

Shmanners 336: Rebekah Harkness

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you are listening to *Shmanners*.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: I feel great!

Teresa: Oh, good!

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: I also feel great. [laughs]

Travis: I love a morning recording. We don't normally get to do them. Justin is out of town when we're recording this, so we are recording this during the window of time we normally do *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*.

Teresa: Oh.

Travis: And usually *Shmanners*—

Teresa: Are you gonna be bringing me that kind of energy?

Travis: Yeah, interrupting—

Teresa: Some real— real classic goof-em-ups?

Travis: Talking too much. Well, I don't know about classic, but a lot, and at least 10% of them might land.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Yeah! Uh, but I'm in a great mood.

Teresa: Nice.

Travis: Our Christmas shopping is basically done, which is very exciting.

Teresa: Well, *your* Christmas shopping is done.

Travis: Hey, babe? We're married! *Our* Christmas shopping!

Teresa: But I still have a few more things to get for you, and the animals, the dogs and the cat.

Travis: Okay, but that includes me, too.

Teresa: But I need—

Travis: We're not getting separate presents for the dogs and cat.

Teresa: But I'm getting separate presents for you.

Travis: Okay. Make 'em good. I'll give you a full critique afterwards, just like I do every year.

Teresa: [sighs] Well, as you know, my job is always to win Christmas, so.

Travis: That didn't use to be true, by the way. I don't feel— until we started dating.

Teresa: But then— but then I won, and I just love that victory.

Travis: Well, so this is the thing, 'cause we talk about— we'll get to the episode in a second, folks. But you come for the banter.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um, in— so, growing up, right? For me, Christmas was a test of, like, how well do you know the person, right? So we didn't really do lists. I mean, we did the thing when we were kids, right? Of, like, going through catalogs and telling our parents. But then as we got older, like into our teenage years and into adulthood, it became like, "I knew that you would love this and you would never think of getting it for yourself." Right? And that kind of became the thing. And then you and I started dating, and your family is much more like "This is a very practical thing that you told me you needed, and I got it for you, and I saw a need and a filled a need." And it's just like, "I know you'll need this," right?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: And so what's funny is, this year it feels like you and I have reversed our programming, where I went through—

Teresa: Only for you. Only for you. I only—

Travis: But you're the one talking about winning.

Teresa: I only feel that way about winning with you. Everybody else, I can buy from their list. I don't care. But it's you. I want to win over you.

Travis: I'm glad that we've been together for 26 years—

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: —and you are still trying to impress me. That means a lot to me. The magic's still there.

Teresa: [laughs] It's still there.

Travis: Romance.

Teresa: Yep.

Travis: Competition.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Uh... I don't know what we're talking about this week.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: I could just banter with you all day long, my love.

Teresa: Um, so we are going to talk about Rebekah Harkness.

Travis: The witch from Scarlet Wi— no, that's Agatha Harkness.

Teresa: No... yeah. Um, so she was— first of all—

Travis: [fake surprise] Was? She's dead?!

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Aw, man.

Teresa: Um, so her story, very compelling, kind of wacky, and a little heartbreaking.

Travis: Just like me.

Teresa: Yes?

Travis: All three of those.

Teresa: And it was suggested by a *Shmanners* Fanner, so thank you very much. Um, she's kind of like a *Real Housewives* cautionary tale, why you absolutely don't want to be an heiress. [laughs quietly]

Travis: I'm pretty sure— and I've never watched the show— but I'm pretty sure everyone on *Real Housewives of Blank* is a cautionary tale.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Like I said, I've never seen it.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But my impression of just hearing other people talk about it is there's not a lot of, let's say, heroes on *Real Housewives*. And I say that, once again, don't @ me, bro. Because I don't know for sure. But that's just been my... take.

Teresa: The marketing...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: ... has shown you that.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, so a little bit of background. She was born—

Travis: I would like to make a show called Fake Housewives of Somewhere—

Teresa: [through laughter] Oh boy.

Travis: —where it's people who aren't married but pretend to be married, and it's like, who can pretend to be married the best? And it's a reality competition to see who can convince the other players that they're actually married. And half of 'em are married, half of 'em aren't.

Teresa: [sighs]

Travis: Will they win? I don't know. They're fake housewives.

Teresa: I don't know. Okay.

Travis: [speaking quickly] Or maybe they have to pretend like they don't have jobs?

Teresa: [laughs] You really are coming at me with that MBMBaM energy.

Travis: Baby, I told you. I got— well, this is normally when we record *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*, so I've got it all pent up. [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs] You gotta release it. Okay, born Rebekah Semple West on October 17th, 1915.

Travis: Simple West?

Teresa: Semple.

Travis: Semple.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Sample.

Teresa: *Semmm*-ple.

Travis: Sample?

Teresa: [wheezes] Do you—

Travis: With an E? I really can't hear it.

Teresa: Yes, with an E!

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: [exasperated sigh] Second daughter of Alan Tarwater West, who was a St. Louis stockbroker, and the founder of G. H. Walker and Co, which is a brokerage firm.

Travis: Already I can tell you, this family? Killing it on middle names.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Semple and Tarwater.

Teresa: Let me tell you why I mentioned all of those names. G. H. Walker is George Herbert Walker, the grandfather of—

Travis: Of George H. W. Bush!

Teresa: —George H. W. Bush, and great grandfather to George W. Bush.

Travis: So... okay. So Rebekah Harkness is an ancestor relation to the Bush family.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and then so along with rich people money come rich people problems.

Travis: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Teresa: Her parents were completely removed from any, like, raising of their children, which is not uncommon of this time period and of their socioeconomic status.

Travis: So, different from champagne problems, where a champagne problem is like, "I just don't have anywhere to keep all my diamonds!"

And it's like, "Ah, what a champagne problem."

This is more just like, oh, you weren't involved in your children.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Fun fact, her longest employed governess was probably so employed for so long because before that, she worked at an asylum.

Travis: Oh, interesting. You know, movies like *Mary Poppins* and *Nanny McPhee* and stuff like that make it look so fun when children try to run off governesses. But it's— I bet it's not fun, in real life.

Teresa: Yeah, I don't think it's fun.

Travis: No.

Teresa: Um, I mean, the exception being I think, like... the, like, modern royal family, I feel like the nannies and governesses are there kind of like as extra

parents, 'cause it feels— movies and TV and the media tell me that William and Kate are very much involved in raising their children, which I think is nice.

Travis: Sure. I don't know them.

Teresa: I don't know them.

Travis: I— listen. I have formed zero parasocial relationships with the royal family. Neither good nor bad. I— can I tell you? Until someone mentions them, I forget they exist.

Teresa: [laughs] That's probably for the best.

Travis: Yes. But to be fair, that's how I feel about most people when I'm not immediately looking at them.

Teresa: Oh. Okay. That's very telling.

Travis: Yeah. Yeah.

Teresa: Um, okay. So, as a child she liked dancing and ice skating, maybe because she liked it, but also because the pressure started early to be fit and trim and a good-looking wife.

Travis: Ughhh.

Teresa: She attended some pretty prestigious schools, including the Fermata School for Girls in South Carolina. It's a big deal, because lots of Roosevelts and several other high class famous families went through there.

Travis: Mm-hmm?

Teresa: And so, like, she had all of the— like, the outside trimmings of a high society lady, but she...

Travis: She didn't get... the— the— uh, the good part? [laughs]

Teresa: She acted out regularly.

Travis: Ohhh, okay.

Teresa: Um, and so she set out to, quote, "Do everything bad."

Travis: Wait, quote from who?

Teresa: Her scrapbook.

Travis: Oh boy. Okay.

Teresa: So typically after graduation a young girl of her socioeconomic status would go out to be a debutante, right?

Travis: Sure, yeah.

Teresa: Or a deb, we've talked about these.

Travis: Yeah, you would get your debut, and then you'd be a debutante.

Teresa: Mm-hmm. She thought of it more as a dog show.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: So, think Westminster.

Travis: So this is a... [sighs] would you say that just from this research and reading about it, it seems more like a rebellious streak than, like, a, she was a terrible person? I mean, hard to see where that line is, but if it's like, debutante stuff is a dog show, and ignored by parents and forced to do activities and then sent to a school and it's like [blows raspberry]. "I'm gonna—I'm gonna rebel! And I'm gonna do everything wrong here."

Teresa: Well, yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Little of column A, column B.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: So, by 1932, she and a group of her friends created a subculture of local debutantes, and they called themselves the debu-nots.

Travis: Oh, I like that! Now, I need to know. I need— Teresa? Sometimes when we do biographies of people that I do not know before we start, I become a fan of that person.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Is she a bad person? Does she grow up to be a bad person? 'Cause I need to know if I should be rooting for her now, or if it's like, "Oh, no, no, no, no. Do not get on her side now, because... some stuff gets bad."

Teresa: [sighs]

Travis: Okay. You've told me enough with that sigh, my love.

Teresa: Okay. So she, in her later years after— I mean, she just kind of, like, spent a ton of money just to spend money, and she had a reputation of being not nice, and she very selfishly built her— her, like, kind of social status on—

Travis: Okay, you don't have to tell me more. We'll get to it.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: But now I know, reserve— reserve. Say, "Mmm, interesting. Ah, I see." A lot more. Okay.

Teresa: Okay, okay, alright. Um, so for example, these debu-nots... [laughs quietly]

Travis: It's a good name.

Teresa: It's a good name!

Travis: It's good branding, too.

Teresa: She and her friends laced a punch bowl with mineral oil. Do you know what that will do to you?

Travis: Poops?

Teresa: Yes, the poops.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: It's a laxative. Other shenanigans would include dancing on tables naked... at these balls.

Travis: Now, hold on. I would say that there is a large gulf— even— we gave people, uh, digestive issues? Serious.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: But I would classify that as, especially in the early 1900s, a shenanigan. Then... somewhere farther down the scale...

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Is dancing on tables naked. Which I guess is a shenanigan of sorts, but seems, for the time period, a lot more risqué than giving people digestive issues. But maybe that's just my own naturally Puritanical nature. As you know, I'm a very reserved, uh—

Teresa: Of course.

Travis: ... Uh, very humble person.

Teresa: I'm just trying to give you the breadth of the debu-nots, just from one end of the scale to the other.

Travis: Sure, sure. Okay. I'm reserving judgment.

Teresa: She did eventually marry, albeit seven times.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Yeah, I know, right?

Travis: What is she, Snow White? Snow White was married to all the dwarves, right?

Teresa: No, she wasn't. No.

Travis: She just lived with them in sin?!

Teresa: I guess so...

Travis: Oh, man. Changes that whole movie for me.

Teresa: One of her marriages, I believe the first one was in 1931. She married a photographer because she had, quote, "Nothing else to do."

Travis: Oh boy.

Teresa: That doesn't seem very cool. Um, and later stated after having two children—

Travis: Now, it doesn't seem very cool morally, but it does seem like a cool thing to say in that rebel kind of way. "Oh, why did I marry him? Had nothing on." That's not— that's a pretty cool...

Teresa: I mean, I guess so.

Travis: Like, cool customer.

Teresa: She's also quoted as saying, "I knew I was making a mistake the minute I walked down the aisle," and divorced in 1946. A year later she got married again in 1947. William Hale Harkness is who she married, and that is how her life, like— she was rich, and then she became, like, the upper echelon rich after this.

Travis: Oh, okay, ultra rich, yeah.

Teresa: Ultra rich. They were— he was an heir to Standard Oil.

Travis: Oh boysie! Okay, yeah, that's a big one.

Teresa: Yeah. Uh, so there's— this is the difference between, like, well-off Midwestern money and, like, Rockefeller level money, right?

Travis: Yeah, right, right, right.

Teresa: Um, they were so rich that they held the wedding at William's apartment, at 730 Park Avenue.

Travis: Oh, on Park Avenue.

Teresa: Yeah. Huge place, right?

Travis: I assume that's in New York?

Teresa: Yes, indeed. [laughs]

Travis: Not a different Park Avenue, just somewhere else?

Teresa: No, no. Park Avenue, Manhattan.

Travis: Okay. Where they could see, I'm guessing, the Park?

Teresa: Sure. They were known for their opulence.

Travis: Sure!

Teresa: But also their philanthropy. So, they— opulent side, right? They purchased an estate in Watch Hill, Rhode Island, named the Holiday House, which was a mansion with its own private shoreline. Um—

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Yeah, I know, right? And this is where they hosted their, like, Great Gatsby parties.

Travis: Oh, sure, sure, sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Teresa: Right, yeah. For example, she once filled the pool on the property with Don Perignon.

Travis: Wow. One, uh, a lot of Dom Perignon, obviously.

Teresa: That's a lot.

Travis: But two, did people swim in it? 'Cause then instantly it's ruined.

Teresa: I guess?

Travis: Also it would feel weird. All the bubbles?

Teresa: You swim in it and you drink it while you swim?

Travis: Gross!

Teresa: I mean, it's kind of like drinking the bathwater, isn't it?

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Also you'd swim and you'd get sticky. There's a lot of bubbles. Can't be good for you.

Teresa: [laughs] I don't think—

Travis: Cannot be good for you. That's one of those opulence things where it's just like, yeah, that's opulent, but why? There's way more opulent things you could do.

Teresa: I know, but it's just a—

Travis: Practi— impractical.

Teresa: A giant waste of money is what it is.

Travis: Impractical. Do you remember we talked about that party on a previous episode where somebody filled a fountain with, like, champagne— with punch, I think, and then had waiters in little boats in it, and they would go around and, like, scoop it up?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That is, I think, better than just a swimming pool... where bugs are gonna land in that!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Like, right? You're gonna be attracting— ugh. I'm just saying, I'm actually grossed out.

Teresa: I'm imagining a *Wonderful Life* moment where someone gets pushed in because, like, everyone's ogling it, right? Someone gets pushed in, and then everyone jumps in on top of them. And then—

Travis: And then it's gross!

Teresa: And then it's gross, and they all get out, and their servants towel dry them with tiny cocktail napkins.

Travis: That's gonna ruin your clo— ugh.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: I have so many problems with this.

Teresa: Okay. Didn't last long. He passed away in 1954. They only had one child, who was five years old at the time.

Travis: Did he pass under mysterious circumstances?

Teresa: No, he was ill. He had cancer.

Travis: Oh, okay. Oh. Well, now I feel bad.

Teresa: Sorry.

Travis: I mean, I couldn't have known.

Teresa: Which means that she inherited the whole of his fortune, which at the time was 54 million dollars.

Travis: Wait, what year?

Teresa: 1954, and you don't have to adjust it.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: I already know.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: That would be 545 million dollars today.

Travis: Whoa. That's a chunk of change! That's some walking around money!

Teresa: Ohh, yes. So, for starters she poured a ton of money into—

Travis: Into a pool and swam around in it!

Teresa: [laughs] That Holiday House on Watch Hill. For some reason she decided to add eight kitchens, and 21 bathrooms?

Travis: Now, hold on.

Teresa: That's seems... [laughs]

Travis: Was she still doing the mineral oil thing?

Teresa: [through laughter] I don't know! I don't know.

Travis: Because then I get why you— how many guests do you have? Okay. Multiply that by two, and then give 'em all mineral oil. Have fun, folks. There's a bathroom for all occasions.

Teresa: Okay. So, in 1955—

Travis: I can't wait to find out what happened in 1955, but first, how about a word from some other Max Fun shows?

[theme music plays]

[Feeling Seen theme music plays]

Jordan: I'm Jordan Crucchiola, the host of Feeling Seen. Where we talk about the movie characters that make us feel seen.

Marissa: And I'm the show's producer, Marissa. Jordan, you've interviewed so many directors, actors, writers, film critics, and I like to play this little game where I take a sip of coffee every time someone says, "That's such a great question."

Guest 1: That's such a fabulous question.

Marissa: Or they tell you how smart you are.

Guest 2: I think you are rather brilliant.

Marissa: And of course, the big one is, when they—

Jordan: When they cry unexpectedly.

Marissa: ... Cry unexpectedly, yes, yeah.

Guest 3: Jordan, I don't wanna cry on your podcast.

Guest 4: I was not expecting to cry!

Jordan: [laughs]

Guest 5: I mean, it makes me kind of wanna cry.

Jordan: Feeling Seen comes out every Thursday on Maximumfun.org. Listen already! What are you waiting for?

Marissa: Jordan, that's such a great question.

Jordan: [laughs]

[Feeling Seen theme music concludes]

[Tights and Fights theme music plays]

Hal: Hal Lublin here with breaking news on a revolutionary form of entertainment, professional wrestling! For more, we go to our correspondent, Danielle Radford.

Danielle: Professional wrestling is the craze that's sweeping the nation. Featuring fisticuffs and colorful costumes.

Hal: But who can help us make sense of this world of body slams? Lindsey Kelk has the answer.

Lindsey: Sources tell us of an amazing called Tights and Fights. Filled with discussion of the absurdity of professional wrestling. Plus all the sincerity and hilarity that you could shake a stick at.

Danielle: Listen to the Tights and Fights podcast every week.

Lindsey: Find it on Maximum Fun, or wherever you get your podcasts.

Hal: And your old timey radio.

[Tights and Fights theme music concludes]

Travis: The year is 1955!

Teresa: And this is where she—

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: —embarked on her, quote—

Travis: I was gonna go longer with that, but...

Teresa: ... career.

[pause]

Travis: Okay. Assassin.

Teresa: [laughs] No. She considered herself a composer and a dancer.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She wasn't really very good at either one.

Travis: Hey, babe?

Teresa: But she was rich, so—

Travis: I could— I could infer that, because you started it with "She considered herself... "

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: "A composer and a dancer." And very rarely is it like, "Oh yeah, Picasso? He considered himself a painter." [through laughter] Like, people don't—

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: ... phrase it that way.

Teresa: Well, so since she was rich, she was able to put out albums and put on performances, and her rich friends loved to watch her do it. You know, but nobody really cared.

Travis: Yeah, 'cause this was before, like, TikTok and YouTube and stuff, where people would be like, "This is really bad and I can't stop watching it."

Teresa: She was consistent tabloid fodder.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Some of those include, she had a pet raccoon. She supposedly kept scotch in her fish tank. She allegedly was kicked off—

Travis: [simultaneously] Once again, were there fish in there?

Teresa: —off of a cruise ship for swimming nude.

Travis: Were?

Teresa: I don't know.

Travis: Was it loose scotch, or was it bottles of scotch? Were there fish in there? Were they drunk? The pet raccoon is the least shocking of them.

Teresa: Here's one. She is accused of dyeing her neighbor's cat green.

Travis: Okay?

Teresa: In a fit of petty vengeance.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Um, she appeared in *Vogue*. She, I mean, the artist part, right? Is interesting, because she's rumored to have taken Salvador Dali as a lover for a time.

Travis: I bet, just knowing what I know about him, that was weird.

Teresa: Oh yeah?

Travis: Yeah. I mean, do you think that anybody walks away from a relationship with Salvador Dali, known weirdo, and goes "Hm. Pretty vanilla."

Teresa: [laughs] I guess not.

Travis: No. I once saw a performance art video where that man recreated his own birth coming out of a giant egg, with lots of fluids. It was— I can guarantee, if you took Salvador Dali as a lover, hold on for the ride of your life.

Teresa: So in 1959, she founded the Rebekah Harkness Foundation to use her fortune to fund the arts.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Her first beneficiary was the Jerome Robbins Company Ballet USA.

Travis: Okay. That seems like a good thing.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Arts funding? I'm a fan of that.

Teresa: Yes. But the biggest one that she did was when she became a patron of Robert Joffrey.

Travis: I don't know who that is.

Teresa: Um, okay.

Travis: I think he was the king in *Game of Thrones*?

Teresa: Have you heard of *the* Joffrey? The Joffrey Dancers? The School for the Joffrey Dancers?

Travis: No?

Teresa: No, okay. Um, so it was kind of the best of times and the worst of times for the Joffrey Ballet Dancers, because she had a lot of money, and she was pouring money into this organization. But also, um, demanding that her whims be accomplished. So she wrote, quote, "ballets" for them.

Travis: Oh boysie.

Teresa: Yeah... because of her patronage, she scheduled one of her scores, called "Dreams of Glory," for—

Travis: So she used it as her own, like, artistic... like—

Teresa: Puppet.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Absolutely. You know, here's the thing. The dancers, they didn't like it. The public wasn't, you know, super enthused about it. But, you know, it was kind of like... she was supporting them, so...

Travis: Sometimes in the arts... you just gotta do what you gotta do to get through those tough times.

Teresa: So there's some good performances, there were some bad performances. There were several that were actually canceled, because they were always looking for excuses to cancel them, because they didn't like doing them.

Travis: As my older brother Justin once said, the easiest thing to do is nothing.

Teresa: Is nothing.

Travis: I find this is true, even now as an almost 40-year-old— well, 39-year-old, let's not borrow trouble— as an adult, if something gets canceled, even if it's something I was looking forward to, it suddenly feels like I've— I've just gotten bonus time on this Earth!

Teresa: Yeah. [laughs] In 1963 they were invited by John F. Kennedy to perform at the White House, which Robert Joffrey was not super enthused about, because again...

Travis: They had to do her thing?

Teresa: They had to do her thing.

Travis: Oh no!

Teresa: Um, and the one act production ending up costing over 135,000 dollars. You know, 'cause costumes, and props, and stage lighting and all this kind of stuff.

Travis: You got travel, you gotta put everybody up. Lot of overhead.

Teresa: And Rebekah paid for all of it, and it had a very lukewarm reception. [laughs quietly]

Travis: Yeah, so in the end Joffrey paid for it.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: This is the problem, man. This is the problem with funding of the arts and people using it like that and, like, making demands of it. Is like, you're getting that up front funding, but in the long term, you're tanking your, like, notoriety and audience and stuff like that. It's tough, man. A lot of— hey. If you're looking to fund anything, arts funding, really important right now. 'Cause arts funding is, like, the first thing to get cut when there's financial problems, right? 'Cause any organization, any business that funds arts is like, "Well! [blows raspberry]."

And the problem is, a lot of arts companies out there are having to make decisions between that, like, up front, do we focus on now or on long term thing? I'm just saying, support the arts.

Teresa: So eventually—

Travis: But don't make demands of 'em to do your crappy productions.

Teresa: Right. Eventually Joffrey cut her off.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Stopped returning her calls. I mean, but she had basically bolstered this entire company for years. So then she said, you know, "Screw you, I'll open my own company." [laughs]

Travis: Well, if they were smart, they saved a lot of the money she paid them and did an endowment.

Teresa: [laughs] Who knows? So in 1964 she withdrew her funding from the Joffrey Ballet, and took a bunch of their dancers with her, and opened the Harkness Ballet, and a company home called Harkness House.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Sure. Um, so she—

Travis: Rebekah's Place.

Teresa: Rebekah's Place. She refurbished a 1200 seat theater and, you know, continued to compose. And I guess— I don't know if she danced in this one or not.

Travis: There's no way. At this point it's, what? 1960-something?

Teresa: Yeah. '68.

Travis: And she was born in, like, 1915?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: There's no way she's dancing in it! 53?

Teresa: I mean, she received a Doctorate of Fine Arts degree from the Franklin Pierce College.

Travis: I'm not saying she couldn't dance.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: I'm saying what I know of, like, the ballet world?

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Is like, it's very similar to, like, professional sports. Where I think you would be hard pressed to find a person dancing at a professional level over the age of 40. And I'm not saying that because I think that that is true, I'm saying that because I think that that is the case amongst professional dance companies.

Teresa: Well, let's be honest. She doesn't really care if she's any good at it.

Travis: That is also an excellent point.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: That is also an excellent point.

Teresa: Um, this divided the art world at the time into two different camps, obviously. But here's the thing. She had a really bad reputation. She was very hard to work with.

Travis: [simultaneously] No way! Get outta town!

Teresa: Um, she considered—

Travis: [simultaneously] I couldn't have guessed.

Teresa: —the studio her own personal dance playground.

Travis: Yes, okay.

Teresa: And, you know, anytime she would do a magazine, it was always all about her. It wasn't about, like, any of the performers or whatever. And she did dance, she cast herself in her ballet.

Travis: Well, there you go.

Teresa: Uh, [laughs] *Macumba*, I believe it's pronounced?

Travis: Great.

Teresa: In 1965. And, I mean, that's not great for your dancers, right?

Travis: No!

Teresa: She married again. She was becoming increasingly reliant on drugs at the time.

Travis: That's the other problem, right? When you're dancing at that age, there's a lot of injury and soreness and... I mean, I'm 39 now. I hurt myself standing up from playing with the kids on the floor.

Teresa: Yeah... uh, and so she didn't— she left that company too.

Travis: The one she started?

Teresa: She was like, "Whatever." She started a new one!

Travis: Called Harkness Dance Company 2.

Teresa: Uh, the Harkness Youth Dancers.

Travis: Did she dance with them too?

Teresa: It was a school for younger students.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And she spent, of course, an obscene amount of money on this school.

Travis: If you remove the selfish, self-serving part of this, she's doing a lot for the arts. Awesome.

Teresa: Sure. And it seemed that this one is the one that most pays off for her, especially. By 1970, she was so involved with the Harkness Youth Dancers that she actually didn't attend the main company's New York premiere, right? So she was really involved with these young kids. But... [heavy sigh] she was— she was pretty petty. Um...

Travis: Get outta town!

Teresa: [laughs] That year—

Travis: The same one who dyed her neighbor's dog green?

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Petty, you say?

Teresa: Petty.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: The main company, the Harkness Ballet, was supposed to perform at Montecarlo.

Travis: And she dyed 'em all green.

Teresa: Um, well, she canceled it. Just...

Travis: Just canceled it?

Teresa: Because?

Travis: Just because.

Teresa: Just because.

Travis: Oh boy.

Teresa: She didn't really— didn't really want to. And then she—

Travis: Did everybody still get paid?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh! Then boo!

Teresa: Nobody got paid. She fired all the dancers, replaced them with children.
[laughs]

Travis: Boo? Yeah, boo!

Teresa: Yeah. So she usurped her own company to prove a point, is basically what she did.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And when you're super rich, you get to do that?

Travis: And be a jerk.

Teresa: So her final years were plagued with family problems, duh, and health woes.

Travis: Oh, people at home didn't get along with her either? Weird.

Teresa: Yeah. Um, there were some difficulties with, I mean, her daughter Annabelle has a long, fascinating history that's a lot like her mom's. Um, a story of, you know, trying to be an artist, failed relationships, people exploiting her for inheritance.

Travis: Yep, yep, yep.

Teresa: Um, her son Alan shot and killed a man in a brawl—

Travis: [shocked] Oh boy!

Teresa: —and was charged with second degree murder. Which, 'cause he's rich, would be dropped to manslaughter. But he did actually go to prison for eight years.

Travis: Cool?

Teresa: And then she died on June 17th, 1982 in Manhattan, at 67. Her will clearly stated that she wanted to be cremated and placed in a 250,000 dollar gold urn.

Travis: Lordy loo.

Teresa: Designed by her friend, Salvador Dali.

Travis: Uh-huh. And?

Teresa: Well, so the urn that he made wasn't quite large enough?

Travis: Oh boy.

Teresa: Which is... kind of weird. The ashes that could fit in there were placed to rest in the Harkness family mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. The rest of her ashes were placed in a Gristedes bag, which is a supermarket? A high-end supermarket?

Travis: Oh boy! Oh boy!

Teresa: Is there a metaphor sadder than that?

Travis: Oh boy...

Teresa: I mean...

Travis: They couldn't have scattered them on the ocean or something?

Teresa: I guess not.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: [sighs] She wished to be an artist, and they put [holding back laughter] her ashes in a grocery bag.

Travis: I mean, it does make a statement.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Like all great art, it does make a statement!

Teresa: Um, but here is the reason— not *the* reason, but one of the reasons that she has not faded into antiquity.

Travis: Yeah?

Teresa: Is because of Taylor Swift!

Travis: Did Taylor Swift go to that dance company?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: Taylor Swift wrote a song on her album *Folklore* called "The Last Great American Dynasty," dedicated to Harkness's wild legacy.

Travis: Weird. Okay. Weird.

Teresa: Yeah. The song is more about how Rebekah was an ostracized woman determined to live her life to the fullest.

Travis: Okay. I don't know about all that. That seems like a romanticized version of it.

Teresa: It is. Definitely. And it's a great song. Um, but Taylor Swift also bought the Holiday House, the one that had all—

Travis: So she has, like, a thing for Harkness.

Teresa: Yeah, she has a thing. In 2013.

Travis: Okay. Interesting.

Teresa: So, I mean... Rebekah was clearly a woman who wanted to leave an impact.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Some of that impact was probably great for the arts. She also founded countless medical research projects. There is a medical research building in her honor that she gave a ton of money to.

Travis: That's good.

Teresa: I mean, so, like, it's good to spread the wealth around, right? The Joffrey Ballet as well also probably still benefits from the capital that she generates.

Travis: Well, if it still exists, then yeah.

Teresa: Yes. It's still operating today. So, like...

Travis: I'll tell you what it sounds like the problem to me— and this seems like a problem still happening today, but especially during, like, the— when we're talking about, like, heiresses and robber barons and oil magnates and stuff like

that. A lot of focus on legacy, right? Funding things, giving money to things to name things. Not a lot of focus on just, like, day to day kindness.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: More about, like, "I will be remembered 'cause my name is on all this stuff." And not like, "I will be remembered by this person that I was nice to."

Teresa: So, did society do her dirty? Do you think that you would side on the side of Taylor Swift saying that she was kind of like a, you know, a hurting woman who was misconstrued and just wanted to, I don't know, live her art dreams? Or do you think that maybe she used her wealth poorly, and treated people poorly?

Travis: Well, I don't know about using her wealth poorly. I mean, pouring a bunch of champagne into a swimming pool? Boo! It seems—

Teresa: But using an art company as your personal... puppetry?

Travis: So this is the problem, right? Is I think that it sounds like she did a lot of arts funding. And you talk about, like, medical research and stuff like that. Cool. But I don't know how altruistic— especially the arts funding doesn't sound like her heart was in the right place with it. Other stuff you can say, like, "Well, this got branded, and we only focused on the negative stuff, and she was rebellious and didn't want to do, like, the debutante thing." Okay, cool. But... the stuff with, like, using the company as her own playground and stuff...

Teresa: And not paying dancers, and leaving companies, and—

Travis: [simultaneously] Canceling stuff, yeah.

Teresa: Leaving— yeah.

Travis: That seems pretty cut and dry to me. So, I don't know, complicated. I'll leave it at that. I have no strong feelings. I will form no parasocial relationships.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: With— with Rebekah Harkness.

Teresa: If I— if I would— if I was going to extrapolate, I feel almost like maybe Taylor Swift identifies with Rebekah in a way. Not saying that Taylor Swift doesn't have any talent. I do believe that she does have talent. But maybe she feels like Rebekah was, you know, just a woman trying to do— live her dreams, right?

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: And Taylor Swift is like, "That's me."

Travis: "That's me. I'm the problem. It's me."

Teresa: [laughs loudly]

Travis: Alright, everybody! That's gonna do it for us. A couple announcements. If you're listening to this on the 16th, then Candlenights is tomorrow. That's when the show goes up. That's December 17th at 9 PM Eastern Standard Time. But even if you're listening to this later, the video on demand is available through January 2nd. Tickets are on sale now at bit.ly/candlenights2022, Candlenights 2022.

Don't forget to preorder *The Adventure Zone: Eleventh Hour* graphic novel. You'll get the preorder perks with those. The book comes out February 21st. You can go to theadventurezonecomic.com, and then submit your receipt at bit.ly/eleventh, the word spelled out, bit.ly/eleventhhourpreorder, and you'll get a lenticular sticker featuring art from the book. Go check out all the merch at mcelroymerch.com. 10% of all merch proceeds this month go to Harmony House, and we still have some tickets for the 20 Rendezvous Fancy Takes Flight, for the shows we rescheduled for April 27th in San Jose.

We're doing *Adventure Zone* with Aabria Iyengar. On April 28th in San Jose we're doing *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*. April 29th we're doing *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* in Denver. All existing tickets for those shows will be honored, and you can still get those at bit.ly/mcelroytours. Mask and proof of full vaccination or negative COVID test within 72 hours of event start is required. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group,

Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group today. Thank you—

Travis: I forgot to say. Thank you to our editor Rachel, without whom we could not make this show. Thank you to our researcher and writer Alex, without whom we could not make this show. And thank you for listening. We could make the show without you, but why?

Teresa: We couldn't make this part without you. We would love your suggestions, especially if you have suggestions— we would love your help with topic suggestions for Black History Month and Pride Month, and—

Travis: Anything else. If there's other months or dates or stuff that you're like, "This is an important date and they've never talked about this before." Then please, let us know.

Teresa: Absolutely. And you can send all of those suggestions to our Gmail, which is shmatterscast@gmail.com. And say hi to Alex, 'cause she reads every one.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners, *Shmanners*. Get it.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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