

Still Buffering 439: The Birdcage (1996)

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[theme music, “Baby You Change Your Mind” by Nouvellas plays]

Sydnee: Hello, and welcome to *Still Buffering*, a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us. I’m Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I’m Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: Tey, I know that you’re an expert on cats, right?

Taylor: [stammers uncertainly]

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: An expert, no, I wouldn’t claim that title. I love ‘em a lot, I love ‘em a whole lot. I might love ‘em more—

[cellphone rings]

Taylor: — than most people, but I don’t know about— That doesn’t make me an expert.

Sydnee: I—

Taylor: [wheezes] Just loving something a lot doesn’t make me an expert.

Sydnee: I usually go to you for cat related questions though.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah, and I have a theory about— So my cat Amelia, who I believe is part feral because for many years, we weren’t able to touch her. Like she lived in our house... and ate food that we gave her, and sometimes would sit in the same room with us. But if I approached her as if to pet her, she would run.

Taylor: Well, she was your cat’s cat, correct?

Sydnee: Yes, she was CJ's cat, and then CJ sadly passed away, and then we got Olive, and now she's kind of Olive's cat.

Taylor: Sure. Right, sure.

Sydnee: Which is weird also 'cause she's much older than Olive, but whatever.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't know, maybe that happens in cat communities.
[chuckles]

Taylor: [chuckles] They just adopt, they adopt each other.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: And then, you know.

Sydnee: But in the last like year and a half, she has started allowing us to pet her, which is very strange.

Taylor: That's great.

Sydnee: She's actually sitting— She's sitting in the chair across from me right now, just sort of staring at me as I talk about her. But she like—

Taylor: Well you better be— You better be good about what you say, she's listening. [chuckles]

Sydnee: I know, she's listening. Amelia. Yeah, she knows I'm talking about her.

Taylor: She thinks she's a guest, she's like, "Wait, I— Where are my headphones? Um, excuse me." [chuckles]

Sydnee: She is like literally leaning towards the microphone, I don't know if she's gonna—

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: — know if she's gonna talk, but she has wanted more pets and attention, and like I still have to be really like tentative when I approach her, like I have to reach very slowly. If I move suddenly, and she's not that way with everybody, it's mainly me that she'll let pet her.

She's starting to let Justin and the girls, there aren't many people outside of us that she'll let near her. All this to say, she does this thing where she'll come over and sit next to me, and reach up with her paw, and tap me. And I'll look at her and pet her, but she'll continue to tap me.

So it's not— I thought it was attention, I thought literally she was sitting next to me and tapping me like, "I'd like a pet now. I'm here, prepared for pets. Here, please pet me." But she continues to— And I— She was doing it last night while we were watching TV, I was petting her head, and she was reaching up and I thought "It's not a tap. She's petting me."

Taylor: Is she like—

Sydnee: Is it possible she's petting?

Taylor: — seeing her— Is she like pressing her paw into you?

Sydnee: Well, it's not the makin' biscuits thing.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: It's just she sits, and it's one paw up, and she will like push against my arm, and then pull down. It's like a petting motion.

Taylor: I mean, cats do mimic our behavior. I also could say like, you know, because she wasn't around other— I mean she was around cats, but like if you got her real young, you know, she just might not fully understand the makin' biscuits, that might—

Sydnee: We did— She was a rescue, she was part of a litter that was found behind a dumpster behind the hospital.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: And we took her home. She was very— 'Cause we didn't know at first if she was gonna make it. We took her to the vet a bunch, and she was real cuddly when we first brought her home, course she was sick. And then after she got better and started to get a little older is when she started hiding from us all the time.

Taylor: Well. I mean it could just be a cat behavior that she kinda understands, but doesn't fully.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: Like that happens a lot. Jack's that way when it comes to covering his litterbox, you know.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like he never quite figured out that you... you have to put your paw in the litter to cover up.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: So he'll do it outside of it.

Sydnee: Okay.

Taylor: And the wall, like there's like— he's scratched all the paint off behind his litterbox, but he will not cover— I have to go behind him and scoop over it, "Okay, good job guy." 'Cause he'll put in so much work cleaning the area around the litterbox.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: To no effect. [chuckles]

Sydnee: To no effect.

Taylor: And then he'll just look at me like, "I don't know what's happening. I did what I did!"

Sydnee: "I don't know."

Taylor: Okay, okay. I got it from here.

Sydnee: Well that's what— I just didn't know— I mean it's so strange. I didn't know if she was mimicking like I'm petting her, and so like, "Ah, this must be how we show affection," and she's petting me back. It's what it feels like.

Taylor: I don't know.

Sydnee: But I— that feels impossible.

Taylor: No, I feel like I've seen lots of videos on TikTok of cats sort of petting their owner, or hugging their owners. Yeah, I think it's important to remember that cats have, what, like a relative intelligence of like a three-year-old.

Sydnee: Oh.

Taylor: So you've had three-year-olds.

Sydnee: Okay.

Taylor: Your three-year-olds can figure out a lot of affection cues.

Sydnee: Well it's weird 'cause I know that cats think we're cats.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so like I do the slow blink thing at Olive a lot.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And she does it back to me, and like I feel like we're communicating in cat language that way. Amelia, that has no effect on. I do it to her, she doesn't know why I'm doing it, I don't think. She doesn't do it back, she just stares at me like, "What?"

But she pets me, and I pet her, and we sit there in the couch petting each other. [chuckles] So maybe she's more human like, maybe instead of her thinking I'm a cat, maybe whatever I am she thinks she is.

Taylor: I mean it's fair to say that, especially 'cause you got her very young, she was a rescue. You know, we— some behaviors are innate, but most of all of our behaviors, all of us animals, are learned behaviors. Maybe she's gonna learn the behaviors that she sees exhibited.

Sydnee: She learned to pet me.

Taylor: Yeah, that's really sweet.

Sydnee: I know, that's what I— Last night, this all happened last night, we were sitting on the couch watching TV and she started doing it, and it just hit me like, "Oh my gosh, I think you're petting me."

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: It's like, "This is what we do, right? We do this to be like 'Hey'." [chuckles]

Sydnee: "Hi, I'm happy you're here."

Taylor: That's it.

Sydnee: Yeah, 'cause then after a few minutes she'll just sort of curl up next to me and go to sleep, and it's like, "There."

Taylor: Well.

Sydnee: "Do you feel better now? Are you soothed? [chuckles] Did I do it?"

Taylor: Does she purr?

Sydnee: She purrs some.

Taylor: Oh.

Sydnee: She doesn't purr nearly as much as Olive.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: She purrs, and that's a newer thing too, like she almost never did, and now she does occasionally. And then Olive gets jealous.

Taylor: I—

Sydnee: Olive likes to sleep on my head, under the pillow— Or I mean under the blanket, head on pillow, like wherever, just as close to me as possible.

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: She likes to be like face to face, nose to nose. [chuckles]

Taylor: I relate to Amelia's level of introvert trying to warm up to somebody. Just gonna spend like, let's see, half of my lifetime if not more.

Sydnee: Mm.

Taylor: Just being like, "Eh, keep your distance. Keep your distance. Alright, it's been about a decade, I guess you can touch me now. Eh, I don't know about that. We can sit close to each other, how about that?" [chuckles]

Sydnee: "I'll orbit you."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: "I'll sort of—" [chuckles] That's what we said, for the longest time she was like this weird roommate we had.

Taylor: [chuckles] Aww.

Sydnee: And like she lives in the house, we see her sometimes, she kinda keeps to herself, she does her own thing. She doesn't cause any problems, she's never scratched or bitten or in any way attached anyone ever, or anything.

She doesn't instigate any fights with Olive, I mean she is sweet as can be. I think when you say, "feral," people think you mean something dangerous, you know what I mean?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I just mean like slightly undomesticated.

Taylor: Well, and I don't understand that on like a biological level entirely, but I know that like feral is just like a... it's like— it's not just like a conditioning state, it's something on like a genetic level, right?

Sydnee: Right, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, she— her ancestors, I guess, her— she comes from a lineage of cats that maybe were— did not spend as long indoors or something? I don't know.

Taylor: And had not been domesticated, mm.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Well.

Sydnee: I don't know.

Taylor: You know.

Sydnee: Either way, I just thought it was an interesting pet phenomenon that I think my cat pets me back.

Taylor: I think that's adorable.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It's got— You've just got an introvert who's taken a long time.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: To warm up. [chuckles] It's a very loud house full of extroverts, so of course she would have— I would hide in the basement too, I hide in the basement when I'm in your house.

Sydnee: She should chill with Cooper more, the two of them would be fine just in their bedroom, in Cooper's bedroom, you know.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Making up weird scenarios and... [chuckles]

Taylor: Keeping to themselves, that's nice.

Sydnee: Mm, yeah. Yeah, I always come to you for expertise on birds and cats.

Taylor: I don't— I mean I'm not— I don't know why, because I'm not an expert about either of those, I just like 'em a lot. Which again. [chuckles] I like—

Sydnee: Just a fan.

Taylor: I like scones a lot, that does not mean I can make a great scone.

Sydnee: Well.

Taylor: I can just eat a great scone and be like, "Wow, that's a great scone!"

Sydnee: I can make an okay scone. Justin makes a great scone, and I try to copy what he does.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: So if you need scones, I got you. [chuckles]

Taylor: You got scones.

Sydnee: I got you, we can make scones.

Taylor: Yeah, you got a scone guy? [wheezes] "I got a guy."

Sydnee: I got a scone guy.

Taylor: He's got scones.

Sydnee: It's good to have a scone guy.

Taylor: A good scone is hard, I don't know, it's a— there's a magic to it.

Sydnee: Well, it also depends on where— like what sort of scone tradition we're talking about. Because what I was used to the kinda scones— Like if you get a scone at Starbucks, let's say. And I don't know if all bakeries in America go like this, but like if you get a scone at Starbucks, it's like— it's kind of a hard thing.

Taylor: Yeah. See I would— I don't know, I would say that the— It's been a long time since I've had a Starbucks scone, but the fault of the Starbucks scone is that it's not hard enough for me.

Sydnee: See, the scones that Justin makes are from, gosh. I think this was a *Great British Bake Off* recipe, like this is a— this is from one of our British scone books, that's where it's—

Taylor: I mean, I think that's where you wanna get it, right.

Sydnee: But it's a much—

Taylor: Or go to the Irish for a scone.

Sydnee: Yeah. But it's like a softer, like crumblier, it's not hard. It has like a sugar crust on the top, so it does have that little sugar crunch on the top, but then inside, it's almost what we Americans call a biscuit.

[quiet vibrating sound]

Sydnee: Inside.

Taylor: Interesting.

Sydnee: But sweet.

Taylor: See I don't know, I— 'Cause I— My favorite scone that I've ever had, and I mean this is how— You know, memory can often convince us that things are the best just because there's, you know, remembrance and—

Sydnee: Sure.

Taylor: — and like good vibes around it. But when I went to Dublin as like a young person in my '20s, I had a whole wheat scone at a bakery that was— I don't know, I was staying with somebody that went to the art school there, and it was right near the art school.

And it was just like it was the perfect, like it was wonderfully crumbly on the outside, you know, like good crunchy bits, but then the inside was just so, so soft and still so warm.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: That the inside was just like just so buttery and soft. The outside had that good— I want that like— I want that crunch, I want the outside to be a little bit— It needs to be a good hard on the outside, soft on the inside. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah. I'm just saying—

Taylor: I like my scones like I recognize my own nature. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] It's like— No, yeah. I think that's how a scone should be. That's— 'Cause inside a scone, it really is like it's so soft and pillowy, it's almost like a biscuit.

Taylor: Yeah. Yeah, the inside should be that like biscuit.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah.

Taylor: But— Well and this was like there was nothing on it, and I kinda feel like that's like the real test of a scone. Like I— I do love some stuff on a scone, some raisins or like— There's a baker here in New York, Amy's Bread, that does like a banana walnut scone that's so good. But when a scone can be plain—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: — and be amazing, that's really impressive.

Sydnee: Yes. Then you— That's when you get some curd.

Taylor: Mm. I like a curd. Eh, I don't know, for a scone I think I prefer a jam, but I enjoy a curd too.

Sydnee: Did you watch the Tony's?

Taylor: I did, I was gonna say I was made to, but it sounds like I wouldn't choose to, but I was working last night and we had a watch party at the bar I work at, so the Tony's were on. There was a whole— Like they'd had a whole balloting system, the party design.

Sydnee: Mmm...

Taylor: Like a bunch of people came in costume, it was hosted by a Mary Todd Lincoln, which was great.

Sydnee: Oh that's great. That sounds like fun. Yeah, I— Well I'm sure a lot of people's ballots were upset by Audra McDonald not winning, I know that was a big controversy.

Taylor: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Oh, is that the *Sunset Boulevard* lady?

Sydnee: Nicole Scherzinger?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Okay. I enjoyed seeing your close personal friend, Lin Manuel Miranda, get to perform with the *Hamilton* crew again.

Sydnee: That was great. I have to imagine that ending the medley with *History Has Its Eyes on You*, well right before the final *Not Throwing Away My Shot*, had to be intentional. I felt that.

Taylor: I think also all of them wearing all black.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah.

Taylor: It was so cool to see every— Like that was— All of those people were the original company, and a lot of them have gone on to have much bigger careers than just playing like a member of the ensemble.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: So to see everybody come back to perform that is really cool.

Sydnee: Mm, yeah. No, that was a really cool moment, and obviously wonderful, but yeah. Yeah, I didn't get to watch a lot of it, I saw clips of it and then, you know, TikTok is how I tend to view things these days.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: As sad as that is. [chuckles] But it's just like the—

Taylor: I—

Sydnee: You know, it's a curated, it's the best bits.

Taylor: Well. I do— I did— I've been getting a lot of fashion breakdowns of the Tony's.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: I enjoy those.

Sydnee: Yeah, I like the fashion breakdowns, and then I like the performances. I don't know.

Taylor: You should have—

Sydnee: I also—

Taylor: Go ahead.

Sydnee: Well, I was gonna say, it's also hard, and this is one of the tough things I wrestle with with musical theatre is that if it's a newer

show, I haven't seen it because I live in West Virginia, and you know, we don't get up to see shows that often.

And so there's this mo— like there's this limitation as to— I can't root for things the way you could for like an Emmy or an Oscar or like a Golden Globe, where like I've probably seen some of what they're talking about.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: But it's hard with the Tony's, 'cause I, well, I don't— I have no access to these works of art, and so I cannot judge them, you know?

Taylor: Well, I mean, you know, you say that and I live in New York and I— I have not seen— Any of the big wins I had not seen, 'cause I just— it's hard. It's so expensive.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like I understand, it— Theatre should be supported, but it just— for somebody that is not [chuckles] abundantly rich, it's very expensive for me. And you know it's hard to find the time to go see it.

I— There— We have resources here in New York, you know, there are like the cheap day of tickets that you can get that are really good, lotteries and stuff, and watching the Tony's last night I'm like, "I need to make a more concerted effort to just go see what you can see, like don't plan on a specific show, just get the ticket you can afford, and go."

Because I genuinely— I just love live theatre, like I don't— I'm not discerning, I don't have a great palette for it. Any time there are people singing and dancing onstage, I'm just like, "Wow, this is so nice!" I just need to make more of an effort to go. [chuckles]

Sydnee: I— See, I think that's true, and you know, I think most people do, whether they know it or not. I do think most of us, if we sit down and then somebody's right there in front of us, singing, dancing, acting, whatever, I think there is a magic to that, there's a risk to it, there's a vulnerability to it.

There's something about it that it's— it connects with a lot more than just whatever the material is. And I think most people do, or would feel that

way if they had access to that, I think it's tough— It's a tough question 'cause then how can you replicate that... outside of Broadway, but not on a screen, you know, 'cause like filming it, not that there's an—

I mean, you know, I've seen like the filmed version of *Hamilton*, it's fantastic, it's very well done. I've also seen *Hamilton* live, there's no comparison.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: You know, I mean that's just the truth, there's no— You cannot watch something on a screen that would be equivalent to seeing them perform it right there in front of you. I mean it's just not— it's never gonna be the same visceral experience, so how can we give that experience to everyone, everywhere, regardless of where you live and your ability to afford it.

Taylor: Well.

Sydnee: I don't know, I don't know the answer.

Taylor: Because I would say one, it's good that you can't, actually, as that might sound a little messed up, but like Broadway is special and I think it should continue to be special. I think there should be something that, you know, drives... drives the culture here in New York as, you know, the place you come to have that amazing experience.

But then the other side of it is like what you all do, like community theatre I that. Like I don't feel different, I mean yes I know that seeing a show on Broadway with an incredible production value, you might be 'ooo'ed and 'ahh'ed a little bit harder than a community theatre.

But I think that core feeling of "I'm witnessing something that is happening a la minute, like it is happening live, anything could go wrong," and it's just— it— the fact that it happens at all is kind of amazing.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Live theatre has that, it's— I mean it's the same with like a concert, like you know, I— Seeing a small, you know, little punk band or going to a giant, you know, stadium show, live... creation is an amazing

act to witness, and I don't think the scale, or the amount of fame involved really affects that, it's always amazing to witness.

Sydnee: Yeah. No, I mean, I agree. I was watching, we had our first tech rehearsal for *The Prom* last night, and watching the— I mean even having been a part of creating the show, watching it happen, it just— there's nothing like it, it feels like magic. It feels like every night we're walking a tightrope and somehow we succeed, and I don't know how.

Taylor: Mm, yeah.

Sydnee: 'Cause none of us know how to walk a tightrope. [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs] But that's what it is, you know, it is— it's a beautiful, choreographed act where everybody pulls it off, there's not stopping, there's no redoing.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And that's the amazing thing, I think it reminds us all what we're, you know, capable as— of as a species.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, so we can create things. Well Tey, we were talking about— we're talking about live performances. And you know, a live performance I love is a good drag show.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Like they had in *The Birdcage*.

Taylor: That is, yes. [chuckles] There is—

Sydnee: There we go.

Taylor: *The Birdcage* is a level of drag performance that most drag shows are, like with the live singing and the choreography.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Teylor: It is really funny, 'cause I've been doin' a bit of drag lately, and it's like seeing this— I'm sure there are absolutely drag shows that go— that do this much work.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Yeah. No, it is defi— Well, and I mean it's a like professional, like they're practicing constantly, they have a whole organization behind 'em. You know, it's not like an individual queen trying to like put together a costume and a performance all by themselves, and then taking it around to different places, this is like a set thing. So I— you have to imagine there's a lot more resources and budget.

Teylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right? [laughs]

Teylor: It is basically a theatre that just specializes in drag. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. I love this movie so much.

Teylor: It's a great movie.

Sydnee: It— Can I say to like— Not that this is the most important thing about this movie, but it makes me so happy and then so sad to watch Robin Williams in anything anymore.

Teylor: Absolutely.

Sydnee: It's really— Just like... So— He's so talented, and he's just so perfect in this, I mean he does such a great job. And I was thinking about like this must've been kinda risky for him, to do— at this time. When did this movie come out? 1990... 6? 7? Something like that?

Teylor: Well we have this conversation about like should— Do gay characters need to be played by gay people? You know, and I think— I understand like both sides of it. But for this movie, for this period of time, being an incredibly high-profile actor and playing this role, I mean that's nothing if not just a like out of support for the community.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Because it was definitely risky though, and it doesn't— I mean it feels perfectly in character for Robin Williams.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah, well and I mean it just— Like if you consider that prior— So this was '96. So prior to this, he had already done like— Well I mean I guess if you just think back to like *Mork & Mindy*.

So you have become this sort of like beloved, you know, funny, comedic, cartoonish kind of like character in the American TV world. Like people— that's how people think of you, and that this would be a risky thing, in 1996 then, to be like, "And now I'm playing a gay man on TV."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: In a very like not just like playing a gay man, but like there's so much in *The Birdcage* that's sort of about— it's like a farce, right, there's so much— It's that. It's heightened, comedic, like ridiculous scenarios that we, you know, become hyperbolic in the way that they're presented, and end in this sort of fantastical scenario that probably wouldn't happen in real life, that's kinda like the heart of it.

But underneath is this really beautiful story of... how can this— You know, how this gay couple is committing to each other and committing to their life together at a time when they couldn't get married.

Taylor: Well and I—

Sydnee: You know.

Taylor: — think that the role that Robin Williams plays opposite Nathan Lane, who Nathan Lane is a lot more of like... what you might consider the, you know, not the "cliché," like it's a wonderful performance, but it's like, "Oh, that's what a gay man is," he's flamboyant and, you know.

Sydnee: Sure.

Taylor: Like Robin Williams is sort of playing the "straight man," if you will, in a comedic duo.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like which I think is— it's a good portrayal, in a time where you just like gay characters are throwaway, like one note types of writing, he is a nuanced portrayal.

Sydnee: It's really— He— It really is, it's really fascinating to watch. I was thinking about that as I was watching, like there's no— Like he definitely is a gay coded character, there's no mistaking it.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: You know, 'cause sometimes you see like straight actors playing gay characters, and they're just sort of like they just happen to be gay, but nothing about it— You know, there is nothing in this character, like it's almost like the actor wanted you to know like, "Listen, I'm just pretending, I am totally straight. [chuckles] Don't get it twisted." And there's definitely aspects to the way Robin Williams like carries himself, and the way he interacts with Nathan Lane, like it—

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: He is a gay man, there is no mistaking that. But you're right, it's a different kind of gay man, and the idea in 1996, like culturally, that being gay is not one thing, that it looks a lot of different ways, and sounds a lot of different ways, and can appear—

Like I know that's not a novel idea, but it was in 1996, it was. That, you didn't see that on TV, we— If you had a gay character on TV in 1996, they were probably the most extreme stereotypical, you know, caricature of what quote unquote "gay" is.

Taylor: Well and I do think, I mean it's— the one moment you see him kind of get like— When he's alone with Nathan Lane and they're kind of— they're having a fight, and it is a very like—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: — You know, it's a— [wheezes] It's a very gay fight, I don't know how else to say it. Like they're both being a little o— like over reactionary, like you know, extreme.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: It's— I just— It's such a— I mean credit to the beauty of the writing of the show and then the movie, it's clear that that character can be more open and comfortable with his partner than anywhere else in the world, 'cause he's a lot more kind of...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: To himself elsewhere.

Sydnee: It's interesting, it— in it— I mean, and I don't know that we know this canonically within the film, but like when Robin Williams' character is giving Nathan Lane's character a sort of like, "lessons on being a guy."

Taylor: Yeah. [chuckles] It's so good.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Like what's inherent, the understanding has to be there that like Robin Williams has had to do this.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: Like his character has had to put on this façade, and I guess Nathan Lane's character hasn't, and so that's a, you know, I mean I don't know if we know that, but like you have to assume that Robin Williams' character has had some sort of situation in the past where he was pretending, he was playing at like, "I guess that's how guys butter their— or put mustard on their— " [laughs]

Taylor: [chuckles] I love that scene.

Sydnee: "I've pierced the bread."

Taylor: "I've pierced the bread!" [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: See, I think the reference of just John Wayne. This is so random but it made me chuckle, 'cause I knew we were gonna be talking about this, I saw someone comment— some jerk comment on Cole Escola's look from last night and be like, "We need to bring back John Wayne!"

[through laughter] And it made me think of that scene in *The Birdcage*, like, “Okay.”

Sydnee: [chuckles] We need to bring back John Wayne?

Taylor: Like from the dead? What do you mean? [laughs]

Sydnee: For the Tony’s?! Do you mean for the Tony’s?! [chuckles]

Taylor: You were watching the Tony’s, I think you need to look in the mirror. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Did John Wayne ever do— Did he—

Taylor: I don’t think John Wayne was big into music— I’m not that familiar with the career of John Wayne, to be honest.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: I assume— I’m aware he was a cowboy.

Sydnee: Did he do like theatre, like onstage? Like did he do musicals? Like did he— [giggles] Why would John Wayne be at the Tony’s?!

Taylor: I— He’s gonna show up and, I don’t know, tell Cole Escola how to wear a dress? I’m not sure, I’m not sure. Also we’re—

Sydnee: What a wild—

Taylor: I feel like cowboys were actually like way gayer than we— history credits them to be, right? I know pirates were.

Sydnee: Yeah!

Taylor: I mean it’s the same as everything else.

Sydnee: All of history’s gayer than we wanna talk about, right?

Taylor: [laughs] Yeah, that’s fair. That’s fair.

Sydnee: Like that's— [chuckles] That's— [chuckles] There's— I mean that's, you know, we all know, we're at a point where we've acknowledged that especially like American history, a lot of what we've learned is not true, it's all like skewed in a way to make us not look like jerks.

And like we know this, we haven't fixed it. [chuckles] We haven't— [chuckles] We haven't gone through the trouble of trying to like correct it, but we're just sort of aware that everything that we were taught was just sort of a half-truth, or you know, maybe just an outright lie.

That's part of it too that we haven't come to terms with yet, like history was also— there's a lot of it that's really gay that you just don't even know about. You're not ready for the conversation.

Taylor: I mean I'm ready for it. I think there's—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: — millions of writers on the internet that are ready for it, [through laughter] and have been enjoying that.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: You've been to—

Sydnee: Well I don't mean fanfic. [laughs]

Taylor: It's not, it's alternative historical narratives.

Sydnee: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Taylor: Pirates are gay, so are cowboys.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Deal with it! The military too.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: "Oh, we don't wanna have that conversation."

Sydney: Well, anyway. [chuckles] So the— If you've never seen *The Birdcage*, I'd really recommend, it's a very— it's funny 'cause I watched it thinking like, "I wonder if I could watch this with the kids. I wonder if it's like—" You know what I mean? 'Cause it's funny, they love drag, you know, I don't know.

Like it's and it's a funny movie, but then I just did— I thought a lot of the jokes would kinda go over their head. You know, they just— It's a not adult in the sense that like inappropriate, but adult in that it's not the kind of movie that a 10-year-old would find funny yet. You know, give her a couple more years, that was kind of what I was thinking.

Taylor: I would also think that for your kids, a lot of the plot and humor relies around the idea that being gay is not okay, and I... they haven't grown up with that belief. [chuckles]

Sydney: That's true, I mean that, you know— [chuckles] I will say though like I think that's sort of the double-edged sword of living somewhere like where we live.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydney: So my children obviously have been taught that, you know, it is okay to be exactly who you are and who you are can mean a lot of different things, and here are all of the various ways that people are that are just fine. And I mean we, obviously we have those conversations.

But we do live in West Virginia, and they definitely have heard, you know, in school and from other adults, negative things about... you know, being gay, about the LGBTQ community, they're very aware of that. I don't know if that's— [sighs] You know, that's such a—

Is that good that they're aware, so that they can be— so that they can stand up to it, so that they can call it out, so that they can, I don't know who they are yet, but defend themselves or be an ally, I don't know.

Or is it— I always wonder like it's kinda like that conversation, I remember that Gloria Steinem said once that she was talking to a young woman who was saying like, "I don't even know what you mean when you say 'glass ceiling'."

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: And is that a good thing for a young woman to not know what the glass ceiling is, or is it important for us to understand it so that we can be vigilant? I don't know.

Taylor: Well, I think that there's an important... awareness there that it doesn't all happen at once, you know. What you're talking about, like your kids growing up in West Virginia, still regularly encountering homophobia in the school system, out in real life.

Like we forget sometimes, because I get frustrated with like the younger— I'm gonna get old person for a second here. Like the younger crew that just doesn't— Like they grew up knowing it was fine to be gay, it's totally cool. Like the kind of next generation down, I would say very privileged people that I encounter in New York a lot of the times.

And there is that thought, well what does it matter if they know? They don't need to know suffering, they don't need to know struggle, they don't need to know that it was ever hard. And that would maybe be okay if gay rights happened everywhere all at once, and everybody got over it.

But that's not how it happens, and so when your most affluent, privileged people just disconnect from the history, and all of the people that are the next level down in the rest of the country are still dealing with the ramifications, then you lose your loudest, most like available voices. Like every—

Sydnee: Mm.

Taylor: You need to know the history.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Because even if you're in a position to not be affected by it ever once in your life, that means you probably come from some level of privilege that you could be of use.

Sydnee: Well, and I think like that probably has to be true on some level for any group—

Taylor: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: — that finds itself within a minority in a larger majority, you know what I mean?

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: If you're within a group that there will always be fewer of you than there are of another— of some other kind of, you know, some other people. You always have to be aware of that because you're trusting that that majority group will always protect you, accept you, stand up for you rights just like they will for their own.

And history has shown us that that goes back and forth. Maybe we move in that direction for a while, but that doesn't mean we won't move back.

Taylor: Yeah. [chuckles]

Sydnee: It unfortunately— I mean... Here we are. [scoffs]

Taylor: Well exactly.

Sydnee: Like wake up and look around. [chuckles]

Taylor: Well and that's like, you know, I think the last time I watched *The Birdcage*, I mean it was years ago, but watching it again, just the son is such... a little jerk. Like it was really hard for me to kinda—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: Even me, like to think, like contextually think like, "Is this kid fair in the way he's behaving?" Maybe in the time period people would have related to him.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Would have understood where he's coming from. Now for me, and where I exist in the world, it just seems insane, just seems awful.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: So like look at the people that raised you and say, "You need to disappear entirely, and you need to change everything about yourself." When they're deconstructing their house, taking all of the art—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: — and beauty out of the house, like it made me, like I cried. [laughs] Like I had a moment where like this is so sad.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Watching two people that worked so hard to live the life they wanna live, out of love, have to quite literally shove all of their personal things in a closet, like have to put it all away.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Like that's so awful.

Sydnee: And... Well and I think that's kind of the brilliance of it is that you have that underneath it. You have that like, "These are two people who have found a way to have their life, their love, be themselves, you know, like live that— live their truth, and they are forced to put it away, to hide it, for a while." I mean, you know, it all works out in the end of course. But I think that that paired with how funny—

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: — how ridiculous the movie becomes, is what— I mean that's what you hope for a piece of art like that, it can draw you in, make you laugh, make you empathize, you care about the characters, you're rooting for them, you think they're funny, you think they're relatable.

And then you realize that you don't have a lot in common with them, but you still understand who they are as people, and we all grow. I mean that's I think the hope of something like that.

Taylor: Well.

Sydnee: Is that— Is you can walk that line.

Taylor: Well and I mean it is smart having the younger generation, the son is the one that's coming in with sort of the prejudices. Like he's not prejudiced, but he is still the one that's the force of that happening.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Which yeah, I'm saying it's a good reminder of like it doesn't, you know, it doesn't all just get better and it just keeps getting better and you don't need to worry about it. The younger— Age is not related to whether or not you can be free of this sort of programming.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. No, we can always lose. I think that they... they make him redeemable. I think it's key that Calista Flockhart's character is not homophobic.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like she is not the problem, you know. The problem is, and she acknowledges it too, her parents. Her parents are the problem, she is not, I think that makes the son redeemable. I think if it was for the girlfriend, the whole thing would kinda fall apart.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But I think if it's like the two of them are like, "My parents are just these unreasonable, conservative jerks and I'm sorry," and you know.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: "I'm not like them, but..."

Taylor: No no, I agree.

Sydnee: "Here we are."

Taylor: Well you know, the moment we're both like— I— It's really important that Robin Williams' character is the one that puts a stop to it, like that— after they sign the patrimony thing, which is very sweet, 'cause like you said, that's like the closest you could get.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Taylor: Like, "You couldn't be married, but here, I'm gonna give you everything I own." You know.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: "We're as good as— We're not as good as married, but this is what we can do." And that he goes to his son and says, "Nope, we're not sending, you know, my partner away, we're not doing that." And then also that it's the son—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: — is the one to say, "This is my mother who raised me, who is also a man." [chuckles] Like yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah, I think it is, and it— I mean really— I would imagine a lot of people saw the movie, thinking like, "Oh, this'll be funny."

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: "Because you've got Robin Williams playing—" And I mean again, I am not saying— I'm trying to think of as a moviegoer in 1996.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: You've got Robin Williams playing a gay man, you've got Nathan Lane, who at the time was not out out.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: Was like his friends knew, but had not publicly made that statement, you know what I mean? He wasn't hiding it but he also had never publicly come out.

So— And you know these funny actors, and Nathan Lane's going to be dressed as a woman, and then it ends with all the characters in drag at a drag show, you know, trying to escape so that the media doesn't see that

this Republican, what is he? A senator or whatever is, yeah, that he's dressed as a woman. Yeah, they're at a gay club whatever.

And so it ends in this like hyperbolic situation, and so a lot of people go thinking like, "This is going to be hilarious." And it's— it is, but it's not just that.

Taylor: As a weird aside, and I don't know if you felt this way, but Nathan Lane in drag. Does it remind you of our Grandma Jodie?

Sydnee: Yes, quite a bit.

Taylor: [chuckles] Like to an absurd amount.

Sydnee: The hair, well the hair.

Taylor: Yes, I mean the hair is exact.

Sydnee: I mean the hair is identical.

Taylor: Yes.

Sydnee: Yeah, that is exact what Grandma Jodie's hair looked like, exactly.

Taylor: And that's not a— I just— it—

Sydnee: So.

Taylor: There's always a touch of like this is— feels very personal because it reminds me of my grandmother. [chuckles] I say that with all the love.

Sydnee: I thought that too, yes. I thought it definitely, yes. And I mean it, yes, kind of conservative lady.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Kinda— Yes. Yeah. [chuckles] All very yes, seemed very much like her. [chuckles] You know I thought it was interesting, we were—

Justina and I were talking about the movie after we watched it, about was Nathan Lane— I couldn't remember if he had come out at the time yet.

Taylor: Mm.

Sydnee: 'Cause I was thinking like what a big risk for Robin Williams, and then was Ro— You know, if you are a gay actor and you're playing a gay character, but also you're not out, there's a whole other risk there, right? Like—

And we were watching this clip of an interview with Oprah that the two of them did when the movie was coming out, where Oprah— She doesn't ask Nathan Lane if he's gay, but she kind of edges up against the question. And you can see him kind of like stammering, because he's not sure how to respond, because he isn't ready to say that publicly.

And like Robin Williams jumps in and answers— starts talking and makes a joke out of whatever Oprah said, and starts talking over to like save him. It was very sweet.

Taylor: Sweet. Aw.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: I mean that's like an open— an open awareness in Hollywood, right. There have been so many people that have had to not be themselves, I mean even know, like that's— it's not like it's a thing in the past, and I'm not even gonna name names because I think it's gross that it still has to happen, but it's also everybody's privacy.

There are so many actors that are in Hollywood that everybody knows is gay, but they just can't— Because of the amount of hate that's still out there, because it will hurt their box office numbers, or you know, make them not as hireable, they have to keep themselves in the closet.

Like we talk about it like it's the past, and clearly we're going backwards, but also we never really got there. Like we never got to the point where it's 100% okay, and now somebody's, you know, trying to... reverse history, like we never fully got there, people have always had to pretend to be something they're not in order to...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Have a life where they wanna live.

Sydnee: Yeah. I... I think that it's weird how— Well it's now weird, but it's just it feels to me, watching that movie and knowing— like remembering what it was like to live in 1996.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: You know? [chuckles] I know what the world was like, I know what media was like, I know what the conversation around— I mean I— And maybe it's hard for young people to even like imagine at this point.

The conversation that we are now I think still having about being trans, this was the conversation we were having about being gay in 1996. Like we weren't even to that— a conversation about gender, right?

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like we were just at a point where we were debating if it's okay, like if your sexual orientation is quote unquote "okay" or not. I mean we were just having that conversation. And it was still very much taboo to represent these things on TV in any way that wasn't just a joke, in any way that wasn't a punchline. That was really how gay characters were used, if at all, it was a funny thing.

And the idea that this movie was made at this time, with these actors, you know what I mean? I think it's— it's kind of amazing to me that this just was put out there for people to connect to, and it didn't ca— I mean, I'm surprised there wasn't a huge uproar.

Taylor: Well.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Taylor: I think one, it goes to show how long we've been having these conversations, how long artists have been trying to put the idea out there through various forms, like [chuckles] "We should be allowed to be whoever we wanna be."

It's not new and it's been a struggle for a long time. But I— also we're dealing with a show that existed before social media, so there could be outcry, but also it's not really— it doesn't function the same, you know.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It's a bad nexus where the feedback now can be louder than the art form itself.

Sydnee: That's true, that's a good point. Whereas at the time I think— I'm sure there were people who were like, "Well I went to see a funny movie about guys dressed as girls, and now I'm offended."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I'm sure those people existed, but you know, I don't know who they had to tell about it. Not me.

Taylor: Well you know, that's— you could write an article about it, but you know hopefully if you've got open-minded, liberal, artistic people who handle writing the articles then that article doesn't get written. That's— When all of a sudden anybody can have a thought and elevate it to the highest platform, then you know, there's no filter. [chuckles] There's no grease trap on the world anymore.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Well, I'm really glad that we decided to watch it, 'cause I love that movie, and I, like I said, I just— I don't know, it really— In my head it was like, "Oh, that movie's so funny," and then watching it again, I remember all the other things that are happening there that I think are important and meaningful, and encourage empathy, and are necessary now, even as they were then.

Taylor: Yeah. Well and I— Of course there was the stage show, *La Cage aux Folles*, which I love the movie.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: I will say, I do— Especially because it's Pride Month, we're all going to lots of, you know, Pride-themed drag shows this month, you're gonna hear "I Am What I Am" at least once. [chuckles] At least once.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: That is something in the show that I love, that performance, that number, so.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It's, yeah, like it's— has— have a million drag queens performed that number? Yes. It's still an incredibly beautiful song sung in the context of this film.

Sydnee: Yeah. Absolutely. Well Tey, what are we gonna do next for Pride Month?

Taylor: Well, I think we just keep this— Look, we want the kids to know the old tomes. [chuckles] The— The history as accessible—

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: — in cinema and music. So I thought we could watch *Paris Is Burning*.

Sydnee: I would love to do that, that sounds excellent.

Taylor: A wonderful documentary on ball culture.

Sydnee: Perfect. Well we will continue to celebrate Pride Month next week with *Paris is Burning*, and in the meantime, I hope that you are all enjoying yourself and staying safe. And... also going to maxfun.org—

Taylor: [chuckles]

Sydnee: — and listening to a lot of other podcasts that you would enjoy. Tey, how did you like that? [chuckles] You can email us at stillbuffering@maximumfun.org, and thank you to the Nouvellas for our theme song, "Baby You Change Your Mind."

[theme music fades in]

Taylor: This has been *Still Buffering* a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I am still buffering.

Taylor: And I am too.

[outro music plays]

Taylor: I just love the way— I took some like screenshots of Robin Williams costume in this, 'cause I just wanna dress like him.

Sydnee: It is— I will say, it looks very comfortable too.

Taylor: It's very—

Sydnee: Like it's cool, but it also looks very breezy.

Taylor: Oh yeah, like very breezy, very comfortable.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: It's slightly macho, but in a gay way, and that's hard to pull off.

Sydnee: It is. Yeah, that's very true.

[ukulele chord]

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