

SMFA Summit Interview with Crista Flanagan, premiering 24 May 2021, 10am PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone, so excited to bring to you one of my favorite people in Hollywood and beyond. This is Crista Flanagan. Hi, Crista.

Crista Flanagan

Hi!

Bonnie Gillespie

I'm so happy to have you here. Thank you so much for joining me. It's so good to see you.

Crista Flanagan

Great to see you.

Bonnie Gillespie

We're gonna have a lot of fun, let's dive right in, shall we? Yes. Okay, so tell me about the role of permission in the artist's life, because I know that that's something that you and I agree gets built into the equation of artistry and auditioning and maybe it doesn't necessarily belong there.

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, when you when you first say, right, tell me about permission, the first thing I think of is, you know, actors who need to be okay, right? "Am I okay, am I okay, am I doing what you want? Am I doing..." some actors have a big picture, "am I doing what the industry wants". And then, even with auditions, am "I doing what casting wants? Am I following the rules? Am I enough? Am I competitive?" When you're on set. "Am I okay? Is this what you want," right? And I think that actors need... so much of the time we need permission we need somebody to say, "Hey, by the way what you're doing is not just okay, we really love it, thank you for bringing your creativity. Thank you for bringing your uniqueness, your strengths to the table." And I think that it would just be so beautiful if that was our default setting instead of, "Okay, I'm going to hold back a little bit, until somebody lets me know that I have permission to be myself."

Bonnie Gillespie

There's so many ways that we could bake more compassion and kindness into Hollywood and the process. And I feel we're starting to see some of that happen just by some of the curtain being pulled back and so much secrecy now being thrust out into the spotlight of where the realities of what's going on in conversations. You know, good, bad or ugly, at least where we're now aware of what some of the process is. Do you believe we're headed toward a Hollywood where, you know, you show up to audition and are just thanked for bringing your gifts to the process and shown that respect for your talent, and what you've what you've involved yourself in with just how the process now can operate because you've shown us something as an artist

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Bonnie Gillespie

that even if you're not the one that gets the role you created an idea, you sparked some idea, or direction that it could go. Are we headed there?

Crista Flanagan

You know I think that some people are already there, you know. I think that there are collaborators in the industry who just sort of innately understand it. Others are learning it. You know, I don't know that it's, you know, automatically downloaded but I always tell actors... actors are in a really interesting, interesting position in the collaboration, because stories are with producers and production companies, studios, networks, they're working with writers and directors, they're developing stories for months if not years before actors are a part of the process at all. And so, I think that sometimes, you know, actors are the last people invited to the party. And there's so much momentum with a TV show, with a project before actors come on board. I think that sometimes we can kind of get run over by the process, you know? It's, it's fast and there's a feeling of you either get it or you don't get it, you know? You either lucked into it or you didn't, you know. And so, I think that there are casting directors and directors and producers, you know, face-to-face with actors who are sensitive to that and saying... you know, producers in a casting room who are saying, "Hey listen, I've been with this project for a really long time. I understand that you haven't. Let me, let me kind of introduce you to this and let's see if there's a good collaboration here."

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah, one of the things I started doing probably after I'd been casting about three, four years was every person who made it to callbacks would get a phone call from me either way.

Crista Flanagan

Yes. Oh, that's so good.

Bonnie Gillespie

Well, you shouldn't learn... I was a kid actor so I had, like, great emotions about how you find out you didn't get it being: because you see it and it's not you. Like that's not the kindest way to find out you didn't get it. And so, I started calling people and saying, "you. I'm calling, not for the reason you think I'm calling. You didn't get it. So, I know that I'm leading right off with news you don't think you're about to get when you see my number. But now I just want to let you know: Wow, you were great, of course, you were right there 'til the end; you booked the room. You've got fans; it's not this but nobody's retiring tomorrow." You know, those, those types of conversations have always felt important for me to have just because of the kind of business I want to work for, meaning my own business.

Crista Flanagan

Yes. And so often, Bonnie, that makes a big difference to an actor in how they proceed in their next steps. In their next thoughts. That can be just as good as booking the job. That can sometimes be just as good, or almost as good, you know, it really... an actor needs confidence to

know that what they're doing is working. And, and this part may not be for you but, you know, keep going and the next one might be.

Bonnie Gillespie

And how do you get that confidence when you are dealing with maybe a producer who doesn't say, "Let me get you up to speed" or a casting director who says, "Hey, you were right there 'til the end"? How do you get that for yourself when you're dealing with the people who are not necessarily bringing that to you?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, I think just in life, you have to make, just in life, you have to make sure that others people behave, other people's behavior and words are not completely dictating how you feel about yourself.

Bonnie Gillespie

Amen.

Crista Flanagan

You know, if I'm walking through life, and I need you to behave in a certain way for me to feel good or I need you to say certain things to me to feel good, then I have bigger problems anyway.

Bonnie Gillespie

Good point, good point. Now, you you are someone who contributed a phenomenal story in "Self-Management for Actors" that I know a lot of people really connect with, where you shared a day in the life of a pilot season long ago. The time of that sort of experience... is that over in Hollywood? Or do we still have some very real "I'm changing into the third outfit of the day in my car or behind my car..." I mean, does that still exist?

Crista Flanagan

I mean, you know, since COVID no, you know. We're self-taping. But I will say, there are so many actors in town who are self-taping two and three and four auditions a day. You know they're, they are changing outfits, they're, you know, and the self-tapes are their own beast. Actors are now filmmakers. Actors are worried about microphones and cameras and lighting, and now you've got to find your own readers, and, you know, that you might even get notes and have to retape your self-tape. So, in some ways it's actually gotten bigger, you know. When we could go into casting directors' offices, they took on a bulk of that work for us, and now we have even more responsibilities.

Bonnie Gillespie

And with those more responsibilities, obviously come more opportunity in that you get to determine what your best take is. There's not the "I went up on a line and they said thank you we're done."

Crista Flanagan

That's right. You know, so what, what I've noticed is it's doing is, there are people in alignment with self-tapes, and people who understand set life, you're going to be on set 10 hours a day, 12 hours a day, sometimes 16 hours a day; you're going to do a lot of takes. "Oh, we got to do the masters, then the two shots, then the singles," there's a, there's a lot going on there. And so, people who are used to that really kind of have no problem doing 9, 10 takes of something, choosing their best. They're taking their time, they understand that this is, this is the job. You're pretending like you have the job. I think that if you're in a hurry, if you're like, "No, I just want to do it once or twice, I'm sending in not good self-tapes," I think that, I think that auditions actually got better. The people who are booking are doing better auditions because, because they're doing 10 takes and choosing the best one. And so, if you are a person who's going in one-and-done, trying to wing it, trying to get away with anything that's less than professional, I think that's not going to work out for you.

Bonnie Gillespie

I think one of the things that people get caught up on is well I heard I can't, like, "They are not going to consider me unless I have a certain kind of backdrop or I have to have a certain, like, this kind of tech. This kind of lighting. This kind of microphone. Like it's got to be..." and I go, I've cast someone off the grainiest cell phone camera self-tape done in the woods with wind blowing like, it doesn't have to be all that, if you're the right person.

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, I think it's always, always, for me it's gonna come down to the work, you know. Are you, how is your, how are your abilities? How are your, how is your toolbox, you know, do you have the skillset for this job? Okay, do you have the skillset for this job? I think that that's going to come first, and you know, maybe, all things being equal, between you and another person, if you're both truly right for it. I mean, maybe the color of your shirt matters, maybe your haircut matters, maybe the backdrop matters, but I would say usually the people super worried about that weren't even competing, because they're not taking a look at their process. They're not taking a look at their acting, they're not improving, right? You're always improving, always improving, and those people are the people who will really take an honest look at, at what they're doing.

Bonnie Gillespie

Such a good point. I think there's something so valuable about that growth mindset. I say with my writing: "I hope this is the worst thing of mine you ever read, because tomorrow I'm a better writer than I was yesterday" and that's always going to be true. So, I think as a self-taping

auditioner, you just got to get in the groove of, "It's always going to be better next time because I'm constantly growing."

Crista Flanagan

That's right, that's right. You can learn from every opportunity. Every attempt at something and you just got to keep going.

Bonnie Gillespie

Can we talk a little bit about creating your own characters? Because I know we first met seriously 20 years ago. "15 Minutes of Fem". Do I have the year right? Would that have been...?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

Bonnie Gillespie

So, this is a program that doesn't exist anymore, but it was a brilliant, brilliant concept where, wonderful, talented actors slash creators of content, got up and showed their stuff and industry judges gave feedback and voted. And I got to be one of the latter while Crista was one of the former and Crista of course, swept the whole experience and just, yes, just made magic for all of us. But you, you did so with a character that you created. Can you talk about the process of creating your own content and putting yourself out there with things that are a part of your creative process?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, you know, I think of it really in two ways. First, you know, this, the entertainment industry is a business built on the creation and distribution of intellectual property, right? That's what we're doing. We are creating things out of our minds, and we're actually making those things, and then we're distributing them as entertainment to the rest of the world. And when you become a little piece of that bigger thing, I think that the industry responds to you differently. When you show up and say, "Actually, I've got some ideas, and I make things, and I write them down and I shoot them or I perform them live," right? I think that different kinds of energies align, and I think that that's when, you know, you're kind of looking a producer in the eye, you're looking at writers in the eye, you know, you're, there's a certain respect from creator to creator that happens. And I think because of that you'll get additional opportunities. The other thing is, you have so much inside of you, that is, you're so much bigger than two lines, right? A costar audition. And so, this is how people learn you. This is how people figure you out. This is, you know, you can sit at home worried about your brand for years on end, or you can get up and go do something and make people go, "Oh, I get it. I get what you get. And I want to be a part of that."

Bonnie Gillespie

So, this comes back to the permission conversation we had at the beginning, which is that there's this idea on a lot of actors' minds that is, "What do they want?" and when you said the word "brand" you really hit it for me that there's this, "Yeah, I can create, but I've got to create the right thing, 'cause I got to make sure I talk them into understanding me and that just feels like a lot of weight to put on just 'I want to create things'," which is to me the attitude of it. It's like, "I have infinite things to create."

Crista Flanagan

Yes, I mean, you know, we grew up creating right? We've all made up dances in our backyard and we've all done weird crafts and, you know, it'll all, you know, at the end of your life it will all paint a picture; don't worry about it before then, you know, just go just create things.

Bonnie Gillespie

So, what what is the trick to getting out of... because I so hear you on the "just go create things." But if I'm an actor watching this and I'm in my head around, "but I gotta get it right. I got... I gotta develop this brand. I got to make sure that they know that the role that I'm right for is this thing that's casting tomorrow." What's the daily practice around getting that mindset just turned down a little bit and just go have fun?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, you know, I am. My husband makes fun of me. I'm acting when I do the dishes. You know what I mean? Like, I'll, I'll like say something weird to my... and he's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "I'm just like making something," you know. I'm doing the dishes, I'm in the shower, I'm driving somewhere, you know. I'll say something funny to a friend and I'll be like, "Oh my gosh. How funny would that be if that was a character who..." this and this and this. I think that I think that actors, humans in general, but I think that actors are very creative and they're shutting it off over and over and they're ignoring... I think you guys are actually ignoring your instincts. I think that you're, I think that you're so abundantly creative, but you discount it, and go, "Oh, that's, you know, oh, that's just a funny thing I said. That's just..." everything I've ever created started with a moment. Three lines. A reaction to something, you know? It starts very, very small. And I think that if you don't know what it is. "Well, I don't know. Is it a pilot? Is it a short film? Is it a podcast?" It's okay, you don't know what it is yet. That's okay, right, you just keep feeding the beast. And eventually you'll go, "Oh, wait I think I know what this is."

Bonnie Gillespie

Because you know it's something. And yeah, and if instead you go, "Well I'll wait 'til I know what it is," well now you've made it nothing.

Crista Flanagan

That's right and it will go away; just like the inspiration comes in, right? It will go away. And so don't be scared of that... yes it'll go away. Don't worry, something else is going to come in, but when it's there, hang out with it. See what it is, you know, it might be part of a stand-up routine. It might be part of a webseries. It might be a 10-second film, right, There are things like one-minute films, there are four-minute films, you know. If short-form is less scary, great. If silent is less scary, whatever, you know, just ease your way into it.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah and it doesn't have to then turn into, "Oh, it's this union production and I got the paperwork and it's you know on my IMDb..." it's like just, just make shit.

Crista Flanagan

Just make it. Just make it, it all adds up.

Bonnie Gillespie

So, I wonder if one of the reasons we discount that, we just as a, as a population of creatives, is because it's easy. Because it comes while we're doing dishes or taking a shower, and because it's so much fun and it feels like we're getting away with something when other people have to work so hard in a cube farm or whatever. And we're like, "I get to play."

Crista Flanagan

Yeah.

Bonnie Gillespie

Is it safe to trust it's okay to create for a living, and, and have this much fun and get paid ridiculously well to do it?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, you know the other thing that you've touched upon was this thought of, "Okay, I have this like one line in my mind, but who cares? What is it going to be?" Like, I don't think you know until you enter into it, right? You don't know... you don't know what it's like to be amazing at tennis until you're amazing at tennis, you know? You don't know what it's like to run marathons until you're running the marathon. Like there's something on the other side that you don't know yet. That you don't see yet. So, there's a, there's a, you have to embrace the unknown. There's a, there's a mystery to your life that you really have to embrace and go, "Yeah, I don't know what I don't know but I know that I don't know a lot," you know? And just keep going, keep going.

Bonnie Gillespie

And let it be fun to be in that process of discovery, of "I don't know but let's find out."

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, yeah, "I don't know but who cares?"

Bonnie Gillespie

Because I think we so often wait for a feeling of readiness before we do the thing. And I think the readiness comes from doing the thing.

Crista Flanagan

Right, that's right, that's right. You know, but I will say, there are a lot of actors who have, you know, they've worked hard at this for a long time. They've done all the things, and now the only thing that can happen next is results. The only thing that can happen next for them is validation from outside sources, you know? And so, if you're in that place -- I've been in that place, it's a very painful place -- you can be there for a very long time. And you know, I think that at some point you're going to have to soften and go, "Okay, this can't be what it's about, because this is awful and painful and it makes me want to quit."

Bonnie Gillespie

And that energy comes into the audition, whether it's virtual or in the room that that energy is just like the Pigpen character that's got the dust all over it. Like it's just this funk of, "You owe, you owe me something."

Crista Flanagan

Yes. "See me. I've put in the time. You owe me. Somebody owes me." You know, it's... those are just not the folks you want to collaborate with either, you know?

Bonnie Gillespie

Also think about being on set and you mentioned the 16-hour days like that's a lot of hanging out with people, and even socially distanced we've got to, we gotta like each other's vibe.

Crista Flanagan

Yeah and you know, if it's all about you being seen, then, you know, you got to spend some more time seeing other people, you know? Seeing what is the big picture here, you know? These people who have been with this project long before I got here, what's their experience? What is the story that we're telling? What is the human condition here? You know, get out of your own way, get out of your own way.

Bonnie Gillespie

And how do you find out that stuff about a project, especially when you're at the point of just auditioning for it. What's your process for learning whatever you can about the project?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, I mean, that's just it. Learn whatever you can about the project, learn about the people who are doing the project. You know, I always like to, I feel like this is a town of writers and producers usually they're the same people. So, you know what, what have they made before, and dig into... I mean I'm huge on script analysis. It's everything to me. So, you know, what is the story? What is the tone? Why are they telling the story of the human condition in this way, right? Why, why now, why this, you know? And what are my experiences I can bring to the table to really set that up?

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh, and I love that that takes the perspective so far away from the, "What is my objective; what are my lines," you know, what, what... me, me, me? And instead, it's, it's what's the world?

Crista Flanagan

Yeah, what is the... what is the world, what is the story? This is an industry that is focused on stories. Networks are telling stories, studios are telling stories, production companies are telling stories, writers are telling stories, directors are telling stories. So, for actors to walk in and go, "I'm here to act." I'm like, mmm okay.

Bonnie Gillespie

It's a mismatch.

Crista Flanagan

You're actually here to tell a story, and I hope that you've taken that into consideration, most of all, right?

Bonnie Gillespie

Gosh Yes, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. Crista, can you share, and we'll wrap on this, what your vision is for where, where we're headed Hollywood-wise business-wise. And I'm not going to tell you how far out in the future to go. I just, I know that we've been in this for a long time. We've seen things change. We've seen things change and shift in some really exciting ways. Where do you think we're headed?

Crista Flanagan

I think that stories are going to become more accurate to what human beings are actually experiencing. The more diversity we have, the more people we have telling stories from a unique point of view... I don't think we've had a unique point of view for a long time. I think we've had kind of one point of view, you know? And so, the more people, the more POVs we get, the more nuance, the more uniqueness we're going to see in stories. I think the more, the more we're all going to learn from each other.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah

Crista Flanagan

And then I think things are going to get weird. I think we're going to jump the shark. And that'll be exciting too.

Bonnie Gillespie

I love it because the pendulum is gonna swing way out. And it's gonna be written about in the history books, and we're gonna go, "Yep, it was all about weird."

Crista Flanagan

That's right: "We got to get accurate," and then we got to go, "Okay now it's crazy town."

Bonnie Gillespie

I can't wait. I can't wait. Crista, please tell everybody where they can find, you stay plugged in with you, follow your adventures.

Crista Flanagan

Oh, I love it, I love it. I always say to be entertained by me go to CristaFlanagan.com. To learn from me I have SideOfTheRoadStudio.com.

Bonnie Gillespie

Excellent. Thank you, Crista, so much. I appreciate you sitting with me.

Crista Flanagan

Thank you, Bonnie.