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Jenny Curtis: From CurtCo media.

00:00:02

Speaker 10: There's no place like Hollywood. (music)

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Jenny Curtis: Welcome to another stuck at home special of Hollywood Unscripted. I'm Jenny Curtis, and today we're virtually catching up with actor and creator O. T. Fagbenle. You probably know him as Luke on the Handmaid's Tale, and if you haven't already, you'll soon be getting to know him better as Max. O. T., thank you for joining us.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Oh, thanks for having me.

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Jenny Curtis: So, you're in the middle of traveling right now. You just traveled to London from Tanzania and today, the day of our recording, is the day that Maxxx drops on Hulu.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah.

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Jenny Curtis: So, I'm sure it's been crazy.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, it's been pretty busy. Yeah, yeah. Pretty good. Thoughts about press stuff and things and chatting to friends and stuff, but really, I've just got back to England from Tanzania, so it's a chance to socially distance, see my family for the first time, some of my younger siblings, so that's really the highlight of my day.

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Jenny Curtis: Oh good. So, jumping into Maxxx, this is a show that you wrote, produced, co directed some episodes, are starring in, you're basically wearing all of the hats. Tell us about it. How did it begin?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Well, I've been developing stuff for a while and some shorts and the shorts in the awards circuits and all that kind of stuff, and then I basically had an opportunity, I pitched this idea to the channel about this pop star who is fading and trying to make a comeback, this kind of anti hero type thing and they really loved. They were like, "Great. Make it." And, I really had my executive brother, Luti made this pilot which is really like three shorts. They're on YouTube, and they really dug that

and so they asked me to write some scripts and so I wrote some scripts and then they commissioned the series. Obviously, it's a lot more circuitous than that, but that was the basic rundown of it.

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Jenny Curtis: You were writing the scripts while you were shooting Handmaid's Tale, is that correct?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, that's right. That's right. It took me a couple of years really, to get the six episodes down, start from scratch in a new series. And so, yeah, I'd write during Handmaid's. Actually after, I think it was the first or second series of Handmaid's, I then stayed in Toronto for a summer. I wrote there.

But, a lot of the writing I did, or at least the development I did, I did work with professional improvisors from Second City. And so, we had some incredible Canadian actors and actresses come in and help me beat out the ideas.

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Jenny Curtis: Are you a member of Second City or did you go there with the goal to work with them?

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O.T. Fagbenle: No, you know what? It's one of those serendipitous things where the hotel I was staying at was across the road from Second City and I knew I like to work with actors and direct my way into writing and so I just walked in there and asked to see the principal, and I went on from there.

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Jenny Curtis: What kind of work would you do with them while you were developing? Would you pitch them a scenario and just let them go for it?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, so I was working with a script editor called Bruce Peery and he and I would sit down and we'd chat out our storylines. And so, we'd chat out a storyline, A story, B story, C story, these are obviously our main characters. These are our antagonists. They'll overlap. And then, I would come out with 16 scenes. And so, I know what happens in a scene.

I know that character A comes in wanting X from character B and there's going to be a conflict and at end of it, we're going to come out with solution C. And so, I would go in, I'd pitch the whole episode to the six or seven actors we'd have there, and then I'd say, " Right. We're going to start with scene one. You're playing character A, you're playing character B. This is what you want. This is what you want. Let's improvise it."

And so, we'd improvise the scene and then I'd be like, " Okay, great, and we're going

to make some changes. Character A, you're going to be drunk, character B, you're going to be more resistant and I'm going to replace actor to play character A with this other actor, and you come in and let me see your version of it."

And, I would have men playing women, women playing men, black people playing white people, white people playing black people. It was a free for all and as it would develop, I would get more and more ideas which I'd put in and maybe we'd do each scene about three, four times.

Anyway, we'd spend a day and in a day we'd get to about half an episode and then I would sit down in a coffee shop and I would just write and listen to the recordings. And funnily enough, I'd be really interested to go back and check it out, but there was very little actually verbatim that was taken from the improvisations. There definitely were bits, but a lot of times, it helped me flesh out and understand the characters understand different ways, unexpected ways that the jokes could go. And so, I would build on them and write on them. But, they were such a valuable part of the process for sure.

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Jenny Curtis: And, how long was that part of the process?

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O.T. Fagbenle: What happened is, I wrote over the summer, and by the end of the summer, I had six episodes, so we would do, then I would go off and do rewriting and stuff like that, and we were supposed to go into production that September I believe. There's a long story, but basically, we were going into pre production. We were casting. We were da, da, da, and the channel said, "Look, we want some changes. We're not ready to go into production yet." It was a heartbreaker.

And, most of the times when a channel tells you that, that means they are not going to make your show anymore. And, they reassured us that they were going to make the show and that they just needed some changes. To be honest, I imagine there was some politics involved. It wasn't all about the show, but there were some issues with the show, but they kept their word and we retooled and rejigged and tweaked and improved and then made it the following year. So, that's probably the reason why it took so long to write.

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Jenny Curtis: Were they story changes? Because the show itself can be very raunchy at times and really push the comedy. So was it that it went too far and you needed to pull back, or was it actual story that had to change?

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O.T. Fagbenle: It's interesting. It's hard for me to see woods in the trees and I'd be very curious to read the first drafts and the last drafts, something I haven't done in that comparison, because from my tastes, they were very incremental changes that we actually made by the end of it. To be honest, there was some pushback on some

fundamental things which I just said I wasn't going to do, changes that I just didn't believe we should make.

To be fair, and kudos to all of the commissioners they had some great ideas, but also when I said, "Look this is really important to my vision of the show, they backed me." It took some push, but they backed me and I really appreciated them for that. So, I don't know. One of the episodes had quite fundamental plot changes and I think there was some development of the characters, in particular, Tamsin, the main female lead, I think there was some development to do there some rounding out of her character. So, those are some of the main ways that it improved.

But also, a big part of it was also tuning up production wise. We brought on Phil Clark, the legendary executive producer. It was funny, because we had a meeting and they said ... because me and my brother has got a long history of making music videos and some features, but never really had made television, and I never really made television, so there was a lack of experience on our team.

They basically said, "Look, we need someone on your team that can tell us to fuck off, and right now, you don't have anyone who's got enough weight to tell us to fuck off." And so, we went and got someone who could tell them to fuck off, who was Phil Clark, who never used that phrase, funnily enough.

In fact, almost the opposite. Phil was one of the secrets to being successful in the industry is how much shit you can eat. How much shit can you take and still keep going? And, that was very disheartening, but I think probably very good advice.

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Jenny Curtis: Maxxx is about a formerly famous boy band member who is trying to make a come back as a solo artist and he is basically juggling his need to be authentic with his need to be loved and famous. And so, it's a really complicated character that must have been just absolutely fun to play. I'd love to hear about your process with him.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, I guess in some ways, he echoed parts of my journey, of my, I guess, ambivalence between going for the art, I was a theater actor for many, many years and very happy to it, and then also the idea of being popular and being on TV and stuff like that. So, I guess there was some of that autobiographically played out, and then also I'd gone through this terrible heartbreak and I was trying to recover from that, and so I guess that played out a little bit as well.

So, I guess developing him in some ways was a process of enhancing and over blowing and exaggerating lots of parts of myself I despise and then an opportunity to play them out. That's on a more personal level, but also as they developed, I realized that I was interested in exploring a broader cultural phenomenon where because of social media, it's just some big validation act.

We constantly put forward not our true selves but our idealized selves our presentation of ourselves, our ego, and we put it out there and we hope to be liked and then we might change what we post, depending on how much validation we get. And, it's quite an obscene process that evolves the mind in some ways of thinking that.

I feel sorry for young people who are going up against the brilliant minds of Harvard and Yale, it's programming suites, trying to manipulate our fickle minds.

So, I also wanted to talk about that. Not everyone is a pop star, but I think on some level, everyone who's on social media has some kind of desire to be validated by their peers. So, the process of developing Max was a confluence of those two things.

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Jenny Curtis: When you were writing him, knowing that you were going to play him, did you write with yourself in mind, or were you able to separate the two between writing and playing the character?

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O.T. Fagbenle: My personal process generally as an actor is I don't ever see my characters as not me. I feel that they are me and I like to believe that there is quite a bit of differentiation between the characters I play. And so, the way that's achieved is just by leaning into different parts of it. I once read this psychologist said that by the age of three, a human being has experienced every emotion, murderous rage, jealousy, love, because all of those things are in us in different quantities and so I just believe that as I write each character and as I think about Maxxx, all of the characters are me. My son, is me. I was a geeky kid at school who would get these terribly strong crushes and I am Camden as well, that is sometimes socially awkward and probably unnecessarily verbose. And so, that's how I think about writing.

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Jenny Curtis: If you're tapping into parts of yourself that aren't necessarily the comfortable parts of yourself. Are you able to leave it on set or do you take it home with you?

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O.T. Fagbenle: I did get accused of being a bit Maxish at various points. I guess I do find it hard to entirely differentiate, and part of my process as an actor, even outside of Max is like ... I know some actors who can quick and turn it on. They're there and they're having a cup of tea and chatting about ... they will gossip and they stick their fingers in there, the other character, and they're crying.

Unfortunately, I don't have that capacity. I have really embody and live through. It's boring. I tell you. I wish I didn't have to, but over 20 years of being an actor, I've realized that that's what produces the best results for me. So, yeah.

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Jenny Curtis: So, Max comes home.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Well, you know what? At the end of the day, I've got to have meaningful conversations with costume designers and makeup artists and Nick Colette, the other director on it, and not be a ... so, I'm not entirely Maxish, but there is some blurred

lines I guess maybe.

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Jenny Curtis: Now, your brother worked on this project with you as executive producer, Luti.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, yeah, he did.

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Jenny Curtis: What is it like working with family, because I do that as well and for me, it's a gift because you can support each other like nobody else can, but you can also call each other on your shit like nobody else can.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Right. Yeah, I guess it all depends on what kinds of siblings you have. My brother is one of the most inspirational people I know. He's incredible. He so, both supportive, but he dreams big and he's got big drive. He was born on the 24th of July, he was going 24/7. He doesn't stop and exactly that thing, we were both desperate not to let each other down and to bring out the best in each other and we implicitly trust the intentions of each other, which is to create the best work we can create. And so, yeah, it's one of the biggest joys in my life being able to create Max with him.

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Jenny Curtis: Other people who you worked with on this, one of which is Christopher Meloni who plays Don Wild, who is just insane.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah.

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Jenny Curtis: He was so much fun. But also, he was in Handmaid's Tale. Is there a connection there or was that just a small world that you guys were both in that?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah. Weirdly enough it's the latter. I never met him on Handmaid's. I actually wanted him, asked for him because of his work on Happy, which I found so fun and unexpected. All his decisions were so interesting to me and I thought, "Wow, if we could get him ..." I really didn't think we could and it was Luti again with his expansive mindset which is like, we can get him, and we sent him the script. He fell in love with it. And, we were just lucky enough that he was just on it, because we didn't have all the bells and whistles.

We didn't have big trailers. We didn't have trailers. We had nothing. He really came

and slumped it with us, God bless him. I don't know, I just think he's brilliant in this.

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Jenny Curtis: Speaking of not having trailers and all the bells and whistles, for even the crew, this was really a passion project for everybody and you worked as a big collaborative family.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah. It was tough. There were tears. It was hard. It was hard. And to be honest, not everyone who began the journey with us ended the journey with us, for a number of reasons, but I put some of it down to the fact that we were trying to create something which was beyond our means.

We didn't have all the budget in the world and we wanted to create something brilliant. And so, we just had an expectation. And I tell you, there were a number of opportunities that we gave people including people from minority groups and stuff like that to be heads of department where they'd never been heads of department before, but we believed in them.

We believed in their skill and we believed that their reason for not being head of department before this time was the industry creates blocks in their process of hiring, naturally discriminates. It doesn't need an individual to be racist. It's just the way of the industry.

And so, we gave a number of people their first go, and I tell you, they showed up so hard, so brilliantly, they brought a kind of value to the show which I just ... I'm so grateful for, I'm so thankful for. It was just reconfirmation that the benefits of diversity is not a tick box exercise. The benefits of diversity isn't that everyone gets to feel that they're doing United Colors of Benetton. It's that there are brilliant artists here which are underused and under utilized and it's to our benefit to give them that opportunity.

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Jenny Curtis: Did any of them bring something completely surprising that you wouldn't have had without them?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, well, in particular, there's just one that comes to my head, is Joanna, our esteemed costume head. In episode two, there's this big industry party, and I've been to some weird parties in my life, and I know what it feels like. I know what it looks like, and we were asking for these extras, and the extras we were getting just ... I didn't believe them.

It was very frustrating. For weeks and weeks I'd look through these reams of extras and just be like, "We're not going to have the party with this, with a party that's in my head, the parties I've been to." And so, Joanna came and she was like, "Well look, I'm part of the scene, whether it's the fetishing or the kink scene. I know people who were in there and we can both cast them, but they come with costume, because that's their lifestyle."

And so, we managed through her to get half the party through her contacts and people who are above and beyond. I was walking around that party, hell yeah. This is now a party that I'm both intrigued about and scared about. And, that's the way I want to feel.

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Jenny Curtis: So, Max is making his comeback, fighting with trying to be authentic versus trying to be famous, and it brings up two opposing songs. One is a song about sex and frozen yogurt and the other is a song that has been stuck in my head since watching the show. You say that thing with me. (crosstalk) .

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O.T. Fagbenle: Sing it girl.

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Jenny Curtis: It doesn't leave my head. Who composed those? How did you come up with those songs?

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O.T. Fagbenle: So, Rolling Dice, I first wrote the verse for about 10 years ago and then when we were trying to find a song for this show, I hit up one of my writing partners, Marcus Marr, a brilliant guy and I said, " Look, this is where I am with the song. I'm having problems with the chorus," and so he went out and he wrote me chords, and the way he writes the chords, he'd be like, (inaudible) like that.

And so one day, and to have a longer version of the story, I sat down at my keyboard and I wrote the lyrics to the chorus. So, that's how that song came about. And then, the other song, the soft serve song, someone came with a beat. I listened to 20 beats and I was trying to find something which was silly but real, corny but fun and I just fell in love with this beat. And so, I just wrote the lyrics and chorus and rest of that one day in the studio.

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Jenny Curtis: But, it was you who wrote the songs?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah. Yeah. I had the theme tune as well. But again, almost like with everything, there were collaborations.

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Jenny Curtis: So, Max plays three instruments, and you had to learn to play drums and-

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O.T. Fagbenle: Guitar and bass.



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Jenny Curtis: So, you learned those for the show?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, yeah. That was ridiculous, as if I didn't have enough on my plate, so yeah, I was doing drumming lessons in the evenings and guitar lessons. It was stupid. But, actually I still play guitar a little bit now, so I'm really glad that I go to do that and over this quarantine period with my nephew, I've been teaching him bass, so it was worth it and carried on.

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Jenny Curtis: And now, you're going to have to take Max on tour.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Take Max on to ... no, no, we have been pushing, we're literally pushing me to go record that song, the Rolling Dice song so we can release it or whatever.

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Jenny Curtis: You should.

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O.T. Fagbenle: (crosstalk) and stuff. Yeah, I guess we should.

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Jenny Curtis: So, Max has some truly cringe worthy moments. Is that something you love to play, or is that something that you had to gear up to play?

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O.T. Fagbenle: No, I love that. I love it, because I love watching it in real life. I'm just like, " Oh my God, what a car crash is going on here." And, I guess I'm very sympathetic to why people, or why I in the past dug yourself a whole and then keep digging, trying to redeem it, and I find that very amusing to me. And, it comes from a great British tradition of that, from Steve Coogan to Ricky Gervais, to Fawlty Towers, to Back (inaudible) .

I think it's the class thing. We're so obsessed with class and social climbing in England, and I think that's where a lot of it comes from, people wanting to be " better than they are."

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Jenny Curtis: Going back to the cast. You had mentioned, so he's heart broken and desperate to win back his ex, Jourdan Dunn, who is played by Jourdan Dunn. How did you meet her, get her involved? How did that happen?

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O.T. Fagbenle: My childhood friend, one of my best friends in the whole world, a guy called Stephano Moses. He is a very brilliant guy. He's an associate producer on the show. He was also our location manager funnily enough, and he had a connect to Jourdan, pitched it to her, showed her some of the material, the pilot that we shot. She loved it. We met with her and had tea.

I was very nervous she wouldn't be a very good actor, but she looked great and we got on very well, so I wrote quite modestly for her. Then, we had our first rehearsal together and that's how we deal a lot with improvisation, so I did with her everything I did the Second City people. I said, "Hey, look, this is the scene. You're going to do this and I'm going to say some stuff to you and you say some stuff back and let's see what happens."

And we did it, by the end of the rehearsal, I wrote back to my producers Ali, Karen and Luti and I said, "We've got a problem because she's so good, we're going to need more of her in the show." And, we did. We boosted what she had to do a lot.

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Jenny Curtis: Was there a lot of improvisation on set?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, yeah, there was, particularly with Jourdan. That last scene was pretty strictly scripted, at least her part was, I always got off on a tangent. But, everything else that we had, and we had loads of material that we didn't use to be honest, me and her just played around.

And, it was a lot of fun and we had a great chemistry on set, but generally speaking, we'd try and do the script, but there was leeway. And Helen Monks, who plays my assistant in it, she's brilliant. She comes out and we would just do another take and we would just be like, "Keep going. Give us some more," and Chris, and Pippa. They're all really talented.

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Jenny Curtis: Pippa Bennett-Warner, who plays Tamsin, your manager, so she's on her personal mission of repping true artists and creating something beautiful for the world and then her very first client who lands in her lap is Max, who's fighting against being a novelty act. But, that was a really fun relationship to play with and you said you had to develop it more in the beginning, so I'd love to hear more about the process of her character.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, it's a funny one, because I think sometimes as a writer, and especially because I know I work with improvisation, so sometimes what I see on the script isn't what the execs might sometimes see. So, sometimes there would be notes and I'd be like, "I know it won't be like that," because I'm going to cast in a certain way but it's my first rodeo, so why should anyone believe me about that?

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Jenny Curtis: Yeah.

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O.T. Fagbenle: And so, but that notwithstanding, we did get some very good notes. Tanya, who works with Val, did some great notes for her as well. And then, Pippa herself, Pippa Bennett-Warner is such a talented actress. She's predominantly works in drama. She's a RADA trained, classical actress who's done Shakespeare at the Globe and all sorts. She's the real deal. And, she brought such detail and differentiation, and humor and truth to Tamsin. I am very indebted to her actually, to how she fulfilled that part.

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Jenny Curtis: And, you also went to RADA, so you're both alum. Did you know each other? Or, were you different time periods?

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O.T. Fagbenle: Different time periods by quite a bit, but we did know each other. The black acting community is very small, and it was even smaller 10 years ago, and so everyone knew everyone. And so, yeah, we bumped into each other. We knew each other. After the auditions, we'd have a good old laugh, so yeah, that was great.

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Jenny Curtis: You made a point to have an adopted son character that was such a fun relationship to play in, because Max has so much depth to him while being so shallow. So, it's just fascinating all the tools you gave yourself to really show that he cares about people. I would love to hear more about your reasoning for having an adopted son, your reasoning for him having a crush on the non binary character. I thought the whole thing was wonderful.

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O.T. Fagbenle: I love it too. I love those guys. I love those young actors. So basically, I think it's quite amusing, the whole thing about being a celebrity and adopting. When I say amusing, I mean I really respect it actually. People get (inaudible) it's like, "Hey, you're dedicating a lot of time to a young person, kudos to that." But, I also just think the phenomenon was interesting. So, I thought it would be great for Max, and also gives him a bit more heart. I don't know. It came pretty early that idea. Funnily enough, the idea for the non binary love affair, it's really interesting to me, because originally that character was a female. And in fact, the first time round we auditioned, we were only auditioning women for that part. And, I think part of the feedback that came back was just the concern that maybe there were a lot of female characters that were particularly sexual, because you have Siren in episode three and you had Rocks in episode two, and then you had Chris Meloni's wife and then you had the assistant Rose.

And so, we were all sexually forward, but I really didn't want to change that dynamic. I really liked the dynamic of Alan, the son, being the sub as it were in that relationship. And so, I wasn't sure how to fix it and then I thought, " Well, what if we just change the gender then? If that's the issue, then let's just change the gender and to get that diversity in."

And so then, we auditioned some young guys and yeah, suddenly a bright shining light, I was adamant. The moment I saw ... I was just yeah, that's who it is. And, it was a bit of a shock to Alan, because he'd of course, auditioned with a lot of very pretty girls, and then suddenly ... and he comes from a Muslim background, so it was a little bit of a ... he was like, " Oh, really?" But, kudos to him. He wanted to part and believed in it, and they just had a great chemistry. It's an echo of my teen love affairs and infatuations and unrequited loves (crosstalk) -

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Jenny Curtis: Mystical unicorn of a crush.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

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Jenny Curtis: But, what was so great about it, because it came from a character that was originally written for a female, there was no comment on the non binary character. It just was life. And, everybody was okay with it. And, I thought that was really refreshing.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, thanks for noticing that. That was a very conscious decision, and there were notes for us to mention it, and why don't we have a conversation about it and da, da, da. And, I've been in a show, Looking, for HBO, which is a very popular cult gay drama kind of thing, and it's a funny one because I think for people in minority groups, the fact of their minority identity is quite a relevant part to their day to day life. But, it's not necessarily what we talk about all the time.

All our storylines don't have to be about that. We had the '90s and the 2000s to have those conversations, kind of thing. And I just felt, here we are in 2020, it's possible for us just to find out about these two human beings and how did they try and match together, and it doesn't have to be about the issues.

Of course, the issues are very important. That was just something I just wanted to attempt in this show. (music)

00:25:28

Jenny Curtis: A Moment of Your Time, a new podcast from CurtCo Media.

00:25:31

O-T Fagbenle: I'm currently 21 years old and today I'm going to read a poem for you.

00:25:35

Speaker 4: It felt like magic extended from her fingertips down to the base of my spine.

00:25:38

Speaker 5: You have to take care of yourself because the world needs you and your voice.

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Speaker 6: Trust me, every do gooder that asked about me was ready to spit on my dreams.

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Speaker 7: Her fingers were facing me.

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Speaker 8: It can feel like your purpose and your worth is really being questioned.

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Speaker 9: You're going to stop me from playing the piano.

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Speaker 10: She buys walkie-talkies, wonders to whom she should give the second device.

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Speaker 11: Cats don't love humans. We never did. We never will. We just find ones that are more-

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Speaker 12: The community of rock climbing is that you can only focus on what's right in front of you.

00:26:01

Speaker 13: And so, our American life begins.

00:26:06

O-T Fagbenle: We may need to stay apart, but let's create together. Available on all podcast platforms. Submit your piece at [CurtCo.com/amomentofyourtime](https://CurtCo.com/amomentofyourtime).

00:26:14

Jenny Curtis: (music) In a completely different direction, the Handmaid's Tale is basically a whole other world, and I'd love to jump into Luke a little bit because he's a far cry from Max. In this last season he is patient and loving and he is raising his wife's child from another man, and he faces his wife's oppressors and rapists, not to mention her boyfriend. So, a lot happened for Luke in the last season in Handmaid's Tale.

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O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah. (crosstalk) about it. It all happened, yeah.

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Jenny Curtis: What was that like going through?

00:26:59

O.T. Fagbenle: You know what, that's what actors, we come for that. Oh yeah, make me go through pain. Yeah. So, it's a joy. When you've got great writing and you get to act opposite Samira and Yvonne and Elizabeth, Joe and Max, yeah, please.

So of course, Luke is going through the run of the mill, but as O.T., that's why I came into the profession. That's the kind of turmoil that rocks my boat.

00:27:24

Jenny Curtis: Yeah. We had Bruce Miller on the show a few weeks ago to talk about Handmaid's Tale, and Bruce talked about how the set and the writers' room are always actually really lighthearted because you have to counterbalance how heavy the material is. Is that your experience on set?

00:27:44

O.T. Fagbenle: Oh yeah. There's a lot of laughter. There's a lot of jokes on the set. Yeah. It's great. It's great. It's lovely. And, Bruce also, I've got to say, I think, is very generous as was Warren, but Bruce in particular and Colin Watkins, our VP and sometimes director, in that when we were shooting Handmaid's and I was developing Max, Bruce let me come into the writers' room and sit down, and Mike Barker, who should be nominated for an Emmy every year for Handmaid's, he let me shadow him on the final episode of season three.

And, there was so much generosity from that gang and supporting me, in making my first show, so at any rate, that somewhat speaks to the joy and openness and love that's apparent in the show, yeah.

00:28:18

Jenny Curtis: Do you have a piece of advice that they gave you that stands out to you?

00:28:21

O.T. Fagbenle: You know what? Bruce gave me a couple of goodies. He once told me that the best book he read on writing was a book called Drawing, and one of the things that stuck out to me is that... and I'm going to butcher what he told me, but basically, it was like, when you're drawing a person, you don't have to start at the top. You don't have to start at the beginning or the feet. You don't have to do a rough outline. You don't have to. You can just take any discrete piece, and the example I think he gave is like if a person was standing there with their hand on their hip. You

can start with the space between their arm and their body, and that can be the starting point.

And, you could think of the same thing with a script or a scene or a sentence. You don't need to start at the beginning. The first thing you write of a script does not have to be scene one, and the first thing you write in a scene does not have to be the first lines written. You can find a discrete part and grow of that and that was a really piece of useful information I got.

00:29:14

Jenny Curtis: So, what was the first part of the drawing for you with Max?

00:29:18

O.T. Fagbenle: The funeral scene was something that really stuck out. I remember I had gone to my sister's house, my big sister. I was just, such an important part of my life and her husband who is my brother now, and I remember pitching them who Max was and I was like, "He's the kind of guy who, let's say there was a funeral," and I just starting pitching ... and they were cracking up as I was acting it out.

And, I think that was an anchor for him. He's that guy who sees a celebrity opportunity at the funeral.

00:29:48

Jenny Curtis: Oh Max.

00:29:48

O.T. Fagbenle: Oh Max.

00:29:50

Jenny Curtis: So, I know you can't talk about anything because Marvel is notoriously secretive.

00:29:56

O.T. Fagbenle: No, I'm going to tell you everything. This is the interview where we're going to (crosstalk) -

00:29:59

Jenny Curtis: Oh great. Fantastic. Spill it. Can you tell us though, emotionally, what is it like to be a part of the Marvel Universe with Black Widow. You've said this is, after 20 plus year career, the biggest job you've had.

00:30:13

O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, it is an incredible honor. If you notice, it's a bit surreal honestly. When I graduated drama school, I had no ambitions to be in movies. I had no ambitions to be on television. Zero. I just wanted to be a theater actor. That's all I really understood and that was all that was in my mind. I was very content with that future,

seeing the decades ahead of me performing on various stages and performing some great roles and plays and stuff.

So in a way, it's weird because being part of something like the Marvel Universe, was never part of my original dream, and not because it's not really attractive and amazing and wonderful, it was just something else. It was like, do you want to be an NBA basketball, yeah, sure. But, that's not part of reality.

And so, as it's happened, it's very surreal. I'm doing things like Comic Con and things like that. I feel like I really appreciate it. I don't take it for granted at all because I don't know. I'm a person believes that luck really plays a huge part in the outcomes of people's lives and I believe I've been incredibly lucky.

00:31:18

Jenny Curtis: Has the required secrecy been just killing you?

00:31:21

O.T. Fagbenle: No, I think it's hilarious. It's so funny because I'm not an industry person. I don't read industry mags. I'm embarrassingly ... I have to start watching television. I have to learn about television, and so to me, it's all a fun fair. And, people think like, oh am I task master, and I just think it's fun. And to me, it's I don't know, it's not burning inside.

I really care about my family and I'm working on a charity called the ABC Foundation, and it provides tech opportunities for young people in Africa. These are the things which I think are important and these are the things that burn me. I don't know. This is fun.

00:31:52

Jenny Curtis: Can you talk about at all, the audition process since as far as I understand, they don't tell you anything when you're auditioning for a character?

00:32:04

O.T. Fagbenle: Well, you know what? I will tell you some stuff that I've not said on any interview before. Basically, the audition sides I got were not the same as the part I played. It was completely different, and I got sent them ... I was on holiday with my then girlfriend, and to be honest, when I first got the audition, I was like, " Oh, I'm not going to do that." I was writing Max at the time. I was just like, "I'm not going to do that," because I was already, embarrassing enough, my then girlfriend ... I told her, "Look, we're going to go on holiday, but I'm going to be working from 9: 00 a. m. to 1: 00 p. m. writing every day during our holiday to Mexico. And so, I was like, I'm not now going to take 1: 00 p.m. to 2: 00 p. m. to put down an audition that I'm never going to get because they're going to give it to someone else. I was just like, I'm not doing it. I'm not putting myself on tape. And so, she was like, " You should." I was like, " Look, I can't ... I do want to be respectful to you," and things like that, and bless her heart, she was very generous and she was like, " No, you put yourself on tape." So anyway, long story short, I put myself on tape, in this quite different character. And, it was a banging tape. At some point, I feel like I want to share it, because it was like, that's one of the best auditions I've ever done. And, at the end of it, she was like, " This is good. You're going to get this." And I was like, "



No. Doing a great tape does not mean you do get ..." I've done a bunch of good tapes and no one's even called me back telling me thanks for sending it. No expectations. So, I just sent it off. And then, I was told that I would do a screen test with Scarl and it was me and six other guys, and I wasn't a favorite. I was number four on the list for something that I don't know. But to do a screen test, you have you sign a contract and the contract that I would sign would mean that I wouldn't be available to shoot Max. So, I was like, I don't even know if I can sign this contract. I don't know if I can do that because doing a Marvel Universe, that's, like you said, the biggest job I could ever hope for, but Max is my heart. It's something I did with my brother. I'm going to let my brother down. I have to have that conversation. My brother was like, " Bro, I've got this screen test, and I don't know what to do, because I don't want to let you down," and he's staked his company on this show. It was a really challenging time, and eventually, I was just like, I don't know if I can sign a contract that says I can't do Max. And so, please go and talk with them. And, my reps are like, "I don't know if they'll take that. They're Marvel." And then, I got a call about a week later. My agent called me up and said, " Right. You've got a problem." And, I was like, " Oh, okay." And she's like, " Well, they just offered you the role."

00:34:20

Jenny Curtis: Oh my gosh. I even know you got it, but I still got jealous.

00:34:24

O.T. Fagbenle: I know. I was like, " What? I don't believe this." I was just beside myself. I remember just, I was so happy and joyful, but then at the same time I had this like, am I going to have to call my brother up and tell him that we're not going to do the show, and I was like, " Listen," I said to my agent Julia who's amazing, Julia Burkoff. I said, " How are we going to make it work. We've got to make it work."

And, you know what? It was just like, I don't know, luck, fate, destiny, whatever, Handmaid's, for whatever reason, was running late and so they said, " We're not going to be shooting in September," so they were pushed four months, and then we just asked Marvel, " Hey look, can you fit my filming into these two months and push those there," and then we asked channel four if we could push Max there and they all overlapped like this, but I've actually get to do all three. It was so surreal and I felt so grateful.

I felt so grateful for Marvel and Cate Shortland, who assured me when I got to speak to her. She's an indie filmmaker, and I was like, "Look, this is my baby." She said, " We can make it work. We'll make it work." And so, I'm so grateful to her and to Marvel, who was surprisingly, just flexible and responsive and I feel very grateful for that.

00:35:36

Jenny Curtis: That's awesome. So, again, after a 20 year career, is it weird that now you're popping on lists of actors to watch, even though you've been around for decades?

00:35:47

O.T. Fagbenle: Well, yeah, I don't know. I have a bit of a kind of, I don't know. I don't know. I really try to not care about that. Of course, I care about it. I do care about it. I fricking love it. Let awards rain on my face, but at the same time, I just try and remind myself what's important, what's real.

If you get too much of a sense of self from others, then you're really dangerous, because the world can be fickle and everything changes, and so, look, it's a lesson I'm trying to relearn and teach myself every day to be present and to be grateful for the small things and stuff like that.

And so, I try not to put too much stock ... of course, like I said, (inaudible), but I try not to put too much stock in those things, because I know it's not a sustainable way of having peace.

00:36:42

Jenny Curtis: So, it's speaking about what's real. Can you tell us more about ABC Foundation?

00:36:46

O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, you know what? As my career grew and I realized how lucky ... I was getting paid better. I was getting paid American money for a start and I was like, "Look, I have a responsibility. I've got more to give." And so, I started this charity which I've got the tech passion. I'm passionate about tech and I'm passionate about young people.

We matched up with this organization called Induna Girls in Zimbabwe, and they do exactly that. They give tech training to young women in Zimbabwe, and some of it is as rudimentary as teaching them how to turn on a computer or write an email, go online, because these people don't have necessary access to the internet.

And so, over the last two years, we have provided tech training to over 100 young people. We created a tech hub which has solar panels and cooling system which is mobile and the young people can come there and have access to over a dozen computers we have.

We've paid for them to get tuition, both on a remedial level and also in things like robotics. I just think tech is the future, and for people in developing nations to keep up and to compete, they need access to that.

And so, very recently, Elizabeth Moss (inaudible), Angelica Ross all joined me on an Insta live which you can check out. They were so generous in their time, to help fundraise, because we're aiming to create more of these tech hubs so we can provide access to more and more people in Zimbabwe.

00:37:56

Jenny Curtis: That's awesome.

00:37:56

O.T. Fagbenle: If anyone wants to check out ABC Foundation, it's [abcfoundation.me](http://abcfoundation.me), that was available and then people can also see on my Instagram, there's a link in my

bio, if people want to find out more about it or to donate. We take both money and also things like computers, old computers, old smart phones, all of these things can be put to real use to young people in Zimbabwe.

00:38:14

Jenny Curtis: We'll also put the link in the notes to this show, so if you're listening to the podcast, go into the show notes and you can just click the link and go right there.

00:38:22

O.T. Fagbenle: Right. Thank you.

00:38:23

Jenny Curtis: So, classically trained actor from RADA, accolades aside, fame aside, money aside. If you had to choose one, would it be theater or film?

00:38:31

O.T. Fagbenle: Oh, it's a no brainer. It's theater. It's not even close, really. But, I don't do it now because those things (inaudible) aside. It's hard, and it doesn't pay anywhere near as well, but I was born for the stage.

00:38:45

Jenny Curtis: What is the difference to you between a live audience and a film audience?

00:38:50

O.T. Fagbenle: The audience is definitely a huge part of it. That relationship with an audience, that thing that changes each performance as you feel them and have a relationship with them. But also, a lot of it is the writing. There's a style of writing which is available in theater, which isn't available in television. If someone told me, "You watch television, but theater has an audience. They listen to the words."

And, what's amazing about theater to me is it's not unusual, in fact it's very common for me to do something written 400 years ago in Shakespeare, or to do something within the '80s or the '60s, Lorraine Hansbury. And so, what we're saying, the best works of art from the English language are available to an actor to do again and again.

I can't go and play my favorite character in Game of Thrones. That's not available to me to go, oh, the Wire. Okay, well actually, I'm going to do the Wire next year. I can't do the best of television again and then do my interpretation of True Detective or whatever. I can't.

Once it's in television, once you're done, it's pretty much done, unless 30 years have gone. In theater, you can have four productions of King Lear going on at once. So, it's that. The last play I did, I did a play called Ma Rainey's Black Bottom by August Wilson.

It's one of the greatest plays in the English language. It's absolutely heart wrenching

and stunning. It's a play I wanted to do for 20 years, and that's available to me on stage. And so yeah, that's a big part of it.

00:40:14

Jenny Curtis: Do you have a favorite line from any character you've ever played? One that just really you would tattoo on your arm if you could?

00:40:24

O.T. Fagbenle: Oh my God. I don't know, I'm a commitment phobe. What am I going to tattoo on my arm. I don't know there's so many. It would probably be a line from Mercutio. Shakespeare is just somebody who the world ... I don't know, nothing really comes straight to mind now. But yeah, it would definitely be one of the Bard's lines. I would, listen, I did (inaudible) for four months on tour, little regional theaters across the country and you'd sit in your dressing room. You could hear the ... and then every night, some new line would ... that line I'd never heard before could be the best line in another play.

00:41:00

Jenny Curtis: Do you have a favorite Shakespearean insult?

00:41:04

O.T. Fagbenle: I actually have a book of Shakespearean insults somewhere. Why, do you just have one on top of your head?

00:41:08

Jenny Curtis: Canker blossom is by far the best insult I think you could ever throw to somebody.

00:41:12

O.T. Fagbenle: Canker blossom. The blossom of the canker. Oh God. That's a good one.

00:41:18

Jenny Curtis: Any final thoughts before we close out?

00:41:21

O.T. Fagbenle: Well yeah, just I'd love you guys to watch Maxxx and hit me up on the socials and just if you liked it, tell me. If you didn't, it's fine, just keep it to yourself.

00:41:31

Jenny Curtis: How Max of you.

00:41:32

O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, exactly, exactly. But, I guess if there's one thing that I've been contemplating a bit recently, is it's a really stressful time I think at the moment, of

course, with coronavirus and civilized matters and the environment and it's crazy politics and I think it's so stressful. And, I don't know, I've been reminded a lot this week how important it is to look after one's mental health as much as possible, to be kind to yourself and to find ways to find peace and to be present and stuff. So yeah, I guess if I was going to say anything, it's just like, that's something I've been thinking a lot about recently, and so I wish everyone the best of luck with that.

00:42:10

Jenny Curtis: O. T. Fagbenle, thank you so much for joining us today. Everyone should check out Maxxx. It is now out on Hulu, and I can't wait for Black Widow in hopefully a few months.

00:42:21

O.T. Fagbenle: Yeah, it was fun chatting with you. Thank you.

00:42:22

Jenny Curtis: Thank you so much. ( music) Hollywood Unscripted was created by CurtCo Media. This special episode of the stuck at home series, was hosted and produced by me, Jenny Curtis with the guest O. T. Fagbenle. The executive producer of Hollywood Unscripted is Stuart Halperin. The Hollywood Unscripted theme song is by Celleste and Eric Dick. Make sure to subscribe so you don't miss any special episodes of Hollywood Unscripted stuck at home, and we want to hear from you. If you like something, let us know, and if you don't, let us know what we could do better. Stay safe and healthy, and thanks for listening. ( music) CurtCo Media. Media for your mind.