

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER INTERVIEW
TRUE JUSTICE: BRYAN STEVENSON'S FIGHT FOR EQUALITY
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER
Poet
November 15, 2018
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 29 Minutes

START TC: 01;00;00;00

01;00;17;08

PETER KUNHARDT:

You good? Elizabeth, thank you for coming out on this snowy night, you're kind to do it.

01;00;23;21

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

For the best reason in the world.

01;00;26;08

PETER KUNHARDT:

for someone who's never heard of Bryan Stevenson, how would you describe him?

01;00;34;04

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Bryan Stevenson is a visionary, by which I mean he makes visible American history in its true form. This we see in the EJI memorial, which does that in such an extraordinary fashion. He is a justice warrior, because the things that he does case-by-case, human being my human being, add up to actually moving us forward to a much better place. He's a lawyer, he believes that the law can actually bring justice to human beings who have been denied justice. And he is a lover of humanity. When I think of him, and want other people to understand something about him, it's kind of how he puts his hands on people literally and metaphorically. He writes and talks about putting his hands on a young person, an underaged person who has been done terrible things to in prison, and what happens at that moment that he puts his hands on that child. And I think that, that is something that he does literally with other human beings, but also metaphorically in his work.

01;01;43;13

PETER KUNHARDT:

You des—he's a lawyer, and most people think of lawyers in one way. And he's about as opposite of whatever way that is people think about. Can you talk about his compassion for his clients? He makes it more than just a business.

01;02;01;23

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Bryan often uses the word, as we know, proximity, what it means to get proximate, what it means to get next to other human beings. Again, it's something that he enacts literally, but it has much, much more powerful metaphorical understanding. So, I think that, you know, I won't make generalizations about lawyers and what they do, but given that his training is in the law, and he believes in the tool of the law to ultimately give people the representation and the justice that they need, the way that he enacts it, is by getting proximate to human being's stories. And I think that, that gives him a sense of how he can make other people care about those human beings. But I think also, those exchanges are very simple actually, and very, very intimate. If I talk to you, and you hear who I am, and I give you a piece of my soul, and I

hear you with empathy, then that means we can partner on doing something together, so really it starts intimate with Bryan I think.

01;03;03;21

PETER KUNHARDT:

That's excellent, beautiful. Do you remember the first time you met Bryan?

01;03;12;03

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I met Bryan for the first time in two ways. The first time I met him, was at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, after an evening that the public theater put together where different writers and thinkers read things aloud that related to Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare. And Bryan was a part of that night. I didn't know his work at that point. I knew that he was a kind, shy, quiet man backstage, and we fell into conversation, and that he cared about poetry. I mean, again I wasn't unaware of what he did, but you know, his work hadn't blown up in the way that it has now. And so, we talked about poetry, and about believing in what poetry could do to express something of the human spirit. And then he said to me, "I'm thinking about a project. I'm thinking about a project that will help people understand about lynching. Would you write a poem, or do something if I did that project?" Didn't know

him, who could imagine what he was trying to make? What? A memorial about lynching? I mean, I had no picture in my head, but I said, "Yes."

01;04;17;11

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

The second time I met him, was about six months later. I was driving in my car between New Haven, Connecticut and New York City, and a voice came on the radio telling a story of putting hands on a young person in prison who wasn't able to tell his story. That was Bryan talking about *Just Mercy*, and the story and the voice and the intimacy and the power were so compelling, I pulled my car over by the side of the road, and sat with his voice and listened to him for the next half an hour. So, I feel like that's the way that, in a funny way, I really deeply met him.

01;04;52;13

PETER KUNHARDT:

Wow. You mention his vision. Talk about his vision in particular, in regard to the lynching memorial.

01;05;08;20

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Bryan has a formulation that I think is very clean, very simple, very useful, and very true. He says, as we know, slavery did not end, it evolved. And he talks about that evolution moving from slavery, to Jim Crow, to the resistance, to the civil rights movement, and let me put lynching before Jim Crow, excuse me, ending with mass incarceration. So, that is the argument, if you will, behind these spaces that he's created in Birmingham that are so extraordinary. There is the museum that tells that story, tells it with holographs, tells it with objects, tells it with text, tells it with stories of people who were incarcerated, and narratives from the 19th century that are read aloud, so that you can, in a very immersive way, experience it. And then there is the memorial itself, which is on a mount. When you look on the mount, you see the other mount in ... Excuse me, I said Birmingham before, in Montgomery, where the state capital is.

01;06;10;00

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

So, you see that he has rewritten the landscape, so now you can't look at the state capital without also understanding this happened here too. And I think that what, among the many things that are extraordinary about that memorial, and the enormous slabs with these names and counties and places that bear witness to what happened, are the replicas of those slabs that counties will claim, and some won't claim, and put in their spaces, and mark their landscape, and say, "Jefferson Davis wasn't the only thing that happened here, this happened here too. We will remember their names, we will contemplate." And again, you know, the landscape, I was thinking recently it's like the rocks cry out. You know that expression? The ground will speak, and tell a fuller, truer tale of the simultaneity of American history.

01;07;02;23

PETER KUNHARDT:

I love that, I think we should, for protection sake, I'd like to ask you to do the first line with Montgomery and the changing landscape with the statehouse.

01;07;16;07

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

So, when you look up at the lynching Memorial in Montgomery, what you see on the other mount is the statehouse. So, the Montgomery landscape, that city, and its history have been visually rewritten to restore the story of all that happened there. You can never tell everything, but I think what is powerful about the additive force of what he's doing, is that you realize we can actually never tell all the stories. And that leaves space for others to come in and say, "This happened, this happened to my family. This is how we are Americans, this is how we experience this place."

01;07;52;05

PETER KUNHARDT:

Excellent. To pick up on story, talk a little about Bryan as a storyteller.

01;08;03;14

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Bryan is an extraordinary storyteller. He tells a lot of the same stories as many of us do actually. You know, there are stories that are touchstones,

there are stories that are iconic. There are stories that do a lot of work. He is very attuned to the ancestral passing on of stories. So, I think about the ways that his stories about his grandmother, and how his grandmother would hug him fiercely, so that he would remember that he was always hugged. And how his grandmother would take him to the shack, where his great-grandparents had been enslaved, and ask him to listen. And that, that listening, that's a story worth telling over and over again, because it makes us understand how he is always listening for ancestral voices.

01;08;51;19

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

He urges us all to do that, he wants America to do that, and that, you know, the wonderful, wonderful saying, another story that many of us tell over and over again, every shut eye ain't asleep, every goodbye ain't gone. So even if those people aren't in the room with you right now, if they're no longer walking this earth, their wisdom, their stories, their history, their guidance, is with us still. So, I think that he is a very distilled storyteller, who understands the power of certain stories that can apply over and over and over again to different situations. And he has a beautiful voice, and he has so much warmth in his voice. I heard him speak last night, and it was to a smaller room than I

usually hear him speak in. And there was just a way that he calibrated exactly to that room, and made it instantly intimate. And that is something about his skill, if you will, as a storyteller. I think it's a gift actually, I don't think it's a practiced thing. And also, the way that he can move in different registers, because I've seen him speak to very, very large audiences as well with the same power of spellbinding intimacy.

01;10;07;16

PETER KUNHARDT:

Would you talk about your process of writing a poem for the memorial?

01;10;14;05

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Writing that poem for the memorial was one of the hardest things I ever had to write. Commissions are awful, you want to write something that has integrity, you want to write something that can stand the test of time. You're writing something that is going to live in a way that most poems don't live. Most poems don't live on stone, most poems don't live in material form, and in the context of a whole other production. Most poems are not read by people from all over the world, visitors that you can't control. Where that poem is like other poems though, is once you set them free, once you send

them out, they don't belong to you anymore. And you hope that other people will make use of them.

01;10;57;01

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

So, I think that I did a very active listening, a kind of meditative listening in the way that Bryan talks about thinking, "This is going to be a place where there will be ancestral presence." This will show people that they were not forgotten. You know, this will show people that you may think that history is written and said and done. You may think that the violations of the past are set, but there is always hope, but there is hope in the midst of tremendous, tremendous sorrow. So, how to listen for all of those things, and literally welcome in some voices that would help me make the poem responsibly. That's the listening, and then once there were some lines and some words, you know, the honing, the shaping, the crafting is as it always is. You know, just that kind of oyster knife work to make it very precise.

01;11;55;15

PETER KUNHARDT:

Do you think writing that poem gave you an even clearer vision of who Bryan was, and what he was doing?

01;12;10;05

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

You know, I feel lucky ...

01;12;13;11

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

This may not seem like an answer, but it is. I feel literally lucky to be alive and in the same world that Bryan is in. We are of a generation, we have responsibility. And so, I think that my craft is poetry, his craft is the law, we're both trying to do something in bigger public spaces, and extend what that work can do. We're both educators, you know, I'm now working with some of the tools of philanthropy. We are of a generation; the path was laid for us. We had to make our own way, but we have work to do. We have justice work to do, we have so much work to do. So, I am just grateful that he is there shining this particular light, because we have responsibility. And

that's not a grandiose thing, that's just the truth, so that's what we're trying to do.

01;13;09;20

PETER KUNHARDT:

That's a great answer. Your poem is about hope, and hope is also Bryan's guiding force. Can you talk a little bit about the power of hope?

01;13;26;17

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

You know, I'm thinking, there's a Lucille, yeah, so Bryan and I love some of the same poets. We love Lucille Clifton, we love Gwendolyn Brooks. We find have everything we need in those poets. And sometimes I've gone back and forth about them, and I'm thinking of a Lucille Clifton poem called, *Study The Masters*, that I'm going to try to remember. "Like my aunt Timmy, it was her iron, or one like hers that smoothed the sheets the master poet slept on". And it goes on to talk about how she, her handiwork gave him a place to lie and dream. And then the poem turns, and it says, "She had dreams too.

Sometimes those words were Cherokee, sometimes they were Maasai."

Those dreams in the poem are huge and particular as hope.

01;14;24;13

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

"And if you heard her humming," the poem goes, "You would understand line, form, America." So, this poem, *Study the Masters*, by Lucille Clifton, I think, gets at the complexity of hope. This is not like chin up turned hope. This is not one note hope. This is, you know, a hope that comes through struggle, a hope with much disappointment, a hope that isn't just a shining light on a hill. A hope that perhaps believes in one-on-one human dignity, that believes in giving dignity like in that Lucille Clifton poem to aunt Timmy, who is the housekeeper in the hotel who's ironing the sheets for someone who's going to stand up on this stage and have the words, but remembering that her words and her hopes and her dreams are extraordinary too. So that is an answer with a poem that I think gets at the complex shadings of hope.

01;15;32;02

PETER KUNHARDT:

Would you talk about how the memorial has the power to change how we see the narrative of race in this country?

01;15;42;18

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I am so heartened to hear that so many people already have gone to see this memorial, because I really do believe it has the power to change the way we understand race in this country. Lynching is a word, is a concept, is an action, is a historical fact, that I would venture to say that most Americans don't know about. I think that also connecting ... You know, many are inclined to say, "Well, slavery is over, what are people fussing about? You know, I didn't do it, that's in the past." But understanding that this idea that black people have been reviled, have been made and defined as inferior that, that is a whole structured ideology, I think helps us understand why we are in the place that we are today, not only with incarceration, but with the persistent belief that black people, since we're talking about black people in particular right now, have to prove themselves literate, articulate, beautiful, worthy, citizens.

01;16;50;00

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

You know, you see all that I am eluding too, we are still proving that we are human beings in this country hundreds of years after the end of chattel

slavery. So, I think that the museum and the memorial really help people to experience and understand that. And I think doing it with stories, doing it, calling upon the power of empathy, believing that human beings can hear other people's stories, that human beings can take those stories in, I think really is going to make for shifts that we can't necessarily measure. I think that also, the thing that we can't measure, is when young people in large groups start to go. You know, when perhaps the Washington trip that used to be iconic for middle schoolers all around the country, maybe will be replaced in some instances with a Montgomery tour, or a civil rights tour. How those young people will understand our country remains to be seen, but it's very powerful.

01;17;55;10

PETER KUNHARDT:

It's a great thing for Montgomery. One of the archivists we were dealing with, wrote us about finding some photographs. He said, "The amazing thing, is that Bryan's right here, and he's still here, and he's still working with us." It makes him proud to be in Montgomery. I think it had a cathartic, great response for the people of the city.

01;18;22;02

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

And you know, I do think also, not everybody I'm sure is happy about it.

They'll find a way to deal with that too.

01;18;37;13

PETER KUNHARDT:

Talk about Bryan's effort to stop passive observance when visiting the memorial, and trying to turn people towards action? We asked him today what his action points were. I'd like to hear you describe what you think the memorial can achieve.

01;18;59;14

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I haven't thought about that. I mean, so many things. One of the things that I love about the memorial, is that Bryan commissioned a wonderful, wonderful artists to make pieces for the memorial. I'm thinking about the Sanford Biggers, or the Hank Willis Thomas, particularly the Hank Willis Thomas as you encounter it, as you leave the memorial space. How do we measure what art makes people do? Gwendolyn Brooks says, "Art urges voyages." Art shifts us inside ourselves, art can make us understand things that nothing else can

make us understand, but it's very, very hard to measure. I think that the indelible emotional experience of some of the art, I think, the indelible emotional experience of again, listening to stories and saying, "Not only I never knew this, but also, why wasn't I told this?"

01;20;01;21

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Why was I sold a bill of goods? Why was I given a version of American history that leaves so much out? Why was I given a version of American history that has good guys and bad guys? Why was I given a version of American history that doesn't invite me to empathize with someone who's not me? I'm not any of the people in this story, how can I enter another person's story?" I don't have an answer to what people will do once they've been there, but I know that there is such a thing as life-changing experiences. I really do believe that, that is what all kinds of people will have when they are there. This is also not just about people whose minds need to be changed. I'm thinking about the time I went for the opening, and watching African-American elders walking through and saying, "I knew that person, that's my County." That reckoning

for people who are 80 years old, who never thought they'd have a reckoning, that is part of the effect as well.

01;21;04;04

PETER KUNHARDT:

I know you have two sons, have you taken them to the museum and memorial yet?

01;21;09;18

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I have two sons, and I am hoping to take them for spring break to the memorial. They're both in college, so their time is no longer governed by me. They admire Bryan as much as they admire any human being. They admire Bryan probably second to their grandfather. They have been fortunate enough to meet him, and to also experience his warmth and his care for them in that way. I think of my grandmother, on my mother's side, my people are from Alabama. I think of my grandmother, my maternal grandmother saying, "Show children that you care for them." She would say the same thing, "Put your hand on that child. Look that child in the eye. Say hello, speak when

people pass you on the street." If I ever forgot to do any of those things, I would be chided, I was not being human. I think that, that way that Bryan has with anyone of looking people in the eye, putting a hand on a shoulder, and making them feel cared for, I feel lucky that, that light has been shone on my children. They are very, very eager to go, and they are great students of African-American history and culture, and so I can't wait.

01;22;32;14

PETER KUNHARDT:

That's great. During your justice summit conversation at the museum and memorial at the opening, you said, "This memorial is the best one in the world." That's a big statement.

01;22;48;18

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Yes.

01;22;49;11

PETER KUNHARDT:

Can you tell me why?

01;22;52;12

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

I haven't been to all of the comparable memorials in the world, but I try to go to as many of them as I can, because I want to know the question of memory and the polis has always interested me. What is the material form in which people have tried to tell difficult histories? I know that Bryan was very influenced by the apartheid memorial in South Africa, in Johannesburg, which is indeed an extraordinary memorial. I think that why Bryan's is better, if you will, is that he understood that power of art. He understood that there would be feelings that might not have words right away, and that, that needed to have an analog, a place to be in this space. He understood that the enormity of telling the stories, and calling on the ancestors, required some experiential latitude. It's not just about the information. I think that sometimes the other memorials, and they're important, and they're good, but they are conveying information.

01;23;53;18

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

What he's understanding is empathy, the human aspect. I think that a lot of that is understood through not only the works of art, but also the extraordinary artistic design of the memorial itself, and of Michael Murphy's just unbelievable simple elegant design. Even the way that the large slabs rise up and up and up about you almost imperceptibly. The design of the jars that are lined up with all of the different colors of soil from sites of lynchings. Knowing that those sites are now marked. There are no words to that, no words, but names and dates and places, but no narrative. Yet, all of that narrative is summonable in a very human way, and I think that, that's what he understands that sets this memorial apart from anything I've ever seen.

01;24;47;20

PETER KUNHARDT:

That was really great. My last question for you. Bryan always says that we are all more than the worst things we've ever done.

01;24;59;07

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Yes.

01;25;00;05

PETER KUNHARDT:

Can you talk about the idea of redemption?

01;25;06;22

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Every time Bryan says we are all more than the worst thing we've ever done, I tear up. I think about the starting place for that comment. He's talking about people who are incarcerated, people who have been convicted of crimes, people who have sometimes done very terrible things. How we see them as full human beings, you are more than the most awful thing you've ever done. Even for those of us who have not been in those circumstances, we all have regret, and shame, and things we wish we'd done differently, and moments when we know we could have done better. That is, I think, part of the process of just trying to be a better human being.

01;25;52;20

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

And so I think with this unbelievably swift linking of someone who you might not think of yourself as having anything in common with someone who's in prison for committing a very terrible crime, but actually these feelings of shame and regret, are something that we all can understand on the road. We can always try to get better, we can always try to do better. My grandmother, I'm thinking about her so much today, but she said, and many grandmothers have said this. She always said that you had to do your best, but then when you didn't do your best, do your best next time, do better next time. That there is always a next time, that we are always in process. I think we're in grave danger as human beings, if we don't believe that we can get better. He reminds us, he reminds us of that.

01;26;51;03

PETER KUNHARDT:

I'm going to add one more question. Bryan talks about being with one of his clients, and he was describing how broken he was.

01;27;01;00

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

Yes.

01;27;01;21

PETER KUNHARDT:

And then Bryan says, and then he realized I'm broken too. And then he realized, we're all broken, and the system is broken. That being broken is being normal. Can you talk about the concept of being broken?

01;27;20;29

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER:

When I first heard Bryan talk about the concept of being broken, I sent him a Gwendolyn Brooks poem called, *Infirm*. "We are all infirm, O Lord mend me." It goes on to talk about how I am broken, you are broken, we are broken, but we can mend. It's a very simple poem, it's almost a hymn, or it's a very simple spiritual, and even that word "infirm", that's an old timey word. I think we think of infirmities as being physical maladies of being sick, of again, in a

very, very old-fashioned sort of way. She, like Bryan, is talking about our souls, he's talking about our souls, and that all of us have brokenness in our souls. That all of us, each and every one of us, I believe this, that there is no one who is beyond redemption.

01;28;14;04

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER CONT'D:

Now what are the conditions for redemption? That's another question, how can other human beings help each other in this regard? That's another thing, but I think that in theory, every human being can redeem themselves always. Raising children has taught me a great deal about this. They do terrible things to each other, the children, they hit each other, they do terrible things, and then you bring them together to teach them how to redeem themselves with each other. You do it all over again, and hopefully you've helped them to know how to do it themselves.

END TC: 01;29;04;12