To: Dean Randy Hirokawa  
College of Arts and Sciences  

Via: Chair Seri Luangphinith  
Humanities Division  

From: Professor Jacquelyn Pualani Johnson J.P.J  
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Date: June 17, 2015  

RE: Sabbatical  

Please accept this Sabbatical report as a required culmination of two creative projects undertaken during the sabbatical period from July 2014 through December 2014.

1. Shakespeare in the Park – Creating Summer “Kid Shakes” via This is Hamlet

The Hilo Community Players are committed to the County of Hawai‘i and to the Hilo community to provide quality theatre that entertains and educates. A cornerstone of their efforts is the annual Shakespeare in the Park outdoor production in downtown Hilo, now in its 38th year. As the co-founder of the first production in 1978, I wished to build upon their commitment and expand the Players’ effort from fully-staged evening performances to include matinee shows appealing to family audiences. The Board of Directors of the Hilo Community Players gave approval to my suggestion to begin a new initiative called Kid Shakes.

This is Hamlet, the production I proposed to direct, fit perfectly into the organization’s goals. The script was an amalgam of cuttings and characters from several Shakespeare plays, but was couched in a fast-paced, contemporary framework with modern twists and turns.

I held auditions and cast a large group of children and adults, some from the same family. UH Hilo had a good showing in the roster: a music faculty member and her children participated; the role of Hamlet was created by a UH Hilo astronomy major; four other Performing Arts graduates and majors took on substantial roles. Other actors from the community rounded out the cast, spanning ages 5 to 75. We rehearsed in Kalākaua Park several times a week for two months and marked a July12, 2014 opening.

The show was well-received by Hilo audiences, made up of local residents and visitors to the Island, who brought folding chairs and umbrellas, as advised. Only one show was rained-out as a tropical storm approached and the audience traipsed across the street with the actors to perform indoors at the East Hawai‘i Cultural Center’s Museum of Contemporary Art. The audience averaged 60 attendees, with larger numbers at the final run of the 5-performance schedule, bringing the total to circa 350 people.
In short, *This is Hamlet* was a success. Proof of this is that the Players have committed to the new initiative and UH Hilo Performing Arts graduate, Alston Albarado, is directing the second offering this summer, titled *I Hate Shakespeare*. The format remains as I created: matinees in the park, using the stage built for evening shows, and a script that appeals to all ages.

2. **Researching and writing original musical - *Hilo: Da Musical***

The second sabbatical project focused on researching and writing the libretto for an original musical, entitled *Hilo: Da Musical*. The show was premiered in the 2015-16 season at the UHH Performing Arts Center. The intention was to highlight the idiosyncratic lifestyle of our island home and set the libretto to music in collaboration with several Hilo musicians who committed to the project.

No one had ventured into capturing iconic Hilo people, places, or events in theatrical form, so this homage to my birthplace was a timely way to celebrate the diversity and unique elements found on the east side of Hawai‘i island. Much of the sabbatical was taken up with researching Hilo events, locales, and personages who formed the bases of the script. Additionally, because a pseudo-scientific element was included (via Aliens who decided to use ‘Imiloa Astronomy Center to find out about Hilo, Hawai‘i), the research had to include references to stellar exploration and the “UFO sub-culture” that permeates media today.

Scenes began to take shape that featured the Hilo Farmer’s Market; a restaurant serving patrons who spoke English, Hawaiian, and Pidgin English; and a segment dealing with an eccentric Driving School Police Officer. Hours were spent deciding on visuals to accompany transitions that would codify notable people and events in rapid succession. The process was greatly aided by help from the Hawai‘i Tribune Herald editor, David Bock, who gave his permission for using visuals from the newspaper. Internet searches were conducted, as well for photos of politicians and community leaders who would be featured in a segment accompanying the beloved song, *Hilo My Home Town*.

Music assistance was provided by Mr. Herbert Mahelona, the director of the Kamehameha School, Hawai‘i Campus Choral Program. So that the show’s musicians would have sheet music to use, I recruited Mr. Mahelona to transcribe the three original songs I wrote, *Da Music In Hilo, Bruddah Man, and My Life Was Poi-fect*. Other songs were created using the ballad opera approach, e.g., crafting new lyrics to popular tunes in the public domain to fit specific scenes. *Alouette* and *The Hallelujah Chorus* suited the tones of selected scenes and were used in that manner, as was a medley of Elvis bytes sung by the afore-mentioned police officer. Finally, songs written by Hilo musicians were included, with the permission of the composers, to fill out the musical roster. The original *Coqui Song* was provided by John Flatley; the *SPAM* song was shared by Wendell Ing; and *Semi-Precious Baby* was co-opted from Jeri Gertz. Composing and arranging the original songs, writing new lyrics, and contacting other musicians was a time consuming part of the sabbatical.

Auditions in January 2015, led to a cast of 35 performers, including UH Hilo faculty and staff from several departments, retirees, graduates, majors, and a number of community actors. Rehearsals were held during evenings and weekends for two months and culminated in a 4-show run wherein 1,900 audience members attended.
I directed the show and the band for the show was led by Ms. Erin McClure as a senior project in completion of her Performing Arts, Music Concentration. Erin recruited and rehearsed 5 musicians, made up of students and one Performing Arts Department graduate. It was an extraordinary challenge for Ms. McClure and she grew immensely in her ability to train singers, work within a variety of musical genres, and conduct a small band.

*Hilo: Da Musical* served to enhance visibility for the University and the Performing Arts Department by showcasing the talent pool linked to theatre productions. The Hawai‘i Tribune Herald and UH Hilo’s Ke Kalāhea did their share of getting the word out by featuring the show in the Island Beat special edition of the Trib and a timely campus edition, respectively. Bold photographs and interviews with the artistic staff and actors served to generate much interest. It was intended as a performance that aligned with the UH Hilo Strategic Plan in trying to make a “positive impact on Hawai‘i Island…” I believe attendees left the performance knowing that UH Hilo is aware of its role in the community; is eager to explore our community identity; is supportive of the arts that express and explore that identity; and is interested in forging bonds with community members.

My personal objective in shaping *Hilo: Da Musical* was to challenge myself in the writing process. I had never written such a substantial script (large cast, 2-act length) nor had I written songs and lyrics that appeared in a fully-staged work. The sabbatical allowed me to work on many drafts, test out the script in play readings, and consult with other artistic members of the community about the work I hoped captured my home town. I learned discernment about the content of the piece, paying attention to the length and style of writing that would truly represent Hilo and entice the audience at the same time. I believe the attendance record speaks to the outcome. Moreover, anecdotes from the community about the many folks who returned for more than one performance and others who want to see us do the show again -- or create a sequel!-- attest to the show’s, and, therefore, the sabbatical’s success. Finally, all the work has led to the recording of my three original songs which will be sold to generate scholarship money for worthy Performing Arts students.

I feel gratified that the process was so fruitful, personally. I learned a great deal about “voice” in character creation. I came to trust my instincts about tempo, how to instill climaxes, and where to use exposition. Most importantly, I developed the courage to make daring decisions about story line. I kept coming back to the fact that we islanders enjoy a laugh that has poignancy, want to giggle at ourselves when it is done in safe, non-destructive ways, and that nothing so bad about Hilo can tarnish the love we have for this crescent-city on the Bay.

‘O au me ka ‘o ia i‘o,

**Jackie Pualani Johnson**

Jacquelyn Pualani Johnson
Professor, Drama
Chair, Performing Arts Department

‘Aʻohe pau ka ʻike i ka hālau hoʻokahi.

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*One learns from many sources*