

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Audra McDonald

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Tony, Grammy, and Emmy award winner, and not just any Tony award winner. She has won every single acting category Tony, she's the only actor to ever win all four acting categories: Audra McDonald! I hope you didn't just crash your car, hunnies, because she's major. She's an icon. She's also the co-founder of Black Theatre United. Where I ask her: How can we support the theatre community during the pandemic and beyond?

Welcome to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited. So everyone, if you are a theatre queen. Pull your car over. Sit down. Because this is going to be quite a moment. Welcome to "Getting Curious," Audra McDonald, who, if you do not know, is a record-breaking, six-time Tony Award winner. She has two Grammys, an Emmy Award, also like several other awards, like it's literally, just to give you an idea, I watched this YouTube video where it took you a combined 23 minutes to accept all of the different awards in this one YouTube video. So. And basically our question for the week is, you know, how can we support the theatre community during the pandemic and beyond? And there's no one better literally in the world that we could talk to. So welcome. Audra McDonald.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:01:27] Oh Jonathan, thank you. It's such an honor to be with you. We're big fans of the show. My, I was telling you, my 19 year old daughter was flipping out that I was talking to you today. So it's awesome.

JVN [00:01:39] Oh, my God. You sing when you talk. I can't handle. Ok. My mouth just went dry. So here's the thing. I have, I've been nominated for some things, honey. I've never won something that I got nominated for. And so I guess one question I just want to ask is, like, the first time you, you won, because I think the first of the, because we do need to get that Oscar, which I feel like because you're in the new Aretha movie, honey, I do feel like I smell one coming. I'm just, I'm just-

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:02:06] I don't think that's going to be it. But thank you.

JVN [00:02:08] Well, something. I'm just washing my face with the idea of it. I just, I'm just putting into the universe like you just got to speak into existence, but regardless. So the first time you were nominated and you're, like, sitting, you're like sitting in there. If, if you could just take us back, like, so you're sitting there and you're, like, because did you have

that moment where you're like, "Oh my gosh, if I win this, like my life might change like this could like and what was that like?"

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:02:31] Well, when I was sitting at the Tonys. It was, like, 1994. And I just, the fact that I was there just was already mind blowing. And the whole, the whole evening was like just this out of body experience for me. I just, I was sort of, I had floated up and was just sort of watching it all happen from above. You know, it just, it, none of it seemed real. And it was this really weird moment from when, I think it was Tony Danza. I think actually who opened. Is that right? It might have been, I think was Tony Danza. And he opened the thing to say who the winner was. And as he opened it, I had this weird moment and I don't think I've ever said this to anybody where I went, "It's my name in there, he's going to say my name." It was this weird moment of like, "Oh my gosh, it's my name," but I hadn't felt any of that at all until that moment. And then when he opened it, I was like, "Oh, my God is my name." And then I heard my name. I was like, this is crazy. And then in that moment, I realized, oh, now I have to talk. I have to say something to all of these people that have meant everything to me my entire life. All these Broadway legends in this audience. And I walked up there thinking, I can't talk. I don't know what to say to them. I don't, I don't know how to say thank you. I don't know my name right now.

And I was shaking. I was so nervous. And he handed me the Tony and I turned around. I was like, what am I going to do? I don't want to pass out. I don't want to seem like an idiot. I hadn't prepared a speech because I just didn't think it would happen. And as soon as I turned to face this audience, the first face I see in the front row is Carol Channing. And she has this enormous Carol Channing smile. And, you know, I grew up loving her like free to be you and me, you know, housework, and just do what-, you know, all. I just loved her. She, her voice always reminded me of my grandmother. And I looked at her face and she was beaming. And it calmed me down. So I basically just sort of looked at Carol Channing the entire speech, because I was just like she's going to calm me down. And she just looks, it's just so, it's such a warmth and joy radiating from her face. And I'm, I'm gonna be okay. I just felt so comforted by her in that moment. It was the craziest thing. And then come to find out years later that she, that she's, that she's, she's Black. That, did you know that? That Carol Channing?

JVN [00:05:02] No.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:05:02] Yeah. That her, I don't know if it was her father. There's somebody in her family who was Black. To the point where her mother said don't have children because they might come out, they might look Black because of our, you know, our, our, our, you know, DNA. And then it would be, people would know that you're not all white.

JVN [00:05:22] Holy shit. I never knew.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:05:26] So when I look back on the fact that I was so comforted by looking at Carol Channing, I'm like, well, maybe I just saw, you know, Black female in there somewhere, and I felt calm by it. I don't know. But yeah, that was my first Tony experience.

JVN [00:05:40] Oh, my god. That, like, made me like really emot-ish. But you have won six times. You're the most, you're the only actor to ever win a Tony for all four acting categories, which I just, like, that is so cool.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:05:57] It's, it's, it's crazy.

JVN [00:06:00] Did you ever get less nervous?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:06:01] No.

JVN [00:06:01] As you won the sixth?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:06:02] No, no, no, no, no. Because every one has been a shock. Because all my life, all I ever wanted to do was be on Broadway, but I just wanted to be on Broadway. I didn't think, especially as a Black girl growing up in Fresno, California, the dream was just to at least get there and be like in the ensemble of something. I just never, I, my dreams were big, but they weren't as big as they could have been and as certainly not as big as I tell young kids to dream now. I say, you know, I'm gonna grow up and I'm gonna be a eight time Tony award-winning actress. I mean, that's what I tell my, you know, the people that I sort of do masterclasses for now. I like, just dream as big as you possibly can. But my dreams weren't that big. It was just to finally get to Broadway and be in something. So everything that's happened in my career since then has been mind blowing to me. So I don't, it doesn't compute in a way that it's happened to me. It's something that happened to somebody named Audra McDonald. But I'm, in as far as I'm concerned, I'm still me. I'm still completely messy. I'm still completely unorganized. I still have never been able to get my hair to totally look right in the 50 years I've been alive. You know what I mean? It's, nothing has changed as far as who I am. Do you know what I mean?

JVN [00:07:24] I object to that last thing though. All that's fine, but like, no, I, I'm sorry. I've, I've had to, I've, well I didn't have to, but I've watched every, I'm pretty sure I've watched like most every performance that exists of you on YouTube. And just right now I can see you on Zoom. You have mastered this hair.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:07:41] Well, honey.

JVN [00:07:41] This hair is-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:07:42] It's all good.

JVN [00:07:43] A mastery.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:07:44] It's good. You're so sweet. Thank you. But just meaning I'm still, I'm still very much me. Do you know what I mean? So.

JVN [00:07:49] Yeah.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:07:49] All this stuff that, and also when you think about the fact that what you do, what I do for a living is just, it's my passion. It's the only thing I've ever wanted to do. And all I ever want to continue to do is just to evolve as an artist. Do you know what I mean? I want to be better. I'm still very critical of myself. I want to be better tomorrow than I am today. I want to have learned more about my craft tomorrow than I have today. And I want to be a better singer, actress, you know, listener, mom, all of that. I'm all about evolution, or trying to evolve and taking big risks and, you know, sometimes falling flat on your face. But that's the whole point, you know, of evolution. You've got to, you've gotta learn. You've got to push yourself forward. So, you have to do it for that and not because I want to win an award, because that's, you can only do your work. You can only do your best work. You can't vote for yourself for a Tony. You can't nominate yourself for a Tony. You know? You can't, you have, you really have nothing to do with any of it. You know, all you can do is your work. So that's where I put it all. I just sort of put that that happened to someone over there. And that's amazing. But it doesn't, it, it doesn't compute for me. You know?

JVN [00:09:03] I, I, I, I feel that a little. I always say, like with, in my career, like, I feel, like, I'm kind of in a constant state of shock because like my goal was to just like, live. And like to be getting to do all of this stuff is just like, wow, this is so much more amazing than-. And I feel like for me growing up, I felt like, you know, getting away from my hometown, making it on my own. I felt like that was, like, impossible. And so it made me because I felt, like, in some ways it was, I feel, like, it in some ways it made me work so much harder to, like, prove myself. I guess I do think, though, that because you had to overcome, because you came up in Fresno, California, and like, when did you start? When did you come on like this scene in Broadway? And like when did you leave California and come to New York?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:09:51] Yeah. I moved to New York when I was 18 to go to the Juilliard School. I had gotten accepted in the Juilliard School into the voice department, but I'd been doing musical theatre at our local dinner theatre in Fresno, California, from the time I was 9. And that's what, that's how I got bit by the bug. That's how I knew that this is what I wanted to do. But I didn't, you know, I mean, I, you know, I like to, and Fresno is my hometown and I, and I love it. But let's put it this way. The, the congressman for Fresno County is Devin Nunes. Okay? And he's been reelected. So that's, that gives you an idea of the area that I come from. And, and while there are-

JVN [00:10:34] Devin Nunes is-

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:10:35] Yes.

JVN [00:10:36] Because I was just going to ask you was like, so what was it like coming up in Fresno? So is Fresno more like central California?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:10:41] Central, completely central. In the San Joaquin Valley. It's like, you know, the main city where all the farm towns were around it, and, you know, it's an agricultural center and, and power, I don't know. I mean, now a lot of agriculture gets shipped in from other countries. I mean, I don't know if they still maintain the same kind of power that they used to have, but it's a huge agricultural center. And, you know.

JVN [00:11:05] See, because I don't think people realize this. And it's something that's been more on my-, I've been realizing what a deeply racist part of the country that central California was.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:11:13] Oh, very much. Very much. And there are blue pockets and there are liberal people there. And obviously, I was, you know, I, my, my great grandfather settled in Fresno, California. So the McDonalds have been there for a very long time. But it's, there are still, there's still deeply, deeply red and deeply racist people still in, in Fresno and in that area.

JVN [00:11:38] And who was your Audra McDonald? Who is your you? That you looked up to in Fresno? Like when you're like, who do I want to grow up to be?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:11:47] Well, I, you know, I come from a very musical family and my, and because I had this incredible dinner theatre that I could go and perform and be a part of their company. And I went to Performing Arts High School and a Performing Arts Junior High School. I mean, there are some wonderful things about Fresno, and I was lucky to have all that and it was all public education. You know? This was public schools. Which

are so vital and so important and so necessary to protect. My goodness, we have to protect public education. Anyway. So because I had good exposure, I was able to look up to people, like, you know, Lena Horne and Diahann Carroll and Ella Fitzgerald. And then, you know, I also love Patti Lupone and Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand. Those were sort of all of my, you know, people that I listened to on a regular basis and people that I wanted to be. My mom had the Lena Horne, "The Lady in Her Music," the Broadway show, the cassette recording. Cassettes and albums then, you youngsters with your C-, CDs are gone. I remember when CDs came around.

JVN [00:13:00] I was all, honey. I was, I was all about. I had a cassette. I had several cassettes.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:13:05] All right, did you have the little, what the boombox with the cassettes?

JVN [00:13:07] Yeah. I was born '87. So I have like, I had experience with an early 90s culture. I remember, I remember Brian Adams honey. I remember, that was, I feel like that was what permeated the Midwest. I don't know what, why that. I don't know where that Brian Adams reference just came from. It really-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:13:25] But use it, use it.

JVN [00:13:28] Wait. So. But so you, you moved to New York when you're-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:13:33] 18.

JVN [00:13:33] 18. You, you get into the like one of the most well, probably the most prestig-, prestigious music school of all time.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:13:41] Yeah.

JVN [00:13:42] And then you just start, you just become, you go on to become, like, one of the most prolific performers, most iconic performers, actors, like of like our, you're literally one of those notable iconic actors of-. It's just, it's, I just get the chills on my legs when I talk to people about. It's just so cool. And I, and when you were mentioning at the beginning about, you know, I'm still myself, and I, I won't take the dig at your own hair because was, your hair, it's just it's it's been slayed for so long but all the other stuff.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:14:12] No.

JVN [00:14:12] I know. I know what you're saying.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:14:13] I'm saying, I can't do my own hair. After all these years, I can pay people to do it, but I'm still bad at it.

JVN [00:14:17] Oh. Oh. Well that-. But at least you know. But at least you know what works for you.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:14:21] I know my talents.

JVN [00:14:23] Yeah, but I also like you know how to, you know, you've got to know how to like direct.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:14:28] Yes, of course.

JVN [00:14:29] Even like. Yes. So. Okay. Okay. Now I know, that's fine. But I'm just saying when you were saying you know, but I'm still myself. I think I can even in this 20 minutes, I can just feel that from you. And I also think, you know, so you're, the, the Wikipedia, like, awards that you've won precedes you. But I also think you've been so, the work that you've done and advocacy and bringing your passion to, to the side of, of your art that is helping people and brings more people into the fold of art and gives more people a platform and gives more people a chance, I think is really so beautiful. And that's part of, you know, the question of this episode is how can we support theatre, the theatre community during this pandemic. You founded Black Theatre United, which is correct me if I'm wrong, but that's just like about, it's newer. She's like only a-

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:15:19] A month and a half.

JVN [00:15:20] She's like a month old.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:15:20] A month and a half old. Yeah. Yeah.

JVN [00:15:22] I also don't know why I just gave your organization a female pronoun. Sometimes I, whatever. So. But, but prior to that you have, I mean, you're not new to advocacy.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:15:30] No.

JVN [00:15:33] And you're not new to. So I guess. But I guess to kind of dive into talking about your advocacy, if we could just set the stage of like, so it's 2020. You're minding your

own business. It's January. It's February. It's March. You're working on what, what happens? And how do we set the stage for Black Theatre United?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:15:52] Well, I was working on a, on the television show "The Good Fight," which is the spin off of.

JVN [00:15:58] Yes, Christine Baranski.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:16:00] "The Good Wife." Yeah. Yeah. Christine Baranski. Yes. And the show takes place, you know, in Black law firm in Chicago. And it's me and Delroy Lindo, Christine Baranski, Nyambi Nyambi, Michael Boatman, Sarah Steele, Cush Jumbo. So it's predominantly Black cast, actually. And so we were just, you know, we're filming in Brooklyn and, you know, getting more and more freaked out by the days, we're hearing these numbers and everything starting to happen here in New York. And then one day, our producers just walked in and said, "Everybody go home. We gotta go home." And so from that, you know, I went and had to go pick up my daughter from college, bring her home and just the quarantine.

And then as this happens, so many times before, you know, we're all dealing with the Covid and the quarantine and then story after story after video after video starts to come out. In the way that they've always been there, Black people have always know these stories, you know, with, you know, with the Ahmaud Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, the guy trying to just birdwatch in Central Park, you know. And then, you know, the George Floyd video happened.

And in the way that theatre people, I think, have always, you know, we, we band together to, you know, raise, you know, when the AIDS epidemic was happening, you know. And the theatre community was being decimated, you know, with all the incredible artists and people we lost during that epidemic. You know, Broadway Cares, Equity Fights AIDS was born. You know, you have Hearts and Voices. You have all of these organizations that are raising money for AIDS awareness and research and, and, you know, advocacy to, you know, to protect the community, so, you know, there's that.

When the whole immigration issue is up, was going on earlier, you know, Broadway people always come together to help and support. And there just seemed to be as, as all of these videos were starting to surface of people being killed and brutalized by white people or the police or the Black community, it just felt eerily silent from our theatrical community. It just it felt like we weren't hearing what we needed to hear. And a lot of people with, the Black people within the community were feeling that. Like, where is everybody? You know, you, we're, we are here for you. We, we, you know, I, down and, I was up in Albany trying

to talk to politicians to get marriage equality going years ago, you know, marching for, for, for, for gay rights and, and, you know, for immigration issues. What, and I, and that's, that's just what you do. You help your fellow man. So it just seemed, it just seemed eerily quiet.

And so a lot of us started to say where? What's going on? And a friend of mine, LaChanze, an incredible theatrical Broadway star. She's a Tony winner and she just sort of wrote something saying where, why are the, why are we not hearing from the theatre community? Like the theatre websites and what not. Why are they not speaking out right now? We haven't heard a thing. And I was texting with LaChanze and we were talking about it. And Black people within the community were starting to do things within, you know, with themselves. And there was a Broadway advocacy coalition, which is a wonderful advocacy coalition that was started by credible Black, young Black actors in the community that started four years ago during the time of Eric Garner's killing. And that whole time. And they've been doing incredible work. So they were starting to galvanize again and other Black communities were, but we weren't hearing from the theatrical community as a whole. And so LaChanze and I were talking about that and we said, what can we do? So we started to gather together some of our friends in the business, people who've been in the business 30, 40 years, you know, like Brian Stokes Mitchell and Phylicia Rashad and Michael McElroy, Vanessa Williams, Lewis White, people like that. And we just all started, Billy Porter, I've known Billy since 1989 actually, as well. So yeah. Yeah. Amazing.

JVN [00:20:22] I've known him since "First Wives Club," honey, since in 1994. Like I, that's when I was first introduced. And then "Kinky Boots" after that.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:20:31] Yeah, he's always been, he's Billy. Even people be saying, we're discovering Billy Porter, I'm like Billy Porter has been Billy Porter forever.

JVN [00:20:35] That's what I'm talking about. Like I've known him since I was 7.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:20:39] Yeah.

JVN [00:20:39] You, like, that, but also it actually leads me into, into this and talking about, you know, with the eerily quietness around, you know, because I think, you know, I have some figure skater friends that kind of we're doing some anti-rac-, that are doing work in the anti-racism space in figure skating. Because I think it's important, like, that we, whatever space we're in. Like, that's a good space for us to advocate within because that's, you know, where we have more.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:21:04] Absolutely. You have more sway. Yeah. You have more of a platform. And so we brought, we came together and said, what can we do? You know, we

see other Black organizations coming together, is there any way we can do anything to sort of elevate and amplify? And we decided that we wanted to focus, first of all, a lot of us for so much of our careers and a lot of us still have always been one, one of a few or the only one in the room. And so we're like, you know, it's hard to bring everybody together when we've all been separated in that way. And kind of you think about it in terms of even slavery, house families were separated. And so it's like, you know what? We need to sort of like bring everybody together and just start to sort of build a coalition and see what we can get done. And so that's how we came to be. And we decided we wanted to focus on the macro as well as the micro. And the macro is the fact that our entire house is on fire and there's the pandemic of the, the, the, the Covid-19 pa-, pandemic. But there is also the pandemic of systemic racism and Black people being brutalized and murdered by the police. And that's an issue, that is also a pandemic. 1 in a 1,000 Black men can be expected to be shot at or killed by the police. That, those, that's how bad the statistics are.

And so we decided that we wanted to focus on the fact that our entire house was on fire and then the fact that within that, the theatrical community, you know, absolutely has systemic racism, which needs to be eradicated. So we came together to do that. You know, we, a lot of the things that we're focusing on, like our first town hall was with Sherrilyn Ifill, who is the president of the NAACP, Legal Defense Fund. And that was to bring not only awareness to obviously that organization, which everybody knows about, but more to bring awareness to the context of the history of where we are in this moment and what we can do with the tools that we have in our hands to start to help, you know, with the civil rights issues that face Black people today. And that's voter suppression. That's police brutality. That's making sure that we are counted in the census that is dealing with the way things are being districted and you know what's happening within local elections, who, who are you voting for to be the sheriff or the judges in your town? It all starts on a local level. And so we have been, you know, teaming up with people, like people at Fair Count, the Fair Count initiative, which is run by Stacey Abrams and--

JVN [00:23:38] Yes.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:23:38] Their organizations to work on voter suppression and making sure that people, Black and brown people are so underrepresented in the census, making sure that, so we with, at Black Theatre United wanted to do what we could to sort of like help, help elevate those causes as well.

JVN [00:23:53] For people that, like, don't know about the theatre world or, like, let's just say that there's like, let's say that someone who's listening to this is like with their fucking aunt Karen. And so they listen to this and Aunt Karen says, "Well, when this Audra

McDonald says that there's systemic racism within a theatre. Like how?" Like, how does all of this, how does systemic racism show its head in theatre world?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:24:17] Well, in, in things like, you know, the, if you want to look at IATSE, the union that does like the, the building and the carpentry and whatnot, the union that sort of, the engineers in and all of that-.

JVN [00:24:30] Like the sets?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:24:31] Yeah. All of that. That's a union that I don't even know that I should find out the actual percentage of people that are of color in that union. But it's very low. As far as I know, in the years that I've been working on Broadway, which is over 20 years, I can only name in my mind three stage managers that have been Black. They're in, in the hair union, in the wardrobe union, in the, in the costume design, in, and directors that are-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:25:02] What about casting?

JVN [00:25:02] Oh, I mean, people that actually do the casting. I've never met a Black casting director. I've never met one. In publicity. And then, you know, in terms of producers, you know, just having money doesn't mean you get to produce a show.

JVN [00:25:17] Now, what does that-? What does get produced on-? Because sometimes I feel like people say get produced, but like a lot of people, this is actually maybe me included. What all goes into like when you say getting your show produced?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:25:25] Getting a theatre. Getting a theatre because, you know, there are only so many people who own the theatres and those are very powerful organizations of people who own the theatres. It's a very specific league. And even though there may be plenty of money to back a show or whatnot, these people still needed to have sort of a co-producer that gave them, like, enough white cred in a way.

JVN [00:25:54] Yeah.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:25:54] To get one.

JVN [00:25:55] And that's where you can-, I feel like that's really where I was kind of sussing out not really knowing, obviously because I don't know very much. But like I was thinking, like theatre owners, like when did those families amass that much money? Like

you're-, because I mean, I can't. I mean, who can even afford a damn condo in New York City?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:26:12] Yeah, these are-.

JVN [00:26:13] Like afford renting a house.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:26:14] This goes way back. I mean, these are, this is.

JVN [00:26:16] Right. So if you have the money to own, like, a four story, like, 6,000 seat or 4,000 seat or 900 seat, any sort of, like, sizable real estate in Manhattan, you have to have money. And I'm guessing that most of those owners are not super new, new to that sort of money and power.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:26:35] No, no. It's a very small, small, small group of people who have been in power for a very, very long or families, organizations that have been in power for a very, very long time.

JVN [00:26:45] So I'm going to connect this question in my triple salchow, triple loop next element right after the break, we're going to be right back with more Audra McDonald after this. So welcome back to "Getting Curious." This is Jonathan Van Ness. So, you know, I think a lot of us have seen, like, "Behind the Music," or we've seen, like, things or we, like, kind of, or like, you know, in the salon you would assume like there's a front desk person and the front desk person has a relationship with certain stylists and maybe the front desk person is like friends with the owner. And so there's like politics, right? Like in every industry, there's like politics. So there's the owner of a, of a theatre. And then is there like a board? Or is there like, or does anyone have to oversee who owns a theatre like where is there transparency around like the inner workings of this stuff?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:27:30] Well, there is a league of these producers. But I wouldn't say that there is a ton of transparency. They, you know, they, they are a league and they, they don't have to be transparent because it's, they're all privately owned entities, you know? So I think. I think. It would behoove them as well as you know, you look at even regional theatres and the way they're run and the boards that are, you know, makeup, the way the regional theatres run and that, you know, there's usually an executive producer and an artistic, artistic director or whatnot. Everybody needs to take a look at their own, their own, their own house. You know, for lack of a better term. And. This is an uncomfortable time for people, people don't want to sit in it and sit in the realization that they may have been contributing to a part of this problem or just, not, or their privilege has

allowed them to not even have to look at this problem because it hasn't affected them in any way.

And so Sherrilyn Ifill talked a lot about this. Get your, get your house in order. You've got to get your house in order. And there are, you know, there are lots of organizations and coalitions that have come together within the Black community and in the BIPOC community that are, you know, there's even one organization within the BIPOC community that has already sort of, theatrical community, that has sort of issued like a 29 page list of demands and you know, like I think there's many, many roads to the same destination here and that, you know, you need a multiple pronged approach. But there are a lot of things that, that need to be done and also just to make theatre and, and, and creation of theatre a safer psychological space too, I think for people of color, which a lot of times it can and cannot be, you know. A lot of times it is not. And there are a lot of people who talk about the trauma that they've had with, you know, in being in specific shows or the way they've been treated or passed over or trotted out just to be the face of diversity and then ignored, you know. So it's a, it's a, it's a lot to break down. It's a lot to break down into. And the, is there a silver lining? Is the silver lining perhaps that we are now in this sort of pause because theatre can't happen right now during this, the Covid pandemic. So does it mean that there is time to sort of deliberately and meticulously put theatre back together in a way that is more equitable, more diverse?

And we're not just talk-, like I said, not just talking onstage. Like all these things we just mentioned. These are all behind the scenes. The people who are telling the stories, the creative people in the room, people who want to be interns. A lot of times you have these young kids who want to be interns but can't afford to not have a salary and work in New York City. So do we need to institute more? You need to broaden your search, institute ways to maybe create more scholarships so that other people can be more eligible for these interns, these internships, and then study at the, you know, at the right hand side. That sounds very religious, but, you know, study next to or work next to someone like, you know, a great Broadway director, a great lighting director, a great sound designer. Or what. And so that they can then, so then we're opening up the pipeline. You know, so that more of that talent, that Black talent or BIPOC talent can sort of funnel through and then be a part of this industry, which a lot of times, you know, because of the systemic racism within our country and the way this, this whole country has been built. Those, those avenues a lot of times are cut off. You, you, you can't follow that avenue for a lot of people to the theatre because it's cut off. I mean, it's, it could start back with public education, you know, public education being and the money is going into public education and public schools being decimated in certain communities. Take it away or put into charter schools or whatever. And so there's no arts in, in those comm-, in those public schools. There's no, you know,

there's no community programs, nothing like that. And. I mean, you, we all know the story. Just, just, you know, it just becomes a domino effect.

So there's a, there's a lot to be done. But I think the silver lining, again, if you can find one, is that we, we, we have the time now. We have the urgency, but we have the time because so many of us are not working right now. So we can really focus on how we want to be a part of putting theatre back together in a way that is more equitable. More equal, more diverse.

JVN [00:32:37] Yeah. I mean. I think, you know, one thing that one of our, our, our guests said is, Ben O'Keefe, he's written about is like, you know, white people of today didn't like choose to, you know, because I think a lot of times white people get so like, well, "I didn't do that and I didn't whatever." But it's like white people now didn't wake up and choose to make the system the way that it is. But white people have benefited a lot-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:33:04] Benefited.

JVN [00:33:05] From the system as it as it.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:33:06] Completely, yeah.

JVN [00:33:07] So, and I think a lot of people just, myself included, like, I just didn't know. And I would have never been able to connect some of these dots about the way that systemic racism has wev-, woven itself into the history of theatre and performing arts. I was even just reading this thing yesterday that there some, a lot of sayings go back to in history to like the peanut gallery, for instance, like that was like, that has racist connotations, that people just use that so, you know, casually. But-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:33:37] But see, like I knew what the peanut gallery is because my family used to talk about the fact that that's where they had to sit. I mean, that's the thing. I mean, these are things that like we know, we know about. But you know, white people say, well, I didn't know. Well, your privilege has allowed you to not know.

JVN [00:33:54] Right.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:33:55] So that in and of itself, I mean, so it's not saying you are an inherently racist person. It does. It's not even that. And it's, it's just that you have benefited from a society that has been built inherently racist. And so awareness is a wonderful thing right now. And look. In the way that, you know, I, I, I'm not gay, but I've absolutely believe in the rights. And I've always advocated for LGBTQIA people because

they, you know, they, they're human beings. They deserve the exact same rights that all of us, in the same way that people that, a lot of people that marched with Black people during the Civil Rights movement of the 50s, 60s, the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s. I mean, you have to be allies to each other. And there's a lot I didn't know about the discrimination against LGBTQIA people, but I learned about because it's important. So this is a time of awareness. So this is a time of awareness. I had, another reason I think we created Black Theatre United is so many friends, so many white friends texting me and saying, "Are you okay? I'm so sorry. I just didn't know." And, and after awhile, it just got exhausting. And I understand that everybody's reaching out and wanting to do the right thing and well intended.

So it's like, "OK, well, how do we?" How do, I mean, a lot of people, I'm saying, "OK. You need to go do the work yourself. You need to educate yourself on what's going on." And then. Yeah. Open your eyes. Everybody can become more aware and then we can gather together and get some, get some shit done here. But there, it was exhausting because I, there's a part of me that was, it was hard to keep saying to all my friends. Yes. You didn't know because you didn't, you didn't have to know. And there's a privilege in that. You didn't know. And it's a bubble that sort of, you could live in because that's the way this society has been constructed. But it's-.

JVN [00:35:53] Well, for people like, like I always like when it comes to the militarization of the police force and like the brutalization of Black and brown people at the hands of the police. I knew how fucked up that was and been talking about it and like, you know, the that was like the cudgel I that I always use with my dad, well that and then, like HIV, social safety net as it relates to me to be like this is why you need to understand why racism is like present all over the place.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:36:14] Right.

JVN [00:36:14] For me, I never realized that it, like it's in science, it's in theatre. It's, it's literally in every single, it's not like there were some, you know, impenetrable border around the arts or around like sciences or educat-, anything that made it.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:36:29] It's the cornerstones of the country. The country was literally built on it. It was built, literally built. The, the wealth that was accumulated in the south could not have been accumulated without slave labor. It was it's built into to the country. It's literally the foundation of this country. That's what people don't understand.

JVN [00:36:49] I personally think that, like, we won't ever move forward with that, I didn't realize that we were gonna veer into reparations. But fuck it, let's do it. I personally don't

think that, like the country will heal without that. And it's interesting because growing up, hearing the term reparations, like being a small kid in the Midwest, like just growing up in like what I now know is like a super racist, propaganda-filled place. But I didn't, I didn't understand 'cause I just was like born in it. I'm like reparations, that's like, but no. Like that's what happens in a relationship. If a relationship has been fundamentally betrayed on, of trust, you have to, like, come to the table and be like this was never dealt with. There's this, you know, this huge disruption that happened in the relationship. And unless you heal that disruption, you can't grow past it.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:37:31] Right.

JVN [00:37:31] But there's never been any sort of coming to the table to, like, actually heal what is arguably one of the biggest disruptions and like the, and what we know as human history. It's like Ashlee Marie Preston says like there has to be like a willful circumventing of what we know about racial-

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:37:50] Right.

JVN [00:37:50] Injustice in order for things to continue to function as they have.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:37:52] Right. Yeah. And they're-

JVN [00:37:54] Which is super-

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:37:54] Yeah. It's important. There are sup-, and there are interesting, there are interesting models for it. There are ways that, that, there are ways that reparations can look. And there, there are people are saying it'll never happen. But I think, I think there are ways to, to approach it. There's a model in Chicago, our TV show even did an episode about it with a very, very racist, I don't know if he's a police chief or what, who was responsible for so, so much brutality. The victims and the families of the victims were paid and then courses were taught in middle school and I think elementary school about the history of what happened so that that would never happen again. But that's, there's, that's a very specific model already in place. And they can look, you know, reparations, you know, when we talk about, you know, divesting from the police and investing in communities and I mean, there are a lot of ways. That it can happen, and I think just dismissing it, slight of hand, saying there's no way that reparations can-, I think, I think that's, I think that's wrong and I think that's wrong headed. And I think it is going to have to be a part of the conversation going forward. And it's going to have to happen in some way.

JVN [00:39:16] in my standup comedy world, I call that like a hard left when I like start talking about something that I didn't realize that we were going to but that was such a welcome hard left, and I love that. So y'all if you just seems like take a quick break, if you need to get some water, if you need to, like, pull the car over so you can go to the gas station, honey, make sure to put on your mask and we'll be right back with more Audra McDonald after this.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:39:33] Put your mask on.

JVN [00:39:33] Put that fucking mask on. Welcome back to "Getting Curious," this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have Audra McDonald. So I think so, so right now, because, you know, you were talking about the founding or we were talking about the founding of Black Theatre United. And, you know, it's like the house is on fire as far as like the state of the country. But then there's also this racism within the theatre world. And so I guess my question is, is once fingers fucking crossed like we get a vaccine and theatres do open some day who's doing it right? Who, who, who do you think is doing it right?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:40:16] Well, I think that's what a lot of the transparency is about. And that's one of the things I think people are wanting to lay bare is, you know, what, what how is your organization? What, who makes up your organization? Do you, are you truly representative of, you know, this country? How many BIPOC people do you have in your, in your organization? How many are in the hair department or is this a story? I mean, sometimes it can be something, as you know, as, you know, the type of story that's being told on the stage. And what I do know about GenZ is, and what they are and what corporate America is starting to learn in a very specific and in a real time way is that GenZ wants to know where their dollars are going. And they want to, and they, and they are quick. I mean, my 19 year old is, is quick. She's like, Mom, you're not supposed to be shopping this week. This is Blackout. Don't, don't shop this week or this particular, this particular corporation donated this much money to, you know, this very, very racist-.

JVN [00:41:25] 45.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:41:25] Yeah. Exactly. 45 or whatever. This very, very racist man, or this very, very racist pol, politician or such and such and such. So stop. So don't put your money there. GenZ and then GenZ, I mean, I understand there's a whole rabid debate around Cancel Culture, but I do believe that if, like an informed consumer is a powerful consumer, you know, and I think corporations are starting to realize that. And I don't think the theatre wants to be left behind with that. You know? They don't. Because if you, if, you know, people find out that, you know, there's a, you know, a racist such and such or whatever, either in the company or in the way that this story is being told that's not

sensitive or that this theatre company doesn't have any Black people on their staff anywhere or anything like that. GenZ finds out about that and they're going to, they're going to spread the word. I mean, just think about, just think about what those kids were able to do with that Trump rally in Oklahoma. The way that they were able to buy up all those tickets and make that entire stadium empty. Now, whether you agree with their tactics or not, they send a very clear, clear and powerful message. You know, they have reach. They, and that's, and that, that I mean, they they have reach. They have power. They are coordinated. And so and this, you know, I mean, I think even that was started by some, the K-Pop group, right?

JVN [00:42:56] K-Pop, honey.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:42:56] Yes.

JVN [00:42:58] Who knew?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:42:58] So all I'm saying is they are a force to be reckoned with and they are awakening and they are recognizing their power and with the power like Sherrilyn Ifill said, the tools in your hand with the power of social media. They get on social media and say everybody, or even if it's like everybody go and those who can go up and show up and protest this, this show right here because of such and such or such and such and such. The theatre world is going to have to contend with that. So why wouldn't you want? That in and of itself, should be enough of a reason, because if it comes down to the almighty dollar, then great. Why wouldn't you want to make your shows, your institutions, your, the creative staff, the, all of that as, as, as diverse as, as should be. And the stories told that are truly representative and transforming the narrative and all that. Why wouldn't you want to do that?

JVN [00:44:00] Do you see any response to that feedback so far?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:44:02] I do. Yeah, I do. I mean, we, we, it's important to, you know, Sherrilyn Ifill also said, you know, get it in writing, you know, whatever we're trying to do right now. Get it in writing because it's a window that's open right now. And we want to effect major change. Before. I mean, because I'm sure for some people will be easier, just like, oh, can't we all just get along and eventually will, everybody'll calm down or we'll just go back to normal? You can't. And we have to strike, strike while the iron is hot. I do know that there are a lot of people who are interested in making change. Just how much change? That, that remains to be seen. You know, but, and also it's important to make sure that we don't, you know, a lot of times people will just, especially people in power, just like wait out the anger and then wait out until we're, they're over it and we're on to something

else now and we're distracted by this over here, this over here. And then go about as business as usual. And then it's going to take another sort of horrific video or horrific whatever to come down the pike. And then people do something with this moment. Let this moment be a watershed moment. You know?

JVN [00:45:15] Can people stay up with Black Theatre United on like online, on?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:45:20] Yes. Yes. We have a website. It's Black Theatre with an "r-e." T-h-e-a-t-r-e United.com. We have more town halls coming down the pike. There's a lot of stuff we're getting ready to announce that we're doing. And you can join to keep up-to-date as a member, whether you identify as Black within the theatrical community, even if you're just an aspiring artist or you can join as an ally.

JVN [00:45:50] So for me, I will tell you very quickly, when I was like 9, I auditioned for "The Wizard of Oz" and I really wanted to be the Cowardly Lion. And then I think I probably called the local community theatre like 87 times an hour from like the Friday that I auditioned until Monday to see if I like made it or not. No, I'm not pretty sure like, I think I fully harassed them as like an 8 year old. And then, like, I didn't even make the chorus because I, because I called 87 times on the hour for three days. And so I was kind of like very much traumatized from that rejection and then like never, then I was like, I'm just going to be obsessed with like Venus and Serena and Michelle Kwan and the Magnificent Seven, and, gymnastics. But then in my 20s, you know, being my gorgeous LGBTQ self.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:46:38] Yes.

JVN [00:46:38] I was like, I need to learn more about theatre. So I didn't really, like, come into really understanding how amazing theatre was and really getting to learn more about the history of it. And the, it's just all about the beauty that is theatre until I was in my 20s, which is so sad. And so if there's, I think that there's, I think there's probably other people, unfortunately, that are similar to me in that respect. And so for other people that are either just now coming onto it or especially if there, if there's people my age of young folks in their life, young kids, nieces, nephews, whatever, you have a 19 year old, you are a theatre icon. How can people like, how can people get bitten by the theatre bug, especially now that the things are off? Is there, like is there, is there videos of theatre performances?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:47:23] Well, I would introduce them to great movie musicals of the past and of the present. I mean, I would.

JVN [00:47:31] Can you give us the top five? I know I didn't prep you for that.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:47:34] You sure didn't prep me for that. Let me see, a top five.

JVN [00:47:36] They don't have to be in order. Even if they were just, like, to get to go to like the Miss Musical Movie Universe Pageant, like they, were not even doing top ten, they just, they're definitely in the competition.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:47:46] Oh, my gosh.

JVN [00:47:48] I know, for me personally, "Moulin Rouge" will be there 'cause that's first, like what really fucked me up for a musical.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:47:51] Right. That's a modern musical. Yeah, that's another one. That's, that's great. I mean, you know, the thing is, Disney, in a way, has been doing that with these movie musicals that they've been doing all these years. You know, it's for me, it's hard right now because there is, there are racial issues with some of like, you know, even the top movie musicals that I used to love that were, we weren't represented, but they're still amazing movie musicals. I mean, you know, "Cabin in the Sky," I would say. But, you know, who, that's, that's Lena Horne. That's way back. You know, Hamil-. I mean, people, I'm sure kids are watching "Hamilton." You know, and I know there's some controversy around the fact that it's, it can be seen as glorifying, you know, these founding fathers who were slave owners. And, but at the same time, it's a beautifully crafted musical and, and with brilliant performances and, and an incredible choreography, incredible singing, incredible movement, incredible staging that would absolutely make you fall in love with the theatre, I would say, get as many sort of soundtracks of shows that are out there right now. Do we call them soundtracks still? Download. You download them.

JVN [00:49:06] I think so.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:49:07] You know? I mean I know.

JVN [00:49:08] Yeah. Because. Because that's how I, like. I mean, "Les Mis."

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:49:12] Like, "A Chorus Line" was one that was huge for me, "Dreamgirls."

JVN [00:49:18] "Miss Saigon."

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:49:18] Yeah.

JVN [00:49:19] Because I listened to that, that "Bui Doi" song.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:49:21] Yeah.

JVN [00:49:21] That messed me up. My stepdad and I used to scream sing to that, like driving through like the rural streets of America.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:49:26] Right.

JVN [00:49:34] If people could, like when, like when, in a world where there are shows like that people could go see, coupled with just listening to it, because that's maybe all you could do because maybe you can't get the film of it, then what would your top five be? Like your top five like of a mix of like just listen to for now because like there's probably not a recording of it, slash, when things open you've got to go see this one.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:50:45] OK, well "Ragtime," I'm going to say something that I've been in, but I think that was a musical that was very important then and feels in some ways more, more, you know, relevant now. The state of things were in. And I mean and I played a character who literally, a Black woman who is killed by police brutality. You know? And it's dealing with, you know, a country that is in total racial turmoil, which is where we are right now as well. So that but it's also an incredibly crafted, beautiful musical. Oh, my gosh. You were just wrecking me. I mean, I'm a huge Stephen Sondheim fan. So "Sweeney Todd" is another one that I would say get a recording of. Things that you could see once were back up and running. Well, you know, "Hamilton," but you don't have to, you don't have to go to a theatre to see that anymore. Obviously, I know "Dear Evan Hansen" is really speaking to the children. It's so hard for me because right now it's hard to know what's actually going to be around.

JVN [00:50:45] I guess, like, I'm curious about like when you were like-.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:50:47] Oh, those were, that caught me.

JVN [00:50:47] Yeah.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:50:50] Yeah. It was "Dreamgirls." It was "A Chorus Line" that I listened to over and over again. It was "Ain't Misbehavin" that I listened to over and over again. It was "A Star is Born" with, with Judy Garland, that version. That's a movie musical. That blew me away. And that performance and, and her history, that's another the one that killed me and got me over and over again. "Evita" was another one that, you know, just I memorized every single word too and ended up playing that part when I was 16. That's another one that was.

"The Wiz" was another one that I would act out the entire show in my, in my bedroom and I'd use my walk-in closet. I had this little tiny walk in closet and I use that as my backstage area. And I come out and have the record player playing and I do the parts. Then I'd go back into the closet and change into the next thing and then come back out. Yeah, those were the ones that were, I mean, really big for me. Really, really big for me. So that's what hooked me. You know, "Guys and Dolls" is another, I think, great, great, great musical. Once again, there's not necessarily all the representation that we want to see in a lot of these musicals, but it was still a great musical. So, again, it's, it's, it's an odd time for me to be answering these questions because there's a whole other sort of light in which we look at them and you look at your childhood, you say, OK, that moved me and it maybe fall in love with the theatre. But I also realized that there wasn't that much representation except for things like "Dreamgirls" and, you know, or "Ain't Misbehavin" or "The Wiz," things like that.

JVN [00:52:19] wanted to, because we took a few hard rights, I just got to ask you a few more things about performing. Obviously you are, you're prolific theatre actress, but you're also a prolific TV actress. Honey, you're in movies. So one question that I wanted to ask you, how is it different for you, like preparing yourself to perform, like in front of people like as far as onstage versus like when it's cameras in your face? Because I also got to see your gorgeous portrayal of Billie Holiday, honey. Yes, we love to-. It's so good. But so how does that feel different preparing for those roles when there's like a camera in your face because I feel like it's different adrenaline?

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:52:53] Well, it's a different, it's a different muscle that you end up flexing when you actually get to the actual work of doing it. But the prep is all the same. You still got to find out exactly who the character is. You got to learn everything you can about them, you've got to understand every single motivation for every, every moment they have within the story that you're telling. And that requires great preparation. And so all of that is the exact same. The difference is when the camera's right in front of you, you know, as opposed to being in the theatre where you have to, like, make sure that every emotion, every word, all that is, is hitting the back wall because you're trying to fill a space that can be, have as little as 400 people it or can have as many as 5,000 people or even more. And so you've got to be able to fill, you got to be able to take the stage and fill that space. So even the people sitting in the very, very, very, very, very, very back row are still having the same sort of visceral experience as people in the front row who could have a better, you know, are closer to your face. They, you have fuel to get all that emotion back there. The camera is right in front of you.

So there is a saying, I can't remember who's the famous actor who said this, but you have to think very loudly when you're doing camera work. So all the same emotion, the issues, all of that are all still just as big. But it's being thought in a very loud way, but not presented in a big way, because the camera is right there. So that's the difference, that's the main difference. So it's just a different set of muscles that you have to sort of flex. You know, I'm trying to think of, like, a. I don't know, I guess it's like if you were doing something, you know what it's like? It's like you're doing your floor routine. I'm trying to do gymnastics, sort of analogy.

JVN [00:54:39] Yes, give it to me in gymnastics.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:54:39] You're doing a floor routine and then you're doing some of those same tricks on a balance beam. So a balance beam has to be much more specific. And you just got, you like you have to hit your mark here. And if you go too far, like if you hit the wrong mark, you fall off the balance beam or you go out of frame, you know? So it's that sort of specificity that happens on, in film and television where the camera's right in front of you, as opposed to on the floor, where you still doing the same movements and all that, well not allowed a lot of the same movements, but you've got the space. You got to fill it. You got to, you know, I mean, it's a different thing. I mean, I think that's how I would.

JVN [00:55:16] I feel like I just got like a real life lesson about my life, honey. So you've performed all over the world. I mean, you've done like operas, you like you played in like every gorgeous theatre known to humankind. This is another thing I didn't prepare you for accidentally, what was like your favorite one? Like what's like the one that you think about, where you're like, oh my gosh, it can't believe, like, we're just not traveling on planes right now. I just like that, like that performance like that theatre.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:55:40] Oh. Well, you know, I can think of one. I did, I did a performance in Madrid. I was so nervous because I, it was my first time performing in Spain, my first time performing, you know at all there. And I was, and it was just me. It was not like I was playing a part, I, it was just me doing an Audra McDonald concert. I thought, do I have any fans in Spain? Is anybody in and know who I am? Is anybody going to show up at this concert? So I try to learn as much Spanish as I could just to sort of say hello at the beginning, and my concerts are very loosey goosey. I chat. I never know what I'm going to say. I just get out there and I start talking. And then I sing my songs because I want people to know who I am, you know, by the time it's over. So if I'm very scripted and very prepared, it's not me. And that doesn't feel right. And, and that's not what you want for a concert, for me anyway.

So I, I prepared a little bit in Spanish and then at one point I said I got to go into English and I'm so sorry. I just don't know enough Spanish to continue. So I hope you'll forgive me as I start to speak English. This audience was still to date one of the best audiences I've ever had. They were so loving. A lot of them knew all of my songs and were singing along with me, even though a lot of them didn't speak English. The ones that did were like helping to shout out translations for me. And then, like, they packed the stage door afterwards. It took me like an hour and a half to get out of there because they were all, they were like, it was, I've never felt more welcomed and loved. And, and so I was not expecting it at all. I was. And they, and they were musical theatre fans. I was so moved. You know, and I love Spain, anyways, it's such a beautiful, beautiful country. Oh, my gosh. And the food. So when you talking about places that I wish I could go back to right now. Spain is at the top of my list.

JVN [00:57:31] Last two rapid questions. OK, so this first to last question is, has there ever been a time and you don't have to say who because don't want to put you in like any sort of spot, but just because I love you and I think this would be a really validating daydream. Has there ever been a time where you're up for a Tony or a Grammy or an Emmy against someone who was, like, maybe they fucking, like, said something about like just someone who you just did not fucking like. Because we all have those people that we just, you know, for whatever reason like did not fuckin' like them. I mean, I have a couple. I do. I do.

But was there ever a time where, and obviously I have not won. So I would not have had this experience yet. And maybe that's why I'm asking the question. But, and obviously, you've been nominated for so many time, it could be like 47,000 fucking people that were the nightmare. So it's not like you're really selling anyone under the bus. But has there ever been a time where like you won. And they're just, and this is a yes or no question, where you fucking won and someone who you could not stand, like you beat them? Yes or no.

AUDRA MCDONALD [00:58:32] I will put it this way. There was a time when I, when I did start to have some Broadway success that I ran into someone at an event. This someone has now passed away. So it doesn't matter. But there was someone who was very judgmental and not supportive and just downright mean to me in my days at school. And he was there to see this concert of this very amazing, very famous Broadway singer. And I was there too, to see this person perform. And this person had become a very good friend of mine. And at the time when I was at Juilliard, I was not even allowed to sing for her in a master class. Oh, it doesn't matter. It's Barbara Cook. They're both, the people I'm gonna talk about are both dead. Barbara Cook was, you know, and she was. And I was.

And my, my, my husband at the time, I have a new husband now, was playing in her band and, and she and I were wonderful friends and we performed together. And this teacher

who had been so mean to me at school and just so dismissive, you know, like saying things like, well, you know, your jury was crap and I guess all you want to do with it is Broadway anyway. So fine. Just like, just really awful to me. And I ran into him backstage and he was coming to sort of heap praise on Barbara Cook. And I was just like, oh, hello, Mr. Such-and-such. How nice to see you? And he was like, well, things certainly worked out for you, didn't they? Remember, I told you. And I was like, yeah, I remember everything you said to me. And that's the only one.

JVN [01:00:09] Was she right there too?

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:00:11] Oh, yeah. She was there. She doesn't really, she was sort of like, oh, you know, each other? I'm like, oh, yes, I know you.

JVN [01:00:19] Oh, I love that.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:00:19] And in that moment, I was able. I mean, that's like I mean, as far as, you know, being nominated against other people that I don't think about. But that was the one time I was like, yeah, look where I am and look how much you pissed on it, as I was trying to get up there.

JVN [01:00:35] Yes. I just love a fucking Julia Roberts like, "Big mistake" moment. I can't help it. I just like, I love it. I love that.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:00:40] Big mistake. Big mistake.

JVN [01:00:41] Yes. So then my final question is so Black Theatre United is obviously that's a place where we can follow, stay in, stay in touch with.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:00:49] Yes.

JVN [01:00:51] But I think in this time that we've had in quiet and outside of, if you are new, follow Audra McDonald, honey, but is there any other people in, that are in the theatre space, especially when it, like is there in the hair space, in the set space, in the casting space, in the, just is there are other like kind of players in this space where it's like now that people know and there's other change makers or innovators that you've been particularly like, oh, that's cool. Or like I'm learning like for other people that want to see more change and want to be able to, like, keep the promise of the transparency. Like you mentioned that one company that did like the 29 written demands.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:01:28] Oh, that was just an organization. BIPOC organization of people who came together and wrote a letter about, you know, what they felt about white American theatre and then, and then came out with a list of demands just recently. I mean, like I said there, everybody's coming to it in their own way and, and doing what they can to affect change in their own way. And that was a very, very specific list of demands that they came out with. There's also another group, the Broadway Advocacy Coalition, which I've spoken to and they're, they're an organization with young, young people that are spearheading that, that are working to bring about sort of racial change within the community as well. You know, I think. I think the best thing for people to do, you know, that our fans of the Broadway community and want to be like allies is to, and who want to be allies is to literally start to educate yourself. I think that's, that's the best thing. I mean, there are books you can read about it. There are, you know. "So You Want to Talk About Race" or "White Fragility," or there are, there are books out there or just read about some of the history. Even if you wanted to read about the history of Black Theatre and how it came about. You can even do that. I mean, just start to educate yourself and then be informed. Be informed. I think that's, that's the most important thing I could say right now.

JVN [01:02:59] I love that. I guess too, just like as a follow up question, it's like, like, is there like a, like an Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez of like the theatre Twitter community that's, like, "This, this is the private account of the theatre owner who said he'd fucking do it. And he's not." I mean like that. Like is there any like investigative journalist, like it's like for the people that did the research, but now they're like, I want to fuckin' be like, I'll never come to your theatre again if you don't whatever. Like, like, is there anybody like that on Twitter in the theatre community that's real like, and if you don't know right now, that's not a big deal. I can research myself too. I just didn't know if you're like, oh, their Twitter is on fire right now or their Instagram is on fire.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:03:38] Well, there's a lot of peoples, you know, I, you know, I think people who are doing it and lots of different ways. I mean, I, you know, I think Karen Olivo is somebody that's, that's a very, I mean, she even, you know, she. Yeah. That's someone that I think people should follow. I think Adrienne Warren is someone that's very active and aware of everything going on right now. LaChanze is another one that's very active and very aware. There's so many I mean, we all are. I mean, just follow, you know, follow theatre artists of color. Any theatre artists of color that you can find on Twitter, follow. And you know how that, you know, the algorithm will then say you should be following.

JVN [01:04:13] Yes.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:04:13] Everybody. I mean, there are a lot of people and I guess there's Instagram too, of course, a lot of people are speaking up in very powerful ways right now and going about effecting change in their specific way. I mean, you know, Reneé Elise Goldsberry is another one who is very politically active. Look at what Amber Riley is doing and Amb-, sweet, amazing Amber Riley, who was not only, you know, you know, from the television success she's had, but she's a theatre artist as well, and she's brilliant in "Dreamgirls." Hopefully she'll get to bring her "Dreamgirls" over to this side of the Atlantic. But she was brilliant as Effie in Dreamgirls over in London. And she is on fire with what she is doing and how she's trying to shout about change and, and create change and make people aware. There's lots of us out there. Yeah, know us. Yes, is what I would say.

JVN [01:05:06] Audra McDonald. I, I, I'm to the point in the podcast where I, sometimes I call it, Yogi recess. It's like if you go to a yoga class, and like you really wanted to, like, do you're like, you know, like revolve triangle. But they weren't doing twist that day, and you're like, this fucker. I really wanted to do like, like inverse, like twisting things. Is there anything that we, that we, like that you'd like to hit on that we haven't hit on?

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:05:26] No, no, no, no. We did all of that. We did down dog. We did twist. We did all the inversions.

JVN [01:05:34] We got our inversions.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:05:35] Yes, we got our inversions in. And I feel very good about this. Thank you. It's been such a joy talking to you.

JVN [01:05:41] You too. And I just can't wait to continue to follow you and continue to just see everything that you do. So thank you so much for everything that you're doing.

AUDRA MCDONALD [01:05:46] And thank you for what you're doing too, as well. That's wonderful. It really is. That's right. It really is.

JVN [01:05:41] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. My guest this week was record-breaking Tony, Grammy, and Emmy award winner Audra McDonald. She's also the co-founder of Black Theatre United. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend - show them how to subscribe. Follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson, with associate production by Alex Murfey.