

Transcript of PlayCrush podcast Series 2, Episode 2 | Hammed Animashaun, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

PlayCrush is a theatre podcast created by The Old Vic in collaboration with Sherman Theatre. If you'd like to listen to the podcast instead, search 'PlayCrush' wherever you get your podcasts.

Joe Murphy:

Hello everyone and welcome to PlayCrush. It's Joe Murphy here, we have an absolutely cracking episode for you this week, with the brilliant Hammed Animashaun.

Hammed is a rising star and is sure to soon be a household name. He's worked on some astonishing productions bringing his trademark comedic anarchy to shows like: the *Barber Shop Chronicles*, *Amadeus* and *Threepenny Opera* all at the National Theatre; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at The Bridge; *Dear Elizabeth* at The Gate; *The Producers* at The Royal Exchange; *Monster Calls* at Bristol Old Vic and The Old Vic; *Measure For Measure* at The Young Vic; *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Bugsy Malone*, *Secret Theatre*, *Cinderella*, *Aladdin*, *Mogadishu* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Lyric Hammersmith; *Hate or La Haine* at the Barbican; *KAPOW* and *Married To The Game* at Theatre503 and *The Boy Who Fell into a Book* at Soho Theatre. On screen he is known for working on TV shows like *Black Mirror* and films like the indie hit *The Festival*. Hammed is a very exciting young talent and it was such a pleasure to spend some time talking to him and hearing how this all started for him.

Hammed's PlayCrush was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. The play was written in 1595 or 1596 and is one of the most joyful chaotic and enigmatic plays ever written, so it feels like a very natural fit for Hammed.

'The course of true love never did run smooth' a feuding fairy King and Queen of the forest crossed paths with four runaway lovers, and a troop of actors trying to rehearse a play. As their dispute grows the magical royal couple meddle with mortal lives leading to love triangles, mistaken identities, and transformations with hilarious, but dark, consequences. This is one of Shakespeare's greatest romantic comedies (and probably one of the greatest romantic comedies of all time) so it was really brilliant to get to chat with such a great actor about such a great play.

Thanks everyone for tuning in and continuing to support Sherman Theatre and The Old Vic, it means so much to us. So, without any further ado, here is Hammed and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Hello man, how you doing?

Hammed Animashaun:

I'm good man, how are you doing?

JM:

Yes not too bad, not too bad, I mean how how's it been for you? How have the last few months shaped up?

HA:

Uh, you know it's been an adjustment, it's been an adjustment. Do you know what I'm saying, like um no one really saw this coming and or really I guess no one really anticipated how big this would be and how you know it would just throw the whole world into some sort of, I don't know, it feels like the whole world's on this bouncy castle, but you can't really control the bounce! [Joe laughs] I mean you just hitting the walls your hitting the ceiling I don't know it's one of them things so you're just trying to adjust to this new sort of gravity I guess, of what the world is now.

JM:

Yeah, yeah.

HA:

It's been a massive adjustment like because you know I'm quite, I like to do lots of stuff and then to be told that you can't do lots of stuff it's kind of... do you know what I mean? It's kind of weird. But it's needed, you know? It's needed, it has to happen so.

JM:

Yeah. And how have you found it now that it's sort of starting to ease a bit? Have you managed to go for a few socially distanced walks or hang outs with people?

HA:

Uh yeah, like um I've seen some friends in parks like I've never been quite like anxious person but I think during this whole process I've become very anxious as to where I go and who I hang out with and you know all those things. Especially now like the lockdown is starting to ease or has eased a lot more since you know a couple weeks ago. Um I find myself staying inside a lot more than before [they laugh] because I was, I would go to like the shops and do all the you know food shopping and stuff like that and I didn't really have a problem with that, but I guess now that there are more people outside I'm, so I'm a bit anxious. So um-

JM:

Right, right, yes.

HA:

I guess I'm just like, I'm more: 'oh maybe I'm just going to do an online shop' or you know? [Joe laughs] yeah, I'm a bit more anxious than I was like a couple weeks ago I think.

JM:

Yeah that's interesting because you feel like everyone's going back out and because it's sort of opening up a bit.

HA:

Yeah, I mean it was inevitable do y'know what I mean, like we can't, we can't all stay at home forever do y'know what I mean. There has to be a point where we have to try and find some sort of normality, even if it is you know

this 'new normal', or however they call it so, it was inevitable that people are going to start you know venturing out again. But I guess for me um, because I don't live on my own I live with my family so it's like, I just have to be more cautious as to what I do, do y'know what I mean?

JM:

Yeah, definitely, definitely, yeah. It's been a very surreal time. Um, and it must be weird I suppose, you know, for to pause, you know, on your work I suppose. You know, a lot of your work has been theatre work, you know, that live performance element seems to be, you know, one of your strongest points and um that's just not been possible, over the last few months.

HA:

It's been heart-breaking man if I'm going to be completely honest. Um just like seeing how this whole community has just been forced to shut, I mean loads of industries have been, like all the industries have been forced to shut down at some point, but just like but because theatres I hold theatre so close to my heart. And then just to see it all just shut down and then for a while there was like no, it looked like there was no support at all from like the big- the big guys upstairs, [Joe laughs]and it was just like, it was just, it was tough man. It was tough. It was tough. But like what theatre does that that community feel and everyone just came together and was just like, you know well if they're not going to help us we're going to help, we're going to try at least help ourselves. And it's been amazing just to see like the togetherness like even more so, like we're not in the we're not all in the auditorium together, but we are together in spirit and I think that's what's been keeping theatre alive. And when you've got amazing theatres you know, you know, doing these like these streams or these archive performances of shows that they've done in the past and stuff, it's really you know, they don't have to do that you know, but it's just to keep theatre, just to keep theatre alive in some shape or form. It's just, it was needed man, I needed those streams. [Joe laughs] It's been amazing. It's been heart-breaking but it's also been amazing to see people come together and be like this is our livelihoods you know, and we can't just allow it to um just to fall by the wayside.

JM:

Yeah, definitely. I think it's that resilience has been amazingly inspiring hasn't it? I think across the whole country really, in loads of different sectors uh, and with lots of different people, we've seen that, you know, like there's been people whose donating to The Sherman um, you know, in-in a time of like incredible crisis. And yet, writing to us and just saying like the value and that has like I mean I just find it very moving. And the one, you know, the way that I think I've seen a lot of communities, you know, specifically obviously theatre industries because we're part of it, but I've seen a lot of them come together and when this crisis came it, in some ways, has only proved um how great people are you know. And like it didn't turn us into like evil selfish um people it turned us into loving caring people who reached out and I found that kind of amazing, despite obviously the horror that surrounds it.

HA:

Yeah absolutely, it's been amazing man, the I guess the support from everybody like in the community even, not even like, even people that are not even in the community, just like really supporting the arts and know how important it is. Like, I say all the time how theatre saved my life so you know it would be it'll be weird if I if we came out of this and it's a portion of it even like a portion if it's not here, it'll be weird. But it's great how people are you know really trying to do something about it it's amazing.

JM:

Yeah, definitely. Well let's pick up on that man 'theatre saved your life'.

HA:

100%.

JM:

Well that, I mean, that feels like a great title for the episode already - so that's great thank you for that! [Hammed laughs] Um so maybe we could just zip back um to like where this all started for you, how you got into theatre, um how this kind of crazy roller coaster ride that ends with some pretty unbelievable performances and theatre experiences today in some of pretty much the greatest venues you know in the UK. It would be wicked just to sort of chat about that and hear how 'theatre saved your life'.

HA:

Yeah man, so yeah I grew up in East London and um, yeah I think when I was from when I was a kid I've always wanted I've always loved like making people laugh, and um always like do like performances for my mom in the living room and stuff, trying to make her laugh and stuff, so I've always like enjoyed making people laugh and stuff but I didn't really know how to put that energy, I didn't know where to put that energy. And then when I am when I got to uh secondary school I kind of, you know there's that period I think between when you're 11 and 14 when you're trying to find your identity with all these kids. I think over the course of those two years, or three years, I kind of went from being the quiet one, because I didn't really know my place, to being like the class clown. And then um and then but then also by being the class clown I was been very disruptive in class, um and like you know just-

JM:

I can't imagine that man? I can't imagine that at all?!

HA:

Oh yeah, oh yeah, I was quite disruptive, and then like because I was always trying to make my classmates laugh but it was just like trying to find my identity and trying to find like who I was in in school and what I could do and stuff, anyway but I was putting my energy in all the wrong places like I can't try making you know my friends laugh when we're trying to learn about photosynthesis so um-

JM:

What's funny about photosynthesis? I like that you found a gag in there. [They laugh]

HA:

And um but my drama teacher at school, Fran Sirvi, who I'm still, like who I still talk to now because she's amazing. Um she was like you know you can, you know, this is where you put your energy, this is where you entertain your friends, and I was like 'okay, what in drama class?' and she was like 'yeah'. So um I was doing that and I found myself really enjoying being, or like try creating other characters, or being other people, or whatever, I just enjoyed like playing and just exploring different characters. And then um she kind of she turned to me, I think it was the end of school, it was the end of I was going to college and she said 'you know you can make a living out of this? You can be an actor, you can actually be an actor as a career' and I laughed and said 'nah there's no way.' And um she really tried to you, know, I guess um convince me to go to drama school and all that stuff but I wasn't, I wasn't for it, I was like 'nah I don't want to go to drama school I'm not up for that all that' you know [Joe laughs] because in my head in those times I thought drama school was like leaping around, I don't know, [Joe laughs] and I was just like 'oh that's not for me' sort of thing or like pretending to be like animals in the corner [Joe laughs] and I was like 'nah I'm not down for that' so I kind of strayed away from the whole acting thing. And I went to university to be a teacher because yeah, because my mom was really um really for me being a teacher. So I went to university and I studied drama but I also studied uh English lit as well. So um I was doing that and but my but my drama teacher was like 'you should really think about this as a career, think about being an actor as a career'. So she helped me get my agent, who I'm still with today, um and she's just been she's one of the reasons why you know I am I am an actor because she pushed me from every time I was saying 'I don't want to do it' or 'I can't do it' she was like 'you can absolutely do it'. I remember I was 14 or 13 and I went to see a play at the at the Half Moon Young People's Theatre, where I used to go to as a kid, and I saw um I saw a guy who looked just like me he was black he was a black guy look just like me on this stage and I remember thinking 'I've never seen this before.' My drama teacher would take us to theatre all the time you know would see plays all the time. I remember we went to see uh um *The Woman In Black* I remember thinking 'this is TERRIFYING, but where are the black people?' [Joe laughs] [Hammed laughs] I was like 'oh no wait, I don't know what's going on, this is this is awesome, this is terrifying, but I don't see anyone like me.' We went to the Half Moon Young People's Theatre and I saw a play there and I saw a guy look just like me and he was incredible and I was like 'I want to do that' but then I thought that 'no but he's, he must be a special case' do you not what I mean? and like 'he's gonna' you know and he was great and um I just thought it was not for me. But she really convinced me like 'you can do this'. So she helped me get my agent, she did so much for me man, and um yeah and then she kind of convinced me that I can actually do it because I remember being in university and thinking 'no let me just be a teacher because that's just like the smart way to go' you know. And um but she was, even like in university, she was in my head so um I remember I got her-

JM:

She got in your head man, she got in your head.

HA:

And I remember I had an agent at the time but we were both still really new at this in this industry and um I had I got an audition for a play called *Mogadishu* that was-

JM:

Oh great play, great play.

HA:

It was on at The Royal Exchange and it was going to transfer to Lyric Hammersmith and I remember going in and um Matthew Dunster, you know being Matthew Dunster amazing director, he kind of whipped me into shape and I had the best time of my life doing that play. Um and I learned so much about the theatre and the stage and everything and he was he was incredible like Matthew because the kids that were in the play I think for some of us it was our first jobs, our first professional jobs, and he really looked after us and he was really like, not strict like a teacher, but that like tough love sort of thing do that mean. And he was like 'you guys really want to be actors? This is how you do it' sort of thing and that really, and that really stuck with me. So yeah I did *Mogadishu* and then uh then we did the tour the year after and I still, and I still didn't think that acting was my thing. I always thought 'I'll do the play, I'll do the tour and I'll go back to uni.'

JM:

So, hang on, did you leave uni to do *Mogadishu*?

HA:

I did yeah. Yeah I did. But before that I actually had a conversation with my tutor and I was like 'is there any way I can do the play and still stay in uni?' And she was like 'no, you got a pick' and then I was like 'oh okay so..' for a long time I think I had, I think I had like a week or so to decide, and then um I was like 'okay I'll do the play, if I defer this year, I'll do the play, then I'll come back next year.'

JM:

And what year was that? Your first year at uni?

HA:

That was halfway through my second year yeah. I was I just turned I think I was 19. [Joe laughs] Um yeah and I was like 'I'll defer this year, go and do the play and I'll come back next year' and then it was announced that it was going to do a UK tour, never been on tour before, I was like 'this might be fun'. [Joe laughs] So I spoke to my tutor and said 'I'm going to defer NEXT year, but I'll come back' [Joe laughs] and she was like 'yeah it's fine, it's totally fine' and I've been doing that ever since!

JM:

You're still going next year, totally...

HA:

Yeah.. I'm still going next year, I'm still going next year...

JM:

'I'm excited about it!' And so just talk to me for a bit, because you know there's so much in the industry I think about, like, you 'have to go to drama school' you 'have to be at one of the big drama schools to get an agent' and obviously you've taken a really different route. And a really interesting route. So just how did that come about, with an agent? Like, what was the actual like mechanics of that? Is it, did somebody know somebody, and you got an audition? Or did you send like CVS out? Like, what was the process of that?

HA:

I didn't know, I didn't know anyone. And then it was it was crazy because I'm, I didn't know anybody, I didn't know anyone in the industry or nothing like that. All I knew is that I really liked being on stage and I really liked performing. And um I think, what year was it? I want to say 2007 or 2008, it was it was around there, or two- maybe even two thousand, I can't remember, but I think *Kidulthood* had just uh just come out. There was just like, there was this um, I guess there was this um, what's the word, people really wanted actors who hadn't trained. There was like desire for, to get actors who hadn't trained and stuff and there was a lot of, um yeah, I guess there was a lot of demand for them. And um I remember I used to I used to go so I used to go as a kid, as a teenager, I so as when I was from 11 to 15 I'd go to a Half Moon Young People's Theatre and uh after these after school, you know, classes. And then I got too old and I remember being SO upset [Joe laughs] because, obviously when you get to 16 they gotta kick you out cause you're two you're too old, I remember being so upset and then I started going to um like I guess acting classes in Hoxton Hall um in North London. And I remember I was going to them and then I started working there as well. So I was working there as like a because I was working, yeah I was working there as like a as an usher or on box office there was even a point when I was working there as a follow spot operator. And um yeah so I was just trying I was I guess I was learning everything about the industry but without knowing I was learning everything about the industry if that makes sense. And um then one day Hoxton Hall decided that they were going to make like an agency because at the time it was called Hoxton Street Casting and then uh my there was like um leaflets handed out to all the nearest schools and colleges around London, or at North London, or around East London, and then obviously my college got it and, my um my sixth got it sorry, and my drama teacher was like 'you should definitely go and audition for this' and I was like 'oh maybe I don't know.' 'No, you're GONNA audition for this' [Joe laughs] and I remember I used the same monologue that was done in the play that went to see when I was 13.

JM:

Oh wow.

HA:

I did that monologue and then I got in. And it was like a 12-week, I want to say it was like a 12-week, program. It was sort of like drama school fit into 12 weeks. So the first, so there was 12 of us, and the first half was um you know acting you know 'here's how you act, this is Shakespeare, this is you know blah blah blah' and then the second 'oh this is tv' and then the second half was 'if you make it this is how you should behave' so there was like media training um-

JM:

Wow.

HA:

Yeah it was all that, it was all that stuff. And then they paid for our first year of Spotlight and then they paid for our headshots. Yeah, it was incredible honestly. I'm so lucky and then, I'm so lucky, so blessed. And then um, then my agent walked out and saw and then we did a massive showcase and they brought as many like casting/directors/producers came to see it. And then our agent walked out and then we, it was announced that this was going to be our agent and then we were like 'oh hey' and she went 'hey' and then she walked out and then was like 'right, you're actors. Go out into the world.' [Joe laughs] Yeah it was crazy. And then we were like 'okay so what do we do now?' sort of thing. And then we all just went back to our lives... [Joe laughs] So I went to uni, some people went like and did their day jobs, it was crazy. And then once in a while you get a call from your agent saying 'oh so this is commercial, there's this short film, you want to do it?' or 'do you want to audition for it?' I was like 'yeah of course!' So I did loads of like short films and um I did loads of short films when I was 18. 17/18. And in my, and then I did a play in West London called *Superhuman*. Uh it was in a community theatre in West, in Ladbroke Grove, with SPID Theatre company and that was like um with like loads of young people. And it was in the community uh theatre and it was immersive so it was all around the community centre in this like um estate in Ladbroke Grove. And that was awesome. And then I did um then it was *Mogadishu* came up and then it was like 'okay great'. So yeah that's how it kind of happened. So I didn't know anybody I just, an opportunity came up. I think back then as well there was loads and loads of opportunities for um young people, for young people who were interested in the arts and who wanted to give it a try you know what I mean. And there were institutions and there were buildings that were willing to give these young people a try. So I think I was very blessed and very lucky to be in, be that, at around that time because even then I still really didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't really know who I was. So um you know, and I was hanging out with, when I was a lot younger, I saw a lot of things and I hung around with people that were quite questionable. And I, you know, made mistakes and all that stuff and but I was, really I guess for me, I was didn't really know who I was and then this sort of thing came about and I finally felt at home. Like I knew exactly what I wanted to do. It was crazy. I've never had that moment before in like my I guess my adolescent life. I was just, I was because I was just going through the motions and then um this happened and then it was like 'oh I know exactly what I want to do now' and then yeah it all just sort of made sense and then here I am. You know, 10-12 years later.

JM:

I mean, what a moment. And also, it strikes me how important it was um to see yourself represented on stage at that in that early point.

HA:

Oh it was SO important. It was so important because it was it was literally the first time. We would we would go to the theatre, my drama teachers are arguably the best drama teacher in the world because you know she took us everywhere. She took us to see the ballet you know, she took us everywhere and um you know to see that, to see that play, which was just around the corner from our college, from our sixth form, uh Half Moon Young People Theatre is in Limehouse. And um to see that play and to see that young man I was like 'oh my days. It's like, it's actually, it's actually possible.' You know what I'm saying? And it meant so much to me. I don't know what it is but something just clicked in me and then I've never, I've never forgotten that moment, or that play. And I remember when I first sat down I was being so disruptive. And there was other kids as well and I was like 'oh this is dead, uh, oh my god, why are we sitting, UHHH...' [Joe laughs] And then the place started, and then I saw him, and I was like 'whoa.' You know what I mean, everything just sort of, it was sort of like this weird, I don't know, I don't know, ethereal moment I guess.

JM:

It's belonging I suppose isn't it. It's just suddenly realizing you belong, yeah um, and how shocking that, that feeling hadn't come to you earlier, you know, that's sad you haven't seen that representation earlier. And do you feel that now, like in your own world when you're on stage, do you think of the kids out there in the audience who are seeing you up there and seeing themselves represented through you?

HA:

...um. [Hammed laughs] Not until you asked that question no. [Joe laughs] I don't know. I've never, I've no, I don't know, I don't think so? I guess... you know I always, I always try to you know, I always try to audition for uh projects that I feel like are gonna uh create conversation and create debate do you know what I mean. So um but when I speak to some people afterwards or after the play and stuff and I and that, and I realized how much it touched them, or how much it's created the conversation, I feel like I've done my job. Um it's just it's very nice when you know you receive a message or somebody comes up to you like randomly. Like you might, you might be in a coffee shop somewhere and someone randomly come up to you and says 'I saw you in this play like five years ago and I thought-' I was like 'whoa I haven't even thought about that play' it's crazy, it is crazy, it's humbling.

JM:

Yeah it is, I yeah, I can only imagine. I just love the thought of um little versions of you out there, you know, and then they're gonna go and audition now they've seen you in the *Dream* or whatever and they're, you know, it's

really important isn't it? So, okay, wicked. So you've done *Mogadishu* um smash hit play, nailed it, not bad first one, um big tour, what happened next?

HA:

Uh so after *Mogadishu* then we did the tour, and then I did uh two films uh back to back. Uh one film was called *Borrowed Time* and the other film was called *28k*. And then NOTHING for like a year. [Joe laughs] So I thought oh in that time I was like 'okay so I guess this is the time where I just go back to go back to uni.' [Joe laughs] But I decided not to because I really really wanted to give it a try. So I worked in a bar in Waterloo for yeah, for the best part of a year. And I was just auditioning, I was just auditioning, and nothing was happening. And you know I wasn't getting anything and it was just one, it was just one of those I guess, it was one of those moments I think every actor has where um it just goes dry for a bit. [Hammed laughs] I mean that's what happens. I was just working in a bar I was thinking, I was like um yeah barman/security where I just like you know when it starts getting late and people start getting a bit rowdy I just start throwing people out. And then yeah so that's what I was doing for like best part of a year. And then um and then things started to pick up around 2012. Uh I did a pilot um for a tv show on BBC Three uh, that didn't get picked up unfortunately, but it was I had the best week ever. And then um, then I uh, then what happened after that? Oh yes, and then I did a *Secret Theatre*.

JM:

Oh yes amazing.

HA:

At Lyric Hammersmith with um Sean Holmes. And that was, that was probably like the best craziest, weirdest, two years of my life. It was honestly, I learned so much about myself, about the industry, and um and about like theatre. Like it was just the best, craziest, two years of my life. And I'll never forget, and I'll always be grateful to it. And then um-

JM:

And that was like, um it was, you guys created like an ensemble right? For two years, did plays and, I think um, the audiences didn't necessarily know what the play was? You just come along and then you get it and it felt like the energy of that was a sort of the idea of like radically reinterpreting plays, I felt, like showing them you, like, showing them new ideas?

HA:

Yeah yeah that's exactly right. That's exactly right. Sean Holmes had this wacky idea to do this sort of like um Secret Cinema type thing where people come in and not know what they're watching. And then we were like 'oh yeah this is cool.' [they laugh] We all went to Berlin for three days and we started watching some plays over there and we remember thinking 'this this stuff is WACKY'. [Joe laughs] And then we came back and like should we try and attempt some of that stuff? Some of the European style? And then we did uh the first play we did was *Woyzeck* and then um we did a *Streetcar Named Desire*, but we didn't do American accents, and it was in a white box. Uh and

then so yeah it was seven plays and I think four of them were new plays and three of them were um contemp- already written so yeah it was um it was it was amazing man. It was awesome. [Joe laughs] And like I made like lifelong friends in that, and it was um yeah it was crazy, it was crazy, but it was awesome as well. I think I was like 21 when I went in there? And I was a bit like I was a bit like 'oh what's this? Ahhh...!' [they laugh]. It was cool though, it was cool and then after that Sean asked me if I wanted to uh do panto. So I did in 2011 I did *Aladdin* I played Aladdin in *Aladdin* at the Lyric Hammersmith, uh my first pantomime.

JM:

How was that?

HA:

That was AWESOME. It was awesome. Although I had NO idea what I was doing. So...[Joe laughs] because it's not, because there's a reason why pantomime is called 'pantomime' it's not called you know 'a play'. I had, I had no idea what I was doing. So, I had to learn, like I had to learn the tricks on the trade of panto. So I learned everything I learned on *Aladdin* I you know I delivered on *Cinderella*. I did *Cinderella* in 2012 and then um I played one of the ugly step sisters and that was incredible. And then uh then it was *Secret Theatre* and then Sean asked me if I wanted to um uh do uh *Bugsy Malone*.

JM:

Oh yes, uh what a play.

HA:

Yeah, I was *Bugsy Malone*. I was like uh 'yeah!' And that was, that was really fun, that was really fun.

JM:

And so, what happened? What was, what came after the Lyric?

HA:

After the Lyric so I did, actually in 2016 I did, um uh what I did... oh yes I did um I did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Lyric with the with Filter Theatre and Sean directed it, and I played Demetrius there.

JM:

I um, I saw that production. I absolutely loved that production. One of the greatest Oberon's uh in Jonny Broadbent that I've ever seen.

HA:

[Hammed laughs] Yeah, he's hilarious, he's a dream. So yeah Sean asked me if I wanted to be a part of that and I said, 'hell yes.' [Joe laughs] I think we had I think we had like two weeks rehearsal maybe or three weeks rehearsal. And then we went in and we did, it was an hour and a half, and it was honestly I've never had so much fun. Um it was just wacky and crazy. I mean there was a food fight in there, so it was just like, it was it was so much fun. And then from that was I think the last thing I did at the Lyric in that time. And then I went,

and I went off to The National and I worked with Rufus for a bit and um *Threepenny Opera* with um Rory Kinnear, Rosalie Craig, Haydn Gwynne, uh Debbie Kurup, Nick Holder and loads of amazing... Le Gateau Chocolat...!

JM:

I mean um what a team!?

HA:

Yeah, Sarah Amankwah, yeah. There was like incredible people on that on that and that that was the best time ever. I've never had so much fun on a production. That production, again, I feel like, I feel like with Sean I developed a love for like really out there theatre and then and then *Threepenny* came up and I was like 'yeah this is sick' um yeah. And then um what did I do then? I did um *Amadeus* uh straight after with um with Lucian and Adam Gillan and that was cool. That was um that was really fun because I learnt to play, I actually learnt to play the trumpet for that.

JM:

Wow, so you hadn't played before?

HA:

Never touched a trumpet in my life. And I was, I was very adamant that I wanted to play it with the orchestra, with uh Southbank Sinfonia. I was like I don't I don't want to fake it, I want to play it. [Joe laughs]

JM:

That's amazing...I mean what was that like? Did you just like, did you learn the trumpet? Or did you learn like one tune on the trumpet?

HA:

I learned like two tunes on the trumpet.

JM:

Oh you smashed it mate, you're a real trumpeter!

HA:

I'm a grade one! [Joe laughs] I actually took the test.

JM:

Oh yes!

HA:

So yeah. I was so adamant that I wanted to play. I remember, all I remember was like I really want to play the trumpet I just, I just want to play a trumpet, I don't want to mime it. And then um yeah so I learned it. One of the, one of the trumpeters on in the Southbank Sinfonia, Sarah, she was like, 'if you really want to learn I'll teach you' and that's what she taught me.

JM:

Oh my god that's amazing. One of the trumpeters from the Sinfonia taught you. I mean, like some people would kill for that opportunity!

HA:

It was amazing. I remember Michael Longhurst was like, I remember him saying he was like, 'oh you know you're just going to mime it' I was like 'no I don't want to mime it'. [Joe laughs] But yeah, that was, that was cool. And I developed a love for Mozart that was amazing.

JM:

Yeah I mean what privilege, to like get to know, I suppose that, that music and that, that person so well over the course of the project.

HA:

Yeah it was amazing, it was so cool.

JM:

It seems really interesting as well that, like um, you find homes all over the place you know? Like the Lyric became home for a while, the National became home for a while, that's quite rare I think for actors you don't mean to find that kind of continuity of working and-

HA:

I'm very blessed bro, I'm very, I'm very blessed.

JM:

Well it also suggests um, you're doing something right, you know? If they keep bringing it home, amazing, and so then um what came next?

HA:

uh *Barber Shop Chronicles* came next.

JM:

I mean a defining moment surely? I mean certainly for audiences, I imagine for yourself as well?

HA:

Yeah um *Barber Shop Chronicles* definitely will stay with me for the rest of my life. Um I've never felt something the way I felt on the first night of um, the first preview, I've never felt um energy like that before. Um I, and also, *Barber Shop Chronicles* is just one of those projects that will... I don't think anything can, will touch it, because of what it represented for the actors who were in it and also for the people who came to see it. Because I remember, the first day of rehearsals when I walked in (and no disrespect to any other rehearsals I've been in, every rehearsal I've been have been blessings, have been incredible, I've learned so much) but I think, but what sets this rehearsal apart was that I've never walked into a rehearsal room and felt instantly at home. There was something about what Bijan did, what Inua did, and what the rest of the creative team and what the boys did, where we instantly felt at home. I feel like, I don't know this might be just me, but I feel like you know it's hard when

you walk into a rehearsal room being the minority. Being like one of few black people or people of colour. And um having to, I guess conform, and um, I didn't, we didn't have to do this in this rehearsal room. We were literally just ourselves. Like it was, we were purely ourselves. And I've never enjoyed the rehearsal room so much because we all just reverted back to, we all reverted to our African selves, [they laugh] it was, it was incredible. And the first preview, I'll never forget it. I remember like welling up and tearing up when I saw people stand up and people rushed the stage. [Joe laughs] Like I will, I will never forget that. I will never, ever, ever forget that. The music hit, we were about to do our uh curtain call, or the dance after the curtain call, and people just rushed the stage. And it was like a 15 minute rave that just kicked off in the Dorfman. [Joe laughs] And then it happened again on press night, and we were just, and I remember I remember like going back into my dressing room and crying. Because I was just, like that... I've never seen that, ever. I've never, ever seen that. And I've never felt that way where I've, where I look into the audience and I see young people who look just like me watching the show. And you can tell that they're having the time of their lives, and like people coming to the theatre who have never ever been. I'm talking about people who are from inner city London, or wherever they are in the country, who have come all the way to the Dorfman to see this show about barbershops. About black barbershops. Never, ever been to the theatre, because they genuinely thought it wasn't, they weren't allowed. Or it wasn't for them. And then this show came up and you had people who had never been, never been, who sat in the theatre and watched this show and had the time of their lives. I learned so much, I mean, no man, I will never, I'll never forget it. Was just the best thing I ever did. I'm so blessed and so lucky to be a part of that, to be a part of that production. To be a part of that project. It was great.

JM:

And so I mean I say what's next I feel like you know in a weird way it's like a pinnacle isn't it, like that you've kind of fixed theatre, you've fixed the society, you go become a teacher, back at uni now, you've nailed it!

HA:

So *Barber Shop Chronicles* was 2017, and then we did it again in 2018, and then it was uh then I did *A Monster Calls*.

JM:

A great show.

HA:

At The Old Vic, which again, it was you know same feelings but for a different reason. Um you know talking about grief and loss and having to accept, having to accept like acceptance of losing somebody and that thing was just um, again, another thing I would never forget. And every single person on that, on that show, again - lifelong friends. I mean we went through so much during that show. And um yes again, another shout out I'll never forget, and then um after that I think is uh *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

JM:

Your PlayCrush.

HA:

my PlayCrush yeah

JM:

Look at that! Look, I mean seamlessly mate, seamlessly linked through you're a professional and I like that. So this was your second *Midsummer Night's Dream*?

HA:

Yeah man.

JM:

Um and this time you're at the Bridge Theatre yeah and in quite a different part uh to your first one?

HA:

Yeah played Bottom, Nick Bottom, the weaver.

JM:

Should we chat a little bit about um that experience at the Bridge? And then we'll get stuck into the play or you know crush over each other.

HA:

Yeah um, yeah. My experience, I can only describe it as like being, all of us, the whole cast, being like rock stars.

JM:

[Joe laughs] What a feeling.

HA:

It was! I don't know, I was just, I remember thinking 'this must be what rock stars feel like'. [Joe laughs] I don't know like going out on concert and then I don't know. Hey man, The Bridge theatre first, let me say it's an amazing theatre. The things that you can do over there is incredible. Um I had the, I had literally the best time ever um.

JM:

What I've loved about every project is 'it's been the best time ever'. I'm like, this is a lucky man, this is a lucky man.

HA:

I can't, I can't knock it! I honestly, every single show I've done has been amazing for all like different reasons innit. I've had the best time of everything I've done. I'm just super lucky. I'm blessed to be able to do what I do, so I can I can't knock the stuff that I've done you know you know I'm saying.

JM:

Definitely, no, I love it, well, but I think what I also love is that um you never include yourself in that. Like it's like to do with you as well, is the reason it's the best thing ever.

HA:

Like honestly like at The Bridge I had, oh man because Bottom is a part that I've always wanted to play ever since I read the play for the first time when I was 14 years old. It's been um the part that I've wanted to play.

JM:

Well it basically is the class clown isn't it?

HA:

Exactly, exactly. And I knew I remember when I first read the play and I went 'I know exactly how I'm going to play that. I know exactly how I'm going to play Nick Bottom.' And then when I had, when I had the discussion, or when I had the audition of Nick and we were talking about how he's gonna, he's gonna switch the Titania and the Oberon parts and make Oberon have the spell like being cast to him, and he's gonna fall in love with bottom and I was like 'oh my days this is just gonna enhance the idea that I already have!' Because I've always seen, I've always seen Nick Bottom as this guy who, of course, wants to be the centre of attention, but also just loves life and loves just the moment. He just loves the moment. So whatever happens in that moment he's gonna go for it a hundred percent. So I never really saw it as a thing where Titania you know falls, tells him that she loves him and he goes 'no stop it' I've always gone like 'well yeah, of course you do.. it's me?' You know and so um yeah I just thought it was an amazing idea. And then working with Oliver Chris who's wicked, honestly wicked, and with Gwendolyn who's incredible, and working with all the aerialists you know and the guys and mechanicals and the lovers like everyone was just wicked. Everyone was just awesome. And we honestly, all of us, it was like it almost didn't feel like work. It almost didn't feel like work. It felt like staying at home was what was work, going to the theatre was the fun part. So um yeah man I had I had an awesome time and doing that doing that play honestly. And also because it was a part that I've always wanted to play and I just I really you know, not to toot my own horn, but I revelled man. I just honestly, I went so far. As far as I possibly could, you know, I honestly thought there was a time when Nick was like 'Hammed you need to reign it in.' Because there were a couple of shows, you can ask some of the guys in the show, there was a couple of shows where I did the most. I was doing so much. Because all I wanted to do was just make everyone laugh. Not just the audience, but like my classmates too. [Joe laughs] I wanted to crack them, I wanted to make them corpse, I wanted to like I was just playing. I was just playing.

JM:

And did it meet your expectations?

HA:

100 percent. Like all the ideas, like you know with the ears and the costumes and everything it was just like oh this all makes complete sense. Yeah

honestly it was just, and the audience as well the audience that kept coming in you know who wanted to see this who wanted to see this crazy wacky party. When you've got people flying over you in silks, you know, that's incredible in itself. Those guys were super strong and you just look at them and go 'how are you doing that?' All I have to do is just you know say lines and stuff, but then guys the saying lines AND hanging upside down. David Morse was saying lines and hanging upside down. I don't know who he is, he must be a terminator or an android because I can tell you he was ripped. Um yeah it was not honestly man it went far beyond my expectations, it was just incredible man. And the fact that people enjoyed the show as much as we enjoyed doing it just made it 10 times better. So every time we went out there we knew that they were going to have a good time, only because we knew we were going to have a good time. It was great there wasn't a bad show and we did like 101 shows I think or something like that.

JM:

Oh man. I mean it sounds, I'm so gutted I missed it, sounds essentially like the greatest production of all time. Um so I mean that, you know, *Midsummer's Dream* is probably all about you know one of the best known plays yeah you know of all times, I suppose you know um for those who don't know it, I mean it's about these lovers really isn't it um trying to escape a sort of oppressive regime or a regime that tells them they can't be together. They get lost in the woods, mad adventure fairies magic ensues, everybody mistakes for everybody else, everyone falls in love with everybody else, but at the end of it the right people seem to fall in love with the right people, and um even the sort of grumpies uh back at home in Athens kind of sort their love and their relationship out, and your ends in a massive wedding. It's sort of the prototype romantic comedy in some ways. Um but like what is it a play about for you? Like what, why, for you is that a PlayCrush? I mean is it the part? Is it playing it? Or is there something in the play as well that you responded to?

HA:

I think it's the freedom in our like... okay so for me the reason why I really love the play, one of the reasons why I really love to play, is because I've always said that William Shakespeare (like no offense to the purists or anything like that, this is just me) but I honestly think that William Shakespeare wrote that play when he was drunk or high. [Joe laughs] He must have been. He MUST have been. Because the freedom of which he just WENT. Like he went sooo far left. Like it was dude I mean like because the play starts off, I guess sort of you know like you said the oppressive regime. You've got the king of Athens, they've had the war with the queen of amazon, and he's like 'right we've won the war, you have to marry me you're my prize'. And it's like really like 'oh my gosh that's horrible..' And then you've got these lovers who goes like 'you uh Hermia, must marry this man otherwise you're gonna spend the rest of your life in the nunnery!' And it's like 'oh that's horrible, what's going on?' But then all of a sudden the play just switches. And then you've got these like normal guys who are about to put on a play for a really horrible wedding. People that, doesn't want, no one wants it to happen. You really don't want it to happen. But then these guys just come around come out of nowhere and start making you laugh and you just go 'oh these guys are really funny' and then you then

switch and then you're in the forest, and then there's a fairy, and then 'where did where did the fairies come from?!' Honestly Joe I remember reading this play I was like 14/15. I'm a reading this play I was like 'wh-what?' But like it was just but I was like cracking up as well because you know I've always loved Shakespeare and this and this one just really like sticks with me. Just only because of how wild it is. Like we all know like most of Shakespeare's plays like most of them are pretty wild in itself like you know *Titus Andronicus* - don't even get me started - but like you know *Midsummer Nights Dream* just like you start really grey and then you end up with all this colour. And it's just like I feel like he must have taken some mushrooms I just went 'fuck it.' [Joe laughs]

JM:

We um, I toured a version of it with The Globe theatre in China and you know obviously for us it's like you know as you say like from like 13/14yrs you know this play, you've seen it, whatever, you know. Um but for the Chinese I suppose it's less, you know, it's not as culturally prevalent. And so it was like um doing it like a new writing performance, you know, it was just like 'what the shit is going on? Why is that guy a donkey? Why is she falling in love?' They were just like 'what?!' And like it sounds like your interaction with the play, and the production you did kind, of recaptured that original wildness that I mean, imagine seeing that for the first time, you wouldn't have a clue what was going on.

HA:

Honestly like, because I saw because I saw Sean Holmes production at The Globe. And again it was the same sort of you know, he definitely captured the craziness of it, from the from the get-go. I was like 'what the hell is going on?' Like you think you know the play and then you watch a different production and you just go 'what is going on?' like Sean had like a member of the audience be one of The Mechanicals. That is genius.

JM:

Yeah that is brilliant.

HA:

Do you know what I mean? And I was just like 'this is just....' And again, this is one of the reasons why I love Shakespeare, because there's so many different interpretations that you could, you know. I'm sure there's a, for some people, like you have one interpretation. But I think the reason why Shakespeare is Shakespeare and the reason why he's so you know wildly loved is because you can just interpret it however you want to. And I think for Nick he wanted to, he wanted to go somewhere that he probably hasn't seen before. When you swap the Titania and the Oberon roles and you make it about the male rather than this weird sort of King of the Fairies drugging his wife, to then steal a little boy to make him his slave sort of thing. I was just like 'oh this is a bit, that's nasty, that's a bit dark, we don't like that' [Joe laughs] you know what I mean. And um we wanted to go somewhere else to make it I guess lighter but more you know 'in your FACE Oberon.' [Joe laughs] I mean I

guess that's how I read it. But um yeah I just love how wacky it is. It just goes from zero to 100 in like half an hour.

JM:

Yeah, oh yeah.

HA:

Which is quite long, but well, in Shakespeare it's not.

JM:

But it seems like, yeah, it seems like, um, in in a lot of your work, and I suppose in some ways like culminating in um *Midsummer Night's Dream* that the sort of live experience for the audience. Almost like roller coaster energy and almost like you know um once in a lifetime moment. Whether that's with *Barber Shop* or with *Amadeus* and the trumpet, and the orchestra, or the sort of um performative nature of Bottom it, and it feels like maybe this play encapsulates that that um, for you is it that theatre it's like a live experience unlike any other? And that the audience should come out and have a wild ride and that that's the, that's the experience?

HA:

I definitely want, yeah. I mean I've, when I started to get to that point where I knew exactly what kind of shows or what kind of things I wanted to go up for I was like: I want people to come out of the theatre and really felt like they've been somewhere else. I want them to come out of there and have a real in-depth conversation as to what they've just seen. I don't want, I'm kind of over the whole thing with that 'oh that was good, it was all right.' [Joe laughs] I don't want to be a part of that. I want to be like you've really hated it and I want to know why. Or you loved it and I want to know why. I'm not really down for the middle anymore. I feel like it's more exciting if its either one or the other not you know that little um icky bit in the middle.

JM:

And do you know why? Like it might, it might not be possible to articulate that, but like why that kind of um visceral reaction feels important to you? That kind of proper um, you're a different person from when you went into the auditorium to came out of it. Like, do you know what is important about that for you?

HA:

I don't know. Okay so it's kind of like you never really know someone until you've had an argument with them. I feel like I feel like it's something like that. Where you just go I want to get a real reaction out of you. I want to know the real, I want to know you. Tell me what you really think because I won't get offended. I've been really lucky and blessed enough to do, to be an actor, to do these and to be a part of these amazing plays and I want if you've come to see a play that I've been in I want you to tell me what you really think of it. Don't just tell me 'it was great'. I want you to tell me what you really think of it. Because I feel like that's where we start to have the real conversations and we and I want us to have a debate about it. I want to know why you hated it,

tell me why you hated it. I'm not upset but just tell me why you hated it. Because now I know you got a feeling from it. And that's what I feel theatre should do. Theatre should, it should sting you, it should give you like a feeling. It should just like prick you. It needs to give you something whether it's like a negative or a really positive feeling it should really get you, because it's a form of escapism from whatever's going on in your in your personal life or whatever. It's a form of escapism. So you want to feel like you've gone somewhere else you don't want to you know go to the theatre and just sit there for two and a half hours probably and not feel anything. Because then it, that play hasn't done its job. I want you to go into the theatre and I want it to really like get you but like it can't but it you know it could have got you because you really hated it and that's great because you felt something. You could have gotten there and you really loved it and you felt it in your heart and that's great as well. I feel like both sides are really good because I just want people to feel something when they go to the theatre because that's what I felt when I went to the theatre and I saw that young man you know. I mean he's not young anymore, sorry bro.

JM:

That's cold man, that's cold.

HA:

No he's young, he's young, he's good! But when I saw that guy on stage he looked you know he looked just like me. I felt something. I mean I really felt something. Or when I saw um when I saw *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* I felt something, like I felt it so much that I went back to see a second time to feel it again. It's that sort of I feel like everyone should go to the theatre for that stinging, that sting, that, that, I don't know.

JM:

No I don't, I get, I totally get it, yeah. And to sort of 'go into the woods' like I'm in someone's dream for a bit, like exactly, and get lost in a sort of wild wood somewhere. And I think it's amazing that, you know, that experience from you as a young man is something now you want to like give out and share and inspire in other people. And I think that just feels, what an amazing motivation to work and I think um it's clear in you as an actor because, I think like, um you know the 'make people laugh' the 'show off kid' thing um can be about you, not about the audience, but whenever you know I've seen your work it's all about the audience for you. It's all about, it's not it's like yeh sure 'look at me' but not for my own sake but because I think I can take you somewhere and I think I can give you that sting or that emotional experience and I think that generosity towards an audience like just radiates out and makes you such an exciting actor to watch.

HA:

Thanks man, I appreciate it.

JM:

No and I think like it's so clear now where that comes from. Like in your work um and just a final question, uh I've been asking a few of the guests is: what's

um, what are the sort of things that have been getting you through at the moment? Can you recommend any good content? Anything fun, any good tv shows, films books, music, anything, um to give someone a little uh pick up uh at the moment? Anything you've watched that you thought was particularly good, or heard that you thought it was particularly good?

HA:

I've um I've been watching a lot of a lot of Netflix. [Hammed laughs] Uh look, listen, you know during this time I mean I'm not ashamed man. I've been watching a lot of a lot of Netflix. A lot of Amazon Prime just trying to catch up on some of the box sets that I've missed. So I found New Girl, my girlfriend got me on to New Girl, This Is Us, I May Destroy You. But also there's some books as well that I'm reading this book uh in particular it's a Carlos book: Natives. I think it's a book that everybody should read because I think it's very important to the climate in which we are in today and um in terms of uh racial uh injustice and inequality in the UK. I think is important for all of us to read because um I've learned so much from that book um so I think we should all read it uh but that's about it really you know. And hanging out with my brothers and playing basketball and you know yeah. And just staying in touch with some of my friends that every Friday I've got a bunch of friends who do like quizzes, and every Sunday, and we do quizzes and stuff like that on zoom and stuff so um yeah just trying to stay in touch with friends and I've been doing a lot of baking.

JM:

Oh man, I've gone cooking so... but I respect that you've gone baking. What's your like, what's your proudest creation, what have you, what have you nailed?

HA:

This is thanks to Fisayo Akinade. So my brother yeah and my girlfriend introduced me to the Chocolate and Guinness cake all right.

JM:

What an abomination! I've never heard of this!

HA:

HEY! Listen man. It BANGS man. it's so nice. it's so nice. Because Fisayo is a bit of a chef baker, he can do it all. So uh and then I know my missus tried it and then she like nailed it first try. And then I tried it and you don't want to know what my cake came out like. So I tried it again and it was better than the first time. It wasn't fantastic but it was better. And then I tried it the third time and it came out I was like yes. So um yeah baking, cooking as well, trying to cook different things and be watching a lot of Jamie Oliver's like quick cooks on like YouTube. Trying to get like those quick things that you can make in like half an hour um yeah man. Just trying to stay mentally healthy you know because yeah I feel like it's you know I don't even know how long it's been now I know it's been over 12 weeks or 13 weeks or whatever but it's easy to fall into that uh dark space. I think during the period of um I mean that whole thing that happened, the murder that of George Floyd, and yeah and all that

stuff, like for me personally it kind of put me in a really uh dark space. And it took me a while to climb out of that. So um but I'm feeling good now. But I'm just trying to stay healthy mentally I think for me is the most important thing.

JM:

Yeah and being generous to yourself, right? Like yeah, it's alright whether you're feeling like, it's all okay.

HA:

Oh yeah 100% man. And eating lots and lots of um burgers.

JM:

And that's what, that got you out of the space in the end.

HA:

Oh man it was the burgers man you can't beat a good burger.

JM:

I'm so with you. What's your best burger in London? Have you got a best burger in London?

HA:

The Honest plant burger is wicked.

JM:

It's next level.

HA:

It's next level, you can't touch it, can't touch it. I'm not even a vegan. I'm not even a vegan.

JM:

You're choosing it over meat. I mean that is, that's big.

HA:

Do you know how big that is bro? I love a bit of chicken. That is huge. But yeah but that plant burger is just next level man. So yeah um that's what I've been doing just trying to stay mentally healthy man. Just watching a lot of comedy yeah um yeah. Just laughing with my family, laughing with my friends, just trying you know because I think on average like humans laugh like 15 times a day or something like that right, I feel like we should laugh more than that a day so.

JM:

Yeah that should be the baseline, right? And should be working up from there.

HA:

You should be working up. We should be trying to hit 30-40 laughs today.

JM:

Wow. It's big. It's ambitious. I love you for that, but-

HA:

We should try it man, mentally healthy man, we should try it.

JM:

I'm with you. I'm totally with you. And we should all have plant-based burgers from Honest Burger. I'm into it. Um, Hams, thank you so much man that was totally brilliant. Um thanks for being on the show, and for being so open, um and just chatting it through with us, it's really amazing for everyone.

HA:

Thanks for having me. I appreciate it man, I appreciate it.

JM:

Alright man, much love.

HA:

You too man.

JM:

The brilliant Hammed there. What an amazing dude, with such an interesting story to tell. My favourite thing about these episodes is hearing about all the different kinds of pathways into this industry. There is no one way and that feels really inspiring. Thanks for listening everyone. Go gently and go safely.

The Old Vic would like to thank Principal Partner Royal Bank of Canada and the T.S Eliot Estate for their support. Sherman Theatre would like to thank the Arts Council Wales, and everybody who has supported us through this difficult time.