



# Treading New Ground

A profile on Fiji's brave  
new VOU Dance Company

By Raewyn Whyte

VOU is Fiji's leading independent music and dance company, specialising in traditional, contemporary and modern fusion dance styles intermixed with live music. As Fiji has no arts funding, they have to earn every dollar, and their performances are often commissioned by tourist organisations and festivals.

Founded in 2007 as a collective of urban Fijian artists working in dance, music, design and film who wanted to explore new things, VOU was the dream and vision of Sachiko Miller, who recently returned to Fiji from studying contemporary dance at the University of Auckland under Timothy Gordon and Mary Jane O'Reilly. At that time, contemporary dance was almost unheard of, so VOU began to offer classes. Demand quickly grew, and the VOU school now has more than 250 students from age 3 to adults, helping to sustain the company's activities.

The company's mission is fourfold: to spread the magic of [their] spirit, energy, and mana to the world through music and dance; to always be inspiring to others; to draw on [their] rich cultural heritage and take it to the world; to develop the arts industry in Fiji through education and creating commercially sustainable career paths.

After performing hundreds of shows across Fiji, and presenting similar culturally influenced shows internationally in Australia, Indonesia, India, China, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia, VOU came to Auckland in October this year to present *Mataqali Drift* as part of *Tempo 2014*, during a 10-day stay in the city. Once their performance season ended, they were in residence at Auckland Museum, exploring the

Museum's Pacific collections with local artists, and workshopping with Auckland Fijian youth towards a performance at the end of Fijian Language Week.

*Mataqali Drift* is VOU's first major contemporary dance "production", a suite of interconnected dances collaboratively developed to share personal stories of living in Suva, caught in the tide of urban drift, and of associated issues faced by the dancers on returning to the city after a period spent in their home villages reconnecting with ancestral traditions and "watering their roots".

In Auckland, a short film was shown before the live performance to provide a context for New Zealanders who have little knowledge of Fiji and its traditions. This film documented the village experiences and included traditional meke performances.

The meke is a recurring element in *Mataqali Drift*, deconstructed, reconstructed, performed at varying paces, and most impressively, embodied by traditionally dressed Jone Soro, father of dancer Eddie and grandfather to Eddie and Sachiko's firstborn, Rasa, who also appears in the performance. His presence is strong, his gravitas adds much to the performances which convey often difficult personal struggles.

"We wanted to give Fiji something REAL... new and authentic contemporary Fijian dance which touches people in some way," says Sachiko. "It is what we are here to do, to inspire thought, discussion, challenge, pass on our contemporary stories and express. It is our duty as artists to continue to dig, continue to create and continue to give. It is our duty to bring the magic to others." ■