

# What makes a good director?

**Jessica:** [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to this behind the scenes morsel, where today we're going to be talking to acclaimed audio drama director Jeffrey NES Gardner. Jeffrey wears a lot of other hats in the audio drama world, audio artist, engineer, executive producer, occasional actor, but it's their director hat we're concerned with today.

Uh, this interview is, if we're doing it right, going to be a joint production between Procyon Podcast Network and Unwell, and kind of a piece of bonus content for. To facilitate. We have Andrea, who is a co-founder of Procyon Podcast network writer, creator of the Romcom audio drama, me and AU and co-writer and co-creator of the conspiracy thriller audio drama station to station.

**Andrea:** Hey,

**Jessica:** hey Andrea. Jeffrey has directed among other things a lot of unwell and also several episodes of Starship Iris. Hi Jeffrey. Hello, and I'm Jess. I'm one of the writers bra well and I created and bright Starship Iris. It is so lovely to be here with you both today. You as well.

**Andrea:** You too, [00:01:00] Jess. Always a treat and I'm very excited to meet you, Jeffrey.

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. So good to meet you.

**Andrea:** Mm-hmm. . Uh, so I wanna start us off with what I think is maybe the most basic, but probably the biggest question here, because I think director is one of those jobs that can have very different conceptions from medium to medium. So in really broad strokes, what does an audio drama director.

**Jeffrey:** Well, the good news is I think it actually could have really different conceptions, honestly, project to project. I would say that at its most narrow and basic, a audio fiction director is the person who is in the recording studio to listen to the actors and give them feedback on their performances. Now, uh, Obviously is an incredibly limited, um, Way to look at the role.

And so I guess what I would say for myself, the way I [00:02:00] like to work as a director is somewhere between, uh, a director and kind of a showrunner executive producer. Uh, As the director, I see it as my job to be the person who

touches every piece of the process and kind of keeps an eye on everything from an artistic sense.

So, um, in unwell, for instance, I am in the writer's meetings discussing the scripts and plans with the writers. I, you know, take a hand in providing notes for editing there. I then go into the studio with the actors and give them feedback notes, shape the performances so that everything comes together as a cohesive whole.

And then in post production, I work with our lead sound designer. Eli Mavin and our sound [00:03:00] designers for each episode to kind of craft the sound reality of the world. I think a lot of this comes from the fact that I got into directing as a stage performer. Um, I was a theater director and dramaturg in a previous life.

I think in the theater, the director tends to be the person who is kind of steering the ship from all angles in a production, um, in a way that sometimes is, is not as true in television or i, I think in film. Mm-hmm. . So I, yeah, I like to have just a little bit of a hand on every piece of the product.

**Andrea:** What was your path, um, from stage into audio storytelling?

Like what about the medium intrigued you initially ?

**Jeffrey:** That's a great question. So, um, the short joke answer I like to give is that I [00:04:00] live in Chicago and I was producing a play somewhere around 2008, 2009, and. We were going up in this little theater and it was so cold and there was a blizzard and people were coming in and, uh, you know, stomping their boots off and finding their seats.

And I was just feeling guilty that I'd made these people come out in this awful weather, . And, you know, I, I turned to the camera and surely there must be a better way. And it's, it's, it's not quite that. Um, uh, but that's a part of it. I, yeah, I, I had some stories that I wanted to tell that were a little bit bigger than I could afford to do on stage at that moment, and.

I was excited about reaching, kind of both reaching broader audiences and making art [00:05:00] that was not ephemeral in the way theater is. You know, you put up a show and then it's gone and it, you know, it's nice to be on to the next thing, but also, It's nice to have a thing that you create that like exists for longer outside of people's memories.

And it's nice to like not be worried each time you put up a show. Like, are the people gonna show up on this specific day at this specific time to see it? Um, It's great to be able to make a thing and say, Hey, listen to it now. If you're ready for it or listen to it in three years, it'll still be there and it'll still be, you know, the same level of good.

**Andrea:** Starship Iris is famously, I think for anybody who's listening to this from our end recorded in front of a lot of different computers in a lot of different parts of the world. How does that compare to, uh, the shows you've done with, uh, Heart Life, nfp, like Un Well, and Our [00:06:00] Fair City? Are those mostly remote or mostly sort of in studio with you?

**Jeffrey:** Yeah. So for both our Fair City and unwell, we record almost entirely in studio. Wow. Um, yeah, it's, it's really wonderful. Um, we, we are so lucky in Chicago to have this amazing wealth of really talented performers. Uh, you know, there's such a strong theater and improvisation and comedy and, you know, television and film seen here.

So we're really spoiled to have just these amazing resources of local actors. And so, um, whenever possible, obviously there have been some circumstances over the last few years that have made that hard. Um, but we like to get as many people in the room together as possible. That was especially important for us in the beginning of unwell because we really, you know, it's, it's a really strong [00:07:00] ensemble show and we really wanted to give the actors a chance to learn and get to know each other's rhythms and paces and how their characters functioned.

And honestly, it's, it's, it's at a point now where for our last season, you know, We were able to record a, a good chunk of people together, but there were some people who, because they were sick or, um, you know, not comfortable with being in a studio with other people, um, we had to record separately. And the neat thing about doing.

Serial art like this where you're working with the same people year after year after year on the same characters, like the writers have created these characters who have such strong voices. And the actors all know exactly how their scene partners will deliver lines. And that's not to say that, um, they don't sometimes surprise us, but [00:08:00] like they all understand what these characters sound like and how they interact and how they're gonna react to certain things.

And, and that makes my job much easier because I think in a situation where you are not recording things synchronously or together, it becomes the director's

job to like read the script and hold in your head at all times what each character, what you want each character to sound like, and what their, what, what you're hoping they will do.

And then also what. Each performer who has already recorded what they have done and kind of holding those against each other and saying, Okay, I know I have a, you know, this kind of take of this line, and also an alternate take where they bring this other energy to it, and so now I need to make sure I'm crafting something with this next actor that fits with, you know, both of those.

**Andrea:** Yeah, no, it becomes a very different job then. And speaking from personal experience, I think it can turn into sort of a, a bummer situation sometimes when [00:09:00] somebody sends you something that's really surprising and interesting and you're like, This won't match anything. .

**Jeffrey:** Yeah, I, you know, I have, um, I don't know if I've ever gotten something that's like, ah, this is just impossible.

Um, this is, I, that's, that's part of why I always, you know, even if I'm sure I won't use it, I always like to contract in, you know, a, uh, a second session where I'm like, cool. I just learned, you just taught me something completely new about this scene. Let's, uh, let's revisit it and, um, and see what we can build because it's, it, yeah, it's, it's such a shame to, to lose that amazing insight, um, that each of your actors will bring.

And that's one of the great things about doing it all simultaneously and, and to a this extent in person together, because you can, each of the actors can react to that in real time. And you. So how did you

**Andrea:** find, um, coming into Starship Iris, where I think, correct me if I'm wrong, that this isn't [00:10:00] still the process yet where you have everybody in a room, but the room is essentially a Zoom room,

**Jessica:** Yes.

**Jeffrey:** Yes. Yeah. Uh, you know, um, I've been directing a lot of things, uh, or working on a lot of things that are kind of set up that way these days. Um, and. We're all getting so much better at being on Zoom, and I think I have certainly learned a lot through the last couple years about how to interface with actors and, you know, get good performances in those situations.

I think, you know, it's, it's worth saying that, like, as hard as it may be for the director in that situation, often I think the, it's the, um, The dialogue editor who really has a, their work cut out for them in those situations.

**Jessica:** Yes. Shout out to Erin, who is amazing, amazingly

talented. Well, and, and, um, you know, even.

My process as a [00:11:00] dialogue, editing and unwell, um, is, is part of my process as the director. I think that like, because I'm also a sound designer and editor, I do a lot of my directing in the dialogue edit, as funny as that sounds. Um, it's, it is. Even, even when we were recording everyone simultaneously, I will often go in and make big timing changes and shift things around, uh, or, or, you know, millions of small timing changes,

Uh, so, um, it's interesting because it's, you know, I, I feel like sometimes people say, Oh, it's, uh, Less artificial when you're all into the room together. And I, I actually don't think it's quite that. It's just, um, some of your work towards making it not artificial has already been done.

**Andrea:** Sort of on the subject of, I don't know if artificiality is the right word, but, um, did you find when you sort of started moving from stage direction where you've [00:12:00] got people who are very much moving in 3D space to this voice acting, which.

Purely kind of trying to do just a lot of things through inflection. Did you find it changed the way you had to direct it all?

**Jeffrey:** Huh? I, I mean, Uh, you know, actually I think maybe part of my process has been bringing back in more of the things that I do when I'm stage directing. I, I actually spend a lot of time giving actors blocking notes that they will never execute and they will never, you know, I don't want it to change how they, you know, I am.

For the most part, you know, depending on an actor's process, perfectly content for my actress to stay completely stationary in front of a mic the whole time. But I will still give them a lot of like, okay, at this point you're lying down. Okay, um, uh, with this line, I want you to cross the room to talk to them.

And I find, um, maybe [00:13:00] it's because a lot of the, the actors that I tend to work with have theater training that they respond really strongly to that and. It's often a better way of, of crafting the performance in terms of like getting

that energy. Um, I think one of the big differences in moving from stage to headphone , uh, let's call it that, is, is just the structure of making, you know, for a stage play you have.

Three w three to six weeks if you're very lucky of rehearsal. And then your cast is gonna go and like do the show for six to 12 weeks and um, you know, get it to as good of a place as you can by the end of that rehearsal. But like often. The show evolves and grows so much over the performance period. Um, and so you are trying to not only [00:14:00] set up your cast to like be in a place where they can leap off and start like that organic growth process, but also like as a director, you're like, Okay, these are the things I think are important and so I'm gonna have to like work with my cast to get all of that ingrained so that sticks around.

Whereas, Audio fiction, they only have to do it once and we only have to get the thing once. And even if they get, you know, if, if they nail one line in one take and one line in another take, or a one word of that line in one take and the rest of the line in another take, like I can work with that. And so it leads, I think, to a process of learning, Okay, how much rehearsal does this actor want?

How you. How much prep do we need to give them? And then going and just like capturing a bunch of stuff and, and giving yourself as the director, kind of that beautiful palette of [00:15:00] colors to paint with in post. Yeah. So, you know, um, with unwell we will generally, you know, we'll do just a completely cold read at the beginning of a recording session, just hear it out loud and then.

Usually one more read after a pretty comprehensive round of notes with a little bit of feedback sprinkled in in the second one, and then we just hit the studio, you know, And depending, honestly, depending on the actors, and depending on which writer wrote it, that part will go faster or slower and we'll, you know, sometimes discover things or sometimes craft a perfectly set diamond.

And what was the process like for Iris? So for Iris, um, you know, because we were all remote there ended up being a thing where we kind of just recorded all of it. We started again with a pretty cold read going through, [00:16:00] um, a chunk. Giving some notes and then doing usually two takes after that. Part of the thing with the season of Iris that I directed, or the pieces of the season that I directed is that, um, we broke it up.

Way more into just little French scenes rather than recording a full episode at one time, which is something that makes, that is a lot easier to do when you are not bringing people into a studio. You know, when you're bringing people into a studio, you want to get a full session in. Whereas in a situation like this, you can

be like, Okay, this is at this point we are going to, you know, take a half an hour and record just the scene.

Um, so that was a very different process. It's also, you know, they are, um, I feel like because I am not producing or, um, crafting that show from a, from a larger angle, there is, I am way more, um, listening to the [00:17:00] actors there and. Figuring how to out, how to best support their choices. You know, these, these people have all spent a lot of time with the characters and notably way more time with the characters than I have.

Mm mm And so, um, it would be silly for me to pretend that I understand. Anything about the character's motivations or what they're doing better than they do. However, I am able to be an outside ear and say, Okay, I think what I'm hearing is you are going for this. In that moment have you considered, you know, bolstering it by thinking about this or, you know, ah, I hear the joke that you're making there.

Um, but I think it could be supported better if you, you know, give yourself a little more space there. Things like that. Mm-hmm.

**Andrea:** So Jeffrey, one of the things I've kind of noticed in all of the work of yours that I'm really familiar with is that there is a really strong ensemble core, and I think that [00:18:00] also is true of Iris. Um, what is it about those kind of stories that you're particularly drawn to?

**Jeffrey:** Oh gosh. Um, that's a great question.

I mean, I love people and the more people I get to cast the happier I am. Uh, that's kind of a joke and kind of not . Um, you know, part of it is that, um, I have been mostly interested in crafting these, you know, kind of big multi actor, um, fully realized. Movements, sets, et cetera, worlds. Like, that's just like the work that I have gotten involved with mostly.

And so, and I think, I think the ensemble cast is a great way to do that. The producer and uh, you know, person who has to maintain the budget and do the scheduling. Half of me is like, Jeffrey, why can't you just do a single [00:19:00] narrator piece? Like, come on. And so, you know, maybe I'll do one of those very soon, um, just so I could get to nap occasionally.

Wow. Um, No . No, no. I think, I think, um, uh, I, I do also, I love listening to single narrator pieces. A lot of my favorite shows are, are like that. So, I, I, I don't think it has been, um, so much a conscious like choice to go towards the

ensemble nature. It's just that the, the stories that I have been excited about telling have been much more suited to that kind of structure.

Uh,

**Andrea:** I have a question for Jess for kind of the Irish side of things. I think it's still somewhat uncommon in the more DIY side of the podcasting space to have somebody direct the work who did not write it because money is hard. Um, yes. But what made you decide [00:20:00] fairly early on that you wanted to have somebody else in there?

Um, doing that part of it?

**Jessica:** Yeah, so I directed the first, I wanna say, four episodes of Starship Virus, and what I found was that I was bad at it. I came in thinking, Oh, this will be simple. You know, I wrote the scripts, I understand them, and I realized when I got into the zoom room with the actors that all that I understood was already on the page and there was, there was no additional guidance I could give them and they would try a performance.

So when I write scripts, I read everything out loud, very literally. I do a a little one person table read. . And so they would make choices that were not how I had read it, and I would be like, Maybe that's better. I don't know. I don't know if I should get a take the way that I expected it to go or not.

Like I, I felt so silly because they, they, they wanted guidance and I had [00:21:00] just, I was like, Wow, this is really hard. And also there are people who are good at it, who like to do it and they should be doing

this job.

You know, directing is one of those funny art forms where, because I think because as a director your, your artistic medium, by which I mean the like, In the same way that like a painter has paints and brushes like your, your medium is other people.

And so it can feel like a thing that anyone can do because anyone can, you know, talk to people and tell them to do things. That being said, I think it is, it is a highly specialized skill set, um, to be good at directing. And it's one of the few things where I am mostly on the side of, of course, [00:22:00] like get rid of gatekeepers and things like that, but like, Mostly of like, if you want to paint a painting, you should paint a painting.



Uh, and if you want to act, you should go and read Shakespeare on the corner and so people listen to you like just go do it. Awesome. And maybe this is because it's an art form that I'm involved in and maybe not. I don't always feel that about directing. And I think it's because as a director, someone is putting a, an enormous amount of trust in you and investing a lot of power in you.

And I really think that because your medium is other people, It is a position where you can do a lot of harm intentionally or not. It is. It is a place where you can hurt, offend, [00:23:00] emotionally damage in a lot of cases, put people in physical danger if you are not thinking very, very deliberately about what you are doing.

And so like, Do I think that anyone who is interested should pursue directing? Yes, absolutely. Do I think anyone who wants to should direct? Right now, I'm, I'm a little less comfortable saying that because I, you know, you, it's, it's a bit like being a teacher, uh, in some ways or a coach. If, if, if, if I, you know, if someone was learning to weightlift, you wouldn't say, Oh, you, you love weightlifting, so you should teach them.

Like, no, that's a horrible idea. Someone is going to get really hurt. And, you know, I think, I think in a similar way, like, [00:24:00] yeah, it's, it's. It is an art form that should always be done incredibly deliberately and with an awareness of the power and, um, and effect that you can have on another person.

**Andrea:** Um, for people who are interested in sort of exploring that avenue more, do you have any sort of suggestions about how to start shifting your thinking to consider some of these things that you've brought?

**Jeffrey:** Gosh, Uh, that's a great question. Um, yeah, therapy, Um, . No, I mean, I mean, legit. Yeah, like, like figure your own stuff out and, and be in the process of being able to really actively empathize. With the people you're interacting with and the people you are working with. And I think practicing the practice of caring and, and [00:25:00] holding people carefully into all parts of your life, like.

It is a really good start and a really good place to kind of practice it. And as a bonus it'll just make you a, you know, nicer person to be around. But, um, I think doing that, I, I think directing is, is one of those funny things in that like, especially once you've gotten rolling a little bit as a director, um, you.

You very infrequently get a chance to be inside of someone else's process. It's part of why I love and try to maintain an outside life, uh, from a directing as a

sound designer, because then I get to kind of listen in on how other people direct and watch their process and learn from it. But I think, you know, places where you can find someone who.

You trust and, and think is doing good work [00:26:00] and you know, sitting in on recording and listening to how they work and stealing things that work and learning from things that don't work is great. . And you know, the good news is that you can do that in a lot of ways. You can be an actor, although, you know, when you're doing that, you're very focused on doing something else.

So that can be harder. You can, um, just asking to shadow or saying, Hey, do you need a script supervisor or any other number of kind of roles that you would need to be in the room. Um, I think is a really good way to kind of watch other people and see how they handle those problems. But I do think that like, one of the things that makes you a good director is just being able to, um, get people to listen to you while you're being kind, which is, you know, turns out like there are so many stories about bad directors because [00:27:00] it's, it's easy to.

Get a bunch of people going in the same direction if you don't care about how they feel about it. And that might make a good movie, but it's not a great way to live your life for anyone in that situation. So, yeah. Uh, yeah.

**Jessica:** Yeah. When you hear those like nightmare stories about directors who like slapped their actors to get the right take, it just feels like, why didn't you trust your actors to act their job is to, is to do this.

Mm-hmm. .

**Jeffrey:** Hmm. Yeah.

**Andrea:** Nobody needs to get slapped and nobody needs to get sent like rats, . Yes. Uh, to sort of pivot back onto a slightly lighter note, um, Jeffrey, what was it like, uh, coming into the Starship virus process as far as, um, meeting and interacting with the cast? Oh,

**Jeffrey:** uh, they are just, Deck to Canopy, Um, I don't know, spaceship terms quite well enough.

um, deck to [00:28:00] canopy, just like deeply, deeply sweet people. It was, it was really neat to meet everyone. Um, and like as someone who has been a fan of the show, like really neat to kind of both see faces behind the voices and, uh,

get to see these people kind of. Jump in and inhabit these characters that they've been playing for a long time.

That was really fun. Yeah. They're just all really lovely people, so I felt very welcome and, and had a lot of fun. Um, of the

**Andrea:** episodes you directed this season, was there anything that particularly stood out to you? Is this is, this is the thing I feel like I left a really good stamp on, or this was the thing where there's a challenge that I feel like I really overcame.

**Jeffrey:** Oh gosh. Um, we've had a whole pandemic since then. . No, I, you know, I, the, honestly, the things that stand out [00:29:00] for me about that process were really getting. Getting to hear the things between the takes, getting to hear the camaraderie between the cast, getting to listen in on, you know, all of the inside jokes that, uh, had pres been preserved from previous seasons, and, and just getting to kind of experience that, you know, it's, it's a, like you said, it's an ensemble show and it's always just so much fun to get to hang out.

With an ensemble that's already been built and like sit in and listen in on that. Yeah.

**Jessica:** Thank you everybody for listening to this episode through whichever means that you found it. We're gonna do plugs where each of us plug something and it, it doesn't have to be a podcast, but frequently it is. I'll start, I'm gonna plug, um, because I, I plug, Keep it steady.

My romcom high school audio drama all the [00:30:00] time. And I plug Starship Virus all the time. So I'm just gonna say, um, there is a podcast called the A Cast, which is, uh, Jamie Loftus doing a deep dive on the Kathy Comics. And it sounds like a joke, but it's not, and it's amazing. And going into the politics of it, going into.

The kind of the, the criticisms of boomer feminism and every, every angle you can think of gets covered and it's just a delight.

**Andrea:** I haven't plugged me in AAU actually in a few episodes, so, and since, Yeah, go ahead. Yeah. Uh, so me and AU is a complete 15 episode romcom ish, uh, coming of age story about meeting and falling in love.

Through the time honored medium of where we'll fa you slash trans fiction. It's

**Jessica:** [00:31:00] such a delight. Strong

recommend

**Andrea:** And you can find it everywhere you find Starship Iris, including our website, uh Percy, on podcast network.com.

**Jeffrey:** Um, I am going to plug a, uh, a musical artist that I have fallen down a deep dive on.

Um, you should go check out the, uh, Mongolian death metal band. The HU? Uh, h u. Um, they are amazing and, uh, they are, um, Just fan a fantastic risks of metal and traditional instruments and you know, this deep, wonderful singing. So go give yourself an a treat and check them out.

**Jessica:** Fantastic. Thank you both so much for being here and doing this.

Yeah. Thank you so much, Jeffrey This's been a great

**Jeffrey:** conversation. This was delightful. [00:32:00] I really appreciate it.