



## SEASON ONE

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**Ep: 1 – Jeff Perry “An Explorer’s Heart”**

**Date: 4/2/20**

**Featuring:** Jeff Perry and Cliff Chamberlain, with Audrey Francis, Glenn Davis, Caroline Neff and Laura D. Glenn.

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**Jeff Perry:**

For the first time in my life, I don't know what's going on.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Jeff Perry:**

And he says, "Aah, now you're getting somewhere."

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*.

**Audrey Francis:**

Are we starting?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

We're starting!

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Let's do this!

**Audrey Francis:**

Hi, everyone.

**Caroline Neff:**

It's good to see your faces.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Good to see you all too.

**Glenn Davis:**

Same.

**Audrey Francis:**

So, we're going to record an intro.

**Glenn Davis:**

Wait, so who's leading this thing?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I think Caroline is, right?

**Audrey Francis:**

Awesome. Good job, Caroline.

**Caroline Neff:**

That is a great deal of pressure.

**Glenn Davis:**

[*Laughter*] I thought it was Caroline.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay, Caroline.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, I'm already sweating. Um—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Nobody can see your sweat. You can't hear sweat. So, it's all good.

**Caroline Neff:**

You don't know how hard I sweat. [*Laughter*] Um, okay! My name is Caroline Neff. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf Theatre Company since 2016, and my pronouns are she/her/hers. And my favorite food is eggs.

**Audrey Francis:**

Ew.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Wow.

**Audrey Francis:**

True and gross, gross and true. All right, this is Audrey Francis. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf since 2017, and my favorite food is French fries and ice cream.

**Caroline Neff:**

Together?

**Audrey Francis:**

Or not.

**Caroline Neff:**

Separate?

**Audrey Francis:**

Both. You give me one, I'll take it. You give me both, I'll take 'em. Did I say my pronouns? She/ her/hers.

**Caroline Neff:**

Thank you.

**Glenn Davis:**

This is Glenn Davis, and I had to actually look it up when I became an ensemble member. It was May of 2017. My pronouns are he/him/his. And yeah, was that it?

**Caroline Neff & Cliff Chamberlain:**

Favorite food.

**Glenn Davis:**

My favorite food is cauliflower.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Whoa!

**Audrey Francis:**

I don't believe you.

**Caroline Neff:**

That's a real surprise. That's a real surprise.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cauliflower!

**Caroline Neff:**

But it's very very versatile. I will say.

**Audrey Francis:**

Well, it's weird. I've just never seen you eat cauliflower.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh my, God. I've never seen anyone eat cauliflower.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wait, Cliff. How do you say cauliflower?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh God, cauliflower (*call-ee-flower*).

**Audrey Francis:**

[*Laughter*] (*imitating CC*) Cauliflower.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Is that not right? I'm from California.

**Audrey Francis:**

I'm from Colorado, so I don't really know. Um, okay, Cliff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

My name is Cliff Chamberlain. He/him/his. I've been an ensemble member at Steppenwolf Theatre Company since 2018, and my favorite food is dark chocolate. Specifically thin, dark chocolate covered pretzels from uh— yeah.

**Glenn Davis:**

Nice! And Cliff, where are you?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I'm in Los Angeles right now. I was just in New York a couple weeks ago. We were in previews along with Caroline for *The Minutes* and got out of there two weeks ago and now I'm back in Los Angeles.

**Caroline Neff:**

Glenn, where are you?

**Glenn Davis:**

I am in Chicago. I was in LA and raced back to Chicago when the sky started falling.

**Caroline Neff:**

Audrey?

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, I'm in Chicago— River North neighborhood, in my closet. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

And I'm in New Jersey. I'm in Springfield, New Jersey, with a very, very dear friend. So I would love to just talk a little bit about how this brainchild came to be.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I've always thought that because at Steppenwolf we have this ensemble of artists, that there are so many people whose stories are worth hearing. And some of the podcasts that I really like are interview style podcast, one-on-one interviews that give people a chance to have longer conversations than you might hear in either a five minute, you know, television appearance or a print interview. And I know that the four of us have been talking about this type of idea, a podcast, for— it's got to be a year, right? Along with Billy Petersen I know had talked about it before. And Jeff Perry, who is our first guest, has sort of been talking about a podcast for a long time. So the fact that it's happening now in the middle of this wild time in the world, I find to be, it's a nice thing to kind of hold on to while everything else is crumbling outside. Just— just the fact that I get to talk to you three is kind of a gift, so.

**Audrey Francis:**

Same. We're also all in a very precarious moment right now like, like— we're these four newer ensemble members who all just lost—

**Caroline Neff:**

Our job?

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, we lost our livelihood.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

All four of us, yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

So hearing that conversation with Jeff made me feel less alone and less scared. And also reminded me, like, that it's a marathon.

**Caroline Neff:**

That's awesome! And our show's called *Half Hour*. But what is— what is half hour to you?

**Glenn Davis:**

Half hour is the time in which you need to be at the theater before the show starts. So if your show starts at 7:30, then you have to be there at 7:00pm. I think it's going to come as a huge surprise for some people that we only have to be there 30 minutes before they do. Many times I'm walking into the theater, I might grab a drink, alcoholic usually, before the show, and then I'm walking through the bar, going to the dressing room, and some person who knows me goes, "Wait, wait, you're just getting here?" and I'm like, "Yeah." They're like, "Oh, you haven't been, like, getting ready, like, for the last three hours?" People think that it takes like, seven hours for us to get into character.

**Caroline Neff:**

I also love that it's like— it isn't— it's the first time— you see these people six days a week, but yet it always feels like a really fresh, like, walking into a dressing room at half hour and being like, "How was your day?"

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Like, it's such a special ritual for me. I always get there an hour before because I'm— I'm— I have anxiety.

**Audrey Francis:**

Well you're also a professional. You like actually warm up and shit.

**Caroline Neff:**

I do.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, Audrey gets to half hour half hour after half hour. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

She's actually like, "Can my half hour be 10?" [Laughter] "Including fight call?"

**Audrey Francis:**

Yep. I have asked that before. That is a true story. I've also asked to leave the show early. Like, do I have to do curtain call?

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, get out of there. Um, and who's our— who's our first guest? Our first guest is Jeff Perry who's one of the founding members of Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and Cliff? Your interview with him is amazing. He's such a, like, wealth of information and joy and kindness. How'd it go?

**Glenn Davis:**

And he is the best storyteller too.

**Caroline Neff:**

So good!

**Glenn Davis:**

I could hear him tell stories all day.

**Audrey Francis:**

And also just like, organically and involuntarily infuses hope into everything that he says.

**Caroline Neff:**

I cried twice in the first 10 minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

So did I!

**Caroline Neff:**

I really did. It just felt so good.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, it was awesome. I mean, I, I've had, you know, multiple conversations with Jeff over the years, but to have like, selfishly, to have a one-on-one time with him was— he's just so smart. He's really honest. He sort of said a few things that really blew my mind about admitting to some of his struggles and, and also how he kind of came out of those things is really, really cool. And he's such a warm, nice person.

**Glenn Davis:**

Nice.

**Caroline Neff:**

I love that. And one of the things that as we've sort of been thinking about future episodes that's really exciting me is I'm realizing how many ensemble members I don't know terribly well. I mean, I know them and I know their reputation and I know their work, but I would be lying if I said I knew them as human beings, and so to have that opportunity— not only to talk to my friends, but to talk to the people that I don't know very well yet, I'm really excited about.

**Audrey Francis:**

Alright, shall we get to the interview?

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay!

**Glenn Davis:**

Let's do it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I think so. I think everyone's going to really enjoy it. I mean, I think it's definitely time to head to the dressing room and see what Jeff has to say.

**Caroline Neff:**

I, for one, am dying to hear it again.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Jeff, it's so good to talk to you.

**Jeff Perry:**

Buddy, oh my god!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And I'm very grateful and happy that you are the first person to sign in on the half hour board. So—

**Jeff Perry:**

Well it's really exciting man, because you and I and Glenn and Caroline and Audrey and so many— and Billy Petersen— so many people have kicked, you know, this idea around.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It took a pandemic to make it really happen.

**Jeff Perry:**

And it took a pandemic for us to get off our ideas and do something, but—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You know that— it really is like, what do you do when you can't do the thing that we do, which is perform on stage with a group of people.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And luckily we have at least this chance to connect one-on-one, and then hopefully with more people who might be listening in so, yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

No matter what I think everyone's going to be trying to find the good in the situation, right?

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah, for sure. For sure.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So let me ask you something. Let me ask you, what is your— when you get to the theater for half hour, what do you— when half hour is called, what's your go to— what do you do at half hour? Are you someone who gets dressed in your costume right away? What are your habits and rituals at the half hour mark?

**Jeff Perry:**

Um, I usually— except like month, you know, nine of *August: Osage* or something, um, [*Laughter*] where it's a three hour and 20 minute show and on two show days, you know, you're just thinking that your nervous system can somehow pretend you haven't done this, you know, 1000 times. And that it hasn't been just a couple hours since you last went through the cathartic story, you know? But in a big generalized sense man, from I bet high school plays on, Cliff, I bet I get there a bit before half hour because there's always kind of nerves and wanting to make sure I'm there. And I'm a big list maker and note taker, so I'll often have little things I jotted to myself from the night before or the week before or a month ago or this or that and kind of, kind of look at that.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It's amazing that you still get nervous for— I mean, I know that, I find that to be true for actors of all ages.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

But I find— I still find it fascinating that— and I actually find myself getting more nervous to do plays the older I get.

**Jeff Perry:**

Uh-huh, yeah, that's interesting. I, I must say, in a general way, there's exceptions on any given day, but, but I— I'm getting better with myself as the decades roll on, man. And calmer in a way. I'm in my early

30's, it might have been Frank Galati's adaptation and direction of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. I'm not sure. I can't quite remember the Steppenwolf play. But—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, you've done 40 of them, so I'll give you a—

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Give me a pass on that. But, but it was— it was certainly before late '87, early '88 when I traded zip codes for Los Angeles. To return to Chicago a lot but kind of, in a way, traded zip codes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

And, and Austin Pendleton was around. We weren't in the same play, and it could have been he was audience at the moment, or this or that. I feel like we were in previews of whatever I was in. And he's always been a mentor and a buddy and a confidant and I said, "Austin, I'm freaking out man. I've loved doing this since I was about 14 or 15 and, and for the first time in my life, I don't know what's going on. I don't— I don't have confidence. I don't know if I'm going to remember where I go. I don't know if I'm going to remember my lines. I don't know the most basic things. I don't know this. I don't know that. I don't know that." Austin patiently listens to me and says, "Jeff, what phrase are you using quite a bit?" "I don't know?" And he says, "Aah, now you're getting somewhere." I, you know, I bit my tongue. Or I literally said, "Eff you, man! [*Laughter*] I got a preview tonight, I am telling you that I'm having a nervous break— a work nervous breakdown!" And, and— but what I came to love and appreciate was a much more overarching, you know, kind of, the artistic path lesson. It's probably really common, Cliff, for us actors, for us humans, to have some portion of ourselves intent on "I'm going to be the, I'm going to be the best student. I'm going to have the final solution. I'm going to have the best solution. I must have the plan. I must— I must be able to execute this and that." Versus, "Wait, wait, what's Austin saying? What's he saying? I think he's saying 'I don't know' is much more fertile territory than 'I know'."

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

Or pretending that I know. You know. And it's kind of the control freak versus the explorer.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

If those words make sense.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

They do.

**Jeff Perry:**

And, and the more that Tina Landau has entered my life, the more that side of myself that always existed that loved the moment— the moment's accident, the present-tense unknowing, the more I let that become a greater and greater percentage of how I wanted to work and how I wanted to live, in a sense, the more fun it became. And the calmer I became.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You— you talked about being a teenager. You are from Highland Park—

**Jeff Perry:**

Yes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Illinois. You were born in the 50's.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yes. 50— 1955.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

1955. August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yes, sir.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Your mom— your— your dad was a teacher?

**Jeff Perry:**

Yes, he was an English teacher at our local high school. My mom was a stay at home mom at certain years, a elementary school secretary in, in other years. And I have two sisters who are in heaven.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Jeff Perry:**

The some sort of heaven that I believe in being a very lapsed— being a very lapsed Presbyterian.  
[Laughter] And—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Sure. And what was— what was that life? What was your childhood like? And how did it get to theater?

**Jeff Perry:**

Somewhere at the end of grade school, Cliff, or the beginning of middle school, my eldest sister Jo saw that there was a local audition for the American Conservatory Theatre's residency, I believe doing two different plays, *Charley's Aunt* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. And they needed two people my age, a boy and a girl, to play the son and daughter in Pirandello's play. And my sister took me by the hand, we lived about a block from one of the Ravinia Festival entrances.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Uh-huh.

**Jeff Perry:**

And— and I auditioned for this thing. They had me do some kind of physical improv. It had something to do with a kind of reactive moment of. “you've just been scared by something and you're looking around...” That's kind of all I remember. And then I remember one task in the play was falling off a ladder and trusting you'd be caught by one of the other actors. I don't know if two people auditioned or if I was the only one, but I got the part.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Nice!

**Jeff Perry:**

And, and I loved doing that that summer. And apropos of— of not much else then, wonderful, you never know where life makes its connections. Austin Pendleton was a member of that company. He wasn't in that production, he was in *Charley's Aunt* with actors like René Auberjonois and others, but he was a member of the American Conservatory Theater Company at that time. And then, within a year or two, our eighth grade English teacher adapted a Herman Wouk novel, or a portion of it, and created a school— created a play— created a play of sorts. I can't remember its duration, it might have only been 30-40 minutes long. And I got a big part, and I remember it feeling so comfortable and fun to do that. And to get some, you know, to get positive feedback from classmates, and especially to get the attention of girls. And that proved giant.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Were any of the other folk part of that class, or did you meet some—

**Jeff Perry:**

So I met Gary Sinise as sophomores in high school—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Jeff Perry:**

And this tremendously charismatic, wonderful, formative teacher of English and drama.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So important.

**Jeff Perry:**

Barb— yep. Barbara June Greener-Patterson, and, and Gary and I are 15, I guess, and she's roaming the halls enlisting people to come audition for that year's musical, *West Side Story*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So you were buddies before?

**Jeff Perry:**

No, no. We met, we met through that.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Jeff Perry:**

We met through that. And would later, or almost immediately during the process, after the process— he and I being unwilling to believe that those four performances were over and playing this lousy little tape recorded reel to reel, you know, audio of the school play— the school musical. Uh, you know, that Gary and I were rescued from academic mediocrity at least, failure probably, [*Laughter*] and kind of shown something that we absolutely adored.

**Stage Manager:**

15 minutes please! 15 minutes, top of show. 15!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You have three huge legacies in my mind: Steppenwolf— being one of the three founders of Steppenwolf, the School at Steppenwolf, right, which is basically your brainchild, right?

**Jeff Perry:**

I got the people on the phone first, the passionate educators amongst us, the Anna Shapiro's, the Martha Lavey, the Sheldon Patinkin, and it quickly became Amy, and K. Todd and others. Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well I'm a graduate of the School at Steppenwolf. Audrey Francis and I were both in the same class, 2004, and it changed my life. So, thank you for that.

**Jeff Perry:**

Oh, man.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And then I know you did *Nash Bridges* and have done a ton of TV, but *Scandal* was a really big deal for you, too, right? And—

**Jeff Perry:**

Totally, yes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What is that like to— here you are, you've created Steppenwolf. You've started Steppenwolf. You've had all sorts of success with Steppenwolf. You've gone to LA, you've come back to do plays. And then you get *Scandal*, and then *Scandal* takes off. What is that ride like as someone who books that job— I don't know, were you in your 40's or 50's when you booked that?

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah, I mean that was 12— I'm 64. That was 12 years ago— 52?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's it like to take that ride at 52 as opposed to, you know, the ride that you were on early Steppenwolf or *Nash Bridges*. What's it like having a show like that at 52?

**Jeff Perry:**

It— it's— can we be R-rated?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Fuck yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

Okay. It's fucking heaven. It's heavenly. It's, like, the best. It was like a seven year drink of the most heavenly water meets flaming shots of tequila kind of thing. [Laughter] And so when everyone quite naturally through some kind of— through a combination of simple curiosity, growth, sometimes life choices of children, they start to individually, like a band where its members start to go, "I need to do an album on my own." And, you know, "I need to do this and that."

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

I was like the last of the originals clinging to, you know, the row— the little— the little sail boat's you know, masts, or something—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You're Ringo Starr, just like wait, Paul!

**Jeff Perry:**

Don't, don't, don't, don't! Wait!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

John, what are we doing?

**Jeff Perry:**

Wait, what are you doing? What are you doing?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

We got a good thing going here.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, and so, uh, it was *Balm in Gilead*, whatever that was, man. The New York version of that '83, '84.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I've seen that video. It's amazing.

**Jeff Perry:**

Laurie Metcalf and I had little tiny Zoe and—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Zoe Perry, your daughter, right?

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah. And Laurie and I—Laurie and I were together about five years. I don't know how long the literal, you know, marriage license was. But we knew at that point that we, we were going to separate, and going to divorce. And we were confused and felt failure about it and this and that, but never hatred, thank God, and we have a great relationship now and have for years and years and years. But I thought, "Okay, I'm—" Laurie got the Roseanne Barr TV show.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yep.

**Jeff Perry:**

And everyone else had felt some TV or film work, pretty much by that time, and some non-Steppenwolf theater work.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Uh-huh.

**Jeff Perry:**

And I had a little, but also I thought my geography of more solo exploration was going to be New York.

**Cliff Chamberlain:** Ah.

**Jeff Perry:**

And when Laurie got posted to Los Angeles, and it was so quickly successful, that TV show. That decided my geography and, because we were very committed to being in the same town with her, with Zoe, our daughter. And there were times— there were times, man, in— it often felt to me, Cliff, like we had extended our adolescence as long as we possibly could, and our collaborative life as long as we could. I would come to know in further decades that, oh no, thank God there will be more chapters of that collaborative life.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

But, at the time, I felt like maybe that was it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

That seven to nine year period of this obsessive tribe, you know?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

And then there were many times in LA where it just felt like, shit man, everybody 7 or 10 years ago my age already got through the hard crap. Or even gave up the profession, but whatever. If they were still at it, they already had momentum of a kind. And I'm auditioning for the first time in years and years and years.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah. And that is such a mind trip too where you've had this giant success and you know you've built this thing and now you're— you make a switch, and now you're auditioning again. It is a—

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

And it could be the very bottom of—what felt like the bottom of the potato chip bag. You know, man?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Sure.

**Jeff Perry:**

I'm either getting nothing, or getting some tiny thing that you just feel—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Like a lot of grease.

**Jeff Perry:**

God dang, man. Yeah, tiny little crumbs and grease. And, ah, and it also— because Laurie's success or John Malkovich's success or Joan Allen's success. You know, it's interesting Cliff, I ended up in therapy for the first time in my life. Part of it was something pretty predictable and I think common for people in their 30's.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

You know, a lot of stuff that they have swept under the rug comes in raging at them.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

But the thing that was most present for the actor psyche in me was, I'm jealous.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh gosh.

**Jeff Perry:**

I am feeling envy. It's the worst fucking feeling in the world. I have never felt this. I have only felt happy for my friends and I can't. This is horrible.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

This amount of comparison and self-esteem problem and everything that jealousy is, um, was hideous, and it sent me to a shrink who I ended up quite adoring and—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And it helped? And you—

**Jeff Perry:**

It did! It did! It did. It kind of— in an on again— mostly on again, a little bit off again depending on— for about five years and it, and life and work and that therapy and, you know, a lot of things helped me out of— helped me out of that.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

If I'm ever talking to anyone who's just starting out, that is the thing that I try to get people to get past as quickly as possible because it just burns you up and I've seen much better actors than me get burned up by that.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What about you when you're— if you had one— and talking about the school, the School at Steppenwolf—

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's the one piece of advice— like the tried and true piece of advice that you give to students on their, you know, first or last days?

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah, you know, I'm being reminded of something that feels like a kind of core life lesson or value or something, Cliff. *Scandal* buddy Tony Goldwyn— actor, director, producer. He reached out a couple days ago and said, "Jeff, I got an idea. You love teaching. I never have taught, but what do you think about you and I trying a Zoom, some sort of teleconference, co-teaching?" I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." Then we started talking about it. And he said, "You know, you know one of the core things, Jeff, that has taken me decades and decades and decades to get better at?" "What, Tony? What?" And he said, "Well it's

being open to study, study, study without— with an explorer's heart. With an improvisatory heart rather than, 'I must come to an executable conclusion.'"

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Right.

**Jeff Perry:**

He said, "I felt that so much more than— in any other part of my life— in this really demanding seven hour *The Inheritance* by Matthew Lopez.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah

**Jeff Perry:**

He was on Broadway these last months doing it, and he said, "Wouldn't that be a core beautiful thing to impart?" And I shared with him what I just shared with you, Cliff, the Austin Pendleton thing.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah!

**Jeff Perry:**

The Austin Pendleton moment with me and him from, you know, from 15 years prior, 20 years prior, whatever. And—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I mean, isn't another execution— is death?

**Jeff Perry:**

Well, yeah. And it's like conclusion.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

Wait, conclusion is concluded.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**

Conclusion is an ending. Conclusion is dead.

**Stage Manager:**

5 minutes. This is your 5 minute call. 5 minutes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, I'm going to hit you with a little lightning round, okay? These are 10 questions we're going to end the *Half Hour* podcast with every episode and you're going to be our first 10 question lightning round—

**Jeff Perry:**  
Guinea pig!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
—participant. Ready?

**Jeff Perry:**  
Lab rat.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
Guinea pig. Enter it with an explorer's heart [*Laughter*]

**Jeff Perry:**  
Alright.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
As you have done this whole conversation. Alright, ready? Just rapid fire, lightning round. What is the favorite Steppenwolf production that you've ever seen?

**Jeff Perry:**  
*The Glass Menagerie.*

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
Toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Jeff Perry:**  
Uh, separating from Randy Arney and helping to replace him in a way.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
Hmm. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Jeff Perry:**  
I stole one of those big, big banners that we put on the street, bud—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
Yeah.

**Jeff Perry:**  
Of me as a transvestite in *Balm in Gilead*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**  
Oh, I love that picture!

**Jeff Perry:**  
Yeah, that's it!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, that's awesome! Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing in it or not.

**Jeff Perry:**

John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson. I'm about 18 years old. They're in their 80s. They're doing Pinter's *No Man's Land* in London. We're on the one family trip where we left the confines of the US, and I thought, "Oh my god. Wait, wait, wait, you mean if you can walk, and you can remember lines, you can do this 'til you die?" [Laughter] Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Jeff Perry:**

Ah. Oh, I'm in such good denial about this. I can't— oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck. Go to another one, maybe I'll think of it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay. What's the last song that you listened to?

**Jeff Perry:**

Um, probably on Sirius XM, you know, like the 70's channel. The Carpenters. "We've Only Just Begun".

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

[Laughter] Fantastic. Perfect for the first episode of *Half Hour*. Who's your favorite writer?

**Jeff Perry:**

Steinbeck.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Jeff Perry:**

Trattoria Gianni's.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Fantastic. What animal do you most identify with?

**Jeff Perry:**

Labrador.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Nice. Uh, you got an answer for the job that—

**Jeff Perry:**

The job that broke my heart? Yeah. Shit, yeah. Um, it must be in that jealousy land somewhere.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Let's leave it there. We can leave it there. We can leave it in jealous land.

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah, I got 9 out of 10.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Fuck it. Alright, last one buddy. If you were a character in a play—

**Jeff Perry:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What would your character's description be?

**Jeff Perry:**

I would steal some of John Steinbeck's description of the character I got to play in *The Grapes of Wrath*—Noah Joad. "He was a stranger to the world, but he was not lonely."

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Thanks for listening. And thanks again to our guest this week, Jeff Perry.

**Audrey Francis:**

*Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

**Glenn Davis:**

The music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milbourn and Michael Bodeen. Today's Stage Manager was Laura D. Glenn.

**Caroline Neff:**

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Brenna Barborka, Joel Moormon, Kara Henry—

**Audrey Francis:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Glenn Davis:**

'Til next time, this is Glenn Davis.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm Caroline Neff.

**Audrey Francis:**

Audrey Francis.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And I'm Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What do you say to someone about to go onstage?

**Caroline Neff:**

Don't fuck this up for me. [*Laughter*] I stole that from Tracy Letts. That's what Tracy Letts tells you right before you go on stage to do one of his own plays.

**Ep: 2 – K. Todd Freeman: “Being Despicable”**

**Date: 4/19/20**

**Featuring:** K. Todd Freeman and Audrey Francis, with Cliff Chamberlain, Glenn Davis, Caroline Neff, and Christine Freeburg.

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**K. Todd Freeman:**

I don't have an interest in playing nice people.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

[*Laughter*] Because I'm not nice.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*.

**Glenn Davis:**

Hey, everybody. We are back. This is Glenn Davis.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is Audrey Francis.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm Caroline Neff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I'm Cliff Chamberlain.

**Glenn Davis:**

Okay, so we have a fantastic interview led by Audrey Francis—

**Caroline Neff:**

So good.

**Glenn Davis:**

Of K. Todd Freeman. How was that Audrey? Was it fun? Scary?

**Audrey Francis:**

It was both of those things, just like K. Todd Freeman is. I met him at the School at Steppenwolf. He was my teacher and he directed me in the Chekhov scene study and told me that I was egotistical and I needed to check my fucking ego. [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Whoa!

**Glenn Davis:**

No, no he didn't.

**Audrey Francis:**

I mean, no, he didn't. But he did. [*Laughter*] He didn't with his words, but he did with his direction.

**Glenn Davis:**

He's never taught me I wouldn't—I don't know what that experience would be like. Was he—I'm assuming he was great.

**Audrey Francis:**

You know, I got to be taught by him and directed by him multiple times. And I will say that it's that good fear, the healthy fear, where you're working with someone who demands such excellence that is uncomfortable, but not unsafe.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

And basically, the first time I worked with him, he became my mentor and my idol and friend. So, it's scary, but it's also some of the best theatre experiences I've ever had.

**Caroline Neff:**

And everybody that I know that was taught by him that has come out of the School, is like, "That was one of the most life changing teachers I've ever had."

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I didn't study with him at the School, but he was around and incredibly intimidating because of how... just, his presence was sort of... He was commanding and mysterious. And it wasn't until—he filled in for a week on *The March*, a play that Frank Galati adapted and directed, and we were dressing roommates. And this was maybe ten years later. And you know what it's like when suddenly your teacher is going to be on stage with you—and then sitting in your dressing room with you. To just sort of suddenly have that barrier broken, where we were just in a room together, I absolutely fell in love with him.

**Glenn Davis:**

I had the unfortunate experience of working with K. Todd Freeman [*Laughter*], in *The Brother/Sister Plays* back in the 2009-2010. And that was my first play at Steppenwolf, and I was exhausted every day, just learning lines and trying to figure out this—these parts. And K. Todd just looked like he was so at ease. And you know, I never see tension in his face, in his body. He just feels so liquid on stage. And then a few years later, he directed me in *The Christians* and having him as a—that's the closest thing I've ever had to him as a teacher. I was doing *The Christians* and there's this part in one of the monologues where

I felt like I like did my thing. And he was like, “Yeah, you still got some way to go.” And I’m like, “Oh, do you want to keep working?” He goes, “No, no, when you decide to go there, I’ll be ready.” And it sort of put this pressure on me to where I was like, “Wow.” I didn’t know if he was, like, messing with me in the head or if he was just—or if he really, you know, meant it. And then, you know, eventually, as you all can assume, I got there because I’m talented. [Laughter] But he was like, “You did it, you did it. There you go.” And so, I guess without took from that was this: he has a way of working with you where he just trusts—he’s cast you for a reason. He trusts you. He’s an actor. He knows everyone has a different process. He knows there’s somewhere you need to get to, but he wants you to take your own way of getting there.

**Caroline Neff:**

Man, now I need to be directed by K. Todd. Now I’ve never been taught by him, never been directed by him. I’ve only been an actor in a play with him, which was, as everybody has said that’s worked with him, was amazing because he’s so at ease. And he’s so professional, and just makes the job look easy. We were doing *Airline Highway* together—

**Audrey Francis:**

On Broadway!

**Caroline Neff:**

And I mean, aside from walking in some of the highest heels I’ve ever seen with no trouble at all, we also—the thing that I remember most specifically, because I was such a bundle of nerves because it was it was my first time on Broadway, and I just remember during tech, sitting next to him at—the set was this beautiful set—and sitting next to him on the stairs, and he’s got these giant high heels on and he’s just—a wig. And he’s just scrolling on his phone. I’m like, “What are you doing?” He goes, “I’m shopping.” I was like, “What are you shopping for?” He goes, “It doesn’t matter.” [Laughter]

**Glenn Davis:**

One of the one of the things about K. Todd is that (and I think all of us know this about him) he’s lovely and fun and self-deprecating and sardonic. He’s all those things. But until you like, really sit down with him, you have really no idea who he is. Like he loves clothes. He loves shoes. On stage, he’s probably one of the best partners I’ve ever had. Because he’s always at play. And he’s a joker.

**Caroline Neff:**

Well, one of the things that I loved so much about the fact that Audrey was interviewing K. Todd is because you have this long history and this long relationship, and just exactly as Glenn said, you know, if you just go by him in passing, you don’t get his full personality and the intricacies and how funny he is. And how everything that Glenn just said—and I just—Audrey, I think you did such a great job drawing all that out. And it was so fun to hang out with you guys in that room.

**Audrey Francis:**

Thank you.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah. I didn’t get to know K. Todd as a person and the fun, warm, funny person he was until I got to know him at half hour on *The March*. You know, like right before *The March* started in our dressing

room, that was the time that I got to know him a little bit. And multiply that by 1,000 and you have Audrey's relationship with him, you know, and it's really great to hear.

**Glenn Davis:**

So why don't we get to this interview and hear how well Audrey did? [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Thanks, y'all. I'm already sweating again. Please don't fuck this up!

**Stage Manager:**

Good evening, everyone. This is your half hour call. Half hour till top of show. 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:**

Okay, first of all, what do you prefer? Do you prefer Ken? K. Todd? Kenny?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

It depends on who it is. For you it's Mr. Freeman.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay, Mr. Freeman. Great. Thank you so much for coming to *Half Hour* today. Okay. So for those of you who don't know, or Ken if you know (Mr. Freeman, excuse me), you know, the show is called *Half Hour*, because it's that magical time that we as actors have essentially when we get called to go to the theater, and we only have—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Magical? Magic?

**Audrey Francis:**

Well, nerve wracking. So, do you have any half hour rituals, procedures—what's your half hour strategy?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I like to arrive at the theater just before the stage manager calls half hour.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah. sounds right.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And I like to go to my room. Hopefully it's a single but sometimes it's—more often than not, I have to share it with some other person.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And I just like to be quiet with my music and not have any contact with anybody. Get into my little zone. And then “Place, Mr. Freeman, Place! Beginners! Openers! Mr. Freeman to the stage please!” And

then just go on and slay them, just slay them. I don't—I just like to be quiet and alone basically is what I like to do.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. And when you're quiet and alone, like do you have a process for focusing? I know you said you listen to music, but does it change from play to play?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No, it's mostly just music and just staring in the mirror. [*Laughter*] I don't like to get, like, into costume until after, like 15. If it takes a lot to get into costume then it's 15. If it doesn't take a lot, then it's like ten or five. And then I just like to—when I stare at the mirror, I just want to make sure I see the character with the costume on you know. That I see the person before I walk out the door. But then there are the days where I just want to go around everyone's dressing room and just act silly and say hi to everybody. I have a couple—those come in like once a week.

**Audrey Francis:**

You have this uncanny degree of focus and ferocity on stage that to hear that you just kind of stare in the mirror and wait till 10 minutes before you put your costume on, and maybe you're talking to people. How do you snap into that so fast?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

It's the quiet time. It's the quiet time beforehand because the quiet time calms me down.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And I'm not—there's really not much going through my head. Seriously. There is nothing going through my head.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And that's why I play the music. Because usually—the music changes from show to show, and hopefully, I'm not thinking about what's happening in, you know, in my life.

**Audrey Francis:**

Mm hmm.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I'm just getting to like a zero point. A point of zero.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

You know, just trying to get down to that.

**Audrey Francis:**

And then what does that do for you when you get onstage, then?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh, well god, it probably does nothing because you know, the performance still comes out as wretched as they always do, but—

**Audrey Francis:**

Right, right, right. And speaking of wretched: two Tony nominations, a Drama Desk Award, Obie all that stuff. I mean, I could just go to your Wikipedia page. I mean you do have one which is already a sign of fame. Like you have one of the most well-rounded theatrical resumes. From like film, TV, theatre. You've got cult classic TV shows like *Buffy* or *Series of Unfortunate Events*. You've got like huge blockbuster films: *Dark Knight*. But if I were to ask you—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Uh-huh.

**Audrey Francis:**

Of all of the things that you've done—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Uh-huh.

**Audrey Francis:**

Do you have one project that like, stands out to you as a game changer in your career? Like one that maybe took your career in a direction that you didn't expect? Or one that maybe changed your mind about your career? Or one that, I guess, made you feel like you could actually continue to be an actor? Was there any like moment where you were like, "Oh, I can do this?"

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No.

**Audrey Francis:**

Really?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah. *[Laughter]* I'm still not sure.

**Audrey Francis:**

You're still not sure if you can be a professional actor?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yes. I'm not joking.

**Audrey Francis:**

Talk more about that.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah, no, no, no. To answer your question: no, I still feel like, you know, once I get my—once I you know, no. I don't have the ego to answer that question in a positive sort of way. Now look, I've got productions that I've been *uber* proud of and have, you know, the handful of like really... What do you call them? Marquee sort of productions or projects that I've worked on. I've got that, but I wouldn't—I don't call them game changers.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay, what's your—what are the ones that you hold most dear?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

*Angels in America.*

**Audrey Francis:**

Which you—did you originate that role?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, I originated the role in LA for both plays. I was not the “original-original” but the original for both plays being done.

**Audrey Francis:**

In the role of Belize.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

In the role of Belize. Then *Song of Jacob Zulu* because that got me into Steppenwolf. And then... Oh, *Downstate*.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I think it's a kick-ass, dangerous, fucked-up cool play.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah. Bruce.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And it was really, really, really, really fun to do in a horrible sick way. You know, even though it's a sick play, it was really fun to do.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Because of the other actors and the material and all that kind of stuff.

**Audrey Francis:**

How do you decide that you're—*Downstate* is a role—was a role for you where you played someone who had a past that is quote unquote, maybe, questionable. How do you enter a role like that? That is, say on paper, not a good person?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, I mean, how do you play Macbeth? How do we play all those horrible people that have been going like—it's not special. This play isn't special in the sense of the playing ugly—look *Steppenwolf* is birthed on playing—plays full of ugly characters. So, I don't think that's special. Plus, I don't have an interest in playing nice people. Because I'm not nice.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's true.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I mean, I really don't. You don't either do you?

**Audrey Francis:**

No. I don't want to play people who are perfect.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, no one's perfect to begin with. And then aren't they boring?

**Audrey Francis:**

They're so boring.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Even during *The Minutes*, Cliff was saying how the role that he's playing now in *The Minutes* was difficult for him because he is a kind of a gross, horrible person, this character that he's playing. And he says, you know, he says, "I'm so not—" because Cliff is our, you know, all-American, you know, Mr. Ingenuer Boy. And he's so used to play nice guys. And that this was really difficult for him in ways because he's just because—Anna was saying, like, "Just relax and enjoy the ugly, you know, just this live in that." And he said it kind of bugged him and I'm like, "Oh god, I just am the opposite of that." Like, I would just—I relish in being despicable. The more despicable the better. But that's just me. I'm not a nice person. Cliff is honestly—is truly one of the nicest men on the planet who's ever been born.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right, and you're dead inside.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I'm dead inside. That's why you and I get along so well.

**Audrey Francis:**

[*Laughter*] Very true. But do you have to find a way to be like, “Okay, how do I make this true for me?” Like, how much imagination goes into play?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, you know, it depends on the play. I mean, you read the given—you read the play and the given circumstances and some things you relate to, and some things you don't relate to. So, the things you do relate to, “Okay, that's cool.” There are things you don't relate to, you kind of figure it out. You have to use your imagination to fill those in. Right?

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And I think most—nine times out of ten, we can relate to most everything.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's what's fucked up.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

That's what's fucked up. That's how you end up being able—that's why we can play Macbeth. That's why we can play serial killers and vampires and you know, all sorts of whatever. Because we all have extremely incredible imaginations. And we just have to allow ourselves the freedom to use them.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's awesome. Okay, so when you did *Song of Jacob Zulu* with Steppenwolf, did you know who Steppenwolf was when you auditioned for them? How did that all start?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Of course, we knew who—everyone knows who Steppenwolf is. Yeah, yes, I knew. I knew. The first time I heard of Steppenwolf was, I guess, oh it must have been in college. No, I must have seen... I think the first thing I saw was their PBS American Playhouse filmed version of *True West*, which happened somewhere around my senior year in high school, freshman year in college. But it—no, no it aired my freshman year in college. Because we all—like the entire drama school—ran down to the TVs in the Student Lounge place. And not just the Drama students, but you know, just tons—it was a small school. Anyway, we all watched it in this little student lounge.

**Audrey Francis:**

And this was in Texas?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No, this was at North Carolina School of the Arts.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

The University of North Carolina School of the Arts. That was you know, life changing and exciting. So, everything we did back then, like my four years in drama school, were all like Step—were all Shepard and Steppenwolf, with throwing things and, you know, breaking chairs. [*Laughter*] And we thought we were so cool and edgy, and... God, imagine me playing Eddie from *Fool for Love* at 18.

**Audrey Francis:**

Amazing.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

But then my first play that I ever saw that they did was when I was in school. And it was... I came up through New York on my way home to Houston and saw... The three guys. Terry, Kevin Anderson and John Mahoney in that play.

**Audrey Francis:**

*Steel Magnolias*.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yes. [*Laughter*] *Steel Magnolias*. Come on, you know the play.

**Audrey Francis:**

*Kinky Boots*.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No. [*Laughter*] What's the play called? It's genius. Anyway—

**Audrey Francis:**

*Orphans?*

**K. Todd Freeman:**

*Orphans!* Thank you.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay, great.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Anyway, so I saw that at the West Side Theater, and that changed—that did change my life. That to me is a—That to me is a game changer for like me seeing theatre. The way he—Gary, the director—used music, the way—the energy that Kevin had, the depth through which Terry Kenny just—talk about someone diving into a role and, like, losing themselves to something. You know that's—and then Mahoney's just... the light that came out of him during that performance. That to me—theatre was never the same again to me after that, you know. The goal of what a good production should be or what acting should be, what your commitment to it your, how deep is your love baby—no, how down and dirty can you get into it and the demand. And what also was game changing was I remember I first got you know, inducted into the blood, the blood—

**Audrey Francis:**

Yes, you can say it.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

The blood sacrifice of Steppenwolf was working on some just workshops and things of some plays, and watching Laurie and Malkovich and Rick Snyder and all these people just get up in that—in Yondorf or wherever we were rehearsing or across—the rehearsal hall before we moved across to Yondorf. Anyway, just watching these people just carefree play, you know. And risk, and try all these sort of things that were just funky or completely not going to be the final choice quote unquote, but you know, but they had to do it just to see. You know, just to see what the boundaries are. And just watching that abandon was a real lesson. Because I remember just those first few times, my first few forays into the Wolf of Steppen, I just told myself to shut up and just shut up and watch and learn.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wow.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

So. Those to me are game changers. Those—I look at those as game changing things. That it... sort of honed how I look at the work. My work.

**Stage Manager:**

15 minutes please. This is your 15-minute call. 15 minutes till top of show.

**Audrey Francis:**

When you became an ensemble member, did you then—I'm thinking of the set of the first show you did when you were an ensemble member.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Uh huh.

**Audrey Francis:**

Did you feel the pressure to make sure that you were then an example of what been an example to you? And if so, do you still carry that?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I mean, yes and no. I mean, I was young, you know. You're young, hung and full of cum, you know. [Laughter] People are just, you know... you remember back that far, in your mid-20s, when you—

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh, yeah.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

You just did anything because you just did it?

**Audrey Francis:**

Yes

**K. Todd Freeman:**

You weren't—you're too young to know to be scared.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right. Right, right.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Do you remember that feeling? It's gone. That's been gone for decades, but—

**Audrey Francis:**

It's been gone. [*Laughter*] Yeah, I'm scared all the time. I'm scared when I wake up.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I'm scared right now. [*Laughter*] But, you know, still, I was I mean, I've always been a perfectionist and, want the performance to be... I always set a high bar for myself. So that's always been... but always takes charge. So, it means a lot. It matters a lot that I'm trying to give the best performance that's possible. So that matters. The way you phrased it, I didn't look at it like I have to hold the—carry the world on my—I didn't feel that way. But I just want to make sure I was the best I could be. And, "Wow, if they like it? They let me play here? Okay I'll just keep doing it if that's what you guys like. You're kind of crazy." You know. But once Randall Arnie, you know, he said—and because he's the artistic director—and he said you know, "Once you're in, you're in," it's like, "Well, okay now guys, you're stuck with me, so." [*Laughter*] But I always naturally wanted to be—give the best of myself. So that I guess didn't change because that that's always been my standard. I just want to... Like, the first show I did after *Zulu* was *Clockwork Orange*.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh. Amazing.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

That was just you know... Everyone was so wild and crazy, and we were all having such a good time and we're just trying to survive each show without me going to the hospital. Because I went to the emergency room, I think three—or at least three times during that that show.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wait, what happened?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

What didn't happen? So, the whole stage at 1650 was—the floor of the set was 18 inches of dirt. And so, it—all of the set pieces were taken off the... what do they call it—the counterweight system and put onto the sandbag system. So, all the pieces just slammed into the dirt. Nick Offerman, who was in the show, during tech was on the—the actors, there was so many set pieces. So much going on. So much tech going on, that actors would do a roll, run off stage, untie the—fly a piece in and then change clothes and run back onstage and act. And so, one time I was jumping up and down on the hospital bed at the end of a scene and Nick started to pull the hospital bed out into the flies before I jumped off of it. So I was going up. Lots of things happened a Fresnel lens fell from a set piece. I'm sorry a set piece was being flown out; it hit a Fresnel lens, the lens came out of the light instrument on the grid 30 feet up and fell onto my balls at the end of a scene.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh my God.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

That sent me to the hospital. Some particulates in the dirt, got into my eye and scratched my cornea. So that sent me to the hospital. [Laughter] The goo and the gook of all the dirt, would get into your nasal passages, your sinus passages. And so I lost my voice completely two days before opening, so that's me to the hospital as well.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh my god.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

It was amazing. We had so much fun.

**Audrey Francis:**

Do you wish it was still like that?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

Because now it's like there's like insurance and shit. And there's like people—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

We had insurance and stuff. But like, like, you know, Bob Breuler was like, you know, "Real quick ,cancel first pre—" because he was the Equity Deputy, "we have to cancel the first preview this is dangerous!" It was a big to-do, I think we missed two shows, trying to tech that show. It was it was a nightmare. Half of the fight call was a half hour before half hour because there were so many fights. But it was you know, it was bloody expensive. Who knows if the theater could afford to even do that show now, but it was so much fun. It was so much fun.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's incredible. You mentioned before about like people who will lose themselves in roles. Have you ever lost yourself in a role?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, I mean that in the good way. I don't mean that in the psychotic bad way.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah. Me too. Yes. I mean like, you know, have you ever in a good way, lost yourself in a role?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah, hopefully, all the time? Don't you think so?

**Audrey Francis:**

I think so. I think so, but when I say that, what's the first role that came to your head?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh well darling, all of them! You know, Rumpelstiltskin in fourth grade comes to mind. [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay, Rumpelstiltskin, that's awesome.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Rumpelstiltskin, and I played Zeus in fifth grade Lord of the thunder and lightning in my aluminum foil lightning bolts that I threw across the room.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wait, stop right there. Have you always known that you wanted to be an actor?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

Did you ever have a backup plan?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Well, I mean, I liked architecture and I took drafting classes and I thought, you do that, and then also kind of dabbled in psychiatry, psychol— psychiatry for a little bit. But I've been doing it since I was 11 years old, acting.

**Audrey Francis:**

And did you legit make a foil lightning bolt and throw it across your room?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh hell to the yeah, I was Zeus! I played Zeus, what are you supposed to do? You have to have lightning bolts to punish the people.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh my god. I love this so much.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

But I haven't told you about my adaptation of the TV miniseries *Sybil* when I was in sixth grade called "Steven" which I directed and starred in on the last day of sixth grade before I went to Junior High School, and Miss McConnell said "You're gonna be famous one day. You're gonna be a star." [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Miss McConnell.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah, my sixth grade teacher, yeah. I wrote this play called "Stephen", it was my adaptation of *Sybil*. Mother was like, putting my face in hot oil that was being cooked on the on the stove.

**Audrey Francis:**

Stop it.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

This is highly irregular and abusive, I'm sure like nowadays it's cooled out a bit like, you know, sent to the psychiatrist for writing— [*Laughter*] Karen Sneed played my mother and so, in the play, she had to like, you know, throw hot oil on me that she had been using to fry some chicken or something whatever. And then she slaps, hits me over the head with the cast iron skillet. It was a vanity production that I did on sixth grade and it was fantastic [*Laughter*]. But then I started proper acting classes after that in seventh grade and then high school.

**Audrey Francis:**

So can I ask— can I ask a question about race?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Sure.

**Audrey Francis:**

Did you like— you were the first African American ensemble member invited in.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah. And still bitter than I'm not the only one.

**Audrey Francis:**

[*Laughter*] Was that— what am I trying to ask here? I want to ask if you felt like you had to—

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

No, I didn't.

**Audrey Francis:**

Great.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I only realized it was a thing, and look, I knew it was a thing. It was a thing in Chicago that like, other black theatre companies or whatever were really irritated by it for some reason, I never quite figured out why. And then I got bitter once they added those people like James Meredith and Ora Jones and John Hill, then it wasn't fun anymore.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right. Because you weren't the star.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I wasn't the— yeah, I wasn't, yeah. It's like the only child you know, getting a brother and sister, like, this ruins the fun!

**Audrey Francis:**

Right. *[Laughter]*

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Nah, I quite like them now, but it took a while for me. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

It's very hard.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

What made you jump over to directing?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I mean, the older I've gotten, you know, the nerves ramp up a lot. And then being a director, I don't have to, you know, it's, it's less torture? Because acting is, performing is in with the perfectionist thing. And like, I'm not as carefree or whatever as when I was 20 and I didn't— you know, like so now there's fear, there's rent, there's, you know, all that kind of stuff. There's like— it matters too much now? *[Laughter]* There's that, and then, you know, even though it's— even though it is nerve wracking to sit and watch the performance, you know, once it's done, then you get up and you leave and you, you know, I never have to— that pressure of having to walk up onto the stage is just not there. And that is kind of relaxing. I can pop a Xanax and watch the actors do the, go through the show and it's perfectly fine.

**Audrey Francis:**

The way that you work as an actor living through that eight times a week can be taxing

**K. Todd Freeman:**

It can be taxing! You know exactly what it's like, I've seen you do it too. Tina Landau told me, I don't know where she got it from, but that, you know they do tests and stress tests and things and that apparently going, an actor going onto the stage to perform is equivalent in stress to a firefighter going into a burning building, and also that, you know, your body doesn't know that it's make believe so it just— if you're in it right I think your body doesn't know that it's pretend, so it's going through all these emotional things that the character's going through, and it thinks it's real so that's stressful. In many, in a lot of ways it's taxing and it weighs on you and it costs.

**Audrey Francis:**

So does, does that make you then like, at this moment in your career, more discerning about what roles you're willing to take?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Of course. Like, I will never do a two show, a two-hander ever again. Anymore.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wow.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Or a, or one man show. Because *Top Dog*, I did *Top Dog*, we did it for a whole year, through over four different theaters. We started at Steppenwolf, then took it to the Alley Theatre in Houston, the Dallas Theater Center and to Hartford Stage. And it's a two hander, and it's like, "No, I can't do that anymore." That was— it was a lot of work. I mean, it was a two act two-hander which, those are rare, but it was just, it's like, you know, too old for that now, I can't do it, I can't do it.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And you know it's like, I need some off-stage time or some sit down time or like, just throw it to somebody else for a minute. I just can't, I can't do it. [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Totally. I just need to go eat a pack of cigarettes.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah, you know, or like, yeah, whatever it is, it's too much— it's a lot of work.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah. Yeah. So you've been nominated for two Tony's.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Mm hmm.

**Audrey Francis:**

Is that a mindfuck?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yes and no, but I lost both times. First time I thought it would matter, career wise, and I didn't get an audition, a single audition for an entire year after that.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wow.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

I remember going to an audition for some HBO show later, years later in LA, and the woman, the casting director even know what a Tony was.

**Audrey Francis:**

Excellent.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

And so it's like, okay, you're a casting director. And you don't know what a Tony Award is?

**Audrey Francis:**

Tough.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

So that was heartbreaking, and is like, why am I here? Why am I— why are we in this room together right now? Woman, like, whoever you are. And then the second time, I've tried not to get involved in the whole hype of it and, but then people start to say, you know— and I didn't follow social media. I didn't read any of this stuff, but then people start coming up to you and saying things. “Oh, The New York Times says you're, you're the favorite”. And then, you know, you start to think, “Oh well, maybe.” And then I lost and I was pissed. So, so it's like that. It's just, it's— yeah, they're mindfucks. Both times they were mindfucks.

**Stage Manager:**

Five minutes everyone, this is your five minute call. Five minutes til top of show. This is your five minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

So part of the half hour is we have a quick little lightning round.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh, God, okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. 10 questions. We'll get it done in 60 seconds.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Oh it's gonna be like, a Rorschach kind of thing? Okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, yeah, it'll be that. Okay, ready?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Uhuh.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. The clock is ticking, here we go. Favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

*Orphans.*

**Audrey Francis:**

Toughest experience at Steppenwolf.

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
Martha Lavey dying.

**Audrey Francis:**  
What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
Oh, I don't have any.

**Audrey Francis:**  
Me neither. Who fucking takes shit from plays? [*Laughter*] Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing in it or not.

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
When the phone went off when I was about to do a monologue in *Carter's Way*, and this woman answered the phone and said, "No, I can talk". And I stared at her, you know my eyes. I was facing straight front, but then she got up out of her chair and she started heading toward the exit, so I didn't— before I spoke, I let her exit the theater and then just started, kept going.

**Audrey Francis:**  
And that woman was Audrey Francis. [*Laughter*] What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
Oh, I really want to be in this Bryan Cranston Showtime thing. This past year, but—

**Audrey Francis:**  
What's the last song you listened to?

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
The last song I listened to?

**Audrey Francis:**  
Just say Metallica. We know, we know you listen—

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
Well it's gonna— it would have to be like, you know, Bon Iver, something from Bon Iver.

**Audrey Francis:**  
Oh, okay, favorite writer.

**K. Todd Freeman:**  
Cormac McCarthy.

**Audrey Francis:**  
Favorite place to unwind in Chicago.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Alinea. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay.

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Yeah, I'ma keep it. That was a joke, but keep it. It sounds pretentious enough.

**Audrey Francis:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

A black jaguar.

**Audrey Francis:**

Obviously, with a huge dick. *[Laughter]* Final question, if you were a character in a play what would your character's description be?

**K. Todd Freeman:**

Sarcastic, caustic, brooding, funny.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Thanks for listening.

**Audrey Francis:**

And thanks again to our guests this week, K. Todd Freeman.

**Glenn Davis:**

Half Hour is produced by Patrick Zakem, recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

The music for Half Hour is by Rob Milbourn and Michael Bodeen.

**Caroline Neff:**

Today's stage manager was Chris Freeberg.

**Glenn Davis:**

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman and Kira Henry.

**Audrey Francis:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Til next time, this is Cliff Chamberlain.

**Glenn Davis:**

Glenn Davis.

**Caroline Neff:**

Caroline Neff.

**Audrey Francis:**

And Audrey Francis. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places.

**Glenn Davis:**

I think you'd actually be a better teacher than all of us. [*Laughter*]

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, totally.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Really?

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

That is not true, but why?

**Glenn Davis:**

I don't, I don't really know.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

But tell me why.

**Caroline Neff:**

Be specific.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Be specific about why I would be great at that.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, I trust you. I trust you more than any of us. I don't, I never know what RJ's going to say. And I'm just scared of Caroline usually. So I think you're good to go.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

And Glenn's middle names are "loose" and "cannon", so— [*Laughter*]

**Ep: 3 – Kathryn Erbe: “Pretending to be Badass”**

**Date:** 5/5/20

**Featuring:** Kathryn Erbe and Caroline Neff, with Cliff Chamberlain, Glenn Davis, Audrey Francis and Michelle Medvin.

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**Kathryn Erbe:**

That's the kind of work I love to do.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I love to work with people who are in it with their hearts as a cog in a greater machine.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Welcome back to *Half Hour*, the Steppenwolf podcast, Episode Three. I'm Audrey Francis.

**Glenn Davis:**

I'm Glen Davis.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm Caroline Neff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And I am Cliff Chamberlain.

**Audrey Francis:**

So, we have a wonderful interview that we're about ready to listen to: Caroline and Kathryn Erbe. How'd it go, Caroline?

**Caroline Neff:**

It was so fun. It was so fun. You know, I— one of the things that I just really love about her is, even from the first time that I met her, she's always like—I've always felt like I've like I've known her somehow. I mean, not even directly related to her career, which has strangely, and we talked about it in the interview, but a big part of my life for a long time. But she just—I mean, I really felt like I was just sitting in her living room, like, having coffee. It was so nice.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, she—every time I see her, which is on TV and once at the Steppenwolf Gala, she always has this very warm feeling. And yet I'm—I've been afraid to walk up to her.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It's funny because when I was in college, someone brought that, sort of, red Skrebneski *Steppenwolf* book to college. And we were flipping through all the pages, right? And we're all sitting on the steps

looking at all the pictures and stuff. And you know, you know who Malkovich is; you know who Sinise is; you know who Joan Allen is. But for some reason, when it got to Katie's page, I was like, "Oh my gosh! Her! She's in the ensemble!" Like, she still to this day is sort of the most famous person, in my mind, at Steppenwolf. Because I know, you know, like *Mighty Ducks: 2*, which she mentions or talked to you about, and *What About Bob* and also *Stir of Echoes*. Have you ever seen that movie with Kevin Bacon? It's so good. And she's great. So she just, like, has that place in my mind for the ensemble and it's so cool to hear her talk.

**Glenn Davis:**

Katie is... Actually, the first time I met her was not even at Steppenwolf. I was doing this thing called Theatre of War that she and I do, sometimes, maybe a few times a year, where we do—we bring like Greek tragedies or classic plays to vets. And I met her at one of those and she was so lovely and endearing. And then she just like, went—in this part, just, like, killed it. And I was like, "Oh man, she's in the company. I want to work with her." So, we've talked about working together at some point, but she's always busy doing TV. But I was glad to hear that she wants to get back to doing more theater. So hopefully, we'll all get to work with her at some point.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

I got to see—we talked about this in the interview—but I got to see a play that she was in at Roundabout Underground with my friend Christopher Livingston, who I worked on a play with at Yale Rep a few years ago. And when we—I went to go see it with a friend of mine—and we sat down, we're so taken by, and it was the first time I'd ever seen Katie on stage, and she really was like just luminous. It's a story about, like, grief, but about grief for their son who's in jail because he committed sexual assault on a campus. So, it's kind of approaching that from a much different angle and was just surprising at every turn. And she was so, so, beautiful in it but she was also wearing this sleeveless dress. And we got done watching the play and Kimberly and I were like, "God, that was amazing. She's so good. Also... did you see her arms?" [*Laughter*] And now, one of the highest compliments we can give each other, or friends is, "Dude, you have Katie Erbe arms today."

**Glenn Davis:**

It was also dope to hear her talk about how she was a fan of Steppenwolf before she was a member.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, yeah.

**Glenn Davis:**

And how these folks came through and just slayed and she just fangirled all over them. It was great to for her to take us back there. That was really cool to get some insight on that.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, really great job, Caroline.

**Caroline Neff:**

Thanks. It was a lot of fun. What a cool first interview for me. She was really special.

**Audrey Francis:**

Well, Cliff, do you have popcorn in your purse? Are you ready to listen?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I'm ready.

**Audrey Francis:**

Glenn?

**Glenn Davis:**

100%. Let's do it.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. Godspeed. Episode Three.

**Stage Manager:**

Welcome back, everyone. This is your half hour call. Please sign in if you've not already done so. This is half hour. The house is about to open. Half hour, please.

**Caroline Neff:**

Hey, Katie.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Hey Caroline!

**Caroline Neff:**

How ya doing?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I'm alright, thanks.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, our podcast is called *Half Hour*. Because we all kind of came to the determination that half hour is that really—like, it's an incredibly special and kind of magical and very individual part of an actor's process. And so, I just want to start off by asking you, what does your half hour look like when you get to the theater?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

So, I usually get to the theater at least an hour before the show. So, half hour is when I sort of start to panic. [*Laughter*] Or that's when—half hour is when I'll run lines. Like, the older I get, the harder it is for me to remember what I have to say. So, the last play I did was *Something Clean* at the Roundabout Underground and that—

**Caroline Neff:**

It was remarkable.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Oh, I forgot that you got to see that.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

With Christopher.

**Caroline Neff:**

I know, I love that guy.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Me too.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Well, he and I would spend a good bit of time running through our first couple of scenes, just because those lines were very difficult for me to retain. So, I—for that play, also, I was exhausted every day, just bone-tired from the emotion and also just the physicality of it. So, I would frequently get to the theater even earlier so that I could take a nap if I wasn't able to do that elsewhere. And then, you know, eat a little bit if I could. If I had—I pretty much make sure I eat before a show I can't eat too much but I—

**Caroline Neff:**

It's such a tricky balance and I have not figured it out yet. Like, what is the thing that keeps me full through the show, and doesn't make me feel like I'm going to hurl?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Yeah. [*Laughter*] No, Joke. It is—and it depends on the job right? For me.

**Caroline Neff:**

One hundred percent.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Yeah. And what I have on my plate for the rest of the day. And that's one of the things I find so challenging about plays, that many people might not understand, is that our whole day is geared for preparation for the performance.

**Caroline Neff:**

Right. And remind me there wasn't an intermission in that play, right?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

No, it was straight through.

**Caroline Neff:**

Which is tough because then you really do—you have to think about it all day. Like, “How do I stay like, healthy and how do I make sure that 45 minutes in it's not, ‘halt: bathroom break?’” Those are the ones that terrify me, when I'm like, “How long before the play starts do I have to stop drinking water?”

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Yes, yes!

**Caroline Neff:**

You have a different route into Steppenwolf than a lot of people do. You didn't grow up in the Midwest, and you came to them through *Grapes of Wrath* right when it moved to Broadway? Can you talk just a little bit about what it was like entering that production after a run here?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Oh my god. That is the process of a teenager's dream coming true.

**Caroline Neff:**

Mm hmm.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

So, not a lot of people know I'm a high school dropout—former high school dropout. And I ended up, through the incredible generosity of my parents mortgaging their house—their home, to send me to a boarding school that was a therapeutic boarding school. I ended up graduating from high school. But all through growing up—I grew up in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, which has a very large percentage of theater and film and television and music, performers, professionals. And so, I grew up performing in plays, and it really saved my life. And so, I went to this school—this boarding school. I got taken into the theater program. The drama program. And the guy who ran it was my beloved friend and mentor, Greg (who is no longer with us anymore). And Steppenwolf—this was the year that Steppenwolf took the world by storm and came to New York. And the production of *Balm in Gilead* that John had directed was at Circle Rep on Seventh Avenue (it's now Sushi Samba). So twice in the summer, Greg would buy tickets and he was, like—I would go with him to get the *New York Times* every Sunday, and we were reading about Steppenwolf, and he was talking about Steppenwolf, and saying “We've got to see them. We've got to see them.” And up until that point, I had seen, you know, the tour of *Annie*, of *A Chorus Line* in Boston. You know, my mom would take us to see a lot of stuff. But I had never seen anything on Broadway. And I'd certainly never seen anything like *Balm and Gilead*. I mean, I could almost weep recounting my experience of sitting in that tiny theater and watching Terry, Gary, Laurie, Jeff, Joan, Rondi, Randy (I think), Glenne, Al Wilder. And Laurie had what I remember is like an hour and a half long monologue, I think it was 20 minutes. I had never seen anything like this. And coupled with this—the Springsteen music, which was the soundtrack of my life, on full blast. Terry, you know, my future husband. My jaw was in my lap, my mind and my heart were blown. And I will never forget what it felt like to leave that theater, to be inches from those people. And leave that theater and drive home, you know, back to the tiny school in Massachusetts in the middle of the night. Just staring out the window with my entire perspective changed.

**Caroline Neff:**

Whoa.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

So, flash forward: I went to NYU. I graduated; I went to NYU and got a job in a sitcom that took me to LA right after I graduated and—

**Caroline Neff:**

With Lynn Redgrave, right?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

With Lynn Redgrave, and Jackie Mason, and Cathy Lind Hayes, and Brandon Maggart. Lynn Redgrave is one of the most—I mean, she was just an angel on this earth. And we had a great time, in spite of it being also very challenging. And it was a sitcom and I got paid, you know, thousands of dollars. I'd been making seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour in the East Village, and then I got paid a couple thousand dollars a week for this job. As an actor!

**Caroline Neff:**

And was it your first foray in Los Angeles? And also, what was the name of the TV show?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

It was called *Chicken Soup*. I had to move to Los Angeles. It was my first—when I went there to test for it, I had \$3 in my pocket. I had never been to Los Angeles; I didn't know where I was. I smoked; I wanted to walk and get some cigarettes and the guy at the desk was like, "No, you can't walk anywhere, to get some cigarettes." [Laughter] And when I had to move there—when I got to move there to film, the actual show—

**Caroline Neff:**

Tell us how you really feel.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I cried for days until I got a boombox, and I sorted out which direction was which. And so, anyway, so when that job got canceled, I moved back to New York and the first audition I had was for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Holy shit.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

And I had already been stalking Terry in the East Village. And, you know, was obsessed with many members of the ensemble at that point. And I worked a block away from where Terry lived, and we went to the same coffee shop to get coffee, and I had seen plays he directed and—

**Caroline Neff:**

Did he know you?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

No.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh, God.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Oh, no, no, no. [Laughter] So, I had—while I was at NYU, I had a Sam Shepard monologue. And that's what I did for my audition. And I don't think they hired me for my acting skills, necessarily. I just you know, remember being grateful to be there. I don't know if I told them my history. I doubt I did. I think I probably just went in and did my monologue and maybe we chatted a little bit.

**Caroline Neff:**

You didn't walk in and go like, "Terry Kinney goes to this coffee shop and this is what he orders."  
[*Laughter*]

**Kathryn Erbe:**

You better not cast me, because I'm a stalker. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm a creep. [*Laughter*]

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I was told that there was a conversation between Randy and Terry about how cute I was.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh my God. [*Laughter*]

**Kathryn Erbe:**

That may or may not be true. [*Laughter*] I—that's okay now, for me to—

**Caroline Neff:**

Sure.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

You know, I took that I was happy, whatever. I just was happy to have the job. And so, I got cast and I had three roles and none of them spoke. I was horribly disappointed. They were—none of them were speaking roles, but I understudied Sally—

**Caroline Neff:**

Hmm.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

As Rose of Sharon. And I was grateful that my roles were not speaking roles, because I couldn't speak when I got in that room.

**Caroline Neff:**

When did you get asked into the ensemble, and what was that like?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I was asked to join the ensemble while I was shooting. This incredible piece of art, entitled *The Mighty Ducks: Part Two*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Very familiar. Listen, I've got a list of movies that I want to tell you about the changed my life that you were in.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

My God. Is my *Mighty Ducks 2* on the top?

**Caroline Neff:**

No, I'll tell you what's on the top when you're done.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

So, you know, that movie is beloved to a big group of people. But for me, I was not... It wasn't a high point of my career. You know, I was away from Terry. We didn't have any kids at that time. I just was miserable, smoking a lot, walking around with my dogs around Minneapolis and then Los Angeles. I loved the entire cast. I love-love—still have—I'm friends with some of them. And but so Randy called me I remember being in like Anaheim. I was someplace in the parking lot, walking around, probably smoking. And he asked me if I would join and I was... I'm sure I cried.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yep.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I know I didn't feel worthy. I know that really, I sort of blamed or thanked my—I really felt like I... I don't know. It's been a struggle for me to feel like I'm an upstanding member, in my own right, being a member of the company. So.

**Caroline Neff:**

Well, you are very beloved in the company. You're also an ensemble member with the Atlantic right?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Can you talk a little bit about, like, the differences and the similarities of those two companies?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Well, one of the things I would say about *Grapes of Wrath*, my experience with *Grapes of Wrath* and with Steppenwolf in general (and I think this is also true with Atlantic) is that felt like—it just felt like I was doing a high school show. It felt like they were—everybody was so welcoming and friendly and we were all on the same team. And the, you know, the tension was pretty low. And that surprised me. That's the kind of work I love to do. I love to work with people who are in it with their hearts, as a cog in a greater machine. I love that about Atlantic too. I think they really share that. I think it's different being a resident New York company, than a Chicago company. My feeling about working in Chicago at Steppenwolf is that the theatre community in Chicago is so much more willing to meet the performers halfway. And in New York, I feel like you have to bring them to you. And they're... The microscope which you are judged through is a lot more severe. That's my impression.

**Stage Manager:**

All right, everyone. Fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes, please, to the top of the show. Fifteen minutes.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, you did a movie that was one of my absolute favorite movies growing up. And my mom, and my sister and I would watch it almost every other week, and it was called *What About Bob*. And then you went on and you did nine years of *Law and Order*?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Eleven.

**Caroline Neff:**

Eleven. God, which is, again, it's such a part of my family fabric. And it was really fun to go back and watch, over the last few days, clips from all of that because there is this through line in them—it's just how, like, warm you are, both in person and on TV and film. And now that I've gotten the chance to see you on stage as well. Like, is that something that you're aware of? Or is that something that just sort of happens quite naturally with you? Is it like, that's the “you” that you're bringing into the room, no matter what the material is? You know what I mean?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I—you know, it's all gravy. It's all gravy for me. The fact that I get to work and pay my bills, and have a really, really blessed life—a really good life—from working as an actor, blows my mind. I mean, I should be dead, I really should be dead. I was a high school dropout, as I said. I was in a lot of situations that I shouldn't have survived and the fact that—and I wanted to, honestly, I wanted to be a rock and roll star. I really love to sing, but I don't have the guts to do it. And so, acting is, like, my default. And I got into a college and it's been—that's sort of been my experience. That I just am like, “Oh, I'm doing this now... for 30 years.” And, you know, I joke that I don't have a craft, but I do, kind of. I guess I do. It's my own, but it's not something I could, like, explain. But the bottom line is that I try to be truthful and try to bring myself to the character. Like I try to—it's kind of an osmosis thing. But it I look for the overlaps and I put myself in that position. So, I'm never going to be someone who wins, like, Academy Awards because I don't change. I kind of am myself, to varying degrees, in every role I play. Do you have kids?

**Caroline Neff:**

I do not.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Okay. So that also changes, you know. When I was just a single person, when I was then just a married person without kids, I could devote myself to my job. And once I had Maeve and then Carson, it became a totally different story. And so, you know, even now with Carson a teenager and Maeve living in another neighborhood in Brooklyn, you know, I have a life. And so much of my work life is dependent on my being able to fit it into my life-life and vice versa, if that makes any sense.

**Caroline Neff:**

Totally.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

But the *Law and Order* job that was the first—when we started, for four years, we did 22 episodes a year.

**Caroline Neff:**

And did you have—when you got that job did you already have Maeve?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Yes, she was five.

**Caroline Neff:**

She was five. And then you got pregnant with Carson during the run of that show.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, you said 22 episodes for the first four years?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

For the first four years, if I remember correctly. And those were 18-hour days.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh my God!

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Five days a week.

**Caroline Neff:**

And when you're in a role like that you don't ever get to—you're not, like, cycled in and out. You are in every episode.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

For the first four seasons, it was Vincent and I, and the perps. And then we had, of course, Courtney Vance and Jamey as, you know, our captain and our DA. And we had other people who were regulars. But for the most part, it was Vincent and I. And I knew Vincent ahead of time. And he obviously has a work ethic that is rare. I mean, he had high standards for himself and what he wanted to do with that role coming to television, really, for the first time in that kind of position. And we shared a theater background so we would try to infuse the detective stuff with emotion. You wouldn't think it would be that hard to say those kinds of lines. *[Laughter]* And it was really—that was exciting. To try to make it something more than what it was on paper. But I also got to pretend that I was really badass, you know?

**Caroline Neff:**

I don't know if you're pretending. You're pretty badass.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Well—

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm mean, you're not carrying a gun most days. *[Laughter]*

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Right, right. Badass in ways that I don't get to pretend.

**Caroline Neff:**

Sure.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

You know, so I got to learn a lot about myself, and what I was capable of and what I was made of.

**Caroline Neff:**

And so, you left *Law and Order* in 2011. And then what happened? When you when you finish something that is so all encompassing like that, are you—is it—what do you feel?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

It was hard. I honestly didn't know who I was. I feel like I'm still learning how to act again, because it is a very different way of working and way of acting. You know, that kind of television is kind of an old fashioned television, compared to the explosion that happened while we were doing it in terms of creativity. And, you know, that was about delivering the lines as fast as we could, and moving through the work in the day as fast as we could. And so, I've had to really try to learn again how to breathe and be... And just be in a character, because you don't always get given permission to do that; you have to take it. So, I didn't work for a long time, in all honesty. It took me a long—people—I didn't—because I didn't work on other things artistically, there was a decade plus where there were new casting directors, new people creating who I didn't have any exposure to who only knew me from *Law and Order*. And so, they thought that that's all I could do. And to be really honest, I eventually just said, "I'll go in for any sized role. If it's a two scene role I will read." Just so that I could start meeting people again and show people that I was no longer doing the show. Because they rerun the show, you know, in perpetuity, so people in some places think we're still making them. And so, you know, it's been a slow... I think that that the industry is—and fans may have an easier time (and I don't know why this is), but may have an easier time of letting actors—male actors—transition into other roles than they do female actors. And then we have the added incredible luxury of the aging process and how society and the industry, you know, thinks about that. So all that added up to me not working for a long time, and it was a scary time and a humbling time and then Daniel Talbot exploded in my life and I did a play for the first time in I think it was 19 years.

**Caroline Neff:**

Whoa!

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I did a play at Rattlestick.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was it?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

It was called *Yosemite*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Do you have a preference? Because you've done so much of it all between film, television and theater? Do you have a preferred medium, or one that you find most challenging?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I find theater the most challenging. And also, I love it the most, probably. But, I have come to believe that it costs too much and pays too little. I know that in New York, to make a living wage as a person in the theater is very, very difficult. I remember after doing *What About Bob*—I left *Grapes of Wrath* to do

*What About Bob* and then when I came back to New York, I did a play at a theater called the WPA, which doesn't exist anymore, on 23rd Street. And actually, I did—I think I started doing a play called *Speed of Darkness* on Broadway, and did that play at the same time and the Broadway paycheck was much better than the Off Broadway. I was rehearsing one and performing the other. And the Off Broadway paycheck was like, I mean I want to say it was \$232 or something. And I remember thinking, “What? What? How, you know, how do people do this?”

**Caroline Neff:**

And this is when you were in a role that you were nominated for a Tony for, right?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

*Speed of Darkness*. Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, you're doing that, and then rehearsing Off Broadway, and they're basically paying you peanuts. [Laughter] And you already had all this film and television stuff. Like, “I'm best friends with Lynn Redgrave. How dare you?” [Laughter]

**Kathryn Erbe:**

“Don't you know who I think I am?”

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

It didn't even occur to me to think that. I just was like, “Who can do this?”

**Stage Manager:**

Attention everyone. This is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes to the top of the show. Five minutes.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, at the end of all these, we have a lightning round of questions.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Oh gosh.

**Caroline Neff:**

And I think I have the answer to this first one but: your favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I would probably have to say *Balm in Gilead*, but that would be tough to choose.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was your toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

My toughest experience at Steppenwolf was probably doing a play called *My Thing of Love*. Terry directed it, and at that time we were married, I'm pretty sure, or we were about to be married. And when we were married, I did not like him bossing me around in any way shape or form. And it was tough. I really have—I have great... you know, I owe him a lot of apologies [*Laughter*] for how I was as a rebellious actor. But also, that was my only time working with Laurie.

**Caroline Neff:**

Whoa.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

And she was my, and in many ways is still, one of my idols as an actor. And that was hard. That was hard for me. It was really hard to feel—to keep my confidence because she's a force of nature. And I was playing a woman sleeping with her husband. And so, she basically tore me apart every night in front of 500 people. And so that was probably my most difficult Steppenwolf experience.

**Caroline Neff:**

Wow. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

My most prized piece of play memorabilia? I don't know. I think I've let go of things along the way. Well, I have some costumes and stuff. I have one of the dresses I wore as Pat Nixon in this play *Checkers* that Terry directed me in, that we were no longer married during and I had a blast working with him. [*Laughter*] So.

**Caroline Neff:**

I love that. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Oh, so many. There was a Nicholas Cage movie called *Family Man* that I really, really wanted to get. But I didn't. I mean, there's such a long list. But that's the first one that comes to mind. Most recent being *Americanah*. I would love to be doing that. Well, no one's doing anything right now. But.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you're performing in it or not?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I don't know why this comes to mind but when we were doing *Grapes of Wrath*, and we did that for six months, and I just—The first thing that came to mind when you said that was Bob Breuler: he would walk around Hooverville (I think it was Hooverville; maybe it was the square dance) and he would come over to... I remember him once coming over to the group of people I was standing with. And he talked to us for a few minutes. And then he walked away. And while he was talking to us, he farted.

**Caroline Neff:**

No.

**Kathryn Erbe:**

And we didn't realize it until he had left. And there was—

**Caroline Neff:**

He crop dusted you? In a Steinbeck novel?? [*Laughter*]

**Kathryn Erbe:**

I didn't know there was a technical term for it.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh yeah. [*Laughter*] What's the last song you listened to?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Right now, I'm listening to "Bitch, I'm Madonna" on repeat.

**Caroline Neff:**

I think that's amazing. Who is your favorite writer?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

That's hard. I read all of James Baldwin this year in the past like six months, and he may have to be, you know, he may be it. But there are many others. And Anne Lamott has saved my life too. So.

**Caroline Neff:**

Cool. What's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Along the water. I've spent lots of time walking on that bike path or you know, along the lake.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, what animal do you most identify with?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

That's a good question. Horse, maybe.

**Caroline Neff:**

Ooh, any particular kind?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

No. No I'd love to be one in another life. Maybe, a wild horse.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, yeah. Cool. Final question. If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Kathryn Erbe:**

Let's see. Middle aged woman, been through some stuff. Learned a lot; much still to learn. Struggles to speak her real feelings in charged situations, but eventually gets there. And has a lot of self-confidence but loses touch with that.

**Stage Manager:**

All right everyone, this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a wonderful show tonight. Places, please. Places.

**Glenn Davis:**

And that is it for *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

**Audrey Francis:**

Thanks for listening.

**Caroline Neff:**

And thanks again to our guest this week, Katie Erbe.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

This episode of *Half Hour* was exclusively sponsored by Doug Brown and Rachel Kraft.

**Audrey Francis:**

*Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

**Glenn Davis:**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

Today's stage manager was Michelle Medvin.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf, especially the staff, who we know are doing everything they can to keep our lights on.

**Audrey Francis:**

'Til next time. This is Audrey Francis.

**Glenn Davis:**

Big homie Glen Davis.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cliff Chamberlain.

**Caroline Neff:**

And Caroline Neff. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places. Like, Audrey, I would say to you, "Katie Erbe arms."

**Audrey Francis:**

Is that what this episode is? Episode three: Katie Erbe Arms? [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Katie Erbe Arms.

**Audrey Francis:**

You just have to listen to this episode once a day for 30 minutes and you'll have #KatieErbeArms.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

That's right. [*Laughter*]

**Ep: 4 – William Petersen: “Cast Me or Not”**

**Date:** 5/19/20

**Featuring:** Glenn Davis and William Petersen, with Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis, Caroline Neff, and Mary Hungerford.

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**William Petersen:**

The most powerful word you have as an actor in your life is “no.”

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**William Petersen:**

The thing is, that we’re all on some kind of journey, and it’s usually our own journey.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

My name is Cliff Chamberlain.

**Glenn Davis:**

This is Glenn Davis.

**Caroline Neff:**

This is Caroline Neff.

**Audrey Francis:**

And this is Audrey Francis.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Ah, there's no place that I would rather be than with you three at *Half Hour*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Same!

**Glenn Davis:**

What’s up fam?

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah, that could be a song.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

[*Singing*] There's no place I'd rather be than with you three at *Half Hour*.

**Audrey Francis:**

[*Sing-song*] Bing bang boom.

**Caroline Neff:**

I feel like Cliff has been watching a lot of Disney movies. [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, yeah. We had *Frozen Two* on the other day. We're actually going back to some of the classics. We watched—we're like halfway through *Funny Girl*. Oh, yeah, a little Barbra Streisand.

**Audrey Francis:**

Is that Disney or...? Is that Disney?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

No, but it was what we call segue. [*Laughter*] Or a pivot. I quickly pivoted away from Disney into that. Glenn, what a conversation. There's a segue to Glenn and Billy Petersen, who—Glenn, I loved your conversation with him, man. I mean, like, careers like his don't seem real. Right?

**Audrey Francis:**

Right.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

How do you wind up in Idaho, and then an executive producer on CSI? You do that if your name is Billy Petersen.

**Glenn Davis:**

What I learned from Billy in this conversation is that very early on, he figured out something about himself. And that was: he didn't want to do anything that he didn't like, or he didn't want to do. So, he would just say, "No." So, he said, "No," a lot. And that's how he sort of ended up where he's at. And I think that as actors, we're sort of programmed to say "yes" to everything, and we just sort of go "Oh, someone's offering me something or someone wants me to audition for something?" And we just go "Yeah." We don't—we sort of don't even think about whether we want to do it or not. And Billy, that's sort of foremost in his mind. "Am I going to be happy doing this thing?" Whether it's a huge movie, a huge play, a TV show, and he just said "No," a lot. And that's how he sort of ended up where he's at.

**Caroline Neff:**

Well, and even though he's been in LA for a number of years, he embodies to me everything that I learned about how to be a Chicago theatre practitioner. Which is like, it's really bold. It's really, like, fiercely connected. You know, and I loved him talking about when Steppenwolf and Remains, were all in DC at the Kennedy Center together, like, oh, this is so family and (for lack of a better word), I mean, it just to me really embodies what ensemble is, which is, "let's take care of each other and let's take care of the art before anything else." Which is just really inspiring and cool and was great to sort of be reminded of.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Absolutely.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

I was really struck by: one, I've never heard a podcast with so much fucking swagger in it between you and Billy Petersen.

**Glenn Davis:**

But at the same time, he's very humble. He's very cognizant of things had to break a certain way for him to get to where he's at. So he's just like, he's this great amalgamation of just chill, cool. And knowing himself, so.

**Audrey Francis:**

The other thing I really loved was like (similar to what you were just saying Caroline about like the idea of family), this idea of “Look, if I said I'm gonna do something with my family, I'm loyal to them. And I'm doing that.”

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

The one—one of the things that I thought was coolest about Billy (and I won't give it away) but his answer to “What type of animal do you associate with?” and the simplicity with which answered it, to me, is why we ask that question it. Like, he just he answered it, and it was a totally—I would have never in a million years thought of that animal. And it's so perfect. So—

**Caroline Neff:**

He also didn't have to think about it at all!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I know!

**Caroline Neff:**

Like, that's the question that he gets all the time on, like, press junkets. [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah, I mean, I guess without further ado, we should sort of make sure that we take in as much swagger as we can. If you're low on swag, this is your chance to—

**Caroline Neff:**

Refill. [*Laughter*]

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your half hour call. This is half hour til the top of the show. Half hour. If you have not signed in, please do so at this time. Half hour, half hour.

**Glenn Davis:**

How are you doing?

**William Petersen:**

I'm good. I'm good. I'm growing the COVID beard and the COVID hair.

**Glenn Davis:**

It looks great. It's great to talk to you because you and I have talked over the years, but we've—you know, it's funny because we're friends and I've never had to look you up. I've never had to, like, do any research on a friend before. But like, I'm looking you up and something occurred to me: there's a strong argument to be made that you have been a star in film, TV and theatre.

**William Petersen:**

It's good to be king. *[Laughter]*

**Glenn Davis:**

Touché. When you look back, what, sort of, what part of your career were you, sort of, most proud of?

**William Petersen:**

You know, it was—I'd have to probably say it's the first 10 years. You know, it was—we started Remains Theatre in Chicago, and Steppenwolf had started, and the Organic Theatre was there, and the Goodman Theatre was young and flourishing. And, you know, that whole period from (I want to say) like 1977 to 1987, was just so exciting. And all of the people that I was meeting on a weekly basis, you know, all the actors—it was an amazing group of people that, that just descended into Chicago. And, you know, it was a thrill. Every night was a thrill because we were together, we were young, we thought we knew everything, and we didn't know most things. And so, we made all kinds of great mistakes, but then we recovered from them. *[Laughter]* And it was just—it was a thrilling sort of bipartisan effort on the part of hundreds of artists in Chicago, young and bold.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

But they all, you know, every—I've been, again, lucky. I—there's no part of any of what I've really done that I didn't like because when you're doing something that you love, there's not a bad really a bad workday.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah. I do want to talk to you about theater. I want to start there because a lot of people who are going to be listening to this are going to be thinking, "Oh, yeah, Billy Petersen's a member of Steppenwolf," and probably think that you've been a member for a long time. But it was actually in 2008 that you became a member. And preceding that you were, as you just mentioned, a member of Remains Theatre. How did that sort of—how did that happen? Because you were a founder as well, right?

**William Petersen:**

Yeah. Well, it was, I want to say, like 1979.

**Glenn Davis:**

Okay.

**William Petersen:**

And I had just gotten an Equity card at the Victory Gardens. I was meeting actors. I'd met a bunch of the guys from the Organic Theatre. And, and I was terrible auditioner, Glenn. You know, I just couldn't audition to save my life. I couldn't get cast anyways. I would go in and audition for shows. But I couldn't get cast. And we just—I just thought, you know, “Why—I know all these actors. We're all hanging out. We all take classes together, go drinking together, whatever. We played softball together. Why don't we do theatre together?” You know? And that was really the idea for Remains. Was that we just, you know, how much better are you when you play together every day than you are when you—? I would find myself getting cast in a play. And I would meet the actors, first day of rehearsal. I would get to know their last names about opening night. And then four, five, six weeks later, we were closing and I didn't really even know where they lived, you know? And then I might not see them again for years. And so, we just said, “Let's just do this together. Let's just be together, we'll figure it out.” We didn't—nobody had a dime. Nobody had a place to live. Nobody had a job. And we just said “Let's do this together.” You know? It's—and then it was very exciting because, at the time that we were doing that, Steppenwolf had already started up in Highland Park.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

And so, we became friends. And it was kind of great. I got to do shows over there and they would come and help us at Remains. John would come and direct a play, or guys would be in stuff, you know? And so we just kind of became—we were sort of like a sister company to Steppenwolf. You know, and we had Amy Morton and we had Gary Cole. And then those guys went off and joined Steppenwolf after Remains folded. We went on for a lot longer than we thought we were going to go on.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

You know? And at that point, I didn't really—I wasn't in a position to really commit to another theater or be part of another theater. And it was lovely in 2008, Martha and Amy talked to me and said, “Do you want a home?” I was like, “Yeah.” And I hadn't been on stage for like eight years because of the TV show. So, I was afraid I was never going to get back on stage. You know? There's that fear that if you don't do it for a while, you're never going to be able to do it.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

And so they offered me a seat at the table, and I jumped. *[Laughter]*

**Glenn Davis:**

That's great, man. Let's go back for a bit. You—so you were born in Chicago, right?

**William Petersen:**

Evanston.

**Glenn Davis:**

Evanston; you were born in Evanston. And but you grew up in Idaho.

**William Petersen:**

No, I didn't grow up in Idaho. But I did go out there and finish up my high school out there. I had—oh, it's a very—I had dropped out of high school for a while. I ended up in sort of a night school, high school situation. This was back in the, you know, 1970, '71. It was rock festivals everywhere, there was protests in the streets, there was, you know, the whole Vietnam thing. And I was—I just found it much more interesting to be out of school. *[Laughter]* But then I got to be 18, or something, and my brother was living out in Idaho and he said, "You know, you gotta finish up high school somehow. You know, what if you need a job someday, you know." And so, I went out and I lived with him. And became—and I was a huge sports nut. And the only reason that I wanted to be around school was to be able to be on the football team and the basketball team. So, I ended up being able to do that out there and finished up high school finally, with like, several D-minus-minuses on my report card. *[Laughter]* But I was able to play ball and that kept me in, and so at least I got a degree out there. And then I kicked around Idaho for a long period of time, which is really where I discovered the theatre.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, you went to Idaho State, right?

**William Petersen:**

I went there for a year because my girlfriend, at the time, had been there. And so, I'd been down there to visit. And I'd met the guy who was head of the theatre department down there, and I was trying to play football for them. I was going to play football, but my grade point average was so bad that—it was like before they did red-shirting, but I was basically like a red shirt. Like, "You got to come here for six months and get your grades up."

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

"Because of your high school, you got to at least carry a C or something." And so, he put me in some theater classes just to like, just show up. He was like, "Just show up." I was in Stagecraft and Lighting Design and Voice and Diction, you know, stuff you could just show up and get an A. And I met all these people that were from the theatre department. I said, "Man, this is way better than the football team." You know. And they started letting me work backstage on stuff. And I didn't really intend to be an actor at all; I just liked being in the theater department.

**Glenn Davis:**

So, when they invited you to the theater department, it wasn't to act. You were just—

**William Petersen:**

No, they just wanted me to take classes so that I—you know, I wasn't a major anything. I didn't have any idea about a major, I just wanted to play football. And, I took these—so I took these classes. But I started meet these guys. And then they were looking for somebody who wanted to be around the theater that would carry the keys. So, they made me auditorium manager, and they were giving me like \$3 an hour, which in 1973 was like, good bucks, you know. *[Laughter]* And so I would just hang out in the theater, because I'd get three bucks an hour every hour I was there, whether I was in class or not.

Because if people needed to get the lights, or they needed to open up a rehearsal room, or— I was the guy. And I never left. And finally, they made me, at the end of that first year, they made me do an acting class. And do a play.

**Glenn Davis:**

So how did you end up back in Chicago after that?

**William Petersen:**

Oh god, it's a long trip. But I was—I had gotten married and had a baby. And I took a job up in Northern Idaho as a logger. Because I'd met a guy who had ran a little logging outfit. And because I had this, my wife and this little baby, I had to, you know, I needed work. And so, I went up to work for him. But it was incredibly difficult. And I kept longing for the theater. We ended up living in a trailer. And I ended up ended up working at a truck stop, actually. And my dad back in Chicago sent me an article on the Organic Theater. They had gone off touring in Europe or something, and somebody in the *Tribune* wrote an article about them and he sent it out to me in Idaho. And I read that. And then I was watching a little black and white TV at the truck stop one night and I saw Bill Murray, who I'd gone to high school with for a minute at Loyola, in Wilmette. And he was on Saturday Night Live or something. I was like, "That's, hey, that's Bill Murray. What's he doing?" And I was like, "It's happening in Chicago," you know? And then I said to my wife, at one point, I said, "Let's get out of here. I can't work at a truck stop the rest of my life." And we loaded up a little Toyota and drove across the country and got to Chicago and I started to try and be an actor.

**Glenn Davis:**

I also saw that you were in the American premiere of *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Goodman, right?

**William Petersen:**

Yeah. Yeah.

**Glenn Davis:**

How did that happen? And what was that like?

**William Petersen:**

So, I had a relationship with Greg Mosher, who was the artistic director at the Goodman at the time, and I had met David Mamet. And anyways, they were they were putting together a production—the original American production of *Glengarry*—and they were going to take it to New York. And they called in Joey Mantegna. We had a great cast. And, so, I said, "Yeah." It fit a certain slot between stuff I was doing for Remains or whatever. And I said, "I'll do it." But then we were scheduled to do—Remains was scheduled to do *The Time of Your Life* on the mainstage at the Goodman in February, and they wanted to take the show from Chicago—*Glengarry*—to New York for a Broadway deal. And I said, "I'm not going. You know, I want to do *Time of Your Life* with Remains here." And they were like—they didn't understand that at all. Why I would not go to Broadway with *Glengarry*.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

But I—you know, we were excited to do *Time of Your Life*. We'd been planning it for several months. And so, I only did the Chicago version of the production and then they went off to New York.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, I have it on good authority that David Mamet, to this day respects you so much for that choice.

**William Petersen:**

You know, Glenn, I think one of the most powerful things you can—the most powerful word you have as an actor in your life is “No.” You know? I mean—and a lot of people don't understand that, in the business *per se*. You know, they don't understand why you wouldn't do something because mostly we're—we try to take whatever we can get because there's not a lot. There's a lot of dry stretches, you know? I just think that I got that early on. It was never (for me) about—it was never about paychecks or fame or, you know, any of that stuff. It was just about being with these people in the room. It still is. I mean, the rehearsal period for me is the exciting time. It's the fun time. It's the time where I learned all the things I never learned in school.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

And you know, once the play opens, I'm about done, really.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your 15-minute call. 15 minutes til the top of the show. Fifteen, fifteen.

**Glenn Davis:**

What do you do in the, you know, for your half hour when you get to the theater? Anything special?

**William Petersen:**

Well, when I was younger, I used to just show up before the show whenever I could get there, you know, back in the day. But, the last 10 or 12 years back in the theater, I sort of get—I get to the theater early, probably an hour and a half or an hour and fifteen minutes before and I walk around under the “E!” Tracks out in the alley and just go over some of my stuff in my head for the show. Then I'll get in there maybe fifteen minutes before half hour so I can say hi and talk to stage managers. And then I'll just sit in front of the mirror till the show starts and figure out which way my curl should go. [Laughter]

**Glenn Davis:**

So, I want to fast forward a bit, and—you and I, we both shared an experience, at different times obviously, but we both went to the Stratford Festival and worked there for a season or two. And I just want to—I'm bringing that up, because that was really where it first started for you in film and TV while you were there.

**William Petersen:**

Yeah, it was—that was an amazing sort of... that was an amazing year. Because from *Glengarry*—like I said I had done *In the Belly of the Beast* in the fall at Wisdom Bridge and then segued over to do *Glengarry* at the Goodman, and then we did *The Time of Your Life* at the Goodman, and then I did *Fool for Love* at Steppenwolf, because most of Steppenwolf had gone to New York to do—to remount a production of *Balm in Gilead*. And there was just a few of us left in Chicago and so we—you know, Terry Kinney grabbed a script and we did *Fool for Love* with Rondi and Randy Arney. And we ran that for as long as we could, because there was nothing else for Steppenwolf to run, you know, because everybody was gone. And while I was doing that the—John Hirsch, this brilliant man who was the artistic director of

Stratford, came down to Chicago. He was looking for a Stanley Kowalski for *Streetcar*. They had their season going and they had a late opening—an August opening for *Streetcar* and he didn't feel like, whatever, he didn't have a Stanley Kowalski in his company at the time. So, he came down and, somehow or another, had been told to see me and he came down and saw *Fool for Love*. And then he, he cast me and we close *Fool for Love*. And I went up to Stratford and rehearsed the show and opened it. And we did *Streetcar*. It was a tremendous production. It was a lot of fun. And oddly enough Billy Friedkin—William Friedkin, also from Chicago, was directing—was going to direct a movie called *To Live and Die in LA*. And he had gotten his casting director to start looking at actors. He wanted guys that had never been in a movie before. Because he wanted to kind of replicate his experience with *The French Connection* from years before. And Bob Weiner was the name of the casting director. And I remember, he told me this story. He was auditioning guys in New York. And one of the guys who auditioned was Gary Sinise, who was in New York, probably still doing *True West*. And he auditioned Gary, and Bob Weiner was a particular kind of individual, and after he was done auditioning him, then he said, "That's great. Thank you very much. You're not going to get the part. But, do you know anybody back in Chicago who might be right for this part?" And Sinise (being a mensch) said, "Yeah, I got a guy. I know a guy you might be interested in his name is Billy Petersen." So, this guy looked around for where I was, and I was up in Stratford doing *Streetcar*. And he flew to New York—to Toronto and came over to the theater. And I got a phone call. I didn't have an agent or anything. And he said, you know, "I'm here to see you... a movie," whatever. He came and saw the show, and then after the show, I met with the guy. He was weird as you could be. And he said, "Could you come down to New York and meet William Friedkin?"

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

I said, "Well, I only have Monday off." Do I flew down to New York on Monday, they flew me down from Toronto, which is easy. And I went over to Friedkin's apartment. He just had me up in his apartment. I walked in and I was like, you know, I've seen *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection* and I was like, "This is very nice to get to meet this man who I admired so much." And he literally gave me a couple of pages of dialogue. We sat down on a couch in his living room and we read it together. He read one part, I read the other guy. And he puts the thing down and said, "You got the part." I was like, "Okay, so he's crazy. He's just offering everybody that comes in his apartment, the role in *To Live and Die in LA*." That's what I thought. And I was able to get my friend John Pankow, from Chicago, who was there at the time doing, like, understudying *Amadeus* on Broadway. And he came over and he got to play my—you know, we improvised the scene for Friedkin that night and he cast Johnny, as my partner in the movie.

**Glenn Davis:**

You call up your boy and said, "Hey, come over. We're gonna kick it, and we're gonna talk to this director, and I think you can be in this movie with me where we're the leads?"

**William Petersen:**

Yeah. [Laughter] And it happened. And I was like, "Okay, this is either completely mad, and it's all just been, you know, a joke. Some candid camera situation. Or we're going to have a ball." And we did. And we learned everything we could possibly want to learn from Friedkin in that next six months. And he needed to do—he wanted to do the show right away.

**Glenn Davis:**

Mm hmm.

**William Petersen:**

And again, I said, "I'm sorry, I committed to doing *Streetcar* through October," because that's how late the season went in Stratford.

**Glenn Davis:**

Oh, he wanted to do the film right away. So you—

**William Petersen:**

Yeah, this was in early September. He said, "We're going to start shooting in three weeks." And I said, "I'm not." And he said, "Well, we have—but that's—you know, you can get out of your show. You just got to give them two weeks notice" or whatever. I said, "I'm not leaving the show. I agreed to do the show till the end of the show." And he pushed the movie back. I mean, that's stuff's not even heard of and I didn't have an agent!

**Glenn Davis:**

Is it fair to say that that sort of sent your career in a completely different direction than you would have thought otherwise?

**William Petersen:**

Well, yes and no. I got, you know, I had some money for the first time. And I was just going to go back to the theater. I had no intention of ever—you know, if I make another movie great if not, I don't know.

**Glenn Davis:**

So even then—so even then you weren't like, "Oh man, this is the start of something special. I'm ready to kick this thing off."

**William Petersen:**

No, I didn't have an agent. I still didn't have an agent.

**Glenn Davis:**

After the movie.

**William Petersen:**

Yeah, after the movie that I had all these agents asking me to be my agent. But I said, "Well, I don't need an agent. I have a theater. You know, I live in Chicago. What do I need an agent for?"

**Glenn Davis:**

Wow.

**William Petersen:**

And then Michael Mann showed up for the movie *Manhunter* when I was in Washington, DC doing *In the Belly of the Beast*. Which Steppenwolf was doing—they were doing... was it *Streamers*? They were doing *Streamers* and *Coyote Ugly*.

**Glenn Davis:**

Okay.

**William Petersen:**

We were we were all at the Kennedy Center. It was like a Chicago summer at the Kennedy Center. So, it was kind of hilarious because we were all hanging. I was—Amy and I were babysitting Jeff and Laurie's daughter Zoey, who was two years old or a year and a half old at the time, in between shows, you know. And Michael Mann showed up and said, "I want you to do the lead in my movie."

**Glenn Davis:**

*Manhunter.*

**William Petersen:**

Yeah and I was like, "Well, okay. This will be over in August. He says, "Yeah, no, no we'll shoot in the fall. And—but I need you to do a—" he asked, he said, "I need you to do a screen test because Dino De Laurentiis is producing nobody knows who you are." And I don't think Michael—you know I met Michael on a movie called *Thief* that he had done in Chicago.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

And, before that. And he wanted me to do it and I—but I didn't want to do the screen test. So I just said "No, I can't do the screen test. I love the book. I love the movie. I'd love to do it. But either you cast me or not because if I do a screen test it's not gonna be any good and they're still not gonna know who I am and then they're gonna think I can't—I don't know how to act."

**Glenn Davis:**

Wait, wait. Go back. Go back. Michael Mann asked you to do a screen test. You tell the man "No."

**William Petersen:**

Yeah, I just said "I don't think that's a good idea." [*Laughter*] And they asked Billy Friedkin if he showed them any of *To Live and Die in LA*, which hadn't come out yet. And he said, "No, I'm not showing you my movie. I didn't have a—I didn't get to see a movie of him before I cast him. You're on your own." And so, I sort of said, "Yeah, you're on your own. I mean, it's your movie; cast me or don't cast me."

**Glenn Davis:**

You know this is amazing stuff you're saying, right?

**William Petersen:**

Yeah, I know. I know. But you know, at the time, it was—first of all, it's good to be young and foolish. [*Laughter*] But I wasn't that young either at that point. I was 32 years old. That was the other thing. You know.

**Glenn Davis:**

This is incredible. Just the notion that you're a relative, nobody, and you're sort of dictating terms in a way that is unheard of.

**William Petersen:**

I know, actors don't even like to hear it, you know, because it just makes them feel bad. But the thing is, is that we're all on some kind of journey, and it's usually our own journey. And nobody knows,

necessarily, where their journey is gonna go. But I think if you approach it like that—and for me the decision was made when I was like 25. Do I want to be in the theater if it means I'm poverty ridden when I'm 45? And I said to myself, I remember very, very clearly saying to myself, "You know what? That's okay. That's okay with me. As long as I can say that I was in the theater. That's okay."

**Glenn Davis:**

Remarkable. Let's talk about a few things. I know you worked with Friedkin again; you all did *12 Angry Men*, right?

**William Petersen:**

Well, it was just it was unbelievable. I found myself in a room with George C. Scott, Jack Lemmon, Ossie Davis, you know, Mykelti Williamson, Jimmy Gandolfini, you know, Tony Danza we were all just sitting around a table for three weeks. Edward James Olmos. It was a remarkable month together. We rehearsed it for about 10 days. We could've done it on stage. But, you know, we shot it in sequence. And it was just, you know, I've been fortunate to work with some of the greatest older actors. I mean I—that's the other thing. I've just been lucky in the things I did that just sort of fell, you know, into my lap.

**Glenn Davis:**

Now, most audiences know you from *CSI*, because you spent nine years on that show. But what they might not know is that you were a leading producer on that show from the first episode to the last—even after your character was written off the show. And this happened at a time when actors weren't given that type of power, authority, agency. Tell me how that all came to happen in the first place.

**William Petersen:**

Well it's, you know, the infamous—now infamous—Leslie Moonves.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah.

**William Petersen:**

Who, at the time we did *CSI*, was the head of CBS. I met him when he was the head of Warner Brothers Television. And he had—he was fascinated with the movie *Manhunter*. And he kept—I kept going over to Warner Brothers. He kept calling up, not all the time, but I had a couple of meetings over at Warner Brothers Television, where he wanted me to do something for Warner Brothers Television in the—like *Manhunter*. And but he wanted me to play a lawyer, or a doctor, or a policeman. He wanted me racing around town in a fast car with a gun on my hip, you know.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, yeah.

**William Petersen:**

But Nina Tassler, who was his drama development, who he brought over from Warner Brothers to CBS, I would talk to her in these meetings and she sort of got what I was looking for, which wasn't around. They weren't making any shows like that, you know. And I didn't want to play a divorced dad taking care of, you know, funny kids, and all of that. And she heard a pitch from a guy who had not been a writer who was a writer. He was living in Las Vegas and he come to town. He was going around pitching a fingerprint-duster show that nobody was ever going to do. [Laughter] And Nina heard this pitch. And she literally called me up and just happened to catch me one afternoon. He was on his way back to Las

Vegas. He was done with his pitches; it didn't look like anything was going happen. And Nina said, "Listen, I heard a pitch from a guy who's totally crazy, wonderful, young, never written for television, doesn't know half the shows on television. And he's got this wacky idea about crime scene analysts trying to put evidence together." And I—she said, "Would you meet him before he leaves town?" And it was like in an hour and a half, he was going to leave. I ran over to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. And I met him in the bar at the Beverly Wilshire. And he pitched me this idea. I didn't know if he could write a lick. [Laughter] But I loved the idea. And I loved his enthusiasm for breaking all the television rules, you know. And I went—I called up Nina. And I said, "Yeah, I'm in. let's develop this."

**Glenn Davis:**

Wow.

**William Petersen:**

It was also, Glenn, it was at a time where the OJ thing had happened. The world was confused about what was real, what wasn't real, what was evidence, what wasn't evidence, where the truth lay. You know, this was 1999, 2000. And I knew that this was kind of cool because it was going to be about guys seeking the truth. And finding the truth and saying, "This is this this, isn't something else. This can't be anything else. This this is hair fiber. It's nobody else's." And I thought that that was a great thing to give an audience, you know.

**Glenn Davis:**

That's awesome, man. Once you did that show, you did it for nine years, right?

**William Petersen:**

Mm hmm.

**Glenn Davis:**

How did you know it was time to go? And how did you how did you, sort of, orchestrate your exit?

**William Petersen:**

Well, I—you know, it was one of these things where I, again, like when I do a play, you know, it's after opening night, I'm always looking, "How can I get out of this thing?" [Laughter] You know, it was great up until then, and it was the same thing with the show. I was—from the time I started doing the episodes, I was like, "Okay, I've done this, now what do I do?" And—but we kept—we found ways to make the show great and make it better. And it was really more like a theater experience because I had the same people I was working with every day. And I got to know them well over the years and all of that. But they had done a spin off. They've done *CSI: Miami*, Gary was over doing *CSI: New York*, there was *CSIs* everywhere. You know, every network had their *CSI* on the air. And, you know, there was only so many stories we were going to be able to tell that weren't either being told by any of the 10 other *CSIs* that we're now on the air. And I felt that I had done just about all I could and there wasn't a lot more for me to do. And I was a little concerned. I hadn't been on the stage in eight years. And I was a little freaked out that I wasn't—what if I get to the point where I'm scared to go back to the theater? And so, I let them know—they let me out to go do a play in Providence with Amy. Amy directed me in *Dublin Carol*, a Conor McPherson play. And that was as scary as I could imagine, just having been out and having been away for eight years. I was, you know, that was a that was an experience. And then I was lucky enough Martha asked me to come back and do it in Chicago. And so that's when I knew I wanted to just end my run with *CSI*. It was like, "Perfect, I'm going back to the theater." You know. I

didn't really want—I wanted to go back down to the basement at Steppenwolf, sit in that room and get ready to do a play.

**Stage Manager:**

Company this is your five-minute call. Five minutes till the top of the show. Five minutes till the top of the show. This is five.

**Glenn Davis:**

Well, here's a lightning round. I'm just going to ask you questions and you just say the first thing comes to mind. What is your favorite Steppenwolf production you have ever seen?

**William Petersen:**

Oh boy. Ah, well, you know, the three iconic ones are *Balm in Gilead*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *August: Osage County*. Those are the ones that you can define a decade of Steppenwolf work. I wouldn't know how to pick one.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah. Toughest experience at Steppenwolf.

**William Petersen:**

Walking into the Upstairs Theater with *Slowgirl*, a play that we had rehearsed at the Geffen in Los Angeles—Randy Arney directing me and Rae Gray, just the two of us—and realizing that the theater was set up in an arena sort of situation where you had bleachers on both sides of the stage. And we had to try and re block the show and make it work for two different sides. You know, Austin had turned the theater around for something and all of a sudden, we were wandering around trying to figure that out. That was just the toughest sort of like, “Okay, I gotta get my head around this go out there and just figure it out.”

**Glenn Davis:**

In a two-person play. Yeah. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**William Petersen:**

Oh, I have the bowling jacket. That Stanley Kowalski wore in *Streetcar Named Desire* up at Stratford. I have it somewhere in a bag. A gold green bowling jacket that he used to come—he used to be so proud. I had to dig that out someplace. It's in a basement somewhere.

**Glenn Davis:**

Yeah, I got to see that. Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience, whether you were performing in it or not.

**William Petersen:**

I suppose. Well, the most memorable was when I was doing the opening night of *Glengarry Glen Ross* and I was out there with Joey Mantegna and he went up on his lines and never came down. [Laughter] Eventually, we heard the stage manager—Joey Drummond was yelling the lines through the back of the thing. Finally, Joey just pulled out the map of Florida and said, “Okay, it's intermission.” And then he went on to win the Tony in New York. So. [Laughter]

**Glenn Davis:**

What job you didn't get that broke your heart.

**William Petersen:**

The Porter in *Macbeth* at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. I audition for the Porter. They were never going to give me the part; I was young, and it went to some graduate student character actor from Illinois State and I didn't get to play the Porter.

**Glenn Davis:**

What's the last song you listened to?

**William Petersen:**

"Kokomo." The Beach Boys.

**Glenn Davis:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**William Petersen:**

Well, right now it's Karl Knusgård. The Norwegian who wrote *My Struggle*, this 3,600 page, six volume... He's fascinated me over the last five years as I've tried to read this whole thing. It's an amazing compilation.

**Glenn Davis:**

Gotcha. What's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**William Petersen:**

Wrigley Field.

**Glenn Davis:**

Dude,

**William Petersen:**

That's a good afternoon right there.

**Glenn Davis:**

It's the best. That's the best answer I've heard so far. What animal do you most identify with?

**William Petersen:**

The elk.

**Glenn Davis:**

If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**William Petersen:**

Old, white-haired with a paunch. Desperately trying to find a place to sit.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a good one everyone. Places, please. Places.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Thanks for listening.

**Glenn Davis:**

And thanks again to our guest this week, William Petersen

**Audrey Francis:**

*Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem; recorded and engineered by Matthew Chapman.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Today's stage manager was Mary Hungerford

**Glenn Davis:**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Caroline Neff:**

New episodes of *Half Hour* are released every other Tuesday.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

In two weeks, we're excited to welcome Frank Galati to the podcast.

**Glenn Davis:**

In the meantime, you can reach us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthttr or on Facebook and Instagram.

**Audrey Francis:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org).

**Caroline Neff:**

Till next time, this is Caroline Neff.

**Audrey Francis:**

Audrey Francis.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cliff Chamberlain.

**Glenn Davis:**

And Glenn Davis. A lifetime to engage; half hour two places.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

This conversation between two of the most swagger-ific guys—

**Glenn Davis:**

We have to cut “swagger-ific.”

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

We do? [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

Keep it, keep it, keep it, keep it!

**Audrey Francis:**

It was swag-nificent. [*Laughter*] And you’re an ex-swag-ulent interviewer.

**Caroline Neff:**

That sounds gross, Audrey

### **Ep: 5 – Storycatchers Theater & StepEd: “I Got Your Back”**

**Date:** 7/7/20

**Featuring:** Cydney Cleveland, Tamara Drew, Caroline Neff, and Abhi Shrestha

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**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois: this is *Half Hour*.

**Caroline Neff:**

Hello, and welcome to this episode of *Half Hour*. I'm Caroline Neff, and I'll be here solo for this episode. We've been absent for a few weeks because we unequivocally believe that Black lives matter, that we are in the middle of a reckoning, and the conversations about our moment before is not what we're interested in sharing with our listeners. So, we've been rethinking our approach and how we want to use this platform, which brings me to today's episode. Today on *Half Hour* we've got a really exciting and inspiring conversation between three vital voices in Chicago's youth-focused theater scene. From Storycatchers Theatre, we're joined by Cydney Cleveland and Tamara Drew. If you're not familiar with Storycatchers, they are an incredible organization that Steppenwolf has been lucky enough to partner with for several years. Founded in 1984, their mission is to guide young people within the juvenile justice system to transform their traumatic experiences into powerful theater, developing the courage and vision to become leaders and mentors. I've had the privilege to watch a couple of their shows and I cannot recommend them enough. They are funny and powerful and filled with gifted performers and writers. Their work is unbelievable. Also joining our conversation is Abhi Shrestha, the Education Associate here at Steppenwolf. Steppenwolf Education, or StepEd, is the mighty department here at the theater that runs all of our programs that reach Chicago-area teens. Guided by principles of equity and access, Steppenwolf Education uses the arts to create a more empathetic tomorrow by celebrating the arts learner, maker and appreciator in each of us. Working closely with Chicago Public Schools and other community partners, Steppenwolf Education annually ensures access to the theater for more than twenty-thousand participants from around Chicago. Also, if you've never seen an SYA show, I can't wait for you to experience it for the first time. Performing for these teens has been one of the highlights of my career. And I absolutely cannot wait to do it again. And with that, this is Storycatchers Theatre.

**Stage Manager:**

Good evening, everyone. This is your half hour call. Half hour till top of show. This is your half hour call. Thank you.

**Caroline Neff:**

So hi, folks!

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Hello.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Hello.

**Tamara Drew:**

Hello.

**Caroline Neff:**

I want to first off thank you so much for giving us your time. I know how—I actually *don't* know how busy you are; I'm just imagining. I would love to start if we can—this is the first time that we've had multiple guests on this platform—and so I would love to just start going around and introducing ourselves. I'm Caroline Neff, my pronouns are she/hers.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

My name is Cydney Cleveland, she/hers. I'm the Director of Production for Storycatchers Theatre. I've been with Storycatchers for about 17 years now. I went from being a participant to Director of Production.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes, hello, my name is Tamara Drew. My pronouns are she/hers, and I am the Artistic Manager and for Storycatchers at IYC Chicago. I'm also our Project Manager for our CPD relationship. Additionally, I am the Artistic Coordinator for our Changing Voices program and I've been with Storycatchers for a year—almost exactly to the day.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Hey, my name is Abhi, I use they/them pronouns and I'm the Education Associate at Steppenwolf. I've been there for about two-ish years now. And I facilitate our Young Adult Council, which is our after-school program with high school teenagers. And I also do a lot of work around our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now just hearing the title of each of your individual jobs—do you mind just expanding a little bit on what that means? Because I hear “Artistic Manager” and I hear “Director of Production” and I know what those things are, I think, in regard to how they work in an artistic organization. But if you don't mind, do you mind just expanding a little bit?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

I'll start off. So, Director of Production for Storycatchers: we're a small organization and only have one production actually going on at a time. And also, with Storycatchers, our main motto is “about the words.” So, what I do is to enhance the show, the words, that are happening and the songs. To aid in those. And this is a small house, I work on it all. So, I do costumes, props, stage. And also I manage also partnerships. That's why I managed a partnership with Steppenwolf for Young Adults with our tour and coming out. And I think that's all my job entails. [*Laughter*].

**Tamara Drew:**

Cydney's also the quintessential big sister of Storycatchers. [*Laughter*]

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And also like a fashion icon. [*Laughter*]

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes! [*Laughter*]

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Thank you.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, so as far as my roles as Storycatchers. So, as artistic manager at IYC Chicago—IYC Chicago is the Illinois Youth Center of Chicago. It's under the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice. It's a juvenile incarceration facility. And we go into the facility and facilitate programming to the boys in that facility two to three times a week depending on what cycle we are in. And we work with the boys with a trauma-informed writing methodology to write stories about their real-life experiences. And then we work with the boys on developing those stories into scenes and songs that we then put all together for a final production, full scale musical that they perform in, in the facility.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And I, as the Education Associate at Steppenwolf, and the Ed Department is a mighty department of four. So, we work really closely together and really support each other in our various focuses. Mine is with our Young Adult Council and our teen programming stream. Our Young Adult Council is a group of 26 teenagers from all over the Chicagoland area who meet weekly at Steppenwolf, to get a deeper dive into theater. And I also sort of manage our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions—SYA, as we call it—that are created with a high school-aged teen in mind. And one of our Steppenwolf for Young Adults productions always goes on tour with Storycatchers. And so that also comes into the line of like, making sure that the teachers and the teaching artists in this partnership are also feel like they're set up for success when engaging with the material as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

I'm so glad you brought that up. Because how long has that—how long has the Storycatchers and StepEd tour been happening?

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Cydney, I feel like you can speak more to that. But I feel like it's been three years?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

Four years.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Four. So, four years now.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was the impetus for that?

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes. So, I think Steppenwolf came to us with *Monster* and I thought it was a really great first production to bring into the facilities because the characters relate to our kids that have the same storyline and the same predicament. So that's why that was the first one that they brought on tour. And our kids just loved it. And also, they can relate to it and see themselves in it. And also, to see a Black actor in the role. They can see themselves in him. Was his name Daniel Kyri, the actor that year? So, that's how it first started with that production. We went to each facility and they were on board to offer it to the whole facility, which is a rare occasion: for the whole facility to see the same play. We take some kids out three or four at a time, to see plays, but it's rare for professional actors to come on to their space.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Yeah, and I'll add too: this started before my time, but you know, in the last two years, something that has proven to be really important for the work that we do, and is even you know, we went through a recent like, what is the mission of Steppenwolf Education and sort of tried to articulate that recently as well. And something that's really important is that we are really committed to breaking down barriers to ensure access and equity for everyone to have sort of these touch points with arts and arts programming. And I think this idea of like what does our work look like without any barriers? To really think about access fully. And I think that's also where, you know, the partnership with Storycatchers is a manifestation of that as well and is really important to us in that way.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah. And I think I'd like to say also on our end, exposure is one of our main outcomes at Storycatchers. So, you know, we take the kids, they have to have a certain grade, they have to have certain behavior and certain achievements to be able to leave the facility and go out on these field trips. So like Cydney mentioned, it's only three to five kids that get to go out each time. But once a year, the show comes into the space and every single youth in the facility gets exposed to the show, and to theater and to art. And you know, we have these talkbacks after our staged readings with the kids, where the audience asks the young men on stage questions. And without fail, each and every one that I've attended at least one of the kids says "I've never been exposed to theater. I never was exposed to singing, dancing. I never knew I was good at it. I never knew I liked it. And I never knew that it was some this legit thing that people do and get paid for and are good at and cool people do." And, you know, so this relationship with Steppenwolf, and giving these kids this exposure is just huge in developing their scope of the world and their possible place in it, which is just so valuable.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

And I'd also love to lift up that, like, when we say we're going on tour, that, like, the tour, the production itself is part of the partnership. Our teaching artists also work with Storycatchers teaching artists and the teachers at the juvenile justice facilities and bring workshops that—you know Steppenwolf has a cohort of fifteen teaching artists who goes to CPS schools and really takes the themes of whatever production and builds a whole curriculum around them, and has these residencies at CPS schools. And we really take that curriculum and that partnership into our work with Storycatchers with the production. In tour. We also have workshops before or after each production and work with the teens in the juvenile justice facilities as well. So that sort of idea of partnership sort of manifests in both, like, the tour but also in our work with our teaching artists and teachers as well.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, I've had the good fortune of seeing a couple of Storycatchers productions and I—your creative process at Storycatchers is so unique. The fact that they all, thematically, are so sound and they always feel of a piece and not pieces. I'm just wondering what steps you go through. Like, do you always have like, "okay, we begin this way and then this is the second step. And then this is the third step"? Or is it malleable depending on the group? Or depending on the timeframe?

**Tamara Drew:**

So I will speak to that. The methodology that Meade Palidofsky, our Founder and Artistic Director, has developed is really well fleshed out. And it's very structured. And we—in my experience, I have never deviated from the methodology. The steps work. So, our first step is always to get together as an artistic team and to work through the show that we're going to partner with Steppenwolf on and think about different writing prompts that we think would work for our young people. And so that's the jumping off

point. We need to get some really tight specific writing prompts so that we can get some really specific answers from the youth. And then once we do that, you know, we expose them to some pieces of this script that represent scenarios from whence those writing prompts came. So that they can kind of relate to those characters and say, “oh, okay, I’ve been in a situation like this, I get what this character is going through, I can speak to that.” And then the methodology is really a series of very pointed conversations and interviews, relationships, digging and being nosy. So, like, I would say, a good skill of a teaching artist at Storycatchers is somebody that can find a way—an entry point—to connect right as a human being with the youth that they’re working with. And who can create kind of a safe space and a trusting relationship pretty quickly, where we can go ahead and ask these questions and the youth feel safe and confident answering them. And often that has to do with sharing pieces of ourselves as well, right? So, these writing prompts that we create, we also have to be able to connect to so that we can help the youth to connect. But the interview process and the way that we go about, you guys, writing these songs is just really ingenious. And I feel like I have a leg up on all other songwriters knowing this methodology. The kids, some of them have been there for years and some of them will continue to be there until they are 21. And some of them are there for a month, right? So, the more material we can get quickly, the better equipped we are to take that youth on that journey while they are with us and to create some some really good rich content. So following the methodology step by step is almost like a must. Otherwise we could get lost in the weeds.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

And our approach to stories is about personal connection. You have to have that one-on-one time also with the youth. Which is also where we create spaces for that with our partners, with IJJ, to say that what we want to create is a space for this youth to tell us their story. So we need a space to do that too.

**Caroline Neff:**

How long is your creative process from say from day one to day one of production?

**Tamara Drew:**

Um, it’s about nine weeks or so.

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, we work in cycles. So that each story is actually heard also along the way. So then not it’s just that they get all filtered into one big play, but they also each individually, need to get heard, and be seen by audience and by your peers. So, the first part of the process is writing each narrative out and then putting that into a staged reading, where you still hear the beginning, middle and end of each story, but they have a flow and they have transition songs within them. And also, one story maybe turned into a song. It also may become the bridge to bring all the stories together. But each story is heard. So that happens twice. So those—it’s usually about eight to sixteen stories that you have to then put a play around it. So that’s the third process. So, the first two writing cycles are usually about eight weeks, eight to nine weeks, and then the previous cycles, so we can see what we got, is about three weeks of working on it, three weeks to a month. And then the audience has a chance at that preview moment to say what they want the ending to be. Do they want to change it? Or what hopes and dreams do they have for the characters that we just showed them on stage? Because nobody’s journey is fully written, so that’s why we can change the ending of the play. Because it’s our ending now. It’s not just one person’s story ending. So, putting up a full production for us takes about two months. So, beginning to end it’s about a year long process.

**Caroline Neff:**

And how many minutes performances do your productions generally have?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, we usually do, in each facility, about three or four shows. Because we want to make sure we have enough for the kids also to do it enough times. So, we have shows for the community, the peers inside and the kids' family is our mission, who we want in the audience and the community. And so, we want to give them all the opportunity to see our show. So, we do it like three or four times.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, and one of those shows is always a daytime show, and youth from the other Illinois Youth Center in Warrenville come to also see what the youth that IYC Chicago have been working on. Their counselors, their juvenile justice specialists (which we know as COs or correctional officers, but they're called juvenile justice specialists), and their teachers, and their superintendents, and everyone that works in the facility generally comes to that Friday daytime show, which is really great for these young men to show themselves in a different light than they're used to being experienced, and show their work, and show their talent, and their ability to their peers and to those adults who are regulating them on a daily basis. That Friday show was always my favorite show. That and the family show is also a lot, right. The stories are *real*, and the families are in the stories. And the often the mothers will just sit there and sob. And then we sob. And then the boys hold themselves together so they don't sob. And it's really, it's a really healing and transformative like thick energy experience.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Now as three people who work with young people, I'm—especially, and Tamara I think you were speaking to this earlier, of like kids that have not had exposure to theater before, that haven't—that didn't know that it was career that they could follow—what is that like? What is that approach like of, “hey, this is what this thing is, let's get excited about it together”? And Abhi, I want to throw this at you as well. Because even though you're getting kids who have been exposed to theater and all that, teenagers are guarded, just anyways. You know, somebody who is dealing with current and past trauma has had to steel themselves even more. And so, what is the what is the entry point?

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Yeah, I can start. I think the—I was thinking about this earlier today. In that, I think, for me, we talk about representation being really important. And I think that something that really like shook me, was we had—when going through the season selection process for an SYA show, we also invite our teens to give feedback, right? So we're like “this might be a play that seems like a good play for Steppenwolf for Young Adults.” And we'll be like, “great: Young Adult Council, can you read this and share with us your thoughts? And we want your voice to be a part of this process as we're deciding what shows we're doing for SYA.” And one teen read a play, and, in their response, they were like “I felt taken care of by this play. I think that a lot of times, we put a lot of pressure and focus on representation.” And she was like, “that's important too. But I feel like even more than feeling represented, I felt taken care of by this play. And that was really important to me.” And I think that, for me, is sort of an approach in thinking about how to engage with teens who either feel a little guarded, or teens who are, you know, not used to theatre. It's like, it's actually about making sure that they feel welcome and taken care of by the space

that theater can create. Like, we can't make someone connect to something, but we can open up a space for connection. Right?

**Tamara Drew:**

Yeah, I will say for us: I mean, our young men are in a very specific place in their lives when we come into contact with them. And just starting off, I mean, getting them in the door. If they have not yet experienced Storycatchers they're not signing up for our program because they're excited to do theater. It's because they're going to get at least 21 days cut off their sentence. So, the cut time is what brings the boys in the door. And it's what keeps them showing up even on the days where they don't feel like coming. But I will say engagement from that first day into that last day, how we get that buy-in from them, there are a couple different things. One: our very talented teaching artist team. I think the kids are always energized and surprised by how talented everybody is. And just music, like when we're singing. The boys are—a) they love the music and they will sing loud and off key and I feel like it's something that's very therapeutic for them. But they also enjoy just listening in awe to Ms. Medina sing or listening, right, to Mr. Denton play the keyboard and they get really, really invigorated by that. Additionally, it's those one-on-one relationships that Cydney mentioned. Like, I think each of us—I know that I have about three or four boys each time in each cohort that are kind of “my boys.” And I can tell when they're in a bad mood, I can tell and I know how to go in there and make little jokes or make comments or bring them out and as soon as you get that first smirk or glimmer in their eye, that's, you know, when you can start pulling them out. And again, I mean, we're in a very challenging environment, right? They are incarcerated. They're all wearing the same outfit every day. They are called by their last names and their number (I don't know what to call whatever that number is), their identification number. But in a Storycatcher's classroom, there is a very strict rule that we call them only by their first names. Because that is identity and humanity. And that gives us a little bit of an in already with them. But I think that mentorship, those one-on-one relationships, and drawing them into the fold of a creative talent field and really happy, positive environment: that's how we get our results in our relationships with these young men. And how if they're still in, I mean, I have not yet experienced in my one year, a young man who was still incarcerated that did not come back to the program for the next cycle. So, I think it's something that they really benefit from and we love them, and they love us.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, I am so excited and so curious about this song that is being recorded at Steppenwolf coming up and, I just, I'm curious about what it is? How it happened; how it's still happening. When do we get to hear it?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

So, “You Can't Kill Our Song” is the title of the song. Written by Tamara Drew, Meade Palidofsky, and Denton Arnell, with the kids in mind. And it's a really fun song. It's an awesome song. It's a protest song about how we feel about this moment, and what we're also seeing, and also working through.

**Tamara Drew:**

Yes! And I'd like to give a little bit of kind of background, too, about how this this came about. You know, when all of this civil unrest that has been just waiting to explode started to come about, we at Storycatchers, I mean, we are a heavily Black and brown staff. And many of us were really just thrown off of our axis, right? And we were really feeling the collective sorrow, anger, rage, sadness, need to motivate and move and do something. Right? So, we are working on this play, *I'm Not Your Homie* at IYC Chicago, our final production that will be live streaming soon. And in it there's a song about a young man's kind of “big homie” who was killed. And why did he like this person? Why do we care about this

person even though they drug us through the mud and, like, brought us into all these bad situations? So, we wrote—the young man wrote a song about his big homie mentor. And in the song, there's a line that says, “you can't you can't kill a song, through our song, their voice lives on,” right? So, thinking about—I was on the phone with Meade. And I have a 14-year-old son, and he's really enraged about what's happening right now. And he's coming to the point where he feels like a man. And he's a young Black boy. And he said, “You know what, tell him to write a song. He should write a song. He's a guitar player.” And I was like, “that's a really great idea. That's a way for him to put his angst into something that then can go out and motivate others.” And then Meade called me back she said, “You know what? We should write a song. What about if we change the song into this anthem.” So, we got together and we started working out the lyrics and we are working with a family right now—oh my gosh, you guys, we have this young man that was in IYC Chicago. His name is Brandon. He came to the program like, “I don't feel like being here, I just want to get out of here. I'm here for the cut time.” And after the first day, I mean he was almost in tears. I was in tears; I think all of us were. We do something called inside outside at the beginning end and we say, “on the outside, I'm wearing; and on the inside, I'm feeling.” And at the end, he said, “You know, I came here, and I thought this was just going to be stupid and annoying, and I wasn't gonna be able to wait to leave. And I mean, I'm really good at this. And I really love this, and I had no idea that this was gonna happen to me today. I think my life changed today.” So, he, oh my gosh, I have goosebumps right now thinking about it! So, he got out. So, we've been working with his family a lot to support them with food boxes and case management, helping them to relocate out of their dangerous space and some different things. And Meade had a conversation with his mom, and she has 13 children and eight of them are boys. So, she has eight Black teenage sons. And she says, “I'm just afraid, every day, every day that my kids are going to get murdered by the police every time they leave the house. I'm worried that they're going to get shot and killed and beaten and murdered by the police.” So, we've put a verse in there for Brenda about her eight sons. And I think that, I mean me, I have three Black sons myself. And this is definitely something that every time I see a video, I just juxtapose their faces on to the person who's being brutalized, and it's really stressful. And this whole idea of parenting, young, Black and brown kids, LGBTQ kids, people who are marginalized, and who we see are culturally in harm's way right now is something that's collectively weighing heavily I think on the conscience of all parents, guardians and loving adults across our great nation and even in the world right now. So yeah, this verse is coming in just straight from the mouth of one of the parents of our young men, and it's gonna be really powerful. I'm really excited about this.

**Stage Manager:**

Five minutes, everyone. This is your five-minute call; five minutes 'til top of show. This is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please, five minutes.

**Caroline Neff:**

This is called the *Half Hour* podcast. And something that we always ask is—half hour, as you know, is like, kind of that that centering time before, before a production or a show and I'm just wondering if the three of you have, you know, leading up to either the beginning of a production or the beginning of a process or the beginning of a workshop like, what do you like, what's your, what would your half hour look like? Or what does it look like?

**Cydney Cleveland:**

At least mine, in the production world, is making sure all of the youth have their pants up, and shirts tucked in, and look good as they go on stage, and not having a meltdown on the side of the stage. As you tell them that, you know, “you've been doing this for the last couple weeks: you can do it, and yes, I'll make sure your mom is out there,” and assuring them and making sure they're in the right

headspace. That's what I'm usually doing the half hour before production. Making sure all the families aren't missing and are accounted for, because it's really disheartening for kids to be knowing that their mom was on the way, and then she wasn't there for the beginning of the show. So sometimes I have to hold the show more than a half an hour to accommodate for the youth's parents coming in.

**Abhi Shrestha:**

Something that is like my half hour is that every Young Adult Council meeting, every weekly meeting, we start with a communal moment of breath. Every meeting is on Wednesday, and so it's like halfway through the week. Usually teens are, you know, coming from school so they've had half of the school week and they're feeling some type of way. I've had half of a work week and am feeling some type of way. [Laughter] And we start with a communal moment of breath. And often I will have a teen lead that or volunteer to lead that. And, you know, a teen will sort of take a moment to help ground us and each other and themselves as well. And it's a moment for us to check in with ourselves and be honest but be generous with ourselves. And it's a moment for us to imbue the breath with whatever we feel like we need in that moment. And just a moment to, like, breathe intentionally.

**Tamara Drew:**

And I will say, for my part, the half hours before our shows at the facility, generally consist of making sure everyone has used the restroom. Because that is something they will try to run out. There's tons of nerves, just like in in college mainstage: we're about to go up, and there's always one kid who's running over their lines. And like, "I'm gonna forget this part, I'm gonna forget this part." There's always one kid who's like, "I don't want to do this, I want to quit. I don't want to do this." We say "you've done it all the way up, and you don't want to lose your 21 days. And you have to finish right? And you've done such a great job and blah, blah." And we always circle up; we give a little pep talk. We remind them that they are representing themselves and the best parts of themselves to the people in this audience. And it's important that the people experience that. We usually also do a collective breath and then we do something before we go onstage. It's called "I got your back." You know, we're not allowed to have physical contact with the boys or do daps, dabs, knucks, whatever you guys call that whatever they call that. But before the show we always go around and pat each other on the back and say "I got your back. I got your back," and they do it with us. We do that and they do it with each other. That's a good final, kind of, ensemble moment of cohesion before we file out onto the stage. And that's what our half hour looks like.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour*, brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre. Thank you so much for listening. And again, huge thanks to Cydney Cleveland, Tamara Drew, all the folks that Storycatchers Theatre and Abhi Shrestha for joining us today. To learn more about Storycatchers Theatre, donate, volunteer and become a part of their work, you can check out their website at [storycatcherstheatre.org](http://storycatcherstheatre.org) That's theatre with an "-RE". They're also on Instagram, Facebook and more. Storycatchers uses quite truly all of their resources to serve the needs of incarcerated youth in Illinois. We highly encourage our listeners to donate to this impactful organization if you're able. You can also support Storycatchers Theatre and their programs by texting "show goes on" to 44321. Likewise, you can learn more about Steppenwolf Education's programming on our website. Make sure to check out "You Can't Kill Our Song" when it is released on July 10. You'll be able to find it on Soundcloud or on the Steppenwolf website. This episode of *Half Hour* is sponsored by John Hart and Carol Prins in memory of Louise Hart and co-

sponsored by Winston and Strong LLP. *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 Freeberg. Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To, Megan Shuchman and the whole gang 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](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). Till next time.

**Ep: 6 – Frank Galati: “Stumbling Forwards”**

**Date: 7/21/20**

**Featuring:** Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis, Frank Galati and Caroline Neff.

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**Frank Galati:**

“I wake to sleep, but take my waking slow—”

**Audrey Francis:**

from Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Frank Galati:**

“I learn by going where I have to go.”

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. [Music] Five, six, five-six-seven-eight! And we're back! This week I am here with myself, Audrey Francis and—

**Caroline Neff:**

Caroline Neff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cliff Chamberlain.

**Audrey Francis:**

Welcome back. And to all of our listeners, we just want to say thank you so much. The *Half Hour* podcast is still in a state of evolution. And we're growing and we're changing and we want to thank you for all of your support, and for staying with us on this ride. Two weeks ago, we had a really great episode that had a conversation between Caroline Neff and Storycatchers Theatre. This week, though, we're coming at you with a very special episode that we recorded way back in the “Ides of May.” Is that right Cliff?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah. That's right.

**Audrey Francis:**

Okay. With the one, the only, Steppenwolf ensemble member, Frank Galati.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah, Frank is well known around the theatre, and maybe just around theatre in general, as one of the kindest, warmest, most generous artists out there. And it certainly came through in the conversation. He's meant a lot to me, over my time spent in Chicago. I've had the pleasure of working with him a few times. And just to talk to him—I'm here in Los Angeles, he's in somewhere in Florida was a gift. And even now this talking to you both I know Audrey, you're in Chicago and Caroline, you're in New York. It's one of the things that this type of technology does for us all at a time when we're all really isolated is give us a chance to connect. So just the sort of magic of getting to talk to him in that way was really special. And

listening back to the conversation too: it was really nice and inspiring then more so now. He, he's a great, great person.

**Caroline Neff:**

It's interesting listening to him because, you know, he's been a mentor to so many people throughout the Steppenwolf universe and beyond. And to just hear the respect and reverence that he's had for people who have mentored him in the past, I thought, was really sort of remarkable. I don't know a person who's worked with Frank that doesn't walk away feeling as though they've sort of been touched by a little bit of magic.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh, I like that. Walk away from Frank Galati as though you've been touched by a little bit of magic. So without further ado, right, that's like the perfect way to lead in.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

That's it.

**Audrey Francis:**

Here's Frank Galati.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So, you're born and raised in Illinois. You spent most of your life in Illinois. And I'm curious what that has meant to you as an artist: as a director, actor, adapter and a teacher. What has that meant to you, to spend most of your artistic life in Illinois and, specifically, in and around Chicago?

**Frank Galati:**

Oh, Cliff, like you, it meant everything to me. I can't imagine my life out of the context of where I came from and where I grew up. I also, I think, came to high school age and college age at—I was very fortunate. Because I got an opportunity to meet and work with some really brilliant teachers. It's always, sort of, the luck of the draw, you know. I mean, any institution is, at any given moment just made up of the people who are there. And it happened that my high school drama teacher was Ralph Lane. And he went on to finish his PhD at Northwestern and took a teaching job at Illinois State, where he met John Malkovich and Rondi Reed, Randy Arney and Terry Kenny and Jeff Perry and Tom Irwin, all those early Steppenwolf folks. And he was very instrumental in shaping their acting style and their aesthetic. He could be very cranky and very cruel. But the discipline of the theatre, the passion for the theatre, the complexity and nuance of theatre-art, the thrill of it, the danger of it, all of that was, you know, communicated by this rather remarkable mentor. And when I was in high school, there was a there was a district, a regional and a state competition. And if you got first place in district, you went on to a sectional and so on. So anyway, Mr. Lane got a bunch of us together and we competed. We did a one-act play. I think we won second prize. And I won—I wrote a monologue, and I won the first prize in the state! I had never lived at such a pitch. It was insane. I was petrified out of my mind. But I was alive! And the thrill of having an idea or an emotion, land with an audience (although I didn't know what that was at the time) was just inexpressible. I mean, like you. It showed me my path, kind of. I have some of these medals from those years.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Frank Galati:**

And it's the map of the state of Illinois. So, Chicago, Chicago history, and Illinois and the Midwest have just been, you know, in my blood, in my DNA, a part of me.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

The fact that you had written that monologue and performed that monologue leads me to be interested in the, sort of, multiple areas within which you excel. As an actor, as a writer, and I know later as adapting and teaching came in. Was there anything at that time, when you were in high school doing that monologue or having those experiences, that you were more interested in pursuing singularly? Or were all of them something that you wanted to pursue?

**Frank Galati:**

Somehow, with me, it's almost always been just a matter of stumbling forward. Sometimes backwards. But always stumbling. I never had a plan. I never saw any real difference between acting and writing and directing. I always thought that the playwright *acts* all of the characters. So, if you're going to be a playwright, you *have* to be an actor, to a certain extent. I mean, I know that there are many who aren't. But it was a mix to me. And again, these circumstances are so formative, and they're half accidental and, and half conscious. What happened was I wrote this monologue. And it was inspired by the old lady who lived across the street from me, who was often left alone by her adult daughter and son in law and her little grandson. She would sit out on her patio behind her little ranch house in Northbrook, Illinois. And she would bake in the sun. Hardly able to move; she was really old. And her legs were all bandaged up. Her legs—she had some kind of skin condition, I guess. And her legs would—this is a little hard to say and remember—but they would bleed. And flies would gather on her legs because of the blood. And I would sit with her. And I'd see her sitting out there from across the street. I could see their backyard because of the way the neighborhood was configured. I would see her out there and I would go out there and shoo the flies away from her legs and just talk to her. And I can't say that, you know, I copied her, or I wrote down specific things that she said. But, I guess I thought first of “the kind of voice that she had, and how slow it was. And how it was kind of like that.” So you start, you know, you're an actor. You have a mimetic gene and impulse, so you imitate. So, I started imitating. And I realized that I could kind of improvise, you know, stuff that I hadn't heard from her but that was, you know, kind of a life story. So that's how the monologue happened. And then, do you know, again it was Mr. Lane. I don't know what he said... something about the monologue. About how I should expand it. Anyway, I did! I turned it into—I wrote a one-act play.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Is it *Hallelujah to the Stars*?

**Frank Galati:**

Yes! [Laughter] How do you know that?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I do my research. [Laughter]

**Frank Galati:**

Oh my god, Cliff. Well, I showed it to Mr. Lane and Mr. Lane said, “you know, Galati, I think you should do this. I think you should direct it. And I'll stay out of the room. I'll give you a slot on the stage. We'll invite people to come and you'll do it.” And I did. And it was because of him that I did. You know, I've said this to you before because I say it in meetings with casts because I believe it. It's from Roethke's poem “The Waking.” “I wake to sleep but take my waking slow. / I learn by going where I have to go.” And that's kind of been my story in a way I just, you know?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah. I think, too, I find it fascinating that even hearing about how that monologue came to be. It starts with empathy for another person, which is what I think of when I think of you. In terms of the directors that I've worked with, and in terms of the artists that have come along on my path. How to exist in this business, being empathetic, kind, wise. And so, I think of empathy and I also think of adapting. I mean adapting her life for the stage. You know, as a high schooler, that that was something that you intuitively knew how to meld. And it leads me to ask you more about adapting. A lot of the works that you have adapted are epic in nature and epic in storytelling and all stories that take place all over the world. Like *Kafka on the Shore* or *After the Quake* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. What draws you to adapting?

**Frank Galati:**

Again, I have to follow the thread back to a mentor, a teacher, in particular with this question, Cliff. It's when I was at Northwestern as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student. I worked every year and every quarter with Dr. Robert Breen. Now Breen was quite a character. He and his wife were a famous, at the time, kind of acting duo. He went to Knox College, got his PhD and was hired at Northwestern, in the Department of Interpretation as it was called (because then the mode of instruction was oral interpretation—in other words, reading literature out loud). But Breen's genius, and I believe he really was a genius, was the blending of narrative and theatre-art. He was a brilliant actor and a brilliant director. But what he taught most profoundly was story, narrative, the essence and the bones of “once upon a time.” So, this has always been of great, great interest to me and I read fiction avidly, voraciously when I was in college and graduate school. It's funny with the question you asked about epic narratives. It's in epic, picaresque or historical novels that you really feel the storytelling engine. Some things can't be adapted. I found Henry James almost impossible largely because of the style of the writing, the incredible complexity of the sentences and so on. But on the other hand, other novels, like *The Grapes of Wrath*—if you if you stop and think about it, *The Grapes of Wrath* really is an epic drama.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Frank Galati:**

Actually, it's an epic comedy. I know that sounds sacrilegious, because it is so profoundly a *mise re re* for human suffering. But the Joads don't know they're in *The Grapes of Wrath*. And they're having a hell of a good time getting to California in spite of their problems. They're lusty, they're funny, they're sexy, they're vital, they're witty, they're intelligent, they're practical. They're an amazing, amazing family. But the point I was making about the why *The Grapes of Wrath* is so adaptable is it's got a lot of dialogue. It's hugely full of dialogue. It's one dramatic scene after another, and some of them are hilariously funny.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain.**

All right let's step back for one second. Tell us how that production came to be.

**Frank Galati:**

The way it worked with *The Grapes of Wrath*. Gary was the artistic director. And it was 1985. And I had known almost everyone in the ensemble since they were in college. Because we had so many mutual friends and I would go down to Illinois State. They asked me several times to direct and I never could until this one holiday year in '85, Gary decided they wanted to do a holiday show. And they picked *You Can't Take It With You*. And they asked me to direct it. So, I was directing it. And after a couple of weeks—I had a ball. I mean, I didn't do anything. I just sat there and laughed. After a couple of weeks, Gary called me up to his office. And he said, "man, you know, we'd like to have you be a member of the ensemble." I was floored.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh!

**Frank Galati:**

I mean I couldn't believe that. It was very unusual. I mean, nowadays it's a regular and organic expansion of our family. It's right. But in those days, it was kind of a big deal and it didn't happen very often. So I said, "yes, of course I would be very honored." And Gary said, "now, man, you should think of something that you would like to do that would be good for the ensemble." And I said, "oh, how about *The Grapes of Wrath*?" Now, mind you, I didn't. I didn't adapt *The Grapes of Wrath*. I just thought of it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Sure.

**Frank Galati:**

Lois Smith, god bless her, came out to Chicago from New York and actually auditioned for the role of Ma. I mean, I can't believe it now, at the moment, but I hadn't heard of her! I didn't know who she was. And Laurie Metcalf recommended her because Laurie had worked with her on that TV show. Of course, I found out who she was, and I realized she was a big deal, even before I met her, but she still agreed to audition. And I felt I felt like getting on my hands and knees and prostrating myself in front of her.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay, so shifting gears away from the Joad's and their journey across the United States, I would love to hear about where your journey started with Murakami and your adaptations of his stories.

**Frank Galati:**

I taught fiction at Northwestern for 40 years. And I, sometimes, would use a novel over a course. Sometimes I would use short stories. I almost always taught James Joyce and the collection *The Dubliners* was my favorite and my students for years loved those stories. But after 9/11, it's a very, very clear marker in my mind, after 9/11 my students changed. James Joyce and *The Dubliners* was irrelevant. You know, it was remote and beautiful. Yes, but remote. It took me a while to figure this out. That the students were—they weren't concentrating. They weren't as they weren't as turned on by the material. So, I kept my eyes peeled and looking for something that I think will connect with them on a visceral level. And I had read some Murakami and always was very intrigued and loved the works of his that I knew. And I came across a collection of short stories called *After the Quake*. And each one of the stories

is focused on a family, a couple, an individual dealing with the aftermath of the devastating Kobe Earthquake that killed almost, I don't know, 100,000 people. Hence the hook with our citizenry in the aftermath of 9/11. So, the traumas that are excavated in these beautiful little stories are the traumas that we are going through during these decades of upheaval, historical upheaval. So, I introduced the stories to my students. They loved them; they performed them. And after over a year or so watching them perform, I thought, "oh boy, you know, this is really playable material." And I asked Martha about whether or not she thought they might be. And she started reading Murakami and she said, "yeah, you, maybe you should explore this." So, what I did was I took the last two stories of *After the Quake*, and I braided them together. Well, you know, it played really well. I had a wonderful collaboration with composers and musicians. We had a Koto played live, and percussion. And James Schuette designed this very beautiful, minimal set. Malcolm, my beloved brother Malcolm, was stage manager of that and it went very well. We got permission from Mr. Murakami, who read the adaptation and sanctioned it. And, do you know, it's still done! It's been translated into numerous languages. It's been done in Japan in Japanese, my adaptation, but in Japanese. And that led me to *Kafka on the Shore* a huge, epic, novel. And a hilarious and scary retelling of the Oedipus adventure.

**Stage Manager:**

Five minutes. This is your five minute call. Five minutes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What is your half hour routine when you get to the theater?

**Frank Galati:**

It varies over the long haul. I have sometimes been in dressing rooms with lots of other guys and had a lot of fun you know, right up to places. Though the last show I did, *The Tempest*, I had to be there at least two hours before. I would kind of hibernate at half hour. And I had to be by myself, warm up vocally, and try to get, you know, my mind prepared for it all. It's a tricky time.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It is. It's a magical, tricky, unwieldy, wonderful, terrifying amount of time.

**Frank Galati:**

Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay, so here's a couple of lightning round questions for you. Okay. All right, the favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen.

**Frank Galati:**

I think it could be *The Glass Menagerie*, in Highland Park, in the basement of the church when Steppenwolf was just a year or two old. And John Malkovich was Tom and Laurie Metcalf was, what's her name... Laura.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Frank Galati:**

*The Tempest*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Frank Galati:**

I have the rag that we hung in the box car her in the second to the last scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* that has printed on it the opening paragraph of the last chapter. I had intended for the audience to read that and not to have to speak it. But it didn't work.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Frank Galati:**

The first time I went to Europe, I went to Stratford, England, and I saw Marlowe's Faust. Doctor Faustus. Now this would have been 1968. Helen of Troy steps out on stage, stark, naked, head to foot. Beautiful dewy bush. Exquisite breasts. Flashing, radiant eyes. Limbs sort of glistening. And 60 feet across the stage is Faust who takes a deep breath and says "Was this the face that launched 1000 ships?" I rest my case.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

[Laughter] Okay. Amazing. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Frank Galati:**

*The Lion King*. [Laughter]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

[Laughter] Damn you Julie Taymor! What's the last song you listened to? "Circle of life"?

**Frank Galati:**

No! [Laughter]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Sorry. What's the what's the last song you listened to?

**Frank Galati:**

Okay, I actually know the last song I listened to. It's John Cameron Mitchell. And John, who is a former student of mine, someone I talk to every now and then creator of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and it's "Turning Time Around."

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay. Favorite writer?

**Frank Galati:**

Oh my god. James Agee.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Frank Galati:**

Lincoln Park at the, you know, where that conservatory is? Sure. Yeah. Lincoln Park. I love Lincoln Park.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Frank Galati:**

This is very immodest of me because I love animals. A dolphin.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And finally, if you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Frank Galati:**

[Laughter] Let's see. Galati enters in a long coat. Large, a mop of white hair, a fringe of beard and a twinkle in his eye.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

Thanks for listening.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And thanks again to our guest this week, Frank Galati.

**Audrey Francis:**

This episode was co-sponsored by Lynn Lockwood Murphy honoring Aidan Murphy and Kenyon College Class of 2020.

**Caroline Neff**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

The theme music for half hour is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Today's stage manager was Laura D. Glenn.

**Caroline Neff:**

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, AJ Roy, Gin To...

**Audrey Francis:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf. Follow us on Twitter @steppenwolfthtr, or on Facebook and Instagram.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org)

**Audrey Francis:**

Till next time, this is Audrey Francis...

**Caroline Neff:**

Caroline Neff...

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.

**Audrey Francis:**

Don't you hate it when you're on a zoom call and you said something super smart but then you're on mute and then you did too many drugs in college and then you couldn't remember what you said? Okay, cool!

**Ep: 7 – Sydney Charles: “Triumph and Trouble”**

**Date: 8/4/20**

**Featuring:** Audrey Francis and Sydney Charles

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**Sydney Charles:**

I'm glad I shifted my energy from being in a place of fear to a place of love—

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Sydney Charles:**

But yeah, I was definitely scared at first. But not anymore. Now I don't care! [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Hello and welcome to this episode of *Half Hour*. I'm Audrey Francis and they have let me host by myself this week, so either your dreams or nightmares have come true. Okay, let's get right to it. On today's episode, I'm in conversation with Chicago based actor, director activist (and all-around badass) Sydney Charles. I'll talk more about Sydney's resume in the interview, but to me she is one of the most exciting theatre artists working in Chicago. Sydney was due to make her Steppenwolf acting debut this past spring in *...Miz Martha*, which was a production we had to cancel just in its second week of rehearsal. In the conversation today, we talk a lot about Sydney's activism and advocacy in the Chicago theatre community. Specifically, Sydney has been an instrumental figure in three major forces that have changed, and continue to change and challenge, the systems of theatre-making in Chicago and beyond. The Chicago Theater Accountability Coalition, We See You White American Theater, and the Second Act Chi. All three of these organizations advocate for the inclusion of, and equity for, BIPOC artists—or for black indigenous people of color. We'll talk more specifically about these organizations in the interview, but I did just want to call them out specifically here. So, after listening to the conversation we had because I have listened to it a few times, I was struck by how much the conversation focused on Sydney's activism work. And so, what I hope you'll find is a profound appreciation that for artists like Sydney, her artistic work does not exist without her activism. And her activism inherently informs her art. So, because of that, I believe that Sydney Charles, truly is the definition of an “artist.” So, without further ado, let's find out what the fuck an “artist” is.

**Stage Manager:**

Welcome back, everyone. This is your half hour call. Please sign in if you've not already done so. This is half hour. The house is about to open. Half hour please.

**Audrey Francis:**

I'm talking with the one, the only, Sydney Charles, who is Chicago born and raised, a dear friend of Steppenwolf, who most recently assistant directed *Bug* on the mainstage and who was set to make her Steppenwolf acting debut in *...Miz Martha* in March of 2020. So, she is one of the Steppenwolf artists

whose process was interrupted because of COVID-19. And if you might have a little bit of COVID brain and need a memory jog, this artist was also most recently seen on stage as Zahra in *Lottery Day* at Goodman (which was a role you originated in *Prowess* at Jackalope), Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, Nina Simone in *Four Women*. You've also associate directed two incredibly poignant and powerful shows *His Shadow* and *The Shipment*, both with Wardell Julius Clark. You've been on *The Chi*, *Shameless*—I could go on and on; it's not a podcast about your resume. [Laughter] The one, the only: Sydney motherfucking Charles.

**Sydney Charles:**

It's so crazy hearing all of that read back to me about anything that I've done recently. So that's just bananas and makes me extremely grateful at the same time.

**Audrey Francis:**

Well, bananas, because you haven't even been an actor for that long, right?

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah. Like, I mean that long in comparison to those that knew when they were seven at their first summer camp play where they were *The Tree*, and they were like, "I want to be *The Tree* or more for the rest of my life." And I wasn't that person. I was a science geek and then wanted to get into law. And in 2010, I was doing a little bit of soul searching and trying to figure out what made me happy after several anxiety attacks about my occupation and ran into theater. And so, I was doing theater often on the non-equity scene primarily since 2010. More off than on. But 2016 is when I went in at full speed, pedal to the metal, full time, and sometimes full broke but full of happiness at the same time. So yeah, four years hardcore. Which is why that list is bananas to me.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I had to edit it significantly. I don't even know if I talked about all your TV stuff.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, the TV stuff is newer. Like, that's something that I am trying to dive into. There is—I have a lot of respect for artists that are or that have made the transition from theater to on screen because it in itself is a different art form. And I respect it. So, I'm trying to finesse that. And before COVID came, it felt like I was on my way to finding a more settled place in that. But it's just a little pause right now. But primarily theater is where I find my home. And actually, I enjoy it more because of the live energy and the live feedback. Not for ego, just, like "I need to feel y'all!" You know, but yeah, but film is something I'm getting into—TV, film—but theater is home.

**Audrey Francis:**

I love that. And I hope that in this moment—you know, they say that theater is dying, quote, unquote. But in this moment, I have never wanted to be in a room full of people experiencing the same story with a myriad of perspectives more than now.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, it's amazing and sobering to realize how much my identity is rooted in that very thing you just mentioned. Like, having people around you sharing this experience of creating the world with your colleagues and then sharing that story with an audience of people you may know, or may not know, or who don't look anything like me. You know, but it's still this joy that's associated with being able to share space. And the fact that we don't have that right now is surreal. Especially when myself and other theater artists have dedicated their lives to creating that space. So, it's just real weird right now.

[*Laughter*]

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**Sydney Charles:**

Like, "I'm a sharer but I can't share" or "I'm a creator and there is no space to create in the medium that is my primary, you know, focus." So, it's, it's a lot.

**Audrey Francis:**

Wow. So. [*Laughter*] Okay, well, then that that leads me to a question I wasn't expecting to ask so soon. And the reason I ask is because I have been lucky enough to see what you're doing with the downtime, not being able to be in a theater. So, being a black, female-identifying, primarily theatre artist in Chicago, who has, from my perspective, become an activist as well, what is your favorite thing about being an activist in Chicago? And what is also the hardest thing about being an activist in Chicago?

**Sydney Charles:**

That's a good question. The hard part about being an activist, especially as a black femme, is having-- rather, getting people to understand you or believe you. Because black women are, more often than we'd like to admit, labeled as being combative, aggressive, loud attitude, sassy—those having an attitude rather, or sassy. Sometimes we are written off as just being extra emotional. Extra, extra. Whatever that means. Read all about it. [*Laughter*] And then as black people as a whole, just being "angry for no reason," "holding on to things that you don't need to hold on to," and "we just want to all move forward and why are you bringing this up?" And "oh, it's not even that serious." But it is that serious when you consider the fact that my mother is—my mother was born before the Civil Rights Act. So that means that the Civil Rights Act isn't even as old as my mom. So because of that, I and those I associate myself with, other likeminded people, we can't just not—horrible grammar: we just can't just not say something. [*Laughter*] You know, like we have to—it's our duty, you know, to speak up. So that's the hard part—is like finding that voice and then hoping that your voice is heard and understood. The great part of that is almost the same. Is that because of that fire and that condition that makes people not believe us, it gives you more fuel to keep fighting. And that's the great part about it. The great part about helping people realize who they are, where they are in space, and in time as it relates to this current revolution of society, not just theater, not just, you know, art making. But how those two things intertwine and realizing that they are inseparable. So that's the great part, the passing of information, the—without breaking out my crystals—the awakening of minds. [*Laughter*] You know, to understand who we are as humanity, and where we want to be in terms of our humanity. So those, they play off of each other, which is exciting. This, this idea of like, a divine dichotomy, if you will, like one can't—the

trouble can't exist without the triumph. And the triumph can't mean anything without the trouble. So, living as someone who is very black-and-white, but living inside that gray is a great place to be. Realizing that and it fuels everything that I do, personally.

**Audrey Francis:**

That's incredible. So, I just want to make sure too, that I'm understanding correctly because—just by nature of you even putting yourself out there it is an act of art and activism.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yeah, it's an act of activism—artivism—every time I step on stage. Especially seeing as the stage that I am stepping on is one that has been designed, functions as, rooted in whiteness. So, every time I decided to do a show, every time I decided to sign a contract, I am flamboyantly—proudly—stating that my blackness will be seen, and it can't be ignored. So, yes, merely existing as a black person, as a black human, as a black femme on these predominantly white stages is an art—is an act rather—an act of artivism and activism.

**Audrey Francis:**

And fucking art.

**Sydney Charles:**

Hell yeah.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I think of, like, Nina Simone, and Colin Kaepernick, and Muhammad Ali, who are—in a way—so there's what you do on stage. And then there's what you do on social media. I follow you and I learn a lot by the things that you post. And I laugh, and I cry and I—I mean, it's not about my fucking experience, I'm just saying that you put so much out there. And I wonder like, do you ever feel scared to be that active or vocal? In the sense of—you fighting for a greater cause in this country, could your livelihood or your profession ever be at risk when you do that? Do you ever think of that when you're posting something? Were you ever scared, say the first time you made a post about a social change, were you scared?

**Sydney Charles:**

Absolutely. I'm certain that I probably posted controversial material or –

**Audrey Francis:**

With air quotes—

**Sydney Charles:**

Right. Exactly, they can't see but I did do them *very* hard—controversial material prior to our current state of society and the racial tension that's happening right now. However, the first time that I actually remember calling it out and being afraid or having some fear behind it was when I became involved with CHITAC. And I vividly remember several people telling me that if I kept speaking out, if I aligned myself

with these people, that I might not work again. Or that it might diminish the amount of work I receive. Or I might be treated unfairly once I get into the space. Or like, “you're known for being very vocal and passionate about your issues, and that's fine, but maybe you should just keep them to yourself.” Things like that. And for a little while, I was very concerned about that. Like, maybe they were right, especially being new in this in this in this particular industry. I'm like, “well, maybe these people do know, because they've been at this longer than me and they know how things work and I don't want to stop doing this thing that I just found, that makes me happy and gives me purpose and fulfills me in a way that nothing ever has before and I don't want to lose that.” And I was in that place. And then one day, there was a lot of pushback. Like on the same on the same day from a lot of theaters and a lot of different people reaching out to us. And I remember, I remember being like, fuck it. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

We're doing it. Fuck it.

**Sydney Charles:**

I mean, it was already being done but I knew then that I cannot operate from a place of fear. Because there's only two choices in life: fear and love. And everything that we do radiates from that. So, I had to come to terms with the fact that *I* was doing this, *I* was speaking out, *I* was willing to put whatever I had already had, which in the great grand scheme of things is nothing, right? But I was willing to put that all on the line just so that we could have equity. Just so we could be talked about in a respectable manner. Just so that we as black people, and brown people can be seen. And if that meant that I never saw the inside of a theater again, but some change happened—if that meant that I never got another offer, but the people who weren't getting offers had a safer space when they went to work—then I was willing to do that. And so, I'm glad I did. I'm glad I shifted my energy from being in a place of fear to a place of love. But yeah, I was definitely scared at first. But not anymore. Now I don't care!

**Audrey Francis:**

Sydney you will just let us know what CHITAC is?

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh, my bad I just assumed everybody knew. Because “duh.” *[Laughter]* Humblebrag. Uh, CHITAC is—  
*[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

I know, I think everybody knows. Just in case some people out here don't.

**Sydney Charles:**

Chicago Theater Accountability Coalition, co-founded by brilliant humans, Ike Holter, Sasha Smith, Kevin Matthew Reyes, and Tony Santiago. And we decided one night in a Facebook Messenger chat that this was bullshit. *[Laughter]*

**Audrey Francis:**

The way that critics were talking about BIPOC artists on stage.

**Sydney Charles:**

Yes.

**Audrey Francis:**

Specifically to the critics, right?

**Sydney Charles:**

Yes, specifically to the critics. And if—the idea that if theater supposed to be this (some more air quotes), safe space, where we can make art without compromise and all this other stuff, then that space has to extend to those reviewing us and writing about us and not using harmful language regarding the art that we're creating about *our* stories. And that, also in addition to that, if you don't have the framework regarding the world that we have built about our lives as black people, then maybe you should not be reviewing this piece of work because you don't have what is needed. You don't have the point of reference, right? So, all of those things intertwine; all of those things play off of each other. And that made a lot of people upset. [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Yeah.

**Sydney Charles:**

But you can be—I don't—facts are facts. Like, you know, numbers don't lie. Like, the number of plays that are produced and done by people of color, versus the number of critics of color is disparaging. So, we have the utmost right to speak out to that. But it was not received well amongst the masses. And it's now funny: a few years later, here we are, again, the issue hasn't changed. It's still—we're still talking about racism, right? So, nothing's changed. It's just that now we have the time because of COVID, and it's more public because of the horrible, senseless murder of George Floyd. And now everyone is like, “Oh, yeah, we should do different programming.” No, you should have done different programming and thought about critics of color a long time ago. But that's good, good for y'all that y'all are finally figuring it out. Or whatever.

**Stage Manager:**

All right everyone: fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes to the top of the show. Fifteen minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

You are on a list of BIPOC artists who have signed a letter and a list of demands saying, “Hey, we see you White American Theatre.” And the We See You movement is, for those of you who don't know, it's demanding a new social contract of anti-racist practices in the theater where BIPOC artists have equitable presence and power, and where newly adopted codes of conduct and transformative practices need to be adopted and adhered to by these predominantly white theaters. And a list of demands just came out that's about 31 pages long of just saying, “hey, it's not about diversity. It's about equality, and it's about justice.” And you're on that list. What was that like to just be like, “Hey, we're going to change

the world and your industry, and we want to know what you think about this.” What the fuck is that like?

**Sydney Charles:**

Receiving an invitation to sign this letter was not even a second thought for me. Because, unfortunately, since we are in a society that is rooted in white supremacy, I know that this is the first step. Me personally, not speaking for the movement whatsoever, but I see this as being the first step to holding all theaters accountable. Because once the big theaters, the White American Theaters, adopt these procedures and policies then we know everyone else will follow. Right? And then we will have—then the playing field will be level across the board. I did not know that the artists that are on that original letter—that all those signatories would be signatories. So, I was also very surprised when I saw that drop and saw all of these heavy hitters and people I respect and admire, be—or, have the same desire to want to, like you said, change the world or change—no change the world is right because artists do shape the world, so, change our world. It is going to require us to think about how we think about BIPOC artists, right? Things that we haven't thought about before. Like, that thirty-one, thirty-three-page document is very particular. Very specific. Things—I know, personally, you know, when I read the demand about having hair consultants, for African American artists, and you know, things of that nature. Because that's a sticking point for me personally. Because I can't tell you how many times I've entered a room and, no disrespect to the lovely artists that I've worked with before, but they don't—unless they were black—they don't know what to do. “Just get whatever you know, works for you.” That's not—I need to be paid a stipend for doing my own—like, that's extra. Because that's your job. So, things like that. I'm like, yeah, if we can just start at the micro level of realizing that while we all have differences, we are all one and that our differences, strengthen our one and then you need to acknowledge our differences so I can feel like I'm a part of you and you're a part of me. Like, we want equality. Yes, like that's like saying if there's a tree and there's an apple there. And you have a ladder and I have a ladder but my ladder shorter, yeah, I can get up there, but I can't reach it. I want equity. I want to have the same fucking ladder. [Laughter] I want to be able to reach the shit the same way you can, with the same number of steps, the same way. Nothing's hindering me. Not a fence, not a not a ladder, not “I need a ladder and a step stool on top of the ladder.” Like none of that. I want the same ladder that you have so I can climb to the same heights that you do. So, I believe that these demands and this push toward a code of conduct will absolutely, positively reshape our world as we know it for the better.

**Audrey Francis:**

What are the, if you had to say, the three primary emotions that have come up for you in, let's just say the last three months of 2020? What would—and all the things that you're a part of, and the groups and the coalitions that you mentioned, what are the three biggest things you've been feeling?

**Sydney Charles:**

Anxious, but not in the way of—I'm a person who battles with anxiety—not in the way of like “I don't AGH.” It's like anxious to see. Like, like Christmas morning anxious. Like I'm ready to unwrap this gift of freedom; I'm ready to wrap this gift of equity. I'm ready. “Oh, I'm so excited and anxious. Oh my God, is it gonna be what I wanted? I hope so.” That's a feeling. Also, focus. Because there are many factors external and internal, sometimes, that will keep you from staying in alignment with what it is that you

know you have to do for this particular revolution. For this type of movement work. And so. Between like the bad reality TV or the Food Network that I am addicted to, I try—not that I can't do that from time to time—but it's easy to become distracted because your soul wants a break. Because this is a lot of heavy lifting. Right, for anyone that's deciding to do any kind of participation in what's happening right now. And then I'm also being gracious with myself. Showing myself grace. Which is connected to the last two. Because of everything that's—like allowing my like self care—a lot of movements in the past have stifled or died down or slow down because we get—because of burnout. So, I'm being very careful to encourage myself and those who are also doing this work or even thinking about doing something in regards to this movement work to just be very gracious and gentle with yourself. So, there are varied times that I've decided to be still. So stillness. So stillness and grace kind of go together as things I've been feeling. The desire to do that, be that. And Christmas morning-ing, and then focus.

**Audrey Francis:**

I like that. And I also just want to say, because I know that we have a lot of white listeners out there too, and I want to say—

**Sydney Charles:**

Hey, y'all! [Laughter]

**Audrey Francis:**

Hey, y'all! I want to say, I just want to say that, that heavy lifting that you are doing is also required for us as white artists as well. More. More of that work is on us. And I think, you know, sometimes I'll hear artists say like, "Oh, fuck, I'm white. I'm not going to work again." And it's not that. It's not a pie. It's this—I love what you say about the equality, that it's like, any time that as we as a white artist start to feel protective or defensive or anything like that, our job is to slow down and find that stillness. And fucking focus, and figure out what's making us anxious.

**Sydney Charles:**

Like you, we can't do all the heavy lifting in response to what we want, because we didn't put us here. So, it's important for people to understand—for white people, non-Black people—to understand that they have to pull their weight, that they also have to commit themselves to doing some work instead of waiting for the work to be done. It's a communal effort. And not just the art community. Like the community of Earth. Oh, that sounds very cerebral, but y'all be okay. The community of humanism. So, we have to commit to that. Because until we do, nobody's going to have the quality of life that we all deserve. While we're living this human experience.

**Audrey Francis:**

I love that. And speaking of your Chicago squad, you are one of the founders of the Second Act Chi, which is dedicated to dismantling white supremacy in Chicago theatres.

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh yeah. And we say co-founder, we say facilitators because we have people that came together. Again, I keep finding myself among these radical people which I love. But myself, Melissa Duprey, Wardell

Julius Clark, Regina Victor, Pat Whalen. And, again, it was the notion that “Okay, that's enough.” We decided that there absolutely needs to be something that's Chicago specific, in terms of what we need to function as an artistic community. That the demands set by We See You are a great launching pad, however, they don't fully speak to what Chicago needs. Right, because everybody knows Chicago is just cut from a different cloth. So, we are very excited and ready to work on, for lack of better words, putting our foot down. We're very excited about putting our foot down in Chicago. If this is the first time you're hearing about the Second Act and you wanted to just get some more information, we have an Instagram page, not so much a Facebook page (it's not our favorite platform). But we do, but we have the video of our first rally, that was on Zoom, on there, that laid out the ideas and the mentality that we want to move forward with. And that it's not insular. It's not just the five of us. It's the whole—we want everyone involved. Because everyone will be working. And what I need is going to be different from what Regina needs and what Regina needs is different from what Melissa needs and so forth and so on. So, we want to invite—and we extend the invitation rather—to anyone that wants to be involved in changing what Chicago theater looks like and how it functions.

**Audrey Francis:**

Yes. Oh, yes. And bringing it back to Chicago theater. Yeah. Sydney Charles. When you get to half hour, what is your half hour process?

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh my god. Okay, now my half hour. I always show up an hour before my call time because I like to be in the space where nobody's there because I need quiet. For half hour, my earphones are in; I'm probably listening to some form of trap, hip hop or throwback early 2000s to get amped up even if it's a somber play—I need that energy surge. I need that adrenaline, so I have my earbuds in listening to Lil Jon, listening—*[Laughter]* I don't need any judgment; don't judge me! Listening to Ludacris, listening to Janelle Monae or OutKast, powdering my face for the fifty-seventh time. Blotting my under eyes for the eighty-seventh time. And probably chugging half of a red, red bull, the cranberry or the watermelon (there's a new watermelon flavor and I'm obsessed). So that's what I'm doing a half hour.

**Stage Manager:**

Attention everyone, this is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes to the top of the show. Five minutes.

**Audrey Francis:**

So, Sydney we have a lightning round, which is where I will ask you some questions very fast.

**Sydney Charles:**

Okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

Toughest experience as an actor or a director?

**Sydney Charles:**

Associate Director for His Shadow at 16th Street.

**Audrey Francis:**

Which, if you are not aware of that you can look it up on social media and see what the fuck happened! Favorite moment of any live theatrical experience, whether you were performing in it or not.

**Sydney Charles:**

Oh my god. There was a—*[Laughter]* one of my favorites—there was a time where when I was doing *Dessa Rose* at Bailiwick Chicago, and one of my classmates was supposed to be saying their line. And he *[Laughter]* forgot and, but it was non-equity we're so close to the to the audience that everybody just froze. They were trying to give him the line through like eye work and it didn't work. That was the most hilarious shit. And during the song he just like started singing vowel sounds because he couldn't remember the words and it was the best shit I have ever experienced.

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh my god amazing. Okay, what job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Sydney Charles:**

All of 'em. *[Laughter]* Each one I don't get breaks my heart. Even the ones I don't want. All of 'em.

**Audrey Francis:**

What's the last song you listened to?

**Sydney Charles:**

Last real song or song that I saw on TikTok?

**Audrey Francis:**

Oh, that's an excellent question. Let's do TikTok actually.

**Sydney Charles:**

There was this clip I watched last night of this girl that was singing about bangs and it was like “not that bang yang. Oh no, this bang gang.” It was the craziest most hilarious shit I've ever seen, and it's in my head now forever.

**Audrey Francis:**

And that girl was Audrey Francis. What is the last real song you've listened to?

**Sydney Charles:**

Last real song I listened to was Stevie Wonder “I Was Made a Lover.”

**Audrey Francis:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**Sydney Charles:**

James Baldwin.

**Audrey Francis:**

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Sydney Charles:**

The Japanese Gardens behind the Museum of Science and Industry. Nobody go there! It's my spot.

**Audrey Francis:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Sydney Charles:**

Horse.

**Audrey Francis:**

Nice.

**Sydney Charles:**

I know, right?

**Audrey Francis:**

What's your favorite food?

**Sydney Charles:**

Tacos.

**Audrey Francis:**

What are you doing, immediately after this?

**Sydney Charles:**

Cannabis is legal. It's medicine. So, I'm gonna go roll a "j." [*Laughter*]

**Audrey Francis:**

Fuck yes. If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Sydney Charles:**

All the things I get called in for. Smart mouth, sarcasm, meets [*Laughter*] gritty, hard exterior but soft interior. Athletic. Black! Black is always first.

**Stage Manager:**

All right everyone, this is your places call. Places please, for the top of the show. Places, please. Places.

**Audrey Francis:**

And that's it for this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre. Thanks for listening. And again, huge thanks to Sydney Charles for joining us today. You can follow Sydney on Twitter or Instagram @mssydchas, or on her website at [www.SydneyCharlesExp.com](http://www.SydneyCharlesExp.com). Also, you'll be able to catch Sydney on stage at Steppenwolf in the Chicago premiere of *Last Night and the Night Before* by Donetta Lavinia Grays currently scheduled for the Spring of 2021. Learn more about We See You White American Theatre at [www.weseeyouwat.com](http://www.weseeyouwat.com) or on Facebook and Instagram. Also follow Second Act Chi on Instagram @thesecondactchi. *Half Hour* is produced by Patrick Zakem, and mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman. The theme music for *Half Hour* is by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. Today's stage manager was Michelle Medvin. Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Gin To and the whole gang 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](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). Till next time. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.

**Ep: 8 – Karen Rodriguez: “Bruja Status”**

**Date:** 8/18/20

**Featuring:** Caroline Neff and Karen Rodriguez, with Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis and Mary Hungerford.

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**Karen Rodriguez:**

Like, so much of the reason that I’ve even gotten into the rooms that I’ve been able to, has been my intuition—has been my instinct.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

And I’ve always been very imaginative. It’s like, I could read a play and be like “I know what this person’s life was.”

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Cliff, Caroline: we're back with a very special guest this week Karen Rodriguez. Let me just say I loved listening to this conversation because I felt like I was back in the dressing room of *Dance Nation*, which if you don't know or if you didn't see (and Cliff would you were lucky enough to not be a part of) Caroline, Karen and I all we're forced into a very small dressing room together.

**Caroline Neff:**

I love that you say forced. I mean, we did insist. [Laughter] On the first day of rehearsal, we went to our stage manager like “We have to be in a dressing room together.”

**Audrey Francis:**

The three of us. Like do not separate us.

**Caroline Neff:**

No, no.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, it can really make or break an entire experience your dressing room situation. I mean, I've had plays that were made so monumentally better by getting a chance to hang out for a half hour with someone amazing.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I will say, I think, when I got to share a dressing room with Karen for *Doppelgänger*, people were not impressed with our warm up which was basically rapping Cardi B's “Bodak Yellow” at the time at the top of our lungs.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And that went over poorly?

**Audrey Francis:**

You know, I think people liked it for the first eight shows—

**Caroline Neff:**

Until they realized there were children in the play.

**Audrey Francis:**

There were children in the play. I think it eventually grew tiresome. [Laughter] Karen and I just got better and better every show.

**Caroline Neff:**

Practice makes perfect.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I can definitely attest to how good *Doppelgänger* was and how good Karen was. It's like—that show was a big Steppenwolf show, full of ensemble members, a TV star (Rainn Wilson) was in it, and yet I walked away going “Who, who was that actress?” She's so funny and just completely stole the show for me. I mean, I just remember being completely amazed at how confident and funny and, just, good she was.

**Audrey Francis:**

So to see Karen's work in *Doppelgänger* and then to see her do something completely different in *La Ruta*—which was a show that she did with Isaac Gómez, her longtime friend and collaborator, about the tragic story of the Lost Women of Juarez and the violence that happens in that community—to watch an actor be able to inhabit such powerful and completely different roles is a really inspiring thing to see for me as an actor.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And even in this conversation, like, the more you get to know her the more impressive she is. Because in that, in *La Ruta*, she was so heartbreaking, and her mime work was incredible.

**Audrey Francis:**

Right?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I love some good mime work. I seriously love some good mime work. And whatever she was doing was so specific and real, it was fucking amazing. And I don't mind I don't mind admitting to the world that I love some good mime work. And she was aces.

**Caroline Neff:**

I got to meet Karen, like, I think her first year in Chicago. I was doing a reading at Victory Gardens and Isaac was the Director of New Play Development there. And he brought Karen in to simply read the stage directions. And Karen reading the stage directions for this play, I was like “Who is this?” And like I literally went up on the lines that I was reading—from a page—because Karen was so captivating just like, “And then she opened the door.” I'm like, “Who is this person?!”

**Audrey Francis:**

I think for the listeners to know: Karen mimed this entire conversation. [Laughter] Alright let's listen to it.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your half hour call. This is half hour til top of the show. Half hour. If you have not signed in, please do so at this time. Half hour. Half hour.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, Karen, I just want to start a little bit by talking about where you grew up and what your pathway to Chicago was.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um, so I grew up in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. It's a little town in on the border by Brownsville, Texas. And I moved to the US around when I was 11. But I moved to—I moved to Kokomo, Indiana, like I didn't go across the border. It was like I moved to Kokomo, Indiana because of my dad's job. And so, I literally got plugged into the school system without knowing any English. Like I literally would sit there—yes, dude—I would sit there and not understand. It was like, what is it like the Peanuts teacher? “Wah-wah-wah.” Like that, it was like that. Well, the kids—there was like, no, like Latin x people in that little town. And so, the kids would actually pinch my skin. Yeah, yeah, it was like so it was a really bizarre experience, especially because I couldn't communicate, but I would have like, um, I would have tutoring sessions afterwards. And so anyway, I watched a lot of *I Love Lucy* and a lot of *Frasier*. The tutor was like, “You should let her watch TV because it'll—like, she'll pick it up.” And so those were the American shows that I loved. *[Laughter]* And then we moved back to Matamoros, but my parents were like, “You know what? You learned English in like a year and a half. And this is gonna be good for you in the future.” Which was like a very, like, ominous and abstract thing to say to a 13-year-old, now. And so, they sent me over to a private school in Brownsville. And around 15—I got very like, “I'm gonna master this language,” because I think it was kind of traumatic to not be able to communicate in a classroom. And I was like, “I'm going to master this.” And I signed up for my drama club. Also, because my teacher was like, “You're so hyperactive, and you won't shut up during class, do you want to come audition?” I'm not kidding. I mean, that's such a cliché story. But that's really what she said to me. And then from then on, it was always in my life.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was it like going to, like, not only sort of leaving your family and going to a private school, but then going to a private school in a different country? I mean, was it any more or less of a culture shock than—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

And that's such a good question, because it totally was. Because in Kokomo I was like, super othered. I mean, like—it was—I, like it's horrible when I think about it now, but it was also—they just had never seen anyone like me, you know? And—but when I came back to Brownsville, I was still othered because I had such—I had very sharp English like mid-Western English. And, like 90% of the kids in the private school in Brownsville were from Matamoros. They were Mexican. And so, they had a very like— they had a bilingual accent. They had a thick accent and so I was sort of like, “Oh, this is like the gringa now.” Even though I was—*[Laughter]* It was such a bizarre, like, I'm laughing because it was just so—what a weird time. So, just sort of like, it was like I didn't belong. So, a lot of those years I longed to just go back to what was my normality what was my—but that wasn't the case. And honestly though, like, if it hadn't been for that, as much as it was difficult and certainly shaped me and shaped my worldview intensely, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that move. I would, I would be in Mexico. I would have gone to like, *El Tec de Monterrey* and probably been like some kind of lawyer businessperson, really.

**Caroline Neff:**

So how did you end up in Chicago of all places, not New York, not LA not—?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

So, I went to UT Austin, and a lot of the grad students there were from Chicago. We had Will Davis Halena Kays, Kenneth Carpenter, Steve Wilson—there were there were a good amount of Chicagoans. And what was really cool about that program was that it has an amazing playwright MFA program. And so, I did a lot of new play development with them and worked very closely with the directors and the playwrights. And when it came time to—like, I was starting to get close to graduation—they were like, “Hey, I know you're doing the business thing. I know, you want to go to law school, or get your MBA, but if you really want to do this, which you should, you should move to Chicago, you'd blow up there.” And that was like things that people said to me separately, like in almost the exact same words. And I do believe in like the universe speaking to you, especially when it's like repeated language. And so, I went to school with Isaac Gómez who is a freakin collaborator of mine and my best friend and he wanted to go to New York. And I said to him, “I think I'm gonna go to Chicago.” But I like knew nothing about it. I— it was just literally I can't—it was a gut thing and I probably wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for the fact that he came to me like two weeks later and was like, “You know what, I think I want to go to Chicago too.” And he did it and then he was like, “Are you coming or what? Am I looking for a Craigslist roommate, or am I looking for a two-bedroom for us?” And I said, “Fuck it, I'm going I guess.” But it was really like—now I think about it—it's like, such a like, early 20s like dumb thing to do. You know? Like, I didn't think about it. I just was like, “Fuck it. I'm doing it, I guess.”

**Caroline Neff:**

And how did you find yourself at Steppenwolf? Was *Doppelgänger* the first play that you did?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

No, I did *The Rembrandt* first.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh, that's right. I'm sorry. *The Rembrandt*. Yeah.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yeah. So, uh, I had done a general and that was kind of it. That was kind of it with my journey at Steppenwolf. And *The Rembrandt* came along I had not been called in for it. And I got a call that day— speaking of like repeated language and repeated, like, motifs—I got a call that day, in the morning I was having brunch with a friend. And this random person like, like we're acquaintances, but it's not somebody that calls me all the time. She had called me and she goes, “Oh my gosh, how was your audition mine went terrible.” And I said, “Audition for what?” And she goes, “For *The Rembrandt*. They're calling all the Latinas in for *The Rembrandt*.” And I was like, I—awkward, I think. So, I'm like sitting there like with my toast. I was like, “I didn't get called.” She goes, “Oh, that's weird. You'd be so right for it. Anyway, let me tell you” and then so then she told me and I hung up and I was kind of bummed out, but I thought, “Well, I mean, I trust my agent I trust—I trust people to, like, know, what's up for me,” right? Like I didn't. I wasn't thinking like, “Let me take this into my own hands.” I just was like, I trust. And then I was actually doing a show at your other resident company, Steep. I was doing *Hookman* at the time. We were having rehearsals. And I was on my way to rehearsal, and I get another call. And it's literally the same conversation, but this one from a very close friend of mine. And this time, she said, “Karen I am not hanging up the phone until you email your agent and you say you need to get seen for this because you're so right for it. I'm sending you the script right now.” And so, I did, and they

got me an audition the next morning. And I went in, and I was—I hadn't prepped very much because I got it so late. And I was really nervous. And I thought, "I'll just—I'm just gonna hold the script and do the acting and that's kind of it." And then I got a call back and I had a week and a half to prepare this time. And I don't want to be like super dramatic, but it ended up being that the agent who's no longer at my agency, the agent who handled that, said to me that a casting needed another push for me. So, I went into that audition thinking that Steppenwolf didn't want to see me. Which was not true. Which was not true. And it liberated me in a way because I was like, "You know what, I'm just gonna lay it down. And, and be proud of what I put out there because these people didn't want to see me." And I think about that story a lot because that show—that booking—led to me auditioning for *Doppelgänger*, led to a bunch of other things, and led to an ensemble membership at Steppenwolf. And I think about how easily I could have not sent that email, or easily could have allowed a semi-lie to deter me from feeling confident in that room. And I just think about that a lot like. And how easily I was allowing other people to take control of my career, and of my—of what was meant for me. And it's like "no." And so I think about that a lot. Now when I get nervous or I get scared to speak out, it's like, "No, just take it. Who cares? What's the worst thing that can happen? They tell you no?" And they didn't. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

Do you think that you've always had that kind of ferocious mindset of like, "I'm going to be courageous and ask for a thing that I think I'm right for"? Or was that a relatively new experience for you?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Absolutely. No, no, I think. I always like the definition of bravery is like—or courage—as, it's doing something courageous with the fear. It's not being without fear. So, it's not fearlessness. It's bravery, it's courageous despite of. And I had to get teeth a little bit with the way that the works. Because I don't operate in that way. I really operate—I always been like this, and it's so annoying because it's just not the way the world works—but I tend to put other people before me. And it's so sad because it's not a bad quality. I wish everybody walked through the world like that. But sometimes the world does teach you, like, you still got to look out for number one, because you are your—you are your best advocate. Only you know what you actually want. But it's scary. So, I have to continuously remind myself. And I have to say, I don't know why, because my life keeps showing me that when I do, it gets rewarded in some sort of fashion. But I still don't learn the lesson. I still have to, like, practice it.

**Stage Manager:**

Company, this is your fifteen-minute call. Fifteen minutes to the top of the show. Fifteen, fifteen.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, I think of three things when I think about you, Karen. [Laughter] First of all, I just think that you're like one of the smartest and most intuitive people that I've ever met. And I'm always, always surprised—not surprised—I'm amazed by so many of my conversations with you because they take twists and turns that I was never ever anticipating. And they make my brain think in a different way. Now the other thing that I think about you is new play development. And so, the third thing that I think that I really associate with you on top of those two other things is your constant and longtime collaboration with Isaac. And one of the things that I love, especially about theater, is that you can have these lifetime collaborations. And I'm just wondering, what is it like for you having somebody that knows you so well and somebody who is such a brilliant writer, and is able to, I think really capture something about you, Karen, that you bring onstage in a way that feels effortless, it doesn't feel put on it doesn't. How has it evolved?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I mean, I think the way it's evolved is that it's become more shorthand. Like we really can read each other's minds at this point. Like, he'll be like, "Oh, cause I was thinking of—" "Oh, yeah, yeah, no, I totally I got you." And then it's like, and then we do it. And it's really fun that way. And we kind of dazzle each other. Like we laugh a lot—it's a very joyous collaboration. I think when we started at UT, it was more—it was more about a shared interest of what mattered to us in storytelling, and that is still true to today. But like our mission statement as far as like, furthering Latinx voices—particularly Mexican culture, Mexican voices—and then, of course, like understanding that women at least in my view, weren't being written with everything that they are. Like, you get to play a facet. And Isaac was writing the whole shebang, the whole meal. And if you see our trajectory, I mean, he writes characters for everybody, but—I'll speak for myself—for me that that are, like, funny and charming and lovely and grotesque and like, and mean and ugly, and everything in between and in one person because that's who I am. I mean, it's the greatest gift to have someone really understand you and reflect you and vice versa. Because it's not just one sided. It's about him too, like, he always tells a story. He's like, "You're coming with me bitch no matter what, because you were the one that read my plays at 1am in the morning in our, like, dingy ass first Chicago apartment." And it was a lot of figuring it out. And we kind of had—we cut our teeth on each other. It's, yeah, I'm like, forever. There are like no words. There's no words. I haven't experienced anything close to that. So, I know it's very special. And I try to honor it and protect it as much as I can.

**Caroline Neff:**

So you're speaking of like a psychic connection with Isaac and I know that you're a person that believes very, very strongly in the energy of the universe and like the energy—and energy that is around us, and that's like energy that's shared between other people and energy that just kind of follows us around. Is that something that—is that something that you think about when you're in process? Are you thinking about the energy that's surrounding you? Are you sort of like letting that energy inform you without asking questions? Or is it not something that you think about at all? Is it something that you just sort of allow it to just happen?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I think when I was younger, I didn't think about it. Because I do think I think as you get older, like the world kind of fogs you a little bit. Like your intuition and your—you just get, you know, you live and you get more baggage. And I do think that that kind of can cloud you. So, as you grow into an older adult, I do think your job is to try to clear yourself of that fog. So, I think when I was younger, I didn't have to try at it at all. I really—like so much of the reason that I've even gotten to the rooms that I've been able to has been my intuition. Has been my instinct. And I've always been very imaginative. Like I—it's like I could read a play and be like, "I know what this person's life was." There was a time in my early 20s, where I started to get very depressed. And I almost thought it was like manic or something. But it was actually—I realized that I was an actual empath. And so, what was going on was like I was absorbing. And it's—and I think it sort of happened because I started to be more surrounded by artists who we do—I do think that we are special in that we're always having to confront ourselves. And so it just makes us like a lot more open than, like, mere muggles. You know what I mean? And so, it was starting to affect me. And then someone told me, "I think you're just an empath." And once I had that understanding—it has opened up like—now I'm much more purposeful about it and allow—it's sometimes not like the best. Like I remember when I did *La Ruta*. I really opened myself up to those women and it did—it kind of did a number on me. But yeah, I—it's like I'm giving witchy vibes here. But I mean, it's a real thing. It's happening to me. So, I know it's for real. And I see it with other people. They just have, it's like, everybody has it to a certain extent, you just have to kind of be, like, open to it.

**Caroline Neff:**

We got to share a dressing room with Audrey during *Dance Nation* [Laughter] and I just, I'm—between the two of you, I just, I'm not sure that I've ever walked into a room and been like, “Oh, they know exactly what's going on with me today.” And I think that's super rare. Because, you know, you and Isaac have known each other for a really long time but you Audrey and me have not, actually. We don't we don't have that super long history. But it was is like walking into an incredibly safe and—as you said—intuitive room. I mean, I think there were a handful of times where you're like “What's wrong” and it's like, “Bah! How did you know?”

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] But I thought that was true of all of us. I mean, like, and—I told you this—like we all, for the listeners out there, we all did induct ourselves into like *bruja* status over here. Like I remember that day I was like Caroline, you're a *bruja* too, you know? [Laughter].

**Caroline Neff:**

Can you, just in case anybody doesn't know, can you just explain the term *bruja*?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Oh yeah. So *bruja* just means like—it literally means like a witch. But it's—the reason I say it in Spanish is because it's like a deeper thing. It's about like being spiritually connected. It's about being an open vessel. Which, again, can like, you know, it's not always a good thing. Because, like, it's not just the good things that come in or that you perceive. But I do think that—I mean, this kind of art. If you have something like that, it inevitably requires you to tap into it. And it also, I mean, it's what happens with ensemble. Like, it's sort of like really having to see the person. I mean, that's what happened—because it wasn't just on stage. It's like, we're in the dressing room and I cannot help but like, receive you when you come into the room. And especially like thinking about like, “This is for life, like, you're stuck with me, I'm stuck with you” and it's beautiful, you know, and we're at the start of it.

**Caroline Neff:**

And I love—I just, I do—I genuinely love the idea that we get to make art together for the rest of our lives. You know?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

For the rest of our lives. It's, like, incredible. It's incredible. We'll be—one day we'll be, like, the older ensemble members and be like, “Do you remember back in the day?” Because we're still like—that's the thing. That's the thing about this whole like—you're literally like in an ensemble with like, incredibly well-established well-known actors (yourself included). But like, I have to say that like, in harnessing that and really like, interrogating that I'm like, “You know what?” It's taught me to understand and appreciate—like, I will never get this moment back. I am the youngest I'll ever be and the oldest I've ever been. And one day I'm going to, like, reminisce about this time when I was like, hitting the pavement and cutting my teeth and like, hungry for it. And I already want to skip those steps and be like, established and like, talk about like the good old days. I'm living the good old days! You know what I mean? Like with you, with Audrey. And so that's sort of where I'm living now.

**Caroline Neff:**

Do you consider yourself a role model?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Oh, God, um. You know, I think my like, detrimental self would say no, but I have to say, Steppenwolf has given me a lot of gifts. And one of them is like, stepping into understanding that I may not feel like that (and I certainly don't necessarily want the responsibility of that all the time). Even though my existence in the theater is radical in and of itself. Like, that's just the truth of it. And I think that was enough for me for a while, because that's a very horrible way to like, I don't know, it's just—to always kind of be a trailblazer, like, inevitably is like—it can be very exhausting. So, I didn't—no. So that that was a big “no” for me for a long time. But then, in my trajectory at Steppenwolf, and in particular, when I did *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, which was the last show that I got to do at Steppenwolf. Seeing all those little girls that were actually fifteen and look like Julia—look like that lead character. Here, I'll tell you a story. So, we did a mentorship program, together, you and me, Caroline, last summer, called the 88-Seat Project. And my mentee, it was the first theatrical thing she had ever done. Like, it was the first play that she had seen. When we went to go see *True West*. It was the first, like, public acting she had done. She wasn't sure if it was for her. And we kept in contact and then she came to see *Mexican Daughter*, and she wrote me a letter where she said—because we had a lot of conversations, cause she's Mexican, too, and she said, “I don't know if my parents... I don't know how they're gonna feel about it.” And I said, “Well, you know what, like, if you want to do it, you should do it. If it's because of fear, then you should do it.” Like, I was like, “You're so young you're not even eighteen” But you know, I mean I can tell her all I want and you know, “Don't do it for me. Don't do it for anybody. Do it for you. Like, try to think of, like, outside of expectations and just like what do you want to do?” So anyway, so like six- or seven-months pass, and she came to see *Mexican Daughter*. And she wrote me a letter. And in the letter she wrote, like, she had applied to Columbia, she got in and she's going to study theater. Yeah, bitch. Yeah, bitch. So, cue like fucking tears for me, right? And I'm not like—the thing is that's, like, not of me or from me or anything. But it was the first inkling of like, I mean, the first direct understanding that my presence alone can do something.

**Stage Manager:**

Company: this is your five-minute call. Five minutes til the top of the show. Five minutes til the top of the show. This is five.

**Caroline Neff:**

So the reason why we call this podcast *Half Hour* is because as you, perhaps more than anyone else I have ever worked with, you know how special the time before we go on stage is. [*Laughter*] And what I will call half hour, I will call Karen's three hours. [*Laughter*] What is your—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[*Laughter*] She's not lying folks. She's not lying.

**Caroline Neff:**

[*Laughter*] What is your, what is your process?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

So, she's right, I get there—well, I get there like two hours before, Caroline, okay? But I get there two hours before. She's like, “That's a lot Karen.” Okay. I get there two hours before. Sometimes a little more—it depends—sometimes a little less. *Pero*, if I get there two hours before half hour, that means I'm getting there before stage management. Which is the way I like it. [*Laughter*] So I go to the set before they come in. And I just walk the space. I think like, the bigger rooms that I've gotten in, the more

I can get very nervous. And it's my way of like—it's almost like I'm peeing on the set. I'm not actually peeing. But you know what I mean. It's like I'm owning the set. It's like, I'm putting my scent on the set so that it's mine and not yours. Like, you are new to the space and I am not. And I imagine the people in the seats. And sometimes I'll say a little lines, sometimes, but most of the time it's just quiet. I'll sit in the chair, if there's a chair or couch or whatever. And then I come out, I take off the mask. I'm doing this all with a mask, so you know, just for visuals here and then [*Laughter*]—

**Caroline Neff:**

Not like a *commedia dell'arte*—

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[*Laughter*] Sorry! Yeah, like a skincare face mask.

**Caroline Neff:**

That is a delightful visual for me though.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

No, it's like a Halloween mask that I get—no, no *este* [*Laughter*] Both are great.

**Caroline Neff:**

Put on your Jason mask, then go out there and pee on the set.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yeah, exactly. And just be like I'm intimidating the set, “You are mine.” No, *este*—and then people start to roll by. And then this is where—this is why I get there early because I do my focusing before. Because then I like to fuck around as you know, with everybody there. And then I like to watch myself a lot in the mirror once I start to put on my makeup. Because it's like my—it's like everybody has—I love to get ready. And I think anybody no matter your degree of like “how you like to get ready or not,” everybody has their own way that they get ready. And in half hour, once half hour gets in there, that's when I start putting on my makeup and doing my hair. And I'm really watching the character. How she would do, whatever. Because certain characters take a long-time others are like “In five minutes I'm done.” And so, I like watching that transformation. And then I sometimes pray and then we get—we do the thing.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, we always like to end—have you listened to *Half Hour* before Karen? Not to put you on the spot.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I have, actually. I'm a big fan. So, I'm very geeked out.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, you know what's coming next?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

A little bit, yeah. A little scared, *pero*, because I'm not good at like “lightning round.”

**Caroline Neff:**

These are our lightning round questions. Okay, are you ready?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Yes, I guess. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

They are softballs Karen, softballs.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay. Okay. *Aqui vamos, aqui vamos.*

**Caroline Neff:**

What is the cosine of—I'm just kidding. That was a trig joke.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Ay callate, estupidas.* [*Laughter*] Yeah, I was like, "What the fuck?" Oh, my gosh, that freaked me out!

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, what is your favorite Steppenwolf production that you've ever seen?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Guards at the Taj.*

**Caroline Neff:**

What was your toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

*Doppelgänger. Doppelgänger.* That farce, that character. But it was also like, one of my greatest joys like, performing it was so amazing. It was awesome.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I have, literally since I was 15 years old (which is when I started to do acting), I have a big Hello Kitty box (because I used to be into Hello Kitty in a hardcore way) I have all of my opening and closing night cards from everybody. And sometimes when I kind of get sad or lose my way or I'm like cleaning up my apartment, I find it again. I'll read it and it's amazing. Like, all the lives that the theater has allowed me to like be in, and touch. And you'll see the trajectory of my journey. And then I remember people. Or people that are still in my life because of the theater. It's pretty—that's—those are very special to me.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you were performing in it or not?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

This one's hard because I feel like I have that for every show that I've been in, no lie. I'll say the one that I hold like a lot of pride in. So, during *Doppelgänger*, Rainn Wilson was notorious. He loved—like if he even saw a tremble in your lip that you wanted to laugh, he was going to go—he was like shark to blood

dude, he was going to go for it. So, the whole run he was just really trying to get us to break, which made it super fun but also like, it was like nerve wracking. And then like, maybe like the last week of shows guess we finally got him? I made Rainn Wilson break and I was like freaking cast MVP. I mean this before I was an ensemble member, so it was just like all the ensemble members saying, “Yes! You got him!”

**Caroline Neff:**

What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um. Last year. I got to go in for a pilot where I was going to get to play the wife—okay, Caroline, get ready—the wife of Gael García Bernal. I literally—I know dude! I know. And like dude, like I grew up watching him! Like I was like, *Amores Perros*, *Y tu mamá también*, *The Science of Sleep*. I mean, like I literally as a child, into adolescence, into young adulthood: I was so obsessed with him. And I knew that I was gonna fuck it up. I just knew. Because I'm looking at the reader just like erasing his face and putting Gael's face on it. And those scenes were very like *coqueta*, they were very flirty. It was like “Put that cigarette out sir” like “You're not supposed to like—” I don't know and I just couldn't! [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

What was the last song you listened to?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Bomba Estéreo, “Duele.”

**Caroline Neff:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

I mean, I have to say Isaac Gómez. I have to, because everything that he writes, I'm like, “Where do I sign?” Um. Pablo Neruda. Anaïs Nin.

**Caroline Neff:**

Where's your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Pick Me Up Café, in a booth for like four hours looking at a script and getting a cake. Getting a slice of cake. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

A mongoose.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yes!

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay. Can I just do like—okay, *porque*, this is why. Because they're cute and sweet and—but also kind of grotesque. And then, they eat snakes! And they're impervious to snakes! And then like have little fangs and that's how I walk the world. I'm like, “I try to be nice and kind, *y todo*, but if you reveal yourself to be a snake, girl, I'm gonna eat you.” [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

If you've got poison in your fangs.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

[Laughter] And I'm impervious to you. So that's all I'm gonna say. Yeah, a mongoose.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay, final question.

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Okay, I'm ready.

**Caroline Neff:**

If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Karen Rodriguez:**

Um. A talker, clearly. A potty mouth. Mercurial. Earth sign. And funny! And thinks that leopard print is a neutral, which it is. [Laughter] It is! It is a neutral.

**Stage Manager:**

Company: this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a good one. Everyone places please, places.

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Thanks for listening.

**Audrey Francis:**

And thanks again to our guests this week Karen Rodriguez.

**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.

**Audrey Francis:**

Today's stage manager was Mary Hungerford.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Audrey Francis:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org).

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Till next time, this is Cliff Chamberlain—

**Audrey Francis:**

Audrey Francis—

**Caroline Neff:**

And Caroline Neff. A lifetime to engage; half hour, to places

**Audrey Francis:**

You heard it here folks. Karen Rodriguez: actress, extraordinary human, phenomenal mime.

**Ep: 9 – Yasen Peyankov: “I Had To”**

**Date: 9/1/20**

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

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**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, Yassen 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](mailto: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!

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

**Date: 9/14/20**

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

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**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 douchey—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](http://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](http://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 Ehrbach for joining us today. To learn more about Be An Arts Hero, visit [beanartshero.com](http://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](https://twitter.com/steppenwolfthtr), or on facebook and Instagram. And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). 'Til next time! A lifetime to engage; half hour to places.

**Ep: 11 – Enjoy Gavino: “Show Them Chicago”**

**Date: 9/29/20**

**Featuring:** Enjoy Gavino and Caroline Neff, with Cliff Chamberlain, Audrey Francis and Michelle Medvin.

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**Enjoy Gavino:**

I am a kind of person who cannot sit on my frustration and anger for very long.

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Enjoy Gavino:**

We could just show them what we can do. Let's just do that, because this is irritating. Let's stop talking.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Hello, friends. We are back again. Episode 11 of *Half Hour*.

**Audrey Francis:**

What?

**Caroline Neff:**

What?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

My name is Cliff Chamberlin. I'm joined by two amazing people.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is Audrey Francis.

**Caroline Neff:**

And this is Caroline Neff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And Caroline. I'm not sure how she found the time to sit down and talk with you because she seems to be one of the busiest and most productive artists, and activists, and people in Chicago, but: Enjoy Gavino sat down and found time to talk to you and talk to us. And it was fantastic.

**Caroline Neff:**

I feel so lucky. I really was. I was listening to the conversation a couple of days ago. And as she was talking about all the things that she does, it really struck me that she kind of is, in a much less annoying way, the Ryan Seacrest of Chicago theatre. [*Laughter*] She hosts things; she produces things; she acts in

things. She's just—she's kind of all over. And everybody really loves her. And I feel really lucky that she found the time to sit down and talk with us.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I've been lucky to be in lots of different rooms with her. Never in a production, but because she gives us so many chances to work with her, whether it be *Barrel of Monkeys*, or the *Erik and Jessie and Everyone You Know Show*, or she's worked with my other theatre company *The House* before and she's just sort of everywhere. So, you have a good chance of being inspired by her and she's always the most (and she even said this, I think in the interview) annoyingly optimistic for other people. Right? Just like you really get that from her. It's so much fun to be around her.

**Audrey Francis:**

I think there's something about Emjoy that makes her so special. And after hearing this conversation with you two, Caroline, I was able to really pinpoint what it is for me. And it's very rare when—to see someone or to know someone who says, “Hey, there's a problem. And this is what's missing. And this is what's needed.” And then they do the thing.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Hmm.

**Audrey Francis:**

And she just does that. And I think so many times we're surrounded by people who just identify the problem—and even go as far as to identify what the solution could be, but maybe don't put the solution on their own backs to fix it. And that is what she does time and time again. And can I just say one thing about that show that Caroline and Emjoy and I got to do together? There was a day onstage in *You Got Older* where I—something happened with Caroline and I, and we were breaking we were not able to get it together onstage.

**Caroline Neff:**

At all.

**Audrey Francis:**

And we could not stop laughing. Yeah. And it was supposed to be a very devastating scene—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

During the show?

**Audrey Francis:**

During the show. Oh yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Oh yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Audrey Francis:**

And I looked at Emjoy, and Emjoy looked at Caroline and I with this beautiful combination of like, “I love that you're having fun and I will not stoop to your level.”

**Caroline Neff:**

And got us right back on track.

**Audrey Francis:**

And got us right back on track. [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, I'm going to get us on track and get this interview started. Because everyone needs to hear what she has to say because she's that type of person. So, let's hear the interview.

**Stage Manager:**

Welcome back, everyone. This is your half hour call. Please sign in if you've not already done so. This is half hour. The house is about to open. Half hour, please.

**Caroline Neff:**

You moved to Chicago from Seattle, right?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

That's correct. Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

And was that—did you go to school in Seattle?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

I did. I did everything in Seattle until I was about 22. So, I didn't leave Seattle at all, except for like, family vacations. Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Wow, that's so interesting to me because I feel like you are such a person that is always be-bopping around. And I just—I feel like I never see you at like—

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Still?

**Caroline Neff:**

Rest. Yeah.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

I have—but that's the thing is like, as a human, I would rather just stay in one place. But like, I mean, as you know—you just follow the work and you follow whoever will have me. If it were up to me, I would just be snuggled with my dog on my couch and then have people come to me so I would never leave the one room, which—

**Caroline Neff:**  
You're royalty—

**Emjoy Gavino:**  
Yes.

**Caroline Neff:**  
Is what you're saying.

**Emjoy Gavino:**  
Exactly.

**Caroline Neff:**  
You're royal blood.

**Emjoy Gavino:**  
Yes.

**Caroline Neff:**  
And therefore, you should be treated thus.

**Emjoy Gavino:**  
You understand me. I'm so glad. Yes.

**Caroline Neff:**  
I do. I do. I'm your humble servant. [*Laughter*] How did you find yourself in Chicago from Seattle?

**Emjoy Gavino:**  
So weird. It's so weird because I actually thought I would never leave Seattle. I mean, the city itself is so incredible. You're by the ocean. You can take a \$2 ferry and see whales, you know, on your day off. And so much—so many of the Gavino clan (my family) is there. And when I was in college, the Seattle theatre scene was just incredible. And amazingly, it was kind of considered the “next Chicago” when I was going to school. And so even then—even when I was in college, and I didn't actually think I could make a living in theater—I was looking at Chicago, like, “If I ever wanted to do theatre anywhere else other than Seattle, I'd want to go there, because it's just more of what I like here.” I didn't want to leave, but if I had to, I'd go to Chicago. And then I met a boy. And that boy asked me to marry him. And that was the same year that he also got a job in Chicago theatre. And so, we magically ended up in Chicago. Yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**  
You wear more hats than I think anybody else that I know—both personally and professionally—and you somehow managed to juggle all those things and I definitely want to touch on all of them. Because you are an actor; you are an activist; you are a casting director; you're the Associate Artistic Director of the Gift Theatre. But you also founded and run the Chicago Inclusion Project. And I would love to just hear about the beginnings of that: how that thought crossed your mind, how it came to fruition. So, do you mind talking just a little bit about what the Chicago Inclusion Project is?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Maybe I can start with how we started, which was: it was just going to be a simple reading. Before, like, even before I turned Equity, but when—especially when—I turned equity (which was a difficult decision to do in Chicago) as a young woman, and as a young woman of color, it was really difficult. I really didn't want to turn Equity. And I knew that when I did, the jobs would dry up, which it did. And when it dried up, I had moments where I was looking around and realizing that the only people who were hiring me were people who were probably just interested in my ethnicity. Not all the time, but a lot of the time. And even before I turned to Equity, actually, to be honest. And you know, other marginalized artists like myself—we would talk about this constantly, powerless, at the back of bars, in dressing rooms. Just muttering to ourselves like “There's nothing we can do this is just this is this is the way it is.” And “I'll just always be called in for the nurse. I'll always be called in for the terrorist. I'll always be called for this. I'll never get to work with you—unless it's in *Christmas Carol*,” you know. And just—frustrated and angry all the time. And I am a kind of person who cannot sit on my frustration and anger for very long. I have to funnel it into something. And so those conversations started to fester and fester and fester, and it kind of turned into “Well, we're tired of talking about it with each other. We don't really want to talk about it with artistic leaders,” a lot of the times. Because people were scared they wouldn't get work right? You know, and we could do those panel discussions, we could, you know, have a roundtable where we're like, “Well, how do we solve racism and how—” you know, and then pat ourselves on the back and walk away. Or we could just show them what we can do. And let's just do that because this is irritating. Let's stop talking. So I was friends with my—first teacher, then mentor, then friend, Michael Patrick Thornton. And I knew he had this theatre company called The Gift and I went to him and I said, “Hey, would The Gift put this reading on? I had this idea I was—I'm hoping you can be a part of it, but like, I want to just get every actor that I have a talent crush on and put them in a play together. All these people who have never worked together before. And they don't have to play stereotypes. They just get to play what they've always wanted to play; what they've always dreamed of playing, that they weren't ever able to because they weren't led into the room. And so, Mike, of course, is huge on this idea of inclusion and accessibility and was like, “That's a beautiful idea. I won't do it.” And I was like, “Oh, cool.” He's like, “I'll help you do it, but you should do it.” And I was like, “But you have a theatre company and I don't... okay.” So that's kind of where it started was: I'm a fan girl of so many Chicago theatre actors and I wanted to put them on stage together to play in an American classic.

**Caroline Neff:**

What was the play?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

It was *The Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Which I know Steppenwolf did an incredible production with and, you know, we thought about a lot of different plays, but we knew we wanted a big ensemble show. And I loved it when I read it in college, and I reread it and I was like, “This is about the American dream.” Like there is there's probably not a better show to, to do this with. And there were very few ethnic specific—specificities, in the character breakdown, which was kind of going to be my point. Which is, you know, it says this person is a dreamer, this person is a dancer, this person is—whatever. And that could look and sound like so many different things. And you could actually do that with many, many classic contemporary works in the

canon. And I knew to pitch this idea to the Chicago theatre population, to the gatekeepers, it had to be excellent. And in order for it to be excellent, it had to have the range of talent that I knew we had in Chicago. I wanted Barbara Robertson, I wanted Alana Arenas. I wanted Mike Thornton. But I also wanted these non-union actors who I've worked with, who I've been in the room with, who were fearless, who have just so much talent, like spilling out of them, that they would infect everybody around them and I wanted them in it too. But to do that we needed to partner with Equity. Equity, I assumed, would be on board with this; would happily just help us out in every way. They looked at the cast list that we wanted to have, and they said, "Cool. So that'll be \$3,000 for one reading." For one night.

**Caroline Neff:**

For one night?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

For one night. And I think the reason was: A) we wanted to do it in a theater because the point was, we had to see all of these bodies on stage together. We also wanted to take donations so that we could do this again. And we also wanted to invite press. And I guess with those stipulations, those three things meant this is the contract that they could give us. And so, we did one of those crowd sourced fundraisers, and I was just like, "I don't—we're not going to be able to—we wanted to raise at least 5000 just for some cushion." And so, we just asked on Facebook and we said, "Look, we're just trying to change the stage picture in Chicago, because we're tired of feeling this way. We're tired of being separated from each other; we're tired of our audiences being separated. We're tired of people not being able to be in the same room together because of economic status or gender identity, or physical ability. This art form should allow for everyone to be in the same room." That was our point. And it was phenomenal because the people who were sending us money were people who could not—these people couldn't afford to give us that money. We were raising funds from actors who weren't in the place to give us what they were giving us, and audience members who weren't in the place to give us what they were giving us. But they wanted that stage picture changed, too. And when we realized that—when we saw all the money coming in, when we had to shift from the upstairs tiny theater at VG, because we doubled by 200%, and move to the downstairs space the day of the reading, we realized, "This is something that people are hungry for." And then when we realize that we're like, "Well, we have to actually keep going and we have to push this further." Because it can't just be a reading. It can't just be coming from us. It can't just be produced by actors. We realized after that moment that the next step was partnering with theatre companies and talking to artistic leaders and asking them "Hey, what's up? What are you going to do?" And then as, you know, as we showed them with our first reading, "Hey, look at what these actors can do," we would, with each theater company that we were working with, show them what our process was. And not in a didactic way. Because if they signed up with us, they knew what they were getting. They knew what our agenda was. But a lot of it was "I'm going to introduce you to some actors that you absolutely should know. Because they haven't been on your radar because you haven't been looking for them. But guess what they're here and they're actually perfect for this show." And, and we tried to work with theaters who were open to the idea. But also, we said, "Pick a show that you would put in your season next year." And we'd plant that little seedling in their head. And then we would help them program a reading that was as accessible as possible. Pay-what-you-can tickets, closed captioning. And with every reading, we learned more and more. And they learned more and more about what an inclusive theatrical experience could be. And so that's, that's really the origins of it. And then, from there, it's just kind of like, "Well, what else does our community need?" And then we would shift and pivot to the training programs and to meetings with artistic directors and to talks with college students. And, you know, it's ever evolving.

**Caroline Neff:**

Just hearing that origin story (some of which I knew a little bit about)—but it feels to me so much like you Emjoy, as a human being, is like, “Hey, there's a need, can it be met? How can I meet it?” And your ability to bring things forward like that. And so, I guess what I'm curious about is where do you see the future of Chicago Inclusion Project? And how would you say that its mission statement has shifted in the last few years?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh, man. It's such a hard question, because, you know, like—it's not even a joke—we talk about all the time, how our goal of the Chicago Inclusion Project is for us not to have to exist. Do you know what I mean?

**Caroline Neff:**

It's like, yeah, it's like oncologists. We'd love to put ourselves out of business.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Right, right. Ideally. We know that's not going to happen. We know that, like, the things that we're working towards, we're probably—oh, not to be a downer—but I'm not going to see a lot of what I want to see in my lifetime. Right? But what I want to work towards—and what has shifted in 2020 (I can speak definitely to this moment) is that we're realizing that—our complicity in white supremacy, right? We're complicit just because we're in theatre. And we live in America. So, we're born into this already, this system.

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

And the way Inclusion Project—I mean, let's be honest—the way Emjoy Gavino started working as an artist and as an advocate, was to try to bring people who didn't necessarily see to my level, what I wanted them to see. And just reach in and bring them up to this idea. And it was a lot of emotional labor. It was a lot of pieces of my heart that I desperately wanted to give, but it costs me so much. And it costs so many of us who do this kind of work so much, because it's so deeply personal. And I'm looking at that cost in 2020. In you know, now people are like having this “aha moment” of like, “Oh, you were hurting? Oh, my bad. Oh, let's figure out how to fix that.” Fine, cool. I was telling you that 10 years ago, fine. But instead of putting all of our energies and effort into bringing those people up to our level so that we can finally have that conversation and to push them into action, pivoting now, to caring for the marginalized artists that we've been trying to uplift. But putting more of our attention on them. And care for them. And “What do you need?” And yes, we will try to educate the people who need that education and provide resources if they need it. But we need to—it needs to be 50/50. And it wasn't before. And that goes for me as an individual person. Like, I can't give you my time and energy the way I was able to five years ago—the way I was able to two years ago. I can't. And I don't want to see people who look like me, or have gone through the hardships similar to me, to go—I don't want anyone to have to go through that anymore. And so, we have to start healing each other. And that work can happen alongside the strides that need to happen with the gatekeepers who really need to catch up to the conversation. We can help that, but not while costing us, ourselves.

**Stage Manager:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Were you working on Chicago Inclusion Project before you started working as a casting director?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

It's so weird. I just realized: everything happened in 2015. Like, everything was building up to 2015, but I got named Gift Casting Director, officially, in 2015. We launched Inclusion Project in 2015. And I was also unofficially casting for Remy Bumppo in 2015. I just kind of got shoved into that. I was kind of like dabbling in it like a couple years before with like some consultations. And "Here's a list of minority actors since you've never met them before and blah, blah, blah." And then just started to get paid for it that year, which I think is no coincidence, but like, it all happened at once.

**Caroline Neff:**

Where like, where do you find your inspiration for casting? Like when you're when you're sitting down with a script? Where does your brain begin from? Like, does it begin with a conversation with the director? Do you come in with some sort of like strong ideas? Is it—I don't know, how does that work?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh, gosh. Yeah. Well, but you know, that there's like, a 5 million possibilities, right? And so, I'll read the script. But usually I'll have a conversation with the director first, just so that I don't go completely bonkers. Because really, unless it says "This person has to be this age, and this gender, and has to be able to do a cartwheel and has—" like, which, they rarely have that specific thing. So, it usually starts with a conversation with the director. Just because I also want to get an idea of the world they're trying to build. I've also been lucky because I've worked on a lot of new work. So also, I want to talk to the playwright and get in their brain. And then sometimes, and I'm sure you do this too, I still don't stay within their boxes. You know what I mean? I was just like, "Cool. You think you want this actor, because you've only known that actor, but have you met so-and-so?" And also, I think you and I and a few other wonderful casting directors in Chicago have this other gift of having been in ensembles with some of these actors. So, we know not only the integrity of what they bring to rehearsal room, but also the things that directors haven't seen them do, we know they can do. And so, I try to give as many—if there's not a lot of time—a limited amount of options, but as many options as I can possibly give per that casting breakdown. Like "If it says this, could it also mean this, this and this? Like what are your givens?" And then from there, I just try to show them Chicago as much as I possibly can. And, and even then, I always have the "Oh, I could have called in so and so you *know* that moment." But—

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah, if only we could cast every play 10 times over.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

And I can a lot of the time!

**Caroline Neff:**

Right. And I still feel like, "Oh, man, we're not quite—we're not getting everybody in here that we wish we could have."

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, I definitely want to talk to you about your acting career because it is one of the most versatile and interesting resumes, because you do new plays, classical plays, musicals. I don't know that there's a genre of theater that you have not, or could not, do. You were in the musical *Working*.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh, gosh, yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

With so many incredible actors, which is a musical adaptation of a Studs Terkel, oral history, right? So, then you did *Iphigenia at Aulis* and you've done a number of the Greek classical plays down at The Court. And then, you know, you and I have gotten to work on contemporary plays like *You Got Older* by Clare Barron and *4000 Miles* by Amy Herzog. But then you're also such a sort of brilliant shepherd of new work as an actor. I don't know how you look at a Greek text, and then how you look at *You Got Older*, and you're like, "I feel confident in both of these." Because I look at both of those and am like "I should hire a coach."

**Emjoy Gavino:**

You are assuming that I'm confident at anything ever, which I'm not. I'm not. So, I approach both of those things with extreme anxiety, but the same anxiety actually. And you know, a lot of the Greek texts that we were working with was highly contemporary—contemporized by, you know, the adaptation. But you know: I am heart-led. Like that is—that's kind of the through line with all of my stuff. And I think, you know, back when I thought I was going to do musicals—and I'll be honest, the only reason that I sing at all and I do musicals at all is because I thought that was the only way Asians could get on stage when I was younger. Which it looked like it was. And so—or *Joy Luck Club*, which I was in. But, you know, I learned—I taught myself how to sing because Lea Salonga sang, and that was the only Asian I knew who did—who was on stage. And so, I learned how to incorrectly belt, and I got myself into musicals. And I did that out of desperation and necessity. But I think—and you've done musicals, or musical type things, I've seen you do it—but there is something that lends itself to things like classical text or things like heightened language, that—they all help each other out, right? That if you if you're lucky enough to have a smart dramaturg and director you can, you can be heart-led. And if you trust the text, the rhythms are there. And the musical stuff just kind of help with that, as kind of a muscle memory.

**Stage Manager:**

Attention everyone: this is your five-minute call. Five minutes, please. Five minutes to the top of the show. Five minutes.

**Caroline Neff:**

Now, you've listened to the podcast.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh, yes.

**Caroline Neff:**

So, I would love to ask you, as we do with all of our guests: what does your half hour look like?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Yeah. I mean, my actor half hour, will depend on the show, and the role, and what it needs. But, as you know, I usually make myself a Spotify playlist. Usually titled *What's on Kathy's iPad* or iShuffle or whatever. And just kind of like music that will get me in the mood of my character or to the starting emotional point of that character. And also, because I'm socially awkward, it will also prevent me from having to have small talk with people that I don't always want to small talk. And that—it'll also depend on if I don't have that much pressure on myself in the show, I'll be a Chatty Cathy sometimes. But usually earbuds in my ears blasting, let's be honest, Brandi Carlile.

**Caroline Neff:**

Are you ready for a lightning round?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh yeah.

**Caroline Neff:**

Okay. What is your favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Shoot. Oh. Can I say two? I'll say—the first one that came to my head—you were there. I did School at Steppenwolf the year that *August Osage* was going on tour to Australia. And Amy Morton was one of my Meisner teachers. And they invited our class and then some special guests like yourself to come watch their rehearsal at Yondorf. And so, there was no set, no costumes. It was just the actors saying the text like, you know, a few feet away from us. And I just couldn't. I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't believe that was my teacher. I couldn't believe that all the things that I've been learning for the past 10 weeks was, like, happening in front of me, like 10 million times over. And I knew how lucky I was to be in that room. That moment was just has everything.

**Caroline Neff:**

Agreed, agreed.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

But then also, *Brothers Size* was also when I first ugly snotted in public. So, that's that.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is the toughest experience you've had as an actor?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Working at the Broadway Playhouse. That was the show that turned me Equity. It was the only commercial run I've ever done. And it was hard in every single sense that it could be hard.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

So, it wasn't technically in the play, but you know that I inherited a couple of deer from the marketing campaign of *You Got Older*. And we named them Sparkle and Heart. And they are in my apartment. And they are always watching. And I love them so much.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite moment of any live theatrical experience whether you're performing or not?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh, God. That's such a good hard question. I did you see *Hit the Wall*?

**Caroline Neff:**

Yeah. A few times.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

The riot scene. I've seen it in every iteration, I saw it at The Garage. I saw it at Theater on the Lake. I saw it in New York. I saw when it went back to Wit and I saw it—the anniversary last year when they did it at the 1700. And every single time they get to that riot scene, and my heart stops and I can't breathe, and I'm so happy that I do theatre and that I know those beautiful people that worked on that piece and that moment. But like it's everything—that riot scene is everything that theatre should be. I loved it so much.

**Caroline Neff:**

That is an incredible play. What job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

I auditioned for *Into the Woods*, back when I thought I could do musicals, in Seattle. And I was cast as Cinderella. I am an alto. I am a comic alto and I want it to be Little Red and I could kill that role today, even though I'm way too old for it. I know how that role should go. They cast me as Cinderella, which was very nice. It's a very nice role. I'm not a soprano. The reviews dragged me, and I was like "Of course I'm bad; I'm not a soprano!" So, like, yeah, that one still stings. Still a little bitter about that.

**Caroline Neff:**

What—this is such a good question for you Emjoy—what is the last song you listened to?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh. Oh, have you listened to Bethany Thomas's new album?

**Caroline Neff:**

Not yet.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Oh my gosh, Caroline. Do it tonight.

**Caroline Neff:**

I think I will.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

There's I mean, there's so many good songs on there. But there's this one song. Do you ever have that song, when you're a teenager, where you play it and you know it's going to make you cry—

**Caroline Neff:**

Yes.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

And then you just like play it. I mean, *Surfacing*, Sarah McLachlan, like the whole album. Like yeah, that was me. But it has been replaced by a song called “The Waves” on Bethany Thomas's new album. And it's so beautiful, but also the lyrics are just so poignant and so right now that like, I'll just, I'll play it knowing that it'll make me cry, and just have the most wonderful catharsis. Which I had earlier this afternoon.

**Caroline Neff:**

Who is your favorite writer?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

You know, it changes depending on the week. Right now, Samantha Irby is giving me a lot of joy. I'm rereading *Meaty* because I've read all of her other books at this point. But. Samantha Irby, right now.

**Caroline Neff:**

What is your favorite place to unwind in Chicago.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Well, in the before times, it was the olive oil and vinegar aisle of Mariano's, you know? But it's not so relaxing right now. So, I would say the gazebo in Welles Park, particularly if you happen to be there when a string quartet is playing or rehearsing, which I did twice. Twice they were there when I was there, and I was like, “This is so happy-making.” It was great.

**Caroline Neff:**

It's like when you accidentally catch the Holiday Train.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Exactly. Exactly like that. [*Laughter*]

**Caroline Neff:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

[*Laughter*] Oh god, I even knew this was coming. Oh, okay. Have you ever Googled “animals dressed as other animals”?

**Caroline Neff:**

No.

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Okay. First of all: it's a very controversial thing because either you will love it, like I do, or you will be offended that I told you to Google it. But, you will feel one of those things. There is a picture somewhere on the internet, of a dachshund dressed as a lobster. So already a highly strung, awkward animal, dressed in something so wrong. And I think it's also a little too big for him. And I feel like I saw that picture and I was like, “I know how that kid feels. That is Emjoy in a nutshell.”

**Caroline Neff:**

All right, final question here. If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Emjoy Gavino:**

I love this question. Okay, everybody's *ate, ate* in Tagalog, is older sister. So, everybody's *ate*. Annoyingly optimistic for everyone else, except for her. Double-jointed in all the wrong places. [Laughter]

**Caroline Neff:**

Should have played Little Red Riding Hood in—

**Emjoy Gavino:**

Should have Little Red Riding Hood in *Into the Woods!* Boom. [Laughter]

**Stage Manager:**

All right, everyone, this is your places call. Places, please, for the top of the show. Have a wonderful show tonight. Places, please. Places.

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

Thanks for listening.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And thanks again to our guest this week: Emjoy Gavino.

**Caroline Neff:**

To learn more about the Chicago Inclusion Project, check out their website at [thechicagoinclusionproject.org](http://thechicagoinclusionproject.org).

**Audrey Francis:**

*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 Michelle Medvin.

**Audrey Francis:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Audrey Francis:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). Till next time, this is Audrey Francis—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cliff Chamberlain—

**Caroline Neff:**

And Caroline Neff. A lifetime to engage; half hour to places

**Ep: 12 – Carrie Coon: “Relaxed Readiness”**

**Date: 10/20/20**

**Featuring:** Carrie Coon and Cliff Chamberlain, with Audrey Francis, Caroline Neff and Mary Hungerford.

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**Carrie Coon:**

And I think that lesson, that I committed to walking in every day and making choices, even if they were bad—

**Audrey Francis:**

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois—

**Carrie Coon:**

And that’s the only way you walk into those spaces.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is *Half Hour*. Welcome back to *Half Hour*. I am Audrey Francis.

**Caroline Neff:**

I’m Caroline Neff.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And I’m Cliff Chamberlain.

**Audrey Francis:**

This is the last episode of our first season.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I don’t know where the time has gone, because it felt like yesterday was the middle of March. And I was coming back from New York sort of in this daze. And all of a sudden, we started making this podcast. And I have definitely got to say that, in a non-pandemic time, this would be one of my favorite things ever, in a year of a pandemic, it has been completely soul affirming, and I’ve loved every second of it. And I am so happy to be in this space with both of you and everybody that has been making the show.

**Caroline Neff:**

I absolutely agree. And we are going to take a bit of a break, just so that we can focus on what we’ve done, and we can focus on where we’d like to go in the future. But in early 2021, we’ll be returning with more conversations with Steppenwolf ensemble members, really vital artists in Chicago and beyond and other inspiring organizations.

**Audrey Francis:**

And we’ve also got a couple more Steppenwolf friends joining us as hosts!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yes!

**Caroline Neff:**

More hosts!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

More hosts!

**Audrey Francis:**

[*Laughter*] So stay tuned for that, because it's a very exciting announcement.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It's going to be—I can't wait, it's going to be incredible. And if you are listening to the podcast, you really don't want to miss those added voices. So, make sure that you're subscribed, either on Spotify or iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and keep an eye on Steppenwolf's social media channels. We're on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram.

**Audrey Francis:**

Go subscribe. And check out this interview because we—I loved listening to this conversation, Cliff, that you had with the one, the only: Carrie Coon.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I loved having it. Carrie is a dear friend of mine, and so to sort of separate (I sort of mentioned this, I think talking to her) like being her friend and just sitting down for a conversation and trying to interview her was a unique challenge. But she's so great in both capacities: just as a friend, and as an interview subject. It was really great. I have such strong memories of her work over the years especially in, I think it was 2010, right? *Virginia Woolf, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* her, Amy Morton, Madison Dirks, Tracy Letts, Pam MacKinnon directed it. Edward Albee. It just was a phenomenon at Steppenwolf. And then they went to Broadway. I saw it on Broadway too, and they were just all fantastic. And she's talked about this before. I know it was a real career-changer, life-changer. It was cool to hear her talking about it.

**Audrey Francis:**

Also cool to hear her talk about *The Post*. So, I remember watching that movie in the theaters. And it's one it's cool to see somebody that you know, on the silver screen like that—well, for me it was cool to see somebody that I know. And then to see them sitting in between like Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep and doing such a great job. And then hearing her talk about that in the interview. I was—I was so grateful to hear this like, kind of, constant beginner's mind and this willingness to practice and also that kind of talk that maybe a lot of us artists need to have about just leaving our insecurity at the door sometimes.

**Caroline Neff:**

Mm hmm. And one of the things about that: I think Carrie is probably the first person that I've known as a civilian, to be sort of catapulted into fame. Like that was the first transition that I think I've ever gotten to witness personally with, as you said, you know, watching somebody that you know, on the silver screen when you were just like, you passed by them in Andersonville on accident. And I loved hearing about her preparation and the way it's evolved, but she used to sit—we shared a dressing room during *Three Sisters*. And she would sit for like 45 minutes before half hour and just sit in the corner and read poetry. And there's just—and hearing about the way that that sort of evolved into the way that she

prepares on sets and the way she prepares for any sport that she plays and excels in I just—there's a calmness and a level-headedness to her that she's just always had and I just am so grateful that I think she always will.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah, totally agree.

**Audrey Francis:**

What a great conversation. I really loved listening to this

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah, I really loved having it.

**Caroline Neff:**

Really great.

**Stage Manager:**

Company this is your half hour call. This is half hour til the top of the show. Half hour. If you have not signed in, please do so at this time. Half hour, half hour.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Good to see you.

**Carrie Coon:**

You too!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And good to talk to you. I realized I was like, "Oh, this is going to be interesting, because Carrie is one of my dearest friends." But I also have, like, such a huge respect for you as an artist and as a human being. So, I was like, "Alright, this is going to be a fun one to figure out how to talk to you as someone interviewing you for *Half Hour* and also your friend." So—

**Carrie Coon:**

You know all my dark secrets.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I know all the secrets. And I have to pretend that I don't. [*Laughter*] So, the show's called *Half Hour*, right? Which is, as you know really well, that sort of magical time before a show starts in the theater. Right? So, start with half hour; what's your half hour routine?

**Carrie Coon:**

Well, I just—I was doing *Bug* before the pandemic hit. And Tracy, my husband (as you know), was in New York doing *The Minutes* with you. And so, I was a single mom, with a nanny, doing a play. And Haskell is two and a half now. So, he was, you know, two, and—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Haskell is your son?

**Carrie Coon:**

Haskell is my son. And I didn't have a lot of free time. My nanny was coming in the afternoons, usually like three or four, before I had to go to work. So, I was getting up really early in the morning with him—six in the morning. Spending the entire morning with him. And then I was going to the theater—usually around five. And I would just try to immediately “Do not pass go; do not collect \$200; go to sleep.” So, if I slept, if I got to sleep, for a half an hour or an hour and woke up, and I feel, you know, pretty good. And so, I would try to do a 20-minute cardio workout to wake myself back up after napping. So, I would just do this cardio dancing in my room. And then that meant that once the half hour mark came, I didn't have a lot to do. I didn't have to wear a lot of makeup. I didn't have to do my hair, or anything. It wasn't this—there wasn't as much to get finished in that time period. So, I found in this particular process, I was listening to songs. And I was staying loose and dancing a little bit. And I—there was a particular opening phone call. And I would go through the opening phone call. And there's a final speech and I would look over the lines of that final speech and sort of go through those at least once in that half hour. And basically, try to stay loose because the show was really intense. And generally, as a woman, half hour involves a lot of other preparation that, as a mom again, I don't get to do that stuff. I don't get to come or two hours to the theater early now. So, my hair and makeup happens at half hour because that's what time I get to the theater now. So, it's changed.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Can you tell me more about that?

**Carrie Coon:**

Well, we're always having to put on, you know, fake eyelashes and layers of undergarments and wigs, and things that transform us. And not to say that men don't do that. But there's just more of it for us.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I mean, I've—pants and a shirt. And some shoes.

**Carrie Coon:**

Right? Yeah. And I always see the guy—like dudes at half hour standing around by the coffee station, you know—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah!

**Carrie Coon:**

Eating a carrot stick. Checking their clock.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I started one show with no shoes. I just needed to throw on like a shirt and pants. Done.

**Carrie Coon:**

[*Laughter*] Yeah, it never really feels that way. For me, especially when I was doing rep theatre in Wisconsin. You know, every look in those classic plays is a wig, and foundation and corsets and hoop skirts. And so, if you want more time to prepare, you've got to come in early to make sure you get it. And the same has happened to me in TV and film. Now, I don't—I don't really have time to prepare for the jobs before I get there. So, I have to rely on the work I've done to just be present in the present moment. And so now, if you catch me on a TV and film set waiting to be called to set, I will be sitting on

the floor of my trailer on a meditation cushion or a bunch of pillows and I'll be meditating. Or I'll be rolling my creaky old lady parts. [Laughter] Not old lady parts—but my muscles out on Yamuna balls because I found that that sort of release work, before I work, opens up my chest, opens up my back, so that I feel well breathed before I go on set. Because you know, as you pointed out, in that 30 seconds where everything is happening around you and you're supposed to focus (and that might happen at three in the morning)—the only tool I found that's been most—what's most useful for me is being able to drop my breath in, keep breathing, keep my body loose and key into the person that I'm acting with. And so that's all I do in my trailer, now, to get ready is I'm rolling and stretching and I'm meditating.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It sounds to me like—and this makes so much sense because of the things that I've seen just by working with you or, you know, even things—I think that a really funny quote that Tracy had about *The Post*, you working on *The Post*. And that, you know, “Everybody's nervous around Steven Spielberg, except for you.” But it sounds like ease and relaxation is really a big part of your prep. And I see that because you're so easy, in the best way, as an artist. Really—

**Carrie Coon:**

Thank you.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Fluid, and. Now you said too, you said “now” in terms of film and TV. Does that mean “now” as in like today? How have things changed—?

**Carrie Coon:**

I mean now as a mother.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Ah.

**Carrie Coon:**

I mean now that I have a kid. And now—I don't know how I was spending all this luxurious prep time before I had a toddler. Because now when I—you know, when I went back to work—I went back to work on TV and film when Haskell was eight weeks old. So, I was still breastfeeding. I hadn't lost weight. I mean, I'd lost some, but not a lot. And I didn't—and I was totally unprepared for the job I was doing. And I became one of those actors who was learning lines in the hair and makeup trailer, which I had never been. And it wasn't a comfortable feeling for me. I didn't like doing that. And yet, there were days when I just had to say, “I have to eat and sleep. And these lines will come when I get to work. And I'll just trust that they'll be there when I show up and do the best I can.” And I had to really—I can't be as hard on myself. And I just don't have the time.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh. And is there some—is there a freedom in some ways—

**Carrie Coon:**

Yes!

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

To that? A little bit? To be like, “Oh.” Because, I remember as a younger actor, that sort of “learning lines in the makeup trailer”—I definitely had an opinion about that.

**Carrie Coon:**

Yes, me too.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

That I look back on with, I don't know, realizing, “Oh, I had a lot to learn myself about how everything works and that people's processes sometimes mean that is a necessity,” especially in terms of what you're saying as a mom. And what was that project that you were working on?

**Carrie Coon:**

*The Sinner.*

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

*The Sinner.*

**Carrie Coon:**

That was my first real network TV show.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Right.

**Carrie Coon:**

Which is—it's a different world than what I'd come from. I'd come from a really *auteur*, what is the word? Sort of sophisticated television that, you know, that nobody watched?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Prestigious?

**Carrie Coon:**

Yeah, Prestige TV is the word I can't think of, because I can't think of words, also, now that I'm a mom.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

There really is a unique difference to those styles of production, aren't there?

**Carrie Coon:**

Not the least of which, is the quality of the writing, often. And I was also one of those people, because I come from the Steppenwolf Theatre and because I'm married to a playwright, that always had a lot of fidelity to the language. And I didn't respect it when I saw people improvising on set. And then I did a show where, you know, the writing was good, but it was appealing to a different kind of audience than I had been appealing to before. And I found that often what that translated into was some—it felt overwritten. And sometimes it felt like I was repeating myself as a character. And because I was, I was very, I was well-respected by the creative team. I mean, just, that's the kind of environment I was in, I was working with people who respected the artists. And so, they gave me the freedom to say, “I don't—this isn't, this line isn't really working.” And for the first time, I found myself doing more of that rewriting, on set, in a way that I had never done in the previous shows I've worked on. Which again, is

just, like you say, about the style of the show. It's not a knock on the writing or anything like that—the writing staff. It was just, I felt like I needed to take that responsibility for the language in a way that I hadn't before.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Right. And gosh, I mean, I know that one of those prestige shows was one of my favorite shows ever. And it's such a fun and surreal experience to watch a show with one of your dear friends, and just purely like the show, right? And that's *The Leftovers*. Can you tell me what your experience was like with that coming right out of ...*Virginia Woolf*? And what that time in your life was like?

**Carrie Coon:**

That time in my life is the reason why I'm working right now. Because, as you know, ...*Virginia Woolf* went to Broadway, and that's the reason I was able to have these meetings with these casting directors who were—who had seen the play in New York. And what actually happened is: I booked *The Leftovers* and I shot the pilot, but then I booked *Gone Girl*, and in the pilot I only have one scene, and that was going to be my first television series. But in the interim, I went to film school with David Fincher and I learned so much, even just about the vocabulary, because I didn't even have the vocabulary for being on a set. I had done commercials and one guest star spot on NBC. Well, two at that point.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Can you just tell me, you've said this to me before but it's such a good story, about David Fincher: he was asking you to do something specific.

**Carrie Coon:**

Yes.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And can you tell that story?

**Carrie Coon:**

Sure, I can. [*Laughter*] It's a popular story that David Fincher does not remember. Okay. [*Laughter*] So now I feel like I've made it up. I was on—it was my first—we had done a lot of exteriors. So that's getting in and out of cars. And going in and out of doors. We were in Missouri. But I hadn't done a scene yet where I had real dialogue with someone. So, we were doing our first scene in the bar, we were in Missouri. So, I was working with Ben and, I think, Kim Dickens. And so, I was at the bar and I had a magazine; I was supposed to look up at a particular time, say my line and look back down. It was very prescriptive, which David's direction can be. And he kept saying, "I'm not getting enough screen direction." And he was trying to have me make an adjustment, and the DP make an adjustment, but I didn't know what screen direction was. So, I was just trying to look up in the right moment. And then he finally—I heard him in video village, say, "You can't do it," and move on. And I was of course, humiliated and scared. And Ben was being really sympathetic and sweet to me.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Ben Affleck for our listeners.

**Carrie Coon:**

Ben Affleck, my brother. The next—I think it was the next day, I think it wasn't that night, everybody was being awfully sweet. The whole cast was amazing, because they were so happy that it was my first job.

They were all really, really excited for me. And they were being awfully kind. And the next day, I went to David and I said, “Look, you know, you hired someone who's never made a movie before. And there's certain vocabulary that I don't know. And I'm telling you that if you can explain to me what it is, then I can do it.” And from that day, from that moment on, he would say, “Carrie, come here, look at the monitor. See this frame? This is why I need you to glide out on your right foot really smoothly.” Or you know, Ben would say, “Carrie, this is super tight, you really shouldn't move.” So, they were—they really took me under their wing, and I got better. I got better as the movie went on. And I learned a lot. And then, right after we finished shooting (because the shoot extended into *The Leftovers*; I kind of went right into *The Leftovers* that same—this week we wrapped) then suddenly I was on TV and we did four takes of something the director said “Okay, we're moving on.” I was like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! I just—I was just warming up!” So, then I had to adjust back to the pace of television. And for me as an actor, what happened in the real world is that *The Leftovers* started airing before *Gone Girl* came out. And I would see it and I thought “Oh my gosh, *Gone Girl*, I'm just making these faces.” I felt like my work in *Gone Girl* was not subtle and wasn't very interesting. And then I would see *The Leftovers*. And I saw that I had gotten better for having made the movie. But of course, they came out in the reverse order in the world so. And no one else is paying attention to it in that way. Nobody in the world had that thought but me. But I was really—it was really obvious to me that I had, you know, that I had started to learn some things about being on camera.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You know, that really feels to me like a moment in time where you either take hold of your own career and say to him, “I need you to help me with this. And I want I can do this. Just resp—you know, look me in the eye and tell me what's up.” Or you could choose to be like, “I can't do it. I'm going to slink away I shouldn't be here.” As a testament to you, I think that you just, like, stood up and did the work.

**Carrie Coon:**

And I learned that lesson, Cliff, at Steppenwolf doing ...*Virginia Woolf*.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

How so?

**Carrie Coon:**

Because when I got that job, I had auditioned for Steppenwolf, numerous times. Erica Daniels had really championed me; she had been one of my judges at the URTA auditions when I went to grad school. So she was one of my first connections in the business when I had no idea what Steppenwolf was because from a small town in Ohio. So, I didn't know enough to be afraid or intimidated by who my judges were. Just a great gift to me. So, I finally was going to play a role on the main stage at Steppenwolf, after auditioning and getting called back for other things. And I knew that I had to accept that I belonged in that room, or else I was going to walk in feeling really intimidated by Amy, by Tracy, by Madison who had been working in the city longer than I had. And I knew that I would get in my own way if I felt insecure, and I just had to put that away. And I think that lesson that I committed to walking in every day and making choices, even if they were bad, and just being bad and knowing that Pam would—trusted me with the job and was going to help me edit the performance. And that's the only way you can walk into those spaces where some opportunity is open for you and it's new and you have a lot to learn or else you're going to shoot yourself in the foot.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah, failing, big and bravely is one of the things that I still am learning in lots of spaces, but at Steppenwolf, in that Yondorf rehearsal room, is the one place where I feel like I can do it the most.

**Carrie Coon:**

You identified that for me when you were in one of your processes, you've actually said—I said, “How's it going?” And that's what you said, that you had chosen to be big and bold and terrible to see what would happen.

**Stage Manager:**

Company this is your fifteen-minute call. Fifteen-minutes until the top of the show. Fifteen, fifteen.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You and I have talked about this a lot. The link between athletics—team sports, specifically—and theatre. Because I know, you coming out of Ohio, you played soccer at the University of Mount Union. Right?

**Carrie Coon:**

I did.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What about athletics and soccer did you love, and do you see still in your work as an artist?

**Carrie Coon:**

Hm. I do feel that, that my—the fact that I was an athlete has put me in my body in a way that I think supports acting, particularly acting on stage. But I also think time on stage is helpful to prepare one for being on TV and film, because you have to use your whole body in space. You're storytelling with your whole body in space. And every movement you make signifies. And when you're in the theater, you get to become aware of that and how you're diffusing a story, or sharpening it with your body. And I think that actually does add to precision on camera, even when it's often face—you know, you're often shooting in three quarters or tighter. So, I always felt that just being rooted in my body was a really important part of my process. And as I've continued to work, my process has gotten so much more, starting from the outside instead of the inside. So, I'm working more outside-in than inside out than ever before. And as I get older, it just gets more and more like that. And also just to be on a field is present—is being present, because you're—those decisions are not conscious decisions. You practice a set of skills, and then you go out to play a game and you have to not think about those skills; you have to look at the field that's in front of you and make those decisions really quickly. And that feels the same as scene work. It's a kind of listening, though sports maybe are more visual. It's a kind of awareness that I think translates well. And, and it was—and now that you bring it up, it's—I remember, it's been a long time, but I would do the same thing. I would stay loose. You know, I would stay engaged with the people on the team. I was always a team captain and occupied a leadership position. And I'm an Aquarius; I'm very egalitarian. I was always—I always had good sportsmanship. And I didn't want my team to behave badly. But I also didn't want them to be mistreated. So, I was always checking in with the other athletes. You know, who was getting—who was getting a hot head, who wasn't getting it done, and just sort of “What's going on,” you know, “how can we get you to this place we need you to be in?” And so, I think that isn't different than being in an ensemble, now that you say it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Carrie Coon:**

But yeah, staying loose. And I'll say this: I worked with Meryl Streep in *The Post*, and I know people love to hear these little tidbits about how people work. I'm not comparing myself to Meryl; in fact, I did it once as a joke and she almost... [Laughter] I said "I've been watching Meryl. I think I'm ready for the next one." She was like, "Watch it little girl." [Laughter]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's your Meryl story?

**Carrie Coon:**

So, I just noticed that Meryl Streep, her takes are always different. She always makes a different choice from take to take. And I noticed in one—you know, there's all this stuff going on around her in this walk and talk scene she had with Tom. And I just saw her sort of, kind of, moving her body in this sort of undulating way and noticing details of things. And she was kind of stretching her arm up a little bit. And she was really just staying loose, present, really looking at the things that were in front of her. It felt movement that was also maybe mildly in character to who she was playing. But it was definitely just, you know, keeping her body loose, getting ready for go. And that felt really—that was really affirming, in a way, to me because I thought "Yeah, I mean, this person has been doing this for a long time and doing it very well." And there's something to that relaxed readiness, which is, I think, very much the athlete's space as well.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, I've also got to just say like it's—when we did *The March* together, we would do *The March*, right? A matinee of *The March* and then how many of our cast members, at least fifteen sometimes, would walk down Halsted and play Ultimate Frisbee—

**Carrie Coon:**

Right.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Right. Between shows, a bunch of us would play between shows, and you were good. [Laughter] And you're fast, really fast.

**Carrie Coon:**

I was fast.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Alright, I have one more question for you. I think you are one of the most fully rounded people that I know, in terms of your art, and, you know, who you are as a friend and who you are as a mom, and especially who you are as a full human being. And I know that on your social media platforms that you are, you have this really strong voice and something that I respect a lot, and just wanted to hear like how important it is to you to be that as well as being an artist.

**Carrie Coon:**

Well, it's funny how, on the social media, there's always—there's this accusation that artists are somehow part of this elite class. Which [*Laughter*—anybody who's actually an artist, you know—the Actors Equity, health insurance is about to go bankrupt. And if you're not working, you don't even qualify for it anyway. So—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And I'm living in my in laws house so— [*Laughter*]

**Carrie Coon:**

Exactly. Exactly. So it—we don't—we're not elitist. [*Laughter*] And I think just like a plumber, or a teacher, we get to have political opinions. And not all artists, especially those who are in the public eye, choose to engage in that conversation. But frankly, I'm not important enough that people care. And I don't—I don't care if people like me. Once I turned 30, I realized that I had been living my life in a way that I was worried that I was going to disappoint other people. And that does not an artist make, because you can't make choices, you know, especially as a woman, if you're trying to guess what other people want from you. And, and it was hard to learn that stuff. It took all of my 20s. But man, I just don't care anymore. And it is so liberating. And so that does—that is part of why I'm choosing to engage politically in social media. Though, I'll tell you this, I'm also prepared to completely walk away from it. I get closer to that every day, it's really time consuming. It's a negative space. And when I think about what I want for my child, who is ostensibly screen free (we haven't used screens with Haskell, we're trying to wait till he's three) so he hasn't seen TV shows or movies (though he's seen some of his teachers on video, and some like musicians that he really loves playing instruments), but when I read about psychologically what that does to us and what it's doing to our dopamine and our attention spans and what else I could be doing with my voice, I'm leaning toward getting away, getting off of it all and seeing how productive I can be. But I do think that when I—if I am away from it, that the work doesn't stop, obviously, being a better citizen.

**Stage Manager:**

Company this is your five-minute call. Five minutes to the top of the show. Five minutes til the top of the show. This is five.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So, the end of *Half Hour* ends with a lightning round.

**Carrie Coon:**

Oh boy.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So, do you have your lightning round skills present? And are you ready?

**Carrie Coon:**

We'll see. I'm the mother of a toddler and I got up really early, but I'll do my best! [*Laughter*]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

No, you're so ready. If you have been reading children's stories—although I bet Haskell probably—

**Carrie Coon:**

Haskell won't let me read to him anymore. He memorizes every book and then he reads them to me. Yeah.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I mean, that kid you know, he's gonna be—

**Carrie Coon:**

Oh, gosh, he really is a piece of work.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Okay.

**Carrie Coon:**

But in a different way than yours are a piece of work.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yes, because mine are definitely pieces of work.

**Carrie Coon:**

Yes. [Laughter]

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, gosh. Okay. Ready?

**Carrie Coon:**

Okay.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Here we go. Favorite Steppenwolf production you've ever seen?

**Carrie Coon:**

That I've ever seen. Oh my gosh. That I've ever seen. Lightning round is cruel! Oh, do you know what I loved? You know what I loved? *American Buffalo*. I thought was stunning. That's one that stands out for me.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Toughest experience at Steppenwolf?

**Carrie Coon:**

Toughest experience at Steppenwolf. *The March* was hard because we were trying to figure it out and it was getting rewritten a lot. And it was hard to be present when I was speaking, often, not to a scene partner but just to the audience.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

**Carrie Coon:**

Oh my gosh. I've gotten—I haven't got—I'm so not sentimental anymore about memorabilia. I did come across something Madison had given me on opening night which was I think maybe a little toy rabbit. And he—it was like this little—it was like a book of—a tiny book of photos that goes on a keychain and he did not remember giving it to me but I love that I had it and that we couldn't remember what the hell he was thinking.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What's with all these amazing things people are giving you that they don't remember?

**Carrie Coon:**

[*Laughter*] I don't know.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

David Fincher doesn't remember his lesson to you, Madison doesn't remember his gift.

**Carrie Coon:**

I think what it is speaks to is the narrator who is perhaps fabricating a bit of personal history.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Maybe. [*Laughter*] All right, what job didn't you get that broke your heart?

**Carrie Coon:**

I can't think of anything.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

You've gotten all the jobs.

**Carrie Coon:**

It's funny, all the jobs that I get, I think are for me. And all the jobs I don't get I know are for someone else. I have a very good attitude about it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

That's a great answer.

**Carrie Coon:**

It's the "other people's blessings" adage. And it's what—I asked Andre DeShields, when I was doing *Our Town* in Madison, "What's the best advice you could give someone who was just beginning?" And he said that. He said "It's other people's blessings. And you just have to acknowledge that that's not yours and that yours is coming." So, I've tried to trust that and be genuinely happy for other people as you pointed out.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Other people's blessings. Okay, what's the last song you listened to?

**Carrie Coon:**

Oh, I've been listening to "Amelia." But from the Herbie Hancock tribute album to Joni Mitchell. I've been a little obsessed with it. It's feeling very sad to me. And she doesn't sing it. It's a cover song by—I don't know if it's Luciana Souza or... I have to look it up. But, "Amelia."

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Who's your favorite writer?

**Carrie Coon:**

I love Henry James. I don't know if he's my favorite. But I'm reading a lot of Gilded Age material right now. And I loved a *Portrait of a Lady* in college. And I'm rereading it now. And I love it.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

**Carrie Coon:**

My house. My house is such a calming place. It's such a welcoming space. And we—whenever we come back, and we've been gone a long time, we don't want to go anywhere.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Well, that's a great thing to have.

**Carrie Coon:**

For a pandemic? Absolutely.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

What animal do you most identify with?

**Carrie Coon:**

What animal do I identify with? I'd either say—I can be standoffish like a cat, but it's not because I'm actually standoffish. It's because I'm distracted and withholding. *[Laughter]* Or perhaps something very nerdy. Is an owl nerdy?

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It can be. It's often drawn with glasses. But you know, are glasses nerdy? I don't think they should be.

**Carrie Coon:**

I know they transform a nerdy girl into a hot girl in a movie.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Or Superman into a Clark Kent.

**Carrie Coon:**

Right. They're a great disguise.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

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

**Carrie Coon:**

Performing or not. I can say that, as one might imagine, the opening night of ...*Virginia Woolf* on Broadway was a pretty extraordinary night just as an actor who grew up in Ohio, who never aspired to be on Broadway because it didn't even feel real or attainable to me. That was an extraordinary moment. And because, you know, because Edward Albee was still alive. And that was one of the last times he was really publicly available in a way that felt like he was, you know, vibrant and still writing. And so to have him come up on stage with us was just extraordinary. And it was so surreal to think that I—that it was me. You know that I was there. And knowing what a—that 99% of actors in the world would have traded places with me. Even if that was the end, you know, of their career. It was really extraordinary.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

It was extraordinary. You all were so good in that play.

**Carrie Coon:**

We got great reviews and then Hurricane Sandy hit [*Laughter*], and we never recovered.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, man.

**Carrie Coon:**

And we closed early. You know. Bette Midler kicked us out.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

I didn't know that.

**Carrie Coon:**

Yeah, we closed early.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh my gosh.

**Carrie Coon:**

They moved Bette Midler in. Yeah. We never—we didn't make money and it was—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Wow—

**Carrie Coon:**

A critical success but an absolute failure.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Wow. Wow. Okay. All right. If you were a character in a play, what would your character's description be?

**Carrie Coon:**

Oh, like if I as a person—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Yeah.

**Carrie Coon:**

Was a character in a play. [Laughter] Carrie: 44. Attractive, but not pretty. Average height. Average looking. Secretive.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Phenomenal. [Laughter]

**Stage Manager:**

Company this is your places call. Places please, for the top of the show. Have a good one everyone. Places, please. Places.

**Audrey Francis:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

Thanks for listening.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And thanks again to our guest this week: Carrie Coon.

**Audrey Francis:**

This episode of *Half Hour* was exclusively sponsored by Helen Zell.

**Caroline Neff:**

If you want to catch Carrie Coon in a Steppenwolf show, she's about to appear in Steppenwolf Now (Steppenwolf's virtual season) in *Red Folder* by ensemble member Rajiv Joseph.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

So, whether you're local or you live far away from Chicagoland, you can now experience Steppenwolf right from your couch.

**Audrey Francis:**

Steppenwolf Now memberships are just \$75 and for a limited time, we're extending *Half Hour* listeners \$10 off when you use the code HALFHOUR (all caps, no space) at [steppenwolf.org/now](http://steppenwolf.org/now).

**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.

**Audrey Francis:**

Today's stage manager was Mary Hungerford.

**Caroline Neff:**

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

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And all the folks at Steppenwolf.

**Audrey Francis:**

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

**Caroline Neff:**

And you can always get in touch by emailing [halfhour@steppenwolf.org](mailto:halfhour@steppenwolf.org). Till next season. This is Caroline Neff—

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Cliff Chamberlain—

**Audrey Francis:**

And Audrey Francis. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

Oh, one more thing. Some of you who work in the performing arts might know that October 10, was International Stage Manager Day. This day originated in the UK in 2013 to bring attention to the often underappreciated work of stage managers across the theatre industry.

**Audrey Francis:**

We want to take a moment to recognize and celebrate the stage managers who were a part of Steppenwolf's season when COVID forced us to close our doors.

**Caroline Neff:**

Please join us in saying a huge thank you, and to raising a glass for Laura Glenn, Chris Freeburg, Michelle Medvin, Jacqueline Saldana, Kat Barrett, Jaclynn Joslin, JuJu Laurie, Zavarie Irons, Mary Hungerford, and to our rockstar Stage Management Apprentices Rafael Zhang, Anisha Banerjee, and Nikki Konomos.

**Cliff Chamberlain:**

And finally, we would be remiss if we did not mention Steppenwolf ensemble member Malcolm Ewen: the only stage manager in our ensemble.

**Audrey Francis:**

All of our love and thoughts are with Mal as he calls G-O's on cues from above.

**Caroline Neff:**

We love you and we miss you, Mal.