



Episode 386 – Miss Shannon Lee | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello and thank you for coming by! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 386. Today, I'm joined by Miss Shannon Lee. My name's Jeremy Lesniak, I'm the host of this show, I'm the founder of whistlekick and you know what? I love martial arts, I love traditional martial arts, I love all kinds of them. Trained in a whole bunch of them, train in a bunch of them still and it's the thing I love most in life that's why I bring you this show twice a week and at whistlekick, we bring you a whole bunch of different stuff. In fact, you can check out everything that we offer at whistlekick.com and if you check out some of the products we make whether it's some sparring equipment, uniforms, you can save 15% by using the code `PODCAST15`. If you want to find these show notes with photos and links and videos and 385 other episodes, you can check out whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. I suspect that most of you know who Miss Shannon Lee is. Of course, she is the daughter of Bruce Lee but she's her own person and she has her own accomplishments, her own goals, and that's why I was really excited to talk to her today. Don't worry, yes, of course, we do have quite a bit of conversation about her famous father but it goes a lot further than that and that's what's important to me so here we go. Miss Lee, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Shannon Lee:

Thank you so much! Great to be here.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Thank you! It's an honor to have you here and we're going to talk about a lot of stuff. We're going to talk about...everybody knows one of the subjects we're going to talk about but we're also going to talk about some TV stuff you got going on and I want to start this kind of in a way that maybe you haven't started an interview before because this is a traditional martial arts show, and so everything we do, everything we talk about on martial arts radio stems from our guest relationship to the martial arts so I'll ask you the question I've asked many times before. How did you start in the martial arts?

Shannon Lee:

Well, I think, certainly, because my father is Bruce Lee, martial arts was sort of a 24/7 happening at my house. So, martial arts was always going on. My father was constantly training, he was teaching, students in our backyard, he was teaching my brother, he was teaching me, to a certain extent, but I was a toddler so just some of those basic wildly throwing your arms and legs around but my father passed away when I was 4 and then for many years, I did not train in martial arts. There was a quick, a quick moment in time when I was about 10 when I trained. It was [00:03:03] who was a friend of my father's but that wouldn't last very long and then I didn't come back to it again until I was quite a bit older but then, when I came back to it, it was because I really wanted to make that connection with my father. I really wanted to study his art of Jeet Kune Do and connect with him in that way because this was something that he had created in his lifetime and I had not really trained in it except for a few months when I was a kid and so, I had become very touched and moved by his philosophical writing and I wanted to really connect with him and understand this thing that he had created and what was so meaningful to him in that way. So, in my early twenties, I started in training Jeet Kune Do eventually and from there I trained later with Benny The Jet Urquidez in kickboxing for many years and I dabbled here and there in some other stuff as well. I did some [00:04:21], I did some taekwondo, I've done a little Krav Maga but primarily Jeet Kune Do and kickboxing were the arts that I trained in.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, any martial artists who's been training for a number of years, at some point we're going to start to think backwards, start to think back towards lineage and why? Why is this form this way? Why is this technique done this way? And it starts to give us a little bit of context of maybe who those people were but, of course, you had a much different, I guess, angle. A much different, I suspect, motivation, for your training at the time especially with Jeet Kune Do. Could you speak a little to that?

Shannon Lee:

Yeah, and in particular, because as you probably know, Jeet Kune Do is, while it has its techniques that my father developed, it is an art that is meant to be somewhat open to the individual and so, in terms of where this came from and why it was created, I mean, I certainly, know the answer to that as far as my father was concerned and I think one of the challenges of Jeet Kune Do over this many years since he passed is it has this very, very strong philosophical component to it, I think sometimes people become a little bit challenged by the notion of the philosophical component because the philosophical component



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seems to say, oh, you can just do anything; oh, you can combine anything which makes it feel like it's not a physical and bodied thing. Yet, at the same time, my father had looked into many different arts. He got his start in Wing Chun and trained with Ip Man in Hongkong for 5 years as a kid and then gone on to start, from that point on, he was self-trained. He certainly loved to work with people from different arts and understand different forms of Chinese Kung Fu as well as many of the other arts that are out there. He had a number of students who came from [00:07:07] Karate and he even had trained in some grappling, some western boxing. He was very interested in fencing and that came into play in some of the movement in Jeet Kune Do as well but, for him, Jeet Kune Do is this notion of like I am going to be as simple in form as direct and efficient as I can be while giving myself this freedom to meet every fight, every moment in that moment expressly and move how my body needs to move. It becomes this thing that is actually, on the one hand, extremely simple and, on the other hand, extremely complex because it requires a lot of skill to be able to express one's self in that way. A lot of training, a lot of understanding of your own body and how your body moves and works most effectively and efficiently and he really believed in the strong strike forward and making your most powerful move as quickly as possible and getting out.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, you referenced, of course, your father's writings and I imagine he's rather prolific. I've read quite a few things and, of course, there's no shortage of writing that the rest of us get to read and contemplate and, if you spend any time on the internet, argue about but you had access to everything, to things that weren't published and from what I understand it was from some of these unpublished elements that led to the TV show, the reason that I get to talk to you today.

Shannon Lee:

Yes, definitely, I mean, so my father, aside from being a martial artist, he wrote many, many volumes of words about martial arts and about his thoughts on martial arts. We have an archive, this collection of writings that is seven volumes that he wrote called his commentaries on the martial way from which many books have been published about Jeet Kune Do and many others since but he also wrote a lot philosophically about life and how one should maximize one's potential as a human being and self-actualize and all of that and he also wrote many creative ideas. He wrote treatments for film and television and scripts and poems and all sorts of things like that as well, so, yes, I have had access to all of that and this show that we've created is created from one of these treatments that he had written back in the late 60's, early 70's for a TV show idea that he created and Warner Brothers TV at that time had been talking to him about starring in a TV show and ultimately, that didn't happen because they said a Chinese man cannot be the lead of a US TV show, American audiences won't accept that and he had created this treatment and it just kind of became another set of papers within the materials that he created in his lifetime and it wasn't until the end of 2000 when I started running his legacy and start looking after it and all of that, that my mom sent all these materials down to me and I started going through them and I came across this treatment and I said, oh, here is this treatment that I've always



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heard about that existed. It's been part of my family history all these years and I was like oh, that's cool and I read through it and I was like oh, it was really awesome but I really wasn't in a position at that time to do anything with it. I had a bunch of other things I needed to look after first and so it kind of just went back in the box and stayed there for a while and anybody who is sort of a [00:11:51] level fan of my father, this treatment and this show and the fact that it didn't get passed and all of that is part of Bruce Lee lore, if you will, and so, over the course of many years, I had gotten to know Justin Lin a little bit here and there, just running into him but I didn't know him well and one day he called me up out of the blue and said, hey, I always heard this treatment, is it true? And I said, oh, yeah, absolutely, it's true and I have the treatment and he was like, oh, wow, can I see it? And so, we got together and I showed it to him and he read through it and he was like you know, this is really good, it is really well-written, beautifully typed out 8-page treatment, really mapping out this show idea and he said, we should make this show the way your father intended it to make and thus, began our journey to create this TV show.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And of course, you're talking about the show, Warrior, which is coming out on Cinemax and what's the debut on that? What's the date?

Shannon Lee:

April 5th, 10 PM.

Jeremy Lesniak:

April 5th 2019 because we might have folks listening to this in the future and of course, one of the things that I am really honored about is that HBO said, hey, check it out, you can watch it so I've had the opportunity to watch almost the entire, at least what they sent me, I assume, is the whole first season and, I have to say, and longtime listeners know that I don't just bluntly complement guests if there's nothing nice to say, I won't say anything but nothing else like this show. I've never seen anything else like this. It not only embodies the martial arts aspects that you would expect in a show like this but what I was pleasantly surprised at and really enjoying is, what I expect is, the cultural accuracy of the time period and the struggles of Asian-Americans and maybe you can speak a little on that and why that was so important.

Shannon Lee:

That came from my father. He purposefully selected this time period. The show takes place in the 1870's in San Francisco, primarily in Chinatown, and my father picked this time period and this subject matter for a number of reasons. Number one, he was very interested in telling these Chinese stories and this is a Chinese-American story and it's an American story more broadly as well because this is about the whole of that culture of San Francisco at the time which included the Kong Wars which was a historical happening that stems in Chinatown at the time where the different families in power in Chinatown were warring with one another. It also encompasses a point in time historically right before the Chinese



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exclusion act [00:15:12] history which was a United States immigration policy and the only time in the history of the United States where they targeted one particular race of peoples and banned them from immigration to United States and this is set sort of like after the Gold Rush and as the railroads are being finished and built and there are all these Chinese living here and they're being used as cheap labor by the industrialists, they're trying to build up the city while at the same time the politicians are trying to "solve the Chinese problem" and they're banning the immigration of Chinese women to the United States so that Chinese men will not settle down and have a family. It's a very rich and complicated time in our history and my father chose this because he wanted to highlight these stories and so, yes, it's a fictional story and yes, it's an action show and it hopefully, serving well on the action front which is something we strived really hard to do and have a really great actions and martial arts sequences but it's also a story that has this sort of rich historical layer to it as well and my father also chose this time period because in the Old West, there were pistols and revolvers and stuff but there was more of the opportunity for hand-to-hand combat or weapons combat and if it were to take place in current day, there's nobody running around with semi-automatic weapons blowing people away. It's a much more visceral time for the clash of all of these cultures.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I think that's a great word for it: visceral. There's a lot of violence in this show but unlike a lot of shows, the violence is part of the story. Violence tends to be, in most of our movies and television today, just a layer. It almost seems to be shock value and I'm admittedly, I'm not one for blood and guts. Doesn't do well for me, I turn my head and I watch a lot of things through my fingers but I haven't had that response with this show and I think that that's because it's a necessary part of it. I feel compelled to watch despite the blood and guts because its part of the story.

Shannon Lee:

For sure, and by the way, that was a big, important part, idea for my father. He did not believe in violence for violence's sake to shock you or make you feel something or wince or whatever. He believed in the combat happening because it was part of the story. It was part of the story of the characters and part of what's going down between the different characters and action and so we definitely held that and the fights are, they're emotional also. There's a lot at stake for everybody and it was a very violent time, I mean, the Kongs of the time period had in their employ these men called hatchet men who carried around this short-handled hatchet and would chop each other with them, chopping each other up and bludgeon one another with them and so, even in our story, not everybody is a martial artist. Some people are just brutally defending or carrying out their job at the time, as it were and so while the show has a lot of "violence" in it, it's all as you say, very intricately woven into the fabric of the story.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, of course, in the notes that I was sent, I was asked to make sure that I asked you about your role in the show which tells me that you had a little bit more to do with it than we might expect.



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Shannon Lee:

Well, I am one of the executive producers in the show. Myself, Justin Lin and Jonathan Tropper are the ones who really came together and created the show. Jonathan is the writer and he's a beautiful writer and show runner and he did a beautiful job really collaborating with myself and Justin to create this world and listen carefully to what was important to us because the thing that I really value in Justin as a partner was he said, we shouldn't just make this show to make the show. We should only make this show if we can do it the right way, if we feel like what we're doing is true to the essence of your father and so, yes, the show is updated and contemporized for the viewing audiences of today because 1970's episodically was very different thing than the way stories are told today but that essential quality where we're talking about these authentic portrayals and stories and where the characters are really complex and full-fledged and we had this beautiful cast, this amazingly talented Asian cast and getting to cast it the way we want it, getting to tell the story the way we wanted, it was a collaborative effort. I read all the scripts, I gave all the notes, I gave all the notes on all the cuts and everything in there were times where we do a lot of fun little nods to some Bruce Lee stuff throughout the show even though technically Bruce Lee is not in the show. It came from his creative mind and its fun for us to drop some little Easter eggs here and there, if you're a big fan, you'll be able to find them but even at times, I was like, it's too much, let's cool with that, trying to drop in a little too much here or I really had a hand in making sure that the women came off as powerful within their own worlds that they operated in. I didn't want them to be just sidepieces to the men in the show so there was a lot of making sure it stayed within the legacy and that also it was a show, as much depth as we could put into it was important to me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It really seems like it came through in that way and maybe it didn't happen this way but I just imagine, I have this imagination that as you and the others were sitting down and just batting around these ideas and how to implement...because 8 pages doesn't become an entire show. There's a lot...Anybody that's ever written a script or read a script knows that there's a lot of pages that go even into a half-hour of television programming and this is an hour-long show. There was a lot that had to happen but, in my mind, I suspect that, not just for you, but for most, if not everyone involved, Bruce Lee was kind of there, in mind. Is that fair to ask?

Shannon Lee:

For sure. I think that's fair to say and also, I mean, this may sound a little out there but honestly, to a certain extent, I really feel like his energy was guiding the process because whether that was coming through me or whether it was coming through other people's sort of respect for him as well, I have to say that there were moments in time where I had to sort of pull back moment where we're really starting to break this story and create the world where I would sort of step back and feel really energize like oh, okay, yeah, this is good, this is coming together, this is going to be good and then just with



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everybody with the cast signing on and the production crew coming together. Everybody seems just so excited and so energized to be doing this show and that there was almost this kinetic energy that sort of sparkled through the whole thing and we had people come in like Brett Chan, who's our fight coordinator usually doesn't work at this level budget-wise but he was so into the concept of the show and the fact that we were bringing this story of my father's to life and he was like, I'm in! Just tell me what to do, I mean, what do you want me to do? I'm here. There was so much good will and so much good energy and I just feel like my father was sending us some of his love in that regard.

Jeremy Lesniak:

As you might imagine this being a martial arts show, specifically a traditional martial arts show, your father's name is brought up almost every episode and it's amazing that here we are, more than 40 years after his passing and he's not only one of, if not, the most influential martial artist of all time but he's still the most iconic and I'm wondering if that's a difficult shadow to live in. Is that empowering for you or is that difficult or both?

Shannon Lee:

It's definitely both. I think one of the things I've said in my life is I'm always in relationship to what that means for me and I think that it would be ridiculous for me to say that it was anything but an absolute honor and a privilege to be the daughter of Bruce Lee. It served love and inspiration and energy and good feeling that he has put into the world and that I have experienced through coming into contact with so many people who have gotten that from him is nothing but beautiful and at the same time, being a human, and having to come into my own and understand my own identity and in particular, I think my brother and I, we both didn't engage in martial arts as kids after our father died because I think it felt just a little bit overwhelming, like stepping into a school would be a little bit like all eyes on us sort of thing and so, it took time to grow into ourselves a little bit and like go, no, this is important and we want to train and still, as a human, you tend to get in your head especially when you're younger and feeling like you have big shoes to fill and feeling like you have to make your own way and all these kinds of stuff, feeling a little bit at times like oh, I shouldn't tell anybody who I am and then sometimes, during like why am I keeping this a secret? I'm proud of who I am and being in this constant relationship with how does this, what does this mean for me in a weird sense because there's no possible way for me to separate myself from it and in a lot of ways, it has absolutely nothing to do with who I am and yet, it does so because there's this legacy that is beautiful and rich and has inspired me as well and so, the reason I got involved in being the steward of my father's legacy and keeping it alive as best I can and amplifying it as best I can is specifically because it is meaningful for me on a personal level. His words has helped me grow and helped me feel, in many ways, and I just know that people need to know also that side of him more as a philosopher and a person who lived his life in a particular way and I want people to know that and so, aside from the fact that he was an amazing martial artist, he was an amazing human and I just want people to come in and contact with that idea and understand what there is for them in the way even if they're not martial artist. It's an ongoing thing but I have to say my



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father's philosophy really says it all which is that I'm not in this world to live up to anybody else's notion of who I am and I only live up to that for myself and I should really only actualize myself and not myself as the image of whatever someone thinks Bruce Lee's daughter is, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, absolutely and while the challenge of that might be a little larger, a little more public for you, I think that's something that we all face is trying to step out on our own and understand what our lives look like, not just despite and because of our parents' influence but how do we form that path anew after that guidance.

Shannon Lee:

Totally. This is the human experience. My experience is no different really than anyone else's. Yes, sometimes there's a little bit more public scrutiny around it and people have, strangers have opinions about it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can totally imagine.

Shannon Lee:

But it's been all these years of personal self-growth and personal maturation to develop this sort of immovable center that is Shannon Lee that can move through the world with some sense of just rooted being-ness which everybody can have, should work on, should develop, that sort of safe harbor within themselves that sense of just being able to impress you because you've done the work to know who you are, right? So, everybody's journey is the same in that regard.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It is. It is. Now, I'm curious. I'm sure you have a ton of stories that I'm wondering if you might indulge us. You mentioned strangers having opinions on maybe the way that you should be doing things and anytime that we've had, I believe you spoke with him for the book, Matthew Polly did a wonderful biography on your father and of course, the moment that that episode, that that conversation aired, especially on YouTube, because YouTube is just the cesspool of human comments, it's disgusting at times the way people will speak and treat each other. Is there a particular anecdote that you might share when you say strangers have opinions on the way things should be done?

Shannon Lee:

Sure, well, I've had a lot of experiences. I've had people tell me that I need to have more children. I have one daughter who is an amazing being of her own and I've had people tell me that I need to have a boy because if I don't have a boy, that would be letting the legacy down and so, I've had that. When I first started acting, I had not, acting was something that my brother loved acting for acting's sake and I loved



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acting for acting's sake. I have a fine arts degree in music and so I performed a lot of the time musically in college but I always loved just performance and creativity and all that. My brother got into acting to see if he wanted it, he knew he wanted to be an actor since he was a small child and he loved acting and as Bruce Lee's son, people were like, oh, you have to do a martial arts project and while he had trained in martial arts, it wasn't, that wasn't his love. He didn't want to just do martial arts films but there was nothing else he could get and so similarly, when I started acting, it was the same. I had not been training in martial arts very long at that point and they were like, oh, well, you're Bruce Lee's daughter so you have to be in these action shows and I'm kind of like, oh, okay, well, but that's not what really what I want to do but I couldn't get any other part and I remember, gosh, I can't even remember. I was doing some show or film or something and somebody took out a full-page ad in the Daily Variety or the Hollywood Reporter against me saying I was a fraud and that I should never be allowed to be on TV and I was like, wow! As a young person, it was very hurtful and my brother had just died and I was in a very tender place and people have opinions, I suppose, but there are a lot of things like that. I had people tell me that because I'm a woman, I'm not smart enough to run the business, all those kinds of stuff.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I don't know if I'm happy or sad that you've had a similar experience to so many others.

Shannon Lee:

Well, I mean, look, this is just the world, and whether you've had, everybody's had experiences like this whether it's on a bigger stage or smaller stage. Everybody had this sense of people just getting all up in their business and deciding what's best. People who are judgmental by nature and the thing is that it is our journey as humans to try not to get tangled up in that and try not to also get sucked in to the emotion of all of that and to just stay true to who we are and doing our work while at the same time, we need to do the same with others. We can't get down in...we can't follow...if we don't want other people judging us, we can't judge them either. We have to kind of focus on ourselves, focus on creating this sense of harmony amongst humans in our lives as opposed to a sense of competition or a sense of me putting somebody else down and so all we can do is work on ourselves, focus on ourselves, be kind, be compassionate, understand that other people are going to do things differently than you are and let them have their own process. This is the same for everybody and I have to say, my father's philosophy really speaks to this. When he talks about empty your mind, the first part is that be like water quote, he's saying don't come in with any preconceived notion. Don't come in with a judgment. Don't come in with an idea of what's right or wrong. Just come in empty and ready and open to receive, to perceive, whatever is actually going on in the moment.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wonderful advice, powerful advice and not always easiest to follow.

Shannon Lee:



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Well, that's what the training is for, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

For sure. Now, if folks want to learn more about the show, Warrior, or if they want to follow you or the show or any of the relevant things online, give us the websites, give us the social media so we can put all that up.

Shannon Lee:

Yeah, thanks! So, Warrior is on Cinemax. You can go to Cinemax's site. You can also find out about it from our site which is brucelee.com or all our social media handles which are @brucelee on Facebook, Instagram, et cetera. It debuts April 5th at 10 PM. Our foundation is bruceleefoundation.org if you want to see what we're doing on the charitable side and the programs we're running. I have a book coming out in January of 2020 called The Water My Friend that is about my father's philosophy and how to use it in your daily life and telling some of the stories of his life and some of my life and I can't think what else. Yeah, I think that's about it. You can follow the show, I know there's a hashtag of [warriormax](https://www.instagram.com/warriormax) so if you're trying to find the relevant posts, there's some really great, actually, little docuseries shorts that have been released about the making of Warrior with the cast and all that and there's lots to find.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Good. Good and of course, we'll link all of that in our show notes, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, in case someone's on a treadmill or driving, no need to jot that down. I really, really appreciate you being here today but you may not know this but we send every show out in kind of the same way. We ask our guests what parting words would you leave the listeners with today?

Shannon Lee:

Oh, okay, well, so one of my favorite quotes of my father's, the one that sort of like really first woke me up when I was in a kind of dark place is [00:40:09] and trying to figure my life out which is a little lesser known quote of his and that's the whole quote itself is long but the very first phrase is the one that really sort of touched me is this one which is the medicine for my suffering I had within me from the very beginning. So, look within, find the medicine, I would say.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I know how difficult it can be to follow in the footsteps of others but I have to admit, I have no idea what it's like to be someone who has trained in the martial arts as Bruce Lee's child. When your father's the most famous martial artist of all time, that carries weight and I have to say, it really seems like Miss Lee shoulders that well and has used it in positive ways as much as any of us could ever hope to. Thank you, for coming on the show today. Of course, we have photos and other stuff related to the upcoming release of The Warrior show over at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Don't forget we've got links and a bunch of other stuff over there as well and you could check out all the other episodes. Now, if it's the



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products you're after, whistlekick.com, use the code PODCAST15 and we do have quite a bit of that stuff over on Amazon, no discount code there though. I'd appreciate any help you could offer us, whether it's a purchase, sharing an episode, leaving a review somewhere, just something, let us know that you appreciate this show and everything that we're doing here at whistlekick. If you want to follow us, we're @whistlekick on twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. My personal email address, jeremy@whistlekick.com and I would love to hear your feedback to this or any other episode. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!