

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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How would you describe how you were in class?

I was kinda the loudmouth. I mean, I spent a lot of time being told to be quiet.

Surprise!

And you built on that for your career.

I built on that. Yeah; that really made it ... you know, it's—it's who you are. And really, every puppet is a part of you. You have to find that part of yourself that connects directly to the character in order to make it believable and real.

Meet this Honolulu native from 'Āina Haina who is now a principal puppeteer on Sesame Street... next on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kākou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. The characters of Sesame Street have become iconic staples of children's programming – but have you ever thought about the people beneath the puppets? One of them, a principal puppeteer of the longtime children's series, was born and raised in East Honolulu, and she's my fellow Kalani High School grad – Pam Arciero. For more than three decades, she's played Oscar the Grouch's better half -- or shall we say, grouchier half? – Grundgetta.

What are some of the great moments between Oscar the Grouch and girlfriend—your character—

Grundgetta.

--Grundgetta?

Um, well, we were gonna get married. That was very exciting. And then, we thought that uh, getting married would make us happy. And being grouches, we don't want to

be happy. And so, we decided to call off the wedding at the last minute. And then—but little did we know that actually, most people are not happily married, and so, we would have been perfectly happy. Who's not a grouchy; right? There are times when you just a really grouchy. And she—uh, she—also, she says exactly what she's thinking at any given time. You know, so that's kind of a ... in a world where you really do need to be circumspect a lot, you know, not ... to offend anybody. She just says what she's feeling. You know. [GRUNDGETTA VOICE] That's a hideous outfit. You know, she'll just go there. So ...

I know you took over that role from someone else.

Yeah; Brian Muehl had done it for one year, and I've done her now for thirty-four years. So ...

Did he give you any advice? I mean, on how to play this woman grouchy?

No.

He said: You're—you're the perfect person for this; you—I've seen you be a grouchy. And he handed it to me.

Oh, that's it.

Basically.

Thank you for mentoring.

And I worked with him, yeah, on—on different shows, so he knew, he knew me a little bit. So, he says: Yeah, it's totally—y—you do it your way, 'cause you know her better.

And you do other puppets as well.

Yeah.

Background, and who else?

Right. That's part of the—there are two skillsets you have to have. Besides just doing a main puppet and a character, you do have to be able to um, do backgrounds. And backgrounds are just like every dog, frog, cat, fish, bat; you name it, you get to so that stuff. And then, there is assisting. And assisting is actually a pretty major thing, and I actually love assisting. Because you watch the other performer figure out how to do all these things. And that is because some of the characters have um, two hands, like

Ernie and um, Telly Monster has two hands. And I consistently have been Telly Monster's right hand for about 30 years.

Is that the important hand?

No, not really. But it's a balance. Because your hand is in the head of the puppet, and then, your other hand is here—the left hand, usually. And then, the right hand comes in, and you have to match and do everything in synchron- synchron- synchronicity with the other character, the other hand. And it has to look natural. It can't look like this hand is doing this.

Right.

You know, you can't be talking with this hand so... And movement is so important in puppetry. In order to get a believable character, you have to break down the movement and take everything you do with the whole body, and do it between your elbow and your fingertips to make it ... you believe that this is alive. And you know, Bert—Bert moves differently than Ernie; right? Bert's very stiff when he walks, and Ernie's kinda lumbering, and cute, and funny. Um, and so, having a movement background is very great for puppetry, because you are breaking down the movement all the time in your head, and putting it, again, between your wrist and your elbow, and making people believe that Ernie is walking this way, and Bert is walking this way, very stiffly. So, that analysis, the ability to analyze movement, and then put it into the character, is huge for me.

To be a puppeteer at your level, you also have to have lots of physical agility and strength.

Yeah; yeah. We—we keep up. I mean, when you work—when I first started working, and I first started working with Jim Henson, we did a hundred and ten shows in six months. So, you were working every single day. And I remember the first week I started, I was working in New York, and it was cold, and I was gonna get a cab home, and I'd been working all day. And now, we work eight, ten hours a day with our arm like this, right? We were walking, try and get a cab, and going... Somebody else, could you hail the cab? I can't lift this arm.

Oh ...

I couldn't do it, 'cause it literally was that- that challenging.

And then, the focus to have everything between your hand and your elbow ...

Yeah; that's—it's directing all your—all your energy—

Effort there.

Yes, right. And it has to be alive, and all your acting goes into that little piece. You know, so it's—you learn it, and it takes a long time. Really. Uh, I—nobody walks in off the street and becomes um, um, a television puppeteer. You just can't. Between the fact that we have three cameras, and—

Taking close-ups.

Close-ups, and wide shots, and far shots, and you have to ride those three cameras looking at the monitor. And the focus of the pup—the reason we do that is, the eyes don't really see. So, I'm looking at you right now, but a puppet might not be in the shot, because the eyes are stationary. So, you have to learn to do that with each camera. And every camera cut, you have to adjust the focus just enough to be alive, and looking down the barrel of the camera.

Right; all those intricacies.

So, that just takes time. It just takes exposure um, to—to the process to being ... all the details of what we do, it's very, very—

Well, it also doesn't look physically comfortable when we see you— I mean, and you're right up against other puppeteers.

Right. If you're comfortable, you're doing it wrong, is the rule of thumb [CHUCKLE] that we have among the puppeteers.

And yet, you love the work.

Oh, I love the work. Uh, there's nothing I'd rather do.

When you work with your gang on Sesame Street, everybody knows you're from Hawai'i, even though you haven't lived here for many years.

Yeah; yeah.

But you certainly visit.

Yeah; uh-huh.

But how do they know?

Well, I often have a flower in my hair, and I—I often dress in Hawaiian clothes. In the middle of winter, you'll see me in a Hawaiian print shirt with, you know, sweater underneath, and tights, and ... And I kinda talk about it a lot. And sometimes, I'll slip into a Hawaiian accent—you know, I'll do a Pidgin accent when they're giving me a hard time. Eh, what; I owe you money?

And you also created a character who speaks Pidgin.

Yes, I did. Um, we had an outreach kind of Baby Muppets series. And um, so it was Baby Big Bird, and Baby Cookie Monster, and Baby Abby Cadabby—different ones. So, I played Auntie Nani, Big Bird's auntie who took care of him as a baby bird. That was very exciting, and I was able to push that Hawaiian influence in. 'Cause then they said: Well, maybe we'll go Jamaican. And I go: Well, you gotta get a Jamaican person, because I can't do that one, for sure. But they liked the idea that he was from Hawai'i.

Nobody around you could really relate to the dialect, right?

Not too much. But they could understand it. That's the advantage to Pidgin; it's quite understandable.

M-hm.

Jamaican Patois—'cause I worked in Jamaica a fair amount, is almost—if they speak quickly, you will just not—you can't believe it's even English, 'cause it is so fast. And so, they also do much more in-words; you know, words that only they understand. But Pidgin is pretty understandable, by most—

And that was the whole point, right, in the plantation days, so that everybody could understand each other.

Each other; right. So, that was the basis for it.

It was here in Hawai'i where Pam Arciero, a creative since childhood, got her first taste of puppetry, at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa... and caught the attention of a visiting lecturer, a renowned puppet and costume designer.

I was getting a drama and dance degree at University of Hawai'i. The gals I was hanging out with at the University had a puppet troupe called Mo'olelo Ki'i 'Ilima. And it was kinda- more or less sponsored by the University of Hawai'i drama department.

That was Tammy Hunt was there at time, and she was wonderful uh, Theater for Youth teacher, and taught puppetry as well. And so, she encouraged us to do shows... ..and we would do—go out into the community and do these little Hawaiian story puppet shows for umm, pretty much every elementary. I mean, I played every elementary school in the State of Hawai'i. I'd been in every auditorium at that time. That just sort of led me to saying: Hm, this is interesting, this is good; I can make a little money. 'Cause we made a little money doing it. And then, they said: Well, this man's coming to teach this summer; maybe you want to be in it. And I said: What? And they said: His name's Kermit Love, he works with the Muppets, and he's coming to teach this summer course, so you should take it with us. So, I said: Okay, sounds great. And um, so I did, and he was wonderful. Kermit umm, was the man who built Big Bird, and designed Snuffleupagus, and he was a famous costume designer. At the time, he was already long white hair, long white beard; it looked like you were taking a class with Santa Claus. But he'd already worked with Agnes de Mille, and Mr. Balanchine at the ballet, he's built costumes and puppets for them. So, he was just world renowned, and you were just like: Oh!

So, he was named Kermit before any other Kermit.

Yes. The story is—Jim Henson and Kermit Love lived in the same apartment building, and the doorman said: You know, Jim, there's someone who's named Kermit in this building; I think you should meet him. And so, they met, and they realized that they had so many similar interests, and then Jim hired Kermit into the—

But there was already Kermit the Frog at that point.

Kermit the Frog existed, and Kermit Love was way older than that. So, that's how they connected.

Oh ...

And- and just- he was a wonderful influence; wonderful mentor.

And didn't he want you to get into puppetry right away?

Who?

Kermit Love.

Yes, he did. Probably 'cause I was really, like, gaga about puppets. Well 'cause once I found it, when you find what you love, you just can't stop, you know, obsessing about it. Just like being in love with someone, you're in love with what you're doing, so you just keep every- every detail. And then, I think because I was so willing to just learn, and

learn, and learn, and practice, and practice, and practice, hours, and hours, and hours standing in front of a monitor and camera to get that right. And I still do. I will still rehearse when I'm not working. If I haven't been on camera for a month, I'll pull out my video camera or—you know, now it's so easy 'cause you can flip up your computer and just work in, and make sure that everything's working properly in your body. Because the other thing, it's reversed; right? The monitor is backwards.

Oh, that's right.

So, when you have your hand up and you move this way, it goes that way on the picture. And so, if you don't have your—there's a point where your brain just clicks it over, and it makes perfect sense.

Physical agility, creative interpretation, and hours of practice – these qualities were instilled in Pam Arciero long before her time at the University of Hawai'i. Since she was a little girl, Arciero loved everything about the arts.

I always loved um ... dance and ballet, and play-acting was kind of what I did a lot of. And I loved playing with dolls and small figures, actually, as a kid.

And did you talk—did they talk to each other?

Oh, yeah. I—

Did you make the voices?

Yeah, not so much. But actually, I did; when I watched TV, I always imitated voices as well. That was really fun to me, to try and copy voices. So, of course, my parents thought that was an extremely odd thing, but they—you know: Go ahead. Um, and so ... as a kid, I never thought I would be anything—I thought I would be maybe a ballet dancer, uh, maybe an actress. I like to sing, I like to make stuff, art stuff, so I kinda just liked doing all of the arts. That was very interesting to me. Not so good on the math side, but—

What about singing?

Singing; I always sang. Yeah; I always sang a little bit. And you know, once I was in high school, I was in chorus, and all the different things. Um, and we did uh, acting, a little bit of the plays at Kalani. But everyone said: That's not a real job; what are you gonna do, what are you gonna do? And I just went: Well, I don't know, I don't know; maybe I'll be a ballet teacher, maybe I'll be a schoolteacher, maybe I'll be ...

I know your father was in the Army as an officer, and then he was a Matson executive.

Right.

Did he have any thoughts about what you should do?

His encouragement really would have just been—he was very much about being who you are. Which was kind of unusual in those days; right? He was a very romantic and—uh, soul. And I think—I think the war was very hard on him, which is why he would—you know, he'd often ... he'd recite poetry and go off on these kind of tangents with me. But like many World War II people, they never spoke about what really happened.

Right, there are not a lot of details.

There's no details about what it was, but you could just tell. He'd just go: You know, life is really short, you just can't.

That was that generation. They didn't talk about it.

It was that generation; they did not tell you what happened to them. They did not. So, they would react. And you know, like many men of his generation, they always—they would ... tie one on pretty frequently. You know, they'd get drunk, and they'd start rambling these different stories. But not much detail of what those stories were. But he would also do funny voices. And part of—I think my ability to get funny voices was to make him laugh, while I made funny voices too.

Oh ...

You know, and he loved humor and poetry, and dancing, and music. So, it was a—umm, a very—he was a very interesting man.

And what about your mom?

My mom is also—was also in arts and crafts. She loved Hawaiiana, she was always in a Hawaiian civic club or in a—um, what were they called, the U.E., United—they had ladies clubs in those days, and she was always starting one in the neighborhood so that they could learn how to make Hawaiian quilts, or they could make recipes and stuff. So, she was very uh, involved mom, and active um—

And so, both artsy parents.

Somewhat; yeah.

Arts-oriented parents.

Yeah, yeah. I guess that's true, in comparison to some others. Yeah.

You know, our parents did lots of backyard hula, luau kinda things, you know. Um ... and ... she was a very fun person. I just loved being with her. And she didn't really sing, but she would try. And like I said, she would sing with the Hawaiian Civic Club and do different things, and so, the inspiration was always, with her, the community that was happening. And her neighborhood community, all her—all my aunties in the neighborhood, they would have coffee every day together, and it was that kind of, you know, old school style.

Was she a stay-at-home mom?

She was a stay-at-home mom until I was about thirteen. And then, um ... during the war, she um ... her college education was interrupted by the war. So—and we all know what the war in Hawai'i 'The War'. Um—

World War II.

World War II; the only war. Um, and she always tells the famous story, I know many people have talked about this, being in boats and picking up on Pearl Harbor Day coming, picking up stuff. Um, and in fact, my grandfather, who was half Japanese, um, was driving by Pearl Harbor. He was a single guy, and uh, he had been at a girlfriend's house and was coming home.

It was about seven in the morning when—

Yeah.

--the bombs came.

Right. Um, and apparently, they spotted him and picked him up, and they arrested him.

Oh, for being AWOL?

No; for being a Japanese spy, they thought. And so, my father had to go and bail him out two days later once everything settled. They—they pulled him out of jail, took him home, and say: No, he's just—he's a dentist. You know. He's a local Japanese dentist. And he wasn't even all, he was half Japanese. So, um ... but she'd always tell story

about that—stories about that, and that, and you know, after Pearl Harbor, hel—helping to uh, recover bodies and parts, and stuff, you know, and boats.

And she did that?

She did that. She worked for U.S.E.D. We always sang that song when I was a kid.

U.S.E.D.?

Yes, you know. Fifty cents an hour, four bucks a day. Um ...

Mm.

So, she had those stories. And then, you know, my father was ... I guess everybody at that time was pretty much involved with the war in some form or another.

And what about culturally; what would you say your culture was, growing up?

My father, being Italian from the East Coast, brought certain sets of ideas. Some of it was sort of the macho Italian stuff. And then, my mom; she's, you know, Hawaiian, Japanese, English, kinda local stuff. So, our culture really was a mix of that. And uh, I would lean towards Japanese culture, was sort of where our comfortable wheelhouse was, and then a lot of Italian spaghetti stuff. So, I always like to say: I don't know whether to have sushi, or spaghetti. You know, is kind of where I came from.

And you had a big family, too.

Yeah; there was five of us. Is still five kids. Um, and that was ... you know, they were spaced out rather well; we're about five years apart, for the most part. So—

So, you get along.

Yeah. You have an—always an older—older sibling doing something. And it was bad. When I went to Niu Valley, every single class I went to, my three older siblings had had that teacher. So, they had expectations of what you were gonna be like, and it was like, I was never that—you know, whatever they—

You were different from the other kids?

Absolutely. Every one of us were different from each other, you know. So ...

How would you describe how you were in class?

Umm, I was kinda the loudmouth. I mean, I spent a lot of time being told to be quiet. Surprise!

And you built on that for your career.

I built on that. Yeah; that really made it ... you know, it's—it's who you are. Um ... and I think that's really one of the things always in my life, I've tried to strive for; just to be who you are. 'Cause you can't be anybody else, really.

But how ironic too, because you're always becoming other people, or other puppets—

That's where I become other people. That's where you get to look at other people, and make fun of other people. By choosing their character traits, and rolling them into a puppet. You know. Um ... an—and getting to explore—and really, every puppet is a part of you. I mean, there's that—you have to connect to it on some level, just like any acting role.

M-hm.

You have to find that part of yourself that connects directly to the character in order to make it believable and real.

These days, when she isn't bringing characters to life on Sesame Street and other programs, Pam Arciero travels around the world to perform live or train aspiring puppeteers. She's proud to serve as Artistic Director of the annual National Puppetry Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center.

I had no idea that being in your field, you would be asked to go all over the world to teach, and to—

Yeah.

--perform, and—

Yeah.

It's been—you've been everywhere.

Pretty much. Um, I... I'm lucky that way. I—I always wanted to travel. Um, and so, pretty much, I go and I work. I think ... the most unusual place I went, I put in a—a large acting show in Saudi Arabia. Um, and of course, there—this was about four years ago, three years ago. Um ... and they're very repressive of women, um, as you probably

know. Uh, I had to wear an abaya to work with my guys when we were outdoors. But it's a very schizophrenic thing, 'cause once you're indoors, you can take off the abaya, which is the black—the scarf and the black, and you can wear anything you want. And we would work and rehearse, and do all our things, and then once I stepped—once I had to go outside, I'd have to get all dressed up to even just get in a car to go back to my hotel. Um, and you had to eat separately; women eat separately from men there, if you're alone. Um—

Were the puppeteers squished up against each other, male and female?

No; they were the dancing ones. They were the big—

Oh, I see.

--dancing, and they were all male. There would be no females. Yeah. Females aren't allowed to work.

How did they like a female directing them?

The guys liked it, 'cause they were young men, and they keep—they all said to me: Pam, five years, it's gonna change; I'm telling you, it's gonna change. And I'm like: Yeah. But umm, I would do semi-submersive things—subversive things. Like, uh, if we did a song about driving, which we had a song called "Let's Go Driving In An Automobile," I made sure the one female character Khokha, which is umm, an Arabian character, she's in all the Middle Eastern productions—she drove the car. Because they couldn't drive; women can't drive. So, I made sure the girl was always the one driving. And then, we had this little thing where uh, Ernie and Bert teach you car safety. And if you go through—and all the things—seatbelt, and you know—

Mm.

--all the things about being safe in a car—don't hang out the window, then you would get a driver's license. And we made sure that every girl got a driver's license and would go home and say: Mom, look, I have a driver's license. Now, that just changed; right? They just recently changed to have driver's licenses. So, that actually is a li—more of a change than I expected. But the guys really said to me, when I—the guys I worked with really thought it would be completely different in five years, that it would be a much more open society. And I just think it's gonna take a lot longer than that.

What about women in puppetry?

So now, it is better. It's still not great. If you look at the Muppets, the main Muppet guys are still six guys. There's no woman there. But Sesame Street, we have five really strong

women puppeteers, and we have nine really strong men. That's our core of puppeteers. So, that balance has gotten much better. And it's a difficult thing, 'cause not—initially, not that many women wanted to be puppeteers. It sounded—You know, if you're an attractive woman who does a lot of voices, you can be a comedienne or an actress. Why would you hide under a puppet; right? And in fact, I was doing a show called *The Great Space Coaster*, and our guest was Steve Allen. And he was playing the piano, and I was hiding under the piano doing the puppet on the side of him. And the g—the human who was in our cast came out, and she—he's talking to her, and I'm talking with him as a puppet. And he looks at her and he says: Well, you're not a puppeteer; right? You're much too attractive to be a puppeteer. And so I stood up like this and looked at him, and said: What? And he goes: Well, I didn't mean—I said: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And got back under the piano and went back to being a puppeteer. But I didn't get insulted by Steve Allen. Not many people can say that.

And you stood up and said you wouldn't take that.

Yeah.

So, better, but there's still not a big infusion of women.

There's still not a lot. Yeah, yeah. I mean, we're working on it; we're tr—constantly looking for women who are skilled, and training new women in. And again, it takes a long time; you have to have the patience. And it's one of those things, either you have it or you don't.

Mm.

And there are some people who can train, and train, and work, and work, and they still don't have that natural feel for what—making the puppet alive. And you have to have that core. So, it is a kind of uh, unique-

Mhmm. Skill-

-skillset. But uh, I have traveled a lot, all over, um, directing those large dance shows, as well as teaching. Um, I teach at ... uh, Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, I've taught. I've taught at the uh, Taipei National University of the Arts. In Yukon, all over. Universe—University of Hawai'i. Um, and actually, I have a lovely University of Hawai'i thing that I love, which is Kermit Love came to teach the University of Hawaii puppetry, and I took that course, and that set me sail on a course. And then, I came back 30 years later to teach that same course to—at the University of Hawai'i.

And was there a young Pam Arciero there?

Kind of; yeah. No, not that I know, but yeah. But it was just really that ... it was completing that circle. I've been very lucky to have circles that complete in my life.

Pam Arciero has lived in Connecticut for more than three decades, but says Hawai'i will always be her home. Her two sons, both of creative minds, are pursuing an array of projects, including stand-up comedy, live music, film production, and video-game voiceover work. Of her husband, Steve Lanza, Arciero says: "He has been my biggest supporter and fan, and a guiding light when I need it." Mahalo to Pam Arciero for sharing her story with us – and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

Did you ever doubt yourself, that: Oh, maybe I shouldn't do this?

Oh, yeah.

Or maybe I'm not—

The first few years.

--good enough?

Oh, yeah; I still do. I still have my doubts. I'm like: What am I doing? How—how did I do ... you know, that's just part of the nature, I think, of being a performer, of constantly putting yourself out there, trying to put yourself out the best you can. And then, there are times when there is no jobs. Or you go to auditions—'cause I still audition; we all audition to get whatever roles it is. You go to auditions, and you leave and you just go: That was terrible; what—what was I thinking, that was an awful choice. And then, you don't get the job, and you go: Yup; definitely an awful choice.

Yeah.

You know. So, that's just kind of the way the business is. It's not easy. It's—it's a hard ... hard part of the business.

So, you have to have a thick skin and being able to take rejection, even now, after all this time in the industry, and all your accomplishments. And you have to have a thin skin, because you're dealing with children, and you have to be sensitive to that.

And you're acting; you have to ac—be able to access your emotions in order to really get it across.

So, you have to really feel.

I—yeah.

If you really want to do something, you just have to do it. And people are always gonna say: Well, that's not a good idea. And—but you have to say: Yeah, but ... I think if you do what brings you joy, and you continue to follow that, you will make it happen in some form or shape. In some ways, I guess people are just: Well, you're a girl, you can be a ballet dancer, who cares what you become. You're gonna be a mom, was sort of how—

Mm.

Ultimately, you're gonna be a mom, was sort of how the feeling I got from some people. And it was like: No, no, you don't understand; this is not about that, this is about expressing who you are through movement, through dance, through arts. And I knew that in—intrinsically, and I don't know why. But I did know that that—that was the key for me, was just to follow, to stay the course, to do what I wanted to do, and it would pay off eventually.

You didn't know what the end would be, but you—

No idea.

--knew this was the right thing to do.

Yeah, yeah; no idea.