

GUEST: HENRY AKINA

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Did your parents expect you, hope that you would go into medicine?

No; my father actually thought of law as a career. And my mother said, No, he will do what he wants to do. And so, I chose opera. [LAUGHS]

And how did that go over?

Well, that didn't go over all that well.

Did you know that opera has been performed in Hawaii for more than a hundred sixty years? The royal family of the Kingdom of Hawaii first attended opera in Honolulu during the 1850s, and Queen Emma herself performed in an opera. In more recent times, Hawaii Opera Theater has been producing visually stunning operas under the guidance of its first ever Hawaii-born artistic director. Henry Akina, artistic director of Hawaii Opera Theater, next, on Long Story Short.

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

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. He's quick to laugh, but often, his demeanor is reserved. Don't let the guarded personality of Henry Akina fool you. Behind it lies a passion for one of the most emotional and visceral artforms, the opera. Henry Akina has directed opera in prestigious opera houses in Germany, Hungary, France, China, Thailand, Canada, and the United State. Today,

Henry Akina is the artistic director of Hawaii Opera Theater. Under his direction, Hawaii Opera Theater, or HOT, has staged acclaimed productions like Madam Butterfly, Tosca, The Tales of Hoffmann, and The Mikado. While attending Punahou School in Honolulu, Henry was drawn to the performing arts, taking a very different direction than his mother and father, with their careers in medicine.

So, you're the only child of two medical doctors?

That's correct; that's correct. My father was Dr. Henry Akina, and my mother was Dr. Eleanor Akina. And my mom is still alive, so that's ... is it ninety-three? And she's wonderful. My father was an ophthalmologist before, and a well-known politician. And my mom was an internist, and then a child psychiatrist.

What were your parents like in raising you?

Well, I remember my mother being very strict, and my father being sort of not there. He was older; he would have been a hundred a few years ago. But I'm sixty now, so that ... probably colors it a little bit.
[LAUGHS]

But your mom was the one who primarily raised you?

Right; right, right. Well, Mom really did, I think, a decent job.

What were you interested in as a kid?

Theater, and the garbage man. [LAUGHS]

Because you watched him out the window in the morning?

Right; right, right, right, right, right, right. Well, like most Hawaiian kids, I watched the garbage men pick these things up, and I thought they were great, and brawny, and wonderful. And I liked them, but I had nothing to do with them in my later life.

[LAUGHS]

So [LAUGHS] ...

So, the other interest was music?

Theater and music; I played three instruments, growing up.

What were the instruments?

Piano, flute, and um, violin as well.

And what part of theater were you attracted to?

Spectacle, I think, mostly.

I know you were a student at Punahou for your entire—

Fourteen years; yeah.

And did you do theater there, too?

Yes; I was president of the Punahou Playmakers for a couple of years. I don't remember how many, but [LAUGHS] ...

And acted in plays.

And I acted in plays from a very young age, and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And I really hadn't thought about opera until quite a bit later.

And when you thought about opera, were you thinking about you singing, or were you thinking about directing opera?

I've been directing for about thirty years, and I don't think I've ever been paid to sing. [LAUGHS] So, there you go.

That's not how you came up to through the ranks.

No, no, no; that's not. I didn't start as a singer like Quinn Kelsey, or like any of the others.

After graduating from Punahou School, Henry Akina attended Tufts University in Massachusetts, and then moved to Germany to attend the Freie University of Berlin graduate program. At the time, Akina did not realize he would live in Germany for the next twenty years.

At that time, Berlin was like a political island, and I had been raised on an island, so I knew what an island was like. And I wasn't as bothered by the wall as other people seemed to be.

The Berlin Wall.

The Berlin Wall.

Which was up then.

Which was up then, and which colored my life a lot. It took two hours to get to the other side of Berlin. And I had taken Berlin because there were three opera companies there. The only other city at that time that

had three opera companies was London. And I thought, Well, you already speak English, you know.

So, you wanted to go to a country where you didn't speak the language?

That's true; that's true; that's true. I thought it would be good for me. So, I did it. [LAUGHS]

And what was it like learning German on the spot?

Well, I don't think I spoke. I had read everything by the time I got there. I had read, you know, Goethe. But nobody speaks that way. [LAUGHS] And so, we had to learn how to speak like a normal person. And so, we did. [LAUGHS] You know. As normal as we can be.

And you just learned it; you didn't take a course. You learned by ...

Well, I had German in school; I was in advanced placement at Punahou, and took that with me. And I had a couple of years of college German as well. And then, went into it. So, I didn't go in exactly cold.

No; you had an immersion experience, with some background.

With some background. Yes; there you go.

And did you feel at home right away?

No; it took a while. It took about three or four years to feel at home. But then I felt at home, and then it was kind of a little bit ... strange coming back

Tell me about life in Berlin.

Life in Berlin was interesting. It was very liberal, as life in Hawaii is, too. I didn't have a car in Germany. I used the subway system and the bus system.

Well, that'll introduce you to people quickly.

Oh, yes. [LAUGHS] I knew a lot more people in Berlin, than I do here. And I think that's interesting, too. Here, I know the people I work with, and the people who I've seen. You know, I walk a dog every day for three miles, and those people I see. But I don't really see very many other people, except for Ann and the people I work with.

And were you accepted in Berlin? You said open society.

I was accepted; I was accepted very readily.

And you had a job going in?

I was a student, going in, and then I had a job. And then, it was ... it was interesting, because my career developed there, and I was a directing assistant, which meant that I got coffee, and I did all these other things. But at that time, I was an assistant for language particularly, because they needed someone who spoke English, and I did. And I was able to parlay that into a career.

At what point did you say, This is it, I'm not going back home, I'm not going back to the East Coast, this is home now?

Well, it took a while. And I think I was back in Berlin, and I was going to come here to work, to the Santa Fe Opera in '79. I was going to do an office job in '80. And I didn't do the office job; I stayed in Berlin and grounded a company, which, you know, went for many years. And it

wasn't until I'd done that, that I felt that it was home. And that was after I'd been there for about four or five years.

Although Henry Akina was fascinated with theater from a young age, it wasn't until he was living in Berlin that he discovered opera, this newfound discovery, which shaped the course of his career and life.

So, it sounds like when you talk about your past, you know, what went before, your childhood, your growing up, it's not as important to you. It's almost as if your life began when you discovered opera.

That's true; that's true; that's true. And it's been my life ever since. I worked with some of the best opera directors I could find at that time. But I don't know if those names mean anything nowadays or not. Uh, Kurt Horres, Gotz Friedrich, and Harry Kupfer, who just did Der Rosenkavalier at Salzburg.

And he was an enormous influence in your life.

Yes, he was; he was.

How so?

Well, he was a director's director. You could really learn from him; he had a technique, and people didn't. Frau Berghaus was wonderful. You know, she had wonderful things, and she had wonderful images. But you couldn't learn from her. But he had a technique that you could learn from, a method that you could learn from. And there was something interesting about it. An actor doesn't have the information that a singer does, for instance. One doesn't know this, necessarily. But singers actually have more information than actors do about a character, for instance.

Why? Because they're ...

Well, because the composer has written everything out, and there's a lot of ... a musical score needs to be done by an actor, whereas the singer has a musical score already in front of them. And so, the musical score needs to be put together by the actor, who will say that something is quicker, and something is slower.

Does that mean the actor has more choice than the singer?

The actor might need more therapy than the singer. [LAUGHS] I discovered that therapy was not my long suit, if you will.

[LAUGHS] You know, I think you've described opera as singing your guts out. I mean, it is a raw, and it's emotions expressed in music. It's a physically demanding job, being an operatic singer.

It is very physically demanding.

And you're directing these people. I mean, tell us something about what that's like.

Well, directing an opera singer is like directing a gladiator, and someone who's right in your face, and sweating, and doing all these things for you. And you have to think about what you're asking them to do, obviously, because you're not asking them to eviscerate themselves, or do things like that. We don't want that. We want to create a full performance. And I've usually had very collaborative relationships with singers to try and get that out of them.

And how do you get it out of them? I mean, you have to be empathic, you have to kind of know what they're going through, and give them a vision, give them some kind of—

Well, I think vision and something to hold onto is important.

Something to hold onto, meaning ...

Meaning, there are guideposts in every score, I think, and there's you know, a moment in each measure that makes the singer respond in a way that—

So, you say, emphasize this, pause here?

Well, that is given by the composer. So the pause, you might take, say, in the case of a flauta, you might say, Well, here, you can be free, or here, you can't be free. Here, you need to move it ahead, or you need to stay with what's written.

So, if the composer has essentially directed the singer, then tell me how it is you add a dimension to that performance.

Well, the composer has written notes on page, and you're there to make things live, to make things live for the singer.

Henry Akina admits that he can be impulsive. In 1981, he stepped out on his own, and founded his own opera company, The Berlin Chamber Opera, with conductor Brynmor Llewelyn Jones. Then, in 1996, after twenty years in Germany, a whirlwind offer led Akina back to Honolulu.

You actually cofounded an opera company in Berlin?

I did; I did.

Tell us.

I did; I did; I did. There was an English conductor and a class of singers that was leaving a conservatory and wanted to do something. And I thought, Well, this is a good thing to do. So, I did. [LAUGHS]

You didn't think of all the reasons you couldn't. You said, Oh, good idea, I'm gonna do that?

Well, yeah; yeah, yeah.

What did it require? It sounds like it would have required something on all fronts, including real estate.

Well, it did, and we were lucky that that was a company of young people that gave us a rehearsal hall. That was very nice of them. And it started out as a very sort of mom & pop of kind of thing. We had a piano, and this sort of thing. And then, it morphed. We became a candidate for state funding very quickly, very early on. And once the state funding started to flow, then there were more things. There was a conductor, and there were lights, and there were things that you couldn't have imagined before, and we weren't as dependent on rentals, and things like that. So ... that was one of the wonderful ways that it actually happened.

And it functioned, and was successful?

Well, it functioned and was successful. I had very good press to begin with, and very good press with the conductor. And that that helped a lot.

And why did you decide to come back to Hawaii, after this successful time in Germany?

I was recruited. And state funding had gone down. This was something that Simon and I talked a lot with Donna Blanchard about, was state funding had done a downturn. And I thought, Well, you know, maybe if Hawaii wants me, that might be a good thing to do. So, they did want

me, and they wanted me in two months' time, which I remember being very challenging.

You mentioned that when you lived for twenty years in Germany, you'd have to go around the Berlin Wall. And then, the Berlin Wall fell. What were some of your feelings about that?

Well, it was ambivalent, because with the Berlin Wall, also this adventure left Berlin. So, I was essentially very poor at that time. So, that when HOT called, it seemed like, you know, Heaven had said, you know, Come home. [LAUGHS] Well, here we are. You know, and we had great luck, because that year was the first year that Quinn Kelsey was in the opera, opera studio, and Quinn is the new Hawaiian singer. And although there has been one in every generation, we were very happy it was Quinn.

Under Henry Akina's direction, Hawaii Opera Theater, or HOT, has become known for vibrant, creative productions, sometimes incorporating modern updates and collaborations with top international artists. Akina directed a reimaged version of Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado.

I love that approach, in sense modernizing with Harajuku costumes.

You're referring to The Mikado, then.

Yeah, Mikado.

Right; yeah.

And you feel free to do that. You don't take the same opera and present it again. You add new touches. You've had Anne Namba's designs, you've had Dean Shibuya change things up.

We have a resident designer at HOT, Peter Dean Beck, who's resident in New York, but who's nonetheless been seminal for design here.

How do audiences feel about those changes?

I'm not sure. You know, people say nice things to me, so I'm assuming that they're honest about those things. But I think that the audiences in Hawaii respond well to good stories, and we try and make good stories wherever we are, from wherever we are.

Do you look for ways to take a classic story and localize it or modernize it?

Well, modernize it, perhaps. Localize it, not so much. But modernize it, perhaps. And in the case of Mikado, for instance, we knew that we couldn't go backwards; we had to go forwards. And we had to look at the Japan of today, which was a lot different than the first time we did Mikado, which was ten years ago.

So, in ten years, it changed.

In ten years, life has changed. Yeah.

So, how did your production change?

Well, the first production of Mikado was very traditional; it had a lot of traditional costumes. The second production of Mikado had nothing that was traditional at all. Except for the gentlemen of Japan, who were gentlemen. But as soon as the three little maids from school arrived, well, you knew that you were someplace else. [LAUGHS]

Pitti-Sing.

Right; right.

Meaning, pretty thing as a name.

Right; right. Well, Pitti-Sing ... she was interesting, because ten years ago, she was very Japanese, and today, or last June, she was very modern in a way made her different. that made her stand out particularly.

You've staged Mikado ...

Twice. [LAUGHS]

And when you stage it again, let's say you do it in ten years, would you imagine another jump?

Well, in ten years, Harajuku is already old, so we may find something else, you know.

Did audiences know Harajuku girls? Because that was the play.

I think that we tried to let the audience know that we were doing the style. But you'll have to ask Anne about the Harajuku things, because it was based on one of Anne's trips to Japan. But I think that in contemporary life, we would be someplace else in ten years.

Right. I think she reimagined those characters as hip shoppers out for retail therapy.

She did; she did. And using cell phones every five minutes. Right. And using an iPad; things like that. So, whatever we're using in ten years will be reflected in the staging at that time.

In 2009, Henry Akina returned to the European opera scene. This time he received an invitation for a new production of Madam

Butterfly at the Savonlinna Opera Festival in Finland, as well as performances in Sweden. In 2014, Akina and HOT revived Madam Butterfly and shipped the set and costumes from Europe to Honolulu for Hawaii audiences.

[OPERATIC SINGING]

Ladies, this is much better; much improved. And so, I should see that again. Okay? And you should reanimate from frozen to [EXHALES]. It would be helpful on both sides, I think, so that each * is well designed and well imaged. You're doing great. [CHUCKLES]

Well, I would say that one of the signature operas that HOT has done a lot of is Madam Butterfly. And the latest version was with sets by Dean Shibuya and costumes by Anne Namba, which were very beautiful. And we did this five years ago, and this was developed here in Hawaii and taken then to Finland, and done in a theater in Sweden as well. So, that was a very beautiful production. Dean had been to a Butterfly I'd done here in '92, and he did a template for the Bangkok Opera in ... well, what year was that? 2004 or 5, or something like that. And then, Anne had done another Butterfly here at HOT. And so, we came together in 2009 to do that.

How did you connect with Anne?

Well, I went to her shop a lot, and she talked a lot with me about various things concerning Butterfly. And at that time, she was doing a lot of kimono work, so there was a lot of traditional kimonos in Butterfly.

And when you get together, you all know the story, you all know what it feels like. So, do you all envision it looking differently?

Well, for our particular Butterfly, we decided that the Asuka Period would be the period that you commence with, instead of being the Meiji

Period, which is traditional with Butterfly, that we would take it a little bit more modern and do the Taisho Period. Which had more to say about the costumes than it did about the set, which was a traditional set.

So, the Hawaii costuming got its first showing in Finland, and then came back here on a slow boat.

That's correct; that's correct. That's correct; that's correct.

Some may perceive the average age of an opera audience in Hawaii to skew older; but according to Henry Akina, the local audience has been shifting over the last few seasons.

What's the average age of somebody attending a performance of HOT?

I would say that we were a graying population, but lately, we're a very young and vibrant crew. And it's a very intergenerational kind of thing. So, you would say that the mean age was maybe thirty-five or something [LAUGHS] as opposed to fifty-five, which is what it was a long time ago.

Your parents introduced you to opera.

That's correct; that's correct.

And I assume that's still happening, when you say intergenerational?

I would hope so; I would hope so. But I know that my generation doesn't like opera as much as it could, and that there are very many people who haven't experienced the opera yet. And there are people who've come with their children; because their children came, they come. So, that's very interesting, too.

Opera has such fans. That's where the word fanatic comes from; right?

Right; right.

I mean, fan. Why do you think opera exerts such a strong pull on those who enjoy it?

Well, I can only speak from experience, but I would say that because it's that form of theater, and it's that form of theater that uses everything that we have. We know that the plays in ancient Greece were essentially operas. And there's something mythic about having things sung at you, and things developed in music.

Henry Akina was selected by the Hawaii Arts Alliance as the 2014 Preis Honoree in Arts, one of the highest honors for the arts in Hawaii.

You are winning. You've already been announced, I believe, as the 2014 Preis Honoree in Arts, which is a tremendous honor, probably the largest honor we have in Hawaii in arts.

Well, I knew Alfred Preis, and I think that that's ... I was saying that, you know, people who know me well don't expect this honor. And I didn't expect it, either. [LAUGHS]

Why? Why didn't you expect it? I wasn't surprised to hear that you were named.

Well, I was, in a weird way. And I went to a board member, Jean Rolles, who had been honored herself. And she said, You will do it for this organization. And since then, I have decided that I will do it for the organization.

But you didn't think you deserved it? Is that what you're saying?

Well, I'm not sure I did. I think that, you know, being the head of a collaborative artform, I feel that like a lot of people deserve this honor.

Like you're only as good as the people who perform for and with you?

Exactly; exactly, exactly. Like I'm only as good as this Butterfly was, and I'm only as good as Anne and Dean can be.

As someone who had to live abroad for many years to learn about opera, a big part of Henry Akina's life is sharing this artform with younger generations. According to Akina, the Hawaii Opera Theater's educational programs reach more than twenty-five thousand students each year. In addition, he helped to found the Mae Z. Orvis Opera Studio to train the next generation of operatic artists here in Hawaii. With Henry Akina's passion, and with opera gaining popularity with younger audiences, it won't be curtain call any time soon for Henry and his company of talented performers. Mahalo to Henry Akina for sharing his story with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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Would you ever be convinced to switch to a different kind of stage performance direction?

I have done that, and it hasn't gone well. You know, so I would assume that I'm doomed to do opera. [LAUGHS]

In the best tradition of opera; right?

Right, right.

In the best emotional way.

[END]