Dan Seed:

Hello and welcome to Big Ideas. A podcast from Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. I'm your host Dan Seed from the University School of Journalism and Mass Communication. We are joined for this episode by a Texas State distinguished alumnus Eugene Lee, who is currently Artist in Residence in the Texas State department of theater and dance. Mr. Lee is a nearly 50 year veteran of the stage film and television, having appeared in more than 200 television movies and series alone. In addition to his writing credits and work on the stage across the globe. Eugene, thanks so much for joining us.

Eugene Lee:

It's a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Dan Seed:

So the focus of our conversation in this episode is on the Black and Latino Playwrights Celebration, which is an annual event in its 18th year, now. That takes place at Texas State of which you're the artistic director. Before, we get into that. Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you get into acting and writing and what drew you to it?

Eugene Lee:

Oh, wow. Somebody told me a long time ago that I was pretty good at it. I did a play in high school and I came to Southwest Texas State in 1970 and my major was pre law, political science. My minor was drama. I ended up slipping those graduating with a double major. I taught high school at Fort worth, Texas for four years after I graduated in 74 and eventually moved out to Los Angeles, committed to having a career as an actor. And I have not looked back. I moved to New York about a year after that and worked in New York with the Negro Ensemble Company and did the daytime soap opera the Guiding Light for a couple of years and did a bunch of off Broadway plays and went back to LA and did some writing and television.

Eugene Lee:

I've had a pretty blessed journey if I can say so myself. Only because I kind of didn't quit. I stayed in line, as they say, and I didn't get out of line because in this business, somebody gets out of line in front of you every minute and you get to move up a little bit. So I stayed in line. In a nutshell, that's what I've been. I've been lucky. I've been blessed. I've brought some stuff to the table too. I brought a work ethic that I think had a lot to do with whatever success that I've been able to achieve.

Eugene Lee:

I mean, I grew up in a Texas that was segregated and I never sat in a room with a white person until I was in 10th grade. And so I was taught by all black teachers in rooms with all black students that I was in America. And especially in Texas, I was going to have to do 300% just to get noticed. I saw those signs come down. I was the first and usually the only if you know what I mean. For a lot of my young adult life. So yeah, that kind of instilled in me a stick-to-itiveness and a work ethic that says, "You get out what you put in."

Dan Seed:

So early on in your career, as you began and you came from that background having experienced that segregation and racism. Growing up, did you carry that with you? The fact that you were obviously yourself, but representing your community and did that drive you at all to reach those heights?

Eugene Lee:

I remember many times being told to be a credit to my race, if you know what I mean. To bring some pride and some dignity to whatever it was that I did. So as to not misrepresent. Yeah.

Dan Seed:

And it's interesting that you say that too, because I'm curious. I was born in the early 1980s. And so for people of my age, what you're talking about seems far away or removed from clearly my experience as a younger person, as a white person. But I'm wondering what it was like in the early 70s, when you started acting. Were you relegated to use a word I suppose, to certain roles? And have you seen that change in a way over the last 50 years?

Eugene Lee:

I've definitely seen it change and there was a certain degree of relegation. Early on, I had a lot of auditions for characters that didn't have names. Like junkie number one or lowlife junkie snitch, or informer number two or gang member number one. They didn't have names. They were just characters and more often than not one dimensional characters that were kind of like tools in the storytelling. But yeah, I have seen that change. There's much more demand for stories. And for honest stories and truthful stories with authority, which is one of the reasons why I write. So that the history isn't revisioned as history, so to speak. And so that it does have an ounce of truth in it. Maybe even a pound of truth, it'd be all true, but to set the record straight. And to cross some cultural lines, some cultural chasms.

Eugene Lee:

I mean, I think that's how we bridge these differences between us, by sharing what those differences are. And if I can write a play or present a character that gives someone who might be bigoted or prejudice, some insight into who I am and the common denominators that we share, then I've sort of torn down that wall of mistrust. Because yeah, I did come out of my youth with ... I wasn't raised to trust white people, for example. I was never told that, but I understood it. I wasn't raised to rely on the police to protect or serve me if you know what I mean. I was raised to deal with police in totally different way than I'm certain you were.

Eugene Lee:

So yeah, it's taken some years and maybe a little bit of therapy for me to get past the mistrust. I don't want to call it hate because I don't know that, that's what it is. When I think hate, I think I wish you weren't here and I'm not there. I'm not there. I don't respond to hate with hate necessarily. I did grow up in a time of Martin Luther King and the nonviolent movement. So that also had a huge impact on who I am and how I am. But yeah, I put a lot of that stuff ... I laid a lot of that by the side of the road, as I moved on.

Dan Seed:

Is art therapy in that regard?

Eugene Lee:

Yeah. Definitely. For a lot of people, especially when it's new information. I've seen people see plays about black people and realize, "Oh my God, I didn't know that." And I think that's when people change is when they get new information, because I'm sort of convinced that the average bigot or the average racist or someone who is not anti-racist. They can't tell you why they hate black people. It's just something that they've swallowed all their lives, something that they live with, something that they've watched and never questioned. I found that to be true. And when they tear down that wall and look real closely at themselves and the source of that hate, there is no source. There is no legitimate, no logical reason for it. None whatsoever.

Eugene Lee:

All the white supremacy ideas, they come from a long ago lie. So yeah, it's great for me to watch this new generation that's repelling all that stuff. They're not buying it, they're not buying it. And I remind all my conservative and bigoted and white friends that your grandchildren are going to be brown. All the flag waving, all the anger, all the stuff in the world is not going to change that. So yeah.

Dan Seed:

What in your career is your proudest accomplishment? Not necessarily maybe the piece that you're proudest of and it could be, but when you look back on your time in television, film, the stage, in all of the roles that you've played, whether it's as an actor or a writer, what are you most proud of?

Eugene Lee:

Surviving, for real and staying in it and achieving whatever little bit of success and longevity that I've been able to achieve. I didn't decide to be an actor so I can become rich and famous. That was never a target that I aim. I figured that would happen, if some other things happened but I wanted, first of all, to be the best artist that I could be. I wanted to be the best I could be at what I do. And I wanted to respect because I always believe that people can like you today and then not care about you tomorrow, but if they respect you, that lingers for awhile. I just kind of wanted those things and to have some longevity. I decided I wanted to do this for the rest of my life and I was going to do whatever I needed to do to make sure that, that happened. I think that's what any person with any kind of career minded sense about them does. I don't believe you ever hit anything that you don't aim at. So I pointed myself in a direction and I was not going to be discouraged.

Dan Seed:

You mentioned earlier in the conversation that you start off as pre law and that drama was a minor. What precipitated that change? Was it the passion for art? Or combination maybe of your ability to affect change?

Eugene Lee:

I think it may have been a combination of those things. I may have been a little bit of me deciding that I thought that, that would be an easier route to take. Then trying to go to law school and et cetera. I just followed my heart more than anything, man. I really felt good about what was happening when I was on stage or when I was being creative and artistic. I felt fulfilled in a way that just propelled me to say, "Okay, this is what I want to do." I could have made a lot more money being a lawyer, that's very clear. But as I said, that wasn't what I was trying to do. I was trying to be happy. I was trying to find something to spend the rest of my life being happy doing.

Dan Seed:

Happiness and passion, very, very important. That's what I always tell my students. There's not a lot of money in journalism. You have to be passionate and happy. Happy about it, and want to do it. And if you want to do it and you're passionate, you can make a good career out of it. So let's get into the Black and Latino Playwrights Celebration, just for transparency for our audience. This interview was recorded before the celebration began on August 31st, by the time this episode is uploaded and you're listening to it, the conference will have ended on September 6th. So we're not going to get into so much what you're seeing this year clearly with the folks that came. But let's start here, tell us a little bit about what the celebration is and what its purposes.

Eugene Lee:

The mission statement that I came up with for this particular project is to study the craft of playwriting, to nurture the craftsmen, the playwright, and to celebrate the work. And those are three objectives that we have every year. Every year, we try to have activities. I call it, pulling all the wagons into a circle to look at the state of the art. Discussions about playwriting, discussions about playwrights, discussions about plays and structure. We do a play writing workshop where people come and they write a 10 minute play. So those kinds of conference like activities, we have. We've discussed topics like black women in plays or women in black plays or with a particular writer.

Eugene Lee:

But just to take a look at the state of the art and have discussions and panels and symposiums that look at where black theater is and where it's come from, because we also do attribute to some pioneer from black or Latino play or theater on the Friday of every year. But the big part of what we do is the new play development workshops, where recently I've gotten up to 200, over 200 scripts a year submitted for consideration, which says to me that we're filling a void because there is a need for writers of color to have opportunities and resources to develop their work. Plays don't just happen. There's a process to what I call finding a play. You don't just sit down and write it out and it exists. There's a whole process. Writers sit down by themselves in a little room and put these words on a page. But there comes a collaborative phase of finding a play, when other theater artists have to come in and actors, directors, designers, stage managers. To help that playwright find out what the export of his play is or her play is. What people take away from the play. Because when you hear it coming out of somebody else's mouth and through your ears, it oftentimes becomes better or worse depending on the context or whatever.

Eugene Lee:

So what we do is, I pick two plays, one play by black playwright and one play by a Latino playwright. And we're able to bring in the playwright, a professional director, one professional actor for each of the plays and dramaturgical support in terms of a dramaturge for each of the plays. And then we finish out the casting of the plays with students from the theater department. So what this project does is sort of bridge the academic world and professional world and gives these students an opportunity to, what I call get in the trenches with a new play. And of all the 200 or whatever plays that I read. I'm looking for a voice. I'm looking for an unproduced, what I call embryo of a play that needs work, not a play that's been produced to and on Broadway. We're looking to help develop a new play. That's where the learning happens with these students, where they find out what their job is as an actor, in terms of helping a playwright, find their play.

Eugene Lee:

And I bring those in and they rehearse for a week. They rehearse Monday through Thursday or Friday for about four or five hours each week, each night. And I've seen playwrights come in on Monday and on Tuesday, show up Tuesday evening with a whole new second act or change a character or take a character out and put them back in on Thursday. Or change the gender of a character or combine two characters. And I encourage the writers when they come here. I say, "If you want to go back to what you had when you first came here, you're welcome to do that. But why not take advantage of these resources to sort of expand your voice, to shout where you whispered and see what happens. To give you an opportunity as a writer to grow and fearlessly." Because I think that's important too. A lot of times plays get produced and you worry about what the critics are going to say, and this is a safe place. This is a place where the word rehearsal, if you look at it, it's re hear.

Dan Seed:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Eugene Lee:

Where you hear it again and you hear it again. And that's how you take it and shape a play by rehearing it time and time again. And so what we do, is we study the craft and we nurture the playwright by providing the playwright with resources to help them hear their play. And then we celebrate that work with a script in hand, reading on the weekend for a live audience. And that live audience gets to do feedback to the playwright, let the playwright know what resonated with them. I sort of monitor those callbacks, those talk backs. And I say, "I don't need you to come up after the play and say, well, I think he should have, or I think she should have. No, no, no, no. All I want to know is what rang true. That's what I want to play rights to leave you with in terms of the export of their play is what made sense to the audience, what resonated with them?"

Eugene Lee:

In a nutshell, that's what it is. That's what we do. And a number of these plays have gone on to professional productions and won awards. And these playwrights have gone on to write other plays as well. I've got testimonials from a bunch of them, that say that this experience was pivotal in terms of where they went after they left here as writers. And it's also life changing for these students in a way. The insight they get into the professional work ethic and the standards, even down to being on time for rehearsals. And we've had a couple students that were fired from the readings and those very same students have gone on to work on Broadway and in New York because they learned the hard way about the standards that you need to adhere to in order to have some longevity in this business.

Dan Seed:

And you touched on, bridging that gap between academia and the real world. And clearly that's our mission here at the university, in the departments that you work in and that I work in. And across university to give that real world experience within the classroom, whereas you said, it is a safe space, but you touched on this a little bit when we talked about your background. But I think it's important to refocus it and bring it back to this. How important is this conference or conferences like this in terms of giving voice to minority artists in communities and developing that artistic community and confidence in their work in order so that their voices can be heard on the larger stage in the world, in the country in whichever medium they choose?

Eugene Lee:

I think it's vital. Playwrights document the human condition. Basically, that's what they do. They hold a mirror up to the human condition and let us get a look and an in depth look at character and character change at strengths and weaknesses flaws. There's tragedy, there's comedy, we laugh, we cry, we sing, but it's all a part of the human condition. What's wonderful about what we do is not just for the writers, but for the students in the community who come. The black and brown people who see themselves on stage, who see their stories being told, it's empowering in a wonderful kind of way. I think just in terms of instilling some human dignity and some pride and some cultural pride. People change when they ... What is it? Learning is defined by the psychologist as a change in behavior.

Eugene Lee:

And I think there's a lot of learning that happens during this week, black and brown students find out often something about their culture, about their music, about their food, about their history, about their dance, about their relationships, about their place in America, about their place in their homes that they didn't know prior to this week. And that same kind of learning happens for the white students who get an inside view at a place they've never been. They get to crawl around inside a culture in a way, and look in the nooks and crannies and look at the strengths and the weaknesses and recognize, "Oh, damn, I got the same ... That's like me." In that respect, I think it not only empowers the minority students, but it also empowers the white students because I think historically they thought that these stories had nothing to do with them. Or more often than not, white people didn't want to go see a black play because they felt like they were going to be the bad guys, that they were going to be the villains.

Eugene Lee:

But when they go see a play, like my play East Texas Hot Links, which is about self-hate, it opens up a whole new piece of wisdom about our relationships. And I think that's one of the merits about what this project does, is about bridging those cultural chasms. Is about these students learning about themselves. And is about these other students learning about someone that they don't .... Learning something new about someone else that they don't know, it is life altering for a lot of these students and not just black and brown, but gay, LGBQT. All of those, domestic violence. I always try to challenge the students with the scripts that I pick, whether it's the language because I love it when the Latino plays have Spanish in them and music, if you know what I mean?

Eugene Lee:

So I also try to challenge them on contemporary issues when I can because a lot of plays do deal with ... Are not afraid to go into places like sexual assault, sexual harassment, and those hot button topics that resonate today. That's a wonderful thing about what we do in theater, it's necessarily political, if you know what I mean. It's hard to deal with the human condition and avoid politics.

Dan Seed:

And nowadays, for 18 years you've done this conference and clearly your career spans almost 50 years longer than that, including your time in college. But how important is it now more than ever to have that kind of education, not only for the playwrights and the actors, but for the audience as well? To force, not force people, but to push people I suppose, into zones that either, like you said, they're not comfortable with or not aware of in order to create more dialogue. And to again, blunt some of what we're seeing now.

Eugene Lee:

It's very important. It's critical. It's vital. And I don't think it takes pushing necessarily. It's just about providing it. It's almost like that thing, if you build it, they will come. I'm convinced that what's ailing America's soul right now is not going to be fixed in a public moment. It's not, it's going to be 350 million private moments, where people sit alone with their hearts and decide that they're going to take the hate out of their hearts. And that's for 350 million Americans, all of them privately at some point doing that. Now it may be that a play is a catalyst for them sitting down and given the fodder with which to change their souls, so to speak. And there's a need for that on ... There's a lot of good people on both sides if I can [inaudible 00:22:30] 45.

Eugene Lee:

But I think you understand what I'm saying, when I say that it's not going to happen in a public discussion. It's not going to happen at a play, it's going to happen when they go home after they see that play and they're sitting with just themselves and say, "Okay, I got to change."

Dan Seed:

Let's talk briefly because you've eloquently described the impact that this has on students and playwrights of color and the art community itself. But the conference this year is clearly different in this time of social distancing. How did you go about reworking this year's event, where normally you have people in the theater and you're working close by and that interaction that you would normally have? How have you changed that? And how does that affect what you do?

Eugene Lee:

Just like what you just said, we're not face to face. And we're finding ways to try to compensate for some of the lack of sensory participation, for example. And a lot of theaters are having to do that, now. It's a new day. I'm convinced it's not a permanent condition. This is theater. Theater will come back to what it was once we get past all of this. But for now, we've been finding creative ways. I've had two plays that I've written, done virtually in readings over this past summer. So the technology is there and people are at different places all over the country and all working on the same play. All rehearsing the same place. So the technology exists and we can do it. And it's just a reading and that's the other thing. This isn't a production. It's not like we're trying to fully mount and do costumes and lights and all that other stuff for plays. It's just a reading.

Eugene Lee:

And what we do in this week, we just barely have time to deal with the needs of the script and the storytelling from structural things to nuance sort of quality to the writing. So yeah, we can do, and I've seen it done. The only issue is, not the only issue, but one of the issues is the technology and flaws in the technology. For example, we will be recording these readings before we stream them live. And the only thing that will be live will be the Q&As after the reading because you know how glitches happen and these things fall out. So we will record the last rehearsal toward the end of the week. And that's what we'll stream when we do these.

Eugene Lee:

So we're finding ways to make adjustments using the technology. I'm ignorant about the technology. And thank God there are students and faculty members at the Texas State department of theater who have a handle on all that. But I don't think it changes the impact. In fact, in many ways I find that it may make it more intimate for people because it is close up. It very much is that, but yet we're adjusting.

Dan Seed:

As we all are adjusting. That's kind of the theme of 2020, I think. So before we wrap up here, I'll give you an opportunity just to discuss anything that you're working on. Anything your students are working on, that the general public may be interested in or have an opportunity to attend or see.

Eugene Lee:

Oh, wow. Well, the tribute this year is to an African American. Actually he's a Caribbean born African American playwright, Gus Edwards, whose work I've done in New York in the past. The Negro Ensemble Company. And we're doing a tribute to him, including some excerpts from some of his works from some of his plays. And from a movie, he wrote an adaptation of a James Baldwin book. Go Tell It on the Mountain. He's a provocateur of a sort, he's a brilliant playwright. His use of language is one that I think everyone will find attractive and poetic in a heightened sense. That's one thing that Nadine [Masone 00:26:15] is working on with some students. She does a tribute every year and she does a wonderful job of bringing to life some of examples of the works of the people that we are paying tribute to. And that's the objective of what that particular thing is, is to expose these South Texas audiences to once again a voice they hadn't heard and some storytelling that they hadn't had the experience of hearing before.

Eugene Lee:

I'm working on a bunch of stuff, I've got two new plays that I'm writing. One about the first two black police officers in Houston to arrest a white man. But I'm spinning it a little bit. He's not really a white man. He's a black man who has been passing. So we've got some interesting drama that happens here. Just from a historical perspective for a long time, there've always been black cops in Houston. They were limited to the Fifth Ward or to whatever Ward they were working in. They couldn't go downtown. They couldn't arrest a white man. So when that first one happened, I always thought that was a pivotal ... That was a change. That was one of those inflection points. But then once I started writing the story, I said, "No, I've got to spin it a little more and make it just ... Up the ante." So to speak.

Eugene Lee:

My other play, which will be done in New York, it was supposed to be done at Queens Theater in New York, starting April 11th but the pandemic, sort of put that off for awhile. But whenever they get back, we anticipate hopefully within a year they'll be back producing and this play will be done. And that plays called Lyin' Ass. And it's about a fictional first black female Texas ranger, which is a seeming contradiction in terms. Black female Texas ranger. That's a white man's world, but this play is about the lies that we live in. The lies that we live with and the play is really about mental illness, undiagnosed mental illness. People who have been impacted by trauma in their lives and they live in lies. They find their peace in the stories.

Eugene Lee:

And there's an old man who lost his wife and daughter. And he sits out in front of the barbecue place or the barbershop or wherever. And he just tells stories. They call him Texas Tuxedo and his tales, but that's where he finds his happiness. If you know what I mean? And I've got four characters in this play who all are living in another reality in a strange kind of way, in response to a trauma. In the end, they find themselves, they find the truth. The premise of that play was in order to sell a lie. It's got to have an ounce of truth. So if you line up 12 lies, you've also lined up 12 ounces of truth. So this play is about these four people getting to the truth about themselves by way of their lies.

Dan Seed:

Very interesting. I'd love to see it. Honestly the works that you're talking about. Just again, speak to so much in what's happening now, what's happened in the past. And also as we've talked about providing that glimpse into a different world, not necessarily a different world, but a world many of us aren't familiar with. And a reality that many of us aren't familiar with. And again, that's the power of art. I'll leave with this quote that I think kind of sums everything up that we've talked about. This quote from John F. Kennedy, "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artists free to follow his vision wherever it takes them."

Dan Seed:

And I think that encapsulates what we've talked about, this idea of art as nourishing our culture, the playwright celebration, allowing the artists to explore their art in a way that sets them free to then elevate the game in society in general. So Mr. Eugene Lee, thank you so much for joining us. This was an excellent interview and we're so glad to have you on our faculty, on our campus, working with our students and mentoring the next generation. Thank you so much for joining us.

Eugene Lee:

It's been my pleasure, man. Thank you for having me. This has been big fun.

Speaker 3:

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