

LONGSTORYSHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Jordan and Aaron Kandell

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It takes a lot of energy and effort to sail across the vast oceans of life to get to where you want to go, and if your worry and fear are energy trains from the focus that you need for the energy of that voyage, you have to go after what you love. What your curiosity leads you to, wherever that's going to take you as courageously as you can. And that's the only way you give yourself a chance of reaching that goal, even if it seems kind of impossible or not even crystallized for you.

Together, these Hawai'i born twin brothers continue to pursue their shared dream of making Hollywood movies. Aaron and Jordan Kandell next on Long Story Short.

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. I found it transfixing to listen to twin brothers Aaron and Jordan Kandell of Honolulu when they're in spirited conversation they are very much in sync and that's even when they don't completely agree. You don't know which one is going to finish the sentence. The brothers are almost inseparable in both their professional and personal lives. They joined the screenwriting team for the 2016 hit Disney animated film Moana, which features the voice of Dwayne The Rock Johnson. And they continue to write together as a dynamic duo and have recently begun producing Hollywood movies such as Adrift, which was released in 2018. Both twins have young families and they even live next door to each other in Mānoa Valley. Aaron and Jordan say their parents, Lloyd and Sherri Kandell, were hippies, originally from the U.S. mainland who once lived on the north shore of Kaua'i, a near Taylor camp, which was a clothing optional alternative community of people living in tree houses. The couple later moved to O'ahu and settled down in Kaimuki, and they were surprised when not one baby, but two babies arrived.

Being the hippie parents, they didn't do an ultrasound. They had sort of a natural doctor who just did a stethoscope, and Aaron, had we found out later he'd gotten sort of pushed up, probably kicked by me under my mom's rib. So that when they did the stethoscope, her heartbeat overpowered the sound of his. It was so close that they only heard one here and one here. So the doctor for her entire pregnancy said, you've got one.

But everybody, she was huge. I mean, we were like six pounds each. So she had this giant beach ball belly. And their joke was everybody but them and their doctor knew that they had twins.

Like, you know, o-

Aunties would come up to her at the beach or in the market and touch her belly and go twin when they actually had the births. She tried to do a home birth and it turned into an emergency. Rushed to C-section. And they pulled him out first. And their doctors were getting ready to stitch her back. They said, wait, we have another pair of feet in here.

Ohh...

Imagine not knowing that there is suddenly the doctor saying we see an extra pair of feet in there after they pulled me out. And so fortunately, it was him and he was healthy and they pulled him out. And for the first two weeks, we were baby A and baby B because they didn't know that, they didn't have names picked out. They had to get all of these se- new crib, new sets of clothes. It was just all a surprise.

Are you identical twins?

We don't know-

--Because of the surprise birth.

Yeah.

We never had the all of the you know, there's varying kinds of tests that you can do with the placenta or DNA when you're born that identify if you're identical or fraternal that we never had done in the rush of the emergency uhh, delivery. So we never actually verified-

Yeah, we don't know.

-to confirm if we're identical or fraternal. I assume we're identical.

Well, how do the dynamics work between the two of you? Was there a time when you didn't get along or that you I mean, how-

I mean, we're kind-

-has your relationship evolved?

I mean we're kind of Peter Pan and his shadow. Like if one of us gets too far away, the other chases them down and stitches them back to their feet. Uhh, we've always been that way. I mean, we've- We- all we know is collaboration. We've just had to share everything from the same room until we were 18. I think, you know, we were roommates in college. Uhh, we wished we had been able to take the same classes in school. Umm, and the first chance we got, we did. We've always been interested in the same everything. Same sports, same books, same girls, same career.

Ohh that sounds dangerous.

That was dangerous.

Same girls.

Yeah.

Sounds like that's the real story.

Yeah, well we had a- we've been, because everything's been collaborative. We've never really fought. It's just been like having a best friend all the time who thinks like you and looks like you, which you know could be narcissistic, but-

Yeah.

it's outside of you. So it's not.

And interestingly, the two girls I think we weren't both interested in at the same time became our wives like-.

Thats right.

His high school sweetheart is who he married. And I had a high school girlfriend. So I was never interested in her, any other girls at that time. And so that one ended up working out. But before he met his wife in senior year of high school-

Yeah.

Umm, one of our good friends set him up on a date in high school with, who became my wife. And they did not hit it off at all.

No.

They had like the worst date of each of their lives.

So this is good right?

Well, it'd worked out. Yeah-

This is a good thing.

Well, then two years later, when the same friends tried to set him up, I was like, its-whats- it's oil and vinegar. It's not going to work. What are you thinking? And then they just sparked-

Instantly.

-instantly.

Wow, who would've guessed that.

So it was a weird.

Yeah.

You know, a weird dynamic, how that worked.

This has been such a strength for you to have your friends, your family, you're professional collaborators. Is it ever a weakness?

Being twins?

The way you are twins,-

-okay, that's a good question. I-

--Because not all twins are as close.

I-I don't want to speak for other people that I would say it's probably more of a weakness, for everybody outside of the weird lynchian twin bubble that is our existence, because for us it's all we know. So anything that's not sharing and having it- like us going to a movie theater by ourselves to watch a movie feels weird. There was a moment, I think, when I was twenty seven where Jordan moved back here with his wife and I was still living in L.A. and I had uhh, and it was a year and I had a year of oh, this is what the human condition is, is being by yourself and having to find community. And like a deep sense of loneliness because I didn't have this like shadow attachment to me that I'd

always had of everything is a shared experience. So anytime you're sitting and eating a meal, that's with somebody else.

Right.

Umm, And- and so I think for other people to- Not y'know for our wives at first, like dating and having to get used to the fact that we were already born with our soulmates, so finding a second soulmate and bringing that into the mix is a weird alchemy. Uhh, that becomes, I think, challenging.

They're probably cringing hearing you call me your soulmate

Probably.

From a young age, Aaron and Jordan Kandell were very close and shared friends, sports and activities. But what influenced them the most was their shared love of reading and writing.

Whenever we had free time, whether it was at recess or a lunch or a soon as-eating-

we got home after school, we were just like this.

Yeah. Umm, We- I think we read a book a day and-

-And did 'Iolani homework?

Well, we didn't have homework until like fourth, fifth grade.

Yeah.

So those first y'know four grades was just our bookshelf literally collapsed from the weight of all the blocks we were reading. It was a lo-

Yeah, we'd read like 300 books a year.

It was crazy.

So you spent your early years reading, reading, reading, reading. At what point did that turn to writing?

Early too. Yeah.

Pretty early, I think from like second, third grade.

We have- I have a memory of getting an assignment that was write a three page, double spaced, huge kid print story that would take, you know, 15 minutes when you got home. And we each separate of each other went and just started writing and both turned in like a 30 page single spaced story the next day, because we just got lost in the world that we started to-

-And also we couldn't charge. So it was easier for words.

We still can draw. But umm, and so I have a very distinct memory of going, oh, like that was fun. And I just go where did the time go? And that was second or third grade. And ever since then, we-

What did your teacher say?

They were like, oh, wow, cool.

Future screenwriters and film producers Jordan and Aaron Kandell of Honolulu both pursued their love of literature and studied creative writing at the University of Southern California. However, they did not start off working together on screenplays.

Over the course of college, we discovered uhh, something you would think you would have known right off the bat, which is we loved writing- both of us. We wanted to work together. We both majored in poetry.

Which is not very collaborative.

No it is not.

We discovered very quickly that poetry is probably really the least collaborative form-

Right.

-of poetry you can do unless you're like- your entire [INDISTINCT] of work is Renzos. Which is a form training lines back and forth. Uhh, but there's very limited styles of poetry that are collaborative.

Right.

Screenwriting and TV writing especially are the most collaborative form of writing I can think of. Umm, and so we were studying those as well and started to write our first

screenplay in college together and thought, this is- this is so much fun and this is so natural-

Yeah.

-and combines kind of the best of what we loved in reading growing up. All these novels and these long form umm, stories-

Mhmm.

-with what we've been trained and are pulled towards in poetry, which is saying as much as you can in as few words as possible, which is very much the limitations uhh, that the screenplay form has about things with which words often are, you know, struggle to capture. And that's the visual medium of- of film and TV.

Yeah.

And so it kind of combined everything we loved into one form.

What did you do after you left USC? Having decided to become screenwriters, which is an almost impossible job-

Yeah.

--to get in Hollywood if that's where you're heading.

We ate a lot of peanut butter sandwiches.

Yeah. No. We came straight home and became teachers. Yeah.

That is true.

It is what we did. Umm, so we taught at Punahou and 'Iolani. Umm-

What did you teach?

I taught tenth grade English uhh, for a year.

And I taught ninth grade Spanish.

And then in the summers we taught and- and that was the first year. And then we started substitute teaching pretty much every subject you can think of.

Every grade, everything from kindergarten to like conducting the full orchestra without any orchestra experience.

And- but a lot of moviemaking and a lot of S.A.T. prep.

Yeah.

You're saving money, I'm taking it with all these teaching jobs.

Yeah. So we were- We- We would teach all day that first year and then write all afternoon when we were done grading and lesson planning and all weekend. Uhh, and then when we went to substitute teaching, we would try to maybe-

Just enough to survive. So like teach one or two days a week and then write the rest of it.

So we very much saw from the beginning writing as our full time job and teaching was something we loved and we're very passionate about. But our first and foremost uhh, pursuit was writing, and so that was allowing us to do the writing.

And were you also looking for those all important contacts to get you to the screen?

No.

No.

-Because we were here. I mean, there wasn't- We didn't- We were not guys born into it, connected in any way, had any uhh, knowledge or access for who to talk to to get there.

Even USC couldn't say, hey, lets- lets-

-I mean, USC was-

--Lets reach out for you.

-USC was great in giving us sort of the launch pad for what the screen writing format looked like. Umm, you know, but most of your teachers at USC were like, don't become screenwriters because that's what we want to do-

It's so hard. Yeah.

--And it's so hard. And, you know, if you love anything else and do that. That was their advice. Umm, so you- you had a sense of how daunting the mountain you had to climb was ahead. But you also, you know when you're 22 to 26, you have that sort of naive, I'm going to climb Everest and I can do it without oxygen or ropes. And here we go, which you need. And it's important to have that. And if we knew better, looking back, you know, in the 10 year climb, it took us to get to the top of Everest uhh, and the frostbite fingers that we have as a result. Like, we probably wouldn't have done it. But, you know, it's good to have that.

How many years exactly, teaching and writing?

The first screenplay we sold was after four years of writing and we sold it, like we got the call. We just started an S.A.T. quiz and there was a summer course we were teaching at Punahoa. And we gave the kids the quiz and then we got a phone call and it was Fox and Disney were both bidding on our first screenplay and we had to go out and close the deal in the 15 minutes they were taking this quiz and come back in feeling like very both excited and like we were maybe going to throw up-

-Panicked. Panicked.

--And then had to run the class as though nothing had happened and finish out the day.

After four years of working as teachers in Honolulu and writing screenplays eight to ten hours a day, Aaron and Jordan Kandell sold their first screenplay to a Hollywood studio. But that show was never produced and it would be another six years and several other un-produced screenplays before the Kandell twins finally saw their work on the big screen with the 2016 release of Disney's Moana.

As anyone who's done anything creative, countless rejection for years and years, thousands of no's before someone says yes. And if you're gonna take every no personally, it's how- I don't know how you move forward.

How many rejections did you receive?

So many.

A lot. It was so- It took four years to sell our first thing. We're like we made it. And then it took another four years till we sold anything else. Umm, and it took ten till Moana, which was the first thing that actually got produced and made, umm, came onto the screen. And so all of that, that whole ten year journey uhh, was informative and challenging, umm, before you kind of figure out how to read the swells and- and steer the canoe. Umm, it took that long to figure that out.

Do you think that that period of discipline and- and without a lot of- uhh, a lot of inst- no instant gratification there right?

Yeah.

Do you think that helped you make it for the long term?

I think we would have honestly-

-Preferred getting instant gratification.

Yeah, I wouldn't care. I would've loved-

And you can still do-

I would've loved the rocket launch straight into-

--|-

--the stratosphere.

Yeah. That would have been great. I think we would have done it anyway. I think we were succ- The success or financial success or any kind of recognition was never our motivation. Uhh, getting it is nice because it allows us to continue to do what we loved and not have to second guess and question how are we going to feed our families? Umm, because we are now getting paid to do what we always loved and were doing since second or third grade. Umm, but we would have done it anyway. For Moana we felt uhh, as fortunate to be called to it because it was not our idea. It was a project that existed for years, three years before we got the call to come and be a part of it.

Were you- Were you there to rescue it, to do trouble fixing?

Yes. So they had and it's not just the- it's typical of the Disney Pixar process, is that over the course of three to five years, usually four to five, they'll put the movie together anywhere from eight to ten times internally before it's shown to an audience, and-

All hand drawn.

-Hand drawn and all, you know, every- every three months. They're basically rewriting, re scoring, rerecording, redrawing and editing up a version of the film, not as animated as you see. It's sort of your old school sketch, flip book animation where Mickey's hand will move like this as you put the pages, but a whole rough cut of the movie. And so

they've done that for three years and the story had lost its way. And so they needed to find new writers to help them steer a course towards what the story was. And they had a lot of the tent poles- we'll call 'em- of the story. They had the girl named Moana. They knew that she lived on Motu Nui. They had all the characters kind of drawn and animated. Umm, so we knew that cast. Uhh, she was going to meet Maui. She was going to sail out and try to restore- Spoiler alert- Teka, Teka into Tefiti. But they didn't know why she wanted to leave. They didn't know why Tefiti had become Teka, and what would turn her back? They didn't know what the relationship with Moana would- and Maui would be or where she would find him or what they were sailing out to do. All of that was up in the air. And so we had to come in and help create all the story to connect those dots.

Isn't it interesting the storyline got lost along the way?

Mhmm.

Yeah.

After all that technical work and artistic work?

Well, a lot of animation is that same- They're all amazing artists, like the best artists you've seen. You'll be sitting talking story like this and they'll be drawing a caricature of you and showing it to you or you'll be talking about we'll say, well, what if they encounter these little coconut pirates? We'll call them the Kakamora and they'll be like, well, will they look like this? We're like, uhh maybe a..

Wow.

-And they'll, more like this? Yes. And they'll just be tossing photos behind them. They'll be just sheets of paper-

Drawing. Drawing.

--and drawing. And throwing, which is amazing because we can't draw. So for us. That was like magic of Disney come true before our eyes. Uhh, but-

-But yeah it's [INDISTINCT]-

--they start- they start with the visuals because they're all artists. So they get really excited about visual ideas. And then it's trying to find... We almost had to come in and be the story way finders and the navigators of the story to connect what these visual motifs and ideas could be through the character work, through the thematics and through the values of the experiences that we had growing up on the islands.

And this wasn't a Hawaiian movie.

No.

It's Polynesian.

[Both] Yeah.

But you really had a role to play in terms of making it authentic and not putting in the wicky, wacky cellophane hula skirts and- and language.

We tried. Umm, yeah. Uhh, we came in hoping to- There were characters that existed in earlier versions that we will not mention uhh, that were culturally insensitive, if not offensive, that we- we threw out. We said, you- you can't do this for- for these specific reasons. Umm, and we then tried to bring in kupuna and advisers like Nainoa Thompson to make the way finding elements as accurate as possible uhh, and to speak towards some of the cultural values we just grew up with that might drive Moana through her journey and in her interactions with Maui. And so, yeah, we played that small part as- as we weren't the only ones. They had uhh, a board, an oceanic adviser trust from all different island cultures of professors and performers who helped advise. But we did come in as-

-We banged the cultural-

--story tellers, yes.

We banged the cultural drums very loudly.

Do you think in words or pictures when you're a screenwriter?

That's a-

--That's a really good question. Uhh, both. I mean, I think-

-It starts with pictures.

It starts with pictures-

We have to see the movie in our head in order to put it on the page. And then basically the process of writing for us-

--Is recording. It's almost, you have to visual- you almost have to sit in the audience. You have to direct the movie and then you have to be able to edit it, and watch it. And once you can see a whole sequence or a scene, then you're just essentially reporting what you're seeing. But you have to go through that process-

So you have a story that you-

-Then you have to visualize it.

--But the pictures have to- you have to lead with pictures.

Yeah. I mean, it's such a- we're such uhh, visual creatures as humans. And the world has become so much more, like visual focus. There's so much media.

You know, you said you're collaborative. I assume that each of you has a role. Do your roles remain constant in terms of putting together a screenplay?

Uhh, it's pretty fluid. Yin Yang, We have different strengths. I'd say as writers and that depends on the day. Sometimes one of us is stronger at one thing than the other.

And you both recognize that that day one is stronger than the other at something?

[Both] Yeah.

Okay.

Yeah.

Yeah.

And in general, we have different strengths uhh, and- and weaknesses. I think Aaron is stronger with character and dialog and getting into kind of the core of how somebody expresses themselves in a unique, interesting, believable... Just getting at who those characters are and what they want. And my strength is sort of seeing the bigger picture of a story and structuring out what's going to happen and how we get there. And then writing-

-He's more of the architect. I'm more the interior designer.

Uhh, sorry, everyone who's not a twin. But it helps us be objective-

-Right.

Because we're constantly questioning each other's work, uhh, storytelling choices, quality of what we were putting out and just saying, can we make it better. We're poking at it.

And why are we doing this-

-That's right.

--And what do we want to get out of it?

And if you're by yourself, it would help to find somebody who can serve that role.

We'll break out a whole story. We'll sit and we'll talk or we'll go hiking through the forest and just talk and talk and talk and talk and figure out how we both see what the grand vision of it is. And then it'll usually be architecting it out, which he's very good at in terms of breaking an outline and detail. And then I'll come in and be, well, let's make this is kind of a cliché. Let's make this more original or fresh or have somebody say something in a way you wouldn't think. And so and then it becomes sort of breaking out and tackling sequences or scenes on the page.

Aaron and Jordan Kandell remain close in their everyday lives. If they aren't working on their next screenplay together, they're together surfing, hiking, watching a movie. We're spending time with their extended family.

It works. I mean, you both are married. Each of you has a child.

Yeah.

And then how do you- and you live next door to each other?

Yes.

Next door.

Very close, walking distance of-

-Like-

-back back fence kind of thing?

Yes.

Back fence.

Share. Share the same boundary line.

Okay.

Yeah.

So how does it work? I mean, because you're working together every day. And even if you weren't working, you'd be seeing each other every day.

Yeah. We're together almost all the time.

Yeah.

All day. We're usually together most of the day working, writing, meetings. Umm, and then at night we'll either all go to his house or he'll come to my house with his family to have dinner. We kind of trade back and forth. We trade taking the kids to school and picking them up.

They go to the same schools?

They don't yet because one, his is-

-Younger.

--too young, umm, but hopefully they will. Umm, and they very much are like sibling-cousins, we call them. They're so close.

And I've heard that the children call each of you uncle daddy.

Yes.

Daddy. And then Uncle Daddy.

Yeah.

That's right.

That's funny.

Yeah.

So what happens when a spouse wants to do something different than what you two want to do?

They usually win.

They win.

Oh they win?

Yeah.

Oh, yeah.

Yeah.

You defer.

Yes, definitely.

Yeah.

Yeah. Because we're together so often-

-Yeah.

-that it's only fair.

Yeah.

So you figured-

-Well-

--a way to make all of it.

Yeah.

They'll win the battle because the war, they already, know is lost.

Kind of seems too good to be true that you know, the wives would be happy and- and get this relationship and then- and then you two would get along so well.

That we would get along so well?

Yeah.

Yeah-

--Yeah, I mean, I- I don't know. I would attribute that to nature and nurture. I think-

Yeah, 'cause our parents were very uhh, they created an environment. We never really fought with our older brother. He was always super supportive and loving. And we just kind of-

-Closed it with him. Yup.

They just created a dynamic where it was you were all, y'know, on the same canoe paddling together.

As of this conversation in the spring of 2019, Aaron and Jordan Kandell are involved in a multitude of screenplays and film projects, including their dream project called The Golden Record, The True Story of Carl Sagan and his Creation of a Record of Life on Earth for 1976 NASA's Space Mission. Mahalo to Aaron and Jordan Kandall of Mānoa, O'ahu. And thank you for joining us for this edition of LONG STORY SHORT on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox, Aloha Nui.

Our mom has just followed her curiosity wherever it's led her for her entire life. So she's been really like-

The jack of all trades.

Yeah.

She's had- she had a different career every three to five years most of our lives.

And would you put that under the fearless category?

Oh, for sure. Yeah.

I think the two things we learned from our mom more than anything, is she always said growing up, the only thing you can control in your life is your attitude. Just everything else is a variable that you can't predict or control.

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