

HAWAII NEWS

Add as a preferred source on Google

Hawaii Opera Theatre makes history with 'Kamalehua'



By [John Berger](#)

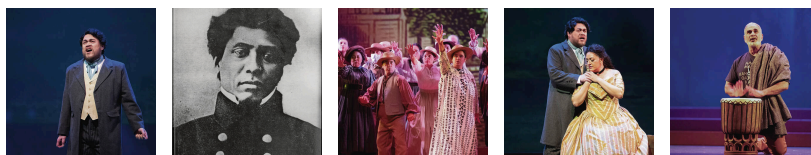
April 28, 2026



1/5 *Swipe or click to see more*

GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM

A rehearsal of the Hawaii Opera Theatre production of "Kamalehua, The Sheltering Tree" on Friday, April 24, 2026 at the Blaisdell Concert Hall. Kelsey Quinn is Timoteo Haalilio.




Nearly two centuries after a Hawaiian diplomat helped secure the kingdom's place among the world's recognized nations, his story is being told on an operatic stage — in the Hawaiian language — for the first time.

Hawaii Opera Theatre (HOT) this spring will premiere "Kamalehua: The Sheltering Tree," a newly commissioned grand opera centered on Timoteo Kamalehua Ha'alilio, the 19th-century envoy whose diplomacy helped preserve Hawaiian sovereignty during one of the kingdom's most precarious moments.


The opera arrives amid renewed public interest in Hawaiian history and sovereignty, and it connects directly to a familiar Honolulu landmark: Thomas Square, the site where Hawaiian independence was restored in 1843 after a brief British takeover.

ADVERTISING



advancinghealth.elevancehealth.com

© 2026 Elevance Health. All rights reserved.
1087739MUPENELV 12 25


Elevance Health - Sponsored
[Learn More](#)

That crisis began when Capt. Lord George Paulet of the British frigate HMS Carysfort arrived in Honolulu primed to investigate reports that British subjects in the islands were being denied their legal rights. When Paulet's efforts to schedule a meeting



with Kamehameha III were unsuccessful he took it as a slight to the Empire and said he would bombard Honolulu unless the king acceded to his demands. The formidable military infrastructure that had forced the unification of Hawaii under Kamehameha I had been allowed to atrophy and there was no option — the king surrendered. Paulet took possession of the islands in Her Majesty's name, created a new Hawaiian government with himself at the center of it, and ordered the destruction of every Hawaiian flag he found.

Five months later, British Admiral Richard Thomas arrived in Honolulu aboard a larger warship. Thomas was welcomed by Kamehameha III, he repudiated Paulet's actions, and he restored the independence of Hawaii. The site of the restoration ceremony became Thomas Square.

Less widely known is what was happening beyond Hawaii's shores at the same time. Hawaiian diplomat Timoteo Kamalehua Ha'alilio was travelling across North America and Europe seeking formal recognition of the Hawaiian Kingdom. By the time that he returned, Britain, France, Belgium, and the United States had all acknowledged Hawaii as an independent nation.

Don't miss out on what's happening!

Stay in touch with breaking news, as it happens, conveniently in your email inbox. It's FREE!

By clicking to sign up, you agree to Star-Advertiser's and Google's [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). This form is protected by reCAPTCHA.

Born into an ali'i family around 1808, Ha'alilio was appointed to the House of Nobles in 1840. Two years later, he became one of the kingdom's first official diplomatic envoys to the United States, France and Great Britain. He departed Hawaii with William Richards, also an accredited Hawaii diplomat, on a two



year diplomatic mission that took them half-way around the world.

Ha'alilio died on the return journey, but the status of Hawaii as an internationally recognized free nation would endure for 49 years to come. And now, 182 years after his death, Ha'alilio is receiving the recognition he deserves.

The newly commissioned work is a cultural milestone as the first grand opera performed in Hawaiian; it is also significant at the work of a Hawaiian creative team: Herb Mahelona (composer), Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl (librettist) and kumu hula Patrick Ke'anini'ulaookalani Makuakane (director and choreographer).

Internationally acclaimed Hawaiian baritone Quinn Kamakanalani Kelsey stars as Ha'alilio.

"I understand my responsibility in all this, and it's pretty exciting," Kelsey said, noting that by the 1840s Hawaii was already grappling with questions of sovereignty. He emphasized the courage it took for Timoteo to represent the Hawaiian monarchy abroad and given the time the importance of his Caucasian traveling companion. "And thankfully Kamehameha III and Timoteo had a friend like (William) Richards to be able to accompany Timoteo on the journey ... so that, hopefully, he would be taken more seriously."

Historical records show that although Richards always presented Ha'alilio as the royal representative of the king of Hawaii there was at least one occasion when bystanders assumed that the Hawaiian was either Richards' servant or his slave.

For more than three decades, Makuakane has been a cutting-edge creative force in hula and Hawaiian cultural arts. His commitment to cultural accuracy shocked some island audiences in 2000 when his historical production, "The Natives



Are Restless,” opened with women dancing hula kahiko in culturally authentic pre-missionary attire. He has also challenged convention by blending Hawaiian and “haole” (non-Hawaiian) elements to create a hybrid he describes as “hula mua.”

But for all Makuakane’s creative accomplishments, “Kamalehua” is his first time directing and choreographing a full-length “haole” (non-Hawaiian) opera.

One of the biggest challenges Makuakane faced was the rehearsal timetable. He said that in San Francisco he spent as much as a year planning and preparing a show for his halau, Na Lei Hulu i ka Wekiu. For “Kamalehua” he had just 30 days.

”Initially there was, maybe, trepidation, because I’ve never directed an opera before,” Makuakane said. But once rehearsals began, he found the experience familiar. “I know the story very well, so I felt really comfortable about that,” he said, adding that he was surprised by the emotional power of the score. “The pieces are just heartbreakingly stirring ... And of course, it’s about our history.”

The production is a first for composer Mahelona as well. He has been writing Hawaiian-themed musicals and operas for performance by the Hawai‘i Youth Opera Chorus and other groups since 1996 but this is his first full-length “grand opera” for performance by a formal opera company.

Mahelona said the creative process begins with observing traditional Hawaiian protocol.

“When I do a Hawaiian opera, I try and get permission first from the source,” he said, explaining that he visits a spiritually connected place to introduce himself, state his intention, and seek guidance. Only afterward does he begin composing.

“Whatever inspiration I get, that’s where the music comes from.”



With Kelsey starring as Ha'alilio, Hawaii audiences will see a cast that includes Joshua Jeremiah as William Richards, Tasha Hokuao Koontz as Ha'alilio's wife, Hana Hooper Ha'alilio, Brendan Boyle as Kamehameha III, Blythe Iakuini Pua'okahana Kelsey as Kuhina Nui Kekauluohi, and Kip Wilborn making a return to the stage playing the British villains Richard Charlton and Captain Lord George Paulet.

Kelsey and Mahelona both feel the significance of the show culturally. They also take note of the importance of HOT's commissioning Hawaiian-language opera for Hawaii audiences and audiences world-wide.

"We all went into this project just wanting to tell the story and share what we learned," Mahelona said, adding that the creative process felt unusually organic. "This is my thirteenth opera, and I thought I knew the process, but this one kind of wrote itself." He said the collaborators shared that sense of guidance. "So it feels like I think we're doing it right."

Kelsey echoed that sentiment, emphasizing the opera's educational and cultural value. "We want to educate audiences and give them something to be proud of," he said. "It's a story that originated here ... and how wonderful that it could be brought to an opera stage."

'Kamalehua: The Sheltering Tree'

>> **Where:** Blaisdell Concert Hall

>> **When:** Opens 7:30 p.m., Friday; continues 4 p.m. Sunday and 7:30 p.m. May 5.

>> **Tickets:** \$40-\$145

>> **Info:** 808-596-7858 or tickets.hawaiiopera.org/779/780 



See more: [Editors' Picks](#) [Entertainment](#)