

SMFA Summit Interview with Tanya Perez, premiering 22 May 2021, 10am PDT

Bonnie Gillespie

Everyone. This is Tanya Perez, one of my very favorite people on the planet and I know I always say that, but this time I mean it more than evah. Tanya, thank you so much for joining me.

Tanya Perez

Oh, my goodness, thank you for having me. Yay. Okay, I had to bring out the pom poms.

Bonnie Gillespie

Clearly Tanya always brings the fun, like that's just never never not fun when Tanya's around, even when things are incredibly serious and incredibly deep, and, and even hard. There is a ray of sunshine that comes with Tanya, and I don't mean in the toxic positivity kind of way, I mean that there is just this groundedness that comes from: Everything's going to be okay. And I would love to start with that. How did you develop that part of who you are, if you can even articulate that?

Tanya Perez

Oh my god. You know, I want to say, I have really resilient family. A really resilient family, to start as a base, even though things got really rocky when I was a kid, but I feel like the that as a foundation helped me see that there was positive, hope everywhere. Like it was just, you know, like, "You can do this, even when you feel like, 'I can't do this', or people are telling you, 'You can't do this'." So, I think that, you know, I cultivated that. I feel like I really cultivated that in just, in the last few years, and especially over the, the, the time of this... one year later, one year later, and I want to say I am grateful. Like from the bottom of my core, just to say that right now, is like, I am grateful for having that experience, because I'm super happy right now. I mean, what?

Bonnie Gillespie

So, let's, let's talk about because you mentioned even when others are telling you like it can't be done, that there is this hope that maybe that's not true. You talked about this a little bit in our pre-recording conversation about, if you could go back wishing that you hadn't believed when other people told you what's possible and what's not possible for you. Can you speak a little bit about... because I'm imagining people watching this and going, you know, "How do I know who I'm supposed to believe?" Like how do you, how do you come home to that centeredness, that is, you know, believe your damn self?

Tanya Perez

Right. You know, with the, with the Black Lives Matter rear-up from last year, and really leaning in hard to like my Latinx culture, I felt like suddenly ancestors were talking to me. Like I really was just like, "All right, here they are," you know, other friends who I know who are,

who are also sayin', you know, "listening to their ancestors". I was just like, "Oh well, you know whatever whatever that means." But I really felt it in this moment and I was just like, "Okay, you know what if I'm going to listen to this, then I'm going to also like learn from my own past." Because when I grew up, I was like told that, you know, I pretty much wasn't enough. I wasn't pretty enough. I wasn't you know skinny enough. I wasn't this and the other. "How could you possibly think about being an actress? You're only a dancer." Or when I stopped dancing, then, you know, "You're only this and you're only that," and I was relegated to to small, tiny nuggets of role. And being told that I was allowed to have "only that", and I should be grateful, really was something that I carried well into, you know, my 30s.

And something just broke. Something was like, "This is not a truth. I have allowed this to be a truth, and I need this not to be a truth anymore," because I am a storyteller. I'm a multifaceted storyteller. I'm on stage and screen, and you know and devising work and clowning and I was like, and all of these things that I was just picking up because I felt like I just needed to hustle, in order to achieve a place at the table. Once I realized, I was like, "I don't know if I want to be at that table. Think I'm gonna go ahead and be at the kids table, because it's a lot more fun." And that was starting to be the permission that I was giving myself. And once I started realizing like, "Oh, I can, I can make this and do it the way that I want to," and then it started resonating with other folks, and also then started bringing in other people. You know, like it was just like a magnet like, you know, was attracting the right collaborators in my life.

So, then I was like okay, "I'm validating myself." And even when things got really messy, I was just like, "Okay, well, that's the mess, then I'm going to learn from it and then I'm going to move forward," you know? And I really feel like it was something that I learned, immediately when I, you know met you and then jumped into the Cricket Feet Showcase. And then I was just like, I was feeling like, this was like what, this doesn't feel natural. I'm used to like people telling me no all the time and everyone's being really positive and supportive. And...

Bonnie Gillespie

What is that? "Gah!" It's like a brain rejects it. Like, "This has to be a setup." Yeah...

Tanya Perez

Right, right, and that's you know that's the rebel -- you know rebel, 5, Capricorn -- to me I was just like, "Oh no, I don't trust it. This doesn't feel right. But I like it. But no. But I like you. But no." And now it's just like when I, when I don't have that I'm like, "Okay. Those are not my people. That is not my project," and I don't have to get emotionally invested in that. And that's what I feel like now is just saying yes to myself.

Bonnie Gillespie

You used the word permission and I want to I want to go in on that a little more because you, you nailed it when you said "give myself permission". And I think especially starting out, so many artists are looking for the other, the gatekeeper. And because there are gatekeepers that

we do have to get permission from in order to be able to do certain kinds of art at certain tiers, where does this sovereignty come from in that, "No, no, I'm going to first give myself permission and then watch all the gatekeepers go, 'What gate? There's no gate here'." Like how does that actually play out?

Tanya Perez

I was discussing this with some artists about gatekeeping because that is still, you know, how we see things. And somebody brought up, and it was just brilliant. It was just like, instead of gatekeepers, how about just, it's people, you know, supporting and and being able to go ahead and be a community, instead of these tiers and things. And they, they exist. Of course, they exist, you know that's that's the, that's the company we keep in the moment... until we change it.

And I feel like, for myself, I got really tired of defending systems that weren't working for me. And I also got really good at playing within them, and then kind of like breaking, breaking the rules. And I, when I started to see the result of that, you know, positive impact, whatever. It was just whatever that that I just was like, the more and more I saw that I was just like, okay, I have to know that I was probably waiting for somebody else to say, "You can do this." When in fact, every time that I did it myself, I was giving myself that. I was, I was literally saying, "You can do this." And I found that very important.

And I also found that that was really, it was probably coming from the most low point of my life when a lot of things just were not going right. And then I was like well, "I mean, I could be depressed. and I'll give it like a little, you know, I'll give it about a week to be depressed and cry and go to therapy and you know, go to the beach or just, you know, break things," and, and I did. But it was one of those, it was it was truly a powerful moment where I was just like, I have to say, I have to, I have to own up to the fact that I can either allow other people to lead my life, or I live my life in that in the moment and just say, just say, "I got it. I can do this, I can, I can allow myself to do this." And that's such a muscle that I still practice. When I see myself going, "Ah, I can't." And I'm like, "Hmm. Why?" I mean, you know, sometimes I'm not going to get everything.

Bonnie Gillespie

What!?!?

Tanya Perez

I get that. I know. And sometimes, you know, of course, you know, it's like you know there's... I'm in New York and auditioning and you know and then, you know, I don't get a role and I'm just like, "That's okay, because I, I'm going to be doing this thing until I do get the role that I want on that show," and still do the work but I don't feel beholden to it. I don't feel beholden to my career and I don't feel beholden to the old ideas of what, what it means to be like coming to New York and auditioning and, you know. And then you, you get this track and this track and

this. And there's, and I felt like there was so much tight stress around it. So now I'm like, "Okay. All right."

Bonnie Gillespie

What made that shift? From that tightness and that stress around it – "it" being career, the pursuit, the rules of it all within you know with the systems in place. What made that shift from that tightness to this lightness that is so much more aligned with just who you are as a person? Can you pinpoint a moment or a series of events, or a time when things just just dropped in for you and became like, "No, it doesn't have to be this way that I always thought it had to be?"

Tanya Perez

I want to go back to... when we, when, when I did "Itty P and Model T".

Bonnie Gillespie

Oh, yeah!

Tanya Perez

It was when I was just like, I mean I, I had, I came back for a job and I got, you know, I basically was booked on it and then didn't get it and then I was just like, "I don't know what I'm going to do with my life." And I started just playing on, you know, playing these, like I was like, this is a silly idea let's just do this. Got a pizza, my friend came over. My friend Darren came over and we were just goofing around. And I was just like this is, this feels fun, this feels good. And then, you know, like a year or two later we were creating a webseries, and that, you know, and to see, you know, how, you know, to manifest something. And I want to say that, you know, I've always been a self-creator. Like I did this in college. I created a whole thing in college where we did this crazy show. I did this when I was five, when we were doing, you know, make my sister do things, just like, "I don't want to do it," and I'm like, "No, we're gonna do the whole Muppet book, like script. I have it here, let's do it."

Bonnie Gillespie

Such a producer: "Get in your place. Places! C'mon! Curtain up! Let's go!"

Tanya Perez

I know, right? Yeah, yeah. Totally.

Bonnie Gillespie

"Get that diva out of her trailer! Come on!"

Tanya Perez

I know, even now I was... already like, I put I... there was something for like a photo, and I was like, "We're gonna, we're recreating this photo," like we were five and now we're like, "We're gonna go ahead and do this; we're gonna get the outfits." They're like, "Oh, my god."

Bonnie Gillespie

Perfect. So, I want to hit on this that you're, it's something that you shared with me, in here which is, you know, "taking hard shit and making it into something truly delicious. My art is made from the hard-earned life I live so I create from that." Can you speak a little bit about how you turn your pain into art that is not only fun to create, but meaningful for others to consume? Because I think so often, we, we know as artists we pull from our life's harder experiences, but you actually don't just pull from them, you, you mine them for what your art needs to be. And I'd love it if you could talk about that process a little bit.

Tanya Perez

Yeah, I mean, I, I'll talk about one project that I was asked to do, which was the, was a play called "Surge", which, it's become one of my favorite pieces. And it's a, it's a, it's a short, one-act, but the producers from the Latinas in Media in Atlanta, asked me like, "Do you have any comedies?" And I was like, "Oh yeah, 'cause I do comedy and I've been doing short form comedy online for a little bit and I said, "You know what, let me go ahead and write you something." And that is the most dramatic piece; it's about a couple going through divorce in the middle of a hurricane. Like the, the, the walls are being, like, torn apart, so it came... like it came instantly.

And I was like, this is, this is a source of a lot of things I had personally going on and relationships and, and I was, and it just, both characters were specific, and there were also, like I felt like multiple lives of me and other people. And when I wrote it, I wrote it probably like in an afternoon. And when I sent it off, I was like, "I know you wanted a comedy but here's this," and they were like, "Oh my God, this, um, you wrote to me," like, the director, she's like, "I feel like you wrote me." The actress who stepped in was like, "This, I understand this, this is, I understand this character." And, um, and I felt like that was when I... I felt like I, that's when I grew up as a writer and as a creative, a little bit because I was like, "Oh no, they wanted comedy. They wanted something really nice and light, but I was like, 'No, I'm always, I'm always a little dark, all my comedies are a little weird and dark'," and this was just an extension of that.

So, I felt like that was when I really was like, okay, I, I know I've lived a personal life, that I just kept under the hood for so long. And bits of it comes out like you know "Peep Show" is a little like being a clown but it's you know it's also talking about like sex workers, and, and how to make that a possibility and a viable, you know, source of income for for that piece. But I was just like, you know, my life, I've had a very, very rich life and being specific.... The more specific I am when I'm creating, the more it resonates.

Bonnie Gillespie

Absolutely. It is, I think especially starting out, we say, "Well let me stay as general and as broadly appealing as possible so that there's no way anybody can reject to how I'm showing

up." And then the lesson we learned over time is, "The more narrowly specific I am, the more, yes, I'm alienating people who don't get it, but the more the people who get it go I SO get it," and we just have to trust that that is in fact how it works.

Tanya Perez

Yeah, I mean, right now I in this year, I've been approached with a production company. So, I'm in development, with a television show based out of my life. And that's, you know, I was like, "My life's not that interesting."

Bonnie Gillespie

Okay.

Tanya Perez

I know. Like, here she comes, she's like, "Oh no, you can't do that." The other one's like, "No!"

Bonnie Gillespie

So, who are these? Can you call them out a little bit? Because I think everybody has that, and just that you turn it into like seriously puppet show, like, is amazing.

Tanya Perez

I know right? This is the naysayer. And, you know, this is my cheerleader right here. So, this one will do literally, it was like. But, but now I have a shorthand I'm just like, "No!" And they go away. They're like, "Oh, I'm gonna go have a margarita on the beach right now."

Bonnie Gillespie

Right, right. It's when it's when that naysayer gets a little attention and knows, "Oh my god, I got, I got her. I can actually get her to spin out that," then, what are your muscles for that? Like, how do you how do you strengthen the ability to say, "No! Go have your margaritas. Leave me alone," without suppressing it? Because I think when we just try not to hear the negative in our own self-talk, we actually make it worse because it just gets louder and thrashier and it shows up in other places in our lives. So, what's the balance there?

Tanya Perez

Yeah you, I mean you bring up a very good point. Because it is something that if you ignore it, sometimes it gets louder. And I, and I now know that of myself. I couldn't have. I couldn't have done that ten years ago. Ten years ago, I would just get upset and you know and you know go to, you know, drink or, you know it try to ignore it or suppress it. But I think you know, the, the easiest answer is, when I know I'm like, I'm, I'm not in my best mindset, I have to stop. Like, I have to physically just go... I stop in my tracks, I'm in, wherever I'm at, I'm like, I'm feeling it, and the anxiety literally starts to tingle on my face.

So I go, "Okay, what do I need to do right now? Do I need to eat?" I have to take an inventory. "Do I need to eat? Do I need to call someone? Is this something that is really serious?" And it's, you know, and I have to go through like is this PTSD? Is this something that can be solved by just, you know, getting a snack or taking a bath? You know, or you know even going in and, you know one of the reasons why I have... I keep doing the 100 days is, and I am not... at this point I'm just like, I keep it there, like on the background. And the things that I jump into are the deep dives, but I keep it there because I know I'm like, that holds me accountable because I have the tools. And I have, and I have tools in meditation and I have tools in the physicality as well, but I know that I'm like, if I'm going to go ahead and if I feel like I'm going to spin out, I now know I have all of these things to step into.

And that's how I just, and that's how I create in a positive way too, like if I'm, you know, as you can see like this, I have toys everywhere. And, and if I feel like I'm like, "Okay what... I'm not..". I'm feeling stagnant or if I'm having a problem with a, with a script, I'm just like, "I need to get up, I need to move. I gotta get in my body. I gotta go ahead and, you know, I got to play with a toy. I got I got a ball. Let me go ahead and use that." And, you know some people like to go to sleep; I like to be activated. So that's the same thing for me it's like when I feel like it's like I'm in a low point or I'm getting low. I have so many tools.

Bonnie Gillespie

I love what you're saying about the self-awareness part of that, because I think it's, it's really easy for us to, I obviously can't speak for everyone, but in general it's easy for us to get into a place of, "Yeah, but push through." That whole hustle culture mentality of, "No, work harder. Make this work. No, you don't get a nap until after you've finished this scene," or, you know, whatever is blocking you at the moment and the fact that you are able to go, "Let me check in with myself. What do I need?" and then provide that... it's radical in some ways and it fucking shouldn't be.

Tanya Perez

Mm hmm. Yeah, I mean, you know being a Latinx creative and learning to say, "Oh, no, no, I'm going to take care of myself and be at the pace that I need to be at, that's going to feel safe for me, that's going to feel exploratory and creative for me"? That is radical, that is revolutionary. And that's what's gonna, that's what's gonna make me go ahead and build my own table.

Bonnie Gillespie

Tanya, I love you. What, what would your comments be... we'll close up on this... on just the the mission, the goal of Creating the Hollywood We Want? Because that's... as we're coming together for this conversation, a real focus on leadership and and creating the stories that that not only need to be told, but that have almost -- sometimes never -- been told .What what does having those hard conversations look like? What does the Hollywood that you envision for -- decades from now and look back on and go "I did that I'm a part of that" -- what, what is that to you?

Tanya Perez

I think the more we get messy, the more that we say, engage, engage in true leadership, which is, you might not know what that is. And if you're being called to it, then try it, try it on. And I think just trying on everything, like, "What hat do I feel like I need to try on? Not because somebody is telling me to do it, it's because I'm feeling it. And I may question it. But let me just try it." And I think that will motivate the ball rolling. Because, I mean, we're, that, I mean, in some ways we're all trying, you know, at life. We're all trying at life but if you if you go ahead and be like, "Well, I'm gonna, I'm gonna wait." And, you know, maybe wait and watch. But don't wait and check out.

Bonnie Gillespie

But you're not waiting for permission, you're waiting to catch a wave.

Tanya Perez

Right, yeah 'cause I'm for me, I'm like I'm a longtime lurker. But I'm also, because I'm like I'm looking, I'm watching, I'm observing, which is very different from being able to go ahead and say, "Ah, that's not for me right now I'm just gonna stop it. But maybe, I don't know or I'm scared," and those are all valid. All those feelings are valid, but then it's then you have to go ahead and say, okay, why are those feelings coming up? But I'm like, you know, for me, I'm always jumping in, when I feel impulsed to do something, and then also know that the expectations don't need to be, you know, like, you know, superstar goals. They need to be, "Oh, I wanted to try that. And this worked, and this didn't."

Bonnie Gillespie

The recalibrating of it all.

Tanya Perez

Yeah.

Bonnie Gillespie

Without getting obsessed with, "is this working" while you're in it. It's more try it and then look and go, "Okay, less like this more like that."

Tanya Perez

Yeah, yeah. I mean there's, you know, there's a whole... I mean it's ultimately like, you know, it's like it's, it's feeling like, "How do I love myself? How do I get involved with that? How do I love people, even if I don't know them, how do I how do I share that love?" I'm like, ahh... I got a little goobery! Yay.

Bonnie Gillespie

So goobery! I love it. Can you tell me how people can share love with you, and stay in touch with you, and stalk you, and lurk, and follow your life?

Tanya Perez

Yes, Instagram is my jam. So, I'm at @TanyaPerezRulez with a Z. And my Twitter's there too but I'm always, I'm loving, I'm loving the visual of Instagram.

Bonnie Gillespie

I love you, Tanya.

Tanya Perez

I love you too. Oh, my goodness.

Bonnie Gillespie

We're doing it! We're doin' it!

Tanya Perez

Thank you. Thank you so much.