

NOW OPEN
at Kapolei Commons



Grand Opening
ENTER TO WIN
A Dream Room at Kapolei Commons

HONOLULU

Star Advertiser

March 21, 2017 | 79° | Check Traffic

Order online & save!

\$5.00
per mo. for 6 mos.
on select packages

Oceanic Time Walker Center

Shop Offers >



RENT ME

TGIF

Play explores 'new normal' of U.S. surveillance culture

By [John Berger](#)

March 8, 2017





COURTESY KENNEDY THEATRE

Dylan Lee, left, Ike Webster, John Wells and Matthew Kelty star in "Smile, You're Under Surveillance!"

Watch Live Now

BREAKING NEWS

Links to Live News

My News Wire
powered by Substack

Watch Now

Teachers relaxing after work make ill-advised comments about some of their students and colleagues; the conversation is recorded without their knowledge and goes viral online. A Playboy Playmate secretly photographs a 70-year-old woman in a locker room and posts nude photos of the woman online along with "body shaming" comments. Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign implodes after campaign emails are "hacked" by outsiders.

To update the tag line from the old "Candid Camera" television show of the 1960s: "Smile, you're under surveillance!"

That's the title of the play that opens Wednesday at Kennedy Theatre.

"SMILE, YOU'RE UNDER SURVEILLANCE!"

Where: Kennedy Theatre

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, 7:30 p.m. March 24-25, 2 p.m. March 26

Cost: \$8-\$18



Info: 944-2697 or etickethawaii.com



“Smile, You’re Under Surveillance!” challenges the “new normal” of America’s contemporary high-tech surveillance culture. It does so with unconventional staging designed by University of Hawaii-Manoa faculty member Markus Wessendorf and his four-man cast.

Instead of sitting passively in a darkened theater, ticket buyers become a “live” television audience watching the recording of a sitcom about two brothers — Hector and Syd — in the studios of International Communications Unlimited (ICU for short). Hector is a professional “hacker.” Syd works for the NSA (National Security Agency).

The audience also sees segments of other ICU shows, addressing the issue of surveillance in other formats.



“The major premise of ICU is that surveillance is a good thing, and every show tries to emphasize the benefits of surveillance,” Wessendorf said last week during a tour of the partially completed set. “Of course, what really happens is that if you listen to someone talk about something embarrassing from his past, the character may claim that he doesn’t have anything to hide, but the audience will very likely think, ‘I probably wouldn’t reveal that to the larger public.’”

The production gets into some uncomfortable permutations of surveillance, including its use for personal benefit — and to invade the privacy of a romantic target, Wessendorf explained.

“Syd is hopelessly in love with Iris, a relatively new NSA agent who is a transfer from Mossad, the Israeli surveillance agency. At the beginning of every episode, his brother talks him into using a new surveillance tool to stalk her or to get closer to her,” Wessendorf said.

“Since this is a sitcom, it doesn’t go well.”

The audience is divided into two groups. One group is seated on the NSA set; the other group is in Hector’s “basement.”

Live video surveillance feeds show each group what the other group is seeing and doing during the show. The two groups change sides at intermission.

The set is relatively simple, but the unique technical elements have been challenging, with live video coverage of both sides of the set and pre-produced sitcom show clips in addition to all the standard stage lighting. Wessendorf got some welcome help in the form of an equipment loan from the UH-Manoa Academy of Creative Media.

 **PREV**

NEXT 





“We had a total budget of \$1,000, so almost everything was pulled from stuff that we already had, but those were the constraints we work with,” Wessendorf said. “I think the technical complexity will not make this show look like a low-budget production.

“We have many, many video clips, video cues, sound cues; we actually have a laugh track for the sitcoms.”

Adding further to the “art meets life” aspect will be the presence of real-life experts on surveillance issues who will participate in pre-show discussions and then appear briefly in the show (see below for scheduling details).

Americans may be surprised to learn that they are subject to surveillance by government agencies and private entities, but surveillance of the public is nothing new. Surveillance was a fact of life in the Soviet Union from the formation of the Cheka (the original communist secret police) in 1917 through the formal collapse of communism in Russia in 1991. People in Nazi Germany joked wryly about “der deutsche Blick,” the act of taking a quick look around to see who might be within earshot before saying anything the authorities might deem politically incorrect; residents of communist East Germany lived with “der deutsche Blick” until the end of communist rule there in 1990.

Americans today take it for granted that people living in China and North Korea are subject to government surveillance, but it is beginning to seem that anyone who goes online or uses a smartphone can have their privacy invaded, too.

Wessendorf originally envisioned the show as an examination of the surveillance culture of the American government, as revealed by the documents released by Edward Snowden in 2013. He began preliminary work on it in 2014. The development process included a symposium — “Dramaturgies of Surveillance:



Edward Snowden, the Security State, and the Theatre” — at the University of Frankfurt (Germany) in 2015.

The impact of hacking, the widespread leaking of documents and the growing awareness of other surveillance techniques that influenced the 2016 presidential election caused Wessendorf to widen his focus, exploring the normalized culture of surveillance at large.

For instance, when are hacking and surveillance a force for good, and when are they a force for evil? Did Julian Assange and his WikiLeaks organization contribute to the defeat of Hillary Clinton by releasing hacked information from her emails? Did hacks and leaks bring about the abrupt resignation of national security adviser Michael Flynn last month?

“Until 2016, the line was clear-cut,” Wessendorf said in a release announcing the show. “Snowden uncovered things that were illegal, and there existed a very clear narrative in which facts mattered. But now we’ve seen a darker version of reality, and this revised theater production will reflect this altered reality.”

Note: Edward Snowden’s ACLU lawyer, Ben Wizner, will give a pre-show talk at 6:30 p.m. March 17. Wizner will appear in a panel discussion at 6 p.m. March 18. Elise Morrison, author of “Discipline and Desire: Surveillance Technologies in Performance,” will give a pre-show talk at 6:30 p.m. March 24. James Harding, author of the forthcoming book “Performance, Transparency and the Cultures of Surveillance,” will give a pre-show talk at 6:30 p.m. March 25. Morrison, Harding and David Goldberg will appear in a panel discussion at noon March 26. All events are at Kennedy Theatre.

◀ PREV

NEXT ▶

✉ Get the latest news by email [Sign Up](#)

Most Read

Democrats blast FBI director after probe
revelation

Man pleads not guilty to killing Kalihi woman

First daughter Ivanka Trump gets West Wing

Waiting for www.i.matheranalytics.com...