

SMFA Summit Interview with Jonté LeGras, premiering 27 May 2021, 12pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

I am so excited to bring to y'all one of my very favorite people; it's Jonté LeGras. Hello, Jonté.

Jonté LeGras

Hello, Bonnie.

Bonnie Gillespie

Thank you so much for joining me as a part of the SMFA Summit. I adore you and love getting to talk with you every time we chat, but especially now where we can share the amazing conversation I know we're gonna have with all these beautiful people. I mean... I think it was, like... I gotta hug myself, because I always think about us in our meetings and how there's just, you always do it so good. You are so... you're so good about that little rock that you give and I'm like... yes, you just so embrace, in life, everything from what I can tell, and you bring so much joy to everything you do. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about staying positive and bringing so much life and happiness into everything that you do, if you do everything, I'm assuming.

Jonté LeGras

Yeah, for the most part, yeah. I, it's funny that you say that. I have a friend. She used to tell me that "Your brain must be filled with like rainbows and sunshine and unicorns." And she said her brain is more like storm clouds, like thunder, and lightning. And she says, "I don't, I don't see how you, how you see the world in cotton candy." And yeah, I mean it's, I think I credit that to my parents, my mom, and my upbringing, truthfully. But yeah, I, yeah, I... my grandma told me... back in the day, in college, I was stressing over finals, I'm sure, and she said, she said, "Well, there's two things you can do about it. You can either, you know, do nothing and stress, or you can do nothing and not stress." And so, she says, you know, "You could... you could choose either stressed or not stressed," and I was like, "Oh, that's interesting." And so, since then, I've chose not to stress as much as possible, but...

Bonnie Gillespie

You're really someone who if I were to say, "Does Jonté have stress?" I'm like, I'm sure there are things that stress you out, but I never see you being stressed. That there's just this approach to even hard problems, difficult conversations, challenges, like threats, like, there's just always in you this centeredness that feels really good to be around. And I imagine that extends to being on set, to being in, in crazy environments where the pace is insane, and there's always a deadline, and there's always a crisis. And you just keep this chill groundedness that is really beautiful to be around. I don't know how much you know about that and, and that process, or if that's something that you have to talk yourself through, but how do you... let's, let's take it to like a set. You've been on some, you've been on some pretty high-end, high-pressure, oh-my-

God-pinch-myself level sets with ridiculous budgets and... but tell us a little bit about some of your experiences like that and your ability to stay centered, if you would.

Jonté LeGras

Yeah, yeah. I've been fortunate enough to be on some amazing stats. One of them being "A Wrinkle in Time," which was pretty awesome. It was a \$100-million set. It's crazy to see the difference of, you know, like, like a webseries versus, you know, a big Disney 100-million-dollar picture. Yeah, it's it's funny that you said that I have the ability to kind of slow things down.

Actually, a lot of that I think comes from my sports background, just, just playing sports and having really, really amazing coaches that tell you to like slow the game down. Especially when the game is going at like such a fast pace, just slow the game down, know your assignments, and just, and just, it's, it's almost as if it's not time to practice, it's now time to react. Like you already know what you know. You've already practiced, so translate that to acting: it's your rehearsal, and so, it's like you already know, you already know what you're doing so kind of slow everything down and just respond, and see what stimuli is coming and just respond and just trust your instrument, and just trust that you've, that you've done the work to kind of let go and and be free. But yeah, definitely a practice, though, I mean it's not like you just switch it on and boom, there it is.

Bonnie Gillespie

And what does that practice look like when you're away from the 100-million-dollar set? What is the muscle that you're running, just in the day to day?

Jonté LeGras

It starts with my morning practice which is, it's something that I cherish. I wake up pretty early and I meditate. The meditation is, to me it's, it's, it's my everything. That's, that's where I practice the slowing down, my deep breathing. I kind of let my mind wander. I know there's so many different philosophies on meditation but for me, it just depends on the day. Sometimes I can clear my brain. Sometimes I can't. Sometimes I just let it be. But, but for me it's the, it's the just calming everything down. And for me, when I start my day that way, that's such a huge win that then the rest of the day, it doesn't really matter what, what comes. Everything is already kind of slowed down.

And then something that I incorporate, which is like, extra credit, I love hiking, so I go to early in the morning, I'll go to the mountain. I try to get there when the sun is coming up and that's kind of the meditative space, as well, and that's that's extra credit. But just being out in nature and grounding yourself and just something about being a part of something that's so much bigger than me, it makes, makes the things that I'm up to and the things that I'm doing kind of insignificant. That they're just, they're kind of like nothing, because look at what I'm part of. I'm part of this amazing like planet, this amazing universe and, and I just get to do my little piece. And so, my little journey is nothing compared to the massiveness that I'm a part of.

Bonnie Gillespie

That's so beautiful because I think I spend a lot of time in the headspace of just "there's so much and there's always so much and there's a lot that's not within our control" and there's this wrangling of, "If I could just figure this out then I'd be able to have control over it." There's something so beautiful and peaceful about the, the surrender, I guess, that comes with, "look at this, this universe that I'm a part of," rather than, yeah, the day-to-day which is going to have some things that we do have to go into our brain about. But when you do have those moments throughout the day, that you do have to go into that headspace, do you find that just by having had that morning experience that you, you approach things differently? Can you tell when you've had time away from your morning routine?

Jonté LeGras

Absolutely, absolutely. I, I do get stressed. I do feel it. I'm under the gun. Apparently, I manifest things kind of funky... funky-y... funkily.... funky, funky, funky. And, and oftentimes, I just because I'm not someone who's really prone to anxiety and things of that nature, apparently, I do have it. My partner's told me I definitely have it; it just shows up differently. And because I'm not aware of it, I just don't recognize it. And so, so those days versus the days that I do start off with my meditations and my morning practice, it's, yeah, the day is slower. The day's more calm, things just don't bother me as much. I can, I can see with, with more clarity, and I can take things in. I can, you know, it's almost like "The Matrix" with Neo, how he's just like this, but yet he's moving so fast, but to him it's kind of slowed down and that's, that's the best way I can compare it.

Bonnie Gillespie

No, that's, that's beautiful. That's, that's very illustrative of, of that, how that vibe feels. And that calmness just then creates a position of power, even in situations where we don't necessarily have an awful lot of that. And I kind of want to transition into that for this part of the conversation; specifically, around the things as artists that we'll say yes to and not feel that we have the ability to say no to. Especially starting out, we feel like we gotta take every opportunity we get like, you know, anything to get footage, anything to get on a set. And you have a pretty strong opinion about the need to kind of set that NO line early for what we will allow, and what we will decide is just not something we're going to take on as artists. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you make those decisions?

Jonté LeGras

Yeah, well first of all, I've had wonderful teachers and guidance. People like, like yourself, you're pretty huge in my world in that way. But, yeah, I, yes, I feel as actors, we have a huge opportunity to, like, the ball is in, it's in our court. We, we have the power but we give so much of our individual power and our collective power as just, as just a... actor body, if you will, to the producers and what have you. And I'm not saying that producers, they're bad, I'm just

saying that we, that we have a lot more power than we think. And you don't have to do every project. You don't... especially if there are projects that aren't up to your standards.

I know many of my actor friends will come to me, like, "I have this appointment, or I'm just going to do this thing just, just to do it." And, and it's coming from a place of just, just a place of weakness. And I, and I feel that the more we say yes to the opportunities that aren't up to our standards, the more we're weakening ourselves and the more we're weakening our body as actors. And not only that, if we say yes to everything, then some of those, like, bogus projects, it just the, they will continue to be produced because those producers know, "Well, actors are going to take it no matter what, regardless of if we don't pay them, if we don't treat them well, if we don't, like, whatever, they're just going to take them, because they're, because they're thirsty." And it's like, "Stop being thirsty and kind of have some pride in your own work and some pride in your own craft!"

Bonnie Gillespie

I look at like the, the crew and specifically sound guys -- and I'm not using a gender when I use the word guy -- sound guys have a no line that is so solid. Like, you can't get someone to come do sound on your set without spending money. That's just, that's it. Period. There are a lot of other things you can bargain away for a six-pack of beer or some pizza or their name in the credits, whatever. And actors are like, "I'll pay YOU if you put me in your project." Like they're so far overreaching the "will work for free" thing. And I'm like, "Look, there is an example right here in our industry of someone that by, by class of job, has just decided, 'We get paid'. And producers figure it out." No matter what the budget of the project, people find a way to pay their sound guy. So, I believe actors have that same amount of power, and don't even realize it.

Jonté LeGras

Absolutely, my that, that... so that's a huge pet peeve of mine. I, I will not do a project, if, if there are other members of the crew, if you will, being paid, and the actors are like working for credit, or working for free. I'm like, "No. That, that makes no sense. We, we are all part of this. We are all part of the puzzle contributing together so then why are you paying a portion of your team, and not the other?" But actors so, so many times to say, "Yes, yes, yes... me, I will do it. I will do it."

And, like, here's the deal: It's not that I'm too good to work for free or something. If it's a passion project, and we're and like we're all saying, you know what, we are like, "We love this so much," and we're, and we're all going to skip being, being paid for the, for the love of this or for, for whatever reason, that's like, that's making you do it, then so be it. All of us are not getting paid, and we're doing it. But if you, but if you have a budget enough to pay a portion of the crew, then I think everyone should be paid and, and again I'm not asking for the top-notch... like, give me, give me the SAG, the SAG minimum, that's, that's, that's the least that I ask for, so yeah.

Bonnie Gillespie

I like that a lot because it really does also set the tone for, you know, "Let's, let's realize we're all in this together," because that really is where our strength comes from is, is that we are a community of storytellers and Creating the Hollywood We Want. And that means that we come together for something that we're passionate about. And we get to decide when we want to work for free. Like, let that decision be our decision not the producers' decision. And then we're going to be getting something else out of it. Like you said, it's a passion project, it's something that's like, "Yes, I'll donate my casting to that because I so want to see it made, and I know I can -- through my relationships -- get people that maybe they couldn't without me," or whatever. But I get to make that choice, rather than the creators.

When it looks, let's let's shift into a place where I know we're shifting more and more. You certainly see in the breakdowns more opportunities for actors of color than ever. And that's growing and growing and growing. What is our responsibility as leaders in the industry -- as all of us watching and experiencing this conversation here are identified as leaders because we're storytellers -- we are creating the Hollywood we want. What is the responsibility of helping people tell better stories and do more in terms of diversity and inclusion, and the types of roles that are available for actors of all types, without becoming everybody's coach, everybody's teacher, for let... you know... "let me give you your racism class"?

Jonté LeGras

Right, right.

Bonnie Gillespie

And I realize even in answer... in asking you that question, I am asking you to teach me.

Jonté LeGras

Right.

Bonnie Gillespie

So, yeah, pardon the irony of that but...

Jonté LeGras

I'm, I'm actually okay with that. I've, I've actually identified myself as a bridge person, so especially when we're having these type of conversations, especially of late, right? I, 'cause, you know, there are a certain group of, I want to say, POC people that, that are like, "Don't ask me. Look it up. I'm not your teacher." And which is, which is very fair, and valid, and it comes from their, their experience, and, and more power to them. Absolutely. Then there are people that are like, "Yeah, I'll tell you everything. Let me, let me... I can, I can share." I think there's a spectrum of, of, who, who is willing to share it and not willing to share it.

Me, myself, I'm a bridge person, so I like bridging the two, the two different groups. So, I'm a person that loves having these types of conversations. And in terms of the question you asked, I think access. And I, I hesitate to say that word because "access" sounds like I'm, I'm begging the powers that be to allow me to have access, but really, I think the more access we have in terms of our storytellers.... So for example, speaking of "A Wrinkle in Time" and Ava DuVernay. I love, I just love that she's creating the Hollywood that she wants to create and so therefore, what does she do on "Queen Sugar"? She, she gives multiple first-time direct... first-time female directors the opportunity to shine and do and do their work and it's not like these directors came out of nowhere. It's, they actually had the access to be able to do their art and their craft, and because of that, now they're seen, and now they can actually work even more and more and more. But it's just because they just never had the access.

So, I think the more access we give to these brilliant artists that are just waiting in the wings to work -- you can literally just give them the reins to tell their stories and they will tell their stories and then therefore, there won't be a type of class, like, you know, like, "This is how we do this and this is how we do, or do that." You can learn through osmosis. You can learn by experiencing or being a part of one of those sets; being hired on one of those sets. And you're watching the the thing go.... I had a friend who was watching -- he's a... I'm clarifying for the story but he's an older white gentleman, and he was -- he hesitated to tell me he was watching the show "Insecure", Issa Rae's show which, which... I love that show. And he says, but honestly, he says, "I feel a little embarrassed to watch it because I, I kind of don't understand what's happening but I like it but, like, but, um, but I feel like I need more, more information."

And it was almost as if he was tugging at me to coach him, to give him some cultural enlightenment and then, but my response to him is I said, "Well, you know, no one ever, you know, taught me how to watch, I mean, you know, any movie. No one told me how to watch 'A League of Their Own'. No one, no one told me how to how to watch 'Dumb and Dumber'. Nobody told me how to watch 'Friends', I had to I had to do my own education. I had to, I had to learn. I had to learn about white culture. I didn't, you know, I was kind of forced upon to, to learn about it but I did it on my own so you, sir, you can do the same, it's, it's, it's no different. You don't need to grab me for it. You can literally... you didn't even have to tell me that. You could have just watched the entire canon of 'Insecure', and I bet you, you would have got a lot of Black culture from just you observing and watching."

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes, yes. Same for me with things like gender identifiers and, you know pronouns and the clunkiness that I felt at first using the word "they" to describe a single person because it broke my brain a little bit just from a grammar perspective. And I went, "I don't actually have to go ask somebody about this, I can just start showing up in places where the conversations are happening enough that I will get what works." It's lurk then lead. You get into a space, pay attention to what's going on. Don't try to come in and be an expert right away but that's such a, you know, like, white person thing. Like just come in and like, "Let me show you how it's done,

people." It's like... so be uncomfortable for a minute and sit there going, "I don't understand everything," and then get to a point where you now can ask a question that isn't offensive, that isn't assuming. It's it's saying, "Here's what I got." It's very much like coming to me asking me about "Self-Management for Actors" stuff. Read the book then ask me a question, you know?

Jonté LeGras

Correct. Correct. Show. Show some initiative.

Bonnie Gillespie

Do your Google!

Jonté LeGras

Show that you actually put some work in. And with that example, it's like the same thing in school. Like if you've done that type of work, then the teacher is more than happy to then engage in conversation with you but if you didn't read the book, that teacher's like, "Go read the book first. Why, why are we even having this conversation? You don't even have a foundation."

Bonnie Gillespie

Agree, Agree. Where do you see us headed industry-wise? I mean I know we don't have a crystal ball but you are rather intuitive and plugged in with lots of different communities at various tiers within the industry so maybe you're picking up on some trends and getting a sense of where we're headed as an industry.

Jonté LeGras

Great question. I, I talk to friends that are like in the upper echelon level, if you will, and nobody knows. They all have their own, like different, their own different opinions. But I mean there's a lot happening, I mean like look at like what's happening with like the Golden Globes. Look at, I mean, especially in the height of the BLM, 2020, with the whole theatre, live theatre space, a lot of POC artists speaking out. I don't know where we're headed, but it's the type of thing for me, that, that you can't ignore it. Like, if you ignore it now, now you're being just willfully ignorant.

It's at the table, so I have no idea where it's going but I, I do... I feel like we're in a nice push. We're... it's it's almost akin to like the civil rights movement of the '60s where like there's just this huge push and so I feel like that's what's happening within the movie industry. But I, what I really hope is that we just take more, we, we, as in, POC but also as in the collective we, as an as the, as, as like your, your community, or like which is building the Hollywood that we, that we, that we want. I just hope that we take more ownership into the direction that we're going, and not waiting for approval or not seeking approval from the gatekeepers, if you will. Because at the end of the day they also need us, it's this symbiotic relationship so it's like we have the power.

Bonnie Gillespie

Not even! Yeah, it's not even, "they also need us"! It's "gatekeepers don't have a job without us"! It's so it's that's, you know "Self-Management for Actors" in its at its core really is sovereignty and ownership of opportunity and don't wait for permission to create art, just start doing it. And eventually people start noticing and going like, "Oh, I like what... I see what you're doing there, I like that and I want to get on board with that." And it's like anything else, if we make it look like fun, if we make it look easy, if we make it look great and effortless -- which is something that our talent allows us to do -- more people want to get involved with that movement. And I think we just now have to make more inclusive storytelling also look easy, look profitable, because it is. It's just we need more evidence of that and I think that's that's part of the work that's happening right now in some really meaningful ways.

Jonté LeGras

Yeah, I'm excited for the new collaboration for these new... there are artists that I never heard of like these amazing directors from the theatre space... I am missing the... I'm forgetting the name but are, but there was this Broadway show that they are that they shot in the apartment, and it's Broadway level actors. It's a Broadway level director. It was just this amazing, it was just amazing collaboration of live theatre but also film, film and TV and so they did a Broadway show inside the small space of, of this one New York apartment. And you felt the New York apartment but you also saw the orchestra, which was like a four-piece band that was like in, they were in the living room, and there are with them, they're interacting with them. And, and so that director is apparently a huge director, but I'd never heard of 'em and so like I'm even me myself, I'm getting more access to, to, like, artists that were kind of in the fringes. And so, I'm excited to collaborate with these amazing new artists that I didn't even know were out there, so.

Bonnie Gillespie

It feels like a renaissance is coming. This opportunity to just become aware of so much talent that has been all over in little pockets and that now we're going to have this critical mass of just nothing but this art being available and and thriving and feeling so good to be a part of. So, I'm excited. I'm excited, too.

Jonté LeGras

It does. It does feel that way. It's a renaissance... I mean, come on, the Renaissance was sexy.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah, right. Of course, you got to get... got to get into how good it feels. Yes, yes, yes, love it. Jonté, for anyone who'd like to plug in with you, stay aware of what you've got going on, follow you on social, can you share all the places that you're available?

Jonté LeGras

Yeah, as far as social, the biggest one for me that I'm on, more than any is Instagram, and so that is @Jonté1, the number one. I am also on Facebook, Jonté LeGras, but you might, it might be a month, or like before I respond back to you. But yeah, just mainly, I mainly Instagram.

Bonnie Gillespie

Awesome. Jonté, thank you so much for taking this time to sit down with me. I adore you; I appreciate you, and again thank you.

Jonté LeGras

Thank you so much.