

SMFA Summit Interview with Margarita Zhitnikova, premiering 20 May 2021, 12pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone, I'm so excited to bring to you one of my very favorite people. This is Mars. Mars, I'm gonna let you tell everyone how your beautiful name is pronounced please.

Margarita Zhitnikova

You can say Margarita Zhitnikova.

Bonnie Gillespie

You can say that. I have trouble with that which is why I'm leaving that to you because, wow. Also of course I've known you for years as Mars and is that all right?

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yes, absolutely. And also, I'm like, "You can say," instead of, "My name is." I've never said that in my life.

Bonnie Gillespie

Well, maybe we'll have some more firsts here today, that would be fantastic. Thank you for joining me as a part of the SMFA summit. When we declared this topic this year, "Creating the Hollywood We Want," I immediately thought about you, because I mean, we go way back, but I've always noticed you doing little incremental steps toward a more inclusive Hollywood. And I of course don't mean Hollywood geographically, I mean, universally, as a concept, but especially in the past year to 18 months. I have seen you really step up the game and get more public with how you're creating more community around the work that we do, how you're making everything more accessible and inclusive. Can you speak to that as far as like, how someone goes about -- that someone being you -- how someone goes about making those shifts, even on the micro when we're creating our own content, for example.

Margarita Zhitnikova

I think the, the barrier to entry for that is super low. I think it's you just have to go in with the intent of like, "I'm going to be inclusive." So, it could be anything like asking people what their pronouns are. When you are bringing them in to audition or when you're sending out the call sheet, like having people's pronouns on there is really helpful. But I think that also like expands beyond the LGBTQ spectrum. Like you can ask people like, "What are your food preferences?" Like you asked me like, "How do you prefer your name to be said?" Like, it's such it's so much about respect. And then also it comes down to if somebody is disrespectful, you talk to them, and you either... they either change or you just make sure you don't bring them back into your safe space again.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's let's talk about I got two things I want on that. Safe space we're gonna talk about next, but first, what is it when, how can you tell it's disrespectful because of just, "I don't care," and disrespectful because "I don't know," without becoming everyone's educator.

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yeah, I think it's just like saying like, "Hey, just so you know, these are this person's pronouns," and if they're like, "Oh my god I'm so sorry, like I will try to do better but I might screw up but I'm going to try." To me, that's enough. If somebody is like, "What is that? I don't care about that," like, "What is this world becoming?" That's when you know, you're like, "You are not my people. You are not in my circle. Let's just smile and be nice to the end of the day if possible." Otherwise just make do without them.

Bonnie Gillespie

Keith has a, my husband, obviously Keith, has a saying that "When people treat you well, you treat them well. When people treat you poorly, treat them professionally."

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yep.

Bonnie Gillespie

I think that's helpful, because you're right, you still have to live on that set together for the rest of the day or however long they're on that set. And it doesn't need to be more antagonistic a space or more conflict-filled a space than a set can already be. But I love that noting, "Yeah, this one's maybe not in my population of thirds. This, maybe is someone who's not in my circle," as you called it.

So, to the circle, I have identified circles of safety, especially around knowing who allies are or where it's safe to feel fully expressed and not edited. How do you gauge where someone falls in your circles before you've had maybe the experience with them? Are there certain things you look for?

Margarita Zhitnikova

I definitely stalk them. I look at all of their socials. I... if it's somebody I, that there isn't much about online, I will try to find references for them, and get to know them because you really like, as you create an inclusive world -- and I think this is something you talk about a lot, like distancing yourself from capitalism and stuff -- these things all take time and it's easy to say, "Well I have three days to shoot this. I just need anyone that's available," and maybe you start out your career that way when you're new, but as you become somebody people look up to, as your work gets recognized, it's also, you're taking on the responsibility of modeling what the new Hollywood is. And you have to take time and do the due diligence to, like, vet everyone.

Bonnie Gillespie

Let's talk a second about how early on in your career you actually identify, "I'm, I'm a leader. I'm actually setting the tone for the new Hollywood and these decisions actually matter." How early does that happen? Or can it happen?

Margarita Zhitnikova

I think now people that are, you know, old enough to start thinking about these things now, like probably see it right away. For me it still felt like naughty like "I'm making my own thing. Just because I want to act." And so, like it took me like three maybe three projects to realize like, I can be selective about who I do these things with, and about the stories that I'm telling, and that this is bigger than just making a vehicle for myself. Like every time I make something, there's at least six people involved and that means it's affecting five other people, and that makes me a leader. And it depends on my attitude how like the set is run or like what happens on the festival circuit, etc.

Bonnie Gillespie

Mars, I love the idea of, "It's not just me but at first it felt naughty." That word you used is so delicious, because I think a lot of actors struggle with, "I'm creating content because no one else will ever cast me so I have to do it for myself." How, for those who are watching who look to your IMDb, they look at your festival cred, they see your work out there and know, you know, of course, it's easy to say from where you sit now, it's worth it. They're not yet sure it's worth it. They're at that first project feeling like a narcissist for creating something for themselves. Also, narcissist plus loser because they're like, "No one else will cast me." (That one's this one.) "No one else will cast me," and "I need to make a project for myself. Me, me, me," and it's a very weird juxtaposition. Why is it worth it?

Margarita Zhitnikova

Those voices will always be there, I think, but you just have to know, like, is your character the center of everything? Is it like, you know, you could have cut away and like look like been with another character or to B roll or something that helps tell the story, versus just staying on you the whole time because that's when you can really tell something is like, you know, not necessarily a vanity project but something more for your reel versus like a piece of art that you want to tell because you have a story. And like for me I can't write something until I know what the bigger message I'm saying is. And like, there are times you know "Appetite" -- one of the my shorts that I made recently -- like I'm barely in the first half of the film, but that's such like a juicy story like I don't care about that. And it's so much cooler to be in a project that says something than to just be on screen the whole time. I think that's really how you gauge it and you have other people read your script and give you notes and tell you what they are seeing from it and so it's a lot of work on the front end as well.

Bonnie Gillespie

And I think also once you, once you're consistently creating content, you, you start to realize it's so much bigger than just this piece of footage for my demo or something.

Margarita Zhitnikova

Especially when people reach out to you and they're like, "Hey, I saw this and you know it meant this or that to me." Or like, "I didn't think I'd ever feel comfortable talking about that but then I saw you talking about that." It changes your life and it's like an addiction. It's like a tattoo. Like it hurts while you're doing it because production is hard and scary, but you keep wanting to, you keep wanting to like make more.

Bonnie Gillespie

That is the most apt analogy I have ever heard of. Like, oh my god that is such a great parallel because as someone with tattoos, it's like while you're getting it, you're just going yes but also never again and then immediately where's my next one gonna be like...

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yes, exactly.

Bonnie Gillespie

That is so self-producing. Oh my god I love it. I love it. All right, tips that you would give for people who identify as hyphenates, creatives, multis in terms of the passionate life that they have around storytelling, especially if they hear from buyers. "I don't care about that. I want you to be an actor. I don't, I'm not looking at you because you want to direct or write or produce, I just need you to be an actor."

Margarita Zhitnikova

Well, I think that you can be selective about what you tell when you go into certain spaces. Like when you're going to a networking event that you're there as an actor, you don't necessarily have to say like, "Hey, I was just in this thing and that thing and I made them." You could be like, "I was in this thing," and this is also why I think it's great to not be the writer, director, producer, editor, and everything because then you have a bigger team and you can say, "Oh well, I just did this project that was directed by Stacey Maltin, and she's an award-winning filmmaker." And so, it sort of like legitimizes your own work at the same time. And it shows that people do want to work with you, which I think is great. But the world will always want you to be something and trying to contort yourself into that box is not going to serve you. So, it's just about knowing where you feel safe to reveal different things. And like for me, I need to get better at that because I walk in and, I'm like, "I'm a recovering alcoholic. I have ADD. I have anxiety. I have imposter syndrome. I act. I write. I produce. Let's do things," and then sometimes that's like, maybe too much.

Bonnie Gillespie

Same, same, same. I'm like, "My brand is transparency so let me pull back the curtain and tell you everything about myself," and I'm like, "They really don't need to know all of that." And I'm like, "Yes, they do."

Margarita Zhitnikova

They do because it shows that like, you know... one of the reasons I think I was an alcoholic is because I didn't think there was any way forward for me to do what I want. And to realize like I'm on the other side of that now living my dreams, and like, you're allowed to screw up, and then, you know, do what you want to do anyway, there's no one linear path.

Bonnie Gillespie

Thank God, I mean, seriously. When the idea of there being only one path would be the most stifling thing. I mean, we're creatives. We chose this lifestyle because there are so many different ways we can go about it. And even if someone tells us that way's wrong, we're like, well then, you're just not my buyer.

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yep.

Bonnie Gillespie

So good! Oh, I'm loving this conversation. All right, you have a database. Can you talk about how this came to be and what, what it's doing for you at this point and what it's doing for the people on the... in the database?

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yeah, so a lot of time I have... I'm queer and people will reach out to me and be like, "Hey do you know any actors that are non-binary or that are trans or that are bi or whatever for these roles?" and for me it was like a lot of scrambling. Being like, "Who do I know from class? Who do I do this?" and I'm like "Wait a minute. I learned so many things from Bonnie about how to be like an organized human. I'm gonna start a database so that anytime somebody asked me for that... that is my dog... he's very excited about my database.

Bonnie Gillespie

Your dog wants to be in your show bible.

Margarita Zhitnikova

So, I essentially made a, I made a Google form and it's still basically in beta, because I'm like launching at 85%. And at first, I was calling it the trans database, then the queer and trans database. Now I'm calling it the LGBTQIA+ database. There are, you know the fields that I put in are like things that people often ask me about, but by no means does it like cover the full spectrum. So, I will chat you a link that is shareable.

<https://forms.gle/paZ4Eo88b7wL8yMy8>

But so, when people ask me for recommendations, I send them this list and eventually I want to build it out and give it its own website so that anybody casting also just has access to the list. And you can put in as much info as you're comfortable putting in.

Bonnie Gillespie

Because I think that's a concern. Because there, there are probably people who worry being on a list like this could lead to lack of opportunities in certain circles. So that goes back to knowing your people, knowing who are, who are those circles of safety, who's your population of thirds. For those who don't know the population of thirds conversation it's there's a third of the population that is already your superfan. Pay attention to them, don't worry about the other two thirds because they're not here for you and they're not going to come over and become here for you. So just focus on the third that already is lit up by what you're doing. But for someone who may be at the beginning of their game and going, "I can't say no to anything. I need to be available for all the different ways I could be cast." What would you encourage them... we don't wanna make anyone do something before they're ready. What is it that this database is meant to do?

Margarita Zhitnikova

It's really meant to push authentic casting, because I am not a person that thinks like a straight person can't play a queer person but I do think like until the world is rebalanced and there's like queer people getting to play all sorts of roles, including queer roles, that you know we should be casting authentically for that. But so it just allows people that want to actually have like a bi person playing a bi character, and bringing that life experience into it, know where to look for those actors. And also like I definitely relate as an asexual person and a non-binary person. For me it's like well if I own my truth about being asexual, am I only gonna get cast for asexual roles? Am I only gonna get cast for non-binary roles? And I think that if you are in a place where you feel safe talking about who you are, you will, one, attract people that see you and care about you. And then like will trust you and be like, "Mars I know you're asexual, but I want to see you try this role, that's like very sexual," for example. And it's, yeah, don't do anything until you feel safe, but there is an incredible community that wants you. As whoever you are. I'm getting chills, and that includes like, you know, hard of hearing. It includes all people with different abilities, neurodivergencies, like, there... Hollywood is changing a lot thanks to people like you, Bonnie. And it is becoming more inclusive and accessible and authentic. And these are all the things that I love and I'm so excited to be a part of.

Bonnie Gillespie

Thanks to people like you too, Mars. I have to say and Keith and I were talking the other day, and Donzell's commercial had just come out and he's in his full drag. And we remember years back when he was like, "I have to hide that I'm gay." And I'm like, "Not only do you have to not

hide that you're gay, you need to be yourself. You need to show people your drag because those legs are criminal and you need to show them to everyone." And here he is a national commercial in full drag. And I'm like it's a national commercial for a car company. That air, like it's airing on network television and I reach over and hold Keith's hand, and I'm crying and he's crying, and I'm like. "This is it. Like, we, this is what we've always said we're headed toward. And look who's getting to benefit from all this work that we've known is worth doing." And it's y'all. Like you're getting to step into the spotlight in ways that 20 years ago we wouldn't even had the conversation and 10 years ago it was a sticky conversation, and 5 years ago it was a, only if we're safe conversation. And now it's like, it is the only conversation in so many ways. And how wonderful to not shrink from that opportunity. To instead go, "I'm ready for this. I'm absolutely ready. Bring that spotlight and 10 more."

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yes.

Bonnie Gillespie

Can you talk about balancing the habituated low enoughness that might live with "No one understands me. There aren't words for who I am," to then suddenly everyone needs you and wants you and that's a big tier jump in many regards. How's it how's the headspace with all of that?

Margarita Zhitnikova

It's, for me, it's definitely like a leap before the fear catches up to you, because I can talk myself out of anything. My, like, little demon voice is very strong, even like emailing you back for this, I'm like, "Oh my God. But what if I sound stupid? What if I say the wrong things? What if everybody in the LGBT community hates me after this?" And like the, everybody has their own opinion. You just have to keep going back to the population of thirds. Like one of the beautiful things about us as human beings is that we all have different experiences. Some people are gonna like you and relate to you. Some people aren't, and like, it's never gonna get less scary.

And because, you know, we're expanding and we're expanding, but at the same time they're still little boxes like I am a non-binary queer asexual person, married to a man. So, like some people are like, "So you're not queer," but to me that's like that doesn't erase my whole life. But like there's always these little boxes that people want to put you into that make them feel safe, and you just have to know that like, you're an evolving person. And you can't behold it... be beholden to like what anybody else wants. And sometimes you stepping out and speaking out creates safer spaces for other people to do the same. And yeah, it's, it's, I have to talk to myself about this all the time because I'm like, "Well if I, you don't get quoted about this, then that could get misinterpreted," but that's the world we live in now. The other option is to like do nothing.

Bonnie Gillespie

And we can always be misinterpreted when a tweet length piece of our conversation is taken and put wherever about anything. I think we talked a little bit about social media and its importance in people understanding you. I think one of the things that benefits me in terms of my transparency and I would imagine you as well is, I'm so completely out about everything on my social, you couldn't take something that I said out of context and then compare it to my history on the internet and make it mean anything other than what it exactly meant. How do you feel about keeping a social media presence because I know there's a love hate relationship with... for a lot of people... with all the socials?

Margarita Zhitnikova

I do think it's like a superpower. I think it's incredible what it's done for us as far as like, uniting us, but also tearing people apart. But I do think like, it is undeniable like you look at my Instagram, even if I don't post for like six weeks, which sometimes happens if I just get like overwhelmed, like you can still see who I am and who you're, you know, I'm trying to think of a new phrase but who you might be potentially working with, you know? Or, yeah, you can just mostly see people's hearts. I think it takes, there's definitely some people that misuse it. But you can generally always get a sense, and that's an advantage, because anything... like somebody once said to me, like why do you post like sexy photos of yourself if you're asexual? And it's like I'm in control of my narrative. I want to post that because I get to decide if bodies are controversial if they're not controversial. Like somebody.... I'm in "Landing Up," one of the first features I produced, for like one minute, body painted, and somebody took a clip of that and put it on a nude website. And I'm like, "You know what, I don't care because I've already put pictures of myself out there that are probably more controversial than this and they are art, and that's like how I feel." So, I think it really gives us a lot of power over our lives to be the ones that like unveil things about ourselves and like we get to PR around it I guess. And yeah like package how that story unfolds.

Bonnie Gillespie

And we also get to see people who are maybe not incredibly comfortable with any of who they are or what social media is about. And in that, the way they present themselves on social is also revealing in that we see the filter they're using. I don't mean the literal filter I mean the the emotional one. The layer of protection they're putting between themselves and their buyers, I guess.

Margarita Zhitnikova

Totally.

Bonnie Gillespie

Trying to think of which way I want to go next. I want to talk about... there's, there's one, one thing I really want to talk about that, I don't I don't know how to approach because in asking you I'm actually asking you to do the thing that I want to talk about we shouldn't be asking

people to do, which is when you are identified as neurodivergent or queer or asexual whatever your labels are that you've made out there. I don't want to have you educate me on what any of that means. I want to talk about what is it that helps you not become the educator to everyone who needs to know more information about what that is. Or is there always going to be a little bit of educating people when we're at the beginning of something becoming more and more normalized to speak about?

Margarita Zhitnikova

I definitely think there's at least a little bit that will always be there, of you having to be the educator, but sometimes if it's like the same person asking over and over again, I'm like, "I'm not going to tell you anymore; it's time for you to take out Google." But if it's like, you know, if you're like, "Hey, Mars, what does asexuality mean?" I might be like, "There's a really great article that was written by somebody that can explain it much better than I am. Here you go." So, I'll send that over, for example. But it does come up, and I like, as exhausting as it can be sometimes, it also brings me joy, because I'm creating representation, and I think you have to find the things that you like about it. And I think that helps.

Bonnie Gillespie

Okay. I love it. That's great, that's, that's simple enough, and, and feels feels good to hear because as someone who of course is curious and has questions, I also want to be incredibly respectful. I think this goes back to the you know when it's being respectful and when it's being disrespectful and that's, that's all the difference. Yeah.

The other one, the other question that I had and we'll wrap on this one is going to be around, not competition, but collaboration and bringing attention to other people doing great work and celebrating the community aspect of the new Hollywood. That's been a big player for you. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Margarita Zhitnikova

I absolutely love doing that. I think that everything in the world wants us to be apart, and one of the most rebellious things we can do is support each other. Like when Stacey my... who I cofounded Besties Make Movies with... we met each other in an acting class, and this was like before "me too" and stuff. But I saw her and I was like, "Who is this really pretty, really talented new girl in class?" And then we like went and got Ethiopian food and we like fell in love, and were like, "Why is that our instinct?" You know, why is it our instinct to be competitive and that's because we're told there can only be, you know, one female or whatever, at the table.

And once we teamed up and said like let's make things together that changed everything for me, and I think for her. Just knowing that there's somebody that has your back no matter what. And our team has grown because we're both people that are like, we want to support everyone. Like we want to tell stories that give a voice to people that aren't like us. We want to, you know, part of our newsletter, we always try to shout out, like indie filmmakers that we're watching, or

like somebody, not even a filmmaker, but like somebody that's writing something cool or a chef or like somebody that we think deserves recognition. And then in my personal like social media I try to share things that I see that are happening, like good things that are happening to people I love, or people I want to know, because it really is like... think about how amazing it feels when somebody else shares your work. As an actor or a filmmaker, you're always like, "Me, me, me; look at me; look at me," and, you know, you're like in a bubble. Whereas if I'm like, "Look at this really incredible thing Bonnie's doing today," people listen.

Bonnie Gillespie

Feels great. It's the whole "two gives for every ask" -- if we could always come from a place of "How can I give? How can I share? How can I help someone else have a leg up?" Like it's always going to come back to us many times over, and it's so much less work than, "How do I get myself out there? How do I get ahead with my message?" Just like instead amplify somebody else's. It will be repaid. It always is.

Margarita Zhitnikova

Yes, one of my now co-writers, Jody Lauren Miller, I met her at a New York Women in Film and TV event, and she told me about a documentary she was working on and I was like, "How can I help you? Anything I can do, let me know." And that left an impression on her which I don't even remember saying. But next time we met, she, she told me about a short film she's writing, and we talked about it a little while and she's like, "Co-write it with me." So, we are now writing this; we're about to turn it into an audio podcast with Jen Ponton... and I, starring with each other. It's gonna be super fun, then we're developing that into a feature and that wouldn't happen if I was like just self-serving and I was like, "What can you do for me, Jody? Let's go! Let's... where's my star vehicle?"

Bonnie Gillespie

Amen. I love this worldview so much and you know that I do and I could talk to you forever. Let's find out where everyone can stay in touch with you or continue the conversation with you, get on your database, get access to your database. What's the best way to stay plugged in with you?

Margarita Zhitnikova

So, the database, and basically everything about me is linked in my Linktree, which is on my Instagram, and my social media handle is the same across all platforms and it is MarzApproved with a Z. I may change that someday... it haunts me, but for now it's @marzapproved. Yeah, I'm gonna let that sit for a while and then eventually, you know, try something a little less. I remember being like, "Everybody has really cool Instagram handles. What can mine be?" And now I'm like, "What was I thinking?"

Bonnie Gillespie

So, it's one of those hangovers from, from the beforetimes. When you're like, "Yeah, I'm not connecting with that one at all now."

Margarita Zhitnikova

Oh, yes. But people make a joke when we're talking and they'll be like, "And that's Mars approved," and I'm like oh no. It's going to follow me.

Bonnie Gillespie

I gotta tell you, Mars, I don't think even after you change it that you're going to lose that. People are still gonna bring that back.

Margarita Zhitnikova

They probably will. But also, side note, my first feature as a lead is now... just premiered at Cinequest. It's called "Triple Threat" and it is now at its first queer festival. It's called... at Outshine Film Festival, which is in Miami, and then it's gonna be at Blackbird so I'm really really excited to be doing actory things with that.

Bonnie Gillespie

Amazing. Mars, thank you so much. Congratulations on all the momentum and you're only getting started. That's the best part like this is nothing but up from here. So excited to know you, to have you in my life. I love you, thank you for this.

Margarita Zhitnikova

I love you so much. And give my love to Keith.