

GUEST: LORETTA ABLES SAYRE 1

LSS 302 (LENGTH: 26:46)

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Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. In the Diamond Head Theater production of Lee Cataluna and Keola Beamer's "You Somebody", Loretta Ables Sayre played Pua Lusa, a local diva whose ultimate goal in life was to be recognized by three-dot columnist Wayne Harada. Little did Loretta know that this story of destiny, family devotion, and dreams would turn out to be her own.

You know her as one of Hawaii's most talented jazz vocalists who's performed for the likes of Neil Sedaka, Dick Clark, and Karen Carpenter. She's an actor with roles in Magnum PI, Birds of Paradise, North Shore, and Bay Watch Hawaii, and she's appeared in many local commercials, most notably playing the role of Loretta in the Bank of Hawaii, Harry and Myra spot. But you might be surprised to know that Loretta Ables Sayre, well versed in Pidgin English, able to play the role of Auntie in so many television shows, and who can forget Pua Lusa in "You Somebody", was not born in Hawaii.

No, I was born in Stockton, California. And my stepfather was in the Navy, and we got transferred over here when I was uh, just beginning second grade. Um, and it was Pearl Harbor Elementary that I went to, but it was close enough to Aliamanu [chuckle] to have to learn how to speak Pidgin. I really did, you know, and you have to—uh, I remember the first day of school, we went home, and we were telling uh, my mom, The—the kids talk funny over here, they—and they don't wear shoes. 'Cause back then, we didn't have to wear shoes to school. They—uh, they—we didn't even have to wear slippers. And I was from, like I said, California, where everybody dressed up on the first day of school. And um, within a month or two, you know, it was, li' dat, and dakine, with everybody else. An—and that—that put me in an interesting place too. Because uh, I was a military child being raised in Pearl Harbor, but looking the way that I look; I looked just like the local kids. So at that early age, I think I kinda learned how to straddle, you know, the different worlds an—and tried to be a part of both of them, much like I do in—in my life now, still.

Well, tell me—uh, y—you talked about your stepfather, but uh, what about your uh, birth father?

My birth father um, was—oh, boy, where do you start with him? He uh, is from the Philippines, and he only had a sixth grade education. He ha—uh, he

became uh, a fisherman to help raise um, his siblings and help his family out, and then he joined the Army in the Philippines, an—and fought uh, with the US during World War II, and decided to come to America to have a better life, and he moved to um, Stockton, California. He was a field laborer. And he worked his way up, eventually, to be a bookkeeper. Um, but he went through—I mean, he was in there with the farmers, and uh, was run over at a—with a tractor at one point, and um, so he really had a—a dream to have a better life in America, much better life than he had.

He married a much younger woman.

Yes.

Your mom.

My mom. Um, my father was forty, and was um ... uh, working as a field laborer for—for one of the fields that my mother's father uh, ran. And she grew up in a very, very abusive household. Um ... extremely so, where—where um, at a certain point in her life, she really—many poi—many times, but as she got older, she really thought that each beating was going to be the end of her life. And the only way that her father, her parents um, but especially her father would end that beating of the kids, which was a daily occurrence, was when the other girls—when the older girls got married. And my mom knew the only way that she was gonna stay alive is—is—is if she were to get married. And she had met my father, they really didn't have a romance, but he was aware of the situation, and he proposed to her one day. And she ... uh, acted as though she were going to go to school, and he um, picked her up, and they went to San Francisco, I think it was, and they got married. He was—

So—

—forty, and she was fifteen.

So in effect, he was taking her out of an abusive—

Yes.

—situation. That was the—

And the—

—the plan.

--beatings ended then. Because at that point, if you were married, then you were the responsibility of someone else. And—and her father uh, would stop that. It—the beatings went on for all the younger kids. But it was the only way that she could get out of—of her situation.

And did they get along after that?

They—well, as much as you possibly could. I mean, you have to—I'm sure she was grateful that he saved her life, you know, an—and got her out of that. But at the same time, she never really had a childhood, so she was in a crash course to become an adult. Uh, they got married at fifteen, she had my older sister when she was sixteen, and um, uh ... three or four years later, had my brother, and about four years later uh, had me. And um, at that time, you're talking about living in a small town. This is um ... late 40s, um ... 1950, around there. So the fact that she was alive um, she had a husband uh, who was working, she

had these three kids, she of course was a housewife. But she yearned to do something else, she yearned to travel, and she always yearned to live in Hawaii.

M-m.

That had been her ch—her childhood dream; she had always wanted to come to Hawaii. Um, an so they made the marriage work as much as they could, but there was such uh, uh, a vast age difference between them that it did eventually take its toll, and they got a divorce, and she married my stepfather a couple of years later, and they had two more kids. And he, um ... well, it was time for him to get transferred, and he asked her where she wanted to go. He had three choices, and she—he said, What are your three choices? And she said, Hawaii, Hawaii, Hawaii.

And was that a love match?

Yes; very much so. Very much so. And I'm really fortunate, 'cause I had uh, a father who was incredibly loving. Um, I think now on how hard that must have been for uh, him to stay in California, and to have his three kids taken to Hawaii at a time where there wasn't money for us to travel back and forth to see him. But like I said, we always had the communication, we always um, uh, had this wonderful bond and love. But I'm always really fortunate, because my stepfather was very loving too; took us right in, without question—without question of race. Now we're talking um, early 60s. My stepfather was younger than my mother, he was in the Navy. And he married uh, a divorcee who was um ... seven years his senior, had three children. He was Haole, German, from St. Louis. My mother uh, is predominantly uh, Filipino-Spanish-French, Chinese also. And um, married her and took us in as we were his own children, and ... never treated us in any other way than that; totally, completely accepted us as—as his children.

Did you have a continuing relationship with your father?

Yes, yes; very, very much so. Um, well, I didn't go and see him again, I think, until I was um, in high school. I was probably in tenth grade before we went back again. And it was—we used to write him all the time. Back then, long distance phone calls were very expensive, so we didn't do a lot of that; but we did write all the time. And—and I smile when I think of that, because I still have letters of his that he wrote uh, when I was growing up, and I have the very last letter he ever wrote to me. And my father had impeccable uh, penmanship; impeccable. And I remember one year, my sister and I stayed up—we were visiting him, and we stayed up until, oh, probably one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, interviewing him. Because when you live in Hawaii, an—and he's in California, there's so much that you don't know. An—and so we knew the only way that we were gonna find out was to ask him all of these questions. So we wrote down uh, all these questions, and we wrote his answers down. And we were surprised to find out that the village that he grew up in was so poor that they didn't even have paper and pencil in his school, that—which was in a hut. The teacher had on the board one of those uh, penmanship charts that we all grew up with, with those two solid lines and the dotted line in the middle, and all

the dotted lines that showed uh, the capital A in script, and then that dotted line with the small A. Sh—the kids would have to draw those lines in the dirt, and they were given uh, a bowl of rice grains, and they would have to make these letters in penmanship with grains of rice. So until the day he died, he had the most beautiful penmanship. And I remember reading those letters when I was young, and just marveling in the way that he wrote.

What did you want to be when you grew up? I mean, uh, every kid gets asked that, every kid has to consider it, and most kids go through a whole laundry list of things that they have to discard along the way. What happened—

Right.

--with you?

Uh, the only thing I ever wanted to be was a singer. I—I wanted to act also, but ... I mean, the only thing I ever wanted to be ... to the point of ... existence; it's the only thing that I ... ever could do. [chuckle] I mean, really. I was never much of a typist or anything like that. You know, and you go back to when I was growing up, the—the 60s and the 70s, um, the goal for—for women and for female children was not to aspire to be the doctor, but to be the nurse; or uh, was not to be the president or the CEO of the company, but to be the secretary. You know, if you got a job doing that, that was really something. Um ... and all I ever wanted to be was a singer. Uh, when my family would go to bed at night, I would sneak down into the living and put albums on the stereo and put the headphones on, and listen to music until the sun came up. It was that—my private time. If they were gone from the house, I would put these records and sing. And there was something about that ... catharsis of singing that ... that, when music goes into your body and gets filtered through your soul, and comes out of you, and it releases all of these emotions, it was so right. My—my soul was singing when I was three years old, four years old. It's just all I ever wanted to do.

So it wasn't the sound that—that—it—it wasn't the sound that appealed to you that you made, it was how it made you feel inside.

Right. Exactly; exactly. And then I realized that the sound is important [chuckle] somewhere along the line. It gets important, so you want to work on that. But always, for me, it was um ... it was about ... not necessarily the performance; it was just the—the release that my soul had, to express these things. I didn't—I didn't know what heartbreak was at four years old, I didn't know what—that—that was. Or maybe—maybe I did. But um, of course, I had not gone through those emotions, but there was something about these songs that touched my soul, that moved me so much.

What kind of songs were they?

Oh, gosh. When I was growing up, we listened to a myriad of music. Really kind of very well rounded in that we had classical music, we had uh, um ... uh, theatrical uh, productions. My stepfather listened to country and western, we listened to um ... R & B and pop, and rock, and the Beatles, and Motown. And—but the real love for me was listening to jazz standards, to listen to my

mom's collection of Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sara Vaughan, and to sing along with those records. And um ... uh, I remember this one particular record that my mom had, a Dinah Washington album; and she had a song on it called "Where Are You". And there's no intro to the song, except for her voice, just ringing out from silence. This ... [SINGS] Where are you, where have you gone without me. And I just would sing that, and feel that. I didn't know what it was, and I guess now the best way that I can say—uh, put it into words is the passion. That even then, there was that passion inside of me that connected to what they were singing, and I always knew that that was the kind of music that, as much as I loved all the different styles of music, that was the kind of music that I wanted to sing.

And did you say that you have never received professional voice training?

No, I haven't. Uh, when I was in high school, I did take two lessons, and the teacher um, was very ... classic—uh, her—her background was classical training. And that really wasn't the kind of music that I had wanted to do, and it just didn't feel right, and so I didn't go back. Plus, we didn't really have the money when I was growing up to go to uh, voice lessons either. There were five of us kids, and my uh, mom worked fulltime, and my stepdad was in the Navy, and it was enough putting food and clothes, you know, out for all five of us kids. So—

Well, would you say you were a natural, or would you say you trained yourself?

[chuckle] I—I think ... training myself and through um ... observing, I think, is probably the best way. Uh, and I have learned that that's what a lot of actors do after all of their training, their formal training. It's really just sitting back and observing people, and really watching them and listening to them. And I think I did that musically and theatrically.

You—you did the listening throughout your childhood.

Right; exactly. That's how I learned to sing, an—and learned—I didn't know how to do it technically, but I could hear the sound that was being produced, and you just kind of try to learn how to do the same thing, and try to make that same kind of quality, um ... uh, in your own style, but that same kind of quality come out in—in singing.

Now, you went to Pearl Harbor Elementary.

Right.

And then?

And then Aliamanu Intermediate, and then Radford High School. And I never went to college after that, because um, I just started singing. I just started working.

You were able to make a living in singing out of high school?

Isn't that crazy? Actually, I worked for a short time at uh, the Navy Exchange as a sales clerk. Um, I worked as a cashier at the—the Trattoria Restaurant on Kalia Road. Uh, but all that time, singing anywhere that I possibly could. And um, interestingly ni—interestingly enough, I had a drama teacher at Radford, Patrick Dickson, who um ... I did all the school productions that—that he would put on.

And he always encouraged me to sing; always. And he would tell me um ... you know, there's less than ten percent of people that go into this business are gonna make a living out of it; less than ten percent. And probably ten percent of that ten percent, maybe, will become successful at it or will have careers at it. And I would say, I know. And he would say, But I think you should continue doing this, because I think you could be part of that percentage. And he always encouraged me in it. And just before I got out of high school, he started performing professionally; he was working at Benihana's uh, Tokyo in the Hilton Hawaiian Village. He was playing the piano there and singing here, and he was doing quite well. And he used to have me come down and sing with him. And eventually, he was offered the job to be Keola and Kapono Beamer's uh, musical director for their show that they were gonna be doing at the Ocean Showroom. And he said, They're looking for somebody to seat people and, you know, all of that; are you interested in doing that? And of course, it meant—if it meant peripherally working in the business where I was gonna be surrounded by music, I was in, I was there. So I was working these unbelievable hours, from you know, eight o'clock in the morning until one o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the morning. I'd go home and sleep, change my clothes, and be heading out again. I would do sales for them during the day, and then seat people that came to the show. And uh, they had shows all during the week, but on Fridays and Saturdays they had two shows at nine and eleven. Andy Bumatai, who was their warm-up act, had a show at one o'clock in the morning. And ... that's when people used to stay up 'til one o'clock in the morning. [chuckle] And uh, uh, he asked me one night if I would come up and sing, and it just so happened that Keola and Kapono finished their show, and they stayed and watched his show that night. And uh, my teacher, who was now my good friend, um, Patrick Dickson, played the piano, and I got up and sang. And Keola called me up the next day and said, um, We've never done this before, but we would like to offer you the position as uh, a featured female vocalist in our show. And ...

So it was Andy Bumatai who in effect discovered—

Really. He was the one that discovered—

The—the person who was already employed by the Beamers.

Yes; yes. Isn't that crazy? And then eventually, Andy left their show, and went to the Royal Hawaiian. And he took me with him, and I was his opening act. So it's just been an—this interesting—the way things weave together, um, all along. Um, and then somehow ... uh, I've been able to continue doing that.

You have, in—in fact, um, been a featured singer at some of the classiest hotels in Hawaii, and for long periods of time.

Right.

Now, given that there is a lot of talent in Hawaii, how did you manage that?

Uh, boy. By ... trying to not take it for granted, first of all. Because you're absolutely right; there are in—incredible singers in town, and I know that any one of them would be able to do what uh, what I was doing there. What I tried to do was be as professional as I possibly could, be true to myself as a performer,

and do music that was true to me, and not try to water it down to appeal to everyone. You know, there's a lot of singers that do something really well, but they think, Well, gee, uh, reggae music is really big, and I think I'll add some of that in. And then they mix it in, and they kinda lose focus on who they are. I think I knew ... who ... my demographic was as far as the people that would come and listen to my kind of music, and try to maintain my standards as a performer, as a human being, as a singer, um, and do my best to represent the places that I worked also in the same way. And be as consistent in that professionalism um, as much as I possibly could, and really not take the job for granted. I—you know, I don't know how—uh, a lot of people seem to do that nowadays, and I'm just—I think I've always been grateful to have the job. And I try to give the audience and my employer the same respect that I would hope that they would give, you know, back to uh, my fellow musicians and myself.

You know, you've—you've been associated with these very classy settings and evening—

Shocking, isn't it?

--[INDISTINCT] and piano.

[chuckle]

But everyone says about you, you're so humble, and you're so good fun.

[chuckle]

What happened to diva temperament?

[chuckle] Um, divas don't work a whole lot.

[chuckle]

So, I mean, you know, that's the truth of the matter, is um ... when there is such uh, a ... grand group of singers that these top hotels could choose from, if you want to put up a little diva attack, uh, they don't have the time to put up with that. Because there's a dozen more singers behind you that are willing to do just as good of a job, if not better, and be more professional. And I just never ... took my work for granted in that way. Um, I really wanted to keep—like I said, keep up the standards for myself, as well as my fellow musicians, and as well as my employers. Because—

Had—had you seen people blow opportunities?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, uh, it—it wouldn't be good to name names, but uh, definitely, I have seen um, singers, male and female, who ... just wouldn't show up for work. And that's shocking to me. I mean, no matter where you work; no matter where you work. And especially nowadays, you think of—of uh, how many people that are out of jobs. You have to really make sure that you do your very best. And ... you know, there—there are a lot of performers that think that you have to have this diva attitude for people to respect you. And I think it actually works against you. Because this really is—it—it's an island, and ... everybody knows everybody, an—as well as the people that come to see you perform, as well as the—your employers. And they all talk. And you—you build up and you maintain the kind of reputation, um, that you

want. And if you're gonna have that kind of diva attitude, they don't have to keep you.

Is it hard to meld the two skills when you're in a musical, and you've gotta act and sing?

Um ... it probably isn't difficult if you're good at both of them. [chuckle] I, of course, am much more comfortable with the singing part than I was with—with the acting. And so it helped that we have, uh ... uh, this incredible director, Bartlett Sher, who directed *South Pacific*, who um, knows how to bring those things out.

How did he bring that out in you, what he wanted from you?

You know, that's one of the wonderful things about living here in Hawaii, is that um ... it's sounds so cliché, but we are ... so mixed. All of the races are mixed, and—and like, we've all grown up kidding each other because of—of the different racial backgrounds we are, but at the same time, you never know ... what that other person, what their mix is, they don't know what yours is, so it has to be in good fun. You can't go through life hating everybody, and you know, holding things against them. But at the same time, you get to uh, observe your Chinese friend's grandma, and your uh, your Samoan friend's mother, and all these different mixes and ... somehow, you kind of glean from all them, and they all become part of you. So it does help in that acting, because um, uh, you have to pull out these little characters. In fact, that's one of the things that got me in the role that I'm doing now, is uh, the director is um ... was raised in Seattle, lived in Seattle, but his mother had married a local boy. And uh, they—during his teenage years, he had come over here, and he had extended family here, so he knew Chinese aunties, and Japanese aunties. And so when I was auditioning for this role, he was saying, Tell me about these women; you know, show me characters or characteristics of these women. It was—that was very easy to tap into, 'cause you have aunties of every color, and every voice sound, and you have the low ones like this, and you have the ones with that shrill voice that's—

[chuckle]

--cut right through you, and ... they're all part of you.

And why not look in the Pacific for ... someone to star in *South Pacific*.

And how grateful I am that they did. [chuckle]

This is just Part 1 of our conversation with Loretta Ables Sayre. In Part 2, we'll find out how she met the love of her life, her husband David. And she'll tell us how, despite her doubts and fears, she stepped onto the biggest stage and actor could ever dream of, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. It's a story that could itself be a Broadway play. Thank you for spending this time with us. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

I remember when I was anchoring a morning show where I think the audio uh, check was at 4:30 a.m., and you were a guest one Aloha Friday morning.

[chuckle]

And you came in, and you were in a great mood, and on time, and um, and you did a wonderful job, as you always do.

Oh.

And then I don't know if you remember this; this was years before you met your husband, David.

[chuckle]

At the very end, I think I asked you, So anything else? And you said, Yes, uh ... if you'd like to—you addressed the camera and you said, If you'd like to date a pudgy Filipino—

[chuckle]

--give me a call. And so we just laughed, and the show went off the air. And I said, That was funny. And you said, I'm serious.

[chuckle] Yeah; exactly. Boy, you gotta be—you know, you just seize that opportunity when it's there.

GUEST: LORETTA ABLES SAYRE 1

LSS 303 (LENGTH: 28:06)

FIRST AIR DATE: 08/04/09

Loretta Ables Sayre has gone from singing backup for Keola and Kapono Beamer to performing jazz standards at some of Hawaii's classiest nightclubs. As an actor, Loretta has been Auntie in numerous television shows, and she's played the role of Pua Lusa in "You Somebody" as no one else can. And now, she's on the world's biggest stage.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to Long Story Short. You know, most times in life, we get to choose our own path; whom we marry, what our career is. But sometimes, destiny takes over. Just when you thought your life was what it is, what it always will be, you meet someone; and that someone affects your life in a way that you never imagined. This is the story of Loretta Ables Sayre, and destiny.

So at some point, David Sayre came into your life.

Yes.

How did that happen?

Oh, my gosh. Um ... by the grace of God, really. I—I uh, was singing at the Halekulani, and had some friends tha—uh, couple of girlfriends that uh, worked with this guy, and um, they were hap—they happened to be coming in to see me that night at work. As it happened, uh, they were bringing in a young girl uh, a cousin of—of one of them who was graduating from college. Anyway, I was working; I was sitting down talking with them, and I got up to do a set. And so it was this couple—husband and wife, and this girl sitting at the table. And while I was working, this guy came in and joined them, s—who I assumed was her husband. And um, I s—walked up to the table when I went on break, and I was a little sassy that night. I know, shocking again.

[chuckle]

Uh, and I walked--You? [chuckle] Who'd have thunk? I walked up to the table where he was sitting, and um ... sh—my friend said, By the way Loretta, this is David. And I said, Hi, David, you're sitting in my chair. And he kinda looked at me; and I said, It's okay, I'm an—I'm a Filipino in an evening gown, I can get my own chair, don't worry about it. And I went over and grabbed this heavy teak chair and dragged it across the room. And he let me.

[chuckle]

And I dragged it over, and I sat down. And we picked up the conversation where we had been talking before, and he was funny and sweet, and he was making me laugh. And I remember thinking, fleetingly in my head, um ... having this little conversation with God really quickly, that you know what, she is so lucky. She—if I could meet somebody like this, this would—[WHISPERS] God, you know, this guy, somebody like him. And by the end of that night, it was very clear that he didn't even know her name, and he ... handed me his business card, and I didn't what to do with his business card. Uh, it said, PR. I said, What do I do, call you if I need PR? And he said, Or you can just give a call. Oh ...which I would never do. And um, and he left, and I just couldn't get this guy out of my head. And I had a very dear friend that was visiting town who said to me, You know what, you're gonna call that number on that card, and just say hello to him. And I said, Why? And he said, 'Cause I don't want to hear uh, six months from now, I wonder whatever happened to that guy? So I uh, was shaking, and I called this number, his business number, and I said, It was really nice meeting you, I hope you come and see us at the club, we're every there—we're there every night except for Sunday, Monday. And I hung up. And got that out of the way. And he called back. And um, met my friend and I for uh, um, cocktails on my night off. And I was so afraid that he was going to be y—yet another ...

Dead end.

Yes. [chuckle]

Had you talked to your girlfriend? Was she doing some communicating—

Oh—

--with the both of you?

--no, actually—uh, no, she wasn't. She wasn't at this point, 'cause this happened very, very quickly. In fact, I think I did call her the next day and leave a message for her saying, I need more information about him. Um, 'cause we didn't have Google back then. [chuckle]

Right.

And—and uh, as it was, on uh, our next—I believe it was eight dates, we dated for two months before we even kissed. And every time he called me up to ask me out to dinner, I would bring a chaperone along. I would make an excuse that I have a girlfriend—

What's with you? Why?

Well, because at this point, I was thirty-nine years old, and I had been through the dating thing, and just wasn't interested in going there again. If they were gonna come into my life, I wanted to know exactly who they were. No more the stupid, cutesy, flirting thing. Who are you as a human being, an—and what's important to you? So every time he would call me up, I would have this friend. Because if you have a friend there, you can't be stupid. And we would talk about everything that was important in life; we talked about politics, uh, the things you're not supposed to talk about; politics, and uh, abortion, and religion,

and all of those things. And by the time we finally did have our kiss, I knew who he was, and I knew his soul.

What was he thinking all this time? Did he think, Wow, does she like me or not?

[chuckle]

Why do we always have to have a chaperone?

Well, I'm sure he was thinking that; I'm sure he was thinking that. Um, he actually says that he knew from the first night that we met.

That?

That we would be married, that I was the one. In fact, I just asked him that question again the other night, and he sticks by it. He says that he just knew.

So you make a happy match at age—uh, in your forties.

Right.

And you become a Broadway star at age fifty.

God is good. It's incredible; it's incredible.

Well, you say God is good.

Yes.

Some might say, God was a little late.

[chuckle] No, God's timing is perfect. Because uh, you know, if it had happened at any other time in my life, I probably would not have been prepared for it. And uh, for this role to come into my life when it did, uh, I could not have been twenty-five years old; they were looking for um, a Polynesian woman, um, from the South Pacific, who was in her uh, between forties to fifties, who could be the mother of a daughter somewhere between seventeen and twenty-two years old. She ... had to have—uh, she had to have this ... life experience behind her where she knew how to go toe-to-toe with men in the 1940s, when women didn't do that. Um, they were just looking for all of these things, and I was at a place in my life where uh, I knew who she was inside. And then the opportunity came around, and—

Which you almost passed up.

Which I almost passed up, were it not for my husband, who kept insisting that I go. And I thought it—um, it was a wonderful opportunity that was coming this way, but I really thought that I would be making a fool of myself by going to this. Because I have not studied acting; I've never studied acting. In fact, for that matter, I've never really studied singing professionally either; I just kinda did it. And this opportunity came, and I really didn't think that I was prepared, and up until the last half hour before I was supposed to be there. So my husband said to me, I'll drive you down there, and you sing the songs, and you work on it, an—and just do your best. And uh, Donald Yap had made uh, a cassette tape for me uh, of the musical accompaniment for Bali Hai. 'Cause we had to sing that at the audition. And we put this in the car, and I'm singing along with this at the top of my lungs, and I'm trying to memorize the—the sides of the—the script. And um—but I was just thinking, you know, all these other incredibly talented women from Hawaii are gonna be at this audition. And when I got into the

theater to sign up, there was Marlene Sai sitting there, who ... is only an icon, you know, in—in—

She was auditioning as well?

She was auditioning as well. And she had just played this role um, with um, Hawaii Opera Theater, and so of course, she knew the character much more than I did. I had done the music for the show in conventions many years ago, but had never portrayed the role in a stage production. And so she was there. Uh, I heard that Karen Keawehawaii had also been called, Sonya Mendez was there. Um, there were all these wonderful, wonderful performers. And so to put my name on that list, I was just thinking, [WHISPERS] What am I doing here? Why am I signing this list? And I really didn't think that I had a chance at all. And we get called into the room to audition one at a time. And when I walked in, I said to them, I have not had the time to memorize this, may I use the script? And they said, Yes. And I just thought, At this point, all I can do is just give them what I can, 'cause I—I—I don't have this memorized, and ... I went through this whole so—the—through all the scenes. I did Bali Hai. I'm thinking to myself, This is the one chance for a casting director to hear me, I'd better belt this last note. So I belted the last note. An—and as I left, the guy that was videotaping said to me, You did a really wonderful job. An—and that made me feel very good.

M-hm.

But I walked out of the room; there was a trash can, and I had this packet, and I thought, I'll never hear from them. And I almost threw all of the stuff in the trash can. And then I thought, No, I'm gonna hold onto it just in case. And I went up to the stage, and started my rehearsal for "You Somebody" there at—at Diamond Head. And I was just relieved to be finished with it. And I thought, You know, it was a chance that came, it was an opportunity. I was glad David talked me into it, I was glad I did it. But now I'm glad I'm over it, so that I can get back to rehearsal for this show. And two days later, my phone rang, and—

Two days?

Two days later, my phone rang, and uh, it was this casting agent. And he said, I just want to let you know that you have been selected by the director um, Bart Sher, for a call back audition in New York for a principal role in a Broadway show. And he knew how important it was to me that he said that, and he spoke it that slowly, and I still—I couldn't re—I didn't respond to him. And he said, Are you there? And I said, Yes. And he repeated it again. He said, You've been hand selected, you've got a call back. And I could not believe the words that ... I—I ... was gonna be seen in New York; it was so overwhelming to me. And I said, Who else got a call back? And he said, No one. Um, you—you got the call back from Hawaii. And I just [SILENT SCREAM] burst into tears. Because ... I know how talented these women are here, and ... I know that they are just as talented and ready for an opportunity like this. And that it would be given to me, that it was my responsibility for myself, and for them, to do the very best that I possibly could. Just because, how often do any of us from Hawaii get an opportunity like this? So um, I cried my eyes out, and I called my husband, and I

think somewhere between the sobs he understood what was going on. [SNIFF] But as I was talking on—uh, to this—uh, the casting agent, I was taking all this information down on a scrap piece of paper, 'cause I wasn't home when he called. And um, a couple months ago, my husband found that piece of paper, and he framed it.

[chuckle]

So we have that receipt at home, where I have the casting agent's name, and the dates when they were flying me there. And um, so I got there to—to Lincoln Center. Never did I think that I would ever be called to audition there, that they would even ... think that—to hire me for a role to perform there. So to stand on those ... hallowed grounds for—for performers, because um, it is the home of the New York City Ballet, the Metropolitan Opera, Avery Fisher. All the greatest musicians and performers in the world have aspired to um, perform there, and have performed there. And uh, I held David's hand, and we cried and cried before I even went to this audition. Uh, so we—I went downstairs, and it was like a scene from Flash Dance, in her audition where's these huge tables and there's four people sitting behind the tables, and they have uh, legal pads in front of them, and they ask you to come into the room. And basically, the director said, Hi, I'm Bart Sher. Uh, are you ready? Let's start with a song; sing Bali Hai for us. And it was one of the most stressful things that I had ever been through in my life. Um, they were taking notes, and I could barely sing. I had all the classic signs of panic; you ca—can't breathe, uh, your mouth goes dry and you're supposed to have your big audition and sign. And uh, it was—I really thought I did horrible. They asked me to sit outside for ten minutes, and then they called me back in and they said, Your big um, uh, call back audition—which I didn't know there was a big one, I thought this was the only one—was supposed to be on Friday. This, I believe, was on a Wednesday when I was there. It was supposed to be on Friday, but there has been a conflict of—of uh, schedules; we would like you to come back on Monday. And I said, That's fine. And the director said, Well, since you're gonna be here, can you come back tomorrow, and we'll just work on this, an—and we'll work with the musical director um, on the song, and we'll just kinda play around with this? And I said, Sure. But I really thought that I had just—they were just trying to utilize my time. And I left the theater, and I thought I had done so poorly that David came to pick me up, and I couldn't talk about it. Uh, for hours, I couldn't talk about it. And we went to dinner that night, and I finally tried to tell him about how horribly I had done, and I cried all the way through dinner. Because I—I really brought all the insecurities that you bring as a performer with you, uh, when you don't have any formal training in this. I didn't have anything to fall back on. And um, and then I realized in talking this out with him that, you know what, I can only be who I am, and bring the experiences that I have in my life with me to this audition. They didn't ask if I was a Julliard graduate; they didn't ask who my acting coach was.

It was all about performance.

Exactly. And so I went back the next day, and this—our director, Bart Sher, said, Let's just try it from different angles. So I had the scenes memorized, and he said, Let's make her happy. I want you to do all of these scenes, but make her happy. Nothing gets her down; nothing. I want you to just make her joyful and gleeful through the whole thing. So I went through all th—this material, making her just sizzling with excitement. And then he would listen to it, and he'd say, Okay, now let's do the change; I want you to make her as angry as you can possibly make her. I want you to swear at me; the words aren't there, but I want you to swear. Use every word that you can think of.

What words did you use?

All the ones that we're not supposed to use on television. [chuckle] Um, because there are scenes that Bloody Mary battles—you know, has these verbal battles with uh, sailors. And he said, If she's really tough, if she's gonna be tough, uh, what are the words that she's gonna use? They—she's been hanging out with sailors and—and with all these soldiers; what do you think they've taught her? So he said, I want you to use it that way. But she doesn't mess around with them. Don't make it cute; I want it angry. So then I would have to turn it one-eighty and just go as angry and seething as I possibly could. And then he wanted to do it vulnerable. And we worked two days, three days in a row where he stretched like putty. And that's—this is answering your question. He want—he wanted—Bring out uh, your Asian aunties, your—the Polynesian aunties, the—you know, how—how—how did they treat their kids when they were growing up? Were they—were they all sweet? You know, I guess—

He wanted a multidimensional person—

Exactly.

--rather than the cartoonish Bloody—

Right.

--Mary that we'd seen before.

Exactly. And she's normally been portrayed a kinda goofy, and um ... you know, kind of voodoo mama-ish. But he wanted her as a real desperate mother. And I see now in the way that he has directed it, she is all of those things that he had us work on. So I had worked with uh, Bart Sher, our director, I had worked with Ted Sperling, our musical director. Um, we had pretty much honed in on what he was looking for in this character. And um, they tell me on Monday, You have two auditions; you have an eleven o'clock with Andre. Um, and because I was so overwhelmed, I didn't want to ask them who Andre was, because I thought um, They'll think I'm an idiot, so—

Andre the Giant?

Exactly; exactly. And they said, You have an eleven o'clock with Andre, and then at three o'clock you have—uh, four o'clock, you have your audition for R & H. But my first concern was this uh, call back audition for Andre. And I get in there, and it's all these people. It's, you know, uh, a long table; there are more people at this table, uh, along with the director and musical director, and director of musical theater—producer of musical theater at Lincoln Center, um,

the casting agent. There are all these people. And then there was this older, very distinguished man, and there was no other younger guy; that was the same guy that was reading to me. And so Bart says to me, Okay, this is Andre, and I want you—so I said, Hello. And I—

Oh-oh.

He said, I want you to go through the whole audition as we worked it. So I took a deep breath, and I started out, and I did this whole audition. And this man, Andre, was sitting behind all the others, and he nodded his head, and then afterwards he came up to me and he said, um, You know, that was lovely, and I want you to do the same thing this afternoon. And he shook my hand, and—and he gave me one—one of the highest compliments I've ever been paid. And I—I'm not accepting this only for myself, but as a performer. Um ... uh, he said to me, This is my favorite musical of my entire life, and he said, But this is the first time in my life I ever understood what the words to Happy Talk meant, and what they meant in the story; the song never made sense to me before. And it—that is—if I got that kind of reaction from him, it was because of Bart Sher, of his direction. Because he was so brilliant. He was able to bring all of this information out in the song that I've never seen performed before either.

And who is Andre?

Andre Bishop is the uh, artistic director of all of Lincoln Center. He's basically ... the boss, big boss, the ...

Larger than life boss.

Yes; exactly. And um, one of the humblest, kindest, gentlest uh, men I have ever met in my life. Just wonderful. And so um ... I'll—I'll make a really long story short. The—the big call back then was at four o'clock. He said to me, Go and rest; I want you to lay down and rest, and then be here for this, an—and just do the same thing you did for me, do that for them. So I get to the theater, and I realize—I get there about a half an hour before, and they have a room for me to warm up in. Um ... when I left Diamond Head Theater, Bri—uh, um ... oh, gosh; his name just left my head ni—right now. Um, uh ... one of the prop guys made a shrunken head for me, um, because my character brings a shrunken head in. And the last night at um, at "You Somebody", everyone that was in the show came by my room, and I nicknamed him Harry, and they blew kisses on Harry an—and aloha, and good juju, and all of these things. And I brought Harry to New York with me. So uh, I pulled him out in my—in my rehearsal space, and I brought into the room with me everybody that was there, 'cause I knew this was the moment that everything that I have ever done in my life, everyone from my father meeting to my mother, to ever—to everything, uh, to my—my mom marrying my stepdad and getting transferred to Hawaii, everything that has ever happened in my life has brought me to this moment. And I wanted to bring all of these people into the room with me. So I brought Harry out, and I was thinking about all my friends and my family, I was thinking about my parents, my grandparents, my family; everyone. Um ... and I felt them. I—this roo—my—the room that I was in was swirling with angels. And I became calm

all of a sudden, and I—and I thought, I'm gonna do the very best that I can, 'cause that's all that I can do. I can't be anything else but that. And I looked at my watch, and it was five minutes to four. There was a knock at the door, and it was the casting agent, Bernie Telsey, who said, you know, We're ready. And they brought me into this room, and there were probably about eighteen—at least eighteen people that were all in there. No introductions were made; they just said, This is Loretta, she's auditioning for Bloody Mary. Uh, Are you ready? And I said, Yes. And I took a deep breath and just went into the scenes, and did everything that I could, and—and it just felt absolutely ... right and good. And even if I didn't get this role, the fact that I was seen for this, that I had this chance, was just right for me. And ... when I finished with my audition, they applauded, and the director was trying to stop them from applauding. I don't know if that's a proper thing to do or not. And they asked me to sit outside, and I was sitting waiting. David, in the meantime, was outside by the fountain, and um—

You know, that's the first time in the audition process where you felt good about it.

Right; right. Because I really—it was that calm that came over me from feeling these angels. Like I said, it was the first time that I just felt like it really didn't matter if they gave me this or not; the fact that was seen, the fact that—that I was—I was flown to New York and I was seen at Lincoln Center. I didn't have to be given the job; it meant so much to me just to have had that happen. And they asked me to sit outside, and they called me back in a few minutes later. And everyone was still sitting there, and they pulled up a chair for me. And Bart Sher said, Well, we just wanted to let you know that, you know, we all talked in here, and um, we decided that we wanted—because you're gonna be going home, uh, we all wanted to be in the same room with you to tell you ... and he just paused. And it was that ... soap opera pause. [chuckle] And I was waiting, and I was really hoping. At this point, I had decided, if they offered me the role of—of understudy, I would lose my mind, because it meant I had a job in New York. And he said, Offer you uh ... so to let you know ... that you got the part. And I was thinking, He didn't say understudy. And he said, Did you understand me? And he—and he said—

[chuckle]

--You got the role ...

Of?

Will you be our Bloody Mary? And they burst into applause, and I j—remember thinking ... This is the greatest moment of my life; this is the greatest moment of my life. And I burst into tears, and I tried to ... compose myself to talk to them. And he said, Do you have anything to say? And I said ... I just want to take you all home and feed you. [chuckle]

[INDISTINCT]

Exactly. And he said, I want to introduce you to some of the people that are here. And he said, um, This is Mary Rodgers, daughter of Richard Rodgers.

Wow.

And this is Alice Hammerstein, daughter of Oscar and ha—Oscar Hammerstein. And I realize ... realized um, that ... these were the daughters of the two men who ... wrote and created uh, American musical theater as we know it.

Are you glad you didn't know that before you sang?

I am so glad; I'm so glad.

These—this is the legacy.

Right; exactly. And um ... to get their approval, uh, just meant everything, everything in the world to me. And um, they've both become dear friends; wonderful, wonderful women. Um ... and uh, I still—there's still that child in me th—that just thinks ... when I see them, I see their fathers' names in the sheet music that I looked at all of my life, of songs that I've sung all of my life. And um ... it was just the gre—greatest moment of my life. And to make it all more perfect, when we called David to tell him, uh, to come and meet me and uh, uh, um ... make the announcement that I got the part, he said to me, I have to tell you, he said, I was sitting outside and I knew it was time for you audition, and he said, I just started praying, and I prayed through all of our angels and, you know, for everybody to thank them for this moment. And he said, I just got the feeling that everything was right, that everything was perfect, and there were angels everywhere. And he said, I remember, 'cause I looked at my watch, and it was five minutes to four.

Fairytales and dreams; they can come true. Sometimes, it's just destiny. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

One of the nicest things uh, ever, was I got um ... uh, a note from Tom Hanks; he and his wife, Rita Wilson, had come to the show. And uh, I didn't get to meet him that night, but I got back to my dressing room the next day, and there was this note that had my name on it, and on the back—back it said, From TH and RW. And I was thinking, Who is—I don't know who this person is. And I opened it, and it was this beautiful, beautiful letter talking about how much he had loved the show, and uh, and he complimented me on my performance. And I think he said something in there, he referred to me—to me as his peer. And I thought, How great is that? How great it that, that ... and I will treasure that. I am—I'm going to frame that, and—and I will treasure that, the rest of my life.