

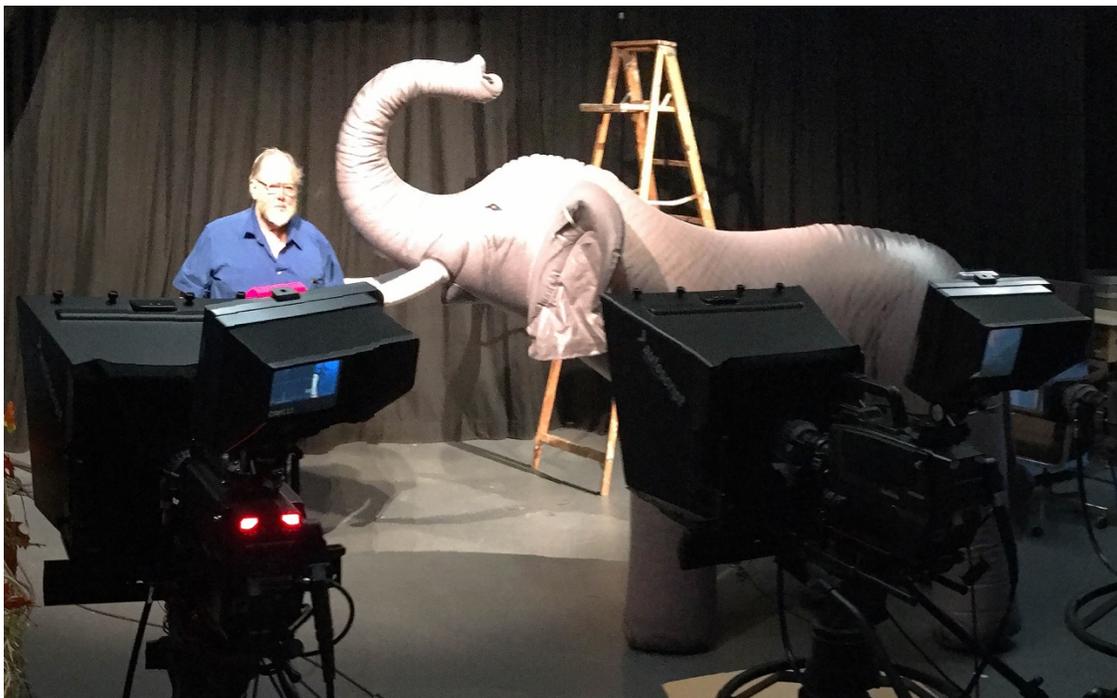
Times Standard

Not My Fault: An ode to Donald Forrest: theater and earthquakes can mix beautifully

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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Donald Forrest in the KEET TV studio during the filming of earthquake preparedness Public Service Announcements in 2019.

It was a gut punch to learn the Donald Forrest, friend, and frequent collaborator, died this week. I was fortunate to work on a number of projects with him that stretched my imagination, and the boundaries of what earthquake outreach can look like. He was also a very good friend.

If you have been in Humboldt as long as I have, you are familiar with Blue Lake's Dell'Arte, School of Physical Theatre, the home base of the Dell'Arte Company acting troupe. Donald, along with Michael Fields and Joan Schirle, were the mainstays of the Company from the mid 1970s into the 21st century.

I moved to Humboldt in 1979 and my Dell'Arte introduction came in the 1980 production of *White Man Meets Big Foot*. I had never seen theater like this – irreverent, satiric, mind boggling, and above all, entertaining.

My relationship with the Dell'Arte folks was strictly enthusiastic audience member until the mid-1990s. It's a very Humboldt story. My family was off on a vacation and there were delays at the airport. The Dell'Arte Company was beginning a tour and also stuck. It was a long delay.

Donald was fascinated with earthquakes and so we talked and talked. Donald was a fabulous conversationalist. He made you feel like everything you said was the most interesting thing he had ever heard. He told me about the Education Through Theatre Arts project he had started at Blue Lake Elementary School. Right then and there on the second floor of the airport we made plans to do an earthquake project the following year.

Our first collaboration was Public Service Announcements with the 8th graders. The class was split into three groups and Donald wrote scripts – Preparedness Matters, Earthquake Kit, and Tsunami. We worked in the classroom with the students, blocking movement and learning lines. Phil Wright of KIEM filmed the final versions at Dell'Arte and aired the PSAs over the next three years.

The following year was a more ambitious project. Donald had convinced Peninsula School on the Samoa Peninsula to join the program and decided that every class in the school would have a role in "Shaky Ground," an all-encompassing play that addressed plate tectonics, the Wiyot origin story of Humboldt Bay, what to do in an earthquake, and everything in between.

The kindergarteners were the "quakies" - concentrated balls of seismic energy that floated around the stage. 1st and 2nd graders were clowns of course, exhibiting every manner of antic behavior until an earthquake occurred and they demonstrated Drop, Cover, and Hold On, followed by leading everyone safely to high ground. 3rd and 4th graders inhabited Myth-time, a creative imagining of the Wiyot and Yurok worlds of animal beings complete with each student choosing an animal spirit and making masks to portray them on stage.

Fifth and sixth graders were the scientists, demonstrating plate tectonics, fault movement and the propagation of seismic waves with large cardboard props. Special day students were the flaming cinders erupting out of Cascade volcanoes. The 7th and 8th graders tied all the pieces together with safety tips for everyone in the audience.

Two years later we were back at Blue Lake School with the production of a number of five-minute video pieces illustrating lessons from recent earthquakes and tsunamis. I had only just returned from my first post-tsunami field survey to Papua New Guinea, and we incorporated some of what I had learned in one of the skits, climbing a tree if no high ground was available.

In 1998, our collaboration with Donald and Dell'Arte was recognized by the Western States Seismic Policy Council with an Award in Excellence for educational outreach. It was only the third year that the organization that represents earthquake preparedness throughout the United States had granted awards and a tremendous honor to be so recognized.

Dell'Arte is known for physical theater rooted in our own place. Translated into the classroom, we went a step further. The process of acting out stories incorporates lessons much more firmly into our psyche than reading a book or watching a slide show. Several years ago, a young woman came up to me after a talk and explained that she had been a "quakie" and it had always stuck with her.

Our schools' collaboration had ended by 2000. Donald was beset with health problems and was no longer running the program and I was up to my ears with other projects. We continued to be close friends and I always kept my eye out for another chance to work together.

That opportunity came in 2019 when I had a small grant through the National Earthquake Hazard Reduction Program. By this time Katie Whiteside, longtime friend/colleague from the golden era of KHSU public radio, had moved to KEET North Coast Public Television. Why not revisit public service announcements and work with both Donald and Katie?

This time no students were involved, although Donald may have regretted the fact as Katie and my acting skills were minimal. Donald was the creative spark, writing scripts and blocking the action. The result was six one-minute PSAs that used humor rather than shock to grab people's attention. Three of the pieces used Ellie, our inflatable "earthquake in the room" to drive home that earthquakes and tsunamis can't be ignored. Two took place in Wildberries (thank you Phil Ricord) to focus on emergency supplies. The final one was in the Blue Lake Casino (thank you Anita Huff) with the take home message that preparedness trumps luck.

I learned so many things working with Donald - be on time, know your lines, it's all about the work, and teamwork. I'm still not great at promptness and memorizing lines is nearly impossible – I can adlib all day but keeping to a script is painful. Putting the work first and paying attention to the team have stuck with me. No matter what type of project, keep your eye on the final product. Anything that doesn't further the story, no matter how brilliant, goes on the cutting floor.

And teamwork. We are a TEAM! Always pay attention to each other. Are we on the same page? Is something wrong? Kathy Moley-Viand was my assistant in those years working in schools. She recalled seeing Donald zigzagging behind her on the highway as they left Peninsula School. She stopped and so did he, explaining he was running on empty trying to get enough out of the last fumes to get home. Kathy explained, "He was so happy that his team was paying attention when he needed. As a team, we worked as a team, and we left the project site as a team. Donald was right behind me. I was paying attention to my teammate when he needed assistance. "

I am so blessed that Donald allowed me to be part of his team. I will miss him terribly, but his gorgeous dulcet voice will always be in my head.

Note: all of the videos Donald and I worked on are archived at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/7> .

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times-Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/5> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column. Downloadable copies of the North Coast preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground" are posted at <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/prepare/shaky-ground>.