

GUEST: PETER ROCKFORD ESPIRITU

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Aloha no. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to *Long Story Short*. What does it mean to be an artist? For our guest, it's a lifelong journey of creative expression through dance. Peter Rockford Espiritu, is founder, choreographer and artistic director of Tau Dance Theater, a dance company that combines ballet, modern dance, hula and Pacific Island traditions into something completely original. Our conversation gives us a glimpse into the creative process of Hawaii artist Peter Rockford Espiritu.

How'd you get the name, Tau Dance Theater?

Tau is actually my name; it's a shortened version — it's Samoan. It's my middle name. And my name is Ututau, but my family calls me Tau for short. And I didn't know what I was gonna call my company, and one day it was — I gotta give her credit; it was Melveen Leed who told me, 'Tau, you should just call your company Tau; Tau Dance Theater.' You know, and I said, 'Well, it's gonna be Tau Dance Theater.' I said, 'Are you sure?' And she says, 'Everyone's doing one name thing now; use Tau. It's Polynesian, it's easy, you know, and it means more than one thing.' So I did; I used Tau, and it stuck.

And that's why you say Pacific Islander, rather than Hawaiian, because you're Samoan too.

Correct. My father is Hawaiian; he's half-Hawaiian from Maui. And my mother is actually from Fagatogo, from American Samoa.

I noticed you're wearing a hala lei of a color I've never seen before.

It's an orange-red, but it's more red, and it's very rare to see that color these days. I think it was more common before. And I'm partial to hala. A lot of people that know me know that I love hala, what it represents, about beginning and endings. And for me, a lot of my life is about beginning and ending. So I thought hala might be appropriate, and the color is certainly is beautiful and very Hawaiian.

Beginning and endings; you mean your productions?

My productions. I feel like a lot of times we start from just a little seed that's planted, and it grows into this big tree, and it is unveiled to the public. But eventually, I have to let it go and move on to the next thing. And so that semblance of — the Hawaiians say huluhia, where things turn over or, that is I think hala represents that, what we do in the business world of the arts. **You're known for combining and mixing genres of dance. But I think I've heard you say that you're a traditionalist; how does that fit in?**

Well, you know, I think to respectfully — and I'm all about that, respect — to do this, you have to be really heavily grounded down here. And I take a lot of — I do a lot to make sure that my connection to the base is strong. And so in those ways, I still study the art and the form, and the life of hula, and I feel that I dedicate myself to that. I still take dance classes, I still go to ballet classes, and I keep myself regimented in those forms, because I have to express myself in a different way. I have to be able to have tools at my disposal. If I don't understand the base and where the base is, then I can't abstract and take it to another place. And that's where my love of the art form is, even if I'm creating a new art form.

Do you take flack from traditionalists who don't want you to take their form anywhere?

Actually, a lot of, if I do, it's probably someone who doesn't know me or the process, and the respect that give that process. A lot of times, my answer to them is, 'It's your job to keep the traditions alive, and keep that base solid. It's my job to identify for today and possibly tomorrow.' And so I will always stand behind my work and always try to explain where I'm going with something, and why I'm going there. And if they can show me that I'm causing trouble in the wrong sense, I will stop what I'm doing.

You collaborated with a traditionalist Hawaiian kanaka'ole hula family on what in a sense was a modern hula. How did that happen?

Well, I sought them out. I wanted to do something that honored the new island — well, it's gonna be a new island maybe in twenty, fifty thousand years — which they named Lo'ihī. I wanted to honor that island, and I identified with that island because it is a new entity.

Beginning.

Yeah; it is. It's, once again, hala. There's gonna be a beginning and eventually, it's gonna break through the water, and it's gonna be part of the Hawaiian chain. What does that mean to us now? Well, it should mean something to us. And I felt that there should be something that would honor that island, and I thought, 'What better people to go towards and ask to help me honor this island than to the traditionalists of hula, the kanaka'ole?' And they thought about it; they thought about it for two years before they took that step. And I'm grateful to them. They felt it was their kuleana because of their connection to Pele, and the lava flows, and that is what is causing this island to come. So now there are chants that will honor that island. Why not honor that island if we as human beings survive ourselves. I hope that those dances and chants will survive that island to honor it when it does become truly an island.

By that time, today's modern chants will be ancient chants.

It'll be kahiko. And there we go again, full circle.

How did you translate Lo'ihī in dance?

You know, we're always talking about — I always talk about identity because that's what I struggle with. And Auntie Pua and Nalani, what they did was identify — they actually ended up calling the island Kama'eheu, The Reddish Child. And we called the project — it went from being O Lo'ihī to Hanau Kamoku, meaning An Island Is Born. So what we had to do was start to write new chants and identify that island and what it meant to us inside as Hawaiians. And then translate that to movement. And as they started developing their side, I had to identify what we were doing, you know, 'cause the hula is very restrictive. And they have to adhere to those restrictions. Me, as a modernist, I don't necessarily have to. I can wear lights on our heads and move around, and we could be the sludge and you know, the coral polyps. We can do those things, we can stand on top of each other and move. So it actually helped to tell a story in a broader, wider sense of the word. And that was my goal, to help tell that story.

You say you struggle with identity as an issue in general. I'm just trying to imagine you as a kid from Aiea who wanted to grow up and be a ballet dancer.

M-hm, yeah; I struggled — it's funny, because I always walk that really fine line. I was a three-year letterman for Aiea High School for the soccer program there, for the varsity team. I was team captain when I was a senior. But I always also a band geek. You know, I was in the marching band. I studied hula, I was part of the drama department, and I was kind of just in everything, but everything artistic. And as I got older, wanting to do ballet, a local young, kinda punky kid, local, from Aiea, wanting to go to New York and dance, I had to struggle with what that meant to me. I was fine with it, but what did that mean to my family? You know, they certainly didn't want me to go off and go move to New York and do ballet. You know, that was the furthest thing. My father is a — you know, he's a welder you know, by trade. And he's a local, you know, young, great man from Maui. Certainly, ballet was not in his, you know, vision for me.

He didn't want to tell his friends at the construction yard; Eh, my kid's gonna be a ballerina.

Right. Or, he's gonna be in Nutcracker; go check him out.

Yeah.

You know? But actually now, he proudly says that, you know, 'My son is a ballet dancer, and he's a director and artist. You know, he's an artist and he's a dancer.' And he's proud of me.

Well, at that time, who were your influences? Who did you look to in art to emulate and learn from?

Martha Graham, in ballet, Baryshnikov certainly you know, started to hold the torch for male dancers. I struggled with identity because what does that mean? I want to be a ballet dancer, but I still love my hula. You know, so I had to go off and look for who I was and why I was. What was my function here, and how can I help Hawaii survive as a culture and as a people?

So you did go to New York, and you did become a ballet dancer.

I did; I was crazy enough and energetic enough to move to New York and start to follow that dream. And I got a scholarship at the School of American Ballet, which is a feeder school of the New York City Ballet that was founded by George Balanchine. And I pursued that dream.

Until?

Until I found out that, well, I eventually realized I wasn't going to be the prince. I wasn't gonna play the lead role. There was a chance, a big chance that I might, but the furthest, the highest I felt that I could go, given my stature and all of that, would be —

Stature and all of that; please explain.

Okay. I really think that in the ballet world, at that time — and you're talking early to mid-80s — I was brown, I was short, and I wasn't blond-haired and blue-eyed. I wasn't gonna be the prince. And once again I had to struggle with the whole thing of, this was my dream. I went to New York to attain the highest position I could in ballet. It wasn't gonna happen.

It's like the equivalent of — you would always be a character actor, rather than the star of a movie.

Exactly. When I left, I knew I was gonna start my own company. And what that company was gonna be, I wasn't sure. But that started the whole journey towards Tau Dance Theater, which is where I ended up trying to identify myself as an artist, as a choreographer, and as a dancer.

Combining art forms, bridging traditions, and even redefining culture -- these may seem like near impossible goals; but as we'll see, it's all part of the creative journey and search for identity for Peter Rockford Espiritu... when our conversation continues.

You know, respect is a word you use almost as often as you use identity. But very important to you, both of these concepts.

M-hm. I think it's the basis of what Tau Dance Theater is all about. Without the core base tradition, I'm nothing. Without the traditionalists keeping their traditions alive and without people understanding the base, We're just a bunch of people jumping around, doing weird things. And that's not my goal. My goal is to understand that there is a connection, to help you identify and understand that connection, that piece is connected to this in some way. The hala, the beauty and the scent that it gives off, and the traditions. I am both of these things. And as a modernist, my job is to help you understand that the reason why I'm here is

because of the connection to these. And I am asking for respect to my genre and where I'm going. 'Cause I'm not just doing anything; I'm trying to keep the traditions alive by identifying who I am.

To do this, you have to understand all of the genres and yourself.

And not be afraid to take those steps. 'Cause you know, you put something out there, you're leaving yourself open for people to you know, not agree. And I don't need you to like my work or agree; I need you to understand that this is one person's view, my view. I don't expect to be correct; I just expect you to understand that I'm expressing myself artistically, respectfully, and trying to find my own identity.

Did you ever miss the mark for yourself?

Oh, man; more often than not. And I myself sometimes don't like my own work. And I'm very honest about it. I'm learning, I'm still a student. And I don't think I'll ever master any of it. But if I think that sometimes I do miss the mark, and the other thing to remember is to apologize if you do miss the mark.

But you put yourself out there, and you do become something of a lightning rod.

You do. And you have to understand, I mean, that you have to do your homework and be able to explain what it is that you're trying to say. 'Cause you know, people might not get what you're trying to do.

But you know, and are probably related to some of the leading figures in traditional hula.

I do. And I continue to study. My first kumu hula was the late John Kaimikaua. My 'auana teacher was the late Uncle George Kanani'okeakua Holoka'i. I now study 'olapa, traditional with Auntie Cissy Ah Kim, and Melvin Lantaka. I do take ballet class on a regular basis, and take modern with my original modern dance teacher, Betty Jones, who was a founding member of the Jose Limón Modern Dance Company in New York. So I keep my tradition, you know, base solid. But I also try to keep myself open to new things.

So you're a dancer and a dance student. And Tau Dance Theater is a 501c3 nonprofit foundation, and you do everything, right? You choreograph, you do the business side. The promotional side must be intense.

Uh-huh.

You market, you fundraise.

Yeah.

How do you all of that?

You know, it's a matter of survival. I mean, I do wear many hats including grant writing, budget projections, final reports, making sure our 501c3 is healthy, fundraising, and the vision of that, as well as kokua groups that I think are important to support. It's all part of the kuleana, and I know you understand that because that's part of who you are, and that's important to you.

Let's talk about transitions within your productions. You tell stories. And you go from one genre to another, but those transitions have to make sense. How do you make them flow?

For instance Naupaka, which was the last full evening length work we did, the whole idea is to stay open to not trying to just tell a story in one genre, but for instance, when the two lovers meet, there is tension, they're just meeting, they're young. And what does that whole scene mean to me? It means that there is entanglement. And what is the genre that I chose? Tango. But it's also — there's a girl en pointe. In the 'awa section, in Naupaka, it's about the drink of 'awa. But what is the cup that is used? It's a coconut. So we used more of a traditional, well, Samoan coconut style dancing, and we used the slap dancing or Hawaiian, they use the pa'i mauma to start it. It's a very physical kinda male thing. And I use those genres to tell that story. So my whole job as artistic director or as a storyteller through dance and movement is to identify what is the most appropriate movement tool to tell that story. We're not a halau, so we're not left to confine from one genre. I use all of the styles possible to tell a story, as long as it helps tell the story, not detract from the telling of it.

Do you ever use traditional Hawaiian music for your modern productions?

I do. Now again, you're talking about tradition. And if you're talking about music and tradition, if it's a mele or an oli that is existing, I tend not to touch them. If I do touch them, they will be presented in the form that is most appropriate. If it's gonna be, for instance, a Kalakaua chant, it's gonna be done the way it's supposed to be in, an 'olapa style. No changes, no nothing. So we rarely go there. We tend to want to create new oli or mele and then we can go on from there.

Peter Rockford Espiritu has an amazing ability to take audiences to places they've never been. A Tau Dance Theatre production can challenge the very meaning of dance and even culture. As our conversation continues, he talks about finding kindred spirits on his quest for creative expression and excellence.

We're back on Long Story Short with the founder of the Tau Dance Theater, and that is Peter Rockford Espiritu.

Welcome back.

Thank you.

You're so different, yet you meld so many ways and are aware of so many genres. And you say you like to keep the Tau Dance Theater small because you need to work with people who truly understand. How many people do you find who are kindred souls?

On average, the dancers that I used about thirteen to fifteen strong. For a large production it usually bumps up to double that. But ... kindred souls. I think collectively, the people that I work with become one for me.

But they don't have to have the same vision you do; you just have to tell them of your vision right now, right?

Yeah; and they don't necessarily have to agree with me. They have to be strong enough to call me on things and say, 'You know, I don't understand where you're going with this.' And yeah; they have to understand what I'm all about, but they also have to be strong within what they do.

And now you're taking your efforts out to the schools; you're working with kids.

We are. We've always been in the school system, and we've always done youth and outreach. And all — every production we've done has always had an educational element. We are actually now in the process of starting a youth group; it's called Tau W2, like Y squared. And it's because after ten years of being a company, I felt that it was time to take a step towards really investing in our future. The ideas that this youth group will not only represent us as youth, but down the line. Hopefully, they will be the feeder company to the Tau Dance Theater, which is the adult company.

Are they more open than others, say, to mixing genres, combining?

You know, what we're doing now is helping them identify the different genres, what the genres are that make Tau Dance Theater, which is ballet, modern, hula, and maybe a little jazz, hip-hop. And then understanding how those genres have helped evolve Tau into what it is now.

How are most dancers that you work with at moving from one genre to another? I mean, you'd think most people would be best at one, and they have a second, and they'd have a distant third.

Sure.

How easy is that for them?

It's not easy at all. A lot of my dancers have one form that they are comfortable with. I push them to be comfortable with two or three. Truthfully, many of the dancers who naturally fall into Tau Dance Theater, have had hula background but chose Western form. And so I think a lot of them, they've had ballet, and then have had others. I don't think I have too many that are just, you know, specialty. You know, that's very rare when I'm using a dancer that way.

Do you think what you're doing will always be an alternative form of the arts, or can you see yourself going mainstream with this?

You know, I think we, once again, walk that fine line of mainstream. I mean, we do convention work, and we do that kind of corporate business kind of thing, where, to me, that's not reality. I mean, and I have no problem with that side, 'cause I ...

Well, how did you do that?

Well, you know, I'm very strong with my cultural ties, and I understand the corporate side. And I understand the connection to it. So for instance, we ended up using elements and for instance, water. Now, culturally sound-wise, first thing that came into my mind was, 'ohe, the nose flute. So using the nose flute, and going into an oli, going into hula, and then that nose flute transcends into a jazz flute. And now you have a connection. And the jazz flute can go into the corporate — the phonetic movement, you know, of every day kind of thing. And I kept using those kinds of themes; using fire, using earth, and trying to help translate the Hawaiian base into a corporate theme.

And not everything has to be literal.

It doesn't have to be literal. They don't even have to understand it. And that's another thing about my productions. Maybe I try to layer things. You can choose to enjoy just the beauty of the movement and the sound, and the music. Or you can choose to go deeper 'cause there's always gonna be layers, and you can actually dig deeper to try to find the cultural connections to what I'm trying to say.

And you are a person of many layers. You know, I'm kind of surprised that hala, with its beginnings and endings, is what you think of, because you seem to me at the core to be a person of transition and bridging.

Uh-huh. But for that transition to happen, there has to be an ending. So it's not necessarily an ending. But there has to be a finite thing that happens. I'm good at connecting and I'm always trying to make it seamless. But at the same time, maybe that's part of what I do, is to make it seem like there is no ending.

Creating seamless transitions that make it seem like there's no end – what a beautiful concept! Mahalo to Peter Rockford Espiritu for sharing his story. And as always, we need to keep this long story short. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!

I go once a year to the Hilo Casting Club. I try to go maybe three or four times a year. I can let go of all the stresses of — and it is stressful—and all the the things that are my responsibility and kuleana, and I can actually just look at the elements. Places like Ka'u, or Kalowalo or you know, Hamakua side or Kalapana area; these are all Hawaii Island areas, 'cause that's where I choose to go and stomp and travel. But those are places where my electronics won't work. I can bring my computer, but it won't be able to connect, my cell phone might not work, and that –

And that's a good thing, right?

That's a great thing! I look forward to it.