



Doug Varone and dancers bring bigger world to Maui's shores

By JULE WIND, *The Maui News*

A dancer's dancer. This might be a valid description of choreographer Doug Varone, who brought seven dancers here Jan. 24 for an energetic performance in the Maui Arts & Cultural Center.

Bringing New York City contemporary dance to Maui is a MACC gift to the community, as it opens our eyes to a world far from these sanded shores. The highlight of the night was the new piece that Varone set to a medley of Jake Shimabukuro, our native ukulele impresario. The Varone dancers made **"Beyond the Break"** into a fast dynamic romp.

The famed Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts is behind this unique collaboration. Many Mauians will never forget the amazing music/dance/photographic performance of "Faces of America: Hawai'i," a tribute to national parks here on the islands. This collaboration at Wolf Trap introduced Shimabukuro's music to Varone, who had put together "The Bottomland," a multimedia tribute to Kentucky's Mammoth Caves National Park. Varone loved the ukulele music and decided to set a piece on it.

Easier said than done. While Shimabukuro often has collaborated with orchestras and symphonies, he had never worked with a dance company before. The two artists went back and forth trying to create something that would work. But Shimabukuro's tight schedule performing nationally and in Japan made the collaboration difficult. Finally Shimabukuro agreed to allow Varone to use six of his former pieces.

The result was **rousing and exuberant**, fulfilling the program description of Varone dancers as **versatile, kinetically dexterous and musical**. I had never imagined dancing to Shimabukuro before.

The other two numbers of the show, from Varone's 2006 20th anniversary shows, gave us a look at the trend of "democratic dance," which eliminates the idea of performer as virtuoso. Instead ordinary looking people walk onto stage as if going to the store, suddenly create poetic movements, then stop and walk off stage as if pedestrians who happen to dance. The idea is that the dancers are human and everyman/everywoman.

"Lux" was set to Philip Glass' "The Light," with dancers in cropped pants and tunics moving in escalating energy with a moon slowly rising behind. The words **"dance the night away"** kept popping up in my mind. Gary Canier, always a front-row fan, said it spoke to him of being held in the light, of being light, of being held in God.

The dancers exhibited **great technical prowess**. The crowd favorite was Hilo native Eddie Taketa, who graduated from the University of Hawai'i in Manoa in dance theater and then went to New York to become a famed modern dancer. He has been with the Varone dancers since 1994. The audience was especially receptive to Taketa's "lyrical silkiness," as Varone described him in a previous interview.

My favorite number of the night was the more poignant, **"Boats Leaving,"** where Varone's signature contact and release movements were set to the chantlike music of Arvo Pärt's "Te Deum." The dancers explored community and connection, broken by painful isolation. They fell apart, became a part of, then again a part from. They danced, fought, loved –with **great intensity and drama** – and periodically created frozen tableaux to **deftly define the human condition**. In these freeze frames, Varone often had a dancer make one perfect placement of a hand to further convey the emotion of the scene.

We on Maui are traditionally and culturally used to great ritual and costume in our dance performances. I realized that I like seeing dancers' bodies, men in tights and all that, so the sloppy jeans and T-shirts and varied dresses of the last two numbers made it seem that costume designer Liz Prince had told everyone to just "wear whatever you are comfy in and we'll go with that."

I acknowledge the absurdity of this statement, of course, since Prince, Varone and his dancers are all highly awarded in their arts. I'm sure it required great effort from Prince to get these dancers to look like the man/woman on the street, and I know that was the point.

I'll get used to democratic dance, just as I learned to love hip-hop and rap music. But I romantically hope there is always a place on stage for costume and ritual, grandeur and a bit of bling. We like that on Maui.