Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Dean Elizabeth Daley, Dean of the USC School of Cinematic Art
August 29, 2023
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 28 min and 58 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
We are fundamentally storytelling animals. We have to tell stories. We don't seem to be able to survive without telling them. It enables us to deal with a very difficult and complex world, and frame it in some way that we can understand. So every once in a while, I will have a colleague from another unit come over and say, you know, we've discovered in our field that storytelling is really important. And I want to say I don't, but I often want to say, “Well, I could have saved you some time. We could have told you that 6000 years ago.” Because people have always told stories and just whatever medium is available they will use.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Elizabeth Daley
Dean of the USC School of Cinematic Art

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INTERVIEWER:
Dean Daley, thank you so much for doing this. The history of the School of Cinematic Arts is extraordinary to me, but you are the longest tenured dean of this school. You came in 1991. Tell me what brought you here. What attracted you to this position and how they recruited you?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, I had come to Los Angeles in 1984, in 1982, actually, and had helped the Mark Taper Forum set up a production company and worked for Gordon Davidson, who was a great mentor, and a man I will always deeply admire. And the company… We did some work I'm very proud of. It was never really a situation where they were going to be able to probably capitalize a production company in the way they needed to.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
So we moved the company to MGM, and that worked quite well until there was a major writers strike. If you recall, '89-'90 was a very painful 153 day strike. So that was when I agreed to come down to USC and stay for a year and work with them and kind of help stabilize their production program. The last of '89 into '90. And I was very hesitant about doing it. I really didn't think of myself as an academic. And, so when they asked me to, I said, well, okay, one year till the town kind of settles back down and, then, the dean who was here at the time, stepped aside the middle of that year and they asked if I could stay another year while they did a search. And I said, well, okay. I had some film projects that I was hoping would go forward, and a couple of them did, and they were very cooperative about

the time I needed for that. But, by the end of 1991, I had pretty much fallen in love with the place. And, as I've said many times to people, it was the best decision I ever made.

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INTERVIEWER:
Tell me about the projects you had done at MGM, or the projects you were developing as a producer, right. You were a producer?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, there were some projects we produced under the Mark Taper Forum banner, Taper Media Enterprises, that I was very proud of. One of them was a television movie called Right to Kill. Which looked at the situation of two children who had been badly abused by their father and wound up killing him. The young man was accused of murder. And, that project actually led pretty directly to the changing of the child abuse laws in Wyoming.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
I went in to see the governor, and he pointed to the stack of boxes in his office, and he said, "Those are all because of you guys." Because this— We got so many letters about the, situation of child abuse and the fact that this young man had been so abused. The other one that I think I would probably say we're the proudest of is, and I say we because lots of people obviously worked on them. But it's one called, "Tell Them I'm a Mermaid," which was based on the narratives of about eight women who were disabled in one way or another, and one of them, who was confined to a

wheelchair, said, when little children stare at her in the grocery store, she tells her mothers, “just tell them I'm a mermaid.”

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And so we titled the show that and Norman Lear’s company produced it. We got a tremendous response for it. Won a lot of awards. And the thing that I think was fun about it was it was actually a musical, and people said, “You're making a musical about disability?” And, you know, the women wrote it themselves. I mean, we– we— It was not our lens on it. It was very much them telling us what they wanted to say.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And also with the second project. So, you know, yes, those are the kinds of projects that I really enjoyed. I always loved working on real world stories that mattered. And sometimes the greatest pleasure was developing scripts that never got made, even though, because you got to know these remarkable people who were willing to trust their stories with you. And I was always very aware that we took a tremendous responsibility when we asked somebody for the rights to their life or the rights to their story.

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INTERVIEWER:
Let's talk about the history of the school. This is the part that came as news to me: The same people Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, the people who– who formed the first artist motion picture studio, decided they also needed a school.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, the school really is the child of the Motion Picture Academy. In February of 1929, the then president of USC and Douglas Fairbanks Sr., who was then president of the academy, the first president of the Academy, of course, started a— Well, the first course was called history of the Photoplay. And there's a wonderful memo that was read at an event. The president invited the student body, which, of course, was very small, to come to a meeting, and they were going to announce this program.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And it says, now that film, which, of course, is all there was, now that film is a mature art form and critical to the gross national product of the United States. It should be accorded the same respect in the Academy as law and medicine. Well, I love reading this. And people say, well, it's about time somebody said that. And I go, well, the date's February 4th, 1929. It's taken us a while. But the school thrived immediately. And of course, it wasn't an independent school. It wasn't an independent school, actually, until much later. It got tucked under various things. But it had the advantage of a passionate faculty and also of a university that was flexible enough to leave it alone and let it grow.

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INTERVIEWER:
Douglas Fairbanks starts this in 1929, but then the economy tanks. But interestingly, film was one of the things that helped the country get through The Depression. It elevated the spirits of the country. Can you talk

about your own perspective on that, and how that changed people's understanding of this as a part of our culture?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
I think people go to the theater for several reasons: They go certainly to hear stories. They also go to be together. You know, the wonderful thing about movies, and I never worry when people tell me we won't go to the theaters because we want to be together. We're herd animals as well as storytellers. And, I think from everything I know of the depression, and I'm not a historian, people came together. It was something they could afford to do. It was a place where you could feel better, where you could dream. And in many ways, Hollywood was built on the dreams of immigrants who had been driven out of Eastern Europe, who had been driven out of Russia, who could— weren't accepted in the traditional professions. But they created the dream that they thought should be America.

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INTERVIEWER:
So moving forward, you come to this place, and it's a respected institution in 1991. Can you talk about what you saw when you arrived here in 1991 as your challenge?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, when I arrived here, I looked at the names on the buildings. I looked at the alumni, and I said, “Wow, I'm going to get to take care of something that doesn't need to be fixed. Isn't this exciting?” And of course, then I

looked at the budget, and the budget was terrifying. There was no endowment. The equipment and facilities were– looked pretty out-of-date to me. And yet I was looking at these remarkable people who had graduated from Ray Harryhausen and George Lucas and John Milius, and the list went on and on and on.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And I was going, "Okay. Something very right is happening here." Everyone wanted to tell me what was wrong. I said, something very right is going on. So the first thing we have to do is figure out what's right, and then we have to figure out how to support that and grow it. But, there was an interesting turning point, which I will share with you. There was a night… They were celebrating, tearing down these old stables that they had been living in and the creation of this new complex that had the first Lucas and first building and the first Spielberg stage and the Johnny Carson stages, and which, of course, was why I thought everything was fine.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
But they had a reception, and I remember standing at a table over, frankly, some very bad cheese. And Steven Spielberg was there, and Steven said, "If you decide to take this job, perhaps what you and I can do is take care of the place together." And I thought, am I smart enough to know I just heard the best offer of my life? And I will always be very grateful to Steven for that. Along with many other things I'm grateful to Stephen for. But he and George came that night, and I looked at the two of them together, and I looked at their dedication to the place, and I thought, well, it's worth a try.

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INTERVIEWER:
So now, with this offer from Steven Spielberg, what did you do?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, I couldn't read the budget, and I was perfectly capable of reading a corporate balance sheet, but I could not— This had categories I had never heard of. So I called a friend out at Sony who was an auditor and said, "Could you come audit these books for me, please?" And he did. He came and he very nicely went over them. And so he called me about, I don't know, a few days later and said, "Okay, I think I have everything in categories that you and I understand that we know what it means." And I said, "Oh, maybe it's not as bad."

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
He said, "Well, your $600,000 operating deficit is much closer to a 6 million operating deficit." At which point I once again wondered if this was a wise situation. All I could ever remember was how much the alums I had met, and everyone seemed to care about the place. And that people liked the advancements they had. These graduates hadn't walked out of here unless that was something worth trying to keep going. And so we looked at it, and, what we then did was we started meeting the alumni.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:

And I started calling alums, and I would sit the older faculty down and say, "Who did you teach?" And they would tell me, and then they would always invariably say, "You're going to ask him for money, aren't you?" And I'd go, "Well, that's not the first thing I'm going to do. But if I don't, we can't keep the doors open." And I realized as I talked to these folks that they— these were their children. How could you go ask your children for money?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
But person after person that we would call would say, well, I've been trying to find out how to help them, but nobody will tell me. And of course you can imagine. My reply was, I will be happy to tell you. But first I'd like to hear about your experience at the school. I'd like to know what you think we ought to be doing. Where should this go? And one of the first people to really come and step up was Bob Zemeckis, who said. Of course, you know. And he came down and taught a class for an entire semester. And we begin to, I think, with the alums, build trust and get to know them. And I have to this day, never called an alum and asked him to talk to a student or give me advice on something and had them say no. The devotion to the school is amazing. It's– it's very much their school. And people often ask me, you know, how do you judge the success of the school? And I have an answer that I think I am now told is not typical, but it is: I judge it strictly by the success of the alumni.

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INTERVIEWER:
Well, tell me about some of them. Tell me about the ones that you would look at. Because people will know them but not know them in connection to USC. So let's share that.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, you know, if you look at the alumni historically, certainly Ray Harryhausen, who was the creator of visual effects, was very much an alum. Then, you know, you move on, certainly to the generation with Lucas and John Milius and Steven Spielberg. And then there are incredible people who begin to work in television. Matt Weiner, who did Mad Men, was here. John Wells, certainly known for Shameless and West Wing, and Brian Grazer and Ron Howard are both alums, and Shonda Rhimes who certainly everyone that watches television knows. Melissa Rosenberg, a terrific television writer. Then, you know, more recently, needless to say, we're incredibly proud of Ryan Coogler, who has proven beyond doubt what cultural impact a film can be.

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INTERVIEWER:
So literacy has been redefined constantly in the last few generations, but you have a very specific point of view about literacy as it relates to film, television and other visual media. Please talk about it.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
I had an experience in the very early 2000s of having a wonderful conversation with George Lucas, in which he said, “Don't you think anyone who cannot read and write with our language—” And he meant the language of cinema, the language of sound and image, and rhythm and time and space and, I think functionally illiterate in today's society.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:

Perhaps as literate as you or I would have been had we left the university unable to write a short essay. And it was like, of course, of course, you make perfect sense, because if you don't know how to take the tools of media and create meaning with them, and understand how meaning is created with them, you are living as a read only participant in this society, and you often don't really understand what's going on around you. So it became clear to me that from that conversation that we really needed as a school to address this in the larger university. So I came back and we set up a fairly comprehensive program in what we then called multimedia literacy, because there were no other terms for it.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:

It wasn't a great title, but it did lead to a number of other programs. And I found that so many of the media literacy courses, they were all about how to defend yourself against media, not how to empower yourself with it, not how to use it. Well, of course, we mentioned this to the students and they all looked at us like, well, of course, of course, you make perfect sense. So I wrote a paper in 2003, which was about really expanding our definition of literacy, and the language has embraced much of this now to the point that we talk about computer literacy, mathematical literacy, etc.. But I think there– there still is a desperate need for people to really understand how this world they live in a, totally mediated world where people are getting most of their information from screens, how it works, how it actually works.

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INTERVIEWER:
So social media, which also now creates a huge amount of original content, probably more than all the studios combined and then some daily. Talk about how you've seen that and how that's been reflected in what you teach here.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
It's an interesting question as to how social media has changed our curriculum. You know, when I first came here, and certainly when some of our famous alums were here, just getting your hands on equipment was impossible. Well, that's really not the issue anymore. Nor is it the issue of how you distribute, because you can distribute it. But how do you get any attention for it? We find that, much to our pleasure, students are far less afraid of making original content. They are certainly not intimidated by equipment. If we have any issue, it's making sure that they don't worship the equipment, and that they understand that no, no, no, the camera is wonderful. We aren't going to do anything without it, but it will not make you Fellini.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
You will have to understand how it works. And you have to have something to say. You know, too– for too many years, making film, television, any kind of media could only be done by those with means. Now everybody can do it. Can everybody do it well? Can everybody do it in a way that deserves another human being's time? That's another question. And, it's a little like when photography came along, those wonderful little yellow Kodak boxes.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Everybody could take pictures, and didn't we have wonderful times with looking back at our baby pictures that they took on grainy black white film? Wonderful, and a great contribution. But it didn't make anyone Ansel Adams. So the question for us always is what does any student have to contribute? To our understanding of our world, to our understanding of our lives, to understanding— To making great stories. To benefiting society in some way through media. These are very powerful tools you place in people's hands. And you know, what do they have and how can we help them find that voice? And how can they learn to work with others who will advance them?

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INTERVIEWER:
So you're talking about students who have to collaborate with others, and they have to be informed by people who have experience, who owe some history. But social media is ubiquitous. There is no filter. Can you speak to that?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
You know, I never want to be in a position of being judgmental about what media is out there. Although, I do certainly like everyone. I'm very concerned about deep fakes. I'm very concerned about what we see in fake news and misinformation, in the ways in which people can be led down pathways they don't even know they're going down. And of course,

that's one reason I argue for increased understanding and basically more understanding of literacy, of how things actually work.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Back to, you know, where did the money come from to produce that? Who's behind it? Who made it? I said to one of my colleagues recently who has been very interesting to have a conversation with. Afterwards, I said to him, "You know, we write your history." And this is a very fine scholar who looked at me quite shocked and said, "You do what?" I said, "We write your history. What goes on those screens becomes the truth. For better or worse, it becomes the truth." That is what people are seeing, believing, reading and understanding. And if you don't know it and you can't make things that are just as good, you don't have a chance.

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INTERVIEWER:
What's the difference between film and television?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
I think the fundamental difference between film and television is where it's intended to be seen and how it's intended to be seen. You know, the beauty of television right now— and these are just words we're having to use because we don't have better vocabulary, but it's episodic. You look at a story and you say, is this story best told in eight episodes? Is it best told in two hours? Is it best told over three years? And so I think with the advent of great television, you have an opportunity to tell stories in the most impactful and appropriate ways.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
You know, I think there are some things that I'm glad they'll eventually get seen one way or another by people, but they were meant to be seen on a big screen. You know, I did not want to see *Oppenheimer* (2023) on a small screen, although I will probably wind up watching it again and again on a small screen. Frankly, I didn't want to see *Asteroid City* (2023) on a small screen because I– I know Bob Yeoman, he's here on the faculty, the cinematographer, and Bob does this incredible work with miniatures and color palettes, and you want to see them on a big screen.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
I also want to be with an audience sometimes. I want to be where we laugh together. You have that sense of people around you sharing this experience. I saw *Barbie* (2023) in a very small town in New Mexico in a, you know, okay, multiplex, not where I would normally go to see a film, but the wonder of sitting with that audience made up of a very, very diverse Hispanic native community, as well as all of us who have the pleasure of getting to be in and out of there. And to see that the interaction between grandmothers and their daughters and people reaching each other and patting each other, not disturbing, but just being together. You knew you were in a cultural moment. And you could watch the energy in the room. People don't have to be talking to have energy together. You know, it's still we're around a campfire. We told stories around campfires, and in many ways, that's what the theater still is.

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INTERVIEWER:
We're now seeing film and television distributed. Almost simultaneously. A lot of things don't even come to a big screen. They go immediately to a small screen. Can you talk about the economics of this? Because I think that's really something that everyone is concerned with. What's the future, as you see it, of how this incredibly important part of our cultural experience can be sustained, given the economics of it?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Well, I think if you want people to go to the theater, you have to give them movies worth driving out of their house for. So, you know, to a great extent, I think it's our responsibility to produce movies that people want to see on the big screen. You didn't have trouble getting people in to see *Avatar* (2009). You didn't have trouble getting people in to see *Barbie*. You know, I can name many others that people went. You can't expect them to do that if you haven't given them something worth their time.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
Time is, after all, the one thing we can't ever get back. So we have to respect it. I'm really happy that there's so many different ways to experience media, that there're so many different avenues. I mean, I look at our students leaving today. You know, when I started in this business, there were six studios and three networks. And if you didn't sell to one of them, you didn't sell. Well, that's not true anymore. There's lots of space.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:

Do I worry about the economics? We always worry about the economics. But I also know that this is a business that is cyclical. It's a business where, you know, television was going to be the death of the movie. Well, didn't quite happen, did it? In fact, it kind of helped movies survive. And then, of course, you can go on and on and on. This was going to— the DVD was going to kill this. This was going to kill that. They never have. If you really believe in great content. It will find its place. So, I am never going to get pessimistic about the ability of humans to tell stories and to get other people to come and share them.

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INTERVIEWER:
One of the things I ask everyone, and, and I think this is going to be easy for you is what gives you hope. And we're in a difficult time in life. It, you know, locally, globally. But you strike me as someone who is a native more than half full. What gives you hope?

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
You know, lots of things give me hope. But, getting to come in here every day where you have one of the most multi-generational societies in the world, and where you have people from all over the globe that work together and that care deeply about what they do. People here live on their passion. And, I was thinking two years ago, Larry Turman, who produced *The Graduate* (1967), among other films, passed away in 2003, at the age of 96.

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:

Larry taught until he was 94. Students would come from all over the world just to get to stand next to him, or just to get to listen to what he had to say. And I remember asking Larry once, "How do you pick your graduates?" Because the Stark students here are always successful. And, he said, "Oh, I ask myself particularly, is this a human being likely to make or cause to be made anything worthy of another human being's time?"

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And I– He said many different answers to that, but he never wanted to hear out of his students. Oh, it's only entertainment. It doesn't matter. He said it always matters. And so I think for me, getting to be with people like Larry Turman, who I had tried to work with before I came here, I had a project. I was so excited. But, you know, I mean, I admired the man enormously. And then getting to see, you know, a Ryan Coogler walk in the door and come into my office and say, "Well, my first film just got in Cannes, but of course, I can't afford to go." And we said, "Of course you can, you're going."

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DEAN ELIZABETH DALEY:
And then to watch what's happened. I mean, how can you not be helpful? You know, I… The people I don't want around my students are cynics. I do not. I do not want the voice of cynicism here. I also, you know, let's face it, we are in an incredibly difficult time. And I don't want to ever be too optimistic to face reality. But I think you only become really cynical when you feel like you have no power. And I hope all of our students leave us knowing that they do have power. They have power to speak and to say things they care about. They may not be the same things I care about, but I

hope we have put tools in their hands and that they know they are responsible for using them well.

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