

Petrice Jones (00:03):

What's up and welcome to another episode of 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. I'm your host Petrice Jones. Today, my guest is Julie Christeas, Co-founder and CEO of Tandem Pictures, the world's first conscious indie film studio. Tandem Pictures was started with the goal of elevating women's stories in independent film. And that vision has since expanded to ensure diverse voices in front and behind camera. As well as a commitment to challenging the film industry's often wasteful practices.

Julie Christeas (00:26):

Every little detail that encompasses our work for the day has some brand of impact on the environment.

Petrice Jones (00:37):

When we talk to Julie, we'll find out why her sets are green and why money talks.

Julie Christeas (00:41):

I like to talk about them in financial terms, because I think whether you are a person that naturally gravitates towards wanting to be inspired by the nature around you or not. Who doesn't want to be able to tell investors? Who doesn't want to be able to look at a loan you might've taken and pay it back quicker because you were having cost savings?

Petrice Jones (01:04):

I'm your host Petrice Jones, and welcome to 52 Hertz: The Lonely Whale Podcast. But first some good news from around the reef. Now here's a big investment tip whales. Humpback whales, right whales, sperm whales, forget about stock markets bears and bulls. The world's whale population has just been valued at a total of \$1 trillion. Resilient economists looked at the 64,000 large whales estimated to migrate through Brazil's coastal waters every year and tagged them with the combined worth of \$82 billion.

Petrice Jones (01:37):

But if you're like me and you're a massive skeptic, you're probably wondering how do they land at such an enormous number? Well, whales are a huge tourist attraction. Every year, tourists in Brazil spend more than \$6 million just for the chance to see them. Whales help to regulate their environments by sequestering carbon dioxide in their bodies, from consuming plankton and taking it to the bottom of the ocean when they die.

Petrice Jones (01:57):

Whales also know to go [inaudible 00:01:59] responsible for half the oxygen production on earth through deprecation. Now of course, whales have intrinsic value on their own just by simply existing, but economists are going to do what economists do. In a capitalistic

system like we have, dollar values like this are applied to nature to put in perspective how much we would lose in the language of money. And you know what they say, "Money talks." So move over Wall Street because here comes Whale Street. So Julie, welcome to 52 Hertz.

Julie Christeas (02:33):

Thank you so much, Petrice. I'm really excited to speak with you today.

Petrice Jones (02:37):

Me too. I'm very excited to get into this. And as an actor myself and having some many opinions here, I'm going to be fighting myself to shut up and let the experts speak. So please just tell us a little bit about you and a little bit about Tandem Pictures, your production company.

Julie Christeas (02:51):

I started Tandem Pictures in 2010 and really started the company with an idea to give women more of a voice in the industry. My partner, Jonny Blitstein, a few years ago really took on this idea of being conscious. Not just about the types of stories we tell, but about how we tell those stories. And to really laser in on how we were functioning, the mistakes we were making and things that we could keep learning and doing better to make sure that we were being as conscious as possible, where the environment was concerned.

Petrice Jones (03:30):

There's a certain level of arrogance that comes into filmmaking, whereby the most important thing is that you get the shot. No matter what else you have to get the shot. You have to make the movie at whatever cost. And with the idea of a conscious production, the whole point is incorporating what we call the true cost. The true cost isn't just what it costs you in your wallet. It's what it costs, everything from the production of the material all the way through to when it's disposed of, and then what happens after that. That's the true cost of any kind of undertaking or any kind of product. So how do you guys go against the current in that aspect where other production companies would just maintain the status quo?

Julie Christeas (04:07):

One of the things that we do at Tandem, because we're an independent film company, is we're often shooting on location, right? We're not going into a studio to build sets. And those locations are often incredibly pristine, beautiful nature preserves. Actually the first movie I produced under Tandem's banner was in Alaska and it took a year of back and forth speaking with not only the parks department, but all the many levels of national protections that they rightfully have to protect that beautiful nature.

Julie Christeas (04:48):

We were the first narrative film to be allowed to shoot in Denali National Park. That really changed me as a New Yorker going to Denali National Park. I felt like I was in the movie Jurassic park. I had never seen that expanse of land, 6 million acres of preserved land. And the lengths that our tiny little team, 40 people, went through to leave no trace behind.

Julie Christeas (05:26):

What does that actually mean? And it was everything from the vehicles that we used, the amount of equipment we had, the amount of people that were able to get into those vehicles, the food that we could bring, where and how we use the bathroom to protect that natural preserve. Like it was a pretty intense experience, but I don't regret having that kind of responsibility as my first time out of the gate, because it really me look at how I practiced in a very different way than I had previously.

Julie Christeas (06:05):

And so now in 2020, so many years later, there are certain things that we take for granted on our sets. Like, of course, no one's going to be using single use plastics. Of course, there aren't going to be water bottles that are emptied then thrown away. We're going to use electric vehicles where we can, and we're going to try to have locations be close together. Or actor's holdings and hair and makeup and wardrobe be close to where we're actually shooting. So potentially people can walk instead of having to drive...

Petrice Jones (06:37):

Right.

Julie Christeas (06:37):

...to all of these different places.

Petrice Jones (06:40):

All these silly little things that seem like nothing that when you across the nature of the whole industry mounts up to a hell of a lot of waste.

Julie Christeas (06:48):

Waste. Yeah. And if anyone has the courage to do one of those carbon footprint calculators, I remember the first time I did that for myself, I had a panic attack. I was like, "Oh my God, I'm a terrible citizen of the globe."

Petrice Jones (07:03):

Scary, yeah.

Julie Christeas (07:05):

What have I been doing? But being aware at least allows us to say, "Okay, well now I know. I can't pretend, I don't know what I know"

anymore." So how can I move forward? So as we began our own journey into figuring out what our best practices would be, it was also overwhelming because it's everything. It's everything from, what are the types of plastics that can be recycled? What can't be recycled? What is compostable? And what about my printing? Every set needs printing. We need call sheets, we need sign. We can't function without a whole bunch of important information that has been contained on paper.

Julie Christeas (07:52):

How do we get around that? Every little detail that encompasses our work for the day has some brand of impact on the environment. And I think the best thing for anyone who's looking at their own practices, their own company and asking, "How do I begin?" Start small, pick a few things that you know are leaving a large footprint behind. The Environmental Media Association, the EMA is a wonderful ally. They have a whole slew of practices that producers can instill on set, whether you're small or large. And we're proud that the last two movies we produced, The Surrogate, which is out now virtually and Black Bear, which will come out later this year via E1, both got seals from the EMA. One the green and one the gold.

Julie Christeas (08:52):

So if you're looking to start, that's a great place to start.

Petrice Jones (08:55):

That's great.

Julie Christeas (08:55):

So the PGA, the Producers Guild of America has their PEACH Guide, I believe it's called. And it's an entire list of green practices that you can easily look up and begin to implement what you can and say, "Okay, well, I can choose these five things." The really interesting thing is that it actually, it's great team building. To give everyone the added inspiration of saying, "Okay, guys, we're going to band together here and we're going to make some choices as a team to leave this place as beautiful as it is when we arrive."

Petrice Jones (09:36):

Right.

Julie Christeas (09:37):

I find that, that really makes everyone feel great.

Petrice Jones (09:40):

You will create a production company where sustainability is built into the fabric of what you do versus me going into working with a big production company and trying to get them to make better practices. I've been lucky enough to experience two very different shows. I shoot one show in Canada and then another show in Atlanta, Georgia, and the

attitudes on set and the understanding of the pain is very, very different.

Petrice Jones (10:05):

On my show in Atlanta, the line producer couldn't care less about the impacts of using a 100,000 plastic water bottles in a single season of his show. I've fought to get even just better companies on board and not endorsing the Nestle's of the world. I managed to get a company down to 1,29 a bottle, but they were really premium water service. And then I brought this to them. I had this big subsidy for 2000 bottles a week, and then the line producer turned around and said, "We pay like 10 cents a bottle."

Julie Christeas (10:34):

Ah, man.

Petrice Jones (10:35):

"I can't justify paying 12 or 13 times as much." I also have a friend called Mike Slavich, who is the Head of Sustainability at Warner Brothers. He showed me a cost slip for what it costs them to produce a show with bottled water. And it was something like almost 30 grand on bottled water, season one. And then they switched to only water coolers and reusable bottles on season two. And he spent like \$6,000.

Julie Christeas (11:00):

That's exactly right.

Petrice Jones (11:01):

So these myths are easily debunkable when people actually look into them. As a line producer you in your head, there's certain amount of money is supposed to be allocated, and that's how it is versus understanding that you can actually save money by doing the right thing.

Julie Christeas (11:16):

Well, and listen, that's where the top down approach to me makes the most sense.

Petrice Jones (11:20):

Right.

Julie Christeas (11:20):

Because ultimately we're in the position of hiring. And if my attitude is cavalier or my attitude is, we come in on budget by any means necessary. Or who really minds if there is a 100 water bottles around here that end up in that river, probably half full because no one drank them anyway. It's so wasteful and it is also disgraceful. It is disgraceful to be in a position of hiring and not help the team see where, as you so eloquently put it, the true cost is. There is no reason in this day and age with all the scientific information that we

have, to have a cavalier attitude towards the environment.

Petrice Jones (12:14):

The resources, absolutely.

Julie Christeas (12:14):

There is nothing, there is nothing casual or cavalier about what is happening to our planet. And what is going to happen to human beings? And I do take responsibility for that. That's my job. That's my job to tell the line producer, "Listen, these are the things that I care about. We need to allocate a bit more here because it'll save us cost over here."

Julie Christeas (12:38):

So many times Tandem Pictures, I have been told, "Well, we can't afford to provide people with water bottles. That's a big expense. As the producer, you know what? I take that out of my own pocket."

Petrice Jones (12:49):

Right.

Julie Christeas (12:50):

If my movie is so small that I can't afford to buy water bottles, Nalgene bottles for people that they can put their name on and have for the show, I'm going to buy them for you. But that is because that is very, very meaningful to me, as meaningful as getting the shot. And I think, not to get too sidetracked here, but the amazing social unrest that has been happening in this country. What people have been talking about for a long time, but what a larger amount of people are starting to be aware of and talk about is this idea of intersectional environmentalism. And isn't it incredible that when we start opening up our eyes to one thing, we can't help but see all the other pieces around it that make an impact.

Julie Christeas (13:42):

So, if I don't care that there's a floating water bottle in a river, then I don't really care about that community and who lives in this community, and who's using that water. And all of the people that are ultimately going to be impacted by my singular behavior, especially as a person who goes to places to work and I don't live there and I'm not part of the community. I think it's part of my job to understand where I'm going and never impact that community in a negative way.

Julie Christeas (14:20):

I want communities to walk away feeling like wasn't this a great experience having an independent film in town. They brought some money, they contributed to this local charity. It was fun seeing some actors in and around town. There's so many ways that we can impact communities positively. We're in a job where we really can, we can make a difference in a positive way.

Petrice Jones (14:50):

You know, I started a with that kind of soul understanding in mind and the business is called The One Movement. So the whole goal is actually to serve the community and make something happen. But the whole idea of being called The One Movement was a shift to understanding that there's a separation right now, between what we consider to be natural and the unnatural. There's all the natural stuff like the plants and the animals and the oceans and what we call nature. And then these humans or sort of these barren entities that have just been dropped on top of this. And we're not actually a part of the whole thing.

Petrice Jones (15:20):

What it breeds is this hostile perception of what we consider to be nature, understanding that you and the environment are one of the same thing is under mental to understanding how to calculate the true cost. If you think of yourself as separate from these things, there's going to be the cost of the environment, which is not your problem. And then your personal cost, which is production and money. So bringing those two things together are really important, and that now, is becoming my life's work.

Julie Christeas (15:47):

I think that's so beautiful how you're talking about your life's work because that life's work is coming from inspiration, from what your natural gifts are as an actor and finding opportunity to say, how can I improve the circumstances that I'm in. But what you were saying about this idea of interconnectivity, that we are not separate from our environment. You know, take that even a step further that we are not separate from each other.

Julie Christeas (16:19):

I feel privileged that I have been able to shoot a movie in Alaska. And when I looked up at the night sky, I saw the red dust of the Milky Way.

Petrice Jones (16:29):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie Christeas (16:30):

I wept, but not many people get to see that. I went and shot a movie in Minnesota. I was out in the North Woods and got an alarm at 1:30 in the morning because the DP was calling everyone that the Aurora Borealis was out. And we ran to the Lake to see the Northern Lights.

Petrice Jones (16:52):

Wow.

Julie Christeas (16:52):

You know, I've had these amazing experiences that there is no part of

my body that didn't realize in those moments, that the same atoms, the same material that make up this world make me up too. And that there's something divine just in that thought that made me not want to hurt this environment, but take care of it and preserve it for those who come next. And having a child now, a son of my own, I can look up and say, "Look at this, look at this leaf, Roman. Look at this flower, Roman. Look how beautiful mother nature is, how perfect this is." But not every kid is in that situation. I mean, I still can't get over that the crisis that happened in Flint, Michigan.

Petrice Jones (17:50):
Don't even get me started.

Julie Christeas (17:51):
It's still happening. How is that possible?

Petrice Jones (17:57):
I think there needs to be more focus on these kinds of things and how, when you don't respect the natural world and you don't respect your people, people die and people who are truly affected. And that is the pinnacle of intersectional environmentalism. Another thing that you touched on was how becoming a mother has affected your perception of this environmental crisis and how it makes you make decisions in the world, and if it's helped you make decisions in Tandem Productions.

Julie Christeas (18:22):
When I had Roman, it couldn't help but make me aware that, yes, the choices I were making, I was leaving something behind, but also he really reminds me that it's really not about being a mother, to me. It is a deeper feeling. And I think it is what you were saying of feeling like there's no them over there. We are all here together. If this might be my son, okay, but what about your son? What about your sister? All of us deserve the same and I think it's an unalienable right. We deserve to breathe clean air. We deserve to drink clean water. I deserve to not have my state government lie to me that the things that I need to live are in fact, poisoning me and my children. And whether that's my kid or your kid, is honestly irrelevant to me.

Julie Christeas (19:23):
And I know that I'm a white woman so that it doesn't mean that I haven't had struggles in my life, but the color of my skin has not been one of them. And I can't separate the knowledge that there are many mothers who the biggest problem they have is the color of their skin. And it's dictated so many other environmental issues around them. And that their children's lives are absolutely as meaningful as my son's life is.

Julie Christeas (19:56):
It makes me very emotional to talk about because there's so many atrocities being committed. And I do think this isn't about singular

motherhood or the idea of being maternal. That's another myth too. These things are human. I'm capable of behaving in just a terrible as way as any man. And my husband and many men are just as capable, are behaving in ways that are described as maternal. They're not, they're human, it's human instinct to care and to love and to nurture and to want something better for you than I might have had for myself.

Petrice Jones (20:34):

How do we start getting people to understand these issues in their entirety? How do we accelerate this for people who don't have a child?

Julie Christeas (20:43):

Right.

Petrice Jones (20:43):

And aren't given that push, how do we get the Amazon's and Netflix's and all the big companies of the world to take charge of that responsibility and pioneer solutions within their own productions?

Julie Christeas (20:55):

Well, I think we started our conversation by talking about the almighty dollar.

Petrice Jones (21:01):

Right.

Julie Christeas (21:02):

And so for me, whenever I talk about choices that we make, that happened to be good for the environment, I like to talk about them in financial terms. Because I think whether you are a person that naturally gravitates towards wanting to be inspired by the nature around you or not, anyone in the producer's seat or the line producer's seat. Who doesn't want to be able to tell investors? Who doesn't want to be able to look at a loan you might have taken and pay it back quicker because you were having cost-savings actively on set? So if you really look at the accounting and I recommend people do this, having a head of sustainability at all of these major studios is a really fantastic thing because those people are intimately aware with every single way sustainable choices save money.

Julie Christeas (22:00):

And that comes down to things like refilling water bottles, filtering water, what it means to make the choice to compost on set. Which I know can feel like a huge pain, but there are local gardens, there are local nurseries that will actually take your food waste and turn it into compost for their natural environment. I highly recommend looking into that. It's a way to also... Practically, garbage smells, food waste smells. If you are on set and you are composting and you are collecting your food waste, giving it to a garden to compost properly is a great way to get that practical problem off of your set.

Julie Christeas (22:50):

Driving electric vehicles, that's another thing. And I understand that depending on where you are, it can be tough to find, where do I charge my vehicle and all of these things. But again, with a small amount of research, that charge goes a long way. The cost savings are humongous.

Petrice Jones (23:06):

Right.

Julie Christeas (23:06):

If you choose to even just scout with electric vehicles, it's a huge cost savings. Using locations that have solar panels and solar energy, is the last movie we shot last summer. We got an amazing location that basically ran off of solar energy during the day, which again is a huge cost savings. Oh, making the decision to use real plates and utensils.

Petrice Jones (23:37):

Yes.

Julie Christeas (23:37):

Another silly thing that you think, "Well, it's not very convenient for me to have to wash these things." Okay, it also is not very convenient to constantly have overflowing trash bags of garbage that people have to carry out and find a place to store it until again, it goes to a garbage plan and is buried in our earth. It is so much cleaner and nicer. And people, a big upside to using real cutlery and plateware on set, is that it makes people feel good to use a real fork and plate.

Petrice Jones (24:17):

Yes.

Julie Christeas (24:17):

It makes us feel like we're not a traveling circus.

Petrice Jones (24:23):

I think the whole thing it comes down to is, are you willing to make the initial investment? Because the initial investment for usable goods and reasonable goods and reusable services will always pay dividends down the line. But the start of all of our productions, I'm sure you've had to do a couple of these talks, it's the, what is appropriate on set and what is not? And rightly so, there's been a lot of terrible misconduct. So these conversations have to be had. I almost feel as though there's been an abuse of our environment and misconduct towards our environment, that we should actually be having these conversations at the start going, "Okay, this is how we run our set."

Julie Christeas (24:58):

Yeah. We have a great line producer that we work with. And she was the first person who said, "We're having the safety meeting at the top of the day anyway."

Petrice Jones (25:07):

Right.

Julie Christeas (25:07):

Let's add the environmental part of that.

Petrice Jones (25:09):

Right.

Julie Christeas (25:10):

"Okay, everyone, reminder to not forget your water bottles, to not forget your hot coffee cups, that everything's going to be refillable, that our recycling station is over there. And the composting bin is going to be behind that tent. So please, don't forget to put your food waste in there." And it became part of the daily ritual.

Julie Christeas (25:30):

She actually really helped me see that we could seamlessly just throw that in.

Petrice Jones (25:35):

Right.

Julie Christeas (25:35):

This is something the company's doing. If people have the information, if you make it part of your daily practice, to take that five minutes and say, "Here's the ways that we're going to work today." And not even necessarily label them environmental practices, just, this is the way that we're working. People will work that way. That is for sure.

Petrice Jones (25:57):

Julie, it's been such a pleasure talking to you, really. Thank you so much for taking time out to talk to us today.

Julie Christeas (26:04):

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. I really enjoyed the conversation.

Petrice Jones (26:09):

Thank you so much, Julie, I appreciate it. Hey, listeners, just before you go, here's a quick ocean saving tip for you from our guests.

Julie Christeas (26:17):

Please get a reusable straw. The metal ones I think are so luxurious because if you have a cold drink, boy do they stay nice and cold day.

Better than the plastic ones. I love those metal straws. It is an immediate way you can respect our oceans. Stop using plastic straws. Do not use them in restaurants. Do not take them with takeout. Do not put in a soda can. Just remove them from any daily practice you have.

Petrice Jones (26:48):

Love what you're listening to. 52 Hertz is made possible by listeners support like you. So go to lonelywhale.org and support season two. Your donation helps amplify the voices of ocean advocates all around the world. Thank you.

Petrice Jones (27:00):

52 Hertz is a podcast from Lonely Whale. Our show is produced by Emma Riley and Mindy Ramaker, with writing from Kyrsten Stringer and audio engineering by James Riley. Special thanks to Young Hero, Emy Kane, Kendall Starkman, and Danny Witte. Subscribe to 52 Hertz wherever you get your podcasts. I've been your host Petrice Jones. Thanks for listening, until next time. Tune in to 52 Hertz and tune out plastic.