

STEPPEWOLF

HALFHOUR

Season 2, Ep: 7 – Tina Landau: “What if We Expand?”

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Featuring: Tina Landau and Audrey Francis. With Caroline Neff, James Vincent Meredith and Michelle Medvin.

Tina Landau:

What happens if we assume that every character contains all of us and its opposite?

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois...

Tina Landau:

And that every time we play a role, we expand?

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*.

James Vincent Meredith:

Friends, we're back! Hey, how's everyone doing?

Caroline Neff:

Great, it's so nice to be with you both.

James Vincent Meredith:

This week on *Half Hour* we got me, James Vincent Meredith—

Caroline Neff:

Caroline Neff—

Audrey Francis:

And me, Audrey Francis.

James Vincent Meredith:

So, Audrey... how are you, Audrey?

Audrey Francis:

Oh, you know James. I'm hanging on by a thread.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah, that's cool, but listen, what I really want to know is what are we listening to today? That's what I want to know.

Audrey Francis:

Well James, funny you ask, I recently sat down with a true fucking visionary: director, adapter, writer, Tina Landau.

Caroline Neff:

She's truly amazing.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yes, yes. Hey, so how was that?

Audrey Francis:

Before the interview I was really nervous. I was practicing how I was going to talk and not stop, you know, not do all the stupid things that I'm currently doing right now. And then the second she starts talking I'm instantly put at ease, the same way that I am as an actor in her room. So it was, it was so much fun.

James Vincent Meredith:

I have been lucky enough to work with her a few times, and every time that I've been in that rehearsal room there's all these nerves and everything at the very beginning of rehearsal. And she is the epitome of the director who says, "Take risks, do your thing, be you and we will find the story together." And, and it gives you the agency to take those risks that maybe you wouldn't with, with other directors. And so every time I'm in the room with her is a treat.

Caroline Neff:

I've actually never gotten the opportunity to work with Tina, so I only know her as A.) an educator, and then B.) also just a leader in some of the meetings that we have at Steppenwolf. And I just think she is so gifted at owning that leadership role, but also making sure that everybody in the room, no matter what the reason we're all there for, that everybody's voice is heard and expressed and valued and I just, I love that about her.

James Vincent Meredith:

Mhmm. Agree, agree. So y'all, is there anything else we should know before we listen?

Audrey Francis:

Yes, there's one thing that we talk about called the Viewpoints technique, which is kind of a hard thing to describe. It's one of those things that you really understand it once you're actually doing it, but I'll do my best to describe it here. Tina is one of the co-authors along with Anne Bogart of a book called *The Viewpoints*, and it's a technique of improvisation that grew out of the postmodern dance world, and it really focuses on giving artists a vocabulary through space and time in which they can communicate, and it's remarkable. So after you hear this conversation, you might want to get that book.

Caroline Neff:

I love Viewpoints, and I thought that hated it, and then I discovered that I actually love it. It's one of my favorite ensemble building techniques of all time, and to be involved with somebody who is as instrumental in the development of that is really special.

James Vincent Meredith:

Well, let's listen. Here's Audrey Francis with the one and only Tina Landau.

Stage Manager:

Welcome back, everyone. This is your half hour call, please sign in if you've not already done so. This is half hour, the house is about to open, half hour please.

Audrey Francis:

Tina Landau: writer, director, adapter, artistic superhero to so many— I'm just going to dive right in. What's the most important part of your artistic process?

Tina Landau:

I think the most important part is being open. Openness. I mean, that's the first thing that comes to mind because I always feel that what I generate and try to think of and invent and force into thought or being is never as exciting and surprising and true as what comes at me. And so when I work, I like to think of myself as being open, an open vessel to all that comes my way. And that's collaborators in the room, but it's also something I dream at night when I'm asleep or a color I see on the street as I'm walking to rehearsal.

Audrey Francis:

I have been lucky enough to be an actor in one of your rehearsal processes. I mean you actually had a day for us where we got to bring what we thought was what you called “vice”. Can you describe—?

Tina Landau:

What “vice” is?

Audrey Francis:

Yeah.

Tina Landau:

When I say something in a process, if I say something is “vice” or “not vice,” that comes from what is perhaps a myth or perhaps a truth that I learned from Anne Bogart, my dear friend and fellow director, who said that when the TV show *Miami Vice* was filming, they had a person who was not in any one department, but was a liaison between location and, and continuity and acting and directing and casting, and that their job was to look at things and say either “that's vice,” or “that's not vice,” meaning that something kind of intuitively belonged in the world of this show. If you can't say it, you point to it. So instead of me or the person on *Miami Vice* saying “this is what this is, I can describe it and here are the elements we need,” you kind of look at all the elements and instinctively say “vice, not vice, not—” you know. So I always feel when I'm directing that I'm working at my best because it's best for the piece if I'm inviting everyone in the room to contribute a lot of material and I can act more like an editor than a generator. And the way I edit sometimes in shortcut is by saying “vice,” and somehow the world starts to emerge and be defined, but it's not like there's any right or wrong about what can be vice at the beginning.

Audrey Francis:

I mean, that's exactly what it feels like being in your room. It must take an incredible amount of faith to build a world on the spot together and trust your intuition. How hard is that?

Tina Landau:

It's not anymore. What would be much harder for me would be to, for someone to say, "Before you start your first day of rehearsal, figure out what it's going to look like and where people are going to go and how the set is going to shift, and..." That would be hard for me at this point. Granted, when I was much younger, the process we're talking about now I think was much scarier, but I have just learned over so many decades of directing that, that this works. It never fails me when I take that leap of faith. So, at this moment in my life, it just feels like second nature. It just feels like the most natural, easy thing to do.

Audrey Francis:

You have been touted and appreciated as a director who is willing to accept all pieces of the human beings that you're working with including identity, race, gender, orientation, ability, all those things. And that, you know, is a very big topic of conversation obviously right now. But you've always done that, and you have always welcomed every piece that makes a human a human. How do you do that?

Tina Landau:

Well, you know, it's funny, because when you said, what was the first question? What do you...?

Audrey Francis:

What's the most important part of your artistic process?

Tina Landau:

Yeah, so I would say attached, like, like a twin to openness is inclusion. You know, they're part of the same beast. So it's the same idea, which is, it's not just, you know, whatever images or objects or stories people bring into the room that I look at and say, "These are the ingredients from which we can work." It's the people themselves. So you know, I'd say adjacent to openness is the notion of inclusivity, and I've always thought of the rehearsal room as being a place where my task is to make a space for people to tap into their maximum possibility of everything they are, and that we are larger than we think we are, not smaller. You know, I remember the director Andrei Serban once saying that what he thought happened sometimes when actors get cast in roles is that they shrink themselves into the role. They think, "I'm going to define this role. She would do that, she wouldn't do that." But what happens if we assume that every character contains all of us and its opposite? And that every time we play a role, we expand? And so I think of that and, you know, I don't know how I do that Audrey, I just, I really think... I think the cause has something to do with me just growing up feeling, you know, completely other and weird and marginalized and not seen and not heard and not fitting in a given room. So I became, over time, very sensitized to that in others.

Audrey Francis:

Hm. And do you feel like you're able to allow yourself to expand when you write?

Tina Landau:

Yeah, I think, I hope so. You know, it's a very interesting time we're living in because in one case, one of the pieces I'm working on that is a project I'll be doing next year in New York at a place called Little Island where I'm now an artist in residence for three years, and it is a retelling of... well, I'm rewriting a play I wrote in 1994 called *Stonewall*, which we did outside as a big immersive site-specific pageant. A cast of 60 with a company called En Garde Arts on the piers in New York City for the 25th anniversary of Stonewall. And I was asked to reconsider it for next summer, and I tried to. The piece has really shifted and it's gonna be a whole new piece, but the characters that I'm focusing on are for the most part trans

and trans women of color and street youth, and, you know, so I've also been grappling over these months with the question of who gets to tell whose story.

Audrey Francis:

Right.

Tina Landau:

So it's, you know, I think of expansion in some ways. You know, writers obviously can't write novels or plays full of characters that look and sound and think like they do. But in this moment of very intensified cultural upheaval which I am profoundly in support of, you know, it has raised questions for me of, like, no, I don't need to expand into that space. I might want to bring on a writer that I collaborate with to live in that space.

Audrey Francis:

Can I read you something?

Tina Landau:

Mhmm.

Audrey Francis:

"The most important element to consider in casting is diversity. Find and celebrate diversity in body type, color, race, gender, and age. That's what the ocean habitat looks like. That's how our world is. And that's the Bikini Bottom way."

Tina Landau:

Yay! You found my SpongeBob casting note!

Audrey Francis:

I did.

Tina Landau:

I was so happy about this cause, you know, the show came up for licensing with Concord Theatricals and they kept asking me, "What's the breakdown, male, female?" And I kept saying, "There is none. Like, there are no males and females." Now I had the good fortune of being able to be talking about Bikini Bottom.

Audrey Francis:

Right.

Tina Landau:

Now, many people would argue, "Well of course there's females. Mrs. Puff is a female. SpongeBob is a male." But in my mind, they're all just creatures. And so I requested in our licensing that we said that any role could be played by anyone of any kind of race, gender, size, ability, etc. And it took a while to get the thumbs up on that from them, but they eventually gave it and I, and I really feel like that. I feel, I don't know, I feel like when a stage is peopled in that way, it's very alive and it's very reflective, not only like, sometimes we talk about saying, "we need to cast this show or staff our theater so it looks like our city." And I would say like, "yeah, I want to cast my shows so they look like nature."

Stage Manager:

Alright everyone, 15 minutes. 15 minutes please to the top of the show. 15 minutes.

Audrey Francis:

Can you tell us a little bit about Viewpoints, the technique that you and Anne Bogart co-created?

Tina Landau:

Yes. I will say this, I don't feel that we co-created it. I feel that Viewpoints is something that exists that has received ever-finer adjustments to language describing it, that started with a woman named Mary Overlie who was a choreographer at NYU that Anne worked with who originally coined the six Viewpoints. And then by the time I met Anne she was doing, like, her slightly own version of that. And then we experimented and studied and shifted and eventually articulated a kind of a theory, if you will, of Viewpoints that were specific to us.

Audrey Francis:

So how often do you use Viewpoints when you're directing?

Tina Landau:

Oh, always. I tried an experiment once when I was directing a play called *Mary Rose* at the Vineyard Theatre in New York, I tried an experiment of not doing Viewpoints in rehearsal to see what would happen. And all I remember is sitting in tech and one of the actors being like, raise their hands and kind of shouting, "We should have done Viewpoints!" you know? [*Laughter*] I don't know what was going on, but I remember that and I remember thinking the same thing. Like, yeah, you know, because Viewpoints function on so many levels. And again, they're not something that we don't organically do anyway, it's just a way of describing it, and therefore making our choices, our awareness, you know, more, more alive and brave. But Viewpoints have to do with a shortcut to language that I can use in rehearsal, so they save time. Viewpoints have to do with generating material, like you were saying before, where, you know, people I'm working with create things that we can then draw on and use. Viewpoints have to do with building ensembles. You know, it can serve as just a basic training technique for having the cast practice listening to each other and responding to each other. Viewpoints can sort of awaken casts to energy inside of our performance so that you're Viewpointing with an audience. One thing I do know is that again, over time, I have learned that I Viewpoint all the time in life.

Audrey Francis:

Yeah.

Tina Landau:

Meaning basically the idea that, again, it goes back to openness. Being open to what actually occurs in the moment, rather than your idea of what you want to have happen. And, and so I feel like yes, I need to call on those skills of listening and openness and working off my partner as much in my relationship as I do in figuring out staging.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, see that's what I was gonna ask because if I'm somebody who doesn't know you or get to work with you, I think, "Man, Tina Landau sounds fucking awesome. I bet she's so chill and cool to party with." [*Laughter*] And I also know you as a huge what I would classify as achiever. Like, you're incredibly intelligent, you're driven, you're a natural leader. So, are those two things ever at odds? Like the, I don't

know if you consider yourself an achiever, but also this like, open to change, this openness to change. How hard is that to apply that in your personal life?

Tina Landau:

I joke all the time that the Tina that my cast thinks they knew in rehearsal suddenly becomes my alter ego Thelma in tech. [Laughter] And Thelma talks like this. And where Tina said like, "I don't know, sure try it, do anything," Thelma will go, "Just say it. Just talk louder, talk faster, talk funnier." So Thelma kicks in because Thelma has to... Thelma has to take us through a new part of the process, which is the audience. Like, you know, if something is not working and it's too long, I'll cut it, you know, Thelma makes cuts. And Thelma, [Laughter] and Thelma keeps her eye on running times. And Thelma tells the designer, "No, we're doing it, I'm telling you," you know, that's, there— so anyway, that's all by way of saying, I think those two things exist in me, and I don't think one could exist without the other. The other image I love is the image of, like, a very loose, flowy, let's say silk piece of fabric that is the play or the openness or the flow or whatever. And that it just will fly away or dissipate unless you find a couple of places and stick pins in it, so that there are like, these pillars around which the flow can keep happening. And that's kind of how I, I think of all of what we're talking about, you know, a little bit how I work, a little bit how you set or don't set a play, like, you know, how much you determine before you're on stage and what do you leave open. And I feel like you're right, it's a constant dance.

Audrey Francis:

But a dance nonetheless. It's so hard, I think, especially maybe, I don't know if it's Americans are just today, or, it's so hard to believe that a duality can exist, that both things can be true.

Tina Landau:

Mm. Yes.

Audrey Francis:

And that's what makes it so exciting. Which now leads me to kind of ask you, you have set your own style and vision and way of working that feels so unique. So when you started working with Steppenwolf, at that time there was like a very gritty kitchen sink realism and that was the only thing that happened. So how did this relationship happen? How did it work? How did you reconcile the differences?

Tina Landau:

I love that question because I haven't thought about it in a long time, but I love what happened. Frank Galati saw my musical *Floyd Collins* that I wrote and directed in New York, and told Martha who then had just become artistic director that she had to go see it and we had to do it. Martha came, she loved it, we started talking about that, it became apparent that Steppenwolf had no idea what they were doing when it came to really producing a musical, and we just decided we should look for something else first. But I remember thinking at the time, "Oh, how is this going to work?" I mean, exactly what you just said, I said, "It's going to be oil and water, it's going to be a bunch of actors who don't want to make a shape and would rather quit and walk out of the rehearsal room, and me having to listen for, you know, five hours to someone talking about what their prop means and where they should put it." [Laughter] And I was like, "It's gonna be a disaster!" But I'll never forget one of the rehearsals of, it was *Time to Burn*, a Chuck Mee play. That was my first show, where Mike, the great Mike Nussbaum of Chicago theater fame, who was at that point older, the oldest person in the cast. And we were doing Viewpoints and what I did with Steppenwolf, as I do always with new people is say, "You don't have to love this. You don't have to think or feel anything other than I ask for two hours of an open heart to just

go with it and see what happens.” And I’ll never forget, at the end of that session, Mike raised his hand and I was like, “Oh no, what’s he gonna say? He’s gonna say this is crap, why are we doing this, we’re wasting time.” And he said, “I just want to share that you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

Audrey Francis:

Oh.

Tina Landau:

I know, I was so moved. Yeah. And then the second year, you know, I was doing *Space* and it was Amy and Bob Breuler and Tom Irwin. And I remember thinking, “good” because there was a famous story at that time how Rondi Reed had said to some director who was working at Steppenwolf doing something that wasn’t Viewpoints but something that was physically based or something did say, “I don’t do gestures,” and stormed out of rehearsal. And I’m not telling this out of school. I mean, you know, I’ve joked with Rondi about this. And I remember thinking again the same thing was gonna happen. It wasn’t till I really worked with, it was Amy, Mariann, Bob, Tom, I’m trying to think if there was another ensemble member in it, where, you know, I remember Amy and Tom throwing themselves at a wall and smashing an orange and just that, that they just did it. They just took that initial leap. And it’s just been a honeymoon ever since.

Audrey Francis:

Oh yeah.

Tina Landau:

And you know why Audrey? Because ultimately Viewpoints and the Steppenwolf way, if you will, are devoted to the same values, which are openness, listening, spontaneity, boldness. Like, the goal is the same, which is how do we create true and live moments in theater. And once you acknowledge that that’s what we’re all after, you, you start to understand that you’ll use anything that works to try to get there. So, you know, and Viewpoints are not *the* way I direct, they are *a* way I direct. And I would never do Viewpoints without text work, or without some other kind of approach or another one that, you know, it’s— anyway, I think that’s why it’s worked with me and Steppenwolf in the long run is because we’re, we’re trying to make the same kind of theater ultimately.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, one last question before we hit the lightning round. What is your half hour process? You can speak to it as an adapter, as a writer, as a director, but half hour before whether it’s a preview, opening, whatever, what do you do?

Tina Landau:

Yeah, that’s really good because I just realized that I do have a half hour process. And what I think of is half hour before having to speak. Like, speaking is, is my landscape of terror. *[Laughter]* And, and, you know, it’s why I am now, you know, when I go to my first day of rehearsal I always write down what I want to say. And again, it’s because I had, when I was very young, some situations where my anxiety and nerves got the better of me and I became very scared. I guess it’s not within stage fright, it was first day of rehearsal fright. And I still get that sometimes, like if I’m doing an interview— I’m not feeling it today, thank goodness, but that’s because you’re so welcoming and warm. But sometimes I still get it, so before I have to do anything, where I feel like there are expectations on me, I usually have to go and sit outside and not talk to anyone and, like, really connect with things like natural light.

Audrey Francis:

Hmm.

Tina Landau:

Just, just remember that, you know, what I'm about to do and the work we do is everything at times, but also nothing, and to have some kind of larger perspective. Like, I'd look at the sky. That's my half hour.

Stage Manager:

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

Audrey Francis:

Okay, you ready for the lightning round?

Tina Landau:

I didn't know there was a lightning round.

Audrey Francis:

Yeah, get ready. Alright, what's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

Tina Landau:

A script of Guy Adkin's that he gave to me shortly before he passed away that is his script of *Time of Your Life*.

Audrey Francis:

What animal do you most identify with?

Tina Landau:

A gazelle.

Audrey Francis:

Who is an artist or some artists who are giving you the most inspiration right now?

Tina Landau:

Gerhard Richter, the painter. Sylvia Rivera. The great trans icon and human whose story I've learned much about surrounding Stonewall. Sylvia Rivera is my inspiration today.

Audrey Francis:

Great. If you had a superpower, what would it be?

Tina Landau:

I want to fly.

Audrey Francis:

What do you daydream about?

Tina Landau:

I daydream stories. You know, I often find myself just sitting and imagining what would happen if this girl that I'm seeing walked into the woods, what would she meet there? And you know, stuff like that.

Audrey Francis:

Ooh, how often do those go dark? Do you ever catastrophize things? Or are you—?

Tina Landau:

No.

Audrey Francis:

Oh god, you're lucky. [Laughter] I'm a just a *Dateline* episode in my head one daydream after the other. Okay, what is one thing you do every day?

Tina Landau:

Drink coffee and drink wine.

Audrey Francis:

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

Tina Landau:

The Steppenwolf downstairs theater.

Audrey Francis:

Favorite piece of advice?

Tina Landau:

Again, I think if I thought about this longer I would have a different answer, but I'm gonna say the first thing that came to my mind which is, "in the time of your life live in the time of your life, live." In the time of your life, live. Which is what I have tattooed on my arm.

Audrey Francis:

How many times has that changed what your, what your mind was when you looked down at that? If you were about ready to do something, did you ever look at your arm and then change your mind?

Tina Landau:

No, I don't, I don't think I have. I think it's, it's more confirmation. It's more, I look down and it says, it's a big "yes and," or it says, if I'm feeling nervous about doing something— is this crazy of me to do? Is this too out there of me to say? I look down at it says, "No. You have one life. Live."

Audrey Francis:

Eat the fucking cake.

Tina Landau:

Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, great. Drink the fucking wine. Okay, final lightning round question.

Tina Landau:

This was not very lightning. This was like, you know, a 15 minute lightning round, but okay.

Audrey Francis:

And yet, one of the fastest that we've done.

Tina Landau:

[*Laughter*] Oh.

Audrey Francis:

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

Tina Landau:

Woman. Let's see... unidentified, mysterious woman in her late 50's with dark hair that continually covers her face as she... what's the word, like, flits, not flits, but like, trounces from side to side on the stage in her big dark baggy clothes sitting on this and that and then the other. [*Laughter*]

Stage Manager:

Alright, everyone, this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a wonderful show tonight. Places, please, places.

James Vincent Meredith:

That was great.

Audrey Francis:

Tina Landau, right?

James Vincent Meredith:

Oh man.

Caroline Neff:

She's unbelievable. She's perhaps one of the busiest people that I know between her stage work, between the work that she's doing at Little Island in New York, and between all the way she's involved at Steppenwolf, and to just feel like you're the only thing she's focused on in that moment is a talent that I wish that I had.

Audrey Francis:

Mhmm. One hundred percent.

James Vincent Meredith:

I think back to one of the shows that I did with her, and you know, the thing that she talked about as far as we have more space— I'm paraphrasing it—than we think we do. We're so much more than we think we are, you know. In the rehearsal room we tend to shrink initially and then find our place, and it's about kind of expanding, I think, and, and that's a hard lesson to learn when you first start working with her. I remember doing *Hot L Baltimore*, and she had us go away and come back with a song that we could sing that was kind of of the era. And we came back in the next day and people were knocking it out, of course Jon Hill is Jon Hill, right? You know, Jacqueline Williams, Jacqueline Williams, right? So they were, you know, tearing it up, you know, their voices are crazy. And then I went up there and I tried to sing something, and I was so nervous and so in my head and I could barely get through it, and I mixed up two different songs. Like, it was the strangest thing, and I felt like, just horrible. And yet she brought

me back in and she made me feel like I was still in and part of this and that, that was— had value. And I'll never forget that. So that to me is part of her. That's, you know, I feel nervous and strange, but I also feel safe when I'm in the room with her.

Audrey Francis:

Yeah. She really makes every artists feel that everything that they have to offer has a place in her room.

James Vincent Meredith:

Guys, sadly we're out of time. Thank you for listening to this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Audrey Francis:

And thanks again to our guest this week, Tina Landau.

Caroline Neff:

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

James Vincent Meredith:

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

Audrey Francis:

The voice of this episode's stage manager was Michelle Medvin.

Caroline Neff:

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James Vincent Meredith:

And all the folks at Steppenwolf

Audrey Francis:

Follow us on Twitter at @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram. And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org.

Caroline Neff:

In two weeks, we're gonna be back with a conversation with a very special guest— Leslie Odom Jr.

James Vincent Meredith:

Till next time, this is James Vincent Meredith—

Caroline Neff:

Caroline Neff—

Audrey Francis:

And Audrey Francis's personal assistant. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.