

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly explore just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included leaders from the world of politics, business, sports, real estate development, community activists, and civic engagement. However today our guest is Jennifer Bielstein. She's the managing director of Actor's Theatre of Louisville so she's from the artistic world. Now listen to this you think you had an interesting childhood. She was born and raised in Lubbock, Texas and she was raised in both Odessa and Kilgore, Texas; Taft, California; Lafayette Louisiana moved to Littleton, Colorado and then ultimately in Houston, Texas. We'll get to that after we get through her bio. Her history is rich and unique in the American regional theatre or theatrical world. So here goes. Miss Bielstein joined Actor's Theatre of Louisville on November 1, 2006. Replacing as she puts it quote "a great statesman of American arts" Mr Alexander, better known as Sandy, Spear. Spear was a 40 year ATL veteran and one of its founding members. Her love of the arts and her sensibilities as a good business woman have translated to at times very incompatible interest into a successful theatrical management career. She earned a custom tailored bachelor's degree in business and theater from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1991. As at that time there was not such programs combining both theatre and business as a degree to form of study. She then went on to successful 15 years stint in the windy city of Chicago's prestige theatre circuit. Mind you there are over 200 theaters in Chicago. Eight of those 15 years she worked as director of marketing at the world renowned Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Where in that row she was responsible for almost six million dollars in annual revenues through ticket sales. She closed her quote “Chicago run as I like to call it” with a three year stint as executive director of the Chicago Writers’ Theatre where they produce 400 performances annually. Mind you with less than a three million dollar budget. Serving on the board of the League of Chicago theatres she spearheaded the development of a Chicago wide program known as quote “Theatre Thursdays” unquote designed to bring theater to new audiences. As the new managing director of ATL or Actor’s Theatre of Louisville and only the second in its history Jennifer will be working in collaboration with ATO Artistic Director Mark Masterson. We are going to try to get him on the show as well. With her focus on generating increased interest in programming, increased revenue, and introducing stage art to new patrons. Her quote “people are spending more time on the Internet at home having more passive experiences,” she laments. “But theatre is so vital as a shared experience between audiences and performers each night. I want to convey that message more aggressively.” She is a member of the 2008 Leadership Louisville class. She and her husband Shane Spalding a Kentucky native, knock knock ah the tie that binds as always they say, reside in the Highlands in Louisville. Welcome to Leadership Landscape Jennifer. It’s great to have you here.

Jennifer Bielstein: Thank you for having me.

Kirt Jacobs: Cool. What drives you to do this where you combine business and theater? It’s a fairly unique background. A very unique background. You did in the time when it wasn’t a degreed form of study. I think there’s a lot of arts or maybe there are a lot of arts administration degrees now. What drives you to do what you’ve done?

Jennifer Bielstein: Well I really love the art form of theater. I love the experience of live theater so I’m very motivated by what I do and driven by what I do because live theater you can go to it and it can be a cathartic experience. You can see yourself onstage or an issue you think grappling with. You can learn about someone else. You can be educated through the experience of theatre. So I think

theatre can change people's lives. I think it's a hugely powerful art form. So I'm really motivated by that and also. Theatre brings hundreds of people together to create a play. You know you need audiences and donors and volunteers and actors and playwrights and directors and designers and crew and you know and that's that's so thrilling to bring this diverse group of people together to put on a production. So I find that really exciting and the creativity involved in live theater is tremendous too both administratively and artistically. You know in a nonprofit you're always working with limited resources. So you know that pushes us to strive to find creative challenges to use to work within those limited resources.

Kirt Jacobs: What I found interesting about you when I did my research is you don't really have a performing background.

Jennifer Bielstein: No

Kirt Jacobs: Usually that is the genesis of the seed which leads to a passion in the artistic world of theater so it's interesting but..

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah

Kirt Jacobs: Very interesting

Jennifer Bielstein: I took dance classes as a little girl.

Kirt Jacobs: Hey that's fair.

Jennifer Bielstein: That might have triggered it.

Kirt Jacobs: I played the clarinet up until the sixth grade. So look at me now. Whom do you credit most influential in your life Jennifer? It can be more than one person.

Jennifer Bielstein: Sure

Kirt Jacobs: It can be professional or personal.

Jennifer Bielstein: Most Influential I would have to say are my

parents. They really whatever they did through through raising me I think they had it they were highly involved in my education as well as my younger sister's education. And since we moved around a lot..

Kirt Jacobs: I was going to let you speak to that if you want to. What was the moving around about? Was it by design or did it just serendipity

Jennifer Bielstein: somewhat organic but it was following my father's career around so it was you know job promotions or companies merged and he was transferred elsewhere. He's in the oil industry.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: And so that brought us full circle back to Texas really.

Kirt Jacobs: Do you think that was kind of the foundation and seed for a lot of what you do now dealing with different people? I mean moving like that I would suspect it might have had an interesting impact of not being with the same group of people growing up all along the way.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah I think it makes you very adaptable.

Kirt Jacobs: OK. Flexible

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah very flexible. You know we were just thrown into new communities every two and a half or three years. It almost became that kind of pattern and you had to learn how to make new friends quickly and adjust. And it was never we never knew that we were going to be moving in another three years it just sort of fell out that way. But but my parents with the focus on education they always made sure that we lived in neighborhoods where we could get into good public schools and have a good education. And they really they made me feel like I could do anything that I wanted to do. So if I decided that I wanted to cure

cancer or something they never felt they never placed limitations on me.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: They always they somehow were hugely empowering as as parents.

Kirt Jacobs: Cool. I like that. I wanted you to explain that. What was the most defining moment of your life Jennifer? It can be more than one again personal or professional.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah I think professionally it had to be when we moved to Houston, Texas. I was a junior in high school and I entered the theater a theater class there. And that's clearly shaped my entire career and life to this point. Again I fell in love with the collaboration with working with this group of people to put on a show and I knew right away my strengths were not in performing.

Kirt Jacobs: At least you are honest.

Jennifer Bielstein: They are on the business side and I became thespian president you know I lettered in thespians.

Kirt Jacobs: There is such a thing. I never heard that. Interesting

Jennifer Bielstein: Yes my leather jacket.

Kirt Jacobs: Cool

Jennifer Bielstein: As geeky as that sound so it was great.

Kirt Jacobs: No I don't think so. Lots of people that appreciate theatre.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yes I decided to pursue it from there.

Kirt Jacobs: OK. What is your biggest professional regret? And regrets is a strong word. Do you have one?

Jennifer Bielstein: That is a strong word yeah.

Kirt Jacobs: Personal or professional

Jennifer Bielstein: I think that my biggest professional regret in something that I still struggle with is trying to find balance. I tend to really enjoy my career.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Jennifer Bielstein: As I said I'm very driven by it. So I put a lot of my time and energy into my job. And equally important are my friends and family and I just haven't found a way to have an equal amount of time for them.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure.

Jennifer Bielstein: I think I'm sure a lot of people struggle with that but it's something that I wish that I could strike a better balance between the two.

Kirt Jacobs: Does it require you to travel a little bit? Quite a bit?

Jennifer Bielstein: Requires a little bit of travel. There's always more that we could do especially you know that Mark and I could do it to be in touch with theatre that's going on around the country. But probably once a month I have to travel somewhere for work.

Kirt Jacobs: That's a lot by some people's standards. On the flip side of that Jennifer what is your biggest professional triumph? And it can be personal as well.

(laughter)

Kirt Jacobs: We are getting a laugh here. Hold on folks.

Jennifer Bielstein: I laugh a lot.

Kirt Jacobs: That's fine. That's good. You're in theatre you're suppose to be happy.

Jennifer Bielstein: My biggest professional triumph is attaining this job. This was a dream job for me. It... Actor's Theatre is one of the most important theaters in the country and so being entrusted with this position and replacing Sandy, Sandy Speir who was so respected around the country for his arts administration.

Kirt Jacobs: He was.

Jennifer Bielstein: And for helping found the regional theater movement. It's quite an honor to have the opportunity.

Kirt Jacobs: For our audience members that may not know is it safe to say it's probably in the top three or five regional theaters in the country.

Jennifer Bielstein: It is.

Kirt Jacobs: Right here in River City as I say.

Jennifer Bielstein: It is and sometimes you don't know what's in your own backyard. But it is one of the best.

Kirt Jacobs: Yours truly got a mention it full disclosure I did a year there as administrative intern from '93-'94 before the internet but I digress. We move on.

Jennifer Bielstein: I'm glad to know it though.

Kirt Jacobs: Cool. What do you find exciting about all of this? Is it the collaboration or what is it?

Jennifer Bielstein: I certainly find the collaboration really rewarding. And for me what's exciting about my job is having the opportunity especially with Actor's Theatre being one of the most important theaters in the country to tackle issues that the field is facing. So for instance many people may know that subscriptions are declining across the country. And slowly just people's... The way they want to commit their time and money on the front is

changing. They want to be a little more last minute in their plans. Generally speaking but that's something our entire business model is based upon. So I'm excited to work with this institution to try and tackle that issue you know. For that will help shape the future of theatre.

Kirt Jacobs: It's an interesting time with the amount of different things pulling at people's time from the internet to everything else.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah

Kirt Jacobs: The global village as they like to call it. What was the best advice ever given to you Jennifer? It can be more than one piece of advice. Professional, personal, family, friend.

Jennifer Bielstein: I keep focusing on professional but

Kirt Jacobs: That's fine. That's fine.

Jennifer Bielstein: But sometimes these leadership positions can be a little isolating you know.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Jennifer Bielstein: There are certain things that you can't speak to your staff about because it would be revealing an issue that they shouldn't be aware of or both Mark and I report directly to a board of directors so you can't sometimes you don't want to concern them with certain issues. So the best advice given to me was to develop a network of peers with whom you can have a confidential relationship and bounce ideas and concerns off and share and vent. And that's been really helpful to me.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: And I've found different ways of doing it throughout my career but it was a great piece of advice.

Kirt Jacobs: Now this show is called Leadership Landscape so we

always ask this question. Can you define leadership in one word? Can be more than one word in the great English lexicon as I always tell our guests.

(laughter)

Kirt Jacobs: There is that laugh. I love it.

Jennifer Bielstein: I don't know if I can put it in one word.

Kirt Jacobs: You don't have too. It could actually a statement if your more comfortable.

Jennifer Bielstein: For me and especially in this industry and maybe in any non profit leadership is about teamwork.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: So I think as a leader you have to really be able to influence others to help support your vision and your your leadership, your direction where you're taking your company or issue or organization. And you also have to have the ability to identify and motivate the right team members and different team members and everybody works a little bit differently so I think it's important that you can work with a group of people and bring them together as a team.

Kirt Jacobs: OK. Great answer. If you could change one thing in your life or in general, excuse me, in general Jennifer what would that be? Could be personal professional. You can look at that an international, national, local level. Really it is a self interpretive kind of question.

Jennifer Bielstein: So after you know having world peace and ending world hunger and all of those things.

Kirt Jacobs: If that's what you're after. If that's what floats your boat. I don't want to offend anyone

Jennifer Bielstein: One thing for me that's been on my mind a lot lately is with all of the way technology has just so dramatically changed the way we work and live our lives.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure. In very short order. Pretty much the last ten years or so.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yes exactly exactly.

Kirt Jacobs: It's been pretty dramatic.

Jennifer Bielstein: How how can we lead the way that we use technology and not be led by it. So for example in my job I'm in meetings constantly, at events constantly, and I still get and no exaggeration 150 emails a day that need a response. They need my input.

Kirt Jacobs: The Blackberry better know as the Crackberry.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah and then you're looking at them 24/7. But you know it's just changed the way we communicate and perhaps when we had to write letters you were more reflective about distilling down what it was that you needed to communicate.

Kirt Jacobs: Exactly.

Jennifer Bielstein: Now it's about everything. So I just I think that something that it's really made us all feel overly busy and so how unnecessarily busy. Great advances it has brought to us but

Kirt Jacobs: Sure. Good and bad with every technological advancement.

Jennifer Bielstein: I'd love to change it for the better.

Kirt Jacobs: It's going to be interesting in 25 35 years when a full generation's grown up with this fast access to information and then how they lead.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah

Kirt Jacobs: How they communicate. We're going to be here to see it.

Jennifer Bielstein: I know.

Kirt Jacobs: It should be interesting.

Jennifer Bielstein: It will be fascinating.

Kirt Jacobs: Got it. Alright moving on. Could you describe in detail a particular incident or scenario again in your professional or personal life where you utilized your own style and philosophy on leadership. And it can be more than one incident.

Jennifer Bielstein: Sure.

Kirt Jacobs: It's a mouthful question but I don't really know how else to couch it.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah I think my style and philosophy of leadership is to lead by example and I'd never ask anyone to do something that I wouldn't do myself.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: And it's also to think lead long range, long term for an organization and not do what's the easiest short term solution

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Jennifer Bielstein: or what may make me look the best in the short term. And again what we do in theater and in many nonprofits it's not a top down leadership structure. It's a diffused power structure and you have to really gain the involvement of many constituents/ So of your audiences and donors, your boards, your staff, and so combining all that like a specific example is right now we're in a strategic planning process for the theater. And we began it in May and we've developed work groups comprised of representatives of those different constituents where we're really delving deeply into gaining a shared understanding of what the current status of

the theater is and then unraveling what the deep most important issues are in each of different areas. You know we're focusing on artistic excellence which is a you know the key to what we do.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure sure

Jennifer Bielstein: The customers that we serve. Board and staff best practices and finding innovative business models and ways of funding what we do. So I think that's an example and then another example when I said I wouldn't ask someone to do something that I wouldn't be willing to do. We're moving offices soon and we all a couple weeks ago got down and dirty in our sweats and went down to the basement and cleaned out items that hadn't been pitched for 40 years. So we all did that as a group and it's something that I didn't feel you know I'm above that. That's not for me to do. It was for us all to do and I thought that was important.

Kirt Jacobs: That's cool. I appreciate you sharing that.

Jennifer Bielstein: Sure

Kirt Jacobs: Now this is a question first time we've asked our guests. Did ask your previous guest. If someone asked you what does Jennifer Bielstein stand for what do you think they would tell me or someone else? Kind of an introspective question.

Jennifer Bielstein: I know.

Kirt Jacobs: Hopefully it's not uncomfortable.

Jennifer Bielstein: Many of them are.

Kirt Jacobs: Yeah that's the show to give me insight into people and how they lead.

Jennifer Bielstein: I think if if someone else were asked that they would say integrity and loyalty. I think I hold myself to a high standards and ethics and morals and I am also very loyal person and through this moving over the years I still have friends from

every city that we've lived in except for maybe when I was three or four-years-old

Kirt Jacobs: Right.

Jennifer Bielstein: But since then once I could talk and remember people and communicate with them but you know I think integrity and loyalty.

Kirt Jacobs: Alright. I like that. It's an honest answer. This is a question I'm just curious I know this is a leadership role you have here is fairly recent. But do you think there's a difference today in our leaders than in past generations? You know we do have a lot more technological advances and access to information. Do you think it's changed then it has in the last 10 years even?

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah I do think

Kirt Jacobs: And how you lead I guess is the way the couch the question.

Jennifer Bielstein: I do think there is something to the technology that forces us as leaders to allow more access to us directly.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: You know I think there are CEO's and leaders of major corporations that you know people can now email because they can they can track that down and and have access to them. And of course in my business I want people to have access to me but I do think that that's a significant shift and the only other observation or significant observation I have to that is I think that there's a a style of emerging of empowering staffs and the team within a company with information and ownership over choices in a way that it may have been more top down.

Kirt Jacobs: So do you think consensus building is a fair comment?

Jennifer Bielstein: Achieving true consensus is a big challenge.

Kirt Jacobs: Well that's it in any leadership role. You know when you lead you lead is what I always like to say to people.

Jennifer Bielstein: Oh yes

Kirt Jacobs: You know you're always the target. When the good times are great it's great and it's not you know that's when you really have to step and rise to the challenge.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah but but

Kirt Jacobs: Go ahead.

Jennifer Bielstein: Not without consensus building but during giving people access to information and the opportunity to input and just

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: feel some ownership. And I always believe that more minds are better than one, So I think I just I think that there's that's a shift that I've noticed.

Kirt Jacobs: Well in that world I think it's helpful too,

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah.

Kirt Jacobs: In that artistic realm you have the creative juices flowing that you don't always have in other elements or arenas of leadership. This is kind of a fun question. I don't know if I asked you this in advance but it will get a nice knee jerk reaction. If you were granted two weeks right today.

(laughter)

Kirt Jacobs: No obligations. No commitments. How would you spend this two week mini vacation from life? Take your husband with you, sorry Shane, or not. You can go do whatever you want. You know you put down the Blackberry. Those 150 emails you can't

access them.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah

Kirt Jacobs: So those are my qualifiers. What would you do with those two weeks? You can do.. We've had people give us all kinds of answers so there's no we're not immune to any answer that you can throw at it.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah right now I feel like I would sleep for two weeks straight.

Kirt Jacobs: That's fair.

Jennifer Bielstein: But I think if money were no object I'd go on a vacation with my husband. Some resort where they would just pamper us and

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Jennifer Bielstein: and like the toughest decision would be you know what kind of massage lotion do they want to use. You know or or what color and nail polish for the manicure.

Kirt Jacobs: I got you. I like it. It's an honest answer. That's what we're after. This is a question not sure we asked but where do you see yourself if at the end of your career? You know do you see yourself... I mean it's pretty good what you got right now. I mean this is really nice having a background with Actor's Theatre it's a remarkable what you've achieved at a fairly young age.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah right I mean right now I'm pretty focused on doing this job.

Kirt Jacobs: I'm sure you are.

Jennifer Bielstein: And doing it well.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Jennifer Bielstein: and as I said it was it is a dream job for me.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure.

Jennifer Bielstein: So it's all right now I would hope that I am still working in a leadership position in this field.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Jennifer Bielstein: Who knows what our art form and industry will evolve into by the end of my career but.

Kirt Jacobs: Yeah it will be interesting times.

Jennifer Bielstein: I hope I am still a big part of it. Of this field.

Kirt Jacobs: OK now it's a question we ask all of our guests younger or older. I don't know if you've seen the show in the past but you know when the great day comes Jennifer you know you've got many chapters left in you. We hope knock on I got some wood over here. You know so maybe the best years are yet to be written. But God forbid you walk out or something tragic happened how would you want to be remembered?

Jennifer Bielstein: I hate thinking about death.

Kirt Jacobs: Most most people do.

Jennifer Bielstein: But but

Kirt Jacobs: I think it gives a great insight into the into your character.

Jennifer Bielstein: Yeah I'd want to be remembered for being a good friend and wife and family member. And for being a nurturing leader in my work and hopefully there would be some good memories of that I've made with those friends and family and colleagues of enjoying life and laughing and then and getting the most out of it.

Kirt Jacobs: And what's interesting with what you do is that your decisions impact people in a very fun and creative way. Hopefully an entertaining way.

Jennifer Bielstein: Hopefully

Kirt Jacobs: So it's it's a pretty unique position you're in. I wish you the best of luck. I want to thank you for being on Leadership Landscape. It's quite a pleasure.

Jennifer Bielstein: Thanks for having me.

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com