

Episode #016 (Transcript)

Charlie Sandlan (00:03):

I remember 1996 for one reason, Rent. I was 26 years old. I had just been in New York a few years. And I had seen, in '95, this very rough version of Rent at the New York Theater Workshop and I was just mesmerized by it. And then Jonathan Larson's sudden death rocked me and I ended up seeing Rent 13 times. It moved me. I reached deep into my soul and it changed me. It was a seminal moment for me as an actor.

Charlie Sandlan (00:41):

And it was also the first opportunity I got to see the work of Norbert Leo Butz, who took over for the role of Roger in '97, and I was looking up to see him a few times. Today we're going to shoot the shit. So put the phone back in your pocket. Creating Behavior starts now. (music). Well, hello, my fellow daydreamers. Happy September. I hope that you guys all had a rejuvenating and safe Labor Day weekend.

Charlie Sandlan (01:36):

I don't know about you, but I have anxiety going into the fall here and the winter. There's a lot going on. I mean, you've got the fear of a second wave. All of you parents, who I have such empathy for, you guys are dealing with your children, and certainly I'm sure the last five months have just been unbelievably difficult. And now it's like, how do I get my kids back into class? Is it safe?

Charlie Sandlan (02:03):

It just certainly seems like collectively, we just don't know what the fuck we're doing. So I hope it all works out. And then we've got a huge election November 3rd, so make sure that you do what you need to do. If you're going to vote by mail, make sure your vote counts. It's important. That's my PSA for today. Every once in a while, you meet somebody that just leaves an impression on you,

in a surprising way, beyond kind of the superficial stuff that comes from a first meeting.

Charlie Sandlan (02:43):

Sometimes you can get in a conversation with somebody and you leave that conversation and it sticks to you, right? You end up playing it over in your head and you just reflect upon it as the weeks go by because, I don't know, it was interesting. It was deeper than your normal conversation with somebody. And that's how I felt when I met Norbert for the first time. And this was really just back in February, right before the world got turned upside down.

Charlie Sandlan (03:18):

We were sitting in my office, at the studio, because he was looking for somebody to help coach him on a piece of material. He wanted to take on a major part and he had time on his hands. And so we were going to work on A Moon for the Misbegotten, the role of Jamie, this really just gargantuan role in that Eugene O'Neill play. He was feeling stagnant and I was actually feeling a little stagnant. You get into this rut; for me personally, teaching.

Charlie Sandlan (03:55):

You're just showing up every day and you're doing your thing and you do it well and it doesn't really take that much effort. And Norbert was talking about the same thing. It was just kind of you're getting to a show, you pull on your old bag of tricks. You do your thing, because you do it well. But there's just something unfulfilling if you're a real actor and you want to dig into some really challenging material.

Charlie Sandlan (04:25):

And so we both found ourselves kind of in this really deep and interesting conversation just about acting and about art and about the struggle of kind of keeping yourself creatively satiated as these years go by. Both of us now are in our 50s. And how do you stay motivated and excited about the work? And so we were all set to dig into this play together and then, of course, life goes

awry and I end up in Guatemala for three months and it just didn't happen.

Charlie Sandlan (05:05):

But we kept in touch. I just think he's a hell of an actor. I have been watching this guy for over 25 years. I've seen him in so many things. My God, seeing him in *Wicked*, he took over for Jeremy Piven in *Speed-the-Plow*, which was just... I mean, to do that, that's pressure; to come in on a Broadway stage and take over for one of the leads. I saw him in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *Catch Me If You Can*, both Tony Award winning performances. *Big Fish*.

Charlie Sandlan (05:41):

And I'm not a musical guy at all, but I'll see him in any musical. I will. He's really, really good. He's transformational and he's good at everything, man. He can sing. He's got a rock voice. He can dance and he's got legit chops. He's got a deep emotional range, and certainly on television. If you've seen him play a Paddy Chayefsky, the great writer, playwright, screenwriter in the FX's mini-series *Fosse/Verdon*, he was great.

Charlie Sandlan (06:22):

And then one of my favorite performances of his, Kevin Rayburn in the Netflix series *Bloodline*, the troubled the younger brother with a, on and off again, cocaine addiction, a murderer eventually. If you haven't seen that show, you got to add that to your list. It's very rare that you get a combination of incredible writing, great storytelling and ensemble acting. It's great. So you should watch it, if you have not. But that talk in my office stuck with me and I'm just thrilled to be able to share with you more of our conversation. So let's just get right to it, shall we? This is Norbert Leo Butz.

Norbert Leo Butz (07:09):

I loved our talk, too. And when this is over, we are going to work on something, even if it's privately. At the time when I called you, I had just finished work on that mini-series, *Fosse/Verdon*. And I was working with Sam Rockwell, who I had done another film with

a few years before that. We've become really, really good friends. And Sam has a really unique... He's a real unicorn. That guy has an Academy Award.

Charlie Sandlan (07:44):

Talented as hell.

Norbert Leo Butz (07:45):

Talented as hell. Has been around forever. Just start channel surfing on your cable and find how many Sam Rockwell films are showing.

Charlie Sandlan (07:55):

And he's a theater guy.

Norbert Leo Butz (07:56):

He is a theater guy, and he always comes back to the stage. And there's nobody I've ever worked with that loves acting more than Sam Rockwell. Everybody says that about him. I really don't. That's all he wants to talk about. He's like a 10-year-old still when it comes to acting; the almost mischievous, boyish excitement he has for it. It was when we did this little independent film years ago that nobody saw. It was during this big FX big budget production. He's still got it.

Norbert Leo Butz (08:33):

He is relentless in the amount of work he does. He's just constantly in the script, constantly throwing out ideas and wants to talk about acting 24/7, and so do I. He's a cinephile. He's a theater geek. And he continues to study acting. He continues to study acting. He continues to see private coach. He continues to work on different movement techniques. And that really rubbed off on me.

Norbert Leo Butz (09:08):

So I was talking to him and I said, Sam, I've been working more in TV and film, which is a great thing. I've got three kids to support. But it's really, really easy to lose sight of why we started to do this in the first place. Sometimes on a film set for a long time or on a TV show for a long time, the waiting is interminable. The scripts

give you sometimes so little to work with. You can tend to get tight guests.

Norbert Leo Butz (09:40):

For all these reasons, you can kind of show up for work with kind of a laissez-faire attitude and think, "Well, I've got no real power in this, so I just have to come and sort of... And Sam just doesn't work like that, man. He's like, "There's a great fucking part, man." It can be the three line thing. And I thought he's absolutely right, man. I had been maybe just a little, I don't want to say lazy, because I'm not a lazy person, but uninspired by a lot of what I was getting.

Norbert Leo Butz (10:15):

And Sam's like, "Oh, you know what you should play? You need to do Iceman Cometh." He would say that to me. And was like, "Oh, you would be so fucking great in Inherit the Wind." He would throw out these titles and I'd be like, "Oh my God, I had never thought about that. He's absolutely right." And why I called you, and we were going to start working on a scene from A Moon From The Misbegotten, is because I was reminded that you only get better by doing great parts. You only really get better by doing the mountains.

Charlie Sandlan (10:49):

You got to exercise the muscle.

Norbert Leo Butz (10:50):

You got to.

Charlie Sandlan (10:51):

I mean, even my students, that's what I train them. They work on the great parts. I mean, it might be beyond them right now, but to aspire to do it, to struggle, to figure it out, there's value in that.

Norbert Leo Butz (11:05):

Yeah. And that was just this thing I was thinking about. I was like, man, I have not played a great part in in a while.

Charlie Sandlan (11:17):

And there's a difference between great parts and lead roles, right?
Carrying a musical and doing Jamie

Norbert Leo Butz (11:25):

100%. A lot of the work I've done, especially in musicals, has been on new work, even most of the plays I've done have been new. And while that's a great experience and it's fantastic to work with a writer or a composer, sometimes the frustration is that you're not just an actor, you have to also be a dramaturg. The script isn't 100% solid a lot of the times. So a lot of your work is about making shit work. Do you know what I mean? It's about tweaking something to make it better than it is.

Charlie Sandlan (12:05):

And you're collaborating with the playwright too oftentimes, aren't you?

Norbert Leo Butz (12:08):

Yeah. And so while it's really cool to see it all come together, I was missing that really amazing feeling when you're given a great piece of writing, like it's done, the architecture is done, it's solid, you've got it. Now you have to rise to it, not sort of bring it down.

Charlie Sandlan (12:37):

And there is the real risk of failure, too, right?

Norbert Leo Butz (12:39):

Totally.

Charlie Sandlan (12:40):

I mean, is there a time where you've... When is the last time you felt like I'm in over my head, like this is this is beyond me and I'm scared shitless, like I can ruin this whole fucking thing?

Norbert Leo Butz (12:53):

That happens a lot with me. I think every actor does that. I think that's a good thing. I think that fear just means you care a lot. But I feel that way a lot. The last time I felt it was, well, I guess the last show I did and play I did was the My Fair Lady revival. I thought I was in way over my head with that one, too.

Charlie Sandlan (13:26):

It's such an iconic part.

Norbert Leo Butz (13:27):

It is an iconic part. And I will say, that that is a great part and that is a great script for a musical. It's lifted straight from the Shaw. The accent is a thick, Cockney accent in a dialect or in a vernacular that's not even used today. Even a contemporary London Cockney would sound nothing like what this guy would have sounded like. That was a challenging part. You're only on stage about 25 minutes the entire show. You come on, you do this kind of fun song. Then you have to come into the scene with Higgins and do this like five-minute diatribe basically on socialist economics.

Charlie Sandlan (14:15):

Totally Shavian.

Norbert Leo Butz (14:18):

Completely Shavian. And it's beautifully written, but really difficult, Shaw's like Shakespeare.

Charlie Sandlan (14:24):

Difficult just because of the language?

Norbert Leo Butz (14:28):

Because of the language. You've got this thick dialect. It's written in a thick dialect, but the thoughts, the specificity of the thoughts is really tricky there. And it demands certain technical things. You can't pause a lot in the line like in Shakespeare. You got to really go to the end of the line. There were some technical language things that you don't have to really consider in contemporary texts so much.

Charlie Sandlan (14:51):

Did you find it challenging to get from one thought to the next, like how do I get to that?

Norbert Leo Butz (14:56):

Yeah, because they think so much quicker than we do. And so you're thinking, "Oh, there's not enough time..." He transitions so quickly. It's the same line. What does that mean? Is that a

different... It's the same thing. And they're like, yep. The director, Bart Sher is a great director. He's like, "Yep. You got to keep going. You find the idea and then you build it and then you take it to the one thing." And then, "Oh, I've got one more thought to finish it out." And you got to go all the way to the end of the line.
Charlie Sandlan (15:26):

What was it like working with him? What a treat.

Norbert Leo Butz (15:26):

Yeah, that was a great experience. That was a really great experience. He's a relentlessly curious dude. Nobody does the kind of hardcore academic research that that guy does. He brings a ton to the table in terms of... It's great to work with Bart. You feel like you get this like masterclass and turn of the century, like Edwardian social and political life in London. He's a really, really brilliant guy.

Norbert Leo Butz (16:00):

So he's bringing to the table, "Don't forget, in 1911, World War I." He's just ready to gear up. Your plan is this alcoholic garbage collector, but there's a movement happening in his neighborhood. This war is going to break out in three years. The people that are going to mostly die in this war are you and your friends. There's a mistrust of power, of the monarchy, of systems.

Norbert Leo Butz (16:34):

He could bring in something that I didn't think of. I love when a director can do this. He offers great metaphors. The greatest thing that Bart did for me when we were talking about Alfie Doolittle, he said, "This guy's a real anarchist." He was like, "I want you to check out Ken Kesey. I want you to check out One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. I want you to check out Salinger and The Beats and the Merry Pranksters, the guys who..."

Charlie Sandlan (17:10):

Jack Kerouac.

Norbert Leo Butz (17:11):

Exactly those guys who were talking about dangerous shit. You know what I mean? And really that generation of writers and thinkers and artists were really delineating a line between the status quo, the bourgeois, and a whole new way of thinking. And he goes, "It's that kind of radical thinking." And so that was so fun to be doing this part in a Shavian play. But I was reading *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Kerouac and thinking, "Oh right."

Norbert Leo Butz (17:49):

And I watched a documentary on the Merry Pranksters. I remember those guys they got in this bus and they did a bunch of acid and they drove around the country basically saying, with their middle fingers up, to all of bourgeois America, he goes, "That's Alfie Doolittle." Alfie Doolittle would be drunk on the top of a bus with Ken Kesey and Jack Kerouac, dressed in crazy hippie garb, naked with his middle fingers up.

Norbert Leo Butz (18:13):

And I just love when a director can sort of take what's a stuffy, old, museum, musical theater piece. And the way Alfie Doolittle was always portrayed by Stanley Holloway, who was great performer, but is this kind of happy-go-lucky, drunk, who does this cute little dance. And Bart was like, "Fuck that. No way, man. This guy is dangerous. This guy is talking about upending society." These are radical, radical positions. And that in itself keeps you from doing like a stock thing. It infuses you with like an immediacy.

Charlie Sandlan (18:50):

So what did that kind of research help you in terms of just like the behavior you created? How did that unlock a part for you?

Norbert Leo Butz (19:00):

It allowed me to take risks on stage, to try things that were just downright weird, weird ways that I could try to assert my power over Higgins, which Alfie had. For instance, in the big library scene that I have with... I just want... We're in Higgins' a massive apartment in London and he's got this enormous desk. And one

day in rehearsal I'm filthy, I've got lice in my hair. I was just such a mess.

Norbert Leo Butz (19:40):

And I'm doing the speech and I just turned and went to the desk and I just sat down in his desk and sat back and started playing with the different things on his desk. And then I just sat there this one day in rehearsal and just sat and looked at him for like 45 seconds. It was this... And I knew Bart was loving where it was going with just the smile on my face. It was reading about those guys, Kesey and Kerouac, that was just sort of like... I don't know. It just allowed me to kind of, what are ways that I can really fuck with this guy?

Charlie Sandlan (20:19):

And did it fuck with him? Did you unnerve him?

Norbert Leo Butz (20:22):

I did.

Charlie Sandlan (20:22):

Now, did any of that any of that stay? Did that sprout into something that stayed in the show?

Norbert Leo Butz (20:28):

It did. And Bart's really great because in rehearsal he allowed me to take a full minute pause and just stare at this guy. When we got into tech, I couldn't take a full minute pause. But he's saying, "Okay. We got to move that along now. I want to keep that." But then I didn't need the full minute. I could do it in four seconds.

Charlie Sandlan (20:46):

It's all about ideas. I mean, you got to have ideas.

Norbert Leo Butz (20:49):

It really is. Rehearsal is about we all agree on what the circumstances are. We all agree on what the objectives here are. We all know the words inside and out. We all understand what it means. Now, how do we choose the most exciting, the most theatrical, the most innovative ways of pursuing those objectives so that it doesn't become rote and easy.

Charlie Sandlan (21:18):

Yeah. I heard you say once that you're not someone to like sit down and memorize his lines. That it's all about the physicality for you, right?

Norbert Leo Butz (21:27):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandlan (21:28):

Do you work from the outside in? Do you work from the inside out? Do you have like a process that kind of like you go to and turn to when you start to approach something?

Norbert Leo Butz (21:42):

I think I do, which isn't to say it's always exactly the same, because you got to adjust to what the material is. You're not going to work on certain things like other things. I mean, I think it's a combination of the two things. Basically, Charlie, what I try to do with any part is... I mean, I always feel like I'm sort of like the defense attorney for whatever character I'm playing.

Norbert Leo Butz (22:07):

So like an attorney would do, what I try to do is I make a list of everything that I have in common with the character: gender, basic age, he's a father, I'm a father, whatever it is. And that all goes in one list. And then I look at everything that we don't have in common. The character is a murderer. The character is a pedophile. The character is a cop. The character is X, Y, or Z. And then the work is about like a negotiation between those things. It's about bridging the gap and saying, "Okay. Well, I've never murdered anybody, but I think I've been so angry at somebody that I have..."

Charlie Sandlan (22:59):

Well, you got murder somebody in Bloodline. That was great. And then you beat him with like a candle stick or something.

Norbert Leo Butz (23:07):

I beat him with a statue. And I think the statute was like a dolphin because it was in Florida. It was a dolphin statute. It just happened to be there. That was insane.

Charlie Sandlan (23:16):

Well, how do you bring yourself to it? Because right, you're not a murderer. So you can identify with those things that you have in common. But how do you bring yourself to this shit that like that's not me. It's in me, but it's not me.

Norbert Leo Butz (23:31):

It's not me, but it's in me. I mean, that's a huge point that I think a lot of actors skip over. This idea I would never do that. I can't figure out how to do that. How do I get this... And this great acting in college, he was the most important acting teacher I ever had, a man by the name of Michael Pierce. I got my BFA at Webster University in the conservatory there.

Norbert Leo Butz (23:56):

It was our first year acting class and he was really struggling with this one student who was just proving to be sort of obstinate and not open and sort of questioning. Really blocked. We're all 18, 19 years old. None of us know what the fuck we're doing. The third time we were doing this improv of characters that we had to kind of create from people we saw on the street and she said, for the third time, "My character wouldn't do that."

Norbert Leo Butz (24:24):

And then she said again, "My character wouldn't do that." And he had this way of, in the smartest way, but really cutting through bullshit. He said, "Could I ask the character of myself, could she come into the room so I could ask her myself where is the character. If I could just ask her directly if she would do it or not." And the girl was kind of like stumped.

Norbert Leo Butz (24:49):

But the point he was making was you're, it, you're the character, it's all coming from you. And what we will or will not do are largely subjective things based on a million other things.

Charlie Sandlan (25:05):

You've got to find the humanity in whoever you're playing. I mean, I don't care if you're playing Hitler. I mean, How I Learned to Drive, no one's trying to be an asshole. No one's trying to be evil.

Norbert Leo Butz (25:19):

Right. No one has the intention of saying... No one has the knowledge, I'm a pedophile and this is just what I do. That's not how we think. That's not how people behave.

Charlie Sandlan (25:34):

But you got to justify it.

Norbert Leo Butz (25:35):

I have to justify it. This was a man who was, in the case of How I Learned to Drive, who had fallen in love with his niece, full on fallen in love. She was 11 or 12 the first time.

Charlie Sandlan (25:48):

A little footnote on that.

Norbert Leo Butz (25:51):

Now, the playwright, Paula Vogel does a great thing in that she has the part played by an adult woman. And so you don't have to go into like terrible places in your head. You don't have to do that. I'm sitting across from an extremely beautiful woman, who's in her 30s, pretending to be an 11-year-old. What uncle Peck does in How I Learned to Drive is pursue a love affair that he feels like he cannot live without.

Norbert Leo Butz (26:23):

I know what that feels like. Are you kidding me? I've been through a divorce. I've been through breakups. I've lost my mind over women before. Lost my fucking mind. I've never sexually abused anyone. I have never done the things that... Peck drank himself to death. You know I stopped drinking 10 years ago because I used to drink too much. There but for the grace of God, go I?

Norbert Leo Butz (26:45):

So these leaps we think we have to make, "Oh, I would never do that." The older that I get, maybe it's more experience, maybe it's

opening up to what I don't have, it's like, I can understand Peck a hundred fold and definitely enough to portray him on stage.

Charlie Sandlan (27:03):

Especially when you frame it like that.

Norbert Leo Butz (27:04):

There are parts that you can get offered or things that you can read where you're really just like, "I don't get it. I really don't get it." Or, "I really can't stand this person."

Charlie Sandlan (27:13):

Have you found yourself in a part where you were like, "I don't fucking get this?"

Norbert Leo Butz (27:18):

Yeah. I mean, I have to say, I've never accepted a part for a role that I thought was just offensive to the core. That's one thing. I have taken parts knowing that there was a really great character in there, but the play wasn't ready or the musical wasn't ready. And that's a really tough position to be in. I've had to learn the hard way.

Norbert Leo Butz (27:43):

Sometimes you think, "Oh, it's not quite ready, but it could be so good only if this and this and this were done to the script, but I love the part and I really like the director." And then you get in there. And more often than not, those are really disappointing jobs because, it's so cliché to say, but really if it ain't on the page, it really isn't on the stage.

Charlie Sandlan (28:03):

No, it's not.

Norbert Leo Butz (28:05):

It's just not. And this goes back to our original thing. I think that's why I came to see you. I had gotten in this point in my career, and I've had some success of making things. of making things work that weren't quite ready and just like trying to get things over the finish line. And that's not the same as doing really great work. It is the job. It's what the contract calls for. I had to fulfill my contract

and show up and do the best I could with what I was given. But the feeling that you get as an actor, when you're really flying, you really get lost in something and you're...

Charlie Sandlan (28:45):

Do you feel like an actor when you're doing TV and film? I mean, it's a different medium, but does it artistically satiate you in the same way that...

Norbert Leo Butz (28:56):

It can. I've had experiences that have been extremely rewarding, but they don't come often on stage either. Most of the times we're like baseball players. Most of the time, it really is striking out or foul tips. But I have had it on camera. It took me a while to get there. I think when actors have spent as much time on stage as I have, and then you start working in front of a camera, there's a learning curve you have to go through, there are habits you have to get out of.

Norbert Leo Butz (29:25):

But I've had some really, really great experiences and it usually comes from... What I like about films or television... I'm getting ready to go do a series up in Vancouver. Thank God my job came back to me. Here's what I like about it: I like the egalitarian kind of approach to film and TV work. I heard Jody Foster say this in an interview one time and I've never forgotten it. She said, for her, the actor is another crew member. He's another crew member, right?

Norbert Leo Butz (29:57):

So cinematographer's got to find the right lens. The art director has to have the set in the right way. The lighting guys have to create that thing. The director has to do... And the actor has to be the storyteller in the center. You're not more or less than, and that's a really cool place to be. It helps to take the onus off of you as like I'm it, I'm the be-all and end-all.

Norbert Leo Butz (30:23):

No. You're all working to get this one shot. I like the concentration. Stilling my body was a learning curve for me. You have to be really humble because you'll have a director come and say, "I really like where you're going, but you can do less. You can do less with your hands." And actors always take that to mean I can be more boring or more real. It's not that.

Norbert Leo Butz (30:52):

It's actually listen even harder. Be more intense with the listening. Be more intense with the thinking and the concentrating and sort of less, because I find most of what we do physically, it's just getting rid of nervous energy is mostly what we do when we move. And I have a quick metabolism. I have a nervous energy. So distilling what I was doing.

Norbert Leo Butz (31:16):

It's really important technically to learn how to do that because you've got a lens and you've got to fit into the shot. All of that stuff I feel like is teachable and learnable through practice. Again, what I like about being on a set is the concentration. I found it so difficult in doing theater in the last several years to get through a performance without a fucking cell phone.

Norbert Leo Butz (31:42):

No, I'm serious. To get through a performance without somebody getting up or walking through, without somebody eating candy in the middle of something, without another actor dropping a line or maybe missing a cue. It hasn't happened often, but I suffer from perfectionism maybe a little bit. But I think what acting requires, I mean, more than anything is that concentration. And on a film set, between action and cut, it's one of the most distilled, concentrated things of time. I really like that. I really like that about it. That suites me.

Charlie Sandlan (32:20):

I mean, you got to really listen and you got to listen in general as an actor. It's everything, listening and getting the attention off

yourself, which is really hard to do because you watch yourself, you judge yourself.

Norbert Leo Butz (32:35):

That's what you're teaching. I mean, that's what Meisner is all about, right?

Charlie Sandlan (32:39):

Yeah. So what was it like being thrown into Rent for the first time?

Norbert Leo Butz (32:43):

Yeah, man, I got really stupid lucky, but I also... It's that classic thing that you hear from people, you have to get stupid lucky. I was terrified, but I was really, really ready for it. So when I moved to New York, I was 28. By the time I was in Rent, I was 29. I moved to the city. But I had finished a master's degree. I had done two training programs. I've been playing my guitar and singing in clubs all over the place.

Norbert Leo Butz (33:16):

I knew the kind of work I wanted to do. My ex wife and I moved to the city. Rent had just opened. I was singing at a small gig for our friends, like off Broadway theater company to try to raise some money. They were doing kind of like a night of fundraising. Somebody in the audience was a publicist for Rent, and like two days later was... I think the show was open like three months at that point.

Norbert Leo Butz (33:37):

And huge, huge, huge two lead actors were having personal issues that was forcing them to miss a lot of the show. So they were in dire need for an understudy for both lead male roles. And so when I came to New York, I did not have a musical theater background. I had kind of a straight acting background. I had done a lot of theater, could assimilate and learn quickly. But then I also had the musical skills because I had this kind of side rock and roll. So I was sort of like ready to go. It's so funny, Rent was the first Broadway show I saw and it was the first show I was in.

Charlie Sandlan (34:13):

Did it blow you away when you saw it? I mean, were you just like... This is amazing?

Norbert Leo Butz (34:18):

It was. And I'm not a super confident... I struggle with insecurities and stuff. And that was one of the rare gigs. I waited outside with a friend of mine. We sat in the front row. We waited hours for our tickets. The show hadn't been going... 20 minutes into it, I said, "I could do this. That's my part." And when that comes in, it's not vanity and it's not ego. It's just a simple fact.

Norbert Leo Butz (34:44):

It's I know who I am. I know what my skills are and this show could really use them. And that was just a thought. I saw it. And then a week later I'm literally in this and the publicist from Rent sees it. And I go to an open call and have a series of callbacks and was cast and then took over the lead role for the second year of the run. So it was a crazy time because I had done anything longer than a month, as a regional theater length of a run of a play. And here I am in Rent for a year and 10 months.

Charlie Sandlan (35:21):

It changed the whole course of your life. You're coming to New York thinking you're going to be a serious Shakespearian actor. You come to New York and you think my career is going to be one think and you have this fantasy about what it is, and then it actually becomes...

Norbert Leo Butz (35:39):

Took me in a whole other direction. I have nothing but gratitude. I mean, my God, how lucky can you get? I was in New York for three months and I get the best Broadway contract I could. It allowed me to buy my first apartment. My youngest daughter had just been born, so it was badly needed. I got my agent, who is still my agent to this day, from that job.

Charlie Sandlan (36:10):

Wow. That's loyalty.

Norbert Leo Butz (36:11):

Yeah. Bernie Telsey, who cast me in that. He's still one of my point guards in terms of bringing me in for stuff. There was a transition after it though. It was such an iconic show and I had the bleached hair and all the piercings. And so then it was like nothing but rock and rollers and drug addicts for the next couple of years. That always does seem to happen if you get sort of known for something. It was a great experience.

Norbert Leo Butz (36:42):

And to this day, I've never worked with a cast... And you were talking before about Jonathan Larson's death. I've never seen a cast of actors have such a singularity of purpose in terms of why they were doing what they were doing. Every actor, if you're going to classes or anything, why am I doing this? What does this mean again? You become all in your head on your journey to becoming an actor.

Norbert Leo Butz (37:04):

The work starts to seem really internal and selfish. And that was a great example for me to see how a group of 15 actors come together, meet on stage every night in a circle, remind themselves what they were doing, the responsibility they had to the writer. It was a beautiful thing to see. It was just the essence of ensemble acting, which is always what you're trying to find. You really are a group effort.

Charlie Sandlan (37:40):

Well, it's a collaborative art.

Norbert Leo Butz (37:44):

Absolutely.

Charlie Sandlan (37:45):

And it's a transformation art.

Norbert Leo Butz (37:49):

Yeah. Bart is an excellent director in this way, too. Every show you have your leads, your principals, and then you're supporting people. And then you're like background people. It's like a hierarchy, like some old feudal... It's a caste system. And you feel

that, but you also feel it in a director like Bart, who goes around to the townspeople and will really come down on an actor in a non-speaking role if he's not believing what they're doing. He really wants to know what your stake is in this scene, at this moment, carrying that basket of flowers across the street. Who are you? What are your beliefs? What brings you here?

Charlie Sandlan (38:43):

I mean, that's artistry.

Norbert Leo Butz (38:46):

It is. And you feel it. An audience feels it. They don't know they're seeing it. They don't know they're experiencing it.

Charlie Sandlan (38:54):

They just walk out and they go, "That was fucking great."

Norbert Leo Butz (38:56):

They just walk out.

Charlie Sandlan (38:57):

And they don't know why.

Norbert Leo Butz (38:58):

Every person on that stage was in the same world. Not one person took my view away and said, "That dude is some guy who goes to Julliard. That's not the guy. That's not the character. That's some guy and he's not fitting into this other thing." And all the great theater makers from the Group Theater to Steppenwolf, to Circle in the Square, all of those, that was the aesthetic.

Norbert Leo Butz (39:26):

Everybody of a world is much investment in the small roles or even the nonverbal roles as the leads. I don't know. It's a very mysterious thing. I feel it every time. You look around the stage and you're like, "I don't believe them. I don't believe them. I don't believe them." Because everybody's looking at the lead actors, and maybe because I've done these big projects, I really do. I look around the stage to see what the bartender's doing or what the maid is doing over there.

Charlie Sandlan (39:59):

Because it's all about behavior. You got to create behavior and you either can do it in an organic way that's experiential or you're just someone that says lines and goes from cue to cue to cue to cue. And there's a big difference from that and going from impulse to impulse to impulse, being spontaneous and in the moment, not knowing what the fuck's going to happen, even though you do. I mean, that's such a beautiful part of it all.

Norbert Leo Butz (40:27):

It really is.

Charlie Sandlan (40:28):

When you're cooking like that, it's a drug.

Norbert Leo Butz (40:32):

It's the only thing I want. And as an audience for art, it's the only thing I want to see anymore. It's the only thing I want to see.

Charlie Sandlan (40:37):

Anything you've seen lately... Well, not lately, but that just blew you away? Brian Cranston blew me away.

Norbert Leo Butz (40:47):

Brian Cranston always blows me away.

Charlie Sandlan (40:50):

Yeah, he was amazing in Network.

Norbert Leo Butz (40:51):

Yeah, man. He blew me away in Network.

Charlie Sandlan (40:54):

He was so deeply alive.

Norbert Leo Butz (40:57):

He was incredible. I wasn't as big a fan. I thought that some of network was like super fascinating. We don't have to get into the aesthetics, but Evo is way out there.

Charlie Sandlan (41:13):

He deconstructs shit. You either like him or you don't.

Norbert Leo Butz (41:16):

And God bless him, because I think it's fantastic that he's doing it. The last sort of ensemble thing, let me try to remember, that just

knocked my socks off, man. I mean, there's been a lot of them. I don't know. This is the first one that comes to my mind. A few years ago, the Signature Theater did some Albee one acts, directed by Lila Neugebauer, brilliant director. And she's a master at this thing of making everybody. And it was a brilliant actor, Paul Sparks, who's a friend of mine; Katie Finneran and Bobby Sean Leonard. And the three of them, they did Zoo Story. It was the second act. And then a later play...

Charlie Sandlan (42:00):

Was it The Sandbox?

Norbert Leo Butz (42:02):

Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (42:03):

They usually pair those up.

Norbert Leo Butz (42:06):

No, it wasn't Sandbox. It was a different pairing of Zoo Story. I can't remember. Brilliant, all three of those actors. So the communication happening between the three of them, the risks that we're taking, the not helping each other by helping each other. Great director, Jack O'Brien, he says...don't help the other person. Don't help them. They're pursuing their objectives. You are pursuing your objectives. Stand your ground. Don't make it easy for the other person. Remain the person who is receiving all of the stuff coming at them. And those three actors just blew me away. But I can think of a lot of...

Charlie Sandlan (42:59):

Mark Rylance is amazing...the last thing that just cracked me open was Jerusalem.

Norbert Leo Butz (43:07):

I was gone working for the year that Jerusalem was planned or I was in something else and I did not see it.

Charlie Sandlan (43:13):

Great Jez Butterworth play.

Norbert Leo Butz (43:15):

I know.

Charlie Sandlan (43:17):

Olivia in Twelfth Night was also...

Norbert Leo Butz (43:19):

I did see that. Here's the thing about Mark Rylance though. I mean, the guy is just... That's just a whole other breed, and some of his film work, too. The guy has done some really, really, really interesting film work, still really intense. And then to see him do Boeing-Boeing, which was this ridiculous farce. What he was creating was just magic, man. That guy is just incredible.

Charlie Sandlan (43:50):

I mean, when you're watching good acting, when you're watching actors that are just completely in the moment, it is a special thing to behold.

Norbert Leo Butz (43:57):

It is. And for somebody like a Mark Rylance, he's a theater actor. I know he's got an Oscar and I know he's one of the most respected actors in Hollywood now, but the core of him, he's a theater beast, he's a died in the wool true theater artist. Maybe I'm biased, but in my opinion, I've only seen those great performances on stage from the theater artists who have been doing it over and over. And Mark Rylands had been doing great work on stage for 20 years in London before he was discovered.

Charlie Sandlan (44:39):

I saw him do Henry the Fifth at the Globe like in '97.

Norbert Leo Butz (44:42):

Oh, I've seen a lot of that on YouTube. There's a lot of that on YouTube. Gorgeous, right?

Charlie Sandlan (44:47):

Unbelievable.

Norbert Leo Butz (44:48):

The trust that that guy has, it's a lesson everybody should take. The trust that he has and how good the writing he's doing, right? So he's just a direct conduit to making sense and making the

points in the language. It's coming through his personal being. But that guy, instead of adding shit onto the shaker, he just takes off more and more and more. You can't almost believe it's happening that he's just sitting there thinking exactly on the line and communicating. No bells and whistles.

Charlie Sandlan (45:22):

No, there's no subtext. It's all right there. It's like just let the language work for you. Just say the words

Norbert Leo Butz (45:28):

And when he does it, it seems like it's the easiest thing in the world, but it's so, so, so hard.

Charlie Sandlan (45:34):

Yeah. I know we're going to wrap up our time. I'm wondering if you could just tell me as we go here, how would you define artistry?

Norbert Leo Butz (45:43):

I usually don't call myself an artist. I usually refer to myself as a performer. I think the word is bandied about too much, quite frankly.

Charlie Sandlan (45:55):

In a pretentious way.

Norbert Leo Butz (45:56):

Yes. Not just in a pretentious way, but this idea that anybody that says I'm an artist and that what I'm doing is art, I kind of reject that. I think that art is in the eye of the beholder. I think it's for the person who's receiving it, not necessarily for the person who's doing it. I'm not saying that acting can't be elevated to a level of art, but it's rare.

Norbert Leo Butz (46:24):

I think how I define art, I guess generally it's a big umbrella term, but I think communication is one of the important words that I think... I think a work of art has to be communicating something between the maker and the person receiving it. So the art and theater to me is a conversation between the playwright and the

audience. The actor is the conduit through which that happens, but the art is the communication.

Norbert Leo Butz (46:57):

And also the art of acting is communicating between performers. So it's a communication within a communication is how I think of theater art. And I like thinking of acting as communicating as opposed to something like, I don't know, emotionally... Of course it's living truthfully under imaginary circumstances. Everybody agrees that that's literally what it is.

Norbert Leo Butz (47:25):

But I think philosophically what it is, is a communication of an idea or a theme or storytelling. Telling a story is a form of communication. So I think it all falls under the umbrella of communication. And if the communication is not received, I don't know that it can be considered art. I'm sort of splitting hairs.

Charlie Sandlan (47:50):

You mean if the communication isn't received by the audience?

Norbert Leo Butz (47:53):

Correct. Somebody can intend to make art, but if there's something lost in the communicating of what that artistic idea is and it's not received, either through problems in the writing or in the directing or in the acting or something that's getting in the way of that communication, then it was a shot at art, but it maybe missed the mark. But communicating, and that becomes vital to me right now.

Norbert Leo Butz (48:26):

I think we're getting ready to go into a whole amazing new fucking thing, because I think what's happened right now, because of a bunch of things, I think we can definitely lay some blame at the leader of this country. But the lack of communication, the lack of people talking, the lack of sharing ideas, the lack of... We're losing our abilities to communicate. There's no communication happening in social media.

Charlie Sandlan (48:57):

We're in our tribe, right? So fuck you if you're not in my tribe and then the other tribes are fuck you.

Norbert Leo Butz (49:05):

Boom, no communication. Communication is done.

Charlie Sandlan (49:07):

We're decaying. We're rotting from the inside. And it is art, it's theater, it's storytelling, like you were saying, that's got to help us.

Norbert Leo Butz (49:17):

I agree. I think all...

Charlie Sandlan (49:19):

Reconnect to our humanity.

Norbert Leo Butz (49:21):

100%. And I think all of the arts do that. I think theater does it in a super profound way, human to human. But music is a communication, visual art of communication, dance is a communication. It's a communication of ideas that yes, appeals to our hearts and to our souls, but it gets an idea or a dialogue out there. And I also think what art is, it's like a shot of vitamin B to our empathic natures. I think it is so critical and crucial... And again, this is where the theater is so important. We've lost our empathy in this country. We've lost our compassion, our shared humanity.

Charlie Sandlan (50:14):

We have no empathy from our president.

Norbert Leo Butz (50:16):

We have none.

Charlie Sandlan (50:17):

And it just trickles down.

Norbert Leo Butz (50:18):

And it trickles down. And in some ways maybe it's exposed this lack of empathy that has been sort of building up, and the theater seeks to break that down and sort of recharge all of us in an intellectual and spiritual, and emotional way.

Charlie Sandlan (50:36):

Well, my fellow daydreamers, thank you for sticking around. I hope that you found that conversation as creatively satiating as I did. Please follow the show, subscribe to wherever you get your podcasts, review it on iTunes. It would be a great help to me. You can go to the website, <https://www.creatingbehaviorpodcast.com>, for all of the information, the links to everything we talked about today on this episode, on all episodes.

Charlie Sandlan (51:06):

You can follow us on IG @creatingbehavior. Follow my studio @maggieflaniganstudio. Lawrence Trailer, thanks for the music. I'm going to leave you with a Stella Adler quote today, she said "You want to be actors because your souls have not been used up by life." Stay resilient, play full out with yourself, and don't settle for your second best. My name's Charlie Sandlan. Peace.