

**Lex Fridman Podcast #432 - Kevin Spacey: Power, Controversy, Betrayal, Truth & Love
in Film and Life**

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Lex Fridman

The following is a conversation with Kevin Spacey, a two-time Oscar-winning actor, who has starred in *Se7en*, *The Usual Suspects*, *American Beauty*, and *House of Cards*. He is one of the greatest actors ever, creating haunting performances of characters who often embody the dark side of human nature. Seven years ago, he was cut from *House of Cards*, and canceled by Hollywood and the world, when Anthony Rapp made an allegation that Kevin Spacey sexually abused him in 1986. Anthony Rapp then filed a civil lawsuit seeking \$40 million. In this trial and all civil and criminal trials that followed, Kevin was acquitted. He has never been found guilty nor liable in the court of law. In this conversation, Kevin makes clear what he did and what he didn't do. I also encourage you to listen to Kevin's Dan Wooten and Alison Pearson interviews, for additional details and responses to the allegations. As an aside, let me say that one of the principles I operate under for this podcast and in life is that I will talk with everyone with empathy and with backbone. For each guest, I hope to explore their life's work, life's story, and what and how they think, and do so honestly and fully, the good, the bad, and the ugly, the brilliance and the flaws. I won't whitewash their sins, but I won't reduce them to a worse possible caricature of their sins either. The latter is what the mass hysteria of internet mobs too often does, often rushing to a final judgment before the facts are in. I will try to do better than that, to respect due process in service of the truth, and I hope to have the courage to always think independently and to speak honestly from the heart, even when the eyes of the outraged mob are on me. Again, my goal is to understand human beings at their best and at their worst, and the hope is such understanding leads to more compassion and wisdom in the world. I will make mistakes, and when I do, I will work hard to improve. I love you all. This is the Lex Fridman Podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description, and now, dear friends, here's Kevin Spacey. You played a serial killer in the movie, *Se7en*. Your performance was one of, if not the greatest, portrayal of a murderer on screen ever. What was your process of becoming him, John Doe, the serial killer.

Kevin Spacey

The truth is, I didn't get the part. I had been in Los Angeles making a couple of films, *Swimming With Sharks* and *Usual Suspects*, and then I did a film called *Outbreak*, that Morgan Freeman was in, and I went to audition for David Fincher, in probably late November of '94. And I auditioned for this part, and didn't get it, and I went back to New York, and I think they started shooting like December 12th. And I'm in New York, I'm back in my ... I have a wonderful apartment on West 12th Street, and my mom has come to visit for Christmas, and it's December 23rd, and it's like seven o'clock at night, and my phone rings, and it's Arnold Kopelson, who's the producer of *Se7en*, and he's very jovial and he's very friendly, and he says, "How are you doing?" And I said, "Fine," and he said, "Listen, do you remember that film you came in for, *Se7en*?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, absolutely." He goes, "Well, turns out that we hired an actor and we started shooting, and then yesterday David fired him, and David would like you to get on a plane on Sunday, and come to Los Angeles and start shooting on Tuesday." And I was like, "Okay. Would it be imposing to say, can I read it again?"

Because it's been a while now, and I'd like to." So they sent a script over. I read the script that night. I thought about it, and I had this feeling, I can't even quite describe it, but I had this feeling that it would be really good if I didn't take billing in the film, and the reason I felt that was because I knew that by the time this film would come out, it would be the last one of the three movies that I'd just shot, the fourth one. And if any of those films broke through or did well, if it was going to be Brad Pitt, Morgan Freeman, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Kevin Spacey, and you don't show up for the first 25, 30, 40 minutes, people are going to figure out who you're playing.

Lex Fridman

So people didn't know that you play the serial killer in the movie, and the serial killer shows up more than halfway through the movie.

Kevin Spacey

Very latest.

Lex Fridman

And when you say billing, is like the posters, the VHS cover.

Kevin Spacey

That's right.

Lex Fridman

Everything. You're gone.

Kevin Spacey

Exactly.

Lex Fridman

You're not there.

Kevin Spacey

Not there. And so New Cinema told me to go fuck myself, that they absolutely could use my picture and my image, and this became a little bit of a ... I'd say 24 hour conversation ... and it was Fincher who said, "I actually think this is a really cool idea." So the compromise was, I'm the first credit at the end of the movie when the credits start. So I got on a plane on that Sunday and I flew to Los Angeles, and I went into where they were shooting, and I went into the makeup room and David Fincher was there, and we were talking about what should I do? How should I look? And I just had my hair short for Outbreak, because I was playing a military character, and I just looked at the hairdresser and I said, do you have a razor? And Fincher went, "Are you kidding?" And I said, "No." He goes, "If you shave your head, I'll shave mine." So we both shaved our heads, and then I started shooting the next day. So my long-winded

answer to your question is that I didn't have that much time to think about how to build that character. What I think in the end, Fincher was able to do so brilliantly, with such terror, was to set the audience up to meet this character.

Lex Fridman

I think the last scene, the ending scene, and the car ride leading up to it, where it's mostly on you in conversation with Morgan Freeman and Brad Pitt, it's one of the greatest scenes in film history. So people who somehow didn't see the movie, there's these five murders that happened that are inspired by five of the seven deadly sins, and the ending scene is inspired, represents the last two deadly sins, and there's this calm subtlety about you in your performance, it's just terrifying. Maybe in contrast with Brad Pitt's performance, that's also really strong, but that in the contrast is the terrifying sense that you get in the audience, that builds up to the twist at the end, or the surprise at the end, with the famous, "What's in the box?" from Brad Pitt, that is Brad Pitt's character's wife, her head.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. I can really only tell you that while we were shooting that scene in the car, while we were out in the desert, in that place where all those electrical wires were, David just kept saying, "Less. Do less," and I just tried to ... I remember he kept saying to me, "Remember, you are in control. You are going to win. And knowing that should allow you to have tremendous confidence," and I just followed that lead. And I just think it's the kind of film that so many of the elements that had been at work from the beginning of the movie, in terms of its style, in terms of how he built this terror, in terms of how he built for the audience, a sense of this person being one of the scariest people that you might ever encounter, it really allowed me to be able to not have to do that much, just say the words and mean them. And I think it also is, it's an example of what makes tragedy so difficult. Very often, tragedy is people operating without enough information. They don't have all the facts. Romeo and Juliet, they don't have all the facts. They don't know what we know as an audience. And so in the end, whether Brad Pitt's character ends up shooting John Doe, or turning the gun on himself, which was a discussion ... there were a number of alternative endings that were discussed ... nothing ends up being tied up in a nice little bow. It is complicated, and shows how nobody wins in the end when you're not operating with all the information.

Lex Fridman

When you say, "Say the words and mean them," what does the, "mean them," mean?

Kevin Spacey

I've been very fortunate to be directed by Fincher a couple of times, and he would say to me sometimes, "I don't believe a thing that is coming out of your mouth. Shall we try it again?" And you go, "Okay, yeah, we can try it again." And sometimes he'll do take, and then you'll look to see if he has any added genius to hand you, and he just goes, "Let's do it again," and

then, "Let's do it again," and sometimes ... I say this in all humility ... he's literally trying to beat the acting out of you, and by continually saying, "Do it again, do it again, do it again," and not giving you any specifics, he is systematically shredding you of all pretense, of all ... because look, very often actors, we come in on the set, and we've thought about the scene, and we've worked out, "I've got this prop, and I'm going to do this thing with a can, and I'm going to..." All these things, "All the tea, I'm going to do a thing with the thing," and David is the director where he just wants you to stop adding all that crap, and just say the words, and say them quickly, and mean them. And it takes a while to get to that place. I'll tell you a story. This is a story I just love, because it's in exactly the same wheelhouse. So Jack Lemmon's first movie was a film called *It Should Happen to You*, and it was directed by George Cukor. And Jack tells this story and it was just an incredibly charming story to hear Jack tell. He said, "So I am doing this picture, and let me tell you, this is a terrific part for me. And I'm doing a scene, it's on my first day. It's my first day, and it's a terrific scene." And he goes, "We do the first take, and George Cukor comes up to me and he says, 'Jack,' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Could you do, let's do another one, but just do a little less in this one.' And Jack said, 'A little less? A little less than what I just did?' He said, 'Yeah, just a little less.'" So he goes, "We do another take, and I think, 'Boy, that was it. Let's just go home,'" and Cukor walked up to him. He said, "Jack, let's do another one this time just a little bit less," and Jack said, "Less than what I just did now?" He said, "Yeah, just a little bit less." He goes, "Oh, okay." So he did another take and Cukor came up and he said, "Jack, just a little bit less," and Jack said, "A little less than what I just did?" He said, "Yes." He goes, "Well, if I do any less, I'm not going to be acting," and Cukor said, "Exactly, Jack. Exactly."

Lex Fridman

I guess what you're saying is, it's extremely difficult to get to the bottom of a little less, because the power, if we just stick even on *Se7en*, of your performances, in the tiniest of subtleties, like when you say, "Oh, you didn't know," and you turn your head a little bit, and a little bit, maybe a glimmer of a smile appears in your face. That's subtlety, that's less, that's hard to get to, I suppose.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, and also because I so well remember, I think the work that Brad did, and also Morgan did in that scene, but the work that Brad had to do where he had to go ... I remember rehearsing with him as we were all staying at this little hotel nearby that location, and we rehearsed the night before we started shooting that sequence, and it was just incredible to see the levels of emotions he had to go through, and then the decision of, "What do I do, because if I do what he wants me to do, then he wins. But if I don't do it, then what kind of a man, husband am I?" I just thought he did really incredible work. So it was also not easy to not react to the power of what he was throwing at me. I just thought it was a really extraordinary scene.

Lex Fridman

So what's it like being in that scene? So it's you, Brad Pitt, Morgan Freeman, and Brad Pitt is going over the top, just having a mental breakdown, and is weighing these extremely difficult moral choices, as you're saying. But he's screaming, and in pain, and tormented, while you're very subtly smiling.

Kevin Spacey

In terms of the writing and in terms of what the characters had to do, it was an incredible culmination of how this character could manipulate in the way that he did, and in the end, succeed.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned Fincher likes to do a lot of takes. That's the famous thing about David Fincher. So what are the pros and cons of that? I think I read that he does some crazy amount. He averages 25 to 65 takes, and most directors do less than 10.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, sometimes it's timing, sometimes it's literally he has a stopwatch, and he's timing how long a scene is taking, and then he'll say, "You need to take a minute off this scene." "A minute?" "Yeah, a minute off this scene. I want it to move like this. So let's pick it up. Let's pick up the pace. Let's see if we can take a minute off."

Lex Fridman

Why the speed? Why say it fast is the important thing for him, do you think?

Kevin Spacey

I think because Fincher hates indulgence, and he wants people to talk the way they do in life, which is we don't take big dramatic pauses before we speak. We speak, we say what we want.

Lex Fridman

And I guess actors like the dramatic pauses, and the indulge in the dramatic -

Kevin Spacey

He didn't always like the dramatic pauses. Look, you go back, any student of acting, you go back to the '30s and the '40s, '50s, the speed at which actors spoke, not just in the comedies, which, of course, you look at any Preston Sturges' movie, and it's incredible how fast people are talking, and how funny things are when they happen that fast. But then acting styles changed. We got into a different thing in the late '50s and '60s, and a lot of actors are feeling it, which I'm not saying it's a bad thing, it's just that if you want to keep an audience engaged, as Fincher does, and I believe successfully does in all of his work, pace, timing, movement, clarity, speed, are admirable to achieve.

Lex Fridman

In all of that, he wants the actor to be as natural as possible, to strip away all the bullshit of acting -

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, yeah.

Lex Fridman

... and become human?

Kevin Spacey

Look, I've been lucky with other directors. Sam Mendes is similar. I remember when I walked in to maybe the first rehearsal for Richard III that we were doing, and I had brought with me a canopy of ailments that my Richard was going to suffer from, and Sam eventually whittled it down to three, like, "Maybe your arm, and maybe your thing, and maybe your leg. But let's get rid of the other 10 things that you brought into the room," because I was so excited to capture this character. So very often ... Trevor Nunn is this way, a lot of wonderful directors I've worked with, they're really good at helping you trim and edit.

Lex Fridman

David Fincher said about you ... he was talking in general, I think, but also specifically in the moment of House of Cards ... said that you have exceptional skill, both as an actor and as a performer, which he says are different things. So he defines the former as dramatization of a text, and the latter as the seduction of an audience. Do you see wisdom in that distinction? And what does it take to do both the dramatization of a text and the seduction of an audience?

Kevin Spacey

Those are two very interesting descriptions. I guess, when I think performer, I tend to think entertaining. I tend to think, comedy. I tend to think, winning over an audience. I tend to think, that there's something about that quality of wanting to have people enjoy themselves. And when you saddle that against what maybe he means as an actor, which is more dramatic, or more text-driven more ... look, I've always believed that my job, not every actor feels this way, but my job, the way that I've looked at it, is that my job is to serve the writing, and that if I serve the writing, I will in a sense serve myself, because I'll be in the right world, I'll be in the right context, I'll be in the right style. I'll have embraced what a director's ... it's not my painting, it's someone else's painting. I'm a series of colors in someone else's painting, and the barometer for me has always been, that when people stop me and talk to me about a character I've played, and reference their name as if they actually exist, that's when I feel like I've gotten close to doing my job.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, one of the challenges for me in this conversation is remembering that your name is Kevin, not Frank or John or any of these characters, because they live deeply in the psyche.

Kevin Spacey

To me, that's the greatest compliment, for me as an actor. I love being able to go ... when I think about performers who inspire me, and I remember when I was young and I was introduced to Spencer Tracy, Henry Fonda, Catherine Hepburn. I believed who they were. I knew nothing about them. They were just these extraordinary characters doing this extraordinary stuff. And then I think more ... recently contemporary, when I think of the work that Philip Seymour Hoffman did, and Heath Ledger, and people that, when I think about what they could be doing, what they could do, what they would've done had they stayed with us, I'm so excited when I go into a cinema, or I go into a play, and I completely am taken to some place that I believe exists, and characters that become real.

Lex Fridman

And those characters become lifelong companions. For me, they travel with you, and even if it's the darkest aspects of human nature, they're always there. I feel like I almost met them, and gotten to know them, and gotten to become friends with them, almost. Hannibal Lecter or Forrest Gump, I feel like I'm best friends with Forrest Gump. I know the guy, and I guess he's played by some guy named Tom, but Forrest Gump is the guy I'm friends with.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, yeah.

Lex Fridman

And I think that everybody feels like that when they're in the audience with great characters, they just become part of you in some way, the good, the bad, and the ugly of them.

Kevin Spacey

One of the things that I feel that I try to do in my work, is when I read something for the first time, when I read a script or play, and I am absolutely devastated by it, it is the most extraordinary, the most beautiful, the most life-affirming or terrifying, it's then a process weirdly of working backwards, because I want to work in such a way that that's the experience I give to the audience when they first see it, that they have the experience I had when I read it. I remember that there's been times in the creative process when something was pointed out to me, or something was ... I remember I was doing a play, and I was having this really tough time with one of the last scenes in the play, and I just couldn't figure it out. I was in rehearsal, and although we had a director in that play, I called another, a friend of mine, who was also director, and I had him come over and I said, "Look, this scene, I'm just having the toughest, I cannot seem to crack this scene." And so we read it through a couple

of times, and then this wonderful director named John Swanbeck, who would eventually direct me in a film called *The Big Kahuna*, but this is before that. He said to me the most incredible thing, he just said, "All right, what's the last line you have in this scene before you fall over and fall asleep?" And I said, "The last line is, 'That last drink, the old KO,'" and he went, "Okay, I want you to think about what that line actually means and then work backwards." And so he left, and I was left with this, "What? What does that mean? How am I supposed to?" And then a couple of days went by, a couple of days went by, and I thought, "Okay, so I see that. What does that line actually mean? Well, that last drink, the old KO. KO is Knockout, which is a boxing term. It's the only boxing term the writer uses in the play." And then I went back, and I realized my friend was so smart and so incredible to have said, "Ask a question you haven't thought of asking yet." I realized that the playwright wrote the last round, the eighth round between these two brothers, and it was a fight, physical as well as emotional. And when I brought that into the rehearsal room to the directors doing that play, he liked that idea. And we staged that scene as if it was the eighth round. The audience wouldn't have known that, but just what I loved about that was that somebody said to me, "Ask yourself a question you haven't asked yourself yet. What does that line mean? And then work backwards."

Lex Fridman

What is that? Like a catalyst for thinking deeply about what is magical about this play, this story, this narrative? That's what that is? Thinking backwards. That's what that does?

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. But also because it's this incredible, "Why didn't I think to ask that question myself?" That's what you have directors for. That's what you have ... so many places where ideas can come from, but that just illustrates that even though in my brain I go, "I always like to work backwards," I missed it in that one. And I'm very grateful to my friend for having pushed me into being able to realize what that meant, and -

Lex Fridman

To ask the interesting question. I like the poetry and the humility of, "I'm just a series of colors in someone else's painting." That was a good line. That said, you've talked about improvisation. You said that it's all about the ability to do it again and again and again, and yet never make it the same, and you also just said that you're trying to stay true to the text. So where's the room for the improvisation, that it's never the same?

Kevin Spacey

Well, there's two slightly different contexts, I think. One is, in the rehearsal room, improvisation could be a wonderful device. Sam Mendes, for example, will start, he'll start a scene and he does this wonderful thing. He brings rugs and he brings chairs and sofas in, and he says, "Well, let's put two chairs here and here. You guys, let's start in these chairs, far apart from each other. Let's see what happens with the scene if you're that far apart." And

so we'll do the scene that way. And then he goes, "Okay, let's bring a rug in, and let's bring these chairs much closer, and let's see what happens if the space between you is," and so then you try it that way. And then it's a little harder in Shakespeare to improv, but in any situation where you want to try and see where ... where could a scene go? Where would the scene go if I didn't make that choice? Where would the scene go? If I made this choice? Where would the scene go if I didn't say that, or I said something else? So that's how improv can be a valuable process to learn about limits and boundaries, and what's going on with a character, that somehow you discover in trying something that isn't on the page. Then there's the different thing, which is the trying to make it fresh and trying to make it new, and that is really a reference to theater. I'll put it to you this way. Anybody loves sports, so you go and you watch on a pitch, you watch on a tennis game, you watch basketball, you watch football. Yeah, the rules are the same, but it's a different game every time you're out on that court, or on that field. It's no different in theater. Yes, it's the same lines. Maybe even blocking is similar, but what's different is attack, intention, how you are growing in a role and watching your fellow actors grow in theirs, and how every night it's a new audience, and they're reacting differently, and you literally ... where you can go from week one of performances in a play to week 12 is extraordinary. And the difference between theater and film is that no matter how good someone might think you are in a movie, you'll never be any better. It's frozen. Whereas I can be better tomorrow night than I was tonight. I can be better in a week than I was tonight. It is a living, breathing, shifting, changing, growing thing, every single day.

Lex Fridman

But also in theater, there's no safety net. If you fuck it up, everybody gets to see you do that.

Kevin Spacey

And if you start giggling on stage, everyone gets to see you do that too, which I am very guilty of.

Lex Fridman

There is something of a seduction of an audience in theater, even more intense than there is when you're talking about film. I got a chance to watch the documentary, *Now in the Wings on a World Stage*, which is behind the scenes of ... you mentioned you teaming up with Sam Mendes in 2011 to stage *Richard III*, a play by William Shakespeare. I was also surprised to learn, you haven't really done Shakespeare, or at least you said that in the movie, but there's a lot of interesting behind-the-scenes stuff there. First of all, the camaraderie of everybody, the bond theater creates, especially when you're traveling. But another interesting thing you mentioned with the chairs of Sam Mendes, trying different stuff, it seemed like everybody was really open to trying stuff, embarrassing themselves, taking risks, all of that. I suppose that's part of acting in general, but theater especially, just take risks. It's okay to embarrass the shit out of yourself, including the director.

Kevin Spacey

And it's also because you become a family. It's unlike a movie, where I might have a scene with so-and-so on this day, and then another scene with them in a week and a half, and then that's the only scenes we have in the whole movie together. Every single day, when you show up in the rehearsal room, it's the whole company. You're all up for it every day. You're learning, you're growing, you're trying, and there is an incredible trust that happens. And I was, of course, fortunate that some of the things I learned and observed about being a part of that family, being included in that family, and being a part of creating that family, I was able to observe from people like Jack Lemmon, who led many companies that I was fortunate to work in and be a part of.

Lex Fridman

There's also a sad moment where at the end, everybody is really sad to say goodbye, because you do form a family and then it's over. I guess, somebody said that that's just part of theater. There's a kind of assume goodbye, and that this is it.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, and also there are some times when six months later, I'll wake up in the middle of the night, and I'll go, "That's how to play that scene."

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Kevin Spacey

"Oh, God, I just finally figured it out."

Lex Fridman

So maybe you could speak a little bit more to that. What's the difference between film acting and live theater acting?

Kevin Spacey

I don't really think there is any. I think there's just, you eventually learn about yourself on film. When I first did my first - When I first did my first episode of *The Equalizer*, it's just horrible. It's just so bad, but I didn't know about myself, I didn't. So slowly begin to learn about yourself, but I think good acting is good acting. And I think that if a camera's right here, you know that your front row is also your back row. You don't have to do so much. There is in theater, a particular kind of energy, almost like an athlete that you have to have vocally to be able to get up seven performances a week and never lose your voice and always be there and always be alive, and always be doing the best work you can that you just don't require in film. You don't have to have the same, it just doesn't require the same kind of stamina that doing a play does.

Lex Fridman

It just feels like also in theater, you have to become the character more intensely because you can't take a break, you can't take a bathroom break, you're on stage, this is you.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, but you have no idea what's going on on stage with the actors. I mean, I have literally laughed through speeches that I had to give because my fellow actors were putting carrots up their nose or broccoli in their ears or doing whatever they were doing to make me laugh.

Lex Fridman

So they're just having fun.

Kevin Spacey

They're having the time of their life. And by the way, Judi Dench is the worst giggler of all. I mean, they had to bring the curtain down on her and Maggie Smith because they were laughing so hard they could not continue the play.

Lex Fridman

So even when you're doing a dramatic monologue still, they're still fucking with you.

Kevin Spacey

There's stuff going...

Lex Fridman

Okay, that's great. That's good to know. You also said interesting line that improvisation helps you learn about the character. Can you explain that? So through maybe playing with the different ways of saying the words or the different ways to bring the words to life, you get to learn about yourself, about the character you're playing.

Kevin Spacey

It can be helpful, but improv is, I'm such a big believer in the writing and in serving the writing and doing the words the writer wrote that improv for me, unless you're just doing comedy, and I mean, I love improv in comedy. It's brilliant. So much fun to watch people just come up with something right there. But that's where you're looking for laughs and you're specifically in a little scene that's being created. But I think improv has had value, but I have not experienced it as much in doing plays as I have sometimes in doing film where you'll start off rehearsing and a director may say, "Let's just go off book and see what happens." And I've had moments in film where someone went off book and it was terrifying. There was a scene I had in Glengarry Glen Ross where the character I play has fucked something up, has just screwed something up. And Pacino is livid. And so we had the scene where Al is walking like this and the camera is moving with him, and he is shooing me a new asshole. And in the middle of the take, Al starts talking about me. "Oh, Kevin, you don't think we know

how you got this job? You don't think we know whose dick you've been sucking on to get this part in this movie?" And I'm now, I'm literally like, I don't know what the hell is happening, but I am reacting. We got to the end of that take. Al walked up to me and he went, "Oh, that was so good. Oh my God, that was so good. Just so you know the sound, I asked them not to record, so you have no dialogue. So it's just me. Oh, that was so good. You look like a car wreck." And I was like, "Yeah." And it was actually an incredibly generous thing that he gave me so that I would react.

Lex Fridman

Oh wow. Did they use that shot because you were in the shot -

Kevin Spacey

That's the take. It was my closeup.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Kevin Spacey

And yeah, that's the take.

Lex Fridman

That was an intense interaction. I mean, what was it like, if we can just linger on that, just that intense scene with Al Pacino.

Kevin Spacey

Well, he's the reason I got the movie. A lot of people might think because Jack was in the film that he had something to do with it. But actually I was doing a play called Lost in Yonkers on Broadway, and we had the same dresser who worked with him, a girl named Laura, who was wonderful, Laura Beatty, and she told Al that he should come and see this play because she wanted to see me in this play. I was playing this gangster, it was a fun, fun, fun part. So I didn't know Pacino came on some night and saw this play. And then three days later I got a call to come in and audition for this Glengarry Glen Ross, which of course I knew as a play David Mamet's play. And then I auditioned. Jamie Foley was the director who would eventually direct a bunch of House of Cards, wonderful, wonderful guy. And I got the part. Well, I didn't quite get the part they were going to bring together the actors that they thought they were going to give the parts to on a Saturday at Al's office. And they asked me if I would come and do a read through. And I said, "Who's going to be there?" And they said, "Well, so and so and so and so," and Jack Lemmon is flying in. And I said, "Don't tell Mr. Lemmon that I'm doing the read through. Is that possible?" They were like, "Sure." So I'll never forget this. Jack was sitting in a chair and Pacino's office doing the New York Times crossword puzzle as he did every day. And I walked in the door and he went, "Oh, Jesus Christ, is it possible you could get a job without me? Jesus Christ, I'm so tired of holding up

your end of it. Oh my God, Jesus." So I got the job because of Pacino, and it was really one of the first major roles that I ever had in a film to be working with that group-

Lex Fridman

Yeah, that's one of the greatest ensemble casts ever. We got Al Pacino, Jack Lemmon, Alec Baldwin, Alan Arkin, Ed Harris, you, Jonathan Pryce. It's just incredible. And I have to say, I mean maybe you can comment. You've talked about how much of a mentor and a friend Jack Lemmon has been, that's one of his greatest performances ever.

Kevin Spacey

Ever.

Lex Fridman

You have a scene at the end of the movie with him that was really powerful, firing on all cylinders. You're playing the disdain to perfection and he's playing desperation to perfection. What a scene. What was that like just at the top of your game, the two of you?

Kevin Spacey

Well, by that time we had done *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in the theater, we'd done a mini series called *The Murder of Mary Phagan* on NBC. We'd done a film called *Dad* that Gary David Goldberg directed with Ted Danson. So this was the fourth time we were working together and we knew each other. He'd become my father figure. And I don't know if you know that I originally met Jack Lemmon when I was very, very young. He was doing a production at the Mark Taper Forum of a Sean O'Casey play called *Juno and the Paycock* with Walter Matthau and Maureen Stapleton. And on a Saturday in December of 1974, my junior high school drama class went to a workshop. It was called *How to Audition*. And we did this workshop, many schools in Southern California where part of this Drama Teacher's Association. So we got these incredible experiences of being able to go see professional productions and be involved in these workshops or festivals. So I had to get up and do a monologue in front of Mr. Lemmon when I was 13 years old. And he walked up to me at the end of that and he put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "That was just actually terrific." He said, "No, everything I've been talking about you just did. What's your name?" I said, "Kevin." He said, "Well, let me tell you something. When you get finished with high school, as I'm sure you're going to go on and do theater, you should go to New York and you should study to be an actor, because this is what you're meant to do with your life." And he was like an idol. And 12 years later, I read in the *New York Times* that he was coming to Broadway to do this production of *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, a year and some months after I read this article and I was like, "I'm going to play Jamie in that production." And I then with a lot of opposition because the casting director didn't want to see me. They said that the director, Jonathan Miller wanted movie actors to play the two sons. And ultimately, I found out that Jonathan Miller, the director, was coming to New York to do a series of lectures at Alice Tully Hall. And I went to try to figure out how I could maybe meet him. And I was sitting in

that theater listening to this incredible lecture he was doing. And sitting next to me was an elderly woman. I mean elderly, 80 something and she was asleep, but sticking out of her handbag, which was on the floor, was a invitation to a cocktail reception in honor of Dr. Jonathan Miller. And so I thought, "She's tired. She's probably going to go home." So I took that and walked into this cocktail reception and ultimately went over to Dr. Miller who was incredibly kind and said, "Sit down. I'm always very curious what brings young people to my lectures." And I said to him, "Eugene O'Neill brought me here." And he was like, "What? I've always wanted to meet him. Where is he?" And I told him that I've been trying for seven months to get an audition for A Long Day's Journey, and that his American cast directors were telling my agents that he wanted big American movie stars. And at that moment, he turned and he saw one of those casting directors who was there that night, because I knew he was going to be in New York starting auditions that week. And she was staring daggers at me and he just got it. And he said, "Does someone have a pen?" And he took a little paper, started writing. He said, "Listen, Kevin, there are many situations in which casting directors have a lot of say and a lot of power and a lot of leverage. And then there are other situations where they just take director's messages. And on this one, they're taking my messages, this is where I'm staying, make sure your people get to me. We start auditions on Thursday." And on Thursday I had an opportunity to come in and audition for this play that I'd been working on and preparing. And at the end of it, I did four scenes. At the end of it, he said to me that unless someone else came in and blew him against the wall, I had just done as far as he was concerned, I pretty much had the part, but I couldn't tell my agents that yet because I had to come back and read with Mr. Lemmon. And so three months later, in August of 1985, I found myself in a room with Jack Lemmon again at 890 Broadway, which is where they rehearse a lot of the Broadway plays. And we did four scenes together, and I was toppling over him. I was pushing him, I was relentless. And I'll never forget, at the end of that, Lemmon came over to me, he put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "That was, your touch was terrific, I never thought we'd find the rotten kid, but he's it. Jesus Christ. What the hell was that?" And I ended up spending the next year of my life with that man.

Lex Fridman

So it turns out he was right.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

This world works in mysterious ways. It also speaks to the fact of the power of somebody you look up to giving words of encouragement, because those can just reverberate through your whole life and just make the path clear.

Kevin Spacey

I've always, we used to joke that if every contract came with a Jack Lemmon clause, it would be a more beautiful world.

Lex Fridman

Beautifully said, Jack Lemmon is one of the greatest actors ever. What do you think makes him so damn good?

Kevin Spacey

Wow. I think he truly set out in his life to accomplish what his father said to him on his deathbed. His father was dying. His father was, by the way, called the Donut King in Boston, and not in the entertainment business at all. He was literally owned a donut company. And when he was passing away, Jack said, "The last thing my father said to me was, go out there and spread a little sunshine." And I truly think that's what Jack loved to do. I remember this, and I don't know if this will answer your question, but I think it's revealing about what he's able to do and what he was able to do and how that ultimately influenced what I was able to do. Sam Mendes had never directed a film before American Beauty. So what he did was he took the best elements of theater and applied them to the process. So we rehearsed it like a play in a sound stage where everything was laid out, like it would be in a play and this couch will be here. And he'd sent me a couple of tapes. He'd sent me two cassette tapes, one that he'd like to call pre-Lester before he begins to move in a new direction. And then post-Lester, and they just were different songs. And then he said to me one day, and I think always thought this was brilliant of Sam to use Lemmon knowing what Lemmon meant to me. He said, "When was the last time you watched The Apartment?" And I said, "I don't know. I mean, I love that movie so much." He goes, "I want you to watch it again and then let's talk." So I went and I watched the movie again, and we sat down and Sam said, "What Lemmon does in that film is incredible because there is never a moment in the movie where we see him change. He just evolves and he becomes the man he becomes because of the experiences that he has through the course of the film. But there's this remarkable consistency in who he becomes, and that's what I need you to do as Lester, I don't want the audience to ever see him change. I want him to evolve. And so we did some, I mean, first of all, it was just a great direction. And then second of all, we did some things that people don't know we did to aid that gradual shift of that man's character. First of all, I had to be in the best shape from the beginning of the movie. We didn't shoot in sequence. So I was in this crazy shape. I had this wonderful trainer named Mike Torsha, who just was incredible. But so what we did was, in order to then show this gradual shift was I had three different hair pieces. I had three different kinds of costumes of different colors and sizes, and I had different makeup. So in the beginning, I was wearing a kind of drab, dull, slightly uninspired hair piece, and my makeup was kind of gray and boring, and I was a little bit, there were times when I was too much like this. And Sam would go, "Kevin, you look like Walter Matthau. Would you please stand up a little bit?" We're sort of midway through at this point. And then at a certain point, the wig changed and it had little highlights in it, a little more color, a little

more, the makeup became a little, the suits got a little tighter. And then finally a third wig that was golden highlights and sunshine and rosy cheeks and tight fit. And these are what we call theatrical tricks. This is how an audience doesn't even know it's happening, but it is this gradual. And I just always felt that that was such a brilliant way because he knew what I felt about Jack. And when you watch *The Apartment*, it is extraordinary that he doesn't ever change. He just... So I'm, and in fact, I thanked Jack when I won the Oscar and I did my thank you speech, and I walked off stage, and I remember I had to sit down for a moment because I didn't want to go to the press room because I wanted to see if Sam was going to win. And so I was waiting and my phone rang and it was Lemmon. He said, "You're a son of a bitch." I said, "What?" He goes, "First of all, congratulations and thanks for thanking me, because God knows you couldn't have done it without me." He said, "Second of all," he said, "Do you know how long it took me to win from supporting actor? I won for Mr. Roberts, and it took me like 10, 12 years to win Oscar. You did it in four, you son of a bitch."

Lex Fridman

Yeah. *The Apartment* was, I mean, it's widely considered one of the greatest movies ever. People sometimes refer to it as the comedy, which is an interesting kind of classification. I suppose that's a lesson about comedy, that the best comedy is the one that's basically a tragedy.

Kevin Spacey

Well, I mean, some people think *Clockwork Orange* is a comedy. And I'm not saying there aren't some good laughs in *Clockwork Orange*, but yeah, it's...

Lex Fridman

I mean, yeah. What's that line between comedy and tragedy for you?

Kevin Spacey

Well, if it's a line, it's a line I cross all the time because I've tried always to find the humor, unexpected sometimes, maybe inappropriate sometimes, maybe shocking. But I've tried in I think almost every dramatic role I've had to have a sense of humor and to be able to bring that along with everything else that is serious, because frankly, that's how we deal with stuff in life.

Lex Fridman

I think Sam Mendes actually said in the now documentary, something like, "With great theater, with great stories, you find humor on the journey to the heart of darkness," something like this very poetic. But it's true.

Kevin Spacey

I'm sorry. I can't be that poetic. I'm very sorry.

Lex Fridman

But it's true. I mean, the people I've interacted in this world have been to a war zone, and the ones who have lost the most and have suffered the most are usually the ones who are able to make jokes the quickest. And the jokes are often dark and absurd and cross every single line. No political correctness, all of that.

Kevin Spacey

Sure. Well, I mean, it's like the great Mary Tyler Moore Show where they can't stop giggling at the clown's funeral. I mean, it's just one of the great episodes ever. Giggling at a funeral is as bad as farting at a funeral. And I'm sure that there's some people who have done both.

Lex Fridman

Oh, man. So you mentioned American Beauty and the idea of not changing, but evolving. That's really interesting because that movie is about finding yourself. It's a philosophically profound movie. It's about various characters in their own ways, finding their own identity in a world where maybe a system, a materialistic system that wants you to be like everyone else. And so, I mean, Lester really transforms himself throughout the movie. And you're saying the challenge there is to still be the same human being fundamentally.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, and I also think that the film was powerful because you had three very honest and genuine portrayal of young people, and then you had Lester behaving like a young person doing things that were unexpected. And I think that the honesty with which it dealt with those issues that those teenagers were going through, and the honesty with which it dealt with what Lester was going through, I think are some of the reasons why the film had the response that it did from so many people. I mean, I used to get stopped and someone would say to me, "When I first saw American Beauty, I was married, and the second time I saw it, I wasn't." I was like, "Well, we weren't trying to increase the divorce rate. It wasn't our intention." But it is interesting how so many people have those kinds of crazy fantasies. And what I admired so much about who Lester was as a person, why I wanted to play him is because in the end, he makes the right decision.

Lex Fridman

I think a lot of people live lives of quiet desperation in a job they don't like in a marriage they're unhappy in. And to see somebody living that life and then saying, "Fuck it," in every way possible, and not just in a cynical way, but in a way that opens Lester up to see the beauty in the world. That's the beauty in American Beauty.

Kevin Spacey

Well, and you may have to blackmail your boss to get there.

Lex Fridman

And in that, there's a bunch of humor also in the anger, in the absurdity of taking a stand against the conformity of life. There's this humor, and I read somewhere that the scene, the dinner scene, which is kind of play-like where Lester slams the plate against the wall was improvised by you, the slamming of the plate against the wall.

Kevin Spacey

No.

Lex Fridman

No?

Kevin Spacey

Absolutely.

Lex Fridman

The internet lies again.

Kevin Spacey

Absolutely written and directed. Yeah, can't take credit for that.

Lex Fridman

The plate. Okay. Well, that was a genius interaction there. There's something about the dinner table and losing your shit at the dinner table, having a fight and losing your shit at the dinner table. Where else? Yellowstone was another situation where it's a family at the dinner table, and then one of them says, "Fuck it, I'm not eating this anymore and I'm going to create a scene." It's a beautiful kind of environment for dramatic scenes.

Kevin Spacey

Or Nicholson in The Shining. I mean, there's some family scenes gone awry in that movie.

Lex Fridman

The contrast between you and Annette Bening in that scene creates the genius of that scene. So how much of acting is the dance between two actors?

Kevin Spacey

Well, with Annette, I just adored working with her. And we were the two actors that Sam wanted from the very beginning, much against the will of the higher-ups who wanted other actors to play those roles. But I've known Annette since we did a screen test together from Miloš Forman for a film he did of the Les Leves En Dangerous movie. It was a different film from that one, but it was the same story. And I've always thought she is just remarkable. And I think that the work she did in that film, the relationship that we were able to build, for me,

the saddest part of that success was that she didn't win the Oscar, and I felt she should have.

Lex Fridman

What kind of interesting direction did you get from Sam Mendes in how you approached playing Lester and how to take on the different scenes? There's a lot of just brilliant scenes in that movie.

Kevin Spacey

Well, I'll share with you a story that most people don't know, which is our first two days of shooting were in Smiley's, the place where I get a job in a fast food place.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's a burger joint. Yeah.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. And I guess it was maybe the third day or the fourth day of shooting. We'd now done that. And I said to Sam, "So how are the dailies? How do they look?" He goes, "Which ones?" I said, "Well, the first Smiley's." He goes, "Oh, they're shit." And I went, "Yeah, no, how were they?" He goes, "No, they're shit. I hate them. I hate everything about them. I hate the costumes. I hate the location. I hate that you're inside. I hate the way you acted. I hate everything but the script. So I've gone back to the studio and asked them if we can re-shoot the first two days." And I was like, "Sam, this is your very first movie. You're going back to Steven Spielberg and saying, I need to re-shoot the first two days entirely?" And he went, "Yeah." And that's exactly what we did. A couple of weeks later, they decided that it was now a drive-through, because Annette and Peter Geller used to come into the place and ordered from the counter. Now, Sam had decided it has to be a drive-through. You have to be in the window of the drive-through, change the costumes. And were shot those first two days. And Sam said it was actually a moment of incredible confidence because he said the worst thing that could possibly have happened in my first two days. And after that, I was like, "I know what I'm doing. And I knew I had to re-shoot it, and it was absolutely right."

Lex Fridman

And I guess that's what a great director must do, is have the guts in that moment to re-shoot everything. That's a pretty gutsy move.

Kevin Spacey

Two other little things to share with you about Sam, about the way he is, you wouldn't know it, but the original script opened and closed with a trial. Ricky was accused of Lester's murder, and the movie was bookended by this trial.

Lex Fridman

It's a very different movie.

Kevin Spacey

Which they shot the entire trial for weeks. Okay.

Lex Fridman

Wow.

Kevin Spacey

And I used to fly in my dreams, those opening shots over the neighborhood? I used to come into those shots in my bathrobe flying, and then when I hit the ground and the newspaper was thrown at me by the newspaper guy and I caught it, the alarm would go off, and I wake up in bed. I spent five days being hung by wires and filming these sequences of flying through my dreams. And Sam said to me, "Yeah, the flying sequences are all gone and the trial is gone." And I was like, "What are you talking about?" And here's my other little favorite story about Sam in that when we were shooting in The Valley, one of those places I flew, this was an indoor set. Sam said to me in the morning, "Hey, at lunch, I just want to record a guide track of all the dialogue, all of your narration, because they just need it in editing as a guide." And I said, "Sure." So I remember we came outside of this hallway where I had a dressing room in this little studio we were in, and Sam had a cassette tape recorder and a little microphone, and we put it on the floor and he pushed record. And I read the entire narration, and I never did it again. That's the narration in the movie, because Sam said when he listened to it, I wasn't trying to do anything. He said, "You had no idea where these things were going, where they were going to be placed, what they were going to mean. You just read it so innocently, so purely, so directly that I knew if I brought you into a studio and put headphones on you and had you do it again, it would change the ease with which you'd done it." And so they just fixed all of the problems that they had with this little cassette, and that is the way I did it. And the only time I did it was in this little hallway.

Lex Fridman

And once again, a great performance lies in being doing less.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. Yeah.

Lex Fridman

The innocence and the purity of less-

Kevin Spacey

He knew I would've come into the studio and fucked it up.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. What do you think about the notion of beauty that permeates American Beauty? What do you think that theme is with the roses, with the rose petals, the characters that are living this mundane existence, slowly opening their eyes up to what is beautiful in life?

Kevin Spacey

See, it's funny. I don't think of the roses, and I don't think of her body and the poster, and I don't think of those things as the beauty. I think of the bag. I think that there are things we miss that are right in front of us that are truly beautiful.

Lex Fridman

The little things. The simple things.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, and in fact, I'll even tell you something that I always thought was so incredible. When we shot the scenes in the office where Lester worked, the job he hated, there was a bulletin board behind me on a wall, and someone who was watching a cut or early dailies who was in the marketing department saw that someone had cut out a little piece of paper and stuck it and it said, "Look closer." And they presented that to Sam as the idea of what that could go on the poster, the idea of looking closer was such a brilliant idea, but I mean, it wasn't like, wasn't in the script. It was just on a wall behind me, and someone happened to zoom in on it and see it and thought, "That's what this movie's about. This movie's about taking the time to look closer." And I think that in itself is just beautiful. I think that in itself is just beautiful.

Lex Fridman

Mortality also permeates the film. It starts with acknowledging that death is on the way, that Lester's time is finite. You ever think about your own death?

Kevin Spacey

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

Scared of it?

Kevin Spacey

When I was at my lowest point, yes, it scared me.

Lex Fridman

What does that fear look like? What's the nature of the fear? What are you afraid of?

Kevin Spacey

That there's no way out. That there's no answer. That nothing makes sense.

Lex Fridman

See, the interesting thing about Lester is facing the same fear, he seemed to be somehow liberated and accepted everything, and then saw the beauty of it.

Kevin Spacey

Because he got there. He was given the opportunity to reinvent himself and to try things he'd never tried, to ask questions he'd never asked. To trust his instincts and to become the best version of himself he could become. And so Dick Van Dyke, who has become an extraordinary friend of mine, Dick is 98 years old, and he says, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would've taken better care of myself." When I spend time with him, I'm just moved by every day. He gets up and he goes, "It's a good day. I woke up." And I learn a lot... I have a different feeling about death now than I did seven years ago, and I am on the path to being able to be in a place where I've resolved the things I needed to resolve, and I won't probably get to all of it in my lifetime, but I certainly would like to be at a place where if I were to drop dead tomorrow, it would've been an amazing life.

Lex Fridman

So Lester got there. It sounds like Dick Van Dyke got there. You're trying to get there.

Kevin Spacey

Sure.

Lex Fridman

You said you feared death at your lowest point. What was the lowest point?

Kevin Spacey

It was November 1st, 2017 and then Thanksgiving Day of that same year.

Lex Fridman

So let's talk about it. Let's talk about this dark time. Let's talk about the sexual allegations against you that led to you being canceled by, well, the entire world for the last seven years. I would like to personally understand the sins, the bad things you did, and the bad things you didn't do. So I also should say that the thing I hope to do here is to give respect to due process, innocent until proven guilty, that the mass hysteria machine of the internet and click bait journalism doesn't do. So here's what I understand, there were criminal and civil trials brought against you, including the one that started it all when Anthony Rapp sued you for \$40 million. In these trials, you were acquitted, found not guilty and not liable. Is that right?

Kevin Spacey

Yes.

Lex Fridman

I think that's really important, again, in terms of due process. I read a lot and I watched a lot in preparation for this, on this point, including of course the recently detailed interviews you did with Dan Wooten and then Allison Pearson of The Telegraph, and those were all focused on this topic and they go in detail where you respond in detail to many of the allegations. If people are interested in the details, they can listen to those. So based on that, and everything I looked at, as I understand, you never prevented anyone from leaving if they wanted to, sort of in the sexual context, for example, by blocking the door. Is that right?

Kevin Spacey

That's correct, yeah.

Lex Fridman

You always respected the explicit, "No" from people, again in the sexual context. Is that right?

Kevin Spacey

That is correct.

Lex Fridman

You've never done anything sexual with an underage person, right?

Kevin Spacey

Never.

Lex Fridman

And also, as it's sometimes done in Hollywood, let me ask this. You've never explicitly offered to exchange sexual favors for career advancement, correct?

Kevin Spacey

Correct.

Lex Fridman

In terms of bad behavior, what did you do? What was the worst of it? And how often did you do it?

Kevin Spacey

I have heard, and now quite often, that everybody has a Kevin Spacey story, and what that tells me is that I hit on a lot of guys.

Lex Fridman

How often did you cross the line and what does that mean to you?

Kevin Spacey

I did a lot of horsing around. I did a lot of things that at the time I thought were sort of playful and fun, and I have learned since were not. And I have had to recognize that I crossed some boundaries and I did some things that were wrong and I made some mistakes, and that's in my past. I mean, I've been working so hard over these last seven years to have the conversations I needed to have, to listen to people, to understand things from a different perspective than the one that I had and to say, "I will never behave that way again for the rest of my life."

Lex Fridman

Just to clarify, I think you are often too pushy with the flirting and that manifests itself in multiple ways. Just to make clear, you never prevented anyone from leaving if they wanted to. You always took the explicit, "No" from people as an answer. "No, stop." You took that for the answer. You've never done anything sexual with an underage person and you've never explicitly offered to exchange sexual favors for career advancement. These are some of the accusations that have been made and in the court of law multiple times have been shown not to be true.

Kevin Spacey

But I have had a sexual life and I've fallen in love and I've been so admiring of people that I... I'm so romantic. I'm such a romantic person that there's this whole side of me that hasn't been talked about, isn't being discussed, but that's who I know. That's the person I know. It's been very upsetting to hear that some people have said, I mean, I don't have a violent bone in my body, but to hear people describe things as having been very aggressive is incredibly difficult for me. And I'm deeply sorry that I ever offended anyone or hurt anyone in any way. It is crushing to me, and I have to work very hard to show and to prove that I have learned. I got the memo and I will never, ever, ever behave in those ways again.

Lex Fridman

From everything I've seen in public interactions with you people love you, colleagues love you, coworkers love you. There's a flirtatiousness. Another word for that is chemistry. There's a chemistry between the people you work with.

Kevin Spacey

And by the way, not to take anything away from my accountability for things I did where I got it wrong, I crossed the line, I pushed some boundaries. I accept all of that, but I live in an industry in which flirtation, attraction, people meeting in the workspace and ending up marrying each other and having children. And so it is a space and a place where these notions of family, these notions of attraction, these notions of... It's always complicated if

you meet someone in the workspace and find yourselves attracted to each other. You have to be mindful of that, and you have to be very mindful that you don't ever want anyone to feel that their job is in jeopardy or you would punish them in some way if they no longer wanted to be with you. So those are important things to just acknowledge.

Lex Fridman

Another complexity to this, as I've seen, is that there's just a huge number of actors that look up to you, a huge number of people in the industry that look up to you and love you. I've seen just from this documentary, just a lot of people just love being around you, learning from you what it means to create great theater, great film, great stories. And so that adds to the complexity. I wouldn't say it's a power dynamic like a boss-employee relationship. It's an admiration dynamic that is easy to miss and easy to take advantage of. Is that something you understand?

Kevin Spacey

Yes. And I also understand that there are people who met me and spent a very brief period of time with me, but presumed I was now going to be their mentor and then behaved in a way that I was unaware of, that they were either participating or flirting along or encouraging me without me having any idea that at the end of the day they were expecting something. So these are about relationships. These are about two people. These are about people making decisions, people making choices, and I accept my accountability in that. But there are a number of things that I've been accused of that just simply did not happen, and I can't say, and I don't think it would be right for me to say, "Well, everything that's ever been I've been accused of is true," because we've now proved that it isn't and it wasn't. But I'm perfectly willing to accept that I had behaviors that were wrong and that I shouldn't have done, and I am regretful for.

Lex Fridman

I think that also speaks to a dark side of fame. The sense I got is that there are some people, potentially a lot of people, trying to make friends with you in order to get roles, in order to advance their career. So not you using them, but they trying to use you. What's that like? How do you know if somebody likes you for you, for Kevin, or likes you for, you said you're a romantic, you see a person and you're like, "I like this person," and they seem to like you. How do you know if they like you for you?

Kevin Spacey

Well, to some degree I would say that I have been able to trust my instincts on that and that I've most of the time been right. But obviously in the last number of years, not just with people who've accused me, but just also people in my own industry to realize that, "Oh, I thought we had a friendship, but I guess that was about an inch thick and not what I thought it was." But look, one shouldn't be surprised by that. I have to also say, you said a little while ago that the world had canceled me, and I have to disagree with you. I have to disagree

because for seven years I've been stopped by people sometimes every day, sometimes multiple, multiple times a day. And the conversations that I have with people, the generosity that they share, the kindness that they show and how much they want to know when I'm getting back to work tells me that while there may be a very loud minority, there is a quieter majority.

Lex Fridman

In the industry have you been betrayed in life? And how do you not let that make you cynical?

Kevin Spacey

I think betrayal is a really interesting word, but I think if you're going to be betrayed, it has to be by those who truly know you. And I can tell you that I have not been betrayed.

Lex Fridman

That's a beautiful way to put it. For the times you crossed the line, do you take responsibility for the wrongs you've done?

Kevin Spacey

Yes.

Lex Fridman

Are you sorry to the people you may have hurt emotionally?

Kevin Spacey

Yes. And I have spoken to many of them.

Lex Fridman

Privately?

Kevin Spacey

Privately, which is where amends should be made.

Lex Fridman

Were they able to start finding forgiveness?

Kevin Spacey

Absolutely. Some of the most moving conversations that I have had when I was determined to take accountability have been those people have said, "Thank you so much and I think I can forgive you now."

Lex Fridman

If you got a chance to talk to the Kevin Spacey of 30 to 40 years ago, what would you tell him to change about his ways and how would you do it? What would be your approach? Would you be nice about it? Would you smack him around?

Kevin Spacey

I think if I were to go back that far, I probably would've found a way to not have been as concerned about revealing my sexuality and hiding that for as long as I did. I think that had a lot to do with confusion and a lot to do with mistrust, both my own and other people's.

Lex Fridman

For most of your life, you were not open with the public about being gay. What was the hardest thing about keeping who you love a secret?

Kevin Spacey

That I didn't find the right moment of celebration to be able to share that.

Lex Fridman

That must be a thing that weighs on you, to not be able to fully celebrate your love.

Kevin Spacey

Ian McKellen said, after 40, he was 49 when he came out. 27 years he'd been a professional actor being in the closet. And he said he felt it was like he was living a part of his life not being truthful, and that he felt that it affected his work when he did come out because he no longer felt like he had anything to hide. And I absolutely believe that that is what my experience has been and will continue to be. I'm sorry about the way I came out, but Evan and I had already had the conversation. I had already decided to come out, and so it wasn't like, "Oh, I was forced to come out," but it was something I decided to do. And by the way, much against Evan's advice, I came out in that statement and he wishes that I had not done so.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, you made a statement when the initial accusation happened that could be up there as one of the worst social media posts of all time. It's like two for one.

Kevin Spacey

Don't hold back now. Come on. Really tell me how you feel.

Lex Fridman

The first part, you kind of implicitly admitted to doing something bad, which was later shown and proved completely to never have happened. It was a lie.

Kevin Spacey

No, I basically said that I didn't remember what this person was, what Anthony Rapp was claiming from 31 years before. I had no memory of it, but if it had happened, if this embarrassing moment had happened, then I would owe him an apology. That was what I said, and then I said, "And while I'm at it, I think I'll come out." And it was definitely not the greatest coming out party ever. I will admit that.

Lex Fridman

Well, from the public perception, the first part of that. So first of all, the second part is a horrible way to come out. Yes, we all agree. And then the first part from the public viewpoint, they see guilt in that which also is tragic because at least that particular accusation, and it's a very dramatic one, it's a \$40 million lawsuit, it's a big deal, and an underage person, was shown to be false.

Kevin Spacey

Well, but you're melding two things together. The lawsuit didn't happen until 2020 and then it didn't get to court until 2022. We're back in 2017 when it was just an accusation he made in BuzzFeed Magazine. Look, I was backed into a corner. When someone says, "You were so drunk, you won't remember this thing happened," what's your first instinct? Is your first instinct to say, "This person's a liar"? Or is your first instinct to go, "What? I was what? 31 years at a party I don't even remember throwing?" Obviously a lot of investigation happened after that in which we were then able to prove in that court case that it had never occurred. But at the moment, I was sort of being told I couldn't push back. You have to be kind. You can't... I think even to me now, none of it sounds right. But I don't know that I could have said anything that would've been satisfactory to anybody.

Lex Fridman

Okay. Well, that is a almost convincing explanation for the worst social media post of all time and I almost accept it.

Kevin Spacey

I'm really surprised. I guess you haven't read a lot of media posts, because I can't believe that's the actual worst one.

Lex Fridman

It's beautifully bad just how bad that social media post is. As you mentioned, Liam Neeson and Sharon Stone came out in support of you recently, speaking to your character. A lot of people who know you, and some of whom I know who have worked with you privately, show support for you, but are afraid to speak up publicly. What do you make of that? I mean, to me personally, this just makes me sad because perhaps that's the nature of the industry that it's difficult to do that, but I just wish there would be a little bit more courage in the world.

Kevin Spacey

I don't think it's about the industry. I think it's about our time. I think it's the time that we're in and people are very afraid.

Lex Fridman

Just afraid. Just a general fear -

Kevin Spacey

No. They're literally afraid that they're going to get canceled if they stand up for someone who has been. And I think it's, I mean, we've seen this many times in history. This is not the first time it's happened.

Lex Fridman

So as you said, your darkest moment in 2017, when all of this went down, one of the things that happened is you were no longer on House of Cards for the last season. Let's go to the beginning of that show, one of the greatest TV series of all time, a dark fascinating character in Frank Underwood, a ruthless, cunning, borderline evil politician. What are some interesting aspects to the process you went through for becoming Frank Underwood? Maybe Richard III. There's a lot of elements there in your performance that maybe inspired that character. Is that fair or no?

Kevin Spacey

I'll give you one very interesting, specific education that I got in doing Richard III and closing that show at BAM in March of 2012, and two months later started shooting House of Cards. There is something called direct address. In Shakespeare you have Hamlet, talks to the world. But when Shakespeare wrote Richard III, it was the first time he created something called direct address, which is the character looks directly at each person close by. It is a different kind of sharing than when a character's doing a monologue. Opening of Henry IV. And while there are some people who believe that direct address was invented in Ferris Bueller, it wasn't. It was Shakespeare who invented it. So I had just had this experience every night in theaters all over the world, seeing how people reacted to becoming a co-conspirator, because that's what it's about. And what I tried to do and what Fincher really helped me with in those beginning days was how to look in that camera and imagine I was talking to my best friend.

Lex Fridman

Because you're sharing the secret of the darkness of how this game is played with that best friend.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. And there were many times when I suppose the writers thought I was crazy, where I would see a script and I would see this moment where this direct address would happen, I'd

say all this stuff, and I'd go, when we'd do a read through of the script, I go, "I don't think I need to say any of that." And they were like, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, the audience knows all of that. All I have to do is look. They know exactly what's going on. I don't need to say a thing." So I was often cutting dialogue because it just wasn't needed because that relationship between... And I'd learned, that I'd experienced doing Richard III, was so extraordinary where I literally watched people, they were like, "Oh, I'm in on the thing and this is, oh, so awesome." And then suddenly, "Wait, he killed the kids. He killed those kids in the Tower. Oh, maybe it's not..." And you literally would watch them start to reverse their, having had such a great time with Richard III in the first three acts, I thought, "This is going to happen in this show if this intimacy can actually land." And I think there was some brilliant writing, and we always attempted to do it in one take. No matter how long something was, we would try to do it in one take, the direct addresses, so there was never a cut. When we went out on locations, we started to then find ways to cut it and make it slightly broader. But-

Lex Fridman

That's interesting because you're doing a bunch of, with both Richard III and Frank Underwood, a bunch of dark, borderline evil things. And then I guess the idea is you're going to be losing the audience and then you win them back over with the addresses.

Kevin Spacey

That's the remarkable thing, is against their instincts and their better sense of what they should and should not do, they still rallied around Frank Underwood.

Lex Fridman

And I saw even with the documentary, the glimmers of that with Richard III. I mean, you were seducing the audience. There was such a chemistry between you and the audience on stage.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. Well, in that production that's absolutely true. Also, Richard is one of the weirder... Weird. I mean by weird, was an early play of Shakespeare's. And he's basically never off stage. I mean, I remember when we did the first run through, I had no idea what the next scene was. Every time I came off stage, I had no idea what was next. They literally had to drag me from one place to another scene. "Now it's the scene with Hastings," but I now understand these wonderful stories that you can read in old books about Shakespeare's time, that actors grabbed Shakespeare around the cuff and punched him and threw him against a wall and said, "You ever write a part like this again? I'm going to kill you." And that's why in later plays, he started to have a pageant happened, and then a wedding happened and the main character was off stage resting because the actor had said, "You can't do this to us. There's no breaks." And it's true, there's very few breaks in Richard III. You're on stage most of the time.

Lex Fridman

The comedic aspect of Richard III and Frank Underwood, is that a component that helps bring out the full complexity of the darkness that is Frank Underwood.

Kevin Spacey

I certainly can't take credit for Shakespeare having written something that is funny or Beau Willimon and his team to have written something that is funny. It's fundamentally funny. It just depends on how I interpret it. That's one of the great things why we love in a year's time, we can see five different Hamlets. We can see four Richard IIIs, we can see two Richard IIs. That's part of the thrill, that we don't own these parts. We borrow them and we interpret them. And what Ian McKellen might do with a role could be completely different from what I might do because of the way we perceive it. And also very often in terms of going for humor, it's very often a director will say, "Why don't you say that with a bit of irony? Why don't you try that with a bit of blah, blah, blah?"

Lex Fridman

Yeah. There's often a wry smile. The line that jumps to me, when you're talking about Claire in the early, maybe first episode even, "I love that woman more than sharks love blood." I guess there's a lot of ways to read that line, but the way you read it had both humor, had legitimate affection, had all the ambition and narcissism, all of that mixed up together.

Kevin Spacey

I also think that one should just acknowledge that where he was from. There is something that happens when you do an accent. And in fact, sometimes when I would say to Beau or one of the other writers, "This is really good and I love the idea, but it rhythmically doesn't help. I need at least two more words to rhythmically make this work in his accent because it just doesn't scan." And that's not iambic pentameter. I'm not talking about that. There is that as well in Shakespeare. But there was sometimes when it's too many lines, it's not enough lines, in order for me to make this work for the way he speaks, the way he sounds and what that accent does to emphasis.

Lex Fridman

How much of that character in terms of the musicality of the way he speaks, is Bill Clinton?

Kevin Spacey

Not really at all. I mean, Clinton, look, Bill Clinton, he had a way of talking, that he was very slow and he felt your pain. But Frank Underwood was deeper, more direct and less poetic in the way that Clinton would talk. I'll tell you this Clinton story that you'll like. So we decide to do a performance of *The Iceman Cometh* for the Democratic Party on Broadway. And the President is going to come, he's going to see this four and a half hour play. And then we're going to do this event afterward. And I don't know, a couple of weeks before we're going to do this event, someone at the White House calls and says, "Listen, it's very unusual to get

the president for like six and a half hours. So we're suggesting that the president come and see the first act, and then he goes." And I knew what was happening. Now, first of all, Clinton knows this play. He knows what this play is about. And I, as gently as I could said, "Well, if the President is thinking of leaving at intermission, then I'm afraid we're going to have to cancel the event. There's just no way that..." So anyway, then, "Oh no, it's fine. It's fine." Now I know what was happening. What was happening was that someone had read the play and they were quite concerned. And I'll tell you why. Because the play is about this character that I portrayed named Hickey. And in the course of the play, as things get more and more revealed, you realize that this man that I'm playing has been a philanderer. He's cheated on his wife quite a lot, and by the end of the play, he is arrested and taken off because he ended up ending his wife's life because she forgave him too much and he couldn't live with it. So now imagine this, there's 2,000 people at the Brooks Atkinson Theater watching President Clinton watching this play. And at the end of the night we take our curtain call, they bring out the presidential podium, Bill Clinton stands up there and he says, "Well, I suppose we should all thank Kevin and this extraordinary company of actors for giving us all way too much to think about." And the audience fell over in laughter. And then he gave a great speech. And I thought, "That was a pretty good way to handle that."

Lex Fridman

Well, in that way, him and Frank Underwood share like a charisma. There's certain presidents that just have, politicians that just have this charisma. You can't stop listening to them. Some of it is the accent, but some of it is some other magical thing.

Kevin Spacey

When I was starting to do research, I wanted to meet with the whip, Kevin McCarthy, and he wouldn't meet with me until I called his office back and said, "Tell him I'm playing a Democrat, not a Republican." And then he met with me.

Lex Fridman

Nice.

Kevin Spacey

And he was helpful. He took me to whip meetings.

Lex Fridman

Politicians. So you worked with David Fincher there. He was the executive producer, but he also directed the first two episodes.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

High level. What was it like working with him again? In which ways do you think he helped guide you in the show to become the great show that it was?

Kevin Spacey

I give him a huge amount of the credit, and not just for what he established, but the fact that every director after stayed within that world. I think that's why the series had a very consistent feeling to it. It was like watching a very long movie. The style, where the camera went, what it did, what it didn't do, how we used this, how we used that, how we didn't do this. There were things that he laid the foundation for that we managed to maintain pretty much until Beau Willimon left the show. They got rid of Fincher. And I was sort of the last man standing in terms of fighting against... Netflix had never had any creative control at all. We had complete creative control, but over time they started to get themselves involved because look, this is what happens to networks. They'd never made a television show before, ever. And then. They'd never made a television show before, ever. And then four years later, they were the best. And so then you're going to get suggestions about casting, and about writing, and about music and scenes. And so there was a considerable amount of pushback that I had to do when they started to get involved in ways that I thought was affecting the quality of the show.

Lex Fridman

What are those battles like? I heard that there was a battle with the execs, like you mentioned early on about your name not being on the billing for Seven. I heard that there's battles about the ending of Seven, which was really... Well, it was pretty dark. So what's that battle like? How often does that happen, and how do you win that battle? Because it feels like there's a line where the networks or the execs are really afraid of crossing that line into this strange, uncomfortable place, and then great directors and great actors kind of flirt with that line.

Kevin Spacey

It can happen in different ways. I mean, I remember an argument we had was we had specifically shot a scene so that there would be no score in that scene, so that there was no music, it was just two people talking. And then we end up seeing a cut where they've decided to put music in, and it is against everything that scene's supposed to be about. And you have to go and say, "Guys, this was intentional, we did not want score. And now you've added score, because what? You think it's too quiet. You think our audience can't listen to two people talk for two and a half minutes? This show has proved anything, it's proved that people have patience and they're willing to watch an entire season over a weekend." So there are those kind of arguments that can happen. There's different arguments on different levels, and they sometimes have to do with... I mean, look, go back to The Godfather, they wanted to fire Pacino because they didn't see anything happening. They saw nothing happening, so they wanted to fire Pacino. And then finally Coppola thought, I'll

shoot the scene where he kills the police commissioner, and I'll do that scene now. And that was the first scene where they went, "Yeah, actually there's something going on there." So Pacino kept the role.

Lex Fridman

Do you think that Godfather's when the Pacino we know was born? Or is that more like there's the character that really over the top in Scent of a Woman? There's stages, I suppose.

Kevin Spacey

Yeah, of course. Look, I think that we can't forget that Pacino is also an animal of the theater. He does a lot of plays, and he started off doing plays, and movies were... Panic in Needle Park was his first. And yeah, I think there's that period of time when he was doing some incredible parts, incredible movies. When I did a series called Wiseguy, I got cast on a Thursday, and I flew up to Vancouver on a Saturday, and I started shooting on Monday. And all I had time to do was watch The Godfather and Serpico, and then I went to work.

Lex Fridman

Would you say... Ridiculous question, Godfather, greatest film of all time? Gun to your head, right now.

Kevin Spacey

Certainly, yes. But look, I'm allowed to change my opinion. I can next week say it's Lawrence of Arabia, or a week after that I can say Sullivan's Travels. I mean, that's the wonderful thing about movies, and particularly great movies, is when you see them again, it's like seeing them for the first time, and you pick up things that you didn't see the last time.

Lex Fridman

And for that day you fall in love with that movie, and you might even say to a friend that that is the greatest movie of all time.

Kevin Spacey

And also I think it's the degree with which directors are daring. I mean, Kubrick decided to one actor to play three major roles in Dr. Strangelove. I mean, who has the balls to do that today?

Lex Fridman

I was going to mention when we're talking Seven, that just if you're looking at the greatest performances, portrayals of murderers. So obviously, like I mentioned, Hannibal Lecter in Silence of the Lambs, that's up there. Seven to me is competing for first place with Silence of the Lambs. But then there's a different one with Kubrick and Jack Nicholson with The Shining. And there as opposed to a murderer who's always been a murderer, here's a person,

like in American Beauty, who becomes that, who descends into madness. I read also that Jack Nicholson improvised, "Here's Johnny." In that scene.

Kevin Spacey

I believe that.

Lex Fridman

That's a very different performance than yours in Seven, what do you make of that performance?

Kevin Spacey

Nicholson's always been such an incredible actor, because he has absolutely no shame about being demonstrative and over the top. And he also has no problem playing characters who are deeply flawed, and he's interested in that. I have a pretty good Nicholson story though, nobody knows.

Lex Fridman

You also have a good Nicholson impression, but what's the story?

Kevin Spacey

The story was told to a soundman, Dennis Maitland, who's a great, great, great guy. He said he was very excited because he got on Prizzi's Honor, which was Jack Nicholson and Anjelica Huston, directed by John Houston. And he said, "I was so excited. It was my first day on the movie, and I get told to go into Mr. Nicholson's trailer and mic him up for the first scene. So I knock on the trailer door and I hear, yes, and come on in. And I come inside and Mr. Nicholson is changing out of his regular clothes, and he's going to put on his costume. And so I'm setting up the mic, and I'm getting ready. And I said, Mr. Nicholson, I just wanted to tell you I'm extremely excited to be working with you again, it's a great pleasure." And Jack goes, "Did we work together before?" And he says, "Yes, yes we did." And he says, "What film did we do together?" He says, "Well, we did Missouri Breaks." Nicholson goes, "Oh, my God, Missouri breaks, Jesus Christ, we were out of our minds on that film, holy shit. Jesus Christ, it's a wonder I'm alive, my God, there was so much drugs going on and we were stoned out of our minds, holy shit." Just then he folds the pants that he's just taken off over his arm and an eighth of coke drops out onto the floor. Dennis looks at it, Nicholson looks at it, Jack goes, "Haven't worn these pants since Missouri Breaks."

Lex Fridman

Man, I love that guy, unapologetically himself.

Kevin Spacey

Oh, yeah.

Lex Fridman

Your impression of him at the AFT is just great.

Kevin Spacey

Well, that was for Mike Nichols.

Lex Fridman

Well, yeah, he had a big impact in your career.

Kevin Spacey

A huge impact.

Lex Fridman

Really important. Can you talk about him? What role did he play in your life?

Kevin Spacey

I think it was... Yeah, it was 1984, I went into audition for the national tour of a play called *The Real Thing*, which Jeremy Irons and Glenn Close were doing on Broadway that Mr. Nichols had directed. So I went in to read for this character, Brodie, who is a Scottish character. And I did the audition, and Mike Nichols comes down the aisle of the theater, and he's asking me questions about, "Where'd you go to school?" And, "What have you been doing?" I just come back from doing a bunch of years of regional theater and different theaters, so I was in New York, and meeting Mike Nichols was just incredible. So Mr. Nichols went, "Have you seen the other play that I directed up the block called *Hurlyburly*?" And I said, "No, I haven't." And he says, "Why not?" I said, "I can't afford a Broadway ticket." He said, "We can arrange that. I'd like you to go see that play, and then I'd like you to come in next week and audition for that." And I was like, "Okay." So I went to see *Hurlyburly*, William Hurt, Harvey Keitel, Chris Walken, Candice Bergen, Cynthia Nixon, Jerry Stiller. And I watched this play, it's a David Rabe play about Hollywood. And this is crazy, I mean, Bill Hurt was unbelievable. And it was extraordinary, Chris Walken, these guys... So there's this... Harvey Keitel, and Walken came in later, Harvey Keitel's playing this part. And I come in and I audition for it, and Nichols says, "I want you to understudy Harvey Keitel, and I want you to understudy Phil." And I'm like, "Phil?" I mean, Harvey Keitel is in his forties, he looks like he can beat the shit out of everybody on stage, I'm this 24-year-old. And Nichols said, "It's just all about attitude, if you believe you can beat the shit out of everybody out on stage, the audience will too." It's like, "Okay." So I then started to learn Phil. And the way it works when you're in understudy, unless you're a name they don't let you rehearse on the stage, you just rehearse in a rehearsal room. But I used to sneak onto the stage, and rehearse, and try to figure out where the props were, and yada yada. Anyway, one day I get a call, "You're going on today as Phil." So I went on, Nichols is told by Peter Lawrence who's the stage manager, "Spacey's gone on as Phil." So Nichols comes down and watches the second act, comes backstage, he says, "That was really good, how soon could you learn Mickey?" Mickey was

the role that Ron Silver was playing that Chris Walken also played. I said, "I don't know, maybe a couple weeks." He goes, "Learn Mickey too." So I learned Mickey, and then one day I'm told, "You're going on tomorrow night as Mickey." Nichols comes, sees the second act, comes backstage, says, "That was really good. I mean, that was really funny, how soon could you learn Eddie?" And so I became the pinch hitter on Hurlyburly, I learned all the male parts, including Jerry Stiller's, although I never went on as Jerry Stiller's part. And then I left the play, and I guess about two months later I get this phone call from Mike Nichols, and he's like, "Kevin, how are you?" And I'm like, "I'm fine, what can I do for you?" He says, "Well, I'm going to make a film this summer with Mandy and Meryl, and there's a role I'd like you to come in and audition for." So I went in, auditioned, he cast me as this mugger on a subway. Then there's this whole upheaval that happens because he then doesn't continue with Mandy Patinkin, Mandy leaves the movie, and he asked Jack Nicholson to come in and replace Mandy Patinkin. So now I had no scenes with him, but I'm in a movie with Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep, and my first scene in this movie, which I shot on my birthday, July 26th of 85' , I got to Wink at Meryl Streep in this scene. And I was so nervous I literally couldn't wink, Nichols had to calm me down and help me wink. But that became my very first film. And he was incredible, and he let me come and watch when they were shooting scenes I wasn't in. And I remember ending up one day in the makeup trailer, on the same day we were working, Jack and Me, we had no scene together. But I remember him coming in, and they put him down in the chair, and they put frozen cucumbers on his eyes, and did his neck, and then they raised him up and did his face. And then I remember Nicholson went like this, looked in the mirror, and he went, "Another day, another \$50,000." And walked out of the trailer.

Lex Fridman

What was Christopher Walken like? So he's a theater guy too.

Kevin Spacey

Oh, yeah, he started out as a chorus boy, dancer.

Lex Fridman

Well, I could see that, the guy knows how to move.

Kevin Spacey

Walken's fun, I've know him Walken a long time. And I did a Saturday Night Live where we did these Star Wars auditions, so I did Chris Walken as Han Solo. And I'll never forget this, I was in Los Angeles about two weeks after and I was at Chateau Marmont, there's some party happening at Chateau Marmont. And I saw Chris Walken come onto the balcony, and I was like, "Oh, shit, it's Christopher Walken." And he walked up to... And he went, "Kevin, I saw your little sketch, it was funny, ha ha."

Lex Fridman

Oh, man, it was a really good sketch. And that guy, there's certain people that are truly unique, and unapologetic, continue being that throughout their whole career. The way they talk, the musicality of how they talk, how they are, their way of being, he's that. And it somehow works.

Kevin Spacey

"This watch." Yeah.

Lex Fridman

And he works in so many different contexts, he plays a mobster in True Romance, and it's genius, that's genius. But he could be anything, he could be soft, he could be a badass, all of it. And he's always Christopher Walken, but somehow works for all these different characters. So I guess we were talking about House of Cards two hours ago before we took a tangent upon a tangent. But there's a moment in episode one where President Walker broke his promise to Frank Underwood that he would make him the Secretary of State. Was this when the monster in Frank was born or was the monster always there? For you looking at that character, was there an idealistic notion to him that there's loyalty and that broke him? Or did he always know that this whole world is about manipulation, and do anything to get power?

Kevin Spacey

Well, it might have been the first moment an audience saw him be betrayed, but it certainly was not the betrayal he'd experienced. And once you start to get to know him, and learn about his life, and learn about his father, and learn about his friends, and learn about their relationship, and learn what he was like even as a cadet, I think you start to realize that this is a man who has very strong beliefs about loyalty. And so it wasn't the first, it was just the first moment that in terms of the storyline that's being built. Knight Takes King was the name of our production company.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. What do you think motivated him at that moment and throughout the show? Was it all about power and also legacy, or was there some small part underneath it all where he wanted to actually do good in the world?

Kevin Spacey

No, I think power is an afterthought, what he loved more than anything was being able to predict how human beings would react, he was a behavioral psychologist. And he was 17 moves ahead in the chess game, he could know if he did this at this moment, that eventually this would happen, he was able to be predictive and was usually right. He knew just how far he needed to push someone to get them to do what he needed them to do in order to make the next step work.

Lex Fridman

You've played a bunch of evil characters.

Kevin Spacey

Well, you call them evil. But the reason I say that, and I don't mean to be snarky about it, but the reason I say it that way is because I never judge the people I play. And the people that I have played or that any actor has played don't necessarily view themselves as this label, it's easy to say, but that's not the way I can think. I cannot judge a character I play and then play them well, I have to be free of judgment, I have to just play them and let the cards drop where they may and let an audience judge. I mean, the fact that you use that word is perfectly fine, that's your... But it's like people asking me, "Was I really from K-PAX or not?" It just entirely depends on your perspective.

Lex Fridman

Do roles like that, like Seven, like Frank Underwood, like Lester from American Beauty, do they change you psychologically as a person? So walking around in the skin of these characters, these complex characters with very different moral systems.

Kevin Spacey

I absolutely believe that wandering around in someone else's ideas, in someone else's clothes, in someone else's shoes teaches you enormous empathy. And that goes to the heart of not judging. And I have found that I have been so moved by... I mean, look, yes, you've identified the darker characters, but I played Clarence Darrow three times, I've played a play called National Anthems, I've done movies like Recount. I've done films like The Ref, I've done films that in which that doesn't exist in any of those characters, those qualities.

Lex Fridman

Pay It Forward.

Kevin Spacey

Pay It Forward. And so it is incredible to be able to embrace those things that I admire and that are like me, and those things that I don't admire and aren't like me. But I have to put them on an equal footing and say, "I have to just play them as best I can." And not decide to wield judgment over them.

Lex Fridman

Without judgment.

Kevin Spacey

Without judgment.

Lex Fridman

In Gulag Archipelago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn famously writes about the line between good and evil, and that it runs to the heart of every man. So the full paragraph there when he talks about the line, "During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place, sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil, and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times, he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil." What do you think about this note, that we're all capable of good and evil, and throughout life that line moves and shifts throughout the day, throughout every hour?

Kevin Spacey

Yeah. I mean, one of the things that I've been focused on very succinctly is the idea that every day is an opportunity. It's an opportunity to make better decisions, to learn and to grow. And I also think that... Look, I grew up not knowing if my parents loved me, particularly my father. I never had a sense that I was loved, and that stayed with me my whole life. And when I think back at who my father was, and more succinctly who he became, it was a gradual, and slow, and sad development. When I've gone back, and now I've looked at diaries my father kept and albums he kept, particularly when he was a medic in the US Army, served our country with distinction. When the war was over and they went to Germany, the things my father said, the things that he wrote, the things that he believed were as patriotic as any American soldier who had ever served. But then when he came back to America and he had a dream of being a journalist, or his big hope was that he was going to be the great American novelist, he wanted to be a creative novelist, and so he sat in his office and he wrote for 45 years and never published anything. And somewhere along the way, in order to make money, he became what they call a technical procedure writer. Which the best way to describe that is that if you built the F-16 aircraft, my father would have written the manual to tell you how to do it. I mean, as boring, as technical, as tedious as you can imagine. And so somewhere in the sixties and into the seventies, my father fell in with groups of people and individuals, pretend intellectuals, who started to give him reasons why he was not successful as a white Aryan man in the United States. And over time, my father became a white supremacist. And I cannot tell you the amount of times as a young boy that my father would sit me down and lecture me for hours, and hours, and hours about his fucked up ideas of America, of prejudice, of white supremacy. And thank God for my sister who said, "Don't listen to a thing he says, he's out of his mind." And even though I was young, I knew everything he was saying was against people, and I loved people. I had so many wonderful friends, my best friend Mike, who's still my close friend to this day, I was afraid to bring him to my house because I was afraid that my father would find out he was Jewish, or that my father would leave his office door open and someone would see his Nazi flag, or his pictures of Hitler, or Nazi books, or what he might say. So when I found theater in the eighth grade, and debate club, and choir, and festivals, and plays, and everything I could do to participate in that wouldn't make me to come back home, I did. And I've reconcile who he became,

because the gap between that man who was in the US Army as a medic and the man he became, I could never fill that gap. But I've forgiven him. But then at the same time I've to look at my mother and say, "She made excuses for him." "Oh, he just needs to get it off his chest. Oh, it doesn't matter, just let him say." So while on the outside, I would say, "Oh, yeah, my mother loved me, but she didn't protect me." So was all the stuff that she expressed, and all of the attention, and all the love that I felt, was that because I became successful and I was able to fulfill an emptiness that she'd lived with her whole life with him? I don't know, but I've had to ask myself those questions over these last years to try to reconcile that for myself.

Lex Fridman

And the thing you wanted from them and for them is less hate and more love. Did your dad said he loves you?

Kevin Spacey

I don't have any memory of that. I was in a program, and they were showing us an experiment that they'd done with psychologists, and mothers and fathers and their children, and the children were anywhere between six months and a year sitting in a little crib. And the exercise was this, parents are playing with the baby right there, toys, yada ya, baby's laughing. And then the psychologist would say, "Stop." And the parent would go like this. And you would then watch for the next two and a half, three minutes this child trying to get their parents' attention in any possible way. And I remember when I was sitting in this theater watching this, I saw myself, that was me screaming, and reaching out, and trying to get my parents' attention. That was me, and that was not something I'd ever remembered before, but I knew what that baby was going through.

Lex Fridman

Is there some elements of politics and maybe the private sector that are captured by House of Cards? How true to life do you think that is? From everything you've seen about politics, from everything you've seen about the politicians of this particular elections?

Kevin Spacey

I heard so many different reactions from politicians about House of Cards. Some would say, "Oh, it's not like that at all." And then others would say, "It's closer to the truth than anyone wants to admit." And I think I fall down on the side of that idea.

Lex Fridman

I have to interview some world leaders, some big politicians. In your understanding of trying to become Frank Underwood, what advice would you give in interviewing Frank Underwood? How to get him to say anything that's at all honest.

Kevin Spacey

Well, in Frank's case, all you have to do is tell him to look into the camera, and he'll tell you what you want to hear.

Lex Fridman

That's the secret. Unfortunately, we don't get that look into the mind of a person the way we do with Frank Underwood in real life, sadly.

Kevin Spacey

Well, but you could say to somebody... You like the series House of Cards, "I'd love for you to just look into the camera and tell us what's really going on, what you really feel about, blah, blah, blah."

Lex Fridman

That's a good technique, I'll try that with Zelenskyy, with Putin. What do you hope your legacy as an actor is and as a human being?

Kevin Spacey

People ask me now, "What's your favorite performance you've ever given?" And my answer is, "I haven't given it yet." So there's a lot more that I want to be challenged by, be inspired by. There's a lot that I don't know, there's a lot I have to learn, and that is a very exciting place to feel that I'm in. It's been interesting, because we're going back, we're talking. And it's nice to go back every now and then, but I'm focused on what's next.

Lex Fridman

Do you hope the world forgives you?

Kevin Spacey

People go to church every week to be forgiven, and I believe that forgiveness, and I believe that redemption are beautiful things. I mean, look, don't forget, I live in an industry in which there is a tremendous amount of conversation about redemption, from a lot of people who are very serious people in very serious positions who believe in it. I mean, that guy who finally got out of prison, he was wrongly accused, that guy who served his time and got out of prison. We see so many people saying, "Let's find a path for that person, let's help that person rejoin society." But there is an odd situation if you're in the entertainment industry, you're not offered that kind of a path. And I hope that the fear that people are experiencing will eventually subside and common sense will get back to the table.

Lex Fridman

If it does, do you think you have another Oscar worthy performance in you?

Kevin Spacey

Listen, if it would piss off Jack Lemmon again for me to win a third time, I absolutely think so, yeah.

Lex Fridman

Well, you have to mention him again. Ernest Hemingway once said that the world is a fine place and worth fighting for, and I agree with him on both counts. Kevin, thank you so much for talking today.

Kevin Spacey

Thank you.

Lex Fridman

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Kevin Spacey. To support this podcast please check out our sponsors in the description. And now let me leave you with some words for Meryl Streep, "Acting is not about being someone different, it's finding the similarity in what is apparently different and then finding myself in there." Thank you for listening, and I hope to see you next time.