

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

SARAH JONES ON SEX & MAKING AN “UNORTHODOC”

LAURA FLANDERS- The Laura Flanders Show is all about doing things differently. Our guest, Sarah Jones, Tony Award-winning performer and comedian is taking on that challenge when it comes to making a documentary. She calls it an 'Unorthodox' about sex, power, race and our economy. And how do you even talk about such things in today's polarized and commercial media world? Sell/Buy/Date expands on Sarah Jones's acclaimed 2016 Off-Broadway solo production of the same name. She plays herself in the film along with four different characters that she's created as well as real people whom she interviews, people in the sex industry and out of it with an array of opinions about it. You will see activists of all kinds alongside celebrities, Rosario Dawson and Bryan Cranston make an appearance. And of course, there's Sarah's own mom. It's in screenings now, on November 8th, it starts streaming on Amazon Prime. I'm so happy to bring Sarah Jones back to The Laura Flanders Show. It has been an age since we've seen each other and you have been through a lot. How are you?

SARAH JONES - And it has been, I think maybe for all of us, I was jokingly saying after a screening of the film, it is such a kind of challenge just to be human these days and to, you know, kind of hold space for all these complex topics as we try to remember who we are mitigated by all the technology and, you know, the kind of pitfalls that come with the Twittersphere and short sound bites, you know, trying to make sense of where we are.

LAURA FLANDERS - It's what I appreciate about you, Sarah. I mean for people that don't know, Sarah Jones has never settled for being one thing, even one, well, one race, one gender, even one person. She travels with a whole array of characters that she has brought to the screen and to the stage before the screen over many years, going back to Bridge and Tunnel, which looked at gentrification in her home, borough of Queens, New York to Sell/Buy/Date, which is now this new film. Many people will say the film is about sex and decriminalization of the industry and how do we have healthy attitudes towards sex? To me though, it's really about what you've always been about, which is how do you hold many identities, ideas, and, you know, opinions at the same time?

SARAH JONES - Well, it's so funny Laura, so my characters are fans of yours and I will let them maybe speak to your question. Hi, there Laura sweetheart, I don't know if you can say sweetheart anymore. I don't wanna say the wrong thing. Anyway, my name is Lorraine. Sarah is the very nice young Black girl performer, who you just met. She calls herself Black. Again, I don't wanna get into trouble, but we, she puts on her shows what she calls her 'one person shows'

and really that means she takes the credit and makes us come out here and do all the work. Anyway, Lorraine has been with me since the 'Bridge and Tunnel' days and...

LAURA FLANDERS- Love Lorraine.

SARAH JONES- Love Lorraine and like my other characters, she has an opinion, right? On women, sex, power as a, you know, a senior herself in a world that often I think sort of separates, you know, the youth and sexuality from, you know, being a person of a certain age and I guess, what, you're not supposed to have any sexuality? And so in the play, which inspired the film, Lorraine actually gives a monologue talking a little bit about something very vulnerable, potentially taboo, stigmatized, which is her own sexuality. How do we even talk about that, right? For women of her generation, you know, God forbid you should, you know, step out of the cultural norms that minimized women's sexuality and made it all about the very heteronormative male gaze. So just for her to be engaging in this conversation at all is sort of mind blowing for her. And I love the idea of bringing, Hi, my name is Bella. Hi Laura, this is amazing, PBS like all day. I just think of my mom in her tote bags and her like mugs. Anyway, I just wanna say that as like a person of another generation, like you all would say Gen Z and I would say like for Sarah Jones and you, I mean like older, I mean not to call you old, but you are, like chronologically advanced people. But like we in my generation have a completely different relationship to like sex, the sex industry, like I have OnlyFans like as one of my main apps that like pops up immediately and I don't see it as like, oh, women are bad if they're sexual. Like actually, something's wrong if you're not sexual. So as you can tell the play, the play which you know kind of inspired the film is really about human beings and just like 'Bridge and Tunnel', the, you know, one person show that I did on Broadway was ostensibly about, you know, gentrification, immigration. It's really about our collective humanity, especially in a culture where we have so much multiplicity and so many opinions, it's actually an opportunity for really powerful honest conversation. And I'll just say this, if we think of, you know, the sex industry or maybe prostitution, sex work, whatever we call it as the oldest profession, which people like to say, I think it's really more like the oldest conversation we're not having in an honest way about something that affects us all as human beings. Why can't we talk about this?

LAURA FLANDERS- Well and the journey that you've been on from stage to film is really the story that you tell in the film. Here's the trailer from Sell/Buy/Date. Check it out.

[SARAH] I'm Sarah Jones. My show Sell/Buy/Date has taken me to some pretty incredible places and now I get to turn it into a movie. This topic's not often talked about, the sex industry.

[VIDEO]- This is your vision that you have built over so long.

[SARAH]- The first thing you see when you Google me is unnecessarily mean, controversy.

[VIDEO]- What is the backlash? They don't even know what it is yet.

[SARAH]- Sell/Buy/Date has become a war zone and my characters have become frighteningly real. Love twist. We are like legit in a crisis. What, do I need a bodyguard now?

[VIDEO]- If you're gonna shut this all down, then the conversation doesn't open up.

[VIDEO]- It means a lot to those of us that are still walking in that life.

[VIDEO]- The gatekeepers of culture, which are usually white, cisgendered males, they're gonna walk in and say, "Oh my god, Sarah Jones, huge fan."

[VIDEO]- Hi, Benny.

[VIDEO]- Thanks for coming in. I'm a huge fan.

[VIDEO] - The real problem is Sarah, as you know, what she really believes. Is sex work empowering? Is there exploitation?

[VIDEO]- You are getting into flavors and textures that make people uncomfortable.

[VIDEO] - I'm keepin' my hands where I can see 'em myself. I didn't realize I had my own truth to unpack. ♪ Oh ♪ ♪ Oh ♪

[Lady In White]- I wish we lived in a reality where I could tell just one side of the story, but that's not the world we're in.

[VIDEO] - This was your destiny to do this show.

[SARAH]-We still don't control our own narratives.

[VIDEO] - People have walked all over us and portrayed us in this fight that continues to be negative.

[SARAH]- We're underestimated no matter how high we can climb.

[Red-Haired Woman]- A lot of people don't know the real history.

[VIDEO] - My hope is I get to make the movie that speaks to all of this. You call it a one person show, but really we do all the work. Okay.

LAURA FLANDERS- So coming back to you, Sarah, real person, as people can tell, the film contains you, your characters, and then real people. Why?

SARAH JONES- You know, it's so important to me, as a solo performer all these years, I've gotten to embody different people, I act... Oh, hi Laura. This is such an opportunity. I wanna say Laura because I love the way you spell it, but my name is Nereida. I am half Dominican, half Puerto Rican, all proud and I am a women's rights advocate. I am very clear that the lives of women and girls, you know, and the ways that the patriarchy that we are seeing all around us, right? We have Roe v. Wade, we have all the Dobbs decisions. We can see in our society that as women, it's almost like we're going backwards sometimes. And so I really wanted to be part of this conversation as a woman of color, but also just like for all of us as women and you know, people across the gender spectrum, non-binary people and men need to be involved in this conversation. Like anytime there's a question of women and power, it's a men's issue cause they're the ones doing the dominating. And obviously if we could fix this, we would have by now. Okay, so bringing Nereida and all of those other voices in has always been a great, you know, kind of fun and hopefully unusual way to talk about what matters to me as an artist on stage. But with film, there's so many tricks and you can edit and, you know, I can turn into different characters and it sort of isn't that interesting when you can watch the Avengers or whatever it is and kind of have magic happening. I wanted to see if we could use this medium in ways that I can't, you know, kind of present these ideas in the theater. Enter real people, the real people who gave me the privilege of hearing their stories. I got to interview people in the sex industry, whether they call themselves sex workers, whether they call themselves survivors. I got to honor their real experience and instead of having it just come from me, I got to learn from them and hopefully bring the audience on a journey that also again honors them as the real experts on this topic.

LAURA FLANDERS- The other challenge that you faced, of course, different from the production on Broadway even was the idea of the entry of a Hollywood company, a commercial company wanting to produce this piece. Talk about your qualms and your relationship with that industry because you raise it very beautifully in the film that this makes it additionally complicated.

SARAH JONES- Yeah, well and again, I wanna stress that we call it an 'Unorthodox' because it has narrative elements, my characters are in there and this is all real life. So it is, you know, it's we take the elements of what happened to me and put them up on screen with some context. But I really did work with a company that said, "We love you, we love your stories, we saw the play, we get it." And then the ensuing attempt to work with them, uh, showed me how little

opportunity I would have to actually get my ideas out there because of a system of filtration and oversimplification and frankly just the opposite of creativity. They gotta sell soap. So I don't wanna sell soap, that's not what I'm here for. I wanna hear human beings and amplify the voices that I don't usually hear. And that's the opposite of what people, whose job ultimately is to first make money. And so what I'm learning is I get to navigate as carefully as I can, the spaces where I can both reach the masses, but also not have, you know, the substantive ideas that I care about watered down and then added to some soap.

LAURA FLANDERS- Join the club, like me and so many other independent media makers, you created your own company, you directed your film yourself, and here we are, you are, with your colleagues bringing what you clearly want to be a complicated story that doesn't really come down on one side or another, out into the public.

SARAH JONES- Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS- In a moment that I have to say is one of the most polarized, binary thinking, commercialized cultures, cultural moments I've ever been in. So I guess my question is, how's it going?

SARAH JONES- Audiences are king, queen and non-binary, non-hierarchical, you know, kind of leaders in all of this. Everyone who gets to see this film, I hope will get to formulate their own opinion, will get to learn more about something that, again, you know, we, it's funny, the notion is, oh, we can't talk about that, we have to sweep it under the rug. We can have, you know, *Pretty Woman*, right? Julia Roberts in thigh-high boots and Richard Gere and a kind of sanitized Cinderella version of a story. Or we can have, you know, incredibly sort of reductive, I think, not that I don't, you know, wanna see police procedurals handle this subject matter if they can, but where are the voices of the mostly women, girls and femmes in the sex industry who we never hear from? Or if we do, they are, you know, kind of vilified or marginalized in ways that forget. I always like to tell people, do you know Billie Holiday, who's one of our most important cultural figures of all time? She actually was able to move from Baltimore to New York in part as a young girl with survival sex. And I think if we could just remind ourselves as a culture that patriarchy, the same kind of ways that women are oppressed by our laws, by our culture more broadly, even though we, you know, progress is being made, but it's still there. When you add sexuality to that, it just kind of, I would say, limits all of us and our ability to be full humans with self-determination and frankly, some joy in our lives. I feel like if we can unpack this conversation more, we can have a healthier relationship to erotica, our sex lives. It doesn't have to feel so kind of bound up in puritanical, you know, the kind of stuff that we're seeing that's so problematic in our larger culture, even though a certain person who was an occupant of the White House brought the sex industry pretty much right into, you know, all of our living rooms with Stormy Daniels. So I'd like to debunk the idea that this isn't part of our daily lives. It's as

American as apple pie, it's also global and it's a core feminist issue that I think every wakeful person should care about.

LAURA FLANDERS- There are serious parts of, many serious parts of your film, although there's a lot of humor there. And one continuing thread is your relationship with your sister who you lost not so long ago. Can you talk a little bit more about her, what you found out about her, because you leave a lot unsaid in the film.

SARAH JONES- You know, human lives and our families and the kind of constellations of what I've come to understand as generational trauma, you know, women across all backgrounds, and I come from a family that's mixed race, Black, White, you know, Jewish, Christian, Caribbean, we have Latinx cousins, I have everybody. The one thing we all seem to have in common is these stories that are either hard for previous generations to talk about, or even for me, you know, stories of women and sex and power and decisions, who married whom as a way to marry up, as they say. How is that not a transactional relationship idea, right? So what I like to do is try to make sure it's a fully well-rounded conversation and include the grief that's there. But obviously, and I lost her longer ago than one might think, but as part of this conversation I unearthed some, you know, new ideas that I didn't know were there. And I think that's also my hope is that as a collective society, we get to dig in and unpack because what we think isn't affecting us is actually right there in the room with us throughout our lives, but including in this area. And if we can heal from stigma, shame, secrets, and get them out into the open, then, you know, I love the expression, 'Hurt people hurt people, but free people free people'. And I'd love to see that for all of us across the gender continuum and around this very tricky topic of capitalism and sex and where they merge.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, the obvious follow up question to that is how was it working with your mother?

SARAH JONES- Oh my goodness. You know, it was wonderful. She's amazing and I got to sort of be grateful that she gave me so many gifts. My mom was a very young mom. She met my father when she was in college and was part of that generation that believed, you know, you couldn't, don't dare do anything, you know, untoward until you're married. And so the next thing she knew she was married with a baby to somebody she... I love my dad too, I'm very grateful, but they didn't know each other, they were kids. But my mom, she's an OB-GYN, you know, so she was sort of drawn to medical school and literally helping women, you know, give life and/or do whatever reproductive, you know, medical procedures were appropriate for them. So I just wanna say that shout out to access to abortion and reproductive health. My mother would say it and anyone else who cares about women would say the same. And working with her was kind of a dream because I got to see a mixture of attitudes. She's an older generation, she does stay in the

film, I won't give it away, but she's worried about me associating with, you know, anything that could be construed as inappropriate or sexually, you know, could harm me. And we know this, right? We know that young people now, if you have an OnlyFans or if you are freer with your sexuality, then maybe your employers want you to be, there can be slut shaming, there can be stigma, when really we get to ask, "Men do it and it's fine?" You know, or the wholesome Midwestern family, sorry to attack the Midwest, the wholesome family anywhere who goes out to a football game with their kids and then goes to Hooters afterward. How is that so different? It's still the sex industry on the side of your wings.

LAURA FLANDERS- Now you do have a certain very entrepreneurial Bronx taxi driver that comes along with you. He has a very interesting perspective on all this. Do you think his attitude changed, participating with you in this film?

SARAH JONES- You know what, I'm not gonna dare speak for him. What's good, Laura? Y'know what I mean, it's me, it's Rashid. Thank you for inviting me. I'm the only dude Sarah Jones brought with her on her journey. But like she said, and I wanna shout out an organization called A Call to Men, my man Ted Bunch. They co-founded an organization that wants to talk about men and how, you know, what I'm saying? Women and sex and all of that, if we ain't careful, it hurts us. You know what I mean? There's statistics about men, you know, watching too much porn, it creates anxiety, it makes your depression worse, all of that. So this ain't just about, you know, trying to be good to the women or ladies or whatever's the respectful term for y'all right now, I get it. Yeah. Yeah, I mean it's just, it's a minefield out there. But I'm saying I don't wanna get canceled, but I also don't wanna be living my life, not really having my own relationship to all of this, that's honest. I mean, I know when I was a little kid, the pressure on little boys, you know, you gotta be a man. I wasn't ready to be no man. I don't, I don't wanna know about ladies yet. You know what I mean? And what if you got... My cousin is gay, all of that. So I wanna talk about it all too. It's just not easy sometimes. So thank you for giving us a space for that. You know what I mean? Real talk. Okay.

LAURA FLANDERS- Love, love me some, Rashid.

SARAH JONES- He has his own relationship and I think it's really important to say, you know, Bryan Cranston in the film kind of shares something about his youth that just, it really touched me that anytime there's hierarchy and oppression and marginalization the way we have of women and femmes in this industry, the people who are doing the buying, I'm not saying that anyone who buys sex is a bad person or anything like that. I'm not saying the sex industry is something we have to shut down. I'm saying let's look more honestly at whether this is serving all of us the way we think it is, or is there some kind of way forward that incorporates all of the rest of the awakening that we're all trying to do?

LAURA FLANDERS - I've talked to lots of people with many opinions on this subject on this show and some have also reminded me, you want to, you care so much about women and work, let's talk about women in a lot of different workplaces and how they're exploited. And you mentioned earlier, yeah, what this possibility of survival sex work has meant to people to get by at times. And I think we're all involved in a conversation of how do we get out of a carceral response to everything? Send in the cop, send people to prison. Punishment is the only solution we feel like we've come up with, with the pain points as somebody put it on our show not so long ago in our lives. What do you think looking, I don't know, 50 years, what do you think is the story that moment will tell about this one?

SARAH JONES- It's funny you ask that, Laura, because the play Sell/Buy/Date was set in the future. And it was one way that I hoped to be able to talk about this topic in much the way that if you teach a feminism class today or if you're taking a feminism class and like you look back and women didn't have the vote in like, I don't know, 1920 or whatever it was, please don't test me on this right now. Like you can't believe that was the world that we lived in. And so my hope is that in the future, people can look back and say, I can't believe anyone ever locked up a woman, while slapping a man on the wrist for just boys will be boys because there were such puritanical attitudes about this issue. I want that. I also wanna see what happens, we were talking a little bit earlier about social media and folks can find me there because for better and worse, it is the place where a huge conversation can happen about this globally. And I hope that we evolve, so that there's more connection, honest connection that isn't just about monetization and your phone knowing what ads to send you, but is more about a truly forward thinking conversation and policy. You know, if we can change policy and culture around these things, I hope that our future folks, our descendants will look back and say, "Wow, you all were a mess. So glad we got out of that."

LAURA FLANDERS- I hate to cut in any way the poems of the great poet and my friend, June Jordan, but I do want to give you a taste of her "Poem to Take Back the Night". Here's June. What about moonlight? What about moonlight? What about watching for the moon behind the locked doors and bolted shut bedrooms and to the blind side of Venetian blinds and cowering under the kitchen table and struggling from the car and wrestling head down when the surprise, when the stranger, when the surprise, when the coach, when the surprise, when the priest, when the surprise, when the doctor, when the surprise, when the family, when the surprise, when the lover, when the surprise, when the friend, when the surprise lacerates your throat, constricted into no, no more sound. Who will whisper? What about moonlight? What about moonlight? What about watching for the moon so far from where you tremble, where you bleed, where you sob out loud for help or mercy for a thunderbolt of shame and retribution where you plead with God and devils and the creatures in between to push the power key and set you free from filth and blasphemy from everything you never wanted to feel or see to set you free so you could brush your teeth and comb your hair and maybe throw on a jacket or maybe not. you running

curious and so excited and running and running into the night asking, only asking, what about the moonlight? What about the moonlight? That was June Jordan, you can find my full uncut conversation with Sarah Jones if you subscribe to our podcast, all the information is at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. And thank you, June Jordan. I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.