

## ***Yes, and Cafe***

### **Episode 4**

**Guests: Lalenja Harrington, Justin Harrington**

Nadja Cech: Welcome to the *Yes, and Cafe*, a podcast where we explore, learn, and create with ordinary people who do extraordinary things.

Omar Ali: 'Yes, and' is the powerful, intentional, and creative practice of building with other people. The name comes from improvisational theater. So, what is it? One, paying attention. Two, affirming. And three, building on what others give you. That's it! Yes, and.

Nadja: I'm Nadja.

Omar: And I'm Omar. And we're broadcasting from the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

Nadja: Today on our show we're interviewing an extraordinary mother and son, or son and mother, whichever way. They are innovative performers and people and dear friends.

Omar: Dr. Lalenja Harrington is a self-described poet and performer, and full-time educator dedicated to exploring the intersection of performance, activism, and education. Over the years, she's been involved in spoken word performance and workshoping, has performed with her sister, Rihannon Giddens, and has been actively involved in many community theatre productions. Lalenja is dedicated to democratizing education and research through the use of arts-based practice and has recently developed a passion for bringing theater of the oppressed to the classroom, the stage, and the community. Welcome, Dr. Harrington!

Lalenja: Thank you.

Omar: It's great to have you, Lalenja.

Lalenja: It's great to be here.

Omar: I remember when we first started doing some work together was with a project, Community Play All Stars here in Greensboro and Warnersville, and I was just struck by your performativity in the community organizing and I just think that you're such a wonderful model of taking performance and using it, and practicing in all areas of our life. Have you always thought about performance in that way?

Lalenja: Well, I mean, I think performance has been, you know, a big part of my life just because my family, you know, my dad was a singer he was in college for music. Music has always been a part of what we do, part of our family gatherings, it's just a part of the fabric, you know, of the way that we've grown up in the--now, you know, my sister is a full-time musician. My journey has been kind of, you know, here and there. In college, you know, I got bit by the poetry bug, and started writing. And then right after college I got involved with the Boston Can't Have Lounge, which is a spot in Boston and Cambridge where slam poetry, you know, lives and breathes and I fell in love with it. So I started slamming; I was on the Boston national slam team,

you know, I've been involved in poetry and one way or the other since then. But then, when my son here got involved at Triad Stage when he was about eleven?

Justin: I was eight.

Lalenja: You were eight? You were not eight.

Justin: I was eight! I was eight years old!

[All laughing]

Lalenja: Oh my god. Okay, so evidently he was around eight, and he was a beautiful star. He was eight, so I was there all the time. And I was just like, "This is fantastic," you know, and he, like--

Justin: Theatre mom.

Lalenja: Yeah. I wasn't one of *those* theatre moms, though.

Justin: It was great! It was a quality theatre mom experience.

[All laughing]

Lalenja: I appreciate it. Thank you. So watching that experience for him just kind of got me interested, and then we had an opportunity to--the first audition that I did for community theatre, I got the lead role, and I was like, "Okay!" [Laughing] "Here we go."

Nadja: Jumping in with two feet!

Lalenja: Yes, exactly. And since then, I've been very involved in theatre.

Justin: Wasn't I in that show too?

Lalenja: You were in that show.

[All laughing]

Justin: Oh. That's great. *Then* I was eleven.

Lalenja: Yes. Yes, you were, okay.

Omar: So let's bring Justin in. I mean, we've heard his voice now.

Justin: Yeah, sorry. [Laughing]

Nadja: That's great. Our mystery guest.

Omar: That's right. [Laughing] Justin 'Demeanor' Harrington is an actor, rapper, and banjo player from Greensboro, here in North Carolina. Recently back from a residency and tour with OneBeat, he is preparing for a 2020 album release. Welcome!

Justin: Hello, hello.

Omar: You've been working on a new album, and you were recently featured in a fantastic *Yes, Weekly* article. It's a great article which we'll post on the podcast website, for those listening. In it, you said that writing your new album has been hard, because "There are so many stories and to tell one specifically requires the context of other stories around it, so how do I take ten stories and keep points of those stories and try to tell one story that feels bigger and feels accessible?" And I was really struck by this, because as a historian, I try to bring in multiple voices and give expression to that in a way that is a story, right? So my question to you is, how do you do this?

Justin: Well, I mean, I think it's something that I've gotten used to doing as a young Black kid, because in order to fit in with certain rooms in the Black community, you have to be able to... Look, the thing that joins black people is this collective, like, shared history, the shared legacy, right? But beyond that, there's not exactly, like, one Black community, you know? There's Black people on the Eastside, there's Black people in the North, like the elves, there's like the Black-- just in my peer group, you what I'm saying, that you got New York, you got Atlanta, Austin, they're all different communities, right? And so, but we all have this, like, shared legacy, and so when we're looking each other in the eye, you know, like Black people always, like, if I see somebody else is black we give him the nod, you know what I'm saying, we give, like... There's certain like cultural things and so it's acknowledging this just, like, shared, you know what I mean, this culture, this like, unspoken unity between people. And so when it comes to my music it's like, I want to highlight that part because what separates us is obvious, what separates us is easy, what separates us is strategic, what separates us is profitable, you know what I mean? And the only way to point at what separates us is to show a little bit of contrast. I'm not saying that's the only way, but it's the way that works for me. So it's like, how do I show that what you're going through in 2018 is not too far removed from what someone might have been going through in 1924. If we look at the commonalities you know, and our collective legacy...

Omar: So what you're pointing to is a shared legacy, a shared history, and focusing on that and then building out maybe, is that a way of thinking about it?

Justin: Yeah, and taking--Like, there's a song I have on the new album, right. The way that I've set the song is, it starts off with a bunch of my homies, you know what I'm saying, we're all just, like, hanging out, we're, like, talking, we're about to go to the club.

Omar: And your homies are your like best friends?

Justin: Yeah, my friends. We're going to go to a club and go hang out; the thing is it's set in, like, the 1920s, so it's going to be, like, some type of jazz club. We got like, conks in our hair, and like this type of stuff. So it's like, the same energy of like, North Carolina going to Arizona Pete's. The club where you meet up with your friends; you hang out beforehand, you get dressed up to the nines, and you go--and now, this is not something I necessarily do often. But it's showing for that song specifically I was like, "Okay, let me just humanize these, like, Black people in the

1920s going to these jazz clubs, you know. Because jazz involved Black people from the 1920s are not really like humanized a lot. It's just a commodity, you know what I mean, like, "Look at the style. Yeah, look at the--" But it's like, yo, bruh, like, people are people everywhere; that's something I learned at OneBeat too. People are people everywhere, and I really don't think it matters what time you're in, because your time is just a context, you know?

Omar: So people are people. They have their fears, they have their dreams, they have... Can you help me out here? Like, how else to just complete that?

Justin: Yeah, I mean, people are people. People have boundaries, people have their desires, people have their wants, their needs. People also have their ego, and people also have their miseducation, and people have their flaws, you know. Everything is everything, and we have to look at all of it for what it is, and we have to... One thing that I'm a proponent of is, like, removing some of the context from a situation that might change variables in the equation. So it's like, if you have a problem with me, if you have a problem with the way that I'm talking or the way that I'm speaking, it's like, do you actually have a problem with the way I'm speaking or do you feel like I'm not supposed to because I'm younger than you and I'm Black? So it's like, I've been on panels where I was making valid points, but because I'm using slang and because I didn't come dressed up, I came in a hoodie and everything, you know, people are going to look at me different. So it's like, we have to remove all of that and just get to the meat of what I'm saying, I guess.

Omar: So it sounds like you actually are also performing this kind of, if you will, almost a provocation to help people kind of, like, I don't know, shake them out of their norm, right?

Justin: For sure. For sure. I love that. I bring a banjo to all my rap shows. I love provoking people. For sure.

Lalenja: Yes he does.

[Music Break]

Omar: So tell us a little bit about, if you will, the work that you've done together. If--this may sound strange--because you have learned, I'm sure, how to perform with each other, right? Three of us are parents, but we're all children of parents, and we've all learned how to kind of navigate those relationships. Could you bring us into a little bit about your relationship?

Lalenja: Sure. Initially, we learned how to perform together on, you know, on stage, right, through community theatre, 'cause we were in these shows together. So we had to navigate, what is that like, me, as a mom, stepping back so that he had the space to do what he needed to do, and be who he needed to be in those spaces, so to not be that stage mom. One of the things that Justin--and Justin is, I consider him to be one of my teachers---and I was in a, you know what I'm going to talk about? [Laughing] I was in a class in grad school and I was working on my PhD and it was on social justice education, and I had a project and I decided that I wanted to write, you know, a rap.

Justin: Oh.

Lalenja: [Laughing] So I'm writing this and so I asked for Justin, you know, I was like, "Can you listen to this, tell me what you think," and he looks like, "Noo," he was like, "Mom," he was like, "No, just no"

[All laughing]

Lalenja: And he proceeded to take it all apart, but then show me how to put it back together in his--with flow, with all the things that it was missing, and it was an amazing experience, you know. And my product was that much richer because I stepped back to say, "Hey, this is the skill and the facility that's required to write," and, you know these young folk who are rapping, they do not get the recognition and acknowledgement of just how skillful they really are, and that is something that I admire about him, his use of language, and I just love it. So anytime he's like, "You want to listen to something," I'm like "Hey!" I'm like "Absolutely," and he's so generous with that, and sharing that with me. And, you know, asking me "What do you think," and so on and so forth.

Justin: She tells me when it's trash, though. [Laughing]

Lalenja: Um, you know, if I'm not feelin' it, I'm gonna say, you know..

Justin: She's gonna be like, "Yo, the bar, I need you to get that 16 right, son, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Lalenja: That is not what I say.

[All laughing]

Lalenja: But, you know, but we do, I do appreciate the--we give each other feedback and we support each other and, you know, it's, I value it. I don't know how you feel about it.

Justin: I think that in our family, we--and this is the perfect podcast for us because we say yes to everything, and I was just--I was actually just speaking to my aunt. I was just like, "Oh, what's up, how's the kids, blah blah blah" we were just chopping it up, and she was like, "What are you working on right now?" and that's such a dangerous question to ask in our family, 'cause I'm like, "Well, I've got a magazine on, I'm blah blah blah," like I've got all these different projects, and I think that we all kind of do that, where we just say yes and we put our foot--because we have so much passion and love, and so that when it's time for us to collaborate together, it's really just like, "Okay, this is a thing that I love. I'm welcoming you into this space that I cherish, you know? You're going to put your passion into this and this is just going to become something different. We're not going to try too hard; it's just like whatever it is, let's just be, and let's just live and like love and creation." Right?

Lalenja: I think that's a really important piece, is that--it's so interesting that I think that's a kernel or something that's at the center of each of us--is the willingness to just be in the space with each other, and whatever comes out of it. So, you know, the organic, you know, nature of it, and we all have skills in different areas that we can bring to it to make it work. So if I'm at the Henry

and I'm singing and I ask you to come up, I have all the faith in the world that you're going to represent when you come up to join and that we are going to be able to have, you know, that creative, artistic energy and moment that makes the whole thing work together. So even when I have no idea what the end is going to look like, I can trust that we have that, that we have that relationship that's going to make it work, because we respond to each other. And again, that's something I value so much, we, when you come up I know we're going t...

Nadja: I love what you're saying here, also as a mom myself, and there's no greater pride than seeing your child excel, and learning from your child; it's so beautiful. And I'm thinking about how when we talk about "Yes, and," this idea that this intentional practice of building on what others say, and supporting them rather than shutting them down--it seems to me like that's really built on, when we do that intentionally over time, like Justin saying, "Say yes to everything," that's what builds that relationship, that feeling of trust. He knows that you're going to be supporting him when he comes on stage with you, and that's what allows the expression to happen so organically and naturally. As someone who's been in the audience, I can say it's beautiful.

Lalenja: Thank you. Yeah, that trust is really key.

Nadja: The trust in the relationship, and that supporting each other, the--call it "Yes, and," call whatever, call it love, you know, is what builds that relationship, I think. That knowing, that feeling safe to be vulnerable.

Omar: I was thinking that you've created a culture in your family, that this is what you do, and sort of, this how you comport, this is how you relate to each other. And I was just thinking about how we're products of our culture, and we're also the producers of our culture, and in some ways we live inside of that interplay, and how it's so challenging, because a lot of the culture that were in is one of negating, putting down, you know, setting up hard. And I think that going back to what you were saying earlier, Justin, that in some ways trying to find the common ground is a beautiful thing, because then, in some ways you have that to build on and look at the real differences and distinctions.

Justin: Yeah, and a lot of times, you learn things that you never would have imagined that you could learn, like for at OneBeat, it was a residency where twenty-plus artists from twenty-plus different countries, we come together we create music. And in order to play old time banjo, what I play, with the Egyptian our, you know what I mean, it's like, "Okay, well what are the commonalities there?" So, music is the language that we can share, and I think that "Yes, and" as a language can kind of transcend a lot of barriers, 'cause if you can just--if anything, you can just hear what someone says and figure out that "Yes, and" sentence--if you can figure out that "Yes, and" sentence, I'm sure you can figure out, like eighty more. You know?

Nadja: Yeah. That's beautiful. So, I was thinking, we just did a wonderful interview with Annah Awartani, and we were talking about food and it was making me so hungry, and here we're talking about music and poetry--and I'm afraid I'm going to put you a little on the spot here; you guys can feel free to say no. Would either of you be willing to share a snippet of a poem or a song or anything, something you might do together? We didn't prepare you for this, but would you?

Justin: Yeah, I mean--

Lalenja: Obviously we're gonna say yes.

[All laughing]

Lalenja: You know what you usually do over "Brown Baby"?

Justin: Of course.

Lalenja: So maybe I can do--I'll just do, like, a verse of that? Okay, cool. [Singing:] Brown baby / Brown baby / As you grow up, I want you to drink from the plenty cup / I want you to stand up tall and proud / I want you to speak up clear and loud / Brown baby

Justin: [Rapping:] See I remember it was me and you versus the world / I remember the durag cap and a sponge reversing his curls / I remember the verses suited like souvenirs on my dresser / My suit & tie is flannel / I sneak a seat to impress her / I'm back and forth with the passion / Classes lacking an effort / Desolate testament, my destiny is definitely ambidextrous / I'm balancing, layers the songbird singing the reverent / While praying, Savior save us from manifesting deception / Where do you place your faith? / Fate in the hands of someone you trust / Music schooled us / Holy harmonious hymns in the pews of luck / Now a fool is only decided by whom he choose to hear / It takes a village / But venomous dispositions to pillage / Now I'm bred for this / Picture breaking bread with the baker / You might have a deeper appreciation for some different flavors / I tune to my palate to colors I couldn't fathom before / I'm something like an unborn child / Just imagine the boy

Lalenja: So fly away / Fly away sleeping / Lie away here in my arms / While your daddy protect you / And keep you safe and warm / Oh, brown baby

Nadja and Omar: [Both applauding] Wow.

Omar: That was beautiful, that was beautiful.

Nadja: Stunning. What a moment.

Lalenja: I have morning voice so, I'm sorry about that. [Laughing]

Nadja: I think we really need to end on that note. That was so beautiful. Thank you both for being in the studio with us today; it's been just an absolute pleasure and a joy to hear from you and get to know you a little bit.

Justin: Yeah, thank you, thank you for inviting us into your space, this was really awesome.

Lalenja: Absolutely, yeah.

Omar: Thank you. That's Dr. Lalenja Harrington and Justin 'Demeanor' Harrington. Thanks, everyone.

Nadja: Thanks. Have a wonderful afternoon. Bye.

Omar: Bye.

Nadja: Many thanks to the University Teaching and Learning Center that provided the recording studio, to Ashley Scott who did our logo, to Lloyd International Honors College, to University Communications, including our production team Matt Bryant and Ben Peterson. If you want to learn more about the work that Lalenja and Justin are doing, please check out the links associated with this podcast.