

## DANCE REVIEW

# Black Grace's tales of Pacific

By Ellen Dunkel  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**T**he dance is Polynesian and contemporary; the story is from New Zealand's history, yet the themes are familiar.

You could cut-and-paste in many people's stories, but for Neil Jeremia, the Samoan-New Zealander artistic director of the company Black Grace from New Zealand, the struggle is for Pacific Islanders. The company opened a run Thursday night at the Annenberg Center, presented by Dance Celebration.

In his "Gathering Clouds," Jeremia speaks of a Tongan Christian priest arrested for overstaying his welcome, of 30 percent of the population filling 80 percent of the jail spots, of getting teased for the shape of his eyes, of new immigrants holding on to traditional songs and dances, and of their children trying to assimilate.

The story is crystal-clear. It's acted out by the 10 dancers in contemporary steps and Samoan *Fa'ataupati*, or slap-dance — rhythmic and visually patterned claps, slaps, stamps, and hops reminis-

cent of stepping, tap dance, and other percussive styles.

The story is explained in a narration and written in great detail in the program notes. The dance is to recorded drumming that would have been even better live, as well as to Elvis Presley songs. It offers some humor but also notes of dread. When police raid a home, the people hide the illegal immigrant in plain sight. But the police return as soon as the man comes out from hiding, and they arrest him.

But it is not a story of sadness, Jeremia says, noting that he is proud to be both Samoan and a Kiwi and wouldn't want to raise his children any other way.

The performance also includes four short and highly entertaining pieces, including "Minoi," a warrior piece performed by company men who also sing and chant as they slap-dance.

"Pati Pati," a work for eight men and two women, combines slap-dancing and Samoan *Sasa* (seated dance) in sections borrowed from pieces the troupe has played in the past. This piece adds high-

ly athletic movement to the rhythms.

The 2013 "Mother Mother," a tribute to Jeremia's own mother, was created as a music video for a New Zealand reggae band, Fat Freddy's Drop. It shows off each of the dancers, particularly the sharp movements of Sarah Baron.

"Method" is an homage to rugby and other games Kiwi boys play, set to the refined notes of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major*. The dancers bound in, out, and on the periphery of a pool of light.

Black Grace is a rare but wonderful visitor, having last performed in Philadelphia in 2010. The movement is far from routine — though the lighting was often too dim to show off all the details.

**Additional performances:** 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut St. Tickets: \$20-\$50. Information: 215-898-3900 or [www.annenbergcenter.org](http://www.annenbergcenter.org)

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**The New Zealand troupe Black Grace** presents stories of islanders' lives in a mix of modern dance and traditional Samoan movement at the Annenberg Center. DUNCAN COLE