

Dance Review: Neil Ieremia and Black Grace perform at George Mason University

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Dance has a habit of luring its practitioners away from more lucrative careers. Neil Ieremia was 19 when he announced plans to quit a banking job and become a choreographer. His parents -- immigrants from Western Samoa who sought a better life for their children in New Zealand -- thought they might as well jump back on a boat.

But they didn't, and lucky for world dance stages, Ieremia has spent the last 15 years directing Black Grace, an all-male company that fuses traditional Maori and Samoan movement with modern dance. Two years ago, the testosterone-powered troupe made a sweaty splash at the Kennedy Center. At George Mason University Saturday night, the dancing was every bit as lusty, but some presentation elements were problematic: murky lighting, excessive narration and choppy excerpts detracted from an otherwise amazing show.

Many choreographers -- from local Indian dance enthusiasts to big-name artistic directors -- attempt to mesh modern dance with ceremonial traditions. Few succeed like Black Grace. Examples from Saturday's program include "Minoi," a Samoan "slap dance" chanted by seven men, and "Deep Far," a call for rain performed by two men and two (guest) women dancers who stand in a square, alternately leaping forward and backward from diagonal points.

Most intriguing: an excerpt from "Surface," a 2003 evening-length work that depicts a traditional coming-of-age tattooing ceremony for Samoan men. The dancers rolled giant stones out onto the stage, then tipped them sideways, creating primal platforms. With the tap-tap-tapping of tattoo hammers hitting sharpened bone as a soundtrack, the dancers ricocheted off the stones into each other's arms.

The show closed with an excerpt from "Gathering Clouds." From the stage, in one of many charming but lengthy explanations, Ieremia said this work was about immigration and Polynesian pride. No introduction was necessary. As dancers sat cross-legged, clapping to the counterpoint of Bach's "Goldberg Variations," the cross-cultural implications were obvious, and a joy to watch.

-- **Rebecca J. Ritzel**