

# **The History of The Actors' Group (TAG)**

## **1993 - 2002**

1993-1994: In the fall of 1993 one of Hawaii's best acting teachers, Dick Kindelon, the former casting director for "Hawaii 5-0," retires after teaching his acting course, "The Honolulu Film Actors Workshop," for well over 10 years. One of Kindelon's most ardent students, Eric Nemoto, organizes members of the class to continue meeting for scene study sessions, and Kindelon gives Nemoto his two boxes of movie scripts to use. The very first meeting is held in a classroom at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and is attended by two people, with Nemoto being one of them (the other being Jerry Hile, who would provide the group a great service by chronicling Kindelon's scripts into overview sheets for easy review). Regardless, the two participate in scene study sessions ("To keep the faith," Nemoto says), but the concept of continuing classes admittedly does not look good. Nemoto tells himself he'll give it one more week. The following week over a dozen people show and Nemoto realizes that the idea of actors meeting for weekly sessions has a chance. During one of its first meetings of the group, Nemoto, with the consent of all present, tells everyone that they will be called the "The Actors Group" or "TAG." When asked why, Nemoto responds, "Because the acronym "TAG" could be "catchy" and eventually it will be known by all. It is decided that everyone will contribute monthly dues to pay for the room rental and to also use as a stipend for acting teacher holding monthly workshops for the group. Dues are set at \$30 for four weekly sessions. Scene study ensues utilizing a video camera supplied by Hile for playback and actors critique each other (basically the same format used by Kindelon).

1994-1995: TAG as a scene study group continues at the university and draws a consistent following with the usual attendees numbering 10 to 12. TAG sessions are held on Wednesday nights beginning at 7:00 pm and often extend to well past 10:00 pm. Some of the monthly workshops conducted by invited acting coaches include Dick Kindelon (who gives the first ever workshop), Garrison True (multiple times), and Dave Winston Barge, who would later go on to play a significant role in the evolution of TAG as a performance group. As it is the nature of most evolving organizations, members eventually decide that the group should become more organized. They decide that Leigh Ann Kinghorn will serve as president, Leilani Langhoff as vice president, and Eric Nemoto will handle the books as its treasurer. Nemoto files all the papers to create the group as an organization and establishes its checking account. TAG members Kinghorn and Langhoff later meet up with local filmmaker Jon Brekke and film editor Mike Powell, who tell them that they have an available space where TAG can work out of for an hourly price. They (Kinghorn and Langhoff) both agree that the move is beneficial and Kinghorn convinces Nemoto to move the group's meeting place to Brekke's and Powell's locale. It is the bottom floor of a building in Kaka'ako that houses their offices. This space, called by Powell and Brekke, "The Yellow Brick Studio," becomes TAG's enclave for their acting sessions and monthly workshops featuring invited acting teachers. TAG sessions become a very popular acting activity for local artists and at its height draws over 30 actors each week. Among the acting teachers who provide monthly workshops at the new venue include Dave Winston Barge, Genie Joseph, Kimo Kahoano, Paul Gleason, Richard MacPherson, and Keone Young. Leilani Langhoff proves to be the main organizer of these workshops. While TAG sessions become very popular, for the few who are coordinating it, it becomes somewhat of an administrative burden. Kinghorn and Langhoff, wanting to grow and expand their own acting credentials make a decision to move to Los Angeles. Nemoto acknowledges this and plans are made for the group to continue after they leave. Literally at their "going away" party, one of the invited guests, Dave Winston Barge (who has been a periodic monthly TAG acting coach), says it's too bad they're leaving because he thought they would want to be part of creating and producing original plays, something he has had much experience in doing. Winston Barge, an actor/dancer/director from New York and California, trained in drama therapy, convinces them to stay, and along with Nemoto and others, transitions the group

from being primarily an acting class to formulating an acting ensemble that produces its own original productions based on story concepts that evolve through improvisational exercises. Dave Winston Barge becomes TAG's first artistic director and calls the actors he will come to direct, "The Actors Ensemble," and the first core group includes Eric Nemoto, Leigh Ann Kinghorn, Leilani Langhoff, Lena Kaneshiro, Shannon Mauck, Beverly Kai, Bernadette Garcia, Jennifer Kang, Mark Brekke, and Audrey Stanzler. He directs all of them in "Dances For Two," a showcase of scenes that debuts as TAG's first ever play.

1995-1996: Dave Winston Barge eventually arranges with Brad Smith, to have "Dances For Two" filmed and shown on Olelo, Hawaii's community TV station. So members of the cast spend a day filming their scenes in the Olelo studios and the production is eventually aired on community television. TAG goes back to weekly acting sessions as Winston Barge takes time to decide the group's next play. They stop their sessions when Winston Barge decides on "The Neighborhood," an extension of one of the storylines developed in "Dances," with half of the original group continuing (Kinghorn, Nemoto, Kai, Mauck, Kaneshiro) and a few new members joining up (one of whom included talented Renee Mullen, who would later become Renee Brown and relocate with her husband, Michael, to Japan, where she focused on filmmaking). Of those that would leave, Leilani Langhoff moves to Guam with her family and her absence is dearly felt. As with all of Winston Barge's plays, the group basically starts out with just a notion, and proceeds to develop the ensuing script and the play with each rehearsal. "The Neighborhood" varies from "Dance" in the sense that it is the first true "full story" play, in other words, an entire story told with central characters that make up a single storyline that runs through the entire play (whereas "Dances" was a series of separate short scenes, some of which ties back to one another). Of particular note, "The Neighborhood" features an accidental development that is eventually incorporated into the play. On preview night, before just a couple of attendees, Leigh Ann Kinghorn, playing a character whose marital frustrations cause her to push her wheel-chair bound husband, played by Eric Nemoto, across the stage in a fit of anger, pushes way too hard. Nemoto, anticipating that he will be pushed off the stage, locks the chair's wheels, but the momentum makes the chair fall over backwards and he with it to the stage floor. Of course, this presents a problem for the play to continue. His character is weak and crippled. How is he able to get back into the chair for the next scene? Fortunately, Shannon Mauck, playing a nurse who is scheduled for a scene with Nemoto after Kinghorn's character has left, is advised off stage by Kinghorn of the catastrophe (while Nemoto remains prostrate on the stage praying that Mauck will do what he eventually in fact does). Mauck shrugs ("No problem"), comes on stage, and in a few short moves, pulls Nemoto back on the chair and the play continues. Winston Barge, totally impressed by the group's ability to solve its challenges on the fly, asks the group (particularly Nemoto, who averted getting seriously injured), "Can we keep it?" The group, realizing he is serious, decides to keep the scene, and Kinghorn, Nemoto, and Mauck rehearse the wheelchair accident until they have it down solid. "The Neighborhood" opens with audiences particularly enjoying its most riveting scene that began totally as an accident. These first plays are a reflection of Winston Barge's vision, talent, and persistence. So confident is he in the process, that after determining each performer's schedule, committing to a play date, and determining the general theme and title of the play, Winston Barge has flyers printed up which he then advises everyone to post around town announcing this new TAG play without a single word of the ensuing script being penned as yet. Winston Barge's process has TAG plays created by actors participating in improvisational exercises, being assigned a character, writing dialogue as these characters which eventually he organizes into a script, which is then used by all to rehearse. TAG plays follow a usual six week rehearsal schedule and always open as planned. These plays are certainly original, often Avant-garde, and some would say very surreal. The audiences, however, are very small, and often there are more actors on stage than there are people in the seats.

1996-1997: Winston Barge continues his leadership of the group and produces "Letters To Cleo" and "Trapped." "Letters To Cleo" brings Dorothy Stamp and Dorothy Mane to the group and gains TAG its first bit of notoriety as it is featured in a special television report (arranged by Kaneshiro) on the

local station, KHNL, and is referred to as “The theatre where you can literally reach out and almost touch the actors.” “Trapped” brings Sam Polson - a former journalist, Air Force veteran, and experienced actor from Washington D.C. – to the group. His inclusion is significant in that he is the first actor to join the group with a significant background in theatre, having previously acted on stage in many productions. His experience goes on to lend a steady hand to the mostly novice stage performers who made up the group at the time. On Winston Barge’s insistence, the first “risers” are constructed for the tiny studio and the play area changed from the Diamond Head Wall to the Makai wall. Yellow Brick’s seating is incredibly intimate, with 30 small seats being the maximum capacity. Despite the availability, audiences are very sparse. A “big house” is when the audience count hits double digits.

1997-1998: It was during this time that Winston Barge had been expressing a desire to change his life’s path and advised all that he’d be stepping aside for a little while. He had long contemplated the opportunity to take a year off and travel and see the world and confided to the group that he felt he was reaching that time. So with Winston Barge taking a bit of a hiatus, the group returned to hosting acting sessions. Eventually, however, Winston Barge returned for one final play, again carved from improvisational exercises, called “On The Verge,” which brought to the ensemble Mike Mazzola, a frequent scene study participant, who would become another major player in the development of TAG in the future. “On The Verge” also was the first play reviewed by Advertiser theatre critic Joe Rozmiarek, who gave a very positive review of the play and first coined the phrase that TAG was like “penicillin mold,” in that it is a theater group that just seems to appear out of nowhere. After “On The Verge,” Winston Barge makes good on his desire to travel the world and leaves the group and Hawaii, and with his departure other active members elect to pursue other interests as well. This leaves Eric Nemoto literally as the only original member of TAG remaining. Contemplating that it might be the end of TAG, Nemoto decides to make one call to a member to see if the group can somehow continue. He contacts Mike Mazzola and the two start to build TAG all over again with Mazzola vowing that “TAG will be bigger and better than ever before.”

1998-1999: Nemoto and Mazzola, along with Stamp and Polson (two periodic participants with TAG who are recruited back by Nemoto) start to rebuild TAG. An initial acting workshop coordinated by Mazzola, presented by veteran actor Richard Hatch (Battlestar Galactica), was a great first step in keeping its current band of actors together and participating in creative opportunities. After that, Mazzola produced “An Actors Showcase,” a compilation of scenes that were selected and performed by the participating actors. This particular production is significant in retrospect because it was the very first time that Brad Powell (who would later become TAG’s artistic director) was to ever associate with TAG. In wanting to prep the showcase for its audience, Mazzola asked Powell (who was then known to all as Mike Powell’s dad) to come and direct the group. With Powell’s help, the showcase premiered to a packed house and was very successful. After this, Nemoto wrote, “The Committee Responsible For Exposing The Reverend Terry Jamestown,” which Mazzola produced and Jon Brekke directed. “The Committee,” a comedy drama, went on to fill the seats at Yellow Brick and keeps the group going. A double showing on the production’s last day brings 45 to an early matinee show and 55 to the last show at night (this 100 in attendance is still a TAG one day record). “The Committee’s” success leads to Brekke producing “An Entity Without Material Reality,” a dramatic rendering of his poetry. This was followed by Nemoto’s “Trees,” which was directed by Mazzola, which became significant in that it garnered the group its first featured article in Honolulu Magazine. Mazzola’s active leadership of TAG would cease after “Trees,” but his impact would be profound. For he accomplishes exactly what he said he would do, keeping TAG alive and making it bigger and better.

1999-2000: Brad Powell, who first became associated with TAG through its “Showcase” produced the previous year, starts to become more involved with the group. His involvement is due in part to a couple of personal requests. The first is made by his son, Mike (who subleases the theater space to TAG and so serves as its landlord), who asks his dad to help lend direction to the group so “they can

pay their rent.” Powell steps in to direct the next play, which on the recommendation of Sam Polson (who personally knows the playwright), is “Code Of The West,” a play by Mark Geist, which is a comedy about Joshua Norton of San Francisco, who once claimed to be the Emperor of America. With this production, TAG evolves; for this is the very first production performed by TAG that is not written by any of its members. After this Powell asks his good friends, acting coaches Fran and Wayne Ward, to produce the next show. The Wards perform “America! A Patchwork Quilt,” and donate their time and efforts as a fundraising vehicle for TAG, a gesture that is greatly appreciated for these are the early days of TAG when the group has literally no money in its account. Sometime after this, Powell’s involvement is influenced by a second request, when Eric Nemoto, the de facto president of the group since the departure of Dave Winston Barge and the others, formally asks him to be TAG’s artistic director. Powell accepts, and the union proves to be a double win. TAG again gets someone experienced in theater leading its productions, and Powell, until then primarily known to be one of Hawaii’s premier choreographers and musical directors, can now venture into directing dramas. One of the first thing Powell does as artistic director is to get TAG to join the Hawaii State Theatre Council (HSTC), which will now make the group eligible to participate in HSTC’s “Po’okela Awards,” its annual awards for excellence in Hawaii stage productions. As for his first directorial effort as artistic director, Powell is asked by Eric Nemoto (on the suggestion of actor Steve Cedillos, who first acted with TAG in “The Committee”) to direct David Mamet’s drama, “Glengarry Glen Ross.” With this production TAG quickly evolves again, staging its first acknowledged mainstream play that has been produced on Broadway. The production garners rave reviews from critics John Berger (who first laid praise to TAG for staging “The Committee”) and Joe Rozmiarek. On a subsequent dare by Rozmiarek, Powell next stages “Buried Child,” Sam Shepard’s drama, and the production gains even further praise from the critics. With these two successful productions, Powell manages to hit back to back home runs for TAG which serves to elevate the stature of the group beyond that of a mere creative curiosity.

2000-2001: As artistic director, Brad Powell continues his transformational leadership. He establishes a process that is so basic to most theatres but is absolutely new for TAG. He establishes TAG’s first actual season of plays (up until this year every play previously produced had been the decision of TAG members a mere months before). First up in this inaugural season is “An Evening Of One Acts: Ticket to the City & Balcony Scene,” both written by Donald Elser, the late father of new board member, Patricia Elser Gillespie, who also serves as co-producer and director. In producing the show, Gillespie, in turn, also institutes the first ever “open call” when casting the plays (again, up until this show, every available role in a TAG play was assigned to an actor already affiliated with the group). Some of the names appearing in this production included Sam Polson, Dorothy Stamp, Peter Bunn, Lance Rae, and Betty Sanchez. This production also featured yet another TAG first; brand new chairs that were coordinated in terms of type and color. Prior to this production, what was used to till TAG’s risers were an odd assortment of mismatched chairs that ran the gamut of old, odd, small, and of course, totally uncomfortable. Just prior to opening, Eric Nemoto’s sister-in-law, who works for the hotel Hale Koa, advises him that the hotel is holding a sale of its banquet room chairs for \$5 apiece. Nemoto goes to the hotel and purchases 40 chairs for TAG. In the fall, after years of members advocating that this be done, Eric Nemoto applies for TAG’s federal non-profit status. He completes the initial application and then responds to a series of federal requests for information (both in written and verbal formats). At HSTC’s Po’okela Awards, TAG receives its first ever nominations. “Buried Child” is nominated for Best Play. Its stars, Sam Polson and Betty Sanchez, are nominated for Leading Male and Leading Female in the play, and Brad Powell is nominated for Best Director. “Buried Child” does not win that year, but it sets the stage for things to come. TAG’s next play is David Mamet’s “Oleanna,” directed by John Perry, who had first come to TAG as an assistant director for “Buried Child.” “Oleanna,” a riveting drama dealing with sexual harassment, draws audiences to stay behind for impromptu discussion sessions after each show about what constitutes sexual harassment, and how it may differ between the sexes. Perry serves as moderator, and actors Dorothy Stamp and Eric Nemoto answer audience questions. Perry continues directorial honors (and producing as well) by leading TAG to another first, its first ever Shakespeare play, producing “As You Like It.” Perry decides to stage the production “in the round” with the audience situated in seats

entirely surrounding the play area. TAG's lack of proper air circulation, however, presents many challenges and theatre critics have a field day. John Berger is later quoted as saying it was like staging Shakespeare in a sauna, and Joe Rozmiarek likens the experience to a flight delay where one is stuck on the tarmac for hours. Nonetheless, "As You Like It" draws in healthy audiences who enjoy the show. Of the many actors who appear in it, a number would prove to be influential with TAG. This includes Dave Schaeffer, Patrick Casey, Andy Alvarado, Anne Marie, and Melinda Maltby. TAG follows with a comedic favorite, Mary Chase's, "Harvey," directed by Brad Powell, which proves to be a cash cow for the small theatre struggling to make ends meet. Sam Polson and Mary Frances Kabel-Gwin play their roles (Elwood and Veta) like they were born to play them and the production is a huge hit, filling TAG's limited seats (and then some) with overflow crowds. During Harvey's production, TAG finally receives its approved 501(c)(3) letter (official date February 11, 2011). This is followed by another first – the first all-female casted play – Jane Martin's "Talking With," directed by Dave Schaeffer, which follows a series of monologues featuring a strong cast, including Anne Marie, Annie McLachlan, Blossom Lam, Dorothy Stamp, Sammie Choy, and Betty Burdick. Prior to this production, Blossom Lam makes a donation to TAG to enable it to purchase a quality fan that could combat the theater's oppressive heat, and Patrick Casey volunteers to install it onto the ceiling above the risers. Their contributions are no small efforts. These are the times when TAG is known as much for its incredibly miserable and hot environment as it is for its exceptional productions. While not a long term answer, the fan is an amazing help, keeping audiences somewhat cooler. At the end of the season, Eric Nemoto applies for, and receives, TAG's approved "bulk mail" stamp, enabling TAG to now mail its promotional literature at discounted rates.

2001-2002: The second full season of Brad Powell, TAG's artistic director, has him already displaying what he (and thereby TAG) will eventually become known for – the talent of selecting interesting stage productions that is rarely seen in Hawaii. "Gross Indecency: The Three Trials Of Oscar Wilde," fits this bill emphatically. The play, written by Moises Kaufman, deals with Oscar Wilde's three trials on the matter of his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas and others, which leads to charges of "committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons." It stars Richard MacPherson as Oscar Wilde and TAG newcomer Noah Johnson as Lord Douglas. At HSTC's annual stage awards, TAG takes home its first ever awards in only its second year of eligibility. "Oleanna" wins for Best Play, Dorothy Stamp wins for Leading Female in a Play, and Eric Nemoto wins for Leading Male in a Play. Dave Schaeffer next directs "The Effect Of Gamma Rays On Man-In-The Moon Marigolds" by Paul Zindel, which features Betty Burdick giving an absolutely riveting performance as Beatrice Hunsdorfer, the cynical single mother of two daughters who she verbally abuses, while her life goes awry through self-loathing and drug abuse. Brad Powell returns to directorial duties and takes on Peter Shaffer's haunting "Equus," about the accounts surrounding why a young man blinds six horses, which at the time is TAG's most daring and complicated production ever undertaken for many reasons. For one, the story has a required nude scene. For another, the tiny space of Yellow Brick seems too small to feature the built-in carousel that Powell wants to help symbolize a variety of dream and fantasy sequences. And third, all of the actors will have to deal with an immense dialogue driven script which require Scottish accents. But Powell persists. He designs a rehearsal schedule that strategically works to break down the natural inhibitions that the actors who must do the nude scene would naturally have and then establishes a drawn scrim that fronts the stage, serving as a tactful veil which lessens the shock value for the audience. It results in Noah Johnson and Devon Leigh, portraying the young lovers, not only pulling off the nude scene with little problem, but return performances that are poignant and beautiful. To provide sufficient space for the carousel, Powell demands that the TAG stage (the back of which is shaped at an angle that severely reduces the total square footage of the play area) be opened up and squared off. Todd Middleton, who appears in the play as one of the symbolic "horses," does the actual construction (along with a friend) and opens up the space. He also manages to use a jackhammer to bore through the concrete stage in order to secure the center pole, and finally puts the finishing touches on the carousel a mere hours before preview. The rest of the cast, Eric Nemoto, Dorothy Stamp, Frankie Enos, and Hayden de M. Yates do their best to work the Scottish in, if not perfectly, at least on a reasonable basis, and Middleton and William Raye Street don the expertly

crafted horse heads and clogs (created by Kurt Wurmli) while managing to both stand on and rotate the carousel respectively. All this combines to make "Equus" another unqualified success for Powell, who is now developing a local reputation as being one of Hawaii's best directors of dramas. On a side note, the play is the TAG debut of Frankie Enos, a relative newcomer to the Hawaii stage who will eventually go on to be one of TAG's great leaders. Powell continues directing, next taking on Richard Caulfeild Goodman's "The Insanity Case Of Mrs. A. Lincoln." Goodman would go on to contribute to TAG significantly with additional plays during the ensuing years, but "A. Lincoln" is the very first of his plays produced by TAG. It features veteran actress Jan McGrath, one of Hawaii's finest actors, in what at the time she describes as her favorite all-time role, that of Mary Lincoln, wife of the 16th president of the United States. It is also the TAG debut of other actors who will go on to contribute in different ways to the group. This includes Jim Tharp, Virginia Jones, and Richard McWilliams (eventual TAG board members). The next play is admittedly brought back because it had been such a big hit the previous year. Not shying away from the potential for another "cash cow" helping to replenish its coffers, TAG produces the hugely popular "Harvey" once again, which will become the only time TAG ever repeats a show for two years in a row. It is directed by Jake Cafone, and once again has Sam Polson and Mary Frances Kabel-Gwin reprising their respective roles of Elwood and Veta. True to form, "Harvey" packs them into tiny Yellow Brick Studio once again. The season concludes with John Colton's and Clemence Randolph's "Rain," based on Somerset Maugham's short story, "Miss Thompson," and it is directed by David Starr. It stars Melinda Maltby as the "fallen woman" prostitute, Sadie Thompson, and Dan Furst as the ill-fated, self-righteous Reverend Davidson. It features the TAG debut of another eventual contributor to TAG's legacy, Victoria Gail-White.