

Melinda Lopez (host): You are listening to Dream Boston, a new series of audio plays powered by the Huntington Theatre Company. Dream Boston offers glimpses of the future -- full hearted, complex and surprising -- a vision of our city that is somewhere between dream and reality. In today's episode, we bring you a play written by Miranda ADEkoje. The play will be followed by an interview with Miranda, who will be joined by Olawumi Akinwumi, program director of Hibernian Hall. The play is set at the corner of Harrison Ave and Dudley Street. The year is 2025. The title of this play is Virtual Attendance.

Katya: Hi, hi, hi, I'm late

Aurora: You're fine.

Katya: I have never been down here.

Aurora: You came from the seaport?

Katya: Yeah, I put in South End Extension, but the Uber's GPS couldn't locate it.

Aurora: Oh shit, that's my bad. It's called Nubian Square.

Katya: Really?

Aurora: Not really just on GPS.

Katya: Oh, how close are we to Northeastern?

Aurora: So close. I can walk to class from here, and the Uber station is super convenient.

Katya: And it makes so much sense. No one takes buses anymore.

Aurora: I don't understand how anyone could get on a bus.

Katya: The Uber station is so legit. Each car has to have its own filtered sani-system,

Aurora: And one passenger per car. I'm so glad that they got rid of that ride-share feature. Can you imagine all those buses, all those people, all those germs.

Aurora: Just unsafe, you know?

Katya: Yeah, we should go. We have to be there at our assigned time. It's on the next block.

Aurora: I can't work out at home. I live in a tuna can.

Katya: Me neither. How does this place work?

Aurora: It's a massive three-floor building. Bikes are 10 feet apart. Everyone gets an oxygen mask, and each bike streams the instructor virtually.

Katya: Is this it? That's a fancy awning for a gym.

Aurora: Yeah, I've been here before...

Katya: To a class?

Aurora: No, I saw a play here.

Katya: [laughing] At the gym?

Aurora: It wasn't a gym. It was a theater. Hiber... Hibernation Hall? Do you know my friend Kevin?

Katya: Hmm. I don't think so.

Aurora: The screenwriter?

Katya: Oh, absolutely not.

Aurora: He had a short play that he was trying to get produced a few years ago. He sent it to this place, and they rejected it.

Katya: Oh, how can anyone actually be a writer?

Aurora: I know, right? So he was on a vengeance kick, and invited me to a show here to see what kind of plays they actually said yes to. We went, and I remember being so lost.

Katya: Why?

Aurora: The play was about Afro -- give me a second. It's coming. Afro-futurism. That's what it was called in the program. I remember the program, because I had to keep reading it during the play to understand what I was seeing.

Katya: I hate plays like that.

Aurora: Actually I thought it was really funny. This kid from a super rich family in Nigeria comes here for college and tries to become a stand up comedian.

Katya: Hmm. Did it get good reviews?

Aurora: I couldn't find any. I don't think it got reviewed, which was surprising because it was packed when we went. There were some weird parts, though. Him and his girlfriend kept meeting on a bridge that transported them to the future.

Katya: I wouldn't have made it through that, even with the program.

Aurora: To be fair, we were the only white people in the audience, so we weren't really in on the jokes.

Katya: Well, that shouldn't matter. Good theater is good theater. That's why I still go to the Huntington. Their shows are excellent.

Aurora: Did you see that play about the family?

Katya: Yes. The one with the mother who was cheating on the dad with the ultra-conservative politician?

Aurora: Yes. And the sister got me-too'd?

Katya: Oh, oh, wait. No, that was the other show about the other family. In this show, the mom was into BDSM and that's how she found out her son was transitioning.

Aurora: I must have missed that one. Did you see the one that transferred to Broadway?

Katya: Yes, it was amazing. Like Hamilton, but without the rapping. And I really, really wanted to see Sarah Paulson on stage.

Aurora: She was magnificent.

Katya: That's what I mean. It's good theater. It gets reviewed. It gets celebrities. It's easy to understand, with or without a program.

Aurora: And the Huntington was so on it when they reopened — timed entrances, partitions, sani-stations.

Katya: Well, they had to be. They're only theater that's still running.

Aurora: They're like Amazon... I'm glad they put this building to better use.

Katya: Every luxury condo needs a virtual gym within walking distance.

Aurora: It's the least they can do seeing what rent is like around here.

Katya: Right? Are we up yet?

Aurora: Yep, let's go. They just texted. We're on the third floor.

Sound: [a door opens with a chime]

Melinda Lopez (host): Thank you for listening to Dream Boston, where local playwrights imagine locations, landmarks and their friends in a future Boston when we can meet and connect in our city. "Virtual Attendance" is written by Miranda ADEkoje, who will now join us for an interview. And in a moment, we'll also be joined by Olawumi Akinwumi, program

director of Hibernian Hall. "Virtual Attendance" is directed by Pascal Florestal, sound designed by Valentine Frank and line produced by Rebecca Bradshaw and Caley Chase. The play is performed by Ivy Ryan and Becca A. Lewis. To hear more audio plays from Dream Boston, please visit HuntingtonTheatre.org. You can also sign up for virtual classes in our Huntington@HomeSchool series, and learn more about future productions at the theatre. If you enjoyed Dream Boston, please subscribe to us on Apple podcasts, or follow us on Spotify or wherever you found this series. The Huntington Theatre Company encourages you to support your local theater, wherever you may be dreaming. To support the Huntington, please go to our website. And thanks for listening. [shift to interview] Hi, Miranda. It's really wonderful to see you.

Miranda ADEkoje: Nice to see you.

Melinda Lopez (host): And I think the last time I saw you, we were at an evening -- do you remember Kirsten Greenidge hosted this potluck?

Miranda ADEkoje: Yes.

Melinda Lopez (host): We all brought food.

Miranda ADEkoje: Yes.

Melinda Lopez (host): And then talked -- we ended up talking about the food we brought.

Miranda ADEkoje: Yes, yes. Yes.

Melinda Lopez (host): But I remember you spoke so eloquently and passionately about your name and your family and your connection to your home, that I've never forgotten that. That experience of hearing you talk about your connection with these generations.

Miranda ADEkoje: Oh, yes. So this was before I was married. Yeah.

Melinda Lopez (host): Well, yeah, I think you were married, but you were also talking about --

Miranda ADEkoje: My maiden name, about Craigwell.

Melinda Lopez (host): Yes, I wonder if you would say a little bit about your community, and where you come from, and who you are.

Miranda ADEkoje: Absolutely. My name is Miranda ADEkoje, but my maiden name is Craigwell, and that's a great opening question. Thank you for it. So my grandparents are -- both paternal and maternal grandparents -- they're both from Boston. My paternal grandmother was a teacher in the Boston Public School systems, and my paternal grandfather was a chief of police, and as a Black man, that was huge. And he and my grandmother lived on Waverly Street, which is just not too far from here in Roxbury. My maternal grandmother and grandfather: my grandfather was an entrepreneur. He was a florist in Mission Hill for years. And my grandmother was a homemaker. My parents met -- I think my mom was maybe 12, my dad was 14 -- on Waverly Street, which is also in Roxbury. Waverly Street was this place where all these kids were, because there are a whole bunch of families at the time. They met, and they eventually got married. And it was -- you know, it was seen as these two families kind of coming together. Two Boston-based families coming together. And to this day, someone will see me, or see my last name, and say, "are you a Craigwell? Oh! Well, I knew your grandfather, I knew your uncle, your aunt." So our roots in Boston go really, really deep. This is the only home I've known.

Melinda Lopez (host): Yeah. You do a lot of different kinds of things. I know you primarily as a playwright. How has playwriting become the medium for you to express yourself? Why do you write plays?

Miranda ADEkoje: I started as a slam poet in London when I was doing my training, and I really enjoyed performing my own work. But I wanted to learn how to really tell stories in a compelling way. And playwriting was the 'in.' I'm a screenwriter. I do a lot of things with media as well, but there's something about stories and seeing them played out. You know, it's not just about the writing of it. I'm not a novelist. I like the thrill of getting, you know, of seeing those words in someone's mouth, and seeing the play and stories and relationships come to life. So it was the most powerful medium for me to be able to fulfill that need.

Melinda Lopez (host): Yeah, I feel that when I experience your work. You chose in this play to write about two transplants, two women who are not from this part of the world, have no connection to where they are living and the buildings they are walking into. Why was this experience and this point of view interesting to you?

Miranda ADEkoje: Um, it was interesting, and really sad for me, because that is the way the city is going. The changes that are being made -- the gentrification that I see daily-- is due to wanting to welcome and court students, young professionals, folks who aren't from here. But they want Boston to be seen as, you know, a hot city, a city that offers everything. That's metropolitan; that's diverse; that has people from everywhere. So these transplants are who the city is becoming molded for, it feels like. So I wanted to focus on that personality.

Melinda Lopez (host): I find the piece so terrifying and so painful, in part because it just sneaks up on me. Like it takes me a long time to understand what they're talking about -- in particular, how it relates to Hibernian Hall. And I wonder... I also recognize myself in that world as well. I feel like I know what they're talking about. I know what they're doing. I've been that person. I've been that ignorant, you know? And I'm just really curious about this question of, "how can theatre not become that?" We know theatre has to change. We know we can't go backwards to what we were in January of 2020. I think we understand that. What do you see as our options? Our best hope?

Miranda ADEkoje: We talk about theater being a unique medium, because you are allowed to take risks. You're allowed to visualize worlds and things happening that wouldn't necessarily happen in real time. That's how we talk about theater. That's why we love theater. That's why we love art. And I feel like, on the business side of theater, those same risks are not taken. There's this sense of comfort in a subscribership, and what needs to be done to retain these folk; and what those folk are, and what they like, is so important. Because without all that -- without them, you know? -- we can't do this programming. And I just think that theater has to take the same risks that it appreciates onstage, [it has to take those risks] backstage and in the offices. We have to be able to push the boat out on artists that are maybe unknown, artists whose aesthetic is different. Maybe even the gatekeepers, the dramaturgs, the folks that say 'yes, this is a good play.' Or that say, 'No, this is not a good play,' which they never say, but they never produce it. Maybe [the play the gatekeepers are evaluating is] something they don't even understand. But there's a power, and it moves, and there's something exciting about it. And then take that risk and put that playwright up, and see what happens. I... I just don't see that risk-taking. And I think that risk taking is so important to keeping inclusion in our medium and to keeping the sense of freshness and this newness in our medium.

Melinda Lopez (host): Yeah, my favorite line is "the play about the family, no, the play about the other family, and the..." Yeah, we see the same stories, you know, from the same point of view, and "they're just like Amazon." [both laugh.] It just killed me. ... I'm curious if you would talk a little bit about what Nubian Square means to you and how you've seen it change in your lifetime.

Miranda ADEkoje: Sure. So my grandfather's flower shop, before it was in Mission Hill, was in what is now called Nubian Square. Nubian Square is historically Dudley, right? Dudley Station was a historical bus station in Roxbury, and the heart of, I would say, Black Boston throbs from that center, right? Because you have buses that go all around the city, that are congregating there, and it has grown and has developed, but it's managed to keep itself kind of a Black-owned place. There was a place called Nubian Notions that's been there. There's a Black hair store, which I frequent all the time. There's a library, Dudley Library. So it's always been about like, the people. The changes that I'm seeing are happening so fast, and so quickly. The name change: I knew -- I heard about it, but I didn't know that we were going to go from Dudley Station, which has this historical heft, to Nubian Square. And Nubian Square, to me -- it's a dog whistle. Everyone's: "Nubian, hmmm, must have something to do with Black people," you know? So it's more of an identifier, and it's a specific identifier. So there's that. The name is a huge thing. The most heartbreaking example of change that has happened recently: it's just slightly away from Nubian Square, up Warren Street, is the destruction of the Roxbury mural, which had Nelson Mandela's face. And it said Roxbury, with Nelson Mandela's face right in the middle. Stunning. It's an absolutely stunning mural, and it's been around for as long as I can remember. And it was destroyed and demolished, because they're building -- I think, I believe -- luxury condos right in that area. And no one consulted anybody. It was such a violation of the community, and everybody was upset. But it's gone. So those are, you know -- it's happening, and it's happening rapidly.

Melinda Lopez (host): Hence, your characters going to the gym, near the luxury condos. For anyone who hasn't been there, can you talk about the feelings that you have when you walk into Hibernian Hall?

Miranda ADEkoje: Oh, yes. So Hibernian Hall is a multi-functional space -- but I know it, and I've used it, as a playwright, as a theatre artist. And I've always known Hibernian Hall as a home for Black voices, Black stories, a diversity of storytelling. But it feels safe, right? You get in there, you get your work produced, and you know who's coming to see it: it's the community. Because it's behind, I think, a housing development; there is a lot of new -- like a Jamaican restaurant, an African restaurant right across the street. Dudley is right there. So you know who's going to be there. It's your community. And it's a great testing spot, just as I believe the Huntington was a testing spot for August Wilson. It's a great testing spot for the unknown, up-and-coming diasporic writers. Right? Because their team really prioritizes putting forth new work and supporting those voices. So it just feels like -- it feels like a hug. You feel comfortable. You do. You feel comfortable as a Black playwright. I feel comfortable when I walk in. I know that what I'm going to see is going to be at some new point of

development or in its maturation -- even if it's a classic play, it usually has a new director, like a director that I don't know. Or if it's a play that I know, it'll have actors and actresses that I've never seen. Right. Because maybe they're non-Equity. [*Eds. note: Actors Equity is the primary union for performers and stage managers.*] Like maybe they're not in the "big five" in Boston, you know, but they're excellent actors. So any time I go into Hibernian Hall, I feel like I'm going to experience something new. And that is so exciting. Undiscovered new voices. Undiscovered talent. It's just always exciting to go, and you feel so comfortable, and I feel so comfortable as a diasporic playwright when I am there.

Melinda Lopez (host): Thank you so much for sharing those thoughts, and also your passion, and your clear voice. I wanted to invite into the conversation Olawumi Akinwumi, who is the program director at Hibernian Hall. Hello.

Olawumi Akinwumi: Hi. How are you doing? Thank you for having me.

Melinda Lopez (host): I'm good. It's a hot day.

Olawumi Akinwumi: Oh yes it is. It's New England -- whether it's cool or hot, it can never be in the middle, but it is what it is.

Melinda Lopez (host): Miranda talked a little bit about the mural that was lost. How did that affect the community members that you see?

Olawumi Akinwumi: Oh, heavenly. I mean... just listening to the conversation you guys had so far, there's a lot of moving parts happening in Roxbury. And I also live in Nubian Square. When the mural basically was taken down, it was a shock for everyone, even myself. I'm heavily in contact on social media, so whatever is happening, you find it quick; you get real time responses. And everybody was upset. The organization that is redeveloping on that plot is Cruz [Companies] construction. They are known as, you would say, a minority-owned organization. I think what went wrong with that is: communication plays a big part in everything you do. What makes Hibernian Hall so unique in working there: we are a housing development organization, a community developer, and all the properties you see around Nubian Square are all developed by my organization, along with our sister organization, Nuestra. So with that said, we try our best to find ways to engage our residents, or our community members, of what's happening. So I think, with that said -- as that mural was an icon for our community, with it coming down, they could have just said, "Hey, everyone, this mural is coming down; it wasn't permanent. But we will love for folks to get your last pictures or your last memories of this mural that's been there." But no, all you see'd is just immediate photos from everywhere, and everyone's upset: "Like, this is bad. Why didn't you tell us?" And it was just, like, a miscommunication on their part. And then they wrote this release out to everyone that was very vague; [the release] didn't really describe why they did it, or how they did it. But I think it's a lesson learned. And just to be on the outside, I felt like next time they want to do a piece like that, they need to find alternative ways of saying, "Hey, this piece might be coming down, but we're actually going to honor it, and maybe memorialize it in a way, as like part of our building, or a mural as one of the pieces inside the building." So I would say with that, yeah, that would have been something of a step, a way they could have handled that well.

Miranda ADEkoje: One of the things that I do to keep my mind open, like able to write, is that I'm not super active on social media. So if I find out something about that happened on social media, it's like way after it's happened. So, Ola, it was so nice to hear you describe the immediate response -- because by the time I learned that it had come down, it was just "later." I didn't see it on Instagram. I didn't see it on Facebook. I guess my question is, now knowing that Nuestra and MPDC [*Eds. note: Madison Park Development Corporation*] are developing, basically have been developing Dudley, in the Nubian square area, how are you -- are you all part of those conversations with this new [development] coming in? Are they integrating Nuestra and MPDC into these conversations? Are your voices around the table?

Olawumi Akinwumi: That's a good question, Miranda. And just to answer that, I will say yes and no. We all play a part, as an organization, but we try to carefully see where we can actually put in our two cents. I mean, when you walk around Dudley, yes -- and going back into history, eminent domain was a huge thing, which was also giving people opportunity who are being displaced, or who could not afford to live in Roxbury. So I think it goes back into -- more before my time, I grew up in housing. So for me, it's like I'm an individual. I care about my community, and I found ways to keep myself more intact with what's going on. I know I probably have my own individual opinion about what's going on, but I carefully think of like, "OK, what could be said, or how I could share my feelings of what's going on in the community." And I feel like it's the organization's job to figure that out, and know what's best, and what you're serving. It's not about just building housing. Like what you said, Dudley, now Nubian Square, is basically developing so rapidly by -- blink your eyes, and you open it up, you're like, "My goodness, it's like a whole new city." And that's currently what's happening. The library is being redone over. As you know, there's construction going on with the roads. Now, we also have properties that are going up all along Melnea Cass. You had an organization of Melnea Cass [residents] who are protesting and asking about the trees that they're talking about knocking down on Melnea Cass, which is a bad thing. And then you have individuals who are looking at, "oh, wow, we have all this 'affordable' housing coming into the community, but can we afford it?" So there are a lot of different players

within that. You know, we play cordial with Nuestra, which is our sister company. Cruz Management, they have their own ways of how they develop their stuff. You have WinnCompanies. There are a lot of properties. And that's why I feel like there's a lot of confusion. But we just have to find a way to communicate in one voice, as of where that folks who are willing to hear, or want to know more about our area -- because now we're a cultural district -- we have just got to be more attentive and just deal with all these, you know, board meetings that the city is doing. I mean, I guess that's the best way I could say it.

Melinda Lopez (host): What sort of programming do you have now during the COVID pause? Are you able to keep open to the community? What's available for people now?

Olawumi Akinwumi: Hmm. It's a good question. So right now, since March, I had to quickly, quickly, just think quick on our feet. Like, "OK, how are we going to keep ourself relevant in the community?" Hibernian Hall at the moment is closed to the public. We are just basically monitoring due to the government guidelines of the phases that are going out. So currently, everything is now virtual. So I quickly took the season that we had on March 4th at Hibernian Hall, where we highlighted all of the community partners, and these wonderful events that we were going to have throughout the year -- and I just selected a few that would work. And now with the goodness of Zoom and StreamYard and other platforms that we can use to virtually post our content online, it's been very helpful. And even though we are going through this pandemic, I feel like it's also a positive way of how we are engaging with our partners, or just folks in the community. It's helped me a lot. I have started a weekly web series that we started in June and ended the last month of August, which I have Miranda and [her husband, playwright and filmmaker] John on, which is a great pleasure. It was awesome to sift through all of my partners and select. We got about, like 13 different interviews within the summer, and I got to basically meet and hear and just learn about each and every one person I work with. So it just helps my mind to think like, "Oh, what's the next project I'm working on? What can Hibernian Hall do to work with these artists?" And that's part of our economic development program. Even though we have this big ballroom space, that's thirty six hundred square feet, we transform it into different highlights of what is going on. Whether it's like a civic engagement event -- we had Mayor Walsh and Tito Jackson debate a couple of years ago. That was awesome. We've had a lot of like -- Ayanna Presley, our Suffolk D.A. Rachel Rollins, similar things like that. And we've done galas. Right now, we usually do our annual gala in November. So we're actually doing something different. It's going virtual. So that's going to be quite interesting. And this year's theme is Dinner in Black. So we want to highlight all of our artists, community members, that have been in great support of Hibernian Hall and Madison Park as a whole, because that is our mother who basically keeps us striving. And I think it just makes it unique: the fact that Madison Park took a stand to renovate one of the lasting ballrooms in this area, and it's been here since over a hundred years. I believe we celebrated our hundred-and-fifty-year anniversary a couple of years ago through my predecessor, Dillon Bustin. So I've learned a lot. We basically had a lot of cries, a lot of trials, but I definitely want to say Hibernian Hall is a place for emerging artists to basically bring their talents and their craft together and, you know, like a clearinghouse.

Miranda ADEkoje: So in the world of the play, Ola, the Hibernian Hall has been turned into a virtual gym. It's hard even to say that. To even think that that could be a possibility --

Olawumi Akinwumi: I know!

Miranda ADEkoje: -- especially as you talk about the history. So what do you think we can do as a community to ensure that that doesn't happen?

Olawumi Akinwumi: Hmm. I mean, it's amazing, because when I listen to your audio[play], I was like, "That would be scary." To think about how it would look like, in a number of years. I mean, to be honest, it's out of our control. But because [Madison Park Development Corporation are] a real estate organization, they had their ways, they have their motives. And we have to find ways to accept what it is. But at the same time, letting them know that the programming that we're doing is relevant for the community, and we need it. And I think that's a great start. I think being able to have programming and being able for folks to have access to the space is very important. And if we hear our community or residents' testimonies, even in the organizations that we work with, that would help a lot to go a long way to make sure that this space is being preserved, and [to ensure] it doesn't change what its mission is all about. And I think it's great that the organization hears that. The more that we have these interviews or forums -- our CEO, our VP, basically our board -- they're very, very great at analyzing and hearing what the public has to say, and they really take that to heart. And that's one thing I will say about Madison Park: we do care about our community. We do care about our residents. And we just want to be able to hear that, whether that's through social media now -- and that's also changed as well, because you have a lot of the baby boomers, generations who are not used to online, or now they have to basically shift and change how they basically operate, instead of going in person to see a theater. So we want to be able to keep that experience, but also give room for folks to learn new things. And we're also learning as well. You know, this is something that we all did not think was going to happen. But the fact that we have these platforms to keep ourself relevant is something we need to keep in mind, as time over time changes.

Melinda Lopez (host): And we'll be able to direct people to websites. We can post the information on our Dream Boston website: let people know about Friends of Hibernian Hall, and ways the community can get to know more about that sacred space and to support it.

Olawumi Akinwumi: Thank you. Yes, I almost forgot about that. Yes, Friends of Hibernian Hall is a great way to join our network. We created affordable rates for folks who want to dive in and be more involved. And, you know, we have a lot of access, and we're very prevalent online and email. So most of my time is just following up, and making sure that I'm getting back to folks about what's going on.

Miranda ADEkoje: Social media had a big campaign called Pass the Mic, where -- I think it's women who had influence, who had tons of followers, millions of followers were basically passing their accounts over to activists, women of color, folks who were very vocal about the things that are going on. So they basically handed over their social media accounts, and that audience, that would be disinterested otherwise. And I see this partnership, what we're doing right now with this play, with Hibernian and Huntington, is doing just that. Huntington has a massive reach -- but it's focused. It's a focused reach. And I just feel like passing the mic, stepping back, and letting these voices be prevalent, and talk about the pains that are happening, just down the street really, is really important. So I just think that this is very powerful, and I hope that the erasure doesn't happen because of initiatives like this.

Melinda Lopez (host): Thank you so much for that, Miranda. Your play is powerful and upsetting and hilarious and so dark, and it sticks with me. And I thank you for creating it. That's Miranda ADEkoje and Olawumi Akinwumi. Thank you so much for talking with me and for being part of Dream Boston.

Miranda ADEkoje: Thank you.

Olawumi Akinwumi: Thank you for having us.

Melinda Lopez (host): Thank you.