

Chad: This is Radio Lab. I'm Chad.

Robert: And I'm Robert.

Chad: Today on our show:

(OPERATIC LAUGHTER)

Chad: Laughter.

Robert: And I want to say one more thing about this. We've talked about how laughter is evolutionarily sort of wired in; we've talked about that it's a social thing –

Chad: A safety all clear kind of situation –

Robert: Yeah, but it's another level of safety that's kind of fascinating. Let me tell you a really classic and not well known story. It involves the television show *The Nanny*. Remember in the '90s, Fran Drescher had this very big hit T.V. comedy series?

Chad: Yeah...no...

Robert: Well, you'll probably remember the voice of the Nanny:

(Audio clip from *The Nanny*.)

Fran Drescher: Hello?

Robert: That's Fran.

Fran Drescher: Mom -

(STUDIO LAUGHTER)

Fran Drescher: Well, what's the emergency? Mom, Mike Douglas isn't on channel 4 because they canceled him 22 years ago.

(STUDIO LAUGHTER)

Robert: And the story actually is not so much about Fran Drescher as it is about – you hear those people laughing right underneath all that?

Chad: Yeah, constantly.

Robert: Well, this is about Fran's Laughers. It's a story of *The Nanny Laughers*. And it begins with a woman named Lisette St. Claire.

Lisette: Just – fyi – my name is pronounced “Lizette.”

Robert: She’s a casting director at Central Casting in Los Angeles.

Lisette: Central Casting is the oldest extras casting company. It’s been around for years and years and years. Back in the day where people used to line up outside the studios and the productions would come out and pick you-you-you.

Robert: She actually got her start as an extra -

Lisette: My first gig, um, I think it was called “The Big House” and I had to jump out of a coffin but I was a hooker. (LAUGHS) I was a hooker out of a coffin

Robert: Anyway, after years of working as an extra, Lisette decided to jump to the other side of the business, and be the person in charge of casting the extras.

Lisette: You know, you’re on the phone and the production company calls and says, “I need three strippers, two doctors, and four nurses.” And that’s what we do, we find them.

(SOUND EFFECT)

Robert: Now here’s some more background that you will need. In 1985, which is years before *The Nanny*, Fran Drescher had been raped during a break-in at her apartment. Later she wrote about this experience and she spoke about it publicly.

Fran Drescher (clip): That night was the night that changed everything.

Robert: This is Fran reading from her book *Cancer Schmancer*.

Fran Drescher (clip): Two men with guns broke into our home and raped both me and my girlfriend Judy, who had the misfortune of having joined us for dinner. We were never the same again.

Robert: The people who did this to her were caught and locked up. And then things got worse. As her fame grew, she started getting stalked. And this was right around the time that filming began on *The Nanny*.

(AUDIO CLIP FROM *The Nanny*)

Robert: And the thing about filming *The Nanny* – when it’s filmed live, as they say, you know, “before a live studio audience,” pretty much anybody can come in to the theater. And Fran worried that someone who meant harm would come in and sit there during the show. So she and the show’s producers decided to do the only thing they could do: Get rid of the audience, kick them all out

(STUDIO LAUGHTER CUTS OUT)

Robert: And this was right in the middle of the season. They had a taping to do the very next day.

Fran Drescher (clip): No matter how hard things became in our personal life the show must go on.

Robert: So they called up Lisette.

Lisette: They decided instead of having an audience come in, just have people from Central Casting that they know.

Robert: And she said “all right. I’ll fill your audience with extras.”

Lisette: I was looking for about 30-40 people -

Robert: She had thousands of people to choose from -

Lisette: Um -

Robert: And there were all kinds of categories available to her.

Lisette: You could do a search in the database; you know, height,

Robert: There was age,

Lisette: Ethnicity,

Robert: Skin color,

Lisette: Weight, dress size,

Robert: Eye color,

Lisette: Hair color... You could put that all in, and it will bring up what you need.

Robert: She needed a safe audience.

Lisette: You know just normal lively people.

Robert: She could screen them. And while she was at it she thought, “Well, why don’t I get people who are good laughers?”

Lisette: Yeah.

Robert: So with 24 hours to go she put out a rather strange request.

Lisette: I put it out on the Sequence – It’s like a workline, a hotline that people listen to and if they fit, or if they think they fit, then they’ll call in. and I said “Hi this is Lisette,” and I’m looking for some people who have good laughs to work on *The Nanny* tomorrow.

Robert: And when they’d call she’d begin with one question:

Laughter: Hi my name is A. Donnie Mitchell.

Lisette: Ok. Let me hear you laugh.

Laughter: Yeah, ok. (LAUGHS)

Laughter: Hi my name is Pam West.

Lisette: Let me hear *you* laugh.

Laughter: (LAUGHS)

Laughter: Hi my name is Kim January.

Lisette: Like you just saw the funniest thing let me hear you laugh

Laughter: (LAUGHS)

Laughter: My name is Dennis Filer. (LAUGHS)

Laughter: I was at the Laundromat. She answered the phone right away she goes, “Let’s hear it.” (LAUGHS) And everybody at the Laundromat looked at me and I said “It’s an audition! It’s an audition!”

(LAUGHTER)

Laughter: She said “Laugh right now.” (LAUGHS)

(STUDIO LAUGHTER)

Lisette: Different people were calling in; all ethnicities, all ages, 20-something to like 70-something. I had married couples, and it’s not a show like *Baywatch* where everybody has to look, you know, bikini ready.

Robert: Which means they weren’t going to win a beauty contest, but they could get to the studio, sit down, and laugh.

Laughter: There were certain things we were laughing at and they'd come to us and say "Ok, we don't want you to laugh at that." We knew when to laugh and when not to laugh, and then it got to a part where we just knew exactly what to do.

Laughter: Can you think of anything more wonderful than sitting in a comfortable chair all day long and being amused?

Laughter: People looked puzzled. "What do you mean a Laughter?"

Robert: So how much did you pay them?

Laughter: Back then it was like 75 bucks.

Laughter: And you'd get paid?

(LAUGHTER)

Laughter: Yeah we'd get paid for laughing. What a thing to do

Robert: Lisette got a bunch of the laughers in a room together just to show us how it works

Lisette: Ok this is just like a murmur chuckle it's not a gut-wrenching just a little bit of murmur chuckle

(LAUGHTER)

Lisette: Ok – something funny just happened, but it's not like a whole big long laugh, just something really quick and funny.

(LAUGHTER)

Lisette: And this one, something's happening and it's a little chuckle, but then something comes out of it and it makes you pee in your pants.

(LAUGHTER)

Laughter: And we all have our great individual laughs, but we were told not to stand out. So we had to know each other play off each other, and if somebody was like paused in their laughter, maybe we'd cover it. We were a well-timed orchestrated machine.

Laughter: We were.

Robert: So well orchestrated that their services were very desirable...

Laughter: It was just a chain reaction.

Robert: Central Casting began getting calls from other sitcoms -

Laughter: On the *Drew Carey* show -

Robert: On talk shows -

Laughter: They'd sprinkle us in the audience -

Robert: And something interesting started happening on the set. The actors began noticing the Laughters.

Laughter: They would thank us, want to know if we were all right, did we have enough food, was the food good...

Robert: And for a lot of these people who were used to working as extras, and were being pretty much ignored all the time, this was... wonderful.

Laughter: They treated us as though we were principals, family I mean they'd recognize us at Christmas parties, and it was just like we were part of them.

Laughter: They'd come over and sit with us and talk to us. You know, they appreciated us.

Laughter: And that was the part that I loved.

Laughter: Because you know, we got their back, yeah, and we did have their back.

Laughter: There was a time we stayed after, and it was a scene where the Nanny was climbing a telephone pole outside. And she wanted us to come out there and do our thing so that the timing was right and felt right. And I think we went on 14 hours that night. It was wonderful.

Laughter: It is, and you know I almost want to cry because everyone was like a family here; it's Laughters.

Robert: And then – reality struck.

(AUDIO CLIPS FROM REALITY TELEVISION SHOWS)

Robert: Starting around 2000, Reality TV – you know these shows, and there are no laughs required – they pushed sitcoms aside and professional laughing work slowed down to a trickle.

Laugher: And we're laughing three times a week on different shows, and there's like this momentum and this adrenaline, and suddenly it all comes to an end, and it's like – honest to god – it's like going through withdrawal.

(LAUGHTER)

Laugher: I've found that when I'm not laughing, I'm a lot more depressed and (LAUGHS) I've found that it was great therapy for me on a weekly basis.

Laugher: I miss it.

Laugher: Oh god, I miss it.

Robert: It's sad.

Laugher: Anybody out there need any laughers? There's a whole room of us.

Robert: We could use you. Look, Chad.

Chad: Mmmhmmm?

Robert: Just go with me here. What is brown and sticky?

Chad: What?

Robert: A stick!

(LAUGHTER)

Robert: Thank you. And Chad?

Chad: What?

Robert: I had Cheerios for breakfast this morning.

(LAUGHTER)

Robert: This is mowing in high grass! And Chad?

Chad: Yes?

Robert: I'm wearing brown shoes!

(LAUGHTER)

Robert: This is fun. you're all hired.

(MUSIC)

Robert: This story was produced by Rob Christensen and reported by Mary Beth Kirschner. Support provided by the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives at www.dana.org, and the excerpt from Fran Drescher's book Cancer Schmancer was courtesy of Hachette Audio. Our laughers interviewed were:

Laughter: Diva Perry.

Laughter: Bonnie Chaise.

Laughter: Gracie Speranza.

Laughter: A. Donnie Mitchell.

Laughter: Pam West.

Laughter: Brent Perdue.

Laughter: Louise Saxton.

Laughter: Jeanne Van Ozdot.

Laughter: Sandy Allmanson.

Laughter: Ramon Livingston.

Laughter: Bette Danielus.

Laughter: Tom Petra.

Laughter: Dennis Filer.

Robert: And

Laughter: Kim January.