

#008 Emmy Winner Erin Cherry Pt. 1

Charlie Sandlan (00:00):

I am back in New York City. Put the phone back in your pocket. Creating Behavior starts now.

Charlie Sandlan (00:10):

(singing)

Charlie Sandlan (00:11):

Hello my fellow daydreamers from New York fucking City. It is my first episode of Creating Behavior since we have been back in New York and it feels good. We got back in the beginning part of June. We actually got back the first night of the curfew when a lot of the violent protesting and deluding was going on. The city was pretty locked down. We had to show our driver's license and passports to get into the Lincoln Tunnel. It was a shock to the system. We certainly were in a bubble for three months living down in Guatemala with Trish's parents but it's good to be back. It's good to be back in the city that I love even though it is not the city that I left on March 11th.

Charlie Sandlan (01:29):

The city's decimated. Shops are boarded up. The restaurants are boarded up. It's devastating. I think it's going to take a number of years before we get back to the city that we've known.

Charlie Sandlan (01:51):

I was up early this morning and I have been working through Layla Saad's book, *Me and White Supremacy* and it's made me deeply reflective and upset. I'm going to talk about it in a couple of episodes but let me just say that if you are white and you actually want to become disruptive when it comes to your white supremacy or racism, your complacency, your white silence, which I am certainly complicit in, you need to read her book and you need to do the writing prompts that are an integral part of reading, her incredible and insightful book on white privilege and

white supremacy. As an actor, as an artist, you owe it to yourself, you owe it to the people in your life that you collaborate with, that you work with, people of color, indigenous, black, and your white colleagues to begin to start to educate yourself so that you can be disruptive and it's important.

Charlie Sandlan (03:17):

We have a voice. We are artists. We are actors and our job is to illuminate the human condition to stand up and testify and bear witness. You can't do that if you do not have the courage to intervene and to examine who you are and how you operate in the world. It is important as an artist to do that. It brings me now to what I'm just really honored and privileged to do and that is to have a conversation with one of my best friends Erin Cherry.

Charlie Sandlan (03:59):

Emmy Award winning actress Erin Cherry. I just can't believe that I get to say that. Cherry won an Emmy for her Amazon show, *After Forever*, which you can stream on Amazon. She's been a friend of mine for over 20 years. We first met in 1998 when we were classmates at Rutgers University, Mason Gross School of the Arts, where we got our MFA. She has been like a sister to me and I'm just honored to have her. Let's just get right to our conversation. Here's Erin Cherry.

Erin Cherry (04:39):

I'm really excited about us connecting in a different way than we have in the past. I think the first time really for us to dive into conversations that we haven't had, we touched upon, but to get really deep into them, I'm really looking forward to that.

Charlie Sandlan (04:53):

That's why I wanted you on because you are like family to me. We were in grad school together. We were classmates. We've known each other for 20 years. You were one of the few Americans to brave a trip to Guatemala for our failed wedding.

Erin Cherry (05:07):

I still don't think it was... It didn't fail in my eyes because the love and the ceremony happened. You guys had the ceremony. I wish it went in a different way.

Charlie Sandlan (05:20):

Of course.

Erin Cherry (05:21):

I just feel like COVID can't stop love. That's the lesson.

Charlie Sandlan (05:26):

That's true but you made the trip and you put yourself at risk. This was in mid-March and it meant a lot to me. I have to tell you.

Erin Cherry (05:33):

It meant a lot for me to be invited. Thank you. I don't get invited to a lot of weddings. When you invited me to yours, I was like, "Oh, yeah," this is definitely a sign of love because to witness somebody falling in love and getting married to the love of their life and you're invited to see that, that says a lot without having to say.

Charlie Sandlan (05:56):

That's sweet. Well, I wanted you on because there's just so much to talk about. The world's in turmoil artistically and socially and you have a lot to say, not only an artist and an actor, a really good one but you use your voice to fight for things that you believe in. I mean, you've wanted to act since you were a kid.

Erin Cherry (06:21):

Yes. Since I was about six or seven, my mother took me to see my first play. Well, the first play that I remember because she said that she was taking me to see plays even before the age of seven, but it was for Colored Girls. I just remember the colors, these black women, beautiful black woman on stage with different colors on. That's all I can remember.

Erin Cherry (06:46):

Then there was this moment that happened in the play where one of the characters talks about her partner killing her children. She let out this curdling scream and I just remember sitting up in my

chair, my eyes big as saucers and just looking at my mother and rocking in my chair and saying, "This is what I want to do. This is what I want to do."

Erin Cherry (07:12):

It's interesting because my mother talked about how I was just so mesmerized and it was hard to keep me still because I had all this energy, but I was just so mesmerized watching these women on stage and just not you talking and just for a seven-year-old to sit through a play and not talk and just be mesmerized and just look at these women on stage, I knew that's what I wanted to do.

Erin Cherry (07:36):

For my mother to bring me to a play where I can see myself reflected, that was just so important to me. I look back and I was like, "Wow, I wonder who I would be if I didn't see these black women on stage, if I didn't see this play." It was very important for my mother to make sure that I saw myself in a lot of ways.

Charlie Sandlan (07:56):

Yeah, I would think most people of color, it's a long time before they see themselves reflected either on stage or on screen or TV.

Erin Cherry (08:04):

Yeah, it was very important for my mother to do that because my mother, born and raised in New Orleans, went to HBC, all black college, very much into black love, love of self, the voices of black women. She was always that way even before I was born. She just instilled that in me and that's what she told me that as an infant, she would take me to see plays and art shows and dance classes because for her at the time, arts was a way out for me to be able to express myself in a world that doesn't allow me to have expression.

Charlie Sandlan (08:47):

Yeah, and so then you end up going to UNLV for your undergrad.

Erin Cherry (08:51):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandlan (08:51):

I mean, what was it like to be in a predominantly white program with white plays and white actors? What was that experience like and I'm sure it's like this pretty much in every theater department in the country predominantly white?

Erin Cherry (09:12):

Yeah, PWIs is what we call them, PWIs.

Charlie Sandlan (09:17):

Predominantly White-

Erin Cherry (09:18):

Institutions.

Charlie Sandlan (09:19):

Oh, see? I'm learning so much. I never heard that before.

Erin Cherry (09:23):

Yeah, when you hear black people say, "PWI," that's it means.

UNLV is a regret. I don't have that many regrets, but I do regret it.

At the time, I was really young 17, 18 wanting to stay close to my mother at the time for a number of reasons but it's a regret that I

have. I look back and I was like, "Man, if there was one thing I

should have done, I should have gone to an HBCU for undergrad because my parents went to HBCU, it's big in my family HBCUs.

UNLV, I was the only black woman in my class. It was a very hard time and trying to speak up and say, "Hey, I want to act. I want to do what my classmates are doing." It was very hard.

Erin Cherry (10:18):

It's one of the reasons why I knew I had to go to grad school because I didn't get the training that I deserved in undergrad. If I wanted to go to LA or go to New York and figure out a life in the arts in whatever way that was going to be at the time, I knew that I wouldn't be able to compete. I decided, I talked to one of my professors who I was very close to and I said, "I really think I need to go to grad school so I can get the training to be on stage, so I can get more in depth training with my craft because I didn't get a lot of attention in undergrad."

Erin Cherry (10:58):

Also too, I didn't get a lot of stage time, maybe one or two plays, the class Raisin in the Sun, I did Beneatha which was a great experience but it's like there's other things in Raisin in the Sun even at that time. Like now, there's so much more but even at that time, there was other plays than just the Raisin in the Sun. It put me on the path to make sure that I go to grad school, hence, put me on the path to be where I'm at today, hence, all the way to the Emmy because I feel like if I would have gone to just LA or New York, I don't know where my career would be without the training.

Charlie Sandlan (11:32):

Yeah, I mean, that's what spurred you to go to grad school?

Erin Cherry (11:37):

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, because of the fact that I was overlooked and I didn't get enough attention as far as training in class or on stage and then I knew I needed more training if I wanted to have the career that I wanted to have.

Charlie Sandlan (11:51):

Can you just talk to me what you mean about being overlooked, because I hear that and I know that that means something.

Erin Cherry (11:57):

Yes, overlooked meaning that you don't get, even if you're the best actress for the job, you're not going to get cast. You see some of your classmates who are not as great or they're mediocre or they're not even putting in the work the way that I feel at the time they should and they still get a lot of time on stage. We had a playwriting program in a musical theater program. It was like, the playwrights at the time had their favorite actors. They would write what they knew they would write especially, there were more white men playwrights too and they would just write what they knew and they would cast the white actors and I wasn't in the popular club.

Erin Cherry (12:44):

It's interesting because the popular white men and white women of my undergrad, a lot of them aren't working or a lot of them are

still in Vegas and they're doing their theater, but they have all tried to reach out to me and say, "Oh, my gosh, your career, I just I love what you're doing. I can't believe it," because I didn't give up and also too I knew things weren't going to be handed to me.

Erin Cherry (13:11):

Even though I was overlooked, even though I walked into an audition and I would be prepared and be the right person for the role, it just caused me to go more into my work, more into myself and to say, "Okay, you know what, not here. It's going to happen somewhere else but I'm not going to stop training because I have to be twice as good." That's just something that in the black community, you're told since you're a kid, my mother and my father, you have to be twice as good because in order to break the glass ceiling and show up and be excellent in black excellence, you have to have what we talked about, you know this Charlie, about the virtuosity has to be seen because it has to be undeniable.

Erin Cherry (13:56):

You look at Savion Glover and it's like, "Okay, yeah, he deserves to be where he's at because no one can match that," but he has to be twice as good or triple time as good in order to get there. That's how I look at it.

Charlie Sandlan (14:11):

I mean, we have this shared experience of spending three years at Rutgers.

Erin Cherry (14:15):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (14:16):

Spending time with Maggie Flanigan and Bill Esper.

Erin Cherry (14:19):

[inaudible 00:14:19].

Charlie Sandlan (14:22):

Looking back now, I mean, almost two decades, how do you look back at those three years and what it did for you?

Erin Cherry (14:31):

I look back at the three years, it kicked my ass, can I say ass?

Charlie Sandlan (14:35):

Oh, yes you could. [inaudible 00:14:36].

Erin Cherry (14:38):

Okay, good because I'm like you just don't know going in so I have to make sure because I can let something slip. I can let something slip. I look back finally because Maggie, my relationship with Maggie is beautiful in the sense of she challenged me man. She pushed me and pushed me and pushed me because you know because you were there. I came in very. I'm still radical, but in a different way. I'm very radical. I'm in my beliefs, which I don't even think I should use the word radical anymore because they're not really radical. They're just human rights, but at the time, it was considered radical because a lot of people weren't talking about them, but it's like, "Nope, just stop killing us. That's not a radical idea. It's just very human."

Erin Cherry (15:25):

I came in very militant, just from my upbringing. Maggie just would not back down because she saw my humanity and that's one thing that I love about her is because she took the time to really get me to be vulnerable with my humanity and not be afraid, even though I was brave in so many other ways is just as a black woman in this world, letting down your guard is a big no, no, right?

Erin Cherry (15:54):

For her to guide me and help me get to a place where I can be vulnerable and I can show all of my humanity, my blackness on stage and nothing's going to happen to me, right? It's kind of like what we do as teachers with our training, you come in and you're so afraid to just daydream or you're so afraid to be vulnerable and be done too because you think something's going to happen to you and the more you do it, you realize, "Okay, you're safe." That's what Maggie provided for me. She gave me a safe

environment around a lot of white people in our class and our teachers and the institution, but I don't know, I can't put into words. She gave me a safe environment.

Erin Cherry (16:38):

Bill, even though he wanted to give me a safe environment, it was tough love because he was just like, "No, not good. Again. Do it again. Do it again." I really liked the fact that he invested in me in that way because, again, back to the word overlooked, it's a lot of black and brown, people of color artists get overlooked. For a teacher to really instill in you what it means to act, not all teachers do that with their students of color, right? They let them get by with so much just being mediocre or just not being able to have a voice, I guess. Yeah.

Charlie Sandlan (17:19):

Yeah, I remember she said to you, "Why do you have this wall up?"

Erin Cherry (17:23):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (17:24):

You've got this wall and you said, "Well, because I'm a black woman in America."

Erin Cherry (17:28):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandlan (17:29):

I see this with my students of color too, as you try to give them the permission to have anger to express themselves, what was it like to just find a relationship with your own anger and to have that voice and to be able to stand up for yourself and to not feel like there's going to be any repercussions for that. I mean, that must have been really difficult.

Erin Cherry (17:52):

Yeah, it was really difficult. It was very scary, but the fear of my anger was how... I have this saying of, "I'm saving myself from you," especially as I get older now, a lot of things don't get me

angry anymore. I use my anger in a different way. If I really need to utilize my anger, then people will know because I don't want to walk around and just have this anger and just and everything is a fight and everything is a battle because when I really need to speak... Sorry, because when I really need to speak, I want to be heard. If I'm continually misdirecting my anger in ways then it's going to shut people out.

Erin Cherry (18:31):

You have to learn to be strategic with your anger in a lot of ways in that way but for me, it was more of, how are you guys? How are people in my class? How are Maggie? How do I protect them because of this if, I show my anger, if I really allow my rage to come out and then how is it going to be taken and is somebody going to be like what the kids call today a Karen or somebody's going to be with the kids call today a Ken and just not see my anger as part of the humanity spectrum on this planet.

Erin Cherry (19:05):

Even in the classroom of being an artist, just allowing my anger to show and then having people afraid of that and they see me in a different way, and also not wanting to work with me or not wanting to be on stage with me or not trusting me, it's all of those things because your life, again, what you do in everyday life comes over and spills over into the classroom, right? You have to either learn or learn certain things. For me, it was more of I have to learn how to have this trust and vulnerability but how do I do it? I have to be in a safe environment. How do I do that? I have to see where Maggie's coming from and if she's genuine and I have to look at my classmates and see if it's going to be safe the minute my anger starts to show. Am I going to be shunned for it?

Erin Cherry (19:59):

As I started to see those things not happening, then I gave myself permission. It's about the teachers. It's about teaching. As you are coming into this and I've watched you do this, as they start to trust you and know that they could be saved and that you're going to

accept them regardless, especially with the black men that we've trained over the years, when they start to feel the safe, that it's okay and that you still love them and see them the same afterwards, that's when you start to see a change and I think you do a good job with that.

Charlie Sandlan (20:31):

I'm going to go a little off topic here only because you made me start thinking about the classroom. I had a student of color who emailed me and just a week or so ago, talking about how they haven't really felt safe in my class and she brought up a particular moment where in the exercise, in Meisner exercise where you're being told to express yourself and say what you want with repercussions, she was called a spick in the exercise. They both got really enraged and her white partner threw that epithet at her and her point to me was that, "You didn't say that was wrong. You didn't address it and you just told me that it was part of the work."

Charlie Sandlan (21:21):

It made me think about like, how do you allow people to be able to fully and freely express themselves without repercussions and then talk and deal about things that might come up like that, where someone might express some sort of deeper underlying racial animosity in the exercise and then make them feel safe and then make the person that that came too felt safe. It's like I've had to completely try to reimagine what teaching this work seems like.

Erin Cherry (21:54):

Yeah, yes, this is why we need more black teachers or black women teachers or black teachers of color...

Charlie Sandlan (22:02):

Absolutely.

Erin Cherry (22:03):

... across the board because of situations like this, because it's a question of, we have to talk to the student that said the word spick and figure out where that's coming from and also it depends on where we are in the exercises that we teach. It's about is it a point

of view exercise share a circumstance, sorry, and is it a certain point of view or as we start to add characteristics on, is it coming from that?

Erin Cherry (22:34):

That's a different situation because you'll see that in a play, you'll see that on TV, you'll see that in the movies but we're in the beginning and the students are starting to access their humanity, then we need to sit down and talk to that student and say, "Where did that come from? How do you know about that word," and really get into a psychological conversation and maybe that's what we have to the way the conversations are happening with defund the police and get more health care workers and get more therapists out in the world, especially us teachers who specifically teach the Meisner and situations like this come up because so much humanity is being expressed in the classroom, we might have to have a person that we call and say, "This is what happened in the classroom.

Erin Cherry (23:22):

I want to evaluate the student because I really believe a student's work is great but we need to know what this underlying comes from," because it could be something subconscious. It could be from the parents, it could be upbringing, and how do we get this student to say, "This is not okay. I understand where you're coming from, but out of everything that you have to say, you could say something else." Then, that's why I would say that we, as teachers, would have to have a conversation about who else can we have on staff or who else can we have readily available when situations like that happen because we do need to make sure that everybody feels safe, especially black women and women of color. If they have white male or female counterparts, could you see it in the world like the Karens, the Kens like the kids say? I'm not saying that the student was coming from that place, but the student needs to have his blind spots pointed out and that's just the blind spot that needs to be a conversation.

Charlie Sandlan (24:18):

It's a whole another level of teaching and just an understanding about that kind of dynamic that, I mean, you and I, I mean, we never really, I should say myself as a white person, I've never really had to consider. I just chalked it up to well, that's the work. You can take it personally, stand up for yourself, express yourself and then I leave it at that. There's no follow-up care.

Erin Cherry (24:46):

Yeah, we have to do more follow-up care when situations like that happen because if that person really feels that way, then we need to explore that because that is not coming from a character that was written on a paper by a playwright to make a point.

Charlie Sandlan (25:02):

Right, right. Okay, you get out of grad school, you were a reader out of grad school. You were a reader...

Erin Cherry (25:13):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (25:13):

... for some auditions. I tell all my students, they should do that to see...

Erin Cherry (25:17):

Me too.

Charlie Sandlan (25:19):

... what it's like. What did you learn from being on the other side of the table, getting out of school and watching actors audition and meeting casting directors?

Erin Cherry (25:29):

I learned that we take it too seriously in the sense of that, we walk in and we worry about what the casting director or the director or the producers whoever's in the room what they think. It's like, they just want you to be ready. They want you to come in with your own unique ideas, your point of view, who you are, your humanity, your choices, your behavior, that's all they want to see and you come in and you develop a relationship with them, they'll talk to

you. They're like everyday people in between the actors come in and out. They're talking about their kids or talking about their dog or talking about what they're going to have for lunch or just these things and we placed them in such high regard. We put them on pedestals and then we don't realize that they just want to cast the part.

Erin Cherry (26:22):

You also learn what to do, what not to do. You learn how to do a good audition, you know when they leave and you see the reaction, they're like, "Oh, my gosh. That was great. Did you see them? They were prepared." There's some actors who come in, they're not completely off book, but they kill it with. They have their associations. They have their actions. They have their behavior. You can tell they broken down the script. They just come in and they're ready, even if they received the script the night before and I learned not to be so hard on myself and I also learned that we get way too nervous, we get way too scared and it's not...

Erin Cherry (26:55):

That's why I want all of us out there, the artists out there who have not been a reader, I want to experience it because it'll change your life and it will take off so much anxiety, take off so much anxiety because it could be anything like you can come in, nail the script and the producers are like, "You know what? He's too tall for the leading lady, but I love everything he did." It's just little things like that, that you go, "Oh, wow. It has nothing to do with me most of the time," and that's what you'll learn as a reader but if you see it firsthand, it takes the pressure off of you.

Charlie Sandlan (27:26):

Well, you probably also see a lot of bad acting. I mean, [crosstalk 00:27:28].

Erin Cherry (27:28):

We do.

Charlie Sandlan (27:30):

What would you say are some of your top like just don't ever do this?

Erin Cherry (27:37):

Don't ever put the paper down when you think you're on book because some actors come in and they're arrogant. They feel, I'm assuming they're arrogant, but it is an arrogant gesture to come in and you're off-book and... I've seen this because I've been a reader for theater and on camera. I've seen actors come in and put the paper down especially on camera reading with the reader and then they get so nervous or something happens and they're fumbling for the paper is like, "Just keep that paper in your hand," because even if you're on book, your nerves come in or even if you think you're not nervous, you never know what's going to happen in the room.

Erin Cherry (28:12):

You don't know the energy of the room. You come in, you're having a good day, you're like walk into the audition, on the train to the audition and you're like, "Yeah, this is great." You walk in and the casting director is having a bad day or the person in the office is not talking to you and it changes your energy and now you have to figure out how to keep what you had when you studied and then you walk in the room and you're like, "Oh, yeah, I'm good," but all of a sudden, your anxiety comes up because of the experience you have maybe just in the waiting room or hearing another actor speak.

Erin Cherry (28:41):

Just keep your paper in your hand. Also, know where to look on the camera. Know how to greet people in the room and also to know how to talk to your reader. I've seen actors not know what to do with readers as well.

Charlie Sandlan (28:58):

Well, that comes from training too, right?

Erin Cherry (29:00):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (29:00):

When you were from training. Your first job, Lady in the Dark?

Erin Cherry (29:06):

Yes. Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (29:07):

Philadelphia, the Walnut Street Theater. I've heard you say before that that job taught you what it meant to be a professional.

Erin Cherry (29:15):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (29:16):

I'm just wondering, what are those professional basics? What did you learn in that first job?

Erin Cherry (29:26):

The basics I learned from that job was just knowing what a green room is, knowing that you have to sign in, knowing what the stage manager actually really does because in training and grad school, we're just focused so much on the artistic stuff but behind the scenes and costume fittings and what goes on that puts the show together and watching these professional actors who've been doing it so much longer than I have, how they speak to the director, how it was very important to watch Andrea Marcovicci, who was the lead in the show, carry a play and not that she's not carrying just her part, she's carrying the whole show and learning how to talk to other actors and being nice to other actors and dealing with other actors and not being a diva in a lot of way, because she wasn't in that way but just basic stuff.

Erin Cherry (30:26):

It's interesting, how I would come to the show rehearsal at a school. This is the show that gave me my equity card, right? They hired me and they were like, "We're going to give you your equity card because we really want you on the show," but just showing up five minutes late, how that's like a no-no, I mean, just showing up five minutes late and coming in late or just coming and just start talking to your classmates and you're sitting there waiting for

rehearsal and you didn't sign in and the stage manager is looking for you freaking out because they think you're not at rehearsal because you didn't sign in. Those things will change your life. It gives you a sense professionalism that you may not think it's important, but it's very important because one thing I've learned also too is that people talk.

Charlie Sandlan (31:07):

Yes, they do.

Erin Cherry (31:08):

They'll talk. They'll say, "What's Cherry like in a room or how was Cherry?" so I don't want them going, "Well, she was five minutes late all the time. She doesn't know how to sign in it." Also, learning things about a deputy and how you pick a deputy and what the deputy does and how equity is there for you because I was just becoming union. Learning about what the deputy does, how I have rights, how do I get protected, what do I go to the deputy for, a dance captain, what does a dance captain do? It was just eye opening because it's not what you learned in school. You trained, yes. You train how to be a great artist and the best way you know how but the business side of it, that's why it's called show business but the business side of it was very eye opening for me.

Charlie Sandlan (31:56):

Yeah, I mean, you just never want to be the problem.

Erin Cherry (31:58):

Yes, never. Never. No.

Charlie Sandlan (32:02):

All right. You were also lucky enough to work with Andre de Shields?

Erin Cherry (32:06):

Yes. I call him papa.

Charlie Sandlan (32:07):

Of course. He played your pop. Didn't he?

Erin Cherry (32:10):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (32:10):

You did Knock me a Kiss...

Erin Cherry (32:12):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (32:13):

... with Yolande Du Bois.

Erin Cherry (32:14):

Yes. That part was stressful in a good way. It stretched me. I evolved because it was based on a real person. I've never, at that point, never played a real person and W.E.B. Du Bois was, they're the Obamas of Harlem of their time, right? When people don't really know who he is, as far as, people who are listening to this podcast, if you don't know who he is, research him but as you research them, you will see that they were the Obamas at the time.

Erin Cherry (32:46):

In Harlem, the talented 10, just all of the things that he wanted to do to advance the color of black people in AACP, things like that...

Charlie Sandlan (32:57):

Double consciousness.

Erin Cherry (32:58):

... and double consciousness. I learned a lot from Andre in that way of crafting up part around a real person really watching him research, really see him put W.E.B. Du Bois' books, papers in his hand and me going, "Let me get my book. I need to make sure that I study and researcher," and also it's a period piece, learning about the times, the Harlem Renaissance, how the dialect was and watching them and just learning about how they were speaking at the time, what was going on as far as black education, Fisk University, and also having this woman, Yolande Du Bois, knowing people like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes just being in the mix of black education, Mecca.

Erin Cherry (33:53):

I did not want to come in with no knowledge of who she was or nothing because I knew I would miss the boat on people who are watching the play will go, "She's out of adjustment because she didn't do any research," and that will show. I learned that a lot from Andre.

Erin Cherry (34:14):

I also learned a lot about, again, about how to speak to directors and how to stand up for your characters too and also how to, if you don't agree with the director, how to do it. There wasn't a lot of disagreements but when you're researching your character, even if the character is not based on a real person, you start to become one together and you fall in love with them, hopefully, because you shouldn't judge your characters, right? As you really start to do the work on who you're playing, you really have to stand up for their humanity and how they feel justified.

Erin Cherry (34:49):

Sometimes, the director might have a different vision and you go, "Oh, well, I see it this way or that way," and I really learned watching Andre how to navigate, carrying this play, carrying the cast, and also wanting to give W.E.B. Du Bois a voice that he saw in his vision, because you don't see that a lot. I've been in shows where the lead will just have a tantrum or storm offstage because the director doesn't agree with them. I don't want to be that person. Andre has never been that person, at least in that show.

Erin Cherry (35:28):

It was a very, very learning experience and also too for me, the first week I had to get over being in a room with him because for me, I knew him as the whiz. It's like that musical I listened to a lot, it was just like having a black iconic figure in my presence. I never in a million years thought that I would be on stage with him. Getting that out of the way, the first week because I was so nervous to say anything, I was so nervous to just be in the room and act and I was scared and I really had to talk to myself and

say, "I deserve to be in the room with him. I deserve to be on stage with him. He is now my peer. I can't place him up here on this pedestal because it's about the work and if I place him on a pedestal, my character will not be fully developed."

Charlie Sandlan (36:22):

That takes a lot of guts, though.

Erin Cherry (36:22):

It was scary. It was very scary.

Charlie Sandlan (36:24):

Well, you also can fall back on your technique and your training and like you had that too.

Erin Cherry (36:30):

Yeah, I feel like that saved me a lot too because it's like, "Okay, Cherry, just really go back to listening. Go back to responding. It's not Andre talking to you. It's your father who's W.E.B. Du Bois. You guys are the First Family of Harlem and you are standing up for yourself as a black woman during the Harlem Renaissance." That was very rare and Yolande stood up to her father whose W.E.B. Du Bois. There were people walking around in the world and in Harlem afraid of him, not his daughter. I had to really find that strength in me to be able to go, "Okay, it's not Cherry standing up to Andre de Shields, which makes you nervous. It's Yolande Du Bois standing up to her father, W.E.B. Du Bois," and you have to look at that and do the behavior of that and put the other stuff away. Yeah, the training helped a lot.

Charlie Sandlan (37:21):

Well, it takes me to the Emmy and your show After Forever on Amazon.

Erin Cherry (37:30):

Yes. Season two out now.

Charlie Sandlan (37:32):

You got a great cast, Kevin Spirtas is in Cady Huffman, Mitchell Anderson.

Erin Cherry (37:35):

Yeah. For those who don't know Mitchell Anderson, Doogie Howser's father.

Charlie Sandlan (37:42):

Right, right. You won a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a digital daytime drama series.

Erin Cherry (37:50):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (37:50):

Can you just tell me what it was like to hear your name called?

Erin Cherry (37:57):

Gosh, everything went blank. I understand now why people say write something down, because I didn't write anything down because I didn't think I was going to win. I was like, "I'm a newcomer. I'm considered the underdog. I don't think the people in the Emmy Academy are going to vote for me. They don't know who I am." I didn't think about my work just as its own merit. People see my work and just voting on that because there's a lot of networking things that go on behind and red carpet stuff. I'm just like, "These people don't know me. Why would they vote for me?" When they called my name, I was so much in shock to the point where I couldn't move and my cast mates had to shove me, push me into the aisle, and go, "Go, go to the stage." I just was frozen.

Erin Cherry (38:48):

Then, I get to the stage. I'm a hot mess. I sound a hot mess. I couldn't remember anything that I said in the speech. That's why I wish I wrote something down. I remember going backstage and asking myself, "Oh my gosh, did I thank my mother," because I was like, "If I didn't thank her, I was going to hear it," because she, since I was seven, has been a stage mom. She has nurtured my career. If it wasn't for her, I would not be up here accepting this damn Emmy. You go backstage, there's all these cameras and lights in your face. There's a person carrying you around, walking you around saying, "Okay, Miss Cherry, do you need any

water?" I'm like, "Yes, I need some water because I can't." "Do you need a chair?" "Yes, I need a chair because I can't stand." They bring me a chair. I have to sit down because I can't breathe. Sorry.

Charlie Sandlan (39:40):

Yes.

Erin Cherry (39:41):

Right now, it sounds weird because with George Boyd and all that, but that's another conversation but I literally was in a place where I couldn't breathe. I just couldn't catch my breath because I was so overwhelmed.

Erin Cherry (39:56):

There's this table. You go to a table. There's these Emmy's. There's a laptop there. You sign and then they hand you because the Emmy that you have on the stage is not your Emmy. You just hold the Emmy. It's blank. There's nothing on it. Then, I walk back and they hand me my Emmy with my name on it. I just started bawling. I just started crying.

Erin Cherry (40:20):

While I'm crying, there's a person handing me water. There's a person walking me around to all... There's this room where you have to take these pictures. There's a table of like 15 to 20 people on laptops. You have all these cameraman you're in your face and then they send the picture to the people on the laptop and then they're doing just in the moment wins. This is like the live stream of it. By the time I got back to my seat, it was already out that I won. I had my interview with Entertainment Tonight and it was just all a whirlwind. I hope to do it again with the Oscars...

Charlie Sandlan (40:59):

Of course.

Erin Cherry (40:59):

...with a primetime Emmy and a Grammy. I'll get the EGOT. Just give me the EGOT.

Charlie Sandlan (41:04):

What a story. How you got the part, I just find so incredible. You are actually recommended by your friend to the writer...

Erin Cherry (41:15):

Yes, [inaudible 00:41:16].

Charlie Sandlan (41:16):

... Michael Slade and you read the script and you didn't like the character. You told him that you had problems with the character. He agreed to meet you to talk with you.

Erin Cherry (41:30):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (41:30):

Now, most actors would have just said, "Yes. Thank you. Oh my God, I don't care what it is. This is an opportunity," but you actually said, "Listen, I've got problems with this."

Erin Cherry (41:42):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (41:43):

Which was incredibly courageous and an artistic thing to do. Can you just talk to me like A, why you didn't like the character first and how you felt like you were able to even have that kind of a conversation with him?

Erin Cherry (42:01):

Yes, thank you for that question. I just am a firm believer that I have to stand up for my characters. Even if I don't have the part yet, right? If I say yes to something, I want to make sure that I'm saying yes to something that I can truthfully live out that there's no holes in it for me. I know a lot of us artists, we say yes to a lot of things because we just want to work. As I get older and as my energy changes, it's about being artistic, right?

Erin Cherry (42:34):

We talked about this with our students. It's do I just want to be an actor that acts and just take anything or do I want to be an artist? What kind of artists do I want to be and how do I want to leave my mark, right? There's a difference between just being an actor in

Hollywood, that's a personality. That's just like, especially with all these YouTube stars and Instagram star, they just come and they go, and they're acting, they're doing these parts but what does it really mean to be an artist? To really be an artist, in part, is doing things that are not comfortable and that means standing up for myself in any way that I can.

Erin Cherry (43:10):

Now, it's about your why, again, right? It's about how am I going to stand up for myself. Why am I going to stand up for myself? For me, black women, over time, have had so many issues on camera, on stage, in film with the stereotypes or subliminal messages of how we're somehow this magical thing being nonhuman that can just do human things or how we're the help in some ways and we're this the badass woman mother who has five kids and can do anything and we're super women, but we don't have any emotions or feelings or it's not shown how if I am playing a woman with five children, how that affects us mentally or how does that affect us spiritually? It's always two dimensional.

Charlie Sandlan (44:06):

Stereotypes.

Erin Cherry (44:07):

Yeah and never three dimension, definitely stereotypes and that's changing and because of that change, I have to make sure that I reflect what it is I live by myself as Cherry.

Charlie Sandlan (44:23):

When you read Brenda, when you read the part, did you see a stereotype? I mean, what was it that you didn't see there that you wanted to see in the character in order for you to even say, "Yeah, I'll audition for it?"

Erin Cherry (44:36):

Yes. Well, I didn't see why she would be friends with the lead because when I read the script at the time, I said to Slade, I said, "Well, this part could be anybody. She could be white, she could be black, she could be Asian, she can be Latina. Why specifically

do you want to have a black actress?" The one thing I love about Slade is that he wants diversity. He wants inclusion, like our director for both seasons have been women, our cinematographer's a woman, our executive producer is a woman. He's very big on making sure the sets are very inclusive.

Erin Cherry (45:21):

When he said that to me, I said, "Well, if I'm going to play Brenda, she can't just be just the best friend of the lead in some way. She has to have her own humanity. She has to have her own personage. She has to be her own person. She can't just be there for Kevin Spirtas' character."

Erin Cherry (45:47):

We talked for three hours at it. We met for coffee and we had a good conversation. Sometimes it wasn't even about the script. It was just about what's happening in the world, about humanity and I said to him when he asked me because I was a little nervous, I will say that, but he said to me, "What do you think about the script?" Then, this is what I told him what I just said. He listened to me. He said, "Huh," he's like, "Yeah," he's like, "I see what you mean." He's like, "That very important that she's reflected in a way that black women who watch the show can recognize themselves," because what I don't want to happen is for black women to watch my character as she evolves over the seasons and they don't see themselves. That's going to be an issue. If I'm walking down the street and a black woman's like, "Cherry, why the hell are you playing that part? You know, better." I failed.

Charlie Sandlan (46:38):

That's heavy.

Erin Cherry (46:40):

Because my people will call you out. They'll cancel culture, please. We've been doing that before social media but I want a black woman to say, "Thank you so much, Cherry. I see so much of myself in your character," and as she evolves over the seasons

and that's what I told him and then he went back, rewrote, came back and I said, "Yes."

Charlie Sandlan (47:05):

I'll tell you, our friend Mike Colter, our fellow classmate, he's having a really great career.

Erin Cherry (47:12):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (47:12):

He's said often about the type of work that he won't do and will do and something that maybe reflects poorly on him as a black man. I just tell you, I have never, ever, ever had to think about that at all.

Erin Cherry (47:28):

I know. I know.

Charlie Sandlan (47:30):

It's a burden and a responsibility that my white privilege never had to even consider.

Erin Cherry (47:41):

Yeah and this is why it's important when you start to see stories about black artists wanting other black artists who write our own stories because of the fact that when white men or white women start to write our stories or have been, they've gotten it wrong most of the time.

Erin Cherry (47:56):

This new surge of black artists coming through in the Strong Black Lead that Netflix is doing and all these TV shows and these movies that are coming out the writers room and has to reflect the humanity of the characters that are being written. That's why the shows that we're watching, like Insecure and Atlanta are so good because we are writing for ourselves.

Erin Cherry (48:18):

If and when I'm in another situation where I do have to walk into a room and the writer is a white man or a white woman, again, if I have to say something, I will because of the fact that you cannot

write for me if you have not lived in my shoes, right? Even though we say, "Put yourself in another person's shoes and reflect the humanity," it's like, but if I'm going into this black woman and I'm trying to put myself into her shoes, but then the shoe doesn't fit, I need to be listened to because I know firsthand what it's like to be a black woman in America. That's sometimes you don't get hurt and again, back to that word overlook because sometimes, they will say that they know better and I'm like, "No, you don't. You're a white man."

Charlie Sandlan (49:03):

Yeah. Yeah. Slade, he leaves the meeting and you think what? I blew this. He's going to think I'm difficult.

Erin Cherry (49:15):

Yeah, it was one of those things because he did say at the end of the meeting, he was like, I said earlier, "I want to go back and look at the script and make some changes." Then, I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm never going to hear from them again," because even though it was over coffee, even though it's in a room where a lot of people were in the room and we were having a very intimate conversation, conversation or reality, right? We're just having a nice conversation about what's going on.

Erin Cherry (49:42):

In my mind, I'm thinking, "Okay, yeah, yeah, it's not going to happen," because I'm not used to being heard in that way, in that depth. I'm not used to it. It was a new experience for me to really have somebody even sit down for three hours and to say, "Hey, I really want to hear what you have to say." That's very rare when it comes to a white man and a black woman in the arts. I leave. I don't hear back for a while. I'm like, "Okay, I'll let it go." Then, when I let it go, he calls me and says, "We really want you to come play Brenda." I will say this-

Charlie Sandlan (50:20):

He made adjustments. He made adjustments in the character.

Erin Cherry (50:25):

He made adjustments. That's just what I was about to say. I was about to say yeah and he made adjustments. I've teased him. I was like, "Shouldn't I get an Emmy for writing?" I mean, I don't know. I mean, a consultant or something, shouldn't I have an Emmy?

Charlie Sandlan (50:35):

Well, what did he change? What did he add that made you say, "You know what? All right, I'm going to do this?" I've been heard.

Erin Cherry (50:42):

Well, there's a really nice scene in season one where our characters, Brenda and Brian are walking down the street and-

Charlie Sandlan (50:55):

That's a great scene. Is this after he had his heart broken?

Erin Cherry (50:58):

Yes, yes. It's one of my favorite scenes because Brenda says out loud why they're friends and it's on a human level. It's not just because I don't want Brenda just to be the person that's in the office because-

Charlie Sandlan (51:15):

Right. A token black character?

Erin Cherry (51:17):

Yes. Yes. The thing is like also too, it's like, if that's the case, I'm not going to develop over the years if we were to, at the time, it was just one season but we're going to do a third season, hopefully 2021 but if I was just a token black woman, I wouldn't have a storyline. If I'm going to be in the show, you need to give me a storyline and why I'm here and what's going on because why would my character want to be friends with Kevin's character because that's part of the homework, you ask yourself, why do I do what I do?

Erin Cherry (51:56):

I asked myself, why do I do what I do? Why am I coming to work every day? Why am I showing up? Why am I here for this man is just going back to a stereotype of white people are used to seeing

black images always helping the white people. That can't be the case. He changed it for me in that way.

Charlie Sandlan (52:11):

That's, I mean, unbelievable. That's just, good for you. I mean, I hope that everybody's that's listening to this take some inspiration, from your courage and your backbone.

Erin Cherry (52:25):

Thank you. I mean, it's not easy.

Charlie Sandlan (52:26):

It's not.

Erin Cherry (52:27):

It's scary but you have to stick to your convictions.

Charlie Sandlan (52:31):

Yeah. What I also find interesting is your early career, a lot of theater, a lot of theater, and then here you are, you're thrown on a set and it's a big part, what have you learned? I know you've talked about learning to be still in between takes, which I think is an interesting a piece of information to pass on, but can talk about that and what other things you've learned about that medium?

Erin Cherry (53:02):

Yes, being still in between takes for me was important because that every actor as onset is different, right? Some actors in between takes will just be funny or do things they have to do or they're just talking to the crew, laughing it up. In some scenes, is I get it. That makes sense but for me, since it was my first big job season one, I just really want it to be still and make sure that my breathing was in check and also to watching other actors work when I'm not working and how they're still in this on camera when the cameras even rolling with their characters because in theater, you're moving, you're creating this behavior in a bigger way, even though it's still rooted in truth, it's a different medium.

Erin Cherry (53:54):

On camera, to be able to stick to your truth and create behavior and be still is very difficult. Watching other actors do these simple

movements in their truth and the camera picks it up, was very eye opening. Learning how to do that and watching other actors do that, I was like, "Okay, I need to follow that lead because that's going to serve me." That was a piece of nugget that I took with me.

Charlie Sandlan (54:24):

That's really hard. Ian Holm, who just died last week, has a really famous quote, he says, "Anything you can do, I can do smaller."

Erin Cherry (54:32):

Yes. Yes, exactly. That's definitely what I took away from that experience. Also to learning camera angles, the names, just behind the scenes of what right questions to ask the director like, "Oh, where are we shooting? Okay. You're just getting my head, the shoulder. Okay, I don't have to wear my heels? Okay, bring me my slippers, please." Things that you don't have to do, I don't want to be messed up person all day or, "Okay, so the camera is going to be over my right shoulder onto the other actor, I can really let you know. I don't have to be performative or acting right now."

Erin Cherry (55:17):

There's a lot of just things that were just very eye opening and very stressful at the same time but my cast who have been seasoned in front of the camera, they took me under their wing and just said, "If you have any questions, please let me know," or do you understand what this means?" I just I felt really protected and I felt really welcomed in that situation.

Charlie Sandlan (55:43):

Well, my fellow daydreamers, thank you for sticking around and keeping the phone in your pocket. I hope you enjoyed the interview. I did. I'm going to read you part two of my conversation with Erin Cherry. Next week, we're going to get a little bit deeper in the subject of race and what it means to be a black actor and an artist in this country. We're going to get more personal.

Charlie Sandlan (56:06):

Please subscribe to the show. Review it. Share it with your friends if you like it. You can go to my website creatingbehaviorpodcast.com. I now have SpeakPipe on the content page. You can press a button and leave me a voicemail, a comment or a thought. Share something with me and please, you guys, be disruptive. I want you to play for luck with yourself. I want you to find some time to operate outside your comfort zone. It's the only way you're going to grow and don't ever settle for your second best. My name is Charlie Sandlan. Peace.

Charlie Sandlan (56:37):
(singing)