers were mainly drawn from a few forest species of Hawaiian honeycreepers and other domestic fowl and seabirds. Today, dyed duck and goose feathers are predominantly used.

Adornments, such as *lei po'o* (head lei), *lei 'ā'ī* (neck lei) and *kūpe'e* (wristlets and anklets) are an integral part of a hula dancer's ensemble, whether representing a traditional or contemporary look. (top right) There is nothing like the feeling of wearing fresh greenery and foliage upon your body. You feel an immediate sense of connection to nature and the ebb and flow of it's *mana* (spiritual power). The *leis* add an organic, sensual aura to any costume and gives it a very Hawaiian quality no matter how contemporary the attire.

Every upcoming production brings exciting and new challenges on how to costume each piece whether we're faithfully reconstructing something traditional or artistically reinterpreting it.

How do we introduce something fresh and innovative while retaining authenticity? We love the aesthetic look of a costume but does it function properly? What kind of leis work with this particular look? These are the kinds of questions that my designer, Malia King and I consistently ask ourselves. As a matter of fact, we are about to board a plane for Los Angeles to shop at the garment district and visit several fabric manufacturers for this year's show.



No doubt, these and a host of other questions will plague us for the entire trip. No doubt, we will fall in love with a piece of fabric only to discover that there will not be enough yardage for all the dancers. It's an exhausting and exhilarating pilgrimage we look forward to ever year.

Patrick Makuakāne is a creative force in the hula world, and is well known for his innovative choreography while preserving the traditions and fundamentals of hula. Over the years, he has received numerous honors, including a lifetime achievement award from the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival in 2006.



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