

Ep:1

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Featuring: Cliff Chamberlain, Glenn Davis, Audrey Francis, Caroline Neff, Jeff Perry

JEFF PERRY: For the first time in my life, I don't know what's going on.

AUDREY FRANCIS: From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois.

JP: And he says, "Aah, now you're getting somewhere."

AF: This is HALF HOUR.

AF: Are we starting?

CLIFF CHAMBERLAIN: We're starting!

AF: Oh!

CC: Let's do this!

AF: Hi, everyone.

CAROLINE NEFF: It's good to see your faces.

CC: Good to see you all, too.

GLENN DAVIS: Same.

AF: So, we're going to record an intro.

GD: Wait, so who's leading this thing?

CC: I think Caroline is, right?

AF: Awesome. Good job, Caroline.

CN: That is a great deal of pressure.

GD: I thought it was Caroline.

CN: Okay, I'm already sweating. Um-

CC: Nobody can see your sweat. You can't hear sweat. So, it's all good.

CN: You don't know how hard I sweat. Um, okay! My name is Caroline Neff. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf Theatre Company since 2016, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. And my favorite food is eggs.

AF: Ew.

CC: Wow.

AF: True and gross, gross and true. All right, this is Audrey Francis. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf since 2017. And my favorite food is French fries and ice cream.

CN: Together?

AF: Or not.

CN: Separate?

AF: Both. You give me one, I'll take it. You give me both, I'll take 'em. Did I say my pronouns? She/ her/hers.

CN: Thank you.

GD: This is Glenn Davis, and I had to actually look it up when I became an ensemble member. It was May of 2017. My pronouns are he/him/his. And yeah, was that it?

CN & CC: Favorite food.

GD: My favorite food is cauliflower.

CC: Whoa!

AF: I don't believe you.

CN: That's a real surprise. That's a real surprise.

AF: Yeah.

CC: Cauliflower!

CN: But it's very very versatile. I will say.

AF: Well, it's weird. I've just never seen you eat cauliflower.

CC: Oh my, God. I've never seen anyone eat cauliflower.

AF: Wait, Cliff. How do you say cauliflower?

CC: Oh God, cauliflower (*call-ee-flower*).

AF: (*imitating CC*) Cauliflower.

CC: Is that right? I'm from California.

AF: I'm from Colorado, so I don't really know. Um, okay, Cliff.

CC: My name is Cliff Chamberlain. He/him/his. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf Theatre Company since 2018. And my favorite food is dark chocolate, specifically, thin, dark chocolate covered pretzels.

GD: Nice! And Cliff, where are you?

CC: I'm in Los Angeles right now. I was just in New York a couple weeks ago. We were in previews along with Caroline for THE MINUTES and got out of there two weeks ago and now I'm back in Los Angeles.

CN: Glenn, where are you?

GD: I am in Chicago. I was in LA and raced back to Chicago when the sky started falling.

CN: Audrey?

AF: Yeah, I'm in Chicago--River North neighborhood, in my closet.

CN: And I'm in New Jersey. I'm in Springfield, New Jersey with a very, very dear friend. So I would love to just talk a little bit about how this brainchild came to be.

CC: I've always thought that because at Steppenwolf, we have this ensemble of artists that there are so many people whose stories are worth hearing and some of the podcasts that I really like are interview style podcast, one-on-one, uh, interviews that give people a chance to have longer conversations than you might hear in either a five minutes you know, television appearance or print interview. And I know that the four of us have been talking about this type of idea, a podcast, for--it's got to be a year right along with Billy Petersen I know had talked about it before. And Jeff Perry, who is our first guest has sort of been talking about a podcast for a long time. So the fact that it's happening now in the middle of this wild time in the world, I find to be it's a nice thing to kind of hold on to while everything else is crumbling outside just--just the fact that I get to talk to you three is kind of a gift so.

AF: Same. We're also all in a very precarious moment right now like, like, we're these four newer ensemble members who all just lost--

CN: Our job?

AF: Yeah, we lost our livelihood.

CC: Yeah.

CN: All four of us, yeah.

AF: So hearing that conversation with Jeff made me feel less alone and less scared. And also, reminded me, like, that it's a marathon.

CN: That's awesome! And our show's called HALF HOUR. But what is--what is half hour to you?

GD: Half hour is the time in which you need to be at the theater before the show starts, so if your show starts at 7:30, then you have to be there at 7:00pm. I think it's going to come as a

huge surprise for some people that we only have to be there 30 minutes before they do. Many times I'm walking into the theater, I might grab a drink, alcoholic usually, before the show, and then I'm walking through the bar, going to the dressing room, and some person who knows me goes, "Wait, you you're just getting here," and I'm like, "Yeah." They're like, "Oh, you haven't been like getting ready, like, for the last three hours?" People think that it takes like seven hours for us to get into character.

CN: I also love that it's like it isn't--it's the first time--you see these people six days a week, but yet it always feels like a really fresh, like, walking into a dressing room at half hour and being like, "How was your day?"

GD: Yeah.

CN: Like, it's such a special ritual for me. I always get there an hour before because I'm--I'm anxiety.

AF: Well you're also a professional. You like actually warm up and shit.

CN: I do.

GD: Yeah, Audrey gets to half hour half hour after half hour.

CN: She's actually like, "Can my half hour be 10, including fight call?"

AF: Yep. I have asked that before. That is a true story. I've also asked to leave the show early. Like do I have to do curtain call?

CN: Yeah, get out of there. Um, and who's our--who's our first guest? Our first guest is Jeff Perry, who's one of the founding members of Steppenwolf Theatre Company and Cliff? Your interview with him is amazing. He's such a, like, wealth of information and joy and kindness. How'd it go?

GD: And he is the best storyteller, too.

CN: So good!

GD: I could hear him tell stories all day.

AF: And also just like, organically and involuntarily infuses hope into everything that he says.

CN: I cried twice in the first 10 minutes.

AF: So did I!

CN: I really did. It just felt so good.

CC: Well, it was awesome. I mean, I, I've had, you know, multiple conversations with Jeff over the years, but to have like, selfishly to have a one-on-one time with him was--he's just so smart. He's really honest. He sort of said a few things that really blew my mind about admitting to some of his struggles and, and also how he kind of came out of those things is really, really cool. And he's such a warm, nice person.

GD: Nice.

CN: I love that. And one of the things that as we've sort of been thinking about future episodes that's really exciting me is that I'm realizing how many ensemble members I don't know terribly well. I mean, I know them and I know their reputation and I know their work, but I would be lying if I said I knew them as human beings, and so to have that opportunity--not only to talk to my friends, but to talk to the people that I don't know very well. Yeah, I'm really excited about--alright. Shall we get to the interview?

AF: Okay!

GD: Let's do it.

CC: I think so. I think everyone's going to really enjoy it. I mean, I think it's definitely time to head to the dressing room and see what Jeff has to say.

CN: I, for one, am dying to hear it again.

LAURA GLENN: Half hour to top of show, please. Half hour please. Top of show--half hour.

CC: Jeff, it's so good to talk to you.

JP: Buddy! Oh my god.

CC: And I'm very grateful and happy that you are the first person to sign in on the half hour board. So--

JP: Well, it's really exciting, man, because you and I and Glenn and Caroline and Audrey and so many--and Billy Petersen, so many people have kicked, you know, this idea around.

CC: It took a pandemic.

JP: And it took a pandemic for us to get off our ideas and do something, but--

CC: You know that--it really is like, what do you do when you can't do the thing that we do, which is perform on stage with a group of people.

JP: Yeah.

CC: And luckily, we have at least this chance to connect one-on-one and then hopefully with more people who might be listening in so, yeah. No matter what I think everyone's going to be trying to find the good in the situation, right?

JP: Yeah, for sure. For sure.

CC: So let me ask you something. Let me ask you what is your--when you get to the theater for half hour, what do you when half hour is called? What's your go to? What do you do at half hour? Are you someone who gets dressed in your costume right away? What are your habits and rituals at the half hour mark?

JP: Um, I usually--except like month, you know, nine of August: Osage (*AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY*) or something, um, where it's a 3 hour and 20 minute show and on two show days, you know, you're just thinking that your nervous system can somehow pretend you haven't done this, you know, 1000 times. And that it hasn't been just a couple hours since you last went through the cathartic story, you know? But, in a big generalized sense, man, from--I bet high school plays on, Cliff. I bet I get there a bit before half hour because there's always kind of nerves and wanting to make sure I'm there. And I'm a big list maker and note taker. So, I'll often have little things I jotted to myself from the night before, or the week before, or a month ago, or this or that and kind of, kind of look at, kind of look at that.

CC: It's amazing that you still get nervous for--I mean, I know that I find that to be true for actors of all ages. Yeah, but, I find--I still find it fascinating that, and I actually find myself getting more nervous to do plays the older I get.

JP: Uh-huh, yeah, that's interesting. I, I must say, in a general way, there's exceptions on any given day, but, but I--I'm getting better with myself as the decades roll on, man. And, calmer in a way. I'm in my early 30s, it might have been Frank Galati's adaptation and direction of Faulkner's *AS I LAY DYING*. I'm not sure. I can't quite remember the Steppenwolf play. But--

CC: Well, you've done 40 of them. So--

JP: Oh, yeah. Give me a pass on that. But, but it was--it was certainly before late '87, early '88 when I traded zip codes for Los Angeles to return to Chicago a lot, but kind of, in a way traded zip codes.

CC: Yeah.

JP: And, and Austin Pendleton was around. We weren't in the same play. And it could have been he was audience at the moment, or this or that. I feel like we're in previews of whatever I was in. And he's always been a mentor and a buddy and a confidant and I said, "Austin, I'm freaking out, man. I've loved doing this since I was about 14 or 15. And, and for the first time in my life, I don't know what's going on. I don't--I don't have confidence. I don't know if I'm going to remember where I go. I don't know if I'm going to remember my lines. I don't know the most basic things. I don't know this. I don't know that. I don't know that." Austin patiently listens to me, says, "Jeff, what phrase are you using quite a bit?" "I don't know." And he says, "Aah, now you're getting somewhere." I, you know, I bit my tongue. Or I literally said, "Eff you, man! I got a preview tonight, I am telling you that I'm having a nervous break--a nervous breakdown." And, and, but what I came to love and appreciate was a much more overarching, you know, kind of the artistic path lesson. It's probably really common, Cliff, for us actors, for us humans, to have some portion of ourselves intent on "I'm going to be the I'm going to be the best student. I'm going to have the final solution. I'm going to have the best solution. I must have the plan. I must. I must be able to execute this and that." Versus "Wait, wait, what's Austin saying? What's he saying? I think he's saying I don't know, is much more fertile territory than I know--

CC: Yeah.

JP: --or pretending that I know." You know, and it's kind of the control freak versus the explorer,--

CC: Yeah.

JP: --if those words make sense.

CC: They do.

JP: And, and the more that Tina Landau has entered my life, the more that side of myself that always existed that loved the moment--the moment's accident, the present-tense unknowing, the more I let that become a greater and greater percentage of how I wanted to work and how I wanted to live, in a sense, the more fun it became. And the calmer I became.

CC: You--you talked about being a teenager. You are from Highland Park,--

JP: Yes.

CC: --Illinois. You were born in the 50s.

JP: Yes. 50--1955.

CC: 1955. August 16th .

JP: Yes, sir.

CC: Your mom--your--your dad was a teacher?

JP: Yes, he was an English teacher at our local high school. My mom was a stay at home mom at certain years, a elementary school secretary in in other years. I have two sisters who are in heaven.

CC: Okay.

JP: The some sort of heaven that I believe in being a very lapsed--being a very lapsed Presbyterian. And--

CC: Sure. And what was--what was that life? What was your childhood like? And how did it get to theater?

JP: Somewhere at the end of grade school, Cliff, or the beginning of middle school, my eldest sister Jo saw that there was a local audition for the American Conservatory Theatre's residency, I believe, doing two different plays, CHARLEY'S AUNT and Pirandello's SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR. And they needed two people my age, a boy and a girl, to play the son and daughter in Pirandello's play. And my sister took me by the hand, we lived about a block from one of the Ravinia Festival entrances.

CC: Uh-huh.

And--and I auditioned for this thing. They had me do some kind of physical improv. It had something to do with a kind of reactive moment of you've just been scared by something and you're looking around. That's kind of all I remember. And then I remember one task in the play was falling off a ladder and trusting you'd be caught by one of the other actors. I don't know if two people auditioned or if I was the only one, but I got the part.

CC: Nice!

JP: And, and I loved doing that that summer. And apropos of--of not much else, then wonderful! You never know where life makes its connections. Austin Pendleton was a member of that company. He wasn't in that production. He was in CHARLEY'S AUNT with actors like René Auberjonois, and others, but he was a member of the American Conservatory Theater Company at that time. And then, within a year or two, our eighth grade English teacher adapted a Herman Wouk novel, or a portion of it, and created a school--created a play--created a play of sorts. I can't remember its duration. It might have only been 30/40 minutes long. And I got a big part, and I remember it feeling so comfortable and fun to do that. And to get some, you know, to get positive feedback from classmates, and especially to get the attention of girls, and that proved giant.

CC: Were any of the other folk part of that class or did you meet some?

JP: So I met Gary Sinise as sophomores in high school--

CC: Okay.

JP:--and this tremendously charismatic, wonderful formative teacher of English and drama.

CC: So important.

JP: Barb--yep. Barbara June Greener-Patterson, and and Gary and I are 15, I guess, and she's roaming the halls, enlisting people to come audition for that year's musical WEST SIDE STORY.

CC: So you were buddies before?

JP: No, oh, no. We met we met through that.

CC: Okay.

JP: We met through that. I would later, or almost immediately, during the process--after the process, he and I being unwilling to believe that those four performances were over and playing this lousy little tape recorded reel to reel, you know, audio of the school play--the school musical. Uh, you know, that Gary and I were rescued from academic mediocrity, at least, failure probably and kind of shown something that we absolutely adored.

LG: 15 minutes, please! 15 minutes, top of show. 15!

CC: You have three huge legacies in my mind: Steppenwolf--being one of the three founders of Steppenwolf, the School at Steppenwolf, right, which is basically your brainchild, right?

JP: I got the people on the phone, first, the passionate educators amongst us the Anna Shapiros, the Martha Lavey, the Sheldon Patinkin and it quickly became Amy, and K. Todd and others. Yeah.

CC: Well, I'm a graduate of the School at Steppenwolf. Audrey Francis and I were both in the same class, 2004, and it changed my life. So, thank you for that.

JP: Oh, man.

CC: And then I know you did NASH BRIDGES and have done a ton of TV, but SCANDAL was a really big deal for you, too, right? And--

JP: Totally, yes.

CC: What is that like to--here you are you've created Steppenwolf. You've started Steppenwolf. You've had all sorts of success with Steppenwolf. You've gone to LA. You've come back to do plays. And then you get SCANDAL, and then SCANDAL takes off. What is that ride like as someone who books that job--I don't know were you in your 40s or 50s when you booked that? But--

JP: Yeah, I mean that was 12--I'm 64. That was 12 years ago--52. 52.

CC: What's it like to take that ride at 52 as opposed to, you know, the ride that you were on early on for Steppenwolf or NASH BRIDGES. What's it like having a show like that at 52?

JP: It--it's--can we be R-rated?

CC: Fuck, yeah.

JP: Okay. It's fucking heaven. It's heavenly. It's, like, the best. It was like a seven year drink of the most heavenly water meets flaming shots of tequila. And, so when everyone quite naturally through some-- through a combination of simple curiosity, growth, sometimes life choices of children, they start to individually, like a band where its members start to go, "I need to do an album on my own." And, you know, "I need to do this and that."

CC: Yeah.

JP: I was like the last of the originals clinging to you know, the row--the little--the little sail boats you know, masts, or something.

CC: You're Ringo Starr, just like wait, Paul!

JP: Don't, don't, don't, don't! Wait!

CC: What are we doing?

JP: Wait, what are you doing? What are you doing?

CC: We got a good thing going here.

JP: We got it. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. And, and so, uh, it was BALM IN GILEAD, whatever that was, man, the New York version of that '83/'84.

CC: I've seen that video. It's amazing.

JP: Laurie Metcalf and I had little tiny Zoe and--

CC: Zoe Perry, your daughter, right?

JP: Yeah. And Laurie and I--Laurie and I were together about five years. I don't know how long the literal, you know, marriage license was. But we knew at that point that we were going to separate, and going to divorce. And we were confused and felt failure about it and this and that, but never hatred, thank God, and we have a great relationship now and have for years and years and years. But, I thought, "Okay, I'm--" Laurie got the Roseanne Barr TV show.

CC: Yep.

JP: And everyone else had felt some TV or film work, pretty much, by that time, and some non-Steppenwolf theater work.

CC: Uh-huh.

JP: And I had a little, but also I thought my geography of more solo exploration was going to be New York.

CC: Ah.

JP: And when Laurie got posted to Los Angeles, and it was so quickly successful, that TV show. It decided my geography and because we were very committed to being in the same town with her, with Zoe, our daughter, and there were times--there were times, man in--it often felt to me, Cliff, like we had extended our adolescence as long as we possibly could, and our collaborative life as long as we could. I would come to know in further decades that, oh no, thank God there will be more chapters of that collaborative life.

CC: Yeah.

JP: But, at the time, I felt like maybe that was it.

CC: Yeah.

JP: That seven to nine year period of this obsessive tribe, you know?

CC: Yeah. Yeah.

JP: And then there were many times in LA, where it just felt like, shit, man, everybody 7 or 10 years ago, my age already got through the hard crap, or even gave up the profession, but whatever, if they were still at it, they already had momentum. Okay. And I'm auditioning for the first time in years and years and years.

CC: Yeah. And that is such a mind trip to where I know you've had this giant success and you know, you've built this thing and now you're--you make a switch and now you're auditioning again. It is a--

JP: Yeah.

CC: Yeah.

JP: And it could be the very bottom of--what felt like the bottom of the potato chip bag. You know, man?

CC: Sure.

JP: I'm either getting nothing, or getting some tiny thing that you just feel--

CC: like a lot of grease.

JP: God dang, man. Yeah, tiny little crumbs and grease. And, ah, and it also--because Laurie's success or John Malkovich's success or Joan Allen's success. You know, it's interesting, Cliff, I ended up in therapy for the first time in my life. Part of it was something pretty predictable and I think common for people in their 30s.

CC: Yeah.

JP: You know, a lot of stuff that they have swept under the rug comes in raging at them.

CC: Oh, yeah.

JP: Um but the thing that was most present for the actor psyche in me was, I'm jealous.

CC: Oh, gosh.

JP: I am feeling envy. It's the worst fucking feeling in the world. I have never felt this. I have only felt happy for my friends and I can't. This is horrible.

CC: Yeah.

JP: This this amount of comparison and self-esteem problem and everything that jealousy is, um, was hideous and it sent me to a shrink who I ended up quite adoring and--

CC: And it helped? And you--

JP: It did! It did! It did. It kind of--in an on again--mostly on again, a little bit off again depending on--for about five years and it, uh, and life and work and that therapy and you know a lot of things help me out--have helped me out of that.

CC: If I'm ever talking to anyone who's just starting out, that is the thing that I try to get people to get past as quickly as possible because it just burns you up and I've seen much better actors than me get burned up by that.

JP: Yeah.

CC: What about you when you're--if you had one--and talking about the school, the School at Steppenwolf--what's the one piece of advice--like the tried and true piece of advice that you give to students on their, you know, first or last days?

JP: Yeah, you know, I'm being reminded of something that feels like a kind of core life lesson or value or something, Cliff. Scandal buddy, Tony Goldwyn--actor, director, producer. He reached out a couple days ago and said, "Jeff, I got an idea. You love teaching. I never have taught. But what do you think about you and I trying to Zoom some sort of teleconference co-teaching?" I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Then we started talking about it. And he said, "You know, um, one of the core things, Jeff, that that has taken me decades and decades and decades to get better at?" "What, Tony? What?" And he said, "Well, was--it's being open to study, study,

study with an explorer's heart, with an improvisatory heart; rather than, I must come to an executable conclusion.

CC: Right.

JP: He said, "I felt that so much more than--in any other part of my life--in this really demanding seven hour THE INHERITANCE by Matthew Lopez.

CC: Yeah

JP: He was on Broadway these last months doing it and he said, "Wouldn't that be a core beautiful thing to impart?" And I shared with him what I just shared with you, Cliff, the Austin Pendleton thing.

CC: Yeah!

JP: The Austin Pendleton moment with me and him from, you know, from 15 years prior, 20 years prior, whatever. And--

CC: I mean, isn't another execution--is death?

JP: Well, yeah. And it's like conclusion.

CC: Yeah.

JP: Wait, conclusion is concluded. Conclusion is an ending. Conclusion is dead.

LG: 5 minutes. This is your 5 minute call. 5 minutes.

CC: Well, I'm going to hit you with a little lightning round, okay? These are 10 questions. We're going to end the HALF HOUR podcast with every episode and you're going to be our first 10--10 question lightning round--

JP: Guinea pig!

CC: --participant. Ready?

JP: Guinea pig.

CC: Enter it with an explorer's heart, as you have been this whole conversation. Alright, ready? Just rapid fire, lightning round. What is the favorite Steppenwolf production that you've ever seen?

JP: THE GLASS MENAGERIE.

CC: Toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

JP: Uh, separating from Randy Arney and helping to replace him in a way.

CC: Hmm. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

JP: I stole one of those big, big banners that we put on the street, bud--

CC: Yeah.

JP: --of me as a transvestite in BALM IN GILEAD.

CC: Oh, I love that picture!

JP: Yeah, that's it!

CC: Oh, that's awesome! Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing in it or not.

JP: John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson. I'm about 18 years old. They're in their 80s. They're doing Pinter's NO MAN'S LAND in London. We're on the one family trip where we left the confines of the US. And I thought, "Oh my god. Wait, wait, wait, you mean if you can walk, and you can remember lines, you can do this 'til you die?"

CC: What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

JP: Ah. Oh, I'm in such good denial about this. I can't--oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck. Go to another one, maybe.

CC: Okay. What's the last song that you listened to?

JP: Um, probably on Sirius XM, you know, like the 70s channel. The Carpenters. We've Only Just Begun.

CC: Fantastic. Perfect for the first episode of HALF HOUR. Who's your favorite writer?

JP: Steinbeck.

CC: What's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

JP: Trattoria Gianni's.

CC: Fantastic. What animal do you most identify with?

JP: Labrador.

CC: Nice. Uh, you got an answer for the job that--

JP: The job that broke my heart? Yeah. Shit, yeah. Um, it must be in that jealousy land somewhere.

CC: Oh, leave it there. We can leave it there. We can leave it in jealous land.

JP: Yeah, I got 9 out of 10.

CC: Fuck it. Alright, last one, buddy. If you were a character in a play,--

JP: Yeah.

CC: --what would your character's description be?

JP: I would steal some of John Steinbeck's description of the character I got to play in *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*--Noah Joad. "He was a stranger to the world, but he was not lonely."

LG: Places, please! Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please!

CN: And that's it for this episode of *HALF HOUR*, our very first, brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

CC: Thanks for listening. And thanks again to our guest this week, Jeff Perry.

AF: *HALF HOUR* is produced by Patrick Zakem, recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

GD: The music for *HALF HOUR* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen, today's Stage Manager was Laura D. Glenn.

CN: Special thanks to Erin Cook, Brenna Barborika, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry--

AF: --and all the folks at Steppenwolf.

GD: 'Til next time, this is Glenn Davis.

CN: I'm Caroline Neff.

AF: Audrey Francis.

CC: And I'm Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places.

CC: What do you say to someone who's about to go onstage?

CN: Don't fuck this up for me. I stole that from Tracy Letts. That's what Tracy Letts tells you right before you go on stage to do one of his own plays.