

transcript - Exploring Tiger Style: Episode 1

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Host: You are listening to Exploring Tiger Style, a series of conversations hosted by Huntington manager of curriculum and instruction Regine Vital. These insightful talks include perspectives from the playwright, director, actors, local community members and scholars. This is our first episode called "From Stage to Podcast: This tiger changes its style."

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Regine Vital: Hi, everyone. I'm Regine Vital, I'm so glad you're here. Let's start by having everyone introduce themselves, and say where they're recording from.

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Mike Lew: Hi, this is Mike Lew, playwright, recording from Brooklyn.

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: Hey, it's Moritz von Stuelpnagel and I'm the director of the Tiger Style, recording from Hudson, New York.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Hi, everybody. This is Jon Norman Schneider. I'm playing Albert and I'm recording from Brooklyn.

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Nate Miller: Hi, this is Nate Miller, also recording from Brooklyn. I play Russ the Bus and Reggie and the Customs guy.

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Regine Vital: Amazing. So the first question I'd like to ask is I introduced this by saying "Tiger Style! An audio play -- and this is going to be distributed as a podcast. But I'm wondering if there is a distinction that feels important about calling this an audio play rather than just a podcast?"

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: Because podcasts have become so popular -- and also because COVID won't allow us to be all in the same room and the same building -- there's been this re-emergence of audio drama. It's exciting to call it an audio play because you can create a whole world, just by the sound that you're creating -- by playing into the audience's imagination of what they think they're seeing -- and allowing them in some ways, and their imaginations, to be a participant in the story that we're telling.

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Mike Lew: I mean, one thing that I will say is that when I got approached about doing this, I had to reconceive the play and think through, "How are you receiving information?" Like what was explicitly visual about the play, and how would I adopt that? So I think that it is a slightly different genre. And it's been interesting to filter the play through the lens.

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Nate Miller: The theater being such a visual medium and not just like film and TV, you know, you've got the screen and you've got anything that happens on that screen is visible. The theater is so much bigger, so that you can -- whatever that visual story you're telling, can be seen by five hundred or a thousand people all the way in the back row. It was interesting to

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lose that element, the visual element, and have to put that all into your vocal performance and also rely on the collaborative effort of all of our amazing sound designers and post-production people, so that we can make everything happen in the audience's imagination via what they're hearing.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Another thing, formally, that was different was that we didn't get to hear audience reaction in real time, and this play is a hilarious comic satire. So the laughter is itself a really essential part of the experience of playing it. So that was an interesting thing to try to navigate. But I think it was helpful that we all had experience doing it on stage, that helped inform sort of the moments where we typically would get a laugh or something like that, even though we in the playing of it, we would have that in the back of our minds.

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Host: One of the words I've been using to think about shifting a play from a stage to an audio format -- I've been using the word 'transpose' a lot because there are things you have to do to kind of make it fit in a new key, or in a new -- a new state. And so I'm wondering if there have been shifts that you've had to make in order to interpret the script successfully in this setting, in an audio only mode? And have those shifts changed the play for you in any way? Or I guess, to be more precise, has it changed your experience of the story that the play wants to tell?

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Mike Lew: There's sort of two questions that I was trying to address with this version of it. The first is, if you're going to experience this play in an audio only way, how are you going to translate what had originated as a stage production? There are like sightgags that you have to shift. There's visual information that is going to need to be done through sound cues only, or through slight shifts in dialogue to help people to visualize what's happening. So there's like a practical matter of like, how do you translate it? And then I think there's also just this question of like, where are we in terms of our relationship with China right now? And in terms of my own kind of conception around Asian-American identity in 2016 versus 2020, the biggest sort of elephant in the room is how do you address COVID and the Asian-American and Chinese implications of covid itself. So that was enormously fruitful to me to look at the play again with new eyes and try to piece through where we're at politically and keep it fresh.

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: The other thing that changes, too, is access to the play. You know, if you're not in Boston, or if you would otherwise be, you know, inhibited by the ticket price -- or just a willingness or comfort level with coming to the building -- or whatever it is, you now have access to the play in the comfort of your own home, at your schedule, in your time frame and, at, you know, an affordable price -- which I think is really exciting to open up the story to a whole host of a larger audience that felt really exciting to me when I heard the Huntington starting to talk about doing this project.

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Nate Miller: I was very excited to jump in on this project, especially because I'm the only one from this process who didn't do the show live at the Huntington, I was in the West Coast cast that did it at La Jolla. And if we're just talking about the differences between doing it live in

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front of an audience as opposed to doing it on a podcast or an audio play, Moritz actually helped me a lot, figuring out how to make -- I play three different characters in this and trying to find a way to make them audibly distinct and different, because I know that in our production in La Jolla, my characters were very visually different. They were dressed differently. Reggie had a wild wig, and so like a lot of that work was done for me. And I could put all three characters, though different vocally, but in a place in my voice that was safe and sustainable for eight shows a week, for the month and a half that we did it. This was a little bit different. I had to pitch Russ the bus slightly higher in my register in a way that might be a little harder to sustain for a show that goes for eight shows a week for a long time. But I could record it that way. He has like maybe even a little more of a cartoonish vibe to him, which I think is really who that guy is, -- which was a fantastic level of freedom that I got to experience doing this as an audio play.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Again, this play is very -- has a lot of energy and is sort of -- has big energy, and so in the playing of it onstage, we sort of try to embody that through our maniacal physical behavior. But then the task became to try to translate that and try to communicate sort of the bigness of that energy through the vocal performance -- and, you know, trying to underline certain words, or lift certain words, or trying to do that with tempo and rhythm and stuff like that. And it felt quite seamless in a way in terms of process, just because I feel like that's also how we were working in the rehearsal room to begin with.

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Nate Miller: I feel like I want the opportunity now to do it live again, because I've learned so much about the storytelling of this play --

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Jon Norman Schneider: Same

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Nate Miller: By being forced to just do it with our voices. I feel like now I could make some of those visual jokes pop even more because I could back it up with some more of the audible storytelling of it. So let's bring it back. Let's have a revival, y'all.

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Mike Lew: That's not up to you. That's up to AstraZeneca.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Unless we found some like big amphitheater somewhere. Outdoor amphitheater.

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Regine Vital: I'm in full support of of bringing it back. I'm just going to put that out there. So, Mike, just about the genesis of Tiger style as a play. When did you sit down and begin working with this idea? And how did it morph into what has now been multiple productions and now in multiple formats? How long has that journey been, and what have been at stops along the road?

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Mike Lew: Yeah, Tiger style was a very long time in coming. And I think that it came about

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because I felt really boxed in by early, well-meaning mentors that were encouraging me to write about my heritage and write about my family and not feeling like I had a way to do that exactly -- at least in a way that like matched up with their sort of expectations of what that meant. I began to play at Juilliard. A couple of things coalesced, but I think one of the biggest was The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother came out, which I still haven't read. But I was absorbing the backlash to that book in the way that people were critiquing it and saying that 'kids that are raised in this way with really disciplinarian parents will all end up hating their parents and killing each other.' And I was like, 'well, I haven't.' I love my parents. We've -- nobody's died because of this. So I have like a unique window on this aspect of Asian-American culture that I could write about authentically. That's like not like an immigrant story about like "I immigrated to America, and I don't know what it means." Because it's like, I was born here and I'm third generation in. And so I started writing the play at Juilliard, and it went to the O'Neill, and it had its world premiere at the Alliance in Atlanta in 2015. And then the next year, separate production of it was done at La Jolla Playhouse. And like right after that, most of the cast from the Alliance production did at Huntington. And I think that not every play gets the benefit of like these multiple tries. But it's so important if you were ever in a position to be able to continue working on a play that you keep hammering away at it, and have different cities and different audiences respond to it. Because what people were reacting to in Atlanta or in Connecticut was totally different than what people were reacting to in San Diego or in Boston. And I think that, like those various refractions, and the regionality of the refractions, was really crucial to sort of cementing it. And now with Huntington coming back and asking to do an audio version of it, I'm able to look at it again and think through just like how of my politics evolved, and what do we need to hear right now?

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Host: Awesome, that's great. Moritz, I want to bring you into this conversation because we had talked about how doing it as an audio play, you've got -- you're listening through headphones, right? And what sound does when it's in your ears? And Charles mentioned how intimate some of these performances have become as a result of it just being through sound. And I'm wondering for you, as you were directing this group of actors that you know really well and have really great relationships with, how is it for you to help them pitch it just right?

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: Well, I don't know if people who don't have the stage show to compare it to might listen to this group of lunatics and decide that it's an intimate experience. There's there's definitely -- you know, as we all the actors are physically recording from their own closet, I suppose there is a kind of intimacy that we're letting you in on. But I also think that, you know, it is a more intimate experience to listen to something through audio when you have your ear buds in, your ear pods or whatever they've called them -- and you're just hearing the voices. And as these guys say, you don't have a large physicality and you're not trying to reach the back of the house with your voice. You are just in a conversation with someone who's right there. They can just really be talking to each other, even if the stakes are heightened, and even if their emotions are heightened, or whatever it is. And there is a focus on language -- and the rich language that Mike is so genius at creating. That I think does let this be front and center in a great way. You know, I think the challenge for us when we did it on stage is, how do you create a visual world that

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can both support the rich text that Mike giving us, and the broad satire of it, without trying to compete with it? Without trying to overshadow it? But that will allow this weird place called China that they go to in the second act -- and in the podcast version, episodes three and four -- how does that phantasmagoria of China sort of match this strange Southern California that we're living in in Act one? So that we feel like we're in the same play. But what happens in an audio experience, again, is the audience's imagination becomes the set designer. You know, we can give you some music cues. We can give you some sound cues that might help set the stage, but the rest of it is existing just in your mind and whatever you think the actors are doing.

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Regine Vital: So I'm going to be nerdy for a second. I've spent a lot of time studying early modern English dramas -- or Shakespeare and all his friends -- and there are lines in the text about how people would go to 'hear' a play. And it strikes me that all of you were back in a different mode of how we take in stories again. And it's really lovely to think about all that. I will say that one of the things that I'm super interested about is -- I'm coming at you, Jon, with this question. Coming at you. So I've been thinking about this because when -- so for those who may not have seen the stage production, it is quite visually bold. It's big, it's broad, it pops. And you and the actor who plays your sister, Jennifer, the two of you are always together. I mean, I'm always wondering about this, you know, socially distanced production of drama -- when you're not in the room with your main scene partner. Jennifer and Albert, they live together. They travel together. They are going on this freedom tour together. And yet you're recording this apart. What has that been like to do without your sister, riding with you by your side?

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Jon Norman Schneider: That's a great question. I have been doing a few virtual zoom readings during this time, and it's been a really frustrating experience to not be in the same physical space with with the actors and the director and or playwright. That's been a challenge. But for this, I think it was really amazing to have had the opportunity to do the production -- in our case, in Ruibo and my case -- we've done it twice before. And so having had that opportunity to do it twice in a fully realized production on stage, I think that afforded us a very rich sort of history of working together and in fact, building this sort of sibling relationship, which we've taken beyond the walls of the theatre. And we have this this kind of very specific fun sibling relationship now. And so that's definitely helped for this process, because just hearing her voice, I feel a connection with her. And that's been built over the years that we've worked on the play. And then also because we've both done it together, when we speak these words and are in these scenes again, there's a sense memory that sort of naturally happens anyway. It's stored in the body. And so I feel like I'm right there with her, because I'm hearing her come back at me, and I felt connected with her even though we were apart, which was which was great. And that's the gift of being able to have done the production already. So just having her in those scenes and hearing her in my ear was very evocative on its own. And so I felt really connected to her.

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Nate Miller: I also just wanted to say that that Mike's writing has such a beautiful rhythm to it that jumping in with a cast that I hadn't performed live with before still felt like I knew exactly what I was getting into.

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Regine Vital: When its comedy, it's all about the rhythm, it's all about the timing -- when there's a tech aspect that's like unavoidable, how do you kind of keep the room together when you know there's going to be this thing that's going to get in the way?

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: Well, I think you have to have faith in the editing process. And Val and Palmer have been amazing in the editing process. You know, there's something about volume and communicating over the Internet that, you know, that there's an almost imperceptible lag between our communication. Your brain is constantly frustrated, trying to look for social cues, look for physical cues, understand why the rhythm in our conversation is maybe slightly off or whatever, which is the same as what two actors do when they're trying to communicate with one another --is they're trying to understand how their banter works, what the energy between them is, and that all shifts. Even though the Internet is connecting us, there's still a slight delay. There's still a slight distance between us. So the editing process allows us to help correct for that, either by tightening a lot of the dialogue, or by giving the actors a chance to try it a couple of different ways and then piecemeal performances together that really hit all the different colors and beats and that kind of thing. In the rehearsal room, we're trying to construct something that the actors can replicate, in some way, again and again every night and continue to explore it. In this process, not unlike TV/ film, we are trying to explore all the options and get them all in the can, as it were, and then piece the best of all of that together. So what you're getting is, you know, the best of what we came up with on the day, which is fun and challenging in its own way.

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Mike Lew: Something that's been challenging, that's not actually technological, is that without an audience responding to lines, we have to kind of guess at what the rhythm is, which I just think is an interesting wrinkle. Because when you're in previews on a live performance, the audience tells you when you need to pause, or you kind of nudge them to pause later. But there's like a definite dynamic going back and forth with the audience. And I think it's why in a lot of early TV comedy, there was a live audience or there's laugh tracks, because they're trying to capture that same rhythm too.

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Nate Miller: This is how I feel about any time I see, like NBC presents a live musical of whatever. If there's not an audience, it's like what Moritz was talking about. This uncanny valley. I know that joke is funny -- and I know that they're pausing appropriately -- but somehow they're playing to a room that there isn't an audience. And I'm on my couch, and I feel this like strange disconnect. Even though the rhythm makes sense on paper, it doesn't land just right. This is much more like a movie or a TV show that we have worked on, rehearsed, recorded. And then it will be edited, so that it flows smoothly with the audience in mind. But I always have the frustration of these, like Zoom plays that we do. It's like doing a live musical with no audience. It's constantly a frustration

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Jon Norman Schneider: Screaming into the void.

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Nate Miller: Yeah

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Jon Norman Schneider: It's terrifying.

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Nate Miller: I mean, sometimes literally screaming into the void. This is far more satisfying.

00:20:59

Mike Lew: I hope that this gets sponsored by Zoom, this podcast.

00:21:02

Nate Miller: "Sponsored by Zoom and NBC presents The Music Man"

00:21:07

Mike Lew: "I'm so frustrated by this!" "Sponsored by Zoom."

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: I hope we're sponsored by The Void. [pause, followed by laughter] That was an example of a lag. My inner soul panicked. And for a sec, I was like, well, I guess that joke wasn't funny, and these guys when you were gracious enough to give me a pity laugh, and I came out the other side.

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Regine Vital: I think that's just your crew backing you up Moritz. It's all that, you know, intimacy and camaraderie you've built up over the course of these productions. This has been going so well that I'm actually at my last question. You were explaining before Moritz about having a couple of takes that you can weave together to make a fluid piece. And so there is stuff that is really exciting about that. Right. You're going to have this piece. It's going to be accessible to so many people. Were going to get to broaden our audience. You can see it from anywhere. There's no barrier to entry, which is really lovely. But once this piece is set and mastered, there is just this one version. How do you know the joke works if the audience isn't there to laugh? How do you know a moment has landed? If there isn't someone there to boost that up for you with some sort of reaction. And the phrase that I heard from Mike was the tyranny of takes. There's no room for that ephemeral experience. Do you think that's necessary in order for this to be a piece of theater? I mean, it's still a play, it's an audio play, but do we think of it as theater in that sense, or is it not?

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Mike Lew: I do. I do still think of it as theater, but I think that my experience of my own play is going to be so inherently different than any audience member's because I'm just processing it in a different way than they are. There's like the political and stylistic stuff that I want to get across. But then, like when I'm actually looking at the thing or experiencing it, I'm not really processing it on that level. So for me, like the interest that I have in theater is to -- this is going to be a pretty highfalutin metaphor. And I'm not sure if it's going to cohere. But essentially I've created a road, and there is any number of ways to traverse that road. And I will be surprised by the directions that an actor or the director take. And sometimes an actor will do a scene differently or land a joke slightly differently. And all of those feel to me like these wheelbarrow tracks that are along the road and like eventually a rut forms where the play is going to go. But like your wheelbarrow may stray here or there. And so when you have something that's recorded and you have to set all that in stone, I do feel like there's a tyranny of takes because not only are you choosing that and locking it, but also like if an

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actor gives you several different takes that all work, I don't envy Moritz having to pick which one he wants to freeze there. Because for me, the experience of seeing the play is about watching all these variations and seeing whether they still convey the entire project from night to night.

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: It's not easy when you don't have an audience response, especially in a comedy. It's very apparent when something's not -- when a joke doesn't work, you know, because the audience is telling you, and there's no hiding from that. But I think what these guys are so great at, and what I've always tried to do -- is just to try to create something that at the very least will make us laugh, because if it can't even make us laugh, then you know -- how dare we try to offer it up to anybody else? And that's not an easy thing to try to come up with something that will make a room full of very funny people break in some way. But Mike in his wheelbarrow -- or in his road metaphor, we can all play a live version of the game Frogger and, you know, get to level 99 with three lives left -- at least, hopefully maybe at least one life left. But we've had enough quarters to do it. So ... no high school student is going to know what the hell I'm talking about. [laughs]

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Mike Lew: Frogs don't use wheelbarrows, I --

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Moritz von Stuelpnagel: But everybody my age is going to know what I am talking about.

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Jon Norman Schneider: One of the things that I love most about the form of theatre is that it is different from night to night. Necessarily, because the audience is different from night to night -- and that makes it feel like a very alive art form. It's like a different organism every time out. But being somebody that is a perfectionist, as I am a child of immigrants, the idea of somebody sort of picking, cherry picking great takes is very appealing to me. To me, this is kind of a hybrid theater form.

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Nate Miller: I'm endlessly fascinated when doing a play in a theater as to how the events of the world can just one day change the course of a play. Something happens in the news, and all of a sudden a joke that was funny for the last three months is no longer funny, and never will be again, or won't be again for a year. The idea of the tyranny of takes thing that Mike was talking about, like the idea that we're locked into a choice, that we'll just live in perpetuity on the Internet scares me a little bit, but is mitigated by the fact that I can always be like, "yeah, well, I gave them nine takes, and they chose that," so I can let myself off the hook.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Yeah. It takes the onus off the actor, finally.

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Regine Vital: I'm wondering, we updated the play for this moment set in November 2019, as opposed to the production that happened in 2016. Are we worried there might be moments of that in the play? I mean, no spoilers but is that something that we worry about, or is this

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podcast meant to be like a bit of a time capsule in this crazy covid moment we find ourselves in?

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Mike Lew: I don't know that I'm going to have like a quick answer for that, because it just feels like it's ... something that I ponder a lot in terms of what subject matter should I choose that will stand the test of time. And at the core of any play that's worth anything, has to be a meaty human issue, and working your way through that. And I think that that will stand the test of time, regardless of whether, like any individual jokes fall flat because of changing sensibilities, or because of changing reference points. I think what will remain constant is these two kids who had a very specific upbringing and trying to piece through that. And I think you're always going to have problems, blame your parents, try to find home and, you know, be confused and come out the end of it. Like, that's not going away.

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Jon Norman Schneider: Yeah, that wheelbarrow feels universal.

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Nate Miller: This is maybe an answer to a slightly different question. But like in La Jolla, there was like a guy to talk back who was like, I didn't understand why the one white guy had to be such a buffoon all the time. The conversation that we got into was: "is this the first time that you've like not seeing yourself accurately portrayed on stage?" And he thought about it and was like, "yeah, I mean, I guess that's one way of saying it." And I was like, "well, let's all hope that in the next 10 to 15, 20 years, I hope it's faster than that, but that we see more and more plays where, you know, it's not always the white man's experience that is preserved as accurate and everyone else plays the other roles." So in that regard, like, yeah, I hope this play doesn't stand the test of time. I hope we move beyond that. This isn't like such a radical, or "what a strange, interesting way of doing a play."

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Host: This was awesome. I'm like really giddy right now. Thank you, Moritz. Thank you, Mike. Thank you, Nate. Thank you, Jon.

00:29:06

Nate Miller: Thank you, everybody.

00:29:08

Jon Norman Schneider: Thank you.

00:29:08

Moritz von Stuelpnagel: Thanks, everybody.

00:29:09

Host: Thank you for listening to this episode of Exploring Tiger Style! hosted by Huntington Manager of Curriculum and Instruction Regine Vital. Exploring Tiger Style! is sound engineered by Valentin Frank. This episode features Mike Lew, Moritz von Steulpnagel, Nate Miller, and Jon Norman Schneider. To hear the Tiger Style! audio play and more of Exploring Tiger Style! -- and to donate in support of programs like these, visit huntingtontheatre.org. If you enjoy this podcast, please follow us wherever you found this series. Thanks for listening!

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