



Season 2, Ep: 8 – Leslie Odom Jr.: “I Put Myself In”

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Featuring: Leslie Odom Jr. and Cliff Chamberlain. With Caroline Neff, James Vincent Meredith, Audrey Francis, and Mary Hungerford.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

But I knew that it was changing me. It was fashioning me into the artist that I always wanted to be.

Audrey Francis:

From Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois...

Leslie Odom Jr.:

There’s nowhere on Earth that I’d rather be than in this rehearsal room.

Audrey Francis:

This is *Half Hour*.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Friends! Howya doing?

James Vincent Meredith:

Back at it.

Caroline Neff:

Hey guys! This week on *Half Hour* we've got me, Caroline Neff.

James Vincent Meredith:

James Vincent Meredith.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And me, Cliff Chamberlain.

Caroline Neff:

So Cliff, all of our guests are very special guests, but we have a differently special guest on this episode, yeah?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, we have my friend Leslie Odom, Jr.

James Vincent Meredith:

What!

Caroline Neff:

How did that happen? We've been so fortunate to be able to reach out to artists that have worked with us or are in our ensemble or are somewhere in our sphere. And Leslie, other than being an icon of stage and screen, isn't really. So Cliff, can you give us a little background on how you know Leslie and how he ended up on our podcast?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, Steppenwolf, that's how. I mean, along with Leslie being awesome and being a buddy of mine, which I'm really lucky just to sort of be able to say that, the story starts at Steppenwolf. Sara Isaacson, who's a casting director, she's now out in LA used to work at Steppenwolf. She's from Chicago, so she is a huge fan of Steppenwolf and Steppenwolf artists. And she comes back to Chicago a lot to see plays and she saw *Clybourne Park*, and she called me in for this pilot called *State of Affairs*, which was a Katherine Heigl vehicle for NBC and directed by Joe Carnahan. And I somehow, it was one of those things where I somehow booked this pilot and Leslie Odom Jr. was in this pilot and I met him in New York, and we sort of connected right off the bat. I sort of had that, one of those sort of instant connections, right? And my journey with *State of Affairs* was really fun. The show got picked up to series. It sort of in a lot of ways changed the trajectory of my life.

Caroline Neff:

How long ago was that?

Cliff Chamberlain:

We shot the pilot of *State of Affairs* in 2014. I think it was in April or May. But I won't, you know, I won't spoil the ending at least of the story for Leslie about his journey with *State of Affairs*. It's pretty amazing. So yeah, I know him and he's here through Sarah Isaacson. Sarah, we actually talk about, for anybody listening later, she and I went to see a concert of Leslie's together and we talk, I talk about the last time I saw him was backstage with Sarah. His wife, Nicolette Robinson was also there who sang a song with him, and she's a great artist in her own right. So anyways, yeah, it all comes back to Steppenwolf.

James Vincent Meredith:

I just find it really cool because this is a guest who, you know, I've admired their work but I don't know them. I've never met them. I've never met Leslie, so it's kind of neat to really actually see this and experience this interview just like any of our other listeners. Like, I'm learning just as much as they are as you go through this because I don't have a relationship with him. So it's, it's really great to listen to this and I'm looking forward to it.

Caroline Neff:

Is there anything else we should know before we press play?

Cliff Chamberlain:

No, I don't think so. I mean I had a great time talking to him and I just think he's one of my favorite people, so.

Caroline Neff:

Cool. I can't wait. And here it is, folks. This is Cliff Chamberlain with Leslie Odom Jr.

Stage Manager:

Company, this is your half hour call. Half hour til the top of the show. Half hour. Please sign in if you have not already done so. Half hour.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I think the last time that I saw you in person was backstage at your concert.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

With our good friend Sarah Isaacson who I, who is the reason that we know each other. And you know that I am such a musical fan of yours that I listen to *Simply Christmas*, your album, like, in June. [Laughter] I'll just text you and be like, "Hey, just listening to your album. Christmas album. it's June."

Leslie Odom Jr.:

It means the world every time I get one of those texts. It makes me so happy.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well I just, I love your music. And I loved seeing that concert. And I just wanted to hear... check this out. I've got your book.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Ah man.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Which is beautiful. And one of the things in your book you talk about when it comes to music, specifically that it was something that you wanted to do when the phone wasn't ringing.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Can you talk a little bit about what it means to be a musician, a live performer and a writer of music? And your own music?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah, it's my freedom. Oh it's, it is the first way that I found freedom. It is the quickest way to my freedom. I'm trying to find freedom in other ways as well, but yeah, music was the thing that I didn't need someone to call me to ask me to do. I didn't need permission to sing. And when I say sing let me be clear, you know, to make a living as a singer. To make a living as a musician. I could scare up opportunities pretty quickly as a musician, and that was a revelation to me I write about in the book. I mean, that really wasn't something that I was doing in LA for a decade. So it was really, once I realized that it was my ticket to a certain kind of freedom and a certain kind of autonomy, right after *Hamilton* that was the first thing that I wanted to do. I wanted to invest in myself in that way. Because I remember, you know, I remember what it was like to feel like I was sitting on my couch and waiting for somebody to put me in, I was, you know, put me in coach. So after *Hamilton* I just wanted to hopefully change my life a little bit and put myself in.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And when did you start singing? When did you know? Were you a kid when you when you realized, “Oh my gosh, I’m good at this,” or “I love this.” When was it for you?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I wasn't a, I knew that I wasn't a bad singer. You know, when I was a kid, eight, nine, ten years old, I was in the chorus and I was, I could match pitch and I could, you know, I had a pretty nice tone, you know, but I didn't think that I was all that special. You know, even in hindsight I don't, I don't think that I was all that special. I think that I practiced more, you know. I think that I ended up just, I ended up just working on it for many more hours than some other kids, you know. While they were in the science lab, literally, or, or maybe practicing piano or trombone or something, you know, I was singing. And so those hours of practice ended up making me a whole lot better at something that at the start, I think, you know, I was pretty average.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Did you have anybody at that time that either recognized an ability in you that you didn't know was there or that saw something in you? Was there someone back then that said, “Hey, Leslie, listen, I’ve got something”.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah. Yeah, well I had I had a jazz band teacher, that's back when I was, I was trying to play piano, I was trying to play trombone. Mr. Johnson kind of knew that I wasn't— he had, he had better, you know, musicians than, than I, you know, who took to the instruments faster and easier. But he, he also saw that singing was, you know, something that I, that I maybe, you know, was doing a little bit better at that time than some of the other kids. So Mr. Johnson put some, some really important music into my hands. He introduced me to, to Donny Hathaway and Ella Fitzgerald and Dizzy Gillespie and, you know, he just was pointing me in the direction of some, some tremendous vocalists that he thought I should incorporate into my education, in my musical education. So, so for— Mr. Johnson was really influential, and that was at the time, you know, Mr., in a public school, Mr. Johnson didn't teach any other subject. He wasn't the gym teacher/music teacher. In a public school, Mr. Johnson was just there to teach instruments. He was just there to, he was, he was the music teacher. He was the, you know, he ran jazz band. He was there to any kid that wanted to play an instrument.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Wow.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

You know, Mr. Johnson was there to teach them.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And that's in Philadelphia?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah that's right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, speaking of Philadelphia, this is something that— I'm going to say a few words and I wanted to hear what you have to say.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Okay.

Cliff Chamberlain:

The wink in *Rent*.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Oh yes.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Can you talk about that?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I can. *Rent* was a show that I loved. My favorite quote about art and artists, I include it in the book, is that, “an artist spends their entire life trying to get back to the place where their heart was first opened up.” And I say the quote so much that now if you Google that quote it is attributed to me. [Laughter] I know, I know for a fact that I read that quote in a New York Times article. I cannot find the article, but I tell the truth about it because I want the, I want somebody else who read that article to come forward and like, tell me who said it. But anyway I, so *Rent* was that show, you know, that, that— I didn't, I didn't want to be in show business or on TV and film. I wanted to be in *Rent*. That was as far as I could see. I thought that like, I'll work hard enough, one day I'll get in this show and then I'll do the show and then I'll retire. You know, I—[Laughter] I was just like, “What else? What else do you?”

Cliff Chamberlain:

That's it.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah, I thought it was the pinnacle. So I, I bought a ticket to see the show while they were in Philadelphia, and act one, I'm just mesmerized by this thing. I know all the words, it's the touring company, you know. I know all the words and I'm, you know, I'm experiencing it, I'm in the room. And so I was so taken aback at intermission, I remember I didn't even get out of my seat. I just stayed in my seat and poured through the playbill. I was reading about where the performers, who the performers were and, you know, all that stuff. So then act two starts, and I'm like, “Oh,” you know, “I can't wait for this thing to start.” And I noticed this guy. His name was Chris. I've since told him this story, you know, years later I met him and I told him the story. But he comes out from stage left, big smile on his face, and he winks. And I looked to the left and this girl on stage right who was also entering just like, kind of smiled and put her head down like she was, you know, kind of, I don't know, covering a laugh, or like, but there was a shared moment. They knew what that meant. I had no idea what that meant. But they do. And this was the first time that, you know, I had been so enthralled by what was happening on the stage, of course, during act one. This was the first time that, “Oh my God, what's happening backstage?” You know, “Did— was that about... a hangout from last night? Did, did they just make a joke? Do they share an apartment together? Do they share a dressing room together? What did I just witness?” So for the first time I was, I was not only fantasizing and dreaming about being on stage with them, but I wanted to be off stage with them too. I wanted, you know, I wanted to be on the other side of that wink. I wanted

to have whatever that, that private connection was, you know. It was just like electric for me and so, yeah. Changed my life.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well listen, everything about that story, I seriously got shivers because even just the sitting in the, reading the playbill and looking, like, a dedication to knowledge, right? And to like, paying attention to, where are these people going to school? What are these, what have they done? Like, just soaking in all the things, or just the ability to recognize that wink and to think more about that. To me, I'm like, the ones who really want to have this life want all those things. Right? And so it makes, it's not surprising to know that a short time later, you were in *Rent* as a high school senior. I mean it blows my mind that you were in *Rent* on Broadway, right?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

In high school. I mean when I was in high school, I was barely able to survive on my high school stage and thinking about you on Broadway is so awesome.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

You know, I have to tell you, like, there's no— so then, you know, so I do *Rent* and I go to college and all that stuff, I, to me, so, so when I become a college student, honest to God, the pinnacle of success that I could see coming from Carnegie Mellon was to, like if I'm really extraordinarily lucky, maybe I'll, maybe I'll get to become a company member in some theater, theater company. You know, I'll find a little community that values me and and likes my work and gives me work, you know, on the regular. Like, that was like, I just couldn't see higher than that. What is, what is being a company member feel like for you? What is that like? You're living my dream.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Oh, well, I mean, it's great. I'd been, I'd been working at Steppenwolf as a non-ensemble member since shortly after I got to Chicago, and for a lot of Chicago theater artists it is a place that we look to with a lot of inspiration and admiration. And so I'm just, I'm just lucky I think to be surrounded by the mentors, you talk about mentors a lot in your book, and teachers. And there are some incredible teachers—

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

In all aspects of what it means to be an artist and what it means to be an artist right now. With, you know, especially with, with how we can be better on stage and off stage, you know.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

That's right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

I know you, you talk in your book too about citizenship and compassion.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

That's right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And what we can do to help.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

That's right.

Cliff Chamberlain:

You know we, Steppenwolf has a reputation as a place that makes great art and, and I just, I have a real, a real belief that it has a lot of great people too. And so it's nice to be around, around that.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah. Good for you.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, so I was fortunate to be in your dressing room for *State of Affairs* when you were talking about this little project that you wanted to make sure that you were dedicated to—

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

In New York at The Public. And that you just were like, "I'm doing this thing and I think it's really special." And I remember thinking like, "Oh that's cool, but we're doing a TV show. And if this TV show gets picked up, like, it's a TV show." And at the end of the day, what was that little show?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

That little show was a little show called *The Hamilton Mixtape* at the time, later known as *Hamilton: the American Musical*, an American Musical. But I, you might have been, it was the costume designer and then it might have been you were the next one. I was hearing these like, gossipy sort of things that if this, yeah, well if the show gets picked up we're gonna move to LA, production will move to LA.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Which I had no idea about.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I only, I auditioned for a New York show. You know, for me at that time a New York TV show was the dream because I know it's difficult, but I know there's plenty of actors that work out that uptown downtown thing. Like you do your, you shoot your TV show uptown and then you, you can make your

art downtown. So like I was looking for that. And I never would have even, I wouldn't have entertained auditioning for the show if I knew that it was going to move to LA. I really didn't know.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah, I just wouldn't have put *Hamilton* in jeopardy because I knew, I knew what *Hamilton* was. Yeah I took this, this TV show in New York, but I didn't fucking know that I was choosing, I wouldn't, you know—

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have chosen this. This is wonderful, but I have something wonderful so, because you, like you just talked about, you know, I already— because I had been doing readings and workshops of *Hamilton*, I knew. I didn't know that the show would be a cultural phenomenon and successful in the way that it was, but I knew that it was changing me. It was fashioning me into the artists that I always wanted to be. And so there was just nowhere, there's nowhere on Earth that I'd rather be than in this rehearsal room.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well I have since, you know, sort of used that as a beacon, right? As something to say, like, I saw this person know—

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

In his heart what was best for him. I think, and you say in your book too, like, at the end of the day, all it took was simply writing, you know. And just like, right, you just, you simply wrote, asked, said, "This is the situation. This is why it's important to me." And then everybody just said, "Cool. Go for it."

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah. Then the other problem that I, tricky situation that I found myself in is that I had signed a contract. And you can't just, you know, you don't just shoot a pilot and go, "Oh, I don't want to do a series." I mean, it was, it was, it took some doing. It was like, "How the hell?". Once I had made the decision, which wasn't easy, but once I, you know, really knew like "I gotta get out of this thing," it's like, well, how do I get out of this thing? And after, I mean, weeks and weeks of like, "Do I get lawyers? Do I try to get my agents to..." I mean, all these ridiculous scenarios. It was kind of a revelation when, when it's like, okay, where do we begin? Well, how about we ask first. Before we do anything else, how about I just ask. And Joe Carnahan, you know, what a gentleman, Joe Carnahan, and, who was the creator of our show, and Bob Greenblatt who was the president of NBC at the time. Just, just listened to my, my heart and were like, "Sure, we'll let you go. Look, I mean we, we think this is a little crazy. You want to go do an off Broadway show rather than our TV show? Are you, are you sure? Okay." And that was that.

Stage Manager:

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

Cliff Chamberlain:

I know you've probably talked about it a lot but as an actor who just would love to hear, what was it like to play Burr for so many performances and in such a phenomenon?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Oh, ideal, you know, it was the ideal in every way. Lin Manuel has a, has a tendency to, to create the ideal, you know, wherever he goes. It was, you know, the rehearsal room was conducive for the kind of work that you saw on that stage. You know, people were doing brave, exciting, daring work because we were safe, and we were encouraged to, and Lin gave us the confidence of brilliant material. So yeah, I knew every second, you know, I wasn't a kid. I don't know, when we went to broad— by the time we got to Broadway I think I was, I don't know, 34 years old or something like that. So I was just very aware, you know, every moment how lucky I was, what a blessing it was, what a gift that this role found its way to me and that I found my way to it. You know, because the, the even sort of weirder backstory is that I saw the very first reading of *The Hamilton Mixtape* at Vassar. I mean, I was in the audience!

Cliff Chamberlain:

How many people in the audience?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

100? Anybody, anybody that's gone to Vassar knows that, that it's a black box theater. And they were doing this thing called *The Hamilton Mixtape* and Nicolette happened to be up there working, so I happened to be there on the weekend. And I just, so you know, I remember what it was like to hear that opening or "Satisfied" or "Wait For It" for the first time, or "Dear Theodosia" for the first time being in the audience. And I never in a million years thought that I would be in the show, but when I got the email from Lin asking me to be a part of it I knew, I knew what that opportunity was. So yeah, anyway, getting to do it on Broadway, I never one day, not one single day, took her for granted or didn't know what I had.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And I've heard you say this that one of the things you wanted in playing Burr was to be surprised by the ending every show. What do you mean by that?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I mean that ours is a real classic tragedy. You know, you go see *Oedipus Rex*, you know how that's gonna end. You go see a great production of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Medea*, you know how these things are going to end. But in a fantastic production, you forget. We watch our favorite movies again and again. We know how it's going to end but, you know, in a story well told you allow yourself to forget. You suspend your disbelief even as an audience member, you know, so that's what I wanted. I mean, you know, Lin wrote the end of, the end of the first number is, "And I'm the damn fool that shot him," you know, so just in case you don't know, let me, let me give away the ending right now. And yeah, I wanted to take the ride every night. You know, I kind of thought about it, I was real meta, there was some, some nights I would, I would go out there and actively work, then there was like, I could sometimes imagine that show is like a hell for Burr, you know, it's a hell for him. Like he has to do this, I have to do this performance. I have to present this thing every night. It, this is, I can't move on until I find the moment, until I find the

reason that it's gone this way, until I can figure out a way to change it, you know. And I, essentially, what am I trying to say? What I'm trying to say is like, I desperately wanted it to end differently. Every night.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Wow.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I wanted to change it, you know. Like that, that's what I'm up there sweating and working for. Either I'm going to show you guys that, you know, that, the here it is. And there, that's the moment, that's what, you know, or I'm going to— I was thinking of like, a divorced couple, you know. If you could show a couple on, on the day of their wedding a picture of what they're going to look like on the day of their divorce 15 years down the road, they wouldn't believe it. They wouldn't believe it. You'd have to prove it. And then look, and then then there was this moment, and then this moment, and then this moment. Anyway, so that, that's all I meant. It was my job, it was my job to make the audience forget where it was going, and so I did my best to forget where it was going.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Well I think that's, those are words to live by for any actor in any performance. Just be surprised by the ending, you know, just don't pre plan and go in with an open road. I want to ask you about *One Night in Miami*.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Sure.

Cliff Chamberlain:

First off I watched it thinking, "My goodness, everyone in this movie is amazing, and these four guys are a quartet that is just firing on all cylinders." But because I know you I, you know, I've watched you with a certain amount of awe. And I thought, "Leslie is putting it all together in this. His theater, theatrical work because you could feel like it's a play, his music, his, his film work. It's all here." Can you talk to me just about what it was like making that movie?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

A dream. You know, I, a scary dream. But a dream, you know—

Cliff Chamberlain:

Why scary? Because I know that you talk about spectacular failure. Why scary?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Well because it was just, the shoes were, the shoes were awfully big. And they weren't coming to me saying, "Hey, Leslie, we want to play, we want you to play Sam Cooke a year from now. We're going to give you all the tools that you need to succeed and support you." You know, it's the way it often is, you know. I'm still not quite a first call guy in Hollywood. So they'd lost somebody maybe, they might have lost more than one person but they lost their first choice. And so they're scrambling to find a replacement for whoever the actor was that was cast first and the movie shoots very soon. And that's a lot of work. Because I know on some level this is going to be about verisimilitude. This is going to be about how close you can come to, to Sam Cooke, to this man that we revere. You know, I know that he's beloved the world over but in the black community, you know, Sam Cooke is a— Sam Cooke and James

Brown and Prince and Michael Jackson. There are some people that we, you know, we're protective over. There's not a whole— I've never seen Sam Cooke depicted in film at all, right? So—

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah

Leslie Odom Jr.:

You know, I'm gonna be the first? Ah, nah. So anyway, but, so that's why it was a scary dream. But like what you just said, it took me a second but I did realize too that this was an opportunity at least to put it all together, to put the music and the stage work and my exploration in film all together. And Regina was a wonderful director that you know, the, the first way she took care of us was to, to give us each other, you know. I had such wonderful actors to work off of. Kingsley Ben-Adir as Malcolm I think is astonishing. And Eli Goree as, as young Cassius Clay is something really special. Those, those gentlemen too, they had just impossible shoes to fill, not only in the men, the actual men, but also they're in Denzel and Will Smith's shadow immediately, you know, so—

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

It was, it was just, it was heady. You know, it was like, this could really, you know, not work.

Cliff Chamberlain:

We touched on this a little bit earlier but I just, it was really inspiring in your book and I just know it's the type of person you are, but you know, citizenship, compassion, being led by love. Can you speak to just sort of how you feel about those things sort of leading yourself forward, or all of us forward?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Well you know, especially as a, as a parent now, you know, it's one of the things that parenthood gives me, you know, is that thing of, you're— the world is not a gift to you from the generations before, the world is on loan to you from the generations after. So yeah, I just try to think about how to, man, how do I just leave it a little better? How do I leave my little corner of the world better for, for my kids and, and the generation, you know, the generations right behind me? How do I make, how do I make sure that they, that I'm a link in the chain? You know, because it's not, it's not just about my kids. It's about the artists that are behind me. How do I keep them inspired? What do I want to pass down to them? Because people, those of us that are lucky enough to get to do this I think almost to a person, you know, there are some generous souls that poured into us, right? And there's some generous souls that really passed it down and passed it on, you know. Who spent, who spent hours, extra hours with us in a rehearsal room, you know, that, they weren't— unlogged, unpaid. You know just like, just passing it on.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

So just trying to, just trying to make sure that I, that I do that. I have a real interest in that, you know, making sure that— I love what you said about the company reckoning with, you know, what is required of us today, as artists, what is our responsibility today?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

In what ways are we on the front line, you know?

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah. So our show is called *Half Hour*. And it's based on sort of that magical amount of time before a show begins. And we ask all of our guests this and I'll ask you.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Okay.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What is your half hour routine?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I really like to, my, that half hour is all about presence. So I don't, like, if— I don't like ritual, but that is my ritual. Because, you know, ritual is like the thing of like, sort of shoving myself into whatever I was feeling yesterday. Like, you know, instead of using that half hour to like, you know, figure out how to make the same sculpture or something, you know what I mean? Like, I'm like, I don't know what the, I don't know, who am I right now? What am I feeling? What am I in need of? Do I need to pick me up? Do I need to bring myself down? Am I feeling, am I hungry? Am I, am I not hungry at all? Do I need to kick it with a friend right now? Do I need to talk, you know what I'm saying? So like, my half hour is all about presence. You know, I just want to figure out who I am and where I am and what I'm in need of that day.

Stage Manager:

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

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, it's now time for our lightning round.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Okay.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Are you ready?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I'm ready.

Cliff Chamberlain:

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

Leslie Odom Jr.:

So many. There was a, there was a, there was a Wayans Brothers movie, I think it was called "Dance Movie." And I, it was the first real risk, I wrote about it in the book, but it was the first real risk that I

took in this town. I had an idea about how to approach that material. And, and it felt crazy to me and I, and I did it. You know, I was courageous enough to do it and I ended up testing for the film. And at the test, I found out that I was testing against Damon Wayans Jr. I had no idea that he was in the running too, who, listen, he's gone on to do amazing, he's, he's amazing, but it was, the scales were little imbalanced. But I was brokenhearted because I wish that I'd known. I kind of felt like, you know, like I was taken for a ride a little bit.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Right.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

And I thought that that movie was going to make me a star, you know?

Cliff Chamberlain:

What animal do you most identify with?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Lion or cat, big cat.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What's your most prized piece of play memorabilia?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I haven't kept a ton. But a fan, my first piece of fan art came from doing *Hamilton* at The Public. And there's some, there's something about that, that holy sort of circle of inspiration. Like if you, if you make something as an artist and it inspires another artist to make something, like that little circle of inspiration is just, I'm always so moved by that. So I have, it's hanging in my house. The piece of fan art.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What artist is giving you the most inspiration right now?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I'm loving the work of Delano Dunn. I just, I just bought my first piece of real art to hang in my house. He's super, super talented. I think he lives in Chicago too, so look up Delano.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Alright. What do you daydream about?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

A lot of times I'm, a lot of times I'm daydreaming about, you know, the not so distant future. I'm daydreaming about, I'm sort of, you know, trying to clarify the vision. I'm, I'm trying to, you know, so I'm, I'm looking at things and, and if it's, if I'm not as joyful or if it's, if it's not the vibe that I, that I want to be a part of I'm trying to figure out what do I need to do to change that? A lot of time I'm daydreaming about the not so distant future.

Cliff Chamberlain:

If you had a superpower, what would it be?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

If I had a superpower, it would be to eat whatever I wanted and for it to, like— if I could eat up a half a dozen doughnuts and that was the equivalent of 700 crunches. I've thought about this. So that's like, it's all vanity, right? How lame is that? But that's what I want.

Cliff Chamberlain:

[*Laughter*] That's not—

Leslie Odom Jr.:

That's what I want. I want to be able to eat Thanksgiving dinner and that be like, that like, my body registers is that like, you just ran a marathon.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Oh my gosh.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

That's awesome. What is one thing you do every day?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

I tell my family that I love them every single day.

Cliff Chamberlain:

What's your favorite place to unwind in New York?

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Favorite place to unwind in New York was probably the gym. You know, I found a small gym that I was going to. It was like my little *Cheers*, you know. It was a place that I went where I could kind of put my cell phone away and you know, get in touch with my body, and—

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

And then afterwards, there was like, you know, the nice sauna and like, I was doing cryotherapy there, so yeah like. It was my favorite place in New York.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Okay, last question my friend.

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Yeah.

Cliff Chamberlain:

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

Leslie Odom Jr.:

Late 30s. Wiry. And joyful.

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:

Wow, wow, wow, that was incredible. How lovely.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah, it was so good to see him and talk to him. Yeah, the best.

James Vincent Meredith:

I kept thinking back to that point earlier when he was talking about the wink. How, you know, you've got these two people who are on stage and they're on opposite sides and they're just about to go on and they do this little wink thing and you're like, "What's the story behind that?". And I've always wondered that too. And you think about it as a performer, those little things that you have backstage you know, that, you know, some that you use, some that you don't use. I just found it really, a really neat anecdote, a great story of his just, just, he's just a great interview.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah it's funny, I related to that a lot because I, I've sort of been fascinated just as a performer myself, but seeing it too like, anyone, any actors who were checking in with each other on stage. Not, not with the lines or not anything, just checking in across stage, like the little check ins. I just love doing it. I love seeing my friends, my colleagues on stage and just a little check in like, "We're here together." It's one of my favorite things. So when I read that in his book about him recognizing the wink, I was like, "Yes, yes."

Caroline Neff:

Yeah, I always feel so lucky as an audience member to catch those things. It's usually on my second or third time going to see it.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

When he was talking about the decision to leave *State of Affairs* to go and do *Hamilton Mixtape* at The Public, it really reminded me of one of our earliest earliest interviews with Willy Peterson, which is that very, like, Steppenwolf ethos of like, the work is first and where do you feel most passionate because that's the door that you should walk through, not the door people tell you that you should be walking through.

Cliff Chamberlain:

Yeah.

Caroline Neff:

And it also just shows that there's actually when you're making the right decision for yourself, you really cannot make the wrong one.

Cliff Chamberlain:

100%. And I think what's, you know, what I sort of really want to say in that too is that what you just said, when you're making the decision for yourself, it's right, because for me *State of Affairs* was 100,000,000%, the right decision, it was. I made some great friends, it changed my life, it was an amazing experience. I didn't have, I wasn't working on *Hamilton* before that, right? Like, I didn't have this other passion project that I was invested in. But you hear those stories about those artists who just say, I'm putting it all on me, I'm betting on myself for this thing that's unknown but that you love. It's a hard thing to do. And I just thought he did it perfectly.

Caroline Neff:

Yeah, yeah, I totally agree. And unfortunately, just like that, we're out of time.

James Vincent Meredith:

Aw, nuts.

Caroline Neff:

Again, again! Thank you everyone for listening to this episode of *Half Hour* brought to you by Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

Cliff Chamberlain:

And thanks again to our guest this week, Leslie Odom Jr.

James Vincent Meredith:

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Cliff Chamberlain:

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Caroline Neff:

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Cliff Chamberlain:

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James Vincent Meredith:

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Caroline Neff:

And all the folks at Steppenwolf

Cliff Chamberlain:

Follow us on Twitter @Steppenwolfthtr or on Facebook and Instagram. And you can always get in touch by emailing halfhour@steppenwolf.org.

James Vincent Meredith:

Till next time, this is James Vincent Meredith,

Caroline Neff:

Caroline Neff,

Cliff Chamberlain:

And Cliff Chamberlain. A lifetime to engage, half hour to places. So it's 2014 so we, I drove, I drove out to— that doesn't really matter. [*Laughter*]

James Vincent Meredith:

It matters to me, Cliff. It matters to me.