

## **Dance Review: *The Boston Globe***

### **Black Grace dances reflect Samoan roots**

By: Karen Campbell

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When an economist reportedly said that Polynesians suffer from “enduring underachievement,” choreographer Neil Ieremia’s response was a dance, “Gathering Clouds.” However, the excerpts presented in last night’s Celebrity Series engagement of Ieremia’s Black Grace Dance Company show a work grounded not in anger, but in pride and affirmation reflective of

Ieremia’s Samoan descent and New Zealand upbringing.

With its score of singing, chanting, and drumming, the first excerpt, “Exodus,” recalls the social and cultural traditions of the Pacific Island immigrants. The company’s seven men display the muscular, athletic virility that is Ieremia’s trademark. High kicks, stomps, and jumps are complemented by the claps and slaps of Samoan body percussion. Their powerful, clustered unisons break into layers of contrapuntal patterning and gestures of rowing and digging. At one point, they repeatedly rise and fall, dip and sway, until one begins a slow journey across stage, balanced on the backs and upraised hands of the others. Three women are each flipped slowly between two men, their sharply angled bodies like graceful pinwheels. It’s all about community.

The second excerpt, which is the work’s finale, is a revelation. Ieremia mines the aesthetic and many of the moves of the first section, but set to excerpts from Bach’s “Goldberg Variations,” the movement is transformed. While the drumming gave the movement weighty propulsion and heft, the bright movements of Bach’s piano masterpiece suggest longer phrases and a melodic through-line. They seem to lift the movement with lyrical sweep and swing. Here the body percussion provides a filigree of rhythmic accents. In his onstage introduction, Ieremia called it “a way of expressing my evolution as a Pacific Islander.” And as the work closes, with bodies flying through the air, crashing to the floor, then rebounding with joyous exuberance, the sense of transformation and resilience is palpable.

The fusion of traditional Polynesian cultural elements with contemporary dance has always been the foundation of Black Grace. The evening’s first half showcased some of the company’s older works, like the elegant “Deep Far.” The signature “Minoi” remains a favorite, epitomizing this cultural fusion with a traditional song that gently morphs into a “Sesame Street” ditty.