

The Editor's Cut - Episode 058 - Editing SEDUCED: INSIDE THE NXIVM CULT with Inbal B. Lessner, ACE and Gillian McCarthy

Sarah Taylor:

This episode was generously sponsored by IATSE Local 891, Integral Arts, and the Vancouver Post Alliance.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

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Sarah Taylor:

Hello and welcome to The Editor's Cut. I'm your host, Sarah Taylor. We would like to point out that the lands on which we have created this podcast, and that many of you may be listening to us from, are part of ancestral territory. It is important for all of us to deeply acknowledge that we are on ancestral territory, that is long served as a place where indigenous peoples have lived, met and interacted. We honor, respect and recognize these nations that have never relinquished their rights or solve an authority over the lands and waters on which we stand today. We encourage you to reflect on the history of the land, the rich culture, the many contributions and the concerns that packed indigenous individuals and communities. Land acknowledgements are the start to a deeper action.

Today's episode is the master series that took place on January 12th, 2021. Editing Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult with Inbal B. Lessner ACE and Gillian McCarthy. Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult is a series about women by women. It had women in all key positions and they took great care in creating an environment for the cult survivors who shared their stories in which they felt supported before and after filming. We discussed the ins and outs of shaping such a complex and sensitive story, and the challenges that Inbal and Gillian came across in the edit suite. Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult is available on Crave in Canada and on the Starz app almost everywhere else. I hope you enjoy.

[Show Open]

Sarah Taylor:

Welcome, welcome, welcome, thank you both for joining me today, us today, I'm very excited to talk all things Seduced. I kind of got hooked, by kind of, I really got hooked and I'm very excited to discuss this show and the making of this show. So I want to start off a little bit by just finding out a little bit of about you and where you come from and how you got into the world of editing. So whoever wants to start first dive, right-in!

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I'm Israeli. Started studying filmmaking and especially falling in love with editing in high school. And then in my military service in Israeli army and then went to film school in New York. And that's kind of like how my American journey started. My most influential teacher in high school was a documentary editor, probably one of the leading documentary editors in Israel, and it just always fascinates me, fascinated me how to mold random footage into a story. And so while I've done, you know, any kind of genre and

anything from wedding videos to narratives and instructional films about explosive in the army to you name it, documentaries have been my focus of my career.

Sarah Taylor:

Awesome. And Gillian?

Gillian McCarthy:

I'm Canadian, I grew up in London, Ontario, and I also went to a high school that had a broadcasting television program and did editing in high school. And then I went to Fanshawe College in London, taking television broadcasting, and I worked at the local television station in the news department while I was there. Then after college, I moved to Toronto to assist an editor in a small commercial editing company that did, for television commercials. That was kind of my post-graduate, experience with the budgets and 35 mil filmmaking and technology that commercials did. I assisted for a while, and then I was lucky enough to help a creative team for an advertising agency, do a pitch, which turned out to be the original Molson Canadian "I am Canadian" beer campaign.

Sarah Taylor:

Awesome!

Gillian McCarthy:

Then I was 25 sitting doing that and did the sort of beer, cars and communications commercial work. Then I was recruited to a company in New York, and that started my American experience. I did commercials in New York and then just as I was about to get married and move to Los Angeles, I was lucky enough to be introduced to Richard Robbins, who was a producer and writer working mostly through ABC news. We happened, I happened to be moving to his neighborhood in Los Angeles, so we became friends and he hired me to work on a television doc about Bill Bratton's first year as the LAPD chief of police. We did a few more docs over the years. Then we did Operation Homecoming, which got nominated for an academy award. Ever since then, I've been doing nonfiction television and documentary features.

Sarah Taylor:

Fantastic, that's exciting! I love that both of your stories began with a high school teacher who really had an influence in the editing world. That's really exciting to hear. Nowadays I think kids are learning younger and younger because the technology is just, we have the capabilities, so that's really exciting to hear. Now, let's get onto Seduced. What led you both to this project? I know Inbal you're the executive producer. Your story probably started much earlier than Gillian's, but tell us how you, how this project started and how you got involved.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

My producing partner, Cecilia Peck, we've done a feature doc together called Brave Miss World, released in 2014 and was nominated for an Emmy. We were looking for another project to work together. In the meantime, I just work as an editor, and she called and said, she has a few ideas and a few things she was working on. One of them was NXIVM. She was actually an intern who worked on Brave Miss World, attempted to recruit her.

She sent her a lot of emails about this woman's group, and Alison Mack, all these amazing women she must meet and come to an intro and come, there's mentorship, and networking and women empowerment. Cecilia wasn't interested at the time and finally said, I'm happy this is working for you, but please stop emailing me. It's getting too much. About a year later after the emails stopped, she called her up and said, I'm sorry, I just realized I was in a cult and I was under pressure to recruit. They met and she told her her story. Then Cecilia brought that to me and said, I think we have an in. She had already, she had just shot a little reel with this former member.

This one intern introduced her to through three or four other former members. She shot a little footage for a couple hours just to get them on camera. She asked me actually to join her and cut a sizzle reel, like a little presentation. And so we- I downloaded a few things I found online. I had no idea what NXIVM was. I was not following the story in the news. It really took me I have must say months to wrap my brain around what it was and what was wrong with it. I downloaded what I could. Cut that with the footage that Cecilia shot. We were able to go into Starz and pitch it together. I helped with the pitch and in of command there, and eventually got greenlit to do a series. That's how, kind of, how I got started.

Sarah Taylor:

What was the timeframe from the, you doing the sizzler stuff to getting to greenlit to actually start the series?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

So I think we, trying to remember, we started working on the pitch and had the first few meetings end of 2018.

Sarah Taylor:

Okay.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Then we got greenlit. We started developing, got greenlit officially April of 2019. The trial I believe started in May that year, the Keith Raniere trial, and then Starz thought and pushed us to make this plan that we would film and edit and be completely done and delivered in about six months. That was not, [crosstalk 00:09:02] a reasonable expectation. We ended up working almost two years and we locked the show in this, this past summer.

Sarah Taylor:

Then did you, you did have to open the lock when you find out the results of what his conviction and stuff, right? You were kind of waiting for, were you waiting for that?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Well, we were just putting the last finishing touches on episode four.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

It was locked, but we put it in to the end credit.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

We added that information. With couple of the cards, I think we updated them after the most up to date information.

Sarah Taylor:

We'll get Gillian to tell us your story of being approached to do the show and what your thoughts were when you got to get into the edit suite.

Gillian McCarthy:

I had talked on, to, Cecilia Peck on the phone a bit around the time that they were doing Brave Miss World. I think you might have been making it from a feature to a series or something, but it didn't really work out. Then she contacted me to come in to talk about this series. And so I came in and met with Inbal and Cecilia in a little edit room. They said, do you know anything about cults? I had just, I worked on the Bikram film earlier that year. I knew a bit about cults and they showed me the reel. I don't know if reel is the same one they pitched to Starz, but they showed me the sizzle, which, and then I was wow, that's a crazy story. Then I started in October of 2019 originally scheduled to work through the end of January 2020, but ended up going through April or May? Of 2020.

Sarah Taylor:

I noticed that you had a big importance of the team of the series is to be female led. Why was that important from the creative standpoint, and to keep this series female led. I kind of want to know the thought process behind that and how it worked out for you.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

We had experience from Brave Miss World, which is a film about rape and sexual assault. Of interviewing and working with working to tell the stories of sexual assault victims. We learned what needs to be done to create a safe environment on set, and then to tell the stories in the most respectful way honoring the trauma and not exploiting it, or sexualizing it. Cecilia, and I are both women. It happened that both our network executives were women and, definitely on set, we felt that a female, either a complete female crew or a female heavy leaning crew, was going to help these women and former members open up and feel safe to share. What we didn't expect is that, and that's a little anecdote, that a lot, our crew members, it was their first time working on an exclusively female crew.

It was like an unusual experience for them too. They started sharing things and they were like the vibe was just so different for them. Nobody was mansplaining. Nobody was kind of taking over. The egos were all a check. I think it was just very special environment that we created on set. Even on days that we had male crew members, we, they were carefully chosen. Everybody, male and female were carefully chosen and trained for sensitivity. We had a protocol of how to approach our subjects. What to tell them when they finish telling their story, not just like, okay, next setup, but, thank you for sharing. This is really meaningful. There's just a way that we established to interact with these people, so they don't shut down or they don't, just to feel supported and comfortable. Then with, as we were hiring the production end post and post team, we certainly made sure people were, had in their heart, a place for

this story. Whether they were male or female, they understood it, understood what we were trying to do with it and had the proper sensitivity to tell it.

Sarah Taylor:

You can see that in the final outcome, I feel anyway. Gillian, did you have any sort of take on seeing the footage in the end, edit suite and how that, did that come into a play, that there was a female? Could you, tell, could you feel a difference? What was your take on it?

Gillian McCarthy:

Especially in the interview dailies, you can tell it's so hard. I can only imagine to be telling those stories in front of a bunch of people. There was, you can tell in the interviews where there's breaks and there's, we come back and a reset and think that it was a very respectful and gentle perspective in that way.

Sarah Taylor:

I feel like it would easily reflect into your edit when you see that care being taken in the footage and with the people that's gonna happen in the edit as well. Now with the actual series, it's such a complicated story with so many layers, so many things going on, and you had footage from the insider footage from NXIVM itself, you had their promotional videos, you had news clips, you were sourcing from everywhere. How could, how did you wrap your mind around how you're going to tell this story? It's going to be led with India's, her story. You still need to explain what NXIVM is. You have your experts, which I love that you had experts in there explaining what cults were and what, how they were manipulating people and all that information. How did you go about, setting out to make it so concise? So we could all understand, wow, this is how it happens and how it can happen to anybody and understanding all of the ins and outs of a cult.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Well, I kept saying this story could be, if they gave me 10 hours or 20 hours, or 30 hours, I could fill those, no problem. We were, we were contracted to do a four hour series. That was a really big creative challenge of how to distill this very, as you said, complex world, very intricate web of different companies, and sub companies, and courses, and seminars and the lingo, the vocabulary and how much you explain, what you don't need to explain, what you need to stay the hell away from. Because it's, it would take two hours to explain. There were a lot of difficult choices in constructing it. The basic structure was there from the pitch, from the beginning, even before we had India involved. So India joined actually pretty far. India is through the process of being in a high control group like this.

Episode one was always about seduction, and getting hooked and what it feels like to join a group like this. Episode two was about, as it turned out to be about indoctrination. What happens with thought reform and what does your brain go through when you're fed up this information over and over again? And how does it really changes your thinking? The later episode were always about, the heart of darkness kind of like, what does it mean to be in the center, of gravity of this organization? What are the worst kind of crimes and start unpeeling what the worst crimes and experiences of abuse that happen in the inner circle of the cult. Then we initially imagined it as a five episode with the last one being about recovery and healing. And so that was a lot of back and forth, but eventually when Starz insisted on keeping it down to four, which is a really brave choice and also means a lot more people actually going to commit to watching the whole thing, possibly binge it in one night or two.

Sarah Taylor:

Guilty.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

That really constricted us in telling the story a lot more economically and make more choices, but we did come to a compromise with them and had episode four, as some of you've seen, as a supersized episode with the kind of healing and-and what these women go through to overcome what happened to them and find their voice again, as the kind of last chapter of this saga.

Sarah Taylor:

That is a lot to put into four hours of content. There's just a couple questions that I'll get you to, from the audience. For Inbal. What was your experience writing and editing at the same time?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Well, if you're a doc editor, you're a writer always.

Sarah Taylor:

Yes.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Whether or not you're credited for it, I'm sure Gillian, anybody will tell you, they always write. I think every single editor we had on the team, as well as any film, any documentary film I ever cut, I probably should have gotten an edit, a writer credit and part of an organization who that advocates for editors to get writer credits. Ultimately there was a lot of writing done in order to really help the audience go through the experience and understand what they needed to understand, but also not think about the thousands of questions they might have. That they shouldn't be thinking about when they're watching. There was a lot of choices and careful writing throughout, and I'm glad that Starz agreed to give that credit to myself and Cecilia, but it's really, I mean, as a doc editor, you're always writing. You're just writing from existing warrants. Opposed to making stuff up on a clean piece of paper.

Sarah Taylor:

Totally.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

But what was, what was your experience, Gillian, writing?

Gillian McCarthy:

I think that you might be forgetting how hard you worked. You would spend the day producing, executive producing, directly, setting up doing all that. Then, you would spend the all night editing. It was 24/7 for you [crosstalk 00:19:49]. You did a lot in that way, but I think also for me the, helping the structure, was the story editors. This is the first thing- time I'd ever worked with story editors, because I'd only done single feature docs. Where you're the writer with the director and some series that were more discreet episodes, so they didn't have somebody who needed to have that overall awareness of the story arc over multiple episodes. I found that Sarah and Tara were really helpful in structuring that keeping the awareness because you don't- you don't know where you are sometimes, and everything was cut so wide. The first version of Genessee was probably 15 minutes in itself with everybody's story. Then you'd

start to distill it down. I think if for you, my perspective of Inbal's work was that she had two jobs and worked twice as much.

Sarah Taylor:

Wow, you were two people. A question that also came for Gillian was there a piece of footage that you really loved, or part of the footage that you really loved that you had to let go? Which you mentioned the Genessee was 15 minutes long, so you did obviously have to pair back a lot of stuff to get to what we have now. Was there something that you were really upset or kind of sad that had to leave?

Gillian McCarthy:

The one thing that I was sad that had to leave was when they took India back to Silver Bay and they shot her in the winter, and she went into the auditorium and did a lot of talking when she was on the stage and talking about her experience in her promotion ceremony. We'd done some inter cutting with what we had of clips of the promotions. It didn't really survive, but I thought that stuff was really good and she was really good in it.

Sarah Taylor:

Got to let them go. Should we look at some clips?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Cause I don't know how many people watch the entire series, but it's towards the end of the first episode you see in India take, the annual retreat, the annual summer camp of NXIVM and it's in upstate New York. She really makes a decision to confront what happened to her emotionally and physically, and actually go to that place. You'll see the beginning kind of part of it.

Sarah Taylor:

Just a warning for all of the clips, just a content warning, we are talking about assault and there's, it's sensitive subject, so just be warned

[Clip Plays]

Sarah Taylor:

Where do we start? I love how you really worked with the mood in that sequence and how it went from, "Yeah, I want to go to V week. Totally. I want to do that." And then you're like, "Woomph, nope." You did a really great job of taking us on the journey, the emotional journey. So would you like to share your thoughts on that clip and why you chose it?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

It's definitely my favorite in episode one and one of the favorite overall. I mean, this magic that happens when we start intercutting from her in present day to fragments of archival footage, inside a footage that was shot in that same space, and how that's such an emotional manifestation of what's happening inside her head. And it's one of the first sequences we cut in episode one. And once you saw it, you just knew there was something there that was so special. I think the decision we made behind the scenes, in production, to go there and the fact that we couldn't get there, that it was the dead of winter and we got

a call that it was going to be snowing when we got there. And we're like, oh, all the curse words you can think of. But then I was like, "No, this will be great."

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah, it was perfect.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Initially we were like, "Oh, it has to look the same." But the fact that the difference between the beautiful summer images of V week in August versus what's happening as she's going back and it's cold and snowy, and snow is on the ground. And it was freezing to shoot it, but it was really great that we were able to capture this dissonance that's happening inside her brain and also visually. And then, later in the clip she goes into that auditorium where all the events and promotions and performances and speeches used to happen, and you really feel like she's sitting there remembering what was going on on-stage while she's in the audience. And so that was obviously, well thought out, but then it just became even better than what we could imagine in the edit.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. It was very powerful. And you could really feel her emotion that you... Yeah, some of the people are saying like they felt every minute of it. It is so powerful. Gillian, did you have anything with this clip?

Gillian McCarthy:

No. I did not work on episode one at all. I was originally, came in to work on episode two only and then ended up working on two, three and four.

Sarah Taylor:

Oh, excellent. Okay.

Gillian McCarthy:

And never got to one, although there's maybe a little bit of Jness that when they rebalance the episodes that got pulled on up from two to one. And I kind of feel good about not having to work on one because openings are the hardest thing, like you could just cut forever, forever on getting that, the first 10 minutes in the first episode. There was a lot of heavy lifting in that episode to set up everything, so people could understand it, get to know all the people, not just India, all the other amazing women, understand the cults and the cult experts and that, so.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. Yeah. There's a lot. And effective, how it all came together. But yeah, so much that, Inbal, you mentioned earlier like even the terminology and the lingo. And here you hear one of the women saying like, "Oh, they called them objectives." So, I liked how you incorporated in your interviews that they were explaining what it was and it just was so organic that you just kind of got it, you just understood, which is really great. So, kudos to you. Good job.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Thank you. I just wanted to quickly say, again, plans and reality collapse, but originally I was planned to cut episode one myself and have three editors hired to help with two, three and four, but it was

budgeted and scheduled that I would cut episode one myself. Well, that did not happen. I was needed on set a lot. When we were supposed to be full time in editing, we had just started filming with India. It was quickly apparent that that was not going to be the case. And we hired the marvelous Caitlin Dixon to work on episode one. And then Matthew Moul. When Caitlin had to leave, Matthew Moul joined us later and really helped shape this episode.

But yes, so much to accomplish in setting up India's story, the other women, the whole spine of this mother-daughter story, that's in the heart of the series, and how Catherine took India to the first seminar, and how the guilt that she feels about India going deeper in. This story that wasn't told even in Catherine's book, that she actually went on much farther, and then that India ever planned to, and even hosted events in her home and then India followed somewhat reluctantly and then ended up really getting chosen, selected, hooked, but hooked meaning-

Sarah Taylor:

They picked her, right?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Yeah, exactly. She was targeted.

Sarah Taylor:

She was targeted, yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Yeah. She was targeted to go further in. And Sarah Edmondson actually asked her if she wanted to be a coach, she thought she would be a really good coach. So, once India goes on this coaching path is when things really start getting dangerous. And we needed to do all that and then get India out there as she starts exploring in real time, in veritae scenes, take us on this journey of unpacking and understanding what happened to her.

And Gillian and I talked earlier today and we were saying, the India we met, who we started filming with around October of 2019 is not the same India you see today in press or even the same India that was four months later. She was really going through a real time process while we were filming of understanding, as she said, the difference between what really happened and what she was made to believe happened. And that tension drives the entire narrative. And that took us a while to understand, that the whole series is about the difference between how- what the members experienced and what is really at play, the coercion tactics. And that's why all these experts are really critical to give you that outside perspective, as the members are trying to explain you their firsthand experience.

Sarah Taylor:

Because I feel like often we'll just, people will jump to like, oh, well they must be- something must be wrong with that person to get hooked into that. So, to hear the experts explaining it and clearly explaining like, no, no, no, this is how it works, this is how manipulation works. Because there's other shows that have been things, other things that have been done about NXIVM, but we didn't get that key, the expert element, to understand what's happening in people's minds and how they're using the language and manipulating the people that are in the cult. Somebody asks or mentions, since India did join the project later, how did she become involved? And then, how did you make it safe for her, so she felt empowered that she could be vulnerable and do this journey on camera of healing and working through all this incredible- incredibly hard stuff?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

We always wanted to get to a story obviously as producers, investigative journalists, we wanted to get at least one member that was at the core of this cult within a cult really, of DOS. And it became apparent that nobody was going to talk to us before the trial is over. So, our goal was to get women that were in, that would feel empowered enough to, after all that power was taken from them, would feel empowered enough to share their story.

And in the meantime, we were just really working hard at getting other aspects of the story. And we realized that Catherine Oxenberg played a major role in that story. And we had planned to interview her. We did interview her just to get her perspective and kind of her perspective as a former member, as somebody who had a daughter that went really far into it. And what did she do publicly to expose and bring the cult NXIVM to an end, really. And I think once we talked to her, she saw what our team was about, what was our perspective, and she appreciated our point of view.

And India at the time was still working on her own healing and deprogramming. And I think, she was just getting ready to share her story and she wasn't sure whether that's going to be a book, which she also did, or a TV show or a documentary, or. I think because of our relationship, the relationship we built with her mother, she felt comfortable meeting with us. And then once she saw what we had put together up until then, she really decided to join us. She felt we would do justice for her story and treat it the way she wanted it to be told, tell it the way she wanted to be told. So, we worked with her, but we let her take it as far as she could at any given moment, meaning, the first time we flew to Belgrade and filmed with her, I personally didn't even know that she was sexually abused, nor did I ask. So, that had to come from her and she initiated how much she wanted to share.

And then she's the one who said to Cecilia like, "I want to show that healing and deprogramming." And therapy is complicated. And talk therapy for example, talk therapy was very triggering for her because NXIVM was a lot about the DCMs and talk therapy. So, she invited Cecilia to film that buddy therapy session that you see in episode four. So, it was really letting her lead the way and take us on this real journey of what she was willing to share and show. But she was an open book. And she started remembering more things. I know Gillian has a story about can we learn more things from her as we were going through it.

Gillian McCarthy:

Where I was just recalling that, I think episode two or three had gone into the network, maybe, at least once and Inbal, you stopped by the edit room and said, "Well, India just told us about the situation where Keith would make her pull over and take more vulnerable picture, more vulnerable picture. And we didn't know this and you're not going to ask like, "Oh, how bad did he get?" She just offered that up. And it was like, okay, so we're going to go. I mean, obviously they did multiple interviews with her to talk about things and that just opened up other paths and other memories and talking about more stuff. So I think, the first day I started involving, Cecilia weren't even there because they were on a plane to Belgrade to go shoot with India, and that was the first time they had done that interview. And then-

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

That trip was confirmed the night before. It all happened very fast.

Sarah Taylor:

Wow. And so how much editing did you do before you made that shift where you had to change the structure of the series to really be driven by India's story?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I started working and laying out some sequences for episode one and actually laid down sequences for the entire series, sort of things that we didn't know where they would go yet. And you know, we had amazing scenes that we shot during the trial. We initially thought that the trial was going to be the spine, the narrative spine of the series, and that you would learn more and more about what happened inside NXIVM as the trial unfolded. And we had these other really brave former members who sat inside the courtroom and then had interesting reactions outside about what they experienced inside the courtroom, where we were obviously not allowed to film or record anything. So, we had started cutting all these scenes and started imagining what it would be like animating some of what happened inside the courtroom in order to kind of utilize it.

And then when we got India, we just thought, oh, it's just another voice added to this chorus and we'll just figure out how to weave her hand in. But it quickly became apparent that she had to be the narrative spine that would get you from beginning, middle and end, from the moment she joined till the time it all went down, that she was one of the last people standing, she stayed there really until the bitter end. Maybe not as far as dancing outside his bell-

Sarah Taylor:

That scene. Oh, my word. Like, what are you doing?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Not that far, but almost, very close to that. So, once we realized she had to be this spine, we had to completely take down the board, take down the storyboard, put new cards and reimagine it around her story. But there was a lot of stuff already in place and done that we just kind of started weaving around.

Gillian McCarthy:

You feel like the other women like Naomi and Tabby and Ashley, although their stories are part of it and we had that to work with too and a lot of that stayed in. But their experiences really, I think, help and support India's. Like, how do you get into that? One of the most affecting things for me is when Naomi is talking about how if you are in a room and everybody's saying something and you don't feel the same way, how do you stand up to that? And are they wrong? Are you right? And that filled it out too, a lot.

Sarah Taylor:

One question here, did you have any concerns or worry about knowing other documentaries were being made about NXIVM while you were crafting this one? Did you think about that or did you just do what you needed to do?

Gillian McCarthy:

I think it was six or eight weeks after I'd started that somebody was like, "Oh, HBO's doing a 10 part doc." I was like, "Well, what are you going to do?" It's a different perspective too.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I mean the most fascinating thing, we locked the show before they started airing. So, at that point we were done with the hard work and just sat down and enjoyed the show. But it's fascinating how the approaches and the end result is so different. I mean, I was worried that it would be the same or

redundant, but. We didn't know anything, obviously with documentary, but most film productions, you sign all these you confidentiality agreements, and you're supposed to be really tightlipped about what you're doing. So, we didn't share anything about what we're doing, neither did they. So, until they dropped their trailer, we found out about their air date like everybody else. We didn't know that they were not even going to go into the trial in season one. We really had to stick to our own lane and do our thing.

We had- we respect them as filmmakers. We were working side by side, outside the courthouse. We had an understanding that we would share some experts. Like if somebody's an expert on a call, it's fair game that both projects would interview them. But with former members and main characters, we try to stay away and not approach the same people that we knew were already working with them, if that makes sense. So yeah, I think, at the end of the day, there were something like 17,000 members that went through NXIVM. So, that's 17,000 stories. And there was coercion and trauma, I think, on almost every level, even those who were involved for a short time. And I just think there's a lot of stories to tell, and the more are told the better it is, because it just helps people understand coercion, coercive control and unpack this unbelievable story.

Sarah Taylor:

Totally, yeah. Wow. Another question here, which I think will take us into maybe the next clip. Did you have to go through all the modules to understand how NXIVM worked? Did you take the time to watch all their videos to really understand how it worked?

Gillian McCarthy:

I don't think it would be possible.

Sarah Taylor:

There's a lot, right?

Gillian McCarthy:

I mean, we only had what we had and we didn't have much material. I guess people got stuff in their classes, like papers and stuff. Like Keith says in one of those interviews, he's like, "We have thousands of modules." But to me, the gist of it was what it was actually teaching didn't really matter. I mean, to me it was like, it was an MLM. So it wasn't-, you weren't ever designed to get fixed or win or develop. You might feel like you were, but they were always going to be moving the bar, so. Other than the idea that your life issue, that you were inherently broken, that they would instill into you. What they would do to fix it, didn't really matter to telling the story.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I remember we did take a lot of time talking to the former members. I personally, I made Tabby perform [miniem 00:45:03]. Not personally on me, but on our co-producer Morgan Pofert. And I filmed it with my phone. I was trying to figure out how that would play. I wanted to understand the hook, the draw. Because you see so many people that went so far and so you were like, wait, but what did they say? What's the secret? What was so positive? What was the one thing that got you hooked? So yeah, there wasn't a lot available in terms of material. NXIVM team was very protective of their copyrighted, patent pending materials. Everything was locked up. It wasn't like people took copies of the curriculum home. Even the coaches, you were not allowed to take it out of the center, it was always locked. It's not like

there's a ton of material available online. And frankly, we didn't have videos of all the modules. We have very little and we did the best with the most of it.

But Cecilia and I did have, and Morgan had long conversation with the former members to understand the teachings and what the structure of the classes were and what exactly they learned or remembered, or. It's like a word salad. It's just that an attack and that's part of the tactic. You get numb because all these words are just, it's an over saturation to your brain. But I think our job as editors and that's what Gillian is brilliant at, is to find the one line, the one moment where you're like, okay, in that ocean of words, that's the one thing where they hook you or where the implant is starred into your head, that will later pay off or later build into self-hatred, or this misogyny. It wasn't as clear as it is in *Seduced*, right? It was veiled in a lot of other bullshit. So that was our job, to find those moments, that in five seconds you could understand what was really happening as opposed to what they thought was happening.

Gillian McCarthy:

It was also, I think, where the people involved because such a slow build. They didn't start out saying you're going to go to this SOP thing and have to wear a jockstrap on your head. That build. You started with the introductory courses and then they could see who would accept, how far you could go. You'd fill out the form and they'd be able to see who they could push. And just working on it for five or six months, you're not getting that slow build, so you look at something and go, this is nuts, because you're coming in with a perspective. And then their point is to have you have no perspective. Anything outside is not valid. It's only what we're telling you in here is the valid thing.

Sarah Taylor:

They get you to trust the process and trust the people. And then, yeah, totally.

Gillian McCarthy:

That said, the production did say there was people available for us to talk to if we felt like we were getting... There's a lot of traumatic stories and to listen to that all day is difficult.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah, that was one of the questions is like, did you have to take a step back? And I know Inbal mentioned when we talked before this, that you had put together supports for your team for that case. If you're feeling triggered or you need to talk something out, here's something to help you. So, why did you feel like that was important? I think a lot of series and documentaries probably need to have that in place.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I do think it's an important conversation that needs to be had. And I'll just mention quickly that I'm on a brand new mental health committee that we started at the Alliance of Documentary Editors, the ADE, which is an organization for doc editors. And we realized early on that we needed to provide a professional support for the people on camera. I mean, that was a no brainer. I can't... I can be nice and supportive and as kind as I can be, but I'm not a mental health professional. And when somebody's triggered or having really scary, suicidal thoughts, or really severe PTSD because of what they're decided to share on camera, I need to make sure they have a professional standing by to help them before, during and after filming. So, that was a no brainer. The network didn't completely understand it. So, we actually had to raise the funds ourselves to make that happen.

And then when we started editing, I just remember this one day, Roxy who used to be my film student and then was a post BA and eventually was promoted to assistant editor, but she did a lot of logging. And I remember walking the hallway and behind the closed door, I hear her yelling at her screen, like "What the hell!" And...

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:50:04]

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Screamed, like what hell? And I was like, "Roxy, what happened?" She's like, "Why are they staying? How they're not getting up and leaving, like what is happening?" And so in our weekly post meetings, we would try to discuss those things.

And then Cecilia and I decided to make the same services that were ... mental health services that were available for the subjects, also to the crew. So if somebody felt like ... Tracy Layman, who also helped with watching some of this stuff, and she said, "Sometimes I feel like I need to take a walk, because my brain is scrambled. I'm starting to not know what's real or not." And I was like, "Okay, we need to provide that same help to people on the editing team who are getting ... " I don't want them to be brainwashed by Keith from watching this footage.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. No kidding. And so Gillian, did you take breaks and did you think about that? Were you mindful of that you had that option to seek assistance if you needed it or?

Gillian McCarthy:

Well, they told me. I mean, I didn't take advantage of it, but you can't just drive a highway all day. So you've got to do something else. It's like, maybe I'm just going to take a look at somebody else's interview you or go look at the news archive for a bit or go read the trial transcript. There's not really a break, but it's ... Or just go to the lunchroom and get a donut.

Sarah Taylor:

Sugar always helps.

Gillian McCarthy:

Always. You can't go wrong with a donut.

Sarah Taylor:

You also mentioned at one point an organization FACT, I think you said?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Families Against Cult Teachings. That's the organization, the 501c3 organization we partnered with that would accept the donations. And they managed the fund of therapy for the NXIVM survivors. And Starz made a very generous donation to it, to keep supporting them through the release. Because the release became another trigger. Now they didn't just share with our a crew, but also shared with the world.

And sometimes you have to bend the rules for when you do these difficult projects. And I remember we invited ... And Gillian met them several times. We invited some of the former members and then the others to the edit room. And we would share sequences with them. We want them to feel

like we really embrace them. We care about how they feel about sharing their story. We care about making sure that their perspective is represented truthfully.

It was very complicated. I think I underestimated how much of my work was caring for our subjects. Interacting with them, caring for them, considering them. All those things was quite consuming.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. It's so important. I think sometimes we lose sight of that in the doc world, that these people are sharing them. And we need to be very, very delicate with that. And so I hope more and more productions do things like this. And for the post crew for everybody. Because it's heavy. Even watching it like, oh, take a break. I'm going to drink some water or whatever. Right? So I think, yeah, thank you for doing that.

Gillian McCarthy:

There was not a lot of potential to be ... I mean, not exploitative, but as you could see, it really was a TMZ moment. Especially when Catherine did her- went public with it. And India had been through the ringer with that. And it was sensationalized and it needed to be looked at. Because this happened to a lot of people. Was there 150 people in DOS?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Yeah.

Gillian McCarthy:

All smart.

Sarah Taylor:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Gillian McCarthy:

All of those people were super smart and driven and focused. And that's why they were chosen.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah.

Gillian McCarthy:

And deceived.

Sarah Taylor:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, shall we watch another clip? We have a clip from episode two, the JNESS tracks.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

This is really the heart of the indoctrination. There was a lot of stuff in NXIVM teachings that looked legit. And when we really dug into it, we decided, Cecilia and I, that the gender-based programs were really

the core cause for what ended up happening in DOS. And how they changed people, perception about gender and really made the women hate themselves. This is just a little snippet of how we had to distill that down to a little tiny clip.

[Clip Plays]

Sarah Taylor:

In a distilled three and a half minutes, hearing them say like, "Oh, yeah, monogamy is not ..." Just all those lines that you've picked to explain. Yeah. Like somebody just put, it makes your blood boil. It does. And like, ugh, there's so many elements to it that you're like, how is this- how is this happening? Especially right now, how did this happen? Give us some insight on what you chose and how you chose to shape this.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

So we needed India by the end of episode two, to accept a membership in a slave master sorority. Now we have 90 minutes from beginning to that point. In about an episode and a half to get her there. And so we had to distill five years of her in NXIVM with all the indoctrination and many programs that we don't even mention. With her being on the coaching path and trying to advance on the coaching path. And maybe figure out how to make it a sustainable career.

And what she's hearing along the way. We really realized that, as I said before, the gender-based programs were the most harmful in terms of how it changed her thinking. And JNESS was in existence for years. And Naomi took JNESS classes here in LA. So they had- The curriculum was coming down from Keith and then distributed confidentially. Or like with secret kind of ... Like never just emailed. But then read on conference calls or in different forums around the country. And in some places in other countries, as well.

What came from him and eventually at the end of the clip, you see where he gets to. Is like, okay, rape is not really a rape. And the victim is really the abuser. And you want to make sure that by the time you hear that, you can understand how somebody can be susceptible to accepting it.

And it's still like, as somebody commented on the thread here, makes your blood boil. And it's like, there's no way. But hopefully we gave you enough clues where you could see there might be a way. Because anything that makes you jolt or want to run away, they told them that's exactly how you need to feel. If you have the urge to bolt out of your seat, you're doing the work. You're doing the hard work. You are opening your mind. You're not accepting anything as a given. You're really fighting what they call indoctrination, which is the way you were raised, the way you were indoctrinated as a child. You challenging your perception of the world to accept this other things.

And so they kind of used their instincts against them. And that eroding of instinct is what eventually leads India to accept this membership in DOS. And so that was really important to lay it out gradually. But also very concisely.

Gillian McCarthy:

It makes you wonder if there was a huge game plan from the beginning that they ... I don't know that they were all that clever. But to start with JNESS and roll it into the tracks. Which they were called intensives for a reason. That they would take people, make you go to Albany, usually. I think most of them were in Albany. And spend 12, 15 hours a day in these rooms, listening to this stuff with minimal food.

And I know from some of those testimonials we had, in the B roll, people were talking like it's 11:30 at night, it's midnight. After they spent this day, they were required to go and record their thoughts on it. And be coached into what to say, as well. So it's a physical breakdown, as well as a mental breakdown. But JNESS was a gateway, for sure.

And the last clip of Keith is government evidence, right? That was in- came from the FBI. That one I watched. And that's hard to take from top to bottom. Nancy Salzman is there hitting record and setting it up. And they're all sort of ... The first line DOS women are, can't really tell, are sitting around the table, nodding and agreeing.

If they did even say, like, I don't understand, it would just be dismissed. And Kelly said that about JNESS, the tracks that she took. Where she was like, if you had anything to say, they'd be like, "No, you're wrong." You were supposed to discuss the curriculum, but there was no real discussion. You were told what to think.

Sarah Taylor:

Was there any challenges in putting this together, the edit of making this concise? Giving us that information on how- what they're telling the people to believe to get to that point where we hear Keith say the victim's the abuser? Did you find that clip and think, "Okay, this is how I'm going to ... " And this is like ... How did you get to that stage of piecing it together?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I think the biggest challenge was letting go of anything that wasn't directly informing India's through line. There was a lot more things and stuff. And seeing a lot of the other key players kind of in moments where they're overwhelmed or kind of this gazed look on their faces as they're like totally brainwashed, as Gillian said. They would make them sit at the end of a really long day and be a PR machine for spelling out, again, everything they learned that day. And which I think is a really dangerous part of this, how they make all these members be PR machines for the organizations.

So I think we just had to be really thoughtful about what India's experience was and only use the pieces that informed her story and her experience and just kind of bravely let go of everything else.

Gillian McCarthy:

It was, I think originally the concept of the JNESS groups, which as Inbal said, were held. You had your friendships where you had your group of women that you would hang out with once a month, rolled straight into the tracks. And that was a longer sequence. There was this process of splitting that up and moving part of it to episode one and seeing what made sense with episode two. It went through a lot of iterations.

And then I think we watched it once and then we rolled straight into the SOP, which was the men's group like JNESS. But at a certain point, it all just ... you just become numb to it. Because it's hard to differentiate on just if you're just going to watch it once.

Sarah Taylor:

Well, another component that you used a lot in the series was animation of the reenactments of moments in India's story. The next clip that we have is from episode three, and it's the branding sequence. Which again, I'm going to give a content warning, because it is intense.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Obviously, there was no footage that we could use. It was such a tentpole- important part of the story. And to really understand how they willingly and knowingly went into that room to be branded. We wanted to make sure people understood the context, how they made that choice under coercion, but still a choice. And what actually transpired in that room.

[Clip Plays]

Sarah Taylor:

How was that to put together?

Gillian McCarthy:

I think that the tone and the texture that Elyse and the people at the animation brought to it, transformed it. I'd like to just recognize that.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

There's a good story behind it. When India joined as an executive producer, she was really ... her first film. And she kind of fell in love with the process and started watching and binging a lot of documentaries. And so she would say, "Oh, watch this. And what do you think about that?" And so Cecilia and India and I would start binging on the same docs over the weekends.

And she watched ... One weekend, I got a text. She watched Miss Americana, the Taylor Swift documentary. And so then Cecilia watched it. So I had to watch it. And so I watched it. And it's a beautiful doc. And there's a little sequence in it about a court case that Taylor was involved in when she was suing for a dollar somebody who sexually harassed or assaulted her. In any case, they couldn't shoot in that. They didn't have footage from that court case of that courtroom. And they just used this amazing, beautiful, very subjective illustrations that looked like nothing I've really seen before.

And so I contacted the producer of Miss Americana, whom I worked with before. And I said, "You have to give me the contact. We need to illustrate all these court room moments."

Sarah Taylor:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

That's back when we thought that was going to be the through line. And she connected me with Elyse Kelly. She's a DC-based animator. She's just a wonderful, beautiful person and an artist. And it just became better than what we could have imagined ourselves. Every frame was very well thought out. Again, from the texture to the choice of colors, to the composition. There were key moments in the story that we didn't have any footage or photos. Well we're not going to do re-creations. We were really stuck with trying to figure out how to visualize that and still tell this important story.

And it wasn't something we had budgeted for or really planned going into this project. And animation is expensive. Luckily, Starz supported once they saw what Elyse can do and they understood our vision for it and understood the necessity for it. We really had to fight almost like scene by scene. Like, we really need this illustration and this animation. They're like, "Okay."

The branding was number one on the list. We knew that we had to tell that story and we knew we are going to have to come up with the money to do that. But I think that the challenge was how do

you show these moments that are so revealing, traumatic and not make it look like porn? Tell it really from the perspective, from the point of view of the victims and their trauma.

And the goal was we worked with Elyse to make it like a visual manifestation of India's memories.

Sarah Taylor:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

And kind of like you saw in V Week, as she's going through the reception area and seeing those people still there. That should have give you the same feeling like she's remembering these shreds of images and voices.

And we had one visual reference of what that whole branding could have looked like. But we mostly flying blind. We had to just come up with this world, but from the details that India gave us. So place, it was important to place the phones recording it. Because you see later that Keith said you have to videotape it from different angles to create more collateral. We wanted to make sure that was clear. That they knew they were being filmed with multiple devices. And some of the pod mates had to hold the phones and tape and record them. And then get on the table themselves and let their friends tape them.

It's really so wild to think somebody would willingly go through that. I don't know. It's kind of hard to put into words, but when it all-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:15:04]

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I know it's hard to put into words, but when it all came together and as I'm sure people on this seminar know, you don't get this final animation day one, right? You get a sketch and so to see the process evolving to finally both, the amazing sound design work, that was done by Snap sound, the team from Sweat Snap sound and the animation work with India's voice on camera. So with really all the elements kind of pulling together.

The reaction on her face as she's watching that YouTube video that they showed them, it really builds a certain feeling that we wanted to make sure you get the horror of it and relate to her and the other victim who's anonymous. Who's telling you, "well, they told us one thing, but then it was something else."

So this is the whole tension between what they thought it was going to be and what it actually turned out to be, which is so horrific and I think for me personally, the fright experiment that appears in episode two, we didn't show you that clip, but they set women in front of a screen and showed them both clips from movies and real videos of cartel beheading women, and recorded their brain reaction and, put a video camera in front of their faces to record their facial expressions as they're watching it.

It's like a crazy Clock Orange moment, and for me, that is the most horrible thing for various reason that I ever seen and I saw the clip of the beheading and we used it in a way, but, it took the branding to move the justice system. So that's why this is so important. Without the branding, there could have still been NXIVM today. So that's the line he had crossed. I feel like he crossed it a million times before, but in terms of law enforcement, that had to happen for people to pay attention. For it, to

be, a front page photo on the New York Times and for people to finally take them down. The branding wasn't a prosecutable crime, but it took that to bring down NXIVM.

Gillian McCarthy:

I mean Danielle Roberts still has her medical license, right?

Sarah Taylor:

What?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

There's hearings now that have been delayed because of COVID, but she's about to lose it. It's under hearing now.

Gillian McCarthy:

But the branding in itself wouldn't have brought NXIVM down if it didn't turn out to be his initials. And at that point when they were getting branded, and from the series India, 100% believed it was even when she was told straight to her face, what it was. She simply did not believe it until she heard it from his own mouth and I think from the interviews from other people, they had no idea.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

When we did research into other sex trafficking organizations, that's not like an unusual thing to do marking your slaves, marking the women with tattoos, with brands. That's actually something other sexual offenders and sex trafficking organizations or men sex traffic women, they do that. They mark their women in some way and it's incredibly shocking when it happens.

Sarah Taylor:

Wow. Somebody was asking about security. Did you have to do any special security about potential, dangerous things happening by telling the story of NXIVM? Because they are- they had been so powerful over the course of the time they were on.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Yes, it's hard to think about it now because now Keith is in prison for a life sentence- more than a life sentence and Clare Bronfman is finally in prison, but that was not the case when we started filming. And most people we talked to actually decided to not go on camera cause they were so afraid of retaliation. Not just what their families would say, but could they be sued by Clare Bronfman? What was going to happen?

They were in an organization that vilified anybody who tried to speak against it. So they knew firsthand or secondhand what happens to those who speak against it. So, it was complicated to get people to tell the story. And once we did, I think the security is probably typical studio security because you get that on other shows where they're really concerned about their footage for any sitcom too, leaking out. But it was especially important on our project where, nothing was coming out and so when COVID hit in March and we had to move to editing from home, we really had to figure out how we going to translate the tight security and the editing office to everybody taking those drives home. So, it was tricky, it was complicated.

Sarah Taylor:

Another question came up of, how did you get permission to use audio from the jump drives that were taken from Allison's house and some of the other insider footage, even any of that stuff. How did you get permission to use that?

Gillian McCarthy:

I think a lot of it was exhibits in the trial. It was released by the DEA.

Sarah Taylor:

So if it's in the trial then that says- I don't know the rules.

Gillian McCarthy:

Then it's public.

Sarah Taylor:

That makes sense then, yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Anything that the prosecution releases as exhibit becomes public information cause the U.S. courthouses are like the court of the people.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah, yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

So those were in the public domain in a way and then other material was carefully reviewed by a team of lawyers to make sure we have the right to use it and that we're not violating anybody's rights, but still with commitment to telling the best story we can. So not everything passed legal review, but a lot of it that I didn't think would, did. So I felt very, I mean, I remember my first ugly cry was the day that the fair use lawyer called us and told us that he thought everything we used in episode one or one and two was like clear. And I just couldn't I was like, mind blown could not believe it.

Sarah Taylor:

That's amazing, yeah.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Was actually crying.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah.

Gillian McCarthy:

I think that also informed who was obscured in the footage and who was left clear. I mean, definitely if they have the trial exhibit with the sort of circle of Keith in the middle with all the people. So if they were in there, that's, they're in the public, identified already. So we're not going to secure them.

Sarah Taylor:

One more quick question here, and then we'll show one more clip before we run out of time. Did you, either of you do any research on understanding like cult practices and learning how the coursing works and stuff like that, did you investigate, or did you just go with what the footage was or your expert said?

Gillian McCarthy:

The Canadians will know Ticket to Heaven, which is a fantastic film that you should watch and then talks a lot about how cults work. And again, I've done a bit of work on the Bikram, so I need about it from that. But, I think the interviews with the experts really did illuminate specifically with this cult where you could say this intake sheet means this, when they say this, if you question, it just shows how much more work you have to do. So-

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Normally I like to not educate myself or read things outside. It sounds like stupid and lazy, but I like to learn from what's on the screen. So, I don't want to assume things that are not actually there just because I knew them on other documentaries I've worked on, I usually avoid reading things and just try to learn from the material.

And so if something doesn't make sense, I'll maybe like go specifically to one area or look for a book or expert, or pick up the phone and ask India or an expert. But for the most part, I try to let the footage inform me as much as possible. So I don't bring assumptions into it and I try to maintain sort of virgin clean slate perspective. So I'm as close as I can be to my audience, as opposed to like patronizing them, telling them how much I know.

I think it was really important with this series to make it feel accessible, to as many people as possible. The Def stars definitely drove us to make something that felt commercially accessible, viable, palatable to a large audience. And sometimes our instinct were not... Our storytelling style was different. We wanted to reveal things more elegantly or more slowly.

I remember the first cut we screened of episode one at the end of it. Somebody from Deborah told us, "I felt like I could join." And I said, "yes, mission accomplished. This is exactly what we wanted you to do." But they said, "no! We want to know that it is evil from moment one. We want to make sure we know who's the protagonist and antagonist and set that up really clear clearly and tell you along the way." And so that was really tough to like change our perspective and understand the value in that way of revealing it and really letting the tension between what you learn from the experts as you go along and what you don't learn yet, to the moment they going to say that's makes the job of the interview is the subject a lot harder.

You put a lot of responsibility on their shoulders to explain to you their perspective, despite like I'm telling you, there's all these red flags I'm telling you that this is evil, and I still need to believe this woman that she didn't see any of that. That She thought it was good and so that I think was super challenging.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. That's a really hard balance because you don't want your subjects to look like a fool where if the audience is smarter, but I could see how you could watch a cut and be like, yeah, I want to be a better human. I want to do that too. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Such a fine balance.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Yes, it was.

Sarah Taylor:

That's tough.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Should we quickly watch the other-

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah, so we have the... this is a really great sequence that Gillian is famous for I'd say. Is going to be extra famous for.

[Clip Plays]

Sarah Taylor:

The music. How did you decide that piano playing was going to be like, that is just, yeah.

Gillian McCarthy:

We had this footage of him playing and they recovered it and he stopped and started again. So I kind had it twice, which made it convenient. And I came across it and knew that it existed. And then when I ended up on 104 and we had this had been structured because of Tara, one of the story editors had, and they had structured it with the people gushing about him on stage with the arrests. But it... the gushing on stage had already been seen in episode one. So it was reiteration of that, and I remember talking to Inbal, cause I had this idea because I felt like the presence of Keith within that section, wasn't there because it was the news footage and the archive clips. We hadn't really seen him for a while too, because by this time he had been put in jail.

So I remember proposing this to Inball because it took some doing and it's not something that I could just go and spend a couple days and doing and then be like, "no one likes it or it wasn't a good idea." So we talked about it. Should we use it in that sequence or somewhere else? So, and then it did take some doing because I wanted to get the reveal, that it was him playing. So I had to like back time and maybe do a little bit of music editing to get that reveal up from the piano that it wasn't score, that it was him playing that and then to- we even and out in the right points because the person was just shooting and there was only like so many really good shots of him to use. So it took a bit and I did it and you know, it was the typical, everyone was like, "I love it." Here are notes. That's not okay. Its great but-

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

But we knew it was genius from the first moment. I mean, people watched a very early version of this episode after Gillian had put this together and said, "this is like the godfather, this is like, just so amazingly put together." And I felt also like for me, how magic can happen working in a team like a store,

the senior store producer had this idea of like Gillian said, inter-cutting, the professing their love as they are led to court. And then Gillian had the idea to add Keith playing the piano.

It had to take that time and all these people involved in that particular team to come at that final result. And then it had to have that, extra sound design to really make it sing and it's most people who comment like on Twitter or friends, family, people we heard from it's their favorite sequence of the entire series and it's just so really beautiful, beautifully, beautifully kind.

It was one of the things they told him that he was a genius. He had the highest IQ ever and he was a Judo Champion and the concert pianist. I know piano, I'm married to a concert pianist who's also the composer of the series like, Moonlight Sonata is something you learn in your first year of piano, but somehow like that is still impressive enough that he could like fumble through that and still impress everybody. Yeah. It's not even a great performance of the Moonlight Sonata, but I guess it was enough for them to think it all that.

Sarah Taylor:

Yes.

Gillian McCarthy:

I love the fumble at end. He just doesn't care about these people.

Sarah Taylor:

Biggest challenge that you faced working on this project?

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

For me personally, was my first time as an executive producer showrunner so to balance being used to being the editor and touching everything, to trusting the amazing team we assembled to do their thing and still get the show done under very, a lot of pressure from budget, schedules, network. We had to have every single shoot pre-approved and then record it too, we had to have every week kind of accounted for. There was a lot of show running, heavy lifting that had to be done on a daily basis. And so at the very end, after COVID hit, we all disassembled and became harder to really do the kind of one-on-one interfacing communicating, and I ended up locking the show by myself.

So like, and Gillian helped me towards the end. We brought her back, after she was already wrapped to kind of help us a little, but it was a lot, it was like a lot of as Gillian said producing and managing and helping, watching cuts and giving notes and then at night I would be cutting all night. So it was... I don't think I want to do that again. Like if I'm a showrunner, then I'm just a showrunner and like, I'm not going to commit to being an editor, full-time editor as well. Like that's just too much to chew.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. Rightly so.

Gillian McCarthy:

The challenge of wrangling this huge story over the multi episode arc, that's always challenging. It's much easier to do like discreet, where things stop and start. COVID was a big challenge too and I just felt like... and it happened at a time where we were getting into the point where you would be working in the room with Cecilia and Inbal in a more direct, because there was a lot of... as they were shooting, we

were just cutting and not so that I missed that part of it, that we were separate. I wanted to say this though, for everybody that they interviewed, no matter what happened, So many people said, ultimately that they got something out of NXIVM and that to me was the challenge of... I found that striking. Pretty well all of them said, "it ended like in a mess and it was terrible what happened, but there was something in that that helps them, and they might do it again."

Sarah Taylor:

Interesting. Was there anything from working on this series that you'll take to other shows that you do? I guess we know Inbal will not do editing and executive producing at the same time, but what's something that you'll take with you from doing this project.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

I mean, we've certainly learned a lot in developing this relationship with our subjects and what, what are ethical guidelines that we will continue to follow and develop further? You know what we talked about caring for editors as they're handling tough subject matter, kind of a long, secondhand exposure to trauma through the footage, I think is really something that we should look at very seriously across the industry. I think the response to this series has just been so positive and amazing. I was addicted to Twitter for the first few weeks to just like, see how people respond and that they really got it all and they were drawing parallels to their own lives and they understand that coercion doesn't just happen in a crazy sex cult.

It happens everywhere. And they were able to see parallels to their romantic relationships or workplace abusive bosses or our political situation. I mean, there are people this week- last week that were tweeting about, oh, you want to understand people in Mega, you know, mega people watch seduced. I mean, people were tweeting that, making something that's, that's palatable to a large audience and make it educational and impactful at the same time. I think that was the biggest challenge and I really feel that we scored pretty high on that front. So I think that will continue to learn in that direction.

Sarah Taylor:

Yeah. Thank you for taking the time to let us ask questions and explain the process and thank you both so much for taking the time today. It sounds like everybody in the chat is saying, thank you and they've enjoyed it and so, yes, thank you again for sharing with us and we'll look forward to seeing more of you in the future.

Inbal B. Lessner, ACE:

Thank you, Sarah. Thank you so much everybody.

Sarah Taylor:

Thank you so much for joining us today and a big, thank you Goes out to Inbal and Gillian for taking time to sit with us. A special, thanks goes to Jane MacRae and Alison Dowler. The main title sound design was created by Jane Tattersall, additional ADR recording by Andrea Rusch. Original music created by Chad Blain and Soundstream this episode was mixed and mastered by Tony Bao. The CCE has been supporting Indspire, an organization that provides funding and scholarships for Indigenous post-secondary students.

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podcast, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and tell your friends to tune in. Till next time, I'm your host, Sarah Taylor,

Speaker 41:

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