

Pigeonhole Episode 11

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[chill piano and bass music]

This is a re-broadcast of an interview from February, 2017, back when the organization Advance Gender Equity in the Arts was called Age & Gender Equity in the Arts. The group was just about to launch an amazing symposium called Unconscious Bias: Achieving Gender Equity. I talked with Jane Vogel, Director of AGE and with Gigi Williams, who wrote, produced, and co-directed a film about her life experience, trying to raise awareness about violence against women. You can see why I'm bringing this back now from over a year and a half ago. The interview has been edited down for time and relevance, since it's over a year old.

The interview is super different. We're not focused on disability like in every other *Pigeonhole* episode, but the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings warranted this.

I wanna give a brief content notice: We do mention rape, sexual assault, and violence against women and girls. There are no graphic details or descriptions. But I wanted you to know it comes up as one of the many reasons we feel strongly that [more gender equity work is needed](#).

JANE: I'm Jane Vogel. I am founder of Age & Gender Equity in the Arts, a non-profit social justice organization, and we are created to promote the visibility of women in the performing arts.

GIGI: Hi, I'm Gigi Williams. I'm the writer, executive producer, and co-director of *Angela's Sacred Heart*, and I'm also a social justice activist.

CHERYL: It's January 20th, which is a really meaningful day for us to be sitting and talking about women's rights and equity in general, equity across the board. And we're here to talk about the symposium that was your idea, Jane, and we're on the committee for it. One of the hashtags that recently came up was #NowMoreThanEver.

JANE: Yes.

CHERYL: That we wanna use to go along with the symposium. But I think just in general, right? Now more than ever.

JANE: Absolutely.

GIGI: I'm gonna be marching tomorrow. The March on Washington will be scheduled for here in Portland the day after. But anything that has to do with raising awareness about women's rights and making women's lives a little bit better, I really want to contribute or participate in that in any way that I can.

[chill piano and bass interlude]

[Unconscious bias and the need for gender equity](#)

CHERYL: I know that Jane, as you've been designing and programming this symposium, you have met against some pushback of people saying, "Why? We have Meryl Streep," for example. "Why do we need to have a whole symposium dedicated to talking about women's equity or gender equity, age equity?" I am so intrigued, in a negative way, when you get that feedback. [chuckles] So, I wanna hear your own words, though, why the symposium on gender equity?

JANE: And more specifically, it's not just about gender equity, but it's about the unconscious bias around gender equity. And for me, unconscious bias is that it lives in each one of us, but it's that part of ourselves that actually influences our behavior.

CHERYL: Did y'all watch the debates? There was a point where Hillary said, "We all have unconscious bias. We all have unconscious bias." And her opponent: "Argh! I don't." And that is exactly what you're getting at. We know about our conscious biases, but we don't know about our unconscious biases because they're unconscious.

JANE: Absolutely.

CHERYL: And this symposium is an opportunity to come and talk about them and raise our own awareness and consciousness around them and in a non-judgmental way. But to recognize that you have them and that you can take steps to try to unlearn them or not respond to them.

JANE: Mmhmm. Conscious bias is what we intend and what we say. Portland tends to be a pretty progressive community, particularly the arts community. And you don't find a lot of people overtly making racist comments, sexist comments, misogynistic—supporting misogyny—or bigotry. However, when we look at actual behavior patterns, are are not post-racial in Portland. We don't have gender equity. Trans women, queer women, women with disabilities are still marginalized, and that is coming from the unconscious piece. And I feel that in order to really make changes,

we need to focus on looking at ourselves, looking at that part of ourselves that we really don't have awareness of. It's a very difficult thing to do. And I was excited to do that because I feel that it's an important piece in terms of moving us forward in creating change.

What I wasn't expecting was the pushback when it came time to asking for funding because I had such support and enthusiasm from people about yes, this is absolutely a topic that needs to be addressed. When I went out, and I approached women-led organizations, corporations, foundations—and not just women-led, men-led organizations as well—I was not prepared for the response. And the response was I got several people saying to me, "You know, we really don't have gender inequity in Portland."

CHERYL: [laughs]

JANE: And they could name women actors who they saw on the stage, and they could name— They said, "And we have Hillary running for President." I would say, "Well, you know, 85% of our theater companies, professional theater companies, are led by men, white men in this town. And they're wonderful men. They're very talented, artistic men, but they are men, and they see the world through their male eyes because that's how human nature works." And that's a national statistic.

And the other statistic, which Gigi and I share a lot of common passion around, is the statistic of violence against girls and women, that every 90 seconds a woman is raped. That speaks volumes. Rape, sexual assault, violence against girls and women is all about disempowerment. And we have stories about disempowerment in the theater, on the film, in the screens, and that's normalized. And I don't have answers. I would like to raise the questions, and I would like to bring people together—not women, not artists—I want to bring people together from all different walks of life to have this conversation.

And together, if we can create a safe environment, maybe we can co-create some news ideas, some new narratives, some new awareness and enthusiasm about how we can move forward. And now more than ever, we need to do that because of regardless of what your political persuasion is, I'm not interested in having political discussions; however, I am interested in safety and dignity and respect for all people. And that is not what I've been hearing in this election. And so, now more than ever, we need to rise up and talk about these things and make sure that we keep moving in the right direction.

CHERYL: Yeah.

JANE: The other thing that I would mention is that the state of the industry in theater right now is such that for women, there are such few roles and opportunities for them that when a woman speaks out and says, "I don't like it when you touch me like this" or whatever, there is the potential for subtle retribution. At least the woman feels that it increases her chances of not being asked to come back and be cast again. And so, women are more silent, and they put up with that kind of thing. And that's unfortunate.

One of the things that Age & Gender is going to really push for is for all theater companies to have a written policy for safety in the workplace on and off the stage. And theater companies, I know they're stretched with resources, but this is something that can be implemented without a lot of extra work because since the Profile Theater in Chicago—not our Profile Theater here, but the one in Chicago—when they had revealed that, through an investigation, that there had been 20 years of abuse by the artistic director towards the women who had been working there, several theater companies got together, and they developed a code of conduct. And they are encouraging theater companies across the country to pilot that and give them feedback. So, there are documents available that theater companies can use and modify to meet their needs. But we have to begin by having a policy.

[chill piano and bass interlude]

Representation on and offstage

CHERYL: We're talking about women working in the arts as an actor or playwright or screenwriter, anything, but then also how the arts reflect culture and other guide culture. And so, when you have, for instance, a white man writing the role of a woman of color, that's not gonna be good enough for representation.

JANE: And there's discussion and argument about that because the men who are writing and have written, many of them are really, really good writers. But the opportunity for the woman to tell her story is not there, and women who are playwrights are mentored differently in playwriting school. And you know, there's some research to back that up now. Women are not produced, and so, many women end up leaving the profession. And so now, [the Kilroys have gotten together](#) where they are vetting plays written by women so that if a producer wants to put on a play written by a woman, they can go to that list and look at what the works are.

CHERYL: Yeah. Is there, Gigi do you know, is there a list like that of women-made or women-directed films?

GIGI: There is an organization that regularly puts together a weekly list, but it just gives a list of the numbers; it tallies the numbers. And probably, I think at the end of last year, they had a long list about the numbers of films made over the year by women, directed by women, women's stories. And it's very lacking. I mean, we really do need to get those numbers up. It's very, very small percentage of films, and it's getting smaller and smaller. So, that's why I really want to get my film done, and I wanna support films made by women. So, I went to see *Hidden Figures* over the Christmas holidays, and that's a film about women, starring three Black women who played a major part in the space program in helping to get that— What was his name?

JANE: John Glenn.

GIGI: John Glenn, yes. They helped to get John Glenn, the first American astronaut, out into space. They played a tremendous part in this program. They were scientists, they were mathematicians, they were engineers, and they really didn't get treated with respect. A lot of that had to do with the unconscious and the conscious bias. 'Cause we're looking at women, and we're looking at African-American women. And it was very sad, but it made you laugh, and it made me cry.

And these are the films that I would like to see. We need to make more films like that about women, 'cause we learn a lot by people from their stories. And I didn't know about their story until they made this film about it. The film also demonstrated what bias looks like and what their challenge was and what their journey was. So, we learn to emotionally connect to the actors on the screen, and also the audience connects with each other emotionally. At the end of the screening, there was a loud applause from the entire audience. So, we had been on that journey together, and we had an emotional experience together.

I think that the audience, which was primarily white, learned something about what that experience is like if you are a person of color and what their life looks like and what their life feels like. If you're so detached from that environment and not connected to it in any way, how else would you have any way of knowing? And that's why a lot of people think, "Oh, there's no bias anymore. There's no racism anymore. It doesn't exist." How do you know? How do they know? So, I really applauded the filmmakers for that film.

One of the most important examples, I think, that a lot of people were surprised about was the fact that these women were not allowed to use the

restroom in the building where they worked. This was in the 1950s. It was a big complex, but the colored restrooms were situated a 1/2 a mile away in another building. So, on their breaks, their 15-minute breaks, they had to run to use the restroom and run back to their office to get back on time. They were consistently yelled at because they were late, and "Why do you take so long to use the restroom?" So, finally, eventually, they realized that that was gonna be a major problem, especially since there was a restroom right there in the building. So, these are the challenges that people have been—Black people—and women have their issues too. But we need to talk about these things. We need to make more stories about these things so that we will have a little bit more empathy, understanding, and compassion about other people and their challenges.

CHERYL: Yeah. And that starts with acknowledging, "You know what? I didn't know that. I had never thought of that before. I'm glad I know that now."

GIGI: It's unconscious! They had no idea.

JANE: Well, and privilege allows people to be unconscious.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

JANE: That's one of the luxuries that comes with privilege is that you don't have to notice.

GIGI: Until it affects you. Until it affects you in some way. And in this particular case, it affected them because it affected their ability to perform their job. So, then they became aware. This is a challenge, and we need to do something about it. Other than that, they had no knowledge, and they really didn't need to care about what was going on.

CHERYL: And isn't it interesting, too, like we don't want to integrate the bathrooms for your comfort and your dignity. But you're taking too long to go to the bathroom, and that's causing a problem for us. It's still, even when we start to take those steps toward equity, we still often center the most privileged self in that, that oh, we can't delay. We need these numbers run so that the space program can work on time. Not so that these African-American women have dignity.

JANE: Right. So, when we change the action, when we change the bathroom policy, that doesn't mean that we suddenly have become post-racial.

CHERYL: [laughs] No!

GIGI: Exactly.

JANE: Or post-sexist or misogynist because we didn't do it out of an empathic reason like you're saying. We did it because it was bogging them down. It was hurting the system.

GIGI: Exactly.

JANE: Yeah.

CHERYL: Which is why it's so important to get the stories out in the media, get more kinds of stories out so people can say, "Oh, I care about that other person's perspective, not just my own!"

GIGI: And that's the whole point, that we get out of our heads and our of our perspective and be able to appreciate other people's points of views and their perspectives.

[chill piano and bass interlude]

[Intersectional approach to gender equity in the arts](#)

JANE: So, I wanted to be an actor; an actress is what we called it back then. I wanted to be an actress from the time I was about an elementary school child. Our family had come over as refugees from Indonesia by way of The Netherlands, and so I spent a lot of time writing plays and starring in them. And then when I got to high school, that was when my father, who was a very lovely, protective man, pulled me aside and told me that he would forbid me to go into acting. Because, he said, in America they do bad things to women who become actresses. And he had done his research and heard the stories about Judy Garland back then, and that wasn't what he wanted for me.

So, I became a trauma psychologist, and it wasn't until I was in my mid- to late-40s when he passed away that I realized that that dream was still alive. So, I decided to pursue that dream. I have no regrets about that. I'm passionate about the arts. What surprised me was how women were treated, still, in the arts. I don't know. I guess I hadn't seen it up close like that. And so, I realized that I wanted to do something to see if I could make that different, and not me alone, but to bring people together to talk about it and to take some action steps and see what we could do.

Right now, I'm seeing a school of thought that says that we need to do it in a compartmentalized, linear way, that we need to look at race, or we need to look at disabilities, and some other time, we're going to look at gender. And I completely disagree with that. I feel that when we look at race, if we take the women and color and don't bring them to the table, we are not going to make the progress that needs to be made.

So, I say we can't wait until we have successfully addressed the racial equity piece. No. We need to have the women be part of that solution. So, it needs to be in an intersectional way, and we need to not talk about, "OK, we're only going to talk about gender, folks, and we're not going to address race in this." Absolutely not. We're going to talk about humanity, and humanity is about gender; gender is not binary. We're going to talk about race, we're going to talk about ableism, disabilities, we're going to talk about LGBTQ and what that means. We're going to talk about all of it.

CHERYL: Yeah. Now, I wanna point out this is different from "All Lives Matters."

JANE: My understanding of what "All Lives Matter" means is that we don't look at what the Black experience is, and we only look at what all lives— No. What I'm saying is we look at Black Lives Matter, but it's not without the gender piece. It's looking at it in an—what I call an—integrated way. If we truly lived our lives as if all lives matter, then I'm all for all lives mattering. But the reality is that our institutions do not operate as if all lives matter. Our institutions operate as if Black lives don't matter. And that is why we need to call attention to that.

GIGI: I agree, Jane, 100%. You're right. If all lives matter, then we wouldn't need a Black Lives Matter. 'Cause everybody would matter, you know?

[chill piano and bass interlude]

A symposium without "experts"

CHERYL: Another interesting thing that's happening in this moment is we have people coming into extraordinarily high offices—including the highest office in the country—people who don't actually have training or education or job experience in the jobs that they're moving into, which I find completely terrifying and mind-blowing. But I'm thinking about it because one of the key parts of the symposium is that it is not based in "experts" sort of dumping expert information into the heads of non-experts in that binary. But I wanna be clear that that's different from having unqualified people step into positions that they know nothing about.

JANE: I believe that when it comes to equity issues, I feel that we are in the baby stages of really learning about that and knowing about it. I just happen to come from a school of thought in the way I live my life that when I enter into a relationship with someone, whether that person is 2 years old or 90 years old, I come away learning something from that person. And I find that if I'm in the position of being the parent or the expert or the teacher, first of

all, I generally am doing all the talking and not the listening. And then I don't learn.

And I would really like this symposium to be very much about whoever walks in the door has expertise that they are going to share. I don't want to create the illusion—or the delusion—that people who are coming in the door are going to be met with these experts who have the truth, and we're going to teach you about equity. I just don't believe that we're there, and not "we" the symposium people; I believe that we on this planet are not there.

CHERYL: I like that.

GIGI: I like that too, Jane.

CHERYL: [laughs]

GIGI: So, we're learning together.

JANE: Yes.

GIGI: Yeah.

CHERYL: You know, when you hear the word "expert," typically you're talking about somebody with a degree or multiple degrees, which requires money and the access of all sorts, a lot of class and other kinds of privilege to get to "expert" status. Which devalues all the lived experience and the life wisdom that anybody might have.

JANE: Well, and being in my early 60s, which I'm very pleased to be in my early 60s, I have lived long enough where I have been in a period of time in history where we believed certain things to be true. And now 20, 30 years later, we look back on that, and we say, "Whoa. That wasn't true at all." For me, it has humbled me. So, when I hear experts today speaking, I think, you know, 30 years from now, that may not be the way we think at all. And therefore, I like to always be curious and open.

I also think that when we become experts, I think that we have a tendency to stop being curious, and we stop questioning and learning. And that is not a good thing. This whole issue about treating people with dignity, treating people who are vulnerable and who don't have access to resources, finding ways that they can empower themselves, that we can change the way we're living so that it's not adversely affecting them, that is such a complex and difficult situation. Because when we have privilege, we don't like to give that up, particularly around power and money. We don't like to let go of that. So, even though I wear rose-colored glasses, and I'm very optimistic, I also don't see equity as a final destination; I see it as a dynamic process that we

must spend our lives working at, being curious about, and being open to the idea that inside of us lives this shadow where we are indulging in privilege, and it is adversely affecting another person.

One thing I was going to mention is that we have over 40 performers and presenters and that almost 60% of them are people of color, which I think is very important considering what the dire statistic is in theater and in Portland in general in terms of people of color.

GIGI: This is the direction I would like to see that we move in, in other venues as well. And I'm prejudiced, I guess, but I just feel like when women are in charge of things, we look at the finer details too and try to make sure that everyone's needs are addressed as best as possible, try to make people as comfortable as possible. Isn't that correct, Jane? Yeah.

JANE: Yeah, I think as a society, we have a tendency to value cognition, thinking, and we tend to devalue emotions. And we also say that physical strength and brain power, we often associate with masculinity, and we associate emotions with the feminine. And the truth is that the masculine and the feminine lives in every single person, but it is when the feminine is more obvious in a person, when the feminine comes out, it tends to be devalued. That has to change.

GIGI: That has to change.

JANE: And that's not going to change as long as the stories that are on television on the film and on the stage are celebrating violence and aggression as opposed to emotions and relationships and the things that we attribute more to the feminine.

GIGI: What we're trying to do in my work and in your work is to try to put a focus on that and try to bring more things back into balance.

JANE: And everyone benefits from that.

GIGI: In reference to art, the arts in general, I think it's very important. Art to me is the truest expression of the human spirit. It can tell our stories, any kind of art. And in my opinion, art stems from a very human need for beauty and meaning in life. We're inspired by beauty, and we all long for meaning and purpose in our lives. We cannot live without oxygen, and we cannot live without art.

Wrap-up

[bright ambient music]

Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at WhoAmIToStopIt.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

Music in the episode

"[Grey Grey Joe](#)" by Blue Dot Sessions. (Source: freemusicarchive.org.

Licensed under an [Attribution-NonCommercial License](#).)