

Introduction:

This is Life Invented. Invent the life you want to lead. Invent the life you want to lead. Be compassionate, be creative, the possibilities are limitless. Go Broncos.

Narrator:

Welcome to the Life Invented podcast presented by Santa Clara University. From campus life to what it means to learn in the Silicon Valley. This is: Life Invented.

j:

We watch in awe as actors do what they do on the big screen, or in hit musicals such as Hamilton, or perhaps in films with powerful messages. Today we will be exploring the power of experimentation, listening, and story-telling through the theatre life at Santa Clara University. Many of us have heard how important the role of actors and artists are in societies of the past as well as today, so on this beautiful day in the Bay Area and on this episode of Life Invented, we're hanging with professor Aldo Billingslea and exploring how the nuances and the choices actors make on stage can ripple out to the world and can prepare one for life ahead. As an accomplish actor, professor, and integral part of Santa Clara's theatre community for almost 20 years, Aldo, we're excited to ask you to please dish yo' deets!

Aldo:

My name is Aldo Billingslea and I am a professor of Theatre Arts. I teach in the department of Theatre and Dance, I am the first and former Chief Diversity Officer, Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion at Santa Clara University. I am here on the planet because God wants me to teach and act; these are things that I am absolutely convinced of from a long, long time of experimentation to figure out what makes the blood pump and what gives the best effect--the most positive effect--to the greatest number of people that I encounter, so I know that I am on the planet to do those things.

j:

When you are standing in front of young, impressionable minds that have decided to make Santa Clara University their university of choice, what are you noticing about these young men and women?

Aldo:

I see hope, I see possibility, I see the savior of our future. I see that these are people who have grown up with more technology at their fingertips at a younger age than any generation before in the history of the planet. That is tremendous potential: to do better and to kind of balance those who are just trying to do "for self." So, I see that the university's mission of a more sustainable and just and diverse planet is absolutely possible with each class that I stand in front of.

j:

As an accomplished actor with decades of experience, not just in the classroom, but with life itself, what do you find is one of the most valuable skill sets you teach that will enhance their college experience and what they go on to do in years to come?

Aldo:

When students are in my class, I tell them about the most difficult aspect of acting, which is one of the most important, but challenging aspects of life which is the ability to listen. When you're on stage and you and I are performing Othello and we are performing it for the 200th time that year, and you're saying lines to me that I've heard 200 times in the same calendar year but I have to act like it's the very first time that I've heard them. Each of these people who are coming in with all of this technology that they've encountered also need to learn to listen to other people, not just to the game station or whatever they've been playing. I'm not just somebody who is across the planet who they've been playing against, but the person who is in the room with them to see just how they nod their head, just how they have their arms folded, all of those things, the little things. That listening is not just something that's been important and will be important in the future, but as we become more detached from other human beings, it becomes even more important that we learn to listen to each other.

j:

Aldo, in today's current climate where political and corporate leadership is constantly, you know, falling short in bridging communities and people from all walks of life, what way do you feel artists, young and old, can play in activating and inspiring change on campus, as well as on the global stage?

Aldo:

The time where artists step up is a time like this. This is, quite honestly, the time that we've been prepared for, to speak truth to power, to tell honest stories, to tell honestly, "This is who we are" but also, "This is who we could be." The positive, this is who we might become if we work hard enough, this is who we will be if we don't pay attention, all those stories. One is a feel good, and the other is a horror story; not just an opportunity for the artist, it's the responsibility for the artist to tell those stories. And so, doing so takes integrity, takes courage, and it takes support.

j:

One of the stories that I know just means so much to you, and you've been a part of telling it and teaching it, is the story of the life and the work of the great writer August Wilson. Can you talk about why teaching his story is so important for us today?

Aldo:

When you're talking about a Santa Clara student, you're talking about a student body that has an average SAT of 1360, and they have an average GPA of almost 3.8 and these are really, really successful students appearing on a college campus, and for them to be able to wrap their mind around the fact that this man dropped out of school before he graduated in the 10th grade.

August Wilson has dropped out of school, and never went to college, didn't finish high school, and won two Pulitzer prizes, and should have had three. That this man, who set out the task, the monumental, never-before accomplished task, of creating a century cycle so that he has 100 years of African American theatre encapsulated in 10 separate plays, one play for each decade, and that he accomplishes that on his deathbed, denying himself pain medication so that his mind can be clear to complete that task, that that man captures not just the story and the history of the African American struggle in the 21st century, but also is able to address gender issues and socio-economic issues and issues of religion. All these things in these plays is astounding. The thought that these people who have accomplished so much who are studying him might be overlooking other people who, for one reason or another, didn't appear to have the status, didn't appear to be able to make the cut. If one of those can do all of that, who else might be falling through the cracks, who else might we not be giving the appropriate focus and attention and value that shows that all of these people are people of sincere worth?

j:

Professor, you have had the opportunity to portray the lead character Troy in *Fences*, August Wilson's legendary play, many times and have received rave reviews. You know every word to this play, and you also share the same experience with the great Denzel Washington, one of the best actors of this era. What is it like to sit in the theatre and watch *Fences* on the big screen as an audience member?

Aldo:

Well first off, I was impressed because he got the lines right, and I didn't, and you know he's Denzel, so he looks really good doing it. Watching that play on the big screen was thrilling, my blood is pumping, and I know what's going to happen and I know the words that are going to be said. I read the play, I know how it ends, and yet my pulse quickens watching that, and I was--still--find myself in this state of exhilaration, just being charged by it all. But I've seen the play five, maybe six times? I've seen a lot of really terrific actors tackle that role, and it's no less powerful. It's interesting to see how he handles a moment and to think, "Oh, that's a great choice. Oh, maybe I should have done that", and to see a choice and think "Uh, you shouldn't have made that choice". When he finds out that the woman he's had an affair with is dead, and he stands, he's by the window and his legs give out, that's a great choice...except earlier in the movie, when his wife, played by the *incomparable* Violet Davis, finds out that he's having the affair, she made the same choice, and so I don't know in sequence which choice was made first, but he should have just left it. Because when she did it, it worked. When he did it, it looked a little staged.

j:

A little behind the scenes there.

Aldo:

Yeah.

j:

There are young people who are going to be making some decisions about what university to attend. What message do you have for them as they contemplate their futures?

Aldo:

I would say, listen; listen to your heart. There's all sorts of other obstacles that can come in the way. You can start looking and thinking about dollar signs...the dollar signs you might have to pay, the dollar signs that you think you might make, and that those are the flashy objects that are meant to distract you. That the important thing is whether you believe, and if God is your higher power, I don't know. Anybody, the reason that we're here is to affect other people, and if you're listening--truly listening--to your heart, everything is going to be alright. This is from an actor, who, when I first came here, one of the Jesuits said "What's next for you, Aldo?", I said, "I'm going to New York, I'm gonna do *Death of a Salesman*," and he said, "Oh that's exciting. What's after that?" I said "I have no idea." And the priest, the Jesuit priest, told me, "It seems at times, that actors have more faith than priests, because you are absolutely confident that something else will be there." And I said, "Absolutely. He wouldn't give me this desire and this talent if he wasn't going to take care of me as I move along." I've been very well taken care of.

j:

You have indeed sir, and you've been paid for it, and we appreciate your time and we appreciate your words of wisdom, and we will listen more as we go forward.

Aldo:

Alright, thanks, take care.

Aldo:

This is Aldo Billingslea from Santa Clara University urging you to invent the life you want to lead.

Narrator:

You've just listened to the Life Invented podcast presented by Santa Clara University, and there's so much more to explore. Visit us at scu.edu/podcasts, and learn more about Santa Clara's commitment to innovative and inspiring opportunities.