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Old-school Santa

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Long before there was Santa Claus, there was Father Christmas, aka Saint Nicholas, aka Pere Noel, aka Kris Kringle. Many countries, including Germany, Russia, Sweden and France, to name a few, claim a jolly, happy character who delivers toys to good girls and boys.

Now there is a local version, based on European traditions, called "Ancestral Santa." He is the creation of magician Michael Ching of Moanalua and costumer Kathe James of Kane'ohe.

Ching has been dressing up as Santa's helper in a big red suit since he was 8 years old. When he became Santa, he was amazed — and then enchanted — at the enthusiastic response he received from older women.

"Little old ladies adored Santa's attention; they were little girls again for a few moments," Ching said. "It is truly a magical thing."

He became intrigued with exploring what Santa might have looked like to these women when they were children, and how he appeared to their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

"I began to think maybe it was time for 'Father Christmas' to appear as he once was, but after a long Internet search, no suitable costumes were available," Ching said.

That was 2005.

Enter James, a costume designer who has worked on numerous productions and projects. Her credits include "Magnum P.I.," the Rainbow Warrior's muscle suit, Manoa Valley Theatre, Hawaii Opera Theatre, Society of Seven and, most recently, "The Lion King."

"I was lucky," Ching said. "Kathe had a break in her schedule and was intrigued with the idea" of creating a Father Christmas-like costume inspired by garments worn by Russian royalty.

After hours of collaboration, James created a rendering of a red-robed Ancestral Santa with a sack of vintage toys.

"I would love for people to want to learn more about the history of the Christmas traditions that created this character — to be transported to another time and place, as they see the rich fabrics and trims that are no longer used in clothing, and to remember the types of simple gifts that used to be given to children in times past, as they see his bag full of classic toys," James said.

The project resonated with James. "My father came over from Germany as a 7-year-old boy, and his family set about becoming American in short order," he said. "But in his older years, he would be deeply moved at Christmas, when songs from the old country, or especially music boxes, would play. This Father Christmas represents the Old World Christmas traditions that a child will never forget."

"Kathe's working drawing seemed anywhere between the Medieval and Edwardian periods," Ching said, and he excitedly began shopping for fabrics, notions and toys.

The toys, he said, were the hardest things to find.

Ching scouted thrift stores, flea markets, bargain shops and big-box stores. He had a lot



Costume designer Kathe James photographs magician Michael Ching, who is decked out in the Ancestral Santa getup they created.

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60: Hours it took to make the costume.

35: Weight of the costume, in pounds.

6: Yards of red velvet to make the cloak

4: Yards of red faux-fur trim

5: Yards of fabric for under robe

12+: Vintage toys in Ching's sack

of luck at Ross and the Marukai 99-cent store. He even bought a shower curtain at Wal-Mart and took it apart to use the hooks as buttons.

While the costume is still a work in progress, it is near enough to completion that Ching would love to make some last-minute appearances this holiday season. He is currently selecting Renaissance music to play when he is acting as Ancestral Santa.

He is hoping that by next Christmas, he will find venues that are appropriate and groups that would appreciate having this Old World character add to their ambiance.

"This is a different Santa," Ching admits. "I'm still doing research, trying to figure him out. Who he is, what he does. He is not so much the department-store Santa with children on his knee. But certainly the essence of Santa, a 'spirit of goodness and good will.'"

"I invent magic effects, so we can promise he will do things no other Santa can do."

All in the spirit of a merry, magical Christmas.

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Kathe James tucks in the Ancestral Santa costume she and magician Michael Ching created. "This is a different Santa," Ching acknowledges.