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## Melodies of Strength: Exploring Black Resilience in American Musicals

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MELODIES OF STRENGTH:  
EXPLORING BLACK RESILIENCE IN AMERICAN MUSICALS

Maegan Murphy

May 2024

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Theatre  
Sarah Lawrence College

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the evolution of strategies for portraying Black resilience in musicals with a focus on narratives, musical components, and thematic progression in productions such as *The Wiz*, *Dreamgirls*, and *The Color Purple*. It also explores the historical context of Black resilience as it relates to the post-Civil Rights Movement era, and determines how these musicals display and challenge societal stereotypes and systemic oppression faced by the Black community. By investigating characters' journeys and struggles for self-discovery and empowerment, this paper intends to highlight the enduring theme of resilience and its importance within the Black American musical genre.

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## Melodies of Strength: Exploring Black Resilience in American Musicals

When examining the Black American musical, one theme that consistently shows up is that of resilience. We see this in *The Wiz* through all of the trials that Dorothy and her friends go through to meet the wizard. We see this in *Dreamgirls* as Jimmy and the Dreamettes fight to have their music played on the radio. We see this again in *The Color Purple* as Celie decides over and over not to give up despite her constant hardship.

In this paper I examine the evolution of strategies for portraying Black resilience in musicals. I will specifically focus on narratives, musical components, and thematic progression in productions such as *The Wiz*, *Dreamgirls*, and *The Color Purple*. I will also explore the historical context of Black resilience as it relates to the post-Civil Rights Movement era, and determine how these musicals display and challenge societal stereotypes and systemic oppression faced by the Black community. By investigating characters' journeys and struggles for self-discovery and empowerment, this paper intends to highlight the enduring theme of resilience and its importance within the Black American musical genre.

It's important to start by understanding exactly what resilience is and what it means specifically in regards to the Black population. When we talk about Black resilience we're talking about more than just a capacity to withstand. We're talking about resistance to racism and systemic oppression; challenges against which the Black population has always had to fight. In his keynote address at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in 2009, E. Patrick Johnson discusses this and explains specifically how performance for Black people has been the key component behind their resilience. He says:

From the minute nonverbal expressions of the slave to the pensive sway of the weary domestic to the collective marches on Washington and throughout the South, black performance has been the galvanizing element of black folks' resistance to oppression. (Johnson 5)

In pop culture, the portrayal of Black resilience serves as more than just a part of the story being told; it becomes a reflection of the unbreakable spirit and constant perseverance of a community continuously battling against inequality and injustice.

*The Wiz* made its Broadway debut in 1975, just seven years after the end of the Civil Rights Movement. The New York Public Library's collection of *The Wiz* states:

The Broadway musical smash hit "*The Wiz*" was an all African-American production based on the Frank Baum classic "*The Wizard of Oz*." Produced by Ken Harper, the musical opened at Broadway's Majestic Theater on January 5, 1975, and finally closed after an incredible 1,666 performances, on January 28, 1979. "*The Wiz*" garnered seven Tony Awards, including, "Best Musical" of 1975. (The *Wiz* collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black culture, The New York Public Library)

The production has since embarked upon a second national US tour in 2023 and just reopened this spring on Broadway as a revival.

The show's musical style reflected the funk and soul of the 1970s by introducing audiences to musical hits like, "Ease On Down The Road," and "Don't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News." The "Emerald City Sequence," reflects this as well while also serving as a visually colorful triumph. The fashion within the show also beautifully mirrored the time of its Broadway residence. The production served as an exciting spectacle for all to see. In addition to this, other songs like, "Home," and "Believe In Yourself," gave audiences a deeper insight into Dorothy's self discovery and journey towards resilience.

Serving as another adaptation of L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Wiz* details the story of Dorothy who is separated from her home and arrives in the land of Oz after getting caught in a tornado. Along the course of her journey she meets a scarecrow, a tin man, and a lion. As she longs to find her way back home, the scarecrow longs for a brain, the tin man longs for a heart, and the lion longs for courage. The four friends band together to fulfill

their needs by seeking out the wizard who can make their dreams come true. The group's plan takes a detour though as the wizard is discovered to be a fraud. In the end the four realize that all along they each had what they thought they didn't.

*The Wiz* retells this story within the context of contemporary Black culture. Through this lens we can examine the experience of Black resilience that the four main characters each encounter. In their research study titled "The Self-Esteem of African American Women: The Impact of Black Church Attendance," Deborah M. Wilson, Jessica D. Davis, Carol Parker and Candy Ratliff discuss the challenges associated with cultivating positive self-esteem for Black women. The study reads: "Although African American women have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity, the on-going burden of prejudice and discrimination can negatively affect their ability to perform" (Wilson et. al 1).

Dorothy exhibits the kind of resilience that these authors point to in her journey. Traveling to a place unknown and at first scared and unsure, Dorothy soon becomes confident and assertive, learning how to navigate in a world without her Aunt and Uncle as a young Black woman. While she will likely face on-going challenges in the form of racism upon returning home, it is her self-discovery and self-assuredness that has equipped her for those battles. This discovery of and return to self similarly happens for Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion. All three are likewise apprehensive about pursuing what they feel they need, but soon find the strength to do so—and it is through their individual and collective journeys that they come to understand and recognize their worth and value.

In their journal article titled: "Self-Perceptions of Black Americans: Self-Esteem and Personal Efficacy," authors Michael Hughes and David H. Demo discuss the variety of factors that contribute to self-esteem for Black and white students. The article reads, "Instead, among

black and white students, self-esteem is strongly related to the reflected appraisals of parents, friends, and teachers, and these sources of self-esteem are more important for blacks than for whites” (Hughes & Demo 3). The appraisals that these authors refer to are present in *The Wiz* as we see how Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion have encouraged each other throughout their story, leading to a shared sense of self-esteem among the four.

In her essay, “African Diaspora Drama,” Sandra Richards reexamines definitions for Black theater. She explores a narrative path for diaspora dramas “where diaspora is viewed, understood, and performed in narratives of “Return.”” In outlining the narrative devices of “Return,” she writes:

A contemporary descendant of slaves journeys to an African location... Overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and mis-recognitions, she nonetheless perceives similarities between herself and the people who generously extended welcome. She has found “home”...Like a long lost, but not forgotten child, she has *returned* and can then return, self-assured, self-possessed, and properly equipped for struggle in that other home in the Americas or Europe. (Richards 85-86)

Although a retelling of the classic story, *The Wiz* illuminates the racism that Black people have encountered for years. We see this with Scarecrow as he’s told repeatedly that he’s dumb and doesn’t have a brain. This is a real life stereotype against which African Americans have had to fight. There has been a long standing assumption, too, that Black people aren’t educated and when they prove this assumption wrong, it is often met with a sense of surprise from white counterparts—surprise that they’ve gone to college, have degrees, or work in major professions that are high paying. We see this with Lion as he lacks the courage he needs and lives in a place of fear. Similarly, Black people and especially Black men have been made to feel that they need to shrink themselves out of a fear of being labeled as too aggressive, violent, or angry.

We see another parallel with Dorothy as her Aunt and Uncle try to raise her to be prepared for the real world. African Americans have likewise struggled to raise their children in such a way that prepares them for the racist world and society that we live in. With Tin Man we see that he lacks a heart and wants the ability to feel emotion. The parallel here is that Black people, especially Black women, have had to suppress their feelings and emotions out of not wanting to be labeled as the “angry black woman”. This results in becoming desensitized to their feelings which cause struggles with mental health.

In his book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, E. Patrick Johnson discusses the ways in which people attempt to define Blackness and what it means when that Blackness is represented. He asks:

What happens when “blackness” is embodied? What are the cultural, social, and political consequences of that embodiment in a racist society? What is at stake when race or blackness is theorized discursively, and the material reality of the “black” subject is occluded? (Johnson 2)

Here, Johnson is drawing attention to the fact that to be Black in and of itself equates to having societal consequences. These consequences, which make up a huge portion of one’s reality as a Black person, make it nearly impossible to be oneself and to feel safe and comfortable doing so. Indeed, it takes resilience to be Black and to live in a racist society that requires the constant battling of false perceptions and stereotypes. There is a tremendous weight that is associated with not only the refusal to be seen as an equal to white counterparts, but the refusal to be seen at all. In his keynote address at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in 2009, E. Patrick Johnson discusses the exclusion of Black theatre history, scholars and performance studies by saying:

One might ask how such a rich and vital site of knowledge could have been excluded or gone unnoticed within a field that narrates its own history as fraught with political

debates with the academy about its own status as a “legitimate” discipline. Institutionalized racism is one culprit, but so is the inability of academic institutions and individuals to read and value the discreet and nuanced performances and theorizing of African Americans. (Johnson 4)

We see this experience of exclusion unfold in *Dreamgirls* as Jimmy Early and the Dreamettes fight to have their songs played on the radio. The musical group does everything they can to ensure that they will be successful: they rehearse constantly, they write songs, they make sure that everyone has accessibility to travel for performances, and more. Regardless of all of that, they encounter incessant obstacles in getting air time on the radio. What’s worse is that when they do manage to create a major musical hit, a white group pilfers it for their own use. This is an infuriating occurrence and experience for Jimmy and the Dreams as their version of “Cadillac Car” has been tossed aside by the radio stations in favor of the version by Dave and the Sweethearts.

In Johnson’s book he goes on to ask, “Indeed, what happens in those moments when blackness takes on corporeality? Or, alternatively, how are the stakes changed when a ‘white’ body performs blackness?” (Johnson 2). The situation in *Dreamgirls* is a clear example of what Johnson is referring to. The stakes are often very low when others who are not Black consider and perceive the lives and realities of those who are. The stakes become much higher with a greater sense of importance and regard as the lives and realities of white counterparts are contemplated. It is these higher stakes that create room for the irrefutable sense of entitlement that often accompanies a majority of the white population.

For Jimmy and the Dreams it is this unfortunate circumstance that inspires their next song, “Steppin’ to the Bad Side”. One of the song’s lyrics is: “The smile I had is gone away. Those that steal are gonna pay.” This line alone sheds light on the group’s resentment and determination to overcome this injustice. They are at this point willing to do whatever it takes to

get their music played on the radio. However, they don't have many options given that they are Black and living in the 1960s. Because of this, they resort to payola which involves bribing DJs across the country to play their song. The single becomes a major hit as a result propelling the group to higher levels of success.

Resilience is present in this case, but it comes with a cost. The group tried to promote and market their music the conventional way with "Cadillac Car" only for another group to steal it. What they learned from that experience is something that the majority of Black people have had to learn repeatedly: that everything is systematically structured to benefit the white population while hindering all those who do not fall into that same category. It is this lesson that prompts the group to do what they know they can to get their music played.

While the time period of *Dreamgirls* is set over the course of the 1960s and 70s, the show premiered on Broadway in 1981. In an article from the Los Angeles Times, Susan King writes:

Jennifer Holliday became an overnight sensation as the large-framed singer Effie White who galvanized the audience with her soulful "And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going," winning a Tony Award. The show earned 13 Tony nominations and won six. "Dreamgirls" ran for 1,521 performances. The show and Holliday came to Los Angeles and it was revived on Broadway in 1987. (King, "The Many Lives of 'Dreamgirls'")

In his keynote address at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in 2009, E. Patrick Johnson makes an argument that "black theatre and performance has always been and will always be a part of any liberationist struggle." (Johnson 5) This argument applies to the characters in *Dreamgirls* as they work and fight to break down barriers to achieve success. They want to be taken seriously and for their music to have mainstream crossover. While their biggest struggle collectively is breaking into the music industry and staying there, they have other issues with one another that they have to work through as well.

Effie White has to fight against Deena Jones being favored over her for lead singer of the group. She then has to contend with being kicked out of the group and replaced while becoming a single mother to her and Curtis's child in the process. Deena has to fight against being controlled by Curtis who becomes her husband and remains the group's manager. Lorrell Robinson has her own struggle of being romantically involved with Jimmy Early who is married. Effie's brother C.C. also has to fight against Curtis's control and constant rearrangement of the songs that he writes for the group.

The "liberationist struggle" that Johnson refers to is present in all of these storylines and in the show's music. A few song examples are: "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going," "I Am Changing," and "Hard to Say Goodbye, My Love". We see the height of Effie's battle as she sings the first song. It is a clear expression of her pain and hardship. Later in the second act we see how she has changed and found a sense of resilience as she sings the second one. At the end of the show the three original Dreams come together with the newest member Michelle to sing at a farewell concert. At this point all four women have decided to live their lives on their terms. Effie has made a career comeback, Deena has chosen to pursue acting, Lorrell has broken up with Jimmy and Michelle has plans to settle down with C.C. While they sing the final song, they are determined to start these new chapters of their lives with a reassurance that they can overcome any obstacles because of what they've already been through.

It is this kind of mindset that is required for finding the strength to move forward. We see this in *The Color Purple* as Celie deals with continuous misfortune and distress. At one point she says, "I may be poor. I may be black. I may be ugly. But I'm here." While it takes a long time for her to discover that inner strength, she does so despite all of her many challenges. Unimaginable

challenges that include birthing two babies by her father, being married off to an abusive man and being intentionally separated from her sister for years.

In her book, *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*, Salamishah Tillet says: “Opening with Celie, orphaned by age fourteen, writing letters to God, *The Color Purple* is the story of her sexual trauma and gradual triumph as she redefines her relationship to her abuse, her sexuality, her literacy, and God.” (Tillet 40) What makes things more difficult for Celie is the time period that her story is set in. This time period of the early 1900s presents a grander scale of hardship overall: amplified racism, extreme poverty, rampant abuse and more. Celie must redefine her relationship to all of these factors as Tillet says in order to overcome them.

She does just that by finding sisterhood with the character, Sofia. Unlike Celie, Sofia is defiant and outspoken. Sofia encourages Celie to stand up for herself to her husband, Mister. As she sings the song, “Hell No,” she advises Celie that she must fight back against his abuse. Celie does so and later in the second act curses Mister for trying to beat her for wanting to leave. Celie also finds out that Mister had been hiding letters from her sister, Nettie. Celie decides to start writing to her and learns that she is in Africa and living with the family that adopted her children. Celie’s ultimate resilience and self love appears in the second act as she sings the song, “I’m Here.” She understands on a deeper level for herself that her circumstances have not destroyed her. That she is very capable of carrying on and living a life with beauty in it. This beauty materializes at the end of the story as Celie and Nettie are reunited along with Celie’s children.

While *The Color Purple* is set in 1909, the show first premiered on Broadway in December of 2005. In a 2019 article from Playbill, it states:

February 24 marks the anniversary of the closing of *The Color Purple*’s original Broadway production, which opened at the Broadway Theatre December

1, 2005. The musical, based on the novel by Alice Walker and produced by Oprah Winfrey, starred LaChanze in the role of Celie, with Brandon Victor Dixon, Felicia P. Fields, Renée Elise Goldsberry, Kingsley Leggs, Krisha Marciano, and Elizabeth Withers-Mendes rounding out the cast. The musical would go on to be revived in an acclaimed 2015 staging, which starred Cynthia Erivo, Jennifer Hudson, and Danielle Brooks. The production earned the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical, while Erivo took home the Tony Award for Best Actress for performance. (Skethway, “Look Back at the Original Broadway Production of *The Color Purple*”)

In conclusion, the investigation of Black resilience in musicals showcases an important narrative thread that connects with the struggles, victories and societal contexts of Black American history. Through productions like *The Wiz*, *Dreamgirls* and *The Color Purple* we observe characters who maneuver through hardship and stereotypes while achieving a sense of strength and empowerment.

*The Wiz* presents as a contemporary retelling of a classic story, inserting themes of resilience into the context of Black culture. The path of each character reflects components of the Black experience, from Dorothy’s self discovery to the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion’s pursuit of fulfillment. The musical underscores the resilience needed to navigate a world that’s full of racism and systemic oppression.

*Dreamgirls* explores the challenges of the music industry, where Black artists like Jimmy and the Dreams encounter obstacles in reaching mainstream success. The story reflects broader societal struggles, highlighting the resilience required to prevail over systemic barriers and recover agency in a racially biased industry.

*The Color Purple* also examines the incredible resilience of characters like Celie, who face astounding hardships in a racially segregated society. Celie’s journey towards empowerment

and self discovery illustrates the resilience required to fight against racism, personal trauma and abuse.

These musicals not only showcase Black resilience, but also combat societal stereotypes and systemic oppression encountered by the Black community. By examining characters' journeys and struggles for empowerment and self discovery, these productions emphasize the persistent theme of resilience within the Black American musical genre.

Overall, the evolution of strategies for portraying Black resilience in musicals reflects the continuous struggle for justice and equality within the Black community. Through narrative, musical elements, and thematic progression, these productions celebrate and honor the resilience and strength of Black individuals while providing insight into the systemic challenges they face.

An Interview with Nambi E. Kelley, playwright and award-winning actress:

Nambi E. Kelley earned her B.F.A. from the Theatre School at DePaul University, formerly known as The Goodman School of Drama, and has an M.F.A. in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont. She is an alum of Playwrights Unit at the Goodman Theatre. Nambi's production company, FIRST WOMAN, recently produced a digital and in person tour of Nambi's young audiences' play *Jabari Dreams of Freedom*, directed by Daniel Carlton. The in person tour premiered off-Broadway at the New Victory Theatre. Nambi was named a Dramatists Guild Foundation Fellow and New Victory LabWorks Fellow. She completed a residency at New Victory Theatre through the LabWorks Program for BIPOC artists in New York City which gifted Nambi \$15,000 to participate in workshops to develop her new musical, titled *Hero: The Boy From Troy*, based on the early life of Congressman John Lewis (a commission by Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera). Nambi is a former playwright-in-residence at the National Black Theatre, the Goodman Theatre, and a former Dramatists Guild Fellow.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Maegan**

*Jabari Dreams of Freedom* follows a young Black man named Jabari as he encounters racism and historical figures from Black history who face similar struggles. In *Hero, the boy from Troy*, audiences see the life of John Lewis from childhood through his congressional career, as well as the racism he encountered throughout his life. Both are musicals. Can you talk about why you chose to write these stories as musicals as opposed to plays?

**Nambi**

Well, I don't think that *Jabari* is a musical, but *Hero, the Boy from Troy* was a commission from Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera House. This was right after George Floyd was killed. There were all these theaters that were scrambling for Black people so they could be legitimate. So at Pittsburgh CLO, I was the very first Black woman, Black person that had ever done the commission in the history of their organization.

**Maegan**

Wow!

**Nambi**

Which is ridiculous right? That we're still doing firsts. And it wasn't a good time. But that's another story. The cast was amazing. They were so wonderful. Anyway, it just kind of lends itself to music. And so Joe and I, as you know, we work together, Joe Plummer. So I would write stuff. And I thought, this is crazy. This is bananas. There are dancing chickens, and Joe's says, 'I got it baby.' And all of a sudden, he would come up with something ridiculous. And I thought, this is the most ridiculous play I have ever written in my life. And we would just laugh, but we have so much fun creating it, you know?

And then while I was writing it, John Lewis died. When he died, I said, Oh, my God, now we have to really do this play.

**Maegan**

Yeah.

**Nambi**

I was actually really glad that we were writing it because then we could bring him to the next generation, because they weren't going to know. And that was actually really sad. Also, I chose John Lewis, because John Lewis was one of Daniel's (Carlton) heroes. And then I was sort of introduced. I mean, I knew who he was, but I didn't know really specifically. And I was doing research on another project that's actually about to go into rehearsals, in about a month. And there was all of this cross referencing with John Lewis.

It was the pandemic and Daniel and I were locked in the house together. I told him to talk about John Lewis while I told him what I learned. So we shared all these ideas together. And then I was writing it [...] When CLO came to me, there was a woman that I knew from grad school, and that was how they even knew who I was. Her name is Kiesha Lalama. She's so great. But the big picture was that this had to be a musical. Because there's dancing chickens and there's Rosa Parks and Dr. King and all of these icons. It just felt like it should be a musical and it turned out that was the best choice.

**Maegan**

Thank you! Can you talk about the role that music plays in the stories you create?

**Nambi**

Oh, that's a great question. I consider myself a poet. My mother, who I was raised by, was schizophrenic. And she would talk to the walls. When I was a kid I would watch her talking to the walls, and it sounded like poetry to me. Because first of all, I'm only hearing half the conversation right? Because there's nobody on the other side. At least not somebody that I could

see. I believe that watching her as a child talking to walls kind of became my internal metronome. The way I experience language. And it's very musical.

My mother was very musical and she has the most beautiful voice. It just kind of poured out of me in a way. It wasn't a conscious choice. Things just pour out of me as music. I'll send a script to somebody and they'll say, 'Oh, my God, it's so musical. It's so lyrical.' And I'll say to myself, it's what? I don't understand how people see that when I don't even intend it. It just comes out that way. And of course now people actually call me to write musicals. And I don't know the form that well. So that's what I'm doing here in this coffee shop. I'm working on a musical right now, writing this show for Broadway.

**Maegan**

Awesome!

**Nambi**

People call me to write musicals and I think, well, the good thing is this sort of alignment with my ear. But I didn't train in it. I trained as a straight playwright. So I'm a fish out of water trying to figure this out. But I'm learning and even at my old age.

**Maegan**

You're not old! No.

**Nambi**

Oh no sis! I'm old. (laughing)

**Maegan**

What?! (laughing)

**Nambi**

I wear pink. That's why I wear a lot of pink. So that you don't know.

**Maegan**

Oh, my goodness. Here's my next question. In your plays, we as the audience, see the trials of Black people, and how they've been able to overcome them. Your musicals also educate audiences on the lives of Black historical figures. For example, your plays tour the country and are put in front of school audiences. Is educating young audiences important to you and why?

**Nambi**

Oh, my God, yes. It's important to me. It's my lifeblood, it's my passion. I don't make any money, but it's a soul calling. Everybody else gets paid, but I don't actually get a check. But I have to

change that because I need to get paid. But if I got paid? I don't know. I just do it because my heart wants to do it.

**Maegan**

Yeah.

**Nambi**

And I'm blessed that I've had support along the way. I don't know if you saw this in the news yesterday. Some independent investigator came into Uvalde and basically said that none of those officers were at fault for what happened. And I thought, how many children were killed? How many videos are there of those people just standing in the hallway doing nothing while they're listening to gunshots and those children screaming? You can kiss my ass if you think that that's okay. It is not okay.

I just burst into tears. I burst into tears because the older I get, I've always thought, children are so sacred, right? I've always thought that my whole life, but if you really study history, and if you really look at what's happening now in the world, even what's happening in Israel, and in Gaza, the children are the first to be sacrificed. Everywhere across the world children are sacrificed for the stupidity of adults. It's disgusting and it's so upsetting. I think about myself as a little girl, and how isolated I was because my mother was sick. There was a large degree of isolation because we couldn't have people at our house. We didn't go anywhere and we just sat in our house. And we were told not to do anything so that we wouldn't upset her.

But at the end of the day, I found the theatre by the grace of God. All of a sudden I was in front of a theatre and in an audience. And I thought, that's my life. That's what I want to do with my life. It saved me. That's the truth. It saved me because there's no reason for me to be sitting here. Based on my upbringing and where I came from. My mother set fire to the house when I was two while I was in it. I went into foster care. I was never meant to survive. I wasn't. But I found the theatre. And the theatre saved me. So if I could give that moment to a kid, because we're not going to know what these babies are dealing with when they come to see these shows. We're not going to know. But the point is not to know. The point is just to give it and to give it with the purity of your heart, and hope, pray, and trust that God caught it and gives it where it needs to go.

I think that way about all of my art. You think about somebody like Zora Neale Hurston. She died impoverished. She probably had, I don't know how many homes, but she was always on the brink of being homeless. She died in poverty and didn't know the reach of her life. She didn't know that all those decades later, Alice Walker was going to find her on a shelf and bring her to the masses. You can never know the reach of your life. You just give it. So for me, this is my give. My art is my give, and specifically First Woman. The passion I have for the thing that saved me is giving that to young people. There's nothing more important that I do. Nothing.

**Maegan**

In *Jabari Dreams of Freedom*, the fictional Jabari encounters Ruby Bridges, Martin Luther King Jr, Barack Obama and more. They each teach Jabari how to persist. Why was it important to take Jabari on a journey where he encounters these real life figures?

**Nambi**

For me, Jabari was inspired by my nephew. He was a little boy at the time when Trayvon Martin was murdered. My family didn't really know how we should engage him around the fact that he was about to start taking the bus to school and traveling through Chicago. So I wrote the play for him. My whole dream was for him to know how important he was, and to know who he was in the face of lineage and the people who came before. Those stories are all about kids who in ridiculous circumstances had to be better than the adults in the room. I wanted to give my nephew that history.

My dad was a historian. He's passed now, but he was the original dramaturg on the show. He was the person who gave me a lot of that history. [...] It was super important to me that they were children, and not adults, because adults fuck up everything. Think about Ruby Bridges and the courage she had to have in a world that was not built for her. [...] It was important to me that it was children from the perspective of children. That children can be mentors for each other. [...] Children leading children.

**Maegan**

That's so powerful. Jabari also encounters Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama who teach him how to persist.

**Nambi**

Right. Well he doesn't actually meet Dr. King.

**Maegan**

Oh, right. That's right.

**Nambi**

Jabari doesn't, but he hears him. He does meet a young Barack Obama though. I was sort of fascinated. I thought oh, Barack Obama would have been how old at that time? I love Barack. I miss him. [...]

**Maegan**

How does Black musical theatre history inform your storytelling or practice?

**Nambi**

Oh Lord! I'm in that moment now where I'm kind of doing a deep dive. Because it's not something that I know. When I was a kid, *The Wiz* was out and my dad took me to see it. [...] My mother loved musicals and she was always playing them around the house. She had the albums back when people had albums. She had *West Side Story*, and *The Sound of Music*. She would play them and they would come on TV. And we'd sit and then we'd watch them. And it was always a big moment. In the old days, there were like three channels. And channel seven would do a special presentation and it was a musical. It was always part of my world. But I didn't study it. But now that I'm here in New York, I'm doing a deep dive. I saw *Jelly's Last Jam* last week. [...] Leslie Uggams is a beast! [...] She sang her face off. [...] I was like, she's 80?!

**Maegan**

Wow!

**Nambi**

Her voice sounded like she was like 25. The vocal command that she had on her voice. I also toured singing. I should tell you that. I toured singing for two years when I was your age. I toured internationally and did musicals. But they were original musicals. I wasn't doing something like *Guys and Dolls*. They were original musicals that were sort of built to my voice. It was hard work and I really enjoyed it.

**Maegan**

That's awesome! Where did you go?

**Nambi**

Mostly the tour was in Asia. So it was really great. And then they asked me to be their curriculum director, because I had this passion for kids. They said, 'can you build some stuff for our young audiences?' And I said, yeah of course. And then I said, can you pay for my health insurance? And they said, 'yeah.' It was awesome. It was a long time ago.

**Maegan**

Wow.

**Nambi**

Because I'm old. (Laughing).

**Maegan**

No. (Laughing). It's not easy to make a life in the theatre or to be a theatre artist in general. It's even harder to be a Black theatre artist and make a life. What has been the driving force behind your choice to be a theatre artist, and what has sustained you on this path?

**Nambi**

I think the driving force has been how I serve God. And I wasn't raised in a church. My father didn't believe in God. My mother was Catholic, but she didn't practice. But it was something that I found on my own, which meant that it was right. I was super clear when I first started. I thought, oh, this is my service. This is how I serve. And I still believe that. It's how I serve. What has sustained me? I don't know. I think a lot of it is luck. A lot of it is I guess, talent. I mean talent is so elusive. Everybody's talented. But I think, I just made a decision when I was a very young person. I remember thinking, oh my God, if I had to sit behind a desk for my life, I would die. I would just die. I thought, I cannot, will not do that. I have to be out. I have to be writing. I have to be traveling. When I was 18 and I graduated from high school, they asked us, 'what are you going to be doing in 10 years?' I said in 10 years, I will be traveling the world as a performing artist. And I was.

**Maegan**

And you were. That's awesome!

**Nambi**

And I didn't think it was possible. You know? But I just felt really lucky I think. And the grace of God, for sure. But also in a practical way. In a practical way, I think that I'm just really driven. My whole day is oriented around what I'm going to do. I've been here since 10 o'clock this morning writing. [...] I just orient my life around my goals and my dreams. I have a goal sheet and I periodically review them. I create vision boards and that stuff shows up because I visualized it. I pray every day. And I pray for my projects too because sometimes the energy won't be right. But you gotta make it right.

**Maegan**

Yeah.

**Nambi**

I've lived in LA, I've lived in New York, and I'm from Chicago. But I was born here in Harlem. I was just always trying to be somewhere. [...] You meet people and then they remember you, and then the next thing you know you've got a job. I can't tell you how many times that has happened to me. That I have shown up someplace just because I'm showing up and all of a sudden I get a call. 'Hey Nambi, can you come audition for this? Hey Nambi, can you come do this job? Hey Nambi, can you fly here etcetera...' So when you show up, the universe just catches you and takes you with wings. Like how I met you.

**Maegan**

Yeah, it's amazing.

**Nambi**

I remember watching you on stage, and thinking, oh, she's so cute. Look at those little feet. Oh, she'd be perfect for our show, but I was there to support Daniel. I wasn't there thinking about finding an actor. But I so remember you in that, in that little show y'all did with Gethsemane's (Herron) play. I so remember it. And I remember your little feet. And I said, ooo and she can dance.

**Maegan**

That's great. (Laughing).

**Nambi**

So funny. (Laughing).

**Maegan**

Okay, I have one more question for you. Who has shown you how to persist as a theatre artist?

**Nambi**

Who has shown me how to persist as a theatre artist? That's a great question. I don't know if I have an answer. I think I got really spoiled when I was in theatre school. But I got into theatre school because my drama teacher from high school helped me get in. And then I got a scholarship and I stayed. I did an internship at a major regional theater. And I still get jobs from that internship. That was over 35 years ago. I think I was just positioned to be around the cream of the crop. [...] There were all of these giants, and because they were already huge, there was never a doubt in my mind that I could be where they are. [...]

I had dinner with August Wilson when I was 19 years old. He sat across from me and I'm thinking, oh my God, I'm gonna ask him all these questions. And every time I tried to ask him anything, he said, 'but tell me about you. What are you writing?' And I thought, oh my God. This Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, August f\*cking Wilson, just asked me to tell him what I'm writing. So I said, I'm writing this play about little girls in the ghetto from Chicago, which is where I grew up across from housing projects. When I finished, he said, 'will you send me your play? Get my mailing address from the dramaturg.' I did and I sent it to him, but I never heard from him.

I saw him seven years later at an opening night at the Taper in LA. [...] The lights came up and this gentleman sitting in front of me, turned around. It was August Wilson. He looked at me and said, 'you! I remember your voice, but I don't remember your name.' He heard me talking to my friend. I said, I'm Nambi and I met you at the Goodman years ago. He said, 'that's right. That's

right!' [...] That sort of serendipity and alignment made it clear that I'm doing what I'm meant to do.

**Maegan**

Absolutely.

**Nambi**

Because that theatre is huge. And I happened to be sitting behind him? Crazy. Just blessed. You know?

**Maegan**

That's amazing.

**Maegan**

We're all exactly where we're supposed to be.

**Nambi**

And sometimes it doesn't feel like it. And sometimes you want to push and pull and doubt. The whole time I've been in New York, I've been doubting. Why am I here? And I've been here for 10 years. [...] I had to get straight with myself because I didn't get any sleep last night, and I was up until 6am. Just thinking about trajectory and how and why. I came up with some really good answers, which Daniel heard all about this morning. [...] Serendipity and being in the right place. And just trusting. It's weird because the older you get, the scarier it gets. [...] You think, what am I doing? Am I still living like a kid? I've recently tried to put stuff in place so that I have income if something happens to me, because that's the way you have to start thinking. But I've just been really lucky. Really blessed and I'm grateful.

**Maegan**

That's so great. Thank you so much Nambi! Thank you.

**Nambi**

Thank you. Thank you.

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