

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Marilyn Cristofori
LSS 1111 (26:46)
FIRST AIR DATE: 2/6/2018

Once upon a time, arts was considered a basic part of life.

M-hm.

A formal piece of education.

And it still is. Because what we do at the Arts Alliance is ... the big picture. But if you want to be a ballet dancer, you've got to get your body to a ballet studio and stand at the ballet barre, and learn ... that particular discipline. If you want to be an opera singer, you're not gonna do it ... in a school classroom.

M-hm.

I mean, you can be exposed to it, you can learn about it, you can ... the history and the composers, and so on, and so forth. But if you want to be a performer or a creator of that discipline ... gotta go there. There is no other choice.

Marilyn Cristofori headed the Hawai'i Arts Alliance for twenty-four years. Upon her retirement, she was selected as the 2017 Alfred Preis Honoree. That was a prestigious acknowledgement of her lifetime support and leadership in the arts. She joins fellow Preis Honorees next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Marilyn Cristofori always knew she'd have at least two careers, because she started out as a dancer, a calling prone to injuries and other physical wear and tear. Next, Cristofori became a university dance teacher. And then, she enjoyed a long third career heading a nonprofit organization advocating for arts. Upon retirement, she was named 2017's Preis Honoree for her arts achievements by the very organization she headed, Hawai'i Arts Alliance. She joined a long line of distinguished honorees, many of whom she helped to select. We'll revisit some of these arts champions during the half hour, and get to know Marilyn Cristofori. As a child, she spent summers and many other times away from her family home in Sacramento

because her mother was often ill. Young Marilyn would stay with her grandmother in the Bay Area.

I loved my grandmother. It made me identify with the things that were part of that life. And I loved it. San Francisco.

Italian?

Italian. She loved the opera, I loved the opera. I can't sing, but she loved the opera; she always played opera in the house.

And you were the only child in the house?

The only; yeah. She had three children, my mother being one of them, but they were all grown up. I was the only young child. My grandmother did not intend to raise another child; that was one of those ... it happened.

And you felt at home at school, and at your grandmother's house?

I felt very at home at my grandmother's house, and I adjusted to my other home.

Was your grandmother your most formative influence, then, as a child?

I consider her that; m-hm. Yeah.

Did she give you any explicit advice about the future?

Oh, god. She was ... a woman of her era. And I think the year she got married, the women's vote was finally put in, and she was determined I was gonna get an education.

Did she know how she would pay for it, or anyone would pay for it?

Oh, no. I just had to get good grades and earn a scholarship.

So, you knew that from an early age?

M-hm.

That you were gonna go to college through a scholarship, and you were gonna make the grade to do it.

Yeah.

Did you know what you wanted to do?

When I was raised, Leslie, there was the idea that as a woman, you did nursing or teaching, or mothering, or sometimes a secretary, and occasionally you might have another profession. But those were the main ones. So, I thought I was gonna be a teacher.

M-hm. And you did get a BA in education.

I did.

From a very good college.

I did.

You got into Stanford.

Yeah.

On scholarship?

Yeah.

Wow.

At that point in time, it was kind of fun, because women were still new to Stanford, so the ratio was about four to one. So, it was a great experience.

Lots of men. And did—

And I was young, so ...

Did you feel younger than eighteen?

I was twenty when I graduated.

Oh; how did you get into college so early?

Well, when I was much younger, and all that shuffling back and forth to my grandmother's and so on, they skipped me a full grade in school.

Wow. So, you graduated from Stanford University at age twenty.

Yeah.

As a ... teacher.

Teacher. Yeah. And then, we had an opportunity to take a trip to Europe. And ... I thought, that would be fun.

We, meaning you and ...

And some ... Stanford colleagues.

M-hm.

And a professor was doing the trip, and it was like a big deal. We had to go to New York and change planes, and fly over Iceland, and go to London. That was my first time out of California.

And you actually—

I didn't come back for five and a half years.

Is that right?

I discovered dancing, which I had been doing all my life, but I didn't know that I really wanted to do it.

What kind of dancing were you doing?

I was doing ballet at that time. So, then, I wanted to be a dancer, but I had gotten a full scholarship to what was then Radcliff at Harvard Business School. Why did I apply to Harvard Business School? Because the guy that I had a crush on applied to Harvard Business School. I thought it would be fun to go. And I went to Europe, and I decided I really didn't want to go, and I knew that I could always go to business school, but I couldn't always dance. So, I stayed in Europe.

And where did you dance?

I danced in Rome, and I danced in London, mainly. Those were the two.

And what was it about your experience in Europe that caused—you left the boyfriend behind too; right?

Yeah. But another one came along.

And is that part of the reason for staying in Europe, or was it—

Yeah.

--sheer dance, or a combination?

Well, part of it. Because he decided to go to London School of Economics, so we got married. I was working in a contemporary company. And I went to ballet classes, and I went to the Royal Ballet. I was not working as a professional ballet dancer in London. I experienced a lot of it, and that was what I knew. So, when I came back to San Francisco, I then was with San Francisco Ballet, San Francisco Opera Ballet, Pacific Ballet, and Lathrop Contemporary Company. So then, I worked as a professional dancer. And because I was still young enough, since I had graduated so young, I was able to do it, and have ... a fairly decent career.

What other types of dancing did you do?

Then, I did contemporary.

Which was freeform ...

Well, modern dance. And that's why I got involved until I ... I needed to get a job, and became a professor and academic, and you're supposed to write a book. And what did I do instead? I didn't want to write a book; I made ... documentaries for PBS about famous dancers. And so, I got very involved with that part of things.

And you felt passionate about a number of things, it sounds like.

Yeah; yeah. Well, I loved dancing. That's definitely my first love. But every dancer needs at least two careers.

And you know that, going in.

Well, because you can't dance beyond a certain age ... adequately. I got to be a professor, I got to teach. And then, I went to business ... eventually.

Because that's what you were going to do years before. You know, it's not a natural jump, it doesn't sound like, to go from dancing to professor of dance, to an MBA at University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

At least in my day, it was more natural to go from a professional dance career, or to parallel with teaching, and to move into academia.

You were a professor, and then, you left California and came here. Why?

Because I married ... Gregg Lizenbery, my husband, and he got offered the position to be director of dance at UH Mānoa. So, I had taken an early retirement, and then it just so happened he got offered that position. And then, we moved here. That was almost three decades ago. I did not look for my career with the Arts Alliance. But after we moved here, we realized that the cost of living was a little bit different than we were used to.

M-hm.

And so, I had thought: Oh, I'm retired, I'll just ... but that didn't work. So, I needed to find a position. That's what I did. So, for a while, I worked part-time for the Arts Alliance, and part-time for Early Childhood, and made them partners. And then, when I was into the position at Arts Alliance, I realized that I would hit a ceiling if I didn't get a new skillset. Which is why I went to business school.

After receiving her executive master of business degree from the Shidler College of Business at the University of Hawai'i, Marilyn Cristofori felt she had all the tools necessary to grow the Hawai'i Arts Alliance.

How do you get funding for the arts?

Oh ... so many ways. One of the biggest, biggest ... important things that people don't always get. I find when I say to somebody "arts", the shade comes down, and what they see is a painting on a wall in a museum.

M-hm.

Or they remember, because there used to be arts in the school curriculum, when they were in school as a child; they had a music class and they had a drawing class, and they had maybe sometimes a dance class, and they could be in their ... high school production, theater production. And they remember those things, and they don't know that it's not there anymore.

Mm.

So, you have to tell them ... No, it's not been there for quite a while.

Do public schools have virtually no arts classes? Is that what you're saying?

Not exactly. It's heading upwards, but mostly, one of the things the Arts Alliance does now, partners with the State arts agency to run what we call Artists in the Schools.

M-hm.

And that's ... funded by public monies for public schools.

But how do you argue the case when lawmakers or charitable organizations are saying: Look, I mean, we need to support the basics; reading, writing, and arithmetic, and computer technology. We can't do art; that's something you've gotta get on your own.

One of the biggest convincing arguments has to do with brain research. And they've done a lot of research to find out—one of my favorite studies was done, a longevity study. And they followed kids in high school who were either in like boy scouts or girl scouts, or some other community service organization, and where there school arts event in some way, whether it was after school or in school, or if they were in sports. And then, they followed them for ... ten years, and how did they do ten years later, by which time they were usually married with some kids, and in a career of some kind. The ones that were happiest, most successful, had come from the arts. So, then they looked further back into that, and they examined what happens when you have those ... experiences as a child.

M-hm.

That it shapes your brain differently. You have those connections, neuropathways. And if they aren't formed by a certain age, usually puberty, they kind of wither and die on the vine.

It's a key to happiness.

A key to happiness and success in life. So, that's why back in ancient days now ... arts were considered to part of the curriculum. So, the big deal is to get it during the formative years. So, right now, the way our Hawaii school system is built, by the time ... children go into high school ... there are art teachers, and music teachers, and band, and there are options, after school performing arts centers, all of which work very, very well. But a lot of the times, the kids that want to do those things didn't have them when they were young, and so, they don't have competitive skills to be involved. We teach about the arts and how the arts can enrich an experience and change your life.

How big is the Hawai'i Arts Alliance? How many staffers?

Well, we're all the way up to seven.

Seven staffers; and what's your budget?

I took over in '94.

'94; okay.

Yeah. So ... it was thirty thousand. And I said: That won't do. And then, we got up to ... it's varied, depending on what comes ... from national, mostly. Not two million; just under two million. But that was a good jump. It needs to now double again. I feel really good about ... we have a base that's established in the education part. And there's something to work with, and expand, and go to, and staying with education is essential.

You mentioned three careers, and it's a very long work record. I don't know what seventy-seven looks like, but to me, you don't look like you're seventy-seven years old.

I really am. And a half.

Do you feel it?

Starting to happen.

Marilyn Cristofori was the thirty-seventh recipient of the Alfred Preis Honors for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts. In the past, we've featured other Preis Honorees on Long Story Short. We look back now at three recent recipients, and their contributions.

Sarah Richards was the 2015 Preis Honoree. As president of the Hawai'i Theatre Center for a quarter of a century, she spearheaded an historic restoration, transforming the once dilapidated theater into a national award-winning performance center. A former college dean of students, Sarah Richards switched careers and actually succeeded the legendary architect Alfred Preis himself as chief of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts.

You succeeded a man who has got a lot of aura around him in history.

Yes.

Alfred Preis.

Right.

As head of the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts.

Right.

In 1980?

1980; m-hm.

What was he like? Did you know him before you took over?

I got to know him. He was a wonderful man. He was a Prussian architect. And so, he was very Prussian in character, in modus operandi. And he was the one who really initiated the Art in Public Places program, really, on a European model. He was a lovely man, with a great vision.

And when it was time for him to step down, the foundation looked for somebody who was a good administrator, and who could handle the strong voices in the arts community.

Yes.

And they selected you to do that.

They did; they did.

What kind of strong voices?

Oh, well, the arts, as you know, because the State Foundation dealt with all the arts, whether it was visual arts, performing arts, literary arts. And so, there was a lot of variety of art groups we were dealing with. And of course, since we were the granting agency, we had a lot of very personal contacts with how much money grants were gonna be given to what groups.

Right; and projects are like babies.

Oh, yes; oh, yes.

You give money to one, and it's my baby.

That's right.

You know, it seems like a dream job to have all this money that you can give to wonderful art projects. But you probably are under criticism, no matter what you do.

Oh, yes. Giving away money is not just a piece of cake. You need to be clear on what your mission is, what you want to accomplish, and then also who makes decisions and who are qualified to make decisions. It wasn't just sort of, Here's some money. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or in the eye of the creator. But there are certain standards that the art community has, and that's why you ask a group of knowledgeable people to review and make a judgment. We were proud we were number one in the nation in per capita state support. So, we did a fair amount of lobbying the State Legislature, and also getting money from the federal government.

You're a very determined person, aren't you?

I am determined.

You're very goal-oriented.

I was very goal-oriented; yes, I was. Yes.

And you're a missioned person.

Yeah.

Here's 2016 Preis Honoree, Michael Titterton, former president and general manager of Hawai'i Public Radio. Under his leadership, HPR expanded its broadcast reach across the State.

You got your master's degree in public speaking and rhetoric.

Rhetoric; yes.

Why did you choose that?

Bear in mind, this is the very, very early 70s. It's 1971, actually. And ... coming into '72, and I knew the U.S. was ... I mean, this was ... social mobility was here, and that's what I was really after. I didn't know it at that time, 'cause I didn't know the words. But social mobility. And meritocracy. You know, if you work hard, you can get places. And that's really what everybody dreams about, when they dream about America, when they're not from here. If I was going to understand this place, the quickest way to do it might be to study the media, because that seemed to be the bottleneck through which everything passed. And it was a very busy bottleneck at that point. Watergate, for example, Vietnam War, all the unrest on college campuses. Glorious time. And all of it was being fed through a media, which was under suspicion, as much of it is now. And so, I specialized in that.

And you'd already had experienced storytelling, because you had stories to tell along the way.

Well, everybody does. Yeah. Just because of the basic courses that I had to then take as part of being in the rhetoric program, I began to learn something about the mechanics of storytelling, if you like, the idea of a narrative arc. And I was very quickly drafted into teaching public speaking. So yeah, that was ... I hadn't really thought about it, actually, as being part of the whole storytelling business, but I seem to keep coming back to that. But that's what it is, that's what life is; it's the stories we get to tell.

And sometimes, you do things without having a name for it; right? And then, you find out—

Oh, yes; most of the time, actually.

Your real self keeps popping up in the form of what you do.

Yes; that is true. That is true. But storytelling ... I guess that's a lot of the attraction that I have, or that radio has for me, because it's a storytelling medium, and storytelling is ... there's very few human behaviors that that go back further than storytelling. It's the quintessential social act. It's a wonderful vehicle for healing, for illumination, for understanding, for being civilized.

And radio has that intimate quality.

Mm. It's a one-to-one medium, and it's frighteningly intimate. And the best radio is indistinguishable from pillow talk. It's that intimate. And that's what I love about it. I mean, what's not to love?

Henry Akina, who retired from the Hawaii Opera Theater, was the 2014 Preis Honoree. Born and raised in Honolulu, Henry Akina spent much of his adult life directing opera in prestigious opera houses around the world. He even founded an opera company in Berlin, before moving back home to Hawai'i. Under the guidance of its first ever Hawai'i-born artistic director, the Hawaii Opera Theater became known for vibrant, creative productions, sometimes incorporating modern updates and collaborations with top international artists.

I love that approach, in a sense modernizing with Harajuku costumes.

You're referring to *The Mikado*, then.

Yeah, *Mikado*.

Right; yeah.

And you feel free to do that. You don't take the same opera and present it again. You add new touches. You've had Anne Namba's designs, you've had Dean Shibuya change things up.

We have a resident designer at HOT, Peter Dean Beck, who's resident in New York, but who's nonetheless been seminal for design here.

How do audiences feel about those changes?

I'm not sure. You know, people say nice things to me, so I'm assuming that they're honest about those things. But I think that the audiences in Hawaii respond well to good stories, and we try and make good stories wherever we are, from wherever we are.

Do you look for ways to take a classic story and localize it or modernize it?

Well, modernize it, perhaps. Localize it, not so much. But modernize it, perhaps. And in the case of Mikado, for instance, we knew that we couldn't go backwards; we had to go forwards. And we had to look at the Japan of today, which was a lot different than the first time we did Mikado, which was ten years ago.

So, in ten years, it changed.

In ten years, life has changed. Yeah.

Did audiences know Harajuku girls? Because that was the play.

I think that we tried to let the audience know that we were doing the style. But you'll have to ask Anne about the Harajuku things, because it was based on one of Anne's trips to Japan. But I think that in contemporary life, we would be someplace else in ten years.

Right. I think she reimagined those characters as hip shoppers out for retail therapy.

She did; she did. And using cell phones every five minutes. Right. And using an iPad; things like that. So, whatever we're using in ten years will be reflected in the staging.

You've already been announced, I believe, as the 2014 Preis Honoree in Arts, which is a tremendous honor, probably the largest honor we have in Hawai'i in arts.

Well, I knew Alfred Preis, and I think that that's ... I was saying that, you know, people who know me well don't expect this honor. And I didn't expect it, either.

Why? Why didn't you expect it? I wasn't surprised to hear that you were named.

Well, I was, in a weird way. And I went to a board member, Jean Rolles, who had been honored herself. And she said: You will do it for this organization. And since then, I have decided that I will do it for the organization.

Congratulations to 2017 Preis Honoree Marilyn Cristofori of Hawai'i Kai. And mahalo to all of the recipients of this award over the years for the work you've done to advance the arts and keep them vibrant in Hawai'i. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

The key thing, whatever you're doing ... is to support creativity in our society as a whole. Keep your passion about creativity, and moving forward with what is right ... what is just, and what helps everybody. 'Cause if we don't preserve our creativity ... the rest of it doesn't matter.

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I'm really proud of what we've been able to contribute so far to education. We've been able to create and move forward significantly with Arts First and get admirable, high quality arts back in the schools, particularly elementary schools. So, I'm really feeling good about that.