

Ep: 9 – Yasen Peyankov: “I Had To”

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Featuring: Cliff Chamberlain and Yasen Peyankov, with Laura D. Glenn, Audrey Francis and Caroline Neff.

Yasen Peyankov:

If I was going to survive in this country, I had to do theater.

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

Yasen Peyankov:

It was my—it was my therapy. It was my—it was my life.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*.

Caroline Neff:

Hey folks, welcome to Episode Nine of Half Hour. I'm Caroline Neff.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And I'm Cliff Chamberlain.

Caroline Neff:

Um, Cliff, I had so much fun listening to your conversation with Yasen.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Isn't he the best?

Caroline Neff:

I think he might be the best.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And the thing about Yasen, too, for me, is that he's one of my first memories of Chicago in a lot of ways, in terms of someone to look up to. Because I met him—he was one of my professors at the School Steppenwolf in 2004. You know, those people who just um, give you little tiny, uh bits of hope. You know, like, there's definitely people at Steppenwolf who have been that for me. And Yasen's one of them.

Caroline Neff:

So I got to work with Yasen as an actor doing *Three Sisters*. And then he directed me in a play that I did with Audrey called *The Fundamentals*. And the way that his brain can swap back and forth between like those hats is so effortless. But I got the opportunity to actually visit Yasen's home in Bulgaria.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What? Varna?

Caroline Neff:

Varna. Yes. Erin Cook, who's our company manager (for those of you that don't know all the magic that is Erin Cook) and I met up in the airport in Istanbul, flew to Sofia in Bulgaria, spent the night and then drove for six hours across the country to get to Varna, which is on the Black Sea. It's like—it's way, way, way east. And he was there with his wife, Bisa and his daughter. And I've just—I have actually never experienced that kind of hospitality. We got to go to—there was this Romanian princess's castle. And there were 100 different kinds of roses. And Yasen and Bisa made us literally stop and smell every different one.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Oh, that's—

Caroline Neff:

And that's like—

Cliff Chamberlain:

So Yasen.

Caroline Neff:

[*Laughter*] Isn't that? Like, this is so Yasen! And they were like—Erin and I were like, “No, no, we get it” and they were like “You don't actually.” It was amazing. And I just—I do—I just think that Yasen is one of the most like interesting and smart and funny and kind people that I know. And to get to know him as an artist and also as a human being is just—it's pretty fucking special.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah. He gave me this real gift once. Because I did *Superior Donuts* with him at Steppenwolf. It was my first mainstage show as Steppenwolf; it was the show I joined Equity with. And I was just happy and grateful and lucky to be part of the Steppenwolf production, let alone be part of the transfer to Broadway, right? And we're at a roundtable press thing. And I was with Yasen and somebody asked me a question. And I was like, “Oh my gosh, it's time for me to talk like okay, just play it cool.” And they asked me “Are you part of the ensemble?” I said, “No, I but you know, of course Steppenwolf is awesome and it's a bunch of people that I really respect.” And Yasen just said, off the cuff and offhand, like, “He will be.” I don't think I ever would have thought that I could ever join the ensemble if he hadn't said that thing. And it was just a real gift for him to say and I love him for that.

Caroline Neff:

He does. He has an incredible faith in people. And also, as a teacher. You know, I love watching him speak about—and speak to—his students and some of my favorite actors have come out of his program at UIC.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

All of that being said, let's listen in to Yasen Peyankov.

Cliff Chamberlain:

You got it. What a pleasure.

Stage Manager:

Half hour to top of the show, please. Half hour. Half hour, please. Top of the show—half hour.

Cliff Chamberlain:

So Yassen, you grew up in Bulgaria.

Yassen Peyankov:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Varna, Bulgaria. Am I saying that right? Varna?

Yassen Peyankov:

Yep. Yep, on the Black Sea coast.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like growing up there?

Yassen Peyankov:

Varna was at the time the third largest city of Bulgaria. And it's a really famous resort city. It has a couple of really beautiful resorts with a lot of hotels. And it was often referred to as the Sea Capital of Bulgaria. And I had an amazing childhood. We—I lived in a in a very tall building that had 15—it was a 15-story building, and each floor had five apartments. So, when I was a kid, there were a lot of kids living in that building. It was like an entire small neighborhood. And we played all the time. And I actually caught the soccer bug in 1974. This is how old I am. It was the it was the first World Cup that I ever saw. It was in West Germany, at the time. And I remember we were at summer camp, and we were watching the games, and the older kids like formed teams and stuff. But at the time, I was too young to be on any other team. *[Laughter]* So, I couldn't wait to go back to my neighborhood to start my own soccer team.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What brought you to theater? Do you remember when you caught the theater bug?

Yassen Peyankov:

Well, I guess I was always kind of entertaining my mom and my dad and their guests. Like I remember I would sing songs or do some stunts that I had seen on TV. I remember there was this—there was this Polish miniseries about the Polish resistance against the Germans. It was called *Colonel Kloss*. And, you know, how every show shows like different—the opening credits: they always kind of show the same take from different episodes. And there was this one where he would fall down this ravine and then get up and dust himself. *[Laughter]* And I would do that at home over the furniture and play dead to the point where my parents would get freaked out, you know. It was like “Then I'll jump up” and like, “Oh, I'm here.” *[Laughter]* So I was that type of kid. But I really caught the theater bug when my parents took me to my first theater show. And I remember that I was very young; I think I was already going to school. So, I must have been either first or second grade. So maybe seven, eight? And it was a play with adult themes. There was love and betrayal and stuff like that. And we were in the regional theater in

Varna, which is also the Opera House. And I remember that very clearly. We were right in the middle—first balcony. And the lights went down. And then the stage got lit up. And those actors came on stage. And it was magic. I was just so mesmerized by the whole experience. And I clearly remember it to this day that this was the time where I said, “This is what I want to do. This is exactly what I want to do.” And then I started going to that theater regularly to see the shows in their repertory. And when I was 16, I got cast in a show at that theater. And I was like performing with all my idols, at the time, and all these young actors on that stage that I have seen about a decade earlier. I was on it. And it was amazing.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I know what that feels like. That was my that was the summer of 2008 for me: *Superior Donuts*. Did you just know, “This is absolutely what I want to do”? Is that what sent you to the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts?

Yasen Peyankov:

Yep. Yep. I knew. I mean, all through high school, you know, I was with this amateur group doing—we were mostly doing poetry recitals. And then I auditioned for the National Academy. And I didn't get it the first time.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I've read that it's a really hard and competitive process with that.

Yasen Peyankov:

Well, yeah, it was the only drama school in the country, basically. So, we had, I think about, anywhere between two and three thousand candidates on any given year for like 30 spots.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Wow.

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah, that was it. So, they didn't accept me the first time. And then I went to the army, because it was, you know, it was obligatory, you know, we had to go. And then in my second year of the army service, I auditioned again. And that's when I got accepted.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The two years that you spent in the army, what was that like?

Yasen Peyankov:

It was a total waste of my time. *[Laughter]* I hate the military, and everything connected with it. But the only alternative was jail. So, I had to go, you know?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Sure.

Yasen Peyankov:

And at the time, when I went into the army, I was already 19. And I felt like I was so far ahead intellectually. And, just—I was ready to start life. And boom, they grab you and they put you in the army and you're basically nobody; you're a private with no rights. Nothing. You know. It's just—all you do is “Yes, sir,” and do all these stupid military exercises. We didn't have we didn't have any wars at the time,

but we did have joint exercises with Russian troops. So, some of those Russian troops had been, at the time, in Afghanistan. And I just clearly remember the look in their eyes. It was, I mean, these people look like 10, 15 years older than me, by the experiences that they have had being in a war. And that was a really brutal war. The Soviets in Afghanistan was a—I mean, those kids were just slaughtered there. It was just insane.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right. So, you knew you knew in your heart the army life was not for you and you couldn't wait to get going in the theater.

Yasen Peyankov:

I was counting the days backwards from the day I started, man. *[Laughter]*

Stage Manager:

Fifteen minutes, please. Fifteen minutes to top of the show. Fifteen.

Cliff Chamberlain:

So, I'm interested in hearing—after the your time at the National Academy of Theatre and Film arts, what was the process like to getting to America? And specifically, why Chicago? And what was that transition like?

Yasen Peyankov:

So, I graduated in 1989. And the system in the Academy is such—because like I said, it's only one drama school in the whole country—you're guaranteed a job in a regional theater. Because theater, like many other industries, was subsidized by the government. You become a part of an ensemble and you're getting paid a monthly salary to go to rehearsals and perform at night. And I got drafted in a theater which was a traveling theater, but it was based in Sofia, the capital city. At the time I was married to my first wife who was a classmate of mine from drama school. So, we got married in our fourth year. And I was in my first professional production. The date of the opening was November 10, 1989, which is the day the Berlin Wall fell.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Wow.

Yasen Peyankov:

And it was also the day where the Bulgarian head of state, who has been (basically) the leader of the country for 35 years, was ousted. It was the time where all these Eastern European revolutions were happening. The Berlin Wall fell. In Czechoslovakia, they ousted the government through the Velvet Revolution. It happened in Hungary. It happened in Poland. It happened with us. Then it happened with the Romanians, who actually executed their leader on Christmas Day, 1989! So, after those political changes, the theater kind of took a back step in the country, because the people went out on the streets and started demonstrating. So, I was involved in different kinds of protests at the time and we were gearing for the first free elections in 45 years. And there was a lot of hope that we would go the same way as Czechoslovakia, or Poland, or Hungary went at the time and choose a different path. But the Communists won the first free elections in 1990. My ex-wife had an uncle who lived in Chicago.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Hmm.

Yasen Peyankov:

And after the elections, we basically decided that we should move to the states to Chicago. I didn't know anybody. I arrived in the country with a little suitcase with, like, a change of clothes and \$20 in my pocket. And, that's where my journey began.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Wow.

Yasen Peyankov:

I knew that I was going to try to continue with my acting career, but of course I wasn't harboring any illusions. And at the time I was prepared that I might not be able to continue as an actor. And I guess I was prepared to deal with that. And I performed in my first production, the summer of 1991. So, about a year after my arrival, I was in a show, which was in a little place called Urbus Orbis Theater. It was in Bucktown. Bucktown was not what it is today. And that whole strip on North Avenue from maybe between Ashland and Damon, we had all these, like, small storefronts where you can like seat only 20-30 people. Urbus Orbis Cafe was a, kind of like a vegetarian restaurant with a backroom where they would like rent it for performances for bands and theater groups. And I was in a production of *Mann ist Mann* by Bertolt Brecht. And I was supposed to play a soldier in it. And the lead actress quit the show halfway through rehearsals and the director to turn to me and he said, "Do you want to play a widow Begbik?" And I was like, "Sure." [Laughter] So, it was my first it was my first show in the America, first show I do in English, first and only time I play a woman. And it was just a blast.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Welcome to Chicago.

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah. Welcome to Chicago. Nobody came and saw it. You know, I mean, we usually had like, maybe 10, 12 people and you kind of knew most of them. But that was that was the beginning of my artistic path, that little show on North Avenue.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well, I love hearing that. And one of the things I really relate to you about is the storefront Chicago experience. You know, now you're a Steppenwolf ensemble member; you run the theater department at UIC. But for a time, you were just grinding it out, creating plays for no money, starting a theatre company European Repertory Theatre, right?

Yasen Peyankov:

Repertory Company, Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Can you tell me—can you talk about that? Just those early, gritty exciting times?

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah. Yeah, very exciting. Well, I mean, you know how it is Cliff. You get in a show; then you meet people. And through these people, you meet new people and then you go to another show and meet more people. And it's just—that's how you kind of start getting yourself established and people start seeing your work. And so after I did, *Mann ist Mann*, I did like four or five shows like just within one

year. And one of them was a late-night miniseries over at a place called the Playwrights Center, which was on Wilson Avenue. Wilson and Broadway, it was right by the by the train station. It was a really silly show was about raccoons taking over the world. Because, apparently because the raccoons have opposable thumbs, they get in our garbage and they learn our ways. They evolve and they have taken over the world. It was wild. And in that show, I met a guy from England, Dale Goulding. And Dale came to me and he said, "Hey, how about we start our own theatre company?" And I said, "Great, what we going to do?" He said, "We're going to do *Macbeth*." And I said, "Who's going to play it?" And Dale said, "I'm going to play it." And I said, "Who's going to direct it?" And he said, "You're going to direct it." And I said, "I have never directed!" He goes, "It doesn't matter; I'll help you out." And we did it at Cafe Voltaire, which was another off-loop space that was on Clark and Belmont. Again, it was another one of those healthy, vegetarian restaurants. And it had a basement that was showing everything, you know. And if you asked a lot of people, you know, in Chicago, I bet most of them who were around in the 90s would say that they have performed at Cafe Voltaire. So, we did *Macbeth*, which was a huge success. We were actually able not only to breakeven, but to make a little bit of money. And that's how we started European Repertory Company. So, at the time, I was having all kinds of daytime jobs, you know, and my daytime jobs were basically not only paying for the rent of my apartment, but I was also putting a lot of money into the theatre company. And then we had our own space at 615 Wellington where Timeline is now. So, we had a lot of wonderful years there, producing all kinds of shows—mostly European. And met a lot of collaborators. Made a lot of friends during that time. And really, kind of, learned what it takes to produce theatre and how to how to create quality without having all the shiny toys that any, you know, big theater could offer. We were, you know, building sets out of dumpster alleys. And when I started working at Steppenwolf, I was borrowing a lot of furniture and props from Steppenwolf. And so that's—the first seven years of my career in Chicago, I did not make any money. If anything, I actually had to put money to sustain my habit. But I knew, Cliff, that one year when I didn't do any theater from 90 to 91, I just knew that I had to. If I was going to survive in this country, I had to do theater. It was a necessity. It was a deep need in me to do theater. It was my therapy; it was my life. You know, the work was just hours spent on the clock to make money to sustain my theatre habit.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Sure.

Yasen Peyankov:

And in '97, I got cast in my first Steppenwolf show, which was the first show that Tina Landau directed: *Time to Burn*, a play by Chuck Mee. Tina had me in her first three shows. I understudied *Space*, and then I got cast in *Berlin Circle*. And yeah, so I was basically kind of doing back-to-back shows at Steppenwolf until 2002, when I got invited to join the ensemble after another Tina show, which was *The Time of Your Life*. That's when I got invited to join the ensemble, after the run of *The Time of Your Life*.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What is the biggest difference between the theater you grew up with and the styles you learned in Bulgaria versus Chicago theater or American theater? Did you find that your skill set, or just being from another country, helped you? Hindered you? Inspired others to work with you?

Yasen Peyankov:

That's a great question. My education from drama school helped me a lot because I had terrific teachers. My professor Krikor Azaryan was one of the leading directors in Bulgaria. What I learned from him is mostly what happens between the lines. What I found a little different from my experience as an actor in Bulgaria when I came here, watching shows and just kind of starting in American theatre, that

there was a lot of attention put on the text, on the words, and how the words are said. Whereas I felt my experience in like, finding the action helped me have always really interesting and creative choices. I was always driven by the action of what happens, and the words have always been secondary. What has hindered me, obviously, is my accent because I can't completely lose it. But I think I've compensated through my imagination and through my way to be able to perform the action of what is happening. And this is something that I have always—I'm a—I mean, I'm a physical actor. I'm quite a—I need my props. I need to know what I'm doing, you know. I guess my knack for physical theater is the one—the thing that kind of, probably, maybe, separated me from some of my American colleagues, and really gave me such an advantage in my work, you know. And I've always been—I always wanted to create characters that are very different from each other.

Cliff Chamberlain:

You mentioned your professor who I had the pleasure of meeting during the School at Steppenwolf, when I was a student there in 2004. Maybe the most intimidating and kind person. I mean, I didn't. You had to translate for him the whole summer. I can just see him smoking cigarettes just nonstop. Just knowing, knowing all the—I've heard—I've read something, a quote that you said, talking about the best part of theater is having a secret, right?

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Or it's one of the most important things? And he, to me, knows all the secrets.

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah, yeah. I really love his definition of theater. He said, "If two people are sitting at a table, having coffee and just talking is this theater? No, it's not. If one of them gets up, leaves the room, and then the other person pours something in his coffee. And then he comes back, and the conversation continues. This is where we have theater, because the audience and one of the characters know a secret that the other character doesn't know."

Stage Manager:

Five minutes, your five-minute call. Five minutes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, so the show is called *Half Hour*—

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And you know what the half hour is like. The magical time before a show starts. Can you tell me about your half hour process?

Yasen Peyankov:

I always like to be at the theater at least an hour before the show. It was ingrained in me because that's how it's in Europe; the call is like one hour before the show. It starts with driving to the theater. I like to run the lines while I'm driving, which kind of makes for a few curious looks from cars that are passing

you by, or just standing next to me in traffic. Then I go to the theater, I say my hellos to the stage management team. Usually I'm the first one to arrive, most times. And then I like to go to my dressing room. And if I'm at the top of the show, I like to put my costume on when half hour is called. And if I'm alone in the dressing room, which has been the case the last few shows, I meditate for about anywhere between 15 minutes to like 20, 25 minutes. I really try to relax and clear my mind. Leave everything that has been happening up until this point in my day behind, and just kind of be in that space of complete relaxation. So, when I go on the stage, I just let it all happen.

Cliff Chamberlain:

That's fantastic. You've listened to the podcast before; you know what's coming.

Yasen Peyankov:

Yeah, yeah. I'm actually prepared for some of it. [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yes! Okay, lightning round: Yasen Peyankov. What is your favorite Steppenwolf production that you've ever seen?

Yasen Peyankov:

August: Osage County, 2007. I was blown away. Blown away. I loved it so much that I translated in Bulgarian and directed it in Bulgaria three years later.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What's been your toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

Yasen Peyankov:

Mm... toughest experience. Probably the passing of Martha shortly followed by the passing of Mariann. They were kind of close to each other. And it was very difficult. It was—I mean, those were wonderful collaborators and close friends I'd like to say and... Yes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

Yasen Peyankov:

I actually have a hand bound version of *Hysteria*, which I did in 1999. Malkovich directed me in it. And he gave all of us as an opening night present a handbound copy of the play. Really beautiful little book.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing or not?

Yasen Peyankov:

I think I have to go to *Superior Donuts*.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay.

Yasen Peyankov:

And you were there with me. When after the big fight that happened between Mafia and Michael. And Mafia's character is laying on the floor and I'm above him and (I'll be paraphrasing you know) "You have friends, I have friends, but you know what I don't give a fuck." It was just—that was—just the way that whole thing was set up, written and executed, you know you're going to have such a great, almost orgasmic, experience when you wrap it up there. [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah. Oh gosh. Oh, I love that. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

Yasen Peyankov:

There is one that I knew about. And it was in *Borat*. Do you know that movie?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Of course.

Yasen Peyankov:

Sacha Baron Cohen? I auditioned for the—for his sidekick, his manager.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What?

Yasen Peyankov:

I—yeah, yeah. I went to LA to audition for that. We were actually—I was in a show and I flown in on my day off. And I was—the audition was basically improvising with Sacha Baron Cohen. And it was an amazing experience. And the way everything went down in that audition, I was sure that I had it. And I didn't get it. I was so disappointed.

Cliff Chamberlain:

My gosh.

Yasen Peyankov:

But you know what? Cliff, it worked really well, because that same year, actually, I started dating Bisa. So, if I had gotten the movie, maybe Bisa I wouldn't have hooked up that summer. And, hey, I'll take Bisa any time before I take Sacha Baron Cohen. So, there you go.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What's the last song you listened to?

Yasen Peyankov:

Mm. We've been listening to a lot of jazz lately. I think it was something by Nina Simone.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Who's your favorite writer?

Yasen Peyankov:

Hemingway. Hemingway for, like, novels. Chekhov for plays.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Fantastic. Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

Yasen Peyankov:

It's got to be the lakefront. I love the lakefront. It's—I love being around water. Every time I'm around water. I just—maybe because I grew up by water, but yeah, the lakefront would be the one.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Sea Capital of Bulgaria. What animal do you most identify with?

Yasen Peyankov:

Okay, see, that's an interesting one. I always start I was a lion because I'm a Leo. But my wife tells me that I'm an eagle. So, I think I'd have to settle for the griffin.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Nice! [*Laughter*] A combo. What do you mean settle?

Yasen Peyankov:

A mythical creature.

Cliff Chamberlain:

That's not a settle. That's a like “I'll tell you what I am, a Griffin: a combination eagle lion.” [*Laughter*] All right. And finally, if you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

Yasen Peyankov:

Alright, so this is where I did a little bit of digging around. So, what I did is: I went through all the roles that I have been auditioning for, some of them I've gotten most of them that I haven't. And I made a little compilation of all the descriptions from Breakdown Services. And this is what it looks like. Age range: 40 to 60. Caucasian. At least 5'10" in height. A tough Eastern European guy who looks like a hitman (think *Eastern Promises*). Has an accent but not forced, maybe just refined rather than specific to another country. He's brutal, calculating and invincible. Always calm, even in crisis. Intelligent philosophical, realistic. Good-humored, but not a man you want to disappoint. Jolly and rosy when laced with vodka while concealing a dangerous edge. Unexpected warmth and vulnerability. Not too “character-looking.” Not a model. His mannerisms are quirky, not slick. Likeable. He has a dry sense of humor.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well add to that description, one of my heroes and one of my favorite people. And thank you so much for talking to me, Yasen. It's so great to see you and hear your voice and hear your stories. You've meant a lot to me and to a lot of other people as well. So, I love you, man.

Yasen Peyankov:

Thank you, Cliff. I love you too. I'm so glad we got to do this.

Stage Manager:

Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Caroline Neff:

Thank you for listening.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And thanks again to our guest this week, Yasen Peyankov.

Caroline Neff:

Half Hour is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

Caroline Neff:

Today's stage manager was Laura D. Glenn.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To—

Caroline Neff:

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Follow us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram.

Caroline Neff:

And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org. Till next time, this is Caroline Neff—

Cliff Chamberlain:

And Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places. I usually—if I start rambling, I usually just start talking about people—how much people mean to me so...

Caroline Neff:

What a terrible character trait, Cliff!

Cliff Chamberlain:

Golly!