



ORIGINAL PLAYS & CLASSIC HUMANITIES

A Special Series from Kumu Kahua Theatre, for its 2005–2006 Season



**KUMU KAHUA THEATRE
PRESENTS
ALBERT WENDT'S
NEW DRAMA
*THE SONGMAKER'S CHAIR***

The Songmaker's Chair is the story of a Samoan family, the 'Āiga Sā-Peseola, and what has happened to this adventurous family over three generations. In the words of its author, Albert Wendt, the play introduces audiences to “the lives of those courageous migrant families who have made Auckland and Aotearoa their home.” To survive and adapt, they have intermarried with Māori and Papalagi, and developed what they call the Peseola Way—defiant, honest, and unflinching.

First staged in Auckland in 2003, the play was a huge success, with sold-out houses through the run. *The New Zealand Herald* particularly admired how “Wendt deftly structures the scenes to present his ten characters in an impressive range of combinations that reveal the nature of the various relationships between siblings, husbands and wives, parents and children and so on.” Remarking on the “delightfully festive atmosphere” at the premiere, the *Herald* also described how, although “the action is set in the one house and occurs largely within four days, we are taken to Samoa and other parts of Aotearoa, traversing more than forty years.” Noting the “memorable moments of dialogue and staging along with well-integrated singing and dancing,” the *National Business Review* remarked that “the opening night audience, composed of a large number of Samoans, made it apparent that the best and more risqué lines were in Samoan.”

A story of conflict, continuity, and change, and the first full-length play by one of the Pacific's foremost novelists and essayists, *The Songmaker's Chair* will play at Kumu Kahua Theatre, 46 Merchant Street in downtown Honolulu, on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings at 8 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. from March 16 through April 15. For information about performance times and tickets, call 536-4441, consult www.kumukahua.org, or visit the Box Office between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. Monday through Friday.

The cast and crew of *The Songmaker's Chair*. Front row (left to right): director Dennis Carroll, author Albert Wendt; second row: Jackie Tufa-Marques, stage manager Emily Tam, Fa'i Silipa, Wil T. K. Kahele; third row: Hina Puamohala Kneubuhl, Vaialofi E. K. Samifua, assistant director Christine Silipa, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, Fata Simanu-Klutz; forth row: Talavou Avegalio, Sami L. A. Akuna, Gilbert Molina (photo by John Wat).



Notes from the Playwright . . .

The Songmaker's Chair is my first full-length play, and is a fulfillment of a promise to Nathaniel Lees in the 1970s that I would write a play for Samoan actors. It has taken a very long time to fulfill that promise. And for me it's wonderful that Nathaniel directed and acted in the first production of the play!

The Songmaker's Chair began many years ago in Samoa as an image of an old man, my father, sitting in his favorite chair beside a large radio: a haunting image that refused to go away. I brought it with me to Auckland in 1988. From that year until I wrote the first full version of the play in 1996, I saw a lot of Pākehā, Māori, and Pacific plays—a truly magnificent and dynamic development in our country's theatre that continues today. I acknowledge my debt to such playwrights as Harry Dansey, John Kneubuhl, Selwyn Muru, Vincent O'Sullivan, Briar Grace-Smith, Hone Kouka, Oscar Kightley, Makerita Urale, Toa Fraser, Jacob Rajan, Vilsoni Hereniko, Victoria Kneubuhl, and others. I was absolutely taken by those plays—and I learned much from them. Until one night I was so inspired, I started writing the first version of *The Songmaker's Chair* and finished it in a few days. I transferred the lonely old man and his chair from Apia and reset them in Wellington Street, Freemans Bay, Auckland, where I used to spend my school holidays with relatives. And he became Peseola Olaga with his wife, Malaga, and their four children and two grandchildren, and their Papalagi daughter-in-law, and their Māori son-in-law. Since their arrival in Auckland in 1953, the Peseola family has developed the unique “Peseola Way” to live and navigate their lives by.

Now it is a weekend in the height of summer, and Peseola has summoned his 'āiga to their family home. We find out why as the play unfolds; we also experience the conflicts and passions, the alofa and loyalty, the fears and secrets of this family.

Since I came to Aotearoa in 1952, I have observed and written poetry and fiction about the Samoan and Pacific migrant experience. This play is my latest attempt to encapsulate that, and to celebrate the lives of those courageous migrant families who have made Auckland and Aotearoa their home. It is also in gratitude to the tangata whenua who welcomed us into their home.

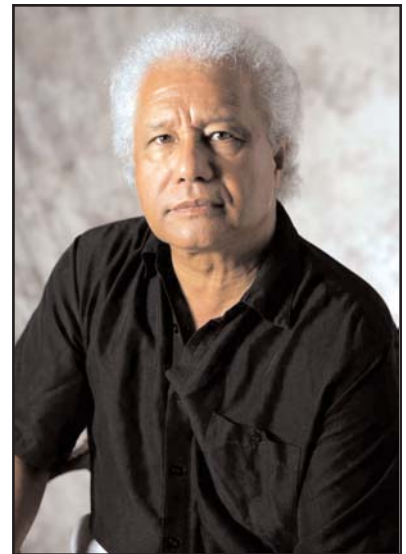
Like the Peseola family, our journeys have been from our ancient atua and pasts to the new fusion and mix and rap that is now Aotearoa and Auckland. We have added to and continue to change that extraordinary fusion, the heart of which is still Māori and Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. The song is still richly alive and growing.

*Why is it we've stayed this far?
We think we've found a firm fit to this land.
To our children and mokopuna it's home.
That's good enough pe 'a o'o mai le Amen
And Papatūānuku embraces us . . .*

Ia manuia le Tapuaiga!

— *Albert Wendt*

A leading figure in the field of Pacific literature, ALBERT WENDT is the author of various novels, stories, poetry, and plays, including the classic *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (winner of the New Zealand Watties Book of the Year Award), *Sons for the Return Home*, *The Mango's Kiss*, and *The Book of the Black Star*. A mentor to many writers throughout the Pacific, since 1988 he has held the Chair in New Zealand and Pacific Literature at the University of Auckland. He currently holds the Citizens' Chair in English, established by the Hawai'i State Legislature to attract individuals of extraordinary scholarly and creative accomplishments to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. *The Songmaker's Chair* is available from the University of Hawai'i Press.



KUMU KAHUA THEATRE

PRESENTS

THE SONGMAKER'S CHAIR

by

Albert Wendt

Directed by Dennis Carroll

Set Design by Dan Gelbmann

Lighting Design by Melissa Steinbach

The ensemble features Kumu veterans Wil T. K. Kahele and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, and newcomers Talavou Avegalio, Vaialofi E. K. Samifua, Fata Simanu-Klutz, Jackie Tufa-Marques, Fa'i Silipa, Hina Puamohala Kneubuhl, Sami L. A. Akuna, and Gilbert Molina.

Kumu Kahua Theatre is supported in part by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, through appropriations from the Hawai'i State Legislature, and by the National Endowment for the Arts; the Mayor's Office of Culture and the Arts, Mufi Hannemann, Mayor; The Hawai'i Community Foundation; Territorial Savings Bank; and Foundations, Businesses, and Patrons.

The Director's Cut . . .

The Songmaker's Chair draws on the great tradition of Western dramatic realism immortalized in the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and O'Neill, in which a family is a repository for powerful, deep bonds between its members, but also harbors resentments and secrets which emerge at crisis points. Albert Wendt's play particularizes this tradition of family drama within Samoan culture, adding the element of the family relocated in an alien country.

The glimpses into Pese's mind and imagination form one tributary stylistic stream giving the play its special tone and individuality. Another is the derivation from the Samoan tradition of *fale aitu*, the Samoan "improvisational comedy" with elements of parody, female impersonation, and stand-up comedy. This tradition is exemplified by modern-day Samoan immigrant performers in New Zealand presenting "Samoan comedy" in English, such as Etavate Ete and Tofiga Fepulea'i. Albert Wendt has drawn on this genre in several startling presentational episodes in which the audience is suddenly and directly acknowledged, even exhorted to participate, by the "performing" characters.

Finally, I have added another stylistic device where characters not present in the pertinent scene become "witnesses" to moments in which more "private" memories and resentments of certain characters are disclosed. This device is meant to suggest the strong spiritual and intuitive bonds of the healthy 'āiga, the Samoan "extended family" whose members and elders are consulted whenever major family decisions are made, or issues of succession of authority are resolved. These "witnesses" especially scrutinize, through their silent and careful attention, the members of the new generation, to whom the leadership of the 'āiga will pass.



The initial image for this production came from Wendt's novel *Pouliuli* [Darkness] (University of Hawai'i Press, 1980). Wendt here presents a similar situation to that of *The Songmaker's Chair*, but the story ends tragically, with the generational transfer of authority aborted. The cover of the book depicts a circle of small pebbles on the grass, with its center anchored by one larger oiled pebble. In the novel this circular icon is introduced into the village of Malaelua by a visiting vagrant/prophet, who is driven away by the main character when he aborts the circle in removing the central pebble. The idea of a circle in danger of destabilization and distortion dictated the ground plan for the production, with an off-center circle flanked by cubes on the circumference. I hoped it would suggest a

state of precarious stability, with Pese at the (off) center, threatened throughout the play, hemmed in by a somewhat claustrophobic bulwark of family traditions and imperatives, but with those traditions intact and passed on at the end.

— Dennis Carroll

DENNIS CARROLL has had seven plays workshopped or produced, including four by Kumu Kahua Theatre: *Way of a God* (1998), *Spur* (2000), *Massie/Kahahawai* (2004), and *Age, Sex, Location* (2005). He is Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

PASIFIKA ARTS ON STAGE

KATERINA MARTINA TEAIWA

The opening paragraph of a review in *Dance Magazine*, one of the premier dance journals in the United States, starts, “There’s more going on in New Zealand than jet boating and bungee jumping. Neil Ieremia’s all-male troupe, Black Grace, an amalgam of Samoan tribal dance and American modern dance, transcends its beginnings without losing sight of its roots” (Rinehart 217). While there is clearly an inappropriate use of the word “tribal,” the review illustrates the increasing visibility of contemporary Pacific art in the international arena. From the literary to visual and performing arts, works from the Pacific diaspora, and from New Zealand in particular, are being featured across the globe.

Pacific curators and scholars Sean Mallon and Fulimalo Pereira quote visual artist Fatu Fe‘u as saying, “Part of our survival is doing our art. If we don’t then we are lost in another country, without an identity” (25). The theme of identity is pervasive in the works emerging from the diaspora, and as Rinehart’s review indicates, they are often read as both new and “rooted.” The implication is that Pacific Island languages, values, and practices continue to inspire the artist. Storytelling through writing, theater, film, and dance is placed in a continuum of oral and embodied practices that have long characterized Pacific approaches to aesthetics, politics, and historiography. As a result, the artist is never just writer, filmmaker, or choreographer, but rather “Maori” writer, “Fijian” filmmaker, and “Samoan” choreographer. This doesn’t always sit well with artists, and Ieremia in particular is vocal about his desire to be approached simply as “choreographer.” At a conference in Wellington, he was asked by a member of the audience about both the pressure and prestige of the New York debut of his company. His reply, in the words of one of his own dancers, was, “a stage is just a stage and people are people. We’d have to do our best whether we were performing in Invercargill or New York.”

Along with the demands of the art market, the “roots” that anchor cultural practices provide a grounding and reality check for many artists. During a recent discussion at the University of Hawai‘i, celebrated author Patricia Grace described her approach and craft simply by stating: “I tell the stories of ordinary people in their ordinary lives.” The lives of ordinary people in her community happen to be, as she also noted, quite extraordinary, and in her case, Māori. The stories she weaves from their lives are often read against a background of popular representations of the region as Paradise, savage, underdeveloped, or increasingly, corrupt. The works of artists such as Grace, Witi Ihimaera, Albert Wendt, Sia Figiel, John Pule, Sima Urale, Toa Fraser, and “The Naked Samoans,” then, provide a more nuanced and complex view of the lives of Pacific peoples.

While the recognition of works on the international stage gives us every reason to rejoice, we often find that in many contexts “Polynesian” is conflated with “Pacific.” There is far less regional and international visibility of voices and practices in Melanesia or Micronesia, and their own growing diasporas in Australia and the United States. While Polynesians in New Zealand are increasingly the directors, curators, scholars, and critics of their own works, this is not the case in the rest of the region. Another feature of the arts scene is the growing currency of the term “Pasifika” to characterize all things Pacific outside the islands (check out, for example, *Pasifika Styles 2006* in the UK, and the *Q-PACifika* arts network in Brisbane). The diversity of peoples in the diaspora, and their minority status, inspires new Pan-Pacific, and usually Pan-Polynesian, descriptors for the community. These have included various spellings and pronunciations of Pasifika/Pacifika/Pacifica, a contraction of



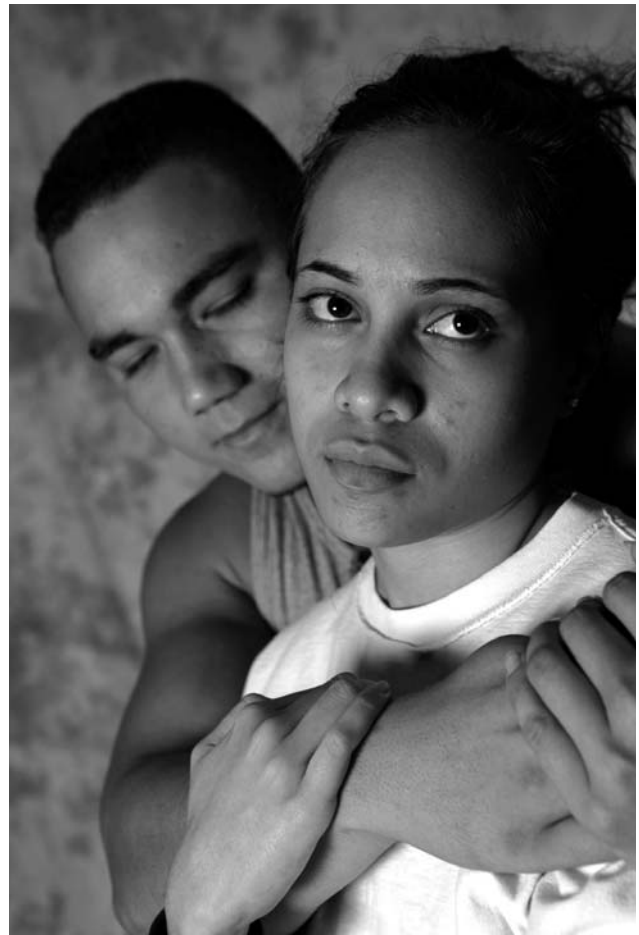
ABOVE: Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl as Nofo Olaga, second generation of the 'Āiga Sā-Peseola, and Fa'i Silipa as her husband, Hone Roberts.

RIGHT: Talavou Avegalio as Falani (Frank) Olaga comforting his sister Lilo, played by Vaialofi E. K. Samifua.

(Photos by Brad Goda.)

*My father was right: I have grown to fit his Chair.
And It has grown to fit me. I know it feels at home in
my shape. It has witnessed, in sad forgiving silence,
nearly all that has happened to my 'āiga since we came
to Aotearoa. Haven't you, la'u uō? You even know my
dreams and nightmares. Tonight, my friend, you will
welcome with me the Atua of my 'āiga.*

—from *The Songmaker's Chair*



Polynesian to “Nesian,” and even “Polifusion.” These terms illustrate a continuing exploration of the possibilities of self expression and survival in the diaspora, and as always, the negotiation of identity, of sense of place, and of relationships past, present, and future.

Works Cited

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KATERINA MARTINA TEAIWA is Assistant Professor in the Center for Pacific Island Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. Her research includes creative approaches to Banaban history, and the importance of dance to Pacific Studies.

TRANS-PACIFIC CROSSINGS: PACIFIC ISLANDERS AND GLOBALIZATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

SA'ILIEMANU LILOMAIAVA-DOKTOR

For all its diverse causes, population mobility of Pacific Islanders seems to be a major feature of life in the late twentieth century. In fact, in much of the world, geographical mobility is the norm rather than the exception. Some of us move from villages to villages, from cities to cities, or countries to countries not just once, but several times in our lives, be this for employment, marriage, education, or simply the search for a better life. Tragically, many others are forced to move: by war, persecution, environmental disaster, or poverty. Whether the move has been for economic gain, political asylum, academic qualifications, or social or cultural reasons, those who step across cultural and geographical boundaries are, in varying degrees, likely to find themselves transformed. As we physically move, so too do our personal and social boundaries shift; in this sense movement involves a constant process of repackaging and self-redefinition.

It is this process that lies at the heart of this play. *The Songmaker's Chair* is a play about Samoan and Pacific migrant experience. It concomitantly celebrates the life of the courageous families and individuals who have made Aotearoa, New Zealand their home. It is also in gratitude to the tangata whenua (people of the land) who welcome them into their home. The main characters of the play are Peseola and Malaga, an 'āiga (family, kin group) who decides to leave Samoa for New Zealand so that their children could receive a better education. The story of Peseola and Malaga's family illustrates the trials and tribulations, feelings of ambivalence, and the cultural and social consequences encountered by migrant families in their malaga (journeys, travels—broadly, movement). As we shall see, it brings economic, social, and geographical mobility; it binds families together, while also pulling them apart; and it is a central source of advancement, and symbol of power, yet also resisted through stress upon local sources of power, traditionalism, and sometimes religious revivalism.

In what is sometimes called the “age of migration,” concepts such as diaspora and globalization are being used to describe population movements that reflect the current political configurations of the global economy. Attempts to cast Pacific migrations as diasporic in order to cash in on the currency that diaspora studies presently has in sectors of academe are tempting, but the uncritical and wholesome application of such descriptors is problematic. The literature we have so far tends to concentrate on those who move, but those who hold the fort or “stay put” also have as much influence on diasporic processes: the two populations cannot be separated. In Oceania, the island societies are fundamentally land-based and communal collectivities. Hence, the concept of “migration,” with its conventional notions of severance of ties, uprootedness, and rupture, clashes with local metaphors of movement intricately tied to land and place. Place is often constructed as a tangible, physical entity, but there is far more to this. For many Pacific Island societies, place has a spiritual dimension; it provides a sense of belonging as ancestral birthright, irrespective of a member's generation and location of residence. Although migration may result in the relocation of an individual, it does not mean an uprooting and severance of ties from places of origin in its most obvious sense.

Cultural metaphors of movement, such as malaga in Samoa, vera ruka or komu ruka in the Solomon Islands, or uruur in Satowan, Chuuk, influence how islanders conceive of their movement. Their journeys are not simply movements through space, but like all travels lead to a reshaping of boundaries and reconfigurations of culture, identity, community, and spirituality, as well as an expanded territorial distribution.

SA'ILIEMANU LILOMAIAVA-DOKTOR is a lecturer in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Geography department, where she teaches human and cultural geography. Her research interests center on indigenous epistemologies and sociocultural aspects of society-environment interactions, and particularly how culture influences environmental, political, social, and economic dimensions of development in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the Pacific Islands.

Portraying Pacific Migrations: Legacies and Challenges

In telling the story of the 'Āiga Sā-Peseola, playwright Albert Wendt explores a variety of historical events, cultural legacies, and artistic challenges. With funding from the Hawai'i Council for the Humanities, Kumu Kahua Theatre is offering two free public presentations that consider the consequences of some of these issues.

Event I: Pacific Migration in Art, Society, and History

Tuesday, March 21, 7:30 p.m. The Korean Studies Center Auditorium, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

This event will explore how migration by Pacific Islanders within the Pacific has been represented in drama, fiction, poetry, and other artistic media. Historian and cast member Fata Simanu-Klutz will talk about the size, the nature, the history, and the social and cultural consequences of this traveling. Writer and folklorist Caroline Sinavaiana, who has lived in Samoa, the continental United States, other Pacific Island nations, and now in Hawai'i, will talk about the impact of migration on language, forms of expression, and self-understanding. Playwright Albert Wendt will discuss how the challenges of drama influenced how he dealt with this subject, and director Dennis Carroll will address how to make the issues of migration come to life on stage. A scene from the current production of *The Songmaker's Chair* with special relevance for the evening's discussion will also be presented.

Event II: Pacific Island Migration: Art at Home and Away

Tuesday, March 28, 7:30 p.m. Kumu Kahua Theatre, 46 Merchant Street

The speakers this evening will focus on the nature of Intra-Pacific migration, and the challenges of "transplanted" art. Katerina Teaiwa, whose research and artistic interests lie "in the area of intra-Pacific movement/migration/diaspora, and the circulation of contemporary musical and dance forms," will explore how all the traveling that goes on between islands affects the ways "ideas, forms, or materials move across cultural areas that still seem so fixed as ' Samoan' or 'Fijian' or 'Tongan.'" Robert Sullivan, noted Māori poet, essayist, and writer of fiction and non-fiction, will talk about how the great history of Pacific Islander travel is not only the subject of contemporary Pacific literature, but affects all the ways that migration is artistically represented. As with the first event, Albert Wendt and Dennis Carroll will speak, and a scene from the current production of *The Songmaker's Chair*, chosen for its special relevance for the discussion, will be presented.

The Pacific Diaspora: A Brief Bibliography

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Kumu Kahua Theatre: Two Plays & the Humanities

Kumu Kahua Theatre's name translates into "Original Stage," and its dedication to producing a genuine reflection of the life and experience of Hawai'i has enabled the theatre to develop into one of the most original and exciting companies in America, and in the Pacific region. Throughout its thirty-five year history, Kumu Kahua has been committed to preserving and enriching the cultural legacy of Hawai'i and its diverse population through the art form of theatre. Its stated mission is to produce "Plays about life in Hawai'i, Plays by Hawai'i's playwrights, Plays for Hawai'i's people."

With support from the King Kamehameha V–Judiciary History Center, the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i, and the University of Hawai'i-Mānoa Department of Theatre and Dance, Department of English, Center for Pacific Island Studies, and Center for Biographical Research, Kumu Kahua Theatre is sponsoring a series of four public presentations devoted to examining some of the historical events and cultural legacies that have shaped Hawai'i. The subject matter comes from two plays featured in Kumu Kahua's 2005–2006 season, and the events will take place at 7:30 p.m. on the following dates during each play's run. For more information about the programs and the plays, see page 7 of this guide, or contact Kumu Kahua Theatre at 536-4222, kumukahuatheatre@verizon.net, or the Center for Biographical Research at 956-3774, biograph@hawaii.edu.



Kumu Kahua performances are being supported by the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, celebrating more than thirty years of culture and the arts in Hawai'i.

JAPANESE CULTURAL CENTER OF HAWAII



Funding for this series of programs is provided by the



The Songmaker's Chair, by Albert Wendt

Tuesday, March 21: Pacific Migration in Art, Society, and History (at the Korean Studies Auditorium, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa)

Tuesday, March 28: Pacific Island Migration: Art at Home and Away (at Kumu Kahua Theatre)

Another Heaven, by Eric Anderson

Tuesday, May 23—Labor History, Labor Conditions in the Late Monarchy Period (at the Japanese Cultural Center of Hawai'i)

Tuesday, May 30—History and Drama, Fact and/or Fiction? (at the Kamehameha V–Judiciary History Center)



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