

Ep: 6 – Frank Galati: “Stumbling Forwards”

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Featuring: Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis, Frank Galati and Caroline Neff.

Frank Galati:

“I wake to sleep, but take my waking slow—”

Audrey Francis:

from Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

Frank Galati:

“I learn by going where I have to go.”

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*. [Music] Five, six, five-six-seven-eight! And we're back! This week I am here with myself, Audrey Francis and—

Caroline Neff:

Caroline Neff.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Cliff Chamberlain.

Audrey Francis:

Welcome back. And to all of our listeners, we just want to say thank you so much. The *Half Hour* podcast is still in a state of evolution. And we're growing and we're changing and we want to thank you for all of your support, and for staying with us on this ride. Two weeks ago, we had a really great episode that had a conversation between Caroline Neff and Storycatchers Theatre. This week, though, we're coming at you with a very special episode that we recorded way back in the “Ides of May.” Is that right Cliff?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah. That's right.

Audrey Francis:

Okay. With the one, the only, Steppenwolf ensemble member, Frank Galati.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, Frank is well known around the theatre, and maybe just around theatre in general, as one of the kindest, warmest, most generous artists out there. And it certainly came through in the conversation. He's meant a lot to me, over my time spent in Chicago. I've had the pleasure of working with him a few times. And just to talk to him—I'm here in Los Angeles, he's in somewhere in Florida was a gift. And even now this talking to you both I know Audrey, you're in Chicago and Caroline, you're in New York. It's one of the things that this type of technology does for us all at a time when we're all really isolated is give us a chance to connect. So just the sort of magic of getting to talk to him in that way was really special. And

listening back to the conversation too: it was really nice and inspiring then more so now. He, he's a great, great person.

Caroline Neff:

It's interesting listening to him because, you know, he's been a mentor to so many people throughout the Steppenwolf universe and beyond. And to just hear the respect and reverence that he's had for people who have mentored him in the past, I thought, was really sort of remarkable. I don't know a person who's worked with Frank that doesn't walk away feeling as though they've sort of been touched by a little bit of magic.

Audrey Francis:

Oh, I like that. Walk away from Frank Galati as though you've been touched by a little bit of magic. So without further ado, right, that's like the perfect way to lead in.

Cliff Chamberlain:

That's it.

Audrey Francis:

Here's Frank Galati.

Stage Manager:

Half hour to top of the show, please. Half hour. Half hour, please. Top of the show: half hour.

Cliff Chamberlain:

So, you're born and raised in Illinois. You spent most of your life in Illinois. And I'm curious what that has meant to you as an artist: as a director, actor, adapter and a teacher. What has that meant to you, to spend most of your artistic life in Illinois and, specifically, in and around Chicago?

Frank Galati:

Oh, Cliff, like you, it meant everything to me. I can't imagine my life out of the context of where I came from and where I grew up. I also, I think, came to high school age and college age at—I was very fortunate. Because I got an opportunity to meet and work with some really brilliant teachers. It's always, sort of, the luck of the draw, you know. I mean, any institution is, at any given moment just made up of the people who are there. And it happened that my high school drama teacher was Ralph Lane. And he went on to finish his PhD at Northwestern and took a teaching job at Illinois State, where he met John Malkovich and Rondi Reed, Randy Arney and Terry Kenny and Jeff Perry and Tom Irwin, all those early Steppenwolf folks. And he was very instrumental in shaping their acting style and their aesthetic. He could be very cranky and very cruel. But the discipline of the theatre, the passion for the theatre, the complexity and nuance of theatre-art, the thrill of it, the danger of it, all of that was, you know, communicated by this rather remarkable mentor. And when I was in high school, there was a there was a district, a regional and a state competition. And if you got first place in district, you went on to a sectional and so on. So anyway, Mr. Lane got a bunch of us together and we competed. We did a one-act play. I think we won second prize. And I won—I wrote a monologue, and I won the first prize in the state! I had never lived at such a pitch. It was insane. I was petrified out of my mind. But I was alive! And the thrill of having an idea or an emotion, land with an audience (although I didn't know what that was at the time) was just inexpressible. I mean, like you. It showed me my path, kind of. I have some of these medals from those years.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Frank Galati:

And it's the map of the state of Illinois. So, Chicago, Chicago history, and Illinois and the Midwest have just been, you know, in my blood, in my DNA, a part of me.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The fact that you had written that monologue and performed that monologue leads me to be interested in the, sort of, multiple areas within which you excel. As an actor, as a writer, and I know later as adapting and teaching came in. Was there anything at that time, when you were in high school doing that monologue or having those experiences, that you were more interested in pursuing singularly? Or were all of them something that you wanted to pursue?

Frank Galati:

Somehow, with me, it's almost always been just a matter of stumbling forward. Sometimes backwards. But always stumbling. I never had a plan. I never saw any real difference between acting and writing and directing. I always thought that the playwright *acts* all of the characters. So, if you're going to be a playwright, you *have* to be an actor, to a certain extent. I mean, I know that there are many who aren't. But it was a mix to me. And again, these circumstances are so formative, and they're half accidental and, and half conscious. What happened was I wrote this monologue. And it was inspired by the old lady who lived across the street from me, who was often left alone by her adult daughter and son in law and her little grandson. She would sit out on her patio behind her little ranch house in Northbrook, Illinois. And she would bake in the sun. Hardly able to move; she was really old. And her legs were all bandaged up. Her legs—she had some kind of skin condition, I guess. And her legs would—this is a little hard to say and remember—but they would bleed. And flies would gather on her legs because of the blood. And I would sit with her. And I'd see her sitting out there from across the street. I could see their backyard because of the way the neighborhood was configured. I would see her out there and I would go out there and shoo the flies away from her legs and just talk to her. And I can't say that, you know, I copied her, or I wrote down specific things that she said. But, I guess I thought first of “the kind of voice that she had, and how slow it was. And how it was kind of like that.” So you start, you know, you're an actor. You have a mimetic gene and impulse, so you imitate. So, I started imitating. And I realized that I could kind of improvise, you know, stuff that I hadn't heard from her but that was, you know, kind of a life story. So that's how the monologue happened. And then, do you know, again it was Mr. Lane. I don't know what he said... something about the monologue. About how I should expand it. Anyway, I did! I turned it into—I wrote a one-act play.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Is it *Hallelujah to the Stars*?

Frank Galati:

Yes! [Laughter] How do you know that?

Cliff Chamberlain:

I do my research. [Laughter]

Frank Galati:

Oh my god, Cliff. Well, I showed it to Mr. Lane and Mr. Lane said, “you know, Galati, I think you should do this. I think you should direct it. And I'll stay out of the room. I'll give you a slot on the stage. We'll invite people to come and you'll do it.” And I did. And it was because of him that I did. You know, I've said this to you before because I say it in meetings with casts because I believe it. It's from Roethke's poem “The Waking.” “I wake to sleep but take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go.” And that's kind of been my story in a way I just, you know?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah. I think, too, I find it fascinating that even hearing about how that monologue came to be. It starts with empathy for another person, which is what I think of when I think of you. In terms of the directors that I've worked with, and in terms of the artists that have come along on my path. How to exist in this business, being empathetic, kind, wise. And so, I think of empathy and I also think of adapting. I mean adapting her life for the stage. You know, as a high schooler, that that was something that you intuitively knew how to meld. And it leads me to ask you more about adapting. A lot of the works that you have adapted are epic in nature and epic in storytelling and all stories that take place all over the world. Like *Kafka on the Shore* or *After the Quake* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. What draws you to adapting?

Frank Galati:

Again, I have to follow the thread back to a mentor, a teacher, in particular with this question, Cliff. It's when I was at Northwestern as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student. I worked every year and every quarter with Dr. Robert Breen. Now Breen was quite a character. He and his wife were a famous, at the time, kind of acting duo. He went to Knox College, got his PhD and was hired at Northwestern, in the Department of Interpretation as it was called (because then the mode of instruction was oral interpretation—in other words, reading literature out loud). But Breen's genius, and I believe he really was a genius, was the blending of narrative and theatre-art. He was a brilliant actor and a brilliant director. But what he taught most profoundly was story, narrative, the essence and the bones of “once upon a time.” So, this has always been of great, great interest to me and I read fiction avidly, voraciously when I was in college and graduate school. It's funny with the question you asked about epic narratives. It's in epic, picaresque or historical novels that you really feel the storytelling engine. Some things can't be adapted. I found Henry James almost impossible largely because of the style of the writing, the incredible complexity of the sentences and so on. But on the other hand, other novels, like *The Grapes of Wrath*—if you if you stop and think about it, *The Grapes of Wrath* really is an epic drama.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Frank Galati:

Actually, it's an epic comedy. I know that sounds sacrilegious, because it is so profoundly a *mise re re* for human suffering. But the Joads don't know they're in *The Grapes of Wrath*. And they're having a hell of a good time getting to California in spite of their problems. They're lusty, they're funny, they're sexy, they're vital, they're witty, they're intelligent, they're practical. They're an amazing, amazing family. But the point I was making about the why *The Grapes of Wrath* is so adaptable is it's got a lot of dialogue. It's hugely full of dialogue. It's one dramatic scene after another, and some of them are hilariously funny.

Stage Manager:

Fifteen minutes, please. Fifteen minutes to top of the show.

Cliff Chamberlain.

All right let's step back for one second. Tell us how that production came to be.

Frank Galati:

The way it worked with *The Grapes of Wrath*. Gary was the artistic director. And it was 1985. And I had known almost everyone in the ensemble since they were in college. Because we had so many mutual friends and I would go down to Illinois State. They asked me several times to direct and I never could until this one holiday year in '85, Gary decided they wanted to do a holiday show. And they picked *You Can't Take It With You*. And they asked me to direct it. So, I was directing it. And after a couple of weeks—I had a ball. I mean, I didn't do anything. I just sat there and laughed. After a couple of weeks, Gary called me up to his office. And he said, "man, you know, we'd like to have you be a member of the ensemble." I was floored.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Oh!

Frank Galati:

I mean I couldn't believe that. It was very unusual. I mean, nowadays it's a regular and organic expansion of our family. It's right. But in those days, it was kind of a big deal and it didn't happen very often. So I said, "yes, of course I would be very honored." And Gary said, "now, man, you should think of something that you would like to do that would be good for the ensemble." And I said, "oh, how about *The Grapes of Wrath*?" Now, mind you, I didn't. I didn't adapt *The Grapes of Wrath*. I just thought of it.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Sure.

Frank Galati:

Lois Smith, god bless her, came out to Chicago from New York and actually auditioned for the role of Ma. I mean, I can't believe it now, at the moment, but I hadn't heard of her! I didn't know who she was. And Laurie Metcalf recommended her because Laurie had worked with her on that TV show. Of course, I found out who she was, and I realized she was a big deal, even before I met her, but she still agreed to audition. And I felt I felt like getting on my hands and knees and prostrating myself in front of her.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, so shifting gears away from the Joad's and their journey across the United States, I would love to hear about where your journey started with Murakami and your adaptations of his stories.

Frank Galati:

I taught fiction at Northwestern for 40 years. And I, sometimes, would use a novel over a course. Sometimes I would use short stories. I almost always taught James Joyce and the collection *The Dubliners* was my favorite and my students for years loved those stories. But after 9/11, it's a very, very clear marker in my mind, after 9/11 my students changed. James Joyce and *The Dubliners* was irrelevant. You know, it was remote and beautiful. Yes, but remote. It took me a while to figure this out. That the students were—they weren't concentrating. They weren't as they weren't as turned on by the material. So, I kept my eyes peeled and looking for something that I think will connect with them on a visceral level. And I had read some Murakami and always was very intrigued and loved the works of his that I knew. And I came across a collection of short stories called *After the Quake*. And each one of the stories

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is focused on a family, a couple, an individual dealing with the aftermath of the devastating Kobe Earthquake that killed almost, I don't know, 100,000 people. Hence the hook with our citizenry in the aftermath of 9/11. So, the traumas that are excavated in these beautiful little stories are the traumas that we are going through during these decades of upheaval, historical upheaval. So, I introduced the stories to my students. They loved them; they performed them. And after over a year or so watching them perform, I thought, "oh boy, you know, this is really playable material." And I asked Martha about whether or not she thought they might be. And she started reading Murakami and she said, "yeah, you, maybe you should explore this." So, what I did was I took the last two stories of *After the Quake*, and I braided them together. Well, you know, it played really well. I had a wonderful collaboration with composers and musicians. We had a Koto played live, and percussion. And James Schuette designed this very beautiful, minimal set. Malcolm, my beloved brother Malcolm, was stage manager of that and it went very well. We got permission from Mr. Murakami, who read the adaptation and sanctioned it. And, do you know, it's still done! It's been translated into numerous languages. It's been done in Japan in Japanese, my adaptation, but in Japanese. And that led me to *Kafka on the Shore* a huge, epic, novel. And a hilarious and scary retelling of the Oedipus adventure.

Stage Manager:

Five minutes. This is your five minute call. Five minutes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What is your half hour routine when you get to the theater?

Frank Galati:

It varies over the long haul. I have sometimes been in dressing rooms with lots of other guys and had a lot of fun you know, right up to places. Though the last show I did, *The Tempest*, I had to be there at least two hours before. I would kind of hibernate at half hour. And I had to be by myself, warm up vocally, and try to get, you know, my mind prepared for it all. It's a tricky time.

Cliff Chamberlain:

It is. It's a magical, tricky, unwieldy, wonderful, terrifying amount of time.

Frank Galati:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, so here's a couple of lightning round questions for you. Okay. All right, the favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen.

Frank Galati:

I think it could be *The Glass Menagerie*, in Highland Park, in the basement of the church when Steppenwolf was just a year or two old. And John Malkovich was Tom and Laurie Metcalf was, what's her name... Laura.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

Frank Galati:

The Tempest.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

Frank Galati:

I have the rag that we hung in the box car her in the second to the last scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* that has printed on it the opening paragraph of the last chapter. I had intended for the audience to read that and not to have to speak it. But it didn't work.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Favorite moment, of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing or not.

Frank Galati:

The first time I went to Europe, I went to Stratford, England, and I saw Marlowe's Faust. Doctor Faustus. Now this would have been 1968. Helen of Troy steps out on stage, stark, naked, head to foot. Beautiful dewy bush. Exquisite breasts. Flashing, radiant eyes. Limbs sort of glistening. And 60 feet across the stage is Faust who takes a deep breath and says "Was this the face that launched 1000 ships?" I rest my case.

Cliff Chamberlain:

[Laughter] Okay. Amazing. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

Frank Galati:

The Lion King. [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

[Laughter] Damn you Julie Taymor! What's the last song you listened to? "Circle of life"?

Frank Galati:

No! [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

Sorry. What's the what's the last song you listened to?

Frank Galati:

Okay, I actually know the last song I listened to. It's John Cameron Mitchell. And John, who is a former student of mine, someone I talk to every now and then creator of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and it's "Turning Time Around."

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay. Favorite writer?

Frank Galati:

Oh my god. James Agee.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

Frank Galati:

Lincoln Park at the, you know, where that conservatory is? Sure. Yeah. Lincoln Park. I love Lincoln Park.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What animal do you most identify with?

Frank Galati:

This is very immodest of me because I love animals. A dolphin.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And finally, if you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

Frank Galati:

[Laughter] Let's see. Galati enters in a long coat. Large, a mop of white hair, a fringe of beard and a twinkle in his eye.

Stage Manager:

Places please. Places please for the top of the show. Places please.

Caroline Neff:

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

Audrey Francis:

Thanks for listening.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And thanks again to our guest this week, Frank Galati.

Audrey Francis:

This episode was co-sponsored by Lynn Lockwood Murphy honoring Aidan Murphy and Kenyon College Class of 2020.

Caroline Neff

Half Hour is produced by Patrick Zakem; mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman.

Audrey Francis:

The theme music for half hour is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Today's stage manager was Laura D. Glenn.

Caroline Neff:

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, AJ Roy, Gin To...

Audrey Francis:

And all the folks at Steppenwolf. Follow us on Twitter @steppenwolfthtr, or on Facebook and Instagram.

Cliff Chamberlain:

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

Audrey Francis:

Till next time, this is Audrey Francis...

Caroline Neff:

Caroline Neff...

Cliff Chamberlain:

And Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.

Audrey Francis:

Don't you hate it when you're on a zoom call and you said something super smart but then you're on mute and then you did too many drugs in college and then you couldn't remember what you said? Okay, cool!