

SMFA Summit Interview with Jacqueline Steiger, premiering 27 May 2021, 2pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone, I'm super excited to bring to you somebody that is just near and dear in so many places of my heart. This is who I affectionately refer to as Cracker Jack, Jacqueline Steiger. How are you, Cracker Jack? I can't call you Jacqueline. You're just... Cracker Jack. How are you?

Jacqueline Steiger

I'm so good, Bonnie. It's... I'm so excited to be here. I was so honored to be invited to this, and I love all the conversations that you just have in the world, just existing.

Bonnie Gillespie

Ah, goodness. It is so much fun to chat with you always, because I always learn something. I always grow. And one of my favorite things to do is have conversations to grow. And if everybody grows from the conversation, bonus. But I'm looking for my expansion. I want, I want, I want to change who I am with every conversation because if I am always staying the same, then... how boring. What was the point of getting put in this skin suit you know? To walk around on this planet?

Jacqueline Steiger

That's so fascinating and that's such a wonderful place to be. Like you go into every conversation with in the, in the growth mindset. You know the difference between the fixed and the growth mindset. You risk every conversation you go in, being like, "Tell me about myself, tell me about you, let me learn a new thing, I could be wrong."

Bonnie Gillespie

I hope I'm wrong about a lot of things because -- especially when I look at how I grew up and with whom I grew up and some of the realities that still exist for a lot of those folks back in Atlanta and in my family -- I go, there's so much that is... is not correct about that worldview and only because I've traveled so much, only because I've been so educated, only because I put myself in maybe uncomfortable conversations, I think I allow myself to constantly grow. But I always am looking forward to, "What's the next thing I can learn about you, about me, about the world, about why," like all that existential shit, you know?

Jacqueline Steiger

So, you have so much mindset and self-care. And the amount of strength that it takes to go in to conversations and be vulnerable like that. We don't talk about how actually difficult it is. Like the first thing in a conversation is as soon as there is a conflict is, "Do you react to that in a growth mindset, or do you get defensive? Like, are you safe in that conversation?" And that was something that I noticed about myself, when I was doing all my internal unpacking is, if I notice that there's conflict in a conversation, I will start to feel unsafe because I grew up with a lot of childhood gaslighting and shit. And so, if there's conflict, that means that danger could be

happening. And I really had to sit with that and be like, conflict doesn't mean danger. Conflict doesn't mean that I am not safe right now.

And so, if you are somebody that can't separate that, the amount of, like, side processes it takes to run through, like... I don't want to, like, it's not an excuse, but that is the, the method. That's the, like, the mechanism of white fragility is that like, "I'm going to be defensive because it's not safe for me to be wrong." But then, you know, we don't know: "Oh, wow, I'm feeling defensive, I'm going to take some time and I'm going to feel in my body where is the thing that I'm going to be wrong about." You know, we make that the other person's problem. That's what, I grew up as a white person is, "If I'm defensive, I can make that somebody else's problem." We don't learn to go into and feel our things.

Bonnie Gillespie

That's so well said. I just had put up something on social media recently about why, "why use pronouns" because I, since using pronouns, have regularly been asked, usually by cis/het/straight/white males, "Why do you, why pronouns, why?" And so, I wrote a thing on "why pronouns". And I explained that if I get attacked, doing it -- and I don't feel that it dings my enoughness to get attacked over that -- imagine what it must feel like if the using of your pronouns is a big step, is a declaration, is something that does create the potential for harm on just that, "Why are you using that? Why are you... who are you, what does this mean?" And that energy, and I hate to paint with such a broad brush but it always is coming from that patriarchal population -- that identity of that, that white guy. And I obviously know and surround myself with a lot of white guys who are not that guy. Thank God, that's why they are in my life.

Jacqueline Steiger

That's the barrier to entry.

Bonnie Gillespie

There's a place where I don't have a lot of tolerance for growth, and it is when I'm met with that kind of an attack energy. And I think what, you used a word that I really want to jump on there, you used the word "react". And I think the idea of reacting is already so -- don't wanna gender it -- but masculine. It's so aggressive. It's so, "What's my next move," rather than, "Can I just take this in, and what would that be like, to receive"?

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, and that's, that's always my thing is looking at it in terms of like the, "Why would you have your, your pronouns, or that makes me uncomfortable," is I look at power dynamics and I say I would always rather make somebody who is generally marginalized feel safe, than somebody who's generally privileged feel comfortable. And I think that is a paraphrased Captain Awkward quote from like 2013, but I... because she would always rather make a

woman feel safe than a man feel comfortable in terms of like creating safe spaces in gaming communities, I think was the original thing.

But I look at that in terms of any intersecting power structure. There's a really cool wheel of privilege graphic that I've been seeing going around and I really like that one. And that determines where you place in terms of your various intersectionalities. Like in terms of disability. I am disabled but I can tend... I tend to pass as abled. I'm ambulatory. I don't need a wheelchair. I don't have a lot of access needs. So, while I experience a lot of marginalization, I can pass, and I don't experience the, the marginalization of somebody who has, say, intellectual disabilities or who has a, assistive communication needs.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's talk about what that means to be able to, to know you can experience being marginalized, but you're able to pass in a way that allows you to, to not experience some of it in the same way that someone who maybe has more accessibility issues. What does that look like just in the practical... for someone who's listening to this and just going, "I don't know what they're talking about"?

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, so I had a... I luckily, I have very interesting framework for this because I went to school for queer theory before I integrated the fact of disability. And as a, as a pansexual, bisexual, queer lady, I did a lot of research about passing privilege, and how passing privilege isn't actually a privilege because you still experience... it's basically compliance training. And so, if you can pass, you have a narrow window of acceptability of "that's the person you are". And then the second that you are non-compliant, that's the thing. You know, like, "Will you go out with me? Well, you are a bitch." You know, that's that same as soon as you're non-compliant, you step outside the box.

And so, I've been trying to untangle this because I do have... I can advocate for people. I can get into spaces where people think that there are no disabled people. But, as I have been learning more about myself, I'm like, "Oh, actually I didn't pass as well as I thought I did," that's... passing is not actually passing all the time. But I don't... people do not automatically look at me and think that I am disabled because I have spent a lot of my life portraying normal people, or weird people, or exceptional people. And so, I got tangled up in this exceptional, or tragic, kind of narrative for a long time. And now I see that I can be in spaces where it is assumed that the demographic is other than me. And that's the problem with passing is, I don't change, like, I don't change the room just by existing. I have to speak up, and then I get the, you know, and then I get the stigmatization of disclosure. And just like having to disclose or not having to disclose is such a fraught thing, because there are so many people that can't, and then there are so many people that cannot disclose. So, I am still untangling that one for myself.

Bonnie Gillespie

And I think it will always be something that requires a little bit of untangling just because as the world shifts, as people's ability to grow shifts, as tolerance -- hate that word -- but as that shifts, I think it does then shift what our relationship is with how we identify or where we want to disclose -- and I use the phrase "circles of safety".

Jacqueline Steiger

Yes, I read up on that. The other day I was, I wanted to send that to people. It's such a good metaphor because exactly that, where your circle of safety is... is what, where you have to pass in or not. How good you are at code switching.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes, because there are certain populations with whom you can actually be your full, most vulnerable self and as you know Keith is going through his, his work on being diagnosed paranoid and PTSD and going through a lot of the vulnerability work with that, it's like, "How much safety is there, ever? If you've never, ever felt safe."

Jacqueline Steiger

Right, I actually I had to deal with a similar thing, not in terms of safety, but in terms of boundaries. Because I didn't realize how much that this was a part of me that the amount of surgery and medical care I've needed, I have had the experience, like the physical remembered experience of being physically cared for, like with bathing and dressing and changing and feeding, as a child, as a teenager, and as an adult. And so, I know that there is a level of dignity that I am not afforded to unless it is, you know, my, my being brave. Like, they might see, you know, "They might see me shit, but they won't see me cry" kind of thing. And so, that amount of dignity, that amount of like... what boundaries can I have? Not as a safety thing but like where, where am I allowed to put up walls and how, like how much access do people get to me in order for me to survive?

Bonnie Gillespie

And don't you feel that, that the ability to set those boundaries becomes even more important when there are ones that are not optional.

Jacqueline Steiger

Oh absolutely, yes.

Bonnie Gillespie

And I think, as a matter of respect, being able to say, "You've chosen this is a boundary: I won't see you cry." I don't then need to go, "No, no, let's be closer. Cry with me." Like that, that doesn't create closeness; that just violates what you've said you need.

Jacqueline Steiger

Right, yeah. And, and that's such a thing is, the more, the more disability justice research I've done, the more I've seen that like the relationship that the disability community has with the medical community, there's often not that reciprocity of, you know, "I will work with you on these terms, but I want my autonomy in these terms." There's... that's not usually how it goes. And so, it's often hard to translate. Okay, well I'm not allowed to have any boundaries in order to receive care in the medical profession, but I certainly can learn them in terms of dealing with the people around me. And, or, in fact, you know, "Oh, that looks really bad because I applied this here to that over there and now I'm trapped in toxic systems." Like untangling all of that is so difficult.

Bonnie Gillespie

Well and I think about... you're the, you're the first person who gave me access to a wonderful piece about The Spoon Theory. A decade plus ago, you and I first starting to know each other and work together, and I was power drinking, and staying up all night, and running myself to exhaustion constantly. And then I would get sick and be laid out for weeks at a time. And you shared that article with me, and I remember feeling seen in a way that I, I had never been in that you were educating me on how I needed to understand you and your capacity. And at the same time, you were showing me a very clear way of describing energy to people who may not ever think about capacity or energy or the, the tangled work that is constantly going on in the background while you're on set with other people whose biggest concern is are they going to remember their lines.

And, and I'm curious what the process of balance is for you. When it comes to knowing there's a limited amount of capacity, which we all have a limited amount – it's just, what are the limits – while also navigating a culture that is really trying to, some parts of it, really trying to catch up with what we're even supposed to ask and do to make you feel safe and cared for in professional and personal settings, and also a part of the population who is kicking and screaming and going, "Could you not cram yet another thing down my throat." "Okay white guy. You had a good run. Okay, Boomer." I know that's a big-ass question, but....

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, I mean I want to... I... you brought up Spoon Theory and I wanted to mention how, how much hustle culture and the, like, always ON stuff ties into ableism so well. Like, just the idea that if you are not always ON, there is a part of you that is, you know, you're missing out on things. Like, it's so... it hurts everyone, not just disabled people, by the way, just like how racism hurts everyone, not just people of color. But I am honestly really curious to see what happens, because we just had a big pause of, "Hey, this is what it's like for some disabled people, this is a reality." All of those things that we needed, that we couldn't get accommodations for, now they're the norm, and we're gonna see how much of that goes back to normal, but I honestly don't know what it's gonna look like. There's just been so much changing and there's.... I see

people trying to do, like, I see changes, and that's really heartening, and I see, you know, so many....

I saw a Twitter culture thread the other day that workers are organizing because they can just see on Twitter, like, "Yo, all of all of us McDonald's workers quit." "Oh, all of us McDonald's workers quit, too." So, when I have to think about, back to your question, when I have to think about what to do in terms of balancing bringing a larger table and keeping all of the voices heard, I think about some of your stuff, because I think about "energy is currency." And I think about whose voices are already prioritized and whose voices am I listening to. And, you know, we are in... we have such a privilege right now of more interconnectivity than ever before, and we could just prioritize whoever we want to prioritize. There aren't any actual rules, we don't have to listen to them just because they're loud.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let me sit with that for a sec. That's an important reminder. Because sometimes we get caught up in the loud of it all, and feel like we have to give it our focus because it is so just massive.

Jacqueline Steiger

I'm noticing like I have to switch between my socials, which are really curated for disability justice folks and, oh, queer, Black, autistic people deconstructing racism but like, really nerdily with like a lot of citations, or like gay cis communism questions. And then I have to go and look at the, the rest of the world and I think, you know, it's that, "Do you live in a bubble versus are you trying" thing. And so, I like to balance between living in the future I want to create -- the thing that all creatives do all the time -- and paying attention to what's actually happening in the world and like paying attention to who we surround ourselves with and who we're listening to and what media we're listening to. And it's such a dying art, thinking about like, "Who wrote this article? What newspaper is it? What are the citations? Where is this YouTuber getting their information?" Just, you know, I am a media criticism person from ages ago and so I always think about that, and I've noticed... now I've noticed that I'm not the demographic of my own news sources anymore because everybody's talking about rejoining the workforce and I'm like, "Ah, so you're writing not for me."

Bonnie Gillespie

Isn't it interesting though that this period of time, quarantinetimes has really allowed creatives to have more of a voice with the rest of the world in terms of, like, "Yes, this is how we live all the time. We never know where the next dollar is gonna come from. We're always, like, at the whim of, 'I don't know if there's money coming in'"? Like I feel like we've been able to teach resilience to some people in some ways.

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, I really... that's a really good point.

Bonnie Gillespie

You know, because our our lifestyle's always been, "Don't know. When's the next job coming? Not sure. Gotta get creative." And, and then suddenly people who always thought, "I have a job to go to. I always have a paycheck coming in," suddenly got a rude awakening. That made us suddenly have a whole lot more in common. And meanwhile artists are like, "Not much has changed. Okay, now I can't do the bartending thing... what can I do instead? What what... I can create a fitness online thing instead of my fitness in the gym thing and still get paid to do it," because we're creatives. We'll come up with creative solutions.

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, it's funny because that's... it's sort of the same thing about abled people noticing disability. It's literally the same thing. "Oh, wow, I thought that there were rules and stability. And that, as long as I followed them, I would be okay." Turns out that's not true, and fringe people have always known that and so fringe people are better at bouncing back because we have that embodied experience. But yeah, I have loved seeing the creation that has proliferated, like wine-Zoom plays, and interactive-click-through experiences, and everybody just keep innovating. I, you know, I'm not as involved in the day-to-day actor creative scene as I would like to be, because I can't, I can't keep my eyes open while bright lights are shined on my face. But I like watching all you guys create.

Bonnie Gillespie

How do you... how do you do with Clubhouse? Are you doing audio-only explorations of creativity?

Jacqueline Steiger

I haven't yet. I actually, I, wait, it's something that I would have to work through because I don't even listen to podcasts because I'm, I have a lot of visual problems, and a lot of experience recovering from eye surgery with my eyes closed in dark rooms listening to audiobooks as a child, so it brings me right to that place. So, the next time I need to recover from things, I have a list of podcasts and then that will be my entree into audio media. But I have I have heard how Clubhouse is proliferating and I love reading the trends and stuff. I also haven't TikTok-ed yet. Besides, like, I read a lot of trends about online media more than I go into it. I just started on Twitter again.

Bonnie Gillespie

But I so think of you as someone who is always in the entertainment industry, whether you're actively auditioning and putting yourself out there as a, as a filmmaker, as a writer, as an actor, you know, all of the above, or not, like, I... sort of like you -- obviously, you had a much higher-profile, child-actor-hood than I had -- but I think something about starting acting so young, it just kind of becomes just a part of your life and kind of never goes away.

Jacqueline Steiger

You can't unsee the wires. Once you're a television-American, you can't unsee the wires.

Bonnie Gillespie

That's perfect. What... I want to talk about what changes and trends have you have you seen happening, yes, but do you... where do you see us headed as an industry? And I don't need you to go to any specific amount of years out in the future but, obviously, you're great at spotting change, and seeing, you know, how quickly it's coming together. Where do you see us headed as an industry?

Jacqueline Steiger

Gosh, so I also worked the last couple years not currently, but previously in digital rights management, so I was able to do a lot of trend-forecasting about what properties were getting bought and what the streaming space looks like. Like, so, I mean, the fact that the SAG-AFTRA influencer agreement exists now is such a huge thing. The fact that there are, there... it is now an acceptable category, like it is established, and now... the social media stuff is obviously huge, but the, the democratization of voices and the fact that you can get a critical mass of representation in any community, and the fact that we know now that, "Oh, this is wrong. Oh, you know, it's not great." I saw a lot of tweets doing a celebratory sarcasm of, "This is the first Academy Awards that had a ramp in it, which means that the Academy Awards is finally not breaking the law."

Bonnie Gillespie

Shocking. Yes.

Jacqueline Steiger

Not like, it's not like a, "Hooray, progress." Like, "Ooh, that should... uh..." and that's sort of how I feel about most progress things. Like not, "Hooray," but, "Welcome to the present; we are running a real nation," to quote some guys. And so, I like that, and I like that we are now getting to have conversations besides just how many non-white people are in the room and how many women are in the room.

Like, I watched "Promising Young Woman", and the conversations around that are amazing. And I am a huge horror nerd buff and so watching the conversations around "Get Out", and then the conversations around this sort of Black-pain-horror genre that has sprung up around that. And hearing the conversations about "When are we going to have queer and trans stories that aren't just about coming out?" We got, we've gotten a lot more of that in the last 20 years. We don't have to just have "bury your gays" stories anymore, but we're starting to have conversations that really mean, you know, it's not just about who's in the room, it's not just about who's behind the camera. It's about, "What you are doing with your power once you have that access," you know? Are you, you know, are you putting the ladder back down for the next person or whatever it is?

Bonnie Gillespie

And I feel like there's so much responsibility around that but it's also, you know, what an honor to like... part of the whole concept of "Self-Management for Actors" is pull back the curtain on the thing that, when I started writing in 1999, it was so mysterious. And the way you learned what was going on in casting was you got in there, but nobody would tell you how to get in there except for get an agent who would say, "Oh, don't worry your pretty little head; I'll get you in the room." And there was an awful lot of control given over that now we actually have so much more opportunity to get in and, and make things happen. And so, the responsibility of now having access in new ways and and earlier ways, you don't have to wait until you're the highest tier level actor before someone will listen to you about how a culture needs to be on set or what sorts of changes might need to be made to a script. What is our responsibility as, as leaders -- which I believe all storytellers are leaders -- you may not buy in on that, but that's that's my assertion. What is our responsibility?

Jacqueline Steiger

That's a great question. I mean, I personally, I think that the responsibility is twofold and I don't know if this is just my own inner thing but... I personally believe that as creatives and as people that, that take in experiences and shoot out, you know, emotional rapport, that it is our responsibility to not stop learning. To always try and keep ourselves open to the world and learning about, you know, ways in which that we could be wrong. And so, it's our responsibility to keep the channel open and it's our responsibility to do the work to be able to hold the channel open. And that includes doing the internal unpacking work, doing the in... I've done a whole compassionate self-parenting journey in the last year, and that was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Bonnie Gillespie

It's brave.

Jacqueline Steiger

Turns out it's not, it's not actually more efficient to hate yourself. So.

Bonnie Gillespie

What? That's been my fuel for 50 years. What are you talking about?

Jacqueline Steiger

And you cannot trick yourself into not hating yourself either. I've tried all of the ways. So, it is our responsibility to actually do that; to find our enoughness, as Bonnie says, and to hold on to that when we experience things that make us uncomfortable, because that's where growth is.

Bonnie Gillespie

I'm letting that sit; that's beautiful. That's beautiful. Let's close on this, my lovely Cracker Jack.

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah.

Bonnie Gillespie

So crazy about you. Could talk forever. I want to know what for someone listening, who says, "I'm just so terrified I'm going to get it wrong," what is your advice for folks who may be in positions of greater privilege, for how they can help? And obviously it's going to look different for everyone, but what, what is your advice around not being afraid to get it wrong? Because I feel like that's what stops people from being better allies, sometimes.

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah. The minute that you try something, you're probably going to get it wrong. And that's the first step. Sorry, I get it wrong all the time. I, like, that's the thing is, we're going to be wrong. We don't know and we're going to be wrong, and it's our responsibility to be graceful about it.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes, love it. Please let everyone know where they can stay plugged in with you, find out where you're tweeting now, or anywhere else that you are on social.

Jacqueline Steiger

Yeah, I Instagram and tweet at @CrackerJackJS. And my instructional design business is about to have a bunch of announcements but they will all be retweeted from there so you can follow me, business or personal, so.

Bonnie Gillespie

Wonderful. Thank you, Jacqueline. I love you. I appreciate you.

Jacqueline Steiger

I love you too. Thanks so much, Bon.