



CONSTELLATION CONVERSATION — Sun

Daniel Alexander Jones & Sharon Bridgforth

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I am thrilled to have you be a part of the ATEN project. In so many ways, you are at the heart of the ATEN project, because this is a project that imagines the principle that the Sun—its divinity, its power—radiates always, and is always available to us with no intercession. And if there is a person that I know on the planet who radiates love, who does not demand of people that they pay a toll, that they kiss a ring, that they make themselves smaller in your orbit, it's you. And that kind of generous, world changing and way-making light is what we need more of now on this planet. So, I had to come talk to my big sister about this subject of the Sun, and this song, HYMN TO BE GOOD because I feel like this is absolutely your wheelhouse. So, welcome. It is an honor to have you be part of this Constellation Conversation.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Thank you so much, Daniel Alexander Jones. We go way back; I remember the very first time I laid eyes on you. We were in Austin, Texas, at Little City Cafe. You were in town to direct Shay's piece. And I just hunted y'all down like a scavenger and found you. And you were gracious enough to have coffee with me. And the barista accidentally spilled coffee on your white shirt. That expression on your face let me know that we were family from the very beginning. But, I thank you in all sincerity, I feel full. I feel full of inspiration, I feel full of tears, I feel full...like my heart is dancing and racing, because I feel like this is such a huge thing that you have created and that you're inviting us all into. It's very, very timely. It's very expansive. And it reflects you so deeply because it's like all time is in this thing. And you are doing the thing that you always do, which is you reach out, and you bring the rest of us with you. So, it's a privilege to be here. And I'm so excited to bear witness. And that video, oh, my God. It's so gorgeous. So, thank you all for that.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Thank you so much. It brings me to tears every time I see it, in part, because, simply, of the beauty of seeing that relationship between Cat and Tenzin.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And knowing that Tenzin is growing up in a circle, a sphere of unconditional love. And that I can see the way that Tenzin has flourished from my first meeting, which was orchestrated by the great Linda Earle, and all of our work together on our projects. But, just paying attention to the gifts that were so apparent when I first encountered Tenzin, and knowing that part of the reason that they have bloomed in the way that they're blooming *is* that love. And of course, that reminds me of the love that I shared with my Mom. And the video, in some ways, draws on some of the imagery from my childhood with her where she would sometimes hide these clues. And I think about... she would invite us onto a journey to go find something. But, ultimately, what she was always doing was helping us find ourselves, right? Always.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Always.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Absolutely, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And my... first... *opening* question to you, you are that way with your daughter Sonja, who is our great Boss, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

That's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But I've watched the ways in which you have chosen in your life to stand in love, when you could have chosen to stand in a lot of other things. But, I wonder if you think that that choice has led you into a greater relationship with your true path? And if it has, can you maybe talk about that? Because the story we most often hear is the story of someone who as they get older, and they go through their life experiences, they become jaded, or they become protective. And again, you are someone who I feel has done the opposite. Any response to that or thoughts about?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, I have lots of responses. I think that, first, for me, it started with the blood lineage that I was born into. So, people who maybe did not have the ability to express emotions, and love in the way that I felt that I needed someone in retrospect. I can say, I was somebody who's always been GenderQueer, and just a lover of women, and also very clairsentient. So, very, very sensitive and deeply aware, and curious about what was going on around me.

So, I came into a field of love that I was rooted in, in blood and spirit and lineage, and that also surrounded me. But, it was wild, it was mayhem. It was rough, like it wasn't a neat thing. And, I then, probably, it was partially self-protection. I think, also, I was very angry and I felt untethered, and alone. I couldn't see that the thing that I wanted the most was there because it wasn't being presented to me in a way that I understood or knew how to receive. And so, I just started, self-medicating, which for me was drinking, and just being wild. And I think because I grew up... My family's from the South, but I grew up in South Central LA, where you didn't have all the great aunts and aunties watching you all the time, where I was a latchkey kid, but I did take the bus and go all over this city. This is my city. I done pissed everywhere up in this city! At a young age! Which freed me and made me a person of the world, but it also, I was lonely. So, all of that was what my daughter was born into. And thank goodness, our souls come here *themselves*. And despite the parents, and despite, whatever the parental inabilities are, the individual soul has an opportunity to make choices.

I believe that my daughter came here. She probably was my grandmother last life, because she certainly has always been, in some ways, more mature than me, like *wiser*. But, I think she came here to do healing in our lineage. And it was because I loved her more than anything that I had ever known that I chose to figure out how to be well. And that was a very long journey.

And what it ended up doing was returning me to face myself and to see that the thing that I wanted the most, I always had it. So, I was, in some ways, then able to release some of the icky things inside of me and play, and celebrate, and stay curious, and grow, and give more. And so, luckily, I did that when she was relatively young, so then I was able to support her. And I will say her father also loved her more than anything in the world.

So, I came out to myself when she was... actually, when I was pregnant, but I divorced him when she was probably 6 months old. But, we loved her so much that we figured out how to remain family. And so, we did and his family is still my family. And, it wasn't cute and pretty. It was a lot of mayhem sometimes, but we did it because of love.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

In that place, where it's mayhem... In that place, where it's crunchy... In that place, where you were in and out of clarity because of self-medicating, what was the thing that stood in you? How did you know there was another call? Maybe, you didn't even know there was another *pathway* yet, but something wouldn't let you say, "This is my lot in life. This is my circumstance." What was that?

Sharon Bridgforth:

I think it was planted inside of me. I have... One of my very, very early memories is I was probably, maybe I was 5 and I was in Memphis, living with my great grandparents on my Mom's side. And I used to sleep under their bed, and I used to also just play under it. It was a shotgun house and is one of the old-fashioned, like really high off the ground beds. And I used to love being under, like, I *loved* watching all of them. And I loved being under that bed. What I now know is they were dying. And so, during that time that I was there, they both died. I feel like they transmitted something to me.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah.

Sharon Bridgforth:

I also feel that... I knew I was loved, and I was just so in awe of these people that were shaping my lives, both blood relatives in Memphis and extended family and relatives in LA. But, I think something got planted. And I also knew that people made sacrifices, like, for instance, my mother, single parent, raising me by herself, doing all kinds of hard things because she wanted me to have a better life.

So, I always had that. And then, later with mentors, different kinds of things got placed inside of me. But, I think that also, my soul came here to grow through that, and to heal through that, and to *offer* through that. And so, because like the... another little thing that got planted, which is a big thing, is my great aunts in Memphis were teachers. So, they started me in school early. They taught me how to read very early.

And because at home in LA, I spent so much time on the bus, I read, and we had an old-fashioned library down there in LA. And, I just read, read, read. And so, when things... I remember, I was probably in like the seventh or eighth grade, probably depressed. And again, I think it was around this thing of feeling not taken care of, and

probably, scared because I knew that we didn't actually have enough, my Mom and I, and being angry, like... all the things. My first impulse was to write. And so, I always wrote my way through my growth and understanding, and it started many years before I ever shared anything.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

When you wrote in those early times, did it come to you as a kind of call from outside of you? Or was it more, at that time, more like the equivalent of a journal or a diary, like putting down what you felt? Or was it a combination? Like, what did it feel like early on?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Early on, I remember the very first thing that I... As I was reading, my response was to write, was Song of Solomon from the Bible. I just thought they were so beautiful. And so, I was feeling very conflicted. And again, what I now know is, in addition to all that, I was just a Queer, little tomboy, who they had figured out wasn't going to grow out of that. And so, then I just felt wrong in my body. And so, I wouldn't say that I named it as writing poetry. But, my response after reading these beautiful words was to try to craft something that expressed what I felt. And I also, my man is Langston Hughes. And so, having been exposed to his work, and one of the things that I like, he's such a treasure to me for many, many reasons. But, the way he wrote was... It really reflected how people spoke, and what I saw in my life, and I knew that he loved us. And so, the kind of freedom to express in a real way, and to try to craft from the inside out in ways that felt authentic to me, and who I come from and am, I think was inspired to by other writers especially, but like Langston Hughes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, in some way, part of what you experienced was this connection to lineage that was not about another human being interceding in your everyday life. But, it was about those writings, those books from across time and across space. They somehow spoke to you. So, Langston *found you*, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And you *were found by* Langston.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Exactly.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

You resonate there, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, exactly.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I remember that so vividly with Ntozake Shange, that that was my moment of feeling that... where I remember reading,, and there was a hall in our library in Springfield, which was right across my high school. So, you could go in there, and that was my dream place because it was mainly grown people in there, but they left you alone.

So, it wasn't a lot of loud children, or whatever, and I liked it, it was quiet. And you could be in your mind and your heart and be about that. And I remember going upstairs to the little section that they had for plays, reading her, and shaking.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I said, "Oh, my..." I felt like I have found the Holy Grail.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

This makes sense to me. It made sense on a level that because the book was alive.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

In the same way that Langston, because she's out of that same tradition. So, it's like...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, I wouldn't... I guess what I'm coming to in my observation is that, sometimes the things that will guide you toward your path will be the things that are least expected, that might be a book, or it might be an overheard word or a story that someone tells. And, I'm really heartened by that because I think you can say to people, "Keep your ears open. Go, look, be curious..." Even in the midst of as you say, this is not about some easy, anything. We always still, right now, these have libraries. We still have places we can go. Most people, not all.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, that's true.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But, I think that idea that it doesn't always have to come from the source you think it should be coming from.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That... As you're saying, he was here all along, but living in a different form. I want to ask you also now about what it was like to be on the path of being an artist. And so, your story intersects with moving to Austin, and your history is known in the sense of you did so many incredible and innovative things, founding *root wy'mn* Theatre Company, starting this body of work that really, I've never... your work is *singular*. There's no one who works like you and writes like you.

And that is an important thing to note, because it meant that you had to do it when there weren't a lot of models around for you of what that meant. So, I'm curious if you might talk very specifically, about what it took for you, to in a way, trust your own inner compass, even though it may have led you in directions that everyone else didn't

recognize. And the moment when you met, can you describe meeting one or two of your mentors who intersected with you and then helped you run down that road?

Yeah, thank you. I love that. Yeah, like I said, I grew up just really in awe of the people, the elders around me, and they were so fine and fast, and on the move and hard workers, and full of dramas, and all kinds of stuff. And on my mom's side, I feel like I have this blues heart voice, which is my primary voice.

But then, when I was a young teenager, probably around 13, I became... My dad and my stepmom and my siblings... My dad and my stepmom are from New Orleans. So, I became a part of that, part of myself. And that's the jazz of it to me, that is inside of me. And I knew at that young age that there was more than meets the eye because I always felt different from my Memphis side of the family. I always felt like there was something about me that had a different rhythm. And then, when I got plopped into this other part of my family, I was like, "There it is."

So, I would *now* say: I had blood memories. And, that the things that I knew that I knew, and didn't know why I knew them, were actively a part of me. And so, the melding and the coming together of all of those various parts of myself, and I loved them too. I love watching them, and maybe it was a lot of things going on.

So, for me, as somebody who's very internal, actually, I'm actually, kind of an introvert. It was so much to take in, and so much to hold, and so much to wonder about. So, I've always had that and especially after I stopped self-medicating and began to feel my feelings, it was just rich. It was like this rich ground that had been shaped way before me and shaped for me by others, and by my own choices.

But, a huge moment *for colored girls...* was huge for me too. The first piece of theater I saw, I think I was 20. And I saw the... Yeah, I was probably exactly 20. I saw the touring version of the original *for colored girls...* in San Francisco. And I went because on the radio, they had a section of that show. Basically, she's like, "Water this plant your damn self," like that?

And I was like, "What is this? I have to go to this, whatever this is." And I went to that theater. And it was like, everything shifted and changed inside. Things just synced up. I still didn't know what to do with it. So, I was still... Because I thought I was going to be a teacher. My people were like, especially on my mom's side, "You better get a job and have some insurance," you know what I mean? They, still to this day, don't really quite understand what I do.

But, they see that I'm okay. So, it's like, *okay, whatever*. And so, I kept reading and kept... That's opened a whole path and portal that I followed privately, mostly through reading and seeking things out myself. And I started taking dance classes and stuff like that.

So, I think the next really huge moment was in Austin, Texas. So, I moved from LA to Austin in '89. And, at that time, Austin was small, and therefore, it was easy to find people. There was so much going on, and you could get involved and you could find it and you could just... You would get snatched up and pulled in. And Marsha Gomez, one of the founders of Indigenous Women's Network. She described herself as a red Cajun. So, she's from a little

bitty town in Louisiana. She said, "My father's the only person that had ever heard of her town," and he hadn't actually been there.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Wow.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, which blew her mind. And Marsha's mom had passed and Marsha had been in mourning for a long time. And the first public thing she did was she came to see my very, very, very first show, which was called *Sonata Blue*, Starla Benford was in it and it was produced in Austin by Word of Mouth Women's Theatre Company.

I thought I was turning in a bunch of poems, and they were handwritten. And they called me and they said, "We want to produce your one woman show." And then, everything changed. And so, Marsha after the show came to me and she was like, "Girl." And she told me the whole thing about having... She basically saw me and she snatched me up.

The next thing I knew... Because at that time, she was also running the Alma de Mujer Retreat Center in Austin, which now Genevieve Vaughan gave to the Indigenous Women's Network. But, at that time, it was a place people that were doing social justice work particularly, globally. A lot of Indigenous people doing social justice work would come have retreats.

I was just following Marsha around. First of all, I had a crush on her. And then, secondly, she saw me. And so, it's that old-fashioned, you just get snatched up. I cleaned the cabin. I went on staff. I didn't get paid. I cleaned the cabin. I was her sous chef. I sat in her studio for hours and watched her make things. I carried her huge pieces that she... I mean, she was a sculptor. I carried her pieces to wherever they were being presented.

And she snatched me up and threw me into the sweats. And she put together a program with Cherríe Moraga through Cynthia Pérez and La Peña Art Center. And Cherríe, I had read her book *Loving in the War Years*, and I still to this day swear I think that book helped save my life.

So Marsha said, "Girl, we'll put you on a program with Cherríe. I want you to go first." And I freaked out. I had not... My day job... I had day jobs. I was working in social services, working for the Austin-Travis-County Health Department, managing syphilis cases at that time. I had not shared my work publicly in that way. Even though I've had that show, I still didn't quite know what to do with all of this.

Marsha basically made me get on, be on the program with Cherríe and read. And I just remember, I was shaking. I thought I was going to throw up. And Cherríe just looked at me and just hit me on the shoulder and pushed me.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Oh, I love it.

Sharon Bridgforth:

So, I think...

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's great.

Sharon Bridgforth:

... that was a huge shift; and Cherríe to this day, I consider her a big sister. Marsha has passed now, but that was a huge... I have so many of them. And of course, I'll have to say, our Laurie Carlos and Robbie McCauley.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

One thing I want to make note of is you just described a thing that in our contemporary popular imagination doesn't have a lot of example, which is that you had these three women, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Four, I'm going to... Let's even count Genevieve Vaughan right? Let's even...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... Xicana, Indigenous, white, you a Black woman with the South and the different selves in you. And there was a sense of common purpose.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I'm curious, just if you would reflect for a moment on your subjective experience of what we now think of as allyship, which is a different way of talking about the collaboration and weaving the same clothness that I think you were a part of. That Marsha could look at you and see your soul, and that that seems to be what guided her rather than solely a political allegiance. Do you agree with that? Or disagree with that? Or how would you frame that?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Oh, yeah, I agree with you. I totally agree. And, I grew up... First of all, my experience even from my mom's side to my dad's side, I feel like those Louisiana Creole people, they were Black people and identified as Black. But culturally, I was actually different. I didn't grow up in that culture. And I didn't get a part of it until I was a teenager.

So, I was aware at a very young age that Black people are real different. And, I went to school with some Afro-Caribbean people. And being in LA, which, in my time of growing up, was even more segregated than it is now. And basically, the city of LA, it was different races and ethnicities of people of color all over the city and Jewish people. And, Queer people if you were in the Hollywood area.

But, I took the bus so I was in and out of everything. And as I got older, my schools were further and further away. So, by the time I was in high school, I was riding the bus from South Central LA to Echo Park, which was Latinx people primarily at that time Chicano people, but people from just different parts of the world. I feel like I was a citizen of the world.

And I grew up being loved and loving people that were very different than me, in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, traditions, background. But, we all kind of were really the same in some core way. And we had values that connected us. And so, love being a core value.

So, by the time I got to Austin... And again, at that time, the Austin that I really artistically grew up in, and I consider the 90s, when I grew up artistically was small. And so, you had Ana Sisnett who was Panamanian, like you had just like everybody was up in that mix, honey, and they were doing global work.

So, they were artists who are working for change globally, and even locally, with a global perspective. And they were honoring earth-based practices and traditions as artists, but as organizers, and as people who came into rooms together.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I love that response. And I feel that part of what you articulate is that the container was actually a global container.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The work was work that was grounded in small, local, intimate interaction that had global implication. And so, what I also see as a fundamental aspect here is, as is often the case, it is Queer women of color, very often, who are activists, leaders, who are demonstrating the lived experience, the lived *side* of what it means to engage genuine body-based transformation, like that it comes from your bones. It's about this thing of the life in the care of the people every day.

And, when we get in the realm of the abstract, it can get very preachifying and very, very proselytizing and about policies and theories. All of which are important, but there's some way that when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, it's like these women that you have described who are women who really were born in circumstances that were often the opposite of love, but who chose love.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Absolutely. And part of how they were able to get to that was that they valued elevated practice, and learned from what they were born into.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Okay.

Sharon Bridgforth:

So, as people born into earth-based traditions, which is global and it's not all people of color. It's also, there are white folks that are born into that, too. But, they valued what they and they understood that what they were offered as part of their birthright, that part of their inheritance was important. And it had what they needed in order to serve, which was a great value, *serve* the collective.

And so, they weren't looking down on who they came from, or what was practiced as they were going up/growing up, they actually, were reaching into that, and then adding in their parts that they received, and their learnedness in this and whatever it was, they added that in. And, I think prioritized the collective over their individual...And, that doesn't mean that there wasn't mess.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Who knows... I mean...

Sharon Bridgforth:

... or anything like that, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

They are people and will always... *drama*.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that's very important to me in this whole conversation series, right? And really, the whole project is that none of this is about a utopia. It's not about reaching for something that we would leave our humanity behind to find.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's about saying that when you prioritize, and you actually work from that core set of values that you've been describing, some other things start to come into view. You'd access different information and different resource, different power. But, I cannot underline enough what you said. You have to value who you are and where you come from.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And if you take your cue from a master narrative that either erases where you came from, or minimizes where came from, then you're going to be always in a deficit relationship to your sense of self.

So, I would now like to ask you about your relationship with one of our great mentors, but someone I know who is very important to you. And I'd like to know if there were some things you want to share. Now, several years after her passing, that feel like things that still are vital for you in your walk from Laurie Carlos.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you. And, you know I have to thank you that I even met Laurie, because you were the one that introduced... like you always do, you're always reaching and connecting and pulling us all forward together. In 1998, my piece *Blood Pudding* was being produced by Frontera@Hyde Park Theatre.

I think you were going to be the director and/or had been asked and couldn't. And so, then you ask... You brought Laurie into the picture. And so, then Laurie said, "Yes," came to Austin, Texas. And that's the condition that I met her in. I got to sit next to her. I got to drive her around. I got to learn and watch as she directed my show, and that particular piece, I was trying to understand my relationship with my father, and the Louisiana that was inside of me that I had felt. But, didn't have words and tools to quite understand.

And so, loosely speaking, the show is about the history of Black people in Louisiana. And in retrospect, I look back and the writing I feel is kind of terrible. It's not that well-written, just the truth. But, Laurie held it with so much respect.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Right.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Oh, God. She just was so loving and generous and kind. And she treated me with so much respect. And she made me feel like she had great regard for what I was doing. And then, she directed the HECKS out of that piece, and the performers performed the heck out of it to the point that it literally took me 20 years to figure out that writing wasn't great.

[Laughter]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

The writing was bad! Because you're like, "It was so good. And how is my writing this way?" But, why do you think that that is a thing that Laurie gave us, right? And you and I spoke about this one time, how she would say that she could go into people's bodies?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Oh, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And she could. And I remember learning that from her. And it's an interesting thing, because I feel like, each were given a very particular set of investments by her. She put... It's like she... I remember, some of my family, sometimes they would tuck a thing in your hand and send you off.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Giving you a trinket or a memorabilia thing. And they wanted you to have it. And if there was a way that they knew you needed it right then, but it was going to be *really* useful later on. And so, when she said that, what she meant is I remember being in the room with her, and that she had developed that thing that you said, you have, that I said previously, that I have, which is a kind of clairsentience, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yes, yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah. I felt it so strongly, that she could read... It was like she was a walking MRI. She could go right...

Sharon Bridgforth:

That's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... into the person that she was talking to, and see where they were blocked, see where their energy centers were, see what they weren't saying, see where their fear was, see where their gifts that were hidden where, and as you

and I know from being in the room with her, she would actually, walk up to you and put her hand, that hand right in your body. And... (sound of gestures)

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yes, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... move things around. So, she would do a kind of healing work on you in real time, partly because she knew how to do it, and she knew that the value would be... If you were opened to then have the experience she was inviting you to have in the room artistically. So, there were some people where she would cluck her tongue and be like, *they'll get there*. She's not going to do that work for them. But...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... I think she did that with you. She did that with me. She did that with Omi.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She did that with Sonn. I can go through the...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... crew. But, in that thing, in that process, so what she did, she demonstrated that there were gifts she saw in you, gifts she saw in me that she knew needed cultivation. And I say, she saw the play *Blood Pudding*. She saw through the writing to the *play*, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, in a way, she was able to read what you might now call "bad writing", but she could see it in its fully dimensional way. So, you might now go back and put a different phrase there, or you might change a section, but the thing you would be shifting would still be rooted in the thing she saw and made. So, I would argue she saw your play and staged your play.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Thank you. Thank you, and it's interesting too, because the next piece of mine that she directed was *con flama*. And with *con flama*... So, *con flama* I was basically, trying to understand my relationship with my mother. And so, I started out though, topically and I was like, "This is a poetic journey that takes place in the City of Los Angeles, on the bus, and da da da da da..."

I had all this poetic language about what the thing was, but I hadn't rooted it in itself yet. And so, our first rehearsal, Omi was the Dramaturg, Lourdes Pérez Perez and Annette D'Armata were the composers, Florinda Bryant, Zell Miller III, Ana Perea, Sonja Parks were cast members. And first rehearsal, Laurie said, "Let's have coffee, before rehearsal." And so at that time, we used to rehearse at that place on Guadalupe and there was a coffee shop over there. So, that was me, and Lourdes and Annette, we're all excited.

So, they came with me, and we just thought we were having coffee. And when I opened the door, Laurie was holding the script in the air, and she stood up and she threw the script on the ground. And she leaned forward, and me and Lourdes and Annette are holding hands by now. We're like, clutching our pearls. And we're like our breath is caught. And Laurie said, "Why was that girl on the bus at such a young age?" And I was like, "I don't *know*."

And then, by this time, I'm crying. And she said, "Where was her mother?" And I said, "I don't know." And so, me and Lourdes and Annette were crying and all that. And then, Laurie stood up, and she came to me, and she grabbed me. And she said, "Until you tell that story, you're going to be telling the same story for the rest of your life."

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Sharon Bridgforth:

And then, she hugged me, and we went to rehearsal. And so, then that night, yes, Jesus, that night, I wrote in the little girl's journey with her mother. And what that did, it changed, it seated me in my writing voice, it changed everything for me. It healed me in a way that I couldn't have been healed otherwise.

And part of what it did was, it helped me to look at my mother separate from me because in order for me to see that little girl and answer these questions, I had to figure out well, who was the mother and what was her story? And of course, there are ways that I knew my Mom's story. But, there are ways that I hadn't considered because I always had... I was looking through my own child lens at this woman.

And so, it changed everything. And I put on a Patti LaBelle song, honey. And I wrote that thing overnight. I wrote in that thing, shifted things around, change, added next day. We had a much better draft.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And this is a deep... It didn't take you a month, because it was right there you need it...

Sharon Bridgforth:

No.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But again, she had to go in there and go like... (sound of gestures)

Sharon Bridgforth:

She did it. And I said to her later, I said, "What?" I said, because it was so different than how she dealt with me with Blood Pudding, and I asked her about it. And she just looked at me and kind of chuckled. She said, "You weren't ready. You didn't trust me enough, yet."

So, she waited. She knew that I was ready. Now, that was not always her MO because she sometimes will come for the people and they were nowhere near ready. But, in some way, she knew that it was their time, and they could just say yes or no.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right. She used to joke and call me the surgeon. She continued, like you have that you're going to come in here with that fine focus and cut right to the dah, dah, dah. And I was like, "If I'm the surgeon, what are *you*?" Because it's like, you know...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But, what I understood was she was so in her medicine.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And I think, Laurie and I have famously had one of those huge breaks like the Dizzy Gillespie Miles Davis legendary...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... as like we *broke*. And so, my time of being mentored by her was then equaled by the time where I was forbidden. And I have many times to look back to try to figure out like, what was that all about? There's a general narrative, which is like, the apprentice has to leave the master. That's a classic shape.

But, I think what I later came to understand, Sharon, is that Laurie was fully in her role as a medicine woman, and she was unafraid to use her medicine. And sometimes, her medicine was, she was going to go and the person was going to be shaking after.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Wasn't gonna to be sweet.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And it wasn't going to be easy for them. She was always clear. I don't think I ever saw Laurie lose a night asleep over nothing, because she was like, with her angels and talking to the people, whatever.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, that's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She knew with you who you were. And she knew that the medicine would work best *with you* when you trusted her.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, exactly.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, she probably cared and saw, and she gave you medicine at the right time that was sweet...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... hard, but sweet.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I saw her give people medicine that was fire. And they needed her to break something in their own confidence that was built on oppression, or built among arrogance, or built on a lie. And she was the one who could come along and knock that out of them. And sometimes, people were like, "Wow, she can be really harsh." But, I often look back at those people and I'm like, "But didn't she change you and put you back on your path?"

Sharon Bridgforth:

That's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

That's right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And then with me, what I now understand is that she was angry with me because my learned habits of people pleasing, and of seeking balance, we're getting in the way of my willingness and my ability to *really use my medicine all the way*. And she knew that if I'm going to realize my work on the planet, I'm going to have to be that medicine man, like she was a medicine woman.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Right.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And that I will not be able to do a lot of the things that I was trying to do back then.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, I think she threw down a gauntlet with me, that I now feel like I've been able to embrace but it took me a decade...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And lots of trials and tribulations. So, what do you think some of her other lessons were for you? And have you learned them? And what do you feel like... Have you had those "aha" moments?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I feel like I learn a lot from her on the other side. She feels very present to me. I think the kind of self-determined independence and willfulness that she lived with, which also my family, it lives with, and demonstrated. I really think, God, I have that. I am willful. And once I get something and feel like that thing is the thing, I'm just going to do it.

And sometimes, it's painful. Sometimes, it's hard. Sometimes, it seems impossible. But for whatever reason, I can't not do it. And I think she modeled that. It's like she knew what she knew. She knew it, and goddammit, she was going to do it. Sometimes, and here's the lesson, *it wasn't in her best interest*.

So, what I feel is that she, like all of our ancestors, wants more for us than they were able to have, do, or offer. I don't think she would want me to do that kind of willfulness to the point of my own detriment, which she sometimes did. So, I think the thing that I'm still trying to learn is how do I expand where I put myself with more authority, as opposed to staying in the places that I love, because I'm moved by love, I follow love.

So, I have these... And especially, I've been a touring artist for... since '92, I think, but self-employed touring artist since '98. So, I've had the great privilege of returning to places over and over again, and developing long-term ongoing relationships with cities, with institutions, with individuals, and I always follow love.

So, I have some other guidelines, too. But, I fall in love with places and people and work. But, sometimes, I think I need to say "no" a little more. And part of what that "no" requires of me, I think, is to see myself and put myself forward with more authority. And that's the thing I'm still trying to learn.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And then...

Sharon Bridgforth:

And Laurie did that. And she did it. And sometimes, I think like I said, to her detriment, but she did that thing.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

...part of it too, for those who are listening that I feel compelled to say, is that Laurie was a *genius*.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

She was... someone who did not...

Maybe, other than that place you're talking about... like that... where the willfulness was the thing that allowed her not only her survival, but her flourishing in many respects, but, maybe limited some other things.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Okay.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But, she was not defined by what the time of her genesis wanted her to be, by any stretch of the imagination, she was free, free, free, free, free. And as an artist, she exemplified everything on a stage that we aspire to.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It was with no hesitation. The equal of any of the greats in any of the other media. So, in jazz in, in painting, in film, whatever you want to... however, you want to call it, her work in live performance was singular. You had to see it. Once you saw it, you were changed.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Absolutely.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

You saw it you were changed because you saw what was possible if you were working, really with that kind of mastery of our tradition of work. And none of the cliché... And what I loved too she hated expected things. She hated...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And she wouldn't do anything twice...

Sharon Bridgforth:

No.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... because she's already done it.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, part of what I think, we met her at a time where she was really stepping into her elderhood. And I think that that's part of what you are in the thresholding of is standing in your elderhood, which means this kind of authority and this kind of confidence sort of like your revelation from before. It's already there. I say that to you right now, you already have it but you haven't... Your mirror is not clean, maybe. Because the impact you have on others.

Your mentorship has changed and embolden and allowed the art practices of dozens, if not hundreds of other artists who sing your praises and bow to your brilliance not in a false humility way. But, in the way of when we honor that Sun, right?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Daniel Alexander Jones:

So, this version of the Sun that we are making this song is about that afternoon, beautiful golden hour light. It's the time and the message in the song is *be good to yourself, be kind to yourself, be sweet to yourself*. And I'd like to ask, I have two more questions. And the first one is, would you speak a little bit about that idea of being good, being kind, being sweet to the self, and maybe even to others? What do those values mean to you?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Thank you. I feel, and again, in retrospect I'm learning from my family. I'm learning from the mentors. I'm learning from my own life and choices. And what I see is that we... I was shaped by people that valued community, valued gathering, valued taking care of each other, valued working hard, so that those coming could do better.

People that invested with all of their might-every dream, every hope, all the promises, even though for many of them, they never received those things. And that way of being looked like laughter, it looked like dancing, it looked like Saturday night parties. And as my mom would say, "finger popping." It looks like, joy. And for me as a spiritual seeker, I think because I just have always been so sensitive, I've also always been a seeker.

So, as somebody who's been in... inside of deeply, lots of different spiritual traditions, the thing that I came to is spirituality to me... the *evidence* of my spirituality, needs to look like joy. If the evidence of me is somebody that is practicing beliefs, that are of spiritual importance, and content, and training, if it don't look like joy? I don't know that spirit is there.

I kind of wrote my way through things that were blocks and hindrances and sicknesses and things that kept me from really being who I most want to be in the world, who my soul intends me to be. I realized that for me, it's really important to not hold things that are toxic, resentment, anger, fear, and it's not that I've accomplished all of that, but it's like, the healing *through* whatever may be locking those things in and causing patterns and triggers and stuckness, my work is to let those things go.

And one of the first way... And so, in 2005, when I had cancer, that really was something that became crucial for me to actually figure out how to do for myself. Because I realized with that diagnosis, that all the things that I was angry about and upset about and all the stuff I was holding didn't matter. I just wanted to live.

So, then what is that? And if I say joy is the evidence of my spiritual practice, how can I be holding so much resentment? How can I be blaming other people for everything? And as my dear one, Lori Wilson, who helped me get sober, said, "Well, fucker, everywhere you go, there you are." So, I got to look at my own ass.

So, what happens when I do that? And so, the more I heal and grow and move through and dig into and write my way through these things, the more playful I am, the more curious I am, the more spaciousness I have to hold others, the more I can receive what's already mine that I'm seeking. That's right there.

And so, it becomes very critical. And our dear, dear one, Rajasvini Bhansali, has taught me the fine art of self-care, the beauty and the import of self-care. So, and to me, that's not a trivial thing. It's a deep daily practice.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

I know, in the places where I've been at my lowest, hearing that truth felt at times laughable. It felt so far away. And I didn't trust it, maybe. But, I've come to know and I feel like I could testify to the incalculable power of choosing love.

I want to close with a question that's rooted in an observation. The other night, I happened upon a short video that was sent to me by a friend who's indigenous and it was this elder named Ma-Nee Chacaby who was speaking about two spirit folk. And you and I both have been held by, met by, guided by Indigenous folk, as we've talked about, (guided) by people from a number of different cultural traditions. And I have on more than one occasion, been referred to, by them, as two spirit.

And I don't claim that because for me, I feel like because I don't belong to that cultural tradition, I can use it as a way to describe my experience, but I'm not going to claim that identity. But, what I feel, and I've been feeling it so much recently, in some of the healing that I've experienced with my mom's passing, and coming into a greater understanding is how deeply you and I mirror that in each other, that there's a *wholeness*, and it doesn't feel anything less than the entire point, like the purpose.

That's why we were made the way we were, by who we were, in the ways we were, in the times we were. And I bring that general thing up, because in this discussion, she spoke so powerfully about in the many generations past the centrality of two spirit folk as medicine workers, and that they were the ones very often who had the medicine and everybody knew it.

And I've been just sitting with this sense of being called to my medicine, but again, recognizing there are not a whole lot of people out here who walk with it in the same way, and then, you do. And so, I'm actually curious, if you might talk about the ways that either makes sense or doesn't make sense to you, and what you think our particular connection is giving us at this moment, because I think there's something being born.

And I'm curious, I just want to be curious, have you reflect on any of that? I know, it's a lot. But, I say I would rather ask it even though it's not like a crystal clear question because up for me.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I feel like I've always paid attention, been curious about and been shaped by spirit, been aware starting with those early, early experiences of sleeping under my great grandparent's bed when they were dying.

This conversation and ancestral conversation have always been gender queer, loving women. Lesbian isn't the right word, but it's the best word, but then I feel multi gendered, not ever having a word for that. I feel like that's all a big part of it. And as I became able, as my ability to hold my feelings and my experiences and what I know expanded, and to be able to do that sober has grown over the years, different cultures, different spiritual traditions have contributed to that.

One, so I'm married to Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, who is initiated to Osun, I'm initiated to Yemaya, and the year of a spiritual traditions and cosmologies although I am "not practicing," right now, synced to me up beyond all times in the veil. It's synced up something deep inside of me, including my genders because I believe that as a child of the ocean, I'm holding all of it and that is the... And I've always known that.

Nobody had to tell me that I was a child of Yemaya, but knowing that I started writing about that before I knew what that word was. *lovve/rituals and rage* I talk about you my Yemaya. Where did I know that from? I have no idea. But, anyway, so there's this way that I have been walking towards and walking deeper inside of... And becoming myself more fully with time, with assistance from others, with practices and with intention, and with the grace of the Divine.

Because otherwise, I would be dead because there's no reason other than somebody prayed for me, and grace that I am alive because I have done some stupid things. And life is dangerous for all of us. You know what I mean? In so many ways. I think with you, I have always... It's like you're my mirror. And so, I feel like there's a soul mirroring that I experience with you, that helps me stay grounded, know that I belong, and know that I'm not alone.

And then, I think we push each other. So, it's like, we can tell each other the truth in ways that other people can't tell us. So, the ability to be spirit family, with someone that you trust that is worthy of your trust is the greatest gift. And so, I feel like we're both in different ways in this time, just like I think this is happening collectively, too.

We are moving into a new time, a new way, a new place, which is destiny. And so, I think that we're helping each other and we always have been helping each other towards that. And the evidence of the truth of that to me is in how that is happening collectively, because this is the time. That oh, shit is crumbling, it ain't never worked. And is disappearing, like gusts of wind have sucked it up and blown it away. So, you better be your damn self. You better tell the fucking truth, I'm all cussin' in here.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

You better cuss in here because that's how we need to do!

Sharon Bridgforth:

Shit. So, anyway, all of that.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's how we need to do and we'll close out. I want to close out with a remembrance, you and I will remember.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Okay. Okay.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Among the many traditions that we have partaken in, there was a period where Sharon was bringing me to regular meetings at a Buddhist temple in...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Oh, God.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

In the Hill Country of Texas.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Jesus.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

And this temple was something else, and there used to be these nuns that would give Dharma talks to a group that we were part of, like a small group of gathering. And I love... because... they would have an interpreter because they would speak... They were from Vietnam, right? Was it?

Sharon Bridgforth:

I think so. I think so.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah, so they would speak, and then they had an interpreter who would interpret that, translate that into English for us, and then change our questions. But, the room we were in was like the size of a living room, but they had a mic and a PA system.

Sharon Bridgforth:

I loved it so much.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It was so fabulous. It was all about the right and the ritual of the thing.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah, yeah.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Anyway... They had a little gift shop. And we went in the gift shop...

Sharon Bridgforth:

During a festival.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

During the festival. That's right. It was like the winter festival or something like that. And what happened, Sharon?

Sharon Bridgforth:

Oh, Jesus. So, we were trying to buy each other gifts.

[Laughter]

Daniel Alexander Jones:

That's right.

Sharon Bridgforth:

And the gifts were expensive. And we were like, "You can't buy me that." We started fighting in the Buddhist temple at the festival in the shop.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

But, really yelling like, "You can't buy... I'm buying this."

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yeah. "You can't buy me that that costs too much, I will gift that."

Daniel Alexander Jones:

Yeah. And so, we came out of there and we call that phenomenon, BlackBuddhaLove that was...

Sharon Bridgforth:

BlackBuddhaLove, baby. BlackBuddhaLove. It's a real thing.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

It's a real thing. But, I feel like in its own way, that is so much of what we're talking about is, there are a lot of forces. And at our best, we come from the people who are able to work with all of them and find...

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... find the way to balance.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Yes.

Daniel Alexander Jones:

... And move through it. So, Sharon, thank you.

Sharon Bridgforth:

Thank you, Daniel. Thank you.

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This conversation was recorded as part of *ALTAR NO. 1 – Aten*. For more information, additional conversations, and to participate in this immersive journey, visit:

aten.life

Learn more about the speakers and their work at:

<http://www.danielalexanderjones.com>

<https://www.sharonbridgforth.com>

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ALTAR NO. 1 – ATEN is commissioned by The Public Theater, and created with support from CalArts Center for New Performance and New York Live Arts' Live Feed Residency, with funding from Rockefeller Brothers Fund, National Endowment for the Arts, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and the Partners for New Performance.

ALTAREDDSTATES is made possible with generous support from the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Theater Project, with lead funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and additional support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. Additional support provided by the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab.

Produced by CalArts Center for New Performance.

