

Episode #020 (Transcript)

Charlie Sandan (00:02):

I say on the first day of class to any student that walks into my studio, that it costs everything to be a serious artist in this country. That if you are going to live an artistic life, a creative life, you are going to sacrifice a lot. You're going to make a lot of real tough decisions so that you can do what it is you love to do. When I read an article in The New York Times back in September about Michael Paulson titled, She Gave Up A Lot To Play Othello, it stopped me in my tracks.

Charlie Sandan (00:36):

It was a feature article about an actress named Jessika Williams who was presented with a real dilemma during these pandemic times. Equity has flat out said, there is no live theater, it's not allowed under union rules. There she was presented with an opportunity to play Othello with the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia. She gave up her Equity card in order to do it. I had to talk to her and find out what that decisions was like. So today, Jessika Williams comes on to shoot the shit with me, so put the phone back in your pocket, Creating Behavior starts now.

Lawrence Trailer (01:19):

(singing)

Charlie Sandan (01:41):

Well, hello my fellow day dreamers. Happy October. We are cruising into fall and thank God this miserable fucking year has got three months left. I will say that the news on Friday, Trump, COVID, the words poetic justice, have never been more clearly defined. Yeah, I hope it's long. I hope it's drawn out and I hope he suffers to be quite honest with you. Apologies to my mother, because I know she's going to hate hearing me say that, but that's how I feel.

Charlie Sandan (02:15):

So onto today's episode shall we. Listen, I read this article in The NY Times and I couldn't stop thinking about it. I just thought, "Wow, what a decision to make." We're in this horrible pandemic. Theater is shut down across the country, but the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton they had adopted some really stringent and specific and clear-cut guidelines and protocols for how they were going to handle moving forward with their season. They were planning on doing Othello and Twelfth Night in rep, and they had come up with a blueprint to do it. They actually have a very beautiful space, an indoor space, it's called the Blackfriars, which is a replica of Shakespeare's indoor theater from the 1590s, 1600s. It's beautiful. Stunning really in its detail. It's a really beautiful place to be able to see theater. You can actually stream this production of Othello with Jessika from their website.

Charlie Sandan (03:38):

But, Equity was saying, "No, you can't do it." They are a non-union house with union contracts and there're rules that have to be abided by. Equity had dug their heels into the ground and she made a decision. She turned in her Equity card to play the part, to be able to make a living, to pay her bills, to be able to survive. You're going to hear her talk about just the shit show that she went through to try to get unemployment. For actors who were working in multiple states over the course of a year to get unemployment is a nightmare.

Charlie Sandan (04:23):

So, we talk about that. We talk about just the role itself, how she approached it. How she's been navigating this career. This is a woman who bought a van a number of years ago and travels and lives and works out of her van. She goes from regional theater to regional theater. She lives a real bohemian, artistic life. She's a fucking actor. I just had a blast talking to her. She's down to earth. She's artistic, she's well trained. She takes herself seriously. She takes the work seriously, which I appreciate, certainly as a

teacher and a fellow artist. So, I hope you appreciate the conversation, here it is. Jessika Williams everybody.

Jessika Williams (05:12):

It's funny, because I was told that I was going to be interviewed by The New York Times. It was kind of similar to this situation. I did it on a Monday morning at like 11:00 or something. I didn't know what it was going to be, which was great. I'm glad that I didn't realize that it was actually going to be the kind of main article in the art section. Then they asked me to do a photo shoot and I thought it was going to be just like a little black and white headshot in the corner of some column. This lovely photographer, she was just like this little refreshing light of artistic energy. She was getting in the bushes and we got in the water, and I was like, "What is this? Why is this a full blown photo shoot?" I thought maybe it was just for her. Then I didn't realize until the article had come out that it was a big article.

Charlie Sandan (06:11):

You started out studying in Scotland at the Royal Scottish Academy, right?

Jessika Williams (06:20):

Yeah. Yeah, Scotland was dope. I had always wanted, since I was in junior high school, I kind of always had it in my head that I wanted to go study Shakespeare in the U.K. It was cool to get that path and to go to Scotland and work in London for a little while. It was pretty dope. I was really sad when I had to get back to the states. When I returned I didn't work for a long time. It didn't matter what I had on my resume in the U.K. I went back to L.A. and got a restaurant job.

Jessika Williams (06:50):

Then a friend of mine was like, "Hey, I've got an apartment in SoHo for 500 bucks. You should move to New York." I didn't know that an apartment in SoHo for \$500 was like the crème de la crème of a situation. I had no idea. I was like, "Yeah, sure. Whatever." So her and I lived together in a one bedroom

apartment on Sullivan Street for a year. It was pretty awesome. I didn't realize until I decided to move out of that apartment that I gave up probably the best thing that anyone has gotten before. But it was, living on Sullivan Street in your early 20s, two girls, it was an experience that got the better of me.

Charlie Sandan (07:33):

What do you mean by that?

Jessika Williams (07:35):

The things that happen in New York to a person who is like a hedonist and someone who indulges in life and food and drugs and alcohol and just staying up all night, that was ... I was loving it. For the first year and a half I was like, "This is dope. This is awesome." The money I was making as a bartender and a waiter was ridiculous, especially because my rent was only \$500 a month. All of the pocket change that I had just kind of slowly disappeared over time. I learned a lot. I like to think of living New York and hustling in New York as my master's degree in acting in so far as it was an emotional playground of boundaries and characters coming in and out of my life that taught me a lot about myself that I didn't know before, because I was just out there on my own.

Jessika Williams (08:33):

It was tough journey, but it was good. What had happened was after five years of living in New York, I finally got to a point I was like, "This is not sustainable. I'm not getting any acting work." I was going to the Equity auditions and waking up at 4:00 in the morning and sitting outside that nasty alleyway. This was before they had the new offices that they have now. Dropping shifts to go to these auditions and not booking anything. A lot of it I think is because I had that, I feel like when you're not a working actor you kind of reek desperation when you walk into an audition room. And that there's a way to kind of, or a technique to kind of get rid of that. So you can walk in and it's like, "You know what, this job isn't going to make me or break me. I'm just coming in to audition.

I'm coming in to meet you." In hindsight, if I had acquired the ability to do that before, maybe that would have changed things. But, I mean I was just always just hungry to work.

Jessika Williams (09:32):

Also, because I studied in the U.K. and my whole network was in the U.K., there were girls who had been in the auditioning circuit just like me for way longer. They had a little bit more of an edge in the game and the casting directors knew them a little bit more. I had finally got to the point where I would start getting callbacks, but I would be in the room with the same 10 girls continuously. It's like, "Oh hey, what's up?" Like, "We should probably get to know each other." That was happening a lot. I feel like if I had stuck with it a little bit longer, I might have succeeded in starting to book work. But the cold New York lifestyle just got the best of me and I-

Charlie Sandan (10:11):

Listen, it's a hard life. The struggling actor life. I mean, certainly when you're not Equity and you don't have representation, and you're grinding out these open calls, it will chew you up. Right?

Jessika Williams (10:22):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandan (10:23):

It will chew you up. Well, so how do you go from that? All right, so you struggle and then how do you end up traveling the country living in a van and doing regional theater all over the country. I mean you've been all over the place.

Jessika Williams (10:36):

It's been awesome actually. So what had happened was I was like, "You know what, I'm done with this. I'm not going to be an actor. I'm going to be a yoga teacher."

Charlie Sandan (10:43):

That's what everybody's fall back is it seems like.

Jessika Williams (10:45):

Oh, totally. I had found this really awesome yoga studio in Brooklyn and it seemed to kind of like save my life. It was the one

thing that kind of just kept me grounded. If I've had a bad week or a bad couple of days or whatever, it's like I would just go to the studio and I would practice and I would be surrounded by these incredible strong women. It was just awesome. What I did was I sold all of my stuff. So I literally, I went on a hike and just got into my head. I was like, "You know what, I've always identified as an actor." I've always been like, "I'm an actor. Now that I'm not acting, I feel helpless. I feel useless, because I'm identified my personhood with my achievements and my career." That conflation can get really, really tricky, right?

Charlie Sandan (11:35):

Absolutely.

Jessika Williams (11:35):

So I was like, "Screw it. I'm not an actor anymore." Like, "Let's play around with that idea." I went back to Brooklyn, got rid of my ... I had a two bedroom apartment in Crown Heights for \$1,250. It was all mine. I had it to myself, but I was constantly working, so I couldn't really enjoy it. So I got rid of the apartment. I sold all of my furniture. I sold everything and I went upstate to New York and I worked at this guy's bar for two weeks and earned \$4,000 in cash. Then I dropped it all on my yoga training. I moved into a little backpack that I got and I went to Costa Rica and then I traveled around before and after the yoga training that I went onto and just kind of lived out of my backpack for six months, and then went back home to California. I was like, "All right, I'm going to teach yoga. This is a new path. This is great."

Charlie Sandan (12:34):

Were you thinking I'm done acting?

Jessika Williams (12:37):

Yeah. That was the mentality I was trying to entertain. More so as an exercise of trying to not associate who I am with what I do. Let it go. Because somehow I was just always meeting broken expectations. I was always clinging onto something that didn't seem achievable. I'm from L.A. and I never really wanted to do

the hustle in L.A., the TV and commercial hustle. Because I mean, everybody struggles with body image and our presentation or whatnot. I just felt that the camera world was going to be a little bit more cruel to me. That's how I felt at the time. Then I didn't know if I was willing to undergo that kind of psychological trauma of always dressing at a 10.

Charlie Sandan (13:32):

Which is tough, because that's where the money is.

Jessika Williams (13:34):

Exactly. Exactly. I just, I didn't feel emotionally ready for that. I felt like, because I'm a very sensitive person and I allow other people's energies and things to kind of affect me. I just felt like going down that route was going to be really, really tough. I had already been doing it sort of in New York. I was like, "I need a break from trying to do that." Because it's not the craft that I want to take a break from, it's the craft of like the business aspect of it.

Charlie Sandan (14:08):

The business side of it.

Jessika Williams (14:10):

Yeah. I don't really have a business bone in my body, which is like, how I am here today. But anyways, I was in L.A. for a couple of months and I got a bartending gig. Then the American Shakespeare Center, I had auditioned for them, I think three times before when I was in New York. I got wind of them from the Shakespeare forum in New York. And I missed my friends, and so I was like, "Hey Mom, I'm going to go on this audition." That was my excuse to fly across the country for a week and hang out with my friends in New York. So yeah, I walked into that audition thinking like, "Just whatever." It's like, "All right, cool. Let's do this again." Then they hired me.

Charlie Sandan (14:52):

So when you fly back to L.A., right. So did you buy a van out there?

Jessika Williams (14:58):

No, the van came a little bit later. My first trip across country was in my Prius and then I did two seasons here and then I got a gig in Northern California at Cal Shakes. Then that's when I bought my van. So after that, I was living in the Bay Area. My brother's been living out of a van for a decade. I've always wanted to do what he did. I was like-

Charlie Sandan (15:24):

Yeah, there was a romanticized kind of thing about that, right?

Jessika Williams (15:28):

It is, but it's tough. Don't believe the videos of like the cute girls saying like, "I did this all myself. Van life." It's like, "Okay, it's a money dump. It's a lot of work." It is beautiful. It did save me a lot of money in the long run from having to ship things. I mean, I've been on either side of the ... I think like maybe three or four or five times I've moved across country in the last four years. As far as having everything that I own with me all the time and I have my cat as well. Not having to put him on a plane and then having all of these companies give you housing. So I haven't paid rent since I left New York.

Charlie Sandan (16:15):

Well you've built, I mean, some long-term relationships with some of these companies. You've been working with ASC for how many years now?

Jessika Williams (16:24):

Four years, I guess. That's the math, I think.

Charlie Sandan (16:28):

So where were you when the pandemic hit? Where were you in March?

Jessika Williams (16:32):

I was here. We were in our-

Charlie Sandan (16:34):

Oh, you were in Staunton.

Jessika Williams (16:35):

Yeah. We were doing our Renaissance season and I was playing Benedict in Much Ado About Nothing. Over half the company was furloughed except for the actors and a couple of the people in the admin. They went to half salary or a third salary and we were like, "All right. This is what we have to do." At that moment, I don't think anybody knew we wouldn't be able to continue. But we had no idea, right? Yeah. It was just a couple of weeks of everyone kind of quarantining and isolating and scrambling around trying to figure out what to do. This company went from roughly a kind of around 3.5 million operation to like a one million dollar operation in a matter of months. Because the house that we work in, we literally are keeping the lights on. It's our responsibility to keep that house open.

Charlie Sandan (17:43):

And it's a beautiful space. I mean, that Blackfriars Playhouse is stunning.

Jessika Williams (17:48):

It's magic.

Charlie Sandan (17:49):

It really is. I mean, I watched Othello. I streamed it, so it was the first time I actually got a chance to see the space and it's beautiful.

Jessika Williams (17:59):

Yeah, it's something else. Sometimes when, given the lifestyle I've been in, I sit here and I wonder, I'm like, "What am I doing in the Blue Ridge Mountains right now?" I'm so far away from my family. I'm like, "What am doing?" Honestly, one of the reasons I do come back to this theater so much is the space is unlike anything else I've experienced. It is the way that we work here, because like you'll run a show for four months.

Jessika Williams (18:31):

The opportunity to run a character in an environment like that, under the same conditions with the audience in universal lighting, with Shakespeare's language, does something to the text and to

your technique that is, it's just remarkable. All of a sudden it's just like, "Wait a minute, I don't know how I would be able to do Shakespeare or do this character if I didn't have an audience to talk to." For example Benedict. Benedict, he needs to talk to people. All he does is ask the audience questions. So to be able to actually ask somebody a question, wait for their reply, and then get your answer or come up with your answer, is such a gift that you just don't get in a lot of other staging environments.

Charlie Sandan (19:21):

But now all the work you were doing we them, it was Equity work.

Jessika Williams (19:25):

Oh yeah.

Charlie Sandan (19:25):

You had an Equity contract.

Jessika Williams (19:27):

Yep.

Charlie Sandan (19:28):

So, can you just talk about how you came to the place where you were like, "I'm going to turn in my Equity card"? I know that's a fucking tough decision.

Jessika Williams (19:41):

Yeah, it tore me apart. I felt like I was in the middle of like my parent's getting divorced, which is not something that I've ever experienced, but I was like, "Oh, this must be what it feels like." Because I have mom and dad calling me, talking to me, trying to explain the situation the me. Something that I find really interesting is when people have been responding to the decision that I had to make, like, "Oh, poor her, she's been forced." Or like, "She's been forced to make this decision." Somehow, that language applies that I don't have any agency of my own and that I didn't make a decision. I find it really interesting and a little dehumanizing actually to assume that I allowed an institution to force me to make my choice. It's just, that's just not the case at all. We're presented with tough decisions every single day.

Jessika Williams (20:39):

I wasn't aware that Equity wasn't going to let us do the show. They had come out with their guidelines and we had a safe start protocol in place. The ASC did work hard to communicate with Equity around our protocols and what we had in place. Of course, it's not proven, because no one's ever done it before. We don't have anything to compare it to. Equity was like, "Do you feel safe? Do you feel safe?" I was like, "Yeah. We have a really, really low COVID case. Tiny, tiny community in the middle of nowhere. We all live in the same building. We're a block away from the theater, so no one is taking public transportation. Anyone who has kids or a spouse, were all working in the same bubble, in the same community." I also wasn't receiving unemployment. I got completely screwed out of my unemployment.

Charlie Sandan (21:38):

How did you get fucked like that?

Jessika Williams (21:40):

Because last year I didn't work in Virginia at all. I worked in Ohio. I worked in Nevada and I worked in Idaho. So I applied in Ohio, because I was like, "That make sense. That's where I should apply for unemployment." It took them six weeks to determine me ineligible. So I didn't know that I was ineligible until six weeks after I had been putting in, filing my weekly claim. Then by that time they were like, "You have an open claim in another state." They thought I had an open claim in Virginia. Then I'm on the phone with Virginia. For two weeks straight, I'm waking up at 7:45 AM trying to be one of the first callers to get someone to talk to me about my situation.

Charlie Sandan (22:27):

What a fucking mess.

Jessika Williams (22:28):

Oh God. I mean, it broke me down so many times, because I was like, "This is ridiculous." I worked all last year. There is no reason I should not be receiving unemployment. But Virginia said that Ohio

owed me. Ohio said that Virginia owed me. I was going back and forth, and then to the point where I did actually have two. I was attempting to file a claim in two states, which looks fraudulent when they're looking at the database and whatnot. I appealed in Ohio. I had a lawyer look at my stuff. They just got hung up on the fact that I had two weeks left in Virginia of available unemployment. So I should have filed in Virginia and then I was like, "Dude, that's so stupid, because then I would have had to reopen with you guys." So I mean, that was like-

Charlie Sandan (23:17):

So there was no income. There was no money coming in.

Jessika Williams (23:22):

There was no income. I mean, that's like \$10,000 for the amount of weeks that I wasn't working, that I just-

Charlie Sandan (23:27):

Was this March, April and then May?

Jessika Williams (23:31):

Yeah, it was March until I started this contract in June, like 9th. So yeah.

Charlie Sandan (23:38):

Now, when you had your Equity card, did your insurance kick in? Were you getting health insurance through Equity?

Jessika Williams (23:42):

Oh yeah. I have health insurance well into next year. Because-

Charlie Sandan (23:45):

Even though you've given up your Equity card, that holds for the next year?

Jessika Williams (23:49):

Yeah. They don't take that away from you, because I earned it.

Charlie Sandan (23:53):

So they come to you and they say, "Listen, we're interested in having you play Othello."

Jessika Williams (23:59):

That's one of the reasons I came back here for the previous season. I knew I was going to be playing Othello in October of last year. So I came back to Virginia to do that. The shtick was that I would do the Renaissance season and then I would do it in the summer/fall. I knew that that was in the cards. What I didn't know obviously is that there was going to be a shut down of theater in general. Another thing that's kind of being circulated and it's a little bit of a misconception, and I'm not union bashing by the way.

Jessika Williams (24:34):

I think a lot of people think that I'm anti-union and that is just not the case. It's just it was tough. I wasn't earning any money and I felt a lot safer working for this theater under the restrictions and the protocols that they've set in place than I would. I would have had to pick up a service industry job. I would have had to pick up an office job. I would have had to expose myself in so many other ways where I don't have control over the environment or the people around me are not controlling the environment for my sake. For each other's sake.

Charlie Sandan (25:07):

So what, so ASC said, "Listen, we want to do this in a non-Equity house." So I mean, they had to also separate themselves from Equity as well, right?

Jessika Williams (25:19):

Yeah. So they've always run a non-Equity contract alongside the Equity contract. It's the ASC tour. So what had happened when Equity didn't allow them to move forward with the safety protocols ... We have a disease specialist who works in town. The whole community, because the community relies on the business at the ASC, everyone kind of put their heads together and we came up with this plan and Equity was just like, "No." The one thing that we were missing was the kind of the testing. Other than that, I guarantee you the protocols that we're doing right now, when theaters start to reopen, it's going to look very, very similar to what the ASC is doing.

Charlie Sandan (26:00):

So why did you do it?

Jessika Williams (26:02):

I didn't enjoy the energy that was coming at me from the union people that I was talking to. For a week I was getting phone calls early in the morning of in a way it almost felt like they were trying to get me to tell them that the ASC had done something wrong or bad. Or that I felt unsafe. Or that they had broke the rules. They were asking me questions about housing and little details like this. Almost like they were really, really searching for a way to pin something on the ASC. I didn't enjoy being used in that way.

Jessika Williams (26:40):

I was just like, "You guys. I'm fucked right now. I can't get back across the country, my van broke down. I'm not receiving any unemployment. I have housing here and I feel safe in this environment." Like, "Can there be some grace? Can I pull away for a second just so I can get my act together? Just so I can survive this pandemic?" Nothing like this has ever happened before. They were just like, solidarity all the way. Like, "There will be repercussions if you decide to do this work." I was just like, "Damn. That sucks."

Charlie Sandan (27:14):

That's a tough spot to be in. Now I would assume and I'll just ask you, would you have done this for any other part?

Jessika Williams (27:22):

There is definitely that aspect of it, but I would say honestly, the main reason was strictly financial and health wise. If I wasn't receiving the same pay that I was receiving when I was on an Equity contract, or the fact that I have housing as well. Not paying any utilities or anything like that. It was a total survival decision. Honestly, if I had been receiving unemployment, I'm not sure that I would have stayed to do the part, because I would have been like, "All right, there'll be another opportunity for this." This just-

Charlie Sandan (28:07):

But you're just trying to survive.

Jessika Williams (28:09):

Yeah. And also in turn take care of the theater and this community. I was talking to a really good friend last night about, she's was like, "Wasn't playing Othello fun?" I was like, "No. It's actually not fun."

Charlie Sandan (28:27):

No, it's not an enjoyable journey-

Jessika Williams (28:29):

No.

Charlie Sandan (28:29):

... to live out eight times a week.

Jessika Williams (28:32):

No, absolutely not. And especially in this climate and just what's happening. I didn't realize that the internal journey as Jessika the actor was going to be struggling with it as much. And the content and the structure and the way that the audience reacts and loves Iago. It tears me apart man.

Charlie Sandan (28:54):

What as an artist, as an actor, did the last three months do to you as you were trying to take on a work that is, it's steeped in racism and misogyny and he has a painful journey. So how did you navigate just what's going on in the world and taking on the part?

Jessika Williams (29:20):

It unlocked a lot. The world unlocked a lot I think. It's been more difficult to separate. I've always kind of been able to leave things at the door, but there was a lot of things that came up with me and some of my other colleagues, the other people of color in my cast. Things we couldn't really ignore or shoo away. Things that I realized I'd been brushing off and letting slide in the workspace for a long time. And that-

Charlie Sandan (29:56):

Well you know, that Dear White Theater, that letter, which I'm sure you've probably read it, right?

Jessika Williams (30:06):

That was a huge inspiration actually. Me and a couple of other people we kind of kick started this program at the ASC, because after that all of the theaters put out statements in support of Black Lives Matter. It's like, yeah, you can put a statement out, but then what do you do?

Charlie Sandan (30:24):

It's got to be institutional change from within. You need artistic directors. You need playwrights, directors. It just can't be ... I mean, just post a BLM picture.

Jessika Williams (30:36):

This totally ties into the question of navigating this part in this time is that myself and some of my colleagues, we didn't do our own like, "we see you white American theater," but we gathered information and thoughts and instances as a way of giving feedback to our company and to our leadership. And the whole thing as a whole of things we should take a really, really hard look at before we can actually claim that we're in support of BLM. That's being heard and that's being dealt with and it's a hard conversation to have.

Jessika Williams (31:19):

It's also created a little bit of a divide too, as like, the ASC is not necessarily known for ground breaking conceptual Shakespeare making. We do the words. We don't solve the problems, we just kind of present them. We lean very, very heavily on the text and the technique of talking to the audience and whatnot. I don't know if that's going to be enough moving forward, especially with a play like this.

Charlie Sandan (31:54):

Well what do you mean by that?

Jessika Williams (31:56):

There's an argument about whether or not Othello should be done anymore. Or like, "Why do we still keep doing this play or other plays like it?" I'm an advocate for not putting Shakespeare away. I

see Shakespeare as a really, really beautiful example of humanity. If you take away all of the kind of the race and the gender and the class and you just listen to the words that people are saying, I feel like it's a really beautiful exploration of the human spirit. But, I also think that as artists moving forward, we do have a job to not necessarily solve the problems but attempt it. Have a clear idea of the story it is that we're telling. Or we're trying to say, or where we stand. You can never control the audience. You can never get them to all arrive to the same decision or feeling, or take away the same thing. But you can definitely present where you stand on it.

Charlie Sandan (33:02):

Is Staunton a conservative community? Is it Trump country?

Jessika Williams (33:07):

Well it is, it's like 20 minutes out of downtown, Trump country all around. Staunton itself is like a little cute purple, blue town. But our audiences are all ... It's a sea of white hair. It's a-

Charlie Sandan (33:24):

But you're probably one of the only ways that a lot of these people that just watch Fox News all day can get something different and be challenged to think in a way that they're not in their day to day life.

Jessika Williams (33:38):

Precisely. And it is important and the conversations around it are really, really important. Right now we don't have that because of the pandemic. We don't get to meet up after the show and go to the bar or have as many talkbacks as we would like to in talking about the content. We also put the show together under extreme circumstances. Crazy circumstances. The level of stress was just doubled. So, taking a really, really loaded play and doing it under these circumstances, there's so much to unpack, of course we're not going to get to it. But the experience is real and people are devastated. People are delighted, which that really infuriates me, but I'm not in control of that. I have to-

Charlie Sandan (34:29):

What do you mean people are delighted? What are you-

Jessika Williams (34:29):

Oh, when people are rooting for Iago. When people are rooting for the villain and enjoying the kind of the ... The play is slightly structured as a comedy in its actual form, which is odd. But, I also in realizing, it's like, "Oh, this character was definitely not written for a black man. This character was written for a white person." Inside of the play wanting to shake the audience up, or I want to just shake the play and be like, "No, there's a way of telling this story where Othello doesn't look like a buffoon. Where he doesn't look like an idiot." Because I don't think he is an idiot. I think he's a damaged person and there's another person just kind of pouring salt on a freshly opened wound until ... But, I feel like there is a way to tell that story with this play. And it's fascinating, because some nights I feel like, "Well no, Othello just gets totally duped." Then other nights, I really give my Iago a run for his money and I'm like, "No, I'm going to make you work harder motherfucker."

Jessika Williams (35:35):

And that's the other beautiful thing about this space is being able to kind of adjust and play the music in a different way that's not set every single night. The audience also informs that. My brother came to see the show and oddly enough there was like eight other black people in the audience, which is not something that ever happens at Staunton. The energy that we got back from the house was so different. They were mad at Iago. They were hissing at Iago. The energy was just so different in the room, whereas on another night, you've got people when Othello goes into his epileptic fit, laughing.

Charlie Sandan (36:16):

What's that like to be laying there going through that and hearing the laughter?

Jessika Williams (36:21):

Oh God, it's awful. It really, really sucks. But the gift is that the language that he has after that moment is so angry and so dexterous and muscular, like when he's chewing out Desdemona, and when he's getting ready to kill Casio in the moment, there's a way to channel that anger that I experience on stage into the following scene. It just gets ... My friend was like, "Dude, sometimes you scare the shit out of me in that scene." I'm like, "Because I'm really angry actually." Othello is angry, but Jessika the actor is also hurt and angry and-

Charlie Sandan (37:06):

As well as should be. I mean, you're the character right?

Jessika Williams (37:08):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandan (37:08):

You are the part. How did understanding the epilepsy, did it unlock something for you, or did it give you a way of approaching him psychologically?

Jessika Williams (37:21):

Totally. It totally did. And I didn't put it off, but I knew that I wanted to work on it. I called my brother's friend who is a doctor and I was like, "Can you talk me through some of the things that happen physically with this kind of auto emotive syndrome. He kind of gave me a step by step, which helped me do it physically and then it kind of now, it just kind of lives simultaneously with the text. It really became clear to me. All of a sudden I started seeing all these other clues in the text that like, "Oh no, Othello's got a condition." He talks about it in the beginning. The, "some distressful stroke that my youth had suffered." He talks about his journey and it's like, "Oh, this is someone who is literally been on the run their whole entire life who is suffering from PTSD, who has been beaten, who has overcome extreme obstacles. He has little flubs in his language that also indicate that, oh, there's something happening there. You can have a whole bunch of tiny seizures happening all the time and you're not aware of them.

Charlie Sandan (38:27):

And I saw that, you caught that. I mean, you had maybe what two or three little moments where you could tell, something was going on with you. That you were not in control of.

Jessika Williams (38:37):

Right. And then just a little like ... But that's also in the language. I found more of those instances after I kind of clung to that idea. It made his journey resonate on a level that was real and truthful, as opposed to trying to justify him all of a sudden losing his shit because he thinks his wife is being unfaithful.

Charlie Sandan (39:00):

That's so simplistic.

Jessika Williams (39:03):

Right. And it's like that is enough. That also does happen to people. But generally that's a symptom of a larger issue there.

Charlie Sandan (39:10):

You know what I liked about what you were doing is that you weren't trying to act like a man, but you were very grounded and you had mannerisms that were masculine. But can you just talk about how you tried to approach it? How you altered your physical life, because you were very grounded and you had a masculine energy about you, but you weren't trying to act like a man.

Jessika Williams (39:38):

I embody a lot of my brother's physicality. My brother and I, our cadence is so similar. We have the same facial expressions and the same kind of body movement. I just kind of breathe him in a little bit more. I breathe my dad in sometimes and just let it sit in my body. It actually feels really, really natural to me.

Charlie Sandan (39:59):

Do you have a process? When you get a part and you start to look at a play for the first time, do you have a way of working that's kind of like, "This is my thing. This is what I do when I approach a part"?

Jessika Williams (40:13):

Totally. I mean, it's been a lot of Shakespeare the last few years, but I feel like the same goes with any part that's non-Shakespeare. But it's a hard look and investigative process of the text in particular. I'll go in and I've got my folio. I've got my porto. I've got my script. I've got like an Arden edited edition. I go in and I understand the choices and the changes that have been made and I'll get stuck on something that I probably won't even figure out. Won't even be unlocked until there's actually an audience in the room. I'm like, "Oh, that makes sense."

Jessika Williams (40:52):

But I do a lot of work on the text. Then I allow myself to kind of get lost and I'll work on a passage or a scene. And I will, like some actors don't really like to watch other actors work, but I'll early, early, early on I'll watch as much as I can. I'll watch as many Othellos as I can, or as many Kates as I can, or as many Violas as I can and just see their choices, what they've done with the text. Then I put all of that away but it's still I the back of my head, so if something has worked over and over again, chances are, I'll also make that choice.

Charlie Sandan (41:30):

You mean if you see something in five Othellos and you go, "Oh well, that works"?

Jessika Williams (41:32):

Yeah. As far as understanding the character, it's kind of like if you read a book that's really interesting all of a sudden, everything around you is like, "Oh, that's what that sentence means." Or, "That's what that word is." Or a word will just start to come up. I feel like that happens to me with characters. When I work on a character, almost everything that I'm looking at kind of works as another lens or another avenue or another path to getting to understand this character.

Charlie Sandan (42:04):

I teach the Meisner technique. That's what I train my student's in. The Meisner technique really is grounded in your ability to listen.

I'm just wondering for you, how would you describe the importance of listening for you and just how you work and what's it means to you when you talk about listening as an actor?

Jessika Williams (42:28):

It's everything. I think it's often times more important than the words that you say. And not showing it, but allowing it to be seen. You don't want to show that you're listening, but you want the audience to hear your thoughts in a way. There's so much that can happen and sometimes it's difficult, because your scene partner for one reason or the other isn't looking at you. Or maybe they're not in the moment and they're not present. So you don't actually understand what it is that they're saying, but you still have to find a way to listen.

Jessika Williams (43:09):

A trick that I like to use is just fall in love with something. Fall in love with something, so it's like maybe my scene partners words are getting away from me. Or I'm like, they're not really tuning in, they're not really connected to me, so I'll fall in love with their earlobe. Or if they'll hang on a syllable, if there's like a plosive or something like that, I'm like, "Oh, the way that you say your P's." Just choose something to fall in love with and that can aid you in active listening. Not everybody is great at it and it's hard to listen when you're in a scene with someone who's not listening.

Charlie Sandan (43:46):

Yeah, it is.

Jessika Williams (43:47):

But with this language in particular, it's like you're always responding to something that's being said. Often times with Shakespeare you'll pick up on certain vowels or certain plosives or consonants, and what you say is a direct connection to what that other person said, so it's very, very important. And then, when it's spoken, the audience is then also, their listening is turned up because they're hanging onto the same consonant or vowel or subject or item that's being talked about. It's repeated on purpose.

Charlie Sandan (44:25):

Do you have any regrets about what you did?

Jessika Williams (44:30):

I mean, I think it would be silly to say no, because I feel like as human beings, we're going to always think about the choices that we've made and what we would have done, what we should have done. I often wonder what I would be doing if I wasn't doing this and I'm like, "Wow, I probably would have made myself back to California." Be kicking it with my mom in her garden. Drinking martinis and getting a job somewhere and having this time, this opportunity to self-reflect. To again, disassociate yourself from what you do and have a hard look at yourself as a human being that's not connected to a job or a goal, which I think is what a lot of people are going through right now.

Jessika Williams (45:18):

For some, depending on the situation that you're in, for some that's really difficult. For some it's probably refreshing. I mean, I'm so stressed out. I'm tired. I'm stressed. But at the same time, I feel safe. I have all of my basic needs met. Being a part of this project, there's an affirming quality to it where it's like it's not entirely self-serving. What I'm doing and what we're doing as a company is in care of others. It's in care of the community. It's taking care of each other. People who have worked here for over 15 years, they have their families here. They have their houses here and the ASC is their source of income. Keeping that place alive is also in turn helping them out. Putting food on their kid's table as well as my own. Having these conversations with the community and the students and all of the educational programs that we're doing around this is sparking really good conversation and it's inspiring. So for that reason, I definitely don't regret the choice that I've made because I don't know what it is that I'm doing or we're doing, but it does feel important, and most importantly, it doesn't feel out of like ... I'm making a lot of sacrifices for others. Not just myself.

Charlie Sandan (46:54):

Yeah. Well, I mean, you're giving something of value, right? To the community and there is something very noble about it honestly. I mean, the artistic life is such a courageous life. You're risking everything. You're putting your fucking self on the line. I mean, if you had to say something to that 18 year old kid who was headed off to Scotland about what this life is going to be like, what would you say to somebody who is starting out and has this idea of what they think this career is going to do of them? It never pans out the way you think.

Jessika Williams (47:34):

Don't chase an outcome. Don't chase a dream. Don't chase something outside of yourself. But just constantly be working on yourself. Then through that, you'll know whether this is for you or it's not. This lifestyle is not for everyone, specifically in theater. Theater is not going to pay your bills for your entire life. I would have also told myself to definitely work on and hone other skills as well.

Charlie Sandan (48:08):

You've got to have hobbies.

Jessika Williams (48:10):

Yeah. Yeah.

Charlie Sandan (48:11):

It sounds like you've acquired, I mean, you've lived some life. You've acquired a lot of life experience. I tell my students you cannot bring more to your art than what resides inside of you. So you've got to continue to feed yourself. You've got to have other things that you love to do, hobbies. You have to be an intellectual omnivore.

Jessika Williams (48:31):

Yes.

Charlie Sandan (48:32):

If I could quote Steve Jobs, he was like, "You've got to be an intellectual omnivore." I just love those two words together. What do you love about acting?

Jessika Williams (48:44):

Really, really feeling the pennies that drop. The moments that drop in the audience. Feeling that. It's not something that's tangible and yet it is. You can feel an emotion shift in the room and it feels like actual human connection.

Lawrence Trailer (49:05):

(singing)

Charlie Sandan (49:08):

Well, my fellow day dreamers, thank you for sticking around and keeping that phone in your pocket. It means a lot to me. If you are finding this show inspiring in any way. If you are learning something. If you find it interesting, please share it with your friends. Pass it along to other actors and artists who you think might enjoy it. You can go to my website <https://www.creatingbehaviorpodcast.com> for all of the content, all of the links to every episode. You can leave me a message. I use SpeakPipe, go to leave a comment page. Press that red button and let me hear what you're thinking, your thoughts, any questions you might have. Follow me on Instagram @creatingbehavior. Lawrence Trailer, thank you for this song. My friends, Listen, you've got to stay resilient. You've got to keep fighting. Be disruptive. Play full out with yourself, and don't ever settle for your second best. My name is Charlie Sandlan. Peace.