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Hana Hou!
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South Sea Showbiz

story by Liza Simon
photos by Dana Edmunds

First, a little lesson in How to Succeed in Polynesian Showbiz. Sixty-five-year-old Iele Eseroma, who has been on the job as a master musician for Island entertainment giant Tihati Polynesian Productions for more than three decades now, strolls over to where we're seated just outside the showroom of the Sheraton Princess Kaiulani Hotel, nightly venue of Tihati's flashy, Vegas-esque floorshow, *Creation: A Polynesian Journey*. "The secret to this business," he says, "is that you have to get on the stage and enjoy what you are doing. If you don't, it's going to be all work and no fun—and no one is happy." The every-day-is-Christmas twinkle in Iele's eye proves that he takes his own advice.

A few minutes later, Iele and his band kick the show off with a pounding ceremonial welcome befitting a high chief, while high-tech light beams emblazon the stage with images of dancing masks. Limbs of men and women untwine from a volcanic mound and cascade downwards. The tale begins, narrated by veteran Tihati emcee Joe Recca, who looks a bit like a local Moses. The already expressive dances of Polynesia are spiked with theatrical tableaus. Traditional numbers, lush with costuming and smoothly undulating torsos, are woven into dramatic vignettes that paint highs and lows of joy and sorrow in vibrant primary colors. One moment, a resplendent Tahitian princess is flanked by conch shell-blowing attendants, the next she's gone from sight. It's sheer magic, as taught to a select few in the Tihati cast by Vegas illusionist Franz Hararry.

Welcome to the hip-shaking world of Tihati Enterprises, where the spectacle of Paradise Found packs the luau tables night after night, with high-energy production extravaganzas that draw from the traditional dances of Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and other Pacific Islands. Tihati is the biggest in the business by far, with regular shows on three islands (not to mention cruise-ship gigs); a cast of more than a thousand employees who are at the beck and call of company-issued cell phones or faxed instructions to report to one of the events that go off simultaneously nearly every night; a convention service with offices throughout the entire island chain, separate departments for lounge entertainment, costume

design, talent recruitment, technical services and two sprawling warehouses to deliver props and supplies to theme parties.

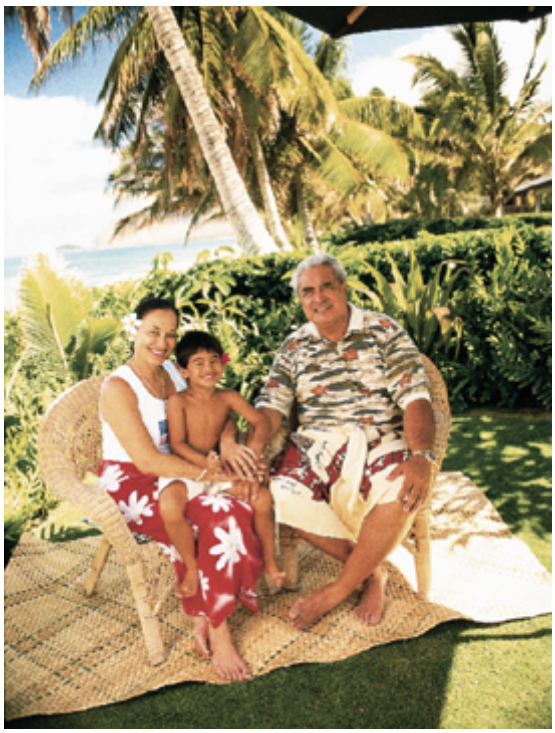
It's a long way from the whimsical night more than thirty years ago, when Tihati's husband-and-wife founders, Jack and Cha Thompson, first shared the stage fresh out of high school, where they had been sweethearts. A part-Hawaiian beauty from a rough Honolulu neighborhood, Cha was the headline dancer in the legendary Puka Puka Otea production at the Queen's Surf. Jack, who hails from tiny Swains Island in Samoa (population: barely over two dozen) and came to Hawaii at the age of seven, had been practicing Samoan fire-knife dancing with the help of some of the Puka Puka masters, when he got the proverbial big break: The house was packed with tourists, and the regular fire-knife guy didn't show up. As he was hustled onto the boards, he says, he realized he needed a stage name to fit the part: "So I turned to someone and asked for a Tahitian translation of Jack." Thus, he was introduced to the audience as "Tihati," and the legend was born.

"We were kids and we just loved to dance," recalls Cha, taking time out from her executive duties at the Tihati head office in Honolulu. "At one point," Jack remembers, "I had a job at Hawaiian Airlines as a baggage handler. I had worked my way up to reservationist, but I couldn't wait to get to the showroom, grab a spear, stick a flower in my hair, put on a lava-lava—and dance!"

Terri Peverly gets her show face on.

Eventually, another serendipitous break came when someone forgot to book a replacement for Don Ho when he was on vacation from his gig at Duke Kahanamoku's bar. Asked to fill in at the last minute, Jack and Cha quickly pulled together a cast of good friends. Soon, the dynamic duo were able to quit their day jobs and ride a wave of booming tourism right into a show at the Sheraton Moana, and they haven't looked back since.

Jack and Cha are adept at changing their company's act to keep up with changing times, but they never stray from the basics that have been the mainstay of their thriving enterprise: "We want to perpetuate our culture..." begins Jack, "...so our first rule is be true to yourself," finishes Cha. In tandem, too, they recite the entertainment ethos behind their performances: "We are not a purist show, but we must deal with the challenge of authenticity. Without selling out, we want to give everyone a piece of Hawaii to take home, so it's a balancing act."



Cha and Jack Thompson,

with grandson Jack Tufono.

To keep the act real, the Thompsons rely on the ties that bind:
Family, they say, is everything in Polynesian culture, so that's how they strive to run their operation. "We try to provide an environment where professionals will feel accepted and validated," says Cha, who raised four kids of her own plus seven ha¯nai (adopted) children during the part of her career when she was dancing. "The work of performing is hard, but it's fulfilling if you feel accepted."

The Thompson backyard in Honolulu's exclusive Black Point area is frequently the backdrop for a to'ona'i (that's Samoan for a Sunday family feast), with performers showing off their dance stuff to one another in impromptu rehearsals. "We leave, go to a movie and come back, and they're still at it," says Jack. The premier Polynesian showbiz mom and pop take plenty of time to dole out tough love to their performers, most of whom they hire themselves. They routinely stop in at shows and will call for practice after the performance if someone's not dancing up to the Tihati standard.

Cha and Jack's daughter, Misty, a Tihati executive producer and scriptwriter, jokingly compares the family business to a circus: "We're always slapping on makeup, throwing on costumes and getting onstage when we never expected to. You have to be ready for anything that pops up." The irrepressibly candid Misty describes what it was like to grow up doing her homework in her mother's dressing room: "People would be running around half-naked, changing between numbers, all frantic, looking for a safety pin or tape for a costume. Then I'd see them on stage a moment later doing a beautiful hula. I thought everyone lived like this."

Hoku Garza beefs up his warrior act backstage at *Creation.*

Backstage at the Hyatt Regency Maui, a group of women are busy applying the thick stage makeup and even thicker false eyelashes that are de rigueur for Tihati female performers. The scent of plumeria mingles with hairspray. Lining the mirrored room are florid regalia and dance implements from around the map of Polynesia, needed by each performer for no less than seven quick costume changes.

The huge feather headdresses worn for the Tahitian otea require special handling. "Remember I would stuff mine with tissue to get it to stay on?" a petite dancer named Alexis Sambrano says, pantomiming the wobbly moment to the laughter of others filing into the dressing room. Jamie Lum-Lung doesn't miss a beat in telling me that Alexis has just won an international title in Tahitian dance, so I should look out for her solo tonight.

Later, as Jamie slips into a white dress for her own solo of the Hawaiian Wedding Song, she says that she studied hula as a child but gravitated to punk music as a teen. When she walked into a Tihati audition sporting purple hair in a half-shaved 'do, the show manager was skeptical—until she started to move. That moment in 1982 launched her on a career that included a seven-year stint in Bangkok at the since-discontinued Tihati King Kong Luau, so named because it took place in a 5,000-seat amphitheater and featured about 250 dancers. "I danced for the king and queen of Thailand, something a girl like me from Kalihi would never imagine getting to do," she says. "A big part of Tihati's appeal is that you get to travel. When the new dancers ask me when they'll get their turn, I tell them, 'Work hard, and your time will come.'"

A little later, I'm seated at a long communal luau table, incapacitated

by post-poi paralysis. A brilliant setting sun is reflected in the syrupy liquid left in the last round of mai tais, and the chit-chat flows easily, revealing the occasions that have brought people here from all over the world: birthdays, anniversaries, honeymoons—always lots of honeymoons. Inevitably, someone asks about tonight's show. Is it, well, you know … exciting? Or would it be better to head back to the hotel, loosen your belt and put your feet up on the lanai?

Just as inevitably, the answer comes, not with just one bang, but a sustained, klata-kat-klat eruption of the toere, the hollowed-out wooden percussion instrument that gives this show at the Hyatt its name: Drums of the Pacific. For the next hour or so, we take it all in: the men with their chiseled physiques, the women with their curvaceous figures. There are carefree maidens in the Tahitian aparima, fierce warriors in the Fijian wesi. A closer look reveals one of the dancers I'd met earlier in character as Kalua, the princess sacrificed to Pele for consorting with a commoner. In the finale, the last dancer to take a bow, with a high-energy 'ami of her tiny waist, is the keiki (child) dancer, who had strolled into the dressing room earlier with her mom, her hair done in curlers. After the show, the performers descend from the stage to form the "Tihati Aloha Line," providing guests one last chance to get that signature "here's me with a hula hunk" snapshot.

Despite all the attention showered on her like this since she joined the Drums cast at age eight to become the featured keiki dancer, Tiana Arausa gets a good giggle out of my suggestion that she is a celebrity. Now, at twenty-one (the same age as the show), she is quite amazed to find that perennial visitors recognize her as often as they do. She's happy that she's met a lot of people from around the world, and she's learned responsibility early in life, she says, but the real fuel that keeps her going is the sheer joy of what she does. "I love to perform so much, I'd keep dancing even if I had a broken leg," she declares, seated at the edge of the empty stage.

Other cast members, now dressed in street clothes, second Arausa's emotions. Boise Septimo, who hails from a family of renowned local musicians, explains how he had moved to Japan to pursue playing Polynesian percussion, because opportunities were always scarce in Hawaii, where guitar-based music had reigned supreme in the local scene. When he got word that Tihati was expanding, he returned and joined the Drums cast. Now, on a nightly basis, he says, "I do what is creative, I do what I love and I support my family!" Septimo also adds proudly that he's begun to collaborate on something he never thought would be possible here: a CD of pure Polynesian percussion.

At seven the next morning, Tihati veteran Tavita Taue'etia throws open the doors of the company's prop warehouse in Lahaina, where he is the manager. The crew of Tihati Technical Services begins to comb through what looks like a jumbo-sized toy box for pieces of theme-party décor—from a motorcycle biker backdrop to the set from Phantom of the Opera. "We can turn any room into a big fantasy," says Tavita, who began working for Jack and Cha in the '70s as a fire dancer.

Tihati show manager Cliff Ahue and line captain Theresa Ulberg check the inventory at the Maui prop warehouse.

Carting around huge ersatz tikis, bamboo poles and gallons of torch lighter fluid, I recognize the fearsome Fijian chief who expertly wielded a shield and arrow in Drums of the Pacific, now dressed in surf shorts and a Tihati T-shirt. "Must be my wild hair," says Anapogi Tevago. "It's always a dead giveaway." He says he is thrilled to be doing five performances and set-ups a week—a positive channel for his high energy, which once went into gang activity, he admits. Raised by his grandmother on Oahu, his sole dance passion used to be hip-hop: "I never knew any cultural stuff. Never understood why my people got together. Now I love getting into character with the Fijian stuff. You just go out there and blast 'em and make the audience feel it with you. It serves my passion."

Later in the day, two teen hopefuls are practicing Maori poi-ball moves in the shade of the white tents that serve as the dressing rooms for the regular Tihati luau show at the Maui Renaissance in Wailea. Seated on a rock, the one with the nose ring sighs wistfully about her upcoming audition: "Tihati has so much aloha, so much prestige. They're the best."

Jamie Lum-Lung wows 'em in the dance of Kalua at the Hyatt Regency Maui.

Arriving to give the duo a short lesson before show time is Lisa Cervantes. A development director for an arts organization by day, she belongs to a growing number of Tihati performers on daytime career tracks—including a nurse and a pilot—who regard what they do onstage as a release from workaday pressure. Cervantes is also the designated "ladies dance captain," an important position in a hierarchy that infuses the huge enterprise with a sense of order. Those who hold the rank are responsible for other cast members' performance, both onstage and off. To head off the friction that can inevitably develop among a broad range of personalities, the Tihati way is to have the dance captains organize extracurricular events for their charges: Beach days, picnics and movies are popular as a way to defuse the tension, lest it creep into a performance and tarnish that trademark aloha smile.

The emcee and show manager at the Renaissance is Cliff Ahue, affectionately called kumu (teacher, or master), reflecting his background in serious traditional hula. While dance and music gurus are often flown in from remote South Pacific cultures to teach the Tihati performers new numbers, and experts in stagecraft are imported from Vegas and New York, Ahue keeps a close cultural eye on the Hawaiian hula performances. "We're most careful about the way we present the hula," he says, "because it's the thing that has been subjected to the most Hollywood stereotyping."

Amid the departing audience after the show, Kanani Davis is getting hugs from her parents. They had come this evening to see their daughter perform the "Tiare Princess" solo, her torso covered in a white shell breastplate as she was borne through the audience on the shoulders of four brawny men. It's a provocative "signature piece" that caused a stir when Cha created it in 1982 at the Moana, and a long way from the practice of dental hygiene that Davis is studying by day. Of her plans to continue with Tihati even when she gets her degree, she says, "Where else do you get to laugh, look elegant, scream and smile, all for the purpose of making other people feel as good as you do?"

I’m reminded of a moment backstage earlier in the evening. While the rest of the line were penciling in temporary moko (facial tattoos) for the Maori dance, I asked Lisa what constitutes a "bad night" on the job. Just the other night, she tells me, part of her costume flew off during a fast hula. What did she do? She smiled harder and danced better, she said, summing up the South Seas showbiz ethos that drives Tihati, making it such a thrilling operation to watch—and to work for. "People want excitement," she said with a spotlight shimmer in her eye, "and you don’t want them to leave without getting it."

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