

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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We have a delightful scene about road rage, and our grandest boy-very big boy, plays his mom, who has road rage. And he's-he does this wonderful scene. This boy- He almost didn't get a chance to because his teacher, and I didn't know this, he's in Special-Ed. And here he is composing five scenes.

And that's the magic. This is not about training people to be actors-

No it's not. We want contributing adult citizens.

He teaches teenagers how to rehearse for life. George Kon of Honolulu, 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. Honolulu's George Kon helps Hawai'i teenagers navigate that challenging time of life. He co-founded and leads the Alliance for Drama Education and its flagship performance group, T-Shirt Theatre. T-Shirt Theatre is based out of Farrington High School in Kalihi, O'ahu and uses what George calls a low-tech, high-zest approach to its productions. The students don't use elaborate sets or costumes and their honest, raw performances resonate with audiences. Many of the plays are written by the students and have helped young adults explore issues like racial prejudice, bullying, abuse, and teen suicide.

George Kon's own path to becoming an educator and theatre director was anything but conventional. He spent his early years in the sleepy plantation town of Pu'unēnē, Maui but his country lifestyle was put on hold for a few years.

You know uhh.. Growing up, I didn't spend the whole time on Maui. Because-

What happened? You moved.

Yes, yes. After I was-when I was about 4, my sister was 8, my mom and dad decided that instead of being a nurse, she wanted to have a schedule that was closer to ours. So she wanted to go and get her teaching certificate from the University of Hawai'i.

In Mānoa?

In Mānoa.

Honolulu.

Honolulu. So for a Japanese lady to take her kids to another island, leave her husband on, that's... That's a no-no. In fact, we're split right in half in our family. His parents thought it was a bad idea.

'Cause she was leaving her husband.

What will people think? Right? It was like 'hmm' no no no no.

Did he consider going with her? I guess...

Well, how would, she needed to earn-

Oh.

Keep the money but, how would she gonna pay for the tuition?

And what did he do with the plantation?

Well he was an accountant.

Okay, so he had money.

Yeah he-he-not for the plantation. He was a-uhh, public accountant.

Oh I see.

He had his own business. So he couldn't leave that business. He had clients, and-

And she-she had to leave the island because there was no four year institution-

Well yeah.

-on Maui at the time

No, not on Maui. Now they have one but you know-

Yeah

That was then...

So, that must've been the talk of the camp.

That was a big deal! But her mom-and dad-when they found out about uhh, the feathers being ruffled, I think they got on the phone with them and said "Mind your own business."

Ohh.

She's gonna do this because-

True family squabble.

Yeah, but they you know, they didn't come to blows or anything like that but it was a rift. So dad obviously couldn't go to his own parents house to eat dinner. So he went to mom's house, mom's family's house. He would have dinner at there every night, and then uhh one of the neighbor ladies who did his laundry for him, would have him come over for dinner as well.

So he-

He got no support from his own family.

Wow. But-but, so he supported his wife and-and her-

—yes

-goals. And-and he apparently couldn't cook or wash his clothes himself.

Or wouldn't. Yeah, yeah but he was-he was uhh taken care of.

Well, four years is a long time.

It's a long time. So we would go home at summer times, and winter.

What did you-oh so while your mom was in class you were in school.

So-so I was-

-But still it must've been hard.

Yeah I went to many schools. Y'know I went-I can remember being at Hickam, uh, Ben Parker, Ala Wai school. I think I was at-

Maybe because she was renting around town or-

Well, we were- y'know how it is right, you stay with family first before you rent. And then finally we rented our own place at Isenberg Street, and she walked up to campus-

Maybe 3 miles or so?

The healthiest she's ever been in her life.

Wow, that-that was a big deal for you and your sister too because-

It was.

-this is Honolulu, and Kāne'ohe

It was. Yes, yes, yes.

Great lesson, probably for your sister especially, that mom has a career goal, and actually the career goal was in order to be around you folks more.

Yes, yes yes. Y'know, she was a very effective teacher. She taught first grade.

Where at?

Lihikai.

Lihikai school.

Mhmm.

And did the two families come together after-

-Never

-this?

Never. No, it was-uhh-it never...It was never healed. It just stayed as uhh-as a rift.

After George Kon's mother completed her degree at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and became a teacher, the family moved back to Pu'unēnē, Maui.

What were you interested in, in high school? What kind of interests piqued you—

Student Government. And, I don't know how it happened 'cause I came from this really small school, Pu'unēnē School. But when I got to Baldwin, I got right off, freshman class president. Sophomore student body president.

Student body when you're a sophomore?

Sophomore. So that got me invited to Lexington Kentucky for a National Student Government conference.

You were a talker, weren't you?

I was-

You could make speeches.

-I was, was. Yeah.

You weren't shy.

I was not. So, here I am thinking, I'm gonna do something with public speaking, maybe be uhh...A politician or lawyer.

Mhmm.

And then I see this fabulous Chinese dancer named Al Huang. He came to Baldwin, and he's dancing with a Caucasian partner in modern dance. Never seen modern dance before. And, when I saw it, you know I wasn't attracted to the ballet, but modern dance had elements of gymnastics and martial arts-

And you were-

-which I had.

-You were into those things. You were into martial arts and gymna-

Those things. Yeah. Al Huang-

Okay

The modern dancer, gave me that idea that maybe I'd like to try this, so uhh-Often times when touring artists come, they'll do a workshop on the weekend. I went to the workshop. I was the only boy. Not surprising right? But I stayed, and I said to myself when I go to college, it has to have modern dance. So Grinnell had modern dance.

And that's where George Kon went after high school. A private liberal arts school in the middle of Iowa.

But very soon, I found that dance was related to theater; it's in the same department. I started to take courses in both dance and theater. And then, year and a half into Grinnell, I got a chance to go to the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. There, I met Rick Zank, who had just come back from Nepal.

Mhmm

He was a very, very accomplished professional actor who was kind of disenchanting with how theaters were run. And he had a book by Jerzy Grotowski called *Towards a Poor Theater*. You know, my low tech, high zest email address comes from that aesthetic. He said: Theater is too fat; it's got way too many things that ... film can do much better. You shouldn't try to replicate reality, because what theater has that no other art form has is the live relationship between the actor and the audience.

Mm.

You can really discard everything else. Which was pretty revolutionary at the time.

Thats right.

So, here, with Rick ... I created at Grinnell a piece called—uh, I didn't even title it. It was uh, based on the character of Pentheus from Euripides' *The Bacchae*. I don't know if you ever come across that in classics. So, it's a— it's a movement piece with very words. And I show it to my dancer teacher, and I show it to my theater instructor at Grinnell, and both of them kinda pat my head and say: That's very interesting. End of story. When I take it to Milwaukee Repertory Theater and show it to Rick, he starts directing me, and he starts to evolve and develop the character that I'd started. And he says: This is the kinda theater I want to be making; would you be interested in coming to join me and a few others at the University of Iowa, which has a center for new performing arts that's just gonna start.

How far along were you at Grinnell in Iowa?

Hour and a half. And Iowa City is just an hour away from Grinnell, coincidentally. But it's a world away. It's where the International Writing Workshop, where Tennessee Williams got his start.

What did your parents think? 'Cause you left—

Oh, here—

--college.

Here it is; yeah? Uh, I—I—I had trepidations about making that phone call. 'Cause I'm the only son. My dad, eldest of five boys, the smartest of the litter, and he didn't go to college 'cause his father begged him to help send the other boys. So, all the other brothers went to college, but not him. So, his only son ...

He's gonna live through you.

You were gonna get your degree.

I was gonna get my degree. He said: Take business administration.

Uh-oh.

And here I am, studying drama and dance; right? And then, I call him and say: Dad, I got this opportunity to join this professional group; it's a Rockefeller-funded, five-year project at the University of Iowa. If I'd gotten my degree, I would have to work for seven or eight years before I could even position myself to go for a grant like this. It's being put in my lap here. And I'm not even finished college, but they feel I have what it takes.

So, you substituted your capture of a college degree with professional experience.

Professional job. Fully paid. We didn't have to wait tables, drive cabs. It was not fat, but we had a living stipend. Which is like, unheard of; right?

George Kon continued to perform professionally with the Iowa Experimental Theatre Lab which eventually relocated to Baltimore, Maryland and later toured in New York and France. Then George began to share his style of experimental theatre at New York University.

The company starts to fragment. You know. Uh, people start to leave. And I get picked up at NYU. They want me to head up um ... what we do with the lab work in something they called the Experimental Theater Wing.

You were hired to be a teacher.

I was hired to be a—

And you didn't—

--teacher.

--have a college degree.

I did not have a—

And you worked for NYU.

I worked for NYU. Isn't that something? Yeah. 'Cause in the Experimental Theater Wing, it didn't matter your certification. It mattered that you had—that you made theater.

M-hm.

And we had worked for, by that time, six or seven years, in this form, ala Grotowski.

And at the time, were you going to Broadway plays? Were you enjoying the city?

I got invited to try out for Pacific Overtures.

And did you?

No. But uh, somebody scouted me, and said, you know: I think you would be good for this.

That's not the way you wanted to go.

Well ... it kind of flickered through my mind, that that would be interesting to see if I could cut it, you know, doing that. But we hadn't—we hadn't finished—at the time that I was made that offer, we hadn't finished with our work with the lab. I was still in the full course of creating plays for them. If that had happened ... after, when I was in between things, I might have—I might have gone—

But there are a lot of people who had have said: Are you kidding? I'm gonna grab that. That's a choice I may never get again.

Yeah.

But you said: No, I'm committed to what I'm doing.

Right. At the time, uh ... the work that I was doing with the lab was uh ... was really interesting and consuming, all-consuming.

While teaching at NYU, George Kon would reunite with an old friend, Walt Dulaney, whom he met back in high school. The two would go on to form a partnership that would span three decades.

You know, Walt and I had been friends since I was in high school.

Okay this is Walt Dulaney.

Walt, the famous Walt Dulaney. I met him—the way I met him was umm...I knew he did prom assemblies. I asked 'would you come to Baldwin, do a prom assembly?' That's how I met him.

Wow, and this is a guy who would be your artistic partner for years.

Yeah; for years. So, Walt and I—uh, Walt went to m—uh, Rochester Institute of Technology to um ... get his uh ... photo illustration degree at the same time that I was doing the work with the lab. And then, we reconnected in New York to teach the Experimental Theater when he assisted me. And then, when the first snows would come, we would relocate to Hawai'i. And Farrington was one—one of the first places that we anchored in.

Why is that?

We got—uh, Wally Chappell, who ran HTY, we—we got hired at HTY first as their education directors. And we suggested to them that they should ... run drama education in the schools. HTY didn't go for that project, so we decided to branch off on our own. So, Wally helped us meet Alfred Preis. Do you remember Alfred Preis?

Alfred Preis was an architect, and he—State Foundation on—

State Foundation—

--Culture and the Arts.

State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. But he was a czar; he was the art czar. And everything that went, he said: Go.

And he funded it.

He funded it. Right. So, Alfred gave us our first, first grant; it was called Suitcase Theater. And in that grant, we—we were—our goal was to meet every drama teacher in the State.

Oh ...

So, we went ... with our suitcase, to every—and we didn't have a car. So, we went by bus all the way out to Kahuku. Walt and I, from the Suitcase Theater grant, discovered that of all the schools, Farrington was most like the neighbor island schools.

Mm.

The kids were super-appreciative of what we did. Even if they had a hard time doing our Stage Fright Workshops, they loved—you know, they were—they had aloha.

Stage Fright Workshops; what are those?

Yeah; yeah. You know, audience manners.

Okay. And this is actually what got you a permanent role

at—

At—

--Farrington High School.

--Farrington. Yes. Audience manners.

So, we—

There was a need to teach the—

So, we—we—

--students manners at assemblies.

Yes; yes, indeed. So, we—we—our workshops uh, had a component called performer fitness, project—

Mm.

--pronouns with poise. Tchh-tchh; ah. And personality. Everything's alliterated; right? Those four aspects are what we teach for the actors. And then, audience have to pay attention, uh, show appreciation, appropriate applause. That part is what Sherilyn Tom saw when she came to see our Midsummer Night's workshop with the gifted and talented students. She said: I want that, because our kids are so rowdy, we can't have assemblies; can you help us?

And when was this? What was the year when the audiences were so unruly?

1980. Early; very early. But Sherilyn Tom, English Department chair, was a visionary. She said: This is what you do. Teach Shakespeare four days in the classroom, on day five take them into the auditorium, just their class. Have each of them stand in the solo spotlight. But soft, what lychee in the window breaks? Right? One-by-one. They will earn empathy for the guts it takes to be onstage.

That is very—that's a really brilliant idea.

It's a brilliant idea.

Empathy.

Yes.

From the audience.

Empathy. So, four years later—shhh, we could open the doors because everybody knew how to be an audience.

That's amazing.

Same lady says: You get these kids all excited; why don't you take the most talented kids you saw during the year, and do a summer drama workshop. So, we did just that. Six weeks later, couldn't let go of the kids. So, we go to Alfred Preis; right? State Foundation. Normally, it takes uh, a year to apply for a grant, da- da-da. We just asked him: Would you fund our dream project? We're in Kalihi at Farrington; we're gonna call it T-Shirt Theatre. What do you say? He gave it to us.

George Kon and Walt Dulaney co-founded T-Shirt Theatre in Honolulu in 1985. George estimates they've touched the lives of more than 10,000 students. Walt Dulaney passed away in 2011, and George continues to serve as Executive Director and Artistic Director of the program.

We are a private not-for-profit corporation. Alliance for Drama Education is the mothership, and T-Shirt Theatre is the flagship, the most visible and heartstrings part of the—

And you followed your mentors, and you didn't go for the costumery. It's imagination that really—

Yes.

--you know, basically—

Low tech, high zest.

Is T-Shirt Theatre an after school program?

Yes.

So, what-what hours is it?

It—it goes Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, three to five-thirty. And we go eleven months out of the year.

And can any child in the district—

Any child—

--participate?

--on the island, if they can get themselves there to rehearse with us, to participate.

And do they have to pay to enter?

There is no fee. How you pay is by coming promptly, and consistently to rehearsal, and giving it your one hundred percent. The first project is the envoys. That's where we take small teams of actors to each of the ... was it ten feeder elementaries to Farrington. They perform for each class. We do like, five classes a day. And then, they coach small groups of students to perform for their own class by the end of the forty-five-minute period. It's an amazing process to see these kids, who sometimes are very, very shy, be able to do this. Very, very big project, they have to take a whole day off from school to do this. But that's one project. Then there's a fall show, and then there's a spring show. And if they do two out of the three, we can—you know, you can take a pass. You can say: I need to take a leave of absence.

So, you do treat them as professionals in the sense—

|—

--that we expect you to be here—

Yes.

--here's the requirements.

Yes. Because ... and actually, if they don't show up, then you're left with ...

--a real puka.

It is a puka.

Not kipuka, but a puka—

Yes.

--in your program.

It is a puka.

So, that's a real world lesson. You know, there's a real—

Yes.

There's a real consequence when you don't show up.

I think uh, why I love drama education so much, particularly when it comes to performance, even in elementary schools is, when you don't say your line correctly, or when you don't show up, somebody suffers, and they will let you know about that. You know. And I think ... academics sometimes don't have that real world consequence.

Do the students determine their own material in T-Shirt Theatre?

We work to a theme. And this last show actually came to us from uh, two of the actors. They said: George, can we do something with memories? I said: Memories, memories ... let me think about that. I liked the idea, but I didn't want to just be nostalgic. So, as

Jonah and I were discussing it, I said: How about ... memories to capture, or capture; capture is gonna be like our title. So ... you know, well, can you distill it even to a moment, when you were changed. That's—and that became the prompt.

That's a good question. What came—

Yes.

--out of that?

Our show, Memories to Capture. That was our spring show. Th—the one that touches me the most is um ... a scene we call In Due Time. And this boy is trying to figure out how he can come out. And so, he says—uh, in the scene, he—he converses with his—his conscience, and he's kinda deciding who is gonna be the first one that I tell this to. Can I tell my parents? No. Uh, can I tell my best friend? Uh, she's not really ready to hear this. Ha; can I tell my sister? Yes. So, this boy has a really good relationship with his sis, so he comes out to his sis. And then, he comes out to his good friend. And the good friend, you can see, really has trouble with this. And then, he comes home. As he's opening the door, he overhears Mom and Dad talking. And Mom is saying: Stelthen, Stelthen; where are you? And Dad is saying: Where is that boy? Mom says: Maybe he has a girlfriend. I've never seen him with any girls; if that boy is gay, I will have failed in my role as a father. So, he never comes in the house; right? Stelthen chooses to do this at the public show where his dad is in the audience. He has not disclosed to his family.

Wow.

That's some guts; huh? After the show, Dad gives him a big hug. Son, I love you.

That's what you're dealing with youth who are going through all kinds of—

All—

-changes—

--kinds of things.

--and adjustments, and very big struggles. Especially in a low-income area, where you just—you know, sometimes there is some dysfunction. I mean, some of the kids are really vulnerable.

Very, very vulnerable.

And your career is still going strong in this, and it's all ... you're still following this course that nobody instructed you in. You know, you see where it takes you, and you make the best of it, and you're looking to mold young people.

I am. I am. And I'm hoping that uh, Jonah and Primo are able to carry it. You know, I'm grooming them as a legacy. You know if- as a parent, if you form a business, you hope your son or your daughter will take it over; right? Primo came from the inaugural T-Shirt Theatre group. And now, he's back coaching. He's the one that sells Harleys. Story about Primo. Um ... he's closing the windows one day, and the windows in the room pops and cracks, and cuts him. So, he's got this kinda scar on his wrist. So, remember that. He's working at Zippy's, and his supervisor comes roaring in on a motorcycle, coincidentally, very pissed off. He and his girlfriend are having some kind of fight, throwing pots and pans. So, Primo, who has played a number of counseling scenes in T-Shirt Theatre, starts to say some of the words from one of his scenes. Hey, what you doing, man? Chill. You know, he starts to try to talk the guy down. The guy doesn't want to have anything. What? What are you talking about? And then, you know, he doesn't give him the time of day. Primo keeps on talking about it, and at one point, he goes like this. He doesn't say anything; he just shows him. And the guy goes— Whoa; you too? 'Cause he's suicidal, this kid. Primo says: You know what, you should go home; I got it covered over here. Go home; call me as soon as you get home. What for? Oh, just talk story. And he—he got the manager to go home.

That is a good life skill. And the manager is still with us today, I presume.

Yes.

Mm.

So ... life following art. Script it, and then use it. Rehearsing for life; that is our mission.

In 2018, T-Shirt Theatre presented Kipuka, an anti-bullying project that explores the issues of bullying, cyberbullying, and teen suicide prevention. This latest production under the artistic direction of George Kon was original and drew from the true life experiences of his students. T-Shirt Theatre continues to serve as a kīpuka—like green growth in a lava field... for the next generation of students. And while George looks to pass on the direction of T-Shirt Theatre to the next generation, he told me during this conversation in the spring of 2019, he's not ready to exit the stage yet. Mahalo to George Kon of Pālolo Valley in Honolulu. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

Take two. Very much. That came from Walt. T-Shirt Theatre, because we rehearse, is a perfect uh, environment for that. You know, and the kids learn that if they make a mistake, they can always take two. And I think if th—you know, if we can help them understand that that doesn't just go for drama, that goes for anything that you're trying to accomplish, there's really almost always a chance to redo.