

The Big Something: Eliot Gray Fisher on *The Warriors: A Love Story* **Audio Transcript**

Jake Brownell: Welcome back to *The Big Something*: in-depth conversation on culture and ideas in the Pikes Peak region. I'm Jake Brownell. Next weekend, Austin-based multimedia performance group, ARCOS Dance, will bring their original production, *The Warriors: A Love Story* to Colorado Springs through an interdisciplinary mix of music, dance, theater, and film. *The Warriors: A Love Story* explores the love lives and legacies of Colorado Springs residents, J. Glenn Gray and Ursula Gray.

Glenn and Ursula Gray met in Germany in the aftermath of World War II. He was an American soldier from rural Pennsylvania with a PhD in philosophy, she an accomplished dancer and athlete from the decimated German city of Dresden after an unlikely courtship and marriage. The two found their way to Colorado Springs, where Glenn was offered a job teaching philosophy at Colorado College in the decades that followed, the two would go on to make substantial contributions to the local community and national intellectual culture. In particular, Glenn would become known for his book, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, published in 1959, as well as for his work as an early translator and champion of the 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In advance of next weekend's performance set to take place at Colorado College's Cornerstone Art Center. I spoke with Elliot Gray Fisher, multimedia, director of ARCOS Dance, and the grandson of Glenn and Ursula Gray about the story of Glenn and Ursula, and why it's still relevant today.

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Eliot Gray Fisher: J. Glenn Gray grew up in rural Pennsylvania, very humble origins, several children in his family, and he was the only one who went on to college. And there were stories about his intellectual leanings from very early on. He had been told by his parents, apparently, to go out and watch the cows regularly as part of his farm duties, and was always found lying around reading instead, or, you know, not really keeping an eye on the cow cows because he was, had his face in a book, which was very unusual for, for the family and for the, um, for the region really.

So this farm boy from the country, went on to college, and he ended up going on and getting a master's in German language and literature. But what he discovered in reading all of this German literature was that he delved even further into sort of this, the world of the mind and fell in love really with, with European culture, with German culture especially. And his studies in literature took him down the path of reading some philosophy, and loved that even more than the literature he'd been reading. So he ended up, uh, going on and getting a PhD in philosophy.

So he kind of took that path to its logical conclusion, you know. And then he received his doctorate from Columbia—news that he'd received his doctorate—in the same mail on the same day as his letter from the President inviting him, drafting him into the war, basically.

Jake Brownell: So tell me about Ursula Gray, his eventual wife. What was she doing during that time?

Eliot Gray Fisher: So, Ursula grew up in Dresden. She had been encouraged from a young age to pursue the arts in a way that Glenn hadn't. She found a love for dance. She was very physical and loved movement. So she danced with all of these early dance pioneers at the time. Modern dance was just sort of coming about, you know, the expressionist movement in Germany, um, sort of led to this, I mean, all of these modernist artistic movements and were born out of World War I, in some cases, out of the turn of the century. And she was in on that movement.

She, studied with Mary Wigman, who was one of the sort of preeminent figures of modern dance, in those early days in Germany. So anyway, she studied dance and she also trained and was an alternate, for the Olympic track team for Germany for the 36 Olympics in Berlin.

Jake Brownell: And so Glenn is drafted into the war. Ursula, I'm sure was drawn in in various ways. How did they eventually meet?

Eliot Gray Fisher: So they met after the war they met in Munich. Ursula survived the bombing of Dresden, February 13th and 14th, into February 15th, 1945, you know. Which is a very controversial campaign. She and her sister escaped after having lived through those nights and survived the

fire bombs and the and the enormous fires and firestorms that were caused by it, and the strafing by airplanes afterwards. And they escaped to Munich. Glenn had some compelling and horrific experiences in the war that he had witnessed and participated in and was troubled by. And, he wanted to do something that would be the antithesis of the destructive work that he had been engaged in during the war. So he came back to Munich as part of the American military government there, the occupying American government that was setting up the university system at the time. They were, they had to denazify it. So Glenn was involved in that, and Ursula found her way after a number of jobs into being a secretary, and then ended up being head secretary of that sort of area. So that's how they met.

Jake Brownell: So after Glenn and Ursula meet in Munich, what happens next? How do they sort of proceed to build a life together?

Eliot Gray Fisher: So, this is the funny story that we ended up using via interview footage that we got from this documentary series that was shot in the 1970s. They met working together right in, in Munich in this educational division. And, they weren't allowed to talk to each other at the time.

[string music]

Ursula Gray: We were strictly forbidden not to fraternize. Americans and Germans were not supposed to talk to each other. So we didn't talk. But I found one orange on my desk.

J. Glenn Gray: It never occurred to me that one shouldn't do this, that this was inappropriate.

Ursula Gray: And this was the first sign of attraction or getting together.

[music continues]

Eliot Gray Fisher: He says in this interview that he always imagined that he might fall in love with an enemy girl, just for some reason. It was just kind of like this kind of predisposition that he was, at least he was not going to not consider it.

J. Glenn Gray: Curiously enough in my journals, I often felt that I would marry a German girl. It happens in every war that many marriages between former enemies take place.

Eliot Gray Fisher: He expressed his interest to her with this gift of an orange, this mysterious gift. And they went on and the rules lightened up as they say in the interview, and they were able to talk to each other and began dating, or courting, or whatever it was back then, and got married pretty quickly.

Ursula Gray: My friends, when they heard I married American, were very angry. They said, "How can you? You are a traitor. How could you with Americans bomb trace and hear you marry an American?" And I lost many friends.

Eliot Gray Fisher: She likewise, kind of didn't care that he was an American.

Ursula Gray: I couldn't feel so, I couldn't feel that at all. Glenn was a human being and so fine and so sensitive, and so made no difference but nationality.

Eliot Gray Fisher: So they got married and they ended up coming back to the US. He got a couple job offers, and one of them was at Colorado College. He took the job, they came out sight unseen. I don't think he'd ever really been west of the Mississippi, if I'm right, but they just packed up and they drove out there. And as soon as they got into the area, Ursula was just overjoyed, because it looked like the Alps. Here was Pike's Peak, here were the Rocky Mountains, and it looked familiar to her. And so this was a place where she, that she really fell in love with, and she thought she could spend the rest of her life, and then they did.

Jake Brownell: And so as they went on and built careers, and in particular as Glenn Gray went on to be a writer and write books of philosophy, they both, if I'm correct, worked to incorporate their experiences in the war into the intellectual work that they did. Could you talk about how that kind of worked itself out in their creative output? And, you know, you can focus on either one.

Eliot Gray Fisher: Well, Glenn is the, the most obvious one. I think, you know, Ursula is a little harder to trace. It's a little subtler, I think. Glenn was haunted by the experiences that he'd had in the war. Going back and starting to teach at Colorado College, and going back into the classroom, was this refuge, was this way for him to begin to feel like a civilian again and to make that shift, that mental shift. But he also found tons of veterans in his classes because of the GI bills. There were lots and lots of veterans that he was teaching. And he found a special bond with them because they had shared the experience of combat, of war. And it was something that occupied his mind a lot.

And so his first major project was this book, *The Warriors Reflections on Men in Battle*, which was pretty unusual, especially for an American to come out with at the time, because it was pretty honest about war. And it was not jingoistic and didn't paint himself as an American or America generally with an oversimplified brush. It's this very kind of phenomenological approach. So throughout the war, he was writing in a journal as well as corresponding with people back home and friends in other parts of the war. And he went back over the course of—it took him 14 years to write this book. He looked at some of these and tried to turn them into—try to universalize them and try to look at their broader implications.

And one of the things that he was interested in having filled his head with especially the classical Greek philosophers in his doctorate program, was a very broad historical scope: looking at humanity and looking at the documents that have tracked war. What war is, what the experience of war is, its motivations, its effects on society. So, he had this very sort of long view, both while he was in the war and then in retrospect as he was writing this book. And this book that was published in 1959 about contemporary warfare is strangely still really relevant today. Probably unfortunately, still really relevant. In fact, maybe even more relevant, which is bizarre.

Jake Brownell: And what exactly about it do you, do you think is still relevant? Like what are some of his major points that he makes in that book, that seem to still be resonating with people today?

Eliot Gray Fisher: Well, I think, you know, the interesting thing that he does, like I said, by kind of zooming out and looking at, you know, the experience, the relationships, the sort of moral character of situations that he encountered, those are things that are universal. And yet there's a piece of it that's talking about how technology, specifically, I think, has begun changing what war is at the time that he experienced it in the middle of the 20th century. And I think those are the things that have become more relevant.

One of the things talking about the way that technology has colored how we do war is images of the enemy. There's a whole chapter on propaganda and sort of the modern propaganda machine. Which again, has only become far more sophisticated and potent. He talks about the images of the enemy and the indoctrination of soldiers to hate the enemy. You know, to turn people, regular people who in most normal instances wouldn't, you know, just kill someone to be willing and eager to kill members of this group that are being fought. So, you know, I think that's one of the things that we're especially interested in, is the way that his words continue to echo in our time. And he was really prescient.

Jake Brownell: And to that end, so just tell me a little bit about what this performance is going to be, the performance that's set to take place at Colorado College, and why ARCOS, why you felt that this story would be well suited to the kind of multimedia performances that you all do.

Eliot Gray Fisher: Well, it's interesting, because ARCOS started doing this kind of work just a few years ago. We just formed, and my background is with video and music and theater. And my collaborators, Curtis Uhlemann and Erica Gionfriddo, who's my wife, are dancers and choreographers. And we started working together and trying to see how we could combine all of our art forms really dynamically in the 21st century, right? This is an idea that's been around since Wagner talking about the *gesamtkunstwerk*, you know, this total artwork that could combine everything. And for him it's

opera, right? You can have these beautiful painted sets or sort of the visual arts or incorporated art and architecture into the settings. There's music, there's theater, there's all of these things. And so we're a hundred or so years past the invention of film, and art and technology sort of have merged in interesting ways. And we're interested in using the tool that we have today to create an art form that resembles what people have seen in the past, but is also saying something new.

So it was interesting: what makes it a perfect story to tell is that Glenn and Ursula, their lives and their work and their loves combine many of the things that we want to combine, right? So there's dance: there are things that we can tell in dance that we can't tell with text. And yet there's also Glenn, who is a man of words and a man of ideas. And we can also have that, you know, what if we combine philosophy and dance and video and narrative theatrical elements? In my view, these two people were very ordinary people in a lot of ways, and yet they were extraordinary. I like that idea: regular people doing extraordinary things. And I like to celebrate that legacy in this production.

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Jake Brownell: That was my conversation with Elliot Gray Fisher, multimedia director of ARCOS Dance. ARCOS will be performing their multimedia dance theater production, *The Warriors: A Love Story* at Colorado College's Cornerstone Art Center on Friday, September 4th, and Saturday, September 5th at 7:30pm. On both nights, the performance is free and open to the public. For more information or to hear that interview again, head to kcc.org. This is *The Big Something*. We'll be right back.

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