SUBJECT: Public Theater is--

SUBJECT: The Public Theater is--

SUBJECT: To me, the Public Theater is--

SUBJECT: A space that can be filled by real people.

SUBJECT: Where I can see bold and experimental theater.

SUBJECT: Revolutionary.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: If you've heard anything about the Public, it's probably because of *Shakespeare in the Park,* the foundational linchpin of Joe Papp's original vision. But what you might not know is that our programming isn't just about presenting amazing works of theater. It's not just about *Hamlet, Henry,* or some *Merry Wives.* It's about how we bring people together. Art educates and art heals. So today, we're going to take a minute to dive into one of the initiatives designed to do just that right here on the *Public Square.*

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

SUBJECT: Your work.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: [CHUCKLES] OK. Hello, and welcome to Public Square 2.0. My name is Garlia Cornelia Jones, the director of innovation and new media at The Public. And today, we're going to talk about one of our programs you might not know that much about.

The Public Shakespeare Initiative engages audiences, develops artists, educates young people, supports their teachers, and in all, is as multidimensional as the community of Shakespeare lovers we serve. Through programs like the Hunts Point Children Shakespeare Ensemble, the Initiative reaches out in every direction to include students, teachers, artists, scholars, audience members, and more to celebrate together the astonishing depth and breadth of humanity that Shakespeare captures with such beauty and enduring power in his plays and poetry.

These past few years have been hard on the youth supported by the Initiative. Arguably, the most important part of the Initiative is the Hunts Point Children's Shakespeare Ensemble. The ensemble works with a group of students from the Hunts Point neighborhood in the Bronx. Over the course of a school year, they are exposed to teaching artists, workshops, and spend their time rehearsing and producing a play. This year's production is *Romeo and Juliet.*

This past May 1, the initiative held the first live in-person Shakespeare talk in over three years. So today, we're going to pop into this conversation as moderator Ayanna Thompson talks with actors Ato Blankson-Wood, Michael Stuhlbarg, and Sam Waterston. And for those of you who listened to our last episode on the Tony-nominated play *Fat Ham,* you'll probably recognize director Saheem Ali as he joins the conversation. All this right here on today's episode of Public Square 2.0.

ANNOUNCER: Since 1960, the festival's annual school tour has brought Shakespeare into the city's schools. With the opening of the Public Theater, thousands of high school students have accepted the festival's invitation to come to Lafayette Street for a startling production of *Hamlet.* Hamlet is played by Cleavon Little. April Shawn is Ophelia.

APRIL SHAWN: Oh, my Lord, my Lord, I have been so affrighted. My Lord, as I was sowing in my closet, Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced, pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other, and with a look so piteous in purport, as if he had been loosed out of hell to speak of horrors, he comes before me.

CLEAVON LITTLE: Peanuts! George Washington Carver peanuts! Hey, one for a dollar. Two for a dime. Hey, peanuts! George Washington Carver peanuts! I'm not giving you. peanuts! George Washi-- well, wait now, wait a minute, why, I got it--

APRIL SHAWN: My Lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have long had long to redeliver. I pray you'll now receive them.

CLEAVON LITTLE: No, not I. I never gave you aught.

APRIL SHAWN: My honored Lord, you know right well you did and with them words of so sweet breath composed has made the things more rich, their perfume lost, take these again for to the noble mind, rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. Here, my Lord.

CLEAVON LITTLE: Are you honest?

APRIL SHAWN: My Lord?

CLEAVON LITTLE: Are you fair?

APRIL SHAWN: What means your lordship?

CLEAVON LITTLE: For if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty. [CHUCKLES]

APRIL SHAWN: Could beauty, my Lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

CLEAVON LITTLE: Aye, truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty to his likeness. This was sometimes a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once.

APRIL SHAWN: Indeed, my Lord, you made me believe so.

CLEAVON LITTLE: You should not have believed it. For virtue cannot so inoculate our own stock, but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

APRIL SHAWN: I was the more deceived.

CLEAVON LITTLE: Well, get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? Why, I myself am indifferent honest. I could accuse myself of such things if it were better that my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offense at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do, crawling between Earth and heaven? We are errant knaves, all. Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where is your father?

APRIL SHAWN: At home, my Lord.

CLEAVON LITTLE: Let the doors be shut up on him that he may play the fool nowhere but in his own house.

APRIL SHAWN: O, help him, you sweet heavens.

CLEAVON LITTLE: If thou dost to marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry. Be thou as chased as ice, as pure as snow, thou shall not escape calumny. Marry a fool, for wise men know what monsters you make of them.

APRIL SHAWN: Heavenly powers, restore him.

CLEAVON LITTLE: I have heard of I paintings well enough. God has given you one face and you make yourself another. You jig an amble and you lisp. You nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance. I'll no more of it. It hath made me mad. Go to. Go to. To be or not to be, that's the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of trouble and by opposing end them.

To die, to sleep, and by that sleep, to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep, to sleep, perchance to dream-- ay, there's the rub. For what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause.

There's the respect that makes calamity of so long life. For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay, the insolence of office, the spurns that patient merit of his unworthy takes when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin? For who would fardels bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death.

That undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of? Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all. And thus the native hue of resolution is sickled over with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pith and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry and lose the name of action.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

AYANNA THOMPSON: I can tell you a little bit about this production because, 1968 here at The Public, the building was newly opened. It was called the Naked Hamlet. And the production was directed and highly adapted by Joe Papp and initially starred Martin Sheen when he was kind of leaning into his Spanish background and so was adopting a Spanish accent for some of the performance.

And there was a lot in the production that was signaling a kind of anti-war vibe against the Vietnam War. And so it was marking the opening of this building as part of the Public Theater as kind of highly American Shakespeare, highly identity-reflecting, highly politically engaged, sounding the Public today. So we see that the tradition continues. So did I vamp long enough? Are we ready? [CHUCKLES]

If not, we will--

CREW: A couple of moments.

AYANNA THOMPSON: A couple of moments? If we feel it will take too long, we can just get into our discussion, because while it's an amazing video, we also have an amazing panel. So maybe we'll just get into the discussion. How do you all feel? All right.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

So just so you all know, they know the questions I'm going to ask them. So if they're really bad behaved, it's not because I'm springing anything on them. Ato--

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yes?

AYANNA THOMPSON: *Hamlet,* this summer.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

It's going to happen.

AYANNA THOMPSON: It's going to happen. What can you tell us about the production and what can you tell us about how you're preparing for *Hamlet,* how you're thinking about your *Hamlet?*

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, I mean, I'm still in the formation process, right? I'm still taking everything in. I'm still figuring it all out, right? But this production that we're doing is set now-- it is set in the American South actually. And right now, I'm just trying to stay present. That is my big task for myself, is to bring all of myself in the present moment to everything we are doing in that moment and not thinking beyond that.

AYANNA THOMPSON: It's not thinking how long each soliloquy is, yeah?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: No, not at all. I mean, Kenny has been saying this thing in the room that this is a new play, this is actually a new play. Every *Hamlet* meets the moment that it's in. So how do we make this a new play for this moment? And we'll figure it out, and hopefully, we'll achieve that, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Excellent. So I'll turn to Sam next, hoping you can talk a little bit about your 1975 productions. But you said there were two, one at the Delacorte and one at the Beaumont.

SAM WATERSTON: Yes.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yeah? Directed-- well, you've played lots of Shakespeare, which I think they heard about in your introduction. So what was the director's approach and what was your approach to *Hamlet* at the time? And what was the context for the production?

SAM WATERSTON: Well, the context for the production was that the Shakespeare Festival, which became the Public Theater, didn't know that it was going to be around for a half a century and become what it has become. And certainly, I as an actor, didn't have any idea that that's what was going to happen. But I was thinking, because we were all talking out of school in the dressing room, and inevitably, we began talking about the kinds of things that we're going to be talking about here.

And first of all, I played Laertes in Stacey Keach's*Hamlet* before I ever got to play Hamlet. And that was in the Park. And until yours, this would have been a-- it would have been a straight record that from then until yours. I would have been in every production of *Hamlet.* But Stacey said a wonderful thing. He said that there was a reason why these plays were so durable, and that was that they were, to a very large extent, actor proof.

This is a key kind of release because you think, oh, my God, this is so big. But Stacey's advice was learn the lines, say them clearly so that people can hear them, and you'll be all right. The play will hold you up. And that can be a nice thing to know.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yes, deeply comforting, yes.

SAM WATERSTON: But I didn't have any-- and then the other question that came up was, what was the institution standing for and all that stuff? It stood for a job hanging by a thread in the Park, that nobody knew whether there would be another season. It wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms. But it did do something. And so I'm so glad that this question was raised.

It said we want to be a theater that does these two vital things, brand new plays about now, and Shakespeare. I went into this really honestly because it's so damn much fun. But I needed a reason, a rationale, an excuse for doing it. And those are the two big excuses, Shakespeare and talking to the times.

AYANNA THOMPSON: That's so amazing, amazing. Did you want to talk about how the show changed between the two venues, because you said they were radically different?

SAM WATERSTON: Oh, yeah, they were. The whole production design was completely different. The director was the same. In the first production, it was thought that it would be a really good idea to have it be like a military state. The Delacorte is a large theater. And when everybody was in uniform, it became kind of hard for the audience to figure out who was who because everybody was wearing the same clothes. So to correct that mistake, we did a complete Elizabethan, every kind of doodad and gewgaw all that you could think of in costume.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Pumpkin pants.

SAM WATERSTON: But again, I mean, I think the key person on this stage right now is you because you're doing it. And so it's like what they say about a novel, that nobody reads the same novel. Everybody makes a novel between the book and themselves. And this is what's about to happen, a new play is about to be born, and you're it. It's just-- it's so cool.

AYANNA THOMPSON: So Michael, perhaps you can pick up on an old novel then. You were directed in the Delacorte in 2008 by a horrible director named Oskar Eustice, and Sam was your Polonius to your Hamlet. What can you tell us about the production? What was the setup? What was your approach to preparing for the role? I know that you-- backstage you didn't want to say more about it, but that you had gotten some really great, very sage advice from another actor about how to approach the role. But I was just wondering if you could share whatever details come to mind.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Oskar set the story around-- that summer, this was 2008, they were doing *Hamlet* in repertory-- repertoire-- repertory, repertory, together with *Hair* , the musical set in the '60s. And that has been, and I think, continues to be a very precious time for Oskar, the '60s when things were exploding and our country was in a very turbulent place.

So he sort of loosely set it in that time, mostly for costume. But I don't know. Yeah, mostly for costume. So we sort of took that and ran with it. I don't know how much factored too much into the storytelling except for the fact that there were the sound effects of planes whirring over at a certain point when Fortinbras' army was-- things like that. Modern context.

Somewhat modern context. And I had wanted to play Hamlet since I had seen it on BBC videotape from the age of-- at the age of 14 when I saw Derek Jacobi play it in English class. And I was like, oh, my God, this guy is ranting and raving, and I feel like ranting and raving too. And it kind of got me into the idea of falling in love with getting to do it. Because eventually, once I did get a chance to do it, it was exhilarating and thrilling.

And it moves so fast and at the speed of thought, living thought. And in terms of trying to figure out who the guy was, I just placed myself in his situation really and in the context in which our director was providing for us, and tried to walk around in his shoes for a while.

I never really put a stamp on it in any particular way. We made some choices. But as Sam was hinting at, the play is somewhat-- it can handle anything you kind of throw at it. If it's a big choice or a small choice, you still have the language to hold on to. And that is your ladder through the evening, which I found out in the doing of it. It's a longer conversation, but I'll stop there.

AYANNA THOMPSON: That was brilliant. [CHUCKLES]

So Saheem, I know your production of *Fat Ham,* newly on Broadway. And so--

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

--is an adaptation of *Hamlet,* and quite brilliant. And I wonder, what was your relationship with *Hamlet?* How did you work with James on the script? I know that it had already had an iteration before coming to the Public, but what kind of conversations did you have about adaptation, about Shakespeare, or about just going in totally new directions?

SAHEEM ALI: Yeah, so in the last couple of Shakespeare productions that I worked on, I had actually invited a playwright in to collaborate with me. So for *Merry Wives,* I worked to Jocelyn Bioh, who's a wonderful playwright. For *Romeo Juliet,* I worked with Ricardo Perez Gonzalez, who was also-- and that, it was translation as well because part of the play existed in Spanish. And for *Fat Ham,* James had already done that work on his own. So I'm just always finding ways in terms of the present moment to find avenues with which Shakespeare speaks to the contemporary moment.

And part of that can be contemporary text. So it's a question of why and when and how you can integrate contemporary text with Shakespeare to create something that is partly and isn't because it's not strictly an adaptation. Because if it were an adaptation, then every situation, every form of communication would be in contemporary text, but it's not. Juicy uses actually Shakespeare's text from Hamlet to express himself.

And so finding ways to make that believable and relatable and theatrical became the challenge because, usually, you just speak in one idiom or the other. It's very rare to have both kind of intertwine in a realistic way. So I just really appreciated how James had taken this original story. And as I said to the cast, Shakespeare himself was borrowing plots and storylines from other people and speaking it, telling it in his own way.

So in some ways, James did that with Shakespeare's text, and kind of in a very subjective way, took the text, took the speech as he wanted, and discarded with the rest and made it all kind of fit. So it follows the *Hamlet* storyline and characters to a degree and then it becomes its own thing. And I think it's kind of delicious to follow along and track that and let go of that as necessary. And I think what James did was kind of extraordinary because if you know *Hamlet,* then there's a lot there for you that you can appreciate what he's done.

And we've had audiences who have never seen, read *Hamlet* before, and had an extraordinary time and still managed to follow the story and the characters. And that's a really tricky thing to do. Usually, it's one or the other. So from the moment I first read it, I was just in awe of how he threaded that needle so specifically.

AYANNA THOMPSON: So great. I wonder if, in particular, you could talk about the Gertrude and Ophelia characters because I think I would love to hear from Sam and Michael about their Gertrudes and Ophelias as well. But in *Fat Ham,* we get these-- what I think of as more three dimensional figures. So I wonder if you could talk about how that came about and how you chose your amazing actors. And I just learned that the entire cast from the Public moved to transfer to Broadway, didn't lose anyone or gain any, which is remarkable.

SAHEEM ALI: Yeah, no, they were extraordinary cast. And for me, part of the magic is when you find actors who have a chemistry and a synergy, you don't mess with that. And these seven individuals had such a great rapport, but also were able to handle the language and the tones and all the nuances with such specificity. So it was important to me to maintain that because they're part of what made the production really work here. I know for James that he wanted to take in Ophelia. He didn't want her to kill herself. He didn't want it to be tragic.

He wanted her to kind of take her own destiny into her hands and have a different kind of conclusion to her. So hence, he wrote Opal, who kind of comes into her own in the piece in a way that Ophelia tragically never gets to. And with Tedra, in a similar vein, he says the one thing that Hamlet never does to Gertrude is tell her what actually happened. He never gets to articulate to her, actually, he killed my father. He killed your husband.

And so James really wanted that moment to exist in the play in a way that it doesn't in the original. And I think you get to see Nikki Crawford, who's a wonderful actor, carries the role with such comedy and humor and size, and then really shifts so beautifully in that moment when she has to confront what's actually happened. And so I think, for James, it was important to allow her to be dimensional in a way that I think Gertrude doesn't get to.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yeah, no, I think it's brilliant. So Michael, do you remember your Ophelia and your Gertrudes and your scenes with them? How did they play out? How were the relationships defined?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Margaret Colin played Gertrude, and Lauren Ambrose played Ophelia. And Margaret had famously played a Jackie O kind of a character previously and had a kind of striking resemblance. She's also quite tall, almost a foot taller than me, as was Jay Sanders, who played my father and the ghost of Hamlet. Hamlet.

So the fact that I was kind of dwarfed by these mythical characters was-- and Sam is tall. And David harbor, who played Laertes, he's very tall too. So I kind of I felt quite small amongst all these folks. But it kind of, in some ways, served his feeling throughout the story of not necessarily feeling like he's been cast in a way to do the thing that the ghost tells him to do.

I mean, this was 15 years ago. So remembering the relationship with them and the struggles, the physical struggles and how that manifests in how you're trying to encourage or discourage a moment, whether it's with your mother or with Ophelia, we learned some things. And it was--

I don't know exactly what I would want to say about it other than we were exploring thoroughly every night and trying to find our way within the context of what we were given to say. I've often heard it said language is character. So in some ways, the idea of just saying it loud enough for people to hear it, you get a lot going on there. Yet, at the same time, it could be a lot of things, depending upon what the cutting of the piece is and what the context of your relationships can be, what your histories are with your Ophelia and with your mother and how personal you want to make them, can make them.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Do you remember your back story for Hamlet and Ophelia? I know, it is the wayback machine--

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: An interesting thing that we spoke about in the dressing room was that I had been wanting, as I mentioned earlier-- wanting to play this part since I was a teenager. And so as such, I dragged the play around with me everywhere I went. I warmed up with it. And so when I was lying on the floor, it was underneath my head because it was kind of the perfect size, let my voice come out naturally and all of that. And I read just about as much as I could about the thing.

So my head was so full of too much information by the time I was trying to do it that, in some ways, the simplest approach was the best for me at that time. it was, I have one thing to do, step on stage and do that one thing. All those other things, I'm sure, informed me in one way or another. But my head was so full of stuff, that I didn't necessarily allow myself the time to discern from all of that information what I wanted to put a-- hold on to what I wanted to let go of.

SAM WATERSTON: I was a witness to this performance, and what he is describing as his inner life was a very different thing to watch. Here was somebody who's name was Hamlet, whose head was so full that even all the words that Hamlet was given to say were not adequate to what was going on in his head, which was very Hamlet-like.

[LAUGHTER]

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Very kind of you to say. A little more than kin, and less so kind. But no, what did I want to say about that? Not much. I'll let that lie. What was-- oh, there was-- no, well, I don't remember. Let's move on.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Just to give Sam a chance to remember, what your approach was to your relationship with Ophelia and to Gertrude.

SAM WATERSTON: I really think the story with Ophelia is pretty plainly told, so I just followed the directions.

AYANNA THOMPSON: We got lots of different versions though.

SAM WATERSTON: And then Ruby Dee played Gertrude. So that was very cool. And again, these plays are supposed to be seen, performed by players. And the players write the play with a very good kind of basic structure that is provided by Shakespeare, very, very reliable and durable. So you got nice people to work with?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: I like them a lot.

SAM WATERSTON: So then you're home.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Ato, you're one week in--

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Uh-huh.

[LAUGHTER]

AYANNA THOMPSON: And you're here. What have you in, maybe ahead of time or during this first week-- have your thoughts shifted about how you're approaching the relationship with the women? Have your thoughts shifted about your relationship with Claudius, who's John Douglas Thompson?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Holy Moly.

AYANNA THOMPSON: [CHUCKLES]

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, John Douglas Thompson is-- an actor I have admired for years. And to be playing the Hamlet to his Claudius, is very exciting. OK, my head is full right now.

And in terms of my relationship to Gertrude and Ophelia, one of the things I'm most interested in is if we're talking about bringing yourself to a role, the women in my life are a never ending source of love. And I feel like the complications that are possible in this play if the engine of these relationships is truly love, excites me. Those complications excite me.

If we meet a son who really, really does love his mother but thinks she's disgusting in this moment, there's something that feels aligned for me. There's something about this Hamlet really loving Ophelia and not having the ability, the capacity to love her well that feels aligned to me. More anon.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Did you want to talk at all about-- I mean, there's tons of debates over the 400 years about Hamlet's mental stability. Is he putting on an antic disposition? Is he actually going mad in some way? Does it happen at a certain point? Has it been happening gradually?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, I'm still answering that question. There are moments I'm like, oh, that's it. And then something will shift, and I'm in constant questioning about it. And I wonder if the constant questioning is also something Hamlet is going through.

[LAUGHTER]

Tell me.

AYANNA THOMPSON: I love it. This does feel like the ghosts.

[LAUGHTER]

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: But in all seriousness though, something that I am excited about is, like, I don't feel the responsibility of the-- I don't feel the legacy of this role as a burden so much as I feel like I will have Michael on the stage with me. I will have Sam on the stage with me. Everyone-- oof-- who have played this role, they will be standing with me as I do this. And that feels really beautiful.

[APPLAUSE]

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Just a quick anecdote that I mentioned earlier in the dressing room, I had the great, good fortune to work briefly with Sicily Berry who was the head of voice at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and worked with her on a production of *Cymbeline* that we-- she invited us to go over there and to do the play there in 2001. And one of the things I begged her to spend a brief amount of time working on the piece with me and we had a couple of sessions together.

And the one thing she tried to encourage in me was that I was enough. And as I mentioned that to you before, you are enough. And I never quite embraced that. I never quite because I did feel that sort of weight of tradition. But at the same time, in the doing of it, you'll find great freedom, and I can't wait to see that.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Me too.

AYANNA THOMPSON: But maybe the weight of the tradition was part of your Hamlet, feeling the weight of his familial tradition as well. It's written in there.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

SAM WATERSTON: The doing is complicated but the answer to the question, is Hamlet crazy or is he sane? And practically every question worth asking in any Shakespeare play on any subject the answer to, is he crazy or is he sane, is yes.

[LAUGHTER]

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah.

SAM WATERSTON: That's where these plays live, just like in our daily life, which is why they are so indestructible.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, yeah.

SAM WATERSTON: You're going to be cool.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: I think how many times over the last three years I've asked myself, am I losing it, you know?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yes.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: And the wonderful thing as well is that there are places in the play that it can hold anything you throw at it so that you can pretend or try anything with it, and the language can just fly. So it can feel like a kind of hysteria in the doing of it if you choose to go that route. And that's thrilling too.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Saheem, I wonder if you wanted to talk about Juicy and the conversations you had around, where is Juicy's mental health?

SAHEEM ALI: Yeah, that didn't factor into James's adaptation of the play. Juicy, in terms of his identity, what we understand the pressure for him is that he's a queer, overweight man in the South and had suffered the pressures of identity in that regard. And so you find him in a moment where he's navigating his comfort with himself and with his family and how that factors into this notion of masculinity because he's been raised in what we understand to be toxic masculinity.

His father and his uncle have not been the best role models of sensitivity or being like a three-dimensional human being in the world. And so Juicy is really coming up against how to step into his version of being a man when he's being pressured by the ghost of his father to act in a way that doesn't come quite naturally to him. So that's the navigation for him.

I think that he is then forced to reckon with, like, who am I in the world as a person? But also, how can I act in a way that reconciles what I'm imagining I am and what this world is projecting onto me? Yeah, so I feel like maybe that's how James-- we haven't actually talked about this, interestingly, but I feel like maybe that's how James imbued this particular version of *Hamlet* with the question of self.

SAM WATERSTON: You're going to get to think as fast as Hamlet. It's such a trip.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah.

SAM WATERSTON: It's such a trip.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah. I like this idea that's a question of self, that the madness-- the question around madness is also a question of self. That's all.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Sam, I wonder, since you were just saying you're going to get to think as fast as Hamlet, Ato, I wonder if there's a soliloquy you might want to read even though it's unrehearsed and we just sprung this on him.

SAM WATERSTON: Well, no, I was going to bring-- I was going to bring my iPad because I wanted to present the conundrum of thinking as fast as Hamlet, which you were referring to because the play has-- you have to get on with it. So I won't bother with this, but I got to play Hamlet twice. I listened to Stacey do it.

I listened to you do it. And once in a workshop that John Barton ran, I did the "to be or not to be" speech, and I got it right, once, in a stand alone thing without the play, before it and the play after it and all that stuff. He's very quick witted, is Hamlet.

AYANNA THOMPSON: So what did it feel-- what was it to do it right, to get it right?

SAM WATERSTON: Well, it's just to be able to think the thoughts that gave rise to the words--

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: At the speed.

SAM WATERSTON: --at the speed and in the sequence that Shakespeare wrote them because the thoughts are immensely complicated. And to have all the words just come out like you and I are talking now and have them have as much meaning connected to them as the way we're talking now and to have them be such explosive poetry, add water and they just get huge, and to have-- it's like you were you were quoting-- who are you quoting in the dressing room?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: You mean the note that I--

SAM WATERSTON: Yeah.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Mark Rylance.

SAM WATERSTON: Yeah. He was talking about climbing the mountain. You'll never run out of mountains to climb. What a trip.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: So we've gotten lots of advice for Ato. Ato, do you have questions that you'd like to ask?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: No, no. I really do feel like what has happened today, both on this stage and backstage, was just like you got it. Go.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Yeah.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: And that feels-- yeah, I just feel like I got a blessing or something to go, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Well, should we open it up to the audience then? We have time. I think we have-- let's see, Michael. I don't see Michael. Yes, OK. With the mic? Do you have the mic?

CREW: There's a mic.

AYANNA THOMPSON: There is a mic? Oh, sorry, Michael's not doing the mic. Of course not. If you have a question, please raise your hand high.

SAM WATERSTON: We've answered all the questions.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Well, it sounds like be present.

AUDIENCE: Hi. My name is Emma. My question is, you had referenced a bit about the production of *Hair* that took place a few years ago. And I'm curious if any of you would like to share anything about how "what a piece of work is man" is put to music in *Hair,* and how you see Claude as a Hamlet figure.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Ato was in *Hair.*

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: I was. Yeah, I mean, the moment "what a piece of work is man" happens in *Hair* is during the trip. And the tribe has taken drugs, and we're essentially following Claude's trip through-- for this section. Claude is debating whether or not to burn his draft card and go to Vietnam.

And his trip is full of violence and touches on like the history of violence, specifically in this country. And then out of that, out of sort of the most violent moment comes "what a piece of work is man." And I have a hard time, and I'm trying to as we're going through this process, divorce that from-- divorce "what a piece of work is man" in *Hair* from in Hamlet.

But I'm not sure-- I'm not sure I can or I want to or should in that, like, it occurs in this moment with Rosenkranz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet.* And I think there's a sort of violence in betrayal that Hamlet is speaking about.

And I think he's also dealing with maybe some-- I don't know, some self betrayal. I don't know. I don't know. But there's something about violence and that peace that feel-- they feel like they feed each other in some way. And I wonder if that will be possible inside of this production, to be seen, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: There's a question in the back. I don't know if--

AUDIENCE: Hi, my name is Fred. Do you have a favorite speech or scene or a speech or scene that's particularly difficult to do?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Do you have one yet, Ato?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Right now, they're all difficult to do.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Do you have any favorites, even though they're difficult?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: I feel like we're still in process on my favorite speech because we've been cutting it. There have been two versions already. If I have my druthers, there will be a third. But it's, "oh, what a rogue and peasant slave" for me. There's something about the element of meta theatrics in this play that I love. Hamlet's relationship to the players is-- I mean, as an actor, it's just something I love about this play. So yeah, that would be that one, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Michael, do you have a favorite or favorite hard part or both?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: I found the nunnery scene really difficult because we struggled with the physicality of that somewhat. And also, honestly, the very first time Hamlet's left alone at the very beginning, the language in "oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt" is so jagged and strange.

Extra beats, beats missing, turning on a moment. And also the diminution of time that he says about-- it was a month. No, less than a month. No, it just sort of like-- there's so many clues and things in there that you can dig that I think I kind of-- I don't know if I ever allowed myself thoroughly to just let it go and just let it inform me.

Because I was digging so deeply into the structure of the language, which is part of the fun of Shakespeare for me in general, is that he was an actor himself apparently. And that he put these words on the page in a way to help the actors signal that there was perhaps, if there's an extra beat or a beat missing, that something's going on there if it breaks the rhythm of the verse. And also, if it's in prose, the way I learned about it was that, if something is written in prose like "what a piece of work is a man," there's something also perhaps going on underneath it.

If we consider a verse living thought, that perhaps there's subtext to the other one. And the fact that he's speaking to Rosenkranz and Guildenstern to supposed friends of his from school, you can invent that however you want to, that to explore having to say you know how beautiful the world is. But to me, what is this quintessence of dust? All that stuff is so much fun to me because it can hold any invention you put onto it or behind it or underneath it. I forgot the question.

[LAUGHTER]

AYANNA THOMPSON: Sam, do you have a favorite bit from *Hamlet* or and a favorite part of Hamlet?

SAM WATERSTON: "Let be," the play rotates around those two words. They wouldn't mean much if it weren't for all the spheres and moons and satellites rotating around them. But it's vast.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Wow, wow.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Wow.

AYANNA THOMPSON: That was a mic-drop moment.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, I'm fully like--

AYANNA THOMPSON: Saheem, do you have a favorite bit of *Hamlet* or favorite hard part of *Hamlet?*

SAHEEM ALI: Well, I think so in *Fat Ham,* James takes "I have heard that guilty creature sitting at a play," that speech. And it's just so brilliant because he makes every character in the play one of the players. They play a game of charades, is how they get to the accusation moment. So I just think it's just so-- and it's the first time Juicy speaks in Shakespeare's text to the audience. So it's such a beautiful turning point because you go inside Juicy's head, and he's speaking in Shakespeare's text, and it is that speech that's about to set up this game of charades, that's going to have deeper implications. And it's just it's such a brilliant turn in the play.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Love it. Other questions? So there's lots of questions up here.

CREW: We have one up here.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Oh, one-- OK.

AUDIENCE: Yeah, hi. I'm Sue. What I'm trying to ask is, because there are as many *Hamlets* as there are fingerprints in the world, and yet somehow, they're all one at the same time because they're brought to life through these words, I'm asking each of you and this kind of an old acting exercise, if you had to describe *Hamlet* in three adjectives, what were the ones that were most resonant for you, for those of you who have played him, when you were playing him if you recall?

And are they different in retrospect? And I don't mean this, Ato, to mess you up, just to kind of open your mind maybe, and the researchers too because--

AYANNA THOMPSON: We'll start with Sam.

SAM WATERSTON: Michael?

[LAUGHTER]

AYANNA THOMPSON: You've been volun told.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: "Words, words, words."

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

[LAUGHTER]

SAM WATERSTON: Who would want to sum up *Hamlet?* Not I.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Well, in context, I don't know what to say about that. It is large enough to hold all of us. So how do you sum up a human being? So it is all of us. And it's also interesting because it can be somewhat subjective and that everyone has their own idea, as you suggest, of what this thing could be. But when each of us speak it, it becomes something else. And that's why it can be done over and over and over and over and over again. So how about you?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Oh, Sam's giving you more time.

SAM WATERSTON: My son James, who's here, I think, somewhere--

AYANNA THOMPSON: There he is.

SAM WATERSTON: --used to say that his favorite line from Shakespeare-- I might be characterizing this wrong-- was a line of bottoms, "for it hath no bottom." And if there was ever a play that answered that description, it's surely *Hamlet.*

AYANNA THOMPSON: Ato, do you feel like offering up three adjectives?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: No.

AYANNA THOMPSON: They have resisted your challenge, Sue.

CREW: Ayanna--

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yes?

SAM WATERSTON: We're not competent.

CREW: At this time, we have both videos ready to be shown. Would you like to introduce one of them?

AYANNA THOMPSON: We have more questions, so I think we'll wait for the questions. But thank you.

AUDIENCE: Hi. I'm Phil. I'm going to be in rehearsal for *Hamlet* in a couple of months.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Whoa.

AUDIENCE: To me, it seems, to endeavor to play *Hamlet* is to endeavor to encompass the paradoxes that are within us all. What are some of the key tensions that activate or activated your characters?

AYANNA THOMPSON: OK, key tensions. Michael, do you to start? Actually, why don't we start with Saheem to talk about Juicy? Because they're ornery, and you're kind.

[LAUGHTER]

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: I'll take that.

SAHEEM ALI: To be or not to be.

AYANNA THOMPSON: What do you think were the key tensions for Juicy?

SAHEEM ALI: Oh, oh, oh, oh, it's just he's got to act, but he doesn't know how to act. And I mean, like, act on. There's a gauntlet that's thrown very early on and he has to navigate that. So I think it's between action and action. He'd rather disappear into the shadows, but he has to actually do something. So I think he's constantly struggling to reconcile that. That's what I would say, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yeah. I love that one scene in the Michael Almereyda *Hamlet* film where Ethan Hawke's walking through Blockbuster and he's in the action section. And I think you guys could have used that.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Yeah, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: All right, Sam or Michael, who's going to go? Key tensions for your *Hamlets?*

SAM WATERSTON: Well, they live together. I think somebody raised the idea of the paradox as if it were something to be solved. But I think whatever you try to do in terms of solving this play, the play wants everything to be alive in it at the same time.

I had an English teacher when I was in college who explained to me that "to be or not to be" was that "be" had a different meaning in Elizabethan times than it does now. Now it is more like a state that you're in. And then, it was more like acting. So "to be or not to be," when we hear it, is like should I kill myself or not?

But to an Elizabethan era, it might have sounded like that, but it would have also sounded like, "should I do it or should I not do it?" And I think, yes, again, is the answer. Is it this or is it that? Yes.

AYANNA THOMPSON: All right, Michael?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Forgive me, I'm just trying to get the correct question again. To activate, is that what we're talking about or it's-- forgive me.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Phil is saying he's going into rehearsal in a month and he knows the play is full of paradoxes. But what are the key tensions that helped you activate your *Hamlet?* Did I summarize that right, Phil? Yeah?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: To me, language was everything. So there was an exercise that Sicily did with students sometimes where she put two chairs out. And with every time a piece of punctuation happened, you would shift over to the other chair. So it gave you a different perspective. So you could physically feel the difference of how often his mind changes or how, if there is a run-on sentence, you'd stay in one place for quite a while so you can get a physical sense in some ways. And it has momentum to it.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Sic another exercise that was walking the punctuation so that you would do a 90 degree turn for a comma and 180 for a period and, I, forget slightly more for a semicolon or something. But again, another way of feeling physically in your body, the thought patterns, right?

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Yeah, it gives you a physical sensation of what the mind is doing. Cool.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Any key tensions for you yet, Ato?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: No, but something that did come up as you were asking the question was something I said earlier was love and disgust. I think love of his father is activating him. Also, disgust. That murder is there as well. Love for his mother. Disgust for her as well. Love for Ophelia. Disgust for her as well. Love for this family, this world, but disgust at all this betrayal--

AYANNA THOMPSON: And for himself.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: And for himself. Love for himself and disgust at himself.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Would attack you by the heel.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Exactly, his inability to act. So I think, yeah, for me what's coming up is love and disgust, yeah.

AYANNA THOMPSON: All right, I know there's other questions over here.

SAM WATERSTON: I like the word disgust.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, right? It's good.

AUDIENCE: Hi. My name is Olivia. *Hamlet* is one of my favorite plays, but I think one of the things I love about it is a lot of people talk about, like, Hamlet's going through this incredible loss and the grief of that and that huge transition of going to being not without a parent. And a lot of people talk about his isolation and that kind of thing. So I was curious if you all have ever thought about where Hamlet goes for comfort because he feels so alone.

SAM WATERSTON: I have a crazy idea that it goes to the audience.

AYANNA THOMPSON: And this is absolutely the case in *Fat Ham, right?*

SAHEEM ALI: Completely, completely.

SAM WATERSTON: And I also think that if you want to make yourself crazy, imagine that you're Hamlet and you're in this situation and there are people watching. And if that doesn't make you a squirrel, nothing will.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Michael, did you have a similar take on--

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Well, in some ways following up on what Sam just said, in other ways, they are your-- as I shared a bit of advice that I received during the run of our show from Mr Rylance, he gave me a lovely postcard with thoughts about things that I could put my attention on as opposed to feeling sort of this psychic amount of pressure. Mostly, it was like one step at a time. Just take it one-- no one's ever spoken-- no one's ever spoken these words before you set out to speak them. But what was the point I was going to make? Forgive me.

AYANNA THOMPSON: About the audience and--

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: Yeah, they are your soul. So in some ways, they can be just as much a part of you as opposed to being an antagonist. We could be opening our souls to each other as if guys are our best friends. Can you believe what the fuck is going on? That kind of thing and how welcoming and soothing that can be. Also, there's a purging in some ways, with all of these words that are coming out of him.

And in some ways, just putting it-- getting it out is one way of relieving what's going on inside of you, speaking it, whether it's to your soul or to strangers or to the people in the scene or whatever, I guess.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Ato, to have you thought yet about your relationship to the audience or where your Hamlet would go for soothing?

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: It was one of the first things I thought about. This is going to be my fourth time on the Delacorte stage. And I think the thing that was most exciting about this was I know I felt, I had a hunch around how much Hamlet needs these people. And I'm very excited about 1,800 different people to ask questions to. I don't really have-- it feels like it takes care of the need for a spontaneity. It's like whoever is out there, just look out and deal with them. And that makes it new. And so that feels really exciting.

AYANNA THOMPSON: Great. I think we have time for one last question.

AUDIENCE: Hi. I'm just wondering if--

AYANNA THOMPSON: What's your name?

AUDIENCE: Oh, Mary. I'm wondering if you like Hamlet. And do you have to like him to play him? I don't know.

SAM WATERSTON: Sure. Sure. Stand up for your character.

[LAUGHTER]

Meryl Streep said that somewhere. That's what you're paid to do, stand up for your character. So you got to like him.

MICHAEL STUHLBARG: It's one of the wonderful challenges of what we get to do when we get to do it, is to walk around in someone else's shoes. And you can't help but have an affection for what they're going through or a sense of empathy because you feel it in the doing of it, whether you think you're going to or not, it just kind of takes you over. And yeah, we are staunch defenders of the people we're playing as well, regardless of if what it is that they do.

SAM WATERSTON: And in Shakespeare's case, it always makes you bigger. So who wouldn't want to?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Yeah.

ATO BLANKSON-WOOD: Yeah, yeah. And the gift of Hamlet is he is so complicated. He is complex. And I think the gift of Hamlet in this moment is we're-- sometimes it feels like we're careening toward this two dimensionality, like, this binary of right and wrong, good and bad. Cancel, don't cancel. Liberal, concerv--

I'm excited to present a complex person and remind us that we are actually all so much more complex and nuanced than this moment would like us to be. [CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

[MUSIC PLAYING]

AYANNA THOMPSON: Well, I have three adjectives for this panel-- brilliant, kind, generous. Thank you so much.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

And thank you to Michael Sexton.

CREW: Ayanna, on would you like to lead us out with one more video for us to play?

AYANNA THOMPSON: Michael, do you want a video or no? No, he's saying no. We missed our video moment, but that is no problem. We had a rich conversation, so thank.

CREW: You have a great night, everyone.

[APPLAUSE]

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: On our next episode, we take a look at the future of this industry. Where are we now after the upheaval of a global pandemic? And how have we responded to the uprising for racial equity? To help us answer some of these questions, we sit down with Scarlett Kim, associate artistic director and director of innovation and strategy at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Sarah Ellis, director of digital development at the Royal Shakespeare Company, and our longtime artistic director at The Public, my boss, Oskar Eustice.

That's it for this week's episode. If you're enjoying this season of Public Square 2.0, please 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.

[JAZZ MUSIC]

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

ANNOUNCER: Today's episode of Public Square 2.0 was hosted and produced by Garlia Cornelia Jones, director of innovation and new media at The Public Theater with support from New Media associate Emily White. Script by John Sloan III and Garlia Cornelia Jones. Creative production includes story support by John Sloan III of Ghostlight Creative Productions, and audio production by Justin Sloan of Ghostlight Creative Productions. Special thanks to Saheem Ali, Ato Blankson-Wood, Michael Stuhlbarg, Ayanna Thompson, Sam Waterston, and the Joe's Pub team. For full list of credits, please visit our website publictheater.org for the show notes.