

Episode #022 (Transcript)

Maggie Flanigan (00:02):

One of my favorite quotes is from Stanley Kunitz, the poet, and I quote him a lot. And he says, "Art demands that sense of risk and danger, but few artists in any period, risk their own life. A trapeze artist on his high wire is performing and defying death at the same time, he is doing more than showing off his skill. He's using his art and skill to stay alive."

Charlie Sandlan (00:38):

I'll tell you, Maggie always has the best quotes. And today I'm excited to give you part three of my conversation with my mentor and master teacher, Maggie Flanigan. Anytime I have an opportunity to hear what she has to say about acting, about character, about the artistic process, I consider myself very fortunate and I hope you'll feel the same way. So put the phone back in your pocket, Creating Behavior starts now. (singing)

Charlie Sandlan (01:30):

Well, hello, my fellow daydreamers, I'm going to get you into my talk with Maggie. But I wanted to talk about a movie and an artist that has inspired me in the last week. I just turned 50 here in July. And you get to a certain age, a certain place in your career and you realize man, that sure didn't go the way I fucking thought it was going to go. And I think about that 23 year old kid that moved to New York City after getting his BA in theater. Even at 31, when I got out of grad school, you have this fantasy, this idea of how you think your life is going to go. That one year plan, that three year plan, the five year plan, what you think your life's going to be after ten years. And then you get to 35, you get to 45, you get to 50 and your life, your artistic life is not at all what you thought it was going to be.

Charlie Sandlan (02:39):

It has winded its way and produced, hopefully something that has tremendous value for you personally, even though it might not be

what you thought was going to happen to you. And I never would've thought in a million years that I would be teaching, that my life's work really was in educating and helping and teaching and shaping artists. Never would have thought it. And I've always kind of struggled with the idea that, is it really of value, what I'm doing? Does it really fucking matter? These things, and we all confront them, we all have these thoughts. And in that, and I even hate to admit it, but it's true. You have this idea, well God, I'm going to be famous or I'm going to have a lot of money and millions and millions of people. They're going to see my work and revere me as a real virtuoso.

Charlie Sandlan (03:45):

And we have these fantasies, even though we don't like to admit them, don't like to talk about it because it can be embarrassing. And I tell my students all the time, even those that come to interview with me, like if you're interested in doing this for fame and celebrity, you're doing it for the wrong reasons and I'm not really interested in teaching you. But in truth, we all have it. I just don't think it can be the priority. So when I saw a film this week called 40 Year Old Version, now that is a Google word search nightmare. Version, V E R S I O N. 40 Year Old Version by the playwright Radha Blank, I was inspired. It's a really good film. Now it's not an original, this idea of a screw up unscrewing their life and figuring out what they're going to be doing for the rest of their years. But it was very personal.

Charlie Sandlan (04:46):

Now, Radha Blank, who I had never heard of, did not know before I saw this film, has been a struggling playwright and writer for the last, I don't know, well, over 15, maybe even 20 years. She grew up in New York and she's been grinding it out here and in LA. And this film, which is deeply personal. I mean, the title of the main character is Radha Blank. She wrote it, she directed it, she starred in it, she produced it, she got it accepted into Sundance where it won the directing competition in 2020, this year. And it is

very personal and it is about a struggling playwright and it's really lovely. And I'll tell you what was really kind of just refreshing about it because you don't see it very often. A black female who is not a sample size for sure, being the lead and the star and the emotional core of a film. And it was lovely.

Charlie Sandlan (05:58):

And you could tell, this was not a big budget film. It was shot on 35 millimeter, all of the interior shots of her in her apartment, she's using her actual apartment. She used her brother to play her brother in the film. So she scraped this together with whatever money she was able to gather. And it's really good. And just finding out a little bit more about her life, she was accepted in 2008, so you're going back now, 12 years, she's accepted into the Public Theater's Emerging Writers Group. Now, if you're accepted into something like that, you are thinking and believing in yourself, that man, this is it. This is it. I'm going to have a Pulitzer in the next five, six years. I'm going to be on Broadway. Of course you would. Well, first off The Public is one of the best theaters in the United States. It's one of the core pieces of the New York arts scene. And over the course of her time there, she wrote 12 plays.

Charlie Sandlan (07:08):

Just to give you an example of the kind of talent they get, in following years. Dominic Morrisseau has been a part of the writers group. Brandon Jacob Jenkins has been a part of the writers group. And in those following years, she had one play produced. It was called Seed. And it actually got reviewed in The Times not very well, they called it low budget. And so she's been grinding it out. She had a stint as a screenwriter. She was fired from that job. I don't know why, but she was, talks about that. And she said something here that I thought was important to share with you because you've got to stay true to yourself. You've got to stay true to your life experience, your imagination, what you want to contribute into the world. And she said, "I didn't do poverty porn. I

didn't do war torn Africa. I didn't do period pieces where people would tap dance and sing."

Charlie Sandlan (08:10):

And certainly those are the kinds of things that appeal to the white world. Certainly the white board of directors, the white artistic directors. And if you think about a lot of the plays that come out from, black and people of color playwrights, a lot of it is that because that's the only thing that they can get made because it appeals to our white sensibility. But she put everything she had into this film. You can tell. It's very raw, it's very personal and it's actually really quite good. And she had written, she talks about this, a 10 episode series that was based on her hip hop persona, RodiMUS Prime. And she actually had it completed, she carved out 10 episodes and then her mother died and it derailed her and she was grieving deeply. And her mother was her biggest supporter. And she just couldn't imagine and fathom creating without her on this planet.

Charlie Sandlan (09:19):

And I just think that's something all of us who have suffered a deep loss. My dad died 10 years ago this year. And I know that many of you have lost a parent, have lost a sibling, someone deeply close to you. It can derail you. The grieving process can really do a number on you for a number of years actually. And I just think about Radha's life here and she gets this film made, she gets accepted into the Sundance Creative Producers Lab, which is also very prestigious where she was able to start to workshop this film. And then to win the directing competition. It's phenomenal. So you should know who she is because I think it's a source of inspiration for all of you who might be adding another candle to the cake and thinking to yourself what the fuck is going on with my life? When's it going to shift? When am I going to be doing what I want to do? And you just have to stay true to yourself. You have to keep that compass pointing due North and do the work. And that's what I wanted to talk about.

Charlie Sandlan (10:37):

So with that, I'm going to send you off into my conversation with Maggie. This is the last part of our talk that happened on July 5th, back on my birthday. And we're going to talk about how do you read a script for the first time? How should you approach a piece of material in an artistic way? And just the artistic process in general? So I hope you enjoy it. Here is my mentor, Maggie Flanigan.

Charlie Sandlan (11:08):

Well, I know you have a very specific way that you think an actor should approach a script for the first time, how they should read it. And can you just talk about like what's the artistic way of approaching the script?

Maggie Flanigan (11:21):

Well, I think it's very important to really open yourself wide open, no judgment when you're reading it and leave yourself alone, make sure nobody is going to interrupt you. So it's very private and live your way through it. Meaning that you're allowing yourself to let what's being said and done drop inside of you and no judgment. See what begins to happen to you. And the openness is very important, no judgment about, oh, I've got to do this. Oh, that's what the character is. You're in your head, you must kind of daydream yourself through it, open to whatever the words are and to whatever your impulses are. But it's never an intellectual reading.

Charlie Sandlan (12:24):

And should actors ever be practicing their lines out loud?

Maggie Flanigan (12:27):

Never, never, never because otherwise you'll end up in your head and you'll have line readings.

Charlie Sandlan (12:36):

But that's what most actors do. That is what most actors do. They practice their lines, how they're going to say them.

Maggie Flanigan (12:42):

Well, not if you've trained with Sandy and other acting teachers, I'm sure stress that as well, because there's some wonderful actors out there didn't study or train with Meisner or a Meisner teacher. There are other techniques, but this is a strong point with Sandy. It has to do with being able to improvise within a script, within a scene.

Charlie Sandlan (13:08):

And just to be clear, that that doesn't mean like just making up my own lines, ad-libbing because that's not what improvisation means.

Maggie Flanigan (13:14):

No, it doesn't. It means finding your own impulses there. The actor, you live your way through the scene, you organically begin to see a pattern of behavior, but you don't get in your head about it. You see what impulses begin to surface and you. And they may not be right for the text, but you can't care, you can't care. Some of the most wonderful moments are surprising to you. So it's a matter of living it through and discovering, allowing yourself to come to life if that happened and not come to life. And some of the character work can begin to come to life for you, but you don't want to plop an idea of a character or plop an interpretation screened onto a text, not screamed, but screen, like a silk screen. This is how I'm going to do it. No.

Charlie Sandlan (14:30):

Well then you're really limiting yourself. Nothing can happen too that's interesting or surprising. It's not creative either.

Maggie Flanigan (14:37):

It's not creative. No.

Charlie Sandlan (14:39):

Well, can you talk about character? I mean, it's the height of the art form.

Maggie Flanigan (14:44):

Yes, character acting.

Charlie Sandlan (14:44):

It's I think what every actor aspires to. Can you just talk about that? Like how to approach the character, how to start to think about the things that one can do to make physical adjustments.

Maggie Flanigan (14:57):

Yeah. Or emotional.

Charlie Sandlan (14:59):

Or emotional adjustment.

Maggie Flanigan (15:00):

Or meaningful moment adjustments. Well, character acting is the highest form of acting. It is, I think the most wonderful thing in acting is a character actor, character acting, and it can be a simple character, a flirt. Do you know that this particular guy or woman, that's what they do. They're constantly flirting with other people. Well then the actor needs to practice flirting and not just flirting, but the need to flirt. Do you know, maybe they think they're just God's gift to women or women think I'm beautiful and doesn't that other person want me. And so that is the beginning of a character. And you practice the action away from the text. You don't nail it into the text in the beginning.

Charlie Sandlan (16:09):

You mean you have to be able to improvise from the character.

Maggie Flanigan (16:11):

Yes. Improvise and see what fault, what part of the actions fall into place. And you can do this internally. And so you're building the line of the scene from the character's point of view. It's not going to be necessarily what you're going to do. You. It is the character's point of view. You can create a character from a point of view, you can create a character with what the character continually does, flirts with everyone around them but there's not a person that the character doesn't flirt with. And that would be a small part.

Maggie Flanigan (16:51):

Now, if you flirt in the scene, then you may have a more complicated character. But look at Hamlet, look at the major parts,

the actor is always doing actions and trying to achieve. Then their little objectives, little objectives have to do with what you do in the beat. The beat change is emotional. Either you got what you're doing, what you wanted or you didn't. And it may cause you go into the next beat or something happens there with the other actor, which like a change in music, forces you, changes you into the next beat, like waves in an ocean. That's how a beat should occur.

Charlie Sandlan (17:40):

And the character work. I mean, there's oftentimes where you have to adopt a point of view that's different from your own.

Maggie Flanigan (17:50):

Yes and isn't that exciting?

Charlie Sandlan (17:50):

There was an article, I don't know if you've read it. Kate Blanchett wrote an article a couple of weeks ago about her part. She played Phyllis Schlafly.

Maggie Flanigan (17:59):

Oh right, I never saw that.

Charlie Sandlan (17:59):

Mrs. America, who was pro pro-life and believed in the conservative kind of view of a woman in the home.

Maggie Flanigan (18:08):

Definitely conservative.

Charlie Sandlan (18:09):

And yeah, so Kate Blanchett was talking about how this character, this woman who actually lived was the antithesis of who I am, but that's kind of what attracted her to the part is that I know it's in me because I'm human and I'm going to bring myself to a deep appreciation of someone that thinks and believes and feels the way she does.

Maggie Flanigan (18:28):

That's right. But that's wonderful. That's a wonderful character part. And you can do that by your imagination, you can do that by as-ifs.

Charlie Sandlan (18:42):

How about the darker parts of us? If you've got to play a bigoted part or a racist or somebody ...

Maggie Flanigan (18:47):

Those are the best parts.

Charlie Sandlan (18:48):

They are. How do you bring yourself to it? Or actors that go, it's just not me. And I don't believe this. And they fight and they struggle with the material.

Maggie Flanigan (18:54):

Well, they don't want to be seen, but the most important thing is bringing that character to life. And from yourself. We will not see where you go as an actor in order to achieve the behavior of a person who's really evil, or like somebody who's a flirt and flirts with everybody.

Charlie Sandlan (19:18):

But even evil people don't think of themselves as evil. I mean, you've got to find the humanity.

Maggie Flanigan (19:22):

Oh no, I'm not saying that, the character may be evil, but the person playing the part can't judge the character.

Charlie Sandlan (19:30):

You've got to find the humanity.

Maggie Flanigan (19:30):

He needs to know that this person is malignant and he has to create that behavior. And the actions support the character, and it all goes to what you're trying to achieve in the beat, which causes you to go to the next beat, which causes you to go to the next beat. And you may never achieve your objective.

Charlie Sandlan (19:56):

How about animal imagery and dialects? Those are also things that can help create behavior.

Maggie Flanigan (20:04):

Well cats are very sexy and sensual, that can produce behavior for a woman or for a man who's ...

Charlie Sandlan (20:15):

Maggie the cat.

Maggie Flanigan (20:16):

Maggie the cat. Yes in,

Charlie Sandlan (20:18):

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Maggie Flanigan (20:19):

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Charlie Sandlan (20:21):

So we're talking about ideas.

Maggie Flanigan (20:23):

Acting ideas.

Charlie Sandlan (20:24):

Acting ideas. I know that's important. It's essential. You've said many times, you're never going to be better than your ideas. So what's that mean to have ideas as an actor?

Maggie Flanigan (20:33):

Well, if you're going to play a major part, you've got to have an idea for that part. An overall idea, how you're going to play the part and it's got to be behavioral, produce behavior. But it's general. The overall idea is a general idea. She's a flirt. She's a lethal flirt, meaning that she's got something negative in mind that she wants to achieve with the other person, which can create, a beginning to create a part of the character who is a really bad.

Charlie Sandlan (21:17):

Like a militant feminist. There was a great article on, well, they did an obituary, a late obituary for the woman that shot Andy Warhol.

Maggie Flanigan (21:27):

Yes. Yes.

Charlie Sandlan (21:28):

Who wrote the SCUM Manifesto, which was that she wanted to kill all men, castrate all men. That's a point of view.

Maggie Flanigan (21:37):

That's a strong point of view, well, I don't even know if you can call it a feminist view.

Charlie Sandlan (21:40):

Militant maybe.

Maggie Flanigan (21:41):

Militant feminist.

Charlie Sandlan (21:43):

Yeah. I know you talk a lot about needing to be inspired and having mentors and heroes for yourself to keep yourself creatively satiated. Who were some of yours?

Maggie Flanigan (22:00):

One is, which women will probably hate me for is Henry Miller. And he truly expressed himself and many people found it offensive, and it I'm sure it was.

Charlie Sandlan (22:14):

Misogynistic.

Maggie Flanigan (22:15):

Misogynistic, yes. But his spirit, and he wrote a book, Stand Still Like The Hummingbird, which is a very inspiring book, where he talks about art and what has meaning for him. It has nothing to do with his novels. And that's a book I went back to for a long time, but I loved his honesty. He allowed himself to respond to the way in which viscerally or imaginatively, that may have been offensive to other people, especially women. And he loved women. He loved women. So I'm sure there's going to be a lot of negative response to what I just said. I responded to a lot of artists.

Giacometti is someone that I responded to, and it's not like he's talking about art. It has to do with his long, attenuated sculptures, and they spoke to me.

Charlie Sandlan (23:31):

Well, what did they do for you in terms of just as an artist? How did they inspire you?

Maggie Flanigan (23:35):

I read somewhere, and I don't know whether this is true or not that he was already successful painter or maybe a sculptor as well, and that was in his twenties. And he even had a gallery and he then didn't do that anymore. Holed himself up in his studio, working, sculpting, probably painting and drawing. And the long attenuated sculptures that he did of the men and women that came to him. And I believe from what I read and remember, that he was there for 11 years working in his studio and that's not known. I'm sure other visual artists have done that as well.

Writers, I'm sure have done that. Actors don't know that. It's not something that they can do. That's partly what training is about. Training is about really tuning up your instrument and learning how to craft as an actor. But he holed himself up in his studio and worked to find something that was original, that meant something to him.

Charlie Sandlan (24:57):

So we're talking about an appreciation for the struggle of creativity.

Maggie Flanigan (25:01):

Yes. Right. Which with acting, I think there is appreciation from many actors, but you've got to love the struggle because it's in the struggle that good things can happen from. And you have to be able to tolerate the failures or seeming failures in discovering what you want. And then when you sit with yourself and working and let your imagination flow, oh my goodness. So many things will come to the surface that you never ever thought of. That may be the most potent for your character. Reading great novels and dancing, Louis Horst, who was the pianist for Martha Graham, his quotes. And I also loved quotes.

Charlie Sandlan (25:57):

Yes you do.

Maggie Flanigan (25:58):

That came from the artist. And Louis Horst had them. I can't rattle them off for you here, but I have them written down in the book of quotes that I had, that just inspired actors, can inspire an artist and it doesn't have to be an actor. It can be a painter, it can be a musician. It can be a dancer. They're all talking about the same thing. They're talking about work and craft and love of it and willing to fail because in the failure you can discover something that you never, ever, ever knew existed.

Charlie Sandlan (26:39):

I thought I would transition just here as we wrap up our talk here. Just our current time, I mean, we are in the midst of some serious racial unrest and us collectively coming to terms with our systemic racism and white privilege and how the theater, how actors, black actors, people of color have been suffering in this business. You've been watching this and seeing it unfold. How are you feeling about everything that's happening?

Maggie Flanigan (27:13):

Oh my God. It's devastating to me. The injustice that has been endured by people of color. And I have strong feelings about it. Injustice is a semantic court for me. And I can come to life and I can empathize with people who have been treated heinously.

Charlie Sandlan (27:49):

I mean, did you see racism in South Carolina growing up? Was that something that you were ...

Maggie Flanigan (27:54):

Yes, I did. I heard it and saw it and thought it was disgusting. Even though I'm from the south, my parents were not overt racists. They had opinions, but they were not anybody who acted out, but they did have point of view. So I wasn't exposed to the nasty racisms that occurred in the south, the hate.

Charlie Sandlan (28:25):

But it's still there?

Maggie Flanigan (28:25):

Oh, it's still there. I've not been in the south since 1972, but I also found racism up here too.

Charlie Sandlan (28:35):

Of course.

Maggie Flanigan (28:36):

The oppression of the other. And so I found it kind of the same as in the south, but different, different point of view. The oppression of women. But the main thing is the oppression of people of color. And it's very upsetting to me. It reminds me of the Civil Rights Movement, which when I was in my first year in college, it just was devastating. And then when Martin Luther King died in '68, I found that out and I was devastated by that and enraged. And then Robert Bobby Kennedy died in that summer, by being murdered by Sirhan Sirhan, it just was such a violent time but an important time. An important time in the life of this country and in the life of the people in this country. But it produced some change, but not the kind of change that needs to happen now.

Charlie Sandlan (29:47):

Well, did you ever see it or witness anything just as an actor or as a teacher? Where people of color were maybe treated differently or taught differently?

Maggie Flanigan (30:01):

Not in terms of my being in New York, I didn't see that in an acting class. I didn't see it and I hope I didn't do that. I don't think I did. The only time I'd be upset with someone is if they were lazy or argumentative.

Charlie Sandlan (30:19):

Right. And that had nothing to do with color. That's just anybody that's not doing their work or not taking themselves seriously.

Maggie Flanigan (30:27):

Right. I wish I could speak more to it. I've been devastated. I keep saying I'm devastated, but I mean ...

Charlie Sandlan (30:34):

What does watching that orange fucking pig of a president is just, every day is just so disgusting and depressing.

Maggie Flanigan (30:45):

Absolutely. He's mean, he's callow, he doesn't have a clue about what he's doing and lies.

Charlie Sandlan (30:54):

Yeah. Pathological.

Maggie Flanigan (30:55):

He's a pathological liar and pathological in terms of pumping himself up, there must be a terribly weak man somewhere in there.

Charlie Sandlan (31:05):

Yeah. Well, do you have any advice for ... Listen, my God. We're just being torn apart in many ways, but also the pandemic. And I know certainly a lot of my students and actors are feeling depressed and despondent and unemployed and trying to figure out how to stay an artist, to stay creative. Do you have any advice for people that, certainly we are in a time of crisis?

Maggie Flanigan (31:34):

Yes we are. And other artists, other times in history, there were artists who produced work, maybe not during that time, but maybe, and maybe after. But look at Germany in World War II. Before World War II and after. But there were many artists who had very strong response to Nazis and what happened. And the art is beautiful and there can be huge response to what's happened here, the last three to four years, and even the systemic racism and darkness in this country. One can express their point of view and find a form for it and live it out through one's own craft or what one does. But testify, testify what's going on, take in and speak about it, paint about it, write about it, live it out, act about it because it's truly timely and universal. But use it and testify to it in your own art form.

Charlie Sandlan (32:54):

I think that's great. I mean, I could continue to talk to you for another couple of hours, but this is probably a good place to wrap it up.

Maggie Flanigan (33:03):

To end it.

Charlie Sandlan (33:05):

We're talking on my birthday here today.

Maggie Flanigan (33:07):

Yes happy birthday.

Charlie Sandlan (33:08):

Thank you. And I can't think of a better way to spend it. I spent many of my birthdays with you.

Maggie Flanigan (33:14):

Yes you have. We have you up here.

Charlie Sandlan (33:15):

Over the years. I bet you I've probably spent at least 10 birthdays with you. Although last year you thought I was turning 50 and you wrote ...

Maggie Flanigan (33:22):

I know, last year.

Charlie Sandlan (33:23):

You wrote happy 50th on my 49th birthday cake. So we're going to do it again today.

Maggie Flanigan (33:27):

Yes. Twice.

Charlie Sandlan (33:29):

Yes.

Maggie Flanigan (33:29):

Second time around.

Charlie Sandlan (33:31):

That's right. Well, listen, I really appreciate the fact that you agreed to let me talk to you on this.

Maggie Flanigan (33:39):

Sure. I hope I said something helpful.

Charlie Sandlan (33:41):

Of course you did. You're one of the best acting teachers that we've ever had in this country. And you've trained a hell of a lot of people and you've left a legacy. And my job and my privilege is to carry not just Meisner's work, but your work and what you stood for and what your life's work has been about, to hold onto that and carry it forward. And so I appreciate everything that you've done for me and for every other actor out there.

Maggie Flanigan (34:13):

Thank you. Thank you for your appreciation. And I've enjoyed talking to you and hopefully speaking to actors out there and find something helpful in this. But thank you.

Charlie Sandlan (34:26):

You're welcome. I guess we're going to go get some birthday cake.

Maggie Flanigan (34:29):

Yes. Your birthday cake. It actually has the right year on it.

Charlie Sandlan (34:34):

The right year on it. All right. Well, I love you and thank you.

Maggie Flanigan (34:35):

Love you too.

Charlie Sandlan (34:38):

Well, my fellow daydreamers, thank you for sticking around keeping that phone in your pocket. I do hope that all of you over the course of your life, get a chance to experience both sides of the mentor/mentee relationship, because there's nothing like it. Please follow this show wherever you get your podcasts, you can review it on iTunes. That would be fantastic. You go to my website, <https://www.creatingbehaviorpodcast.com> for all the link and content to every episode. You can leave me a message. Hit that red button. I use SpeakPipe. Let me hear some of your thoughts, your questions, your comments, some opinions. You can follow me on IG. @creating behavior. Lawrence Trailer , thank you for the music. My friends, it is a long and winding path.

Don't give up on yourself. Keep that compass pointing due North
and don't ever settle for your second best. My name is Charlie.
Sandlan. Peace. (singing)