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Fine staging brings to life old tale of Hawaii

Review by **Ryan Senaga**
Special to the Star-Advertiser

The retelling of Hawaiian lore can get old and stodgy, so kudos to Kumu Kahua Theatre for giving new life to noted University of Hawaii teacher and artist Jean Charlot's "Moa a Mo'i."

The title translates as "Chicken into King," but, of course, that requires a bit of explaining. The play — based on real-life alii — revolves around 'Umi, a commoner about to be killed by his abusive father. (Turns out the bully isn't his real dad anyway.) 'Umi is pushed to flee by his mother and sails off in a canoe. On the verge of starvation, he lands safely on Hawaii island by the blessing of a god to

whom 'Umi sacrifices a single louse, his last morsel of food.

'Umi then finds his real father, the king Liloa, and instantly becomes the mortal enemy of his half brother Hakau, the heir to the throne. The people of Hawaii take an instant liking to the newcomer, and his brother, fuming with jealousy, "accidentally" falls into the raging inferno of an imu.

From that point the game is on, not only for the Big Island kingdom, but for the rest of the Hawaiian archipelago. During the battle for Maui, 'Umi teases that island's king with a chicken feather before killing him, hence Charlot's title.

The machinations of the

rulers and the enemies who seek to overthrow them are almost Shakespearean in nature, as are the gods who show favor — or don't — on 'Umi's quests.

As directed by Daniel A. Kelin II, "Moa a Mo'i" has its moments of eeriness and violence, but there are also welcome bursts of humor and romance.

Tyler Tanabe as 'Umi speaks in an informal tone, and his benevolence is sprinkled with sincerity and charm. As entertaining as he is, though, there are times when his character's dialogue is so casual and Western, it seems at odds with some of the other ensemble's more formal, almost Elizabethan tone.

Speaking of the ensemble,

audiences may wish that a character appendix — like the lineages detailed in epic fantasy novels — was included in the program. Many of the supporting characters are unnamed, and it's nearly impossible to match them with the actors named in the program. (There are 50 roles divided among 10 actors. The program simply reads "Ensemble" with the names of the cast in alphabetical order, and Charlot probably didn't give most of his characters names in the fablelike script.)

The in-the-round theater setting is sparsely furnished, with vines hanging from the ceiling and a giant rock that dominates the center of the stage, functioning as a seat,



COURTESY KUMU KAHUA THEATRE

Sebastian Orlich, left, Tyler Tanabe and Kava Jones appear in Jean Charlot's "Moa a Mo'i" at Kumu Kahua Theatre.

a pedestal and a prop container. The lighting is integral, especially when dissolving into the scene whereupon a god descends among the humans.

When 'Umi confronts a fe-

rocious shark god, it is through flashing red light and the clattering and choreography of actors holding large wooden sticks that the beast is brought to life. The staging is inspired.