

“Life as Art: Achieving Harmony, Serenity and Balance”
an interview with Jason Scott Lee
by Justina Taft Mattos

Best known for playing the role of Bruce Lee in “Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story,” Jason Scott Lee has a film career spanning over twenty years. This local boy turned international film star is an inspiration to many artists in Hawai‘i. But even more inspiring is his odyssey into personal discovery and how that has changed his outlook on life. In the serenity of his home at Pu Mu (a name meaning simplicity and nothingness), he shared his story and his philosophy on cultivating life as art.

What inspired you to pursue acting as an art form?

At the beginning, the whole point of getting into acting was to gain a sense of freedom in my life. Being able to release emotions and locked up feelings. I think that’s what my whole evolution as a human being, as an artist, is all about: gaining personal freedom.

When I had the opportunity to play Bruce Lee in “Dragon, the Bruce Lee Story,” I met my si fu, Jerry Poteet, and he brought me to a level of awareness and sensitivity that I never knew existed. He used to say, “It’s going to be very hard for you to convey the things that you are learning now; one of those things is simplicity. In the martial arts you have to feel things within the actual practice to understand. Nobody looking from the outside will be able to tell what’s happening on the inside.” On the outside nothing changed, but on the inside, something turned on. Like I had a secret that only I knew. I was able to utilize a lot of the things I learned from martial arts in my acting. So it helped my acting to reach a new level.

Why did you leave Hollywood?

While in the acting field you start seeing certain realities within the business: discrimination and lack of opportunity. I said, “What can I do within my power to overcome these obstacles?” The only way, I realized, was to go inward and come up with a game plan where I was still developing my inner self and feeling empowered by what I was doing; not having the business control my freedom of expression.

Once I realized that my own personal development was the only way that I was going to overcome this I started thinking, “What is the core of what we are trying to achieve artistically and as human beings? I realized that beyond the discrimination and racism, beyond the economics and the millions these movies make, at the core of it, we’re all human. We’re all natural beings. So I started thinking along the lines of “what is it to be more natural?” And if you do attempt to become more of a natural person, how does that affect your daily life? How does it affect life as art? As I got into that idea, I started investigating other avenues of cultivating the human self. When I was 26, after my second movie, I had enough money and wanted to be close to my family. Moving back to Hawai‘i gave me room to breathe and think.

I moved back to O‘ahu after spending eight years in Los Angeles. I had a place in Ka‘a‘awa, which I thought was a very beautiful, natural place. This is an evolution of how I was seeing things, because after being in the city for that long, seeing the physical beauty of the east side of O‘ahu, I thought, “This is paradise.” But the more I lived there I realized paradise is not just the land I walk on and the beautiful green mountains close to the turquoise waters. I realized the human activity made this - no longer a paradise. All the traffic, and the attitude of the people, had changed from my growing up days on O‘ahu. I realized I wanted something even deeper. I found Volcano fit that bill.

Why Volcano?

One thing was... the forest in Volcano. Growing up on O‘ahu I had never experienced this type of foliage. When I saw the native forest - for the most part it’s primarily an ‘Ohi‘a and Hapu‘u forest - that

kind of tapestry triggered in my mind the idea of harmony. You could sense the serenity of this area. There's a certain balance in the types of birds and animals that live here. And with less human activity, nature was more abundant. That's what I was looking for. Because I think the chaos of the human condition is the very thing that eats away at your creative endeavors. Some artists may feed on that kind of kinetic frenzy, but for me it was more about stillness, letting the muddy waters settle so things could become clearer. Back to that idea: simplicity and freedom.

Do you think your introduction to the martial arts turned you in that direction?

Yeah. When I started looking at that idealistic vision of simplicity, I started reading about Taoist mystics and Taoist masters, kung fu masters; what they did in their lifetimes, and why. Many retreated into the mountains to do heavy meditation. Some were martial artists, some were healers, some were both. Some were herbalists. Some were acupuncturists who didn't need needles to do acupuncture. That idea of inner cultivation made me want to test those waters. I don't think I got as deep as those types of hermits, but I think I was able to get a taste of it, which allowed me to think a lot deeper about my career in film, and about "what exactly does my work do... is it constructive? Is it positive? Is celluloid forever?" Some people say once you're on celluloid, you have everlasting life. I think that's a vain point of view, but you'd be amazed how actors fight for roles because they want to be remembered.

The more I asked myself those questions, it seemed my actions were futile; my efforts were in vain. In the movies, how much did it count for? How much was I contributing?

So your decision to move more toward nature was motivated by a desire to have a greater impact on the world, compared to just acting in a film?

Well, like I say, first it's that sense of freedom. I thought, "What's wrong with just living?" Those questions started overriding a lot of my career. "Why can't we just be?"

I think that's something a lot of artists ask. But you have to put food on the table. You have to pay the bills. So feeding the soul - versus feeding the body - is probably a conflict many artists struggle with.

Yeah. That's the question of "How do we *be*?" How can that lifestyle just become free creativity without business attached to it, without someone critiquing your work.

With the martial arts, that was the aspect of simplicity: Learn the principles & techniques, abide by the principles, and then dissolve the principles. The last part of it, the part that you evolve to, the part where you transcend, is letting it all go. Just *be*.

It's very much like acting. You go to acting workshops and classes, learn the techniques. You internalize it, you live with those principles of acting techniques, adjust yourself accordingly, and then in the end when it becomes a part of you, you let it go. That's where I started seeing the relationship between those art forms.

The only thing that was missing was feeding the body. When I left L.A., I was already eating organic food, but it was so outrageously priced; three times the cost of regular produce. I said, "Wow, is it that hard to grow your own food?" So I came out here to try to grow my own.

Growing your own food and occupying yourself with those daily activities, how much money do you need to cover your bills? You're in a place where the food for your soul is met, and the food for your body is met, and it's like... closing the gap. I can't say it's been overnight. It's been almost twelve years refining my abilities; much like in acting and in martial arts.

At this point I'd say I'm good at it, but I wouldn't say I'm a master gardener. Working with nature there's so many variables. You'll never know it all. I think that's one of the key principles in designing a life as art: you have to come to a point where you realize that it's not necessary to know everything. Because you never will. And that puts you in a state of neutrality. It stops you in your tracks: not having to know. It puts you back into that space of "being."

With this movement toward sustainability, I get asked a lot to go speak at events, but I find it hard to convey what I'm trying to say, because – yeah - the end result is sustainability, but the process of getting there is just to *be*. I realize I don't need a lot of things: a roof over my head and good weather to work in. When you start realizing that, everything gets cut back. And your bills get cut back. Next thing you know, you start questioning even big-money movie offers that come in. You think, "that'll take me away for X amount of time; do I really want to do that? Is it really worth it? Is it going to make any difference at all in our time? Or will it be a detriment? Will it be my greed and my want for material things that is making me go and do this project? Or - is it a great story that needs to be told, that has some educational quality?" The more I look at it, the less I want to go anywhere. Because I feel that gap is closing – as far as looking outward to appease any creative or artistic desire.

Growing crops and food for the table is bringing me closer to nature. And the thing about nature is that it just *is*. That's what we're trying to get to.

My last teacher, Masanobu Fukuoka, the natural farmer, was the most crucial. Observing his way of being, his way of life, his living art, was a tremendous confirmation to me, to maintain the vision I had in my mind.

I tried to create a creative space, the Ulu Theatre, hoping I could bring other artists into this mindset, and I found that was really difficult. Because unless an individual has his own sights set on it, it's very hard for people to let go of certain habits or desires and goals. And everybody progresses at a different rate. It was a struggle to keep sharing those ideas, with everybody nodding "yes," but not really getting it. So the decision to close the theatre was a big burden off my shoulders.

Now I have more focused time designing the gardens & making them beautiful. Working with geometry, working with water, figuring out what grows best, what can tolerate the fog. What can tolerate the heavy rainfall and stay in the ground and keep producing so you always have food on the table.

Did Fukuoka influence the style of farming you chose to pursue?

At first I started on the difficult road of natural farming. What Fukuoka did; that was the epitome of an evolved human way of living. Because I was not at that point yet, it was very hard. So I use organic methods, I use natural methods, I use ancient Chinese methods in dealing with the heavy rainfall of this area. I'm in the process of putting up a greenhouse - which is not necessarily natural farming, but in this harsh weather it will help to grow a greater variety of foods.

When I first came back from Fukuoka's farm I had grand ideas about natural farming as the zenith of living. But that was like coming back from a religious experience or a retreat, and going, "How do you put it into practice? Holy, stumbling blocks!" So I had to formulate my own way of doing things.

I still abide by certain natural farming principles. I look at the greater picture, not just my little garden plots. With that in mind I looked at the forest. People took down a lot of the big 'Ohi'a trees in this area. Because 'Ohi'a trees grow so slowly I decided to plant Koa trees. Koa is a fast growing native tree and it'll start to fill out and create a canopy. That's one of the first things I started doing: giving back to the

land so it remains in harmony, in balance. If you have that balance, you won't have an infestation of things and you won't have unnecessary runoff.

By attempting this lifestyle... living with less, without electricity for ten years, with an outhouse, I found I made very little impact on the natural environment. By growing your own food you don't have to ship in as much. I realized, just by attempting to go in this direction, I'm benefiting all things. That's something very hard to turn away from. I don't think there's anything else I've investigated that comes close to that.

When you're in harmony with the natural world you feel like you're just - a part of it. So the ego stuff falls away. It's not like you have an epiphany and it's gone. It's something you work at. The toiling you do every day is the practice to make sure your ego stays in check. The more you do for the benefit of all things, the less you think you are. So I don't have this fever to act. I don't even have the desire to do martial arts. I just love waking up in the morning and going outside to see what went on in the night and what kind of weather is going to be coming during the day. Trying new kinds of vegetables and seeing what companion planting works best for certain plants. Those are all forms of artistic freedom, creative expression, creative introspection. "How do I design my garden so it's the optimum that it can be? How can I till the soil and know that a million microorganisms will benefit?" Fukuoka brought that to my attention. Like a Zen master, he'd say, "If you pay attention to the smallest things in the world, the impact can be very great." When you start thinking about that, you start downsizing things. Along with that, you get freedom to enjoy the day. Freedom from stress. Freedom from a lot of things. Serenity.

Do you have any final words of advice for artists struggling to find that balance between feeding the body and feeding the soul so they can live life as art?

Yeah. One, get out of debt. Two, pay as you go. Three, grow your own food. This lifestyle... it looks like nothing. It looks like just digging in the dirt and planting seeds; like manual labor. In that simplicity, that manual labor, is an incredibly rewarding artistic experience. A lot of people have this grand idea that their art is worth sharing with the world. I could say that too - that this plant is worth sharing with the world. By my guidance, my influence and a little bit of care, I was able to help this along. Not grow it by myself, but help it along. That's an art.