

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: VICTORIA KNEUBUHL

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I think that when we understand what happened in the past to our country and our people, that we will be able to make better decisions about what we create in the future. Because I feel like if you don't understand your personal past, your collective past, you can get into a lot of trouble.

Bringing together the past and the present is a trademark of Victoria Kneubuhl's work. Respected Honolulu playwright Victoria Kneubuhl, 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. Writing is Victoria Kneubuhl's passion. She's driven by a desire to share her Hawaiian and Samoan heritage, and give a voice to powerful women of the past. Kneubuhl has written more than two dozen plays. Her writing credits also include novels and television documentaries. She's the recipient of the State's highest literary honor, the Hawaii Award for Literature. However, as a child growing up in Manoa, Kneubuhl never dreamed of becoming a successful playwright.

Well, I was born in Kapiolani Hospital in 1949, in the Territory of Hawaii. And I grew up in Manoa Valley, right up the street here. So, that's where my formative years were. My mother was pretty much a housewife, and my dad worked for American Factors; he was an auditor.

Now, at the time you were born, was Samoan-Hawaiian as an interracial marriage, was that considered unusual, or was that common?

You know, I don't really know. I don't think it was that unusual. But I do think it's unusual that my father, you know, came here at such an early age from Samoa to go to school. He was seven years old, and he came with his brother, who was nine. They came on a ship, and they both went to Punahou School when they were little.

Could they speak English?

Yes.

Raised bilingually.

Yes; they were both bilingual. And my father tells these wonderful stories about being at the boarding school, the Punahou boarding school, which was a farm school, he said. And it was out in Kaimuki, you know, near the graveyard, near Diamond Head Cemetery. That was where the boys boarded.

Now, that sounds like your family was well-to-do, to be able to go from Samoa and afford Punahou.

Well, I think my grandfather was. To afford, to be able to do that, they must have been. And I think it was important to them that their children had a really good education. My grandfather was from Iowa; Burlington, Iowa. His parents were immigrants from Switzerland, I think. And he ran away from home when he was ... seventeen, or something. And he lied about his age, and he joined the Navy. And he ended up in Samoa, and he met my grandmother who was, from what we call an afakasi family, just half-caste, afakasi. It's not a bad word. And I think she was about three-quarter Samoan. Because her father was half-Samoan, and half palagi. He was a descendant of a missionary [CHUCKLE] from the London Missionary Society.

So, from an early time, your family was mixed generationally.

Oh, yeah.

And going through different times.

And our family, you know, has these roots in the Pacific that include Hawaii, but you know, also include Tahiti and Samoa, and now we have relatives in New Zealand and Australia. So ... yeah. This is our home.

So, you're growing up in Manoa. What was life like at the Kneubuhl house?

Well, you know, my earliest memory is playing outside. And when I was a little girl, there were still farms. There were farms in the back of Manoa Valley, you know. There were a lot of Japanese farmers back there. I guess they were leasing land from the Bishop Estate. That's what I understand. Manoa lettuce was really grown in Manoa. [CHUCKLE] And behind the school was mostly farms. And there were gardenia farms back there too. So, I kind of think of my childhood as pretty idyllic.

And rural, in Manoa.

Yeah. I thought I grew up in the country. But I guess I didn't. And we had a lot of freedom as children to roam around. It was safe then, and we could swim in the stream, and hike around in the mountains. It was great. I feel lucky.

Victoria Kneubuhl explored her Samoan roots on a trip with her father when she was a teenager. The trip had barely begun, when her dad did something that really surprised her.

I didn't really know anything about being Samoan. Sometimes, my dad's brother John, who was a screenwriter in Hollywood, would come over and charm us all with stories about what was going on in Hollywood. But I didn't have much contact with that part of my family until my father decided that he might want to move back to Samoa and work for my grandfather. So, when I was, I think like thirteen, my father decided he was gonna go back and have a look at what it would be like to live there, to kind of test the waters. And he took me with him. Just me. So, it was in the early 60s, and Pan American was the plane that flew in there, and we got off the airplane, and the airport was kind of like this wooden shack with rat wire on it. And there was a big line of our family there, you know, waiting to meet us. And I was holding my dad's hand, and all of a sudden, he started speaking Samoan. And I didn't know he spoke Samoan. You know, I used to ask him when I was kid, Oh, Dad, how do you say milk in Samoan? He'd go, I don't know, I don't know. He wouldn't tell me. So, I got off the plane, and he started speaking Samoan to all of these people, and I ... I felt extremely unsure of the world for a moment. But that was a really interesting summer for me, because he and I kind of drove all around. And you know, Samoa was really different, what was that, fifty years ago, fifty-plus years ago, than it is today. So, ... only part of the island had paved roads, and not every place had electricity, and most of the outlying villages, people still lived in ... fale, you know, in grass houses and had that kind of cultural village life, and the material culture that went along with it. And so, it was really enlightening for me to see a Polynesian culture at that time in my life, and to see how people lived.

You were hearing your father determining whether to possibly uproot you, your life would change radically. Were you concerned, or was it travel log time?

No, it was pretty much a travel log time for me, and I was really excited to be there. And I had all of these great cousins that I met that I ran around with. And my father came back after two weeks, but I stayed for the whole summer with my aunt. And I loved it there at that time. It's a different place now, but then, it was really fun.

And yet, your father did move, and you did not.

Yeah. Well, you know, my parents, it was important for my father that ... my brother and I go to Punahou. So, we stayed here, and my parents and my younger brother moved down there.

And you stayed with your grandmother?

Yes; in Manoa.

And did you graduate from Punahou?

No. Actually, I dropped out of high school and I had a child when I was seventeen years old. So, it wasn't a great situation for me. And I think I felt kind of lost and alone, and so I was looking for some, you know, place that I felt safe. And ... you know, life is funny, though, you know. I had a child when I was seventeen; but by the time I was twenty-four, I couldn't have children anymore. And of course, now my daughter is like my best friend in the world.

Something you thought was gonna hurt your life, needed to happen then. Is that how you look at it?

Well, part of it, yeah. Not all of it, but part of it. And yeah, it was hard to have a child when I was, you know, so young. But ... that's what happened.

Did you remain in Hawaii, or did you go to Samoa?

You know, when I left my first husband, I went back to Samoa and I stayed there for about seven years and worked there. And ... I came back to Hawaii, I think, in the late 70s. Eventually, as wonderful as the island was then, it just seemed too small to me. My horizon started to shrink. You know, and so when I came back to Honolulu, I started going to school. I went to the Academy of Arts for a while. They used to have a studio program there, where I went every day to a drawing class or a painting class.

By now, Victoria Kneubuhl was in her late twenties, with a new husband and a second child. After earning a bachelor's degree in liberal studies, Kneubuhl was considering a career in psychology, when she stumbled on a class that would change her life.

I was thinking about getting a degree in psychology. I was kind of in love with Carl Jung, with Jungian psychology, and I was fascinated by it. And we were having a break. You know, I was having a break from school, and I thought, before I apply to this program, that I would do something different. So, you know, they used to register in Klum Gym.

I remember that. Long lines in Klum Gym.

Yeah. That's right. So, I went to sign up for a creative writing class in the English department, but they were full. So, I'm looking through the program, and I see this class that says, playwriting. And I thought, Oh, yeah, you know, you know, my uncle does that; yeah, I think I'll try that. So, I wandered into this playwriting class. It was really fascinating; the class was fascinating. It was really hard, and the teacher was extremely tough and scary, and I almost dropped out of the class, because I was feeling humiliated. And so, I went home, and I had this little talk with myself, and I said, You know, that man, he's really smart, and he really knows a lot, and I paid for this class, and I'm gonna ignore all of this stuff that I don't think has anything really to do with playwriting. And I'm just gonna take what he knows, because I paid for it. So, I

changed my attitude, and I walked back in the class the next time, and ... it was fine. You know, I think it was just that attitude change on my part that kind of changed the whole class. And I was so happy with where I ended up, compared to where I started from, that I enrolled in the same class again with a different teacher, Dennis Carroll. When I got into Dennis' class ... he was a wonderful teacher. He has all of this love and passion for the theater. You know, he started Kumu Kahua Theater. And he really took me under his wing and nurtured me as a writer. And he had confidence in me and my work. You know, when you're a young writer, you just don't know if you're any good. And then, when someone who you admire and you think is really smart tells you, Yeah, you know, this is good, it really helps you to continue and to grow in your craft. And that's what Dennis did for me. And not just me. You know, he did it for a lot of other writers, too. So, I think if it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't be a writer. And because Kumu Kahua Theater was there, you know, they were interested in my work, right away. So, my very first play was produced, which you know, for a playwright is ...

This was college, it got produced?

Yeah.

And what did you choose to write about? What was your first play about?

My first play was called Emmalehua. And it was about a young woman. It was set right after the war.

Which war?

World War II. It was set right after World War II. And it concerned a young woman who had been made a hula kapu when she was a girl, and who had drifted away from that calling or that honor. And you know, at that time, everybody in Hawaii was interested in being American. And so, it was about how she came back to ... her craft and art. And I really wanted to write about, you know, who I was and where I came from, and ... so, that was my first play, and that got produced.

Was that you? Was that girl you?

No; it wasn't me. I'm kind of a clumsy dancer. I know; it's terrible. I'm Polynesian, and I don't sing very well, and I can't dance either.

You can write; you're like a dream.

What was your second play about? Still in college?

Well, actually, the second produced play I worked on was in collaboration with Dennis Carroll, Robert Nelson who was a musician, who just recently passed away, and Ryan Page. Dennis wanted to do a play about Kaiulani. so, that was the second play that I

worked on. Although that play is not really mine, because there were so many people contributing to it. And the next play I wrote was *The Conversion of Kaahumanu*, which has been produced in a lot of different places.

That's a great theme that you chose. Conversion meaning to Christianity of this alii of the Hawaiian government.

Well, at that time, I had three part-time jobs when I was going to school. And you know, I had to work so hard to get an education. I had these two kids, and you know, I was going to graduate school fulltime, and you know, I just don't know how I did it. And my husband doesn't know how we did it either, but we managed to do it. And one of my part-time jobs was working at the Mission Houses Museum; I started there as a guide. And they had a living history program that interpreted the interaction between Hawaiians and missionaries. And I loved working there; I loved the people I was working with. I was working with Deborah Pope, who is now the director of Shangri La, and Glen Grant. He was working there, too. And so, we were actually the principal role players in this program, and so, we had to do a lot of research about that time period. And that play, you know, it just kind of came to the surface.

She was often blamed by many Hawaiians for going away from Hawaiian spiritual values to Christianity.

I think that one of the reasons she chose to ally herself with the missionaries is that, you know, there was a lot of gunboat diplomacy then, and a lot of Westerners considered Polynesians, not just Hawaiians, but all people with dark skin, less than human. And becoming Christian was one way of showing the outside world that, No, we're human.

One perspective that comes out in your play is that, you know, for those who think that the Hawaiians at the time in leadership were just being squashed and put down by White people, that's not true, you believe.

I don't believe that. I mean, I believe that our alii were doing the best that they could for the people, and that it was a really, really hard time. And I hate these histories that make it seem like, you know, Hawaiians were being kind of led around by the nose by all of these people and weren't savvy and smart enough to see what was happening, and try to make the best decision that they could.

Political and racial conflict in Hawaii are common themes in Victoria Kneubuhl's plays. Her topics include modern controversies over iwi, or bones, and the overthrow of the Hawaiian Monarchy. The latter was a five-act, fifteen-hour play staged on the steps of Iolani Palace. Kneubuhl says she often hears the voices of her protagonists in her head.

I'd love to hear you talk about structuring a play. Because I wouldn't know how to go about condensing all those years, and continents, and time.

Yeah. You know, structure in playwriting is probably the hardest element. You know, when you first start learning about playwriting, dialog, character, those things come pretty easily, because we know them all. You know, we just have to listen, and we can hear what people talk like. And we know characters. You know, we know what other people are like. So, those things come pretty fast. But structuring a play is, I think, a constant challenge to a playwright.

You've got one stage. You can determine the number of acts, I presume.

Yeah; you can determine the number of acts. You can figure out how many characters you want. Although these days, for the commercial stage, you know, they don't want a lot of characters in a play anymore, because they don't want to pay. So, writing for the community theater has its advantages. You can have as many characters as you want, and nobody's gonna care. But you basically have the stage, and you have dialog. That's it. I mean, you have some lighting, and you have some props, and you know, you can have some sound effects. But pretty much, you're telling your story through dialog.

What is that like, when you sit back on opening night? I'm sure you're not sitting back; you're probably sitting forward. What is it like seeing it unfold?

You know, opening night isn't really the night when I'm the most shocked. There's a point in rehearsals where the actors are off book, where they're not holding their scripts anymore, and you first see your play being acted out by people. Something that was just inside your head is now out there. And I always feel like, oh, my god, my underwear is hanging on the line, and everybody's looking at it.

Because it comes from deep inside you.

Yeah. And it's kind of the first time it's exposed out there. And that's when I feel the most strange.

What are you like when you're writing a play? Are you locked in a room with beverages? I mean, do you shut the windows and hunker down? How do you do it?

Well, you know, when I first started writing, I was going to school, I had three part-time jobs, I had two children and a husband, and a house to keep clean. So, I just learned to block everything out, you know. And while dinner was like, on the stove, I was at the dining table writing away. And I just learned to, like, close things out and you know, kind of focus on what I was doing. Because I didn't have the luxury of anything else.

Do you think in retrospect, that helped you? That you could work it into your life.

Yeah; I think it did a lot. And when I hear people say, Oh, if only I had some time, I could go away; I just laugh, you know. Because if you really want to write, you just sit down and write.

And Victoria Kneubuhl has added novels to her writing portfolio. At the time of our conversation in the summer of 2015, she was working on her third book in a murder mystery fiction series set in 1930s Honolulu.

Did you leave playwriting behind, or did you decided to take a break and write novels, mystery novels?

Well, I could never leave playwriting behind, because that's where I started writing. But at some point, I realized, gosh, my plays are pretty serious, you know, and I really need to have some fun with my writing, so I think I'll write a mystery. Because you know, when I want to relax, my escape literature is, you know, old-fashioned cozy mysteries. And so, I decided to try and write a mystery. And actually, I'd started another novel too, and I couldn't finish either of them, and I had to pick one to finish. So, I decided to finish the mystery. I was finishing the mystery, and you know, I had no idea how to find a publisher. And UH Press had published my book of plays, so one day, I was in Safeway and was looking for mayonnaise, and I saw my editor, the editor of my playwriting books there. And I was talking to her, and I said, Oh, you know, I'm writing a mystery; do you have any suggestions about where I could send it for a publisher? She looked at me kinda suspiciously and she said, Did you know we've been kind of thinking about doing a mystery series? I said, No. And I don't know if she believed me or not. But she said, Well, we are, so send it to me. And so, then I really, you know, finished it. Because I had that incentive.

And you put many places, places that you know well into their settings. You actually have the curator of Bishop Museum killed in the museum.

Well, you know, because I worked in the museum field for so long, I knew that that field pretty well. So, I made use of it. You know. And I really feel that novel writing, you know, even when it's fiction that's kind of a genre fiction, mysteries ... those kinds of stories preserve history in their own way. You know, they tell us a little bit about the past in a really different way.

You put the Haleiwa Hotel in your in your novel.

Yeah.

Which really existed.

Yeah. Yes, and just the way people related to each other. You know, I mean, I feel so fortunate to have known the kind of kupuna that aren't with us anymore. So, I think fiction is a wonderful place for preservation, too.

We're coming to the end of a really wonderful conversation. I don't know if there's anything you wish you could have a chance to say to people, or that hasn't been brought out, or just any thought that you'd like to share.

One of the things that I really want people to know, who would like to be writers, and who would like to write, and who are from the islands or the Pacific, is that our stories are so worth telling. And that, you know, it doesn't matter if you don't make the best-seller list in New York. If you write something that is heartfelt and genuine, you are leaving a gift for your community.

It's tough to make a living as a playwright in Hawaii, and Kneubuhl has always had a day job. She's been the Curator of Education at the Mission Houses Museum, and she taught playwriting at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Since 1993, Kneubuhl also has written and produced episodes of the television series Biography Hawaii. Mahalo to Victoria Kneubuhl of Maunalani Heights, Honolulu for sharing your story with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

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Let's move to something that occupies a lot of your time today, and it's a passion and a hobby involving dogs.

Yes, I'm a crazy dog person. You know, my husband and I really got interested in dog training a few years ago. There's a new sport, it's really popular on the continent; it's called nose work. And it's the same training that those, you know, real working dogs at the airport do. But you train the dogs to sniff out legal substances, and they're oil essences. And there are different levels of competency that your dog can aspire to.

[END]