

STELLAR FIRMA

BEHIND THE WAVEFORM —

THE MAKING OF STELLAR FIRMA

Content Warnings

- **Innuendo**
- **Discussions of: poisoning**
- **Mentions of: death & human remains, food & alcohol, arson, torture**
- **SFX: occasional beeping**

RHYS: Comedy, science-fiction, improvisation. Once considered three incompatible elements, they now stand at the core of the most remarkable series ever committed to digital audio storage. Incidentally, a medium far superior in every way to cassette tape. I'm Rhys Tirado, reporter the *Quarterly Frequency Botherer's Digest*. In this special, behind the scenes episode, I have been given unrestricted access to the creative minds behind the phenomenon that is *Stellar Firma*, and I will be trying to figure out what makes them go 'tick-tock, tick-tock, ring ring, genius time.' Join me as we go Behind the Waveform.

[serious docu-drama music style plays]

RHYS: I was able to sit down with the show's co-creators: award-winning actor Ben Meredith, and award-adjacent actor, writer, and showrunner, Tim Meredith at their acclaimed Brighton fruits squeezeria, The Brothers Merejuice.

[ambient restaurant-style chatter and sfx pick up]

RHYS: How did Stellar Firma initially come into being?

TIM: Ah, gosh. We... Well, Ben tells it better, but I'll start.

BEN: Hm? Sorry?

TIM: We're talking about how it came into being, Ben.

BEN: Sorry, I was just kaleing up some broccoli for the latest smoothie inventions. Uh, what are we talking about?

TIM: We're talking about how Stellar Firma came into being.

BEN: [**chuckles**] Stellar Firma, Stellar Firma. Yes, I remember that.

TIM: It was a winter's day, so we were inside, because we've got very thin skin. And we were hoping to find a way to enrich the world. That sounds big.

BEN: Well... Was it the world? I think it— I like to think of it more in solar terms. You know, for example: they're looking into Mars, and there might be some bacteria there, or frozen— And what I'd really love is for them to just unthaw the little bastards, and just play them some Stellar Firma.

TIM: Yeah. Is that too much to ask? We said no. And so the show is born.

RHYS: Often described as the audio-comedy/scifi/improv mavericks of your generation, have you ever been concerned with being **too** cutting edge?

TIM: Can... an intellect be too sharp? Could you cut another with your mind? It's a risk.

BEN: You certainly haven't cut me, dear brother of mine.

TIM: I'll get you! I'll get you. I'll get you.

BEN: You'll get me the day you win an award.

TIM: Ah, it's... Yes. We're not doing that here. No, we've always wanted to just... Not intimidate people with our work. Some is too aggressive, too... confrontery, if that is a word, which I hope it is. We wanted something that is more... Like a cuddly little bear. But you open a bear? It's full of razer blades. But don't open up the bear, and you'll be fine. So you can look for danger, yes, but if you don't want to, don't worry about it.

BEN: Absolutely. Our intellects are our swords. Our katanas. Our kukris. Covered in cotton wool. A soft bedding. Sheathed.

TIM: A little duvet. A cheese. A particularly soft and fluffy cheese. The answer is no.

BEN: Yes, absolutely.

RHYS: Ben, did you ever regret the risk you took starting a podcast as two straight white men? Did you ever think that maybe the world wasn't ready for that combo?

BEN: **[sighs]** I mean, these kind of things do cross your mind. Is the market ready?

TIM: Ben, can I stop you there? [BEN: Mmmhmm?] I just have a word in my mind, and that word is brave?

BEN: Mmm, mmm.

TIM: Is that too much?

BEN: No, no no no no. Courageous, I think, I think. Yeah.

TIM: We just felt that the world **was** ready, because we respect it.

BEN: There was a white cismale hole in the podcast market, and by goodness, we took it.

TIM: Mmm, mmm. To pave the way.

BEN: Absolutely.

RHYS: Tim, you've yet to receive any awards for your work on the show. Why do you think this is?

TIM: Umm, I don't really... I don't go in for conspiracy theory. I think that we did land on the moon. Um, I think that Mars contains maybe bacteria, nothing more. But there are times— Well, let's put it like this. The Catholic church did a real number on Galileo. So is it too much to believe that maybe the global forces are trying to put me down? I think no. But for legal reasons, I think it's because the votes went against me.

BEN: I have an alternative theory: the awards lie where the talents do.

TIM: No, I don't think that's the case. I don't think that's the case. Well, I mean—

BEN: Well, one award is an accident. Two awards, maybe a coincidence. [TIM: No...] Three and more? Just, you know, that's a trend.

TIM: No, I think that's a conspiracy. Uh, I think it's a way to put down the talented. I think it's a way to exclude me for the things I've done and said. Sure, I've been thrown out a lot of parties, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't win awards, even if the parties were for those awards, mostly attended by judges. They should put that from their mind. A thrown punch bowl doesn't mean that my acting isn't good.

BEN: Well, we shall see what the judges think at the 2022 International Juicery Awards.

TIM: But they hate me.

RHYS: It is well-documented that a great number of the actors that are featured on *Stellar Firma* over the years have died or disappeared in uncertain circumstances. Christian St. Bellamy, who played Sigmund Shankeray, died in a wind-hiking accident in the Seychelles. El Dorado Slim, who appeared as Angry Jim, was lost with all hands during an aquatic dinner theatre sinking near the Isle of Man. And Dame Judy Clench, remembered as the much-loved pile of meat with a fork in it, walked out of her Bicester Caravan during one fateful, Tony Blackburn-themed dinner dance, never to be seen again. But some have survived. Among them, one of the Meredith's closest collaborators on the shows, Jennifer Haufek, best known for her portrayal of Hartro Piltz. I spoke with her at her summer chateau in the south of the North of France.

RHYS: How did you first get involved with the show?

JENNIFER: Okay. Uh— Are we gonna— Are we really gon— Are we doing this? I didn't... I didn't really expect, Rhys, that we were rehashing Stellar Firma today. Um. I don't— I'm surprised people are even still talking about that show, to be honest. It's, you know— Some people move on, and I have. I have obviously moved on. I'm— Look around here. Such a... It's a lovely, quaint little settlement I have arranged for myself, and... And it's just, the work that I'm doing right now is just, it's very important, but I understand. I mean, if I take a moment, and I just... think about obviously the fans, and, you know, it was a part of my life that I like to not revisit very often, but I do get it. Um. And, and I do love my fans, no matter what-where-how they find me. Um, so I will answer your question, Rhys. Um. I first got involved in this show because my agent, Larissa NcKay, she contacted me, I think this must have been, oh, several years back, and Larissa was like, 'Oh Jenny, we've got this quirky little science fiction show. You really must do it.' And at the time I was in between jobs, um, I had just gotten this new haircut, and I was trying some new things, and, you know, I heard 'science fiction,' and, um, Larissa's really never thrown me a curveball. She's pretty solid, so I said, alright, let's do it. Um, now, the thing was, once you get involved in Stellar Firma, much like the show, there's no un-getting involved. You're in. Um, so, yeah, obviously I signed something, and was unable to extract myself from that creative project. Um, but that's neither here nor there. So that's how I got involved. I had a haircut.

RHYS: Hartro is possibly best remembered for her use of feet in mouths as a form of punishment. What inspired you to introduce that element of her character?

JENNIFER: Auhh, with the feet, with the feet, ah! Everybody. I mean, it's unreal. Do you know how many photographs of my feet they just— They're papered all over the tabloids here. I mean, I've actually embraced it, and like, and I like wearing out the supple sandals that I wear. I have a local

beach that I go to, and I often walk barefoot there. Um, you know, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. The feet. Lover. Um. Anyway. I— The feet thing just came up basically, um, I was doing the show, and Tim, um, Meredith, you know, obviously, you spoke to him— Yeah, he just won't shut up. He keeps talking all the time, and, you know, it was very clear that Hartro had to review for these shows. She had to review their planets and duh duh duh duh— I couldn't get a word in edgewise. So, I mean, I tried several things. I tried socks, but then obviously the **[mutters]** David and the socks, and so then every time I tried to put a sock in Tim's mouth, they'd be like, David would react. So the producers were like, don't do the sock, so, I was like, okay, fine, I can do... uh... I tried shoving some pencils in there one time, and obviously that hurt Tim, um, which was— You know, unagreeable. Uh, and, so, I was just sitting there one day, and he was blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, like he does, and, I just— raised my foot and just popped it in. And it— You know, everybody's like, 'oh, it's so, you know, sexual undertones.' I mean, come on. If somebody's yabberin', and you've tried everything, and I mean, it literally— The foot rose on its own and just went 'psh,' right in. But as time went on, I, I hate to say it, but I think Tim liked it? Because, um, and I'm not, take that as you will, but uh, he started misbehaving on purpose, and I know he was, and he would look at the foot, like expecting it to come. I was like, I'm not giving you the foot, I'm not doing that. So, I don't know if you noticed, but as the seasons went on, the foot became less of a thing, and... I just, yeah. So. That's all I really need to say about that.

RHYS: Prior to Stellar Firma, you were an accomplished riverboat gambler and gun-for-hire. What drove you towards acting?

JENNIFER: I don't normally talk about... that period of my life. Uh. I've done some things. I've seen... some things. And I've... been at the crux of some... accidents. Uh, and, we'll call them accidents. Basically, I got in trouble with some people you don't want to get in trouble with. And I was trying to make my mark, and I fell in love. So... turns out, I get some mail, and I open it up, and this is my next mark, and guess who it is? Well, if it's not the love of my life. And Gary and I had been together, living in a flat in

the UK, a basement flat, and, you know, we'd been making ends meet. Gary was having a hard time, and he was involved with some nasty people, and, uh, unfortunately those nasty people, uh, were the nasty people the employed me, so, yeah. Came down to, uh, love or life. And, uh, I chose, why, I chose life. So... Gary was my last job.

RHYS: Since Stellar Firma, you have worked on mostly hard-hitting dramas and theatre. Why the move away from comedy?

JENNIFER: I never wanted to do comedy. Small, small comedy, I call it. I mean, how easy is that, you know? Make people laugh, ha ha ha. Easy. So, I thought, you know, what's for me is the tough stuff, the drama, the make 'em cry, make 'em think. Make 'em wonder. Make them **feel**, and I just said to my agent, you know, 'Get me that.' I mean, I want to be on a stage for five hours with one lamp, and a gun. And just, give it to me and I'll make it work. And I've been doing some amazing theatre lately. I've opened up my own theatre company, and I've constructed a theatre down the road from my chateau. Uh, it's called the, um, The Deep, Deep Existence. And we do plays that make people think. And that's it. So... You know, if you're ready to stop playing around, and you wanna see something real, come there. Um. Please come. Please come there, and see something. Um. We're... we've got availability most nights.

RHYS: Would you ever go back?

JENNIFER: Ah, Rhys, Rhys, Rhys. Oh, does it— Does a butterfly go back in the chrysalis? I mean, does a child open a present on Christmas day and then go, "Oh, oh, oh, no, I won't have this doll," and put it back in the box and wrap it up? I mean, does somebody say, "Oh no, I do not want a birthday cake, even though it's my birthday"? I think you and I know the answer to that. Um, and the answer is: absolutely not. There is no way, no how you're getting me back there. I'm moving on, my pastures are green,

and I am flying high. And anybody who has a look around here just sees, you know what, Jenny? You know that Jenny? Jenny Haufek? She's winning.

RHYS: Not all of the stars of Stellar Firma remained actors after the show finished. The beloved vent-dwelling coward Enola was played by Helen Gould, who now works as a journeyman metallurgist at Kimbalton Ironworks in Cambridgeshire.

RHYS: How did you first get involved in the show?

HELEN: What? Sorry, what, what was that?

RHYS: How did you first get involved in the—

RHYS: I later visited Helen again after her shift near the village well.

RHYS: How did you first get involved with the show?

HELEN: Oh Rhys, it's lovely to see you! Um, big, big fan. Big fan. Um— Yeah, so— Yeah, I'm always happy to talk about Stellar Firma. You know, it was a really, really fun time. I had a lot of— You know, obviously it's a comedy, so there was a lot of— A lot of laughter, a lot of joy in the room. Um. Working with the Merediths. Um— Yeah, I mean, it's just a shame— It's a shame that the Incident happened, um, and, and, you know, I can't really— I can't play anymore fictional characters on podcasts. But, you know what? You know what? You live and learn. You live and learn, and... You know, occasionally get cursed, but you live and learn, you live and learn.

RHYS: How do you think working on Stellar Firma has impacted your life?

HELEN: I mean, if I'd never done Stellar Firma, then, you know, I wouldn't have ended up, you know, discovering my true love, which is for iron, and, you know, blacksmithing. And that's, that's obviously, that's my life's calling, um. So, uh, honestly, I have to say that working on Stellar Firma? Probably changed my life. I mean... If it wasn't for that, and, you know, for the Incident, then, um, I wouldn't be here today in this, you know, this very idyllic setting, with my tools, and my lovely blocks of metal.

RHYS: Since the show, you haven't appeared in any productions, preferring metalworking instead. Why?

HELEN: Oh, well, yes, obviously I'd love to be in other productions. Uh— It's just, you know, it's just a shame that obviously I can't actually, uh, be on podcasts? Really, much, anymore? Um, in terms of like a voice acting, uh, capacity, because of The Incident, but, um, it would be really nice, it would be really nice if I could, um, uh, go back to playing characters, um, I can't, you know, I can't even play characters on the radio now, actually, because of the The Incident, but as myself is fine. It's just, since, you know, what happened, uh, yes. Yes. But, um, it would be nice, but not a good idea, not a good idea, yes.

RHYS: If you could talk to Enola right now, what would you say?

HELEN: If I could talk to Enola, I would say... I hope you enjoy that Starpuncher as much as I enjoy punching iron. Um. And I would also tell them to seduce an alien for me. Yes.

RHYS: During the original run of Stellar Firma, there was much talk of your torrid love affair with Joe Brush Gently, who played Trexel's broom on the show. And the much-publicised fallout of your 46 hour annulled marriage.

HELEN: Oh, yes! Joe, Joe. What a lovely lady. Yeah, what about it?

RHYS: Nothing. I just wanted to mention it.

RHYS: Perhaps rather fittingly, the firm favourite of most fans of Stellar Firma was the pitiless murderer of millions, and station A.I. I.M.O.G.E.N., played by Imogen Harris. As part of agreeing to be interviewed, she insisted we meet at a secret cabin in the Swiss Alps, as she is currently evading capture from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for her part in a barleywater import/export scandal.

RHYS: How did you first get involved in the show?

IMOGEN: It's, uh, it's, well, quite a funny story, actually. It was 1957, and me, Richard Briar, Sherilyn Fend, Zipyof Rainbow, and Queen Caroline of Naples who was 126 at the time if you can believe it, had all cooked up this wizard plan to smuggle cuckoo clocks during the annual Halloween fancy dress competition. Now, it was all going swimmingly until Dicky, bless him, tripped over the Ambassador to Poland. He was dressed as the second member of ABBA. Down come his trousers, cookies everywhere, and in ensuing confusion, Ben Meredith turns to me, says 'Do I want to be in a podcast,' and I said yeah.

RHYS: Initially, I.M.O.G.E.N. was intended to be a magical horse that accompanied David on their adventures. Why do you think that was changed?

IMOGEN: That was changed? Oh, I've... I've been playing her as a horse this whole time. Well, I hope that's okay.

RHYS: Ban Ki-moon described your character as "The ultimate destiny of all life. Cold, calculating digital intelligence." Do you think your character is a good role model for future generations?

IMOGEN: Dear old Ban, what a character. No, no no, no no no no. No. No, if I get my way, there won't be any future generations.

RHYS: What is your favourite memory from working on the show?

IMOGEN: Well, that's ah, a-huh. That's an excellent question. So many... So many memories. I'd have to say... Tuesday.

RHYS: During the course of these interviews, I also took some time to speak with the production staff at Rusty Quill, who ensured that the show actually aired and didn't sound like mounds of hot, hot garbage. Producer Katie Seaton and editor Maddy Searle spoke to me via satellite link from within their fortress of solitude.

RHYS: What was it like, working with two of the greatest minds of fiction?

KATIE: Two of the greatest... Oh. Do you mean Tim and Ben? It was fine.

MADDY: Yeah, yeah, it was alright. Um. Wouldn't say it was like, uh, life-changing experience or anything, but it was, it was good fun. Yeah. We had a nice time.

RHYS: How do you contain such raw talent?

KATIE: Well, I normally have a weekly meeting, and then sometimes I need to send them some messages and things? What do you mean by that?

MADDY: Yeah, yeah, we don't have to do... a huge amount, apart from maybe like give them some compliments to keep them happy.

KATIE: Oh, yeah, the compliments are important.

MADDY: Yeah. Um, I think, and sending like, flowers once a month is also a good shout. Greases the wheels a bit. They're very sensitive boys.

KATIE: Yeah, yeah.

RHYS: What was the hardest thing about working on the show?

MADDY: I think one of the trickier things — it was relatively easy to write most of the time, but one of the trickier things was there tended to be a lot more toilet humour in the recordings than was appropriate for the episodes, and so there was a lot of... farting and belching that had to kind of edit out. But, otherwise, it was, as I say, relatively plain sailing.

KATIE: I, uh, I dunno what all of that farting was about.

MADDY: Yeah, yeah.

KATIE: It was strange.

MADDY: I don't— Yeah, I'm not really sure where that came from, but.

KATIE: Yeah, nothing to do with space, really. It's just... Well, we dealt with it anyway.

MADDY: Maybe we need to ask them about their diets. Maybe that's what we need to do.

KATIE: Mmmm, yeah. I've heard people have good luck with gluten-free, and that sort of thing sometimes.

MADDY: Yeah yeah yeah. Since I've switched to porridge in the mornings, it's been a lot better for me, personally, so.

KATIE: Yeah. Maybe mention that to them, Rhys.

RHYS: The descriptions of characters and settings in Stellar Firma varied wildly throughout the show. What point were you making when you decided to do this?

KATIE: I didn't decide that.

MADDY: Me neither.

KATIE: You got any other questions?

RHYS: Some have called the show's style of comedy 'shallow and frivolous.' How do you respond to that?

KATIE: Oh, right, uh, hold on. **[paper rustling]** 'I say that such people might not be taking into account the searing critique on the capitalist system.'

MADDY: Yeah, I do, um, appreciate... the, that kind of angle? But also, if it is shallow and frivolous, then, that's fine. That's great. People need a bit of a laugh now and then, why not? Fill your boots.

RHYS: With the show now out of production because the Merediths wanted it to be and not because of an ongoing copyright infringement case from the estate of Monty Python, we now have to move on and find new meaning in our lives. But not before we return to the brothers one final time.

RHYS: How would you like Stellar Firma to be remembered by history?

TIM: I mean... One always wants to be remembered for their art, but I mean it would just be nice to be remembered, I suppose.

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RHYS: Behind the Waveform was written by me, Rhys Tirado, for the *Quarterly Frequency Botherer's Digest*. For more information, go to www.bothermywaveform.biz.

Created by Tim Meredith and Ben Meredith

Produced by Katie Seaton

Executive Producer: Alexander J Newall

Featuring: Rhys Tirado, Tim Meredith, Ben Meredith, Jenny Haufek,
Helen Gould, Maddy Searle, Katie Seaton

Editing: Maddy Searle

Music: Samuel DF Jones

Artwork: Anika Khan

Mastering: Jeffrey Nils Gardner

