

Behind the Scenes with Chelsea (Julia Henning)

JENNY CURTIS: Hey, this is director Jenny Curtis. You'll hear me say this in the coming clip, but the character of Chelsea is one of my favorites in the entire series, and she is played beautifully by Julia Henning. Julia is a friend of ours. So when she joined Chris Porter and I to talk about the role, we had a really candid conversation about who Chelsea is and the joys and challenges of recording this character.

JULIA HENNING: You guys kind of took the words out of my mouth in terms of Chelsea being the personification of the thing that's left behind. We know Chelsea to be Jamal's best friend. They're like brother and sister. They were neighbors. She was his greatest cheerleader, is in so many ways. But in my mind it was like she's the humanity in the show that like, carries across gravity. So you think about you're isolated in space, you're isolated in yourself. I mean, if *SOLAR* is so much about being separated, but the unity of hope, of grace, of the will to live, the will to survive, I feel like Chelsea represents what we're surviving for, what we're living for. I loved that she kind of had, you know, this energy to her. We're hearing so much of the crew in space kind of panicking and struggling. And I feel like she's going through these moments of tender celebration and these moments of tender reflection. And she's so innocent and beautifully naive to the whole situation of what Jamal going into space is. And for me, that's just such a beautiful representation of, you know, love. Like people are going through crazy things, and yet we just think of them as being our best friend. You know, yeah you're in space. But like she says, she's like, 'What up J?' You know, she talks to him as if there's no distance or proximity between them. So for me, Chelsea was so much the essence of what we're fighting for and who we are at our core. And I actually, I love that in the show, you guys talk about so much of the Russian doll, and I felt like Chelsea in a lot of ways was the core of the Russian doll. She's, you know, part of what they keep peeling back.

JENNY CURTIS: Oh, I love that.

CHRIS PORTER: I love it. Also, I want to mention that the 'What up, J?' was 100% a Julia contribution

JENNY CURTIS: Oh, yeah. We didn't say no.

JULIA HENNING: You're right. I forgot about that.

JENNY CURTIS: You did that in the booth. I've said this before. I'll say it again. That's the beauty of working with actors, because you guys come in with personalities that we couldn't have anticipated and surprises. And I remember moments we were in the booth and we're finding like where the humor is and where the gravity is. And I remember one of my favorite things is the joke of Schrodinger's box. And Chelsea doesn't know what Schrodinger's is. And so Julia mispronounced it and we were like, huh, that's funny, but maybe say it right once just so we have it. And they were like, 'How? How do I pronounce it?'

JULIA HENNING: Like this is real time, real life? I have no idea what this is.

JENNY CURTIS: But it like, became this really wonderfully rich moment because it felt so authentic.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

CHELSEA: I know there's some quantum component that you mentioned, so I don't get this joke, but here goes. Schrödinger's cat walks into a bar. That's it. That's the setup... Bye J.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

JULIA HENNING: I do remember that moment too, actually, my laugh in the take that you guys kept was true was honest because I just remember we got it. I finally said it right and then I laughed because I was like, I don't know this is. I had no idea what this means.

JENNY CURTIS: Just to go back into the editing. In the first monologue in episode four, you go, 'Here I am, actually sending you this message. Woo!' The woo is actually not from that chunk. I think we had like said, okay, we got it. And you went, Woo! And that was like somewhere else. And I was like, I love that. That's got to go somewhere.

JULIA HENNING: I was going to say, I don't remember a 'Woo' there, and I was listening to it again yesterday and I was like, okay, I was really excited for that take. I think really, you can hear it, you can feel it.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

CHELSEA: The day you leave Earth orbit, the day you start getting these messages. So here I am, sending you this message. Woo!

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

JULIA HENNING: I mean, I'm sure that will come up again. But in talking about recording, nothing will ever beat the story of me getting over the question mark line. There is one line. I don't remember what it is, but dear Jenny had to stop me so many times and literally go, 'Julia. This is a statement with a period and you keep making this a question.' And I was like, okay, I got it. So I would do it. Question Mark. And I was like, okay, mirror to me, Jenny, tell me, what am I doing wrong about this line? And of course, as an actor, you can't help but like suddenly become really conscious of that because when somebody gives you a very specific thing and you're like, I got to get it right and nothing will ever be me hearing you say it. I mirrored it back. And then as soon as you press record couldn't get out of it, it was like, I'm sorry, this is going to be a question from here on out.

JENNY CURTIS: It's also the director - actor thing of like finding the performance and finding who the character is. And I think you as Julia, are such a grounded person. You're like the most grounded person I know. It gives me chills just thinking about it. With Chelsea, like you said, she's light hearted, and I think that encourages the little bit of thinking... like.... this.

JULIA HENNING: Yeah, exactly.

JENNY CURTIS: And I think that's what we kept trying to get out of. But it didn't end up in a question. We did end up getting it.

JULIA HENNING: Because you literally, I remember, you like, conducted me with your finger. You were like, go up now. Now go down with the statement. Go down with the statement. And I was like, and it's done, done. I remember when we hit it and I was like, can we please move on? We got it, right? Those are my favorite moments, though.

JENNY CURTIS: That was also part of, like me as a director, but not a learning process for me in this. But I did that with a lot of our actors where there would be like a line or a word. Sometimes it was just like the word 'yes'. And I swear to God we did it 20 times, and everybody in the booth, like, not in the booth because they're on Zoom, but everyone be like, okay, Jenny, you have 20 takes of 'Yes', like move on.

JULIA HENNING: That actually came up, though. I was thinking about that. That was actually a really beautiful moment that I kept between you and I during that, because you even said, you know, I'm an actor and I'm directing and we're friends. I'm hearing this line in this monologue in my head and how I would say it. And so that's coming through a little bit in how I'm directing you. And I remember separating in that moment as an actor, you know, some people with I think a thicker ego might go, okay, this is my time. I'm the actor. But it actually was really impactful to me. A) that admittance and that humility because I was able to go I want to hit what she's hearing in her head as a director and as an actor because the resonance of the emotion underneath both of our performance, if we can amalgamate those two tones, then it's going to come out and it's going to hit so many more listeners. And I just remember as an actor going, I understand that the actor's director, I understand the director's actor, those two roles coming together. And I don't know, it just taught me a lot in that moment. I was really grateful that you shared that with me because it allowed me to understand your process. And I think open up as an actor a little bit more.

JENNY CURTIS: I love you so much . But it is, and I've had this conversation with John Bangs, to working with friends who you can really just be with. Yeah. Has been a huge learning tool for me because there is that graciousness there of let's stumble through this together. And I really love that when I really said that to you was when we were doing the second monologue from ten, which when I say these are two of my favorite monologues Chris has written, the second one is just gut wrenching.

JULIA HENNING: I mean, it was, it was an honour.

JENNY CURTIS: I'm obsessed with it.

CHRIS PORTER: Thank you, guys.

JENNY CURTIS: Like I have said before, I was like, I was almost upset that I was ALI because I would have rather been Chelsea so I can perform that monologue.

JULIA HENNING: I feel that.

JENNY CURTIS: I think that's why I did have to say to you, I'm aware of this thing that I have, so totally thank you for working through it with me. But also when we were trying to get through it and we were going through the various takes and I was probably asking for too many takes and whatever, I think we were doing the thing. Everyone's like, okay, you got it, you got it, you got it. And I was like, okay, I want to do it one more time. And I gave you this direction. Julia, I just want you to think about how much art means to you.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

CHELSEA: So that night you scrawled on a series of 15 napkins. Hiroto showed them to me. A list of every book. Every movie. Every show. Every song. Every play. And every musical. Anything that had ever given me joy. Anything that you knew I loved. Any piece of creativity you ever saw me digest and comment on. And you told Hiroto that if he read every book, watched every movie, listened to every piece of music on that list, that he would know who I was. That he would know how to love me.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

JULIA HENNING: Oh my God, I remember that!

JENNY CURTIS: That's, like the acting in the show is phenomenal, but I did a lot of micro cutting. I really crafted some things in this show. That's just a take, man. Like you went through.

JULIA HENNING: I hear when it starts in the monologue, too, because the beginning, again, was kind of that energy where we were like, This is foreign to me a little bit, especially when coming out of the pandemic. I mean, and that being the first recording, that energy, accessing that levity in myself was an exercise with you guys that I felt safe to do. But the minute I remember that, the minute you said that, you hear it, I'm choked out from the beginning. And it's like your lines, Chris, when you're like the movies, the plays, and the musicals. When I hit musicals, it was like my favorite musical is Phantom of the Opera and Cats. And I do not I do not apologize for it. So deal with it. You know what I mean? Like, I know the difference. But I just remember thinking that and especially at that time, the relationship I was going through at that moment, those were the things that we bonded over. So that art became like, Oh my God, the people who know me, it's in my voice now. The people who know me know where art lives in

me. And I don't actually share that part of myself with a lot of people. And so when you said that, I just remember being like, we're not going to go any deeper than this. You opened up my heart

JENNY CURTIS: And it was perfect.

JULIA HENNING: Oh, thank you so much for that. What a gift to be reminded of that.

JENNY CURTIS: Thank you.

CHRIS PORTER: Thank you both. Thank you, everyone at this table. Let's just say that.

JULIA HENNING: I love us.

JENNY CURTIS: Julia has so much more to say about Chelsea, and it's all available for you to listen to. Hear the entire conversation in the SOLAR Panel on our Apple Podcasts Premium Channel.