

CHATS & CONVERSATIONS

JONAH LISA DYER, SCREENWRITER & NOVELIST

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In life we come across people that simply make your day brighter. Jonah Lisa Dyer is one of those people. In college, I remember her smile, energy and her talent as an actress. Reconnecting via Facebook in recent years and talking with her online after twenty-plus years was an absolute joy. As I typed up this transcript, I found myself smiling and even openly laughing and very appreciative that she shared her knowledge, viewpoints and herself with me from her home in Idaho where it was snowing on this late April day. (ST)

ST: Perhaps the biggest challenge for students is having the confidence to take that big step after graduation and to pursue their dreams. What gave you the confidence to take that step and was New York your initial destination or were there places in-between?

JLD: There were definitely places in-between. My plan was to get my Screen Actors Guild card or Equity Card in the Dallas market and then either go to Los Angeles or NYC. I was leaning towards New York. I was doing theatre and commercial work in Dallas and I ended up getting my Screen Actors Guild card in an episode of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. So, I did that and then oddly my boyfriend, now my husband, he got a job offer and we did a film together called *Late Bloomer's* with his sisters. One of his sisters directed and one of them wrote. Stephen produced and I acted in it and we got into Sundance. I maybe wasn't quite ready to make the leap yet . . . like I was sort of just not doing it and I have this relationship, and I was Dallas based and I could have probably done that for a while, but he got a film production job from Tonya Wexler (who directed *Hysteria*) and she offered him a job doing development and producing for her in New York and that ended up being our catalyst. I wasn't really great at going like "It's time. I'm going to take that leap." I was still sort of in my, "Well, I'm doing this. I got my SAG card and my now my Equity card, so maybe I should go to L.A." But I had this relationship and then his job ended up being the thing that pushed me into a bigger market and going to New York.

ST: I read online that one of the shows you did in NYC was *Smoke on the Mountain*.

JLD: Yes, it was a great show. It was the revival at the Lambs Theatre.

ST: Being from the Ft. Worth/Dallas area, were you use to a larger city? Was there an adjustment when you moved to NYC? Did it feel pretty much the same or just bigger? And in particular, what were your experiences in regards to auditioning?

JLD: It was really hard. It was a lot harder than I expected it to be. Definitely being in Dallas was a bit of a proving ground and going to auditions. But it's different, just walking around to auditions rather than

driving around. Moving around in that way was very different. In the Dallas market you get to know the actors there, and in New York you don't know anybody, so that was difficult. It was like Dallas in a way, but also a completely different beast. Dallas to L.A. may have been more similar in terms of driving and culture, and just the logistics.

I did all the things you're supposed to do in NY. I signed up for classes and did workshops and I hung out at the Equity building and read the trades and did that for six years. I did that one big job and did some commercial work as well. And I got hired out of NYC into regional markets. In Dallas it was maddening because you can't get hired at the Dallas Theatre Center because they're bringing in New York actors and you're like, "Uh, give us locals a chance." And then when I lived in NYC I'd get hired to go to the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami or the Cincinnati Playhouse or in Boston and I would do shows around the country and make a living and have insurance. Work thirteen weeks in Cincinnati and nine weeks in Miami and that was fun.

ST: Was there anything specific in your academic background that prepared you to write screenplays or a be novelist?

JLD: I took one class with Tom Jones [Professor of Playwriting at Texas Tech]. That's it. I wasn't focused in that direction. I took the class and wrote one, one-act play. I don't think he thought I was anything special, I just took the class for my degree. That was not something that made me think "I can do this." I was singularly focused on acting. It was the six years of being in New York and beating on the doors. Sometimes it feels you're just begging people to recognize you have talent. You know you have it. The people around you know you have it. And the people who taught you know you have it. But you walk into those rooms to audition and there's maybe a baseline assumption that you have talent, but it's like a "proof it" mentality. It wears you down after a while.

Getting back to the original question, I don't think it was necessarily anything in my education that led me to that [being a writer]. As a little girl, before I discovered acting in 7th grade or 8th grade or something like that, I always thought I'd be a writer. It was something I identified with in elementary school. And so, it was kind of coming around in a way and it was a very backwards way of getting into writing, but it was through stand-up comedy. That was the little bridge, the stepping stone between acting and writing was stand-up comedy in the middle. It was partially because I was so tired of beating on doors and going, "Please recognize that I'm talented." I was like, "I just need to get onstage." Everything says that, all the books I remember reading at time. "Make your own opportunities and get on stage and do your one-woman show and do your whatever. Do the showcases and just get on stage." But, it's just really hard to do, really difficult to do. So, I said "I'm going to take a stand-up comedy workshop and get on stage." Stephen and I started working on writing my material together and we realized we were a really good writing team and we'd get excited and we'd be in our living room in New Jersey and I'd say something and then he'd get excited and he'd say, "Oh yeah, yeah, do this." And he'd add on and then I'd add on and it was really dynamic. It was fun and it was funny and we started writing that material. He was into producing and his sister was a screenwriter. He had this brilliant romantic comedy idea he'd been trying to pawn off on his sister, the writer, for like two years. He'd say, "You should write this thing." But she just couldn't really connect with it. And I was like, "Stop trying to give her that idea. It's a great idea and we should write it." So, we wrote it. It was a "never amounted to anything screenplay" called *Chinese Heaven*, a romantic comedy. It was just based on the idea that his sister had introduced us and she had done this three or four times and people would end up getting married. And someone had told her "If you do this seven times, you'll get into Chinese Heaven." So, she was on her way to Chinese Heaven. And it was just like, "What? What is that?" So, we wrote a

screenplay about a woman who couldn't find love herself but matched up all these people and had this concept of Chinese Heaven. It was like magic realism and it was a fun little thing. But, it got us all this attention and it got us a film agent and got us into a lot of meetings and really shifted our self-perception from producing and acting to being writers. "We're writers! We're writers! We've written this thing. We give it to people. They assume we're screenwriters. They don't know we're not screenwriters." They didn't know that. We wrote a screenplay, they liked it, we're screenwriters. Boom! So, we started self-identifying in that way and realized it was our ticket out of New York. Isn't that hilarious? It isn't our ticket into New York, but our ticket out of New York.

ST: On your web site you note moving to Idaho and working with screenwriter William Broyles [*Apollo 13, Cast Away, The Polar Express*]. How did that move come about and what kind of work did you do with him?

JLD: This is really the ridiculous thing, it's like (*jokingly*): "If you want to be a Hollywood screenwriter move to the mountains!" That's how you do it. You just have to stay open to possibilities because you just never know where they're going to come. We decided we were going to be writers and we had this success and we were going to write things and didn't know where we were going to land, but we knew we didn't want to be in New York anymore. Sometimes a little piece of advice I give young people when I'm doing a speaking engagement is that:

You don't always have to know what you want. Sometimes it's good enough to know what you don't want.

Sometimes that's the only clarity you have. And that was the only clarity we had. "We're sick of New York. We want to get out of here. This is not making us nice people and we're ready to leave." So, we left. We put all of our stuff in storage and got in a car and drove across country. We thought maybe Austin? Maybe upstate New York? Maybe it's time for L.A.? We went to L.A. for a month and we were like "Ycch." We didn't like that. So, we were like, "Let's go to Jackson Hole [Wyoming]. We'll live in Jackson Hole for a while with my aunt and uncle and see what's what because we always said, 'When we make our million dollars and we're rich we'll live in the mountains.'" And then we discovered the other side of Teton Pass. Jackson Hole is on the Wyoming side of the border and right across on the other side of the Tetons (or the back of the Tetons as the Jackson Hole people call it) is this little bedroom community in Idaho that's totally affordable. It's like the Hoboken [N.J.] of Jackson Hole. So we were like, "We could live here now." So, we decided to stay for a while and be ski bums and really give ourselves the space to figure out where we want to land and where we want to write and where we want to be to make that transition and that career happen. Anyway, I answered an ad in the *Jackson Hole Daily News* for: "Writer needs assistant. You have to have a sense of humor and no film." And I didn't know who it was. I answered the ad and I didn't know that Bill was from Texas, that he was huge and founded *Texas Monthly* and I was the only other screenwriter who applied for the job. So, he met me and we hit it off great and we had all these connections and I ended up working for him for six years. He lived in Jackson Hole. And that to us was like . . . in a Monty Python movie where like the big Terry Gilliam illustrated finger is pointing the finger of God: "That's the place!" We were just in this layover going: "Are we going to go back to New York and live up state and get out of the city or is it Austin or L.A., where are we going to go?" And that was the big finger of God saying, "You're there. That's where you're going to be." So, we bought land and built a house and I worked for Bill on *Flags of Our Fathers*, I worked on *Jarhead, The Polar Express* . . .

ST: What were your duties working with him and on those films?

JLD: Well, I was reading every draft and giving notes. I was basically . . . in the book world it would be your editor. I was the editor of his work. Coming from the magazine world he's a super-open, collaborative person who's really open to notes. So, I had a lot of creative input with him. I read every single draft. I gave notes. When he made notes, I inputted those notes. I sat in on his phone calls and took notes of his script meetings with Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, Robert Zemeckis, Ed Swick, Sam Mendes . . . all those people, and with my little headset typing those conversations and those interactions. I was on those calls and sometimes I was in the room and in those meetings and because he was open and collaborative, I was completely open to going, "You know, how about if...?" and I participated in those meetings. It was an MFA in Hollywood screenwriting is what it was.

ST: An astounding experience.

JLD: Yes, and I just stumbled into it . . .

ST: . . .because you answered an ad.

JLD: Just because I opened a newspaper one day in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It was magical! And we talk about that period in our lives . . . you know we all have those moments where it's like, "I was riding the wave. I was surfing the universe." You know? I could point to anything and I could have it. It was a brief moment . . . like eight months of our lives. "Tell me what you want. I'm magic right now and I can make it happen." And we talk about that. "How do we get back into that space?" Where it's just happening, you know. It's not sustainable, but it was a magic moment.

ST: You and your husband Stephen are a writing team and he often works in an office away from home while you write at home. Do each of you have specific responsibilities in terms of plot, dialogue, action, etc.? In essence, what's your writing process?

JLD: It's changed over the years and partially because we have the years before we had children and the years after we had children. That certainly changed my relationship with work in a big way and probably his to a little bit lesser degree. We use to be like, "You write three scenes and then I'll write three scenes" and that has morphed into "Write as much as you can. Get as far as you can and when you can't get any farther" we pass it off to the next person so we do that a little bit more now. We always work on our plots and work on our characters and develop all that together on our feet, like you and I are talking right now . . . walking around our living room, taking notes longhand and then one of us will have more time because of our kids and whatever stage of life they're in. For the first six years I always defaulted to him as the first drafter and over the last several years I've gotten more into drafting, but for a long time I was the second (phase two) because I just didn't have the brain-power left to do that work.

ST: In my classes I often speak of collaboration, compromise and cooperation. Which one of those three words best describes the process that you and Stephen embrace and why?

JLD: Oh my gosh, all of them are super important. Collaboration just feels natural. Maybe it's coming out of the theatre. I definitely find that my theatre background helps with my writing and my collaboration as a writer immensely. Maybe it's the director / actor relationship that I'm replaying . . . that I'm really use to. But I would say that perhaps the toughest one and probably the most important is compromise. That's really tough. Most of the time we agree on the big points. We write tonally (because

there are two of us), we write to a tone. It can't be my voice and then his voice because we're both writing and it can feel discordant. It can't feel like a different person wrote this scene and another wrote another scene or this character changes from my voice to Stephen's voice. We really have to focus on the same tone so we're both writing to the same thing so you can't tell I wrote this chapter and he wrote another chapter or I had more of hand in one scene and he in another. So, compromise becomes really important because we don't always agree. And I would say pre-kids that it was harder and we really fought more vehemently and for our own individual point of view and "I'm right." Maybe it's because we had kids or maybe it would have happened anyway in our partnership because we got more comfortable with it and are more trusting of each other as writing partners, but we don't really fight as much anymore. One of us may go: "Sure let's try it your way." because we know it's going to come back around. When you do fifty passes through a screenplay you know you're going to get another bite, another whack at that piñata.

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So, it's like: "Alright, let's go with yours. If you're so dead set on that, let's go with it." Because chances are the next time I read through it, [*whispering*] I won't even remember. It will either work or it won't and I'll get another shot at my idea. You know?

ST: It reminds me of the actor / director relationship. For me, as a director, it doesn't matter where the idea comes from. If it's best for the show, let's do that. There are times when I'm asked about a specific moment in a show and I can't remember who contributed what.

JLD: That's right, you don't. So, the process for us...it's evolved into: "I can tell you have stronger feeling for this than I do. I think it should be A, you think it should be B, but you seem really more invested in B than I am in A, so I'm going to let you go and we're going to hold A in reserve." Conversely, it may be "Know that I'm so positive this is right I will not stand down." And then he has that internal dialogue. "She's really invested in A so I'm going to back off this." Let it happen that way and know that we have a plan B.

ST: Let's chat about *Hysteria* for a moment? How did such a premise for the film come about and tell me a bit about the research that was necessary either before or during the writing of this film? Also, it took seven years for this film to be made?

JLD: *Away and Back* was ten. I'll tell you that story next. *Hysteria* came to us as a one-sentence idea. The director that Stephen was working with, Tanya Wexler (he was producing her films and they were trying to get a slate of movies made) and we were beginning to transition . . . and when we moved here to write, Stephen kept his job with her and he commuted once-a-month to New York for like a week. This was while I was beginning my job with Bill Broyles and Tanya went into a toy store . . . not an adult toy store . . . I just realized I . . . and *Hysteria* is fraught with those kinds of puns and you can't even help yourself. But, she walked into a toy store and she was talking with the owner who was also a film producer and who had found and produced *Finding Neverland*, but she owned a toy store, because that's how this business is, and they were talking and got to know each other and "We should really make a movie together one day." And they just really hit it off. Her name is Tracey Becker and Tracey told Tanya, "I have this idea for a film. I gotta find writers, you'd be the perfect director for this film. It's about the doctor who invented the vibrator in 1880's London." And that was the idea. And Tanya was

like, "That's brilliant!" And she pitched it to us and we had what we call our "jump off the couch moment" which is when we hear an idea and go: "I have to do that." or "I know how to do that." With stuff that other people pitch us that's how we know we need that. So, we had that moment with *Hysteria*. I even remember telling Bill one day and he was like: "I don't know what you do with that? How do you not make that a Saturday Night Live episode?" And it was like: "Yeah. Is it a one-joke idea?" So, we started working on it with Tanya and Tracey . . . no money, it was just a speck idea . . . and we came up with the characters and the tone. We had to figure out what kind of film it was going to be. Obviously, it's going to be a comedy, but it's Victorian England and so we watched a lot of screwball comedies, a lot of 1930's Cary Grant and Hepburn and we settled on *Holiday* and we thought, "That kind of plot could work with this." We absorbed it a little bit and tried to create a sort of merchant ivory meets screwball comedy film and we really also tried to channel the voices from that time. We were kind of writing for Kathryn Hepburn and Hugh Grant, not Cary Grant but Hugh Grant, even though obviously, they'd never be in a movie together, but those were our prototypes for those two characters and we worked on it for a long time and then they found a London producer, the woman who did *Her Majesty Mrs. Brown*, and she had some other kind of arty films in London and it was just a long time of getting the writing done, getting to her and getting rewrites done at every stage and then finally getting it made in London.

ST: When you went to the premiere, what was that like for you?

JLD: It was really wonderful, but I have to say that even more wonderful than that . . . well, first let me say, it is wonderful. Sitting in a full theatre at the Toronto Film Festival, in like a thousand seat theatre on a huge screen and we were in the mezzanine and hearing people laugh and laugh so much that jokes were lost. They were laughing so hard at the first thing they didn't even hear the real zinger. So, that was wonderful and amazing. But, even more amazing than that was walking on set the first day. The house, the doctor's office? I mean, in a screenplay we had put descriptions of the doctor's office, but we didn't talk about the wall paper or the ephemera on his desk or those things and yet, the design, the production design had captured everything that was in our minds. And so here we had been writing this script in this cabin in Idaho and then these people built it and then we got to walk around in it and touch stuff and look at what was on the desk with the writing and the fountain pens and the books on the shelves and it was just amazing to walk around in this dream that you had created. That was maybe the most shocking and intense experience.

ST: The film is so rich in its design, but each character is fun and engaging on every level.

JLD: We always joke . . . and we just came up on this term, but we write soft-core feminism. That's what we write. We realized it about a year ago. We were like, "That's what we do." We write soft-core feminism. It's like feminism light. It's like feminism with sprinkles.

ST There are many inspirations for a playwright, a novelist or screenwriter. I take it that *Away and Back* might never have happened if you and your family were living anywhere else than where you do in Idaho?

JLD: Our surroundings more than our family. We have a pond not far from our house where swans come each winter . . . trumpeter swans come each winter because the pond doesn't freeze over and we had seen a lot of swans there and we had also seen flappers on the electric lines here because swans had died there. We have hiking right outside our house where we just going up into the national forest behind our house. And we were up there one day within the first year or so we lived here and there

was a little ten-year old girl on a full-sized ATV stuck in the mud and she was a mile up into the forest all by herself and she was just rocking this ATV trying to get it out of the mud. And we walked up and said, "Hey what are you doing? You know, like "You're all alone up in the woods. You're ten, on a giant ATV." And she was just up there having a good time. She wasn't worried or concerned, except her ATV was stuck in the mud, and she asked us to help her rock it and then she got it out of the ditch it was in and then she was like, "Bye." And took off and we were like, "What the hell?" But, it was very Idaho. She was just this little country girl in her back yard, essentially playing. And we were like, "That is a fabulous character." And then we read this newspaper article, again the *Jackson Hole Daily News*, about some swans that had been released and one of the signets was lost in the migration and they were asking for spotters to watch out for a bird with this leg band and it was sort of region wide to look out for this tagged bird. So, we just put that all together. We just started learning...and to circle back to your research question...you can't force someone to be curious about something but if you are just a curious person and if you just cultivate a general curiosity about the world, then research isn't this really dry boring thing. It's a need. I have to know. I have to know more! I don't know if you can create that in school? Maybe you can, but I think it's just your *need* to know something. I didn't have that level of curiosity about...even theatre history when I was a theatre major. I didn't need to know it. I *had* to know it. Research born out of pure curiosity doesn't feel like research.

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It just feels like following your mind on a fabulous journey. We wanted to know more. Where are the swans going? What are they doing and why do we have these little flapper things on our lines? And my gosh, what if they died and what if a little girl saw that? It just kind of all came together.

ST: Now, if I remember correctly, a year or so ago you and Stephen were on a trip to Europe exploring castles I believe.

JLD: We did, we went to Denmark. We were in Copenhagen.

ST: Was this a research trip for a future project?

JLD: It was absolutely a research thing. It was actually through *Hysteria* . . . again another fabulous research experience. A Danish producer saw *Hysteria* and had an idea about the telling of a story of a very famous monarch, Christian IV (very famous in Denmark). Our whole perspective of that time is very Elizabethan, very English oriented because they ended up with the Empire. But at the time, they didn't have the Empire, the Danes had the Empire because they had the ports and they were a much bigger deal and they were growing and at the time the Danes were the big power house of Europe. She actually thought we were British (*laughter*) . . . and so did Jonathan Pryce. He thought we were Brits too. Anyway, she came looking for us and found us and pitched us the idea. It wasn't maybe an off-the-couch moment, but we thought "That's a pretty good idea." And she wanted to bring us to Denmark to discuss it more and research and we were like, "We're yours." So, we went there for two weeks and basically did a two-week intensive on the Danish monarchy of the late 1500's, early 1600's.

ST: Is this a project you're currently working on?

JLD: It's a project we're currently working on for Danish television. We've done preliminary work, pitched it and they are trying to get funding for a TV series.

ST: Ultimately the arts are a business whether we like to acknowledge it or not.

JLD: Yes, they are. People always ask: “What’s the hardest part of being a professional writer?” I’m like, “cash flow”. It’s not ideas and where they come from. It’s not sitting in a chair and writing. All of that is incredibly hard and so is cash flow.

ST: You and your co-writer and husband, Stephen recently signed a deal to turn your novel, *The Season* into a film. Congratulations! As I read this very enjoyable book I couldn’t help but think it would be a great film as you’ve both made it so easy for the reader to visualize the specific location, the action (whether it’s on the soccer field, interaction with other characters or the beautiful debutante dresses). The attention to detail is amazing and I imagine will be an asset for the director, designers and production team. Were you an athlete in high school? Did you play soccer? Did Stephen?

JLD: Stephen was very athletic. He played a lot of sports and actually went to his first college on a baseball scholarship. I played little girl soccer but I was not an athlete at all.

ST: So, tell me a bit about the process of writing a book and the research . . . obviously you’re both from Texas . . . we’re you a debutante?

JLD: I was not a debutante. I was incredibly blue-collar, middle-class family. Stephen is the one with the debutante pedigree. He came from a very nice, University Park family and he was sort of in a family that was sort of in the Dallas scene. His aunt and grandmother on both sides, all of his cousins, his mother, all did the debutante balls so he sort of has that in his history. So, we had family members to talk to all about that. We had my discomfiture of kind of being in that family and going to lunch with his grandmother at the Dallas Country Club and not being from that world at all and which fork do I use . . . that sort of feeling. And then just growing up in Texas and growing up around those people and knowing those women and those families . . . so there was a little bit of research and certainly Stephen knew sports and soccer, but that was much more drawing from your own experience and imagining what a person in a certain circumstance might be experiencing and feeling, more than heavily researched based.

ST: When you write do you have a particular actor or actress in mind?

JLD: Yes. I don’t know if everyone does that but we do. We do fantasy casting. We’ll actually print out headshots and pin them on the board as we’re writing and think about how that person looks. Sometimes it’s an amalgam [of people] and sometimes it’s a real person and sometimes it’s Kathryn Hepburn from these three films and we’re writing that kind of Hepburn / [Spencer] Tracey banter for that character.

ST: And you channel their rhythms?

JLD: Yeah, sometimes you do. We were hired by Sony after *Hysteria* to write the screenplay for *The Pioneer Women*, Ree Drummond. She’s a cooking show personality and she was an L.A. PR girl who married an Oklahoma rancher and became a ranch wife and she wrote this blog for years called “The Pioneer Women” about being a ranch wife and what that life is like and going from high heels to tractor wheels and falling in love with someone completely different.

ST: “High heels to tractor wheels”, that sounds like a country song.

JLD: Right. Well, they hired us to write the screenplay for it and Reese Witherspoon was attached and it didn't end up getting made. We got paid handsomely to write it and it was a great job and we worked in the studio system, but it has never seen the light of day and never will. It will sit on a shelf somewhere and never get made. But, in that instance we were going back and looking at Reese Witherspoon movies and seeing what's in her bag of tricks? What's she really good at? What's she like as an actress so we can bring her voice to life.

ST: Switching gears again, if you were to talk to a group of students what advice do you have for young students in regards to networking?

JLD: I will give you a real-world example of this. Networking is super important. Networking is such a nebulous term when you're not in the business world to know what that really means. To me it just means care-taking relationships. When you develop a relationship with somebody just keep it up. Don't let that relationship go. I mean, what's it been, twenty years Steve? (*[A personal guilt trip is taken by the interviewer.]*) I mean sometimes they come back and we're going to talk about your book.

ST: Well, I was always the older guy. The older married guy with kids [back at Texas Tech].

JLD: But keeping those relationships with those people who are doing the same thing or close to the same thing is important. My real-world example is that one year we were pitching an idea to a director at his production company . . . to an executive at his production company and she didn't like it that much, but she had read *Away and Back* (which at the time was called *Big Sky*) . . . she had read it as a sample and she loved it. She just loved it. And they weren't going to make it. It wasn't part of their mandate. It wasn't what they were looking for. But she just kind of held on to it and she back-pocketed it. And we kept up with her . . . we had this one meeting with her and talked to her for years. We'd touch base once-a-year and just kind of go: “How's it going Naketha?” And she'd be like: “It's going great. I still want to make that swan movie.” We didn't have any kind of deal with her, any paper. She just loved it. And she moved companies and at one point she was at Disney TV and she hired us because she just always thought of us. She hired us to do a rewrite on something they had. We got paid and again it never got made but that kept us going for a year. Then she was at Lifetime for a while and with her TV stuff she ended up knowing people at Hallmark . . . ten years later! She is the reason *Away and Back* was made at Hallmark Hall of Fame . . . because she loved it and because we just kept that relationship alive and we just checked in with her periodically. She finally found a home . . . we thought it was a Disney movie. When we first wrote it we pitched it to Walden and Disney and all these places and places got interested, but at the time it was: “We're making Narnia.” They don't really make these little bitty movies that is TV and she just kind of carried it to her TV world. To me that is networking, just not letting relationships fade away with people that are in the same business you are in.

ST: In the academic world (hypothetically) there may be a student here or there that has a bit of attitude or an over-blown ego. If you were to talk with students about interacting with people in the industry what might be a good course of action?

JLD: Oh gosh, mutual respect you know life is just too short to be an asshole. We get to work with some really high-class assholes sometimes and it's difficult. It's one of the reasons we live out here and not in Los Angeles. It's just not worth it to have to deal with difficult people. And I think I honestly figured that out on stage and carried that into screenwriting because we've all worked with jerks and it's just no fun and yeah, some people can be jerks and get to work again and again, but I would say that's the

exception and not the rule. My experience is the nicer you are the better your chances of being rehired and people carrying your script around for ten years. Because not only is it a good script that they really want to make, but its: "I really like those people. I would like to work with those people." Those are the relationships that you chase. It matters in this business.

ST: What haven't I asked you that you would like people to know about the Dyers or about you or about the profession?

JLD: Hmmm . . . I would say defining success is really important. If you don't define success for yourself and what it means for you, you get this kind of default definition of success by society which is very often unattainable or at least almost impossible. And it's funny, but Stephen and I have a really hard time thinking of ourselves as successful screenwriters. When I look at everything laid out on paper it seems absolutely ridiculous, but you know *Hysteria* was not a hit. It wasn't a hit. It left theaters quickly and didn't make a lot of money. It was marketed as an art house movie instead of as a mainstream movie and it didn't hit with art house audiences. It was soft-core feminism and it wasn't smack-you-in-face feminism it didn't really hit as an art house movie. *The Season?* We got a huge advance on *The Season* but we didn't earn out our advance and it did alright, but it's not considered a successful book. And that's ridiculous [regarding the term success]. We have a house. We have cars. We have our kids. We do whatever we want. We can travel if we want to. We have two movies that have been made. A book that has been published and Warner Brothers is going to make our book into a movie. And sometimes it's tough to feel successful. We're not known writers. No one is beating on our doors. No one is calling up and asking: "Will you write this or do this." So, I think it's important to start out with your own definition of success and that you can feel good about. It's the thing that got me out of acting. I was working with an 80-year old woman who when she took off her winter hat she also took off her wig. A pack-a-day vegetarian who lived in a fifth floor walk-up and she was New York through and through. She had been doing what I was doing in New York her whole life and I had just gotten a commercial for the Beef Council, you know: "Beef, what's for dinner" those commercials? And it was a HUGE job. I was in this commercial, I played a bridesmaid, I didn't even talk, but it was a huge exciting deal. And we were talking and she was talking about an audition she was excited to go on and I realized looking at her that: "This is success as actor. What I am experiencing right now and what this woman is talking about, that's success as an actor. I'm not going to be happy with that when I'm fifty." And so that was a real wake-up moment for me. Achieving that success as an actor is not going to make me happy. I'm only going to be happy as an actor if I achieve this crazy pinnacle . . . like if I'm Julia Roberts. And the likelihood of that happening and me finding happiness and success because that's what I'm going to define happiness and success as was like, "Wow. I should look for something else that's going to make me happy." So, I think defining success for yourself before you go into the marketplace and before society defines success for you in their huge outsized way is really important.

ST: Final thoughts?

JLD: Relating back to another question regarding what I learned from theatre: I think maybe the most important thing I learned from theatre, that I've been able to carry over into every aspect of my life (certainly as a writer), but even as a human being and as parent, is empathy.

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I don't know if you learn it when you're working in the design area or if you want to be a lighting technician, but as an actor and in the directing program and in screenwriting programs, you're definitely learning to put yourself in other people's shoes constantly . . . maybe doctor's get taught that, although I hear that is the part of medicine that is the least taught in academic settings, and it's so taught in theatre. You're constantly being taught and asked to imagine yourself in certain situations and I think that's so important. I think you can get that in other things like literature. I think that happens when we read. We put ourselves in the shoes of the characters and that's why certain themes like in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Christmas Carol* keep coming back. They're classics for a reason. They teach us about our humanity and that's why we keep reading them and want to update them. Those themes are big and they teach us something. That's what theatre does. It teaches us about other human beings and in turn makes you a better human being. And that's what I learned in theatre in Voice for the Actor and Mask with [George] Sorenson and on stage in *A My Name is Alice* and anything I did in theatre, I was always learning about empathy. If there's a theme for theatre education I think that's what it is, empathy.

You know, it's just storytelling. That's what I learned when I made the switch from acting to writing. You have this identity whether it's teacher, salesman or actor or whatever. And it's really hard to let an identity go and to move on to something different and it was really hard to say, "I'm not going to be an actor." What? Like this is what I've been doing since 8th grade and this is what I thought I was always going to do. I had to change how I self-identified and recognize that: "Oh, I'm not an actor. I'm a storyteller." I'm still a storyteller, I just tell stories in a different way. Some people tell stories as painters or as actors or directors or teachers. There are so many different ways to tell stories and that is what I am. That's what I do. I tell stories.

ST: And you do it very well.

JLD. Thank you.
