

BELLA RICHARDS

My first teacher outside the family was Bella Kuamoo from Keokaha. My mother was taught by Elizabeth Beamer. My mother taught me the bass and the piano. She was my first teacher in the hula. My mother didn't teach us chanting so she sent us to Aunty Edith Kanakaole's mother, May Fujii. Hula kahiko at that time was called olapa.

My mother stopped teaching hula for a while and so I went to Bella Koamo. My father used to see a singer named Haleloke perform with Arthur Godfrey in Hawaii Calls. Her mother used to give luaus for tourists. This was the only kind of hula that was popular and he hated it.

When my father died my mother said nobody must morn so she took us to a kumu. I was eight years old. Bella Kaoamo taught us the ten basic steps but no chanting in the ancient. Some of the modern day hula kahiko looks like fighting more than dancing.

I went to Edith's mother when I was 14 years old. If you talked back to the kumu in those days, you would get whacked with the puili and if you went home and told your mother she would give you a whack. I studied under Auntie Edith two years

In those days you could not question the kumu. You just did what they told you. Today's student need a pattern to the beat or they're lost. When I was being taught we had to listen to the kumu because they gave us no to help learn the dance.

When I was young, we were taught that you should leave what has been passed down as it is. If you change it you will be kahuna(ed) forever. But today all the motions for kahiko is created. I am not saying this is right or wrong but they are not the same motions to the ancient dances that I saw performed by the kumu hula of my time. I cannot judge the contemporary groups today in kahiko because what I consider important in a dancer is not considered important anymore.

I began teaching in 1942 in Kailua and I also taught with my mother in 1935 in Hilo. I uniki'd with Bella Koamo. It was just a presentation. I uniki'd as a dancer not a kumu. I studied with Bella for 3 years. We went to her house because in those times there was no such thing as a halau. Halau was not freely used like today. It meant a very choice group of people. A real halau, the students have to live with the kumu, eat and sleep with the kumu. I believe only those people can call themselves students of a halau.

My training was noa, there was no kapus. My style is a reflection of my mother because she was so balance conscious. You had to paint a balanced picture on the stage. If the body went left, your hands should be left.

I watch all the dance programs on PBS and any ideas I get I put them into my hula auwana. The heart has to be open and giving when you dance. I was taught to stay in one place when I dance but I like to make use of the space available.

My mother was the most important influence on me because she was family. But Aunty Edith's mother, Mary, gave me a lot. She was a very short woman. I learned a lot at 14 because you got a licking if you forgot anything. There was no such thing as child abuse back then. There was limbering up exercises when I trained. We would sit on the floor and the kumu would stand on our legs. I tell my students if I could take it then they can take it now. We also had to stand in the doorway with our hand outstretched and arms to the floor. This was all to make our bodies flexible enough to dance the way our kumus expected us to dance. Outside of my mother she is the kumu I am most fond of. What I remember most about my teaching career is that the Hawaiians didn't write things down when I explained it to them on the board. In my time we were trained to remember everything. Today's Hawaiians carry on that tradition but without the disciplined training that we were given.

I enjoyed the male hula style of Henry Pa. My forte in teaching is auwana. To tell you the truth I wasn't a very good dancer but I did remember a lot. I see me in everyone of my kids. I tell these kids to love what they're doing. I tell them there is no future in keeping up with the Jones's, you have to just concentrate on yourself. Once I read that Mikhail Baryshnikov practices 17 hours a day. When I hear that I know I'm not wrong when I push my kids. That gives me faith.

The olapa has changed so much that I'd rather send my kids to kung fu or aikido. I love Aunty Edith's rendition of

I feel the olapa is going down the drain. In the auwana and the olapa, the kumu don't know enough about the language. I am a contemporary hula.