

**SHAYLA TITLEY:**Hi, my name is Shayla Titley.

**ALVERNEQ** I am Alverneq Lindsay.

**LINDSAY:**

**BRIT SELLERS:** My name is Brit Sellers.

**AUTUMN RAE** Hi, my name is Autumn Rae Knight.

**KNIGHT:**

**KALEDA DAVIS:** Kaleda Davis.

**LICO** My name is Lico Whitfield.

**WHITFIELD:**

**PRAYCIOUS** Praycious Wilson-Gay.

**WILSON-GAY:**

**LICO** I'm a production manager here at the Public Theater.

**WHITFIELD:**

**ALVERNEQ** And I'm a line producer here.

**LINDSAY:**

**KALEDA DAVIS:** The manager of the call center-- audience services.

**AUTUMN RAE** One of the assistant company managers here.

**KNIGHT:**

**SHAYLA TITLEY:**I am the director of patron programs and services and I have been at the Public--

**PRAYCIOUS** I have been at The Public--

**WILSON-GAY:**

**KALEDA DAVIS:** I have been here for 21 plus years.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** What's up, everybody? My name is Garlia Cornelia Jones and this is our Black History Month episode. Today is Tuesday, February 28th, the last day of Black History Month, and we're going to do things a little differently this time around.

Instead of focusing on one specific show, we're going to take the time to uplift the many Black artists, managers, technicians, and professionals that work here at the Public Theater. We're going to spend the last day of the shortest month, spending time focusing on the impact Black artists make on a daily basis. And hopefully by the time we're done, you'll agree that Black history, our history, and these unsung stars, deserve to be celebrated each and every day of the year.

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

**SPEAKER 1:** Your work.

[CHUCKLING]

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:** This is the third episode we have dropped this month. And let me tell you, getting a new podcast off the ground and recording three audio and video episodes has been a fun lift. And it is really exciting to get Public Square 2.0 out in the world in this way. While February has been full, we will go back to the flow of bi-weekly episodes in March this season.

So just remember to tune in every other Thursday. And don't forget to like, subscribe, follow, and give us that five-star rating you know we deserve. As always, I'm a person who stutters. It doesn't bother me so don't let it bother you.

OK. So over the course of this month, the Public Square team was able to connect with several Black staff members. But that's not all we did. The committee, which includes my colleagues, Carla Biagini, Kaleda Davis, Autumn Knight, Alverneq Lindsay, Asha Nelson-Williams, Brit Sellers, Nate Shelton, Valerie Simmons, and Praycious Wilson-Gay, worked hard on several components for the month.

If you check out our social media, we had weekly posts highlighting unsung stars. We spotlit technicians, designers, behind-the-scenes admins, and many more. In addition to this podcast, to round out the month, we had a Black staff appreciation night before seeing *The Harder They Come* all together. Here is my colleague Brit Sellers.

**BRIT SELLERS:** The Public Theater means a lot to me, especially freedom of expression. I really think one of the main reasons why I was drawn to the Public Theater and to work in that space is because of the way voices are allowed to express their stories, the way people are allowed to be heard. I think it's really important to highlight our unsung stars and the Black greatness of our theater because, so often are these incredible people working in theater that you don't ever get to see their faces. But they are what brings the stage to life.

And those unsung stars are often technicians, designers, producers even sometimes-- like, they're the ones that are not on stage and don't have the big bold credits. But they should be celebrated just as much as everyone else, if not more, because they're the whole reason why theater happens. They're the whole reason why theater looks the way it does, sounds the way it does, lives the way it does. And it's really important to celebrate our unsung stars and Black greatness.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:** Thanks, Brit. Our first unsung star is Emilio Sosa, Tony Award nominated costume designer and chair of the American Theater Wing Board of Trustees. But just in case you don't remember him from his numerous awards, you'll probably recognize him from the hit show Project Runway. Emilio and I first worked together on *Much Ado About Nothing* during my first year at The Public. It was my second show as a line producer, and first show in the park, and my first time dealing with the raccoons and the rain.

[CHUCKLES]

We had an all-star cast and creative team that included direction by Tony Award winner Kenny Leon, choreography by Tony nominee Camille Brown, and wigs, hair, and makeup design by Oscar winner Mia Neal. It was a fantastic and wet summer and production that was near and dear to my heart. I was thrilled to sit down with Emilio this month in the middle of his tech process for *The Harder They Come* and *Sweeney Todd* on Broadway. Emilio! Hi.

**EMILIO SOSA:** Hello, good morning.

**GARLIA** Let's start a little bit by having you introduce yourself to us.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** My name is Emilio Sosa. I am a costume designer and chair of the American Theater Wing.

**GARLIA** And what really attracted you to theater in particular? Although I know some people will recognize you from your-

**CORNELIA** -

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** [INAUDIBLE].

**GARLIA** --from the fashion world too. But what really brought you into theater?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** For me, the big difference and I think why I gravitated to theater versus fashion-- which I love and I still dabble in it-- is storytelling. I realized I'm more of a storyteller-- and giving people an experience. Theater allowed me to tell stories that hopefully resonate with people on a longer scale.

**GARLIA** I also think about what you were talking about in the work that you do at the American Theater Wing and how really supporting and mentoring people to see, this is an option. These are options that we do have and that we desperately need.

**EMILIO SOSA:** We definitely need. I think so. I think we have to-- for me, the most important thing is, how do you engage the audience at a younger age? And that's part of going into schools and just letting them know that there are other careers in the arts that are not in front of the camera or on stage.

There's such a bigger world behind the camera or under the stage-- you know what I mean. There's costume design. There's lighting design. There's projection design.

So even if you are like computer savvy, the whole theater design is all computerized. It's no longer like a whole bunch of people just in a room drawing on paper. It's one of the most sophisticated systems in the world. It's all mapping, it's computer generated design. It's really technical so I'm hoping that the younger generations who are so computer savvy-- you know, because we all live on our phones--

**GARLIA** Right. [CHUCKLES]

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** --will be able to see that there other careers within the theater world that can lend some of their interest. So if you're interested in fashion, theater design might be a good place to maybe find an avenue for you. Because we do need an influx of younger talent just to keep it going-- and younger talent that hopefully is mentored by older, seasoned people who are open to give what they've learned. Because I've been very, very, very, very fortunate to have mentors.

And I understand how important mentorship is because I wouldn't be where I am now if I didn't have my great mentor, the legendary Geoffrey Holder, who is an icon of the theater. And also as a Black man doing theater when he was doing it, in the late '40s and '50s-- which it was a different landscape now. And he created an entire legacy that today, people still know his work and still love it. So I was fortunate to find that person. Hopefully I can be that to some person that needs that.

**GARLIA CORNELIA JONES:** Yeah, that is so important. I want to go back a bit, and you mentioned how you approach storytelling through costume design. And I'm curious, how you as an artist are deciding what a character should wear and how they should dress.

**EMILIO SOSA:** Well, I wish I was the only one deciding but that's by committee. That takes a lot--

**GARLIA** Sure.

**CORNELIA JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** Nothing in theater is done alone. That's one of the things--

[LAUGHTER]

That's one of the greatest lessons I think we all learn from theater, is you have to be in the collaborative-- you have to have a collaborative mindset. Because no decisions are ever made by yourself. So it starts with-- I always say everything, starts with the word. The script is king.

So some directors will give you costume design notes. Like they'll write, Mary in a red dress enters through the door. My job is already done. [LAUGHS]

Now what type of red dress, that's where I come in. But it is a red dress because that's the playwright's vision. And we're all there to really support the playwright's vision through the manifestation of the director. Because then the director has their own take on everything. So I approach it as clothing being worn by people in a specific time.

So I don't approach it as a costume design job. I'm just like, OK. Like right now we're doing *The Harder They Come*. That's 1973 Jamaica. I don't look at that as a costume.

I just do a lot of research and see what were people wearing in 1973, Caribbean. Because for me as a designer, the greatest compliment I get-- when I get it-- is, oh, I remember my mom had a dress like that. Oh, I used to wear those kind of pants. Oh my God, my grandmother used to wear that. So that means that I've made a connection to something in their past that they can connect to that brings them into the story, even another level deeper than just, we're experiencing it on our own.

So for me, authenticity is what I shoot for. But then I also do the Rockettes, so I do sequins and beads and fantasy. So it just depends on what the venue and the story is. But for me, it's about authenticity because I want the audience to have a connection, not only with the words but the clothing that they're experiencing.

**GARLIA**

Do you feel like being an immigrant influences the way that you look at issues of race and art here in this country?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** I think so, in a way, but I also grew up here. So--

**GARLIA**

Yeah.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** I came here at such a young age that I always have a duality in my upbringing. I have very Western, American, upbringing in the streets. That's public school, that's friends from different cultures, that's musical influences. But in my home that was all Spanish speaking, Spanish TV, Spanish conversations.

My parents barely learned English just because they were much older. And they were blue-collar workers so they made a life in an environment where you didn't really have to speak that much English because your local grocer was Spanish speaking. You went to the Spanish speaking stores in the neighborhood. You're all working the factory and primarily they're all Latins.

So I had a duality. Like I'm fluent in Spanish and I still communicate with a lot of my family in Spanish. So being of those two worlds, I was able to see it, and also separate from it in a sense. Because being of color in theater is a daily challenge. Just being in the room-- they say, just being in the room is one goal. But what you do while you're there is really the work to be done.

And for me in this world of theater, being of color, it's always a challenge-- always. Like I said, I was fortunate to find Geoffrey Holder at a young age. So he kind of shepherded me into the world.

So I got to meet a lot of the players. Also working in the costume shop as a shopper, I was able to see and absorb a lot of, not only the successes of costume designers, but also the mistakes and how you have to clean it up. I learned how you navigate your conversations with a director in a fitting room, or if a producer wants to make a pop-up visit.

[CHUCKLES]

I learned all those kind of negotiations. And you only learn that on the job. It's not taught in school. And it's about listening-- I think the biggest tool you have is your ears-- and not always having the right answer. It's OK to say, let me circle back and get back to you instead of giving them an answer they want to hear and then that you can't deliver though.

And it's all part of the race makeup of the industry because we've made huge strides. But we have so far to go, I think. And my tenure at the Wing-- I just want to emphasize, you have the opening of the tent, bringing in the next generation. Everyone deserves their first shot because I've gotten my first shot when I knew nothing.

Like Spike Lee was a huge benefactor for me. He was the first really director that I worked under. He hired me young early in my career, prior to having any theater experience, to style his commercials when he had-- a long time ago, he had his own advertising company called Spike BDD or something like that. He would do a lot of commercials and he hired me to do those. So Spike was the first person to put me in front of a conference room to explain my designs, which is huge in our world because you have to be able to communicate your ideas to a group of people who have the power of saying yes or no to your idea.

[LAUGHTER]

**GARLIA** Yeah, that's a lot of pressure.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** You know, I made a bad joke that landed flat. Spike just looked at me and I said, OK, no bad jokes in conference room.

**GARLIA** No bad jokes.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** So that was the lesson.

**GARLIA** That was the--

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** The fact that he put me in front of there, that's the mentorship. you learn that. You're not taught that in school. So it's important to have people that look like you help you maneuver these areas because I feel we're our best hope and our best shot at success if we support each other.

**GARLIA** Yeah. Ugh, that-- yeah. I just-- I mean I don't need to say anything after that. I mean I think that is so, so true.

**CORNELIA** And I feel like there's so many of us in this industry who are constantly looking for people who look like us in the room just to say, oh, you're here. This is great.

Like I think I remember our first time working together on *Much Ado* with Kenny Leon. And so that was also my first park experience. I'd been at The Public-- I had just started a couple of months before and I was thrown a lot of big shows in a very short amount of time. I think I did--

**EMILIO SOSA:** Baptism by fire. Yes.

**GARLIA** Yeah, they-- I was, truly. But I enjoyed it. but I remember-- you know, and this was also my first-- I'd been home with my children for seven years. So my baptism by fire was also a lot of adults and people!

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

[LAUGHTER]

And we're speaking about real things! And OK, this is work. But I just really appreciated seeing such a diverse design team on Much Ado. And having been in theater for a very, very, very long time, but also The Public-- and I was older, kids divorced, by the time I started at The Public.

But I had a whole career in theater that had nothing to do with being at a big institution. And then walking into this big institution and being like, OK. Where-- like, where are the people? Where are the people that look like me?

Where are the people that are going to understand me? Where are these people? And also when I'm in those production meetings just feeling like, OK. Like, we're starting just to see more of us-- means a lot. it just-- it is so important.

And that's also why it was so important for the Black History Month team to highlight you and to really find a moment to really take time to uplift the work that you've done, both at The Public and outside. Because for us, you are one of those where we are-- we're calling them unsung stars because they are people who are behind, who are not on stages, but they are still so valuable and so important in our industry. And so you are a person that definitely rose to the top. And I'm so happy that we got our schedules together--

**EMILIO SOSA:** Well, I--

**GARLIA** Because I was like, I got to have Emilio in this episode! [LAUGHING]

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** I appreciate it, I appreciate it. But just touching up on some of the points you made, diverse teams don't just happen. It's, you have to make a conscious decision to have them. And Kenny, Spike, Kenny, so many other directors of color, they make it a point to bring others into the fold.

And a lot of us don't have a lot of the credits that other candidates may have, although we may have all the knowledge and the know-how. But they're always taking a chance when you're entrusting your vision to someone that doesn't have the credit, like I said, of someone other. But they deserve their shot. And Kenny is very, very conscious of how he populates his world-- so to be able to work with a director of his caliber that's also conscious and understands that part of his work is also bringing us along.

So that's why I'm always very open to giving either associates or assistants their first jobs. Sometimes they do well, sometimes they falter a little. But everyone needs their first gig. Because we all had that grace. Someone opened the door for me so it's only right that I keep it open for those who are coming behind me.

**GARLIA** Yeah. I feel and I hear this theme of service, just in the ways that you're talking about how people have supported you and how you continue to uplift and support others, which is predominant in communities of color.

**CORNELIA** We are out here making sure that we are not the only people in the room. You know? And I really hear that in what you're--

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** Yeah.

**GARLIA** --saying.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** I think that's huge.

**GARLIA** Yeah.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** I think that's part of it. That's part of our legacy. It's part of what I leave behind. People will remember-- maybe they'll remember a show that I did, or something. But I think it's more important that as I move on in my career, that there are others who have the same opportunities or bigger opportunities because I was able to help in some small way their growth and development.

**GARLIA** Yeah. So I said that this Black History Month we are highlighting unsung stars. And we've called you one of  
**CORNELIA** unsung stars. And can you talk a bit about why you feel like that that is so important?

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** Look, to be unsung-- you know what it is? I've always been about the work for me. I'm a behind-the-camera type of guy. But I realized that to get the work, you have to be in front of the camera to some extent.

And that's not my nature. I'm more-- I'm quiet. I don't talk a lot. But in my position as Chair and also costume design, I know I have to be in the forefront.

And part of it is not-- at the end of the day, I've been given an anointing by my Maker. And my job is just to share it with everyone. Because I didn't create it. I'm just the vessel that is shepherding it through.

So I can't be selfish with it and for a long time I was. And now I realize that I'm here because I've been given a gift and an opportunity. And my job is to share it so more people can hear about it. And maybe it helps them in their journey to follow their dreams.

Because like I said, I didn't see my first Broadway musical until the age of 20, and that's huge for a New York based artist. I was running up and down Times Square in high school. But the idea of the notion of a Broadway show wasn't even in my headspace. Not only because-- it wasn't in my community. My community was never engaged in theater.

So you can't-- and that's what I mean when you have to engage your audiences where they are, not expect them to support every show when they're adults at 25, that they haven't really been embraced as teenagers to, [INAUDIBLE] arts. I always use that example-- you could live in New York your entire life and not see a Broadway show. So something had to change.

We're not reaching a certain group of people, and we still aren't. Because just recently in our season, if you look back at the shows that really did not-- weren't as successful as they should have been-- are the shows of color. We closed them-- it was like domino effect.



And it wasn't that the work didn't merit being on Broadway. It's that producers need to target and market shows differently. You're not going to get a success by going with the same-- your list of people that you've been calling for the last 30 years.

**GARLIA** That's right.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** You have to open up that list to people that are not in your Rolodex-- for those old folks that use Rolodex.

[CHUCKLING]

**GARLIA** That's right. That's right.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** You need to open your books and find your audience. You have to find an audience for your show. You can't just rely on your subscription audience-- they're going to come and support it. You can't. You have to be out there.

The most-- like, I remember back in the day-- guerilla marketing, like back in like-- hot '97, you know, KISS FM. You had those teams where you went into the community and you just blasted the community and you brought them and you brought it and you brought them to the world.

**GARLIA** That's right.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** You know, maybe we designate another theater into the Off Broadway situation that's closer to the community so they can get to see the caliber of work that is offered. There's a lot of ways that I think the American theater needs to expand the tent so we can create more artists, and not wait into their 30s and then denigrate that audience that they don't support. They can't support when you never gave them the chance to grow within the art, what they don't know. A flyer at the end of a run--

[SCOFFING LAUGH]

**GARLIA** That's nothing. You need it six months before at least. Right?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** You need to be in the community dropping leaflets.

**GARLIA** You need to be--

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** Everywhere--

**GARLIA** --in the community.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** --everywhere, everywhere. Every community--

**GARLIA** Churches.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** Churches, community basketball--

**GARLIA** I'm like church--

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**EMILIO SOSA:** --after school-- you have to go where your community is. And hopefully producers will get that. But then again, you have to look at, what's the makeup of producers of color on Broadway. There's very, very few and they can't take up the entire mantle. So some of it-- we have to do some of the work ourselves to help. So it's huge, but I think there's a-- we can do it. We just have to want to do it.

[MOURNFUL MUSIC]

We just have to open it up and make it bigger, because I think our community is longing to be seen on stage to hear our stories-- and not just as a passing, oh, come support this now that it's not doing very well. It's about, we honor you and you are part of this journey. Take it with us at an early stage.

(SINGING) Take us back to pray, pray.

**LICO** What's important to me about being Black at the Public Theater--

**WHITFIELD:**

**ALVERNEQ** For me, to be Black at the Public Theater--

**LINDSAY:**

**LICO** Everything that I've done here so far has been a platform for a voice that's a marginalized group, or a platform  
**WHITFIELD:** for people who don't normally have platforms in other places.

**ALVERNEQ** It is an opportunity to work closely with artists who I understand might be having a really difficult time navigating  
**LINDSAY:** a massive institution.

**LICO** What it means to be Black specifically here is to be representative of a community of theater makers and  
**WHITFIELD:** storytellers that goes deep into this country. Being a person, an ancestor of people who've been telling stories in this country for centuries, that have been quite often pushed aside. And we take up space here and we are allowed here and we are seen here. And we make sure to make that visibility known--

**ALVERNEQ**  
**LINDSAY:**

--not just historically, but specifically within theater, there are so many Black people who have been working to really set the tone and set the trends for this industry, that have been supporting and building stories on stage, have been supporting back of house. And I think especially for the folks that work back of house-- these are like the production managers, the stage managers, folks who are on crew-- it can sometimes feel like a job where you don't get any recognition. Because once those lights go on in the theater, what the audience sees are the people on stage. And I think it's so important to remember that a lot of the people who are helping to create these stories are Black people and other people that don't get the recognition that they very much deserve.

(SINGING) And I'm broken into pieces. Pray, pray.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Our next unsung star is Narda E. Alcorn. Narda is a professor and stage manager who has worked on Broadway, Off Broadway, regionally, and internationally. In 2019 Narda was appointed chair of the Stage Management department at the David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University. Amongst her many career accomplishments, she has worked on most of August Wilson's work on Broadway while the playwright was still alive.

She is a mother, author, and finally, a facilitator at The Public, supporting our cultural transformation process. Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Narda and talk with her about her career, the craft of stage management, and the intersections of race within the professional theater industry. Here's part of that conversation. Narda, hello. Hello, hello.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:**

Hello, Garlia. Thank you for having me.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Thank you. I'm so happy to be able to have this conversation with you for our Black History Month episode. And so I just want to start by asking how you got started as a stage manager.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:**

So I'm very fortunate in that I had an amazing high school teacher who-- so I was-- let me back up just a bit. I grew up in Los Angeles and I was fortunate enough to discover theater through acting. I started acting as a child and I auditioned for the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts-- LACHSA, as we lovingly call it. And I was actually the very first class of LACHSA opening up.

So I entered as an actor. And after my first year there-- actually I went in as a sophomore, which is when the school opened-- I had an amazing teacher by the name of Craig Slate hand me a book. It's called *The Stage Management Handbook*. It's by Bert and Gruver. And he said to me-- he said, Narda, I think you're a stage manager.

I had never heard the term stage manager. I did not know what a stage manager was. I took the book. I went home. I literally read it from cover to cover. And from that moment all I did, certainly in high school, was stage manage.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Wow.

**NARDA  
ALCORN:**

I just fell in love with it, truly. Certainly the idea of being able to manage and to lead a process with the other leaders of the collaboration and the organization of it-- and I also knew that I was a mediocre actor, but I did feel that I could thrive as a stage manager. And so I was very fortunate, again, to have that amazing teacher really see something in me.

From there I went to conservatory for college where I studied stage management. So I went to the theater school at DePaul University. And then from there, I did my graduate studies at the Yale School of Drama, also studying stage management.

And really it's been my life's work, of course, as I have taught it, as I of course have practiced it. I've written about it in my written work and my book and essays. So I'm truly in love with the discipline without question.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

And I'm also curious, what about stage management do you think that people in the general public do not understand. And how do you explain why this role is so vital to a production and our industry as well?

**NARDA  
ALCORN:**

Thank you, that's such a great question. I think there is so much that folks, even theater folks, don't understand about stage management. I would say most importantly, I believe that stage managers are indeed leaders. We are, again, with the other leaders of the collaboration, with our directors, and certainly our choreographers or our music directors-- depending on the piece, maybe our dramaturgs, certainly our producing team. We are among the leaders of the collaboration.

And I would say that there are many stage managers, one, who don't think of themselves that way, as leaders. And also there are other collaborators who don't realize that stage managers are leaders. So that would be, I think, my number one point in terms of what is perhaps misunderstood about stage management.

And then secondly, I would say I believe the stage manager's role is one of support. It's to support the process. It is to support the creative vision. And it is of course to orchestrate and to execute.

And yes, we do have some responsibilities in regard to ensuring that we are recording health and safety issues, recording latenesses and absences. But this idea of stage managers as punisher or stage manager as disciplinarian or something, I really reject-- stage manager as police-- those ideas I really reject in terms of our role. And I think I certainly am really interested in eradicating that opinion of stage managers in the process, and really wanting folks to truly see us as partners with the other leaders of the collaboration, and a huge wealth of support in all the ways. So that is my hope certainly in terms of the writing that I'm doing, and certainly the work in terms of anti-oppression and anti-racism in regard to stage management. I'm really hoping to change that view.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

It's very meaningful to just hear you speak about stage management in that way just because when I think of a show, once the director is no longer there every day, this piece of art is left with the cast, the crew, and the stage manager.

And so that understanding to-- I guess I would say, the outside world-- is very important as we really acknowledge the work that a stage manager does, and can do for the success-- the sustainability of a production and the success overall for everybody that comes in and out of it. So what you said really rings true for me. And I think you've touched on it a bit, thinking about if there is something in your career that you've discovered that people assume about stage managers that is untrue.

**NARDA  
ALCORN:**

Something that I think folks think about stage managers that is untrue-- well, that we're there to simply watch the clock, you know, that we're timekeepers. I think that is untrue. I do also think that there are some stage managers who function that way.

And again, I do believe that the job is more than that. There is a lot of function to our role. And we execute a lot and we certainly have a lot to do. And there is a lot that can't be easily quantified.

Because again, we're thought partners and we're leaders and we're facilitators and we're managers. So it's hard sometimes to sort of tick the box on how that shows up. And yet it does-- hopefully, daily.

And we're also artists, you know? So we're learning and really digesting the vision of the creators. And then every day, hopefully eight times a week, we are absolutely trying to execute what they've left for us. So yeah, I think it's-- again, I think that many folks, both in the theater and outside, think that there's just a series of tasks that we have to get done. And I would just say that the job is so much bigger than that.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm, yes. There have been a lot of shifts in our industry over the past few years, at least on the surface. We've moved to get rid of 10 out of 12s as an example. Do you think that these changes are permanent and do you think that they can be sustained? Or is it just something that is for show, for lack of [INAUDIBLE]?

**NARDA  
ALCORN:**

I do-- I think the changes that I've seen, which again, is absolutely-- most theaters, certainly I think in the US, have gotten rid of 10 out of 12s. Some theaters are perhaps in the rehearsal period, maybe working a five day work week. I do-- and some of the contracts have been adjusted so that-- allowing for a few more personal days perhaps and sick days. I think that those will stay.

I'm not sure that it's enough, quite honestly. And also specifically in the phases of tech and previews, I'm still struggling to help facilitate processes that structurally are very much the same-- which is that you have this finite amount of time before you meet an audience, and too often it's not quite enough time. And of course, the urgency of time-- the impact that that has for us as humans typically is negative, in that many of us do not behave well when we are feeling so stressed and under that pressure-- which I think adds to the oppression that has been historically a part of the American theater.

I don't know yet how to have an impact on that. Because the structure-- certainly in those tech and preview phases has, for the most part, remained the same. And so it's really hard to ask folks to be their best selves in the most extreme and difficult circumstances.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:**

Right.

**NARDA** And so I'm curious and I'm really thinking about what-- is there an antidote? Is there a way-- because I don't see  
**ALCORN:** that changing unless the financing model changed. And in this country I don't know that that's going to happen any time soon.

Because again, many theaters, they need to meet that audience as soon as they can in order to start bringing in some revenue. And yeah, it's just a particular thing. So that part of the structure of the process has remained for the most part the same. And I don't think it's aiding in an inclusive, compassionate process.

**GARLIA** Can you elaborate on that oppression that you mentioned? A lot of people have talked about it or alluded to it,  
**CORNELIA** but what is that oppression? I think for people that might be shocked to hear that term in relation to theater,  
**JONES:** especially when people think of our industry as being very progressive, what is it about the way this industry has traditionally functioned that encourages a lack of equity?

**NARDA** That's, again, an amazing question. Yes, I'll do my best to try to explain what I mean by using that term  
**ALCORN:** specifically within a theater context, and specifically within the phases of technical rehearsals and previews. In my experience, it has been allowed and even expected that typically many of the leaders, whether these are creative team leaders or leaders of the production departments, that-- again, because of the stress and urgency of those times, the technical rehearsals into previews-- behaving badly, and that could be anything from yelling to using a disparaging tone to dismissing someone's concern.

That type of behavior-- not having time for someone who you supervise because you're too busy and you're too stressed. So really not opening yourself up to any questions or feedback, publicly shaming-- those types of behaviors, in my history and in my experience, have very much been a part of the technical phases and the preview phases.

And again, from my point of view, it has been allowed because it's that idea that, oh, well, it's tech. Of course I'm going to get yelled at. Or, of course they're going to yell at me. And there has been a complicitness within our industry that those particular phases of the production, you are allowed to behave poorly.

And of course, if you are someone with the least amount of authority, or if you're someone who is constantly receiving all of that, that is what I am specifically referring to as that oppressive nature, where you no longer feel like you have agency to share a concern, to ask a question, to speak up, because of how folks are behaving. And so it is that-- is part of what I hope to affect in my role as facilitator, also in my role as stage manager, which is again, to introduce the idea that even in those times that are urgent, even in the phases of the production like technical rehearsals and previews, we can actually choose compassion and kindness and we can choose to slow down.

And that's huge. In fact, it's actually quite revolutionary. Even though of course, it's very individual and it feels like a very small shift, but it would be truly-- that, I think, is radical transformation, honestly.

In terms of, again-- and especially, I would say, the leaders of the collaboration-- that being of course, your directors and your playwrights as well as your production managers and your heads of different departments. You know, they have the most influence because we are in a hierarchy. And that would be-- again, I think it would be radical if the leaders of a collaboration, even in the most stressful phases, prioritized people, which means prioritizing, I think, kindness and compassion and slowing down and communication. All of those things which I think-- that's how we can have what I would call a much more inclusive and compassionate process as opposed to the historically oppressive process that tech and previews has been.

So that's what I would say I mean by that. And again, I think it's radical transformation and it's sorely needed. And it is honestly-- that is what I learned coming out of 2020 in terms of what I want to strive for in my practice is, how can I influence that. How can I help to change that?

That's what really struck me out of the racial reckoning, out of [INAUDIBLE] White American Theater, out of all that we saw coming out of, of course, the murder of George Floyd-- and then when we really put a spotlight on the theater industry, of course I interrogated my own process and my own practice. And I also interrogated my understanding of the production process. And that's a place where I identify that we really need significant change.

**GARLIA** How is working at The Public different from working in other environments?

**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

**NARDA** There's so much going on all the time! [LAUGHS] As you know-- it's an exciting place. I mean, again, there's so much. And that abundance, to me, it is important to recognize it as abundance as opposed to perhaps sometimes chaos that it might feel like.

[LAUGHTER]

But I don't know of a place-- I've certainly never experienced another organization that has so much abundance at the same time. And again, that's what makes the Public Theater so unique and really a very special place. And it's also why there are so many challenges at the Public Theater.

At any given time, there are so many balls in the air and so many people really working hard to keep them all where they're supposed to be. And it's-- yeah, it's just, it's a lot. It's a lot.

**GARLIA** It's-- [LAUGHS] we could also call it abundant chaos. We could also--

**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

**NARDA** Yes.

**ALCORN:**

[CHUCKLING]

**GARLIA** Abundant chaos! You have worked on quite a bit of August Wilson's work. And I'm curious what is it about August  
**CORNELIA** Wilson that stands out for you as a stage manager. And how does his work contrast with newer Black playwrights  
**JONES:** like Tarell Alvin McCraney as an example?

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:**

Thank you for that question. I love talking about August. I was very privileged to have spent his last 10 years as one of his primary stage managers and collaborators. I was able to-- I believe I did four of his premieres in New York and on Broadway and two of his revivals-- two revivals of his work.

August Wilson too-- *Fences*-- the original *Fences*-- the James Earl Jones *Fences* on Broadway-- that was my very first Broadway play that I ever saw. And I must say, I came from the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts which was quite diverse at the time, although our faculty were not so diverse. And I had never read any August Wilson.

I had never read a Black playwright at that time. And so it was truly impactful for me to see Black folks on stage, speaking poetry, but also speaking from our neighborhoods. And it was really-- yeah, it was a very significant moment, I think, in my development as an artist and as a stage manager.

And it was because of that, because of seeing that work, that I, even as a high school student, said, one day, I want to work with August Wilson. I want to meet him. I want to work with him.

That's exactly why I went to apply-- applied and thankfully got into, at that time, the Yale School of Drama, because I knew that August had a relationship with the school. And it was at the school actually that I met August Wilson. And I was very lucky. The teachers around me, I had told them of my love of him and his work. And I was able actually to take an internship my second year and go to the Goodman Theatre where *Seven Guitars* was playing, and be the stage management intern on that production.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Oh, wow.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:**

And then fast forward about a year or so later, and I was hired as the assistant stage manager for the regional tour of *Seven Guitars*. And then of course that was my very first Broadway show. So--

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Wow, wow.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:**

And then from there again, 10 years of working with August. And, you know, I was with him when *Gem of the Ocean* was being written. I was with him when *Radio Golf* was being written. So really-- yeah, just really special. And I think so much of my discipline, I think, and attention was really developed with my working with August and really understanding attention to detail and truly being disciplined about my practice. I think I really learned that from those years that I spent with August.

And also he-- you know, I've always loved my work and August is someone who loved his work. I mean, he was so joyful in the rehearsal room. He was just delighted. He was just delighted that these folks had come together to bring his plays alive. And it was really amazing to watch his delight in the process.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:**

Yeah. Ah, thank you for that. And then how do you feel about the state of Black theater and Black artists in commercial theater today? Are there things that make you hopeful?



**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:** Without question. I mean, again, Black writers have always been there and now many of them are getting the attention and the credit and the opportunities, of course, that they deserve. I still-- as I think our industry, you know, I'm grappling with, how do we sell these shows. How do we make sure that what we would call Black shows-- or perhaps shows with primarily or predominantly folks of color or Black folks in the cast-- how do we sell those shows to America?

I think we're still figuring that out. And I refuse to believe that shows that in many ways are written from a person of color for people of color, I refuse to believe that those plays and shows are not as American and in many ways marketable as other shows. So that is my worry, I think, and concern. Because the narrative as you know, in our field, can turn quite easily to say, that well sure, that's all well and good. But you can't sell those shows so then you should not do those shows.

And especially in the commercial theater, I think that that is an ongoing conversation. And I also think that again, the marketing teams across the landscape specifically of commercial theater-- ideally those teams are becoming more diverse in all ways. And I think that that will go a long way in terms of actually building audiences for plays that five years ago you would not see on Broadway.

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** Right.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:** So--

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** Yeah, yeah. So then what does audience development-- you've touched on a bit. But what does audience development mean or look like for us? We know that Black audiences do patron the arts, so what is it that is keeping those audiences from Broadway in specific, and how do we do a better job of making commercial theater more accessible?

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:** I am certainly no expert and my opinion would be-- what keeps me from the theater-- it's too expensive. I can't afford it.

[CHUCKLES]

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** Right.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:** I needed to be--

**GARLIA**  
**CORNELIA**  
**JONES:** And you're a stage manager for a lot of Broadway shows.

**NARDA**  
**ALCORN:** I know. At the end of the day, that's what I would say. It's too expensive. You know?

**GARLIA** Yeah.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** And that's not-- yeah. Again from my eyes, that's certainly what is keeping me away-- and many folks, I think.

**ALCORN:** And again, I also want to recognize, there are plenty of Black folks and people of color who are doing well and who can afford it.

**GARLIA** Yeah, absolutely.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** And so we should also make sure that we're tapping into them. But I don't know that I know enough to know how to do that.

**ALCORN:**

**GARLIA** Sure, sure. We're in the last phase. I want to honor your time, and just we're in the last few. How do you balance the teaching, the stage managing, the parenting, the cultural transformation, family life? [LAUGHS] How do you balance it?

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** So for me, I don't subscribe to balance. Because--

**ALCORN:**

**GARLIA** OK, great.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** I don't think that there's a balance. I think that--

**ALCORN:**

**GARLIA** OK.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** I think for me, I have a lot of abundance in my life. Again, I have my teaching and my stage management work and facilitation work, and of course my amazing family. And at any given time, something's in the driver's seat and something's in the back seat. And that fluidity of how that moves is how I have lived my life.

**ALCORN:**

And it's about being very communicative about, at this time, my family's in the front seat. And we're taking a vacation. [CHUCKLES] And it's all about my family.

And then there might be times when my family actually goes to the back seat. And it's all about school. And then even school goes to the back seat because The Public. The Public and I are in the front seat and it's all about the Public Theater.

[CHUCKLES]

**GARLIA** Yeah.

**CORNELIA**

**JONES:**

**NARDA** And that's actually how I really think of it. And what's wonderful is-- again, we're in the car and it's an amazing  
**ALCORN:** drive. And that fluidity that I can move with is really useful. And I've become quite agile at that.

And I think what makes it work for me is that I certainly strive to be very communicative at all times so that folks actually know. To stick with the sort of poor analogy-- my family knows when they're in the back seat. You know, they know like-- Narda's in New Haven. She's going to do X, Y, and Z. Likewise, hopefully I've been communicative-- the Public knows that I'm not available until such and such a time. Or folks know that I can't do a show until the summer, et cetera. So it's really just about being communicative and that's how I've made it work.

[ORGAN MUSIC]

**SHAYLA TITLEY:** I guess I'll say, when you think about a theater or the Public Theater, what comes to mind is what you see visually.

**KALEDA DAVIS:** The unsung work is the support that creates the foundation for the flashy scene work.

**SHAYLA TITLEY:** So you tend to know that there's actors, that there is a director, that there is a playwright who put the production on. But there's so many layers behind that work.

**PRAYCIOUS** At a time where the theater industry is reimagining itself after coming out of the pandemic, it is important, now  
**WILSON-GAY:** more than ever, to really highlight all of the work that goes into making theater happen.

**AUTUMN RAE** We have fought so hard to be acknowledged in this world. It is really important for us to understand who the  
**KNIGHT:** people that are working behind the scenes. And there have been people of color working on stages forever and just have not received the acknowledgment nor the accolades that they truly, truly deserve.

**PRAYCIOUS** Oftentimes we don't really get to see representation of us on the media and a lot of the praise ends up going to  
**WILSON-GAY:** our White counterparts. And I think it's really important to give them their flowers.

**KALEDA DAVIS:** Black History Month to me is the embodiment of that and the sharing of that and the pride of that and the Black joy of that. We don't get enough of that.

**GARLIA** I hope you've enjoyed today's episode. For the past hour or so, we've had the opportunity to hear from leaders in  
**CORNELIA** our industry. And while Narda and Emilio are undoubtedly prominent Black artists, their accomplishments  
**JONES:** shouldn't be heralded simply because of their ethnicity. Like all artists of color, their Blackness is an enhancement, a richness that allows for them to add nuance, culture, perspective, and passion to their work.

Maybe you're sitting at home or listening in your car and thinking, this is great, but how do I get involved? What can I do to support? Well, today, both of our unsung stars gave you an answer, and it's very simple. Go see Black art. Support artists of color on Broadway, in regional theater, at independent film festivals, and in your own community.

And we, the Black staff here at the Public Theater, will keep doing our best to bring these stories to the stage. Remember starting in March, Public Square will be releasing episodes every other week. So tune in Thursday, March 9th. And if you haven't already, go back and take a listen to the first few episodes from the season.

On a special note, all the music in this episode has been written by independent Black artists, so check out the website for that information. As always, remember to like, subscribe, follow, and give us that five-star rating you know we deserve. I'm Garlia Cornelia Jones and we'll see you next time, Thursdays at The Public Square.

**SPEAKER 2:** Black History Month is 12 months a year. We don't relegate our history to 28 days [INAUDIBLE] in February. [LAUGHS] Every day you're living your life you're making Black history, because our history is about survival and reinvention. So the fact that we're still here and we're thriving, that's part of our living legacy.

**GARLIA  
CORNELIA  
JONES:** Welcome home to Public Square 2.0. We can't wait to have you back.

**SPEAKER 3:** 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, and Black History Month planning committee members, Brit Sellers and Nate Shelton. Creative production includes story support by John Sloan III of Ghostlight Creative Productions, and audio production by Justin K. Sloan of Ghostlight Creative Productions. Special thanks to Narda E. Alcorn, Carla Biagini, Kaleda Davis, Autumn Knight, Alverneq Lindsay, Asha Nelson-Williams, Brit Sellers, Nate Shelton, Valerie Simmons, Emilio Sosa, Shayla Titley, Lico Whitfield, Praycious Wilson-Gay. For a full list of, credits please visit our website [publictheater.org](http://publictheater.org) for the show notes.