

STEPPEWOLF

HALF HOUR

Season 2, Ep: 10 – James Vincent Meredith: “Tear This Off”

Air Date: 8/17/21

Featuring: James Vincent Meredith and Karen Rodriguez. With Audrey Francis, Cliff Chamberlain and Christine D. Freeburg

James Vincent Meredith:

I don't think I'd ever wanted to be a part of something so much as to be in that company on that stage.

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, IL...

James Vincent Meredith:

It really lit a fire under me. It really did.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*. Okay, here we are. We are back with another episode of *Half Hour*. My friends, my Romans, my countrymen. [Laughter] How are you?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Doing good, doing well.

Karen Rodriguez:

I'm good, I'm happy to be here. I'm awake. And ready.

Audrey Francis:

Yeah, yeah. And I'm here physically but not mentally and emotionally, and this is Audrey Francis.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Cliff Chamberlain.

Karen Rodriguez:

And me, Karen Rodriguez.

Audrey Francis:

Karen!

Cliff Chamberlain:

Karen Rodriguez back in the *Half Hour* house!

Karen Rodriguez:

I know, right! It's been a hot minute y'all. It's been a hot minute. I hope you missed me because I miss y'all. Y'all look hot. *[Laughter]*

Cliff Chamberlain:

What have you been up to?

Karen Rodriguez:

I've been filming a new show. It'll be on Fox. It's called *The Big Leap*, and it'll premiere on September 20th, Mondays.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yes.

Karen Rodriguez:

And I play a little stripper.

Audrey Francis:

Ow ow!

Karen Rodriguez:

Get into it! Get into it.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I can't wait.

Audrey Francis:

We're so happy to have you here today Karen because you have a surprise for us that Cliff and I haven't even been able to open up yet.

Karen Rodriguez:

That's right, yeah.

Audrey Francis:

So Karen, who the fuck did you talk to this week?

Karen Rodriguez:

I talked to fellow ensemble member and our very own *Half Hour* host, James Vincent Meredith!

Cliff Chamberlain:

The doctor on the other side of the *Half Hour* table!

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah!

Cliff Chamberlain:

So how was that Karen, talking to James?

Karen Rodriguez:

Oh my gosh, it was awesome. It was so easy. You know, like it was, it really, you're really gonna hear, I think when I reheard it, a really true intimate conversation between friends. It just felt like we sat down, we kept it real, and I'm excited for our listeners and for y'all to hear how like just, how his mind works, because he's very surprising and funny and tender and ferocious in this interview.

Audrey Francis:

My first time working with James was we were doing *Between Riverside and Crazy*, and I think the thing I just want to say is I'll never forget how relieved I was when I heard him get a note on the first preview that we had. And Yasen was directing. And Yasen gave James a note. I don't even remember what the note was. And James said, "Yes, yes. You know what happened, Yasen? I stepped out on stage and I realized there were people there." [Laughter] And I was like, "Oh my god, James Vincent Meredith even gets nervous, and he's this ensemble member." And just at that moment I was like, you're just the coolest, most honest person that I'm lucky enough to work with.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah I, I don't know how I've been so lucky, but I've been in five Steppenwolf plays with James.

Karen Rodriguez:

Man whatever, whatever. Stop showing off, Cliff. [Laughter]

Cliff Chamberlain:

It's only to show off at how lucky I am. You know James is, he has such power, right? And he's got this amazing way with language and he's got this, you know, Karen, you mentioned the sort of brilliant mind and this brilliant heart. He's just one of my favorite people in all ways, and I consider myself incredibly lucky to be a colleague of his and a friend. And a co host! [Laughter]

Audrey Francis:

So should we stop talking shit behind his back?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yes.

Karen Rodriguez:

Let's do it.

Cliff Chamberlain:

All good things.

Audrey Francis:

Why don't we hear what he has to say. Okay, here is Karen Rodriguez with James Vincent Meredith.

Stage Manager:

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

Karen Rodriguez:

I want to start at the beginning, which is where did you grow up?

James Vincent Meredith:

I grew up in Evanston, Illinois. I was born in Chicago, but I grew up in Evanston.

Karen Rodriguez:

What were you like as a kid?

James Vincent Meredith:

What was I like as a kid?

Karen Rodriguez:

Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, people always talk about like, your favorite superhero. And my son Evan loves Spider Man, huge Spider Man person. But I've, I, I always was a huge fan of Lynda Carter and Wonder Woman, like it was my thing. Like, I would literally be that kid who would like, do the turn around, you know, on the playground—

Karen Rodriguez:

Oh my gosh!

James Vincent Meredith:

And get all kinds of attention. Because I actually really liked Wonder Woman. It's so funny when I think of my child and how he doesn't really care about fitting in. He's just his own. And I guess I was kind of that guy too. I guess I'd describe myself the same way that I would now which is kind of like, an introverted extrovert. If that makes any sense.

Karen Rodriguez:

It does.

James Vincent Meredith:

You know I would wear, you know, the parachute pants. Okay, so I'm dating myself big time, alright, it's cool.

Karen Rodriguez:

[*Laughter*] Do it, do it.

James Vincent Meredith:

And I remember wearing them to school, I think it was my first day of eighth grade. And I was kind of a class clown up to that point. Like, I kind of, you know, I'd fool around, I'd kind of be the butt of various jokes, you know. And so no one really I guess took me too seriously. And I remember that summer before eighth grade saying, "I'm gonna change."

Karen Rodriguez:

[*Laughter*] Like, high school new me.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah, well this is just—

Karen Rodriguez:

New era new me.

James Vincent Meredith:

Just going into eighth grade. Like I remember thinking, "I'm gonna be, I'm gonna be different," like, "I'm gonna be serious, and people are gonna have to take me serious," you know what I mean, like... and that lasted probably until lunch. *[Laughter]* I mean, come on. Like, you know, I can't really, you are who you are, right? I guess I was that kid, like, I was always kind of trying on different things. And you know, I guess trying to be taken seriously, I guess? But then I also enjoyed, you know, the applause, you know, at assemblies and I enjoyed, you know, reading speeches. And around this time of year we, you know, I'd usually have like, a Martin Luther King speech, you know, and I would read that, and I, I enjoyed that sort of attention too. So I guess you could say I was just kind of a serial hat trier-oner, I guess.

Karen Rodriguez:

Same.

James Vincent Meredith:

But I also did love when I got that kind of like, positive attention and response from, you know, from my classmates.

Karen Rodriguez:

So you graduate high school, and where do you go to college? And what do you, what do you study?

James Vincent Meredith:

Well, let's say I attended the University of Illinois in Champaign. *[Laughter]* Attended I, I studied there, I did not graduate. In fact, I remember thinking I should major in English, or some sort of pre law because like everybody black in Champagne was either majoring in Business, was doing business administration, or engineer, or pre law. And I really wasn't smart enough to do any three of those. But I was like, you know what, let me put my name on one of them, and in the meantime I might fool around with theater. It didn't work, it didn't work at all. I dropped out like, after a year and a half. But I didn't really come back home yet. I wanted to stick around down there cause I was kind of feeling myself and you know, I'm down in Champaign, right? You know, so, you know, I'm working as a server at Papa Dale's pizza and you know,

Karen Rodriguez:

Oh my gosh *[Laughter]*.

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, I'm working the late night shift at Steak n' Shake, flipping the burgers, you know. And I still did a bit of theater here and there. And I think the Station Theater is were really kind of started cutting my teeth down there a bit.

Karen Rodriguez:

Outside of the of the original ensemble members, you're one of the few that's like, born and raised in Chicago. Was Steppenwolf on your radar at all? Like, was that a thing?

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, I remember when I was in high school I, and maybe even college, I remember walking around rockin— and I don't even know where I got it— this Steppenwolf shirt. It was like, kind of scripted, it was really cool script. And it was tie dye. I don't even know how that happened but I just remember rockin that shirt. And I knew very little about who they were like, honestly, like, I knew it was some kind of theatre company. And you know, this was a cool shirt. You know, a lot of people say, “Well, I know the first time that I saw such and such or I went and I saw this show or whatever I knew that I wanted to be up there or I wanted to be an actor or whatever.” And I really don't have that story. I knew that I wanted to do something with acting, but I didn't know, I couldn't have told you the difference between Steppenwolf or Goodman or any of those theatres. Like I just, I didn't really see, I didn't really go into the city to see that stuff.

Karen Rodriguez:

How did you make that leap from this kid who was like, “Alright, this is, this school thing isn't for me, I'm flipping burgers,” because you know James, you are a trailblazer. You're iconic. You have carved out a very distinct path for yourself that I think a lot of people can now follow because of what you have done with your legacy. How did that leap happen?

James Vincent Meredith:

I knew that I couldn't stay down in Champaign forever. Even, even though their rent was so cheap. So I went up there with a friend of mine, I think that was fall of 94. And I, I remember sitting in a coffee shop shortly thereafter, I think it might have been Urbis Orbis, this really old coffee shop like, in the Wicker Park area. And I remember sitting there and I remember thinking, “I'm gonna be, you know, doing this full time in a year. I'm gonna be acting full time in a year.” But I didn't know, I didn't have a plan. Like I didn't know, you know, internet wasn't really happening then. I wasn't able to just like, look up, you know, theatres, like—

Karen Rodriguez:

Auditions or whatever, yeah.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah, so it was just a weird like, analog period where I was like, “I know I'm gonna do this, I don't know how I'm gonna do it.” But I, I, I kind of had the bug and I was like, “I didn't go to school for it. I didn't graduate in theater, I don't know, I don't know all the stuff that a lot of these people who've got these master's degrees, hell, undergrad degrees know. So I better like, start hanging out at certain theaters that I like.” It's kind of what I tell people now, like, who are starting, it's like, “Go to theaters that you like, go to, go to, you know, see actors that you love and, you know, watch what they do and the choices they make and all that stuff and just, you know, sit in the back and, and lay in the cut and learn a little bit,” you know? And so I knew I had to do that coming up here. But somewhere between that, kind of that October of that 94 and, you know, somewhere in the ensuing three, four years I was like, I feel like I can do it.

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow. What was the first show you did at Steppenwolf?

James Vincent Meredith:

My first show I guess with Steppenwolf proper, like, on the main stage was *Pain and the Itch*. And that was a Bruce Norris play, and I'll never forget the nerves, the fear, the excitement. Like I remember doing

the, you know there's like a designer run that you have, you know, at Yondorf, where, you know, front of house and all the creatives and everyone, they sit there. The night before it's just like a regular rehearsal, and then you come in the next day and there's like, literally 75 chairs. I was freaking out. But I remember there's one part of that show where my character, he's got like a, I don't know, like a page monologue I guess. And I'm in the monologue, and I look in the back. And beautiful Martha Lavey, she got up and she started kind of walking around the back of the room. And it freaked me out. *[Laughter]* Like I was so nervous, I had to call for line. It's a designer run, you know, but—

Karen Rodriguez:

It's a designer run.

James Vincent Meredith:

It's a designer run, but I just remember freaking out. But I, I don't think I'd ever wanted to be a part of something so much as to be in that company on that stage. Not the ensemble, like, just that acting group, that company. It really lit a fire under me. It really did.

Karen Rodriguez:

What was unique about it, like, to you?

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, Tracy Letts was on that stage. Marianne Mayberry, Jayne Houdyshell, Zak Orth, Kate Arrington. It was just, it was an amazing group of people. And to know that I was there with these people who had careers, and yet we were in such a collaborative room. Like, I felt that my opinion mattered. I felt that what I had to say was listened to, like actually listened to. And I never felt embarrassed. Well, except when I went up on my lines in front of Martha, *[Laughter]* but I never felt like I couldn't try this or try that. Or what about this? Or what about that? And I really valued that kind of agency that I had with that show.

Stage Manager:

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

Karen Rodriguez:

One of my favorite things about Steppenwolf are the stories like the ones you're telling right now, and a category of stories that I love is the asks, because I think it's all unique and different depending on the company member. So can you tell me about your ask?

James Vincent Meredith:

My ask?

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah.

James Vincent Meredith:

Like how I got in?

Karen Rodriguez:

Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

So I had just finished doing *The Bluest Eye* with the luminous and like, gigantic actor Alanna Marinus.

Karen Rodriguez:

That's right.

James Vincent Meredith:

And I got an email from Martha that said "Hey, I'd like to meet with you." So I went in, and I saw a couple of other ensemble. And then I walk into the office, Martha's office, and Anna's there. And I'm like, "Hey guys," and so I sit down and, you know, I had no idea why, you know—are they gonna talk about a show or what? And they, they asked me into the company right there. And once I closed my mouth, cuz I was just like, stunned, I said yes. And I ended up going in with like, a killer crew. You know like, Ora and Alanna and Kate Arrington and Yon and Jon Hill, just a, crazy. Unbelievable. And I also have to say I was, I kind of went in with my eyes open to a degree because, you know, the prior year there was like a, you know, there's a Timeout, you know, "theatre so white" article, it was like, on the cover. I remember my guy Anish I think was on the, on the cover. And I remember thinking, "Okay, well this is interesting. Suddenly, you know, after all this time of K. Todd, you know, doing his thing and holding it down, now suddenly, you know, you want all of us in here," you know, like—

Karen Rodriguez:

Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, my eyes were open. So it's like, "Huh, okay." And then I remember Martha asking me to, if I wanted to play John Proctor in *The Crucible* after that. And that was gonna be the first show that I did as an ensemble member. And I remember thinking, "I gotta tear this off, I gotta, I gotta kill it." Like I, because I had this feeling like, hell I still have this feeling, the imposter syndrome, right? Like, there's a lot of people who don't think I deserve to be here, or I'm just here because of my color, or whatever it is, you know.

Karen Rodriguez:

Same. Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

And so it was a real, it was kind of a stressful time for me, I'm not gonna lie. Like, and I remember thinking, "Maybe it's in my head," you know? And then I was talking to another kind of actor friend of mine. He's like, "Oh, you're gonna be in, you're gonna be in *Crucible*." I was like, "Yeah, it's gonna be interesting." He's like, "Yeah, so who is so and so? And who is this? And who's that?" And I was like, "Yeah, I think Ora is playing Tituba." And he said, "Oh, *Tituba*." And I was like,

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow.

James Vincent Meredith:

"Yeah. *Tituba*." And I remember thinking, "This dude doesn't think that I even know what the hell I'm doing."

Karen Rodriguez:

Right.

James Vincent Meredith:

He's correcting me on the character. And could I, could I have taken it as, "Oh, it was no big deal?" Sure, I could have, but I knew it wasn't. I knew that this is kind of his way of saying, "Okay, okay, sure. They gave you that." And I just remember thinking, "I really, I can't, I gotta prove that I belong." I hate to say it so, so plainly, but that's kind of how I was feeling at the time.

Karen Rodriguez:

No, but it's, it's the truth. I certainly, I mean, I certainly feel the same way. And it's hard to walk around with that double consciousness of understanding that you're walking in for yourself as an individual artist, and also carving out a path for everybody else behind you.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah.

Karen Rodriguez:

Because between K. Todd and your class in 2000, from 94 to 2007. How have you been able to combat that, if you've been able to, to be able to walk for yourself? Because I think there's a point where you just, you kind of have to. You kind of have to walk for yourself.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah, I just remember thinking, "I gotta make sure that I earn it, I gotta make sure that they see that I deserve to be here, I gotta let them know that a black man can play this role and play it really well." And it was weird. It was like, you know, there's, there's always that, that colorblind versus color conscious.

Karen Rodriguez:

Same. Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

And I remember thinking, you know, there are people who are like, "Oh, no, no, he just got it because he's, he's really a good actor," and all this other stuff. And, you know, "This is colorblind," you know, and yet, when I come in at the very end of that show, I'm in chains. Like that's a, that's a powerful image, and that's not a, that's not colorblind.

Karen Rodriguez:

Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

I kind of had to start thinking about characters and roles more through that lens, you know, and not be so... what's the word? Lazy is not the word, but so—

Karen Rodriguez:

Like, casual or something.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yes. So casual about the idea that I'm just doing this because I'm doing it like, there's a lot more that goes behind me with this.

Karen Rodriguez:

Same.

James Vincent Meredith:

There's a lot more and so, and I still remember even like years later, I was doing, I was on tour doing a show and the, one of the principals said to me, "You know how I know you?" And I was like, "Well yeah, we're doing this show." [Laughter] She's like, "No, like, how I first knew you," and she's like, "I did a paper on *The Crucible*."

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow.

James Vincent Meredith:

Which was 2007, 8?

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah.

James Vincent Meredith:

And this was years later. This, and she's like, "That's, that was part of how I knew that I could do, not just do this, but do certain roles."

Karen Rodriguez:

Mhm.

James Vincent Meredith:

And it's just one of those things where you have no idea who you're affecting.

Karen Rodriguez:

Yes.

James Vincent Meredith:

It's amazing how, how your work can affect someone that you may not even know knows of your work, you know what I mean? Like,

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah.

James Vincent Meredith:

It was really stunning to me. Yeah. And so yeah, it's an ongoing process. It's like,

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow.

James Vincent Meredith:

You know, every, every show, every, every part, like, I find myself being a lot more cognizant of making choices that, you know, are quote unquote responsible.

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah. So you've done musicals. Can you tell me about that experience, particularly in *The Book of Mormon*? What was that process like?

James Vincent Meredith:

Scary. Scary.

Karen Rodriguez:

[*Laughter*] Also because it's a musical, right, like?

James Vincent Meredith:

Absolutely scary. Look, anybody who knows me knows that, I don't really do this as much now but, karaoke is my thing, right? [*Laughter*] You know, when I was first over at Steppenwolf, you know like, me and John Hill and all those dudes, we would go to like, Hidden Cove, or we'd go to... [*Laughter*] That was my thing. I did karaoke. But I didn't really do like, real singing. Anyway, I remember going and doing that first rehearsal or first two and the director saying, "Okay, so we're gonna, we're all gonna learn some of the music. So let's just all kind of sit here and grab our books, you know, and we're all gonna learn the music." And then they started music. And everybody knew the music.

Karen Rodriguez:

Oh my god.

James Vincent Meredith:

Except for me, everybody knew the music. Part of that is because they all could read music, and I can't read music. It was a train wreck, Karen! It was a train wreck. [*Laughter*] And I remember this was two days in, seriously two days in, I called my agent and said, "Sam, Sam I don't think this is gonna work." [*Laughter*] I was like, "I'm just too far behind like, these people are like, gazelles. I can't do it." And he talked me off a cliff. And he said, "Look, just get through the week, just soak up what you can, get to Sunday. I'll get, I know a guy on the Upper East Side. He can take care of you, just get to the weekend." And he literally plinked out every single note for me, every note, like every note that I had to sing, he plinked it out. And that was huge. Like it, it really settled me down a little bit. And I made it through and I, it was one of the, seriously one of the best experiences I've ever had.

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow.

James Vincent Meredith:

Got to travel the country with my wife and,

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow.

James Vincent Meredith:

And Evan, and it was great. Really great.

Karen Rodriguez:

Speaking of Kathy and Evan,

James Vincent Meredith:

Yes.

Karen Rodriguez:

What has been a parent taught you?

James Vincent Meredith:

Patience. [*Laughter*] Patience, and to forgive and move on. And not just forgive things that Evan may do, but to forgive myself. Like, I've realized like, I'm a bit of a grudge holder. I have been over the years and it's like, I can't do that. You can't with a kid. You have to, you teach the lesson and you move on. And, and you try to forgive yourself when you screw up and you will screw up. You know, I guess that's the main stuff.

Stage Manager:

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

Karen Rodriguez:

This show is called *Half Hour* because it honors the tried and true tradition of actors getting there 30 minutes before the show. And everyone's, and everyone's processes a little different in those 30 minutes. What's your half hour process like James?

James Vincent Meredith:

You know my half hour process.

Karen Rodriguez:

I do.

James Vincent Meredith:

We used to be in a show

Karen Rodriguez:

Well you know mine too! [*Laughter*]

James Vincent Meredith:

I don't know, it really, it really varies. Sometimes I do this and sometimes I do that, you know, like I, I'm, I'm— I've gained a lot of discipline over the years as far as acting is concerned, but if someone asks me that, like, I couldn't tell you this is what I do every single time, you know. I have a certain kind of headspace that I have, and I have certain things that I guess I do. Like I'm, I'm horrible with stage fright so I'm literally always running lines, like backstage to myself sometimes, literally before I go into the scene, you know. I would run lines backstage before Rainn Wilson would open the door for [*Laughter*]

Both:

Doppelganger.

James Vincent Meredith:

Because I knew that like, there was a good chance that I would forget my lines because he was always making me crack.

Karen Rodriguez:

Oh my gosh.

James Vincent Meredith:

And so I literally had to run lines like, before every entrance in that show.

Karen Rodriguez:

Okay, James Vincent Meredith, it's time for the lightning round. Are you ready?

James Vincent Meredith:

No. I should be ready. *[Laughter]* I should be ready because I think I know some of the questions but I, I didn't prepare. So good luck.

Karen Rodriguez:

But that's good. That's good. Then we're just gonna, whatever comes off the top of your head. Here we go.

James Vincent Meredith:

Oh, you're gonna get it, okay?

Karen Rodriguez:

[Laughter] What was your welcome to Steppenwolf moment?

James Vincent Meredith:

Besides Martha Lavey walking around in the back during that designer run?

Karen Rodriguez:

[Laughter] Yeah.

James Vincent Meredith:

Probably it would be that same show. Being downstairs under the stage, waiting for the lights to go down for the very first show. Because the show starts with all of us on stage and me crying. And I just remember like, that was, it was a positive, like, it wasn't really, it wasn't really a bad thing. It was just more of like, the anticipation, the nerves, my heart racing, sitting there and waiting for them to say "go" and all of us rushing up those stairs. And then the lights coming up. And, and me crying. I, the very first time that happened I just remember, I'm here. Yeah.

Karen Rodriguez:

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

James Vincent Meredith:

I really wanted *Red Velvet* at CST when they did that a few years ago. And, and I felt really good about the audition. And I felt like, I think I got this, I feel really excited about jumping into this part of Othello, and I didn't get it. And that was a tough one.

Karen Rodriguez:

What animal do you most identify with?

James Vincent Meredith:

Okay, this one I sort of thought about, but I can't remember the name of the animal. [*Laughter*] So you know that fish that like, you know like...

Karen Rodriguez:

Haber cua [*Laughter*]

James Vincent Meredith:

You go up to the fish and it's just chillin and then when you get too close to it, it goes—

Karen Rodriguez:

The puffer fish.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah, that's it. That's it. [*Laughter*] I think I'm kind of a puffer fish because like, I get so jumpy and scared about junk. You know, I'm like in a constant state of like, puffing up and like, deflating.

Karen Rodriguez:

Deflating. Oh, I love that. What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

James Vincent Meredith:

The drawing for *Crucible*. I had like a, you know, where you get the, the drawing for, you know, the concept for your, your costume and all that stuff.

Karen Rodriguez:

The rendering?

James Vincent Meredith:

Yes. And I have that framed in our dining room. That's probably my favorite thing.

Karen Rodriguez:

Wow. Wow. Who is an artist that is giving you a lot of inspiration right now?

James Vincent Meredith:

Okay, this [*Laughter*] this is really gonna sound like a cop out, but I swear it's true. Evan. Because he's, like he has this beautiful artistic mind. And he, and it comes out in so many different ways, and it has no filter. And he has no, there's nothing that, that holds back his desire to share it with you. So whether it's singing, which he does a lot of, whether it's drawing 80 different versions of Spider Man, like he has this, he just has this creativity. And I know that whatever he decides to do, whenever, he's going to be incredible at it. And his fearlessness of it. I think it inspires me to not be so scared to express myself. So I guess, I guess he would be, I guess he'd be the artist.

Karen Rodriguez:

What do you daydream about?

James Vincent Meredith:

Hawaii. [Laughter] I'm not gonna lie. I miss, I miss, I miss traveling with my family to like, like, the ocean. I miss like, the saltwater. I dream of, of just hanging out on the beach on a warm day with our toes in the ocean. Yeah.

Karen Rodriguez:

If you had a superpower, what would it be?

James Vincent Meredith:

I always wanted to be able to play an instrument. I think there's just like, something about playing an instrument to me that is so like, you know, there's, no matter where you are, no matter who you see, no matter what the language is, music is music. And I just, love the ability. I would love to have that ability to, to play for anyone. Like any instrument. It would be killer.

Karen Rodriguez:

Favorite place to unwind in Chicago.

James Vincent Meredith:

It's really hard because of where we are right now, right? Like, we can't really

Karen Rodriguez:

Same.

James Vincent Meredith:

Go to places. Like we can't go to restaurants or bars or coffee shops or whatever. And so it's hard to remember the joy that I felt being at this place or that place. I guess it would just be, you know, out walking in the woods, I guess. Like walking in like a forest preserve or something like that. Like just, just, just crunching, you know, crunching the leaves and stuff and walking.

Karen Rodriguez:

If you were a character in a play,

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah! Yeah! Doggoneit!

Karen Rodriguez:

What would your character's description be?

James Vincent Meredith:

Ah, see why didn't I prepare for this one? Why didn't I prepare for this one? [Laughter] Black, mid 40's even though I'm 49, mid 40s. [Laughter] Slightly graying, slightly balding. Probably not as smart as he thinks others think that he is, but probably slightly smarter than he thinks he is. A fan of language, hugs, moody, sometimes caustic, but with a good heart.

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.

Audrey Francis:

Man, what a national treasure.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I could listen to James talk forever.

Karen Rodriguez:

Me too.

Audrey Francis:

One of the things I won't forget about this interview is when he said he tried to do the Wonder Woman in the playground. [Laughter] And just like twirling around, and that was, that's, that's who I see him as. As like a grounded person who also is able to like dream big and hope and imagine and have a sense of humor with it. So I will always see him twirling around trying to do Wonder Woman in my mind.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What I thought was really cool about that is going to the end of the interview sort of the big circle back to his son, Evan. And you know, just that like, heartwarming answer about Evan being his favorite artist that you can just see like— and I think Karen it was really great because he talked about the legacy I think that James is leaving. And he's leaving it with his family, you know, in the, in the way that he interacts with Evan, and in the way he talked about “Hey, I saw you in *The Crucible*.”

Karen Rodriguez:

That's right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And he's—

Karen Rodriguez:

I wrote a paper on you, right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, it's just like, everywhere James goes, he leaves a legacy for people to follow. He's such an inspiration. Yeah, it's really cool.

Karen Rodriguez:

And I think he's an inspiration because he's very honest, he's very genuine, because I think in this interview, he's still going to continue to leave that mark. I think, I hope, it's certainly fed me and gave me breath to hear someone like that, so inspirational, so talented, and so be real about the hardships of having to prove— I mean, it literally is mind blowing to me that someone of that caliber of talent and personhood can still have those moments. And I think it's important for all of us to hear and I really thank James in this interview for being so honest and forthcoming about those experiences because I think it's going to continue to shape and change people in their own journeys. I'm very thankful to him for that.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well, and he's gonna continue to do it next year on stage, right, in *Choir Boy*. He's in *Seagull*, too, so—

Karen Rodriguez:

Yes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I mean, if you're looking for chances to have your life changed by James Vincent Meredith, you got a bunch of them coming up, so get ready.

Audrey Francis:

Yes. Alright y'all, that brings us to the end of today's episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Thanks for listening.

Karen Rodriguez:

And thanks again to our guest this week James Vincent Meredith.

Cliff Chamberlain:

This episode of *Half Hour* was produced by Anna DeNoia. The *Half Hour* podcast is produced by Patrick Zakem, mixed and edited by Matthew Chapman.

Audrey Francis:

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Karen Rodriguez:

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Cliff Chamberlain:

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Karen Rodriguez:

Follow us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram

Cliff Chamberlain:

And you can always, always, 24/7, 365 days a year get in touch with us by emailing halfhour@Steppenwolf.org.

Audrey Francis:

Til next time, this is Audrey Francis

Cliff Chamberlain:

Cliff, James Vincent Meredith's biggest fan, Chamberlain

Karen Rodriguez:

[*Laughter*] And Karen Rodriguez. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places