

SMFA Summit Interview with Donzell Lewis, premiering 26 May 2021, 4pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone, I'm so happy to bring back to the SMFA Summit, Donzell Lewis. Hey, Donzell.

Donzell Lewis

Hey, Bonnie and hello SMFA community. Hello all the ninjas out there.

Bonnie Gillespie

So happy to have you back. You are just one of my very favorite people, as you know, and I love how inspiring you are in every conversation we have. Because it always seems like we take a journey, we, we tell some stories, we have some fun, and by the end of it I just, I feel uplifted and I feel so connected. So, thank you again for coming back.

Donzell Lewis

Thank you for having me back. I mean, the honest truth is that you create this safe space for us to share the journeys, right? And to also explore the journey and know that the journey is something that we're all going through. And I know myself, I forget that a lot. And I forget that everyone's going through a journey, and that the journeys are always... they have ups and downs and for some reason I always, when I'm going through the down, I just feel like I'm the only one going through the down. And you forget that everyone's going through a journey. Everyone's going through ups and everyone's going through downs. And it's just this moment.

Bonnie Gillespie

How do we stay mindful of that truth? Because everyone has that rough spot. Everyone hits that pothole and then sends me a message and says, "I'm out. I can't; it's too much." Everyone.

Donzell Lewis

Like me, like three weeks ago.

Bonnie Gillespie

I wasn't gonna call you out specifically; I was just saying everyone. But, but yeah.

Donzell Lewis

You know, what is working for me is always, and always has been, a solid friend circle. I really, honestly, when I leave this planet, hopefully, you know, after many, many more years here, I will be able to say that one of the things that has been a true joy and treasure and blessing in my life has always been having a solid friend community. People who I can be honest with, who I can be vulnerable with. People who hold me accountable, people who support me and people who listen to me. But also, people who say, "Get it together. Like, you, this is on you. You know that you have a choice. You made this choice, and these are the results of the choices that you made, and we're not going to be those friends are going to just say, let you play the victim.

We're going to say, wait. We honestly listen to you, and we are going to hold you accountable for your part of it."

That's rare. That's very rare, and I don't think people choose their friends wisely. I think people choose their friends for a lot of different reasons, be it, what they can get out of it, the social status, what those friends mean to them to other people, and I've just never done that. I've always chosen friends that just, I felt like I could be comfortable with, because I was the outsider. I was the, you know, high pitched, nasally-voiced, gay kid in the south. So having a friend meant a big deal to me. I needed to have a friend who I could be my true self with, who I didn't have to hide or cover. And so, I... that carried over into adult life of choosing friends who like me and love me for me. So definitely having good friends.

I think the other thing is also reading. Reading is fundamental as RuPaul says. Now we know Ru is talking about a different type of reading. But reading is fundamental and so great to me, because I had... in college, my mentor, she was really big on actors reading and she said, "How can you be an actor if you don't read stories? We tell stories. Stop looking for the script to always find the story. The stories are all around you. You should always be reading a book." And it's true. But it's not just for acting. You should be reading a book because that's where you're getting the universality of life. You're understanding stories, be them fictional or non-fictional and you're going, you're learning, and you're understanding more about the world. You're understanding about people's journeys and you're finding connections to yourself in those journeys. The reading for me is a huge thing. Like, I'm always reading. I'm always reading either a fictional book, or if it's not a fictional book I'm on my self-help kick, or if I'm not on my self-help kick, I'm on, you know, a kick, a book about personal development or, well that is self-help, but also I love reading bios. You know like I read "The Chiffon Trenches" a few weeks ago, you know, from André Talley, and you know you just you, even though I'm not in fashion, it's great to hear his come-up. It's great to hear his story. And I think you, when you do that, you realize, "Oh wow. Everyone has a journey. This fictional character has a journey, and this character, this real person whose biography I'm reading had a journey."

And the last thing is, we gotta get in therapy. We gotta stay in therapy.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's normalize therapy. Yes.

Donzell Lewis

Normalize therapy. We normalize every other type of medical help: going to the doctor, going to the eye doctor, going to the dentist, going to get your STI checkups. Like we normalize all of it. But we don't normalize having that therapist, and your friends cannot always be your therapist. You know, friends, you will run your friends away. And what's happened... those have always been like my three staples, and what has happened recently has been learning to be grateful. Learning to be in the present, learning to count your blessings, learning to be grateful,

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Bonnie Gillespie

because then when you start counting the blessings, you realize how you got the blessing. And when you realize how you got the blessings, you realize it's a journey, because they don't just drop out on the sky. We want them to just drop out of the sky, right? Like we want to manifest and say, you know, "Bring me this amount of money," or whatever, and the universe will be like, "Oh sure, like, I'll hook you up with that amount of money. Here's the opportunities to get that amount of money."

Bonnie Gillespie

That's right.

Donzell Lewis

What is part of the journey, right, because then it's like, okay, so how did I get that check? How did I get that money? And what were the opportunities that led me there? And did I like the work that I was doing there? And sometimes it's a yes and sometimes it's a no, especially for us as actors, right? We have to have this survival job, and then we realize like that eats away at us, but we have to get the money. So, the universe is like, "Sure you want a survival job? That's all you're asking for I'm going to give you a survival job. Bam, you got it." But then if you want to ask for a job that's in alignment with your talent, with your vibrational frequency, then the universe is gonna say, "Oh, okay, sure, I'll give you that too. If you want the money, I will give you the job to get the money, but you got to be specific about what job you want to get, how you want to get that money." And that's all a part of the journey and you start realizing, at least for me, I started realizing, wow I do remember... like I definitely had that breakdown three weeks ago where I'm like, "I'm done! It's too hard." And then I was like... wait a minute.

Bonnie Gillespie

It was like a goodbye letter. I was like...

Donzell Lewis

It was everything. It was everything, and it was so fascinating, because I had a friend who I called and, you know, and said all of that to, as well. And she said, "I'm going to send you a book," and she sent me a book. It was "The Magic" -- the book is called "The Magic." And she was like, "Let's do it together." And I was like, okay, so I did that book together with her every day, and it changed my perspective, because it really helped me understand like you are at this level that you've never been at before. And right now, Donzell you're complaining and you're hurt, and you're saying you want to give up because you're not at the level that you want to be at. But now if you stop at like the level that you're at, you cannot deny that it took work to get to this level and you are not where you used to be.

Bonnie Gillespie

Not at all.

Donzell Lewis

Not at all. And that's the journey. Counting the blessings and counting all of what I have. And then looking back and saying, "Oh, but five years ago I didn't have that. Five years ago, I wanted this."

Bonnie Gillespie

There's a past Donzell looking at you today going, "I get to do all that?"

Donzell Lewis

Yes.

Bonnie Gillespie

Amazed at all the things that you're living right now. And the same is true for five years from now, Donzell, and again....

Donzell Lewis

Yes, and I'm trying to put the present Donzell as the future Donzell and just quieting the past Donzell. And not even letting the past Donzell celebrate and be like, "Dude, look how far we've come. Like you're not where you want to be but you don't really good where you're at. And you used to work..." you know, I'm part of the exhaustion was, I was... I've been working, six, seven days a week, with everything that I do from acting to drag to teaching, six or seven days a week.

Bonnie Gillespie

It's a lot.

Donzell Lewis

And it's a lot. And there's exhaustion and I need to learn how to set boundaries for myself. But there is a... awareness of the Donzell who used to work six or seven days a week with three survival jobs.

Bonnie Gillespie

That's true. I remember that.

Donzell Lewis

Now you work six or seven days a week. Yes. And I'm sensing the energy of working six or seven days a week, right? And I'm like, "Oh my god, six or seven days a week" and like, this is too much I'm doing all this work, like why am I doing all this work, and I'm not where I want to be and I'm not this and I'm not that. And then, when I'm doing the book and I'm counting the blessings and then the realization happens of, "Okay, so yes. You work too much or you work too hard," or I don't even know the right phrase like, yes you need to find work-life balance.

Bonnie Gillespie

There needs to be balance to all the work you do for because...

Donzell Lewis

Yes.

Bonnie Gillespie

Because recovery is a part of hard work. It just always is.

Donzell Lewis

Yes, it always is. And it's like at the heart of that, that's the thing to target is: Find the balance. But the blessing of the whole situation is, you're doing six or seven days of days of work of what you love. You're making all of your money, for the first time in your life... for the past two years, I want to say two, maybe three. You know me and math. But the realization of: You have this life that you are loving and every single dollar, every coin is coming from acting or teaching, which is what you love to do. And then the light bulb goes off. And then I'm like, "Oh, I'm not where I want to be, and that's totally okay. But if I can just stay on the journey, I already have the proof in the evidence that I will get to where I want to be, because where I'm at now, used to be where I wanted to be."

Bonnie Gillespie

Exactly!

Donzell Lewis

"It's just I want to be farther along. So Donzell, just keep going. You're doing everything right."

Bonnie Gillespie

Exactly. Lord, yes, yes, yes. Now I want to flash back... you talked about your mentor in college and I want to talk about somebody else in your, in your college experience, because I know you've told the story in my website, in my blog, but we didn't talk about this last summit, and I said we're going to... we're going to have this conversation. Are you open to sharing about some bad advice you were given when you were in college, about who you could be versus what's actually true?

Donzell Lewis

Oh yeah, absolutely. Let's go ahead and unpack that. And I say that because like now I'm in a different position of it, which is what happened was, when I was a sophomore in college, and we're talking the first month of sophomore year in college, we're not even talking about like halfway through. So, I'm still also part freshman, right? This is fresh back from from break, and I'm a theatre student in the theatre department and they had these toxic cattle call auditions, that they ended up getting rid of by the time my class left because we really pushed up against them. And we had this toxic cattle call auditions where, in the university, in the beginning of

the year, all of the actors from all grades, from freshman to senior, would come into the auditorium for one night, and however long it took every acting student performed a one-minute monologue in front of the entire department. All the faculty, all the grad students, all your peers. That itself is already pressure and toxic because then you're already comparing yourself. You're already intimidated and, you know, you're also like the natural order is happening, right? The cool kids at the department are being, you know, you're starting to... clique and all of that. And so, I did my audition. And this is such a pivotal moment, because I didn't know how pivotal it was until maybe last year. I wrote a monologue. Great monologue about me and a guy, and we're having, you know, going through fellatio. Don't know the audience here.

Bonnie Gillespie

You know, read the room.

Donzell Lewis

There's no room to read anyway in the big video. And it's a comedy, and you know he ends up, you know, arriving, but it goes into my hair. And I had this big freakout moment and it's great. It's hilarious. Everyone's laughing at it. Keep in mind, by the way, a couple of seasons ago, this was a storyline on "Insecure" with Issa Rae.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Donzell Lewis

And, and so, and I'm not saying she took that from me because I don't know her from there, I'm just saying, you know, keep in mind this made it to HBO.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Donzell Lewis

But I got called into the office of the chairman, the very next week, and saying that what I did was not appropriate, what I wrote was not funny. What I wrote was crass and crude, and also that, you know what, ultimately, "I just think you're too gay to be an actor." Those words literally came out of his mouth. Not, "I think you should consider somethings else." Literally saying, "Actually, I think you're too gay to be an actor."

Now what happened in that moment was he spoke a moment of death into me in two ways. This was me discovering and exploring my voice as a writer. And he shut that down. This was me exploring my voice as a content creator. He shut that down. This was me exploring my voice as a comedic actor. He shut that down. And this was me stepping into my queerness for the first

time as an actor, not hiding, and he shut that down. I didn't realize all of that, because at the time, all I heard was, "too gay to be an actor."

Bonnie Gillespie

Right.

Donzell Lewis

So instantly, that was the most shocking. That was the most hurtful that and you know, he advised me to leave the department, to change career choices, and all of this. I pushed back against that. Didn't really, you know, believe it, but also believed it... to the point where...

Bonnie Gillespie

Because it's in there now. There's just a little...

Donzell Lewis

It's in there. And then also I'm proving myself that that whole year, right? So that whole year I'm doing all the August Wilson stuff because like I'm trying to prove like I can be you know a straight black actor. And, you know, and also, I was put on probation. I had to audition at the end of the semester, you know, to prove that I can stay in the department. Very toxic. I was in therapy, actually. I was in school therapy at that time. This is the first time I went to therapy.

And looking back on that, when I came to LA that weighed on me. And it's weighed on me for years, even after I started getting the evidence that he was wrong. Because it hit me in so many different ways. So, if you asked me two years ago, could I be a writer? I would say no I don't write. Why? Because the first moment that I went and took a big leap and wrote, I was literally shut down. So, I never wrote anything else again. Keep in mind, I had wrote when I was a kid. In middle school, high school, I had wrote plays, I wrote poems. I enjoyed writing, but I kid you not, after that moment, I never wrote again. I was like I can't be a writer. I went into drama the whole time after that. I felt like I couldn't be a comedic actor. I had to rediscover comedy and even when I went back into the improv... when I went into the improv community, the first couple of years of that I was trying to pass until it was... I didn't find success in that until I became my authentic self. And I was afraid to be funny. I was afraid to write my original words and I was afraid to be my full self when I was acting in so many different ways.

And one by one, I eventually knocked down each one of those, and proved, you know, him wrong. And then a year ago or not even a year ago, maybe a few months ago, I had a friend ask if I was still trying to prove him wrong.

Bonnie Gillespie

Wow.

Donzell Lewis

And I didn't, I was like, I... no I don't... I don't think... but they were right. And I had lost the joy. And when I started to get all of the things that I dreamed of and I started to get the roles and the bookings and the auditions, and even though it was my authentic self, there still was that voice going on, and it still was me saying I'm gonna prove you wrong. And that was when I realized, "Oh, you've really lost doing this for yourself."

Bonnie Gillespie

That part.

Donzell Lewis

So, then I had to go back and recover. Yes, this is your story. Yes, this is a part of you, but it no longer serves you or no longer holds over you.

Bonnie Gillespie

Because until you link together all the things he was capable of shutting down at once, it was just the, I'm gonna prove him wrong about this one thing, and take the joy out of all the rest. And once you can start to unpack and re-parent a little bit, and in this case, you know re-mentor, re-advise -- whoever he is in in the world, just be a better adult on behalf of him because he was so irresponsible -- to disempower some of what he did to you with those early remarks, it's as if you're able to come back to the joy that existed before that, for writing, for creating, for being your fullest self.

Donzell Lewis

Yes, yes, yes, yes, which is what I'm in the process of doing now, to be honest. I'm rediscovering the joy; I'm rediscovering what I value. I'm rediscovering what makes me happy as an artist, and it's been very happy and it's been very liberating and it's been very hard work. Much hard work as well, because I really was on autopilot, and I felt like, "Well I was the typical profile of an American in their career." It's just I was that profile of an American in their career as an acting teacher and as an actor. And it was next job, next job, next job, get better, do this, bigger check, bigger this, bigger that. Status. Status. Status. Status. Status. Just like any other American in any other job, right? And that's why I kept going through the back and forth and the up and the down of like I'm doing great, I'm not doing great, I'm doing great, I'm not doing great... because I'm chasing all the symbols.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Donzell Lewis

To prove him wrong. Instead of just enjoying what's coming to me, living in the moment, doing the work that I've been called here to do, and enjoying the work because I value that. And now

it's been great to rediscover that, and you know what helped me the biggest was honestly the recent booking that I had with Hyundai.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's talk about that.

Donzell Lewis

Yes, that was so great. That was an emotional moment because I had booked before. I had booked in drag before. I had booked queer roles before, and all that good stuff. But I never really shared it. And I don't know why. I think there was something that was a part of me that said like everything had to be kept separate. Everything had to be, you know, the successes of teaching had to be the successes of teaching. The successes of acting had to be the successes of acting. The successes of drag had to be the successes of drag, and they all had to be separate in these worlds. I don't know why. And then I posted the Hyundai commercial. Well, it was branded content, I have to say that. I posted that.

Bonnie Gillespie

Looks like a commercial to me... I don't know.

Donzell Lewis

If it walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck.... And I posted that on my Facebook, because it was like, I need to celebrate myself. And the reception was... I don't even know how to... it was honestly a dream come true.

Bonnie Gillespie

I'm gonna tell you, you made not only me cry, which doesn't shock you because I cry all the time, but my husband the Marine. He and I sat together, holding hands, crying, saying, "Look at this. Look at this." Because of course we're remembering back to when we first met you still in that shadow of, "I gotta play straight. I gotta, I gotta have this kind of headshot, it's got to look like this." And we were like, where's you that? And now we're looking at this going, there's him in that. Look at that, that goddess right there, like just shining through so beautifully, and being celebrated, but the best part was that you were celebrating it.

Donzell Lewis

Yes, yes. And, and I, I got, you know, parents sent me videos of them showing the showing it to the students and I was like, and you know, you know, there's, you know, you can hear you know the mom in the background and she's like, "Can you find Mr. Donzell?" And you know and you see the kids gathering to watch and they're like, "Oh my gosh." And they like point and they're like, and they're smiling, and they're happy. They're like, "Oh my gosh, he looks so beautiful." Like other parents texted me like, "I showed, you know, so and so the Hyundai ad and like they loved it." I had people from my hometown, you know, repost it. I had teachers

message me on Facebook saying, "Great work." I mean like just the reception of it really showed that I had been hiding.

Even in my success I had been hiding. And the truth is is that my success is not in the Hyundai ad. It's not in how many classes I teach. It's not in how many jobs I book. What I realize is it's the experience that I bring to people. That we all bring an experience to the people on this planet, doing whatever it is that we do. And I realize -- and even looking at that, and even looking at my past work, and when I did "Dope Queens" and that show is a very heartbreaking show. But what I realized is at the end of all that, throughout all of that, there is one message that I constantly bring. And that is a message of love and true acceptance and community. That's what I've fostered in my classrooms, that's what is at the heart of my lessons. That's at the heart of every character that I have played that has given me any form of like, recognition. And then when I posted that ad and seeing all the different worlds come in and say, like, how it affected them, I was like, "You've been missing it the whole time. You've been missing that you could be a train conductor, but your train is going to be about love."

Bonnie Gillespie

Amen.

Donzell Lewis

"You're going to be... that's the success Donzell. So yes, you can do all of this. Yes you can teach, yes you can act, yes you can do drag, because what the universe and you are really creating together, it's creating a more loving, accepting and connected world." I was like, "AHHH!"

Bonnie Gillespie

I love that so much. Oh god, I love it. I love it. And I'm imagining back to this, this professor and going: What I love about today, and the changes that have happened and are continuing to happen, is that conversation could never happen today. Because because even if it did, it would take 30 seconds for it to hit the internet and he would be over. And I am so grateful that those types of early dampening of spirits can't happen in the same way anymore. Because I hope it means we're now at a generation of young creatives being able to fully express and get celebrated for the courageous steps that they're taking toward living that that more loving, more giving, expressive life.

Donzell Lewis

I agree and I think it's because -- or at least for me it's because -- it's what I didn't get. And I think we all have the choice, as people, to perpetuate the patterns and cycles that have been presented to you, be them good or bad, or to break them. And I could have perpetuated what he did.

Bonnie Gillespie

Easily. Yep.

Donzell Lewis

It could have manifested in other ways, but I could have took on that toxicity. I could have not... I could have given up on myself. I could have given up on my dreams. And then I'd be somewhere else in life, unhappy, unsatisfied, probably toxic, probably just a wrecking ball of damage to other people around me. And I didn't... this wasn't an active choice at the time, it was, "You've got to... you know that's not right. Don't listen to that. It hurts but you know it's not right." And now coming out of it as I look back on the journey. I realized like, oh, I chose to break that cycle. I chose to go into education and take on students to always teach from a place of love. To knowing that like if I'm there some other person isn't there causing damage. I'm in this classroom, and I know that in this classroom we are going to figure out who we are, we're going to love each other, we're going to empower each other, we're going to dig down deep and get to our truest essence and not hide that from the world. Because I want you to know that it's welcome, because that's what I didn't have. And I want to give that to the people that I'm around because I worked so hard to discover it, so why would I sit on this treasure? Why would I sit on this after, like after discovering how much joy there is on the other side of the pain? Why would I hide that from people?

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's close on this because I could talk to you forever. Where are we headed as an industry? The theme of this year's summit is Creating the Hollywood We Want. I love that you and I share that joy of intentionality in our storytelling and in our connection in our work with students. It's all about really having that connection and building just better, happier, more joy, more gratitude, just that kind of setpoint. Where do you see us Hollywood-wise, going forward?

Donzell Lewis

You know, I've thought about this a lot and I think going forward we are going into a much more resilient and unapologetic Hollywood of marginalized creators. I think we have to be prepared and understand that no system of oppression, that no system that perpetuates oppression, is going to easily give it up.

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh, no.

Donzell Lewis

No one... they're just not. And so, although we've had a lot of initiatives and changes happen, I think we need to all have the reality check that we're not waking up within the next year. Yes, the Golden Globes are canceled because of what happened. But we're not waking up and realizing that it's all gone and eliminated. But what we do need to realize is that there has been a shift, and a power balance that has started.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Donzell Lewis

And I think that we're going to have a Hollywood that is going to be full of many more creators who unite, who support each other, who cross their lines to join someone else, you know? And what I mean by that is, you know, I take my friends, for example, Quincy, who is a Korean American, was right there with me at the BLM marches, and I was right there with her at the South Asian hate vigils. And you're seeing communities cross and say, "There is unity together," and that we're all fighting this faceless beast of systemic racism that affects us in more ways than we know.

Bonnie Gillespie

Absolutely.

Donzell Lewis

But what we do know is that if we stay in our boxes, we're all fighting twice as hard and we're fighting in our box. But the minute we break out of our box, and we go to the other side and we join hands, then we're becoming a collective. We're making a shift.

Bonnie Gillespie

We're unstoppable.

Donzell Lewis

We're unstoppable. And you're seeing that happen. And so, I'm very curious to see how that grows, and I'm very curious to see what happens in my lifetime because I think that we will see a massive shift happen. And it's going to be moment when I look back and say, "Never would I have thought, or never would I have saw the day." And that day is coming and I can't wait for that day to come.

Bonnie Gillespie

I feel like, I feel so lucky that we're living at a time where we're going, "History is being made, like, right this second, and we're a part of it, and we're going to actually get to see so much of it shift in our lifetimes." And there's always going to be more to do, but just the seismic shift that we are going to get to bear witness to and be the storytellers for is massive. It's so exciting!

Donzell Lewis

Which is what we're here to do. It's, it's, we're here to tell a story and it always goes back to again: Reading is fundamental. We are telling a story, and no matter what you want to think about it, whether it be a commercial, webseries, voiceover, movie, a TV show, it doesn't matter, at the heart of everything that we're doing in this town is telling a story.

Bonnie Gillespie

Donzell, I love your stories. Tell everyone how to keep in touch with you, keep up with you, hang out with you please.

Donzell Lewis

Well, I will be back on social media -- I've been very busy, but my students closed their musical last night, so I will be back on social media soon -- where you can find me on Instagram at @just_donzell. That's J U S T underscore D O N Z E L L. And that is also my Twitter that I visit maybe twice a year. Instagram would be the place to find me.

Bonnie Gillespie

Right on. Beautiful. Thank you, Donzell. I love you.

Donzell Lewis

Thank you. I love you.