

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

LAVERNE COX, SAM FEDER: “TRANS LIVES DEPEND ON OWNING OUR STORIES”

LAURA FLANDERS: Trans-liberation, it's become the latest frontline in our struggle for human and civil rights. It's a hinge issue, meaning that it intersects with just about every other racial, gender, and class reckoning of our time. The ways trans people are represented speaks volumes about our society, and it shapes all of us in complex ways. Trans-liberation in turn, just might help make all of us more free. But, to move forward, we have to know whence we came. In their new film, "Disclosure", Sam Feder, Amy Scholder, and Laverne Cox use over a century's worth of film to show how anxieties about trans identities have been with us since the earliest days of the movies. Hollywood, past and present, has had the power to shape, not just attitudes, but how we act, and generations of trans people's lives. With that history as background, "Disclosure" explores what's next for trans-liberation, and what a culture with trans voices at the center might actually be like to live in for everybody. The makers of "Disclosure" though aren't just sitting back and hoping, they are actively using their powerful documentary as a tool for social change. With me to discuss the film and what they're up to are actress, activist, executive producer, Laverne Cox, director, Sam Feder, and producer, my old friend, Amy Scholder. Welcome all. For those in our audience who have yet to catch "Disclosure", it's streaming on Netflix. Here's a trailer, check it out.

Coming to you, Laverne, there is a notable appearance by Oprah Winfrey in that trailer. She made an appearance in my Twitter feed the other day, mentioning the film, tell us what was notable about that?

LAVERNE COX: It was wonderful to see that tweet. I'm a huge admirer of Oprah Winfrey. She's one of my idols. She just recently did an interview with Elliot Page, his first televised interview since he's come out as trans. And apparently Elliot told Oprah and her team that they should watch "Disclosure" before the interview, and she did. And she said lovely things about how she learned things that she didn't know, and how important the film was for her in terms of giving her a new understanding of the subject. Which is so amazing, because anyone who's a huge fan of Oprah, knows that Oprah's been interviewing trans people for 20 years, and that those interviews, they've been troubled. And it's not to diss Oprah, because I would never do that, 'cause I love her so much, it is just that representation for many, many years, as "Disclosure" shows, of trans people had a certain level of discourse that objectified us, reduced us to our bodies, and ultimately dehumanized us. And so what is so exciting about "Disclosure", about Oprah's evolution here, and the impact that film is having, is that folks are understanding

that history, and so now we can begin to write a better history, a more humanized history for trans folks in America, and hopefully globally.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sam, tell that story, how did Laverne get involved in all this? And it seems like an example of why you should attend conferences and speak at them.

SAM FEDER: You know, when I started making this film, everyone that I talked to about it, was like, "Oh, Laverne Cox should be in this film. She would be so excited about it. You know, she'd wanna help you make it." And that's just like, I'm not that kind of person that's gonna reach out and ask someone, you know, of Laverne's caliber, you know, of her celebrity, you know, of her notoriety, that's just not my style. So I was like, "Yeah, that sounds great, but there's no way that's ever gonna happen." But I always — I did wish that we would interview her. And we have enough friends in common that I thought that would maybe be possible, that I at least get to ask her if we could interview her. So that was sort of the background of, you know, the years leading up to it. And then I was invited to present some of the initial research I had done at Outfest Film Festival out here in LA in July of 2017. They dedicate a day or two to what they call The Trans Summit, where they focus on trans storytellers and trans issues. And they invited me to give a 20 minute presentation. So I talked for about 10 of those minutes, and showed a 10 minute clip reel of some of my research. And while I was talking, I looked up towards Amy, she was in the audience, and sitting right in front of Amy was this beautiful blonde with sunglasses on, reflective sunglasses, and a hoodie like trying to be, trying to be subtle. What I was taken by was she was so engaged, right? She's nodding along, and she's so engaged. We look over at Amy and Amy's like . . . [GESTURES].

LAURA FLANDERS: You interviewed 30 trans people for the film as I understand it. Were there things that you learned, Laverne, in doing this as you listened to your fellow interviewees?

LAVERNE COX: Every trans person has a different experience of something. And even as a black transgender woman, I have blind spots. Susan Stryker was such an incredible resource. Everything that she said about Judith of Bethulia was so interesting and exciting, and I didn't know before. There's just always a lot to learn. And I think that is very, very exciting, and it's very humbling, and I think we all should be humbled. Even if we think we know our history, that there's so much to learn.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's some really cringe-worthy, and stomach turning, horrendous phobic appearances and statements by people like D.W. Griffith of "Birth of a Nation", who, it turns out, was also obsessed with trans identities. Take a look.

You don't actually demonize anybody. It's kind of like you just said around Oprah, Laverne, that some of these people you love and hate them. And the idea of the film is for social change. Amy, I'm guessing that's why you got into this project. It is changing lives. It has the capacity to change lives. And that's been your business since I first knew you as an editor of feminist and culture forward books.

AMY SCHOLDER: I have spent my career in book publishing raising and lifting the voices of marginalized people, and people whose stories have not been centralized. And that's been my calling, and in particular LGBTQ folks and our stories. Well, I met Sam when he was premiering his last film about Kate Bornstein, "Kate Bornstein is a Queer and Pleasant Danger", a beautiful film about a beautiful person who happens also to be one of my authors and dear friends. And when I learned about Sam's next project that he was just starting the research for, I understood immediately how important this work is to tell this history, to center trans stories, to center trans people.

LAURA FLANDERS: To recap a little bit about the title of the film. It didn't really occur to me until the very... Well, towards the end what "Disclosure" referred to. Before there was "Disclosure", there was lack of disclosure, namely stealth. Sandra Caldwell talks about that in this clip.

SANDRA CALDWELL: Do you know what it's like to go on a set and be afraid? Your head is trying desperately to stay in the scene. You wake up afraid, you go to sleep afraid. You're trying to figure out if somebody is gonna drop the bomb that day, the next day, when is it gonna happen? So you're just afraid all the time. They got so much on the outside, we'll just see how much they got on the inside. But anyway, I did what I had to do, it was called survival. It was called survival. I would never think for a moment that I was the only one. And you wanna go and you wanna say, "Girl, ain't we something," but nah, you just left it alone. I wish I could've. Man, would've that been good.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back, it was important to all of you that the film didn't just depict trans people differently, but was made as much as possible by trans people. Can you talk about what that involved? Maybe Sam, Laverne. Sam, start with you.

SAM FEDER: Yeah. Thank you. That's something I think we're all really proud of, you know? And we knew it was just as important to have trans people behind the scenes as it was in front of the camera. I mean, everyone we interview is trans, but I think that there's really not enough understanding of how every decision that's made behind the camera influences the story just as much as what is said in front of the camera. Like how it's lit, how you're framing somebody, like how you're talking to people, right? Who they're looking at when they're sitting in between takes, this all informs what you're gonna shoot, what you're gonna capture, and what the film is gonna

be. And so it was deeply important that that was trans people that were gonna be in that space. Also, trans people are disproportionately underemployed, right? I think it's three times the national average, four times if you're a trans person of color. And, you know, also being a trans person, whether by choice or circumstance, you just don't have as many opportunities. So we prioritized hiring trans people on this set. And when we couldn't hire a trans person for a specific role, the non-trans person we hired mentored a trans person. As much as we've been asked to do Q&A's on our film, we've also been invited to development inclusion and equity trainings to talk about our hiring practice, 'cause people are understanding that this is the way we move forward. It's not about unpaid internships or, you know, the the ideal of working your way up. We actually have to mentor people, and pay them as we mentor them to really level the playing field, to really give people the opportunities to do the work that they wanna do.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wanna thank you, especially for the film having such a fair and equal representation of trans men in the discussion, and a big discussion about how, you know, misogyny plays out in all of this as well. You Amy, former editor of the Feminist Press, were there things that you learned? I was very struck actually, by Yance Ford, when he talks about some sort of women empowerment narratives, whether you're talking "Yentl" or others, being dressed up in horrible trans men narratives that were only disempowering to him.

AMY SCHOLDER: You know, just in making the film, and in our fundraising, in our... You know, this was my first producing credit, so when I joined Sam many years ago to start our research and development process, you know, I felt like, "Oh, I'm gonna surround myself with my feminist friends, and my progressive filmmaker friends." And it surprised me how many folks were kind of unaware of trans issues, or unaware of how as feminists, and as progressives, you know, these are our issues. It was hard to confront. And it surprised me when I was describing our process, and felt so proud of how we were going to prioritize hiring trans folks behind the camera. And it was surprising how many people would pull me aside and say, "Oh, you know, let's get the best people. You don't wanna, you know, set a hard and fast rule like that." And people have come back to me and said, "You know, you were right. And I missed it. I didn't understand that you did get the best people."

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Laverne, there's the film, and then there's all the work that's happening around the film. I mean, you are as much actress as activist. I don't know whether you put one before the other, but boy, you do a lot of both. On the activism side, how are you using the film, and what impact is it having so far, as far as you can see?

LAVERNE COX: We know that when we dehumanize people then we can discriminate against them, 'cause we don't think of them as human. And so much of the work for trans-liberation is to see us as human. Right now in this moment, under this legislative session, there've been an unprecedented number of anti-trans bills targeting transgender children. And a lot of the ways in

which these lawmakers are able to pass these laws is because of misinformation about who transgender people are. And so we've been very excited that lawyers from the ACLU are using the film to educate folks about our issues and the circumstances, and how they've come to know and understand who trans people are. That judges, that lawyers, that organizations, that people in Hollywood are watching it so that they can better tell trans stories.

LAURA FLANDERS: Laverne, I have to say I came to this interview kind of wanting to . . . Well, thank you and your fellows in this film for your service. It's like, my God, what you have gone through, not to dwell there, but to talk about what is possible on the other side of that, which you also represent. Talk to us about what your vision, we talk about a tipping point, and you have that cover from Time Magazine, "The Transgender Tipping Point, Culture Is Shifting". What's your vision of what's on the other side of this tip?

LAVERNE COX: Healing. Healing, and love, and acceptance, and everyone's humanity is on the other side. But it's this thing, I had a beautiful conversation on my podcast, "The Laverne Cox Show" with Renee Brown. Actually, we had the conversation first on her podcast, "Unlocking Us", and she said, and she's always — I'm a huge fan of hers, and she's said for years that when we deny our stories, those stories define us. When we deny something, our story defines us, but when we can own our stories, we can write a brave new ending. And for a very long time, we've been in denial about the story of trans folks in America, and globally in cinema. And now that we have the information that Disclosure's given us, we can begin to write a brave new ending if we own the story.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sam, do you wanna weigh in on that?

SAM FEDER: I'm not interested in a world where we're all the same, where I'm just like you and you're just like me. I'm not interested in a world where trans people are just part of the binary. I like being trans, you know, I like the fact that I've had to really interrogate my place in the world and understand how I can move in this seemingly static understanding, and I've had to find a way of making it really mutable, and I like what it has done when I have to understand how people are looking at me, as frustrating as it is. But, you know, I think the depth of introspecting trans people have to do really is, you know, it gives us a bit of a superpower in a lot of ways. And I don't wanna live in a world without gender. You know, there's a lot of talk about gender is over, and I think that's fine for people who want that, but I don't want that. Like, I think gender is beautiful, and expansive, and fun. We have to do what Laverne is saying, is we have to heal, and we have to write a new ending, and then maybe we can live in this world where, you know, we can be all these things that we are in the privacy, in our safety, in our communities, and we can be in that in the rest of the world too.

LAVERNE COX: Sam, we have to be able to imagine it though. We have to first be able to imagine it, to visualize it, and then we can make it, have it come into fruition. And if we can imagine it, then we can begin to create it maybe in small pockets. And then folks can be like, "Well, what's going on over there?" Come on in, it's great, it's gorgeous, it's awesome.

SAM FEDER: We have our small pockets, right? We have our queer space, and then capitalism comes and commodifies it. So that's a whole other conversation.

LAURA FLANDERS: So Laverne, how you negotiate that off the podcast, off the movies?

LAVERNE COX: The contradictions in sort of being a capitalist, I guess, and working for multiple national corporations while trying to do this work and maintain authenticity. We're in contradiction all the time. You know, it is a very conflicting kind of space to be in. And it's like, there's, you know, folks talk about an inside game and an outside game. And I think at this point I'm maybe doing some sort of inside game. But it's not lost on me, how difficult and challenging it was to sell "Disclosure" though. A year ago we were sort of, you know, a year ago this time, we weren't quite sure, you know, if we would even be able to sell this film, if people would see it. And then Netflix came along, you know, at just the right time for very specific reasons, and we were able to have that incredible platform. But it is still very difficult as I go out into the world and pitch trans themed shows, it's still very hard to sell shows about transgender people.

LAURA FLANDERS: We often end this program by asking people what is the source of their belief, that sort of systemic, big change can happen? I mean, you're giving us a lot of such examples really in the people in the film, but is there one that stands out as you do this work and the work you're gonna go on to do, Sam?

SAM FEDER: The way that we show that like Oprah evolves, right, you know, and that she came around and publicly, you know, holds the film, and that was incredible, you know? And she did an interview a couple days later with Nick Adams and referred to herself as the poster child of what not to do.

OPRAH WINFREY: I was actually more nervous about this interview than anything, because I wanted to get it right since I was on the poster for getting it wrong. Like for the trailer for "Disclosure".

SAM FEDER: I mean, this is, she's an incredibly — I obviously don't have to tell you all this, but she's an incredibly influential, powerful woman, you know? So to say these kinds of things, that gives me hope.

LAURA FLANDERS: Amy, what about you? What's the evidence you draw on?

AMY SCHOLDER: Oh God, Laura. You know, I came out of the AIDS epidemic, that's when I was coming up as an adult and as a professional in the arts, and was so devastated to see my community, you know, disappear one, you know, person I loved after the next. But we, you know, as community, did our best to fight for our existence, and our rights. And some of us survived, and that strength and sense of, well, if you're really focused, and if you care about one another, and you're not dependent on biological family, and you're not dependent on social structures that already exist, that you can actually change the course of what's happening. There were a lot of missteps then, and AIDS is not over. So I'm continually learning from coming up from that experience, and now going through a second pandemic, you know, I think that informs everything I do.

LAURA FLANDERS: Laverne, you, proof of life post tipping point.

LAVERNE COX: The evidence for me is my own life. And when I — I had a speaking engagement last week and they were reading my bio, and they were saying, The first trans person to be on the cover of this magazine, or be nominated for this, or have a wax figure at Madame Tussauds, and all those things. What hit me that time hearing that bio, was that before me these things had not happened. And these things were happening in 2014, in 2015, and '16. And so what is sad about that is that they had not happened before me you know? And then that they are now happening and that I'm not the last. My friend, MJ Rodriguez, she's on the cover, a solo cover of Entertainment Weekly. It's her second cover, but it's her first solo cover. Trans people have been on the covers of magazines and now another trans person's been nominated for an acting Emmy. And so for me, that gives me a tremendous amount of hope. Is it enough that one or two of us, or three or four of us have been elevated and are doing well? No, that is not enough. That is not social change, that is not the revolution that we need, but it gives me a tremendous amount of hope, my own story.

LAURA FLANDERS: I wanna thank all of you for being with us. This has been a great conversation. For more, for our uncut interviews, go to our website. I'll be back in just a minute. Thanks for joining us.

It takes a lot to keep people divided, and culture can either help or hurt that power project. The post civil warriors were pregnant with possibilities for a real progressive reconstruction, trade unions were rising as were black towns, and the movement for women's votes. Instead, what we got though was the first gilded age, and a perpetuation of the kind of plantation politics that lay at the Civil War's roots. It's no surprise that those early movies from Hollywood, like D.W. Griffith's, were full of messages that kept people in their place about who's good, and who's bad, and who's safe, and who's a threat. In this second gilded age, also pregnant with possibility,

culture can weave us back together. And for the movie makers behind "Disclosure", that's the work. I'm Laura Flanders, 'till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. Thanks for joining us.

For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, and to tune into a podcast, visit our website at LauraFlanders.org, and follow us on social media, [@TheLFshow](https://twitter.com/TheLFshow).