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—Photographs by Ron Edmonds.

As Iolani Danced . . .

By Lois Taylor, Star-Bulletin Writer

The greatest. It doesn't mean much any more. Any manufacturer who can afford an advertisement on television can claim that he has the greatest laundry soap or the greatest compact car or the greatest headache pill in history.

So when Iolani Luahine was introduced yesterday afternoon to the fourth, fifth and sixth graders of Alvah Scott Elementary School as "the greatest living hula dancer," they waited to be convinced.

It was an extraordinary performance by an amazing woman. Described as "somewhere in her 60s" by a member of her troupe, her body and her movements are of someone half that age.

Her appearance was heralded by a young dancer in a red malo blowing a conch shell. Well, how many times have Aloha Week and May Day programs gone the same route? The kids wiggled, and two of the more precocious sixth grade girls whispered and giggled. He was a very good looking young man.

She moved onstage, dressed in a yellow strapless top and elasticized waisted skirt and wearing a laua'e wreath. Her hair is gray and her face is either wrinkled or etched with character, depending upon your viewpoint.

One little boy, who is probably the terror of the play yard and the despair of his teacher, said in a stage whisper, "Makule wahine" which means "old lady."

It was about here that certainly more than one adult in the audience thought to himself that Iolani, like youth, is a wonderful thing, and it's a shame to waste either on children.

But you don't earn the fame of Iolani Luahine without the kind of concentration that ignores the immediate surroundings for the broader picture.

She was at Alvah Scott School as one of four Oahu performances sponsored by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts with the National Endowment for the Arts, the State Council on Hawaiian Heritage and the Daughters of Hawaii. She was there to dance.

It's hard to figure out what all those groups did, beyond talking her into performing in the first place. Iolani last danced publicly once in September and once a year before that.

But when the chants of Hoakalei Kamau'u began, accompanied by the hypnotic beat of the hula pahu (drum), and Iolani moved across the polished floor of the cafetorium stage, the fidgeting ceased.

Even Debbie Johnson, who of all the fourth through sixth graders had been chosen to make the thank you speech at the end of the performance, stopped studying her lines and began watching.

The dances were introduced by Napoka Oppenheimer, a male hula dancer with a graduate degree from the East-West Center in Pacific studies.

He explained the legend that inspired each dance, and some hulas were no longer than a minute. "O Kona kai 'opua" was described almost as haiku verse: "In Kona, Island of Hawaii, billowy clouds gather on the horizon of the tranquil sea."

There was a suggestion in her body of the slow movement of the seas and in her hands of soft clouds, and it was all over in about 45 seconds.

She danced only one hula with Oppenheimer, "Kui Moloka'i," that was described before hand as having "motions similar to boxing." It really didn't, but it was probably the best way to explain a highly sensual performance to a bunch of 10-year-olds.

Iolani didn't appear to be a 16-year-old girl in a flirtatious mood with her lover, she was a 16-year-old girl. It can't be explained. From the provocative gleam in her eye to the swing of her hips and the eager little steps as she approached Oppenheimer, she was a young but not inexperienced girl.

The dance ended, she shook out her gray hair and was again a middle-aged woman.

The program was over, Debbie presented her speech and another child gave Iolani a homemade pikake lei.

As the children went back to their classrooms, Iolani sat in a tiny backstage area and wiggled her toes into a pair of green jersey tabis.

"I dance for the little ones," she said. "Only for the children would I leave home. The hula is being reactivated, the old dances, but they must be taught to the young children.

"It's their heritage. They are the ones to carry it on."

Her yellow costume was folded and packed into a well-worn flight bag and she had changed into a white muslin dress. She was on her way with her niece, Hoakalei Kamau'u, to go shopping at Pearlridge.

"You don't get me out of the a'a and the pahoehoe very often—that's the lava on Hawaii," said the world's greatest living hula dancer.

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