**Story Finders**

*Popular OLLI film instructor, Butch Epps, and gifted writer-poet, Paige Wajda, explore the art of finding stories on-screen on the page, and most unforgettably, the story within ourselves.*

**A POLAND:** OLLI instructor, Butch Epps, earned his MFA, Masters of Fine Arts at UCLA film school. After his undergraduate and graduate film studies, Epps spent many years in the entertainment industry all the while keeping his focus on story and storytelling before migrating east to our desert. Where he teaches sold-out cinema courses at our OLLI, there is another reason a movie aficionado comes to our desert.

**B EPPS:** For the waters.

(LAUGHTER)

**B EPPS:** And for those of you who don’t know, that is for *Casa Blanca*.

**A POLAND:** California writer, poet, Paige Wajda taught for many years in Poland before earning a master's degree at the University of Edinburgh. So, how did a La Quinta lady end up in a world away from her beloved desert? Well, therein lies her story.

**P WAJDA:** I met some people from Poland during my study abroad semester in England and they were fun people I have ever known. If I moved to Poland I can be with them all the time.

**B EPPS:** on the note of fun, on my father’s side they came from Poland Russia. So, I’m sure we will have fun.

(LAUGHTER)

**P WAJDA:** Yes.

**A POLAND:** Stay tuned for a fun conversation as two vibrant voices of OLLI share thoughts about finding stories on screen, on-page, and actually almost anywhere but especially finding the story within you.

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**A POLAND:** Welcome to *In Conversation: The Voices of OLLI*. OLLI, O-L-L-I is an acronym for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute located at and networked with the Palm Desert Campus of California State University San Bernardino.

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**A POLAND:** If you saw Butch Epps in Paige Wajda in and you might have mistaken them for dad and daughter but they are actually colleagues and what they share is timeless. Both are story finders. For Epps, it is primarily on the film screen. For Wajda, mostly on the written page. They begin their conversation exploring the are stories wove into the human condition.

**P WAJDA:** Yeah, I think so. I think it is prevalent in every culture around the world that they have stories of some kind of storytelling tradition. I actually do think everyone can tell a story that is why I teach the class *Story of Your Life* because I do think everybody has a story from their life that they can tell and can tell it well. Is that story publishable? Maybe not, maybe it won't circulate past the members of their own family. Yes, I would say, definitively yes.

**B EPPS:** Yeah, I would agree with that. I think everybody has a story to tell. Absolutely. It is not just the story is but how the story is told, I imagine you know this Paige. In terms of breaking through, I think it’s about finding your voice and letting that voice speak for you in the story you’re telling. I did something a number of years ago and found a voice for that particular thing. Not that I got it published nor did I seek to get it published but people showed I showed it to, it strikes them. The other thing in terms are we wired for a story which in that sense is are we wired to respond to stories? Yes, because that goes all the way back to cave art is telling the story of some sort. An instructor many years ago talked about the power of story and how it kind of began with let's say nomads. One nomad comes to another nomad they need to find a way to communicate and let’s say language forms but their actual desire to communicate is to come across someone and say, “Hey, what’s over there?” and being able to be told, “this is what you can find over there.” In a sense that is the beginning of storytelling.

**P WAJDA:** I think for most people even if they are not writers, stories provide the means for an escape. I feel like especially right now with the horrible things going on in the world. We need that kind of escape, either via movies, TV shows, books, or anything. We need stories to get us out of the world and out of our own heads. I think that memoir writing is also like an escape because you are escaping to your past, mining the stories from the different times of your life when things were easier, or when you overcame and can see that you grew in some way. That is why I think that is why I became a literature major because stories like save my sanity.

**B EPPS:** What kind of stories attract you?

**P WAJDA:** I think my favorite genre will always be science fiction and then memoirs. Those are very different things.

**B EPPS:** Yeah.

**P WAJDA:** I also love poetry and pretty much I have never met a different genre that I didn't like. I just want to say that I took screenwriting twice in college and I hated it the first time. So, I gave it a second try and I hate it. I felt really confined by the formula of it.

**B EPPS:** The format. Yeah.

**P WAJDA:** Yeah. I think it’s very difficult and very rigid but I don’t know, maybe you can give another insight on it.

**B EPPS:** So, in regards to the formula, I really, really understand that there is a craft that has to be learned first. Not only screenplay format, how to write descriptions of the inscription of interior, where you are, the inscription of places, and move to dialogue for a scene. There is a formula to screenwriting in terms of story beats. That happened from the beginning to where you should be in the middle to where you should be at the beginning of act two, act three, to the ultimate climax of the story and wrapping up the film story. It is like learning the piano. You start off by learning scales and the discipline of that, and the practice of that and you move on to learn a piece of classical music and you keep practicing and practicing and you get really good at that. Playing that. Then you decide you don’t like classical music, you’d rather like to play jazz. Even jazz has a structure to it but once you learn the structure you can play riff as much as you want. That is kind of what film genres are, you learn the genre and you can play within the genre. That’s essentially what film formula is as well.

**P WAJDA:** I’m just curious, do you ever find enjoyment of a movie is inhibited by the technical knowledge that you have? Do you ever wish you just can enjoy it and not peel back all the layers?

**B EPPS:** Well for me that is part of the enjoyment. In one of my film classes in graduate school the instructor, named Howard Suber, would talk to us about seeing a movie twice. The first time we relax and enjoy it. The second time you go back and see how the movie is being told. If you’ve seen the movie once, you know the ups and downs of the story. So, when you go watch it the second time you can see the craft begins to be revealed. Not that you can’t start seeing craft the first time around but it stands out the second time around. For me, there are two types of entertainment, a movie that is fun to watch and you just forget all that and there is the joy of working it all out but not necessarily all movies bring me joy but the joy of figuring them out is fun. Now when you write, have you been finding that the more you write the more experience you have with crafts. So, does that make it easier for the problem solving to make the structure for poetry or prose?

**P WAJDA:** Yeah, it definitely. I am amazed when people can write. They have never written a novel and they write a novel and sell it. I have written three novels before but none of them are publishable. They were practice essentially. I have written hundreds of films but none of them will see the light of day.it is a constantly, thankless job because you are working but you’re not getting paid for it yet but you know it will be worth it when one of your books hits the shelves which is what you want.

**B EPPS:** It sounds like you’re on track. It definitely sounds like you’re on track. In terms of science fiction, do you keep up with science magazines and stuff?

**P WAJDA:** I do not.

(LAUGHTER)

**P WAJDA:** I took one science class in college that was colloquially known as physics for poets because it was theoretical physics dumbed down for literature majors. It was really interesting and mind-blowing. I will just Google or Wikipedia things that I don’t understand.

**B EPPS:** I love Wikipedia. It is a tremendous resource. You do have to fact-check. One of the things I find useful is the footnotes. Wikipedia is a great starting point for a lot of stuff and I don't frown upon it.

**P WAJDA:** Yeah. it saved my life a lot of times. You can really get into a wormhole because they will name-drop somebody and you have to click on them and read about them. You can be on it for hours. It was the great science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke who wrote, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” and that is something I think about a lot when I write.

**B EPPS:** That’s right.

**P WAJDA:** What happens when those things get taken away. I also have read the post-apocalyptic types of books. I recently read *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, which is a great book! It’s about a pandemic and it’s not a bummer I promise. It’s really uplifting and hopeful. Her characters talk a lot about missing the internet, electricity, air conditioning, and all these things. It is so fascinating to think like wow what would life be like without air conditioning. None of us would live here, I don't think.

**A POLAND:** Butch and Paige’s conversation then turned to a luxury that all writers crave, *time.*

(CHUCKLES)

**A POLAND:** Time to find their story.

**P WAJDA:** I recently read a book about writing by one of my old professors Claire Askew and it’s called *Novelista*. I thought it was great and it had lots of great advice, she said you can write just fifteen minutes a day and pump out five thousand words in those fifteen minutes. You would have written a hundred thousand words by the end of the year. I was like damn that’s right. I started writing and forced myself to write on days when I worked eight hours and write at least fifteen minutes. I do think it is not exactly like a job where you have to put on a suit and go to work. You do have to make yourself do it even when you don’t feel like doing it because if you are waiting for a muse to come, you could be waiting for years. I did that for four years when I lived in Poland. I’m too busy or don’t have time or I don't have anything to write. It is like cleaning the cat box, you have to do it.

(LAUGHS)

**B EPPS:** Right. I kind of fell off the habit but I started again this morning. Starting my day, setting aside an hour before the day starts watch a documentary. Something that inspires me, something that I am able to learn from, even the great courses I like the lectures. There is a lot to learn from that, I love learning. Then there is also the work, there are times and days when there is nothing happening and I am doing what I have to do for it. Then in the process, one day a light bulb goes off because of the other footwork I was doing so it kind of comes together, and then boom the big epiphanies but I wouldn't get those epiphanies if I didn't keep plotting along. I don’t know if I am a plotter P-L-O-T-T-E-R but I am a plodder -P-L-O-D-D-E-R. The reason I brought it up is that it is work, but because I like it, it doesn’t feel like work but you still have to work at it but there is a joy to it. Even when it’s not working, there is still a joy to it in the process of working it. Back story. I have been working on developing a project for a long time and it has required a lot of research, and intuition guiding that research. I guess that is why I like movies so much. I like the visual aspect of the story being told and the verbal aspect of the story being told, well the dialogue if you will. Screenplay structure, it is not fun for me to read a screenplay, it useful but it is not fun. Watching the finished product and seeing the interplay with the visual and the work I enjoy that.

**P WAJDA:** Yeah, not only is poetry comprised of images. Of course, it is almost like imagery condensed because it is not much else. Unlike in prose where you have character development, tension, and all that stuff. Poetry really relies on imagery and that is the best part of it, not only the musicality of the words but the images it injects you with. As a writer, images such as works of art can be a great jumping-off point to writing a new poem and finding inspiration. I even have a series of poems called *Nintendo Nights* about video games that I wrote because you know, I like to modernize things. So, I feel like many video games nowadays are works of art themselves so I like to write about video games since it ties back to my love for science fiction. So, tell me more about your project.

**B EPPS:** The title of the project is *Citizen Kane in the Cinema of God: Pieces of a Puzzle*. That Citizen Kane was a breakthrough film in terms of what came before and after it. It is an integral piece in terms of the great conversation in the cinematic canon. What came before and came afterwards, especially the filmmakers he influenced afterwards. Specifically, filmmakers in the seventies like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and others… Peter Bogdanovich. So anyway, this is called *Citizen Kane in the Cinema of God: Pieces of a Puzzle*.The title originates partly from when Herman Mankiewicz the writer, co-writer of *Citizen Kane*, co-writer with Orson Welles, was on the set. Orson Welles walked by and Mank and a person next to him said, “there for the grace of God.” I think in working with this, it has evolved to… a book will eventually come. What I will be doing first is creating a teaching tool where each slide in the PowerPoint presentation will act as a piece of the puzzle. I will walk through as an instructional guide through each piece of the puzzle. Hopefully in a way that it has a rhythm and a flow in particular music to it and particular voice to it, which I think it does have. It will combine pictures with words because a picture is worth a thousand words. So, this is the way I think it can be best communicated as pieces of the puzzle, parts to a whole. So, moving back to what you do Paige, I am so excited about what you’re doing and what you’re teaching people because everybody has a story to tell even though when they think they don’t have a story to tell. There are stories to tell and everybody has things that are interesting in one’s life. The trick is to get it out of people.

**P WAJDA:** Yeah, that is such a good point. I took a life writing class in my second year and wrote about partying because we were only twenty and all the stories were about partying but it helped us write in a way because even for high school, middle school kids writing about yourself is a lot easier than trying to make something up. So, even if it is just a story about what you did last week or last summer it can be really helpful for people not only to find their creativity, but as a form of catharsis, or therapy.

**B EPPS:** Exactly, you not only find yourself or your voice as a writer but you also achieve catharsis on an art therapy level. In terms of finding your voice, everybody has a song to be sung and I think what you do Paige is that you act as a voice coach for people to help bring out that song.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**B EPPS:** Happy writing.

**P WAJDA:** Thank you! And you too!

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC FADES)

**A POLAND:** Butch Epps and Paige Wajda, two vibrant voices singing the praises of teaching at OLLI.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

**OLLI MEMBER 1:** The instructor's core is one, passion. They are all full of passion.

**OLLI MEMBER 2:** Because they are not doing it to make big bucks, they are doing it because they love it.

**OLLI MEMBER 3:** I taught briefly undergraduates, hated it. Taught graduate students I liked it. I taught post-graduate and post-doctoral students and liked that better. And this is the best experience I’ve ever had, precisely because of the students.

**OLLI MEMBER 4:** I enjoy, more than I ever have learning.

**OLLI MEMBER 5:** It certainly does help up your game when you know that there are people who are listening very closely to what you say and you have a very fixed amount of time to present your ideas.it needs to be educational and it needs to have some style and be able to tell your story in an effective way.

**OLLI MEMBER 6:** They are just about making this a wonderful experience for each and every student.

**OLLI MEMBER 7:** it is not intimidating it is exhilarating.

**OLLI MEMBER 8:** It doesn’t get any better than that.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC ENDS)

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**A POLAND:** This has been *In Conversation: The Voices of OLLI*. Our thanks to Cal State San Bernardino in Palm Desert. Along with the communications study professor, Lacey Kendall, and her media students. This podcast was produced for OLLI by Lou Gorfain and I am Dr. Arlette Poland.

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