

Chats and Conversations

JEAN MARIE DONNELLY

Educator – Theatre, Television and Film

STEVE TAFT: Let's begin by telling us a bit about yourself, your educational background and what specifically do you do as a tutor in the theatre and entertainment industry?

JEAN MARIE DONNELLY: I grew up in West Nyack, New York in Rockland County about 40 minutes north of NYC. We just sold the family house we had in the family for sixty years. I was very fortunate to be born just 40 minutes outside of the city. I am a certified teacher. I have a Bachelor's degree in Secondary Education and am currently working on my Masters degree in Elementary Education at City College because my goal is to be what is called a Studio Teacher. I work on movie sets and TV sets as an educator working with child actors and provide the academics for the child actors.

ST: Of course, I'm curious as to how you got into this business and why you pursued the opportunity to run around Broadway, movie & TV sets educating child actors and their parents, opposed to a traditional classroom?

JMD: Dumb luck and good timing. I taught in a high school for two years and this opportunity came up and the job description said, "Traveling Teacher". It was an ad in *Playbill.com* and I thought I'd never get it. All you had to be was a certified teacher. So, three months later I was on tour and did 26 cities in 24 weeks and I got to travel the country. I had two 5th graders and two 7th graders and they're now out of college.

ST: What's the biggest cast of child or student actors you've had to work with?

JMD: *Matilda* on Broadway. Sixteen kids or twenty-one kids when some were in rehearsal. It was wonderful. I was there for three years. I had a Math partner and Science partner and I covered English and History.

ST: So, how does it work for the kids? Is it school during the day and show at night or squeeze in school between matinee's and evening shows?

JMD: It depends on the kid. The kids that live in NY, some went to school in NY and some are home schooled. In NY they're allowed to work ten hours in the theatre and three of those hours are dedicated for school and academic study. So, as long as they have five contact days with the teacher with the seven day week and they have fifteen hours in a normal school week, three hours a day, that is satisfactory academic instruction.

ST: I assume these students get a lot of personal attention?

JMD: Yes. Right now I'm working on the show, Amelie and I have two students, a 3rd grader and a 5th grader.

ST: Tell me about your responsibilities as an educator when working with a show, not only with the children you work with, but the "educating of the parents." So, tell me about your interaction with parents.

JMD: There are two kinds of parents. There are those that have no idea about the entertainment industry and those are the ones you have to sit them down and say, "It's going to be OK. We will get through this. I'm going to teach you all about how the industry works, film, TV and Broadway." I teach them the rules, kind of calm them down and say, "We're going to do this." Then after awhile they kind of become pros at it and they begin to teach other parents. But I also teach the production companies. What are the child labor laws, how are we going to make it work with the demands a production company has and how do we make it work for the kid? I get kids from kindergarten through seniors in high school.

ST: How does it work when a kid gets to a certain age and hormones kick in or attitude? Have you had to handle those kinds of challenges?

JMD: Yes. (*laughter*) The kids I work with usually have chosen to be there. Those are the kids you want, the kids that are driving their career. The kids you don't want are the kids whose parents are living through the kid. That's a difficult situation. And there is that expectation that they (the kid) have two jobs. They have to be professional on the set and they still have to be a kid. The hardest working people in show business are the kids because they have two full-time jobs.

ST: Is it tough for a kid that performs on Broadway to remain being a kid?

JMD: Sure. Broadway is easier than film or TV because when they step outside of the theatre district they don't get recognized as much. The popularity of social media changed that in the fact that they are now more exposed. I do teach all parents to buy all the social media accounts, all the accounts with their child's name so they cannot be impersonated.

ST: Are you at the shows during the shows or just during certain times of the day or evening that you are working with the students?

JMD: For Matilda I taught both during rehearsal periods when we were putting new kids into the show and then during the show. For Amelie I am mostly during the day because it's less kids and the Walter Kerr (Theatre) is a tiny little theatre backstage. The Schubert is a lot bigger.

ST: What are some of the others Broadway shows or TV shows or films you've worked on?

JMD: The two Broadway shows are *Matilda* and *Amelie*. TV, there are so many. *Men in Black 3* was fun because the school room was right next to the creature room, so I would teach, they'd come get the kids to film and I'd go into the creature room and watch them make creatures. I worked on the TV series, *Are We There Yet?* for about three months. That was interesting because I got to meet a lot of different people and I was the kids primary teacher.

ST: For the actor, the next gig is sometimes an unknown. How does that work for the educator in the business? Do you have something lined up beforehand?

JMD: At this point I've been doing this so long that some people call me directly. But I also work with an organization called "On Location Education" and I get requested a lot. Do I always have the next thing lined up? No. But, do I know someone is going to call in a panic because they don't have a teacher and don't know how to handle it, yes.

ST: Well, you obviously have a reputation for being a quality educator. Now, I'm guessing my students may be curious as to the pay of an educator in the entertainment industry compared to a regular teaching position in a school system. Does it compare?

JMD: You have to decide what you value? Does it pay as well? No. But I will tell you that today I am working from 1:30pm to 5:30pm and I can do what I want with the rest of my day. I'm also not as restricted as other teachers are. The kids come to me with the work a lot of times. If I'm working on a series and they come to me as home schoolers, I decide what they want. When I'm working in NY, my boss is usually an hour away and I don't have an administrator looking over my shoulder saying that on Tuesday I have to be on page two or whatever because the rest of the classes are there. I did five years in a traditional high school and it just doesn't work. I'm too creative. I would get in trouble for having kids up and moving. I was written up several times for that.

ST: That's stunning to hear. We should be teaching encouraging creativity. Companies are looking for people that imaginative and can think differently opposed to employing robots.

JMD: You said the wrong word for education. You said, "think" and then you forgot education's "F word", fun.

ST: So, in your capacity as an educator working in the entertainment industry, what have you learned?

JMD: I've learned the importance of networking. I've learned the importance of that P.A. you meet [Production Assistant] may be the A.D. [Assistant Director] that hires you the next time. You need to be very nice to people, professional, cordial, and your reputation travels with you. A friend of mine said, "Capital comes in many forms." And your reputation is your capital. The

way you treat is your capital and people remember. You never know who someone else know and the longer you stay in the entertainment industry the smaller it gets.

ST: Your twitter page states: "You're consistently searching 4 new ideas." Any examples of what those ideas may be?

JMD: Teaching me something. One of the things I love about my job is if I'm going to go somewhere it's going to be somewhere different, I'm going to meet people and I'm going to learn something from someone. That's a benefit of doing what I do. Show me a book, show me a new skill. One of the girls I'm working with now loves fashion. So, she has an hour and she's going to teach me how to make a sketch on a fashion book. I know nothing about fashion but my ten year old does. So, I'm going to learn from her.

ST: How is it when you've worked with a child in a cast for an extended period of time and they are moving on and here comes a replacement, is it tough to say goodbye? Do you stay in contact with them?

JMD: It is. One of the things we did on *Matilda* is we had graduations. And I had a phenomenal guardian team who really went out of their way to create a graduation ceremony. We phrased it as "You're here. You've learned, but now it's time to take what you've learned and move on and do other things." Many of those kids have moved on to do other shows and some have gone back to school and want to be regular kids.

ST: What's one of your best experiences working with a child and what's one of your worst experiences?

JMD: There been so many good experiences. What's hard is the down side of the industry when you have parents living off of the kid. When you have a kid who wants to stop but the parent won't let them. It's hard to navigate that with the parents and the industry as well.

ST: What haven't I asked you that you would like to share with my students about you, or your life or your career?

JMD: If you're going to work there are a couple of things you need to know. If you're going to work in California and be a Studio Teacher you need two licenses for that, you need the Elementary certification and the Secondary certification. That allows you to work with children from California. I believe Alaska is the other state with the Studio Teacher license. Other states you have to be certified in one area and you can pretty much work all over the country.

If you're going to do this you have to be open-minded and flexible. The general rule of thumb is that if it can change it will. Broadway is easier because you know you're going to the same theatre everyday and it's warm and inside. If you're going on location all bets are off. I've taught on a beach, in a trailer in Times Square, in a junk yard. I have taught in parks and some of the strangest places you could ever think of.

When people ask me, "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a teacher." "Oh, what do you teach?" That's when it gets interesting. "I teach child-actors." "Oh, you're an acting teacher." "Uh, no." I reply. "Have you met anybody famous?" "Yes." "Who?" And that goes into a long conversation. And now what I keep getting is: "Have you seen the show *Love?*" And that drives me nuts. Because the guy on love makes us look like idiots and I hate that. I've gone through too much schooling and have too much experience to be an equivalent to that guy.

ST: One last question: How did you meet theatre producer, Meredith [Lucio]?

JMD: I met Meredith through Theatre Resources Unlimited. I actually worked for them at one point, and she was involved in the producing. I've also produced theatre and people are now starting to call me to consult on movie, TV and Broadway projects. "I have these kids. How do I make this work?" So, I go in and help production companies as well.

ST: I really want to thank you for your time and sharing your insight. It means a lot. You'll open the minds of our theatre education students as to another occupational option. Keep up the great work.
