Taking Hawaiian language to the stage

This month the University of Hawai‘i mounts its first production conducted entirely in ʻōlelo Hawai‘i. It’s part of a fledgling but growing Hawaiian Theatre program started in 2012

By Tiffany Hill

our dozen students stretch their legs, hoist their vocal cords by humming and read their lines on Kennedy Theatre’s dimly lit stage at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. From a distance it looks like any other rehearsal. That is until they begin the evening’s run-through. Unlike any other production to take place inside the 52-year-old theater, the rehearsal is conducted entirely in ʻōlelo Hawai‘i.

This month, the 45-member cast heralds in a new chapter for the university’s theater program with the Hawaiian language production of La‘ieikawai, a traditional Hawaiian mo‘olelo (story) adapted for stage, featuring original hula, oli and mele. The play highlights the personal journey of the beautiful and illustrious La‘ieikawai, her sisters and her friendships. It’s the culmination of the university’s fledgling Hawaiian theater program and a long time passion project for assistant professor Tammy Halkopu Baker, who adapted the mo‘olelo and heads the program.

Baker spent roughly five months writing the adaptation of the epic mo‘olelo, after conducting extensive research at the state archives, Bishop Museum and visiting Kāpuna. “I’m a true believer that the mo‘olelo changes us,” she says. “La‘ieikawai just started popping up. My son had to read it at Kamehameha Schools for his sophomore honors English class. Then the book fell down on the shelf at the house. The story was calling out.”

“The story has poetic dialogue,” says UH student Ionee Goodroe, who plays ‘Awohelihekapua, one of La‘ieikawai’s sisters. “I liken it to Shakespeare; there’s a broad appeal.”

Baker has a way with making the language come alive, and inspire her students and peers. The Kānānā’s native grew up dancing hula and performing on stage. Her college thesis was a Hawaiian language production. After graduating from UH-Mānoa, Baker taught at the Kamehameha Center for Hawaiian Language. But even there she found ways to incorporate theater and making learning ʻōlelo Hawai‘i relevant for her 21st-century students. In several classes, she and her colleagues and friends would perform with Ka Hālau Hula ‘O Keali‘i, the first all-Hawaiian theater group she started in 1995. “What has always brought people together to do these projects has been the (Hawaiian)

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language,” says Baker.

“We are a company of activists who love our language, our stories and our traditional practices,” says Kane‘ehu‘ilani Wainui, a UH student actor in La‘ieikawai, and a member of Baker’s troupe. “We want to present (that) for contemporary Hawaiians.”

When a position opened in the Theater Department, Baker says it was her kuleana to expand what she’d already started. In the fall of 2012, she began the Hawaiian Theatre program. “Sometimes I pinch myself,” says Baker with a laugh. “Am I really doing this as a job? To be able to share the knowledge and the language experience I’ve gained over my various experiences with different kūpuna, in this venue is a dream and an honor.”

In the two years since its inception, Baker developed four courses for the program, including a Hawaiian acting workshop, hula kū‘i or Hawaiian puppetry, drama and theater of Hawai‘i and pidgin drama, and the UH Graduate Council recently approved a Hawaiian theater master’s program, which is slated to begin this semester. Each class incorporates both the English and Hawaiian languages, but Baker says her classes are for everyone. “I have theater and language majors,” she says, “but also students in engineering or biology! They gain awareness and appreciation of the language, of different mo‘olelo.”

While the cast of La‘ieikawai comprises mainly UH students, Baker felt it was important to include the community. The production also involves high school students, community members and four kūpuna for the production’s hula and contemporary dance choreography, and original oli.

“For me it was always a desire to have Hawaiians perform,” says UH student Kani‘alei Kalena, who plays La‘ieikawai. A graduate of a Hawaiian immersion school, Kalena says both the program and play helped her fall in love with her native tongue all over.

“This work helps create a relationship with the community, to bring our culture to life,” says Malama Kane, a UH student who plays Kahalaimāpuna, who befriends La‘ieikawai.

Baker too believes theater is an integral tool to connecting the community to “ʻōlelo Hawai‘i” and revitalizing Hawaiian culture. And despite her long hours at the university – she often eats all three meals on campus – her dedication to Hawaiian theater extends beyond UH. She is already brainstorming ways to take pieces of La‘ieikawai into schools and community centers with Ka Hālau Hula ‘O Keali‘i.

You don’t have to be fluent in Hawaiian to understand the performances either, she says. “There is still relevance in these traditional stories,” she says. “We are faced with many of the same issues today and we can draw upon these mo‘olelo for guidance in today’s world.”