

Women at Warp Episode 166: Investigating Gates McFadden

[Women at Warp theme]

Sue: Hi, and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry *Star Trek* Podcast. Join us on our continuing mission to explore intersectional diversity in infinite combinations. My name is Sue, and thanks for tuning in. I'm flying a solo mission today, and in just a moment, you're going to hear a recent conversation I got to have with Gates McFadden.

But first, you know how this works. We've got a little bit of housekeeping to do. Our show is made possible by our patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron, you can do so for as little as \$1 per month and get awesome rewards from thanks on social media, up to silly watch-along commentaries, exclusive patron merchandise, and even some non-*Trek* podcast episodes. If you're interested in joining us over on Patreon, visit patreon.com/womenatwarp.

We also want to remind you about our TeePublic store with podcast and other *Star Trek* designs available on shirts, mugs, bags, stickers, magnets and more. Check out teepublic.com/stores/womenatwarp.

And finally, this summer, Women at Warp will be hosting the Virtual IDIC Podcast Festival, celebrating the infinite diversity in *Star Trek* and sci-fi podcasting, July 17th and 18th. Right now, the programming application is open through Friday, June 18th, so check out womenatwarp.com/idic-fest if you're a fellow podcaster interested in participating. All of these links, of course, are also on our website at womenatwarp.com.

And now, here is my conversation with Gates McFadden.

Hi, Gates. Thanks so much for joining me.

Gates: Oh, hi, Sue. It's a pleasure.

Sue: I'm so glad that we finally have you on the show, and all because of your new podcast.

Gates: Well, yes. Are you trying to make me feel guilty, Sue?

[laughter]

Sue: Never, never.

Gates: Because I do. You are so great. And Women at Warp, it's such a great podcast you guys do. So, I'm very sorry that it's taken me this long, but I am here. I am totally here and ready to warp.

Sue: [laughs] You have experience, right?

Gates: That's right.

Sue: So, tell me how this came about, *Investigates: Who do you think you are?*

Gates: It came about because the CEO of Nacelle, Brian Volk-Weiss, just cold called me out of the blue. I had done a little narration for them at some point, but I had not met him. And he said, "Hi. I've been thinking, I would really like you to do a podcast for Nacelle that we'll produce and do all this stuff. But I think it would be great." And I'm like, "Huh? I'm sorry,

what?" [laughs] Because it certainly was not in my purview of what was going to be happening.

But he kept coming back, and I think he first wanted it to be about me talking to my friends about episodes in *Star Trek* and our experience and stuff like that. And I knew that none of my friends, nobody wanted to do that. We do it all the time on panels and things. There was no reason to think this was going to be more special. So, he said, "Well, you can talk about anything you want. You can just talk." That's interesting, that here's good friends just talking to each other and stuff.

Anyway, long story short, he convinced me after two times of saying no and then I said, "All right, give me one more day and I'll give you my decision tomorrow." This was like the third time he called. And that's when I went to my friend's house and their dog dared me to do it. And I came back and I said, "Okay, well, a dog just dared me to do it, so I'm going to say yes." And that's how it happened.

He really has good ideas, this man. He has been a fan of mine, and I'm very grateful for it because I'm so pleased that I did this. I've learned so much about myself and my friends by doing it. And you get into a process where you're learning something new. And it's what I actually have said, and it's the truth. You risk failure by trying something new. And it's what for decades, I told my students, and I've always tried to be that way as a director, to say to actors who were scared, "You've got to risk it. Risk failure. I'll protect you." And I think I had to walk the walk, so I had to risk doing something that I had no clue how to do. But I think it saved me during the pandemic to have something that I was trying to do and learning how to do and making mistakes and deleting the whole thing. [laughter] Having to go back and re edit and-- [crosstalk]

Sue: Been there.

Gates: Yeah, I bet. And it's a lot of work. And I don't think I had understood how much work it was to do a podcast. Now I do. So, yeah.

Sue: Yeah. I think a lot of people, when they hear celebrity is doing a podcast, is thinking that you're going to go into a recording booth and talk for your hour, and then you're done, and somebody takes it from there. But you were really hands-on for this entire process.

Gates: Yes, that's right. They said they would take it-- "After the conversation, we'll do all the editing." And so, we tried that and I heard it and I went, "Nope, nope I wanted to do the editing." So, I went back to the thing because I think it's the director part of me. It makes a difference to me, and hopefully to others, that it's a more cohesive conversation. And I had lots of material with some people.

Some people, it was two and a half hours of material. And then, how are you going to take that down? And so first, I would try to make it one episode, and it just didn't work. I went, "No, no. You don't get all the variations." And so, then I would say, "I have to do two episodes." And they were like, "Yeah, we'll do two episodes." Again, there were no rules. They gave me that freedom, and that was wonderful.

Now, I have someone who's wonderful. That's too many words, wonderful. [laughter] Now he's an amazing sound editor. So, he takes a look-- I work for a long time on the edits, then I send it to him. And then, what he does is he adjusts the tones, the sound, and deals with the tracks. And if I've done an edit that's not particularly tight, he will clean it up. And he has much better machinery and everything to do that. And he and I work really well together. So, he asked me a question. He says, "Did you mean to do that?" And I'll say, "Yeah, does it not work?" And he's like, "Yeah, I'll make it work. I just wanted to know." So, he's wonderful. But

again, I've learned how to sound at it in a basic way. I'm not as good as he is. I don't understand so many things, but it's exciting.

Sue: That's a new skill to take on during the pandemic, right?

Gates: Exactly, exactly.

Sue: Was it trial and error? Was it YouTube videos? Did somebody walk you through it the first time?

Gates: No. You know what it is, it's interesting. Editing is something I think directors are used to doing in your mind, or at least I am. Like, every show I've done, transitions are key to me as a director. They always have been. And editing is about transitions and about where do you want the focus. And are there too many other little words or something that gets rid of what the story is? Just different things. It's not like you're changing what the conversation was because the entire essence feeling of the conversation is there. It's just heightened in a way. So, yeah, I had to learn a lot of things. I didn't just press a button and get rid of all the long pauses or anything.

And I had to learn how to have a conversation. I'm resisting asking you all sorts of questions [laughs] because I'd like to know, how did you learn?

Sue: How did I learn?

Gates: Yeah.

Sue: A decade ago, when I first got my Mac, my first Mac in many years, I went to an Apple Store class on GarageBand- [laughs]

Gates: Wow.

Sue: -the basics of editing. [laughs]

Gates: Wow.

Sue: Yeah.

Gates: See, that's what I've always wanted to do that. And I would love to learn how to do more of that and do it with the video. It's just that you really do need. The video editing, it's complex now. They can do so many things. You really have to have a class to know how to do it. You can do basic little things, but to really make it work and have it at a high level, I think you need to know how to use certain programs and apps, which I don't.

Sue: Yeah, there are so many more programs that make it both easier and more sophisticated and more complicated at the same time.

Gates: Right. [laughter] That's right. Well said, Sue.

Sue: Speaking of hands-on with your podcast, I'm talking down to theme music. I know there's a story there.

Gates: Thank you for asking. [Sue laughs] Do you like it?

Sue: I do.

Gates: I love it. My son, who is a violinist and a composer, he's right now a member of the Louisville Orchestra. And they have outreach and educational programs, so they try to get students involved, especially during the pandemic, different people would be doing videos which would try to get people involved in making music or understanding music better. And he's done several. This was one of his earlier ones, and he was doing it on just simple handmade instruments, things that you can find at home and do. Yeah, he just finished, and I said, "Well, let me hear it." And I heard it, and I went, "No, you can't use that. I want that."

[laughter]

It was exactly how I felt about the podcast. He had done something that was more formal, that was wonderful, and I'd love to use it for something else. It was a much more classical, like John Williams sort of thing. And I thought it was great until I heard that and I went, "That epitomizes how I feel about this. I am learning and like a child doing this." And there was something so handmade, and I'm doing this in my house, in a closet thing. And it fit it perfectly. He did this rubber band-- There's another video that he did because he had to remake another one. When he does it for the Kentucky schools, the Louisville Orchestra owns it, so he's not allowed to then-- we couldn't have shared the same thing. So, he remade another one for them which, if you go on Louisville Orchestra, you can see on their educational program what that one was like, but it was just great.

And it was the idea, what he finally did with it when he wrote the new one is he showed on the video to the students, "This is like cornmeal in a jar. This is this. In this, I put a big rubber band and then I use a wooden spoon, and I'm playing the rubber band with different tensions, and that makes the sound go up or down." And then he said, "Okay, and now I'm going to get ready for my performance." And he says, "I'll be right back." And he puts on a tuxedo with a white tie. [laughter] And he comes back, he plays his little musical homemade thing. And it was great.

So, I feel it's exactly right for what I'm doing. It's like, I don't want to pretend that I am an expert in this. I'm learning. My friends are participating. They're an incredible group of people, and they are incredible friends. And so, wouldn't have happened without them, wouldn't have happened without Nacelle. And people are allowing me to learn my way, walk through the forest figuring this out. I hope they like it.

Sue: Learning the new skills needed for podcasting, has that made you want to learn any other new skills that maybe you've avoided or thought, "Oh, no, that's too big a hill to climb"?

Gates: That's interesting you asked, because there actually are several things. I want to go back to do drawing and writing very much. I'd love to try to keep working on the one-woman show that I was doing, not so much because I feel everybody needs to see this show but because, again, when you're in the creative process, you learn so much about yourself and what's the meaning of my life. I'm at that age where I'm looking at my past and getting to know myself in a wholly different way. And that's fantastic. If I can get excited about something--

And it's about believing in yourself. And I think that's what so many of us go through all the time. We get excited by something, and then you hit your first roadblock or your second roadblock, and it's like, nope, you've got to just get up and just-- you're not doing it-- If you do it for the wrong reason, you're not going to be satisfied. You're not going to feel good, not that you're ever fully satisfied. But you feel good when you're doing it because you want to learn something about the world, about yourself.

The minute you start caring, or I do, if I start to worry too much about my performance, that's when I don't like it. That's when it's not a good experience. If you worry about what other

people are going to think, and of course I worry about what other people are going to think, and it's a struggle. It's a struggle not to give people too much. I have to be myself. I have to have my own creative power. It can't be because people say, "Oh, yeah, that's good or that's bad." You have to stand on your own two feet and do it because-- It's like the hair commercial said, you're worth it. [Sue laughs] Although I'm not trying to sell you a hair color. That's the difference. I'm not trying to make a buck on it.

Sue: [laughs] You are already touching on so many of the additional questions I have for you. It's kind of amazing. So, I'm going to circle back to so many things. Right at the start, you mentioned telling your students that they have to take a risk. And I know that you have been passionate about teaching throughout your career. And I'm wondering, why do you think you're so drawn to it? Why do you love teaching?

Gates: I think it comes with-- well, it's a combination. Part of it might be an instinct for mentoring and the instinct that makes you want to become a parent. There's something that you learn so much about yourself and the world when you are reaching out and trying to nurture others. Absolutely, that, for me, is just a fact. I have had some of the happiest times in my life when I'm watching what other people who are in my life, either as a child, a niece or a nephew or a student have done. Mentoring is a fabulous thing. And I had some incredible mentors.

I think it really came from Jacques Lecoq, for example, the man with whom I studied in Paris. He really had such an impact on my life, because all my friends-- I was an undergraduate, but taking the graduate acting classes, you could audition and get in at Brandeis and all of those actors and we had professional actors in the company as well, they were all going to New York to get agents and managers and try to become a star. That was the whole thing. And yes, of course, there was a part of me that wanted to become known as an actor or whatever. But I just, on a fluke, was told about this man from Paris who was coming to do a workshop for 30 people at Harvard. And you had to have a combination. Either you were a faculty member at some drama school, like Juilliard or wherever, or if you had enough training physically as well as acting, you might get a place in it.

And I had already studied so many forms of movement for the actors, as well as dance. I had trained in traditional Marcel Marceau mime, for example. I had done circus skills. For some reason, growing up in Ohio, I could do these things. I had learned how to ride the unicycle, things like that. And then, I was in a serious theater program. And I got into this workshop, and it was only for three days, but he blew my mind because he kind of synthesized all the elements about the arts that I loved.

There were very strong visual things as well as the drama, the acting. You studied masks, which I think helped me later doing anything working with Jim Henson. You had to create your own work. He did clown in this very particular way that was really brilliant for actors. It's finding your own vision of the world that makes you lovable. And basically, it also makes us laugh because it's you-against-the-world situations. Everybody has their own persona. Buster Keaton had his clown persona. Chaplin had his. Everyone's got it. And it's really trying to laugh at yourself, not take yourself too seriously. And it's amazing. And some people, it's very easy. They're already doing it. But most actors, really, it's like a whole journey you take. And it's phenomenal. And every major theater school now in the United States has a class in this because it's really considered an important part of the acting program.

He later went on and did things about architecture. He always had you be aware of your relationship on stage with the audience, and also with whatever space you're in physically. Like, you had to think on all levels as an actor, as a director, as the person who is-- What are you saying by standing in that area of the stage? You should feel it as an actor. Not only

does the director feel it and see it, but you as an actor, you must learn how to be aware on that many levels at once. And when there's silence and are you breathing and what to do with your breath and how that impacts the power of anything you say or do on stage. So, he just really put together a lot of things that I loved.

There were how many English-speaking people? There were maybe like four of us who spoke English, and we were all trying to communicate in French. We had Japanese, we had people from Bosnia. It was wild. And we were trying to work together to create a piece. Every week, we had to work in a group, and the group had to change, and we would create a piece. So, it really was like a metaphor of how we are in the world of trying to communicate with each other and create something together and it would be frustrating and crazy. And then, all of a sudden there were these moments where people would come up with stuff and it was like, "Whoa, that's incredible." And you could figure out, when do you use language and when do you use another kind of language that's not? When do you use a musical language? When do you use a visual language or a movement language?

Anyway, he changed my life. And then, he asked me to come back as his assistant to Harvard and do a two-week or three-- I think it was three-week workshop. And that changed my life too, because I was going to go back and then try to go to New York and get a waitress job and do all that. But all these people asked him to teach at their universities. And he said, "No, I'm not going to teach. I'm going to go back to France. Hire her." And he just kept saying, "Hire her, hire her."

And that's how it happened. I didn't go around going, "Oh, I think I'm going to try to teach now." No, I was still 22, I think. It was crazy. So, I was 22 or 23 years old and for me to be teaching graduate students who were going to be older than me, some of them-- but it just started that way and I ended up-- people were hungry for his work. So again, it didn't really have to do with me so much as it had to do with him. And I was the conduit for his work. And I believed in his work so much that I said yes. And I remember crying when I took the job at University of Pittsburgh, which was the first full-time job-- I had been teaching at American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Fairleigh Dickinson, Brooklyn College. But I could still come back to my New York apartment.

But suddenly, I had done this contract that was incredible. They let me come back to New York. I would teach three days solid, like 8 o' clock till 5 o' clock. I had 30 minutes for lunch. Normally, you don't have a schedule like that. And then, I could fly back to New York and be in New York. But when I directed, I had to stay there for the whole three-month period. Okay. And so, I was like, "What am I doing going to Pittsburgh and everything?"

And I got to Pittsburgh, and it was one of the greatest cities I've ever lived in. I loved my students. They were so varied. They weren't people who had come from elite situations in any way. It was such a diverse class. I loved it, loved it. And it turned out it was a department where it was a young department. And I became such close friends with the people in that department, and I stayed friends with them. I'm still friends with one of them, a couple who are not alive now. But they treated me as an equal. I was given respect. I would come up with an idea and they'd say, "Yeah, do it," because they were doing their ideas. I don't think at any other school was giving that freedom. It's interesting.

So, I was spoiled right away when I was young at how open and how exciting it can be in a theater department. I was doing projects that-- they were amazing and everyone was doing amazing projects and Grotowski was coming. And I don't know, they would just say, "Oh, that sounds interesting. Try it." So, there was this thing about, "Don't worry about failure. We're there." And I think that's what I missed the most. That feeling when I got into the TV and film world, it was a different thing. And it had to be because there's so much money at stake. It just blows your mind.

Sue: There's not the ability to take that kind of risk because it costs too much.

Gates: Exactly. That's right. And that's what's sad. That's very sad.

Sue: Just that vote of confidence that you got from that early teaching, somebody said to me once that the surest way to know that you truly understand something is to be able to teach it to someone else.

Gates: Huh, interesting. That's really true. I think it took me several years. I was teaching but at the beginning, I was a little bit like a parrot just saying what I had learned. And it's true. Until you really go back and explore it and find your own, like, "How do I alter that exercise and make it my own? How do I try this that works, that doesn't work?", it really becomes exciting then. Yeah. In the beginning, I think I was just saying what he said.

Sue: There's a switch that flips when you realize, "Oh, I really do get this."

Gates: Yes, there is. I think it's really true. Yeah.

Sue: But speaking of risk and all of that you were allowed to take-- I guess this is two parts. Is there one big risk you took that really paid off for you? And then, what do you do when it doesn't work?

Gates: Yeah. I think the big risk that paid off for me was when I agreed to do Shakespeare in the Park for James Lapine, because I had been teaching, and I had been dating someone who was in theater administration program at Yale Rep. And I was up there so much because I was teaching at Brandeis. I was introduced to a set of parents at graduation. This is one of my class-- She was in our class. And I'm like, "No, I wasn't in your class." It was very funny. But it was such an experience because Meryl Streep was there, Sigourney Weaver was there. They were doing incredible shows. And I got to be exposed to all of the shows and cabaret shows. Christopher Durang was there. It was really an exciting place to look at the shows because he couldn't leave, he was a student, even though we were the same age. And I had more freedom at that point because I was faculty member.

But I think it was when James Lapine, who was a graphic artist at the Yale School of Drama, and I would run into him because I'd be working on my own classes in the library. We just really liked each other. And he kept saying to me, "Why aren't you acting? You've studied acting." I said, "Yeah, I know, it's just crazy." He said, "You should go back and do acting." And then there was someone else. I met Des McAnuff, who kept saying, "You should go back and do acting." And Des was the one who was directing the play that when I turned down *Star Trek*, I went to do his play because I really wanted to work with him, and he had been someone who had pushed me to go back to do acting.

Well, anyway, James Lapine said, "Will you audition for *Midsummer Night's Dream*? Because I think you would be amazing as Hippolyta." And so, I auditioned, and it came down to between Diane Venora and myself. And she just graduated Juilliard. Maybe she had done more. She'd not just graduated, but she was very soon after graduation.

And he said, "You're two very different ways." He said, "Everyone's just a little nervous because they've never seen you on a stage in front of several thousand people." And he said, "But I really want you to be in this. So, I'm going to give her Hippolyta. But I will give you one Saturday night as Helena." Christine Baranski was Helena. "I will give you one Saturday night if you agree to come in and play a fairy in the show." And I said, "Well, I'll play a fairy, but I don't want to be just a pretty fairy," because I knew he wanted to have them all half naked. And I said, "I'll play a naked fat fairy and who has a personality that's

gangbusters.” And he said, “Okay.” And I just had a blast. I mean, I had a blast because I felt so free. [laughs] I had these big, big heaving breasts that were just fantastic. And I mean, “Oh, it was just great.”

And meanwhile, I didn't have an Equity card. I was prepping for Helena. And so, I would just come and watch rehearsals. And then, I made certain things that were my own choices in Helena, and then I did it. And that was the night that changed my life because six agents asked to sign me. [laughs] So, that was pretty awesome. And I couldn't believe it. It was like a whirlwind then. And then right after that, I got the *Cloud 9*. Caryl Churchill cast me. It was into the run of the show. I was a replacement of the triple role, and that's when I got my Equity card. Yeah, it was pretty amazing.

Sue: It had to be incredible to perform, I feel like, especially *Midsummer* with Shakespeare in the Park. I mean, the Delacorte, to me, the theater in Central Park where Shakespeare in the Park happens is never not a magical experience.

Gates: I agree with you. I mean, it is amazing. I have seen *Hamlet* where it's a downpour and they have to stop because it's like they're going to get electrocuted. But there's Kevin Kline, drenched in water. It's just amazing. Yeah, it is a magical place. And I'll tell you, that Saturday night, there were 2,000 people. I don't know if you know the play you probably do. When the lovers quarrel, all of a sudden, the winds came up like, a tempest. And our dresses were being blown and we were fighting. And it was magical. And the temperature dropped like 10 degrees suddenly, and the winds were gone. And then, we were there asleep on the ground when Theseus and Hippolyta come in. And, I mean, it was freezing. So, the audience was close together, huddling. And it was a magical night. It was just incredible, frankly.

And everyone from Bill Hurt to Deborah Rush, everybody was so supportive. They were all in the [unintelligible 00:31:54], watching me, cheering me on. Actors are wonderful. I love actors so much and to work with them. I remember when I did my first monologue, Deborah Rush, her character, Hermia, puts her hand on Helena's back, and her hand was just shaking. And I wasn't scared until she did that. And then, I went, “Oh, she's really nervous. She's got to do a performance with me.” [laughs] But just such a great experience, such great actress, truly.

Sue: Well, from that, what do you do when the risk doesn't work? Even if you're allowed to fail, what do you do when you fail?

Gates: Well, you feel pretty badly for a while, and you start to struggle with yourself to come out of it. The last thing I performed in, I was working with a wonderful actor who I didn't realize was really struggling, was starting to get-- I don't know whether it was Alzheimer's or I don't know what, but he was struggling with memory loss, serious memory loss. And one night, we go on stage and we're on the stage 45 minutes, we don't leave, and all sorts of stuff happen. We have to pull a body up with a rope, a big body that I can't do on my own and all sorts of stuff and it's nonstop dialogue. And he just blanked. He did not know where we were from the second line. And that was probably the scariest moment I've ever had on stage.

Just a small theater, but your life is flashing in front of you. There was so much exposition and so much stuff happening. And I thought, “Oh, my God, do we stop? Do we go on?” And I just went, “Go on, just go on.” But man, to try to say someone else's exposition-- he was lost, no question. And he felt terrible and I felt terrible for him. But it's terrifying. You're there. It's like the actor's nightmare for sure because you're working on so many levels that time slows down in a way.

It's like I was once in a car crash, and it takes forever, that moment. The car was spinning. There's something that you feel, you feel your life flashing before you actually crash. And it's powerful. I remember looking at my brother just and it seemed like our whole lives were passing in front of us. By the way, it wasn't because we were speeding. It was like this horrible snowstorm that was on Route 80. And if, thank God, we crashed into a 14-foot drift of snow, so we were protected. It would have been rock otherwise. But it's that feeling. And so, it clearly didn't work. I mean, it wasn't like some miraculous performance. I would never ever want to look at what that performance was like [laughs] because it would just bring it back, I'm sure. But that was one of the toughest things I've ever done in terms of performing. That was brutal.

And to know that after all the work you've done and then it's out of control and you're skidding and you're turning and you know there's going to be a crash, it's not-- people are probably like, "What? I didn't understand, what? Why is she saying all of this stuff?" It was either that or stop. So, there you go.

Sue: I remember in some of my very first theater classes as a very little kid being told the importance of knowing the entire script in case something like that happened.

[laughter]

Gates: Yeah. Well, something like that happened, but in a different way. When I was doing this play in-- was it New Jersey? And the whole thing is predicated-- My character walks on. She's got all these groceries, and she's got to be putting them away. She's talking with a friend of hers. And within the first two minutes, there's a phone call and it's someone who wants to kill her. And that sets up the whole thing. It's a thriller. Well, the phone didn't ring. [Sue laughs] The phone didn't ring. And there we are, the entire next two hours are based on this ring, every piece of action that's going to happen. It was one of those unbelievable theater moments where you're just like-- [laughs]

It's like you feel your pants are down, you're standing there and you're going, "Okay." I'm looking at the guy who's playing my friend and trying to do an improv or something, and it's just not happening. He's going, "I don't know. I don't know." And I'm like, "Can you say something else besides 'I don't know'?" or whatever. [laughs] And I just made a choice. It was just so fun. [Sue laughs] I laughed about it at the Interact, but I just said, "Wait, was that the phone? Was that the phone?" And I lifted up like, "Hello?" Really, just unbelievable. You had to do something, because if the phone wasn't going to happen, we weren't going to hear the tape of the voice and the whole thing.

That's where live theater is different. I've had things where it can be the Royal Shakespeare and there's something-- everyone has to leave and you have to get out and you have to come back. I directed something and somebody saw it was obviously fake. It was on a screen, and it was in a small theater but she couldn't stand the sight of blood. It wasn't real blood. It was colored, whatever, gel. And she passed out. So, we had to stop the show. And of course, that ruins the whole energy of the show, but you've got to do what you've got to do, that's theater. But that's where the adrenaline is too.

Sue: Absolutely.

Gates: It's not just like, "Well, we'll do another take and then we'll edit that together." It's like, "No, this is it." And there's something so extraordinary about that. And I love nothing more than feeling the audience, the give and take. And it feels like crap on a night where the audience is not with it and they've just had too big of a meal, too many-- like, on *Cloud 9*, we did a double show on *Cloud 9*. We would start at 8, and-- was it 8 or 7:30? I don't know. We did two shows on Friday night back-to-back. We'd have 30 minutes to redo our makeup

again and start all over with different wigs and all stuff. And we'd walk off stage and they go, [laughs] "Half hour for the next show." Sad.

[00:39:23] That feeling of when an audience is with you, there's nothing like it. And sometimes, you walk out on shows and there's not many people in the audience, but they can turn out to be incredible shows because of what the people in the audience are sending to us on stage. You feel their energy and their interest, absolutely. And if they cut off, you feel that.

Sue: Yes. Well, I obviously want to talk to you about *Star Trek*. But before *Star Trek*, I want to know how you got involved with The Jim Henson Company.

Gates: That was again what I'm realizing now is this is what happened to me most of my life. He had seen me do *Cloud 9*, the show I was just speaking about, but I didn't know he had come to see me. And the guy who did *The Movement*, I'm blanking on his name. Yeah, I'm blanking on his name. He did *The Dark Crystal*. He knew of me because I was teaching at NYU Tisch School, the grad school. I was teaching clown moving for actors, that kind of thing. And I was directing at Tisch with the grad students, incredible people in those classes. And so, he knew-- the guy who was the choreographer, Brian Neal I keep thinking, I don't know what his name is. We'll have to google it, because that's important to say his name.

Sue: Working on it.

Gates: Good. Maybe you can speak his name. He had told Jim that-- Jim was looking for someone who could play Jennifer Connelly's mother, so an actor. Someone who could work with dwarfs and little people and also like Ludo the puppeteer on movement and trying to get it so their bodies could take the rigors of filming a full-length feature with these huge-- it's metal inside. You really have to have strength to do it. It's hot. You have to build up like you're training an athlete. And you have to be able to articulate your neck and joints, which is very much like mask acting. And your hands and all of that fit in with a lot of the movement and mind stuff. Then, he wanted someone who could choreograph the ballroom scene and work with the Goblin King and work with the Goblin movements and all of that. So, it was a really this big role and I had no idea about any of that.

So, what he did is he was checking me out in different ways and he had me do something in Toronto. We flew up there looking at a *Sesame Street* thing and then he gave me *Dream Child*, flew me to London and basically said, "Well, I have to leave, but good luck." He gave me *Dream Child*, introduced me to the director and the director said, "Okay, so you're going to put this stuff on videotape. Give me three versions and I'll pick the version I want."

And it was like a whole new field. So, it just happened. And then, he liked what I did on *Dream Child*, even though British Equity wouldn't give me credit. I only had "Special thanks to Cheryl G. McFadden," which is what I had been using up until *Star Trek*. And then, I wasn't going to do *Labyrinth*, but I had a skiing accident and I lost-- I had a part and five costume fittings for *Hannah and Her Sisters* with Woody Allen. I lost that movie because-- I already had my costume finished, but I was in the hospital and so they had to recast. They actually got rid of the role. They didn't even use it. I was playing this wonderful punk person.

And then, I lost a TV thing that I'd shot two days of, and they had to recast it. And then, there was something else. So, I lost-- It was like a big blow for me because I couldn't do anything for a couple months. I had to really recover. So, I think that really was a difficult moment and I was a little discouraged. I would get calls from the Henson office all the time and calls from him, "I'd love you to do this. It would be going to England for at least nine months." And I finally said yes even though it was not something that I ever went after or I thought of in that way.

So, again, it's one of those strange things that just Brian saying, "Do you want to do a podcast?" I think that I'm realizing how often that has happened in my life. And so, it's interesting. And I've ended up doing things that I actually have enjoyed a lot. And after I did that with Henson, I was ready to go back and do acting. And I turned down choreographing the plant in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Frank Oz had asked me to do that, and I said, "No, I want to go back and do acting."

Sue: Wow. The name I found for *Dark Crystal* is Jean Pierre Amiel.

Gates: Huh? No, that's not--

Sue: Who knows? That's what IMDb says.

Gates: That's French. So, maybe he knew from [unintelligible 00:45:03]. Who knows? Who knows? [Sue laughs] But I know it was something like that. And someone had told Jim, because I got cast in *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. That's the one I left out.

Sue: Yes.

Gates: And I've said to people, it was just incredible-- It was like, right after all these things, *Cloud 9* was happening still, I don't think *Cloud 9* was over. And I was called up on an audition for *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. This was my first movie audition, like that kind of a big movie. And normally when you go on auditions, there's a million people in the room and they look just like you. There was nobody. And I was taken to Jim Henson's office, and he had me come in and he chatted with me and whatever. I didn't even have to read the scene. Now, I should have questioned why would that be? He must have seen me do something.

But anyway, that's why-- And I didn't even understand that until much later. I mean, he never told me that. I just figured it out because I have never had a movie audition like that since. [Sue laughs] So, he clearly had checked me out in other ways. If he saw *Cloud 9*, he knew I could act because I was playing three different characters. But then, British Equity refused to give me working papers. Yeah. And that's why I took it, was to have the role, as in the acting. I said, "Okay, I'll do the other stuff," because I was trying to get away from sort of the teaching and other stuff, I wanted to do on camera. But anyway, I got to work with David Bowie.

Sue: What seems to be a pattern is that you have to be convinced to do things, because I remember reading you had to be convinced to take *Star Trek* as well.

Gates: Yep, yep. There's a flaw in my character, that's for sure. [Sue laughs] There's really a flaw. I think it's because I started to question-- I was pushed so hard to be a performer that I wanted to make sure I wasn't just-- I don't know, maybe it's just feeling like, "Why would anyone be interested in me?" I'm not sure what it is, or maybe it's just insecurity and fear. Who knows? It's obviously something that one continues to struggle with, because I did the same thing with the podcast.

The only thing that I have not felt that way about so much is directing for theater. The plays that even when I was teaching, when I went into it, I really had plays that said something to me from the beginning monologue of a certain character in a Greek play, and I go, "Wow." And I'd get a whole vision of what that could be on stage. And that just happens. And that I love. I love reading. I love reading screenplays and plays. I like that kind of engagement.

And so, it's harder-- Like, if I'm reading a novel, I can see myself performing a role. I can say, "Oh, that would be a really great role to do." And I can also work with people. I love collaboration where we're developing characters. I love that. That's why I think it would be just a kick to be on *Saturday Night Live*, to do that kind of observation and come up with something. It's just really hard, intense pressure, but really cool, because you have to change the rhythm. You have to really be an observer to do that job well.

And the ones who do it well, like Kate, she's just incredible. And Cecily, I mean, they just have observed people so well, and they can change their voice, and they can change the way they are physically, and it's amazing.

Sue: So, just recently, the last couple of weeks, you tweeted about the final scene of the episode, *The Host*, and had your response go viral in a great way, or at least viral among *Star Trek* fans. And I know you've talked about that a million times. What I want to know about this situation is, does it surprise you that all this time later, your character still has such an impact on fans?

Gates: I guess it does but, see, I don't think of it as so much me. I think I see it as, I'm amazed at the impact *Star Trek* had on me that I wasn't aware of. So, if that's true, it makes sense that my character would have an impact just like the set designer would have an impact, just like the writer of that episode would have an impact. I think when you look at something-- that happens to me all the time, I'll go back and watch something that I've seen before. And often, if there's something I think is brilliant, I go back immediately and rewatch it and try to learn and see the things I missed. And there's a million things I've missed.

The first time you're getting the story and different things, what are the things you remember? Seeing it the second time, does it still ring true? What did you notice the second time? And when you keep going back and seeing something, that's when you really are getting the full impact of it. And so, it doesn't surprise me because that's a methodology that I use. Again, I don't go, "Oh, gee, aren't I great? That's why they're interested." No, it's because of the whole mishigas. They're projecting onto our characters different things. For me, that's definitely what I chose to play because I did not want it to be a statement about two women couldn't sleep together.

You only have so much control as an actor. Especially as a female there, you can say things, but it doesn't mean anything's going to change. And I loved the man who wrote *The Host*, I was so, so happy to be the lead of that show that dealt with what is love and questioned it and opened up the whole idea of gay and straight and what is gender and all of that. I felt it was a brilliant-- The Trill were brilliant, I thought, so I really wanted to give it my all even though I was eight months pregnant. I mean, I was huge, just huge. And the last thing on my mind was anything romantic, of course, but I really was honored to be able to introduce the Trill and I think.

There were so many things it brought up? What if it had been a child? When you think of the possibilities of what is love and how much is physical, how much is emotional, how much is experiential, how much of it is pheromones, all that stuff is fascinating to me. So, I did not want people to think that-- you see, there's a way you can play as an actor. You can justify something in ways that I wish I could have made it more clear that it was that. I did my best, but I wasn't in charge of editing and other things. So, you do the best you can with something. It was not much of a scene. I think it could have been nice if it was a more intimate scene.

But I think what people didn't realize watching it, which if you were the act of portraying it, all of this happened within days, and to have that person you love, I think that's pretty confusing, pretty confusing to have three different people, your head's spinning. Your head's

spinning there. So, I felt that was something I think would have been true. I really don't think anyone could have so clearly just jumped, because you're not just dealing with-

She also is the one who saw what the Host looked like, which was a very unattractive thing. It's this blob that was kind of like a scrotum. [laughter] You know, there's a lot of elements, and I don't think people are thinking about that. It's something that lives inside another body. So, in some ways, it's parasitic. Is it? Is it not? So, there's a lot of questions, and I think people were looking at it very simply in terms of just a gay or straight thing and I think it's far more than that.

Sue: You talk about going back to certain scenes. One of the ones that I was always drawn back to, ever since it first aired for me, was late in the seventh season, Crusher is in command of the night shift, and Troi comes in and asks her, "You didn't need to be a commander to be chief medical officer. Why?" And the response is, something as simple as, "I wanted to do it to push myself. I wanted to do it for me." And that stuck with me for all these years.

Gates: Wow. Wow.

Sue: Do you have any recollection of that at all? Not that I expect you should know the episodes like I do. [laughs]

Gates: Well, no, exactly. I don't know the episodes as well, but that makes perfect sense to me in terms of who I think Crusher is. Yeah, that makes perfect sense to me. And I can understand why that would have an impact. That's what you have to do in life, is we have to deal with the existence of power when you have it and when you don't in this world. It causes so many problems. But if we abdicate our own taking power, if we don't take power ourselves in a way that gives us at least the freedom to be who we are and who we want to be, we don't want to be trampled upon, we don't want to be just doing the beck and call of others who we might not agree with at all.

And it's a very difficult thing that humanity just keep dealing with, this lust for power, as opposed to just having enough power, where it's just, you have your own sense of self and you can create your place in the world without stomping on others. But if you don't have any sense, like, if I think you feel for her, I would say she felt like an equal in that situation. And for me, I know that was why teaching it in Pittsburgh was such an important thing, because I was really-- I guess Jacques was the one who really, by selecting me and saying, "Well, she can do it," by allowing me that power, like, "Yes, you are good enough to teach. You can do it. I will let you be my spokesman right now."

Now maybe in 10 years, he had five other people he wanted to do as is right. Because I think constantly, we do something and we have to force ourselves to keep growing. It doesn't always come natural because it's also nice to just sit there and not have to push ourselves again. But when I push myself or when I've ever had teachers who've pushed me or directors who have pushed me or friends who've pushed me, and I have had that in my life, I am happy that I've grown. In the end, I'm happy that I made the effort.

And I think that's the example I wanted to give to my son. And I have enormous respect for him as an artist. And artists struggle with all kinds of things unless they happen to have millions of dollars at their disposal so they can keep theater going or do something. For me, that was the hardest part, was that so much of the time as an artistic director, I had to raise money. And it's what changed it for me, because I loved doing it. What was just relentless was the financials and which I'm not very good at, raising that money. It's not something that comes easily to me. Then, I look at some of the friendships that I made while I was directing

there and I'm grateful. I'm grateful for all the experiences I've had, even though they're very eclectic.

And I think I am a bit of a wanderer. I like to try different things. I'm not someone who says, "I've got to get that." I don't have that usually because I feel in my life, it's been proven too many times that, just when you think this is going to happen, you can suddenly end up in a hospital from something that just happened and your whole life changes. And in retrospect, those have been some of the biggest moments of my life where I've had to deal with it and find a reason to keep moving forward. And maybe that's the meaning of my life. Maybe that's what it's been about and not so much that I'm like have to be super famous and do all this--

In the cast, I was the one who was least recognized all the time, which was a huge mystery to everyone, but it's the truth. And yet, I've looked closer than anyone, so it's interesting. So, there was something that was different that I wasn't giving off in real life that was the same as Dr. Crusher. So, I just find all that interesting.

Sue: I know that there have been some well documented issues behind the scenes of *The Next Generation*, especially in the first season, but one of the things I don't think people realize, and you've alluded to in the past, is that you didn't get the same treatment when you expressed interest in directing an episode as some of your male costars. And I'm wondering if you'd speak to that a little bit.

Gates: Well, it's tough because I was walking into an industry I really knew very little about. My experience with *The Muppets Take Manhattan* and *Labyrinth* were very different. And I did not have a clue about the politics of things. I asked before I agreed to do it on the third ask if I could direct. And at that point, it was a flat no. It was a flat no. That was a surprise. I had done more directing than anybody else in the cast, and I had really directed productions that were very well reviewed. And I don't know. That was surprising.

And I think, again, it comes down to-- here's an analogy. So that even in this Pittsburgh department, where I really like these people, I was living with someone in New York City. I had a boyfriend. I wasn't interested in any of them as a date or sexually. That was not what it was about. I liked them as people. We were colleagues. We really had fun together. But the thing is, I couldn't just go out with one of them to a bar for a drink because it would be seen by others as something that was romantic because I was young, they were in their 30s. If I went out as a group, that was fine. But there was always that barrier. I don't think it exists in the same way now. I hope it doesn't. I really don't think it does.

But there just were lines that you just didn't cross. And I could not go into Gene's office and just be, "Hey, Gene, how you doing?" I don't feel women were equals in that production office. Maybe certain ones were, and maybe I just wasn't up to the level that was expected. Maybe the fault is in me. It's possible, for sure. But I think also, I had worked with so many women in New York. My friends were people like Julie Taymor, Mary Conway, Cecil MacKinnon. I knew Kristin Linklater. I knew very strong women, and I really loved them, and I loved their work. Anna Deavere Smith. And I think I was so lost in that world in the beginning that I think I got really--

And I had just come from a tough situation in *Labyrinth*. And I think I just didn't have a clue how to go about doing things. And I probably became intense because I was fearful. And that's what my defense is, is I just become intense and you cover up. But I think I didn't feel even a warmth with some of the women. It was tricky for me because it was just a different set.

And then, it's funny because when Whoopi would come on the set, that would be more something I was used to. Because Whoopi, to me, just controlled the set in this wonderful

way, this feminine way, female way, not feminine with “girly.” And she was a mother. She was like a brilliant artist. She was great and she was so unthreatened. And she was just there. And I thought, “Now, that’s the way to want to be because that’s the direction to go.”

That’s what it was. I think it’s a combination of things. Remember, I was commuting my entire first season back to New York on weekends, twice a month. And so, I felt this split going on, and it finally became clear because I had no idea if it was going to go or not, the show, and everyone else was living in LA, but I wasn’t. So, again, it was a whole different milieu for me. And I was very completely unschooled in what was LA.

Even the casting directors, it was so different. New York, I dealt with the casting directors, it was something I understood. I came out here, I would have a meeting, and they would be so friendly and nice, and then they’d say, “Where did you get those shoes?” No New York casting director ever asked me about any stitch of clothing that I had. Like, “Where could I get that?” It was just different. And then, you would think you’d walk out thinking you got the part because they were so friendly, but basically, they probably just bought a new good pair of shoes. [laughs] So, it was a world I had to learn and I think I just did the best I could, but clearly, I pissed some people off. [laughs] So, there you go. But I’m still here.

Sue: Well, you have been incredibly generous with your time. I want to take a couple more seconds. I’m going to ask you five rapid this or that questions.

Gates: Okay. All right, let’s do it.

Sue: In a new work, do you want to act or direct?

Gates: Oh, depends on the play. If it’s a certain type, I want to direct. If it’s another type, I want to act.

Sue: Choreography. Bob Fosse or Jerome Robbins?

Gates: Oh, these are tough. [Sue laughs] Jerome Robbins, actually.

Sue: Theater. David Mamet or Stephen Sondheim?

Gates: Oh, God, these are impossible. Sondheim.

Sue: Correct answer.

Gates: Sondheim for sure, for sure.

Sue: [laughs] The Muppets taking Mr. The Frog out of the equation, Fozzie or Gonzo?

Gates: Fozzie.

Sue: And sci-fi stories, mysteries, medical dramas, or time travel?

Gates: Mysteries.

Sue: All right, that’s all of them. Gates, thank you so much. Where can people go to find your podcast?

Gates: Well, it’s on all of the platforms. Stitcher, Amazon, Apple, Amazon Music, all of them. It’s the regular platforms. And I would so love it if people would take a listen and I hope they enjoy. And, Sue, you are wonderful.

Sue: Oh, thank you, Gates.

Gates: No, you're wonderful. I just want to give you a huzzah as I leave because I think it's true. All right, you take care.

Sue: Thank you so much.

And here is another huge thanks to Gates for talking to me, for being so generous with her time. I clearly could have gone on for hours and hours. Make sure you check out her podcast, Gates McFadden Investigates, on all your favorite podcatchers. And to learn more about our show or to contact us, visit womenatwarp.com or find us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram [@womenatwarp](https://www.instagram.com/womenatwarp). You can also email us at crew@womenatwarp.com and for more Roddenberry podcasts, visit podcasts.rodtenberry.com. Thanks so much for listening.

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