LONGstorySHORT with LESLIE WILCOX

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GUEST: JOHN RAMPAGE
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Sometimes, the most quiet, introverted child that you would have the least expectation of something special becomes an entirely different person on stage.

I've noticed that. It seems to counterintuitive that there are introverts in the theater. But there are.

It's why theater becomes a home for so many young people. And in most cases when they get involved in theater, it's not just the performing; it's the family atmosphere. Everybody takes care of each other.

Was that the attraction for you?

Yes.

You started as a child, yourself.

Yes. It was safe, it was a family, people took care of you, people didn't question you. You had similar interests. The thing I've always loved as a young person in theater was the willingness of the generation ahead of you to share, to give you, to pass on. And I think theater becomes refuge for a lot of children who are misplaced and can't find their identity.

From singing and dancing on stage as a young boy, to becoming artistic direction, John Rampage always called the theater his home. Now, he's sharing his love of theater with the next generation. John Rampage, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. John Rampage has been the artistic director of Diamond Head Theater since 1995. Before that, he was primarily a performer, singing and dancing his way across the United States and Europe.

Throughout this time, he regularly traveled to Hawaii, but it wasn't until he was older that he decided to move here.

You know, I've heard it said, I've heard you described—this is an interesting description of you, as a non-kamaaina kamaaina.

[CHUCKLE] Yes.

What does that mean?

I know; I have such a unique heritage, Hawaii heritage. People will often ask me if I … was raised here, or if I'm local. And I always have to say, Yes …

But …

--and no.

Oh, okay.

At the same time. My grandparents moved here in the mid-50s, 1950s. They were great world travelers, had gone all over the world, and Honolulu was just where they loved the most. My grandfather retired from his business, and they decided to live here permanently. But it took so long to get here back then.

By ship.

By ship, or even by prop jet, which was how I got here the very first time when I was a little kid. But from the time I was five, we used to come and live two months out of every year, usually February and March, and we would live with my grandparents. So, I did kind of grow up here. I saw it change drastically over the years. I have pictures of myself in Waikiki where the Moana Hotel was the last thing. There was nothing after that. Then when I got older, I came and spent summers living with my sister. So, through my teen years, I was also here. They lived out in Makakilo back when Makakilo was considered like living out in the—

On a neighbor island. [CHUCKLE]

On a neighbor island; it was so far away. And then, when I was eighteen, my mother called me one day and she said, You're working and you've got your own apartment, and I can't take another Chicago winter, and I'm moving to Hawaii next week. So, gradually, one-by-one, my entire family moved here. So, I do have this kamaaina connection, going back to my grandparents. But I

didn't grow up here. But I've seen it change, and I've been a part of it in so many different ways over the years that I do feel like an old-time kamaaina.

When I see you at work, and I know what you do, and people talk about you, I would think that you started off Broadway and then worked for decades on Broadway, and then you came here. But that's not the case at all.

No. I did start very young as a performer; I started as child actor. And then in my teen years—many times, when you start as a child, then you hit that awkward age where you're not quite an adult, but you're not the cute little kid anymore. And I kinda changed directions and focused on classical ballet, and very seriously considered that as a career. And then a little later, when I could pass as an adult in a show, I decided to go back into musical theater again. But I always had that ballet base behind me. And I worked for several years, and the show I was doing in Omaha closed, and I didn't have another job for like three months. So, I came over to Honolulu to visit my mother for a couple months. I went to what was then Honolulu Community Theater in 1975 and auditioned for a show to have something to do, and all the jobs that I got for five years, I could trace back to that one performance or that one show.

What was the performance?

It was The Music Man; it was 1975, it was part of their bicentennial season. And I made very good friends in that production with Peggy Ryan, who was a very well-known actress and had done a lot of movies. And through her—it was so diverse. I was a backup singer and dancer for Zulu's nightclub act for several years, went back in to the ballet with Honolulu City Ballet as well, I was a magician's assistant at C'est Si Bon. Just about everything. Which was so wonderful in the job that I have now, because I learned something from all of those jobs.

Were you able to make a living in show business all that time?

With a mother who lived here.

So, free rent.

Free rent. [CHUCKLE] I did have my first job in Honolulu, actually, selling puka shell necklaces at King's Alley back in the 70s. And I think that was about the only non-theater job that I've ever had.

Is that right?

And I only did that until after I did The Music Man, and again, these jobs started coming up. Yeah; I was able to make a living, as you said, though, with free rent with Mother behind me.

I'm interested in the background of a future male ballet dancer. Where did you start? What was your family like?

You know, nobody in my family had any theater background, at all. Everybody on my mother's side was connected with law; my grandfather, my uncles, even my cousins. They were never able, and I was never able to say, This is what made me want to pursue a career as a dancer. It was something I think I was just born with, or a love or an affinity for. However, deciding that you wanted to be a male ballet dancer in the 60s was not easy. It was not easy at all. You had to develop a very thick skin.

In school?

In school.

Other kids? Were they the worst?

Other kids. You know, nowadays, it's so different. You have all these dance-oriented programs; it's very popular. Back then, it wasn't. And it was something that you had to, as a child, or I had to as a child, develop a very thick skin.

What did people say to you?

All the regular stuff. You know, that you were a sissy, that it was un-masculine, all the jokes about tights, wearing tights.

How did you handle that, internally and externally?

I knew I was good at it, and that made a huge difference. Yes, it hurt; it was hard.

Did you decide to come up with a retort for everybody, or did you stay quiet?

I stayed quiet; I pulled in. I pulled in and I became very introverted about it, except when I danced, or except when I got to the theater. And that's when I was able to open up. Luckily, I had a very, very supportive mother who loved the arts. She had no background in the arts, but she was also a very strong believer in you follow your dream, and as a parent, you do everything that you can do.

So, what was her advice to you? Don't let those kids bother you; you just keep doing what you love. Is that what she said?

Basically. You know, basically. And just always there to support, to help, to drive back and forth. I mean, I was raised in Chicago, and going downtown in to Chicago in the snow, and in the blizzards to get to a ballet class took a very devoted mother. And she was great about that. It was difficult as kid; it made me a much stronger person as an adult.

Because you have to have a thick skin when you're in show business.

You have to; you have to have a thick skin. You can be so talented, and still have to deal with rejection all the time, no matter how good you are.

Rejection is part of the job for an actor. When John Rampage became a director and the person who chooses the cast, he had already had lots of experience with being rejected, which helped him when he had to say no.

Many auditions, you may be the best person, but you don't get cast because you're too tall, you're too short, you're too light, you're too dark. Things that you have absolutely no control over.

So, you have to not personalize rejection.

Exactly. And many times, the rejection makes you a better performer, because you look at what you could have done better, or how to approach it differently. Or even for some people, to question, Is this really a profession for me, is this something that I can really do, or should I revert and do it as a hobby? Should I take on something else, and just go do theater for myself, and not on a professional level, and not make a business out of it.

That must be hard when you gear up for one of those auditions. I mean, on one hand, you might want to say, Look, I can own this role, I inhabit the role, this is mine. But actually, you have to also be prepared for somebody to say, No, you have nothing to do with this role, that's it.

You do. And you know, you might be perfect in your mind for it. And your friends who can sometimes do you more damage will tell you, This is perfect, oh, god, you'd be perfect in that part, you're so excellent. But you may not be what the director has in mind. The director might want to go in a totally different way. Or the director may be locked into a leading man who's only five-foot-

seven, and as a female, you're five-nine. It doesn't matter if you're the most talented. You know, you have to take all those things into consideration.

And you're on the other side of that now.

I am on the other side of it now.

So, you reject people now.

I know; and it's the hardest part of my job. I hate it. People put so much into an audition. They work on it, they rehearse it, they focus on it, they can see themselves in the part. And then, many times, I'm the person that has to make that call and say, I'm sorry, I know it's your dream part, I know it's something that you always wanted to do. And you always hope that they'll understand, but you also know inside your heart how much they hurt.

What's the worst rejection you've ever experienced as a performer?

[CHUCKLE] Strangely enough, it was at Diamond Head Theater. I had a job for eleven years, directing a summer stock company in Maryland. So, it was the perfect situation. I had half the year on the East Coast, and then half the year back here in Honolulu. And so, Jim Hutchison approached me about doing Pal Joey, which was a show he had always wanted to do. But that show is so dependent on the male lead, 'cause has to be a strong dancer. You know, Gene Kelly did it originally on Broadway. So, it's a show that doesn't get done a lot. And he said, I really want to include it in the season this year, but I have to know that you're available, because it's not something that somebody's just gonna walk in off the street that can do the show. So, I said, I would love to do it, it would be fantastic, be perfect. So, I cleared my schedule, made sure I didn't have anything else lined up.

Oh, I'm feeling sorry for you already. [CHUCKLE]

I know. And so, then when auditions were coming up, he said, Would you come into the auditions just so that I can see you with some of the actresses in town, have you read against other people. And I said, Sure; very, very excited. And while I was there, Tommy Aguillar walked in. Tommy Aguillar had just moved to Honolulu. Now, I don't know if you remember.

I do remember Tommy Aguillar; he took the town by storm.

Took the town by storm in A Chorus Line, had all these wonderful Broadway credits, and happened to be back in Honolulu and just walked in the door and

said, You know, I've always wanted to do this show, I just thought I'd come in and see. And Hutch had him audition, and then had us both come back on a callback, do scene after scene, dance after dance. And then made the phone call and called me and said, I'm sorry, I know I promised it to you, I know you've cleared your schedule, but he's Tommy Aguillar. He's Tommy Aguillar; what can I do? You know. He's got this great name, he's moved here just from Broadway. That was probably my biggest disappointment. And that's exactly how I have to explain things to people now is, sometimes I need to go with a name that has a little more pull or will sell a little more tickets. Nobody ever said show business was fair, and now, I have really learned that over the years.

It's not a right to have a part. It's a privilege.

No; you don't have a right to have a part. There are so many factors that have to be taken into consideration. And I honestly was pretty devastated about that. Because, again, it's a show that doesn't come up very often, and it was really a good chance for me, who was known primarily as a dancer/singer at that point, to really break into a heavy acting role. He made the right choice. You know, now, in my position, I would have done the same thing. So, I understand. But yeah, it was a disappointment at the time.

As artistic director, John Rampage has influence over which plays are produced. To keep the theater relevant to the community, though, he has to anticipate what audiences are going to want to see before making any decisions.

What does an artistic director do?

An artistic director is different from theater to theater. It is not exactly the same job in every theater. My position at Diamond Head Theater is, I am responsible for the identity of the theater, what makes our theater different from other theaters in town.

Have you staked a claim? This is what you're known for, this is what somebody else is known for.

Yes; we have. What we have become known for over the years is producing large Broadway style musicals. And it was not always that way, but over the years, that really has become our signature that people expect from us. It's a wonderful challenge; it's also very difficult to live up to people's expectations. Because some of the shows are so big, and a show that may have cost fifteen to twenty million dollars to mount on Broadway, we have to decide how we can do the same production on a considerably smaller budget at Diamond Head

Theater. So, I'm responsible for the identity. I am largely responsible for picking the shows, putting together the season, appealing to a board spectrum of people.

You know, I've noticed that when I look at the season. I wondered if sometimes when you do a classic that's popular at many venues across the country, if occasionally a classic will fall flat here, for whatever reason. Is it just different sensibilities among the audience, or the timing? I mean, do you ever identify what it is exactly?

On a community theater level, this is not going professional at all, and I think the general public loses sight of the fact that we are totally dependent on who walks in that door to audition. And at any given time of the year, that can change drastically. When we choose a show for our season, or when we're putting the season together, I always in my mind try and think who could play this part, who has the qualities for this part, who is the right type for this part. Doesn't mean I'm going to cast them, but I like to know that I have somebody in town who can play that part. Because we put the season together a year or year and a half in advance, by the time that show actually comes into the cycle, that person that I thought I had it covered with may have moved, may have had to take a second job, may have gotten married, may have been military, may have been a military dependent and they've moved, and your safety net is gone. And then, you are totally dependent on who comes out for the audition.

Do you always have an understudy who can take over, always, always?

No; very seldom. Very seldom.

That's like walking on a tightrope without a net.

It is. For an actor at Diamond Head Theater, and actually in community theater in Hawaii and most of the mainland as well, the actors aren't paid; they're volunteers. They get a small honorarium. And I do mean small. It really only covers coffee, and maybe an occasional McDonald's on your way from your regular job to the theater. But people do it because of the love of the art, and it may be a fantastic part, may be a wonderful part, something that you've always to play.

It sounds like you never get tired of this. You've done it a long time.

I have done it a very long time.

Does it get old, ever?

It gets tiring. It never gets old.

Even if you do the same play periodically? Which you do, in different ways.

Yes, but it's always different. It's always different. Even if you take a production that was incredibly successful and you remount it four or five years later, it's going to be different. I think the worst thing you can do as a director is to try and recreate something exactly. Because then, you've lost what was unique and what was special, and what made it a success in the first place. But it doesn't get old.

Has Honolulu's taste in what they want to see at the theater changed?

Honolulu's taste, but also nationwide. Audiences change constantly. Honestly, things that we were able to do in the 80s and 90s were much more provocative and risqué than we could do now.

Why is that?

Tastes change. So many things affect what an audience wants to see. The economy.

What could have you done then, that you wouldn't want to do now?

Back in those eras, people were much more interested in hard-hitting breakthrough shows. That all changed drastically after 9/11.

I see. Now, we want to feel reassured and confident, and peaceful.

Yes; they wanted …

Happy?

They wanted happy, they wanted to escape. There were several community theaters and legitimate theaters on the mainland that closed after 9/11 because what they were presenting, or what was in their season went totally against how the nation was feeling. That made a huge, huge impact on theater. We were very lucky.

While John Rampage has had his own successful career as a performer and director, he may be best known for the Diamond Head Theater Shooting Stars,

where he directs young people from seven to seventeen to perform show tunes outside the theater.

Shooting Stars is just a phenomenally—

Thank you; I'm incredibly proud of it.

--successful program. You have to turn down kids, because so many people want to audition for Shooting Stars.

That's right. They are the future of theater in Honolulu, and I'm incredibly proud of them. We do training; we do vocal training, we do tap and jazz dance training. But I have always felt strongly that the way you learn theater, the way you learn to perform is going out and performing. You know, we've taken them twice now to New York to study and to perform. And the last time that we did it, we played a small off Broadway theater, for one performance only. You know, I think because I'm around them all the time and they mean so much to me, I am maybe not entirely objective. But in this off Broadway theater, the management said, We can't believe how talented these children are, and how respectful they are, and how well-behaved they are, and how much they know about theater etiquette. So, it was nice to know from professionals living in New York that we've got something special with this group, and we're onto something special. It has changed a lot of children's lives.

While John Rampage has had a positive effect on the lives of many of Hawaii's children, he never had a child of his own, until a friend approached him with a proposition.

It kind of came out of left field; it wasn't something I was expecting. But through a friend who was looking on behalf of her friend for someone who was willing to not just be a donor, but to be morally the father, to be there when the child needed a father. And that was what appealed to me about it. I liked that they were thinking far enough ahead to say, Someday, he's going to need to know that he has a father, or to be able to tell people, I have a father. I actually never expected it, but it's one of the things I'm proudest of. And it really did change my life. He's going to be fifteen in November. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with his mother. Very artistic, but not theatrical. He is obsessed with filming and video, and putting together movies. And his other passion is chess. He loves to compete in chess tournaments; it's his obsession.

That's right brain, left brain action, it sounds like.

I know.

May I ask why he doesn't live in the same state?

He's with his mother and her partner.

So, he has two parents, but you're the father.

But I'm the father.

I see. Has it been really interesting to see what he looks like as he goes along and what his talents are?

He looks so much like me. We have a lot of similarities; our likes are very, very similar. He has a pet snake, and that part, I wasn't so sure about. But on other issues, like [CHUCKLE] he's fifteen now, and he was asked what he wanted for Christmas last year. He said, A suit and tie. And I went, Yeah, he's my kid.

[CHUCKLE]

He's definitely my kid. That sounds like something I would have said at fifteen, too.

At the time of this conversation in 2014, John Rampage had overseen nearly ninety productions at Diamond Head Theater, and he'd won forty-four Pookela Awards for his performances, directing, and choreography. Mahalo to John Rampage for changing people's lives through the magic of theater. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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I really depend on my few non-theater friends to give me a reality check, that life away from the theater is very different than it is on stage, or working back stage. Because I think sometimes, in a creative atmosphere like that, you tend to lose sight of what life is like in the real world and what priorities really are.

For example?

That if the shoes are red, the costume shoes are red instead of blue, it isn't the end of the world.

[CHUCKLE]