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## FILM



BY DIANE CARSON

### KUMU HULA: KEEPERS OF A CULTURE

*Directed by Robert Mugge*

Anyone regarding the hula as a titillating tourist come-on, a transparent excuse for seductive hip gyrations and skimpy costumes, has a treat in store: discovering the exquisite beauty and elegance of the complex, traditional hulas. Having developed an appreciation of those hulas when I lived in Hawaii, I am elated at the anthropological information and thoroughly enjoyable experience *Kumu Hula* delivers in documenting this multifaceted art form.

The hula is an ancient dance practiced for over 1,500 years, surreptitiously during the 19th century when plantation owners and missionaries suppressed it. But its critical importance in expressing the culture of the Hawaiian people ensured its continuance by kumu, the masters, who teach and preserve the hula's integrity. As demonstrated in this film, it thrives today with men and women of all ages, sizes and racial mixtures dancing with mesmerizing movements and compelling chants synchronized with traditional percussion instruments that energize the activity.

Producer/director/editor Robert Mugge heightens the beauty of the dances with imaginative camera placement and with edits that complement the hula's beautiful rhythms, thereby capturing a feast for the eye, the ear and the heart.

Mugge filmed most of the dances Sept. 17 and 18, 1988, at the first annual Kamokila Campbell Hula Festival. He weaves this footage together with comments from master teachers and with breathtaking dance footage shot on Oahu, Maui, Kauai, Lanai, Molokai and Hawaii. Juxtaposed with an impressive selection of chants and dances is an equally varied range of opinions as to the importance and primary function of the ancient hula. But dominating the film, as properly they should, are the energetic pupils who translate the master teachers' knowledge into poetic motion. As one kumu explains, no two hulas are the same, for each celebrates the deities of Hawaiian life, especially Pele, the goddess of volcanoes. Master teachers must be knowledgeable about all interpretations, all the vegetable manifestations of the deities, and the different leis each requires, a fascinating array of artistic objects in their own right. There is comic relief here too in the aerobics hula and the inclusion of one Hollywood film clip featuring the hula performed in the 1937 *Waikiki Wedding* with Bing Crosby and Shirley Ross. Hollywood's usual excess — dozens of hula dancers — highlights by contrast the simplicity and grace of the traditional presentation.

*Kumu Hula* is a beautiful film to watch. The colors look intensely saturated, and the palette from which they're chosen includes every hue in the rainbow. With the striking Hawaiian locations, it's often hard to keep your eyes on the dancers, until you realize how aptly they translate their environment into dynamic expression. As one master explains, the hula nobly embodies the forces of nature through the dancer's body, and *Kumu Hula* succeeds in an enchanting presentation of its proud tradition. As a special bonus after the film, Vicky Holt Takamine, featured in *Kumu Hula*, and four other master dancers will perform with accompanying music.

At Webster University on April 14. ■