

CHATS & CONVERSATIONS

JESSICA RYAN

Producer, Director, Choreographer, Actress, Voice-over Artist, Writer

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Jessica Ryan is a bi-coastal actor/writer/director/producer. A member of SAG and Equity, she's voiced radio, TV and industrial spots for clients like *Starbucks*, *Old Navy*, *Samsung*, *MIT*, *GE* and, perhaps most hilariously, *Annabelle's Adult Superstore*. In addition, she's appeared on stage at Goodspeed, Berkshire Theatre Festival, Cleveland Summer Stages, Joe's Pub and more.

Her directing credits include stage and film, from an innovative multi-media production of *Pasek & Paul's Dogfight*, to multiple documentary shorts about the Crime Victims Treatment Center, as well as YouTube videos with Kirstin Maldonado, Tituss Burgess, Kerrigan & Lowdermilk, Jeremy Jordan, Collabro and more.

Jessica is also the founder of Broadway Unlocked (BU), a company that connects live theatre communities in the digital space. By bringing together theatre influencers, creators, fans and technology-based partners like Google Fiber, BU solves problems of scale for the arts and mobilizes communities around the world. For Broadway Unlocked, 'Tech Theatre' has a new meaning.

She is a member of the Summit community, content collaborator for the Manifesto Agency, and author of *Death for Dummies on Medium*. To learn more about Jessica go to:

<http://www.jessicaryancreative.com/>

Steve Taft: First of all let me express my thanks for your time and insight and also congratulate you as I see you'll be directing and choreographing *Nice Work If You Can Get It* at Missouri State's Tent Theatre this summer.

Jessica Ryan: Thank you. I've been back as an Equity actor and a choreographer before and I'm so excited to return to direct this summer.

ST: Let's travel back in time for a moment: After graduation (or perhaps before), what steps did you take to work within the entertainment industry?

JR: It was like a three-step process. I'm a pretty methodical and precise person. I graduated and did a Tent gig, *Comedy of Errors* at the beginning of the Tent season that summer and I had booked *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* in Kansas City at the end of the summer (which is where I'm from). I got a job with a temp agency that I knew had an office in NYC and I worked for a roofing company that summer while I was working on *Hedwig* and then I moved to New York with three suitcases, \$500 and an appointment at the temp agency. I moved Friday and had an appointment Monday morning. I tend to dive into deep water and then figure out how not to drown.

ST: Did you know someone in NYC that could help you transition?

JR: Not really, but all roads run thru MSU and Joel Ewing (an amazing MSU grad that runs an incredible theatre program in Chicago), his ex-girl friend had gone to NYU and she needed to sub-let her room for the summer. I really only knew two people, Nathan Tyson (who I barely knew at that time and lyricist for *Tuck Everlasting*) and then a guy named Ryan who was an accompanist when I was in college and that was it. It was a challenge, as I really didn't know anybody.

ST: Well, your energy and enthusiasm leaps off of social media and you appear to be fearless which you demonstrated after graduation by taking that big step and moving to NYC.

Now, when did you decide that you wanted to diversify your experience and in what particular direction beyond acting, singing and dancing did you spread your wings initially?

JR: That's such a good question. Well, I went up to Goodspeed in 2004 and got my Equity card. I had gotten an agent right before that and I found out my agent had a terrible reputation. I had made friends with all the company management and the tech people because that's who I have a tendency to gravitate towards and they told me at the end of the contract: "Just so you know, you're agent almost lost you this job." I said, "What?" So, at the end of my contract [with Goodspeed] my contract with the agent was just about up and I decided not to resign because I was covering for Donna McKecknie at the time and I was going on for a few weeks, because she got sick (which was a big deal obviously), and I knew everyone's agent's were going to be up from the city so I thought, "I got this. I'll just sign with someone else." I had lots of interest and a lot of good calls but it didn't happen. No-one would sign me afterwards so I found myself without an agent after this humongous gig. So when I got back to the city I was auditioning, but not booking anything and I didn't want to bartend and just sit and not be creative, so that's when I accidentally started teaching myself how to produce.

That was the first piece of diversifying at the time. I was working at Joe Allen's, the famous theatre restaurant in mid-town. He is very famous and he has "Flop Wall". The restaurant has been there since the 60's and when the musical *Kelly* closed in one night [February 6, 1965], the cast came in and presented him with a signed poster and "God, we closed party", and so he started a "Flop Wall". And right after Goodspeed, after I got back I worked with a director friend of mine and we developed a show called, *Broadway Bombs* and created a company called the Joe Allen players and started writing and producing these shows for five years featuring all these songs from flops.

ST: As a performer you've worked in various locations around the U.S. How did those opportunities come about?

JR: Almost all through my network to be honest, until recently when I started doing some other things, I booked very little just point-blank (like the Goodspeed). Cleveland Summer Stages, which I helped found with Everett Quinton from the Ridiculous Theatre Company and other people such as Michael Maudlin, a former professor from MSU. Everything I've ever done in Kansas City is because of people I know. I work really hard to keep a network of people I truly care about and want to work with.

ST: Regarding your experience in New York or L.A. and the audition process, what has changed in terms of the process?

JR: One change is that there are way more people because there are more musical theatre programs. Now you have these three levels regarding Equity auditions, which is pretty interesting. I was just chatting with some of my younger actors that will work on stuff with me and if you thought sitting

through an entire day ten or fifteen years ago hoping to get an audition . . . well, if you don't have an EMC card now (Equity Membership Candidate) when you get to NYC just forget about it.

ST: It's my understanding actors have to sign-up online for an audition time slot these days.

JR: Correct, and that's a relatively new process. I haven't done that since I've been in L.A., but I'm so glad they've done it and it will be great once they work everything out. A secondary problem which has been going on since I started, is that if you don't have an agent it's really tough because most of the times those EPA's [Equity Principal Auditions] and ECC's [Equity Chorus Calls] you're seeing an assistant casting director and it doesn't mean you can't book it or get a call back if you're extraordinary, but it's harder if you're not in front of the actual creatives.

ST: You mentioned the need for agent and there are so many young people trying to enter the industry, do you have any suggestions for the new graduate?

JR: Well, there's a thousand ways to do it, right? My particular story when I was in NYC with that agency I was telling you about, they did an open call because they were expanding from L.A. to NYC and they posted a notice in *Backstage*. I was going to go and then I wasn't going to go and I was laying on my couch crying because I knew I was making a bad choice by not going and then one of my college friends called me and said, "Get down here!" and I did. Later I found out I booked that agent not only because I did a nice job at the audition, but because I had been an apprentice at the Berkshire Theatre Festival when I was in college and I had understudied Kristina Marie Norman who did *The Red Shoes* and she [the agent], knew who she was. So, that put me ahead of all those other 22 year olds with no credits.

Out here in L.A. you just have to be really good and really confident so you can ask a friend, "Jeff, how do you feel about introducing me to your commercial agent? She's a funny, weird girl." And because I've done the work, I put myself in the position to take care of an opportunity, he said, "Yes, I'll introduce you." And then of all things, fifteen years later I walk into the meeting and she says, "Oh, I'm the one that fired that agent in New York." It's like that confluence of things you can't control and the universe just bringing everything together. You just got to keep hustling for those moments.

ST: As you say, it is so important to ignore rejection and just keep putting yourself out there.

JR: Exactly. We talk here at the voice-over agency (where I'm at now) and I can come in once-a-week and audition and get to know people and have them get to know me as a human being and not just a name on their roster and that can sometimes make the difference. If you're going in and seeing these casting directors you're going to start having conversations. You're going to say something funny and they're going to start caring about you.

ST: So often young actors are attempting to figure out what a director or casting director wants, which can sometimes derail their concentration and reveal their desperation for the job.

In your experience what are some of the personal qualities or traits a casting director or director are looking for in the actor?

JR: One is confidence. You know I've been thinking about theatre training lately and it's tough because you're learning how to be other people, embodying other characters. I've been thinking that at thirty-six, especially with voice-over work, my best tool is just to be me, but I don't even know who I am

because I'm so good at being other things. Having a good sense of who you are: Are you funny? Are you brash? What are the pieces and parts of you that make you really interesting?

ST: Speaking of voice-over work, how did that opportunity come about?

JR: Same as all of the other opportunities. Living in L.A. all of my other friends were doing V.O. and I thought, "OK, I'll take a class or two." I took some classes at the studio and started hanging out, made friends with Bill, who runs the studio and is an extremely accomplished voice-over actor and director, and just kept hustling, taking class and four years later I was feeling pretty good at it and I said, "Bill, would you mind shooting my demo to Jeff at AVO [AVO Talent] and seeing if they're interested?" and again, confluence of universe it just happened I had just booked a Star Bucks gig on my own, which was a national ad and because I had that on my demo and they needed someone with a lower, gravelly voice that was cool and funny and they picked me up and this other guy who is really good and like "the guy next door", they didn't pick up on that same day because they had a million of him which you don't have any control over. So it's another one of those instances where it's, "I don't control much around here."
(Laughter)

ST: Let's explore writing a bit. It appears to be another area you excel at and you appear to be a person that asks: "What if?" and "Why not?" How did you get into writing and exploring that particular aspect of your talent?

JR: When I started living in L.A. (in 2012), the year before in NYC I decided, "I'm not working full-time survival jobs anymore" as I recognized it takes too much energy and I get too invested, which is not a terrible quality to have but it takes away from focusing on the creative stuff I want to do and make my living doing. So, when I got here I knew I didn't want to work a full-time job and so I was exploring Craig's List for remote work, or part-time work or flexible work and this guy posted an ad for a production manager at an animation company. It didn't pay enough and it was paying way less than what I had been making, but the ad was so funny and so smart and I thought, "I'm just going to reply to this guy." There's no replacing that. He hired me, he's an entrepreneur and I was his first employee at this animation company. I set up all the processes for his production management and after five weeks he said, "You're over-qualified for this. Do you want to try writing? I'm doing everything and I need to start getting things off of my plate." So, I said "Sure. Why not?" And so I taught myself how to write these explainer videos for companies and brands and it turned out to be really useful because it's just a micro-version of writing stories. So now for five years, basically every day I write a story. And what I realized was I didn't want to be just an actor, but to be a creative engine that never stops moving. Now I know structure and I know how to write and I read like crazy so I already knew how to write.

ST: And you were a Presidential Scholar . . .

JR: Yes, I was a Presidential Scholar and as people point out, I was the most promising freshman, but you know, no one's counting. *(Laughter)*

ST: The role of a producer can differ greatly depending on the art form, the production and so on. What has been your role as a producer regarding the projects you've worked on?

JR: Well, there's a big difference between producing for theatre and producing for film or digital stuff. I think what I didn't realize when I first started producing the Joe Allen Players (which was the first thing I really produced), but when I started producing *Broadway Bombs* I didn't realize I was more like a film

producer in regards to a creative capacity. I mean I was handling the logistics and all the paper work and all that, but I was also the final say in regards to the creative. Basically like the Brian Grazer model. So, interestingly enough I kept functioning that way when I was producing things. Then last year or two years ago I started working with (Kait) Kerrigan and (Brian) Loudermilk, the musical theatre writers . . . I work with them a lot. They wanted to do this You Tube series so I started basically worked on solving problems regarding a creative series and they asked me to be a producer. But, what I didn't realize about half-way through was they were expecting me to be a theatre producer, the person who raises money, sets up the business structure and hires the people, where in my mind I was thinking I'm going to be the person that gets this up and running and hires and stuff like that, but it's my series which I've created in my head, like a director, the creative person. So that was a realization that these are two very different jobs. I haven't produced much in the theatre since then because it's not a great fit for me or what I want to do.

ST: In addition to your various talents, you've also taken the initiative to learn various computer programs that aid you in presenting to the world what you do (Adobe Premiere, Audition, Illustrator and more). How has such knowledge aided your career?

JR: That's a big thing that has changed because in college, access to those programs was a fixed fee for one of those programs. And I think at the time costs were extremely high and you really had to be a professional in the industry and making money with those programs. But now you have Creative Cloud which is \$54 a month. I can write it off because I do not use it for anything but work and I just started teaching myself one by one to use those programs and it's changed everything. It's allowed me to do everything I've done in the last five years or so.

ST: Let's chat about networking for a moment. How important is it for the young aspiring professional?

JR: It is massively important, but equally important is understanding what good networking is and how it works. It's riding the line between the intentional and the authentic.

ST: It's really about getting to know a person rather than what they can do for you.

JR: Absolutely. I'm so lucky to be a member of this incredible organization called Summit that is made up of start-up entrepreneurs, artists, social change makers, the movers and shakers basically of the world. They do this big Summit each year on a cruise ship with everyone from Eric Schmidt down to someone like me and the number one rule during these three days is to sit down with someone you don't know every time you walk into the room and never ask, "What do you?" first. You are all smart and incredible people, you have a lot in common. Get to know these people. Don't make it about work. That will ultimately lead to huge collaborations down the line, but set the foundation first.

ST: You are returning to Missouri State to direct and choreograph this summer at Tent Theatre. As a director what do you look for in terms of the actor and personality?

JR: Work ethic. I have very high standards. You can't get anything past me. I'm a really hard worker and I act and direct, so you have to step up on the work ethic thing. I directed *Dog Fight* last year during the academic year and I think those kids were scared shitless of me, but they stepped up. They didn't realize so much was going to be expected. In terms of personality, you being you is your strongest asset. Figuring out the line between professionalism and not being a shrinking violet, being you and getting to

know you as a person and as an actor . . . being ballsy. I love ballsy actors that make big choices and strongly being whoever you are.

ST: Tell me a little bit about Broadway Unlocked. As I explored your web site it was my impression that you're not just this enthusiastic, passionate and talented person, but you have heart and care about things.

JR: I do, yes. Are you aware of the Missouri Fine Arts Academy?

ST: I'm aware of it, yes.

JR: Well, I went to the Fine Arts Academy when I was in high school. Part of that curriculum was interdisciplinary study and I can't tell you how much that affected my creative life, obviously. But the second thing was that at sixteen they took us out and taught us how to volunteer and how to use the arts to improve our community and to connect our community. It's crazy, but that changed the entire course of my life. I never stopped volunteering after that point. The next year I went back and taught a six-week Shakespeare program to elementary students and when I got to New York I helped start a company called House of the Roses which is still around today. It provides dance therapy classes for kids in homeless shelters. But, when I resigned from the Board after five years and it was time to let other people take the reins, I knew I wanted to do something. And at that time three of my friends came forward and who were survivors of childhood sexual assault and they had all been referred through the Actor's Fund to a place called the Crime Victim's Treatment Center. And CVTC provided them with a year of treatment and services and it changed their lives. So, my friend Avery asked me if I would help produce a little cabaret for them because they didn't even have a table in the waiting room for the kids when their parents are in session. So I said, "Of course. Absolutely, but I'm terrible at doing small things." So, I started to do a big benefit concert. And in fact, I was just down the street getting some coffee and I passed Michael Leon Wooley whose an amazing voice-over actor, he was our first host of our very first concert. But anyway, I started producing a benefit concert blending the Broadway benefit concert model with the traditional old money gala model which I had learned at House of the Roses, I put them together.

ST: You have to invite the rich people because they in turn know rich people.

JR: The number one lesson learned . . .

ST: . . . because theatre people don't have money. (*Laughter*)

JR: Right, but we sure can sing for you. We raised something like \$50,000 or something like that, but I could tell there wasn't a lot of potential to grow the program, and people who knew the CVCT and grow the amount of money we were raising so we just started brainstorming and problem solving. I love technology, I use it all the time. When I direct I tend to use film elements and technology elements and so when we could use new and emerging technology at that time (2012) to start doing the concert live-streamed and interactive and include people from all around the world and let them be a part of Broadway in real time . . . anyway, to make a really long story short, I founded this company called Broadway Unlocked and we harnessed technology to connect live theatre communities in a digital space. What that does is make our communities stronger. We're well organized and have a product that people want to see and we care deeply about things. At Broadway Unlocked we're always looking for how technology can connect us together. Sometimes that's through the benefit give-back concert or

sometimes its development. I'm working with a director in Kansas City to develop an app as he wanted to fold in the creative class within a city, because they are the influencers and are closely tied to the city and economic development of cities. So, we're about to do our 5th Give-back concert this fall.

ST: Congratulations.

JR: Thank you.

ST: I could talk all day, but I know your time is valuable. So, is there any additional advice you have for the student about to graduate or is there something in particular you'd like to address that I haven't?

JR: Hmmm . . . well, there is something really special about the people you train with, whether it's in college or your continuing education. Thinking about the Fine Arts Academy or MSU where people just put you together and collaborators from college, I guess I would just say how important it is to build a creative family and keep it and maintain it through the long-term. To be thirty-six and through all of that life that has happened since college and I'm writing for a massive agency

ST: Finally, at Missouri State was there a particular professor that inspired you and if so, what was it about them that was inspirational?

JR. There were three people that had the exact same thing in common: Chyrel Miller, George Cron and Dee Dee Sands (who was a special two-year guest professor at the time), they were incredibly hard on us. Maybe it's because I grew up in a dance studio and I'm very competitive and was never, ever the best person, so I was always being pushed and I respond really well to that. Those three professors expected so much out of us. Those people pushed me so hard. I never had a moment to relax or to think, "I'm really good at this. I'll be fine."

ST: One of the reasons I ask is that students don't always want to be challenged and it's my hope that perhaps students will read about you or others I've chatted with and may realize that to recognize their full potential they need to be challenged because sometimes a student doesn't know they are capable of more.

JR: That's something I'm challenged with when I'm on the other side of the table. I want to challenge, but not to feel powerful but to be invested in them and their success authentically and care about them because that's what makes everyone want to work harder.

ST: Once again, thank you for being so generous with your time and insight. Have a great time at our alma mater and directing/choreographing this summer.

A few weeks after our conversation, Jessica made a valuable suggestion on Facebook to those working in or seeking a career in musical theatre that I believe may be of interest:

Musical theatre friends, I have some suggestions for auditions, in particular self-submits after going thru the casting process for a few shows I'm directing lately:

- Record in a studio with acoustics (no echo) if you're not going to use a mic.

- Be sure you know the genre of show you are auditioning for. If it's golden age, know the references. Watch old movie musicals, there's a style, a way of delivering the jokes, a very clear sense of playfulness.
- If the leading woman is an ingenue AND funny, you must take the opportunity to showcase yourself for both. It makes you a clear front runner. From this side of things, it's overwhelming to think that on top of directing and choreographing a show, you're going to have to teach someone an entire style of acting or guide them to find their sense of humor. I know you are capable because you're amazing! But it ultimately comes down to an issue of time and resources, and something you can do on your own doesn't get high priority unfortunately.
- If the sides are funny, go for it. And go for it hard. I can't tell you how much of a one-up that gives you. Don't err on the side of milquetoast. 😂😁

And like the best lessons I've learned for on-camera stuff, take the opportunity to show me who you are! I, for one, gravitate to the folks who stand out, who do it a little differently because they are a little different. Point of view is such a beautiful thing.
