

MARCEL Fat Ham is abundant.

SPEARS:

BENJA K. Fat Ham is soft. It's loving.

THOMAS:

SAHEEM ALI: Fat Ham is joyous.

MARCEL Tender and juicy and delicious.

SPEARS:

NIKKI Fat Ham is--

CRAWFORD:

SAHEEM ALI: Everything that you want to feel happy about being alive.

NIKKI --a funky good time.

CRAWFORD:

[LAUGHS]

Is that OK, or should I do something else?

GARLIA One of my favorite things about working at The Public is the collision of worlds that happens every day and the
CORNELIA way this building can exist as a hub, a nexus for the careers of so many artists. For today's episode, we walk
JONES: through the journeys of several artists from James Ijames's play, *Fat Ham*, now on Broadway after winning a Pulitzer in 2022.

At the time of this recording, *Fat Ham* has been nominated for five Tony Awards, including Best Play. But before all that, before *Fat Ham* was called the funniest and most invigorating new show on Broadway, this amazing adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was produced, you guessed it, right here at The Public.

SPEAKER: This episode of *Public Square 2.0* includes some strong language and a bit of cursing, just a heads-up.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

GARLIA Hey, everybody, it's Garlia here at The Public. The Public Theater is--

CORNELIA

JONES:

SPEAKER: Your work.

[LAUGHS]

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

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. It's safe to say that I'm excited about every episode of *Public Square 2.0* because I truly love what I do. But I'm especially excited about today because of how so many threads in my life and work all converge.

But more about that later. First, a bit about the play. *Fat Ham* was co-produced here at The Public with the National Black Theater last spring, called by *The New York Times*, an outstanding transformation of Shakespeare's tragedy into a play about Black masculinity and queerness. This new play by James Ijames has been causing an uproar in the New York theater scene.

TIO: Damn, your mama so fine.

[GRUNTS]

JUICY: So I've been told.

TIO: She been fine our whole lives. I used to have wet dreams about your mama.

JUICY: She is your aunt.

TIO: By marriage.

JUICY: Oh, right, my bad. What was I thinking?

TIO: It's all right. It's no harm.

JUICY: I think my uncle had my father killed.

TIO: Juicy!

JUICY: And now my father wants me to kill my uncle.

TIO: Juice, like revenge?

JUICY: Yeah.

TIO: What are you going to do?

JUICY: Well, I never killed nobody.

TIO: Yeah, I think it's probably mad hard.

JUICY: Exactly.

TIO: Maybe you could do it metaphorically.

JUICY: No, see, no, that's what I thought, too. But no, he means real for real.

TIO: He won't know. He dead.

JUICY: Maybe I could do it.

TIO: Yeah, maybe. Maybe, that's-- that's a big maybe.

JUICY: I feel like--

TIO: Uh-huh.

JUICY: Maybe--

TIO: Yes.

JUICY: I could consider--

TIO: Yeah.

JUICY: --thinking about-- you know?

TIO: That's a pickle.

JUICY: I could do it.

TIO: It's one thing to wish someone would disappear than actually killing them, you know?

JUICY: Yeah.

TIO: Do you still love your pops?

JUICY: [STAMMERS]

TIO: What, you're not sure?

JUICY: No, I don't know, man. It's not about whether I love him or don't love him.

TIO: Uh-huh.

JUICY: He my daddy, you know, and that means something.

TIO: Does it? I mean, I was talking to my therapist about you and--

JUICY: Wait, what?

TIO: Yeah, and he said, these cycles of violence are, like, deep, ingrained. Hell, engineered. They-- they hard to come out, like-- like, your pops went to jail. His pops went to jail. His pops went to jail. His pops went to jail. And what's before that, huh, slavery. It's inherited trauma. You're carrying around your whole family's trauma, man. And that's OK. You OK. You ain't got to let it define you.

JUICY: Well, that was deeper than I expected.

TIO: Yeah, well, I've been working on myself lately. And since you're a part of my life, I guess I've been working on you, too.

JUICY: Well, thank you.

TIO: Yeah, you family, man.

BENJA K. THOMAS: I listen to him every night. And he pours his soul into that role of Juicy. I mean, I'm so glad that he's able to do this show. People can see him on the neighborhood. And they see the funny. And they see that Marcel. But when they come to the theater, they can experience something else. And I know that Marcel and other cast members have brought tears to people's eyes because they tell us, wow, that was crazy.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: That was Benja, an actor in *Fat Ham*. By now, you might have already heard about this show. And I hope you have. The cast has been featured by *Good Morning America*, *CBS News*, the *New York Times*, and the *Hollywood Reporter*, just to name a few.

So instead of spending our time recapping the show itself, today we're going to talk to a few of the artists that bring this work to life. We're going to ease right on down the road of their memory lane to better understand how they got from there to here.

Oh, my goodness, I'm so excited to be here with the two of you. I feel like I've been waiting-- I have been waiting for a long time for this interview.

[LAUGHS]

So it's just-- and it has felt really, really special, just because of how we all met and the way that I've seen both of you kind of go through this journey.

You were both part of *48 Hours in Harlem*. And so, you know, for me, the really beautiful thing about this *Fat Ham* episode is that I get to see so many of my friends and just people that I've seen on, like, a legit journey. So just to kind of start back, I'm sure that you've talked about the show a lot.

How did you get started in theater. I'll throw it to Benja first. Like, did you grow up and want to be in the arts? Was this always a goal for you?

BENJA K. THOMAS: It has always been a dream of mine to be in theater. I wanted to be in theater even when I knew that you could get paid for it. I mean, when I didn't know that you could get paid for doing the job, you know, I just love performing as a child. And I was very precocious.

And my parents did not steer me that way. You know, they said, don't go into that profession. You need to find something else to do. But this is something that I've always loved. So I, kind of, followed my own mind. And I didn't even go to school for it, to be honest with you. I didn't go to school for it. Most people have degrees in it, like Mr. Marcel, that we have here. But I didn't pursue that in a direct way that most people have.

But I'm glad that I stuck with my dream and stuck with what my heart wanted me to do. So that's how I got involved in theater.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: So if you didn't pursue it, what were you pursuing? And then how did you end up on the stage?

BENJA K. THOMAS: I started out in fashion. And that's hard for, like, people to believe. But I was coordinating a lot of fashion shows. I was always doing something that dealt with the arts. I also did some photography. But my heart was always in theater. So I just joined these little groups and these little, you know, I guess, storefront theater companies.

And I kind of pursued my art from there. And fortunately, I was able to meet a director, Robert O'Hara, when he was still in grad school. And he kind of put me on a lot of stuff. So I said, well, maybe I can do this, you know. And I started pursuing it. Then I left for eight years, and I became a mom, a bonus mom. And I raised two girls for eight years.

And I said, I need to get back into the theater. So again, Robert O'Hara, who had gotten a name by then, I said, Robert, can I audition for one of your shows? And he said, yeah. And I got back into the game, got an agent. And now here I am on Broadway with Marcel Spears. I mean, you know, who can ask for anything better?

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

Oh, I love that. Also, shout-out that Robert O'Hara was the second guest on *Public Square 2.0*. We had Robert O'Hara on along with Joi Gresham. He's talking about *A Raisin in the Sun*, so yes. And also, Robert O'Hara is another *48 Hours in Harlem* alum, so yeah. And Mr. Spears--

[LAUGHS]

**MARCEL
SPEARS:**

Performing and acting and storytelling has always been a part of the fabric of who I am. Like, it's a part of the city that I come from. It's a part of the family that I come from. There are a lot of, like, natural entertainers in my family. It's a big family. It's a loud, very colorful family, very expressive family.

And so, you get a lot of character studies just by watching people live. And you know, you start imitating certain people or doing something from TV. And family as family does will encourage you. They'd be like, Marcel, go do that thing, go do the-- do that dance you was doing. And so, so you sort of like, you develop a natural skill for it. Like, you sort of hone it.

And then my parents put me in, like, church plays and school plays and things like that since I was really little. But acting wasn't really my focus as a young kid. I was into, like, science and animals and those kinds of things. I thought I was going to be like a zoologist or an animal biologist or something like that.

And then a hurricane hit my city and sort of pushed me out of New Orleans into Texas. And I was in a new environment with new people. None of the stuff that I had access to before was there in this new environment. And so I sort of fell back into acting and storytelling because it was familiar. It was something that I was good at. It was something that I was drawn to.

And I think in that process, something just clicked. And I was like, oh, wait, this-- I think this is my thing. Like, this is what I do. I'm good at this. Like, something about this feels right. Something about this feels good for me. Like, it's healing, and it's inspiring. And it's encouraging to do.

And something about the effect that what I'm doing has on other people feels really, like, important, even though it's like a small school theater. Like, it feels like I'm doing like-- people are feeling this. And I was like, all right, I'm going to do this. And so I went to school, Benja, because I was a kid. And so my parents were like, you got to go to college.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

[LAUGHS]

MARCEL SPEARS: You got to go to college. And so initially, when I went to school, I was an English major and a communications double major. So I did English and communications because my parents were like, oh, if you kind of want to do this acting thing, maybe you could be a journalist. Maybe you can work in news and that level. That was their way of doing it.

And like, both my parents are educators or teachers. And so they were like, you get an English degree. You can teach anywhere. You get to communicate with your degree. You could be a journalist. I was like, all right. I immediately, immediately in the first semester of college, my freshman year, I picked up a theater minor.

And then by the end of-- by the beginning of the second semester, I completely dropped English and communications and was full fledged a theater major, like, just--

GARLIA He looked over.

CORNELIA

JONES:

MARCEL SPEARS: Much to the dismay of my parents, they were like, what are you doing? I was a theater major. And I stuck with it. So Benja, I have two theater degrees. I have a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Fine Arts from Columbia because I like pain. And I like putting myself in a mountain of debt and seeing if I could get out. Like, it's a game.

Like, I'm going to see how much debt I can accrue and see, like, if I can make it out by the end of my life, right, if I can make it out of debt. So far, I'm doing OK, actually. [INAUDIBLE]

GARLIA I would say that I think you're doing OK, Marcel. I don't know your personal details. But I would say, from the outside--

CORNELIA

JONES:

MARCEL So far, I'm doing OK.

SPEARS:

BENJA K. THOMAS: I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't pick a major. I mean, it was crazy. You know, I studied fashion, merchandising, and buying. I don't know. I just, you know what, I was getting ready to reveal my age. So I'm not going to do that you can look it up online. But I'm not going to do that.

But you know, was my head was somewhere else, listening to music and not really paying attention and not really focusing, you know. If I could go back in time, that is one of the things that I would do. I would kind of be a little more focused than what I was when I was in college, you know.

GARLIA So jumping into, you know, you both have brought up the support of family and friends. And I think being able to enter into a career in the arts can be scary, scary, and sometimes daunting, right? As Marcel, you've said your parents were like, why don't you focus on something where you can have a job, right?

CORNELIA

JONES:

And so I'm curious, what-- you know you've answered this a bit. But what type of support that you had as a young artist? And is there anything that you wish you had, right? Is there someone in the arts that you sort of wish you saw that was doing what you were doing that you could have said, oh, this is a path. Like, it is possible for me to go this way.

**MARCEL
SPEARS:**

Support, I've always been supported by my family, I think, in everything that I did. I think naturally, the position that I play in my family, I'm the oldest of five children. I'm a boy in this world where men are encouraged to be productive. And so their value is assessed by how productive they can be.

And I'm a Black boy. I'm a Black man in this world, where Blackness is seen as a threat in many places when it shows up in a body that looks like mine. And so I think my parents, who have always been supportive, were worried and concerned that the career path that I was choosing and the thing that I have fallen in love with was not going to sustain me.

It was something that-- they were naturally worried. They were like, man, like, how are you going to make money? How are you going to support yourself? If you have a family, how are you going to support them? What is your life going to be like? And so I think, like, all of their fears sort of put them in a position where support looked different.

Support at that time looked like a lot of questions. It looked like a lot of [AUDIO OUT]. It looked like a lot of encouraging to, like, build up other skills, other revenues of what [AUDIO OUT]. And I think it took them a minute to see just how serious I was about it because then again, from their perspective, seeing their child grow up, like, at one point, I was to be a [AUDIO OUT].

Then I started doing theater. And so in their mind, they were like, OK, he's going to be a teacher and a journalist. He's going to do communications. And he's going to be like whatever, whatever. And then I'm just like, I want to do theater. Like, I want to act. So from their perspective, like, so many shifts have happened, they're like, man, I don't know if this kid is going to like what-- he's all over the place.

But I really was never all over the place. I kind of was always very consistent about what I wanted to do. I just didn't know how to explain it to them in a way that they could understand. And I think once I was about to graduate from Prairie View A&M University in Houston, like, I went to PV. It's an HBCU.

Once I was about to graduate, and I was like, talking about what my plan postgraduation was supposed to be, and I was telling them that, like, I had been encouraged by one of my teachers to continue my training and like, potentially look at some grad schools because originally, my plan postgraduation was to move to California and just make it.

Like, I was just going to be so brilliant that it would be undeniable. And people would be like, all right, we've got to get this kid a job. So that was my original plan. But going into my senior year of college, but through that year and like talking to my professors and like, doing all this professional development and like, all of these courses about what you're going to do postgraduation, I was encouraged to go to grad school.

So I was just like, look, worse comes to worse, I can apply for these grad schools, which is not cheap. Like, you got to pay all these application fees. And my family helped me with that. But I can apply to these grad schools. And if that's what God wants me to be, He'll open that door. And I will have access to that thing. If not, I'm going to do what I got to do and figure out what my next move is. So that's what I'm going to do.

And so I auditioned for-- me and my partner at the time, we auditioned to all these grad schools. We knew we wanted to be on the East Coast because we felt like in New York, you had access to TV, film, and theater. LAS has theater, but it's not as like, robust as it is in New York. So we was like, all right, we're going to go to New York. We're going to be in that area.

So we applied to every single grad school in this area. And I got accepted into Columbia. And I went to Columbia, and I gave them all my money--

GARLIA All your money.

**CORNELIA
JONES:**

**MARCEL
SPEARS:** I gave them all the money that I could possibly muster and some money that I stole from other people that I still have to pay back. And I just poured myself into that process. And I was like, look, I don't know what's going to happen when I leave grad school. But I know that I'm going to take full advantage of everything that this city has to offer me.

And that's how I got into *48 Hours in Harlem* because I-- in grad school, we weren't encouraged to do productions outside of school. But I was like, I'm in New York. And there are so many different, like, organizations and theater outlets. They're, like, there are so many storytellers and theater makers in the city.

It would be ridiculous for me to pay all this money to be in New York, go to school, and not do anything else. Like, I understand we're supposed to be focusing on my training. But I can like, maximize my training by practicing what I'm learning in school in these other places. So I was auditioning for everything. I was trying to go everywhere. I was in everybody's face. I was at NBT all the time.

As soon as I got-- as soon as I got the call-- because I don't remember which one of the producers I met at another festival. But as soon as I got the call--

GARLIA Eric or Jonathan?

**CORNELIA
JONES:**

**MARCEL
SPEARS:** Yeah, yeah, I think it was Jonathan. But as soon as I got the call to do *48 Hours*, I did it.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** So remember how I said this episode was special for me, well, I first met Benja K. Thomas and Marcel Spears back through another project, *48 Hours in Harlem*, produced by Harlem9. And as one of the Harlem9 producers, it's been our job since 2010 to organize this crazy 48-hour theater festival that so many artists have come through.

Why is this so important? Because no one gets anywhere on their own. And as you're hearing from Marcel and Benja, early career experiences have been vital to their artistic journeys.

**MARCEL
SPEARS:** I did *Fat Ham* this time. I was doing everything that I possibly could. I was doing everything.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** Yeah, but that's so-- that is so important because you have been part of this Black theater community in New York for a long time, right? And so then to see you go off and have your TV show, you know, which is just really exciting to say, wait a second, that's one of our alums. Like, we can repost. We can share. This one of our alums from that network to a show.

Like, that is-- it is so beautiful to see that journey. And then we see the rewards. Now you're in a five-time Tony-nominated show on Broadway. I mean, that is just so incredible. That's incredible.

**BENJA K.
THOMAS:**

Well, I wish-- and I wish that I had the focus that Marcel had as a young person. But I will say this, and I don't want it to sound like an old Negro spiritual, you know, but I come from two families. I was adopted. So my adoptive family did not have the opportunity to be educated.

And my mother had to drop out of school at the fifth grade. So for a long time, you know, she worked very hard. What she did was she adopted me. And that was the beautiful thing because this woman raised me to be one of the best people that I think I could be. She loved me unconditionally. And that's where I learned unconditional love.

But because they were not very educated, their focus for me was education, as opposed to performing because that was something that they didn't see as viable or that you could make a living out of. And they wanted more for me. So I was not focused in that way.

But when I did perform, the woman who raised me came to that I did, you know. Even though she said then, just find something else to do, she came to every performance. And she encouraged me in that way. But I wasn't focused because I didn't think I could make a living out of it because of the messages I was hearing as a young person.

So I would go to places, like the National Black Theater. And they gave me a little chump change. They really did. But it was very encouraging. And one of the people who encouraged me most was Tunde Samuels. I don't know if you knew him, Tunde.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

I didn't meet-- I didn't meet Tunde. Someone just introduced me to Tunde's partner at an event. But I never met Tunde. But I do remember seeing to Tunde's photo in the offices in NBT.

**BENJA K.
THOMAS:**

And he was most encouraging to me. You met [INAUDIBLE]. That was his partner. But he was most encouraging to me. And that's when I knew I had something. He was like, Benja, you got something. And he would send me little notes. And he would send me one-person shows of people who've written scripts. And he said, you know, you can do this.

So I think he was one of the original encourages to me. And you know, I still was kind of air-headed. But eventually, I started to focus and think that I could do it because finding out that I was-- finding out that I was adopted, I don't know if you know what that feeling is like. But it's always like, what did I do wrong?

And I had that sense of-- I didn't have a sense of purpose because I always thought that there was something wrong with me. And I thought something was wrong with me for a long, long, long time. And eventually, I met my biological family. And I found out it wasn't me, of course, you know.

And then there was another set of encouragement. But that was later on in my life. I think I kind of veered off the conversation, but--

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

No, no, no, I mean, it's perfect, though, Benja, because we're talking about the type of support that you really had as a young artist, right. And you're highlighting people that they were able to give you encouragement that really like-- like, that is part of your story and these steps and these tracks to Broadway, right. We're in a five-time Broadway-nominated show-- sorry, we're in a five-time Tony-nominated show on Broadway. And that is-- and that is incredible.

And I remember, Benja, I saw a clip of you on social media. And you were showing where you lived at one point, and just sort of acknowledging that you came from this place. And you are now on Broadway.

**BENJA K.
THOMAS:**

It's been an incredible journey, I think. I think that I learned a lot of lessons on the way. And I'm still learning lessons. But now, I'm a lot more confident. And I am working in a show with some incredible humans, not just actors, really, because sometimes you work in shows-- and Marcel, maybe you can attest to this.

You work in shows, and you do the show and blah, blah, blah. But these humans that I'm working with now, they are so incredibly loving, so incredibly giving. It's like we're family. So what people-- I hope that what people see every night is a family unit on stage having a great time, telling a story that's profound, but also fun.

And I hope that they can see the love that we have for each other because we have developed that. And Marcel is kind of like the head of that. I kind of love Marcel. I don't want to say that publicly. But I kind of love that dude.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

I see that. I see that. I mean, I see that. It feels fun. Go ahead.

**MARCEL
SPEARS:**

No, I love you, too, Benja. I think-- uh-oh. We lost. I love you, too. I think hearing about your story, and like, every time I hear you talk about it, like, you acknowledge, like, the journey and like, how tumultuous that journey is and like, how you look around to get to where you are.

But to me, I just hear how-- like, what you said was like, I didn't have the focus. But what I see in you is like this persistence that you've had, like, this commitment to your responsibilities, to the people around you, to the people that you love. And that is something that has always been present in every time you tell your story.

And that's something I've always felt since meeting you. And even like, because again, my first time seeing you, I saw you on stage. I didn't know you. I saw you on stage. I'm just like, this lady is brilliant. Like, what the hell is going on here? And so for me, when I get like, the casting in my email. My agent sends me like, all right, so you're going to be doing *Fat Ham*. Congratulations. Here is the rest of the cast.

I'm looking at you and Billy. And I'm like, I know these people have come to-- like, they're going to come in. And they're going to do their thing. Like, they have come to work. And so I felt an immediate responsibility to step up to the level that I felt like y'all were at. I felt like it had to get to where you were in my work so that I didn't bring y'all down because I was like, they're going to bring it every time. They're going to come with it every single time.

I have to make sure that I am worthy of sharing the stage with these people. So it's so interesting to hear you talk about yourself because you're almost humble to a fault. Like, you just have this like, oh, you know, I'm just here. And this is just like my baby. You earned your spot here. Like, you are absolutely brilliant. And it is a pleasure and joy watching you every day.

And it's true, like, something like-- in theater, we have to make these, like, fast families. But the ones that stick, it doesn't happen all the time. Like the ones that, like, really, really, really impact who you are as a person and make you feel loved and make you feel like this sense of togetherness, like families, like, bicker a little bit. There's, like, a little bit of, like, eye rolling and things like that.

But there's so much love there that you just, like, I just know that these people are going to be in my life for a long time. Like, these are people I'm going to, like, catch up with. Every time I come to town, I'm going to see what y'all doing and different things like that. Like, the love really does go that deep, and that is rare.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

Nikki Crawford is nominated for a Tony for Best Actress in a play for her role as Tedra in *Fat Ham*. But you might know her from one of her many TV shows or movies, like *United States of Al*, *A Different World*, *NCIS-- Los Angeles*, *Criminal Minds*, and one of our producer's personal favorites, *Homeboys in Outer Space*.

But Nikki hasn't just done TV and film. Her career has been incredibly expansive. And this is a historic nomination that places her in the footsteps of Cicely Tyson, Ruth Negga, LaChanze, and Audra McDonald.

**NIKKI
CRAWFORD:**

My name is Nikki Crawford and she/her/hers. Well, I won't say this is all I ever wanted to do. I started off as a dancer. And I thought I was going to dance with New York City Ballet. But I caught the bug actually early on. I wanted to act when I was, like, eight years old after seeing a few shows.

And I just knew, I said, I think this is what I have to do. But I continued to dance and thought that classical ballet was going to be my path. And then I started taking ballets to enhance my ballets. And the first acting class I had was when I was in-- it was like, I was in ninth grade in high school. And I said, oh, no, this is it.

I continued to dance throughout high school, which really helped me later on in life, especially when I did musical theater because it-- I was a true triple threat. I could sing. I really sing. I really do musicals as well. I really do music. I mean, I really sing legitimately. So I'm a singer, dancer, and actress, not so much a dancer anymore.

But that's how I started off in the industry. And then I went to Carnegie Mellon School of Drama. And I have a degree from there. And I've actually started working well before I graduated and then never stopped.

[LAUGHS]

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

I spoke with Benja and Marcel earlier. So we sort of also had the conversations about school or not going to school and kind of the journey to your path, you know. So along those lines, we all know that this industry and jumping into it can be quite daunting, you know. And it also requires the support of friends and family and teachers, right.

And so I'm curious what type of support that you had as a--

**NIKKI
CRAWFORD:**

As a child?

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

--a young artist.

NIKKI I had a teacher in high school, an acting teacher, Ms. [INAUDIBLE], who I've been speaking about a lot today. And
CRAWFORD: she encouraged me. I studied with her in high school. And she pushed me to do this professionally. And my family was very supportive for a very long time until I got to a certain age. And they were like, OK, doesn't look like this is going to happen for you, you know.

And that's OK, you know. When I tell people, young people, especially, you have to have a belief inside of yourself that I don't care who's against you, who tells you don't do it, stop, you suck. I don't care what have you. If you have that voice inside you, and I believe that's the voice of God, you keep going.

I'm just now, after 30 years, being acknowledged on a grand level for my work. And I've been working for 30 years, you know. And it's OK. It's not other people's dream to believe in. You have to believe in yourself. And I have faith in God, and I just felt like God put a gift inside of me that I needed to share with the world. And so it was me and God.

And just-- I just said, OK, we're going to do this.

GARLIA Having it all.

CORNELIA

JONES:

NIKKI We're going to do it, yeah.

CRAWFORD:

GARLIA Is there a type of support on your journey that you would wish that you had? Like, did you see people out there
CORNELIA doing things and not on path that you said, OK, this is how I know I can get there?

JONES:

NIKKI I think there were times. I think financially, it was difficult. Like, I-- you know, I saw the friends who got married.
CRAWFORD: And then they had a husband who was a lawyer. So they didn't have to go out and get side jobs. And I've had to hustle, I mean, hustle, whether that be teaching, whether that be delivering food, buying groceries, you name it, dog walking, standing on my head, being a clown, teaching kids, whatever.

I had to do it because I had to pay the bills at the end of the day. Your landlord doesn't want to hear, oh, you didn't get an acting job. You got to pay the rent. You got to pay-- you know.

GARLIA You got to pay the rent.

CORNELIA

JONES:

NIKKI And so I think that would be the type of financial assistance-- or I would have-- it would have been wonderful. But
CRAWFORD: I don't know if I would have been as hungry if I had-- if I was, you know what I mean, if I had that fallback because there's so much-- there's so much rejection in the business, so much. I mean, I've heard more no's than I've heard yeses.

And if I had that financial luxury, I might have just said, you know what, I'm good over here. I got-- you know what I mean. Not that I ever got into this business to be rich, although it would be nice. But you know, I may have given up. So the path that I took was the right path for me, and it worked.

And so I don't have any resentment. I don't have any ill will towards anybody who failed to continue to believe in me or never believed in me. That's OK. That's their opinion. We're all entitled to it. It was just supposed to happen, you know. I just-- I love James's writing style. I get the-- there's a musicality to it.

And then on top of that, the icing on the cake is that all of the actors on stage, we get along so well. And they're all so brilliant. And it's like-- it's like a dance. I liken it to like we're all playing instruments. And it's like jazz, but we're totally in lockstep with one another. And it's just like you can fly. And I trust everybody on that stage, you know.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: And it shows. I mean, I agree. When I saw *Fat Ham*, I was just smiling the whole time. And when your character came out, I just-- I loved her. And she was just so full of life.

TEDRA: I want to talk to you.

JUICY: About what?

TEDRA: Your daddy.

JUICY: My daddy is dead.

TEDRA: You know what I'm talking about.

JUICY: The king, my queen, is dead.

TEDRA: Huh?

JUICY: It's Shakespeare, kind of.

TEDRA: You watch too much PBS.

[LAUGHTER]

JUICY: How can one watch too much PBS?

TEDRA: You don't need to know all that.

JUICY: Yeah, it's harmless.

TEDRA: Whatever. You need to stop goading Rev.

JUICY: I didn't do nothing to him.

TEDRA: That little charades trick you pulled.

JUICY: No, I pulled a slip from the bowl just like everyone else.

TEDRA: You're upsetting him.

JUICY: He didn't seem upset to me.

TEDRA: Well, he was.

JUICY: Mm-hmm.

TEDRA: Just be nice to him.

JUICY: Oh, how nice the quarrel was--

TEDRA: What?

JUICY: It's Shakespeare.

TEDRA: If you bring up that dead, old white man one more time, don't nobody want to talk about his ass. You act like he got all the answers. You look crazy out here quoting Shakespeare and shit.

JUICY: Yeah, well, it seemed appropriate.

TEDRA: Appropriate, my ass!

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** Acclaimed Kenyan writer and scholar, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, once said, "Black intellectual tradition has given so much to the rest of the world. But it is often invisible." I don't know if Director Saheem Ali thinks about this quote and specific. But his work consistently seeks to celebrate Blackness, even and especially, as it's layered and intertwined with what a lot of people define as classical theater.

We had a chance to catch up with the Tony-nominated *Fat Ham* director on the lunch break during rehearsals for the new musical, *Goddess*, by Jocelyn Bioh.

Saheem.

SAHEEM ALI: Garlia.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** I feel like it has taken a very long time for us to do this.

SAHEEM ALI: I know. I know, too long.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** So we've already had the opportunity to sit down with Nikki, Benja, and Marcel and really have some great conversations. And I know that you all have been in a lot of really cool, quick interviews and talked about the show in spurts. But I would really love for us to start a bit by focusing on you as the artist that is bringing this story to life.

So can we just for me and the audience start by you introducing yourself? And if you can please tell us your name or pronouns, if you'd like to share, and how you identify.

SAHEEM ALI: Yeah, absolutely. So I'm Saheem Ali. I use here he/him pronouns. I'm a theater director. I have been for a while. And I'm currently one of the associate artistic directors and the resident director at The Public Theater in New York where we both work.

Yeah, so I've-- I've been working freelance in New York for a few years now. When we met, I was a freelance director. So my new position of The Public is pretty new. When we did *Kill Move Paradise*, I wasn't associated with any particular institution. So when I came to The Public, one of the things I really wanted to do was to bring playwrights and artists who I care about and want to collaborate more with.

And so, actually, two of them, so Jocelyn Bioh and I met doing a reading at NBT of her play *Nollywood Dreams*, and then James and I met at NBT doing *Kill Move Paradise*. So I have a rich history and tradition with NBT just meeting extraordinary playwrights, and then continuing on with them as the years have progressed.

GARLIA Well, that is such a great story. And I really love all the connections to NBT. I'm always shouting their name, and I
CORNELIA know you--

JONES:

SAHEEM ALI: Me, too

GARLIA You are, too. So that's always very exciting, too. So how did you get your start in theater? Did you grow up
CORNELIA wanting to be in the arts? Was this always a goal, or did you just wake up one day and find yourself here?

JONES:

SAHEEM ALI: So I grew up in Kenya, born and raised in East Africa. And I'd always kind of felt drawn to performing arts, whether it was performing myself or putting together things that people would perform in, so kind of producing/directing from an early age. And I wanted to come to the US to study.

So I moved here in the late '90s as an immigrant. I lived in Boston. I went to school there. I studied theater. And I really shifted my focus to directing when I was in undergrad and wanted to just kind of sharpen my tools. So I looked around to graduate programs. And so I moved to New York to go to Columbia for the graduate directing program.

And that's really where I've now settled in New York because of that. So I'd always been drawn to being a storyteller. And it wasn't until I really came to America that I was able to kind of be exposed to more theater, the making of it, but also the consumption of it, and really found my place in the theater scene in New York, finding playwrights, who I gravitated towards, finding stories that I was passionate about.

GARLIA So I'm curious about your training as well, you mentioned Columbia. And we've talked a bit about this with Nikki
CORNELIA and Marcel and Benja. But we all know that this is a very hard industry. And the education can also take many
JONES: forms. So what type of training got you here, helped you grow? And how do you continue that growth now as an artist?

SAHEEM ALI: So in my undergrad days, as I was dipping my toe into directing, kind of small productions at school, I realized that I had a lot to learn just by being in other people's rooms. So I did a lot of assistant directing because I found that to be a way to be exposed to the craft, to the technique, to the logistics and vocabulary of theater-making.

It's like you can-- some things you learn by doing. And others, you learn by observing. So I was observing for the longest time. And then I felt like I really needed to go to a place where I was-- where, you know, to, like, hang my hat, as you say. Like, I'm going to hang my hat here. I'm going to be in this place. It's going to be like a creative laboratory.

It's going to be a place where I'm not worried so much about, like, packaging and like, selling a thing, but really focusing on the craft itself. And the Columbia program really helped me there. Anne Bogart heads the program. It's six students. And most of them are international like me. So it was really an opportunity for me to be exposed to, like, other ways of making theater and other, like, kind of creative thought processes.

But then to have a chance to work on Shakespeare, work on Chekhov, work on Ibsen, work on like a new text of a playwright who is in the program, who was just doing it for the first time. And I found that those years really helped me cultivate, like, my voice, cultivate, like, my sense of what kind of stories I care about, what kind of artists I want to make stories with.

So it was really an opportunity to experiment a lot before going out into the big bad world and like, having to do it, like, for real.

GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES: Yeah, the big bad world. [LAUGHS] Yes, yes, yes. Does your experience immigrating to the-- also, you've mentioned you're from Kenya. And you immigrated here. So does your experience immigrating to the US affect your work and perspective as a director?

SAHEEM ALI: Oh, absolutely. Well, it affected my perspective as a human being because I came from a country that was a lot more diverse, a lot more tolerant, a lot more kind of welcoming of, like, all types of people because that's how we were brought up. And you know, I discovered racism in America. This is the country where I was like, oh, OK, there's like a real kind of, like, segregation.

People treat you differently. People have different sets of expectations of you. And you know, you, kind of, know that in theory growing up outside. You know, like, slavery is a thing that happened once upon a time in this country. But it isn't until you actually hear that you understand how it manifests in, like, deep, specific ways, both in terms of human interaction, but also in terms of creative possibility, right.

So moving here really taught me that. I learned what it means to be a person of color in America. My first, like, racial slurs that I experienced were in this country. And again, when I used to see work, I'd look at, like, count the number of people of color in, like, a musical or a play and be like, oh, they're, like, always off to the side. Like, why is no one-- why aren't the people of color at the center of the work, you know?

And so that really became like a mission of mine to choose stories and collaborators who did that. And even if it's a play, like, someone who's not living anymore, like, how can I populate that world with people of color in a way that I just hadn't seen before.

So the experience of coming here-- and look, I love this country. I think there are extraordinary things about being in America and American. I'm proudly one now. Like, I vote. I, like, do all the things that one cares about as a citizen. And I also recognize all the things that are problematic and deficient and broken about the country.

And I think just the back and forth really helps me find, like, my sense of purpose, you know, in the work that I do, in ways that I'm just very intentional about the rooms that I enter and the stories that I tell because I just understand the kind of world that we're in.

GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES: Mm-hmm. Thank you. So you did an interview for *American Theatre* a few years ago back in 2020 when you were directing *Richard II*. And in that piece--

SAHEEM ALI: Mm-hmm, with [INAUDIBLE], yeah.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** And in that piece, they quote you as saying, "I wanted to be very clear that people of color were at the center of the narrative and at the center of power." And it's clear from your answer to that last question that you still embody this sentiment.

So I'm wondering if you can expand a bit on how that perspective seeps into your work. Is it a consistent influence? And in specific, how do you balance the presentation of cultural nuances, especially when there's a reality that a lot of commercial audiences aren't as diverse?

SAHEEM ALI: So I feel like because of my own identity, I understand cultural nuance in a way that just-- you know, by virtue of my birth, my identity is mixed race. Like, I'm mixed Indigenous African and Middle Eastern, which is a cultural identity of the Swahili people in Kenya. So already, I occupy like, not really here, not really there, kind of like having like a-- you know, not an either kind of extreme identities that existed in the country.

So coming here, I feel like I understand that more just because of where I came from and also what I experienced here myself as a person of color, who kind of like, got to really know different racial identities as a result of being in America. And so I do work that's complex. I do work that, like, doesn't maybe like-- has, like, intersections of different kinds of identities.

Like in *Fat Ham*, you know, Juicy is queer, and he's Black, and he's southern. And those are three different identities that are so specific to that character, for example, right. Some of them, I have overlap with. And some of them, I don't. And so I get to discover what it means when those three things are playing against each other in a complex way, right, because they each feed into a way that Juicy experiences the world and how he's treated and how he moves through it.

And so I'm sensitive to that, again, because of where I'm from and what I represent myself and how I move through the world. But for me, those are the stories that I gravitate towards because just life is a lot more complex than we maybe want to give it than we-- it's a lot more complex than sometimes stories allow for, you know.

And so, again, those are the stories that I feel like I want to tell. Those are-- and sometimes it's complex. Like, I do plays that have-- set in different African countries. But I can't always find actors who are African here in America, right? So I'm casting African-Americans to play Africans. And sometimes, like, I have to understand the nuance there and what I bring in terms of cultural specificity and nuance and what the actors bring.

And it's always-- there is no one size fits all. Like, we did *Merry Wives*, for example, with Jocelyn Bioh in the Park, where the conceit was this African diaspora living in Harlem and creating this world that has a multiplicity, but a specificity about where we are in America. And so creating that world, making it-- it's just like there's diversity within Blackness, you know.

It's not a monolith. So carving all of that out, even just within the African diaspora, for me, that's like-- that's exciting to enter a world and figuring out, what does that mean? How is that interesting? You know, where are my blind spots? What do I don't understand also? So I just-- I do the work that forces me to engage and ask questions, and also hopefully, everyone in the room is also engaging in the work.

So it doesn't stop. It doesn't stop. I love it. I love it.

GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES: No, it does not stop. It does not stop. And so you've-- just in hearing you, you know, speak about your work, it's very clear that you have directed a-- that you have directed a lot of different types of work from contemporary theater to Shakespeare and then some operas as well.

And I'm curious if you gravitate towards one more than the other and how each genre affects your approach.

SAHEEM ALI: I don't think I gravitate to any in particular. I love working on new plays. I love working on old plays, if I can find a way to have it speak to the contemporary moment, you know. Like, I'm always-- even if whatever, if it's an older play, I don't do it unless I feel like I have a particular entry point that feels fresh and unique and also subjective for me.

It's always important for me to find, like, a connection to it in a way that feels truthful to me because otherwise, I'm making something that is theoretical and for someone else. And I love that. I love sometimes working on those plays because I have a bit more permission and an ability to, like, kind of move things around and like, take out lines and maybe jumble things around as opposed to working with a new playwright, where I'm really like deferential and respectful of, like, what the playwright put down on the page, you know.

Like, yes, we can collaborate. But hopefully, I'm doing it because there's enough on the page that I feel like, OK, yeah, like, this excites me. I'm not going into it to try and like rework it. I'm going into it to collaborate with it. But it's a different relationship because you know, it's someone else's work. And they're there to participate in the making of it.

And I love going back and forth between the two of those. I think I'd be bored if I was only doing one or the other, you know. So I find ways to keep it interesting that way.

GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES: You keep it interesting. Can we talk a little bit about the concept of classical theater and really the term classical as it pertains to the arts in general? It's always a bit like the term classical carries with it the connotation that leans more towards European artistic aesthetics and can also tend to race other cultural art forms.

So I'm wondering if you agree or do you disagree with that perspective and how that affects the projects that you choose.

SAHEEM ALI: I think because of that, like, early production of *Romeo and Juliet*, where I was, like, 16-- 15 or 16, I think, and in a world where they may have been talking a little bit differently, but it was me in it. I've never had trouble finding my way into work that feels truthful, even though it wasn't written necessarily with someone of my skin color in mind, you know, because hopefully, at the heart of it, there's something that is human. There's something that feels like part of the human experience.

I mean, with Shakespeare, I think that's why these plays have survived so long because yes, they're kings and queens, and they're in Denmark and Norway and all those, like, white places, you know. But that's not actually what they're about. Those are like their costumes. They're like something on the exterior. There's something in the interior that all human beings can relate to, if you give them a way in.

People have different ways in when they feel like they can relate. The most powerful thing that theater can solicit is empathy. Like, someone else is going through an experience that you can relate to. You may not have had that intense experience happen to you. But you can put yourself in their shoes.

And there's a way in which the production, there's a way in which the actors-- the space that you're sitting in invites you to participate, invites you to empathize. And you know, there's an adage about the kind of, like, the more specific and like, rooted something is, the more universal it can become.

And that's such a paradox because like, well, how can I relate to, like, something that's like, where people don't look or talk like me? And yet, you can because at the end of the day, you know, as a human being, we feel the same things, you know. And stories make you feel.

And so I think, for me, as long as there's a way that the story isn't perpetuating or doing harm, as long as they're at the root of it, there's something that I feel is an important kind of lesson for someone to take away, then those are the stories worth considering, how they can speak to-- how they can speak to people who may not have been intended when the thing was being written.

Art can transcend. Pieces of music in different languages can speak to you. You don't know what they're saying necessarily, but you hear the melody, you hear the music. And it moves you somehow. So there's a magic there, you know. So I think as long as that magic is something that feels like relatable and attainable to you, then you have permission to figure out how to collaborate with it to make something else.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:**

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. You know, when you talk about empathy, I'm also thinking about the way you just spoke about Marcel's character and the intersections that he embodies. How do you begin to direct someone in such a complex role? Into that again, how do you begin to direct someone in such a complex role?

I hear you talking about this almost universality to the way human beings feel so that I'm thinking about how you work with an actor or an artist to find that truth, even when the experience of the character-- even when the experiences of the characters aren't your own or maybe aren't even shared completely by the actor.

SAHEEM ALI:

So for me, it always starts with the playwright and what the playwright has put down on the page. If I get a script, like, I got *Fat Ham*, I read it. I think it's funny. I think it's moving. I think it's relatable I talk to the playwright. And I say, tell me about your play, tell me why you wrote it, tell me what you were thinking, tell me what you're hoping.

And then hopefully, there's some overlap between what my experience of it was and what they were intending because I never want to work on something, if my experience of the thing is different from what the playwright was intending because in that instance, another director should do it. It's not my place to try and like, you know, make it into something that they didn't hope or dream it could be.

And then the next part is engaging with the actors. So now that we have a shared understanding with the playwright, when we're auditioning the actors, I'm seeing how they come in with the material. I'm seeing what questions they might have. I'm seeing what their responses are. And again, I'm looking for another sense of overlap between what I'm thinking, between what the playwright is thinking.

And so what they bring is their connection to the material. So if they can connect to the material, hopefully, they are now elevating it to something that even I didn't see on the page, something that I'm not capable of because that's their ministry. That's their artistry. It's to elevate the material, to embody. Like, their words on the page that make an actor move a certain way, talk a certain way, all these, like, technical things that add up to being an expression of a character.

Now, in what we do, in art, in theater, there's never going to be 100% overlap. There's always a leap of the imagination somehow. There's always, like, a way in which we are always embodying someone or something else. That's performance. You're not doing-- you're not playing yourself up there. You're playing a character. And that character is not going to be a facsimile of you.

So what are the ways in which you can relate, and what are the ways in which you're going to have to bring something else to the table, because guess what, their family situation isn't going to be the same as yours. The way they were brought up, the brain that, like-- there are just ways in which we have to, like, reach for-- again, it's empathy, how are you filling in the gaps that exist between your experience and the character's experience.

So I'm doing that from the outside. And then the actor is kind of doing that from the inside. And hopefully, we're meeting somewhere to create something that we have an agreement on, you know. So I'm queer, and Juicy's queer. Juicy's Black from America. I'm Black from Africa, you know. He's Southern. I'm Kenyan.

So where are the ways in which, like, I can understand because like, I'm outside of it? But where are the ways that I'm inside of it, and I can relate? And hopefully, there's enough of that that we can actually create something together that feels truthful and honest because even James, James is writing about experiences of people, like, maybe they're like, based on someone that he knows or based on something that he heard.

But he's also using his imagination to create a character, who has personality that's different from his own, you know. So it's always like a leap of imagination. And hopefully, you bring enough from it from own experience to relate. And then the rest is just, you know, imagination.

GARLIA

So you worked-- you've worked with James | James before, as we mentioned earlier. What was it like coming back to that collaborative relationship? Had you two remain friends in the interim? And how does your relationship influence your work?

CORNELIA

JONES:

SAHEEM ALI:

Oh, yeah, James and I love each other. We are brothers. We're friends. We're colleagues. You know, I really-- part of my-- part of the reason I love the theater is because I get to make some of my closest friends that way. I love to work with my friends. I love to meet people doing this thing and then sticking to them and working with them again and again and again. And James is one of those people.

So we met on *Kill Move*, became fast friends, have, like, done readings of things and talked about things in the interim. I was there at his wedding. You know, like, we text almost every day now. We are tight. And so I think, for me, part of what I love is finding people who see the world the way I do, who care about the same things I care about, who have, like, an interest in continuously challenging themselves to create new things and not always do the same things.

I mean, *Kill Move* and *Fat Ham*, like, there's some relationships in terms of how he-- his efficiency of language, his humor. But they're such different stories. Like, I don't want to do another *Kill Move* because we did that already, you know. Like, so what I love about James, too, is he constantly wants to, like, challenge himself to do new things. And that really helps.

So we're already working on the next thing, preparing for that. So it's just, for me, the dream is just, like, having a theater buddy like that, who you're just constantly saying, what's next? What's next for us? So the process for *Fat Ham* was extraordinary.

You know, as a director, you're always trying to find individuals who can bring truth and life to a character. And you're also hoping that together, as a collective, they're going to do that thing where they have, like, synergy and chemistry. And *Fat Ham* was like as good as it gets because those seven actors are all extraordinary in their own right, the way they deal with language, the way they deal with humor, the way they're able to occupy these characters in such beautiful truthful ways.

And then they're such a great collective. Like, they work so well together. So when the show had the possibility to move from The Public to Broadway, my number one condition was like, we have to keep the cast together. We have to because when you find that, it's so special, you don't mess with it. So to be able to take this company and move with them to Broadway was like a dream come true.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** For those people who don't know, it was announced the other day that *Fat Ham* has been nominated for five Tony Awards, including Best Play and nomination for you, for Best Featured Actress in a Play. So first of all, congratulations.

**NIKKI
CRAWFORD:** Thank you. Thank you. I mean, to be in the company of these legendary actresses and all of the people that I've admired for so many years is a dream come true.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** So I know that we have to wrap up. But first, I just want to say congrats on your Tony nomination. I know everyone is so excited--

SAHEEM ALI: Thank you.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** --for you and for the nominations for the entire company, too.

SAHEEM ALI: Thank you, thank you, thank you. That means a lot.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** You mentioned, Nikki, and I'm wondering, as we wrap up, what it means to you both to have all the Tony nominations and the commercial accolades that this production is saving.

**NIKKI
CRAWFORD:** This is a story that people need to see and that people want to see, obviously. So I'm glad that I am a part of that. And we are part of that. And the nomination is just the, you know, icing on the cake. I mean, it's bringing more attention to us. And thank God, you know, we have those nominations so that more people can come.

But just doing the play is satisfying and is food for my soul. So I'm just happy that I'm there.

MARCEL SPEARS: We'd like to see Nikki get acknowledged in that way. I feel like everybody in this play, low key, deserves a nomination. I know it don't work like that. But I feel like everybody in this play deserves a nomination. And because everybody in this play deserves the nomination, the play got nominated because everybody in this cast is swinging.

Everybody, all part of this production is, like, doing their best work, from the design, from the backstage crew, like, everybody is doing and bringing their best work to this play. And so I am so happy when we get these little, like, these little nods and these little pats on the back, like a Tony nomination, because it just means that we're all doing it in such a way that the community, at large, is like, hey, we see y'all. We see you over there with that little Black play that's got going on. We see you.

JUICY: I think my uncle had my father killed.

PAP: Yeah!

JUICY: Now my father wants me to kill my uncle.

PAP: Spread him open.

TIO: Like revenge? What are you going to do?

JUICY: I think I'm going to kill someone.

OPAL: Do it. Whoever it is, do it. You want some help?

JUICY: You're intense.

OPAL: I'm expressive!

REV: The secret is the rub.

JUICY: Ah, there's the rub.

TEDRA: What?

JUICY: It's Shakespeare.

TEDRA: If you bring up that dead, old white man one more time--

OPAL: Oh, snap! Why you always got to go deep?

JUICY: Did you see what just happened there?

TEDRA: You don't get to go crazy, baby.

LARRY: No, I want to be soft.

RABBY: I guess that's what we doing today.

REV: Even if I did do it, whoa.

TEDRA: But you did sound a little guilty.

[ARGUING]

**TEDRA
(SINGING):** 100% pure love.

ENSEMBLE: Wow!

ENSEMBLE: [LAUGHS]

JUICY: Shakespeare was right, this be madness.

**GARLIA
CORNELIA
JONES:** If you've heard anything about The Public, it's probably because of *Shakespeare in the Park*, the foundational linchpin to Joe Papp's original vision. On the next episode, we drop in on a panel at Joe's Pub, as part of the *Public Shakespeare Talks*. Ayanna Thompson moderated a conversation with actors Ato Blankson-Wood, Michael Stuhlbarg, and Sam Waterston.

This year's *Shakespeare in the Park* production is *Hamlet* directed by Kenny Leon. Sensing a theme, you'll also probably recognize another familiar face and voice as *Fat Ham* director Saheem Ali joins the conversation. That's it for this week's episode.

If you're enjoying this season of *Public Square 2.0*, remember to like, subscribe, and give us that five-star rating. You know we deserve. 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.

SPEAKER: 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. Script by John Sloan III and Garlia Cornelia Jones. Creative production includes story support by John Sloan III, Ghostlight Creative Productions, and audio production by Justin K. Sloan of Ghostlight Creative Productions.

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