

## **SMFA Summit Interview with Sheila Houlahan, premiering 21 May 2021, 3pm PDT**

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Everyone, I'm so excited to introduce you to one of my very favorite people on the planet. It's Sheila Houlahan. Hi, Sheila.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Hi Bonnie. Hi everybody.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Thank you so much for joining me. I love you.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Love you too. I can't believe it's been three years now since I first found you.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

How did you find me, by the way?

### **Sheila Houlahan**

You know what it was a regional casting director who I adore who is very, very of the SMFA mindset and ilk, her name is Nike Imoru. And you coached, or at least somebody else, Jasmin Savoy Brown did Get in Gear.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Okay.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Nike also coached her and was like, "Hey, Jasmin had a great experience with this Bonnie Gillespie person, check her out."

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

And you did.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

I did, it was like great. "What's LA?"

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Oh, that's fabulous. So yeah, so in these years that we've now been together, you have gone through what we call some tier skipping. Like, not just tier jumps. Not just the, like, "I'm gonna go from copy-credit-meals to getting paid, to, oh, I'm no longer doing nonunion stuff," and I mean -- this is anybody's journey not yours specifically -- I know you were already at a higher tier when we started, but you've done what the legends tell tale of which is: You can actually

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*Bonnie Gillespie*

skip a tier. You can actually be doing some work over here, and then the next day it's like here's an offer from one of the bigs, like, here's a studio project... "We're just sending over a script; would you please consider it, maybe?" Can you talk a little bit about what that does to your head a little bit?

**Sheila Houlahan**

Yeah, you know, absolutely I can... if it's all right with you, I'd love to talk about it a little retroactively we're gonna go backwards.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Love it.

**Sheila Houlahan**

I really found that the enoughness work that we've done together and that you so passionately prescribe to the Earth is key. Especially recently, I have found that since the beginning, well since a little bit before 2020, since a little bit before the last 13 months, my enoughness has been solid enough -- no pun intended -- that when new opportunities have come up and as I prepare for yet another tier skip, it doesn't scare me. And I remember when this tier skip happened to me in 2019, something sort of happened to my own mental health and my own process where the system sort of had to break down to be able to shore up and build stronger.

I think the enoughness that I lead with in rooms or with auditions, or what, you know, when, when I'm reading a script. If I'm getting ready to meet with a big, I'm putting on that enoughness, and then of course if things don't go well, the enoughness care that I need or I'm like, "All right, we're gonna hide under the blankets and have a burrito and watch something soothing, like a cute little competition show," right? Like that system is so fine-tuned now, and the only way it was going to be fine-tuned is if the old system completely fell apart and died. Because once I stepped into this enoughness work, there was no space for that old harmful rhetoric, and so it kind of like exploded, as you remember. And for everybody listening like I'm really transparent about this but I was actually involuntarily committed. I was placed into a psych ward for 24 hours.

Keith was a literal hero and showed up at the hospital because of somebody who I trusted, who was going to show up did not and so then they administered medication to me without my permission and they handcuffed me and stuff that was like, you know, a lot for your enoughness, because you're already like, "Wow, how dare I do this thing, who am I," and then if you're in that unfortunate situation and the government handcuffs you you're like, well, I mean, here's like a literal questioning of what am I doing right now. So, having Keith there was great and hilarious. Having his energy put it all into perspective. The system really had to literally break down and be built anew. I know Bonnie you went through that with your back, I don't know that everybody has to do that.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

So that's kind of what I want to hit on with this because we can all identify a place where things spun so far out that we're just like, "Yeah, we can't continue life in this direction anymore". But do we have to have such drastic, handcuffs, bedrest moments.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

NO! Don't do it. I like to think I did it so now I can be like, "Don't do that." I am happy to share my experience so that you can be like, "Cool, I'm gonna skip that part. I'm just gonna go back to the good stuff," because I think the fact of the matter is -- Bonnie and everybody who's listening -- is that you don't have to. I think that was my journey, because my own negative self-talk was so violent that when I started to say, "Hey maybe I could just have a good time and we don't have to deal with all of this," there was a physically violent resistance happening inside my brain.

So, I'm not here to say, you're going to have that experience no matter what, but I am here to say that if you find that your own resistance to the enoughness journey starts to get a little bit more activated than some of your peers, that's okay. And you're not alone in that perspective and of course you can reach out to me if that's been a part of your journey, because I am happy to say that now that those demons are for the most part, at bay, because of course it's continuous work every day, right? Re-investing and being like, "Whoa! There you are. Okay I'm going to take a step back," the, the openness that that leads you to in really being like, "Oh, I'm not gatekeeping myself," and like actually Hollywood isn't gatekeeping any of us either really, I mean, yes, of course, marginalized voices are absolutely being gatekept, that's another subject, but in terms of our own enoughness, like, you can get on the phone with CAA and ask to work with one of their top tier talent. You can.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Absolutely. So, love it. You did this little visual... your little... your hand coming up with this, this low enoughness pops up, when this, this little, like, the old way, whatever. What are some of the red flags that your enoughness needs a little more attention? Because I agree. The work is never done. It's it's like you don't get bikini body and now I never have to work out again. It's like enoughness is not achieved and then checked off. It's like enoughness is brushing your teeth; it is every damn day, you know? You can can't put that shit off.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Oh, you mean thing that none of us did in quarantine? How interesting.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

How'd that go. Yeah.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Uh huh. Yeah, you know this this gesture that I do, I always imagine it's like the skull from "Hamlet" like that's me talking to myself and being like, "Self, what are you doing?" So, this little gesture helps me clue into that mindset. But if I may, I would like to share an, an actual specific story that just recently happened and what my process was because maybe walking through that is going to be helpful to people. So, I am producing this hybrid project I'm really excited. Bonnie and I've been jamming about it, and it's, it started as like me just wanting to creatively jam with actors I admire and now it's turned into this like hybrid feature film that's going to be like, solely distributed on Twitch and it's turning into this big thing and, um, yeah, it's been great.

But recently I actually, so what we're doing is we're adapting a play, and as Bonnie knows, I got into the ring of like, "Oh crap, I should probably get the rights to do this, instead of being sued up the wazoo," because that, that'll do a number on your enoughness. So we'll check a play. Yeah right, there's a little bit of this. I was like we're done with this, this happened, we're not gonna go back to that.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

No.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

So, I reached... I had a ballsy enoughness moment and I was like well, internet stalker Sheila found this woman's DIRECT address. So, I'm just gonna write to it and, "Oh, here's her agent at CAA," by doing like IMDbPro stalking. Great, gonna write to him too. So didn't hear back from him for a while. Then finally did hear back from the assistant and he was like, "Cool, this sounds great, like, we're gonna, we're here, we're here to help you make a custom license." Yay! So, I'm all excited. I'm getting my team all fired up and then two days later, they're like, "Just kidding. We already sold the feature film rights. You're allowed to stream this. But this can't go to festivals."

So, when I heard that I was like, "AUGH!" Because my version of what this baby was going to look like was going to end up being different. I like to think about it as that weird sort of designer baby nonsense where you're like, "Oh I thought my baby was gonna have green eyes. No, it's gonna have brown eyes," and you're like, "Okay, I'll just like go into my cave and like think about this." Designer baby creepiness aside...

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

A little creepy.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

I was like you know who's not going to make any decisions right now? This girl. Because I was having an emotional response. And I knew deep down, that this limit that had been placed on

my project was probably going to help it in the long run by just narrowing the focus. So, I was like, "Okay, I'm emotionally activated right now. We're not going to work." So, I just took care of myself. I, what I do is I do a lot of sensory engagement when I'm feeling really attacked. And that's the thing, right? Like I have found that my enoughness, when I feel like something has is threatening my enoughness, my brain perceives it as an attack, whether or not it actually is.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Because, to primal brain it is. It full on is like survival. Yeah.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

Exactly. So, it felt like one and I was like, "Okay, that's not what that is. We're fine." So, you know, it's just about taking that emotional side of myself and being, treating it like a child and being like, "I love you, child." Like, we're gonna wrap up in blankets. That's the touch sensation. I'm going to maybe like listen to something soothing like a sound bath, maybe do some aromatherapy, maybe have a tasty thing. And what how indulgent I want to be with the tasty thing is really up to me and in terms of what long-term enoughness versus short-term comfort, where it fits on that chain. Maybe closing my eyes because usually what triggers my enoughness is the visual. I find that our enoughness... we all tend to be pretty dominant in one or two senses and that can be where data comes in through to mess with our enoughness. So, for me, I'll see something, and my eyes will be triggered for that enoughness, so then I have to physically turn my eyes off and engage other senses to be like, "Nope, that's not who I am. I don't know who this is. This doesn't belong to me. This is a response, but it's not, I'm not on fire, even if I feel like I am." So, we're going to engage with these other parts of myself that are actually me and what I stand for and what my true north is.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

That's beautiful because especially if we're like doom scrolling, we don't even realize what we're feeding ourselves and becoming reactive to. And it really does trigger and activate... I love that you're using that word that's such a big player in our "Expansive Capacity" conversations is like, what, what are you being activated by, and what can you then do with that activation because it's not, "Shut it down!" It's "What is it trying to communicate?"

### **Sheila Houlahan**

There it is.

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Where do I go to get the safety that I'm craving? And then having that collection of tools that you know are go-tos for you. And it's gonna be different for everybody. I think it's so important for us to also not need our enoughness tools to look the same as everybody else's.

**Sheila Houlahan**

It can't. And if I may, I want to plug something for that that I think is going to be really helpful to all the ninjas tuning in. I did DBT, and that is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which is a mouthful but basically translates to holding two opposing ideas in your head at the same time and not dying.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah.

**Sheila Houlahan**

More or less what it is. So DBT saved my life, after that hospitalization phase. But what it is is it's a collection of a couple hundred skills that you can tune into and immediately sort of plug and play. So, there is a book and I want to say it's something like "The DBT Skills Handbook". It's like a green cover and a sort of three-ring binder effect. I forget the author, maybe Marsha Linehan or whoever the actual creator of DBT is. Get it; get the eBook; do whatever. It's the most amazing tool because you can literally self-prescribe. You can be like, "This is what I'm feeling. Bop, bop, bop, bop." Flip through the book; and then they have five different techniques you can try right then and there to sort of shore up and boost your emotions back up. So, it's an invaluable resource, maybe sensory is not the thing that works for you, it works for me but what I like about it is that there's literally hundreds of things you can do to sort of decompress after you've been activated.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Let me ask about the finding out what works for you part of things because one of the things I see happen a lot, is we get into a place of judgment about, "This doesn't work; I'm so broken. This doesn't work; I'm so broken," rather than just going, "This doesn't work; try something else. This doesn't work; try something else." Can you talk a little bit about the process of...

**Sheila Houlahan**

Oh yeah.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

...sifting through and sorting through all the options, especially as you were coming out of a dark night of the soul moment in your life? Like how do you, how do you go through that and not, not judge yourself for the tools, maybe not matching up? How do you go through that process, personally?

**Sheila Houlahan**

Totally. So, in DBT, judgment is actually an emotional response. And what they -- so I just want to say that again -- judgment comes from a place of heightened emotion. If you have lowered emotions about a single object which is why, you know Keith says, "Care less. Care less. Arm's

length." If your emotions are lower, you are not going to have as many judgments upon the experience.

So, one key tenant of DBT is that there's sort of like, pardon the generalization, three thirds of emotionality and brain processes that sort of interconnect. So, and to that end, all the skills go into one of the thirds. So, the top third is like, "I'm on fire; I'm having a panic attack; everything is burning." So, for that, you are looking at de-escalation skills, because you physically cannot use any deep-level thinking to change your circumstance, if you are emotionally flooded. I'mma say that again for the folks in the back.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Please, please.

**Sheila Houlahan**

You cannot rationally think through and process a given problem or situation if you are emotionally flooded. You physically cannot. Fight or flight has activated and you got to calm down.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Right.

**Sheila Houlahan**

Once your emotions get into that second sort of like 40 to 60% activated tier, then you can use skills to sort of reason out, ration, "Okay, what is the problem that's here? How can I show up for myself and make plans in case it happens again?" Or, "Does this align with my values?" Or or the all the gorgeous sort of jamming that we do, you can't actually do it when you're flooded. You've got to be in that 40 to 60%. Then the bottom third -- and this is what blew my mind when I first did DBT -- the bottom third is for communication. You can't communicate unless you are in the bottom third of emotionality.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Really?

**Sheila Houlahan**

Uh huh. We're talking 30% or less is the only region where you can do interpersonal activity.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

And when do we so often try to do so much communication? When we're not there.

**Sheila Houlahan**

The other two thirds. Were like well I'm dying so we should talk about it but that's not actually what our brains are wired to do. So, when I learned that, it actually gave me permission to not feel like I needed to solve everything immediately.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Perfect.

**Sheila Houlahan**

I was like, "Cool, I'm on fire, I'm gonna go like be on fire until I'm not." And then once I feel like I'm in that middle third, I'm going to use the skills and everything that we build in SMFA as well as DBT to sort of process and parse out, "Are these my thoughts? Are they somebody else's? Is this my judgment? Is it somebody else's? Is this aligned with my values, my beliefs, my true north, or is it not? Can I let it go?" Then, when you use those skills, you get down to that level of like, "Okay, it was kind of annoying but it's not going to make or break me." And it's in that space where you can actually communicate with others, which is a game changer because then you're going into these talks around energetic boundaries, without being activated.

So, if, like, for instance I had like a rando boundary with Bonnie about like bologna sandwiches and it was like, "Bonnie I know you love your bologna sandwiches, but if we could just not eat them together in session like I get a stomach cramp after every bologna sandwich. Also, I'm vegetarian, why are we talking about bologna sandwiches?" Now I can communicate clearly to Bonnie and Bonnie can actually receive it because my tone does not activate her. So, by showing up for this way and being like, "I am enough enough to take the time I need to be of sound mind before I take care of myself in an external way," we in turn take care of those around us, which is a cool side effect, it's not the goal. It's a cool side effect.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

I say that part again that the goal is not caretaking everyone else, putting myself last.

**Sheila Houlahan**

Yes.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

That's not it.

**Sheila Houlahan**

It is an inside job. At the end of the day, you only know what's going on in here. I think that's why so many people, so many -- pardon my French, straight white cis dudes -- are like, "I am the center of the universe," because we only know what's going on in here, um, you know there's those like weird psychological philosophical thought experiments where it's like, "What if you are in a simulation?" Which to me is like the epitome of like white dude thinking like



that's that over there, interesting that you had the ability to go there. But we have that weirdness, because we only know what's going on internally. So, like I can't show up and take care of Bonnie for Bonnie because I don't know what she's thinking. I'm not a god; I'm not omniscient, geez.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Right?

**Sheila Houlahan**

There's enoughness, and then there's like, "Wow. Slow your roll." Like just be enough yourself. This is gonna take a lifetime of learning and unlearning and growth; I only have time for this.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

100%. Now, you say you only have time for this. However, I watch you being a leader in especially storytelling around underrepresented voices, you are, you are not just a leader, you're an activist. You are a voice of mobilizing some really important conversations, and I'd love to hear you speak about that a little bit and where's the balance in what's healthy for Sheila and what's healthy for, you know, #CreatingTheHollywoodWeWant?

**Sheila Houlahan**

Oh my god yes wow, there's a lot in that that we can talk about. The sort of two prongs that come up for me are 1) I can't show up as a good activist until I've dealt with this shit. So, the more that I have grown and worked on myself, the more I've been like awake enough to notice what's happening and be like, "That's not great. That ain't great either. You got to fix that." So, I think, I think what's really interesting is a lot of the reasons the silent majority is silent or are silent, I guess, is that folks haven't had the luxury of time or the ability or the enoughness to really work on themselves. And that's why I'm a really passionate advocate around affordable, accessible mental health care. 'Cause I think the more that becomes streamlined, the more people are going to have enough sense of self and cognition of self to be able to look outside themselves. So that's step one.

The second part of what you said, like how do I engage with the world while taking care of me. As a queer woman of color, the only way I'm going to get care is if I take care of myself. Like, no offense to all my allies out there. Like, thank you for doing what you do, but I'm the only one who's going to know when I'm triggered or activated. So, like with all the, the rise in hate crimes against AAPI, there were times I remember posting about it on Facebook and getting like pretty tilted and being like, "Y'all, why are you so silent about this? Like, get out of here." And this one white woman commented on my Facebook and was like, "Um. I haven't seen it in the news so I'm not sure it's important." And I was like, "AUGH!" Like I saw that, went slightly insane, and then was like, "Cool. We're done with Facebook today." And then I found some like physical way to externalize my rage. For me sometimes, that's boxing like just getting a thing and being like, "Bap, bap, bap, bap, bap!" to get that out of my stomach and my head, just out.

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Bonnie Gillespie

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah.

**Sheila Houlahan**

And then once that initial rage reaction was gone, I forgave her internally and was like, "Okay, you know, your ignorance is not entirely your own fault, though it is now your responsibility to undo it." But I'm gonna say, okay, you don't know that it's being advertised because people are not talking about it so clearly, the way I can show up is to start talking about it and encouraging other people with the platform to talk about it.

And I think that, you know the the common thread between all of these topics we've been talking about Bonnie is just taking a day. I think there's... something clicked for me when I turned 25. Okay, um, there's something about 25, where you're like, "Well, I'm not a baby. I'm still learning how to be an adult, but 25, quarter of a century," right? That... Marilyn Monroe really had it right. Um, something clicked for me where I was like, my feelings aren't eternal. Like, if I go to bed, it's a new day and I will have a new emotional perspective on what's happening in my life.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Amen.

**Sheila Houlahan**

I feel like a new cellular being, and when it's a new day. So, if I'm really activated, I'm like, "Cool. Tomorrow will be a new day," like I don't need to like erase the Declaration of Independence today.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Right.

**Sheila Houlahan**

Could give it a minute.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Baby steps.

**Sheila Houlahan**

Sleep on it; sleep on it.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

I don't make a big decision anymore without sleeping on it, even if... okay, correction, there have been a few times where I've been, like, okay, and I've known in my heart of hearts what happened. Like recently, I had this really delicious audition for a series regular role and I was like, "I know that bitch," and I was off book in 15 minutes and my first take was perfect and I just fucking knew because like it was -- pardon my French -- because it was so aligned, but that is so rare in consideration... like in comparison to the vast majority of things where I'm like, "I am still too activated so I'm going to like watch some corny TV and eat a nice thing. Or go see people or go outside and remember that I am a tiny tiny dot in a large beautiful universe that operates fine without me, and will continue to operate fine without me." But just zoom out a bit and be like, "I am enough and I'm also not the most important thing in the world."

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Yes, yes, and I love that that just that breath of a moment of just getting perspective. Being, being the observer of what it is that this whole play is, and then also knowing sometimes I'm going to choose to just go be up in it. I've like when you're like, "This is me. I've got this it's like," sometimes that's, that's part of what we do and it feels really good. And we also then, know, "No. We chose that." And so then when we go, "Why am I still activated all these hours later?" Like, "Girl. 'Cause you chose to get into that drama and you chose to go into the environment."

### **Sheila Houlahan**

You were like, "Drama pool. I'm gonna dive headfirst."

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

We have the, we have the autonomy to choose that and sometimes we do.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

We do. Isn't that what freedom's all about? I mean, I think what's so fascinating about all this work re: enoughness and your true north is the more, the more you carve out your own enoughness, the more that actually informs your true north for you. When I first did the Get in Gear, in 2018, and Bonnie was like, "What's your true north?" I was like, "What?"

### **Bonnie Gillespie**

Yeah.

### **Sheila Houlahan**

And I thought I sort of had an idea but I didn't really know and it's taken me three years to figure out what my actual true north is, and even then, I know it's gonna change because learning of ourselves is a lifelong process and enoughness has to be accompanied with a constant desire to be lifelong learners, or else we get stuck and it's gross. So, I think it's just it's such an exciting thing because the more you take a moment to take that breath and be like, "I am enough to not have to make an impulsive decision, like I could take my time with it, the

more you start to actually learn your own patterns, the more you learn who you are and what you stand for. And then of course the more your true north changes.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

I love it. I love it. Sheila, I could talk to you forever. I want to know where can everybody who wants to now stalk you and be obsessed with you and find out so much more about all you are and all you do, where can we go? Where can we send these wonderful people?

**Sheila Houlahan**

Yeah. Instagram is the best place to connect with me. I'm on Twitter but I'm like rarely on Twitter so don't reach out to me there because I'll like see it in a month and be like, "Oh my god. I'm so sorry." But Instagram, slide in my DMs. I check the, "we're not friends yet" DMs daily so I will see your message. It's at @sheilahoulahan. Follow me, I'll follow you back. Let's DM; let's connect. You'll see more information coming up on my website. I'm actually going to start my own offering that Bonnie and I are going to jam about sometime this summer, in the fall, which is about connecting and finding your own enoughness and true north through your voice. So being like, maybe this is the key to your heart and to your spirit, and maybe we can jam together and figure out more about who you are in the ways that society has told you to be silent.

**Bonnie Gillespie**

So excited about this. My throat chakra is wide open and ready. I cannot wait for this. Sheila, thank you so much. I love you.

**Sheila Houlahan**

Ooh, Bonnie, love you too.