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The actor's life: a survival guide

St. Louis native Jenna Fischer became a household name by playing Pam Beesly on NBC's *The Office*. But don't think landing a role is easy. Despite the theatrical title, nerinx hall grit and some good Mid-western oomph, it took eight years in Hollywood to land the show. Fischer talks about her mistakes along the way - including how she almost became part of a high-priced call girl ring - and how it takes more than just being funny and talented to make it in Hollywood. Buy *The Actor's Life* Host: First, welcome back in St. Louis. Jenna Fischer: Thank you. Thank you very much. Host: When you come to town, do you find that there are so many friends and family there is not enough time? I think we all feel that way when we get home. Fischer: There was never enough time and so many times when I came to St. Louis it was for a special event or event and so, so much time and energy went into that special event. So, for example, the reason that I'm here for this trip is because my nephew has just celebrated his first communion and I'm his godmother and so on, therefore, then I don't always have time for dinner with all my old high school friends. Host: Only perfect times that you're here promoting your book too, right? yes, so I just got out a book and this book is really about my journey from St. Louis to Hollywood. I graduated with a theater degree and I went to Hollywood and I thought, I'm a trained actor, I think I've got some natural talent, I've got my Nerinx Hall grit. I'll make it in six months and it's not six months. I mean, six months later, I'm really winding up, barely got a day's work, don't have an agent, have a terrible head shot. So there was so much that I had to learn about the processes and aspects behind the scenes about how Hollywood's business machines work. And I want to give that advice to young actors now. And I think it's a great book for parents to read if they have a child who might want to go into acting because I think it could help parents kind of steer their kids in a more realistic way. Because it's not just about being funny and talented, it's not enough. You have to have a good business sense I think to really make your way. Host: Well, and also help them understand what you want, because I think you wrote that your parents talked you into getting minors in journalism because they thought, Oh, well like that you could be on TV. Fischer: Yes, I think a lot of people think that actors like part of the show the job, that the reason we become actors is because we're showing off or we're class clowns, or we like being in front of the camera. But most actors I know are very shy, are introverts. I'm an introvert. I don't like being the center of attention. I like to like at a small intimate dinner party with people I know is much more than just a big party. I didn't go to fraternity parties or sororities when I was in college. That would give me social anxiety. So, for me, the thing I love about acting is actually turning into someone else, being figuring out how to emulate feelings of love, shame, jealousy, in a realistic and telling way. So I think when my parents are like, Oh, get a minor in journalism because then you can be on TV. It's like, well, that in no way scratching the itch, it's not at all what I like about acting. I love acting so much that I want to keep doing it no matter what it is, so even if it's not attached to fame and success. My goal really is to make a living doing what I love and I've been doing that for years. Over the years, I was an anonymous actor who appeared in various roles and that's how I made my life but no one knew who I was. Host: And that is your kind of debunking myths of some sort throughout your book. I mean, I think you even wrote that if you're going into it for fame and fortune, the Screen Actor's Guild, Median Acting Revenue is \$52,000 a year. And you can't save \$52,000 dollars a year. You must give 10% to your agent, 10% to your manager. Then you have to give your money to taxes and that's what the average union actor makes per year. So you have to like it. You have to like it. Just something like 5% of working actors make more than \$100,000 dollars a year. Host: Now you know those things but back then, as you said, is there anything you want you kind of have to go. Okay, that's fine. Everything okay? Well, because there are certain union rules. So, a union actor who does a big star guest role on television, who will like you come for one episode, you have to be paid \$6,000 dollars. So when you look at that amount, when I look at that amount, I think, \$6,000 dollars for a week! That's amazing! But what you don't realize is you only get three of those jobs a year. Host: Correct. Fischer: You don't earn \$6,000 dollars every week, but when you get your salary, the government thinks of you so they take taxes as if you were making \$6,000 dollars a week. Now you'll get back by the end of the year. It's gritty nitty, people. It's not what you think and this is it. People think that Hollywood and being an actor is a party and a red carpet and And it's not. It's a business, it's a small business like a small business. Host: I mean, even for those of us who aren't in Hollywood, it's interesting to see what kind of set. I mean, you're talking about the food. Oh yes, the food, I talk a lot about food in my book. Host: You do it and not in a good way. It's not appetizing. Fischer: Well, Dad, I would say one of the best parts of being an actor is there's a lot of free food. When you go on set, they have a morning buffet, they've got a lunch buffet and this buffet, if you're in a television production or a big movie production, these things rival the Vegas buffet. I mean, there's a carving station, you've got seafood, you've got chicken. So you're going to eat and then the irony is that the actors never eat, because we all have to keep a little tiny size to be on camera but there's a lot of food around you, it's really torture. But as a starving artist, I would go and try to figure out all the ways that I could bring home food. So I would work one day on a set and I would go with a little to go package because it was the best meal I could get. That's the best way to eat. But then when you're in a scene, when you're working, and you see people eating dinner in a scene, the food is dirty. So the food around you is good but the food when you really work dirty. So if you have to eat Parmesan chicken in the scene, it's cold. So they cook it and then they make it really cold so all day package because it warms up under the lights it doesn't make you sick and it takes hours to film the dinner scene and so, you just keep getting the same plate of food sort of back in front of you. So I always say if they give you a choice of what you want to eat in the scene, let's just say salad. Host: Not steak. Don't say steak. When I was a starving artist the first time I had to work in the dinner scene they asked me what I wanted, it was in a restaurant, and they said, Just pick something off the menu, and I thought, Oh my gosh, I'm so hungry. And I said, Can I have steak and potatoes? And they said, Oh yes of course! Well, then they served me cold steaks and cold potatoes all day. I was like, Oh shoot. That's not what I was hoping for. Host: And you have a lot of funny things that have happened to you. I mean, you're not afraid of the moment of shrinkage in your book. I mean, there's a lot that most people would probably leave, I'd rather forget those things, but you write them down. That's funny. I have a friend who is a writer and I actually quote it in the book and he says, One of the problems with our industry is that people, there are terms, they never show their chest style. So you look at the final masterpiece of the painting and you think it's just out of a person like that or a script, you think it's just poured out of them, or an acting performance. But the reality is there are so many scratches so many mistakes, so many wrong places where we put colors and then have to fix them, there are so many corrections along the way before you get to the final masterpiece, so my book is an attempt to show you all the brush strokes. Only Only all my mistakes that hopefully people can learn from, that I learned from, because I didn't just land in Los Angeles and not only did I not have a chance to get on a television show once I landed there, I wasn't ready to be on a television show. And that is the great message of the book, which is that you need seasoning. You need to learn how to be on a set. You have to learn the etiquette. You need to learn how to perform for the camera. You need to learn how to survive days that have a lot of changes. I talk about in the book, I have a situation where I have a very long speech that I have to give, a medical speech, and so on, I memorize and memorize it, memorize it, and I am very confident that I brag on the set so that we will finish early because I am so ready. Well, I missed the email where they sent me a rewrite of that speech, so when the cameras started rolling I launched into the speech and my director said, Oh Jenna, didn't you get the rewrite? And I think he's joking with me. I think he's joking because I've been bragging. Host: Correct. And say, Oh ha-ha, come on, let's do it. And he went, No, we had some clearance issues and we had to rewrite it and it was completely different. And the whole crew was there ready to shoot and then I wasn't ready. So I'm talking about that. I'm talking about reading every email. When you get to work, make sure you actually do the scene, make sure you have the right material. Things change all the time. Host: The friends you make when you get out there, I think you write, are a lot of them left after two years. Like, you know what? It's too much, it's too hard. But you stuck to it, what's the message of tenacity that any of us in any industry could use there and maybe even in the future that you hope your kids can see if they read this book if they're looking for a career? You know when you went to that ball game and you fell? Remember the St. Louis World Series? Right? David Freese. Do we think that we're going to get out of that game? It happened. Why can't that happen to you? I can wait for him. I don't know, it's me. I'm the girl who would sit on the steps of the courthouse for nine years to get my law passed and just break people up by just waiting them out. There is a lot you can do by simply refusing to leave and there are many examples where success comes later in life. Every market is very saturated with 21 year olds who want to get out in the world and start that career and especially with acting, but if you 30s, a lot of people left. So I always say to the actors, Stay around because the competition goes down if you wait for it to come out. But also I think, if you don't like it, if you don't need it, if it's not like oxygen for you, it becomes something else. Other. You give a lot of advice in your book about what to bring with you to the audition, what to do to prepare for the audition. You have there what you should always carry when you go for fittings for the role and you talk about underwear, blue jeans. You didn't mention the shirt, which I wondered then. I saw you on Jimmy Kimmel on your towel but you're wearing your jeans, obviously underwear, is that what's going on over there? I should have, yes. No, so what happened was I went back to the stage getting ready and sort of fancy and I had this kind of strappy jumpsuit and I had been wearing a towel with my jeans because they had to put makeup and lotion on my arm. So I sat back there with a towel and they brought snacks and it was 5 o'clock and I was hungry and I was like, Oh, I've got plenty of time. I have plenty of time. Well, then they're like, you're next. Get dressed. I was like, Okay, okay. I went to get dressed and was like, ert, with a zipper and of course I've been wearing a shirt to Jimmy Kimmel. I was like, What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What should we do? Oh, my God, oh, my God. And someone said, Just put on the towel, look adorable. So the choice was a towel, just go big and put on a towel and make a story out of it or the grumpy shirt that I wore from the street, which was then sort of like, why are you wearing that horrible T-shirt, that grumpy T-shirt? So I went with a towel. Host: That's because you know people at home watch it and they're like, Oh, that's the action. That's not action. It was action in the sense that maybe we could find something but, at the time, it was a frenzy and they mic'd a towel and it was like, maybe we could get it somehow but I panicked a little bit. I didn't go at enough time and it was like, just go with it, just go with it. But it wasn't planned. It's not like I came from home with this plan to wear a towel, no. And I felt like a little shaky and I was really nervous. I have to be really like, Okay, okay, I can't believe I'm going to do this. I can't believe I'm going to do this. And I was like, Okay, okay. So it's a little scary. But I got through it. Host: Well, I can't say you're nervous that's why I think it's shtick. Fischer: Oh. Host: So successful. Fischer: Yeah, I guess because I'm like, Well, maybe if I walk out and I just have my hands down and we can get it and it'll be fine. But there's a time thing too. It was like, you're next, you're next, you're next. Host: So that's the addendum. You're in a hurry, don't sweat, you can always wear a towel. That's a book addendum, yes, just go big. I think a little bit just go big and fun with it. Roll with it. Host: You you some time ago about Nerinx Hall and went to school there. I mean, you just said you're not a class clown, you're not an extrovert, but I was hoping you'd be the lead on the show. I mean, that's what I imagine opening a book and seeing your pictures in all these major roles. No, there were actually four pictures of me in the dance choir in high school. I've never had a leading role. In college, I wasn't in one major stage show. I only got cast in laboratory productions which were student-run productions but they were the best. And the best education comes from that because no one gives you the lead role when you land in Hollywood. You have to do it yourself. You have to create your own work. You have to unite with your friends, get your own experience. You have to be the one who can generate jobs for yourself in this business and all through business. It never went away and so, the best thing I got, I went to Truman Slate, was the fact that no one gave me the lead role because I had to decide that it didn't matter and that I would get in my own production. I'm going to make my own way and I'm really praising Nerinx Hall with that fiery spirit. I mean, Sister Loretto, pioneer woman. They ride and cover carts to educate the poor. That determination and so on, it's my legacy that I come from. Now in Nerinx, I am fiery and outspoken but on the issue of social justice. So maybe people at Nerinx will think maybe that I'll go into maybe politics or political science. I am very big on the ways in which advertising has subliminal messages that make women fall apart. I gave a presentation about it at school. So that was my focus in high school, a little bit more in terms of where I came out of my shy shell and it wasn't in a theatre production. Host: Do you ever feel like continuing to do all that or is it Jenna High School or has some that still? No, I mean, I take her with me all the time. We have this Me Too movement going on right now, right? And something I get from Nerinx is a fear to speak. I just always say, Don't mess with a Nerinx girl and don't tell nerinx girl she can't do something because we don't put up with it. Host: Since you're squealing Me Too thing, I mean, there are so many stories from Hollywood. I know you're talking about where you're in a situation where you go to some place that could've been a little dangerous, like there's a high-priced call girl ring? Yes, yes. Master I know it's a completely different situation. That's a hard story to tell in this interview but yes, I feel like I have to say it now that you said it. Host: Because it kind of opens the door. It's not, No, I didn't know that you were you go to auditions in people's apartments. I mean something terrible could happen to me. I'm just lucky, frankly. It wasn't being a Nerinx girl, it was just luck that nothing happened to me. But then as soon as I realized, you shouldn't have done that. No, there was a call for all the group girls to sing, an open call, and I went with my friend and we waited in line and it seemed legitimate and then I got a cast in the singing group. Host: You're not a singer. Fischer: I'm not a singer but I think, well Madonna is not a singer I should have a lot of charisma. Of course, no, I'm an easy target. I was naive and it turned out that what it was, was a singing group that was actually a companion service. And as soon as I realized it, I walked out the door. I keep wondering why we don't have exercise. I would say, I haven't studied my harmony, I don't feel ready. And it turns out you don't really have to sing on the show. Host: Did you tell your parents these stories? God, I don't remember if I told them that story. I don't want them to worry. Host: Correct. But I can't remember. Well now they know because they read the book but no, it could be a really scary situation. Now, that's a little different from the Me Too movement. I've experienced sexual harassment in other industries, not in Hollywood. When I worked as a secretary for many years, I had a co-worker who, at Christmas parties, got drunk and lifted up my skirt in front of everyone and showed me my underwear. And I filed a complaint. I think I'm scared. I feel like I could get fired. I'm a secretary, this is an executive. And I think one of the things that gave me the courage to file a complaint was that I almost didn't care if I was going to get fired because I was like, I don't want this job anyway. But I'll tell you what you're not going to do to women. But if I need that job for my livelihood and that's the only thing I have, that's why women have trouble speaking out because they feel trapped. Host: Correct. And people, in general, are subjected to abuse. So I've experienced that in life like I think every woman who walks this earth has experienced it and it's not exclusive to Hollywood. It's in every industry and what I hope will happen now is a cultural shift, a shift where we trust people when they speak or we say, It's important that you've spoken and it's important that we change this. That's what I hope we see. Host: So have to ask, I know you jokingly said in the book that people should take your next book, *How to Stop Being Annoying*, but, I mean, do you think about writing another book and what it might be about or whether this is I've never seen him before. I mean, I've had this idea stuck in my craw seriously since I got to LA. I'd be like, Why isn't there a handbook for people? Where can I get suggestions? Why isn't there someone in the industry telling people how to do this? This is ridiculous. So I feel like I solved the problem in my opinion. I'm just trying to fill in the blanks. So I don't know. Maybe if there was anything to do with this but not now, no. Here you go. One book. Host: It took a while, seven years? Fischer: From the first time I had an idea and first told my manager about it, it was seven years before the book was published. So, again, it looks like I'm not just sitting down and writing a book and then a book comes out. Host: So if people want to read more of you or see more of you, I mean, you're on the ABC sitcom *Splitting Up Together* where you play Lena. - Yes, I'm sorry. So I finally got back to television. I saw a break. The office has not been on the air for five years and I have done a lot of things at the time but it is a bit more likely than a big television radar. I played in New York and then I was at the world premiere of Steve Martin's new comedy *Meteor Shower*, which moved to Broadway but I didn't move to Broadway. Amy Shumer did an excellent job on Broadway. And I want to do that theater because I just think part of being an artist is getting yourself scared again and not just doing the thing you think you're the best at. So I did some theatre, which was scary but I did it and I was really proud of it and then I had a television show that was in London. Again, I think I want to get out of the American television system. Let's go live in London, let's do a television show in London and it was an amazing experience. And I had two babies at the same time. Host: A lot going on. Now everyone's in school and it's all short-term work, which is great to be a mother, be a parent, just part-time a set amount of time and it's over. So a television show, you sign a seven-year contract and so on, it can go on and on. So I don't want to kind of take that until I feel like as a family we're all ready but I do and I couldn't be more excited. So, the show is *Splitting Up Together*, it's like the opening. Host: It's okay. So his show is *Splitting Up Together*, it's for ABC. It stars me and Oliver Hudson and we play a recently divorced couple who are still trying to get together and raise our children. One of us lives in a separate garage every week and the other lives in a house with the kids. So the idea is kids don't pack bags and go to different different. The old man packed the bag and just sort of went in the garage. So we're still somewhat on top of each other, navigating divorce and children and running households. Host: And this is something that people actually do that I read, yes, it's called nesting birds. Host: Crazy. I didn't know that. That's really interesting. Yes, yes. Host: And this character Lena, I've read somewhere that you guys have some problems together, some control, a problem of spontaneity, which you share. You mean the problem of being great? Yes. We did. No, that's interesting. I felt Pam was a great role for me because it was an expression of where I was at the time, which was that I was actually working as a receptionist hoping that something would come where I could live an artistic life. I mean, it's Pam. Pam wanted to be a painter but she worked as a receptionist and didn't really have my full artistic voice or even as a woman. So, it was all absolutely perfect and Pam's journey found her voice very similar to my trip on the show. But I have to say now, I'm not that person anymore, am I? I'm married, I have two kids. I have a whole other kind of me that is just as much me but which so far has not been expressed. So now I can express it in this character and it is the person who runs the household, who makes the list, who plans ahead, who speaks. It was one of the most different parts of Pam from me, which was that, if I had a crush on Jim, it wouldn't take long for him to know. And if I want something, it doesn't take me long to say it. It took me a long time to achieve things but I was much more driven than Pam and part of my personality could come out in this character. Hosted by Di Lena. And I can make fun of a part of myself and I can strengthen that part of myself. Myself.