

Ep: 10 – Matthew-Lee Erlbach: “Defend Arts Workers Now”

Date: 9/14/20

Featuring: Matthew-Lee Erlbach and Audrey Francis, with Christine D. Freeburg.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

This will be the most important thing I'll have ever written.

Audrey Francis:

[*Music*] From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

It's more important than any play, or TV show or book.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*. [*Music ends*] Hello, and welcome to this episode of *Half Hour*. I'm Audrey Francis and I'm hosting by myself this week. You still here? We all still good? Okay, great. I'm so excited to share this episode's conversation with one of my favorite artists, and to be honest (yes, I'm biased), one of my dearest friends: Matthew-Lee Erlbach. So, some of you might remember Matthew from his play, *The Doppelgänger (an international farce)* that we produced at Steppenwolf back in the spring of 2018. And if you didn't see it, it starred Rainn Wilson, who I was absolutely way funnier than. You still here? Did you believe that? Because it was wrong Rainn killed that play. But honestly, Matthew is one of the coolest playwrights I've ever worked with because he was so open to the process of collaboration. And he really understood what it meant to have an ensemble effort create a play. And I think that is why I found this conversation so enthralling because Matthew truly is the embodiment of what it means to be a community collaborator. So I'm just going to be really honest, I'm going to read the bio that I believe Matthew wrote that is currently on his website because he's such a great writer, that there's no way I could describe him better than he can describe himself. So, “Matthew-Lee is a writer, actor and filmmaker from Chicago, whose work largely focuses on erased histories, as well as the impact of technological revolutions on capital, labor, race, spirituality and democratic movements. He also writes comedy. It's dark. He loves pudding.” I also recently learned that he's a trained opera singer, so, what the actual fuck? He truly is a jack of all trades. And if you want to check out some of his recent work, you can watch his new web series *Human Interest* that he wrote and directed with Mallory Portnoy. It just won best series at Series Fest and I binge watched it—laughed, cried, yes it was better than *Cats*. Is that saying a lot? You get it. But in the conversation that we're sharing with you today, Matthew and I didn't really get to talk about any of that because there is so much more that he's doing right now. So, what we talked about is a campaign that Matthew has recently been pouring hours into called Be an Arts Hero. Be an Arts Hero is an intersectional grassroots campaign comprised of arts and culture workers, unions, and institutions in the United States pushing the Senate to allocate proportionate relief to the arts and culture sector of the American economy. If you're an artist in the US, chances are that you've seen some of their advocacy in recent days on social media. So, we're going to talk more about their work in the interview, but right now, they're working on a piece of legislation in Washington to provide immediate relief to arts and culture institutions and individuals. So Matthew and the rest of the team (including Carson Elrod, Brooke Ishibashi, and Jenny Grace Makhholm) have very quickly assembled a robust national lobbying campaign, and in recent days have been meeting with senatorial staff and members of the House to gain support for their bill called DAWN. And I actually got to participate in one

of these calls. It was terrifying. And also, I learned so much about the way our country views the arts economy. And if you're an artist or a supporter of the arts, I encourage you to please keep listening. Because its pretty mind blowing what Matthew and his team are doing. If you find the conversation in today's episode compelling, we'd encourage you to get in touch with your national representatives and express your support. We have more tools to do so at the end of the episode. But now, Matthew-Lee Erlbach.

Stage Manager:

Good evening, everyone. This is your half hour call. Half hour till top of show. This is your half hour call. Please make sure you sign in for this evening's performance. And we're about to open the house, so please don't use the stage, or the people will see you. This is your half hour call. Thank you.

Audrey Francis:

So, you started as an actor; I know that you have a lot of TV projects you've written for Netflix for Showtime, you've got Nickelodeon, you've got TV stuff going with Sony and yet, in this moment, you're doing something on a totally different level. What have you been doing right now, now that nothing can happen?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Well, now actually, everything can happen. So, the last eight weeks—I think it's been eight weeks—I have been involved with a campaign called Be an Arts Hero, which was, really, accidental. I had started to write a letter, an open letter to the US Senate. And my friend Brooke had reached out and was like, "Be an Arts Hero, da-da-da, this is an amazing group." I'm like, "That sounds amazing; you guys should write a letter." And then she came back. She's like, "Do you want to write a letter for us?" I was like, "Yeah, perfect. I've stopped and started writing this letter amidst my, you know, other things. So, this is great. This is a great focus." And so, as we were working on this, it became really clear to me that what this letter could do was one: mobilize our industry, but also mobilize the arts economy writ large. You know: museums, cultural spaces, related businesses, opera, dance, libraries. When we talk about the arts economy, we're talking about an \$877 billion economy. That's nearly \$900 billion that has not received proportionate or adequate relief. That's 5.1 million arts workers. 675,000 small businesses that just happen to be arts businesses. Now, if the top 10 airlines can lobby Congress to get \$50 billion for their \$1 trillion in generated revenue, that's 5%. Certainly, the arts economy should get adequate and proportionate relief. And what that is, is \$43.85 billion of our \$877. That's 5%. So, the numbers precedential. So, the letter was saying we need an immediate extension of FPUC, we need a 100% COBRA subsidy, and we need \$43.85 billion to put a floor underneath the whole arts economy. Because Steppenwolf employs over a little over 100 people full time. That's a big small business. That's important. Now its product is not a vacuum cleaner; its product requires the hiring of more people. So, every three to four months, a company is hired to create a show, to create a story. Now the business of story is huge. It's one of our greatest exports in Hollywood and Broadway. \$1.83 billion—more in ticket sales last year than all of the New York and New Jersey sports teams combined. So, tell me why the arts economy doesn't receive the same relief. The reason why we're not getting adequate relief is because we're not a squeaky enough wheel. And so what happened with the amazing work that Arts Hero had been doing with their Insta lives, and their graphics, and their educational stuff and with reaching out to celebrities in tandem with the letter—suddenly this letter got over 10,000 signatures from arts leaders across the country. From The Met, Carnegie Hall, Steppenwolf to rank and file arts workers, storefront organizations, places I'd never even heard of before, museums—I mean it is absolutely incredible—to Pulitzer, Oscar, Tony, Emmy-winners, to the countless number of admin, custodial staff, janitors, technicians, engineers, all the blue collar jobs that the arts economy employs. Union jobs also. And so,

you know, this Arts Hero became this mobilizing effort and a labor movement is what it is. And so, through that letter, we were able to get meetings. It became a tool to reach out to Senate staffs. So, I've been reaching out to different Senate staffs, Chiefs of Staff, Senior Policy advisors, legislative correspondents, economic policy advisors and saying, "Hey, here's the story with this letter. Here's what Arts Hero is doing. We'd love to set up a meeting with our team and yours." And we started getting responses immediately. So, we met with Feinstein, Harris, Durbin, Duckworth (you're on one of those calls), Warren, Markey, Cornyn, Tillis—Republican offices—Murkowski, Perdue, King. All across the country, we're meeting with GOP and Democratic senators. And, you know, everyone—either people are surprised, and they're like, "Oh, we didn't know that." And so, there's a real education there. Or they go, "We know that and we're on board with you; how can we help?" But what we were told in these meetings was, you know, "This is really great. Do you have any bill language?" And we're like, "Bill language?" So, we looked at Save Our Stages and Restart and you know, one of the things we heard was, "You don't have to reinvent the wheel, find a template that works for you. And we just need language to help us move it forward." And so, what we've been talking about, this \$43.85, we're like, "Okay, now we need a vehicle for it. We need to explain how this is going to work." And so, what came out of it was, I had looked at the bill summary for Save Our Stages. And we had all been talking about what had worked—what was working in SOS, what was working in Restart, and what wasn't working in SOS and what wasn't working in Restart. And so, what came out of that was expanding on the template of SOS and going, "Okay, this is only talking about the music industry, really. We need to be broader." So, I spent some time and DAWN came out of it—Defend Arts Workers Now. There is no economic recovery, except by the light of DAWN. And that's kind of how we phrase it. So, it's a real fun acronym. And so what that \$43.85 does, is it authorizes existing—it doesn't create any new government—it authorizes existing institutions, the NEA, NEH, CPB, IMLS and SBA, authorizes them this 5%—this \$43.5 billion—because they have dispersal mechanisms already. They have that infrastructure (they'll have to maybe build a little more because it's a grant program). They will disperse that to partner organizations and to institutional and individual applicants for direct economic relief. And what—who we're trying to help are all the people that SOS and Restart aren't helping. And by the way, we're not saying "no, but;" we're saying "yes, and." We want those and we want DAWN. And DAWN is for the operators, employees and artists, of recording venues, live venues, cultural spaces and related businesses. And so that's—DAWN is filling the gaps. It's holistic, because as you and I know, we're not incorporated. We're not a small business. We need relief, because if we're not here—and this is one of the things I say on these calls, too, as kind of a thought experiment—Steppenwolf is a star. Goodman is a star. Krannert Center in Urbana Champaign, The Museum of Science and Industry—they're stars. And they anchor a highly interdependent commercial ecosystem. And if one of these stars implodes, it takes down everything in its vortex: retail hospitality, that restaurant rush at 8pm. You have these implosions happening all over the state. Suddenly a constellation of anchor arts institutions, goes down. Now multiply that throughout the whole nation and you have a systemic collapse. These jobs don't come back. And I'll say one final thing and I'll shut up. If we were coal. If coal was worth \$877 billion, you bet your bottom dollar, every single senator and congressperson would be elbowing each other to bail out coal. But because we don't have a Department of Arts and Culture, because we don't have a Secretary of Arts and Culture, we don't have the same advocacy within our government. The Department of Transportation exists, and it helps transportation. We don't have that. And we need that. One of the things that I think we do is have a congressional committee that studies everything that Americans for the Arts has done NSAA. That information needs to be metabolized and then on the desks, in the minds, in the hearts, and in the mouths of every single representative in the Senate and in the House. And we need to have a committee metabolizing that. And we need to have our Mr. Rogers moment like in 1969, when he asked for money for the CPB and PBS. We need to have a public hearing about the impact of a nearly \$900 billion industry that is everywhere. Our fates are tied together. If the arts economy collapses, our

economy collapses. There is no economic recovery without a robust arts economy recovery. Full stop. I'm sorry for yelling at you.

Audrey Francis:

Holy shit. You heard it here, folks. That's the passionate artist Matthew-Lee Erlbach. No on the real. Okay. Hearing you talk about, "This is an arts movement; this is a labor movement." Sometimes when I hear a lot of the numbers or when I hear about policy or just the way that our government works, I start to shut down. Because I think—one: I think, "I don't—it doesn't matter. I don't matter. We're never going to matter. There's never any change." What's heartbreaking to me, Matthew, is that I think most of the artists that I know, we genuinely question our worth. And currently I, as an artist, I'm going through a weird existential crisis of, "What—why does what I do matter?" And the truth is, is like, it feels like when the world is in this state, I have had these moments of feeling like, "Acting is stupid, and plays are stupid, and TV is stupid, and it doesn't matter and I should quit and go do something meaningful." What do you say to a country that has basically conditioned artists to feel that what we do doesn't matter, but then that doesn't seem to match up with the numbers?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah, I mean, you say that, and it makes me want to break down in tears because I don't want to have to make this economic argument. I don't want to have to say the Illinois arts economy is worth over \$30 billion dollars; 224,000 jobs. I don't want to be doing that every day. What I want to be doing is speaking to exactly what you said, which is: let's forget the project of society for a moment that we're all engaged in. And let's just go back to the basic human need to understand our own existence. That's the conversation that I want to have. And so, what has happened is, we have been—the story of what we do has been turned into extracurricular and luxury. But Audrey, when people come to see you want to play when people come to Steppenwolf or go to a museum or go to the symphony, and they experience the expression of our humanity—if we don't have that we are just spiritually bankrupt. What does humanity mean if we're not exploring what our own existence is? I mean, whatever that looks like. And so, that's why church exists; it is a place for story. And that is what the theater is. It is a secular place for story. And so, what you do, what I do, what we all do, absolutely matters. Here's a really superficial example. I want everyone who doesn't think the arts are important to go back through this pandemic and not listen to music, not watch Netflix, not read books. I want you to go outside and not see architecture, not read signs, not go to a library, which is a house for literature. I want you to live in a world without art. And I want you to tell me how you do. And I want you to tell me how you do when we are under an existential and democratic threat. I want you to see how your day goes. I think it's going to go pretty rough.

Audrey Francis:

No, I, I thank you so much for that because I don't think that people, at least in this capitalist society, realize how influenced we are by art. And myself as an artist, I don't even realize it. You have gone full force into saying, "Okay, fuck it. I'm developing a bill. And this is what I want in Congress. We do not have representation. We don't have a committee. We don't have anything like that." So, can you just tell me what wild success would be for you? What is wild success in the way that maybe the United States can fundamentally change the way we look at and value the arts economy and the art workers in America?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Wild success to me looks like this. It looks like artists getting paid a fair wage across all sectors. It looks like respect for our cultural institutions because that means a respect for our humanity and our humanities. It looks like proportionate investment in our artistic institutions. It means subsidizing our

artistic and creative and cultural institutions. It means a Federal Arts Project. It means long term investment in our sector. Again, we are a jobs multiplier. So, I want to see in America a country that not only respects what we do, but supports it and understands that we are workers. We are arts workers, and we are part of the economy. We're in your neighborhoods. And we—and that we're essential. We are essential to democracy. That's—my wildest—and my wildest dream really is that, you know, in the UK and in Germany, they're giving economic relief because they realize the importance of their institutions. They realize the importance of arts workers. So, my wildest dreams are economic justice and recognition and respect.

Audrey Francis:

I can't tell you, and I'm sure you've had this too, if anybody ever asks, "Oh, what do you do?" which is what everyone in the states always asks; it's the first question. And if I say, "I'm an actor," their second question is, "But what do you do for money?" Or they'll look at—this is my experience—there's this kind of like novelty to it of like, "Oh, okay, well, then what have I seen you on?" Because if I can't tie it to this one thing, then there's nothing else which is just so strange. And so, to hear you say like, "We just want economic justice and recognition. Can we just get recognized for that and have that be supported the way every other year industry is in the States?" And so for you to—it feels a little bit like when I talk to you that it's like, "Okay, so you're, you're gonna fight fire with fire and say, 'Fine, then this is what we need.'"

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah. We're going to speak your language because you haven't been hearing us. The last time you really heard us was FDR and LBJ's Great Society programs when a lot of these institutions came to be. And they were recognized. And so, we that that is the moment we are in right now. And that will happen.

Stage Manager:

Fifteen minutes please. This is your fifteen-minute call. Fifteen minutes till top of show.

Audrey Francis:

I was lucky enough to see you and the Be an Arts Hero team do one of those calls. And it was intense.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Really? *[Laughter]*

Audrey Francis:

Oh my god. Like, I just felt like I was like, "Please do it right. I don't want to fuck it up." And you all were so smart and so brilliant. And you worked with such a—it was a collaboration. It was a team—

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

It's ensemble.

Audrey Francis:

Yes, it's an ensemble!

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

It's an ensemble, man.

Audrey Francis:

Tell me about your half hour process before you get on these calls with the senators.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

So, we realized early on we need in the Senate a brief, a document that had you know, we're doing deep dives. And it's—we have an incredible senate team, led by Kimberly Chatterjee, who's just amazing. And so, half hour, fifteen minutes before we get on a Zoom, or we get on a conference call, we go through. We talk about who's going to lead that call. Like for Illinois, because I'm a proud Illinoisan and a proud Chicagoan, and I went to U of I Urbana-Champaign, I wanted to lead the Illinois calls. Very important for me. I want to talk about my state, how much I love it and what's at stake. And I wanted to get my senators on board. So, we have this brief, we debrief on the brief, we talk about points that we want to hit. And we go. Now it's now it's really shorthand. I mean, I think you came on to our second or third call we ever had. So, I think it was all hands-on-deck, we were still figuring out what to do. And now it's become really easy. Like now, you know, as we're not all doing calls together, because we also can't. We have a huge day of action happening on Monday, like there's so much going on in the organization. So not everyone can do all the things. So that's the half hour. So, I do a deep dive on the brief. I do some googling. I get the words in my mouth a little bit—like an audition, almost. And go in there and have a conversation with my allies and have a warm conversation and talk to them about a part of our country that they might not know about, and if they do, let's work together. Let's get this bill on the floor. Let's pass some legislation. And, you know, and I'll say this too, that even in GOP rooms, we get such a warm response. When it's an economic issue, I think that when you're speaking senator, you really—when you're speaking economics, it is a very easy sell. So that's kind of the half hour. Largely coffee. I'm getting up around 5:30 or 6:00, because a lot of these calls are in DC. So, it's East Coast time. So, I'm exhausted. And yeah, and I fucking love it.

Audrey Francis:

I love that. Are there any similarities between the pitches that you do for the senators and the pitches that you do for Sony and HBO?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah, actually. It's storytelling. And in this case, I get to tell the story of my community, and the stakes are that much higher. And so it's making sure that I'm telling a very concise and propulsive story that makes them want to engage in the materials that I'm going to follow up with. And if we're lucky, they'll buy the pitch. But this will be the most important thing I'll have ever written. And if it happens, I mean, just—it's more important than any, any play or TV show or book or anything.

Audrey Francis:

I just want to know why. Because sometimes when I have the luxury of talking to you on this “pod-versation” via Zoom, and there are little moments when I can see your heart almost break. Like it seems like it's overwhelming with emotion for you. Why is this your calling (if you think it is right now)?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

I think that I'm just exhausted about being left behind. And I see it happening to my colleagues. And I see it happening to incredibly brilliant people, brilliant people in every sector getting diminished and left behind and ignored. And it fucking kills me. And so, I am doing this out of anger, desperation, and hope. And great, great, great, great love. Like this is born from love. I love arts workers; I love our institutions. They are—like, when I think about the miracle of my own existence and of our existence as a species, the fact that like, this is something that we do, is just mind blowing to me, so we have to protect it. And

so, I think that's what drives me too. I don't want to lose that. You know, we lose that we lose our democracy and we lose our humanity.

Audrey Francis:

And you know, Matthew, it's—I think one could argue like, “Hey, there are children starving. And there are people who are experiencing homelessness and there are black people who are being killed by police.” How do we say, “There's also room for this?”

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Well, this is intersectional and Be an Arts Hero is an intersectional movement, which is really important. I struggle with this all the time. How do I hold in my heart and in my head, both what's happening in Yemen, the rain forest burning, Black Lives Matter, authoritarianism in the United States, homelessness. It's so overwhelming and so I have to find my lane. And so, this is my lane. And you know, I've worked with homeless organizations, I've worked—I've volunteered on different issues. And it's—someone said this really amazing thing to me today. You know, “If three rabbits are loose in your backyard, you can't catch all three at the same time, you have to catch one at a time.” And so, this is the rabbit that I'm trying to catch right now. And I see the other ones. And maybe I'll pause for a moment. And they're all they're always in my mind. I am devastated by the state of things right now. But I know that all of that gets focused into this laser right here. And it can be really effective here. And I have a network here and I'm building something here with amazing people. Like, “Stay here. Don't move. Keep going. Keep going on this track.” And so, you always have to be looking at these other movements and pain and addressing it and I think you just have to keep pivoting, and pivoting in the most effective way.

Audrey Francis:

I love that and I agree with what you said about it being intersectional because sometimes I view art as education. It's like, you know, empathy education. And so, I think we see things very similarly, I think we were cut from the same cloth. And so, in a lot of ways I have complicity bias with you—

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Me too.

Audrey Francis:

But if you can be one of the people that is making this kind of change, I have to believe that there's a ripple effect on other things, too. You know, I mean, you and I talked about doing plays about some of the things that you talked about, which is a way of educating on other issues. And if you know what your lane is right now, that's where you do the work. Rather than, you know, crumbling, overthinking. “Oh my gosh, I can't catch all three rabbits.” And I just think that's really, really admirable and important. And something that I'm learning from right now about, like, that it's okay to listen to your lane and make sure you do the most with it as long as you're doing it with integrity.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah, yes. Yeah. Doing everything with integrity and your character is the most valuable thing you have.

Stage Manager:

Five minutes everyone. This is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes.

Audrey Francis:

You ready for the lightning round?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

I'm so fucking ready for the lightning round.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, what did you have for breakfast this morning?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

This is going to sound really douche— I had muscle milk and coffee.

Audrey Francis:

The fuck?!

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

What is your favorite theater experience whether you were involved in the experience or watching the experience?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Medea starring Fiona Shaw. It was fucking life changing. That performance, that direction, that show was breathtaking.

Audrey Francis:

And that's a comedy, right?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Very funny play.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, got it.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Very funny play. Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, what's your favorite piece of memorabilia you've kept from a play or a project?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

God, I keep something from everything. Oh, fuck, man. I don't know. I have these really—there was a time in my life where I wore Red Wings boots.

Audrey Francis:

I love those.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah, they're really great. And I wore them—I wore the shit out of them and had to get them repaired in New York. And so, like, they're great in the winter. They're really hard in the summer, but I was really

committed to these boots. They went like almost up to my knees. And so, when I was doing my solo play *Handbook for American Revolutionary*, I wore them. And I was like, “Okay, these are ready to get thrown out.” And like, “I can't throw these out, like, I've been I've been around the world with these.” And like, and it culminated in the exclamation point of *Handbook for American Revolutionary* so I have to keep them.

Audrey Francis:

Where are they now?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

They are in a box in Chicago. At my parents' house. Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

Last song you listened to?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Oh my god. I don't know what song it is, but I just discovered The Bee Gees. I just discovered—like I knew The Bee Gees were out there, like, I heard the song, like “Oh yeah, they're pretty good.” And then I just really got into—I think *2 Years On* is the album I just listened to. I am so fucking obsessed. I love The Bee Gees.

Audrey Francis:

Wow.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah.

Audrey Francis:

Not what I expected. Kind of making our relationship take a turn in a direction I never knew it would go. That I'm in the for.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Do you hate the The Bee Gees?

Audrey Francis:

No I'm in.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

You're in I'm in for it.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, great. So, what I know what animal do you most identify with?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

This is a funny question that has some historical context. I most identify with a wolf, I think. But I've been told that I'm really more of a teacup piggy. So—because I'm a real snuggle bug. So, I don't know. I kind of identify with both. Yeah. But also, I like coyotes. There's a lot of coyotes where I am right now and they feel very like, you know, they're real survivalists. They're like—they're preppers. I feel like

coyotes have a prepper—well, no, that would be more squirrels, because squirrels like hide shit. Squirrels are preppers, I think.

Audrey Francis:

Okay. All very good to know. Animal that you most fear.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Cockroaches and snakes.

Audrey Francis:

Yeah, me too.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Oh, and racists.

Audrey Francis:

Oh, I hate those animals!

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah, yeah. Really hard. The worst.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, two more questions. Perfect date night?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Definitely music. Cheese. I really like good cheese and wine. It's really bougie and I hate to admit it but I do.

Audrey Francis:

And just a little dose of gout.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

And just—oh my god I'm going to get gout. I'm going to be the goutiest.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, wait—

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

And *Water & Woods*.

Audrey Francis:

Oh, *Water & Woods*. Okay, that's part of the date?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Yeah. *Water & Woods*. Oh, for sure. That's a good date.

Audrey Francis:

Two more questions. And I already said two for the last one, but I swear this is the last two. A job that you didn't get that broke your heart.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Frankie Valli in *Jersey Boys*. I was a I went to "Frankie Camp" is what they call it. And I was waiting tables. It was my second year in New York, and I had been called back a thousand times. I wanted this. I like—I could sing that role perfectly. I wanted that job so bad. And then I found out I didn't get it and had to go back to my job that night. And I was convinced it was going to happen—like just across the board was going to happen. And then I found out I didn't get it, and my manager was like, he introduced me to this table. He's like, "You've got to meet Matthew. He's going to be on Broadway!" And I don't—I never really talked about auditions. But this one I talked about because I was like—it had taken over my life. I had to learn all this material, and it was—I was consumed with it.

Audrey Francis:

Yep.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

And that just broke my heart. And that was probably the moment where I thought, "I'm going to start writing more because this heartbreak, I don't have control over. And I just have a lot to say and I just need to pivot."

Audrey Francis:

Yeah, it hurts so bad. Okay, so then the last question, what would be your character description?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

What do you think my character description would be? I can't answer that.

Audrey Francis:

I mean, I can answer.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

You can answer—

Audrey Francis:

But that's not fair to the public—to the masses.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

It's not fair to the—I feel my character description is... I can't, I don't know how to answer this. I am passionate. Compulsive. Addicted to sugar. This is so bad. I can't talk about myself in these terms. This is—I should go to therapy for this, or a psychic or an Akashic Reader. I don't know I can't answer this! Don't put me on the spot. I'm not, I'm not—I'm too self-aware to answer this question honestly.

Audrey Francis:

Okay, that's awesome. That's your character description: too self-aware to have a fucking honest description.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Oh a hundred fucking percent.

Audrey Francis:

So, ff people want to know about you and Be an Arts Hero, where can we find you?

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Well, right now you can go to beanartshero.com and you can look at our bill, Defend Arts Workers Now. Go there and call your senators. They want to hear from you. Call your Congresspeople. They want to hear from you. Every office says, “We need to hear from our constituents.” If you tell them to support DAWN—if everyone listening to this right now, contact your representative and says, “I need you to support DAWN,” if you send them our letter, the Open Letter to the US Senate, tell them that they need to extend FPUC now, COBRA, that they need to support DAWN, it will make a huge difference. Go to beanartshero.com talk about the letter. Talk about DAWN. Something really big is happening right now.

Audrey Francis:

Matthew, thank you so much for being on *Half Hour*.

Matthew-Lee Erlbach:

Oh my god, thank you for having me. It is such an honor to be doing this—speaking with you. I just adore you and thank you.

Stage Manager:

Places everyone. This is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. This is your places call. Places.

Audrey Francis:

And that’s it for this episode of *Half Hour*, brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre. Thanks for listening! Huge thanks to Matthew-Lee Ehrlbach for joining us today. To learn more about Be An Arts Hero, visit beanartshero.com. The best way to support this important work is to get in touch with your national representatives. They want to hear from you—and need to hear from you—in order for us all to take this idea and put it into action. *Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman. The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. Today’s stage manager was Chris D. Freeburg. Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To and the whole crew at Steppenwolf. You can reach us on twitter @steppenwolfthtr, or on facebook and Instagram. And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org. ‘Til next time! A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.