

Black Grace Artistic Director Shares Inspiration for New Choreography

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Canoe: the word conjures an image of a mode of transportation particular to some Asian and Native cultures. But Black Grace, a contemporary dance company founded in New Zealand 17 years ago by artistic director and choreographer Neil Ieremia, is exploring more expansive connotations of the word, and has named their current dance piece, “Vaka,” for that water vehicle.

Ieremia reports that these dance explorations arose out of the juxtaposition of two artistic creations that he happened to contemplate around the same time.

“I began researching ideas for ‘Vaka’ after becoming inspired by a Bill Viola video installation called ‘The Raft,’” Ieremia says. “Simultaneously, I had been considering the impact of a rather flawed depiction of the migration of Maori to New Zealand entitled ‘The Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand.’”

The latter painting by Louis John Steele and Charles F. Goldie, which was created in 1898 and is housed at the Auckland Art Gallery, is now known to contain numerous inaccuracies about the Maori canoe journeys, but Ieremia made this his starting place for his imaginings.

“In late 2010, I began banging around in the studio focused on finding answers to some questions that I had developed through my explorations,” he says.

Ieremia began with group improvisations with his corps of dancers, most of whom are devoted to the company full-time, and these experiments sometimes led to heated debates.

“One such exercise,” Ieremia says, “involved the entire company imagining that we had been stranded on a deserted island, and as time passed and the necessities of life became scarce, we were forced with the task of getting rid of someone. This went on until only one person was left.”

This exercise allowed the group to explore a key question for Ieremia: “As a human race, why does it often take a disaster or catastrophe for humans to show humanity?”

Ieremia reports that the dance improvisations proved evocative.

“Although we laughed about the island exercise later,” he says, “there was no mistaking the depth of feeling and emotion that was stirred.” These emotions, negative and positive, form the core of “Vaka.”

The positive emotions, in particular, provided a strong foundation for this new work. “There is a beautiful traditional Samoan saying,” Ieremia says, “which when translated into English, means, ‘hope is a tree of life.’”

“I believe that there is always a degree of hope in everything we do,” he adds. “I think previous audiences were able to identify with the theme of hope, and responded exceptionally well to the work.”

The creation of “Vaka” in this manner follows a long-held pattern that Ieremia initiated after establishing Black Grace.

“I founded Black Grace because I wanted to tell my stories my way,” he says. “I also wanted to work in a very specific way, and significantly impact the dance landscape globally in a very Pacific Island sort of way.”

To do this, Ieremia is very selective regarding the dancers that his company employs.

“It’s not as simple as just an audition for a couple of hours,” he says. “I have always preferred to take someone with a great attitude over someone with crazy technique; technique can be taught, attitudes can’t.”

“We are very proud of the fact,” he adds, “that Black Grace is currently the only contemporary company in New Zealand that employs dancers full-time. We are a tight-knit group who work 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, and are on the road often, so it’s important to like each other!”

Along with this reliable core group of dancers, Ieremia’s use of other forms of art as a springboard for Black Grace’s work remains the core of his creative process. “In terms of remaining inspired after 17 years of Black Grace, I find that my own curiosity is the best ‘creative refresher,’” he says.

During the development process of “Vaka,” Ieremia discovered the continuing resonance of his inner life. “I also explored the notion that Humans are Vaka,” he says, “and that we carry within us a cargo shaped by history which we consider to be precious and integral.”

Black Grace returns to Seattle with “Vaka” in February, after making its Seattle debut in 2008 during its North American tour. “I feel very blessed to be able to tour my work internationally,” Ieremia says, “And even though we started touring internationally in 1996 (with more deliberate regularity from 2003), I still feel like the new kid on the block.”

“Seattle is special to me,” Ieremia adds, “as it is the home of one of my favorite musicians, Jimi Hendrix. We are very glad to be returning.”

“Vaka” runs from February 21 through February 23 as part of the University of Washington (UW) World Dance Series, at Meany Hall for the Performing Arts on UW’s Seattle Campus. More details: <http://uwworldseries.org/world-dance/black-grace>.