

EPISODE 751

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:39.4]

FT: Happy 4th of July everyone. Independence day. Hope you're relaxing, enjoying some barbecue, celebrating our independence, holding your family tight. I was wondering whether or not to air this particular episode today, wasn't sure how many people would actually be listening to podcasts but I'm assuming maybe, if you're relaxing and you're by the beach, you're not at work, that you might enjoy a podcast or two and so, maybe no better day than today to air one of my favorite interviews of 2018.

From mining for money in Central Park to winning an Oscar, our guest today has experienced an incredible climb in her personal, professional and financial life. We're welcoming Christine Lahti to the show today, you may know her from her roles in Chicago Hope, Running On Empty, Housekeeping, Swing Shift, Law and Order Special Victims Unit, The Black List. My goodness, Christine won an academy award in 1995 for directing a film called Lieberman in Love.

She's been on Broadway, she's won a golden globe and an Emmy, she's also now an author. Her book is called *True Stories from an Unreliable Eye Witness* where she dives into personal stories from childhood as well as her acting career. Many stories she's never told and we're also going to talk about you know, life growing up in the Midwest in the traditional patriarchal family, what she learned witnessing the financial dynamic between her parents, her mom, a traditional stay at home mom.

How she then went on to scrape coins together in the early days of her performance career. Then we talk about the intersection of money and feminism and building a lasting career in the volatile world of entertainment.

Here is the great Christine Lahti.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Christine Lahti, welcome to So Money, how are you?

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CL: I'm great, thank you so much for having me.

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FT: I can't wait to dive into your new book, *True Stories from an Unreliable Eye Witness*. Congratulations.

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CL: Thank you, yeah, it's my first book and I'm really excited about it.

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FT: It is kind of a memoir, a series of essays that you actually started writing years ago because your daughter encouraged you, right? I read that that was something that was an inspiration that came from one of your children.

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CL: Yes, I had hit the age of 60 and got hit with this tsunami of ageism in Hollywood as an actor and the parts, the interesting parts, the really challenging parts were not coming my way and I was complaining about it and you know, feeling sorry for myself and my daughter said, "Stop, your belly aching mom and go create your own stuff. Quit waiting around for some man to hire you and go start writing your stories down."

I did and I started performing them as monologues at first, thinking maybe I would create a one woman show and now it's a book and then hopefully I'm going to adapt it into a proper one woman show.

[0:03:41.8]

FT: My gosh, I can see a movie, I can see a television series. And right on for your daughter for encouraging you to do this. I have read that this book is about a lot of things, it's about life, it's about love, it's about career, it's about Hollywood but it's also about your sort of evolution into feminism, becoming a feminist. Sounds like your daughter's already there.

[0:04:02.7]

CL: Yeah. I think she was born that way, it took me, you know, I had no idea what feminism was until I was in college and got – thank God, the women's movement, the second wave of feminism was happening. I feel like it's been my lifejacket for my whole life. I'm so grateful and I think because of that, I raised a daughter with – through the lens of feminism and this book is about my journey as an imperfect feminist and how you know, having inherited and internalized sexism and misogyny like we all have, growing up in this culture how I, you know, climbed back on and fallen off the feminist wagon many times.

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FT: What is your hope for readers? There's so many takeaways, timely takeaways, given the me too movement. You've had your own share of experiences, unfortunately. You also though talk about your migration to Hollywood and also, aging and everything in between but what is like the most special thing that you wrote about, that you hope, if there's nothing else, readers will walk away remembering, you want them to remember this?

[0:05:17.8]

CL: I guess what I'm trying to do in this collection of life stories is really reveal and embrace my own imperfections and the times when I messed up or failed someone or you know, just didn't

live as - didn't act, I'm sorry, didn't act as a feminist. So that I think, in writing about them, I've been able to kind of forgive myself and then also in writing about relationships with my parents and my family members, I've been able to – in the writing, I was able to find some healing and –

But really, as honest as I could be, I wanted to tell my stories and then forgive myself, try to forgive myself for a lot of imperfection.

[0:06:11.9]

[0:06:11.8] FT: Have you forgiven yourself?

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CL: Yeah, I think so, it really was a healing therapeutic process to write this book. It was shockingly so actually.

[0:06:21.0]

FT: One of the passages. I'm quoting it off from actually the New York Times. Everyone read this great interview with Christine in the New York Times, mentions an excerpt from the book you write about, It was about 1973, this was before your incredible career as an Oscar winner and an Emmy winner and a Golden Globe winner and Broadway.

That you were in central park earning \$3.35 as a mime. Talk about grit, right? It was short lived but you still did it and –

[0:06:57.0]

CL: Did it, yeah.

[0:06:57.4]

FT: Take me back to that time. Who was Christine then?

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CL: Okay, I graduated from college, spent one year working towards and MFA and then hated the training so I fled to New York and got incredible - started enrolling in these amazing classes with Uta Hagen and William Esper from the Neighborhood Playhouse.

I had to waitress a lot to support myself. I thought, how can I make some money in a more creative way and I had learned some mime so my girlfriend and I went out to central park on the first day, it snowed, the timing wasn't great, nobody was in the park and as you said, we made three dollars and something and change and we had to split it. She played the clarinet.

And I performed mime rather badly. I really was not happy as a mime, I didn't really see a future as a mime or any kind of financial security. I just gave that up and pursued my acting and waitressing and then eventually was able to just stop waitressing because I made money as an actor.

[0:08:05.8]

FT: What was your big break and what did you do when you got your first reasonable paycheck? Not \$3.35, obviously.

[0:08:12.3]

CL: I remember, the big break, I guess I finally did a national commercial and I had visually sworn that I was never going to do commercials because I was an artiste and that was selling out but then you know, again, I got really tired of waitressing and taking two jobs as a waitress sometimes. I found these acquiesced and decided that selling out would be just fine and I did a commercial for Joy dish washing liquid.

That was actually okay as a feminist because I was playing a coach to my son's little league team and I got to wear like sweats and a baseball hat. It didn't feel like such a you know,

completely clichéd version of the housewife. She at least had some kind of dimension to her and I remember being able to buy a fan for my apartment.

My studio apartment that had no air conditioning and I felt so excited and sort of liberated and independent that I could actually buy my own fan and put it in my apartment and it just felt very adult buying that fan.

[0:09:29.4]

FT: We've been talking about feminism up to this point. I mean, I have this theory that really, being financially independent as a woman is one of the best ways to practice being a feminist, right? Because if it's about having choice and freedom and equality, you need money.

[0:09:46.1]

CL: Yeah.

[0:09:46.9]

FT: You can't have someone else's money telling you what to buy or what not to spend on.

[0:09:51.0]

CL: I think financial independence is key to being able to live a life as a feminist. I grew up with a mother and father who were typically 50s, you know, patriarchy, my father was a surgeon, my mother was a stay at home mom, she raised six kids but – she never had her own money until much later in life and I watched as my dad would take away her credit cards when she misbehaved.

If they had an argument, I remember like – I write about it in the book. The next morning, we go out shopping and I'd say, can we get this or this? She said, "No honey, your dad took my credit cards away," and I said, "Why?" "Well, I misbehaved," and I thought she was like treated like a child.

I just – it really scared me and I just was determined, when I got to be an adult that I would always be financially independent. Even to this day, I have my own business manager, I have my own, savings account, my own investments, have nothing to do with my husband of 35 years.

[0:10:58.3]

FT: I love that so much, we also, in my marriage, we have our own accounts, I think also, these days, as couples are marrying later in life and maybe coming with their own assets or children of their own from previous marriages. It's kind of the way it works, you know? You have your own stash and I like that. It gives you autonomy in your relationship.

[0:11:21.2]

CL: Yes. Also, you know, the fact that any woman is now changing her name to take her husband's name, just seems so antiquated and sexist. And why? Why would someone leave, you know, leave, lose their name, lose their money, lose their identity, lose everything in order to get married. That just seems so strange to me that people are still doing that.

[0:11:47.2]

FT: Well, you mentioned, learning a lot about money or at least what you didn't want your financial life to look like through the experiences, the witnesses of your parents interacting with money, was there ever a time when they actually spoke to you about money? There is a survey that our sponsor did recently, Chase Slate that over half of the parents today have talked to their kids about money to some extent.

But was there a conversation or a lesson or anything that they taught you?

[0:12:20.7]

CL: No, I mean, they did both of them to their credit, told me that if I worked hard enough, the sky was the limit and that hard work and being financially independent was going to be essential for me to accomplish my dreams. That was a really great gift they gave me but I don't remember them sitting down and saying, you know, "Here is how much you should save," and here is any of that specifics.

I do remember that my mom wanted money to help my daughter out. Sorry, my mom wanted money to help my sister out, her daughter. When she was struggling with severe mental illness and she wanted to give her some, you know, extra help and because my dad didn't want to –

She called me up and said, "Could you send me some money to help my sister out?" I would do that, I would send her these secret checks so that she could give her whatever – send her things in the mail or help her out with groceries or whatever extra help she wanted to give her daughter and she wasn't able to because she didn't have any money.

Later on in life, she became a professional artist and started selling paintings and that was an extraordinary thing for her, to actually have her own money and do with it whatever she wanted.

[0:13:44.3]

FT: What did she do with the money? I'm curious.

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CL: I think she helped her kids out.

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FT: Yeah, that's so sweet.

[0:13:52.7]

CL: Yeah.

[0:13:54.6]

FT: What is your proudest money moment, Christine? As you have built this incredible multi-revenue career, which I love. Because that's also being an actor and a performer. You know, you don't have a show for 30 years, right? You have a show and then you have a movie and then you have a one woman show and then you have a year where you're not doing anything in some cases.

I'm always asking guests like, what was their So Money moment so to speak? A time in your life where you really felt that, you made a very smart financial decision?

[0:14:28.5]

CL: Okay, I bought an apartment in New York City after my first movie, I think it was – no, it was right after I did Swing Shift and I made some good money on that. It was maybe, that was maybe my third movie but I bought a really ugly, horrible apartment but it was my own, on West 70th Street and was able to sell it maybe five years later for a huge profit and that was allowed us to, then I met my husband and we bought another place and the West 86th Street.

I think it was real estate and I wasn't savvy about it, I just got in at a good time and sold it a good time and that was a really great investment and I felt so proud of that like how did I just make all that money?

[0:15:15.6]

FT: It's New York baby.

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CL: It's New York baby. It was a really ugly apartment.

[0:15:21.4]

FT: Did you give it TLC, did you renovate it?

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CL: I didn't – I did actually, I did some changes to it, little things. Like opened up a hole in the kitchen so you can put a little counter. Yeah, little things I did. I just felt so proud of owning this little ugly place and made it my own and made it really – what I used to do is you know, on the Upper East Side, people put out trash, right?

In those days, it was – on trash day, you could find kitchen tables and chairs that maybe had a hole in them but I would go around with my friends and we would gather up furniture for our apartments and from the Upper East Side on trash day.

I remember, I would have these chairs in my apartment and I would – it had holes in them and the cushions but I would cover them with beautiful material that I had bought and I would just pin them, you know, because I didn't really care about sewing, I didn't know how to sew.

But I would pin them and the people would come over for parties and you know, the pins would come up and some people got stuck with the pins and it was kind of embarrassing but I just remember thinking, well, at least it looks really nice.

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FT: And it's free.

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CL: And it's free, exactly.

[0:16:31.0]

FT: There's only one way from here and it's up.

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CL: Yeah, exactly.

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FT: I can put a nice pillow on this and stain removed.

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CL: Yes.

[0:16:42.6]

FT: Wow, those were the days. Now you have to go to a consignment shop to find anything valuable that was left from someone in east, you know, East Park Avenue in 79th Street or something.

[0:16:52.2]

CL: Right, well now, antique stores are you know, they're just gathering up that furniture and then fixing them up and selling them for thousands of dollars.

[0:17:00.2]

FT: I'd like to go back to your smart decision to create something that was your own which was this one woman show, this collection of stories, which is now a book, which is I mean, you've become the queen of parlaying.

And I think that that is brilliant and it's not a coincidence I think that we're seeing more women in Hollywood big names like Reese Weatherspoon and others who are taking on their own projects. Or starting their own production companies and they're getting outside of Hollywood,

right? They're extending their brands and their sort of fame to create opportunities in fashion and in retail and opening restaurants and being entrepreneurial.

Is that the way to sort of make your career now? Because unfortunately, there still is ageism and there still is a sort of an unfair advantage that younger actresses have over older actresses. You have to kind of come up with a plan for the later years?

[0:18:02.5]

CL: Yes, absolutely. I remember being at the height of my career in my I guess mid-30s, late 30's and people would say, "Well you could just start production company and I would say, "No I am not entrepreneurial like that. I am just an actress." So that is part of my less proud moments as a feminist but I didn't know anything about that and I teach younger women acting classes and when I am teaching these classes, men and women but I particularly say to the actresses, "You know you have to be able to write, direct, produce, act. You have to do everything right, you know that" and they always say, "Well duh, I've already got a web series, I have already written a short film, I am already directing." They're already so empowered these millennial women and my daughter is a perfect example of that and I feel like because a lot of them are raised by feminist mothers. They have that sense of, "Of course I am going to take my career into my own hands and not be dependent."

As an actor you're so dependent on other people hiring you. So yeah, I am a late bloomer in that way and I am producing it now. I am developing material for myself. I want to direct more and create more opportunities for women tell stories that aren't being told about women particularly older women. So yeah, I feel right now that now, I feel entrepreneurial but it took me a long time.

[0:19:36.9]

FT: You described a little bit about the dynamic you have in your marriage, the financial dynamic, go there with us a little bit more. I'd love to learn a little bit about how you and your husband and if you do have money talks or if there is more to your dynamic that is worth sharing, we'd love to learn from you because it sounds like you have a good system down.

[0:19:58.8]

CL: Well at first it was I was making way more money than he was. I was getting these movies and he was just starting out in directing commercials for Off-Broadway shows and so it was a real imbalance and we kept a ledger.

I really wanted it to be 50-50 but he didn't feel threatened that I was making more money and I didn't feel odd about it. I thought it was kind of fantastic and then as the years went by it shifted.

And then sometimes he would make a lot more money than me and then we stopped keeping a ledger and then it was like, "Okay if this is going to be our life together, it's going to shift, sometimes I am going to be paying more of the bills and sometimes you are." And our business managers would talk to each other and, "Okay well this year is pretty linear for Christine. So why doesn't Tommy take over a little more of the mortgage?" Or whatever.

So that's how it's been for us. We've just been trusting that it is going to be shifting for both of us, for both artists and you know, we'll take care of the bills accordingly but it has been really a partnership financially, really a good collaboration in terms of building our financial life together.

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FT: That's great and you have separate business managers. That seems like – is that advantageous or does it create extra layers at times?

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CL: It's been important, I don't know. It might create work sometimes but it's been important for me to keep my finances separate. I did finally this year take a lot of my investments and give them over to Tommy's, my husband's, investment guy so that that's all under one umbrella but I still maintain all my bills and finances and everything with a separate business manager. I guess that is just important to me and will always be.

[0:21:59.0]

FT: And do you think it's rooted a lot in your childhood? I think for me a lot of the decisions that I make now as a 38 year old mom and I am also the breadwinner in my marriage, it is not accidental. A lot of it is the conditioning that I had as a kid growing up.

[0:22:14.7]

CL: Absolutely. Again, I really think that unless women are financially independent that there is – it is a lot harder to really have any freedom in your life to live as an empowered, equally human person.

[0:22:37.6]

FT: Yeah and I'll even go so far to say that that means for those who opt out of the workforce to raise their kids, I mean there has to be a re-entry strategy, please.

[0:22:47.3]

CL: Yes, a re-entry strategy and by the way, why aren't housewives and mothers who do give up their careers maybe there should be some salary involved in that I mean – you know what I'm saying? I don't know how you do that but it always seemed weird to me that my mom wasn't paid for raising six kids and maintaining a house and providing meals.

[0:23:09.5]

FT: Well no one can afford her, that's the truth. She's worth hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars.

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CL: You're right and to have her credit cards taken away because she – you know? That is just really sad and that was such, that image or that –

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FT: Well money was power in your mom's and dad's relationship it sounds like. It was a way to wield power.

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CL: Completely, but it was real. She also, even if she wanted to ever made him – I mean they had a loving relationship but they had problems like everybody and even if she ever – I mean I think about women who are physically abused and can't get out because they don't have any kind of financial independence, right?

They don't have a plan to support themselves and that is really scary. How many women stay in abusive relationships because they can't leave?

[0:24:03.9]

FT: Yeah, they are not in a safe place which means they have to leave but also they can't. It is not that easy.

[0:24:10.2]

CL: That's right, I mean where are they going to live? Of course there are shelters but you know how realistic is that, how scary is that? And yeah, I just think it's just so important for women to at least have some kind of stash put away or some kind of income coming in, even part time.

[0:24:27.5]

FT: I'm so excited to open *True Stories from an Unreliable Witness*, you need to give yourself more credit Christine.

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CL: Well that title is meant to be a little tongue and cheek.

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FT: I know but yeah.

[0:24:39.1]

CL: It is, it is about memory of that title. It came from a story that I was writing about and it was a story about my dad kicking our mother out of the station wagon on a family trip in Chicago. There were six kids in the car and my dad kicked my mom out of the car because she was smoking and he hated it and he was a surgeon and he had worked on – he had all these lung cancer patients.

He hated smoking. So he kicked her out of the car and I remember him driving away and I was sitting in the way, way back and I see my mom's body getting smaller and smaller and smaller and I am thinking at eight years old, "I am never going to see her again, oh my god!" And I recounted the story to my brother and sister as I was writing about it and they had no memory of it and they were in the car.

And so it's just about that title relates to how memory is so subjective and especially these big emotional memories that I write about in the book, they are my memories. That is the most honest that I can be about my childhood, about growing up in show business, as a feminist. But it is so subjective and that is why I say that but honestly I mean it tongue and cheek and that because I am attempting to be so honest, I am actually I think a very reliable narrator.

[0:26:05.6]

FT: As they say in Hollywood, inspired by a true story.

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CL: Yes, exactly right.

[0:26:13.5]

FT: Christine Lahti, thank you so much. Tell us where we can find you next in the big screen, on the stage.

[0:26:19.4]

CL: I wish I could talk about a play I am 99.9% going to be doing. I am so excited about it but the deal hasn't closed so I can't mention it. Maybe by the time this airs there will be some news and you can announce it but I can't say anything right now about it but I am really excited.

[0:26:40.9]

FT: Well we of course will follow you and we'll have all of your links so people can keep up with all of your busy projects and your next steps. Congratulations on *True Stories from an Unreliable Eyewitness*, it is going to be one of the few books that I will actually get to read this summer but I am going to add it to the list. Thank you so much and have a great, great night.

[0:27:00.4]

CL: You too, thank you so much. I really enjoyed this talk.

[END]