

STEPPENWOLF HALF HOUR

Season 2, Ep: 3 – Rajiv Joseph: “Creative Cauldron”

Air Date: 4/27/21

Featuring: Rajiv Joseph and Caroline Neff. With Cliff Chamberlain, James Vincent Meredith, Caroline Neff, Karen Rodriguez and Michelle Medvin.

Rajiv Joseph:

But I guess I don't ever think about—that I'm throwing them out. I don't ever think that I'm killing anything.

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois.

Rajiv Joseph:

I don't think that any work is wasted. I think that all work is cumulative.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Welcome back, listeners, to *Half Hour*. This week we've got me Cliff Chamberlain—

James Vincent Meredith:

James Vincent Meredith—

Karen Rodriguez:

Karen Rodriguez—

Caroline Neff:

And me, Caroline Neff.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And Caroline, this week we've got a conversation with you and our esteemed playwright, ensemble member, Rajiv Joseph. I don't think I've ever met Rajiv in the real world. I've talked him through email. I'm curious, have you ever met Rajiv before this conversation?

Caroline Neff:

I have. And, you know, I feel like his presence always feels a little bit like *Brigadoon*. It's like—it's just sort of there, like, when you're least expecting it. So, I actually—I think the first time that I met him was... I don't remember if it was when I saw *Guards at the Taj* at the Atlantic, if I met him that night. But I'm trying to think if I've ever actually met him within the confines of the Steppenwolf complex. I'm not... And I'm not sure that I have.

James Vincent Meredith:

But that's what's cool about what we're doing, right, with this podcast. You know, getting to know these guys. Like, I've never met Rajiv. Like. So, when I listened to this podcast that you had with him, I learned so much about this person, like as a human being and kind of as an artist, you know. And it's kind of interesting that we do this podcast, and this is how we meet some of our new ensemble members. But I really... as the kids say: I'm here for it.

Karen Rodriguez:

I danced with him.

James Vincent Meredith:

What?

Karen Rodriguez:

Does that count?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, it counts.

James Vincent Meredith:

Yeah that counts.

Caroline Neff:

That counts twice.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Where—?

Karen Rodriguez:

On opening at Steppenwolf for *Guards at the Taj* and they had like this like dance party at the 1700 space. And we threw down. We all threw down. [Laughter]

James Vincent Meredith:

Is there a video of this?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, is there a video?

Karen Rodriguez:

No, no, no, there's no record of that. What are you talking about?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well, *Guards at the Taj*, which I know last week's guest Amy Morton directed, that's how I know Rajiv at least through Steppenwolf, seeing that play. It was amazing.

Caroline Neff:

So, Rajiv also joined our ensemble, a really interesting moment in history. We had just produced *Guards at the Taj*; he joined our company in 2018 while *King James* was still very much in development. So, we

have a new history with him that is blossoming towards a really robust future. But we're in this moment right now where we all get to learn about him, I feel like, collectively. Not only as an ensemble, but as our community is getting to know Rajiv. And I love the fact that he was willing to sit down and do this because he's busy.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Karen Rodriguez:

Yes. He's a Pulitzer finalist, y'all. What the hell?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

He—He knew Robin Williams!

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Karen Rodriguez:

He hugged Robin Williams.

Cliff Chamberlain:

He wrote the movie *Draft Day* with Kevin Costner.

James Vincent Meredith:

What? Wow. Come on, man. For real?

Cliff Chamberlain:

I mean, yeah. Listen, Should we listen to this conversation?

James Vincent Meredith:

Yes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Caroline, what do you say?

Caroline Neff:

I hate the sound of my own voice and I say we do it. *[Laughter]*

Cliff Chamberlain:

Alright. Everyone out there. Without further ado, here's Caroline Neff with Rajiv Joseph.

Stage Manager:

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

Caroline Neff:

Rajiv Joseph: Hi, how are you?

Rajiv Joseph:

I'm good. Caroline, how are you?

Caroline Neff:

I'm doing well. I'm doing well. I'm, you know, staying busy and yeah. Which is good. And you're in Cleveland right now?

Rajiv Joseph:

I am yes. Which is where I grew up, and where I've been spending most of my time during the pandemic, even though I usually live in New York.

Caroline Neff:

And how long did you live in Ohio? You were there through college, right?

Rajiv Joseph:

Oh, yeah. I mean, I—born and raised. And then went to college here and went to college at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. And then that was it, and then I left after college, or about a year after college.

Caroline Neff:

And do you have siblings?

Rajiv Joseph:

I do. I have one brother. He's younger than me. He is a musician. He plays for the Buffalo Philharmonic in Buffalo, New York.

Caroline Neff:

What is the age difference between you two?

Rajiv Joseph:

Five years. I'm five years older than him.

Caroline Neff:

And both artists. Are your parents also artists? Or was that kind of just happenstance that you both found art, that you both found music or writing?

Rajiv Joseph:

I wouldn't say it's happenstance. My parents are not professionally artists, but they are art enthusiasts. And they exposed my brother and I to a lot of, you know, a lot of the arts growing up. And so, it was always a part of our lives. And I don't think it was their intention to set us on the path of pursuing it as a career, but we both did. And you know, it's kind of worked out for both of us.

Caroline Neff:

So, after you graduated from Miami University, you joined the Peace Corps, right?

Rajiv Joseph:

Yes, that's correct.

Caroline Neff:

And where did you end up?

Rajiv Joseph:

I was in Senegal in West Africa. And I ended up spending about three and a half years there. Peace Corps is generally a two-year commitment, but I liked it so much that I signed up for another year and a half. The first two years, I was in the same place, and that was the—that was like the legit experience. That was in this very remote village, far from even a paved road. I had a motorbike that could get me around. A motorcycle. And you know, my village was—had no electricity; had no running water. I went to the well every day to get my water to drink and to bathe with. And it was kind of like camping for two years, you know? You had candles and lanterns and flashlights, because once the sun went down, that was it. You know, it was really like roughing it and really kind of awesome. I mean, it was a beautiful experience. And I got to leave. I would drive out to the closest city, which was about—on the motorcycle—was about a two, two-and-a-half-hour drive, and get my mail and see other volunteers and be able to speak English and drink beer. But then you go back to the village and it was very spartan, you know, very solitary in a way. Very communal too, you know, you're there with the village. But it was a unique experience. And when I think back to it now, this was 20 some years ago, I don't know how the hell I did it, because I don't think I could do it now.

Caroline Neff:

I was going to ask! What—I mean, because you were, what 22? 23?

Rajiv Joseph:

Yeah, around that. Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

So, what made you, right after undergrad, decide to join the Peace Corps and not sort of go a different path: either directly to graduate school or into your career?

Rajiv Joseph:

I didn't know what my career is going to be. I had no inkling that I'd be in the theater at all. I did not have ambitions to be a playwright at that time. I knew I wanted to be a writer; I thought I was going to be a writer of fiction. But I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I was... I had an aunt and an uncle—my aunt met her husband through the Peace Corps. And then I had like three teachers in high school that were also in Peace Corps Africa. And so, I... it was always kind of on my radar as a thing to do. And I was really interested in it. And I liked the idea of an adventure. I liked the idea of... I liked the program of the Peace Corps. I liked what it was offering me and what it was offering, you know, the rest of the world, I guess. And I was really excited to do it. And I just felt like I had been living in Ohio my whole life and needed to kind of stretch my boundaries a little bit. And that's exactly what happened. I mean, it really impacted me as a person and as a writer, and gave me a sort of bedrock, I think of, you know, just considering global stories. Stories outside of, like, the confines of suburban Ohio. *[Laughter]*

Caroline Neff:

Was there something that happened during your time now that sort of catapulted you into wanting to be a playwright or a certain... or further ensuring that you knew that you wanted to be a writer of some

kind? Or was that—were you like, “Actually, I want to write plays?” or...? How did that transformation happen?

Rajiv Joseph:

So, I thought I wanted to be a fiction writer of—to write a novel or write short stories. But then, when I moved back to the United States, first I moved to New York, in part simply because I had a friend there that was living there, who helped me kind of like just get a job, a survival job, and, you know, got me a place. And I had a couple of friends from college who were working in Los Angeles in the movie industry. And they said, “Hey, write a screenplay. Like we can—you can give me the screenplay, and I can put it into my boss's door.” And so, I did. And of course, those kinds of things very seldom work out, and it didn't, but it got me into thinking about writing screenplays. I loved movies, and I thought I could write dialogue well. So then, as it happened, there was 9/11. And I lost my job. And a lot of people in New York lost their jobs, and the economy was in the tank. And I was on unemployment. And I was like, “I don't have... I don't know what the heck I'm doing with my life. And I don't know where I'm going to get my next job.” And so, I decided to go to grad school, and I went to the Tisch School of the Arts Dramatic Writing program, which—to be a screenwriter. Again, I wasn't even considering playwriting or theater in any way. To this point... at this point I'm about 28 years old, and I'd never seen a contemporary American play. I had seen musicals, you know, when I was growing up in Cleveland, and maybe on Broadway, I had seen a couple of musicals, and I liked them very much. I had done a little acting, in high school, in musicals again. But like, I had never seen a straight play that was by a living author, you know, and I didn't consider it something that I would ever do. Then I went to NYU to be a screenwriter, but it was a screenwriting and playwriting program. And we got to go to a lot of theater. And that's when I first started seeing the theater that I would start to emulate: living American playwrights who were writing of our time now. And these experiences had a pretty big impact on me and switched my focus from writing for the screen to writing for the stage.

Caroline Neff:

I mean, what an incredible jumping off point because you don't have any preconceived notions about what it is you're like, “I know I'm not gonna write Oklahoma.”

Rajiv Joseph:

Right. Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

And that's one of the things that I find so fascinating about your plays, is they don't follow forms that I feel like I was taught in college. They feel visionary to me in a way. Because—for instance, I don't usually see a compelling, full, two-person play, and you have a bunch of them. And then you have the ability to sort of jump over to something much bigger, like, you know, like *Archduke*, or... Do you approach those differently? If you're writing sort of one of those intimate plays that's only two people like *Guards at the Taj* or *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, versus when you're writing something a little bit more epic in scope?

Rajiv Joseph:

Sometimes it doesn't... I don't approach it, you know... I don't know I'm writing a two-hander until I've started writing a four-hander or something. Sometimes I begin writing a story and there are many characters and then slowly these characters get winnowed down to two or three, you know, or something like that. I don't always set out to do that. And then sometimes I do. In this case of *King James*, I always knew that was going to be a two-hander. And I've come to this realization for myself

that, like, I really enjoy two-handers and think that they are cool. You know? They're like the motorcycles of plays, you know? They're fast and they are efficient and they're a little dangerous and, and so I really enjoy writing them. But I think it's—every single play I approach is different. And, you know, *Guards at the Taj* started out as this like ten-character play that was four acts and took place both in 1600, and in modern times, and went back and forth between the two and was like, a god awful mess. And then it was like, I threw it away, but kept thinking about it. And then was like, “Oh, I think I like this—the only part of this play I liked was like the two smallest characters, these guards.” And so, I was like, “Maybe I'll take everything else out and just keep them.” And then that's how that play came about.

Caroline Neff:

That's terrifying. [Laughter] And so amazing to hear. Because I mean, one of the one of the stories that I hear sort of, consistently from you about directors that you've worked with, or dramaturgs that you've worked with, is that you have the capability to write an entire draft of a play, throw it out, and start over. Did you have to learn that skill of being able to sort of let go? Or is that something that's inherently in you? Inherently in your creative process?

Rajiv Joseph:

I guess, you know, there might be like, a different way of thinking about this, which is that like, you know, like, the, the phrase that so many people use is like, “You have to be able to kill your darlings,” right, “You have to be able to kill your babies.” And, and that is, you know, reflected in what you just said, like, “Do I have a hard time throwing something out?” But I guess I don't ever think about that I'm throwing them out. I don't ever think that I'm killing anything; I don't think that any work is wasted. I think that all work is cumulative. And so, for me to, quote unquote, throw a draft out, does not mean that I'm abandoning it or considering it a waste of my time. It goes back into a sort of creative cauldron, you know, that I'm cooking from. And so, the original ten-person four-act draft of *Guards at the Taj* is contained in the two-person, one act version of it. It just had to be reduced. And so, I would never have gotten to the second draft if I hadn't done the first. And so, I think that for me, it's never about considering that work I've done has to be held on to. It will be held on to; it just might have to be held on to in a different way. And I think that this is important because it's, you know, this is what it means to develop something. I think that there is a—oftentimes—a fallacy that people who are, especially starting something out, like that I had as a as a young writer, that art kind of erupts from you. It's the sort of idea that artists are these magicians who make these incredible things that come from their unique and twisted minds and come out on the page and are perfect. And, in fact, we're craftsmen and craftspeople. You know, like, we are working tediously and at length and you know, with a lot of sweat to slowly make something that's worthwhile. And I think that's the key, you know. And so yeah, for me, it's not about throwing anything out, but it's about understanding that everything is recycled.

Stage Manager:

Alright, everyone, fifteen minutes, please, to the top of the show. Fifteen minutes.

Caroline Neff:

You also have a history of frequent collaborators like Arian Moayed, and Omar Metwally, Glenn Davis. Do you enjoy writing for specific actors or does it change piece to piece? Does the specificity shift when you have a certain person in mind? Or is it just like, “Actually I know this person can fit in the world of this play, therefore, they're in it?”

Rajiv Joseph:

Yes and no. I mean, I think that, you know, in a few cases I have written for an actor. I wrote the part in *King James* for Glenn, I wrote the part in guard the two parts in *Guards at the Taj*, specifically for Arian and Omar, but also knowing that other people could play those parts, obviously. And I think there's a great freedom for a writer when you know you're writing for an actor or actors. But, you know, at the end of the day, it's more about like, I think you begin with that, but then it gets and it gets into this, the deeper parts of, of creating a story and I forget that I'm writing for Glenn or Arian or Omar because I'm suddenly writing Babur or Humayun or Shawn. You know? And these are characters that have slowly crystallized in my brain after, you know, many, many, many, many, many drafts. And so, they become just, you know, roles, characters. You know? And so, it's—I just enjoy it when I can work with excellent people like Glenn, Arian and Omar. And Amy Morton and Anna Shapiro. Like, these are people that have made me a better writer and a better thinker. You're just luckier, as an artist when you can do that. And I think that's what's so valuable about having an ensemble like Steppenwolf does.

Caroline Neff:

Yeah, I got to see *Guards at the Taj* both in New York and here at Steppenwolf. And one of the things that struck me and continues to strike me about a lot of your plays, is this, this dichotomy, this juxtaposition, but I do—I find it so fascinating about your work. Because you're able to have these incredibly morbid moments like when the two men in *Guards* are slipping in blood, and yet, it's like, it's incredibly funny, you know? And in *Archduke*, where like, the guy is like, messing up the skeleton, and it just kind of becomes this, like, very funny visual joke that I get to enjoy. But then it sort of sinks in about what I'm laughing at... I don't know, are those two worlds that you live in pretty frequently? Like, the morbidity of life. And then like the, you know, the humor of it? It feels like a very sort of Irish thing to me. And, you know, my family's all Irish. And they're like “I mean, you can't help but laugh when something is that sad.”

Rajiv Joseph:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think that's part of the reason why I like theater is that it's a place where like, that juxtaposition can be endured or tolerated. It's not that it doesn't exist in real life. It does exist in the real world that there is a like, thin membrane between the ridiculous and the sublime, or the tragic and the comedic. But it is often unbearable to us. Or it's often... it doesn't occur to us until afterwards, you know, until many years afterwards, you know. Like, when tragic and terrible and awful, and gory things happen in real life, we do not think, “Ah, how absurd and funny.” We think, “How awful and tragic.” But what theater allows us is the ability to understand it in this sort of different way, you know. In a way that— because we know, it's not real, you know, we know what we're watching is an imitation. An abstraction of a story or of something that could happen or something that did happen or something that's imagined. But like, I think that's why we like to go to the theater. And, you know, that's why we like to be have stories told to us: because we can hold—we can be engaged and have our hearts broken by something, while at the same time laughing at it, or understanding that it's not totally real. And it provides this sort of inner relief. And I think that also it's like when I'm writing really, you know, messed up things or, like, hard tragic things or gory things, I think I'm—I often find that it is funny to me that I'm doing that. [Laughter] And I'm like, “Man, this is crazy.” And then it's like, then the humor just kind of tumbles out from there because it's like, you're putting characters in a in a terrible situation. You're playing God and you're like, “Of course I'm gonna make them say something funny.” [Laughter]

Caroline Neff:

[Laughter] Where do you get inspiration for your plays?

Rajiv Joseph:

It always happens in different ways. And there's—I don't go to one place or I don't—I haven't figured out a single place that can offer it to me. You know, *Bengal Tiger* came from a newspaper article. *Archduke*, I don't know, it came from a different sort of story I was writing, and it erupted from there, and then through research and reading and curiosity. I wrote this play called *Animals Out of Paper*, which is about origami. And that play occurred to me when I was on a bus sitting next to a woman—like a Greyhound bus—in the middle of the night, and she was doing origami. And we just are talking about origami. And that was like, what sparked that play. So, I mean, there's all sorts of different places it comes from, but I think for me, it's so much about, creating artistic products is the selection, you know. Like, I, there's so many things that I find fascinating every day, but like, they don't all make the cut, you know? It's all about like, “Well, does this idea have legs, is this idea going to serve me well, and serve an audience well.” And a lot of times that just trial and error.

Caroline Neff:

Now: *Red Folder*. Which is the short, animated piece you did for the digital series, Steppenwolf NOW. It's just stunning.

Rajiv Joseph:

Thanks.

Caroline Neff:

Of course. It's, again, unlike anything I think I've ever experienced from you as a writer, and now also as an illustrator, because you did the illustrations, right?

Rajiv Joseph:

Right.

Caroline Neff:

Is that something that you've always done? Have you always been a drawer or doodler or something?

Rajiv Joseph:

I have. For like the last twenty or some years, I have. But I've only done them for my personal enjoyment or for like, friends, you know? Like little doodles, you know, that I would give to people. But never something I ever shared publicly or thought... Because the drawings, you know, they're simple, you know? They're one dimensional. I cannot draw *well*, right? I do not have an ability to draw anything realistically. I can draw—my drawing skills are that of a child. The story is that of a child, so it actually thematically works. They have a consistency to them. You know. My dad is an amazing artist. He can paint and draw very realistic and beautiful things. And growing up, I was so jealous of his talent. Because he would help me with school projects and make these beautiful things for me and I couldn't even start to do that. I was so incapable of creating something through drawing. And so, when I finally found my way to, “I can do this, I can do a very simple line drawing of a stupid looking guy. It's a cartoon.” But it's something that I've done sort of as a hobby and as something to entertain myself. And when this pandemic began, so many theaters, were doing these virtual pieces, and I did a couple for other theaters. And then Steppenwolf asked me to do a more substantial piece for this, program that they're doing. I was—I wanted to do it, but I was frustrated by the virtual pieces, because, in my mind, like they, you know, they're hard to pull off. You know? And some of them have been quite beautiful and stunning. But, you know, some of them also, for me, I was like, “These are neither theater nor television,” you know? They are kind of this dead zone between the two. And it was in part also just the

frustrations and despair that was coming from having this pandemic and having this lockdown and having theatre be removed from our lives. So, I was like, “Well, I want to do something different.” And I thought, “Well, what if I did this?” And it was—the inspiration was more of like a storybook, you know? Like when you are a child and your parents or your librarian is reading to you a book, you know, and holding the pages up, and you're seeing like, still images, but hearing the story read to you? That's the impulse behind *Red Folder*.

Caroline Neff:

It was such a cool experience watching it because, as you said, the drawings are sort of simple and one dimensional, but they're so evocative of that time period in your life when you're a kid and everything looks simple. And you know, you don't understand the intricacies of the world yet. And so, you are kind of watching it in one dimension. But as an adult watching back, I felt very connected to my childhood-self, who's, like, looking at things just get bigger and bigger and more unmanageable, and more unmanageable, not having that vocabulary. And then I felt so moved and entertained and so connected, even though I was sitting in a room by myself, and that's been a really hard thing to achieve in this medium that we've been that we're forced to sort of live in right now.

Rajiv Joseph:

Right.

Caroline Neff:

Just to go back ever so slightly, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* was your first play on Broadway, right?

Rajiv Joseph:

My only play on Broadway.

Caroline Neff:

Yet. [*Laughter*] And where did it start? It didn't start in New York, did it?

Rajiv Joseph:

No, it started in Los Angeles at the Center Theatre Group, which is the same theater that's co-commissioned *King James*. Center Theatre Group did it first at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. They brought it back for the second year at the Mark Taper Forum. And at that point, it got some traction and then came the following year to Broadway. The Richard Rodgers Theatre.

Caroline Neff:

With Robin Williams in the starring role. Glenn Davis also. Arian was also in it?

Rajiv Joseph:

Arian Moayed, yep.

Caroline Neff:

Yeah. What was that experience like? Kind of being catapulted not only onto a Broadway stage, but also with this legendary comic performer who later in his life was finding such exquisite dramatic outlets for his talent. What was that like?

Rajiv Joseph:

It was more than a dream come true, in ways that I still struggle to articulate. Robin was a hero of mine from an early age as he was for a lot of people. I idolized him as a kid. I even—my mom even found a little thing I had written in like the sixth grade where they had you write who your hero was. And I wrote about Robin. And I gave him a copy of that for opening night. He was an incredible guy, a wonderful person and performer. When we hired him, you know, the, the initial... the sort of, like, the intel on Robin Williams is that he's an uncontrollable force of nature that will go off book at the first, you know, drop of a hat. And people are like, "How are you going to control Robin?" And it was you couldn't have been farther from, from the truth with him. He does that when he is on late night talk shows and when he's doing his comedy, but when he's in a play, he is the most conscientious and generous castmate to the others and never went off book, never deviated from the script. And if he did, he would ask me, and we would talk about it. And he was just a very thoughtful, curious and lovely man to be around and to work with. And I think that all the other castmates agree. And that was the other great thing about it, was seeing how much he enjoyed it. He really had a blast doing the play. And I would be backstage sometimes during shows and he would come out off the stage with Brad Fleischer and Glenn Davis. And he would be like, they'd be high fiving. And he'd be laughing, and he'd be like, "That was great, they loved it; they loved it. That was great." And so that was—it was fun to see him having so much fun.

Caroline Neff:

What a cool gift. What a cool gift to be able to give somebody is that kind of excitement, you know, every day?

Rajiv Joseph:

Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

And, you know, our podcast is called *Half Hour*. And we sort of came up with that, because we collectively we're all thinking about what that sort of magical time period is before curtain. And I'm curious what your half hour is. Whether it's before you're pitching a show, or you're waiting for your first preview, or it's opening night. Do you have a half hour routine where you sort of gear up for whatever's ahead of you?

Rajiv Joseph:

You know, it's different for a writer than it is for an actor. I think that for actors, that's really this sacred time to kind of center yourself and to begin to focus. And for a writer, half hour is really just... it's like this anticipatory time with like, "I have nothing to do," right? The work is out of my hands at this point. And so, my half hour is, generally, drinking, if I'm being totally honest. But if not that, probably sitting in the back row of the house with my notebook and just biting my nails. *{Laughter}*

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:

And now we've come to the lightning round questions.

Rajiv Joseph:

All right.

Caroline Neff:

You ready? What was your welcome to Steppenwolf moment?

Rajiv Joseph:

It was before I was a member of the ensemble, oddly enough. But I it was— I met Anna Shapiro in the lobby at the Front Bar on a very, very, very cold winter morning. A couple days after my play *Describe the Night* had opened in New York. And I had come to Chicago to stay at a friend's apartment who was out of town. She was giving me her apartment to do some other writing for like a weekend. And I wanted to get out of New York, and I wasn't in the best of spirits. And I sat down with Anna and we just had this lovely conversation. And I just thought to myself, "This is an awesome space. And this is an awesome woman" and I left with such a warm feeling. And I think that was it, even though it was probably about a year and a half later, before I was asked to join us at the ensemble. I knew they were about to do *Guards at the Taj* and I just felt like a real sense of welcome from her, and from that space.

Caroline Neff:

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

Rajiv Joseph:

I wrote a pilot for television that I was paid to do. So, I got the job to write the pilot but then the pilot was not picked up. And so that, I guess that would be it. I had put a lot of work into it. And I really liked it. And I still think it's really good. But it did not make it and then it just kind of died on the vine. And so, because I was hired to do it, the material isn't mine, so I can't use it again. And so that kind of sucks.

Caroline Neff:

What animal do you most identify with?

Rajiv Joseph:

Tiger. I was born in the year of the tiger. My high school, Cleveland Heights High School, is the Tigers and I got my first success with a play about a tiger.

Caroline Neff:

What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

Rajiv Joseph:

I'll show you. I know you can't see it on the podcast, but I have it right here. For the opening of *Gruesome Playground Injuries* in New York, my agent and friend Giovanna Sardelli, my agent Seth Glewen, gave me a "Gruesome Playground Barbie." And for those who can't see it, this is a Barbie Doll in a wheelchair, missing limbs having a bandage, bloody bandage across her head. And one of her feet is chopped off and a tooth is missing. And it's a pretty awful, terrible sight and I love it. And it sits on my bookshelf, "Gruesome Playground Barbie" does. And a few years ago, when my buddy from Peace Corps—my two friends—they actually got married, they were both in Peace Corps with me—they came to my house for Thanksgiving. And they brought their three daughters (the oldest of which was about 10, the youngest which was about five). They walk into my apartment and like within two seconds, they're all just staring up at "Gruesome Playground Barbie" with their mouths open. Being like "What the hell happened to your Barbie Doll?" And I was like, "Well, it's a long story." [Laughter]

Caroline Neff:

All right, Christmas gifts for the family. Inspiration. What artist is giving you the most inspiration right now?

Rajiv Joseph:

Oh, man, this is a tough one. I've been reading this very interesting book by this woman named Joy Williams called *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*. And they are these little vignettes about... not about God but about—they're kind of like little tiny spiritual stories. And I have found a lot of inspiration from that book.

Caroline Neff:

What do you daydream about?

Rajiv Joseph:

I daydream about exercising. *[Laughter]* I'm like, "Yeah, that's what I'm gonna do. One of these days."

Caroline Neff:

[Laughter] If you had a superpower, what would it be?

Rajiv Joseph:

I think about this a lot, actually. And I think it's kind of fucked up. But I would want to be a pyrokinetic, which is basically like *Firestarter*. The little girl from *Firestarter*, the Stephen King novel. I think that would be a really powerful power. And I don't know why I think about it so much. And it's kind of a bleak superpower. Like it's basically wreaking destruction everywhere. But I guess that might reflect how I feel about the world.

Caroline Neff:

What is one thing you do every day?

Rajiv Joseph:

Every day I have a cup of hot water and lemon and maybe some herbs in it and go for a walk. That's something I do every day.

Caroline Neff:

What is your favorite place to unwind in Chicago?

Rajiv Joseph:

Front Bar.

Caroline Neff:

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

Rajiv Joseph:

[Laughter] Oh my god. Uh. It's so funny because I don't really *do* character descriptions. I don't write them you know? I, like, generally I just say like the age. So, I guess my character would be like, "Rajiv, comma, half-Indian half-white, comma, 46." *[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.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Boom. Awesome.

Caroline Neff:

[Laughter] I know. Right?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Let me tell you. "Creative cauldron" is my new slogan for life. And for my career. Hearing Rajiv talk about just the idea that nothing is wasted. And just that all the work is cumulative. You know, I'm talking about throwing away drafts, but not thinking of them as being lost, that it's all part of the process. There's so many things along the road, whether or not it's even in the rehearsal process, or just in the life process of being an artist that can be seen as mistakes or hard or failures. But it all leads to where we are today. And in Rajiv's case, it's a Pulitzer finalist, esteemed playwright, total badass. [Laughter]

James Vincent Meredith:

I would totally piggyback on that the idea of needing to go through a process, you know, to get to your endpoint. You know, you got to do your first draft before you get to the second draft, and how he's not really precious about holding on to certain things. But knowing that they are placed to the side until he comes back to them, whether it's like a month or two months, or a year or whatever. Which is why I could never be a playwright. Because everything I wrote would be so hard to come up with that you'd have to kill me to get it get me to put it in a drawer.

Karen Rodriguez:

Yeah, I also really loved what you're kind of speaking to James is like how curious he is. And it really makes for a very surprising person.

Caroline Neff:

And I think you know, if for anybody that's ever worked with me, I'm always on a quest to find the perfect opening night gift. I can say that I think all of us are feeling rather inspired by "*Gruesome Playground Barbie*" and it will now be my life's goal to come up with something as brilliant and perfect does that, so.

Karen Rodriguez:

The standard—the bar has been set. Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

As always, we're gonna try to find some pictures of Rajiv through the ages to share on social media. And I think Caroline, we're gonna have a photo a shot of "*Gruesome Playground Barbie*."

Caroline Neff:

It's worth the scroll.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I cannot wait. Well, that is our time for this week. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Caroline Neff:

And thanks again to our guest this week, Rajiv Joseph.

Karen Rodriguez:

Today's episode was generously sponsored by Laurie Anne Kladis.

James Vincent Meredith:

You can check out *Red Folder* by subscribing to Steppenwolf NOW, our new streaming platform featuring six digital pieces by some of the most exciting voices in the American Theatre.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Steppenwolf NOW memberships are currently available and for a limited time, we're extending an exclusive deal just for *Half Hour* listeners. That's you. \$25 off when you use the code HALFHOUR at steppenwolf.org/now.

Caroline Neff:

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

Karen Rodriguez:

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

James Vincent Meredith:

The voice of this episode stage manager was Michelle Medvin.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Special thanks to Erin Cook, Joel Moorman, Kara Henry, Christopher Huizar, Kerstin Adams, Madeline Long, Corinne Florentino—

Caroline Neff:

And all the folks that Steppenwolf.

Karen Rodriguez:

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

James Vincent Meredith:

And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org.

Caroline Neff:

We love hearing from listeners. You can contact us with questions thoughts, memories, almost whatever's on your mind. I promise someone will get back to you.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And in two weeks we will be back with a conversation that I was lucky enough to have with ensemble member Sandra Marquez.

James Vincent Meredith:

The best.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The best. Okay friends. Till next time this is Cliff Chamberlain—

James Vincent Meredith:

James Vincent Meredith—

Karen Rodriguez:

Karen Rodriguez—

Caroline Neff:

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