

# MidWeek

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Richard Vida, executive director of Ballet Hawai'i, is flanked by dancers, from left, Kiyomi, Kerys, Meg, Gabriel and Emmaleigh.

## His Next ACT

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# His Next ACT

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STORY BY GINGER KELLER / PHOTOS BY LAWRENCE TABUDLO

A young Richard Vida would make the two-hour journey from Connecticut to New York City to sit under the bright lights of Broadway. He'd perch on the sidewalk across from the marquee, eyes fixed on the stage door that promised a world of dreams on the other side. He'd watch, mesmerized, as Peter Pan — actress Sandy Duncan — disappeared through the entrance. In his mind's eye, he could already see himself crossing that same threshold.

The door became etched in his memory. For him, it was never a matter of if he would walk through it, but when.

In 1994, after years of classes and auditions, Vida made his Broadway debut in *The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public*. On opening night, he gripped the stage door's metal handle and was struck by a visceral feeling: this was the exact entrance he'd visualized as a child.

His moment had arrived.

"Manifesting and visualization has always been not something I

learned," Vida says, "but it was always a part of my innate sensibility."

That same superpower would eventually lead him from the Broadway stage to Ballet Hawai'i as its new executive director — though he didn't know it at the time. But first, he had a dream to chase.

He landed a role in *Busker Alley* with 10-time Tony Award-winner Tommy Tune before his career-defining break arrived: a spot in the original production of *Les Misérables*.

"All my other colleagues were like, 'Oh, you made it,' because we were the *Hamilton* of the day," he shares. "*Les Mis* was the biggest show, the biggest phenomenon, and it was just insane. Sold out every night for a decade."

Vida traveled the world performing shows until age 35, when he shifted to television production, working with The Food Network, The Learning Channel and helping launch HGTV.

"That's where I truly learned about producing, 'the business,' cultivating relationships and writing,

and how shows are put together," he says.

He then returned to the stage for *The Drowsy Chaperone*, touring the country for 15 years before transitioning to producing and investing in theater shows — until the pandemic brought Broadway to a standstill.

Throughout his 30-year career in New York, Vida would occasionally escape to the islands. In the small world of Hawai'i's performing arts, paths naturally crossed, and he soon connected with Ballet Hawai'i's artistic director Pamela Taylor Tongg. These visits led to teaching at Hawai'i Theatre Center and Ballet Hawai'i, where his tap and musical theater classes deepened his connection to the community.

"What I loved about coming to Hawai'i was there was less television here. It was more of an outside lifestyle," he recalls. "Hawai'i has such cultural roots in dance and music. It's so much a part of your life. It was wonderful for me to come into a

## It's En Pointe To Paradise For Vida, Ballet Hawai'i

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room, and everybody immediately wanted to dance, whether they had experience or not."

Over time, O'ahu became Vida's second home. In 2006-2007, he helped bring traveling Broadway shows to the islands — something mainland companies rarely attempted due to logistics and cost.

Last year, during what was meant to be a vacation, he got an unexpected offer: Would he consider becoming Ballet Hawai'i's new executive director? Though moving 5,000 miles from his Broadway roots was daunting, it felt like destiny.

"We're doing some wonderful things here and I just love the arts community in Hawai'i," says Vida, who took on the role earlier this year. "We have an amazing ballet, amazing dance schools, amazing talent here, and my vision is that we can all start working together."

**N**ow at the helm of the 48-year-old institution, Vida sees unlimited potential for Hawai'i's performing arts scene, particularly as the community continues to emerge from the pandemic's shadow.

"I believe that Honolulu and the state are just so ready for an amazing artistic renaissance," he says. "Especially now post-COVID, where we're just starting to finally find our way back."

His vision for this renaissance is taking shape with Ballet Hawai'i's *The Nutcracker*, premiering Dec. 14-15 at the Neal S. Blaisdell Arena. When Neal S. Blaisdell Concert Hall's temporary closure forced a venue change, Vida and his team didn't just adapt — they innovated.

"We have worked tirelessly to create something very special this year," Vida says.

The arena will feature an enhanced theatrical seating and new risers, ensuring optimal views



Ballet Hawai'i executive director Richard Vida and dancers, clockwise from bottom left, Kerys, Meg, Kiyomi, Gabriel and Emmaleigh, are looking forward to the premiere of *The Nutcracker*, scheduled for Dec. 14-15 at the Neal S. Blaisdell Arena.

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from every angle, as well as state-of-the-art LED projection screens that will display animated sets.

Set in 1858 Kingdom of Hawai'i, Ballet Hawai'i's version of *The Nutcracker* replaces traditional characters with local counterparts — the Sugar Plum Fairy becomes the Sugar Plumeria Fairy and the Waltz of the Snowflakes takes place atop a snow-dusted Mauna Kea.

For its fifth year, the produc-

tion boasts an impressive lineup: New York City Ballet's Megan Fairchild will dance the Sugar Plumeria Fairy alongside Chun Wai Chan as the Cavalier. Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra will provide live accompaniment, while more than 130 cast members will bring the classic performance to life.

"It's an extraordinary event," Vida says.

Before the curtain rises on opening night, Ballet Hawai'i has an ex-

tra touch of holiday magic in store. Each year, on the final dress rehearsal, the company throws open its doors for Angel Night to welcome children from Title I schools, Make-A-Wish Foundation recipients, Shriners Children's Hawai'i patients and military families to a free performance that's equal parts entertaining and educational.

"Last year we had 300 (people). This year we're going to have 3,400-plus at the arena," Vida says.

Keiki receive study guides, learn about the orchestra, and get a lesson in the proper use of "bravo," "brava," and "bravi" before watching world-class dancers perform alongside local students — many of whom they know from school. The fully funded event has become a highlight not just for the

community, but for visiting performers who often say it's their favorite night of the year.

The initiative extends beyond the arena, too. Ballet Hawai'i partners with Shriners for special performances and Q&A sessions with patients unable to attend the Blaisdell show.

"It is a beautiful evening," Vida says, his voice warm with pride. "It's the highlight of the year."

**W**hile *The Nutcracker* may be Ballet Hawai'i's holiday crown jewel, the organization enriches the community year-round.

"As we say, we start at age 3 to ageless," Vida says, describing programs that span multiple dance styles, with classes for beginners through advanced levels. (For a complete list, visit [ballethawaii.org](http://ballethawaii.org).)

"It's like going to the gym," he explains of the adult classes, some of which require no prior experience. "You're learning and you're getting physically fit."

"We do everything we can at Ballet Hawai'i to bring the best of the best to our community," he adds.

His enthusiasm for Hawai'i's arts scene is palpable.

"There is so much talent on this rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that most people are unaware of," he says, "and I think it's time the world knows just how incredible we are here."

Just as a young Vida once sat visualizing his path through a Broadway stage door, he now envisions a bright future for Ballet Hawai'i. His dreams, it seems, have a way of manifesting.

"Come see what we do, and we'll blow you away," he says with the same certainty that carried him from Connecticut to Broadway and finally to Ballet Hawai'i. "The holiday season doesn't start without *The Nutcracker*."