

Hollywood Unscripted Ep 007 – Tracy Letts

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Scott Tallal: Welcome to another edition of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED. I'm your host, Scott Tallal of the Malibu Film Society. Joining us today is playwright, actor, screenwriter and producer. Tracy Letts, welcome.

Tracy Letts: Hi, how are you?

Scott Tallal: Good. I saw that in doing some research I see your dad, Dennis, was an actor, and your mom was a college professor and novelist.

Tracy Letts: Well, both my folks were English teachers. I grew up in a small town in southeastern Oklahoma called Dew Ranch. And my folks taught at a small college there called Southeastern Oklahoma State University. And then they both took early retirement from school teaching in their 50s and had surprising second careers. My mother as a novelist and my father as an actor.

Scott Tallal: And I saw that one of the quotes from your mom, if I get this correct, was that she tried to be upbeat and funny. But in every one of your stories, everyone gets naked or dead.

Tracy Letts: My mother had a terrific sense of humor and a sense of irony. I don't know. There may be some truth to that. At least there was when she said it. What's funny about that is that my mother's stories, her books, though, they were real crowd pleasers and in some ways seem light. The truth is that there's a lot of darkness in my mom's books as well. So she was a caution.

Scott Tallal: Well, that's really where I wanted to go as I wanted to find out where does the darkness come from in your work, you know, whether it's Bug or Killer Joe or certainly August Osage County. There's a lot of darkness there.

Tracy Letts: I know. I mean, some of it is just my natural inclination that I've always lean toward the macabre or the strange. I don't know. I've always had an attraction for that kind of material. The truth is, too, that family history, you know, August Osage County is not autobiographical per se, but it's based on real events in my family. My mother's father committed suicide when I was 10 years old by drowning himself in Port Gibson Lake, Oklahoma. My grandmother then descended into years of downer addiction and had a huge impact on my family. So there's also some darkness baked into the family. But I don't know what family doesn't have stories like that. Not that story, but everybody's got some darkness in there somewhere.

Scott Tallal: Yeah, but that had to be pretty intense for a 10 year old.

Tracy Letts: Well, it was it was very impactful in my life. And then 30 years later, I wrote a play about it. And I remember at the time I was writing it. I was asking my dad a lot of questions about that time. I was using him for research as I tried to recall some of the things from that period. And he finally asked me, said, why are you writing about this? And I said, well, if the events of that time have always haunted me, they've stuck with me for 30 years. And he said they have? He was just rather surprised, taken aback, I think, at the kind of impact that it had on a 10 year old. But my folks, they were great, wonderful, funny, mercurial, curious, wickedly smart people. And they were great parents. And I love them and I miss them like crazy. But events like the suicide of my grandfather are moments where sometimes families, they take their eye off the ball. You know? I think maybe they weren't noticing just the kind of impact it was having on a 10 year old sensitive kid.

Scott Tallal: But for your mom in particular, she was obviously dealing with a lot of issues on her own at that point.

Tracy Letts: Yeah. Dealing with a lot of stuff. You know, when she first read August Osage County, I was nervous about her reading it because I knew it would impact her, that I was even writing the story. When she first read it and sat down to talk with me about it, the very first thing she said was, you've been very kind to my mother, referring to the mother in August, who's pretty monstrous figure, really but not as monstrous as my grandmother. So even my mom seemed to recognize that.

Scott Tallal: Did you know your grandmother well? I mean, were you close to them at all?

Tracy Letts: Yeah. I knew them quite well.

Scott Tallal: What was the family reaction? Were they supportive when you said that you wanted to pursue acting, playwriting?

Tracy Letts: Oh, very much. I think they wanted me to get the hell out of Oklahoma. And I think they wanted to make sure that whatever I did, I felt a passion for, that I didn't wind up with a boring job. Our house was filled with books and music and movies and conversation and interesting people. And so I think they absolutely loved that I went into the arts because I've had a, I've had a lot of ups and downs as an artist, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's been an amazing, interesting journey for me. So I think that's what they would have wanted for me. I'm sure of it.

Scott Tallal: When you look at why you got into the arts at such a young age and you look at what motivates you now, how has that changed over the years for you? Or has it?

Tracy Letts: Oh, it's changed a lot. It's changed an awful lot. I think most artists, especially actors, will tell you that when they first get into it, if they're honest, they'll tell you that when they first get into it, they're looking for some kind of acceptance, approval, attention. They're looking for some personal strokes. They need that in their lives. And then hopefully you grow. You mature, you need those things less and less and you begin to consider yourself a storyteller. You begin to see that what you do is not about what you get, but rather it's about what you are able to offer. And once you've become steeped in the language of storytelling, you take that on and you can sort of walk through the world and say, I am an artist and I am a storyteller. And this is my purpose. This is my function. This is what I have to offer and to share. Yeah. The reasons you do it change dramatically.

Scott Tallal: That is such a public experience. Being an actor, especially on stage, whereas playwriting, screenwriting has got to be one of the loneliest jobs in the world.

Tracy Letts: That's true.

Scott Tallal: Talk to us about both, if you will.

Tracy Letts: They use different parts of my personality. I think there is a part of me that's very private and that feels introverted and shy, in some ways more who I am. But there's another part of me that craves other people and interaction, social interaction. And I, I was in love with movies as a kid. I was a movie buff. And I just loved film and all the possibilities of film. But once I fell in love with theater, that experience of sharing a space with other people, the awareness that we're all in a room together. There's this contract made where the audience is going to watch this story that we tell and that we're all living, breathing, vulnerable people in that moment. That social interaction is something I absolutely need, long for, and it's the real value of theater. I mean, the exchange that happens between an artist and the audience in the theaters, it can actually be a very profound exchange. When I was doing the promotional tour for *Lady Bird*, actually, and I got flustered with a question like this and I said something like plays are better than movies and movies are better than TV. And Gretta got very excited because she said it's true. She said it's provably true. The reason you can prove it is because you think about the most profound experiences you've had in the theater or at a movie theater or watching TV at home. And they'll always stack up with the most profound experience you've had is watching live theater. I mean, it can also be soul crushing and boring. But when it's great, there's nothing else quite like it. So I crave the social side of performing in a theater, but I also very much crave the solitude of a writer.

Scott Tallal: And then you add to that what you're able to do in both TV and film. I mean, this year alone. *Ford versus Ferrari*. You have such a presence that just pops.

Tracy Letts: Thank you. You know, it's a great script. It was a great opportunity. I was thrilled when it came my way. I get asked to play a lot of those guys, a lot of heads of state or senators or titans of industry. What the Coen brothers refer to as the man behind the desk. I get asked to play that stuff a lot. I look for the stuff that makes it different and interesting. I guess I get asked to play that stuff because I don't know, because I'm a big guy, because I have a big voice, theater background, some physical awareness or a physical presence. But the thing that makes it interesting for me is whatever is just beyond that. I mean, a titan of industry. You've seen it in a thousand TV

shows and movies and it can all feel kind of the same. So I look for the thing that makes it more interesting or more human or in the instance of Ford versus Ferrari, more vulnerable. I mean, I love the idea that we see this guy almost as this monolithic figure for a while until the top pops off and we get to see a lot of humanity and vulnerability and insecurity underneath all that stuff. And that I just thought it was beautifully written and a real gift for a performer to be able to play those parts.

Scott Tallal: This year, you're also in *Little Women*, which is a hundred and eighty degrees different.

Tracy Letts: Well, but I'm still the man behind the desk. I'm still the, I'm still the gate keeper. That's kind of the function of the man behind the desk. Our protagonist needs something and I'm a person that they have to get around in order to get it. And so it fulfills kind of the same function, though it's in a very different package. Mr. Dashwood in *Little Women* is, he's grumpy and he's taciturn, but he's also a businessman and he's trying to make a buck at his profession. And I think he has genuine affection and admiration for the young writer who shows up in his office. It's a great part, great fun. I mean, I'm such a small part of the film, but I'm so, so thrilled to be a part of that because it's such a beautiful movie, Greta's done such a great job with it.

Scott Tallal: And of course, *Lady Bird* was extraordinary. And your role was a real departure, I think, for you.

Tracy Letts: Yeah. No, I was so grateful to Greta because we actually are in a movie together called *Wiener Dog*, a Todd Solondz movie, and we don't work together in the film. We're in different vignettes in the movie. So we didn't meet each other until the movie premiered at Sundance Festival. And I was talking to her at the party, at the premiere party. Me and my wife met Greta and we talked to her for 20 minutes or so and she told me later, she said that was the moment where she had the idea of casting me as the father in *Lady Bird* because she realized in that moment, oh, I wasn't this hard ass that I played in all these movies and TV shows, but that, in fact, I was an old softy. And so to have the opportunity to just put on regular guy clothes and sit at the table and eat a piece of toast and drink a cup of coffee. I leapt at the chance to do it. It did seem like a departure, it is like, oh, man, give me more of this. Let me do more of this, please. Please don't make me wear a suit.

Scott Tallal: Is that going to come out in anything that you're writing now? Oh, or where are you with writing?

Tracy Letts: Well, I have a new play called *The Minute*. It premiered at Steppenwolf year Before Last. And it's coming to Broadway this spring. And improbably, I'm in it. I say improbably because it's never happened before. I've never been in anything I've written before. I've never had any interest in doing that. Frankly, I didn't want to do it now, but a lot of people turned it down and we eventually got to a place on the list where I was like, well, then, hell with it, I'll just do it. So doing that in the spring we open on Broadway March the 15th. That's called *The Minutes* and it's political. But I am told it's dangerous to use the word satire. So I'll just say it's a political play.

Scott Tallal: But in terms of future writing projects, do you see now that you've scratched that itch with *Lady Bird*, do you see it that coming out in your work anytime soon?

Tracy Letts: I don't know. It's a good question. I don't know what's next. I've been doing so much. I've been working really hard for a long time. But I have a 20 month old son. He's my first child. And I'm frankly a little tired of my workaholic lifestyle. And so I booked this play that I've got coming up that's going to start in the spring and takes me through the summer of 2020. And then I don't have anything beyond that. I think I'm going to start to get a little choosier after that, because I like I like spending time with my boy.

Scott Tallal: When you look at the acting projects that are offered to you. What is it that attracts you to take them, especially at a time in your life when you're looking at being more choosy and deciding on those roles?

Tracy Letts: Quality of the writing, first and last. And that's the most important thing to me, just the quality of the writing. There are a lot of bad scripts out there. There are a lot of bad scripts that get made. And I just don't have the time or the energy to devote to trying to prop up some bad writing. And as an actor, a lot of times that's your function. Try to prop up bad writing. Try to make bad writing sound better. It almost never works. Bad screenplays really never become good movies. So the only way I know to choose a

project is by how well it's written. I mean my opinion that it's well-written. So I should say if you see me in a movie, it's because I thought the script was good. That's why I'm in it. And I'm so lucky to be in a position to choose. You know, so much in my life, I was a broke, struggling, unemployed actor. And the idea of choosing a project to do is crazy. For me, it was always just like, I'll take whatever I can get. But I've been able to be choosy in the last few years, and it's a great position to be in. I'm very lucky.

Scott Tallal: Several of your stage plays have been taken to the screen and you've done those adaptations. Talk to us about the challenge of doing that adaptation.

Tracy Letts: Oh, I hate it. I hate it. It's so hard because you've spent years honing this thing for the stage. I take a long time before I sit down to do any writing. I take a long time thinking about the piece. Sometimes years thinking about what the piece is going to be. And then I tend to write it very quickly. And then there's years on the other side as it goes through rehearsals, workshops, performances, opening a first production, second production. And so I have a lot of time to work on, years to work on it after that. And so after going through all of that and finalizing a play and saying, that's the play I set out to write, then I have to throw it all up in the air and try and figure out how to make it work on screen. Yeah, it's not a comfortable fit. I have to say, I don't think plays for the most part make good movies. It's weird because they have a lot in common with each other and yet the things that makes them different are so different. The movies are rhythmically so much different than plays. You know, I performed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* on Broadway and I knew the movie very well, but also knew the play very well. And once you get up, you start doing the play. Well, this is nothing like the movies. The movie is great. Mike Nichols made a great and impactful horror film called *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but it shares very little with the play, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which is so funny, which is so outrageously funny on the stage. And invariably we would have people coming up to us after a performance just saying, Oh, I didn't realize it was so funny because they were thinking about the film. So that process of translating something to the screen. I find it really challenging, really hard. And in fact the last few I've written when the movies have come calling, I've just said, no, I'm not interested, not looking to do that again. Having said that, the truth is that I grew up in a small town in Oklahoma and my access to things like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Streetcar Named Desire* and Shakespeare and all that other stuff, my access to that stuff came through the movies. So the fact that there are kids or young

adults or teenagers in small towns in Oklahoma who can watch August Osage County, the film, and hear that story in a way that may speak to them, let's face it, they're not going to see the play on Broadway. They can't pay a hundred dollars for a Broadway ticket or get to New York. And so the idea that I can put those stories out in the world on film does become important to me. And I am proud of those movies because I have a way to reach further into communities and into the world of young artists and maybe have some impact on them that I couldn't have otherwise.

Scott Tallal: Now, I know when you did August Osage County and took it to the screen that you did change the ending and you took it a little bit further. Talk to us about why that happened.

Tracy Letts: Well, I didn't really change the ending. I mean, the truth is some changes got made on the film of August Osage County. Some choices got made that were taken out of my hands, which is another frustrating part about the process of adaptation. You know, with Bug and Killer Joe, I was working with William Friedkin, who's a great filmmaker and who was very true to my scripts. At the same time, I still consider them William Friedkin movies more than I consider them Tracy Letts plays. I mean, they are very much Billy's films, but he was very true to the material. And the truth is they are such low budget enterprises and Billy has a lot of stature and so they allow Billy to make the movie he wants to make. Billy's got final cut. But on a movie like August Osage County where there are a lot more people involved in that process. As the writer gets bumped even further down the totem pole. So some choices get made that are above your pay grade. You just got to kind of throw your hands up there and say, that's Hollywood. That's the movie business.

Scott Tallal: Well, the boy is obviously left Oklahoma, but has Oklahoma ever left the boy?

Tracy Letts: Well, you could ask anybody that question. I mean, every time I go back to Oklahoma, it feels deeply familiar to me. It feels as alien as it did when I lived there. So it's a strange experience. I know that I was at a thing recently and Alfre Woodard was being celebrated. And I was so thrilled because she's from Tulsa. So we do kind of keep an eye on each other. The Okies who are in this business, we like to celebrate each other. That's a good feeling.

Scott Tallal: Was there a time when you were living in Los Angeles because there sure are a lot of Okies in California.

Tracy Letts: Yeah, I was out in L.A. for a little while. I came out late '97 and I was there until 2001. So I gave it a shot for about four years in L.A. and I worked a little bit. I booked some TV gigs. That's when I did my Seinfeld episode. I shot some episodic television while I was there. But it just wasn't, I wasn't comfortable in front of a camera. I wasn't comfortable in a set. The work was way too sporadic for me to get comfortable with it. And I said, the hell with this, I'm going back to Chicago and I'm going to take a vow of poverty and work in the theater, because those of us who live and work in Chicago know that you can always find work there. You can't make any money, but there's always work and it's good work. It's rigorous. And so I went back to Chicago to do what it is I love to do. And August Osage County happened a couple of years later. And so much for the vow of poverty.

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Scott Tallal: You mentioned the growing up in Oklahoma as a young boy. That film was so impactful on your decision to pursue this. What were the films that really stand out as driving you into this business?

Tracy Letts: Believe it or not, Hitchcock. I loved Hitchcock. It was so foreign and provocative and thoughtful and deep in its way, and yet just incredibly entertaining. I loved everything about those movies. There was something magical about those movies to me, and I was obsessed with Alfred Hitchcock when I was a kid. Just obsessed.

Scott Tallal: When you started acting, had your dad already started in on his second career? Did he start in after you, talk to us about how that timing came together?

Tracy Letts: Well, the first play I remember seeing was *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the local college with my father playing Atticus. So the first time I ever saw a stage play my dad was playing Atticus Finch. And then the first play I ever did was at a community theater in Tisha Mingo, Oklahoma. And my father was in the play. The first play I ever did was with my dad.

Scott Tallal: Wow.

Tracy Letts: And then the first time I ever did a play in which I was any good was a play that my father directed. So my dad was a big part of my development as an artist and as an actor.

Scott Tallal: In what ways?

Tracy Letts: Well, he was he was really good, for one thing. He was very good actor. And my dad had great taste and editorial sense and a great sense of economy. And I remember that play in which he directed me. He co-directed a production of *Skin of Our Teeth* at our local community theater in Duran, Oklahoma. It was super low budget thing, but I remember I was playing the Telegraph Boy in that production and in a speech. And at one point, Dad came up to me and said, why don't you try just saying it? It sounds like you're proclaiming everything. And it was the first sort of acting lesson than I ever got where I went up on stage the next time and I just spoke simply and truthfully in a room. And I felt the power of that. I felt people responding to the power of a voice, speaking simply and truthfully, quietly, even in a room, that it was a compelling thing to watch and to listen to. So Dad was a very important part of my development as an artist. And then I started pursuing it professionally, as I say. I mean, I was right out of high school and I went to Dallas with my little head shot and resumé and started trying to get work and it was right around then that Dad himself started looking into it, too. Professionally, you know, a lot of films and TV shows were being shot in Texas at the time. They were sort of touting it as the third coast. This is the mid-eighties. They built this big soundstage out at Los Colinas and they were making a lot of movies there. *Tender Mercies* was shot in Texas and *Places in the Heart*. And a lot of films like that

were being shot in Texas. And so I went to Dallas and Dad started commuting to Dallas to audition for stuff and Dad started working quite a bit. He made about 40 films, TV shows after he retired from school teaching. And, you know, often character parts, you know, the sheriff, the judge, again, guys in positions of authority. My dad was also a big guy and had a big voice and had taught school for a lot of years. So my dad had quite a bit of gravity. So we both started working in films and TV around the same time. I mean, the truth is Dad was working a helluva lot more than I was in film and TV at that point.

Scott Tallal: But there was a point at which it shifted. I'm wondering, was there ever kind of a two way street where he started learning from you?

Tracy Letts: Well, the remarkable thing was when I cast him in August Osage County. The original production of the play at Steppenwolf, of course, at the time we didn't know it was gonna be quite the hit it turned out to be. But I was putting the show together and I actually had another actor cast in the role and he got a film and he dropped out well before we started. But I had to recast the part. And the director Anna Shapiro and her husband, Ian Barford, who was also in the show, they started lobbying for my dad. They had met my dad over the years and they thought Dad would be a great choice. And I thought, well, I'm going to have to think about that just because. Well, you think about having your parents in the workplace. It's just like, can I do the work I need to do if my parents are sitting there watching me do this work? And I didn't have to think about for very long. I mean, I was 40 years old at that point. My dad and I got along famously. We loved each other dearly. And I and I knew how good he was. And so I thought, no, I'm confident enough in what I need to do in the room that my play will actually benefit from having Dad there to help me with it. I wasn't even sure he would accept. He accepted immediately. Said, yes, I'd love to do it. And he came up to Chicago and he did the play. And he was fantastic in the show. He was great in the play, was a great member of our company. He loved watching me work. He loved watching professional actors at work. Dad had always had such a love for the art form and such a fascination with it that, you know, he played the patriarch of this family and he had a scene about 15 minutes at the top of the show and then doesn't return in the show. But he used to come to rehearsals just to watch the other actors work just because he was so fascinated by the process. The questions they ask. The interrogation of the script. The changes I was making. The contribution of the director. Dad was just very entertained and interested by all of that. And so he was an integral part of our production.

Scott Tallal: I would imagine that really was something quite special.

Tracy Letts: It was very special. You know, between the time we did the production in Chicago and the time we went to Broadway a couple of months later, my father was diagnosed with lung cancer. And so we took the show to Broadway. And I had informed the producers that my dad had lung cancer and the producers were great and they made sure that they helped in any way we needed help. And I had to get my folks relocated to New York and get my dad enrolled for treatment at Sloan Kettering who would give my dad a chance to do the play, to open the play on Broadway. My Broadway debut and his Broadway debut as well. We were delayed by a stagehands strike for a few weeks, which was pretty horrible. But we eventually got the show opened in the middle of December and my father had to leave the show in January and then he died in February. And, you know, at the time he died, of course, I had a lot of people saying, you're gonna be really glad that you had this experience with your father. Of course, I didn't want to hear it. I was reeling with grief over my father's death. But of course, as time has gone by and that has been more and more true for me that I was really glad that Dad and I got a chance to do that together. The experience of doing that with my father is just indescribable. There's nothing really in my career that's approached it. And for my dad, not only for his own benefit, for his own strokes, for his own life as an artist to be able to make the Broadway debut in his 70s, it was deeply moving for him. But to do it in his son's play, his son's play that was being celebrated. It was an extraordinary experience.

Scott Tallal: And your mom got to see all of this happen.

Tracy Letts: Yes, she did.

Scott Tallal: For you for the subject of an interview. I mean, you do so many of these. Is there ever been anything that you wanted to talk about that you've never really had a chance to express?

Tracy Letts: Oh, that's an interesting question. I say to my wife with some frequency, as you know, after I'm gone, people can say whatever the hell they want to say about me. Obviously, it's not going to make any difference to me. I said, but don't ever let

anybody think I took it for granted because I grew up, it was not exactly hard times. I mean, my folks were schoolteachers. Granted Oklahoma school teachers. So not exactly the best paid school teachers in the profession. But I grew up with schoolteacher parents and I grew up with the small rural community in Oklahoma. The idea that I could be making movies, writing plays and acting in plays, going to Broadway and it's well, not exactly the stuff of fairy tales, but it's my greatest dreams about this business. It's not enough to say they've come true. They've exceeded my wildest expectations. So I take none of it for granted. I'm deeply, deeply grateful for the luck. Some of it's hard work. Some of it's perseverance. Some of it's talent. There's a hell of a lot of luck, too. I'm very grateful for it.

Scott Tallal: Well, Pulitzer and Tony, award winning playwright, stage film, television actor, screenwriter and producer Tracy Letts. Thank you so much for joining us. And best of luck with your next move to Broadway.

Tracy Letts: Thanks very much. Thanks for having me.

Announcer: Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is created by Curtco Media and presented in cooperation with the Malibu Film Society. This episode was hosted by Scott Tallal with call-in guest Tracy Letts, produced and edited by Jenny Curtis. Sound Engineering by Michael Kennedy, the executive producer of Hollywood UNSCRIPTED is Stuart Halperin, the Hollywood UNSCRIPTED Theme Song is by Celeste and Erik Dick. Please rate, review and subscribe to this podcast for more conversations with top industry professionals discussing the movies you love.

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