

Ep: 4 – William Petersen: “Cast Me or Not”

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Featuring: Glenn Davis and William Petersen, with Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis, Caroline Neff, and Mary Hungerford.

William Petersen:

The most powerful word you have as an actor in your life is “no.”

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

William Petersen:

The thing is, that we’re all on some kind of journey, and it’s usually our own journey.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*.

Cliff Chamberlain:

My name is Cliff Chamberlain.

Glenn Davis:

This is Glenn Davis.

Caroline Neff:

This is Caroline Neff.

Audrey Francis:

And this is Audrey Francis.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Ah, there's no place that I would rather be than with you three at *Half Hour*.

Caroline Neff:

Same!

Glenn Davis:

What’s up fam?

Audrey Francis:

Yeah, that could be a song.

Cliff Chamberlain:

[*Singing*] There's no place I'd rather be than with you three at *Half Hour*.

Audrey Francis:

[Sing-song] Bing bang boom.

Caroline Neff:

I feel like Cliff has been watching a lot of Disney movies. [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

Oh, yeah. We had *Frozen Two* on the other day. We're actually going back to some of the classics. We watched—we're like halfway through *Funny Girl*. Oh, yeah, a little Barbra Streisand.

Audrey Francis:

Is that Disney or...? Is that Disney?

Cliff Chamberlain:

No, but it was what we call segue. [Laughter] Or a pivot. I quickly pivoted away from Disney into that. Glenn, what a conversation. There's a segue to Glenn and Billy Petersen, who—Glenn, I loved your conversation with him, man. I mean, like, careers like his don't seem real. Right?

Audrey Francis:

Right.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah, yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

How do you wind up in Idaho, and then an executive producer on CSI? You do that if your name is Billy Petersen.

Glenn Davis:

What I learned from Billy in this conversation is that very early on, he figured out something about himself. And that was: he didn't want to do anything that he didn't like, or he didn't want to do. So, he would just say, "No." So, he said, "No," a lot. And that's how he sort of ended up where he's at. And I think that as actors, we're sort of programmed to say "yes" to everything, and we just sort of go "Oh, someone's offering me something or someone wants me to audition for something?" And we just go "Yeah." We don't—we sort of don't even think about whether we want to do it or not. And Billy, that's sort of foremost in his mind. "Am I going to be happy doing this thing?" Whether it's a huge movie, a huge play, a TV show, and he just said "No," a lot. And that's how he sort of ended up where he's at.

Caroline Neff:

Well, and even though he's been in LA for a number of years, he embodies to me everything that I learned about how to be a Chicago theatre practitioner. Which is like, it's really bold. It's really, like, fiercely connected. You know, and I loved him talking about when Steppenwolf and Remains, were all in DC at the Kennedy Center together, like, oh, this is so family and (for lack of a better word), I mean, it just to me really embodies what ensemble is, which is, "let's take care of each other and let's take care of the art before anything else." Which is just really inspiring and cool and was great to sort of be reminded of.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Absolutely.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

I was really struck by: one, I've never heard a podcast with so much fucking swagger in it between you and Billy Petersen.

Glenn Davis:

But at the same time, he's very humble. He's very cognizant of things had to break a certain way for him to get to where he's at. So he's just like, he's this great amalgamation of just chill, cool. And knowing himself, so.

Audrey Francis:

The other thing I really loved was like (similar to what you were just saying Caroline about like the idea of family), this idea of “Look, if I said I'm gonna do something with my family, I'm loyal to them. And I'm doing that.”

Cliff Chamberlain:

The one—one of the things that I thought was coolest about Billy (and I won't give it away) but his answer to “What type of animal do you associate with?” and the simplicity with which answered it, to me, is why we ask that question it. Like, he just he answered it, and it was a totally—I would have never in a million years thought of that animal. And it's so perfect. So—

Caroline Neff:

He also didn't have to think about it at all!

Cliff Chamberlain:

I know!

Caroline Neff:

Like, that's the question that he gets all the time on, like, press junkets. *[Laughter]*

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, I mean, I guess without further ado, we should sort of make sure that we take in as much swagger as we can. If you're low on swag, this is your chance to—

Caroline Neff:

Refill. *[Laughter]*

Stage Manager:

Company, this is your half hour call. This is half hour til the top of the show. Half hour. If you have not signed in, please do so at this time. Half hour, half hour.

Glenn Davis:

How are you doing?

William Petersen:

I'm good. I'm good. I'm growing the COVID beard and the COVID hair.

Glenn Davis:

It looks great. It's great to talk to you because you and I have talked over the years, but we've—you know, it's funny because we're friends and I've never had to look you up. I've never had to, like, do any research on a friend before. But like, I'm looking you up and something occurred to me: there's a strong argument to be made that you have been a star in film, TV and theatre.

William Petersen:

It's good to be king. *[Laughter]*

Glenn Davis:

Touché. When you look back, what, sort of, what part of your career were you, sort of, most proud of?

William Petersen:

You know, it was—I'd have to probably say it's the first 10 years. You know, it was—we started Remains Theatre in Chicago, and Steppenwolf had started, and the Organic Theatre was there, and the Goodman Theatre was young and flourishing. And, you know, that whole period from (I want to say) like 1977 to 1987, was just so exciting. And all of the people that I was meeting on a weekly basis, you know, all the actors—it was an amazing group of people that, that just descended into Chicago. And, you know, it was a thrill. Every night was a thrill because we were together, we were young, we thought we knew everything, and we didn't know most things. And so, we made all kinds of great mistakes, but then we recovered from them. *[Laughter]* And it was just—it was a thrilling sort of bipartisan effort on the part of hundreds of artists in Chicago, young and bold.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

But they all, you know, every—I've been, again, lucky. I—there's no part of any of what I've really done that I didn't like because when you're doing something that you love, there's not a bad really a bad workday.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah. I do want to talk to you about theater. I want to start there because a lot of people who are going to be listening to this are going to be thinking, "Oh, yeah, Billy Petersen's a member of Steppenwolf," and probably think that you've been a member for a long time. But it was actually in 2008 that you became a member. And preceding that you were, as you just mentioned, a member of Remains Theatre. How did that sort of—how did that happen? Because you were a founder as well, right?

William Petersen:

Yeah. Well, it was, I want to say, like 1979.

Glenn Davis:

Okay.

William Petersen:

And I had just gotten an Equity card at the Victory Gardens. I was meeting actors. I'd met a bunch of the guys from the Organic Theatre. And, and I was terrible auditioner, Glenn. You know, I just couldn't audition to save my life. I couldn't get cast anyways. I would go in and audition for shows. But I couldn't get cast. And we just—I just thought, you know, “Why—I know all these actors. We're all hanging out. We all take classes together, go drinking together, whatever. We played softball together. Why don't we do theatre together?” You know? And that was really the idea for Remains. Was that we just, you know, how much better are you when you play together every day than you are when you—? I would find myself getting cast in a play. And I would meet the actors, first day of rehearsal. I would get to know their last names about opening night. And then four, five, six weeks later, we were closing and I didn't really even know where they lived, you know? And then I might not see them again for years. And so, we just said, “Let's just do this together. Let's just be together, we'll figure it out.” We didn't—nobody had a dime. Nobody had a place to live. Nobody had a job. And we just said “Let's do this together.” You know? It's—and then it was very exciting because, at the time that we were doing that, Steppenwolf had already started up in Highland Park.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

And so, we became friends. And it was kind of great. I got to do shows over there and they would come and help us at Remains. John would come and direct a play, or guys would be in stuff, you know? And so we just kind of became—we were sort of like a sister company to Steppenwolf. You know, and we had Amy Morton and we had Gary Cole. And then those guys went off and joined Steppenwolf after Remains folded. We went on for a lot longer than we thought we were going to go on.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

You know? And at that point, I didn't really—I wasn't in a position to really commit to another theater or be part of another theater. And it was lovely in 2008, Martha and Amy talked to me and said, “Do you want a home?” I was like, “Yeah.” And I hadn't been on stage for like eight years because of the TV show. So, I was afraid I was never going to get back on stage. You know? There's that fear that if you don't do it for a while, you're never going to be able to do it.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

And so they offered me a seat at the table, and I jumped. *[Laughter]*

Glenn Davis:

That's great, man. Let's go back for a bit. You—so you were born in Chicago, right?

William Petersen:

Evanston.

Glenn Davis:

Evanston; you were born in Evanston. And but you grew up in Idaho.

William Petersen:

No, I didn't grow up in Idaho. But I did go out there and finish up my high school out there. I had—oh, it's a very—I had dropped out of high school for a while. I ended up in sort of a night school, high school situation. This was back in the, you know, 1970, '71. It was rock festivals everywhere, there was protests in the streets, there was, you know, the whole Vietnam thing. And I was—I just found it much more interesting to be out of school. *[Laughter]* But then I got to be 18, or something, and my brother was living out in Idaho and he said, "You know, you gotta finish up high school somehow. You know, what if you need a job someday, you know." And so, I went out and I lived with him. And became—and I was a huge sports nut. And the only reason that I wanted to be around school was to be able to be on the football team and the basketball team. So, I ended up being able to do that out there and finished up high school finally, with like, several D-minus-minuses on my report card. *[Laughter]* But I was able to play ball and that kept me in, and so at least I got a degree out there. And then I kicked around Idaho for a long period of time, which is really where I discovered the theatre.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah, you went to Idaho State, right?

William Petersen:

I went there for a year because my girlfriend, at the time, had been there. And so, I'd been down there to visit. And I'd met the guy who was head of the theatre department down there, and I was trying to play football for them. I was going to play football, but my grade point average was so bad that—it was like before they did red-shirting, but I was basically like a red shirt. Like, "You got to come here for six months and get your grades up."

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

"Because of your high school, you got to at least carry a C or something." And so, he put me in some theater classes just to like, just show up. He was like, "Just show up." I was in Stagecraft and Lighting Design and Voice and Diction, you know, stuff you could just show up and get an A. And I met all these people that were from the theatre department. I said, "Man, this is way better than the football team." You know. And they started letting me work backstage on stuff. And I didn't really intend to be an actor at all; I just liked being in the theater department.

Glenn Davis:

So, when they invited you to the theater department, it wasn't to act. You were just—

William Petersen:

No, they just wanted me to take classes so that I—you know, I wasn't a major anything. I didn't have any idea about a major, I just wanted to play football. And, I took these—so I took these classes. But I started meet these guys. And then they were looking for somebody who wanted to be around the theater that would carry the keys. So, they made me auditorium manager, and they were giving me like \$3 an hour, which in 1973 was like, good bucks, you know. *[Laughter]* And so I would just hang out in the theater, because I'd get three bucks an hour every hour I was there, whether I was in class or not.

Because if people needed to get the lights, or they needed to open up a rehearsal room, or— I was the guy. And I never left. And finally, they made me, at the end of that first year, they made me do an acting class. And do a play.

Glenn Davis:

So how did you end up back in Chicago after that?

William Petersen:

Oh god, it's a long trip. But I was—I had gotten married and had a baby. And I took a job up in Northern Idaho as a logger. Because I'd met a guy who had ran a little logging outfit. And because I had this, my wife and this little baby, I had to, you know, I needed work. And so, I went up to work for him. But it was incredibly difficult. And I kept longing for the theater. We ended up living in a trailer. And I ended up ended up working at a truck stop, actually. And my dad back in Chicago sent me an article on the Organic Theater. They had gone off touring in Europe or something, and somebody in the *Tribune* wrote an article about them and he sent it out to me in Idaho. And I read that. And then I was watching a little black and white TV at the truck stop one night and I saw Bill Murray, who I'd gone to high school with for a minute at Loyola, in Wilmette. And he was on Saturday Night Live or something. I was like, "That's, hey, that's Bill Murray. What's he doing?" And I was like, "It's happening in Chicago," you know? And then I said to my wife, at one point, I said, "Let's get out of here. I can't work at a truck stop the rest of my life." And we loaded up a little Toyota and drove across the country and got to Chicago and I started to try and be an actor.

Glenn Davis:

I also saw that you were in the American premiere of *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Goodman, right?

William Petersen:

Yeah. Yeah.

Glenn Davis:

How did that happen? And what was that like?

William Petersen:

So, I had a relationship with Greg Mosher, who was the artistic director at the Goodman at the time, and I had met David Mamet. And anyways, they were they were putting together a production—the original American production of *Glengarry*—and they were going to take it to New York. And they called in Joey Mantegna. We had a great cast. And, so, I said, "Yeah." It fit a certain slot between stuff I was doing for *Remains* or whatever. And I said, "I'll do it." But then we were scheduled to do—*Remains* was scheduled to do *The Time of Your Life* on the mainstage at the Goodman in February, and they wanted to take the show from Chicago—*Glengarry*—to New York for a Broadway deal. And I said, "I'm not going. You know, I want to do *Time of Your Life* with *Remains* here." And they were like—they didn't understand that at all. Why I would not go to Broadway with *Glengarry*.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

But I—you know, we were excited to do *Time of Your Life*. We'd been planning it for several months. And so, I only did the Chicago version of the production and then they went off to New York.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah, I have it on good authority that David Mamet, to this day respects you so much for that choice.

William Petersen:

You know, Glenn, I think one of the most powerful things you can—the most powerful word you have as an actor in your life is “No.” You know? I mean—and a lot of people don’t understand that, in the business *per se*. You know, they don’t understand why you wouldn’t do something because mostly we’re—we try to take whatever we can get because there’s not a lot. There’s a lot of dry stretches, you know? I just think that I got that early on. It was never (for me) about—it was never about paychecks or fame or, you know, any of that stuff. It was just about being with these people in the room. It still is. I mean, the rehearsal period for me is the exciting time. It’s the fun time. It’s the time where I learned all the things I never learned in school.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

And you know, once the play opens, I’m about done, really.

Stage Manager:

Company, this is your 15-minute call. 15 minutes til the top of the show. Fifteen, fifteen.

Glenn Davis:

What do you do in the, you know, for your half hour when you get to the theater? Anything special?

William Petersen:

Well, when I was younger, I used to just show up before the show whenever I could get there, you know, back in the day. But, the last 10 or 12 years back in the theater, I sort of get—I get to the theater early, probably an hour and a half or an hour and fifteen minutes before and I walk around under the “E!” Tracks out in the alley and just go over some of my stuff in my head for the show. Then I’ll get in there maybe fifteen minutes before half hour so I can say hi and talk to stage managers. And then I’ll just sit in front of the mirror till the show starts and figure out which way my curl should go. [Laughter]

Glenn Davis:

So, I want to fast forward a bit, and—you and I, we both shared an experience, at different times obviously, but we both went to the Stratford Festival and worked there for a season or two. And I just want to—I’m bringing that up, because that was really where it first started for you in film and TV while you were there.

William Petersen:

Yeah, it was—that was an amazing sort of... that was an amazing year. Because from *Glengarry*—like I said I had done *In the Belly of the Beast* in the fall at Wisdom Bridge and then segued over to do *Glengarry* at the Goodman, and then we did *The Time of Your Life* at the Goodman, and then I did *Fool for Love* at Steppenwolf, because most of Steppenwolf had gone to New York to do—to remount a production of *Balm in Gilead*. And there was just a few of us left in Chicago and so we—you know, Terry Kinney grabbed a script and we did *Fool for Love* with Rondi and Randy Arney. And we ran that for as long as we could, because there was nothing else for Steppenwolf to run, you know, because everybody was gone. And while I was doing that the—John Hirsch, this brilliant man who was the artistic director of

Stratford, came down to Chicago. He was looking for a Stanley Kowalski for *Streetcar*. They had their season going and they had a late opening—an August opening for *Streetcar* and he didn't feel like, whatever, he didn't have a Stanley Kowalski in his company at the time. So, he came down and, somehow or another, had been told to see me and he came down and saw *Fool for Love*. And then he, he cast me and we close *Fool for Love*. And I went up to Stratford and rehearsed the show and opened it. And we did *Streetcar*. It was a tremendous production. It was a lot of fun. And oddly enough Billy Friedkin—William Friedkin, also from Chicago, was directing—was going to direct a movie called *To Live and Die in LA*. And he had gotten his casting director to start looking at actors. He wanted guys that had never been in a movie before. Because he wanted to kind of replicate his experience with *The French Connection* from years before. And Bob Weiner was the name of the casting director. And I remember, he told me this story. He was auditioning guys in New York. And one of the guys who auditioned was Gary Sinise, who was in New York, probably still doing *True West*. And he auditioned Gary, and Bob Weiner was a particular kind of individual, and after he was done auditioning him, then he said, "That's great. Thank you very much. You're not going to get the part. But, do you know anybody back in Chicago who might be right for this part?" And Sinise (being a mensch) said, "Yeah, I got a guy. I know a guy you might be interested in his name is Billy Petersen." So, this guy looked around for where I was, and I was up in Stratford doing *Streetcar*. And he flew to New York—to Toronto and came over to the theater. And I got a phone call. I didn't have an agent or anything. And he said, you know, "I'm here to see you... a movie," whatever. He came and saw the show, and then after the show, I met with the guy. He was weird as you could be. And he said, "Could you come down to New York and meet William Friedkin?"

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

I said, "Well, I only have Monday off." Do I flew down to New York on Monday, they flew me down from Toronto, which is easy. And I went over to Friedkin's apartment. He just had me up in his apartment. I walked in and I was like, you know, I've seen *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection* and I was like, "This is very nice to get to meet this man who I admired so much." And he literally gave me a couple of pages of dialogue. We sat down on a couch in his living room and we read it together. He read one part, I read the other guy. And he puts the thing down and said, "You got the part." I was like, "Okay, so he's crazy. He's just offering everybody that comes in his apartment, the role in *To Live and Die in LA*." That's what I thought. And I was able to get my friend John Pankow, from Chicago, who was there at the time doing, like, understudying *Amadeus* on Broadway. And he came over and he got to play my—you know, we improvised the scene for Friedkin that night and he cast Johnny, as my partner in the movie.

Glenn Davis:

You call up your boy and said, "Hey, come over. We're gonna kick it, and we're gonna talk to this director, and I think you can be in this movie with me where we're the leads?"

William Petersen:

Yeah. [*Laughter*] And it happened. And I was like, "Okay, this is either completely mad, and it's all just been, you know, a joke. Some candid camera situation. Or we're going to have a ball." And we did. And we learned everything we could possibly want to learn from Friedkin in that next six months. And he needed to do—he wanted to do the show right away.

Glenn Davis:

Mm hmm.

William Petersen:

And again, I said, "I'm sorry, I committed to doing *Streetcar* through October," because that's how late the season went in Stratford.

Glenn Davis:

Oh, he wanted to do the film right away. So you—

William Petersen:

Yeah, this was in early September. He said, "We're going to start shooting in three weeks." And I said, "I'm not." And he said, "Well, we have—but that's—you know, you can get out of your show. You just got to give them two weeks notice" or whatever. I said, "I'm not leaving the show. I agreed to do the show till the end of the show." And he pushed the movie back. I mean, that's stuff's not even heard of and I didn't have an agent!

Glenn Davis:

Is it fair to say that that sort of sent your career in a completely different direction than you would have thought otherwise?

William Petersen:

Well, yes and no. I got, you know, I had some money for the first time. And I was just going to go back to the theater. I had no intention of ever—you know, if I make another movie great if not, I don't know.

Glenn Davis:

So even then—so even then you weren't like, "Oh man, this is the start of something special. I'm ready to kick this thing off."

William Petersen:

No, I didn't have an agent. I still didn't have an agent.

Glenn Davis:

After the movie.

William Petersen:

Yeah, after the movie that I had all these agents asking me to be my agent. But I said, "Well, I don't need an agent. I have a theater. You know, I live in Chicago. What do I need an agent for?"

Glenn Davis:

Wow.

William Petersen:

And then Michael Mann showed up for the movie *Manhunter* when I was in Washington, DC doing *In the Belly of the Beast*. Which Steppenwolf was doing—they were doing... was it *Streamers*? They were doing *Streamers* and *Coyote Ugly*.

Glenn Davis:

Okay.

William Petersen:

We were we were all at the Kennedy Center. It was like a Chicago summer at the Kennedy Center. So, it was kind of hilarious because we were all hanging. I was—Amy and I were babysitting Jeff and Laurie's daughter Zoey, who was two years old or a year and a half old at the time, in between shows, you know. And Michael Mann showed up and said, "I want you to do the lead in my movie."

Glenn Davis:

Manhunter.

William Petersen:

Yeah and I was like, "Well, okay. This will be over in August. He says, "Yeah, no, no we'll shoot in the fall. And—but I need you to do a—" he asked, he said, "I need you to do a screen test because Dino De Laurentiis is producing nobody knows who you are." And I don't think Michael—you know I met Michael on a movie called *Thief* that he had done in Chicago.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

And, before that. And he wanted me to do it and I—but I didn't want to do the screen test. So I just said "No, I can't do the screen test. I love the book. I love the movie. I'd love to do it. But either you cast me or not because if I do a screen test it's not gonna be any good and they're still not gonna know who I am and then they're gonna think I can't—I don't know how to act."

Glenn Davis:

Wait, wait. Go back. Go back. Michael Mann asked you to do a screen test. You tell the man "No."

William Petersen:

Yeah, I just said "I don't think that's a good idea." [*Laughter*] And they asked Billy Friedkin if he showed them any of *To Live and Die in LA*, which hadn't come out yet. And he said, "No, I'm not showing you my movie. I didn't have a—I didn't get to see a movie of him before I cast him. You're on your own." And so, I sort of said, "Yeah, you're on your own. I mean, it's your movie; cast me or don't cast me."

Glenn Davis:

You know this is amazing stuff you're saying, right?

William Petersen:

Yeah, I know. I know. But you know, at the time, it was—first of all, it's good to be young and foolish. [*Laughter*] But I wasn't that young either at that point. I was 32 years old. That was the other thing. You know.

Glenn Davis:

This is incredible. Just the notion that you're a relative, nobody, and you're sort of dictating terms in a way that is unheard of.

William Petersen:

I know, actors don't even like to hear it, you know, because it just makes them feel bad. But the thing is, is that we're all on some kind of journey, and it's usually our own journey. And nobody knows,

necessarily, where their journey is gonna go. But I think if you approach it like that—and for me the decision was made when I was like 25. Do I want to be in the theater if it means I'm poverty ridden when I'm 45? And I said to myself, I remember very, very clearly saying to myself, "You know what? That's okay. That's okay with me. As long as I can say that I was in the theater. That's okay."

Glenn Davis:

Remarkable. Let's talk about a few things. I know you worked with Friedkin again; you all did *12 Angry Men*, right?

William Petersen:

Well, it was just it was unbelievable. I found myself in a room with George C. Scott, Jack Lemmon, Ossie Davis, you know, Mykelti Williamson, Jimmy Gandolfini, you know, Tony Danza we were all just sitting around a table for three weeks. Edward James Olmos. It was a remarkable month together. We rehearsed it for about 10 days. We could've done it on stage. But, you know, we shot it in sequence. And it was just, you know, I've been fortunate to work with some of the greatest older actors. I mean I—that's the other thing. I've just been lucky in the things I did that just sort of fell, you know, into my lap.

Glenn Davis:

Now, most audiences know you from *CSI*, because you spent nine years on that show. But what they might not know is that you were a leading producer on that show from the first episode to the last—even after your character was written off the show. And this happened at a time when actors weren't given that type of power, authority, agency. Tell me how that all came to happen in the first place.

William Petersen:

Well it's, you know, the infamous—now infamous—Leslie Moonves.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah.

William Petersen:

Who, at the time we did *CSI*, was the head of CBS. I met him when he was the head of Warner Brothers Television. And he had—he was fascinated with the movie *Manhunter*. And he kept—I kept going over to Warner Brothers. He kept calling up, not all the time, but I had a couple of meetings over at Warner Brothers Television, where he wanted me to do something for Warner Brothers Television in the—like *Manhunter*. And but he wanted me to play a lawyer, or a doctor, or a policeman. He wanted me racing around town in a fast car with a gun on my hip, you know.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah, yeah.

William Petersen:

But Nina Tassler, who was his drama development, who he brought over from Warner Brothers to CBS, I would talk to her in these meetings and she sort of got what I was looking for, which wasn't around. They weren't making any shows like that, you know. And I didn't want to play a divorced dad taking care of, you know, funny kids, and all of that. And she heard a pitch from a guy who had not been a writer who was a writer. He was living in Las Vegas and he come to town. He was going around pitching a fingerprint-duster show that nobody was ever going to do. [Laughter] And Nina heard this pitch. And she literally called me up and just happened to catch me one afternoon. He was on his way back to Las

Vegas. He was done with his pitches; it didn't look like anything was going happen. And Nina said, "Listen, I heard a pitch from a guy who's totally crazy, wonderful, young, never written for television, doesn't know half the shows on television. And he's got this wacky idea about crime scene analysts trying to put evidence together." And I—she said, "Would you meet him before he leaves town?" And it was like in an hour and a half, he was going to leave. I ran over to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. And I met him in the bar at the Beverly Wilshire. And he pitched me this idea. I didn't know if he could write a lick. [Laughter] But I loved the idea. And I loved his enthusiasm for breaking all the television rules, you know. And I went—I called up Nina. And I said, "Yeah, I'm in. let's develop this."

Glenn Davis:

Wow.

William Petersen:

It was also, Glenn, it was at a time where the OJ thing had happened. The world was confused about what was real, what wasn't real, what was evidence, what wasn't evidence, where the truth lay. You know, this was 1999, 2000. And I knew that this was kind of cool because it was going to be about guys seeking the truth. And finding the truth and saying, "This is this this, isn't something else. This can't be anything else. This this is hair fiber. It's nobody else's." And I thought that that was a great thing to give an audience, you know.

Glenn Davis:

That's awesome, man. Once you did that show, you did it for nine years, right?

William Petersen:

Mm hmm.

Glenn Davis:

How did you know it was time to go? And how did you how did you, sort of, orchestrate your exit?

William Petersen:

Well, I—you know, it was one of these things where I, again, like when I do a play, you know, it's after opening night, I'm always looking, "How can I get out of this thing?" [Laughter] You know, it was great up until then, and it was the same thing with the show. I was—from the time I started doing the episodes, I was like, "Okay, I've done this, now what do I do?" And—but we kept—we found ways to make the show great and make it better. And it was really more like a theater experience because I had the same people I was working with every day. And I got to know them well over the years and all of that. But they had done a spin off. They've done *CSI: Miami*, Gary was over doing *CSI: New York*, there was *CSIs* everywhere. You know, every network had their *CSI* on the air. And, you know, there was only so many stories we were going to be able to tell that weren't either being told by any of the 10 other *CSIs* that we're now on the air. And I felt that I had done just about all I could and there wasn't a lot more for me to do. And I was a little concerned. I hadn't been on the stage in eight years. And I was a little freaked out that I wasn't—what if I get to the point where I'm scared to go back to the theater? And so, I let them know—they let me out to go do a play in Providence with Amy. Amy directed me in *Dublin Carol*, a Conor McPherson play. And that was as scary as I could imagine, just having been out and having been away for eight years. I was, you know, that was a that was an experience. And then I was lucky enough Martha asked me to come back and do it in Chicago. And so that's when I knew I wanted to just end my run with *CSI*. It was like, "Perfect, I'm going back to the theater." You know. I

didn't really want—I wanted to go back down to the basement at Steppenwolf, sit in that room and get ready to do a play.

Stage Manager:

Company this is your five-minute call. Five minutes till the top of the show. Five minutes till the top of the show. This is five.

Glenn Davis:

Well, here's a lightning round. I'm just going to ask you questions and you just say the first thing comes to mind. What is your favorite Steppenwolf production you have ever seen?

William Petersen:

Oh boy. Ah, well, you know, the three iconic ones are *Balm in Gilead*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *August: Osage County*. Those are the ones that you can define a decade of Steppenwolf work. I wouldn't know how to pick one.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah. Toughest experience at Steppenwolf.

William Petersen:

Walking into the Upstairs Theater with *Slowgirl*, a play that we had rehearsed at the Geffen in Los Angeles—Randy Arney directing me and Rae Gray, just the two of us—and realizing that the theater was set up in an arena sort of situation where you had bleachers on both sides of the stage. And we had to try and re block the show and make it work for two different sides. You know, Austin had turned the theater around for something and all of a sudden, we were wandering around trying to figure that out. That was just the toughest sort of like, “Okay, I gotta get my head around this go out there and just figure it out.”

Glenn Davis:

In a two-person play. Yeah. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

William Petersen:

Oh, I have the bowling jacket. That Stanley Kowalski wore in *Streetcar Named Desire* up at Stratford. I have it somewhere in a bag. A gold green bowling jacket that he used to come—he used to be so proud. I had to dig that out someplace. It's in a basement somewhere.

Glenn Davis:

Yeah, I got to see that. Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience, whether you were performing in it or not.

William Petersen:

I suppose. Well, the most memorable was when I was doing the opening night of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and I was out there with Joey Mantegna and he went up on his lines and never came down. [Laughter] Eventually, we heard the stage manager—Joey Drummond was yelling the lines through the back of the thing. Finally, Joey just pulled out the map of Florida and said, “Okay, it's intermission.” And then he went on to win the Tony in New York. So. [Laughter]

Glenn Davis:

What job you didn't get that broke your heart.

William Petersen:

The Porter in *Macbeth* at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. I audition for the Porter. They were never going to give me the part; I was young, and it went to some graduate student character actor from Illinois State and I didn't get to play the Porter.

Glenn Davis:

What's the last song you listened to?

William Petersen:

"Kokomo." The Beach Boys.

Glenn Davis:

Who is your favorite writer?

William Petersen:

Well, right now it's Karl Knusgård. The Norwegian who wrote *My Struggle*, this 3,600 page, six volume... He's fascinated me over the last five years as I've tried to read this whole thing. It's an amazing compilation.

Glenn Davis:

Gotcha. What's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

William Petersen:

Wrigley Field.

Glenn Davis:

Dude,

William Petersen:

That's a good afternoon right there.

Glenn Davis:

It's the best. That's the best answer I've heard so far. What animal do you most identify with?

William Petersen:

The elk.

Glenn Davis:

If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

William Petersen:

Old, white-haired with a paunch. Desperately trying to find a place to sit.

Stage Manager:

Company, this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a good one everyone. Places, please. Places.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour*, brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Caroline Neff:

Thanks for listening.

Glenn Davis:

And thanks again to our guest this week, William Petersen

Audrey Francis:

Half Hour is produced by Patrick Zakem; recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

Caroline Neff:

Today's stage manager was Mary Hungerford

Glenn Davis:

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry—

Audrey Francis:

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

Caroline Neff:

New episodes of *Half Hour* are released every other Tuesday.

Cliff Chamberlain:

In two weeks, we're excited to welcome Frank Galati to the podcast.

Glenn Davis:

In the meantime, you can reach us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthttr or on Facebook and Instagram.

Audrey Francis:

And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org.

Caroline Neff:

Till next time, this is Caroline Neff.

Audrey Francis:

Audrey Francis.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Cliff Chamberlain.

Glenn Davis:

And Glenn Davis. A lifetime to engage; half hour two places.

Cliff Chamberlain:

This conversation between two of the most swagger-ific guys—

Glenn Davis:

We have to cut “swagger-ific.”

Cliff Chamberlain:

We do? [*Laughter*]

Caroline Neff:

Keep it, keep it, keep it, keep it!

Audrey Francis:

It was swag-nificent. [*Laughter*] And you’re an ex-swag-ulent interviewer.

Caroline Neff:

That sounds gross, Audrey