

Powerful women take the stage

Mali‘o 2023 at Hawaii Theater celebrates family legacies

By John Berger

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The Hawaiian word “kaona” means “hidden meaning.”

It’s often used in reference to poetry and song lyrics, where a word or phrase has more than one possible meaning, but kaona can also be found in the relationship of a chant or song to the people performing them.

When Kuuipo Kumukahi and the Hawaiian Music Perpetuation Society present “Mali‘o 2023 – Celebrating Na Mele Wahine” Friday and Saturday at the Hawaii Theater, audiences will experience kaona on several levels. First are the deeper meanings within “mali‘o” (“dawn light, twilight, especially as it pierces the shadows of night”). There is also kaona in the phrase “mana wahine” (“powerful woman”).

“Mali‘o celebrates the women of mele Hawaii, each performing with her musical instrument of choice,” Kumukahi said. “I’ve taken the meaning from ‘kahua o mali‘o’ — a place of happiness and comfort. I’ve come to learn of the importance of mele beyond making music.

“Also, in the case of happy and comfort, it is just like a mother comforting her family and home — safety in storytelling, history, lineal and familial ties. ‘Mali‘o also reminds me of when the first light of dawn appears at Kumukahi (a district on the Big Island). All is seen — no evil can hide in the light — a new day is born. By performing with our instruments, we continue to uphold the tradition of our kupuna wahine of mele Hawaii.”

Kumukahi presented the previous Mali‘o concert in 2003. Hilo resident Owana Salazar is a veteran of the 2003 show who will be joining her at the Hawaii Theatre on Friday.

“Perhaps when we say ‘mana wahine,’ we can say that its about mana, or about the mythological woman — Mali‘o — who sings in fairy tales, but this very special thing happens when a woman is playing an instrument and is singing,” Salazar said. “I can’t speak for everyone but I know that when I sing it comes from a very deep part of me.”

Lorna Lim, who will be performing with her sister Nani Lim Yap, describes mana wahine as a spiritual quality that women receive from their mothers and pass on to their daughters.

“I can speak from my experience, and I’m sure it is the same for Nani, in sharing this kind of mana that women have, they bring it to music ... It’s something, we share it with our mom, is that nurturing of the spirit, mothers do that, and that’s the way we feel about mele,” Lim said.

“If the song is from your ohana, then you’re carrying out this generational ‘ha,’ or breath of life, that was passed on from grandparents to child, that kind of relationship, and as a family we share that same kind of mana wahine connection with our mom. That’s the special thing about mothers and that kind of love you have — that nurturing love.

That’s the thing we do through mele. We feel that ‘leo hone,’ that real sweet tenderness of insight.”

Three generations of mana wahine will be on stage Friday when Kainani Kahaunaele performs with her mother, Lady Ipo Kahaunaele-Ferrera, and her daughter, Kaniaulono Hapai.

“Kuuiipo wanted to bring the generational aspect to it and have young timers and old timers and medium timers together,” said Kahaunaele, the “middle timer” of the trio.

“We’re gonna be doing some original songs. Songs from my mom, songs from me, songs from my daughter, keep it just within our own works. Part of it is the storytelling of it so we’re just going to cram as much music as possible.”

Said Hapai: “I get encouragement from both of them and (that) helps me enjoy music.”

At 16, Hapai is the youngest mana wahine on the program. “It’s kind of a tradition in our family, so my mom has been teaching us since we were little. I think I learned to play ukulele when I was six. Now we have to keep (the tradition) going.”

Emceeding the show is Alaka’i Paleka, who returned to island airwaves Monday as a morning show host on Big Island radio station KAPA. “When we speak about mana, it’s not just powers. It’s like supernatural powers,” Paleka said. “All of the women that are included into this concert have long proven track records with the music of it.”

Paleka added that there is also an importance between preserving music and perpetuating it.

“‘Preservation’ is keeping something safe from damage or deterioration. ‘Perpetuation’ is causing it to exist indefinitely. That’s what we’re doing. We’re not ‘preserving’ the music. We’re living it. We’re gonna cause it to exist indefinitely!”



Kuuiipo Kumukahi



Owana Salazar



Kaniaulolo Hapai, front, and Kainani Kahauanele



Alaka'i Paleka



Lorna Lim

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