

Wake Up, Live the Life You Love

Host: Lee Beard

Interview with Special Guest: two time Tony Award winner, Cherry Jones

LEE ~

Hi, Cherry. How are you?

CHERRY JONES ~

I'm good. How are you?

LEE ~

I really appreciate you taking time to do this. It's always neat to get someone to just give an idea of maybe who encouraged them to get the training that they got.

CHERRY JONES ~

Okay, Lee.

LEE ~

You have had an amazing career in the theatre and in the movies. Can you just give us an idea of how you got started.

CHERRY JONES ~

Well, I always knew I wanted to act and I did a lot of speech tournaments in high school and plays in high school, and I had a creative dramatics teacher when I was a little girl named Ruby Crider, and she was a delightful person and she encouraged me to think of a professional career, and made sure I got to go to Northwestern. As a high school student, I went to their High School Institute that they have every summer in Speech and Drama. And that was a wonderful, wonderful experience because I met other students from around the country who were devoted to the theater as I was. They were just more advanced because they lived in big cities and they went to these very good academic schools, and schools with big, huge theater programs.

The teachers there at Northwestern also helped me by introducing me to schools that I could attend for college. I'd never heard of Carnegie Mellon University, and someone had mentioned that to me and I actually ended up attending that school just because this person had mentioned it to me at Northwestern.

And I had a fantastic teacher in high school, Linda Wilson, who more than anything else, just gave so much of her time in making sure that we went to every single speech tournament we could, which was such a terrific experience, getting up in front of people and competing. I never liked to think of it as competing, I didn't think I was competitive. I just loved getting to do it over and over again, so every time I won a round, it just meant I got to do it again. [Laughter] And she was, she was so dear and helpful.

And then I went to Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, and that was a professional training program. And we just spent four years doing nothing but theater. I didn't have a very heavy academic load. It was all about movement, and voice work, scene work. We got a few academic courses in, but not much, and I graduated from there with a BFA. And then from there I moved to New York City, and scooped ice cream for about a year. Then I got a job with

the Brooklyn Academy of Music Theater Company, which was a short-lived theater company. It only had a couple of seasons. I sprung from there to the American Repertory Theater at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I was there for basically a decade. I did about six out of ten seasons with the ART, and that's where I really, really learned my craft. And by the time I was about 33, I felt like I could hang my shingle out as a professional actor.

And there were incredible directors there, several Romanian directors, and Dr. Jonathan Miller from Great Britain, and younger directors who were just getting their start, who I would come to know later in my career in New York, and we were a company. It was a repertory theater, and so we would be rehearsing Major Barber by day, and performing Twelfth Night by night. And it was the best training for the theater that anyone could possibly have, and it felt like a family too because you worked with the same people over and over and over again, so you really got to feel the tight. We could do basically any play that they could throw at us by the time we had been together for several years.

And then I sort of gravitated back down to New York and started working more easily in New York City and not having to leave town quite as much, but it wasn't until I did a play called The Heiress when I was in my late 30's that I was sort of just "discovered" by the public at large, and that sort of really put me on the map, and made me sort or known nationally as a theater actress of note, I guess.

LEE ~

That's quite interesting. I don't want to stop you from continuing with that, but it's a combination. . . Carnegie Mellon, I feel certain opened doors. Not only did it get you up in the East, so it's a school for the arts.

CHERRY JONES ~

Well, it's so interesting because out of my class, there are very few of us who remained in the profession. I have a girlfriend who's an actress, she's understudying in Light in the Piazza right now, and a couple of fellows have opened their own, sort of, art institute, work at sort of art academies, and one fellow actually runs an Actors' Theater now, who was a directing student.

There were only 12 of us when I graduated, and out of the 12, there are probably only about I guess, maybe a third of us are still working professionally in the business. And actually, we would probably had one or two more than that, but they died of AIDS in the 80's.

LEE ~

Well, at what point did you get your first Tony Award.

CHERRY JONES ~

That was ten years ago, '95. That was for The Heiress.

LEE ~

For The Heiress, okay, excellent. Well, you took the map by storm when you won your Tony this last time. I know you were in rather stiff competition. Tell us about Doubt.

CHERRY JONES ~

Oh, it's a great play by John Patrick Shanley. It's a bit of a moral dilemma and a fascinating ride. The audience is pulled back and forth emotionally and intellectually by the arguments and by the information they're given. Well, Shanley said that he just got so fed up with everyone in this country shouting at each other and no one listening any more, and he wanted to write a play that made people leave the theater having to grapple with not knowing, and being in doubt, and living with doubt, and becoming reacquainted with the fact that we cannot know everything. We cannot truly believe that we're right all the time. And it's a beautifully crafted 90-minute play.

LEE ~

And you'll be touring with Doubt, I understand.

CHERRY JONES ~

I am. I am going to tour about six months, I think.

LEE ~

Well, that's neat. And you're working on. . . can you tell us what you're working on now?

CHERRY JONES ~

It's a play by Brian Friel, who is the premier, living playwright of Ireland and he wrote Dancing at Lughnasa, and Translations, and Da and Philadelphia, Here I Come! He's been around forever and has written magnificent plays. His masterpiece is called Faith Healer, and it's never been produced much, and it was produced in the 70's starring James Mason, and it was not well received, and the production was not well received, and it just hasn't been done that much because it's three very difficult monologues for actors, so it's hard to come up with people who are going to commit to learning these very difficult monologues.

I am one of those crazy, handful of women who picked up the gauntlet and said, yeah, we'll give it a shot, and I am doing it with Ralph Fiennes who is an amazing British actor, and Ian McDermott, and we are going to be doing it at the Booth Theater on Broadway on 45th Street.

LEE ~

Great. You have worked with just an amazing number of movies. I don't know whether it's fair to ask you to pick one of your most enjoyable experiences in the movies.

CHERRY JONES ~

Well, I loved M. Night Shyamalan and working on The Village was so much fun because he took us to boot camp. It was this wonderful Girl Scout camp in New Jersey with a lake, out in the woods, and they sort of sanded these sandy, pine woods and the whole cast, all of us, and we got to just sort of, you know, learn how to basket weave, and milk cows, you know, and do all sorts of things. I paid more attention in Girl Scout camp. At least I made a sit-upon. That was about as involved as my basket weaving got.

But we're not in the mountains, we're in the flatlands. But he is so much fun to work with, and he creates a wonderful sense of community, and the pressure was not as . . . you know he knows exactly what he wants. He'll make sure you have the opportunity to do it several different ways so that when he goes to edit it, he's got a lot to work with.

But also, I loved working with Tim Robbins. He was a real taskmaster in Cradle will Rock which I loved playing that character. And I just did an independent feature called Swimmers. It's going to be released in a few months, you know, a couple of small locations. It's not going to be released nationally, I don't think, but it was just a beautiful film to work on.

I just really enjoyed all of them. . . The Horse Whisperer, The Perfect Storm, Erin Brockovich, and you know, my parts are so small in these films that I really feel like I have the best job of all. I just get to come in, do it, and make a sort of instant character, and then I get to leave. And it's fun to do those little parts, and that character work, and actually I guess in terms of what was most fun of all. . . Ocean's Twelve was most fun just because it was shot in Rome.

LEE ~

And you know it is so much fun when you're sitting there watching a new movie and then somebody you know comes on the screen. You say, I know her! [Laughter]

CHERRY JONES ~

[Laughter] That's what people tell me that it's always fun when I pop up.

LEE ~

Yeah, it really is. It's really neat. It sounds like that is a lot of what you enjoy about your work. I was going to ask you what makes acting fulfilling to you?

CHERRY JONES ~

I love the camaraderie of everyone involved in making theater, and I love that you get to really know each other because you, hopefully if you have a long run, you get to go to work with these people week after week after week after week, and if it's regional theater or Off-Broadway or something, at least you get a good couple of months with people. And I just love language. I'm not very articulate, I'm not articulate at all really, and I love that for two hours every night I get to be just insanely articulate [Laughter].

I get to get into the mind of someone else, not only the character but the person who created the character because I think when you're working on something that is well written, you fall a little bit in love with the playwright's mind. I know with Brian Friel, I cannot believe his gift as a writer. In trying to memorize this killer monologue, it's so dense and so convoluted in certain places, and yet, it's written in such a way that your mind and your tongue is pulled along and drawn to follow it and comprehend it, and so it's sort of the best kind of writing that is so complex, and yet you just have to break through it and understand it. . . I wish I could describe it better than that, Lee. It's a passion when you're working with words like that.

LEE ~

That is a very interesting point about working with a cast and crew because that is one of the main comments that we get from the authors that we work with in our book series that our teamwork it is like a family where they get lots of support to be successful. If we can help someone who wants to be a published author and get instant credibility, we have some great information on the web at: <http://wakeupteleclass.com/>

I was thinking about your rehearsals and I was going to ask you about the schedule of a play. How many months before you open, and maybe some hours per day that you work to open a play?

CHERRY JONES ~

Well, it's usually about four week in the rehearsal room, sometimes it's a little less because producers are cheap [Laughter], and then you have about a half of a week of tasks of the moving into the theater and getting the lights right, and the costumes right, and then you have your first preview. So it's a very quick process . . . and of course, the director begins weeks and weeks, and months before that in talking with his designers and dealing with all the tangible things that have to be set well in advance

But with this play, with Faith Healer, because it is a monologue and because the boys are doing it already over in Dublin, I am going to join them in New York in the cast. I am going to be working with the director for a week in early March and then he's going to leave me alone with it for a couple of weeks and just let it percolate, and we will come back together in New York and I'll start an actual rigid rehearsal schedule with him, not rigid, but you know, an official rehearsal schedule with him for a couple of weeks, and then Ralph and Ian will come over from Dublin and we will start tasks and preview, so this is sort of a different schedule than I've ever been on before.

And it's going to be lonely because I don't get to act with anybody. . . and with a monologue, you just have to start as early as you can so that you're really off book when you finally start working with the director. But with other plays, you want to be really familiar with it, but you don't want to start learning it too completely because you want to be able to stay open to what your director and your fellow cast mates give you, so you don't want to get too set, you know, by learning it too solidly beforehand.

LEE ~
Yes.

CHERRY JONES ~

I did a soap once years ago, and I just couldn't remember the lines, I couldn't do it. They weren't particularly well written in the first place and so that actually made it harder, even though they were talking about the simplest things, it made it harder to learn them because they didn't have music to them, you know?

LEE ~

Interesting, very interesting. Well, that brings up a point . . . even though you are a two-time Tony Award winner and obviously very, very talented and accomplished, that doesn't mean that you fit, or enjoy doing everything that is available to you. I am interested in knowing somebody who was in the position to encourage you in your career.

CHERRY JONES ~

My grandmother, Thelma Cherry, was absolutely, she was going to make sure I was going to be an actress. She wasn't a stage mother, but I think if we lived near a major city, she would have been a stage grandmother. But she was always supporting my desires to act from the

time I was a tiny little girl, and then my parents were so supportive of my going away to school to an acting school, which not many parents would be necessarily [Laughter]

LEE ~

Yes.

CHERRY JONES ~

So I owe them a huge debt of gratitude because I couldn't have done it otherwise, because I didn't have enough skills to work my way through college because I couldn't type and I was a terrible waitress. So they paid for my education, and that really did help me get to New York because I needed that. Pittsburgh was sort of the halfway house to New York City.

LEE ~

Yes.

CHERRY JONES ~

So I don't have the resources that a lot of kids have or have to have to get there. My resources were my family and I don't know how I would have done it without them.

LEE ~

Well, I think that's neat. You have family and friends I know.

CHERRY JONES ~

Yeah.

LEE ~

Well, that's great. Well, thank you for taking the time and all the best with the play. I wanted to mention before we go if someone is interested in getting assistance to follow their dream to become a published author as Cherry did in becoming an actor, they can learn more about the support of our team by going to: <http://wakeupteleclass.com/>

CHERRY JONES ~

Thanks so much. Bye, bye.

LEE ~

Thanks for taking the time to talk with me. Bye.