

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: The Storytellers

LSS 1105 (26:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 10/24/2017

I want to make things honest, and develop that aspect of my soul, my nature. And I'm very, very much into writing about my philosophy about anything and everything that comes to mind.

Most of my writing life is concerned with how the past collides with the present. But I'm also saying, you know, that there's a lot of things, even in my personal life, that ... they were like seeds that somebody put there.

I've learned so much about Hawai'i and about these people, and about the culture. Things like that are special, I think for everybody, and not just for me.

Memoir writer Johnny Frisbie, playwright Victoria Kneubuhl, and television director Phil Arnone are all storytellers. They strive to capture and share the human experience, whether it's about their own lives, or the lives and times of those who came before. Storytellers, 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 kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Former Hawai'i Public Radio general manager Michael Titterton likes to call storytelling the quintessential social act, one of the oldest human behaviors that's not only a vehicle for healing, illumination, and understanding, but for being civilized. In this edition of Long Story Short, we revisit three storytellers who were previous guests on this program and hear what drives them to tell stories. Johnny Frisbie and Victoria Kneubuhl are writers; Phil Arnone tells stories through the visuals and the sounds of television.

We begin with Florence Frisbie, known all of her life as Johnny. Her American father, who also was a writer, left the United States in the 1920s looking for a simpler life. He found his paradise on the small atoll of Pukapuka in the Cook Islands. Johnny Frisbie was the second of five children born to Robert Frisbie and a native Pukapukan. Johnny was only a teenager when she published her autobiography, Miss Ulysses From Pukapuka, and in her book she recounts the story of her life being raised primarily on the small atoll, but moving from island to island in the South Pacific.

We were very busy kids. You know, the kids were busy. We played a lot; climbed trees, and hide-and-seek, and swim in the lagoon, swim out to the corals way out. But we had duties, too. You know, we had to help the women in the taro patch. Yeah.

Oh, that's hard work.

Yeah, well, we played most of the time. And that was introducing us to work, and teaching us maybe basically how to take care of taro patch. And there wasn't much to do for kids, but we didn't miss anything. We were also comfortable doing nothing, just sitting. You know, just sitting and looking at each other, or maybe singing a song. And you know, ask a few questions or two. It was really basically a lot of thinking. You know, Pukapukan people think a lot; they just sit and, you know, they look up, and they look up at the coconut tree, maybe thinking, Mm, that's almost ripe, ooh, I must pick that one. Yeah. There's a lot of communicating to the outer.

So, you wrote this book between the ages of twelve and fourteen.

I started a diary at twelve. Yeah. And no, I finished the book at fifteen. Yeah; came out when I was sixteen, just before my father died.

So, it was a diary.

Yes.

In which language did you keep your diary?

Oh, I kept it in Pukapukan mainly, and then English. As I went along, I write in Pukapukan, and I would ask my father what that word is in English. And he would explain it to me, and then I would use the word. By the time I was fourteen, I was able to write in English. Might be not the best, you know, but I was able to use adjectives because my father said, You can't just write like that, you have to put a colorful word there to make the next word happy.

And Miss Ulysses; where did Miss Ulysses come from?

Well, because there were not children's books in that part of the world growing up, my father at nighttime, rather than read, and there's no children's stories, he would tell us the story of Ulysses in the Iliad, and the Odyssey of Homer, you know. Every night, we would go through the whole series of adventures of Ulysses. And that was all I knew, you know. And so, when the book was finished, then my father said, Well, we gotta find a name for this book. Hm, hm; we thought about it, thought about it for days, and days. And then, I said, Oh, you know, how about Miss Ulysses? Because I'm Ulysses, aren't I, Daddy, or Papa? You know.

You identified with Ulysses. And it was an adventure kind of life. I mean, you were facing the elements.

Yeah, that's right. And we traveled a lot. You know, we did. Even if it's just from one island to other, you know, to us, it was big time.

You've received accolades as the first woman writer out of the Pacific.

M-hm.

At age fifteen, is when the book came out.

M-hm.

How's that make you feel?

Good; I feel good. But the thing is, I think being so young has given a challenge to the women who are educated, you know. I mean, like the New Zealand women, Maori women who, you know, have degrees, university. You know, it made it easy for them, made it easy for a lot of Polynesian women to say, Hey, she did it at fourteen, and she had a book published at sixteen. Oh, you know, why can't I do it? You know, to me, that makes me happy, you know, if I was of some use in that area.

You continue to write. And I think when you write, it makes you think maybe better. I mean, just because you're involved in the exercise of putting thing down that have to be true and authentic.

M-hm.

What insights have you come to over your life as you look back?

I've been very lucky. Yeah, been very lucky. Oh, I don't know how to say it. Because I've delved a lot in philosophy, and so, I want to make things ... honest. And develop that aspect of my soul, my nature. And I'm very, very much into writing about my philosophy about anything and everything that comes to mind, and I'm discovering that I haven't really committed fully to what the majority of people think about some things, and how they do it. And I'm very careful that I don't make a fool of the life, the people, with my family.

Is that because of your upbringing, and how ...

It's so different. Yeah; it's so different. It's not a struggle, but it's been a constant awareness of, you know, where I come from. You know, my feelings, my thinking.

Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl has spent a lifetime as a playwright and as an author of mystery books, for which she has received literary awards from the Hawai'i State Foundation On Culture and The Arts, and the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council. Victoria's Polynesian heritage is at the heart of her passion for writing stories, whether they are about historical figures from Hawai'i's past, fictional sleuths, or events that changed the course of history in our islands.

Most of my writing life is concerned with how the past collides with the present. But I'm also seeing, you know, that there's a lot of things, even in my personal life, that ... they were like seeds that somebody put there from the past. And that you know, someone planted a seed when I was a little girl, and you know, something else grew when I grew up. And so, I think that the past, and the present, and the future can get extremely blurry. And I think we have a lot to, you know, especially when we look back at how our kūpuna took care of their physical environment, we have a lot to learn from them.

I think your plays give a sense of that, that the past is a constant. It's sort of timeless.

I think there are certain things that transcend time. And I think that some of us, you know, we feel that the responsibility of our kūpuna is our responsibility too. You know, and when I look at what my great-grandmother was doing during the 19th century, how she was close to the queen, and how she supported the monarchy in a really tough time, I kind of feel like, you know, I should be doing some of that kind of work too.

What does that mean today, to be doing the kind of work of supporting the monarchy, which no longer exists?

Well, for me, you know, my work in writing living history programs and presenting public programs about that time period in history, that has been my work, you know, that I've wanted to do and that I've had the opportunity to do. So, I feel like telling that story over, and over, and over again.

And to accomplish what?

Well, for one thing, you know, that history was not told to me when I was in school. And I think that when we understand what happened in the past to our country and our people, that we will be able to make better decisions about what we create in the future. Because I feel like if you don't understand your personal past, your collective past, you can get into a lot of trouble.

At some point, did you leave playwriting behind, or did you decide to take a break and write novels, mystery novels?

Well, I could never leave playwriting behind, because that's where I started writing. But at some point, I realized, gosh, my plays are pretty serious, you know, and I really need to have some fun with my writing, so I think I'll write a mystery. Because when I want to relax, my escape literature is, you know, old-fashioned cozy mysteries. And so, I decided to try and write a mystery.

You put many places, places that you know well into their settings. You actually have the curator of Bishop Museum killed in the museum.

Well, you know, because I worked in the museum field for so long, I knew that field pretty well, so I made use of it. You know. And I really feel that novel writing, you know, even when it's fiction that's kind of a genre fiction, mysteries, those kinds of stories preserve history in their own way. You know, they tell us a little bit about the past in a really different way.

You put the Haleiwa Hotel in your in your novel.

Yeah.

Which really existed.

Yeah. Yes, and just the way people related to each other. You know, I mean, I feel so fortunate to have known the kind of kūpuna that aren't with us anymore. So, I think fiction is a wonderful place for preservation, too. One of the things that I really want people to know, who would like to be writers, and who would like to write, and who are from the islands or the Pacific, is that our stories are so worth telling. And that we have such a rich history and a rich presence, that we have more than enough material to supply the world with wonderful stories. And that, you know, it doesn't matter if you don't make the best-seller list in New York. If you write something that is heartfelt and genuine, you are leaving a gift for your community. And so, I encourage people to look at where they came from, and tell those stories.

Phil Arnone made his mark in Hawai'i as a television director and producer. He not only directed the top-rated Channel 9 News during the 1970s and 80s, but he produced and directed live coverage of many local events and other regular programs. He returned to his roots in the San Francisco area to continue his career in television production. When he decided it was time to retire in 2002, he and his wife moved back to Hawai'i. But as it turns out, he did not retire. Instead, he put his knowledge of the Hawai'i community and his production skills to work in creating television specials about Hawaii's iconic people and places. His documentaries about such people as Duke Kahanamoku, Rap Reiplinger, Eddie Aikau, Don Ho, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole, Dave Shoji, and Jimmy Borges are only a few of the programs he has produced. What makes Phil

Arnone's programs so special is his persistence to dig deep. He presses for more, more, more in telling the story of a person's life, whether it's finding people who know the subject of the story, or rummaging in garages for old film footage and photographs stashed in boxes that had long been forgotten.

[SINGING] A long time ago ...

God bless you guys. I miss all of you so much. Aloha.

Do you go under people's beds to find this video and film? You find stuff that nobody else has found to illustrate your films.

Well, you just have to not give up. You know, because it's not all immediately available, and lots of times, people have it in cardboard boxes in the back of the house, somewhere in the garage. And you gotta encourage them and make them want to ...

Go look.

'Cause we're usually talking about a friend or a family member in this case, and I say, I need your help. You know, we need to see. Like when we did the Rap Reiplinger show, I mean, part of it was old footage from the action stuff, the fun stuff he did. But we found footage of him as like a three-year-old on eight millimeter in a cardboard box, in the back of the house. But his sister, one of his sisters found that for me, and it was great. I mean, it's so much more fun to see somebody grow old into where you remember them, and tell the story that way.

[SINGING] How can you love me? You really haven't seen all of me. You know, you haven't seen the side that frightens even me. It's so hard for me to see why you love me.

It harkens back to those days where nothing less than perfection was okay for your newscast. Because I've seen you; you have enough material to do a very good film, but you will go get more and more information, and you're okay with a lot of it not being used, just so you have all the great choices.

Yes; that's important. I mean, we do; we need to have all of that. But obviously, we can't use every photograph or every piece of footage.

But you'll go out of your way to get that photograph.

Yeah.

And you don't feel bad if you don't use it later.

No, I don't. But I want to have it. I want Robert, when he writes, to feel like we'll have something to show. It's not gonna be a radio show. We need to have visuals, and I need to make sure that I'm giving him enough to write to. So, yeah. I mean, I think most producers will try and do that.

Who are some of the celebrities you've gotten to know well through following their lives and coming up with a sixty-minute show?

Ooh. Well, you're right. For a while, we were doing only shows about people that had passed on. And then if I call somebody and I say I want to do a show, they get very nervous.

They think I've been talking to their doctor or something, and know something they don't. But you know, we started with, I think, Eddie Aikau and Duke Kahanamoku, and Iz. Those were the first three that we did. And obviously, those gentlemen have passed on. But the truth is that I've learned so much about Hawaii and about these people, and about the culture, that I never learned when I was here working at KGMB. I mean, we never did shows like this, and I never left that station. I was always in the station doing things. And the treat is that it's as much from for me as I hope as it is for the viewers, because I'm looking at these great old photos, at this fun footage, and learning about, You did that? Like the Jimmy Borges show; I was totally unaware of his Forbidden City activities in San Francisco as a young singer. I thought he just was born at Trapper's. But things like that are special, I think for everybody, and not just for me.

And there isn't much in the way of long form filmmaking for commercial use.

No; and I think, you know, Mr. Blangiardi has been kind enough to continually support this kind of programming. And without that, you know, it wouldn't be done, because they become expensive, and you gotta give him something he can sell.

There must have been moments in making your shows where you thought, I got it, that's the moment, that's the shot.

The Jimmy Borges documentary, the best shot that people will remember and maybe cry at, and laugh at, and enjoy, and applaud at, would be when he stood up and sang a duet with uh, Melveen Leed at the Moana celebration of Love of Jimmy evening. And it's an incredible experience just to be there, and we have it on video. And it's a very emotional time.

[SINGING] We left our hearts in San Francisco ...

I dearly love what I'm doing now. And that's why I keep doing it, I guess. I mean, I never get tired of it, and it keeps me, I think, from being boring and bored, and hopefully, these stories are worthwhile doing, so I continue to do them.

Thanks to the drive and determination of those whose passion it is to tell stories, Hawai'i history and culture are kept alive, and our community is richer for it. Mahalo to Florence "Johnny" Frisbie, Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl, and Phil Arnone, all of Honolulu, for telling your stories and for sharing your experiences with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes store, or visit PBSHawaii.org.

[SINGING] Above the blue ...

[END]