

Fear Me Out Podcast

Episode 29

Hosted by Clinical Psychologist - Dana P. Saperstein PhD.

Guest Speaker

Leslie Zemeckis - Being of Service

Kim Fauskee 00:00

In this episode, our guest today is an actor author, documentarian, mother and the wife of an Academy Award winning director are storytelling of stigmatized and marginalized women has won numerous awards and has broken the stereotypical understanding in image of professions once thought of as freakish in on the edge of society. So I hope you join us as we spend the next hour with Leslie Zemeckis.

Dr. Dana 00:35

There are two basic motivating forces, fear and love. When we're afraid, we pull back from life. When we're in love, we open up to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance.

Fear Me Out 00:55

Coming to you from our studio in Santa Barbara, California. This is the fear me out podcast. We're not your typical Self Help Program. Our show takes a deep dive into those psychological issues that affect us on a daily basis. We hope to shift your perspective and have you experiencing emotions differently. Now here are your hosts Kim Fauskee. And Dr. Dana Saperstein.

Kim Fauskee 01:16

So Wesley, we were talking before we started recording, doing research on you and looking at the document or producing some of the articles that you've written movies you've been in. You've lived a pretty robust life. Alright.

Leslie Zemeckis 01:37

I like that. Yeah. That's a good way

Kim Fauskee 01:40

to see. Actor. Yeah. documentarian. Yeah. Author. Yeah. Mother? Yeah. married to an academy award director. Yep. They used to call that a triple threat. But I think that's a, what do you call five? I don't even know what the number five in total, quintuple their threat on that. So anyway, so the next 59 minutes and 30 seconds. How did you get there?

Leslie Zemeckis 02:12

I don't know. One foot in front of the other. I mean, really?

Kim Fauskee 02:17

So let's let let's start with, I'm going to assume that acting was your original calling. Mm hmm. And so how did that begin for you?

Leslie Zemeckis 02:28

I think actually, you know, I'd say storytelling because I was always interested in writing, always interested in reading movies, that kind of thing. You know, and it's just your basic go to LA and start pursuing it as an actor. And then of course, you've learned more things along the way. And you think, Oh, I can do that. So you try directing or you try, you know, writing a book or different things. I think it's, you know, just not staying, doing one thing.

Dr. Dana 02:59

How old were you when you first said you came to Los Angeles?

Leslie Zemeckis 03:03

Well, we don't need to go into ages. Ages don't matter.

Dr. Dana 03:06

No, no, I'm not asking you how old you are. Now. I'm just wondering how old you were when you got started right out of school? Let us go. Where did you come from?

Leslie Zemeckis 03:12

San Diego. Oh, okay. Yeah, I'm a California girl.

Kim Fauskee 03:16

In so you didn't, the acting bug didn't strike you till a little bit later. So you weren't in productions as a child or school productions or anything like that?

Leslie Zemeckis 03:25

No, I mean, I, you know, dance, those kinds of things. But I don't even remember. It's so funny. I don't remember any schools having any plays, but they must have. But I mean, it's not that it didn't. I was just waiting to come up here to pursue it. Here. This is Santa Barbara. But

Kim Fauskee 03:41

in Los Angeles. Yeah. Yeah. And then did you have it? Do you have any idea of enacting you wanted to be on stage movie television, or what was recalling all of it? I do a lot of theater. I love theater. And you're trained as a method actor.

Leslie Zemeckis 03:59

I guess that's what you would call it. You know, I think, you know, after you're around long enough, and you haven't enough different teachers, there's all kinds of training that just kind of blends in. So I wouldn't say I'm particularly one thing over the other.

Kim Fauskee 04:14

So do you have the acting bug? Or was it just a profession that you liked, and it just kind of morphed into other things within entertainment that you liked doing?

Leslie Zemeckis 04:24

What do you mean, do you think the acting bug is the same thing as pursuing it? I mean, I don't think you would pursue it if you didn't. If that wasn't a passion.

Kim Fauskee 04:33

Okay. That was a question I was asking, was it a passion of yours. And does it mean, is it still a passion of yours today? Yes, it is. Okay. When did you start writing?

Leslie Zemeckis 04:43

Well, I think I've always dabbled in writing. I remember trying to write a play and then you know, it's like, oh, I don't like this form or whatever. But I think when I did my first documentary, in 2005 There was so Many stories. Let me see if this is telling the truth. I didn't try to do too much before the 2005 episode, I directed and produced my first documentary about the history of Burlesque. And there were so many stories, that of course, I can't get in to a 90 minute film that I just said, I'm gonna go write a book about this. And then that's when I just sat down and had the time and did it.

Dr. Dana 05:23

What made you interested in that topic in the first place?

Leslie Zemeckis 05:26

Nobody had really done it. From the woman's point of view. I really kind of fell into it. I was doing a one woman show. And my character was based loosely on Gypsy Rose Lee and Mae West. And so I was kind of researching their lives and the word burlesque came up. And I was like, oh, what's burlesque? So I started searching for it. And you really couldn't find anything. Beyond there was a lot of stuff on the male comedians, but everything else about the women was just their name, and kind of this was their act. And I've just thought, well, I want to know more. What do you mean, this is just their name? Especially back in the 20s 30s? And 40s? How did these women get into it? What did their family think about it? What happened to them when burlesque died? And so that's when I started researching it. And it just kind of snowballed. I ended up talking to somebody who knew somebody who had been in it and just, you know, spent, I spent two years going across the country interviewing everybody I could, who had been an original Uber last prom, and I'm talking from like, the 20s 30s 40s 50s, which almost all of them are gone now, except for maybe one is still alive. Betty Rowan, who was huge, really, really famous in the 30s. She just died. She was 106. Wow. And the stories were told, and they were so grateful when I went in there. You know, at first they were hesitant. And then I went there with a friend of mine. I said, Come on, let's get a camera. And let's just go shoot this film and Sherry hollered. And who produced it with me, just like yes. And we would just go into our houses, and they would just open up. There's like, here's my trunk of pictures. And here's all the desks and they said, nobody ever asked us that great story after great story. That was amazing. They were amazing.

Kim Fauskee 07:22

So what was the background of Burlesque? Because you said it started in the 20s. Yeah, I

Leslie Zemeckis 07:27

mean, it's, it's, it's a long line, you know, it's really an American form of entertainment. I think like, you know, now that, you know, I'm on to other things, but the 1860s a troupe came here from England, and it morphed with our vaudeville and minstrel shows to become this thing called Bird last because it because in the early part of like the 1910s, we had a lot of immigrants come here. And they didn't speak the language. And here I'm in New York, because that's where it came, but they could for a little amount of money, they could go to a burlesque show. And the humor was really broad, it was all humor based, so so they could understand without having to hear a joke, the humor of it, and then there would be pretty girls. So it was really for, you know, the working class for men, and then it you know, as everything morphs, then it became not quite a family show, although there was that, but then when it came, women went to him. And then as it morphed from, started having competition with other things, then you have more girls, and you get a little bit more risque to you know, it was always about keeping, you know, the customers coming in, but it was a huge, huge form of, of entertainment in America for years. That was really, you know, its legacy. It's really dismissed as there was no talent. It was borderline prostitution, which it was not at all the men if they wanted to the comedians, and they did they went into radio and had respectable careers and then they went into television you know, Abbott Costello, and Ellen oldest father Elon, all this was in my documentary, as father was a big straight man, which, you know, is a comedian then it was a good looking straight man. And they could all go on and have careers but the women never could. So they're so their career either died after a certain amount of time, or they just did something else with our lives.

Kim Fauskee 09:34

Was there some commonality to these women? What drew them to this profession?

Leslie Zemeckis 09:39

They wanted most of them to be stars, a lot of them had.

Kim Fauskee 09:43

So it was the Hollywood and in a sense, yeah,

Leslie Zemeckis 09:45

I mean, but you know, it was theater, it's so they're not all running out to Hollywood or New York. There was a big circuit of theaters throughout the Midwest and, and so you could be from Idaho and the local theatre or the next town over, and you didn't have to have a talent per se to have a following, they wanted to be on the stage, a lot of them can dance some couldn't. What I found the most interesting and I didn't realize it till years afterwards, there was every type of body type of these women and some worked till they were 5060 to the storm was probably 70 or 80 when she quit, but they never disparaged their bodies, which I thought was so interesting. It was not like, Oh, I was so fat, or I felt I was fat, or my breasts weren't big enough, or they just kind of thought, you know, I'm awesome. And here I am. But it was really making a living. And it was also you know, the height of it during the Great Depression, when a lot of people couldn't make a living and vaudeville really died, there was the burlesque theaters, you could go in there for a dime, you can go in there for 25 cents, you can sit there

all day long, and have someplace to be, you could laugh, you could be entertained. And these people maintain their careers throughout this, you know, really hard time in our country.

Kim Fauskee 11:11

Were they part of their own act, or are they part of a stage performance that like you said, had comedians involved or other actors or

Leslie Zemeckis 11:19

it would be a, you know, a complete show, there'll be comedians or, you know, at the height of it, there was everything that was, you know, big chorus girls of dancing girls, there were singers, there were straight men. And then there were the strippers. I mean, the strippers eventually took over, especially into the 50s when you start competing with, with television, but it was a big, you know, Broadway type, variety show of everything, you would have acrobats and people standing on their hands, which you think, Oh, my God, how did they make a living, but they actually made a living doing this. So it's a big Broadway type show. But you would have your own act, the strippers would go in and they would say here, you know, they would have their music to the orchestra. This is this is what I'm gonna dance to, and you had your amount of time. So you didn't have to fit in with the show. It wasn't like a themed show. Everybody had their act, some of the strippers, not the headliners. But the other strippers would work with the comedians. And they'd get paid a little more for doing a little skit. But everybody kind of had their place, but it wasn't because some shows were traveling. And some, some it would be for that theater, and then they would have guests X come in, you know, it was all a variety of how it worked.

Kim Fauskee 12:43

Was there a center in the country for burlesque performances, or was it east coast, west coast, middle of the country

Leslie Zemeckis 12:50

a lot. It was a lot of Chicago's like Philadelphia, Cleveland, later, Florida, there was some in LA, San Francisco, the world fairs, there was elements of it. Some of those dancers like Sally Rand, who is my third book that I wrote about, because she was really interesting. So it was really spread out all over. And then there's elements of it in the circus, you know, there was a lot of the same similar type X and there was strip X and certain tents. And so it was really, it's really embedded in our culture that we don't even know.

Kim Fauskee 13:32

So there wasn't the stigma back then of body shaming, or body type. I'm assuming there was every sort of body type that were

Leslie Zemeckis 13:40

every sort. But there was definitely a stigma that you were a stripper, because you were really, and actually even in Berglas, the men less so obviously, because they're not taking off their clothes. But they're, you know, one of the women who was in it forever. said to me, it was kind of us against them. You knew you when you walked, you went into a town when you're traveling, and they kind of looked at you. Oh, you're a stripper you're less than. And that's why I think nobody had ever asked them what

their story was beyond what kind of act you do? What was your stripper name? And that's why I think they were so grateful that I asked them and wanted to know what their story was. But there definitely was nothing about a body that didn't have to look a certain way. It wasn't like a showgirl. Like Ziegfeld show girl or an earl Carol's show girl that they were actually measured and you had to be this height and you had to look at, you know, a certain way they were just anything was

Kim Fauskee 14:42

There was there a typical age for a gal to enter that profession. Young

Leslie Zemeckis 14:46

They started as teens but like I said you could have a lot of them dead. If they were big stars. They worked until they were 40 they worked until they're 50 6070

Kim Fauskee 14:56

they made enough money to survive.

Leslie Zemeckis 14:58

Oh god yeah, some made Huge amounts of money and others made a living. You put a lot of it and depending on the era, you put a lot of it back into your act because nobody's buying your costumes, nobody's having your music made for you. Sometimes you had to pay your own expenses just depended a lot on really elaborate acts and they all paid for it themselves. Oh my God, these women were great Blaze star and a few you know. Yeah, I mean, who doesn't? There was that film. I talked to her. She was hilarious. She had a variety of cats that she traveled with like Panthers, maybe a jaguar. And, and she talked about one time she went into this town, and she went out shopping and she came back to the hotel and they're all in an uproar. And her her Her room was flooding. And they didn't want to go into it because she they knew she had a panther in there. And it had somehow gotten into the shower, and it was flooding the place. And she went in there. And she said it, it jumped on her and she thought it was going for her juggler. She had another act where she built a couch that would light on fire. And so she had you know, she traveled with all this stuff. Then there was the lesson SEER who traveled with antique furniture and bathtubs. And she did her act and furs and jewels. So she made a lot a lot is so they made a great living and they could work 50 You know, weeks out of the year,

Kim Fauskee 16:41

for the majority of the gals that were in burlesque. How long was their career? I know that you said that a few of them had lasted, you know later on and to 50 6070s

Leslie Zemeckis 16:53

Yeah, some are just a season. I remember one lady said sometimes a girl just wanted to have enough to buy a new Frigidaire or something. So I think you know, it's also a hard life because you're always on the road. I know a lot of them. Were mothers were single mothers. And that was really difficult because their children were left behind not great circumstances. And I think the children really suffered because of it. And a lot of them were really bitter about it. When I talked to the children as adults, you know, it was hard. So a lot of them got out as soon as they could make money or as soon as they found a husband or went on to another career. It just depended.

Kim Fauskee 17:40

So you had mentioned that they were looked down upon more like strippers than then actually more like prostitutes. In your interviewing of them later on in life, how did they overcome that stigma? Because I'm sure that to some of them, there must have been some post traumatic stress related to that, whether they were cat called that in their communities that they lived in or on stage?

Leslie Zemeckis 18:07

Well, I think it kept them kind of insular, sometimes to themselves if they weren't a big name. And if they weren't known, like a blaze star, who was blatant about it, but she's also later in the show, you know, her stardom in the late 40s 50s. I think you kept to yourself. I think a lot of them never talked about it. They went by different names. One woman who ended up being she claimed to be the first female theatrical agent in New York. When I interviewed her, she was probably late 70s. She said she had just told her kids the year before, and they were 48. Wow. And they never knew anything about her now, she just didn't talk about it.

Dr. Dana 18:52

She was embarrassed by that.

Leslie Zemeckis 18:54

It just was really just not considered anything worthy of talking about. Wow, you know, it'd be like, Oh, you're a stripper without thinking what that meant that there was an act to it that you did dance the the great majority of them didn't show much of anything. There's a ton of roles. So yeah, there's just you know, and they're, and they were really just dismissed as a stripper where they consider themselves dancers.

Dr. Dana 19:23

And then you show up in their lives and, and I got some real pivotal.

Leslie Zemeckis 19:28

Oh, yeah. Oh, my and they loved it. I mean, it gave them great lives. They got to travel, they got to see things. They got that stardom that they probably wouldn't have, have had otherwise, because they weren't trained as actors. You know, even Gypsy Rose Lee, when she went to Hollywood called and said, We're gonna put you in films, then they wouldn't use her name because she was gypsy stripper I mean, it makes no sense.

Dr. Dana 19:56

So she had to have a different name. Yeah,

Leslie Zemeckis 19:58

she went by I think her real name is Louise habit? I mean, you know, there's like for women it was much harder than a man could, you know, say that they were a comedian in that,

Dr. Dana 20:09

Do you feel like this experience changed your life in any way.

Leslie Zemeckis 20:14

I don't know if it changed my life. I think, well you had the experience of making the documentary because then I was like, Oh, I can make one. So I'm gonna go make another and I'll go make another. They all stayed in my lives, I went to their memorials and their funerals, and I sat on the bed with one woman who was 97 when I interviewed her. She could still kick her leg up over her head. It was kind of amazing. Swear, but you know, I have footage of her just holding her hand while she's crying, talking about missing her partner of 60 years who had just died. I mean, they all just kind of stayed in my life. And they would call me with all their medical problems and, and everything. So, there was just a connection, but I keep that with any subject matter that I'm going to work about. It's taught or you know, write about or create, it's not going to be about somebody that you don't know, there's been fascinating characters, you think, Oh, that would be an interesting story, but they're a mass murderer. I don't want to, you know, I don't really need that in my life. It's like I would rather shine a light on something that's it was a really misunderstood art, like that, like my second film about Siamese twins, and freak shows, and like, you know, the third one about a female tiger trainer. I mean, there's so much stigma to all these careers, when people especially like the tiger, and talking about the circus, people don't take into account the times. You know, when I did a film called Mabel Mabel, Tiger trainer about, maybe we'll start the first female tiger trainer. Now, she probably started to get all these years wrong, because I haven't looked at it for a while. I think she started in 1911 1914. circuses were the only way to see animals. They recreated historical events. It was entertainment. And then when I was filming it, I actually went around with a circus for a couple of towns and they were in this not that many years ago, they were still going to little dinky towns that had no sort of entertainment. So these circuses that pull down, which were like traveling cities, they were so giant really brought entertainment and they brought education to a town which they're still kind of doing. But when I talked about it to a lot of people are like oh my god, animals, oh my god, they should never do this with animals. That's not the issue where you have to take it historically of the time and the woman I was talking about. She had raised them. They were in her house. They were not by any means abused. She basically gave her life to these cats. And she was scarred head to toe so I like delving into subjects like that, that people just dismiss as you know, oh my god, she had tigers and was training them she must have been hitting them all the time.

Kim Fauskee 23:27

So how did you find out about me? Well, the tiger trainer and realize that this is a documentary I have to make.

Leslie Zemeckis 23:33

Well, it's all you know, it started with a burlap mask and because of doing research on the burlesque I found these Siamese twins who were briefly in Berlei house which was rather horrifying. And they're

Kim Fauskee 23:45

there and these were conjoined Siamese twins. And they were

Leslie Zemeckis 23:49

huge. They were the ones from the site of the Broadway place sideshow. And then the revival which they actually asked to have me see my film as did American Horror Story because their story about Siamese twins were coming out. And so they wanted to show the cast, but because I was doing research on that and sideshows and burlesque and freak shows, I heard about Maplestory. And it really interests me, I thought this Blimey, I would never go into a Tiger Cage. I'm just like, what does that take? So I thought it was going to be all about courage, and her courage to do this. So I she was she had passed, but I had talked to I had found her last mentee, a man that she mentored and he because of my other work and the way it treated the subjects. He's like, I have all her stuff. I'm just opening it up for you. And I just wasn't going to do the film unless I could find a lot of footage on her and there was a ton of footage on her. So I interviewed a bunch of female current and recently retired female animal trainers also to get their point of view about working with animals, and it turned out to maybe have nothing to do with courage. It was all about love, which I thought was super interesting.

Kim Fauskee 25:15

It's interesting that they've, I guess, cataloged that video from the early 1900s on a tiger trainer.

Leslie Zemeckis 25:26

Yeah, I mean, she, you know, and she was such an idol of everybody that came after her, because she was trained in this kindness method. I mean, her training was she, you know, she had had a horrible, horrible, horrific, abusive childhood basically ran away to join the circus as people did and could and how to career and she was working like with goats or something. And she saw a tiger and she fell in love with them and they are mesmerizing, if you've been like, I've been this close to them with, you know, a cage in between me, of course. And they're just stunning animals, but she really fell in love. And the main animal trainer on the circus that she was working. She said, I want to work with animals. He said, Okay, we'll start with the lions, just go in there. And you know, if you survive trial by fire, that's yeah, that was the training.

Dr. Dana 26:31

If you survive, that's your training.

Leslie Zemeckis 26:33

You know, it's like you're just go figure it out.

Kim Fauskee 26:35

And I think I remember from actually watching that documentary that she said that she always knew that she would die by a tiger. It was she wanted to die for her. She wanted to die by it.

Leslie Zemeckis 26:44

Yeah, that she was gonna die. She wanted her tigers to take her out.

Kim Fauskee 26:48

How long did she last being a tiger trainer in the circus?

Leslie Zemeckis 26:53

Oh, God, she was still working. In her I can't quote exactly, but I think it was her 70s. And when I was talking to Roger, her mentee said it would drive him nuts. Because she had that she started wearing this big broad RedHat out in the sun, which you need your peripheral vision for these cats. She didn't have any in her later years and had no accidents. But she did completely before her body was completely scarred head to toe from numerous attacks. And you know that. And they know and all the trainers that I talked to, they know those cats are waiting to get you looking for an opportunity to hurt you. Oh, yeah, of course. Really? Oh, yeah. And you know, once she fell, and that was an opportunity they just went for. But that was just their instinct. But I mean, she loved them. And everybody that I talked to, that worked with these cats. Absolutely loved them. So much respect for them knew that like, we're not going to be friends. And I'm not going to try and subdue you. It was really kind of an interest in their mind to see what they could have the cat do? And she said, No, you know, a lot of them said some cats would n't get them to do anything. They're not gonna go up on that. On the stool. So you, you see what other kind of thing you can get them to do?

Kim Fauskee 28:26

Did she ever marry or have children at all? She

Leslie Zemeckis 28:29

married numerous times, usually for her advantage in the circus. But she never had children. She didn't want children. And I think it was, you know, because of her childhood. Partly, I'm not sure how amorous her relationships were with her husband's

Kim Fauskee 28:49

not as much as it was with the Tigers.

Leslie Zemeckis 28:53

The Tigers took first, you know, precedent and actually when I was following this one circus even though it was a male trainer of these tigers. He was telling me, "You look, they have to be, I mean, I have to be here 24/7 for them. I've told my girlfriend they came first and he did we walk you know, we were there for days. And if it's like he's always with them, he's always playing with them and letting them out. And

Kim Fauskee 29:22

yeah, I was thinking about that when you were telling the story about her as she ran away from an abusive home. She found her family in the circus, right and the lot and these lions became her children or her brothers and sisters and I'm sure she absolutely raised multiple sets of sure of lions throughout her career.

Leslie Zemeckis 29:40

I have got great pictures of her just at the dining room table and then you're like, Okay, your two little cats just sitting there with you. But yeah, and that's the great thing about you know, burlesque and Sideshow and circuits, it's, these misfit people are misunderstood people. somebody who wants more. And they find their community and it's a community that kind of stays together and they look out for each other.

Dr. Dana 30:09

Do you feel like That experience changed you in any way? Because you, I mean, you've had contact with somebody incredibly unusually evil.

Leslie Zemeckis 30:16

I know. But they seem usual to me. I mean, it just seems, I don't know. I find them interesting.

Dr. Dana 30:26

They make sense to you on an emotional level. Yeah.

Leslie Zemeckis 30:30

Yeah. I like that they had the courage to find their way, you know, especially Mabel, you know, leaving all the abuse to find her way. And she did. You know, I mean, I think she was more scared on the inside than she actually was on the outside. And didn't really trust people. And she was really betrayed at the end. I don't want to give it away for the film. But she was very, very much betrayed, again by people. So it was really all she had was the cats and that connection and her responsibility. And, you know, she cleaned out their cages, she fed them, she did everything. So it's not like necessarily to think of or I'd never, I guess thought about, you know, oh, you're your trainer. And you go in there and you do this big brouhaha and leave? No, it was like 24/7, you know, cleaning up and like, all their stuff.

Kim Fauskee 31:35

Did you have free rein in making these documentaries? And what I mean by that is that maybe certain family members or certain people that were close to the situation didn't want the story, told in a certain way, or hope it was portrayed in a certain way?

Leslie Zemeckis 31:50

No, nobody never said anything. I mean, I think by that, especially by the time I got to Mabel, they were really because you know, they would look at my work. And I don't go in to my work. With any point of view, I just go in to gather the information and tell the story. And if there's going to be negative things about it, I will tell you. So but nobody ever said I hope you don't tell this. Or if they tell me something in privacy. Obviously, they say this isn't for the camera. I'm not going to do that. But I was never restrained in any way.

Kim Fauskee 32:30

Was there a commonality? Again, I asked that question about the gals that were during burlesque. But are there commonalities amongst the three types of documentaries that you did in these women, between a burlesque dancer, a tiger trainer or a conjoined siamese twin? When we talk about similar ties, or marginalized people, or women that may be looked upon differently in society? Did you find some commonalities with them? Or, you know, what was the important piece that you've learned about them? Oh, well,

Leslie Zemeckis 33:05

you know, it's just such a simple thing that they're more than their title. You know, they're not just a stripper. They're not freaks. They're not a circus person, you know that there's a name and a history behind all that. And I think I think as a society, we tend to label people, so we could dismiss them, or that was an important part of anything. So I just look for the people behind it. I think they were all just labeled as whatever, like there's a million kinds of experiences just because somebody was a burlesque stripper, you know, that interesting lives and did try to do interesting things. And some of them failed. Some of them lost other money. Some of them had, you know, did drugs. Some of them didn't, some or, you know, straight as arrows. Some were very good mothers. Just a variety of experiences. Like there isn't any kind of career. But we just tend to think it's one thing.

Dr. Dana 34:10

Was there anybody in your personal family involved in the work that you did?

Leslie Zemeckis 34:14

No, no. I know, I wish I'd like to find a, you know, burlesque stripper or circus person in my family. But no.

Dr. Dana 34:26

And what about your family? Did they take an interest in what you were doing?

Leslie Zemeckis 34:30

Oh, yeah, they love my work.

Dr. Dana 34:31

Do they? Yeah. Did any of them asked to participate in helping you do your work with

Leslie Zemeckis 34:36

no, no. It's kind of like, I just did it together and do it?

Dr. Dana 34:43

Well, I mean, I asked you that question, because my daughter was so thrilled when Kim and I asked her to produce our show. You said I can't believe I get to work with my dad. It's such a wonderful thing to be able to do. So I've just wondered if your kids are

Leslie Zemeckis 34:55

oh, they would be too little. I mean, I was pregnant during one of our films. Oh, Thank you very much.

Kim Fauskee 35:01

Have you have any of your kids expressed interest in going into the business, whether whether it's in the film, whether it's in the documentary, whether it's being a writer, they have those interest now there will see still too, still in that age of trying to figure it out. But have they expressed any interest at all of what mom and dad have done? Or what mom and dad do? Yeah, I

Leslie Zemeckis 35:23

mean, you know, they certainly know. Yeah, yeah.

Kim Fauskee 35:27

And have they watched the documentary? Or are they the age where it's like, okay,

Leslie Zemeckis 35:33

they've watched, they've watched my latest, which is hilarious of all ones, you know, about the core designs in France?

Kim Fauskee 35:42

What's their kind of what's their impression of, of your work? I don't know, that never asked or they don't know. Not interested in what they may think.

Leslie Zemeckis 35:56

It's not that I'm not interested. It's like, I don't want to put them on the spot, or, you know, it's just the work is there.

Kim Fauskee 36:03

Because they think it's important work. I mean, you've taken a piece of American history that had been forgotten, or dismissed. Right. And I don't want to sit bent in another or bent in a different way, whichever way somebody wants to bend it. Right. So I think it's, you know, again, it's, it is part of our culture, in what, you know, our culture evolved from that. So I think, you know, as a young person, I think it's important for them, and again, maybe the subject matter. You know, like, my kid thinks that, you know, there are no roads or cars when I was born, right. He thinks that that also, I'm, you know, I can't relate to anything, but I do, I do think that the work that you're doing is very, very important, and young people should really take note and appreciate that. Thank you for that. So

Leslie Zemeckis 36:56

Why don't you think about what I loved about doing my film about the, and I call them Siamese twins, people give me sh. Are they still alive? Yeah, no, okay. They died in the 60s. But really their story, even though it was made into this Broadway musical, the music is absolutely fantastic. That people just didn't get their story. And I found it, I found their story. I mean, what was interesting to me about them, and I found like their God, daughter, who remember playing with them on a on a porch when they were, they had these captured captors really, who never let them out of the house, their guardians, can you know, they were sold that birth, this whole horrible, horrible thing. But what was most interesting about them, which people didn't get about their story, is they thought they were normal news. So they didn't understand why they couldn't get love, why they didn't, you know, because one, they were really kept away from the world. So if they saw a cute man, and for nefarious means that that man was trying to get to them and marry one of them. They didn't understand that because they weren't out in the world. But they didn't see themselves as freaks. Interesting, but everybody else did. And I think that was probably the biggest downfall to them that they didn't realize other people were seeing them in this way.

Kim Fauskee 38:38

Dana, and I talk about in previous podcasts, and in the book that we're doing about taking on other people's emotions, and how. And I've asked Dana, this thing as a clinical psychologist, how he can do his job day in and day out, and have this objectivity and not take on somebody's energy, because there's horrific stories that he hears and a lot of traumas. And he has to maintain that effectiveness to be able to help these people. And I kind of think that there's some similarity in, in kind of what you're doing with these documentary films. And, you know, the, I'm sure there was some horrific facts that you've heard, and whether they're in the film or not, but we talked about this early on about, you know, having the freedom to make the film that you want to make is, so how does if you've taken on No, if you took on any of these people's energy or or any negativity toward them, and did that sway any of your objectivity in terms of making these documentaries, if that makes sense to you?

Leslie Zemeckis 39:48

Yeah, I don't think so. I mean, I think there really is something about how you have to be a witness to history, and you have to. I mean, I'm currently interviewing something right now for the next book I'm going to do and the stories are difficult, and I cry sometimes when they cry. But ultimately, you have to gather all the facts. And when you can put that emotion into the writing, or certainly into the film, I know what I want my audience to feel or to come away with. But I don't take it on, you know, like for the rest of the day, if that makes sense.

Kim Fauskee 40:29

No, it definitely does.

Dr. Dana 40:34

I mean, Kim brings up a good point, because the most of the people you work with have had their

Leslie Zemeckis 40:38

struggles for sure. Yeah. Well, now most of them are all dead. Yes. I mean, I mean, that's, that's, you know, the sad thing is like you do eventually just start, you know, one after the other, you see them go, because they're all I'm dealing with older people that time gone by, you know, those we don't have those kinds of entertainments anymore.

Dr. Dana 40:59

But it sounds like you were able to separate yourself from their struggles. Yes, I mean, kind of objective.

Leslie Zemeckis 41:05

Yeah, I mean, there's some, you know, stories that you hear, there's one in particular, this man I interviewed, he was just so sad about the loss of his wife, who had been a huge star. And then the stories I heard about him afterwards, which I couldn't include, because I couldn't verify them, really, I could have added them. And it would have been a little bit titillating. But I just couldn't, because I don't really have it as fact. But it does kind of make you change your mind about that person. You know, but if you don't, if you're not dealing with facts, you just have to just go okay, this is the story that I have to tell.

Dr. Dana 41:47

In your extended family. Does anybody else, sort of live in the world that you live in? of siblings, or

Leslie Zemeckis 41:55

of a story of whatever telling? Or whatever it is? And you know, for a living? No,

Dr. Dana 42:00

because what you're doing is unusual. Maybe it's unusual, don't you think? Not really? Like? How many people have made documentaries on the things you've made documentaries?

Kim Fauskee 42:12

Yeah. I'm gonna ask maybe the obvious question, but if you weren't married to who you're married to? Would you've gotten into filmmaking? Or was he a motivator? Or a teacher? Or any that way? No, he's not here to talk. Talk about himself. But is did he have an influence in you doing these documentaries in any way? Well,

Leslie Zemeckis 42:34

I don't think so. I think I just wanted to tell these stories. And I knew, I just felt like I knew that I could, I'd never made a documentary. But you know, I'm smart. I know, I've seen enough, I could figure it out.

Kim Fauskee 42:49

It's like we were talking about earlier before we started recording is that I was telling you that I that you're a very good storyteller. Because when you can evoke emotion, in the story you're telling and again, looking at the documentaries and watching those documentaries that you had, it certainly evoked emotion with me. And that's why I had brought up that question. My God, if I was doing hours and hours of interviews with either these people that are alive, or their family members or co workers are friends, and so on, so forth, I, boy, I don't I don't know how if I could be actually making making that film, because I, I'm one of those people that do naturally take on other people's energy that way.

Leslie Zemeckis 43:33

But I also do, like, I think every project I've done, it's at least like five years of research,

Dr. Dana 43:41

before you start it.

Leslie Zemeckis 43:43

Before, during, I mean, you know, to film my last film that took two years just to shoot, and then to put it together and blah, blah, blah. You know, so you kind of become objective, because there's so many stories and so much fact that you just start going oh, I know, this part of it needs to be told people will, you know, have an appreciation of this person in a certain way or or whatever, or this is funny, or this is something I've never heard before. So I just think, you know, I feel like a little fact, person, I'm just gathering up all these little facts and stories.

Dr. Dana 44:25

Does your intuition play a role in the creative process for you?

Leslie Zemeckis 44:29

Probably just putting it together. You know, like this goes here, and then no, this should go here and leave them with those. I mean, my was it. I think it was Mabel. I just wanted to Sure. Because, you know, without saying because you have to watch the film. Because the ending is so tragic. You know, it took me a bit to figure out, you know, I can't take people on this journey and they just kind of like me That's the end. So you can't so I'm sure my intuition was like, I could figure it out. Oh, this so yeah, you know, you just kind of like try and pull something to just make a good story.

Dr. Dana 45:13

Is it a conscious thing for you? Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And how did you come upon sort of consciously trusting your intuition in the creative process? So why wouldn't

Leslie Zemeckis 45:23

Do I trust it? Well, because most people, because most

Kim Fauskee 45:26

people don't. Oh, well. I mean, that's dean. And I do a lot of talking about that. Because, you know, we don't because we allow our ego, and our subconscious and our unconscious to override what our inner self is trying to tell us. Yeah, so you've been an anomaly. I think

Dr. Dana 45:44

Most of the trouble people get into is that they know better, but because of fear, or like Kyna, saying, they don't want to deal with it on a level that could increase their loneliness. I mean, a lot of people are in relationships. I see people at the end of their relationships, and I asked them, you know, did you know that these problems existed when you got together with the person in the first place? And the only question I've had the same universal answer to is yes. Nobody has ever said no. And so my follow up question is, will you know what we're thinking? And the person always gives me a magical answer, I thought he would change, I thought you would change it, people are really hard time trusting their intuition, because it often takes them away from something that they fantasize they'd like to have, or, you know, you have to stay lonely, or whatever it might be.

Leslie Zemeckis 46:33

Right. Well, I mean, a lot of the stories of the burlesque are ladies, you know, they were, you know, one one woman in the film says it's crazy. She goes, I thought the good times were gonna last forever. Ever thought I was gonna get old, you know, it's like, and that was, you know, and then they pay the price a little bit because or a lot, you know, they don't have the money, they don't have the support, they don't have the career, they don't have the looks. A lot of them didn't have family at the end. So yeah, they thought, you know, they suddenly prefer a world that was just gonna go on forever. Even if they like some, you know, Picture of Dorian Gray, and they had retained their looks, you know, burlesque went away as a, as a as a viable career.

Kim Fauskee 47:24

Does it live today? Somewhere?

Leslie Zemeckis 47:25

It does, there's Neo. It's super popular. And it's great, because there's lots of Arts called boy last, because there's lots of boys and it's brought back a lot of the humor, which burlesque really was, I think it's hard to make a living at the, the way it was, I mean, you know, hundreds 1000s of people could make a living off it because there was a circuit, there was always someplace do I think now it's more scrambling, and there's probably two jobs. But that's one of the things that was just so interesting to me, that these people were making careers sometimes not off doing very much. I interviewed this guy who had a, I guess you'd call it an acrobatic act, that wouldn't go on very long, but they were like, kind of muscleman and do like stuff. And they had careers for years doing this in a burlesque show. And you just kind of think, where could you do that nowadays,

Kim Fauskee 48:24

and make a living Cirque de Soleil, I guess, would be the only,

Leslie Zemeckis 48:28

but they weren't even. I mean, they were sort of skilled, and they could do it, but they're not. They're not doing an hour of

Kim Fauskee 48:34

trapeze. They weren't professionals at it, you know?

Leslie Zemeckis 48:39

So it's just, you know, just fascinating. And where is

Dr. Dana 48:43

your career evolving to at this point in time, if we might ask, I don't know. You're not sure you're not working on a current?

Leslie Zemeckis 48:50

Oh, yeah. I'm working on a couple books right now. I don't think that's true. Yes, that and I still have a film and during the circuit in festivals, that actually premiered at the Santa Barbara Film Festival. What's the film about corte Zaanse in the second empire? France?

Dr. Dana 49:11

Oh, okay. They seem like such a bit obscure No.

Leslie Zemeckis 49:17

Yeah, a lot of people didn't know what cortisone Amisha audience

Kim Fauskee 49:21

they're it's a niche audience.

Leslie Zemeckis 49:26

It's pretty you know, it's another one like they were the you know, the cortisone is worse. Really, super influential in their day, big stars written about up in all the paper, fashion plates. And they had power which people didn't realize, way more than a married woman. They can have their money and they can have property where married women couldn't at the time. So it's just another, you know, group of women misunderstood.

Dr. Dana 49:57

How do you do research on the subject

Leslie Zemeckis 50:00

There's a lot of stuff out there I do. You know, I look at a lot of archives, I read a ton of newspaper articles. You know, I just do all the research myself so I can keep it in my head sort of.

Kim Fauskee 50:14

It's a really interesting subject matter. Again, I'm going to ask the question, How did you stumble upon that? Was or was there a parallel to something else that you've done that not

Leslie Zemeckis 50:25

I mean, I've just read a lot about them. And I thought, this would be really interesting. Can I make it as a documentary, and then I figured out a way that I could, because obviously, there's no footage on them. But I hired some burlesque girls who actually look like three of the girls that I highlight in the film, and I filmed them.

Kim Fauskee 50:51

So actual current burlesque dancers,

Leslie Zemeckis 50:55

who are very comfortable in their bodies in their nude and my film. But they look like these women. It's incredible. So

Kim Fauskee 51:04

was that just lucky casting or good casting?

Leslie Zemeckis 51:07

Good casting, I knew I mean, I cast them because they looked like these women. And I knew they would be comfortable enough to be, you know, in their bodies. And they were, and it's won a lot of awards.

Kim Fauskee 51:21

Congratulations. So can I

Dr. Dana 51:23

ask you a tiny bit about where you come from in your family? Because you seem to feel really comfortable? of going after what you desire?

Leslie Zemeckis 51:31

Yeah. So why do you have to psychoanalyze it?

Dr. Dana 51:35

I'm not looking to psychoanalyze you, because just I don't know if you recognize how unusual it is. Yeah. So I'm just kind of curious about your family and how they sort of interacted with you to help you stay really centered within yourself.

Leslie Zemeckis 51:49

Oh, maybe I just figured out how to stay centered by myself.

Kim Fauskee 51:52

Tell us the secret. Tell us your receiver, because that's what everybody that's listening right now is gonna go? Well, I want to know what her secret is? Oh, there's no secret? I don't know. I just have. I don't know.

Dr. Dana 52:05

I mean, was your family various, a really supportive review and encouraging of you to trust your instincts and your intelligence and all that or? Or do you just

Leslie Zemeckis 52:13

anybody else? I mean, I think you just figure it out, Oh, my goodness, I don't know, I've just,

Dr. Dana 52:20

I'm gonna hide you in my closet for a week. So you can hear how most people feel about themselves and how and, and how little people are encouraged to trust their instincts and really develop their creativity and, and, and how often people are influenced to not be who they are in order to be loved in their family?

Kim Fauskee 52:38

Well, you've heard the cliché as to why people go into acting, right? It's the same thing as why somebody becomes a comedian, right? Because they're going to try and heal their own trauma, through their humor. And actors of the same, you know, the cliché is that actors have such a small self worth, that they're going to acting to increase their self worthiness. See,

Leslie Zemeckis 52:58

That's a misconception like struggle. Right?

Kim Fauskee 53:00

That's what I'm saying here. So, what Dana was saying is that, you know, you're very confident, right, and then that you're confident, is infectious there. And so it's interesting that you've kind of chosen the path that you've, you've kind of chosen there. And that way,

Leslie Zemeckis 53:19

I have a mentoring group, I started with them. And then the Santa Barbara Film Festival, because they're very much into education. sponsors that with me, it's called stories matter. And it's professional female authors mentoring, you know, like the next generation of young girls and it's about finding your voice, and that your story matters. So it's called stories matter. So I don't know what my point was. But

Kim Fauskee 53:46

yeah, so I think that's I think that's, that's such a good mission to take on. And are these local girls here in the Santa Barbara Community they have

Leslie Zemeckis 53:57

been mostly sometimes we you know, because we had to do it all during zoom COVID Which actually one session I've had three sessions one you know, like, they're like five or six weeks one session we actually had a lot of girls from around the country so that was really cool

Kim Fauskee 54:13

in are these teenage girls are college they have to be?

Leslie Zemeckis 54:17

I think it's 18 to 32

Kim Fauskee 54:21

in are they want to be novelists and write screenplays? Everything, so I

Leslie Zemeckis 54:26

don't really deal with screenplays. That's not my forte. So it's really the written word, but it's just telling their story. However, they want to do it how, however way they want to tell it just, you know, it's not there. Most of them are in college or have just finished it. And it's not what you're going to learn in college about the proper noun and the theme and arc and all this stuff. It's just tell your story. But don't worry about that other stuff because that you're getting in your education. Now I just go tell your story,

Kim Fauskee 55:01

right? There's art. Yeah, there's an art of storytelling, right? That isn't taught didactically? Yeah. You must have, you must have a story that you want to bring to the big screen and not just make it a documentary.

Leslie Zemeckis 55:16

I don't know that I want to, I think all my stuff can be made into the big screen. I'm not sure that I'm interested in doing it. I've had lots of offers on stuff from really big people. They were not, I wasn't gonna sell it for what they were trying to do. So I'd rather say no,

Dr. Dana 55:40

not from a monetary perspective, from a creative perspective.

Leslie Zemeckis 55:43

Yeah, I was a creative sort of perspective freight of differences. Very.

Dr. Dana 55:51

I would assume that you became very fond of most of the people that you? Oh, yeah, everybody, they were great. So you want to make sure that they're being properly represented, or that

Leslie Zemeckis 56:01

somebody's not going to try and stop me from doing more work on it. They're not buying the rights to every bit of research that I ever did.

Kim Fauskee 56:10

I'm gonna ask a similar question that Dana, Dana already asked you. But is there something we taught? I opened the podcast by talking about a robust life? And I meant that, is there something that it doesn't have to be within documentaries or screenplays? Or? Or in books? Is there something in your life that you still want to do?

Leslie Zemeckis 56:35

Oh, yeah, lots of stuff. I mean, I want to continue doing this for sure. I don't look too far ahead. It's just like, I want to just focus on a couple projects at a time, otherwise, it gets just overwhelming.

Kim Fauskee 56:52

And is it we come up on the end of this, this conversation here is, is there a certain legacy that you want to leave? Whether it's to your family, whether it's to your work, whether it's to yourself, if you ever have you ever thought

Leslie Zemeckis 57:06

about that? Because where am I going?

Kim Fauskee 57:10

Let's say 30 years, 4050 years down the road, right? When you when you've when you've put something up on the big screen, you've taken the Academy Awards, you've made your documentaries, you've written all the words that you can possibly write. Is that is there a certain legacy that Lesley would love to leave with with anybody as she departs into the next life? If there is such a thing? Yeah, I

Leslie Zemeckis 57:35

don't know. I don't, I don't, I don't think about it. I just want to keep doing the work that interests me. And that's all I can do is what interests me. And it finds an audience. It finds an audience, which it usually does, because it's interesting subjects. That's all.

Kim Fauskee 57:52

Well, we appreciate you being here. Thank you, thank you. And I want you to keep being different and keep producing the different things from somebody that was called different by his mother from an early age. I've embraced that and I don't like being in the middle lane. I love being different. So keep doing what you're doing. I'll continue to be different. And we'll have you back on the next book or the next documentary and talk some more with you. But thanks for being here. Absolutely. Thank you.

Fear Me Out 58:27

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