

ENTERTAINMENT/TGIF

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'Aha 'Aina' a splendid feast for the eyes and palate

Hawaiian culture, history take center stage at The Royal

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By Wayne Harada

"Aha 'Aina, A Royal Celebration," a Monday spectacle on The Royal Hawaiian hotel's beachfront green lawn, is not your ordinary Hawaiian-Polynesian show.

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First off, it's top tier — at \$175, the supreme ticket in Waikiki — so it's not your tutu's lu'au. In fact, it is not dubbed a lu'au; instead, it's marketed as an 'aha 'aina, a celebration that includes a meal, lots of mele, plus a mélange of royal historical nuggets.

It's a specialty, to be sure, but not necessarily only for the well-heeled.

It's the centerpiece jewel of the renovated Pink Palace flagship of the Sheraton banner, and a gourmet meal is served to a sit-down crowd instead of dispensed from a buffet line that's customary with Polynesian events.

Moreover, the refined local food is presented in a parade of tapas: small bites, from appetizers to dessert, elegantly executed as expected in a five-star epicurean hot spot. The Royal, of course, is a Luxury Collection resort.

A three-act wonderment.

Act I is a sliver of living history and culture: demos in poi pounding, kapa-making (mulberry bark, transformed into paper fabric), fishing implement-making.

Act II is the feast: bite-sized morsels of chilled avocado egg pudding with king crab, beef tatakai, 'ahi gyoza, soy-seasoned butterfish, and Kona lobster in spicy curry sauce; the good-sized kalua osso buco on smashed taro, presented in silver domes and reflecting the culinary spirit and adventure from the kitchen. If that's not enough, there's the heart-of-palm ceviche, with Chinese roast duck and hoisin vinaigrette.

The dessert platter boasts haupia cake, cheesecake lollipops (balls of cake on sticks, dipped in chocolate), sorbet martinis and Hawaiian chocolate and Kona coffee opera cake. Sounds like a lot, but shelve the diet — and try everything!

Act III is the show, with Joe Recca as the singing tour guide, whose musical itinerary is as colorful and palatable as the shirt changes he makes over the hour on a voyage that tracks Waikiki's rich history and specifically the Ocean Lawn site, which years ago was known as Helumoa, where royals roamed amid the coconut grove.

The pageant is produced by Tihati Productions but directed by the next-generation sister-and-brother team of Misty Tufono and Afatia Thompson, who conceived, wrote, directed and choreographed the journey, high on historical data but coupled with superb storytelling, costuming and the hallmark Tihati signature: the allure and syncopation of Tahiti and Samoa, but with a dominant Hawaiian heartbeat.

There are echoes of founders Jack and Cha Thompson's style and authority, but this newbie borders on cultural theater, where art and culture hold hands with history in a rare Island cloak, channeling the past with a vibrant present.

The experience unfolds on that patch of green, between the Royal's fabled Monarch Room and the newbie Azure that used to be the Surf Room, so the backdrop still is Diamond Head and the lapping waves of the Pacific.

The program is a panorama of the past, shared with precision and care to detail, with nuanced cultural pleasures and vignettes.

You've got to see the chicken dance (featuring feather-cloaked Sean Jandoc) and learn of its role, and witness the parade of ali'i normally assembled for official state functions: King Kalakaua (Trevor Iosefa), Queen Kapi'olani (Terri Peverly), Princess Ka'ulani (Nicole Thompson), Prince Leleihoku, (Micah Tiedemann), Princess Ruth Ke'elikolani (Lahela Ka'aihue), Queen Lili'uokalani (Cookie Maldonado), all in period dress. For sure, it's a fashionable walk-on segment, but it so defines the breadth and monumental reality of the Helumoa environment: these royals partied here.

The Royal was a rest and recreation site for World War II GIs, so a "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" interlude, with Christina Souza, Erin Wong and Emily Tam-Pick, resurrects the look (big hair) and sounds (animated boogie) of the Andrews Sisters.

Kale Chang and Afatia Thompson share singing solos with emcee Recca, backed by an ensemble of musicians, with some Island favorites as "Royal Hawaiian Hotel" and "Koni Au." A memory lane tribute, about a Waikiki couple, Kimo and Kinau Wilder (enacted by two dancers), embraces "At the Royal Hawaiian Hotel" and "My Sweet Gardenia Lei," recreating their real-life visits in 1927.

Another reflective tidbit tracks the Waikiki contributions of Haunani Kahalalei, the Hawaiian Lads, featured on the radio show "Hawaii Calls," and entertainers Ed Kenney and The Brothers Cazimero, who have had residency at the Royal venue's Monarch Room.

The kane dancers are Pogi Tevaga, Micah Tiedemann, Kapono Rawllins-Crivello, Sean Jandoc, David Kaihenui and Kamu Paikai-Hinds.

The wahine dancers are Terri Peverly, Nicole Maldonado, Tepairu Yarborough, Lehua Tevaga and Keau Crabbe.

The finale — the Samoan fire knife dances — is a spectacle that brings out the cameras and hurrahs. Here, it's performed by Pogi Tevaga, with swiftness and precision and, yes, with fire-eating daredevilry, too.

It's entertainment fit for royals — and anyone else yearning to feel blue-blood-special. And the idyllic location — on the prime Waikiki shoreline — is a snapshot no visitor will ever forget.

You even receive a parting gift, "He Wahi Pa'akai," a packet of Hawaiian sea salt intended to bond the giver with the receiver, a practice common in Hawaiian heritage.

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Jack Norton, 7 1/2, a visitor from California, sprawls out on the Ocean Lawn at The Royal Hawaiian hotel while watching a performance during the "'Aha 'Aina" show.

Photos by ANDREW SHIMABUKU | The Honolulu Advertiser

'AHA 'AINA, A ROYAL CELEBRATION'

5:30-8:30 p.m. Mondays
Ocean Lawn, The Royal Hawaiian hotel
5:30-6 p.m. Hawaiian cultural demos
6-7 p.m. Sit-down dinner, pre-show storytelling and songs
7:30-8:30 p.m. Helumoa Story, recreating ancient myths, nostalgic tunes, a parade of ali'i, plus Tahitian, Samoan and Hawaiian mele and dance
\$175 adults (\$150 hotel guests and adult kama'aina), \$75 children 5-12, free for keiki under 5
921-4600, www.royal-hawaiian.com



Anapogi "Pogi" Tevaga performs the fire knife dance during the finale.

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