

GUEST: TERENCE KNAPP

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My feet have always been a problem. Well, ever since I've been to the islands, that is. Oh, not when I was a boy in Belgium; no, I was as good on my feet as anybody in those days, running around the countryside, helping out on the farm, driving the cows in at night, skating on the River Dijle. Why, the night before I left home for good, I walked fourteen miles to say goodbye to my mother at the Shrine of Our Lady. Twelve years I promised her.

This studio at PBS Hawai'i has been the scene of many wonderful productions. From music specials, educational and informational programs, to shows about the arts, our cameras have captured them all. But in 1976, over a series of several days, a high water mark in local television was set. Journey with us to that time, as we look back on the career of actor Terrence Knapp, here on Long Story Short.

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

***Aloha mai kākou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, you'll meet a man who is considered by many to be a cultural treasure of Hawai'i, a devoted teacher of the dramatic arts, who chose to relocate from the British Isles of Shakespeare to an island home of a very different kind, an actor who has performed with Sir Laurence Olivier in the National Theater of Great Britain, and who mentored Booga Booga's James Grant Benton. Now, that's quite a range. Join us, as we take you from the King's English to Pidgin English with actor, director, professor, Terrence Knapp.**

Did you grow up in an august theatrical family?

No. I grew up the oldest of a family of seven. I had only sisters; I was the only boy, I was the oldest. And my mother—

You sound like you were spoiled by seven younger sisters.

Spoiled, my eye.

[CHUCKLE]

I did the spoiling of them, if anything—

Aha.

—right. Because my father, of course, was in the British Army practically all of my young life until I was about fifteen. And my mother—this was during World War II, 1939 to 1945. And we were forcibly evacuated from London in 1940 into a Welsh mining village, which had no running water, no electricity, bla-bla-bla. My mother got fed up with that, and managed to get us over to Dublin by boat. But things were just as bad there, because there was no rationing, see. In Britain during the war, everybody got a fair share, even though it was only that much, right? And my mother's great advantage was that even children were given an allowance of tea. Tea leaves, right, two ounces a week, something like. Well, she could barter for all kinds of things, because we children didn't drink tea much; water would do, or milk, yeah?

What could she get for the tea leaves?

Well, canned food, for example. And people who had an allotment and grew their own vegetables, right? Just kind of whatever they wanted. If she had something to offer, then it was tea. The British like their tea.

Did you go hungry sometimes?

I don't remember being hungry. But I do think it was the fittest generation that ever grew up in the United Kingdom, yeah. I was seven when the war broke out, I was fifteen when it was all over, as it were. I was a very healthy youngster without an ounce of fat on me, if you follow me. And I think that was true practically of the whole population. In 1945, when the war came to an end, all the young men who had been taken from the schoolmasters, yeah, returned. So there was a wonderful new energy at the Anglican Grammar School that I won a scholarship to. The parish priest was very annoyed that I was then going to go to a non-Catholic high level school. But my mother said, no, she wanted me to take the opportunity, because it was given within a kind of education area, if you follow me, and she knew that I'd get enough of a Catholic upbringing with her and my sisters at home. So I was very lucky. A three hundred year old Anglican grammar school with a marvelous tradition of excellent teaching, especially of literature, and that turned me on. I'd always been an enthusiastic reader of my own accord. We used to go to the public library and look for books, the Count of Monte Cristo, whatever it might be, and if I enjoyed it, within a year I probably reread it, yeah. There was no television in those days, none at all, but there was a wonderful BBC Radio service, and one of the things they did were short plays and stories, and that kind of thing. So there was much to educate and inform, as well as entertain.

How did you qualify for that scholarship?

I had to ... well, actually what happened was, we did a play at school, Macbeth. And I was cast as Lady Macbeth.

You were cast as Lady Macbeth.

Yeah.

Were there girls in the play?

No girls in the school.

No girls in the school; okay. So how did you be the one to get the Lady— Might I remind you that in Shakespeare's time, when he wrote the play, there were no women in the theater at all, apart from tarts.

All right; all right. Point taken. [CHUCKLE] So how did you feel about playing the role?

I didn't have to worry about it, because she came and haunted me at night. And I don't mean in a frightening way. She just came to me. In other words, as I became more familiar with the text, and with the situation of the play itself, she formulated herself in my imagination. And then, because nobody interfered with me and my natural response, right ... apparently, I knocked them for six.

Wow.

And the headmaster, the classics master immediately told the board of governors that I should be given a scholarship, or at least to audition for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Which I did, and I was accepted, and I got the scholarship. But I just had such a jolly time pretending using my imagination.

Did you ever pretend in real life to get through situations?

Yeah.

For example?

Going into the Royal Air Force. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. So, I went through the three-month training period, an intake of twelve hundred young men, boys of my age, eighteen or so. And I passed out as best recruit of the entire wing, and I was offered a commission. Because I pretended I was somebody like Richard Todd. Do you know Richard Todd?

I don't know who Richard Todd is.

A soldier in a film. And yeah, I just pretended to be somebody else. And that's how it worked, yeah.

In 1978, the PBS Hawai'i production of Damien won top national honors, including the coveted Peabody Award. But it might surprise you to learn that Dr. Terrence Knapp discovered Father Damien, not in the 1970s in Hawai'i, but in the middle of World War II, in a little Victorian chapel in a borough of London called Hackney.

And that's where you heard of Damien?

Yes.

In this church?

At the back of the church, there was a magazine rack, little books that people paid the equivalent of fifty cents to buy, and go and read about this, that, or the other. Well, I read every pamphlet [CHUCKLE] in between masses, waiting.

Sure.

And I was fascinated by this character, Damien. Yeah. And—

He's Belgian, what did you relate to?

Yeah, Flanders, rather. So, I absorbed the story for myself. In fact, I still have that two-penny booklet.

Do you really?

Yeah. I should have brought it with me to show you. So he was part of my psyche in a sense, because I'd read about him so much.

And what did the story tell you about him? What did you know at that young age?

That he was a man of very little education, who was filled with the idea of loving God through other people. And not minding doing the dirty work. Because he was used to doing it with the pigs and the cows, all that kind of stuff, yeah. And he wasn't in any sense really educated. And he had a brother, Pamphile, who decided he was going to be a priest, an older brother, so he went off to be trained as a priest. And, Jef De Veuster, later to be Damien he thought he'd like to be a priest too. [CHUCKLE] So he went trotting after his brother. And then his brother was ordained but fell sick, some type of chickenpox, right, and he could not go by boat to the Sandwich Islands, as was arranged. So the head honcho in Belgium said to Jef De Veuster, later to be Father Damien, Well, you take your brother's place. And he said, Yeah, all right, yeah. And he went. Now, when he arrived, the French Bishop who was here said, You're not even a priest? And he said, No, not yet. So the Bishop ordained him, then sent him to Hilo to build a church and Catholicize the community. That's how he got going. It's a remarkable story, really, because he wasn't to know that he had anything like the capacities that he exhibited as the years went by. But I think the simple answer is that he's a man of the soil. There's no pretension about him, he never pretended to be anything other than he was, which was really a simple God-fearing young man who wanted to be of help to other people. And then when I went to talk to Aldyth Morris about doing something for the bicentennial, and I mean, I knew that Damien was the patron saint of Hawai'i, as it were. There was this Marisol statue that I'd also seen in Washington earlier. So we wrote a multi-character play about him. And then, I thought, well, we should develop this more, because he's part of Hawai'i in an extraordinary way. Anyway, I thought it'd be a lovely part to play. [CHUCKLE]

And you were talking right to the camera in this studio—

Yeah; yeah.

All those years ago.

Yeah.

Wade Couvillon was the cameraman, and he—

Yeah, that's right.

He said he felt you were playing right to him.

I did. I did. 'Cause I wanted a pair of eyes, yeah, and he was on a crane, as you probably know better than I do. And so, when he would come in for a close-up, yeah, I would look, as it were, past the lens into his face. And I enjoyed it. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience. It really was.

The University of Hawai'i at Manoa was to be Professor Terrence Knapp's home for a long career, where he taught and mentored generations of up and coming

actors. It was also the site of a most unlikely pairing; the works of Shakespeare, and the local comedy group Booga Booga.

I had met David Friend, who knew Dr. Ernst, who was the founder of Kennedy Theatre. And I had tea with Dr. Ernst in Japan, and he said, When you come to Honolulu next, please let me know. So I did. And first thing I saw at Kennedy Theatre was called The Magi—Russian play. Russian play, a comedy, translated. And I simply could not believe, six hundred people sitting in that wonderful auditorium, having such a good time, and enjoying the play. Then I trotted back to England in due course, then I got a letter from Dr. Ernst to say, would I be interested in coming out and being a guest director. And I thought, I would like that. [CHUCKLE] And he wanted an English Season. We were going to do The Importance of Being Earnest, Shakespeare's Scottish play Macbeth, and then ...

You didn't play Lady Macbeth, though, right?

No, no, no. Hay Fever, Hay Fever by Noel Coward, a lovely threesome. And I enjoyed it. And Joel Trapido, who was the vice chairman at the time, came and said, Are you enjoying yourself? And I said, Yes. He said, Do you like it here? And I said, Yes. And he said, Would you like to stay? And I said, Yes. [CHUCKLE]

That's nice and neat, isn't it?

I didn't have to apply for the job, it was offered to me.

And so, along the way, thirty-five years with the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, you taught students in acting.

Yes.

You must have seen all kinds of ranges of raw talent. What was the most needed thing for these students?

There was a man called Jim Benton who was one of my earlier students, and it was through him that something like Kumu Kahua came into being.

That's James Grant Benton.

That's right; as he later became. He was Jim Benton, right. And there was knock on my door, and I'd been there only for about a year or so, and he put his head—rather, this man put his head in and he said, Eh, you Shakespeare 101?

[CHUCKLE]

And I said, How dare you?

[CHUCKLE]

It was Jim. He came in, and we became buddies very quickly. And he said, could I help him understand Shakespeare. And I said, Yes, you can register as a student in day classes, can't you? He said he couldn't afford to do that. So I said, Well, if you like, we'll have some Shakespeare readings in my office. And he came, and brought, the Booga Booga lot. [CHUCKLE]

That's an interesting assortment of people in your office.

And they were sitting on the floor. There must have been fifteen people in there, as well as on the sofa and on the stairs.

And what attracted you to do that? 'Cause you didn't have to do that.

His delightful personality, as much as anything else, and a kind of Cheerful Charley quality about him, which I liked enormously. And so, we read Twelfth Night, okay. Blow me down if just something like two or three weeks later, [KNOCKING] on my door. He walks in, he's got papers in his hand. He has rewritten Shakespeare's Twelfth Night into Pidgin.

And what was your reaction to that? Could have been very negative.

No, I loved it.

You loved it.

Well, I was enchanted by Jim himself. I thought he was such a delightful spirit, and he was mad about performing and comedy as I am, if you know what I mean. And we read it. I got a cast. And there were people who were wetting themselves with laughter. They really were. So I decided to stage it in the Lab Theatre, because the main stage season was already, set up. And they were hammering on the doors to get in. Then we became, as it were, bosom friends, and I decided to—the Lab Theatre, they liked it. Then we took it out to one of the community colleges which has a big, big auditorium, about six, seven hundred.

Leeward Community?

Leeward. The walls were shaking. The walls were shaking with delight, yeah. So that was simply a lovely thing to have happened, yeah.

What a great cross-cultural mix.

Well, yes, it was. And me, with my great love and respect for Shakespeare itself, right, it was simply a matter of idiomatically transferring that into this other gorgeous language, right, *Pidgin*. Of course, it's English with Hawaiian flavor. But it was great fun. It was great fun.

The same man who enjoyed watching the locals rolling with laughter in the theater at Leeward Community College has certainly seen it all. In his long career, Dr. Terrence Knapp can count among his friends and colleagues some of the most distinguished actors that Great Britain has ever produced; and he knows a thing or two about taking a show on the road.

Well, there's Laurence Olivier, for a start. [CHUCKLE] The Lord Olivier of Brighton Stone, as he was. He became a peer and sat in the House of Lords on behalf of the theater arts. I was with him for almost four years in his company. He was founding a company in Chichester in South of England, a beautiful theater like the one in Canada, open stage. And I auditioned for him, I was taken into the company, and then when he founded the National Theatre, later to be the Royal National Theatre, he invited me. One of the greatest joys of my life was playing Osric in Hamlet with Peter O'Toole as Hamlet and Rosemary her name

fails me momentarily. But it was a stunning, stunning cast, right. And he had me play Osric as the kind of runabout boy at the court of the King, right. So I was often to be seen doing this or the other, offering the Queen a handkerchief. But enormous fun. And I was well noticed in it, in the production, and Larry was very pleased with me.

What did the critics say about you?

Well, they just said I was kind of a quicksilver. And that was the one word that I was very flattered. Light on my feet, and I mean, Hamlet doesn't like Osric for those reasons; he's like an annoying fly, right. But I enjoyed myself enormously.

Judi Dench; you know Judi Dench, right?

Oh, Judi, I know. Well, Judi and I were part of a British council touring company to West Africa. Now, this was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to me in my life. We played out of doors usually, to audiences in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, and on one occasion, we were playing to two and a half thousand people sitting on the southern edge of the Sahara. And because it was so dry, the acoustics was perfect. And as I was saying, I was playing Feste, and I had a trio of musicians who would give me the note, and I'd go. And on this particular occasion, I got the note, and I sang, but they weren't accompanying me. [CHUCKLE] When we got off, I said, What's the matter with you? And they said, You took the wrong key. I said, I did not.

[CHUCKLE]

I said, I took the one you gave me. Apparently, what happened was, there was a train whistle twelve miles away which went, beep. And it traveled all that distance, and I took that as the ...

[CHUCKLE]

That's quite a memory, isn't it? Yeah. And Judi and I became chums, because she liked to paddle around in the swimming pools, right. And so we formed an aqua ballet. [CHUCKLE] It was very hot, altogether in the Sahara, but we had such a lot of fun. And then, two years later, I was invited to do a similar tour of Southeast Asia, and I was looking forward to being with Judi again, but for whatever reason, she wasn't able to do it. But by then, we'd become fast friends, right. And so, I see her when I go back to England, and her daughter Finty and her grandson Sam. And I knew her husband, Michael Williams very well. He sadly died of lung cancer after only about ten years. But it was a closeness and conviviality, and a liking.

In the 1970s and 80s, Hawai'i was a hotbed of television production, and the industry needed the best of Hawaii's acting talent to line its casting sheets. Although he filled his share of guest slots, Dr. Terrence Knapp might hope you might forget some of his appearances on the small screen.

What do you think about acting in that venue? Do you enjoy that?

Not much.

Not much.

'Cause it's trivial. The scripts are trivial.

What did you play in Hawai'i Five-O?

Oh ... a kind of middle aged English twerp. [CHUCKLE] Fully suited and ties, and so on, and visiting something or other. I did do one that—I've forgotten what it was called. Something Hawai'i, and I was cast as an attorney. And I had to do something like a twelve-minute speech and I knew that I probably would have a hard time memorizing it with certainty. Do you follow me? So I asked the director if he would put it on the thing, and I would read it off. And he was very dubious. And I said, Well, this way, I won't falter, I can time it according to ... All right, he said, one take. And I got a standing ovation from the entire set when that one had done. Because I was so relaxed, I didn't have to try to remember, I could just ... and then I said, [INDISTINCT].

Now, you know the Twelfth Night in Pidgin? That never rubbed off on your speech. And after how many years in Hawai'i, more than thirty—

Yeah, well—

You still have your—

If I want—

—English—

—I could do a good—

—accent.

—imitation, sort of, yeah. I can slur. [CHUCKLE] I don't have the vocabulary; I mean, that's what gives the Hawaiian dialect or form such joy, their version of certain words, right, and the way they're used. Oh, I've been a very lucky man.

Hawaii's world class actor, Dr. Terrence Knapp, a man who's rubbed shoulders with English lords and UH Manoa undergrads, who made a huge contribution to the legacy of this TV station, PBS Hawai'i, with his performance in Damien, continues to live in Honolulu in retirement. As professor emeritus of theater, he spends his time traveling, mentoring students, and occasionally performing. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kākou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

As the eldest of seven kids, the rest of whom were girls, what can you share with us about growing up with girls? What kind of insights can you tell us?

You learn to be very patient, first off. [CHUCKLE]

You never got to use the bathroom for any length of time, I bet.

No, no. I don't remember that, but the three elder sisters, as it were, Sheila, Eileen, and Patsy, were only about a year apart, right. So they were almost like triplets, in fact, yeah. And I remember them sometimes losing their temper when they were little girls, and pulling each other's hair, for no good reason that I

could think of. And my mother told me never to interfere. [CHUCKLE] She said,
Just let them do it. [CHUCKLE]