

**REBECCA MARTINEZ:** The Mobile Unit is a place of-- the Mobile Unit is a place that-- oh, what am I trying to say?

**FREEDOME BRADLEY-BALLENTINE:** A Mobile Unit is a vessel of celebration, communication, and community.

**REBECCA MARTINEZ:** The Mobile Unit is a place that opens the door to theater, and is a place of joy.

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** The Mobile Unit is a unique experience that hopefully brings joy, laughter, and excitement to the people.

**JULIAN MESRI:** The Mobile Unit is a place of celebration, communication.

**FREEDOME BRADLEY-BALLENTINE:** A ton of fun. The Mobile Unit is a ton of fun. And I'm super excited about Comedy of Errors this year. As we do that, it is a bilingual production of a Comedy of Errors. So please, come and see it in your neighborhood. There's not even an excuse to not come and see. It doesn't cost you a dime, it just costs you your time. So come on out and see that.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** In 1957, Joseph Papp began mobile theater. Papp's original touring company evolved into the New York Shakespeare Festival, ultimately becoming the public theater we all know and love. Years later, Joe Papp's original idea was given a facelift, and the Public Theater's Mobile Unit was born.

Hey, everybody. It's Garlia here at The Public. The Public Theater is?

**KID:** Your work.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** OK.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hello and welcome to Public Square 2.0. My name is Garlia Cornelia Jones the Director of Innovation and New Media at The Public Theater. This week, we're going to take a moment to talk about one of the Public Theater's most exciting programs.

The Mobile Unit, a reinvention of Joe Papp's Mobile Theater. The summer of 23 marks a return to the more traditional Mobile Unit programming. The past two years have been difficult for all live and performing arts, but perhaps no other department at The Public was more uniquely affected by the pandemic than the Mobile Unit.

Now, the Mobile Unit prepares for a long anticipated return to normalcy with an exciting new production of Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors. But before we talk about where we're going, let's take a minute to talk about where we've been. Barry Edelstein was a key player in reviving the Mobile Unit in 2010 after the program's 30-year hiatus. All of it was built on a simple idea - culture belongs to everyone.

What exactly does the Mobile Unit do?

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** Mobile Unit for me is all about-- and the legacy of Mobile Unit is all about deconstructing the barriers of access to theater and to theatrical experience. It's about taking away the money. So we show up with free, free everything.

It's about taking away the construct in which we created around the experience, and bringing it to you, and saying this is for you too. You may not have thought that it was, but it is for you as well. And so doing that work to deconstruct that is what makes the Mobile Unit what it is. And that is what I feel like will sustain the legacy 20 years from now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** That was Praycious Wilson-Gay, interim director of the Mobile Unit. We'll hear more from her later. During the summer of 2022, Freedom Bradley Valentine came back to The Public as our director of artistic programs and an associate artistic director. You might recognize his voice from an earlier episode this season on our production *The Harder They Come*.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

When you think about, I think, because you're speaking about theater in a time, I think the theater has changed and evolved a bit over the last 20 years. As we think about where we are going, we've had a tremendously challenging last couple of years for our institutions and even ourselves. As you think about where both the industry and The Public, what are you thinking about for the future?

**FREEDOME BRADLEY-BALLENTINE:** The more things change, the more they remain the same. I think some of the brilliance of what Oscar and what you all have done during these last almost 20 years, I'd imagine like, is really going back into the publicness of The Public Theater, and making sure that something like the Mobile Unit was brought back and it was expanded on with something like Public Works.

I think that part of it is what is the next step for these programs. Because if you look at Mobile Unit, that's a traditional outreach program and it's and its model is based in the 60s and it's all about going in and taking a piece of work and taking it to communities.

Next thing you had was Public Works was OK, we're going to take this piece into a community, but we're really going to engage the community in the making of this piece so that it's not just them witnessing the piece, it's them actually performing in the piece.

I think that the next phase of this is going to be, all right, what are the stories that the community itself wants to tell? And creating those stories and giving them and supporting them with the tools to make those stories happen so that we're telling stories that are from the community, by the community, in the community, as well as at the Public Theater. I think that that's another phase that we can go to go deeper into this.

The work that we've done, that I've done in prior places with corrections, I think that that's a big place that we want to go at the Public Theater is how we engage in people that can't get to the space. We have a way now that we provide tickets to people to come to see the show.

We take shows out to communities so that they can see it. But what are we doing then for places that can't have access, that are denied access for whatever reason? I think that that's the next phase of the work that we're going to be doing, and that's the next phase of Joe Papp's original vision of making a theater that's for The Public no matter where they are.

We might talk about this a little bit more. The challenges that are facing theater right now, I think one of the biggest challenges is a lack of trust. There used to be this thing, like the show must go on, we've broken that trust, or situations have broken that trust, COVID has broken that trust.

The cost of tickets that's all of these things have broken that trust, and we have to get back to the show must go on because I think that that's something that's really hurting our field and hurting really the revitalization of theater as we move forward.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Thinking about the show must go on, as in we need to find ways to reduce ticket prices for community to have access. We need to find ways to continue doing our work, but make it more accessible to people.

**FREEDOME  
BRADLEY-  
BALLENTINE:**

That's part of it. There are a lot of costs that have gone up in theater. We've all taken on-- we've all taken on-- at The Public at least, we have a cultural transformation that is occurring that necessary needed. I think that all of theaters are grappling with that how are we making a more equitable workspace. Now, that doesn't just happen.

It takes people to plan that out and it costs and it has real resources that need to go behind that. How are we now going to make sure that we are having a more equitable workspace so that we're not driving people the same way that we were driving people and that we have more resources for them?

Part of that how that's showing up is making sure that we have more understudies. Making sure that we have more coverage for people that are working behind the scenes. When we're talking about making theater the show must go on, we're talking about putting resources like that into spaces so that the show will happen.

**PRAYCIOUS  
WILSON-GAY:**

My name is Praycious Wilson-Gay. I am the interim director of Mobile Unit at The Public Theater and my pronouns are she/her/hers. One of the things that a special is that we're returning back to our traditional model, we're coming with straight Shakespeare.

Summer of Joy, as you know, was parts of Shakespeare's text and it invited the crowd to really inform what was going to happen on stage. We're going back to our straight Shakespeare play. The addition of Spanish language in the piece is something that is very, very special.

As well as we have this amazing composer Julian Mizrahi, who has been working with our Director Rebecca Martinez to craft these beautiful songs that point out, that give life to the characters of Comedy of Errors that you don't see in the traditional script. There are some icky things that happen in all Shakespeare shows. But the way that Rebecca and Julian have taken those moments and have given them a new breath, it's been so special. I just cannot wait to see it out on the road.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Rebecca Martinez and Julian Mizrahi and I had the opportunity to sit down at the beginning of April. You'll notice a background shift as I was in Michigan visiting family for the holidays. Shout out to my dad for his library Awhile Books many on Shakespeare. I definitely needed to pull out a few for some prep.

I love how worlds collide. And my conversation with Rebecca and Julian was one where we discovered all of the collisions our professional lives have encountered over the last decade or so. And how beautiful it was to be reunited in this way with their very special adaptation of Shakespeare's Comedy of Errors.

**REBECCA**

The thing right now that is so beautiful about the Mobile Unit and about this opportunity is that we have agency.

**MARTINEZ:**

We have agency to make the piece that we want to make to make it in a way that feels right for us. Now that we're in rehearsals and we have a group of folks and we've had several development opportunities, but to build it with members in our communities.

And to just continue to think about if we're doing this and we're bringing this out into communities, how do we want to show up, how do we want to represent ourselves, and how do we want to invite people in? And that feels like such a critical and important part. I just said a lot of things.

**GARLIA**

What is the value of doing this work at a predominantly white institution that's focusing on Latino stories?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**JULIAN MESRI:**

I mean, I think one thing to talk about in terms of theater communities. I was born in Argentina, but I came to the US when I was four. My mom Suzanne a cook. She's a Downtown theater Stalwart, and I remember being a kid like eight, nine years old and being in my mom's shows and then going to her in rehearsals.

I'm just getting to know a theater that was extremely accessible, that was very open to communities in a lot of ways. Wow Cafe, Dixon Place like these. Places where the route towards I get together with my friends, we rehearse something, we put something on stage, we find a community is not as large. I feel like the bigger the institutions become, the harder it is to bridge that gap.

What I then realized as I was getting older is that, and I got to connect more with theater in Buenos Aires, is that is very much the form of what we might call Teatro Independente, Independent Theater in Buenos Aires, where the institutions themselves are pretty small. I mean, the theaters are just simply venues that play things in rep and then people come and find their way to make a show and then put it on stage.

And then as we get to these PWIs, what I noticed isn't just the whiteness of these institutions, let's say, but also the massiveness of them in terms of money, in terms of budgets. At the same time, it's amazing because it allows you these incredible resources, and allows you productions that are much larger, and it allows ideally people to be compensated in ways that they otherwise wouldn't.

It also makes those the bridges, it becomes harder to figure out how to bridge those gaps, how to reach out to those communities. And something like Mobile Unit which removes the economic barrier, but then also removes the place barrier.

What let someone know that this place that they have access to. We'll let someone know that this large theater where most of the time they see people showing up in looking very fancy, people who are not in their community going to that place, but lets them know that that's also a place that they're also welcome to.

Yes, you can see a show in the theater itself, but then you can also see a show in a park and you can connect to it. And then you take something like Shakespeare which, again, has all these institutionalized elements to just Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself is an institution. It allows us to say no, no, we have access to that.

I think that the question of access and the question of who gets to have this culture, who gets to say what they want to do with this culture, that should belong to all of us, same with history, same with city. I think it's a very important question to open and that's part of the reason I think it's also so important to show that it is a bilingual conversation.

We are not a city that works in one language. We are a city that works not just in two, we work in so many languages. For us to create work that really bridges out to these communities and that really reflects the world that we're in instead of just one very small subset of that world, we have to start diving into new languages. We have to reflect a little bit more accurately in some ways the world that we all already experience.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Here's more from my conversation with Freedom. I know that community is a really big thing for you. Anyone that has spoken about you that I have known that this feeling is that you are a person that brings people together, you're a person that helps people out. I would just love for you to share a little bit more about what community means to you and what it is that drives you to support community deeply.

**FREEDOME  
BRADLEY-  
BALLENTINE:**

That's such a long question. I mean, in terms of how I view it, it's more philosophical. I back into it in a different way of through my work and how I've decided to structure my life, and my life is really structured around service, service to humanity. That happens to be working in theater and I utilize theater as a way to be in service.

With theater, especially 501(c)(3)s. When you look at those as not for profits, 501(c)(3)s are not for profits. Not for profits were originally constructed to service The Public good. So that means all of us. Now, in New York, it's going to look a little bit different than what it would look like in San Diego. Or if you're with a national organization, it looks different than what it is for a local organization.

The key is to identify who you think the community is in which you're working in. At the Public Theater, which is a huge large not for profit theater, the founding of that was really built upon access. And it was built by Joe Papp and it was built by imagining that we would use parks as a place to gather and share Shakespeare's work. And then when it moved from that area, it moved into moving to neighborhoods throughout New York City.

The Public Theater has always been built on providing access to the arts for all of New York City. Now, it's not just interested in creating access in terms of we want we're interested in doing a show. It's a little bit deeper than that. It's a little bit more than that. It's around providing access to make an impact in your community and using theater.

How do I look at theater? I look at theater as being a place where we get together and share our humanity, share our culture, share our stories, and a way that we can learn more about one another to bring us all together as a community.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Praycious Wilson-Gay is the Interim Director for the Mobile Unit. Working from an anti-racist lens, she specializes in working with communities to amplify the stories that matter to them. Like all of us, her current work as an artist has been influenced by her journey. She and I had a moment to sit down earlier and talk about her work, her life, and her vision for the Mobile Unit.

First, I want to start with your journey within The Public. I have known you to be in a couple different departments over my couple or several years. Would you take us for the people who don't know you through that journey?

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** Yeah, definitely. I started the Public Theater in 2018, I believe is the year I actually started in the marketing department I was a grad school resident with Brooklyn College. And right at that point, there was a residency between Brooklyn College and the Public Theater, specifically with the marketing department.

I helped to curate borough distributions, which is the initiative attached to Shakespeare in the Park where we give out free tickets in the different Boroughs for the show that's happening at the Delacorte later that evening. And that was my first introduction into what community work could look like at The Public Theater.

Soon, thereafter, the summer was over. There was a job description put up by the Mobile Unit department. And I had a couple of folks in the marketing department who are poking at me like, hey, I really think that should apply to this. It sounds like something that you would enjoy based off of what you've told us about your aspirations. I applied and I got it.

I then transferred into the Mobile Unit department as a community coordinator. I served in that role for a couple of years under the leadership of Karen Ann Daniels at that time who was an amazing black woman theater maker. I love her. That was great, but that was my first introduction into working with Mobile Unit's communities which are very specific.

From there, I helped to pilot the Mobile Unit and Corrections Program. I also am a boss fierce black woman theater maker. I was like, I'm managing now. I should be a manager. I was able to get a promotion to be the Community Programs Manager. And then there was the pandemic happened and everything shut down, and a whole lot of things transpired. I did get furloughed during that time at The Public Theater.

**GARLIA** I don't remember at that time with that view.

**CORNELIA JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** It was five months. It was pretty short because, then, we did Summer of Joy in the summer of 2021. Yes.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** By now, you might be sitting around thinking, wait a minute, what is the Summer of Joy everyone keeps talking about? During 2021, while all of us were trying to figure out how to keep producing amidst new COVID waves and variants, the Mobile Unit decided to do something innovative.

Mobile Unit's Summer of Joy was a pop-up experience in New York's open spaces with three key community and performance elements. Each day began with the National Black Theater's stage for healing and resilience co-produced by The Public Theater and National Black Theater in continuation of a relationship that dates back to the 1960s.

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** Oh, the Mobile Unit is special. The Mobile Unit brings free accessible programming to all five boroughs of New York City. One of our main tenets of our program is our Shakespeare Tour that we do at least once a year. And we bring that tour around all five boroughs to community centers, correctional facilities, homeless shelters, recreation centers.

We've actually expanded in the last couple of years due to the pandemic to now perform outdoor, in plazas and on open streets, which has also been a beautiful journey. Yeah, you were. Garlia was there to help pilot the first outdoor tour for Mobile. But yeah, we bring theater to the people.

We've had some other partnerships where we've done with Joe's Pub, where we've brought an artist to a musical artist to our different partners as well. But the base of it is bringing the theater, bringing the art to you, so that you don't feel the need to come to us, and meeting you where you are.

**GARLIA** I love that. I will say that my first-- I've had two interactions with Mobile, the first was Mobile the Nationals with  
**CORNELIA** the tour of sweat.

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Yes.

**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** That was the fall of 2018. I received a cake keychain which is also a bottle opener, which is still on my keys  
**CORNELIA** today. Thank you my Mobile Unit for always having great swag swag. And then being part of Mobile's Summer of  
**JONES:** Joy where we were out-of-doors in the heat with our pink tees that we would cut off our sleeves to look cute.

We also partner with NBT, the National Black Theater for that as well, which was a really exciting partnership because we were out the doors. There was space for families even to have bubbles and people could write their reaction to the work.

**PRAYCIOUS** I fell in love with theater when I was a child. I remember being 10 and my mother taking me to a tour stop on the  
**WILSON-GAY:** Lion King. I just remember that opening moment where the puppets come down the aisles, and I was like, "What is this? I want in." But I also went to a performing arts elementary school, and I had been on the stage and I did not like it.

I knew I didn't like being on the stage. I'm someone who gets like very nervous when I do public speaking and all of the things. After going to that performance, I was like, "Mommy, what is this thing? I want to do it." Just through exploration, I came to stage management because it allowed me to be in the room, and something that I love about theater is the rehearsal process. That's my favorite part of theater.

The performances are great, but to see something that comes from this script that is. It's definitely scripts are dynamic, but also it's just words and see it come alive. It's what makes it worthwhile for me. I knew a stage manager was in the room and they also really handled the show in the room and the environment. And I wanted to be a part of that now.

My freshman year of college, first semester, I decided it was not for me. The long hours, and I just learned so much about it. I was like, "I don't think I want to be in excel's for the rest of my life." I was just like not something. I was super interested in. And so I was like, "OK, so what else can I do that is still within this world but not necessarily stage management?"

I moved into production management. And I enjoyed that as well, but I also was like, I get really nervous around power tools and having conversations with people. And there was just things that happened in my journey in production management that had me be like, I think I could do this for a short while but I don't want to do it for the rest of my life.

With just, like I said, the beauty of theater because I was able to bring in all of those things. And that pivoted me into pursuing an arts management degree and learning more about the systems that have been set up for us to do this work. From there, I just blossomed. I thought I wanted to be a marketer, and then I was like I don't want to work in marketing. That's not my calling either.

So what is it? Something that has always been at the base of who I am as a person is community organizing. I started community organizing when I was 10 years old. And so I have over 15 years of experience in community organizing. And I saw the importance of doing art in the community intentionally in the community.

I had been community organizing for over 15 years. I started when I was 10 years old. The beautiful thing about Mobile Unit was it was an opportunity for me to make that art in community once again. It really was just ebb and flow. And I just did things for as long as I liked them. And then when I didn't like them anymore, I was like, well, what else can I do in theater? But it was always theater, and it's always been theater.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

I will say marketing is such a useful tool and something that we should all really know how to do. I think it's great that you came in through a whole different department which also gave you an idea of how that department interacts with the other parts of the institution.

So when you were in the different part of the institution, you've got some insight, which I think only helps the success of the work that you do. Because you come in as a thought partner with the marketing department. You're like, Oh, I know how this works. Let's think about it this way, which I think is something that the department just was grateful for as well.

**PRAYCIOUS  
WILSON-GAY:**

Yes. Super helpful.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

You've mentioned a couple of times the community work that you've done, and that term is meaningful to me. I'm not sure it's something people would think of immediately within theater.

It's certainly also a way I have shaped my career and thinking about the way that we share our work with people. Can you talk a little bit more about that? What does a community work look like to you? What's outside of an institution like The Public and in theater as an industry overall?

**PRAYCIOUS  
WILSON-GAY:**

Oh, good question. I came specifically into the Mobile Unit with established partnerships. The Mobile Unit has been active for over 12 years, we're in our 12th year. And so I came in with eight years locked down. I might have my numbers wrong. I'm a theater person, not a mathematician.

But that really helped for me to move forward in doing the work because there was already built trust in the relationship. And that's key to any community relationship is trust between the two partners. If the partner does not trust you, your program ultimately will not be successful. Thank you for all of the folks that did that work beforehand.

But for me, the thing that is interesting is how do you build mutually beneficial relationships. And this is something a term that Karen Ann, you so beautifully, during my time, about what it actually means to be in a mutually beneficial relationship with the partner, which is something that calls mutually beneficial relationships, call for continuous conversation with your partner.



And that's really what I do. I'm constantly in conversation with our partners, whether it's, hey, do you want to come see this show? Or, hey, I heard this thing, this protest happened on your steps on Sunday at the LGBT Center this past Sunday. Are you good?

What happened? Do you need any support? Is there anything we can do? There's also a constant resource exchange of, hey, there's a petition we like for you to sign. Hi, there's this event we would like to do. And so specifically for the Mobile Unit, it's really about maintaining those relationships and then being able to have this product of offering the shows.

Another thing that feeds into that is this idea that when we are creating our work we're creating our work with community in mind. So we're not creating our work for the traditional theatergoer who goes to see every Broadway show, that's actually not an audience. Our audience is the folks who are going to walk past and be like, what is this weird thing? And Shakespeare, what is that?

I'm going to sit down for 5 minutes and see if I'm interested. And usually, not all the time, some people brush us off. But for the most part, folks would be like, I'm going to stay because it's exciting, or it's funny, or all the things that Mobile Unit is. It's about being in conversation and being able to deliver something that feels intentional to the partner.

For the larger theater industry, I don't know if I really have an answer to that one because I think that community-- I don't want to use the word weaponize because I don't think that's the word for it, but it's like a token term. When theater companies go, Oh, we work in the community.

**GARLIA** What does that mean?

**CORNELIA  
JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS  
WILSON-GAY:** What does that mean? What community? Who are you impacting? How are you measuring your impact? And then you have to take it to the count of, are you causing any harm when you're doing this community work? It's hard to answer that question because I haven't seen many successful models of what it is to do work with theater in community.

And also relationships that last, I think that's another thing. Folks will work with community for a season, because they got a grant to do this project with this artist and the artist wants to do this work in the community and take their stories and build these beautiful projects, which is all important. But then what do you do with the community that you impacted after?

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:** Once it's over, right. Is it this one time a moment where you-- is it this moment where you just interact with them one time and it's over, or is there a conversation? I really love the way that you have framed it as this conversation again.

Shout out to Karen Ann and the one the way that she just-- I mean, I remember being in meetings with her and that was something. And not even meetings, just conversations with her as a human. That is just part of the ethos that is Karen Ann Daniels, we're going to say how many times we say it.

**PRAYCIOUS  
WILSON-GAY:** Exactly. I'm going to call her after. I'd be like, I called you out the whole time.

**GARLIA** She is worth all the call outs.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Yes.

**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** OK. Wait a minute. Who is this Karen Ann person? Before joining the Folger Shakespeare library as the director of programming and artistic director of Folger Theatre in 2021, Karen Ann Daniels was the director of the Mobile Unit at the Public Theater from 2019 to 2021.

Touring Mobile Unit productions across all five boroughs in New York, and launching new programs such as Mobile Unit and Corrections, which brings the tools of theater into the lives of incarcerated communities. She is a 2021 Fellow at the Atlantic Fellows on Racial Equity.

A network of leaders from the US and South Africa working to deepen their personal leadership, and build expansive new futures in which black people and people of color are seen valued and respected. Not only is she a dear friend, but she is a valued artist and mentor to so many.

**JULIAN MESRI:** I think that what was incredible about that, though, was that we were given the space and the time to work. When people are given space and time to work and feel like they have a home, you make things, and you're able to think about things.

There's a beauty in that. There's a beauty in just simply my philosophy is give people some space and a couple of ideas, and they're going to come up with stuff because that's how our creative engines work. The fact that the institution was willing to say, we trust you enough to just give you these few days, and then give you more days and more days to just create and then show us what you've made, I think that's something really powerful.

**GARLIA** Here's more from my conversation with Rebecca and Julian.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**JULIAN MESRI:** It's the thing that made us feel like by the time we were going into rehearsals now, I feel like we're already in an artistic home. We're able to bring that energy to our cast, we're able to bring that energy to a bunch of our cast too. I think we've worked or--

I mean, some of the people in our cast I worked with that entire from when I was first doing sound design shows, and now they've done like Broadway, and they've all gone through these careers. And it's really wonderful to find us or at the lark. So many of these actors. I remember from the US Mexico exchange, our IP that program was so great.

Again, it's like there's a way in which that creates such a different environment. At the same time, there's actors who maybe I just worked for the first time last year on the Fornes piece, again, that piece was premiered at entire 40 years ago. And the only document for it was like this thing I had to go at Lincoln Center and watch and figure out, OK, how did they do this musical and entire in like-- it's a lot of that. It's a very exciting process to just see how all that comes to fruition, how all that's connected.

**REBECCA** I do.

**MARTINEZ:**

**GARLIA** Go ahead.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**REBECCA** Oh, I was just going to say, I do want to say a little bit about-- one of the things that I have always been-- I've  
**MARTINEZ:** been watching The Public for a minute. There's a lot of reasons to watch The Public. But the thing that I was keeping an eye on is the Latina power team.

With Maria Gorianas, with Stephanie Ibarra, with Roxanna Barrios, with Nadia Medina. Jacob. Well, he's not Latina. He's Latino. But there was a very specific. Laurie Woolery and looking very specifically at this group and there's other folks as well. There isn't in.

Within this larger institution of storytelling, there are advocates that I know I can align with and feel and connect with. It ended up being a Stephanie Ibarra who gave me a seed commission, I don't know, 2018, a long time ago, as a director for the Mobile Unit.

And then we had a lot of transitions with the Mobile Unit itself and pandemic and all sorts of things. But it was that initial commission that got me to think and examine and I followed the Mobile Unit around and I was thinking about the type of work and how things were received. Interviewed a bunch of actors, interviewed some partners.

And just did a really in-depth look at it which was just wildly helpful in the thinking and planning of this. And then when Roxanna was like, hey, do you want to make a thing? I was like, yes, let's make a thing. And she said it was very important that it also have Spanish. And I'm like, yes, I am down. And can it have music? And she said, yes. And I said, OK, I need Julian.

**GARLIA** I love that. I love that. I'd love for you to-- this is an excellent pivot too just from what you shared a little bit.

**CORNELIA** Julian, it sounds as if this piece had quite a bit of reinvention over time and as we think about Shakespeare being  
**JONES:** an actor who also had to reinvent himself.

How do you go about reinventing and adapting the Comedy of Errors into this adaptation? I would love for you to really share that with us.

**REBECCA** I can start a little, Julian, [INAUDIBLE]. One of the initial things that was making me think of is particularly when  
**MARTINEZ:** we were talking about the tour being potentially outside, and this is when there was such big questions. This was like in the fall of 2021 and just how things have shifted and grown. I started to think about street theater in Latin America.

I started to think about what are the ways to invite people in, and what are the ways to-- if you're walking along the street and you hear a thing and you get pulled in halfway through, how to engage this person and bring them in, even if they're there for a minute, or even if they're like, hey, I've got 20 minutes and I'm going to stay, or even if it's like I've been here from the beginning. That was a huge thing.

And that's why music became such an important part about that idea of invitation and wanting to very clearly-- and also tone, tone setting is really important. I really wanted to be a comedy. I really wanted it to be joyful and celebratory. But at the end, Comedy of Errors is about family separation. It's about families who are separated across a border because an arbitrary border because of arbitrary laws.

That's what Comedy of Errors is about. There's wackiness all throughout and we're leaning into the wackiness. And that's why I felt like we can hang on to this story. We can hang on to the structure where the text is mostly in English. We're keeping a lot of the Shakespeare's text. Very edited, but keeping a lot of the situations and then started to use songs as a way to change perspectives.

And we were like, not into that perspective anymore. Or as a way to expand on characters and to give us an insight into a character that maybe was not given a lot of attention to or not given a lot of depth to, but trying to give a little bit of back story of what is the emotional underpinning for these?

Also, it's a wacky good time. But then, at the end, it's really about, for me, what does it mean to reconcile after being separated for so long? It doesn't always have a happy ending. Those were really big questions that we started out with.

**JULIAN MESRI:** One thing about the last question also is very interesting is that my first Mobile Unit experience was as a musician. It never became a full production, but we did readings of Pablo Neruda's transition of Romeo and Juliet. That was my experience with Mobile Unit, and Stephanie brought me along for that. It was Jerry Ruiz was directing it and it was just this incredible way.

I realized that when you see, just bringing in-- because language, and this is something I've always thought of, language has borders. Just like in our society, borders are porous. It really is a matter of really opening that up and the second you open up and you do a show in Spanish suddenly in the middle of Jackson Heights, it communicates in a different way, especially when you feel like Spanish has been put into a specific place within our society and our culture.

The fact that Rebecca came to me and she was like, I want to do Shakespeare. I want to do it accessible. I want to make it a musical. I want to make it in Spanish. All of these things are just making me so happy. All of those things are making me so happy.

I think that this idea of street theater, when I think about-- I was talking about the Teatro Independiente before in Argentina and throughout Latin America, but I'm sort of speaking from my own experience. There's also a tradition of community theater. And because we don't have tons of musicals in Buenos Aires in the way that America does and that specific way, but we do have so much folk music.

The music is part of communities, especially it becomes a part of a community, it becomes a part of a community event, it becomes a part of a family event. It is a connection to the community. When you have these community theaters, I'm thinking of in particular in La Boca where you show up and before you go into the theater, there's a whole mess of food that the members of the community have cooked for us and we eat some food, we chat, we go into a show, and the show is like a musical review.

There's a story and it's a story about the entire history of this particular part of Argentina through one soccer club. And then it just goes through music and music becomes the thread that weaves it all together. I think that there's something so powerful about not just music, but folk music. Music that is, again, not siloed off.

When we think of musical theater and this has been a larger conversation, I've been having with myself about do we call musical theater or do we not call musical theater. And just trying to bring in other sounds and bring in more dance, bringing cumbia, bringing boleros, and have them just be part of that conversation.

When we created this, when I was creating the musical score of the piece, so much of it for me wasn't like I want to do this one style of music. I want to bring in the music that I grew up hearing and the music. But then I also taught, I used to teach a mariachi, little mariachi group in Harlem.

I'm going to bring some mariachi music as well and I'm going to bring the sounds that I've been hearing from my community to create a tapestry of music that isn't the thing, again, when we think of musicals and we think of a certain kind of musical. Thankfully, that's changing and we're seeing more and more examples of hip hop and some Latin styles in music and all of that.

The same way that we're using Spanish. The same way that we're doing that. And to then to bring Shakespeare along. It's a way of saying, no, Shakespeare belongs to all of us. There's entire traditions of theater that take Shakespeare and do what they want with him.

I was just in Buenos Aires and they were doing a version of the Scottish play with one actor and he had adapted the whole thing. It's in Spanish. It's obviously not going to be in iambic pentameter. Part of that is how can we take these stories that are now centuries of years old that have usually lived in certain kinds of institutions and make them part of our culture and our story as well.

**REBECCA MARTINEZ:** We can't just show up in English. We can't show up as a monolith at all. We have to actually represent the folks that we're going to be engaging with. Our upcoming show Comedy of Errors is a bilingual musical adaptation of the Comedy of Errors which was great.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** Here's more from my conversation with Praycious.

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** I rejoined The Public but by the end of Summer of Joy, there was positions that were open in the Mobile Unit. I advocated for myself once again and I got the associate director role. I served in that for a while too under the leadership of Roxanna Barrios who is also an amazing fierce theater maker.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** Someone who was with Mobile Unit for a very long time.

**PRAYCIOUS WILSON-GAY:** For a very very long time, like upwards of more than five years. Really shaped the program into what it is today. After Roxanna moved on to greater things, I was asked to step in as the interim director of the Mobile Unit.

I spent the majority of my career in the Mobile Unit, but it really does align with my personal values around theater making and being in community. It's been a journey, not an easy one, but one that's been worthwhile. The things that I have learned during this time, I could put no price to them.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** What I also hear. Thank you for that. What I also hear is you sharing a couple of moments where you said, Hi, I'm here. I'm doing this for this work. We need to make it something else and elevate it. Can you talk a little bit about that I think as a black woman, as a black person in this industry the ability to say, I'm doing something that should be acknowledged.

You're not seeing it as something that a lot of us have to deal with and there's a lot of anxiety that goes with raising your hand, particularly in a predominantly white institution. Can you shed a little bit of light on that journey?

**PRAYCIOUS**  
**WILSON-GAY:** I think, for me, I know statistically black women don't get the same amount of money opportunities, et cetera, et cetera, as all of our counterparts. I've learned that if you don't advocate for yourself, then no one else will. And if you wait for other people to advocate for you, you may not get it when you want it.

Although none of those times where I had to advocate myself for myself was easy, I also knew that it was necessary because we work in an industry where folks are going to work. It's a collaborative industry. The beautiful thing about theater is that no one's been a production manager their whole life. No one's been an actor their whole life. There's ebb and flow of the amount of work that we do.

I started off in stage management, and then I went to production management. And then I found my way into this producing life, but I didn't begin there. With that, I just knew that I had the skills and I had the tools and the shape of my job descriptions were changing. And with that, that needs to be acknowledged. I'm also just like someone who's like you're going to value me because I know that I'm valuable.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** Yes, you are. And you're always somebody who will support people. I think you're also very active just within the black community at The Public within the staff, being someone who can be a resource for the Black History Month committee. And whatever shape or form, you use your marketing, you use all those skills everywhere. Being your colleague is also a blessing because you just get to enjoy your life and that camaraderie too. I appreciate you as well.

**PRAYCIOUS**  
**WILSON-GAY:** I appreciate you, Garlia, so much. It's really been about keeping our relationships, our community partnership strong so that they understand that us not being able to perform for a year and a half, it's not personal, we're just adjusting. And that in itself being like, I don't have any programming to give you right now. But the minute that we can come back, we're going to do it. That in itself could be its own job.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** Which also goes back to that conversation that we were having about. Just keeping those lines of communication open. If we are able to say to our community partners we're here, we just don't have anything because we're having a tough time too. But when we do, we're here for you. Hi, are you OK? Connecting with people as humans and not as we're going to give something to you so we can say, look what we've done.

**PRAYCIOUS**  
**WILSON-GAY:** Exactly.

**GARLIA** It's very clear that that's not the way that you operate. It really isn't the way that I have known Mobile Unit to  
**CORNELIA** operate at all. Ever since I've known of Mobile, it's been this really beautiful exchange which I think really  
**JONES:** appreciate. And then around Shakespeare which is really cool too. And something that reaches out to the  
community in a new way.

**PRAYCIOUS** Absolutely.  
**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** We keep pulling on this thread and it's fair to say that the target audience for the Mobile isn't the same as for the  
**CORNELIA** rest of the programming at The Public.  
**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** It's not the same.  
**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** Can we talk a little bit more about the difference in the target audience? The effects or the changes, how that  
**CORNELIA** affects or changes the work and does it also affect the show selection as well?  
**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Definitely. Mobile tends to steer away from like the tragedies.  
**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** Yes.  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** We live in New York City. Tragedies happen every day. Not everyone wants to show up to their local rec center  
**WILSON-GAY:** and see a tragedy. We definitely like to focus on joy, especially on the pandemic, we like to focus on comedies  
and joy and things that are going to make people laugh.

I think to your question, what's important to bring up now is the way in which we set up the Mobile Unit, which is  
we bring a carpet, that's about 15 feet by 15 feet, we put audience on all four sides. When you typically go to the  
theater, you need to turn off your cell phone. When someone's phone goes off, everybody turns their head and  
looks at the person like they have committed a cardinal sin.

We say you can take pictures, just don't take videos. I think we've also had people take phone calls during our  
performances. We have people who yell at the characters on the stage when they do something they don't like.  
The way that we show up is with the mindset that we're not going to be sitting in a quiet theater with our hands  
folded.

We're not going to be like this and be like, Oh, this is the best Shakespeare I've ever seen. No, we're looking for  
engagement. We actually prep like our cast to be prepare for people to be like, I know you didn't. You better get  
them. And those are the things that make us special. I think we also bring a show that's cut. We don't do the four  
hour Shakespeare.

We bring a cut script that's no more than 90 minutes because no one wants to sit through for our Shakespeare anymore. I'm just being honest. I personally don't want to sit there for hours Shakespeare. Let me ask for no one. I don't.

Some of the ways in which the actual program is set up and shout out to 10,000 things for creating that model for Barry Edelstein and Oscar Eustace to take and adapt specifically for the Mobile Unit, but those set parameters that we set up around the way we're showing up is what helps us cater to the target audience, which is regular New Yorkers.

**GARLIA** That's it.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Who don't want to pay \$90 to go see a show on Broadway, but still want to see some theater?

**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** Some of what you're saying sounds similar to shifts that we're seeing in theater with Dominique Marceau and her  
**CORNELIA** rules of engagement. That was something that just like popped into my head. I was like, Oh yeah, that sounds  
**JONES:** just like that.

Erika Dickerson just spends I had something. Similar that she also says to people in getting engaging with her work. I'm curious from you what the importance is to just meet people where they are, and how important it is to take this art form off of its pedestal and just say, we're here, enjoy the show.

**PRAYCIOUS** Yes. For me, it's about exposure. An exposure that there is an art form that you don't necessarily have to get a  
**WILSON-GAY:** formal education to that can be a conduit for transformation, whether it be being an actor or actress and actually transforming into a character, or whether it be seeing a story, seeing your story on the stage.

I think about those rules of engagement and I love the first time that I saw colored water. The note was if you feel compelled to say mm-hmm, clap your hands, scream, do it. I was like, Oh, this is so freeing to actually-- it actually reminds me of the globe back back in the day where Shakespeare's shows were not silent.

**GARLIA** No. No.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** They were yelling if they didn't like what was happening on the stage. I don't know what happened between that.  
**WILSON-GAY:** And now where it's like you have to be like shush and be quiet exactly. I don't know what happened, but it's about that exposure and it's also about giving people the ability to react the way that they want to and feel no shame or out of place because they're having a visceral reaction to what they're seeing on the stage.

**GARLIA** I'm wondering then especially in light of some of the things that we were talking about earlier, and the way that  
**CORNELIA** terms like community get thrown around, and as you said, have almost become token jargon.

**JONES:**



How do you enter into a new community and how do you lead a team into a new neighborhood and introduce the Mobile Unit to a new audience? And then what lessons can we all learn about how to create a sustainable community or a partnerships that are more than just a drive by?

**PRAYCIOUS** Yes. I'm going to take the first part of that question. You might have to repeat the second part.

**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** Sure.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** When I show up in a new community, the first thing that I tell everybody is that we are guests in this place. We  
**WILSON-GAY:** are guests. So think about how you would feel if you were throwing a house party and a guest came in and said, I don't know why you put this paper plate out because that's not even in alignment with the party theme. That's not going to feel good. You are immediately going to be like, hold up now. Wait a minute. This is my house.

So the first thing is to recognize that you are a guest when you come into these spaces. And then it's about also being humble and it's about being open and know that someone may come up to you and have a full story and you may not know them from Adam. But you don't show up with defensiveness. You don't show up and try to push them away. You try to gauge how excited they are and match their energy.

Now, if you feel like you're threatened, that's a different situation. But if it's just someone coming up to you saying, Oh my gosh, I love that performance. You remind me of my grandpa when he did this this, this. You need to engage in that. You need people to make people feel like they belong in this space because they do. And the fact of the matter is that we are the guest, so we technically "don't belong" in these spaces.

I usually try to lead with that and really get that in folks head. When you're stepping into this, we actually need to take the form of the community in which we're showing up in and not show up in the form that we assume they want us to. Because they're not looking for what they think that we want to show up as. They want us to show up so that they feel comfortable. And it's our job to make them feel comfortable so that they can actively engage in the work and experience it.

**GARLIA** Yes.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Now, what was the second part of your question?

**WILSON-GAY:**

**GARLIA** The second part was what lessons can we all learn about how to create a sustainable community partnerships  
**CORNELIA** that are more and more than just a drive by?

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Know that your guest always be able to engage in conversation, constant conversation, because community  
**WILSON-GAY:** partnerships are relationships. And so you have to tend to them like you would tend to your mother's relationship. Be humble when you go into those spaces.

Don't show up like you know better than them because you understood the Shakespeare, because you understand the story. That is actually doing a disservice to yourself and the relationships you're trying to build, and it's also undermining folks brilliance.

You can't assume. I think another lesson would be don't assume. Don't come in with assumptions that you're going to be unsafe in this space or that they're not going to get it. That's actually not true. You have to give people as much space and as much breadth to be the person that they are and to experience the work the way that they want to.

**GARLIA** What are some other components of Mobile that people may not see? We have talked to talked a bit about the  
**CORNELIA** work in the correctional facilities. I'd love for you to share a little bit more about that program.

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** We definitely have our public performance sites, but we also do prioritize venues that are more private like  
**WILSON-GAY:** correctional facilities. Over the past 12 years, we've partnered with at least six correctional facilities, local, and state as well as federal. We've also done work with homeless shelters or shelters for the unhoused as I like to say as well.

But that work is not-- we don't publicize that because it's not for public consumption. It's for the folks that are going to be in that space to experience that. There's a lot of logistical work that happens in Mobile Unit that a lot of folks don't see just because we're making theater.

I think there's an extra there's an extra sprinkle to doing that regular producing work because you have to take community into account for every single one of your decisions. It's just like throughout the basis of it. That goes into the choice of who's going to direct the piece, what piece are we choosing, how are we showing up, are you bringing any community engagement elements? Those are a couple of things that folks don't see.

**GARLIA** What do you say to encourage people to come see the Mobile Unit? Why should people attend?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Oh, why should people attend the Mobile Unit? Because we're What do you mean? No, I think people should  
**WILSON-GAY:** attend the Mobile Unit because it's a special experience. If you are used to seeing Shakespeare and having to sit quietly and really pontificate on what's going on, that's not the Mobile Unit.

We're going to show up, we're going to have songs, we're going to have dancing. Afterward, you get to talk to people immediately. You get to put down chairs with us if you want to. We really try to bring people into the experience. And so it's hands-on, it's very intimate, because you will be in the round so you're going to see the sweat on the actor's whole head.

I also think specifically for the show that we have coming up. I don't know if maybe this is because I need to brush up on my Public Theater history. I don't remember the last time that Mobile Unit did a bilingual production. That in itself I think is going to be so resonant on the streets of New York.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

That's it for this week's episode. If you're enjoying this season of Public Square 2.0, we hope you'll remember to like, subscribe, and give us that five star rating you know we deserve. And don't forget to check us out on Tuesdays as we re-released the clearing. A limited series highlighting the play Shadow/Lands by Erika Dickerson-Despenza.

Next time on Public Square 2.0, we get to do a deep dive on the show we hope you've already heard about. "Fat Ham" opened on Broadway on April 12th 2023. You've probably seen it featured on CBS News or in the New York Times. But long before its premiere at the American Airlines theater, "Fat Ham" was a co-production at The Public with National Black Theater.

We get a chance to sit down with some of the artists responsible for this amazing new work, and you take a peek behind the scenes at the development process. For everyone here on the Public Square team, I'm Garlia Cornelia Jones and we'll see you next time Thursdays at The Public Square.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Welcome home to the Public Square. We're so glad to have you back.

**ANNOUNCER:** Today's episode of Public Square 2.0 was hosted and produced by Garlia Cornelia Jones, Director of Innovation and New Media at The Public Theater. With support from New Media Associate Emily White, creative production includes story support by John Sloan III of GhostLight Creative Productions, an audio production by Justin K. Sloan of GhostLight Creative Productions.

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