

SMFA Summit Interview with Mary Lou Belli, premiering 21 May 2021, 5pm PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone I'm so pleased to bring back to the SMFA Summit, the amazing multi-Emmy winning director Mary Lou Belli. Hi Mary Lou.

Mary Lou Belli

Hi Bonnie. I'm so glad to be here with you.

Bonnie Gillespie

I just adore you and love having you as a part of our world and this work. I was just saying before we started the recording. Creating the Hollywood we want is, I think baked into kind of who you are, at least what I've seen in your, your career and your choices, and the way you show up in the world, you're always pushing... where can we, where can we do more? Where can we be more? Could you speak a little bit about how you choose the projects you choose and how you put that stamp on things?

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, you know, and before I even talk about choosing the project, I choose, I'm going to talk about choosing that path.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes. Yeah.

Mary Lou Belli

I wish I could tell you that that path was, you know, out of, you know, "Oh my god this is the best way to operate," but in some ways, it was the only way to operate. Because as a person who was not given every advantage... I didn't know anybody in the business, in terms of family members, when I got here. I did have a good, good friend of my husband's who let us literally sleep on his couch when we were poor actors, and which launched my career onto the first sitcom I worked on. So, in terms of that entry level, it was always about, "Where might there be an opportunity?" And especially as a woman in the business, with no contacts, it was about taking every opportunity I could see, and if they weren't there, creating them for myself.

So, in terms of creating projects, and what you know... why, and which ones I'm creating... you know, as the world has opened up more and more and more—and I feel like I could not be living at a better time –

Bonnie Gillespie

Same.

Mary Lou Belli

...because I am now dedicated to not only doing my own projects that now people are actually listening to, you know, and I'm literally sometimes going back to something... a play I did 20 years ago... some of which sadly is still relevant, or has resurged its ugly thematic need to be for us to look at this subject matter again. But I'm looking at projects, but back then were the only avenue, and some of them I got these avenues, was as a movie of the week topic, or possibly a feature project. There's all these other places, and more than that, places that are eating up content, especially taking seriously if they're coming from a woman, or they're coming from a person of color.

So, in terms of the diverse ideas that are saying, hey, we think there's a... rather than saying, when I started out, there's no audience for this, and it was dismissed before you opened your mouth, it was, oh we think we have very much an audience for that, and not only a targeted audience, but possibly a wider audience. And, and I think, in that spirit, it is opening up the world in ways that makes me so joyous that this is, that the world is now looking at stories, and therefore growing and integrating with each other as human beings.

Bonnie Gillespie

Finally!

Mary Lou Belli

Finally, finally. And then on top of that, someone in my position, having access, and then double that with the fact that now I'm in the later part of my career. Yes, I'm hoping there's another whole chapter after, of this, as a person who's developing and fostering projects, but now I'm dedicated so much to advocacy of those young storytellers. Let's give him a chance. Let's give her a chance. Let's... so there's so much more that's happening in terms of me being able to not just develop my own stuff, but saying, hey, let's pay attention to this person, they just came on, they just graduate from USC and they're fucking... excuse my language... they're brilliant. So that... those two avenues now for me are so rich and and kind of light me up every day because they make me happy that I can A) I'm getting a chance, and... I'm giving somebody else a chance.

Bonnie Gillespie

Amen. Isn't that what it's all about? Is: Come in and then keep the door held open and bring more people in.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, yeah. And and I keep advocating my whole philosophy of... and the way to do that is give to get.

Bonnie Gillespie

Always, always, always. Tell me about people at the beginning of the game feeling like "I have to say yes to everything. I can't turn down anything. I can't..." you know, that whole beggars can't be choosers, at the beginning, we're copy-credit-meals, working for free. How do we get into that mindset of I can be choosy and I can be very specific in my, my messaging?

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, and I have to say, I think that very specific, yes or no is very smart, because I just call it strategic. So, at the same time, I will say absolutely work for free. Absolutely do that favor for someone else, that give to get. But make sure you're targeting that that give possibly, and hopefully, probably has that get back for you.

So, so it's like for instance, I was guiding someone who I'm mentoring through a program at the Alliance of Women Directors right now. And we were talking about strategic use of posting things on the internet, whether you're, you know, you know, doing tweets, whatever. And I said, and then exponentially, adding from your tweet to someone else who's going to retweet you and therefore, you might get noticed because you did this, and you're adding value to a project you would like to be on. But I said, you're not going to choose seven places to do this. You're gonna, you're going to look at the series that's a possibility or probability that might hire you. And then you're going to target that. And let's say that that show this next week is doing its season finale. So, if you can add value to that, while getting your name out there and then enlisting very strategically five friends of yours who you say, I'm going to give you this, and I will do a favor for you. Maybe it's a Starbucks coffee, but I'm going to tweet five times in the next five days, and I would like you to retweet those specifically. And name me when you retweet it. So, then my name got out there, not only when I tweeted it, but when you retweeted it. And you know it's just that it's just smart, smart use of a tool that could become—the internet and social media—a huge time vampire. So you don't, you don't allow it to be a time vampire. You, you, you use it strategically, rather than allowing it to use you. Because I have to tell you, that rabbit hole, I've seen really smart people go down because it's so easy. You know writers who should be writing who I go, "How long did you spend on the internet?" And then they go three hours. I go, "Three hours you weren't writing?"

Bonnie Gillespie

Think of what you could have created in three hours and instead you scrolled, scrolled, scrolled.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, as opposed to a half hour done well.

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh, so the word that's coming to me is discernment.

Mary Lou Belli

Yes!

Bonnie Gillespie

Discernment in the projects. Discernment in the targeting. Discernment in how much time is spent on any of these platforms using them as tools. How do you refine your picker when it comes to sifting and sorting through all the things that are out there?

Mary Lou Belli

Sometimes, sometimes they're decided for me because, what do I have time to do right now?

Bonnie Gillespie

Of course.

Mary Lou Belli

Then the other factor that comes to mind is, where are we in, if it's a TV show, where are we in their season? Or is it an episode I am, I have directed? So sometimes it's, it's getting the most value out of the timeliness for me. And then in choosing projects, sometimes it's chosen by what's on a headline. Like I didn't... this wasn't for me... I'm not attached in any way, but because of some headlines in the last three weeks, I connected a writer/creator with another writer/creator, this, the latter being of the ethnicity of a targeted group. But, but that first writer needed someone like this on the team to take a fresh look at it, in light of what's been happening. So, it was just about pulling things out of headlines, because this business tends to go in waves. And there are times when things are hotter and some things aren't. It might be because of something coming up in the Senate, or something, you know, you know, a motion in, you know, AB-whatever you know, in the California legislature where we just felt, "Oh, this is making headlines today." And, and it's not just because it's timely, but because it might get more attention because of that added value you're bringing from "I didn't bring this up." You know, I always love to have alternate validations. The headline validates that this is important now.

Bonnie Gillespie

For sure, for sure. And I have clients who are in different stages of emotions about the opportunities that are surging right now, and some of them are thrilled saying, "Great. Opportunity. I'm ready for it. I've been ready. I'm now going to take advantage of all these opportunities that are here." And others who are resentful that it's taking so much to get a spotlight on some issues that we know have always existed.

Mary Lou Belli

Okay, so let's talk about resentment.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah.

Mary Lou Belli

It's an absolutely useless emotion.

Bonnie Gillespie

It's a cancer.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, it's a cancer. That's a great word for it. It doesn't help us in any way. And, and more than that, you can spot a chip on someone's shoulder in a millisecond. It comes through in in subconscious ways or sometimes hopefully conscious ways where you just go, "Seriously? You think that's helping?" So, bringing that into a room... listen, if you are a creator, a writer, a director, an actor who wants to be a creator as well... if you're not part of the solution, then it's... then, I'm sorry, nobody wants to work with you. And listen, I'm the most positive person in the world, but you have to dismiss those people who are vampires.

Bonnie Gillespie

Because it will infect the entire set. Having one bitter person. One resentful bit of energy. It's a black hole that just kind of sucks the creative energy out of the set.

Mary Lou Belli

It does. It does. Or, or even out of a development, you know, meeting, whatever, you know. So, it doesn't, it doesn't have a place and at the same time, I'm going to say, you should have that one person or two people or that little support group in your life who you are allowed to whine.

Bonnie Gillespie

I was just about to ask... how do you?

Mary Lou Belli

And and and it's your designated person. I cannot tell you, it's happened twice in the last month, where I've gotten calls from up-and-coming directors, both of whom are knocking it out of the park, but something egregious happened to both of them and I said, "You called the right person. Let it out. Let me know. Absolutely. This was so not fair, and it's so shitty that this happened, and I'm listening. And now you're going to go forward and you wait, you may not send an iota or bring an iota of that, you know, when you go to work, it's a whine-free zone. You're being paid way too much money. Okay, and it doesn't help solve the problem."

Now, I'm going to tell you a little coda to the story. One of the people I said that to I happened to be talking to her boss last week, and he said, "We just loved so-and-so. She was so amazing. She had something thrown at her every day and there was never a problem solving whatever

was thrown in her direction," and then said, "and I would recommend her without, you know, without any problem. And if you need... if you want to recommend her for a project and they need someone to back you up, have them call me."

Bonnie Gillespie

Beautiful.

Mary Lou Belli

Well...

Bonnie Gillespie

That's back to the give to get though.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, yeah but also most importantly she handled it, she took what could have been a terrible situation, and turned it into a huge win for her.

Bonnie Gillespie

Correct, but because she gave to the project rather than going this is stressing me out and I have to like let that out here, it's... she went to proper channels. She came to you and said, "As my mentor, I, can you give audience to this?"

Mary Lou Belli

Exactly and at the same time, if sometimes you don't vent to somebody it will fester.

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh yeah. It will.

Mary Lou Belli

So, find out... find that that that person who's going to listen and be your sounding board and say, "Yep, yep, you're right, you're right. Okay. I heard it. Yeah, have you let it out? Okay."

Bonnie Gillespie

I see I see so many people using social media as their, their vent. Like this is where they're gonna spew all that, like that's what the internet was built for. "How can... where I can spew all my emotions." And I'm like, "Do you realize everything you put on the internet is an ad for what it's like to work with you?"

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, and it'll come back and bite you in the butt.

Bonnie Gillespie

You got buyers watching you and goin', "I don't want that energy in this project." And I believe it's interesting to see this almost idea that there's a silo and that I can rant here, and then I'm going to submit to you on my project and you're going to forget that you saw me bitching about this last set I was on and it's like...

Mary Lou Belli

Right.

Bonnie Gillespie

We see it! What do you what do you... let's talk about mentorship because you, you've talked about that a little bit, that how does someone who wants a mentor, who knows that that would be of value to them... I think we all need mentors and and should also mentor. I think we should mentor sooner than we think we can. We're in positions where someone coming up could use our help our, our guidance, our ear. How do you manage the mentorship relationship?

Mary Lou Belli

I think first of all, you say something about yourself, about when you ask to be mentored and you say something about yourself because you should, if your self-evaluation of where you are is correct, and you're ready for said mentor, then it says something about your wisdom and your accuracy about where you are in the business. If you ask too soon, when you have no business asking, you're not, you're not... you're not even in. Listen, we're on the freeway, you're not even on the right freeway let alone the right car. You know, so if you ask, and it shows how much you don't know about the business, then you've hurt yourself rather than helped yourself. So, you must do everything in your due diligence that you think you are at the level you need to ask that mentor to.... Yeah, you just have to... and if you don't know that... I think your first group of mentors should be a peer group. A peer group, hopefully that's not just peers at your level but a couple people sprinkled in, you know. And it might be through a formal mentorship program that—if you haven't been invited as a person in this mentorship program—maybe there's a reason and then maybe you should look at yourself and go, "Why didn't I get in?" And maybe you haven't done those things to earn. Or "let me evaluate the people who were invited in."

Bonnie Gillespie

That.

Mary Lou Belli

You go, "Oh, I haven't done that. I haven't sold that. I haven't been in this film festival. I haven't..." you know, that sort of thing. So, when someone comes to me, and they're really ready. I mean, there's a, there's a person I know who I've known for like four or five years, and didn't ask me to mentor them 'til this year. But in his four or five years since we met, I've been

going, "Wow, that they just did that." And the initiative and the focus with which they have taken steps for their own career, when they asked, it was a five-minute... five minutes before I answered the email and the answer was yes.

Bonnie Gillespie

Absolutely, absolutely.

Mary Lou Belli

And when someone asks me, and they don't and go, "Oh and what is this," you know, I'm sorry. If you're asking me for information that is easily found on the internet, and you're wasting my expertise, my expertise comes with what you can't find on the internet.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes. Gosh, yes.

Mary Lou Belli

So, and also, if I'm saying... or, if I say "no" and suggest something to you, don't come back to me until you've done that "and" I suggested to you, because otherwise, why me? Why did you ask me? If you're not gonna listen to me.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yup.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, so...

Bonnie Gillespie

I'm just remembering someone DM'd me this weekend and said, not, "Hi, how are you, love your book," nothing. Just "Is there anything casting in LA right now?" And I, I just, I can't. There have been people that I've said, you know, "Read, read 'Self-Management for Actors' or you don't even have to buy the book you can just look at all the free resources that I've put out there, and then ask a question about the how of something or a specific 'yes, and... kind of question." And someone will say, "Okay, that sounds good" and then come back with another question. I go, "You read it already? You're very fast." You, like... it... just do the work, yes. I think because the point of entry for showbusiness is interest and talent, and maybe not even a ton of the latter, that we've got people who treat it so casually. And of course, I like to underscore when you're doing your job at a union level, you're making four figures for your first day on the set. Take it seriously. Put in the kind of...

Mary Lou Belli

That's a lot of money.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Mary Lou Belli

That's being invested in you.

Bonnie Gillespie

Absolutely.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah, yeah. So yeah, I completely agree. I think that you have to be, when you get that chance, you'd better have the goods.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes. Now what and what, what are the goods when it comes to, I know you, you don't necessarily take part in the full casting process, however having cast for you I know you are incredibly hands on, and involved, and love being in those sessions. How, what is "the goods"?

Mary Lou Belli

Well, "the goods" now is, and, and I will tell you, literally a week before the pandemic began, the Directors Guild had already just got, had just negotiated some fabulous new controls or hierarchies, over casting in a great way. So we're going to, if the pandemic hadn't happened you would have seen more directors in casting. No one would have spoken about who those choices were until the director spoke up, there were going to be all these things that were going to be in place, because they were negotiated. And then the Directors Guild had to make these concessions in that sometimes creatively to, in order to accommodate a... "Yes, we want to go back to work, and yes, we're going to have these, we're going to watch more tapes and actually not even in some cases of Zoom sessions for casting."

So, if so, right now my casting process looks like. I get more tapes than I really have time to look at. Hopefully they have been whittled down by fabulous, talented casting directors who go, you know, "We've had a cast and concept meeting. I know what they're looking for. This is a range of people that fit that. Mary Lou, look at this." I get to look at it first. I weigh in first. Very often I sometimes weigh in with myself in the voice of the producer/director, with whom I've discussed my first choices, and then we've said, this is, might be the best for, and most likely to really get cast, so let's go in and my first choices are really our first choices. And then they get looked at by the exec producer who then sends it up to the network level, and then that's how it's decided.

Occasionally I've, I'll come in, and there might have been an offer made because it's a, a big stunt casting. And hopefully, that's happened to me where I felt the person who had been offered it was totally wrong for a part, and I've stated that sometimes. And in one, my first case

that where that happened, that actor was smart enough to say, "Mmm..." turned it down. So, but I had already spoken up they said, "Okay, so you didn't like that person, who would have been a great GET." I go, "Yeah, a great GET. I love this actor's work but they're wrong for this role." But, you know why I thought that, and therefore let's, and the first thing they said to me was, who's first on your list of the other stunt people, and I got my first choice.

Bonnie Gillespie

Now and let's—for people who don't know what stunt casting is—we're not talking about stunts.

Mary Lou Belli

Oh no, no, we're talking about a big celebrity.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah.

Mary Lou Belli

A big celebrity who's coming in without auditioning and it's what's called an offer only. So, it's, they're basically being offered the role, and they can say yes or no, and/or, say yes or no and negotiate money.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes, of course.

Mary Lou Belli

Then... but basically, the network wants this person because of the juice it will give the show.

Bonnie Gillespie

Absolutely, and sometimes they will make that decision without even considering how that fits creatively with the story or the, the idea that they have... great because it's the idea of like well if we can get them and it's like yeah but if we can get them for this story than the story is completely different.

Mary Lou Belli

Yeah. So, it's about getting eyes on the, on the product, as opposed to, who's the best person to help us tell the story. But yeah, it's also, you have to look at the medium we're in that depends on either subscribership, paying per view, or, or advertisers who are thinking those eyes on that product will sell my, you know, detergent.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes, and now let's, let's end on where this gets into social media following. Because I know that there are a lot of people who are influencers who have, you know, millions of followers,

wherever, kind of get in the heads of actors who may have hundreds of followers and then they think that they need to be doing things to try and get a bigger social media following.

Mary Lou Belli

So, I would say I would probably... I haven't done this research myself but the number of influencers that get the job over the best... let's say the best actor for the role, percentage wise, I bet it's always less than 10%.

Bonnie Gillespie

I would agree.

Mary Lou Belli

Now, that being said, if that influencer happens to be a brilliant actor, that brings more eyes, and it's between two brilliant actors, that influencer should get that role because it's more eyes on the product.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yes.

Mary Lou Belli

But I would say, I wouldn't worry about that if I... I would concentrate more on craft, expanding your network, you know, guarding your joy, you know, there's a great—Todd Holland who's a friend of mine gave me this little visual plaque that's on my "Directors Tell the Story" companion website, and it's some, it's his four tenants for success and it's: "Joy, Craft, Network, Repeat." And it's a recipe for success. You know, and it's you know guarding your joy, you know, expanding your network, honing your craft, and then, when you think you've done that, to its fullest, go back.

Bonnie Gillespie

Back to one. Mary Lou, you are just delightful and...

Mary Lou Belli

Thanks, Bonnie; right back at you.

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone would love to stay in touch with you, track what you're doing, what's the best way to stay plugged in with all your...

Mary Lou Belli

The best way to plug into me especially is through, believe it or not—I know it's old fashioned—is my Facebook page because my Facebook page is not necessarily about me except on Thursdays where you might see me, like in that old acting role from 30 years ago.

Bonnie Gillespie

I love those by the way.

Mary Lou Belli

One of the pictures I posted last week was a costume. A little sailor suit I was in that Robert Fletcher, the late Robert Fletcher who passed away this week, had costumed me and you know when I was still in New York and acting. It was like, oh he passed away and, you know, this was, you know, this was the sailor suit he designed for me. But! So, a lot of my Facebook page is about advocacy, and, and also you can always reach me through my agents, you know, I'm... and those things are available on the internet. If you know someone who knows me, find me through email. The thing I hate on Facebook is messenger.

Bonnie Gillespie

Yeah, I don't even...

Mary Lou Belli

Because it's a time vampire. So, I will, you know, my Facebook is, you know, a great way to see what I'm up to. And then the moment that you hit me up through a friend or colleague, it says something about you. So, the access is basically coming with a recommendation, because that person's either emailed me and said, "Is it okay if I share your email?" and I'll go, "Sure; because it came from you." Or... that's the best way.

Bonnie Gillespie

And let me mention one of my favorite tactics that I've ever seen used with that kind of recommendation is, there was someone who had a referral, and sent to an agency, and said, "I'm not going to use this yet, because I know this agency is one that would only rep me at the next tier. So, I have work to do. And even though I really want to get that meeting, I also know nothing's gonna come of that meeting, so I'm going to hold this chip, and I'm going to play it when I have a better hand." And I think that's so smart.

Mary Lou Belli

Exactly. It's so smart. And I'll just tell you, sometimes I've held that trip for 10 years.

Bonnie Gillespie

You bet.

Mary Lou Belli

And things come back to you. People remember you and again it's what I said: And then you measure when I, when they first got that chip about me, that panel we were on together 20 years ago, God she was at the beginning of her career and shit, she's got two Emmys already, you know? So, all of a sudden, your, your, your stock has gone up in their eyes.

This is ***Self-Management for Actors*** content from live training by Bonnie Gillespie. ©2021, all rights reserved.

Bonnie Gillespie

Right on, right on. Mary Lou, thank you so much, I appreciate you.

Mary Lou Belli

Okay. It was a joy thanks, Bonnie.

For 100 days of unparalleled support and a proven framework to support your next-tier life, visit bonniegillespie.com/offer now.

Bonnie Gillespie