

A Moment Behind the Scenes with ALI (Jenny Curtis) - Transcript

JENNY CURTIS: Hey, I'm Jenny Curtis. You know at this point that I directed and produced SOLAR alongside creator Chris Porter, and also I voiced the character of ALI. Be honest. She's your favorite.

Chris and I got to chat through the development of thematic elements and overall creation of ALI. And here we're jumping into a discussion about finding her voice, and as Chris puts it, the heart inside the programming.

JENNY CURTIS: But ALI was her own type of really exciting challenge because we worked really hard to find how a computer could be emotional.

CHRIS PORTER: That's right. What did you feel that you could bring to the role that you didn't find immediately on the page? What was unique and fulfilling for you as an actress about this project?

JENNY CURTIS: The thing, in a sideways way to answer this, the gift of being on the creative team of this show and having so much time developing it is that we had time to get to know ALI. And I didn't have to come in and jump into a rehearsal immediately and get one take at like, okay, that's her voice and then let's go. There was so much time where we had the table reads, we had the rehearsals with the other actors as we were developing the project, I was acting opposite them when they were recording and I feel like where everybody else got a rehearsal, or a table read at most, besides the obvious, Jon, who we've already talked about coming in often, I had time with her to find her voice, and I think that was the most exciting and fulfilling part. And I'm going to keep saying this word all the time and I know, you know, I love it. But the time to play. Because we wanted her to be different, and it's really hard to find what is different about a technological character.

CHRIS PORTER: Can you share some of the ways that ALI evolved, both in pre-production and throughout the story, to have a heart inside the programming?

JENNY CURTIS: Our first table read when we had, I think 12 actors come in and sit around a table and this was pre-pandemic and we all read the first four episodes of the show, and I knew I enjoyed ALI, but we started reading and people were cracking up.

CHRIS PORTER: She has great comedic timing for being AI.

JENNY CURTIS: She has great comedic timing.

SOLAR TABLE READ CLIP PLAYS

ALI: Yes Pilot Davis, if you go on this mission, we will get along.

JAMAL: Can you keep a secret?

ALI: No.

(laughter)

TABLE READ CLIP ENDS

JENNY CURTIS: Having that live feedback was so hugely helpful to know this is where we can lean in, and this is where we can develop her, and this is where she can have a personality.

CHRIS PORTER: You had mentioned that you were directing these people and you were reading all the lines to have the actors respond to them. Did that experience of having to read and perform with this while listening to the other people's performances, did that lead you to reconsider how you were performing ALI once you got to the other side of the window?

JENNY CURTIS: Reconsider? No, but talking about how it took time to develop her, I performed very much on intuition and how things feel. So the more I got to play outside of the recording studio, the more I was able to comfortably drop in once I was, and I say comfortably with a big asterisk on it, because as you know, it took a little while originally. I don't know if you were going to go here, but originally we weren't going to record ALI in the studio because it was just you and I and I have a mic at home and we knew ALI was going to have a treatment to her, so it didn't have to sound as clear as everybody else. We were going to try to record her in the studio we're in now, which I don't know if anyone can hear what just happened, but motorcycles just went by us and that was a challenge. And so then we were like, well, what if we record her in my apartment? And I had a really nice mic in my apartment and I set it up on top of a jewelry case next to my closet, and I tried to make myself a little sound booth. And everything in my being is so anxious. I have to have things be perfect. I definitely overthink. And finally, we were like, You know what? Screw this. We're going to go into the studio.

CHRIS PORTER: We talked about it with Jon when he was here in a previous Solar Panel, that there's a certain level of physicality that allows you to drop into that role. And I think you had even mentioned like squeezing a part of your hand at some point. What, what did you have to do to drop into ALI? And I know one of the things you had to do, because we heard it all, all the time.

JENNY CURTIS: Okay. So, yeah, the hand thing was not an ALI thing. The hand thing, in case anybody didn't go back and listen to last week's conversation with Jon. That's an emotional trigger for me. And obviously, ALI... I'm doing it now and I'm going to get teary.

CHRIS PORTER: Oh, don't do it. Don't. Stop it. Stop it. We're having a fun interview.

JENNY CURTIS: So it's an emotional trigger for me to dig my thumbnail into the center of my palm, which is just an actor thing I have in my tool kit. And ALI, I would often do this.

Aaaahhhhto warm up my voice. And then I would go back to ALI's main line. "Searching for Mission Control"

ALI RECORDING: Searching for Mission Control.

JENNY CURTIS: And she would immediately drop into my chest and immediately, like, come right here in the sort of front of my soft palate.

CHRIS PORTER: She's gesturing kind of to like the top of her mouth and nasal sinus region.

JENNY CURTIS: But nobody really....

CHRIS PORTER: Kind of on...

JENNY CURTIS: Their mouth in that kind of way...

CHRIS PORTER: Usually not. It's a soft palate.

JENNY CURTIS: And that's how I would find ALI.

CHRIS PORTER: Now, in its creation, I always knew that the ship was going to be a major character. And the story is about dealing with trauma, both physical and mental. And honestly, I could think of no better metaphor than to have a ship with a hole literally ripped through it. How much of your humanness did you have to remove and how much did you have to put in to thread that needle?

JENNY CURTIS: That wasn't an active choice, whatever it was. I tried really hard to remove all humanness. You know this. I would get really, really mad that I would have to breathe. It bothered me. ALI doesn't breathe, and I was pissed that I couldn't make it all the way through the temperature readings without taking a breath. Which, you know, the magic of editing. Just stop and breathe you crazy lady. The humanness in ALI, I mean, there were a couple of days, though, like when I would direct obviously we've talked about this. I'm on the other side of the glass. I'm reading across the actors and performing with them and blah, blah, blah. And when I would go into the booth, we would do one line at a time, because ALI doesn't really need to react to people because she has her cadence. But there would be some lines where you would be like, where are we going to find the emotion here? And then you would feed me a line and I would react. And it, it was helpful in that, those moments where we needed to find her humanity. Then you became the reader on the other side where I was actually acting with someone rather than just checking off the lines as we go.

CHRIS PORTER: Right.

JENNY CURTIS: God, that was fun. Let's do this again.

CHRIS PORTER: Right from the start.

JENNY CURTIS: And there's some background on the Aethon language interface. I could talk about ALI all day and in fact, you can hear more of our discussion about her on the Solar Panel available on our Apple Podcasts premium channel. Thanks for listening. And till next time... searching for mission control.