

Nambi E. Kelley: Someone in the family found it and shared it, and I remember sitting there in my office and there were names in the document who were listed as property, of names that I had heard through my childhood. I just wept. I closed the door to the office and I just wept and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do with the document, I didn't know what to do with those feelings, I had no clue. I was just flabbergasted to see the names of my ancestors in this document.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: I don't know if I've shared this with y'all, but I am only third-generation post-enslavement on my father's side, only generation three.

Jason Delane Le...: We're Jason and...

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yvonne Lee. Wife.

Jason Delane Le...: Husband, father.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mother.

Jason Delane Le...: Actors.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Producers, and seekers.

Jason Delane Le...: Educators. Explorers of identity.

Yvonne Huff Lee: You're listening to Lagralane Spirits, a delicious podcast, where we invite you into our living room for a family spirit symposium. A real talk meeting of the minds over reverent cocktails.

Jason Delane Le...: Join us, as we dive back in time to examine the legacy of our ancestors that have shaped the stories of our shared cultural history. You can find all of our cocktail recipes and show notes on [lagralanespirits.com](http://lagralanespirits.com), and as always, please enjoy.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Responsibly.

Jason Delane Le...: Whether on our own or with assistance, we must find a way to take action, to preserve our stories and to amplify our voices.

Yvonne Huff Lee: We must be self supporting. History has shown us what happens when we are not. Welcome to Lagralane Spirits, dear listeners.

Jason Delane Le...: Yvonne.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yes, Jason?

Jason Delane Le...: Have I told you how much I love you?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh man. Here we go. What happened?

Jason Delane Le...: Whoa, whoa, whoa. Okay. Can't I tell my wife, I love her?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Depends. What's on your mind, honey?

Jason Delane Le...: A lot. Let me unpack what's on my mind. Okay. This episode is about how we need to take some deliberate action, in order to continue to shift narratives and build equity into our societal foundations. Now, the other day you were talking about the Freedmen's Bureau from 1865.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Ah, right.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Talk about shifting narratives. Right?

Yvonne Huff Lee: For you listeners, yes, I actually was just talking about the Freedmen's Bureau, because sometimes our weekly company meetings turned into a banter of cultural trivia. Just quickly, a shout out to GirlTrek, who took me on a walk and took me down this path and I love them for that.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: For everyone who wasn't there, when I was listening to GirlTrek and not in our company meetings and for those that don't know, the Freedmen's Bureau was responsible for helping post civil war refugees. Largely they helped black folk get back abandoned and confiscated property, reunite with family, legalize marriage that happened during slavery and help soldiers get pensions and back pay, to help the formerly enslaved become self-sufficient. The bureau was in action for three years. The entire movement was about taking action.

Jason Delane Le...: The bureau also helped with the establishment of schools in the south. People staying behind and make change. They didn't choose a freedom that others were embarking upon, because these fore thinkers had to change the narrative. I'm imagining this fierce collective of teachers staying behind, to not only make sure that black kids still had access to education, but also almost more importantly, to help change the narrative of what these kids had been told about themselves.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: To be told and taught that they were worthy.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: That they were capable of something different or something other, you know? I think about how those sparks of action ignited those kids, even if just one of them, to do the same for someone else down the road. Whether directly or not, I am related to that moment. Yvonne, you are related to that moment. Isn't it like tracing a family tree to our personal history? We both hold some black blood and identify as black.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: Along with the other identities we hold and I hope we are continuing what was happening in those classrooms. Do you hear what I'm saying?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah. Yeah. I think I do, Jason. It's like, we've been given this opportunity to take up the unfinished business of the Freedmen's Bureau. Right.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: To take up the business of any prosperous town, of any future forward thinker who was extinguished too quickly. We all know that we can come up with what those names are and who those people are. Right now, that's what our job is, to carry on the work that always ends too quickly.

Jason Delane Le...: Just to piggyback to that thought, Yvonne, isn't that every generation's responsibility? From the reconstruction era to now, it's every generation seems to get to a point where the realization comes in. It's our turn to pick up a narrative and run with it, one way or the other, whether we agree with how it's being picked up or not, whether we are reactive or proactive to the situation. That just seems to be what this moment is that we're in.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah. Yeah. It's like, if we don't take action now with the resources that we have, we're not letting down those that came before us, but those that are coming after us, like thinking in terms of what I've learned from the indigenous community, in the sense that they think about seven generations after them.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: In a sense, we are the Freedmen's Bureau of today or an artsy activist branch of it, I suppose so, you know.

Jason Delane Le...: Sometimes when I hear you spitting wisdom like that, I wonder how I got so lucky. Oh.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh, we're lucky biscuits and gravy, babe, but okay. Can I just say, it is such a reflective moment for me in this moment. Here we are recording this podcast about how to change narratives and in the grand history of things, we are a small blip in the world, even in this moment right here. Yet, it is so gratifying to know that we still hold some power, because we are working to make a change in what may seem small ways and that small drop of change from everybody, okay, me, you, the people who are listening, can make a tidal wave. It feels really good.

Jason Delane Le...: Really microcosmic at the same time. Right? I mean, it helps me to understand my place in taking action rather than just looking at how big and insurmountable and impossible the odds are stacked against us. Right? Why would we say anything or create advance and narrative of unity and equity and inclusion and diversity in a society that doesn't want it, or that would be a bit defeatist? Right?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: But now this being our second to last episode of the season, I hope our listeners are also inspired to go out, make that film, write that pilot script, produce that

project. Tell their story that is going to come from their own voice. Whew. Yes, yes, yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I think we forgot something.

Jason Delane Le...: Oh, I got so deep in my history feelings. I almost forgot one of the major reasons we're here.

Yvonne Huff Lee: The cocktail.

Jason Delane Le...: The cocktail.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Did our listeners really just get through all of that without a drink? I'm impressed. Okay. What are we having tonight, Jason?

Jason Delane Le...: For tonight's drink, I thought that I would create a new drink, actually built up on the specs of existing drinks, but I wanted to rename a drink for our purposes tonight. The cocktail that we're drinking tonight is called The Bureau '68. Our discussions of the Freedmen's Bureau, which if you don't know, the original name of the department that was created was the Bureau of Refugees, freed men and abandoned lands. That bureau was in existence primarily from 1865 to 1868.

Jason Delane Le...: It went on until about '72 in different iterations, but so the cocktail we're drinking is inspired by the history of the Freedman's Bureau. We are calling it The Bureau '68. The specs are, I've poured two and a half ounces of Hine Cognac, three quarters ounce of Ramazzotti Amaro, a half ounce of a combination of citrus of lime/lemon juice, quarter ounce of simple syrup and then if you know me at all, if you've been listening to our podcast, you know how much I appreciate and adore bitters. We have some dashes of Angostura and we also have some dashes and when I say some, you can go as many as you want, basically. I don't say like one dash, I say like, "Go get dashes." For our purposes tonight for a garnish, we are using two black berries and you shake that up.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Black, black blackberries.

Jason Delane Le...: Black, blackety, black, and you shake that up and pour. Yes. So, cheers.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Well, cheers. It's delicious. It is delicious and refreshing. It has a seriousness to it, but a lightness to it, because of the acid.

Jason Delane Le...: It's gold in coloration.

Yvonne Huff Lee: It's lovely.

Jason Delane Le...: Thank you. It's my first original recipe built upon the specs of others, but through my lens of access, I have brought together these ingredients for us to sip upon.

Yvonne Huff Lee: You know what I like about the name of it too, is when you say Bureau '68. There might be people who think like '68 as in, you know-

Jason Delane Le...: Summer love?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Summer of love, yeah, all that, but there's, it's the '60, 1868 and 1968.

Jason Delane Le...: 1868.

Yvonne Huff Lee: There were these similar things that were happening about taking action.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: But then you understand that it's The Freedmen's Bureau and then it, all of a sudden takes us even further back into history about where we've come from.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: All the excellence that was happening and post reconstruction. It's all the intelligence and the talent and the leadership and the love and the joy that was left out of history books.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Yvonne Huff Lee: When you taste it, it has the combination of like the remembrance of all of these accomplishments, but also, when you talk about bitters, right, the bitter sweetness of success cut short.

Jason Delane Le...: From a historical lens, I'm just fascinated by those that rise up against something that's in front of them and confront it.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: Whether they succeed or not is up for historians to write about. But the urge in peoples to confront what is up in front of them, it has been going on for centuries.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah. One of the things that we're trying to do, is to use our own personal story, to help you on your own personal journey.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: I love hearing other people's personal stories, because it's always quite inspiring. But in our work with Lagralane, we've been dipping our toes into telling our own stories and developing our own stories. Currently we have a short called Lifeline, that's been hitting the festival circuit that Jason, you know my husband, Jason.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: You wrote it and directed it about your own personal story and it's been beautiful.

Jason Delane Le...: Very fun.

Yvonne Huff Lee: We want eventually, we want that to make its debut is a feature and have a larger platform. Then even personally me taking my own steps.

Jason Delane Le...: Yep. Speak it.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Y'all have strong knuckled me into directing my first short by the end of the year.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I'd say, honestly, it didn't take much convincing, but it did because it is a little scary to be able to do things like that. If you have some fear and anxiety it's okay, because I'm failing it too. We all got it.

Jason Delane Le...: Girl, girl. You've got this.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Thank you.

Jason Delane Le...: You got this.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Thank you very much. What are other examples of how we're trying to take action? We're also working with our dear friend Nambi E. Kelley on a book adaptation.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Of *Infants of the Spring*, which is a book that Jason read and from the beginning inception of our company. He was like, "This is amazing. Visually, this is stunning. I want us to talk about Harlem in this way," the Harlem Renaissance. If you don't know the book, *The Freedmen's Bureau* is going to come for you in your sleep.

Jason Delane Le...: No, educate you.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Totally kidding. I'm just kidding. Everyone should have at least heard of this book. It's Wallace Thurman's best known work and it's a satirical and scathing look at the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. It's all about black people creating the space for us to be able to comment on ourselves, rather than somebody else doing it. That's about all I can say about that project, except that you know, it's a damn good script.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes. *Infants* is actually the first project to kick off our Lagralane initiative, the original project wing of our film company. Yvonne, like you said, I brought *Infants of the Spring* as a book that I read 30 years ago when I was in college. That's how *Infants* came to us and then Nambi E. Kelley was the perfect writer, right Yvonne, to come on in and help us adapt this book. She lives in Harlem, born nearby where the manner was that Wallace Thurman himself talks about within the book.

Jason Delane Le...: Her aunt wrote a stage play version of *Infants of the Spring* that premiered in Chicago in the early '90s. Michael Shannon was one of the stars of that play at timeline.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Right.

Jason Delane Le...: We didn't know that coming in and it, I mean just the serendipitous connections that have been circling around Nambi's adaptation for us, it's been astonishing.

Yvonne Huff Lee: It just was like, "Wow, you're the right person."

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Nambi, are you there?

Nambi E. Kelley: Hey, beauty.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Hello. We are so happy to have you here. We're here, we made it to this day.

Jason Delane Le...: Nambi Kelley. Nambi Evelyn Kelley. How are you sister?

Nambi E. Kelley: Oh, so happy to be with y'all today. This is lovely.

Jason Delane Le...: It's great to be with you too. Thank you for taking the time to come talk to us.

Nambi E. Kelley: Yeah. When do we drink?

Jason Delane Le...: Well, that's right now.

Yvonne Huff Lee: You can drink at any moment, if you'd like to a little sippy sip.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes, ma'am. I'm mean right about now.

Nambi E. Kelley: Today is my class reunion and I'm not there.

Jason Delane Le...: Aw.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh.

Nambi E. Kelley: Here we go.

Jason Delane Le...: Well, to your class reunion, cheers my friend.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Chinky, chinky.

Nambi E. Kelley: Cheers. Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center class of 19 [inaudible 00:15:45].

Jason Delane Le...: Right on, right on.

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: Okay, everybody.

Jason Delane Le...: All you got to say is 19. We're with you. I'm right there with you. Just say it's all in the 19.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I know. Once you say 19, it's already over.

Jason Delane Le...: It's okay.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Okay, everybody, I just wanted to let everybody who's listening hear a little bit about this wonderful woman that we're about to speak to. Miss Nambi E. Kelley is an award winning actress, playwright. She is currently a television co-producer on Peacock's Bel-Air. Her stage adaptation of Richard Wright's Native Son has been seen across the country and premiered off Broadway to multiple drama league award nominations and winning best play at the Adelco Awards. Nambi was also chosen by Toni Morrison herself to adapt her novel Jazz, Former playwright and residence at The National Black Theater, the Goodman Theater and the dramatist Guild fellow and recipient of the 2020 NNPN annual commission.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Nambi is also, my goodness, this is so lovely, Nambi is also a prince prize winner, developing a play on the life of Stokley Carmichael for court theater in Chicago to premiere in the '23/'24 season. Her first production company, First Woman, is currently producing a digital and national tour of Nambi's young audiences play, Jabari Dreams of Freedom. She is in development with several other TV projects and you can find this lady, you can see it also, be in the show notes [nabikelley.com](http://nabikelley.com), [jabari-dreams-of-freedom.com](http://jabari-dreams-of-freedom.com) and [firstwomaninc.com](http://firstwomaninc.com). Oh my goodness, Nambi.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: It is so beautiful to see how gorgeous your career, just to say all that makes me feel good.

Jason Delane Le...: That's right and Nambi, Nambi, it's amazing, it's so good to have you on our podcast. We go way back. We go back into those 19 something, something, something, something, something something, somethings.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Back to the back, back.

Jason Delane Le...: Yvonne, Nambi and I all came up in the Chicago theater scene and Nambi and I had the opportunity to work on, it was my Goodman debut. Well, it was our debut. Gina Taylor's John and Crow, back in the day. It's just great to see how your career is flourishing, both onstage and with pen in hand. For our listeners, when Yvonne and I first started dating in Chicago, we had a new year's Eve party.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh my God. You going to tell people that story?

Jason Delane Le...: I'm going to tell people that story, I'm going to tell people that story. It was not, I'll even date it, ladies. I know better than date y'all, but I will date it. That what



happened was 1998. We were having a New Year's Eve party to go into '99 and nobody showed up. We had the food spread, we had the drinks out, nobody showed up. Even my brother, even my roommate, did nobody showed up, except for you Nambi.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Except for Nambi.

Jason Delane Le...: You walked in, hung out with us for a little bit. Then you were like, "All right, I got to go y'all."

Yvonne Huff Lee: I had to be somewhere at midnight.

Jason Delane Le...: I got to be somewhere now. Y'all have fun, now. Yeah. Rich history of friendship, of theater, of supporting each other in the journeys that we've all been on. We are thrilled to have you on our podcast.

Nambi E. Kelley: Oh, I'm so happy to be here.

Jason Delane Le...: Dig, dig. Today we've been talking about the Freedmen's Bureau, how that moment was about changing the narrative around access, making sure or at least making an effort to get folks a chance to sustain themselves. We're equating this with art and theater and filmmaking, making sure we are taking action to contribute to our own narrative. It's what we're doing in the theater art space with our Lower Depth in the film space with our Lagralane.

Jason Delane Le...: You're doing it through all of the vehicles that you're creating. The projects that you're working on. You have a style and a voice that seems to have always been about reclaiming history or at least keeping history alive with new perspectives. What do you think about both being an actress and a writer, how you seek out opportunities for yourself, but also put the ladder back down and provide opportunities for others to shine?

Nambi E. Kelley: I think it certainly has changed over the decades that we have been working as artists. I think that obviously now there's much more access. I often think about what if Lagralane and Lower Depths existed 25 years ago? How things would be different or not.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: But I think in terms of myself, the way I think about art is I really just follow my soul. I know that sounds so like Pollyanna, but I really do mean that. In terms of access, for myself as an artist, I always trust that what is meant for me is going to come to me. Even if something comes to me and it goes away, then that means it wasn't mine. I've been very lucky/blessed. Things come to me and they grow me.

Nambi E. Kelley: I look at things in that way. This project is coming to me, my agent call me about this gig because there's something I'm supposed to learn and they're supposed something I'm supposed to give. My challenge in those spaces is what I'm supposed to learn, being open to learning and then being present to giving as

much as I possibly can. How that turns into now that I'm producing more, my intentionality is always to create space for people to stretch and get your feet wet. I know this is not, maybe not your dream, but while you're in my presence, I want you to be the best that you can possibly be and then fly and do the thing that you want to do, if this is not it. That's how I approach with particularly, I'm thinking about the national tour that I just produced. It was very difficult, that was hard. I was doing it by myself. I've never done it before in my life. It's a national tour.

Jason Delane Le...: This is Jabari.

Nambi E. Kelley: Premiering in New York. This is Jabari Dreams of Freedom.

Jason Delane Le...: That's right. That's right.

Nambi E. Kelley: Premiering in New York at the New Victory on 42nd and Broadway.

Jason Delane Le...: Come on now.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Wow.

Nambi E. Kelley: I was like, "Okay, I got to do this by my [inaudible 00:22:35]? Okay. I need a team."

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: But assembling a team through the pandemic when you're self-funding.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: It just, it kicked my butt. Then I got sick, as y'all know, and I had to hire a line producer to step in for me. But I was, I'm paying people salaries, like what? Who am I?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh, wow. Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: How many people, there're 20 people on my payroll, how did that have happened? But I think ultimately, right, like ultimately it was super rewarding because these are people who maybe wouldn't have gotten this opportunity. There's a young lady in our company named Colette Ambo, who's a very talented and wonderful human being and just such a team person. She's from an island somewhere. I can't remember where, but she never, she didn't know anything about black history in the states, let alone American history, let alone, oh, now I'm going to Iowa, now I'm going to Florida. To be able to see these places and to be able to give her that opportunity was wonderful.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: It was wonderfully rewarding to watch her grow into that part and just her own it. By the end of the run, she was single handedly getting standing ovations. It was just like, you know.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Wow.

Nambi E. Kelley: But that was great. To give people the opportunity, because I don't know if the two of you have toured, but I've toured. There's something about being on the road with a group of people and doing art that is just, it's magnificent. To be able to be a conduit for that in a work that mattered. Jabari Dreams of freedom is a play that was commissioned by Chicago Children's Theater was produced in Chicago in 2015. That unfortunately there's a huge need for it, because stuff is so messed up with black folks, you know?

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: I think about the children a lot. How are the children processing the pandemic? How are the children processing the death of George Floyd and y'all have kids. Right?

Jason Delane Le...: Yep.

Nambi E. Kelley: You're up in the trenches with this.

Jason Delane Le...: Yep.

Nambi E. Kelley: I'm peripheral, but still, it consumes me.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: I have a niece, I have a nephew and they're a little bit older, but it's still... How are you processing this? How are they processing this? How are they going to move forward from this moment and not be sick? Right?

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: That's something that really drives me.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah. Like you said, we have kids. Grace, we're having conversations with our oldest who is a new teenager now. She a new teenager now. Just turned teen.

Nambi E. Kelley: June 6th. She and my niece have the same birthday.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes. She's bugging out on everything. Right? I'm trying to talk to her about Uvalde and what went down in Texas and she's like, "No, no," I can't even form the words around in her mouth. The 2020s are insane. I mean, American history has a lot of insane moments. These past couple of years are in there. I applaud you for using your art to bring awareness to your audiences.

Nambi E. Kelley: I applaud you, because y'all doing the real work. You know? What I mean by being a parent at this moment in history for black children, I can't imagine what the burden, the crown is that the two of you carry walking through the world with that responsibility. It's huge. It's huge. It's the biggest and most important job in the world, in my opinion. I applaud both of you for not only parenting, but also creating opportunities for other people because that's parenting as well.

Right? The way you've shepherded these two companies, it's in the way you've created opportunities for people to shine and fly. It's beautiful and it's generous and it's going to change lives. It is changing lives. I don't know how you do it. I don't know how you do it.

- Yvonne Huff Lee: The big part of it is, making sure that they have to be able to process what's happening in the world, but maintaining self-identity, maintaining self-love, maintaining a sense of how do you actualize kindness towards other people? What are the actions you take in order to be kind to people and know that energy that you put out in the world, it comes back. We can be scared, then we have to be courageous and then...
- Nambi E. Kelley: Oh, go ahead ma. Yes.
- Jason Delane Le...: That's where art comes in. Right?
- Nambi E. Kelley: Absolutely.
- Yvonne Huff Lee: I feel like I need 12 million breaths.
- Jason Delane Le...: I feel like I need a cocktail. With this, and this is a proper segue, Nambi, are you ready for your cocktail confession?
- Nambi E. Kelley: Oh goodness. Okay. Yes, I did it. Okay.
- Jason Delane Le...: Here's question for you. Here's a question. I'm going to take a quick drink, quick drink.
- Nambi E. Kelley: Yeah. Sips. Sips. Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Jason Delane Le...: Sometimes we're going to talk about some serious things that might make you want to pour something into a glass. Here's our question. How do you personally take action to shift the narrative and what advice would you give to folks coming up behind us and even those already in the room, to take action to shift the narrative?
- Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Nambi E. Kelley: Oh. Oh wow. How do I take action to shift the narrative? It's connected to my parents and the loss of them and the understanding that time is limited and precious and you only get so far to run with the baton and your job is to pass it back once you get to the end of the race. Right? That's the thing that drives me is thinking about the people who went before and how hard they worked for us to have the freedom and the luxury in the middle of the day to have a cocktail.
- Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative), that's right.
- Nambi E. Kelley: That's the thing that gets me out of bed. I'm a person who prays, so every morning I pray and I thank God, spirit, universe for everything that is able to move through me in the time that I've been gifted to be here. Because what else

us going to do? Right. But be grateful and keep rolling, keep running, keep passing the baton.

Nambi E. Kelley: As far as people that are coming behind me, I highly encourage, I know what works for me. What works for me is to have a spiritual life. What works for me is to have my mornings at the park, across the street with nature. We're across from Morningside Park and there's a beautiful pond over there. I literally between a four and 6:00 PM when I get a break from the writer's room, I'll walk over there and I'll just sit and I'll watch the ducks.

Nambi E. Kelley: Two days ago there was this gorgeous family of ducks. Just there was a daddy and a mommy and the babies and they were just doing their thing, swimming. It was so beautiful, to fill your spirit with those moments, because that's the armor. When you talk about the world and how little our society seems to care for children and the things that impact them, like to be able to fill your spirit, your heart, your mind, your soul, with the things that are beautiful in life and the people that you love and being present to conversations and looking people in the eye and meeting heart to heart and telling the truth. I really think that for me, those are the things that matter. Those are the things that get me jobs. When I meet people with their humanity, not with, "Oh, what you going do for me?"

Jason Delane Le...: Right. Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: Like a soul to soul, we're on a journey together and what are we going to give each other as human beings, so that I can give this to my child, or this to my cat, or this to my man, or this.... The art to me is living right? It's the art of living. If you're the master artist, if you understand that you're the master artist and I don't mean to have colonizing language using the term master, because I know some people are like, "Well master [inaudible 00:30:31]."

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-mm (negative).

Nambi E. Kelley: What I mean is.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I got, I you got you.

Nambi E. Kelley: If you are in charge, you in charge of your life...

Yvonne Huff Lee: Boss Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: Boss. You create your life. You're the artist. Fearlessly fill yourself with love, with joy, with laughter, with this is Tuesday pool side barbecue.

Jason Delane Le...: That's right. That's right. That's right.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Our last meeting Tuesday.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: Yeah. Because it's like, what else are you going to do?

Jason Delane Le...: There seems to, for me, there needs to be an understanding of the times that were once lived, that allow us to live the times that we are living now, in order to create the world that we want our children and our children's children and our children's children's children to live in the future. It's not all "Burn it all down to the ground." What do y'all think about that?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Hmm. Well, there are some things I'd like to burn down to the ground, that I don't think I'm going to mention on this particular. I think there has to be a deep respect for history, because if it's not spoken about, then that means it's not dealt with. That means it will, if it's history that's not dealt with, then it can repeat itself in a way and continue a cycle.

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: I think that you can burn something down if you actually understand everything about it.

Nambi E. Kelley: Speak that.

Yvonne Huff Lee: But to burn something down without understanding the history of how far back it goes, who it's affected, those kinds of things, you're not really getting rid of it.

Jason Delane Le...: Nambi E.Kelley, you have worked with us at Lagralane on a awesome, exciting, wonderful adaptation of Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, the Harlem Renaissance novel. There's so, so much goodness in your adaptation, there's a speech in it that I want to read real quick. "What does it matter what any of you do, so long as you remain true to yourself? Why not let each young hopeful choose his own path? One cannot make movements, nor can one plot their course. When the work of a given number of individuals during a given period is looked at in retrospect, then one can identify a movement and evaluate its distinguishing characteristics. Individuality is what we should strive for. Let each seek his own salvation. History will do the rest. To me, anything else is unintelligent." What do y'all think about that?

Yvonne Huff Lee: That whole passage makes me think of that's the freedom that we're all searching for. That it really is about our own individuality and being able to strive for it, in the same way any person regardless of color should be able to do.

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: When I hear it in the way that you read it so beautifully, husband, I think there's a part of the goal where that privilege is actually not afforded to everybody, but that's what we want. That's what I want. That's why using story to change the narrative, so that everybody can have that freedom of being your own individual. If you do that, history will begin to shift and bend towards your way. There will be things in life that will not allow you, that will lump you, based on the way that you look, based on what they believe about your history. Yeah. That's what that really makes me think of.

Nambi E. Kelley: The way to shift the narrative, is to be your most authentic self and the most authentic self, thereby engages in the community and creates change for others. Right? It's the hero comes home with the elixir and gives it to the people and the people are changed. You have to go on the journey and be true to who you are and that's how you change. For me, that's going to the park in the middle of the day and sitting with ducks.

Jason Delane Le...: I dig it. Right. Right on. Yes.

Nambi E. Kelley: That's my individual bliss, joy, freedom, as my dad would say, "Bliss, freedom." But yeah, because us as black folks, we don't get to be individuals. There's always this, at least historically, this pressure of are you going to serve yourself or are you going to serve the people?

Jason Delane Le...: Right. Right, right.

Nambi E. Kelley: You know?

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah.

Jason Delane Le...: Right. Right.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah.

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: It's like, you serve the people by serving yourself.

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: You know? That's how I think about it.

Jason Delane Le...: I love that be true to yourself.

Nambi E. Kelley: Because there's no difference. Exactly. There's no separation between me and you and us as one. If I'm loving me, I'm loving you. That's how I think about it. It's not either orris. Yes, and.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I think what I love to, I'm just looking at your body of work again, that we talked about earlier, I mean, all of these people in history that have affected us in such great ways with their novels, Native Son, Tony Morrison with his politics. Stokely Carmichael, and then understand that Jabari Dreams of Freedom was actually, it was inspired by your nephew. Right?

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: I feel like all of those, I don't know if you could talk a little bit about what are the steps that you take in order to help switch the narrative? I feel like each of those have like very distinct ways. You're like, "Okay, this is how I'm going to change

the narrative with this story. This is how I'm going to do with that story." Could you speak to a little bit about each of those projects? Because I think people can get a sense and an idea of like, if you were an artist, if you are not an artist, these are the ways that you can create change and change the narrative.

Nambi E. Kelley: Sure. I think for me, they were projects that someone came to me and said, "Hey, Nambi, what do you think about X, Y, Z?" I think that's part of what I was speaking about earlier, about finding out when something comes to me, what am I supposed to learn? What am I supposed to give? Because my dad was a historian in and a documentarian, I'm always drawn to stuff that is historical, as opposed to hysterical. But forgive me, I couldn't help it. I heard it in my head. I had to say it.

Jason Delane Le...: No, I love it. I love it. That works. It works for me. I'm a hysterical historian myself.

Nambi E. Kelley: Because I believe that, yeah, this is going to sound wild, but I believe that ancestors they're like, "Okay, this needs to get out and who's going to be my conduit for this?" I'm open. Right? I believe in history. I believe in going back to go forward. Right? With Native Son, it was super important to me. That piece was written in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder/acquittal of what's his face, whose name I will not speak, but that changed the trajectory of that work, because I was alive and open. Richard Wright would come to me in dreams and he'd just sit there, which he wouldn't say anything. What that said to me was, "All right, you're on the right path, because if you weren't, he wouldn't be here." Right?

Nambi E. Kelley: But really in terms of agency was like, I could do an old stodgy adapt of this thing and you can walk away and be like, "That was so beautiful." Beautiful, right? Or I can put you inside this young black boy's mind, which whether or not you agree with his choices, you going to understand it. You're going to understand the thing that made him. In that space, in terms of alignment, in terms of baton passing, Richard Wright's intentionality was, "I'm going to show you the monster that you've created. My point of view is that Bigger Thomas was not a monster, he was a brilliant young man who didn't have agency. I'm going to put you inside his mind, so you can see how brilliant he was/is because he lives forever.

Nambi E. Kelley: Because he's a character, so that you have to engage with the forces that didn't allow him to fly. Literally, did not allow him to be as brilliant as he was, to be able to calculate all of these steps he took to save his life. I think that's important. It's important that we particularly get inside black people, because we're so used to just watching us from this other gaze that is not authentic to who we are.

Jason Delane Le...: What you did in that was awesome to show everything you just spoke to. We're human. Everyone is much more complex than we are oftentimes given credit for. Now, some people ain't that complex. Some people ain't that deep, but some people are and...

Nambi E. Kelley: Some people are out of wine.



Jason Delane Le...: Some people need another pour of some wine, but if you are, and like you said, he's a character and Bigger Thomas is that complex, and you crack that open beautifully. Thank you for that exploration as a black man in *Native Son*, because that showed a complexity that we don't get to see that often.

Nambi E. Kelley: Well, thank you for that. I appreciate that. That piece is really close to my heart, is a novel that I loved since I was a child, because I knew the street names. I was like, "Oh, Cottage Grove."

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: That's down the street. I love seeing the way it continues to morph into storytelling, like the way *The Wizard of Oz* is like the backbone of so many stories, but people don't speak about it.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: *Native Son* is also on that level. I'll see it, I'll be like, "Oh yeah, that's *Native Son*." You know?

Jason Delane Le...: Yes, yes.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Wow.

Nambi E. Kelley: But like Richard Wright was a question on jeopardy and nobody got it. I was furious.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Oh.

Nambi E. Kelley: I was like, what you mean, you don't know Richard Wright? I was like, who's Richard Wright? None of them knew it. There's another play that I'm working on, that I want to talk to y'all about actually, because it's a National New Play Network commission.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: But this play, I don't know if I told y'all this, that my family found the will of the person who owned our people, "owned". Owned our family and I wrote a play about it.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yes. You mentioned that once.

Nambi E. Kelley: Yeah. We just did it in New York at the WP in a Pipeline festival. We only did an excerpt of it. It's a one woman show. Karen Aldridge did it. People left to their feet.

Jason Delane Le...: Love Karen.

Nambi E. Kelley: She had script in hand and people were like, "Oh my God," like the material, her performance. But that particular play, because it's very personal, is definitely like the activism part of this conversation. My activism is telling the truth. Right?

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: It's telling the truth about the impact of this particular document on generations of black folks, myself included. This play spans time. It crosses the eve of the emancipation of Barack Obama. It crosses the eve of emancipation. It crosses the eve of Dr. King's assassination and it shows regular folks who are all connected through that document.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: In how those moments in time and how they were navigating it and it's a poem. The whole play is a poem and it's really like, how do you impact change? I think, I mean, and this is not new that's how you do it.

Jason Delane Le...: That's how you do it.

Nambi E. Kelley: You just tell the truth.

Jason Delane Le...: Tell the... That's how you do it. That's how you do it. What we did-

Nambi E. Kelley: You live your authentic truth.

Jason Delane Le...: You know this whole podcast idea was built around ancestry and exploration of the past and truth and storytelling. This is another art form that you can use to express yourself.

Yvonne Huff Lee: When we answer that big question that it's just about telling your truth and it does take those moments of watching the ducks go across the pond. It does take reflection, so that you can understand what that truth is. Then, it's interesting, when you found those papers and the truth. Maybe the world wind is happening and then those papers are thrust in front of you. How did you feel? Because I imagine people get the truth set out in front of them and then they get overwhelmed and then they don't know what to do. Then, they don't know how to take action. Right? How did you feel when you got those papers and then knew what to do?

Nambi E. Kelley: Well, it was 2019. I was in LA in a writer's room and I was in my office and I was sitting and I was... Our family has a group, Facebook chat, like cousins I've never met. My grandfather texts 13 brothers and sisters. My family is huge. Right? Someone in the family found it and shared it.

Nambi E. Kelley: I remember sitting there in my office and there were names in the document who were listed as property, of names that I had heard through my childhood. I just wept. I closed the door to the office and I just wept and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do with the document. I didn't know what to do

with those feelings. I had no clue. I was just flabbergasted to see the names of my ancestors in this document.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm.

Nambi E. Kelley: I don't know if I've shared this with y'all, but I am only third generation post enslavement on my father's side. Only generation three. My father was the second. My grandfather was the first. Now my grandfather was on the young end. My grandfather was on the young end, the baby end of his siblings.

Jason Delane Le...: Right, right.

Nambi E. Kelley: You know, he wasn't the baby. That's why the math computes.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: My grandfather was born at 1892. John Quincy, Adams Kelley. He was born in 1892.

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: JQA, grand man, we used to call him. It's not that far removed from us. When you think about agency, even within the context of my family, like the way my grandfather dealt with that legacy, he got two degrees. Right? He's like, "You're not keeping me down." He got two degrees. My grandfather ran for public office as a Republican, because blacks were Republicans back then.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Right.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: That's how long ago this was.

Jason Delane Le...: That's right. That's right.

Nambi E. Kelley: My father, the way he dealt with it was he got his PhD at 29, from Columbia, which is why I was born in New York up the street. The way I deal with it, is I have that document in my hand and I didn't initially in that moment, think this is going to become a piece of art, because I was just so flabbergasted that it existed. But because I'm open to everything that comes to me, like Tiffany Trent, back in the day.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Tiffany.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative). She is.

Nambi E. Kelley: Wonderful director dramatur, in Chicago.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Nambi E. Kelley: She used to say to me, she used to say-

Jason Delane Le...: Love her.

Nambi E. Kelley: "Nambiance." She used to call me Nambiance, she said, "Nambiance, you're a sponge. Just like everything that happens to you ends up in your plays." I'm in this relationship with this Daniel Carlton. Wonderful, brilliant, amazing artist. He'll come see my plays. He says to me, he's like, "You don't waste nothing. Do you?" It's like, it's not conscious. It's not conscious. It just rolls out of me.

Nambi E. Kelley: I literally got this commission to take it full circle. I got the commission and I kind of had this idea, "Oh, it's going to take place in three different time periods. It's connected by a family heirloom." I was shocked when I figured out that the heirloom was the document. I had been thinking the doc, the heirloom was like, "Oh, it's a ring. It's a necklace. It's a book."

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: No boo. It's this thing right here.

Jason Delane Le...: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: It's this document with your ancestors' names on it and how do you transcend that? I was like, "Well, it's in the play." The play is this woman is having dreams. She's dreaming about ancestors that she's never met and she doesn't know she's related to them and then she finds their name in a document and she finds out, "Oh my God, they've been talking to me this whole time." That's the play.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Wow. Okay.

Nambi E. Kelley: I put it in the play word for word and this wonderful director named Michelle Ross, wonderful person. She's worked with Jeremy O. Harris on directing some of his stuff. She was like, "Well, I feel like in this world where you've brought all these ancestors, but we've got all of these, this beautiful, sacred voices in this, why is the slave master's name? Words? What?" She did it with such grace that, pun intended, that was for y'all.

Nambi E. Kelley: Such grace, that I was like, "You know what? She's right. Why would I give this voice? Why would I give this voice in 2022?" I cut it, I cut the document. But she talks about it. She finds it. She reads it, but the audiences never have to, never has to endure hearing the ridiculousness that is in this document and that's right.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Wow.

Nambi E. Kelley: That's the next generation taking the baton and taking away the agency of that doc.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Burn it down. Burn it down.

Nambi E. Kelley: If she hadn't said it, I might not have gotten it. Burn it down. Right.

Jason Delane Le...: Yeah.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: That's the shit you burn down.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes. Yes.

Nambi E. Kelley: The play has this whole metaphor of water and so you think about fire, water, it's all about water and about how we've always been connected through water since the beginning and end of time.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: She holds this woman can't cry. She finds the document in the play. I'm going to give it away.

Jason Delane Le...: Now.

Nambi E. Kelley: She finds the document in the play. She holds it in her hands and the tears melt the document, because her tears are laced with the healing from her ancestors. That's why, that's what makes it disintegrate. Not fire, not violence, release and authenticity.

Jason Delane Le...: Truth.

Nambi E. Kelley: Is what is, and truth is what gets rid of that document. The document in the play melts. I don't know how some directors going to figure that out, but it melts

Jason Delane Le...: It's going to melt.

Nambi E. Kelley: Right.

Jason Delane Le...: Yes.

Nambi E. Kelley: It doesn't exist anymore. The last stage direction in the play is like, "The tears of her ancestors melts black pain into time." End of play. But it was cathartic and personal and you know [crosstalk 00:49:08].

Jason Delane Le...: I'm actor studio. Right? What you're speaking to is, that's at the core, in my understanding, that's method. That's using your truth in your storytelling to dig deep and affect the artists involved and your audience. That for me, is at the core of what's called the method and it's brave. I tip cap with the utmost respect just for you being open to sharing that, because not everyone would. Right? But that's the artistry that you represent and that we all came up together.

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: I actually really appreciate so much all the vulnerability you have in telling your story. I guess I'm learning right now, just within this conversation. When we read that quote about individuality and how history will tell all of it, how much we

need to value our own stories and how important they are and whatever we think is so small and tiny, and nobody will ever care about, people actually are looking for that connectivity.

Nambi E. Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Yvonne Huff Lee: If you don't share it, then they can't connect to you. It goes back to like everything that you were saying, Nambi, earlier about being a spiritual being and connecting with somebody through spirit, through humanity. It feels like such a simple answer to all the craziness that's happening in the world. Every day we practice being authentic with other people. Practice. You have to practice it. It's not something that will always come easily when you're not around people who actually already know you and love you, but you do have to, in order to change the world, you actually also have to be around people who don't give a shit about you.

Nambi E. Kelley: Right.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Right.

Nambi E. Kelley: Right, because who are you in that?

Yvonne Huff Lee: But you trust that the hurts will change.

Nambi E. Kelley: Right. If they don't, you keep moving, you give what you give and keep moving.

Jason Delane Le...: Keep moving.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: That's right.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Yeah.

Jason Delane Le...: You're talking about the three generations removed. Right? So many people get caught up in this whole kind of concept of like, "Why, just get over the past. Why can't you just get over it? You know, move on."

Yvonne Huff Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Delane Le...: "That was a hundred years ago. I didn't own no slaves, why are you all mad at me?" All of that stuff.

Nambi E. Kelley: Yeah. Super quick, just say about a culture of kindness.

Jason Delane Le...: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nambi E. Kelley: How work and kindness are one in the... They're synonymous. Native Son was a commission that came to me, because I was so suffering when I lost my mother. I was so isolated and alone and had no idea how to deal with that level of grief.

It was debilitating. I made a decision in my life. I said, "If I know someone is suffering, I am never, I'm going to be relentlessly in their orbit."

Nambi E. Kelley: There was a woman who was the literary manager at this theater, but she was a peripheral friend, but somebody that I really liked and she was going through some, a loss. I just reached out to her every single day was like, "Hey, thinking of you. Hey, here's a heart." Just so she didn't feel alone. That's how I got that commission, because she went back to the theater and she said, "Yeah, Nambi Kelley, we should hire her." That's how I got that job.

Nambi E. Kelley: How I got Bel-Air was the two show runners were on a previous show I worked on, my first show, and one of the guys, he... This is in 2019, he was upset about something. I don't even remember what it was now. I pulled him aside into a corner and I prayed over him. I just was like, we're going to speak some life into whatever this situation was. I prayed over him. He told me recently, he was like, "I never forgot that." Now I have a job as a co-producer on a series because he never forgot that in this act of kindness, that I reached out and took care of him as best as I knew how to in that moment.

Nambi E. Kelley: I love that. Just to take it back. I love that what you said about that's how you arm your children to deal with this world. I pass, I say that also as that's the way to create agency, is just be a human being and be kind and reach and treat people with your heart. Nothing else matters to me. Nothing else matters.

Jason Delane Le...: That's right on. With regards to Bel-Air, anytime you tell that story moving forward, I hope you always, and I hope this is meant with the humor intended, but please always begin with, "This is the story, all about how my life... I got all, I got put on to Bel-Air."

Nambi E. Kelley: Go home to Bel-Air.

Yvonne Huff Lee: You guys.

Jason Delane Le...: Absolutely beautiful, Nambi.

Yvonne Huff Lee: This has been...

Nambi E. Kelley: Thank you.

Jason Delane Le...: Absolutely beautiful.

Yvonne Huff Lee: This has been so great. I'm so happy that we got to connect again. I'm looking forward to what we do with Infants of the Spring and what the truth is about that time and all that brilliance and non brilliance as we understand the story and that we all get to be black people, a 360 individual and that will inspire other people, whatever race, whatever identity to be a 360 person. This has been an awesome discussion about how do you pass the baton? What do you do when you're in the room? How do you help other people take action? The simple understanding of culture of kindness is... I just think it's the perfect answer.

Jason Delane Le...: Empathy, compassion, understanding, truth in self. If you need a moment, go get down with some ducks. Go take a break, go walk in nature. Take a moment. Do whatever you need to do and that's something that I agree with 195%. Find time for self, in order to be able to share when you're in the room fully, authentically and truthfully.

Yvonne Huff Lee: All right, cheers everybody. I got to go get another drink.

Jason Delane Le...: Cha-ching. Cheers.

Yvonne Huff Lee: I'm filled up. Any last words, Nambi?

Jason Delane Le...: Cheers.

Nambi E. Kelley: You too are two of my favorite people in the world. Thank you for your brilliance and your joy. I just love both of you so much.

Yvonne Huff Lee: We love you too.

Jason Delane Le...: Nambi, we love you. We have the utmost love and respect and admiration of you, for you. Thank you so much for taking the time with us this afternoon. Now, I think we all should go pour another glass and think about what we just all talked about right now.

Nambi E. Kelley: Amen. Cheers.

Jason Delane Le...: Cheers.

Yvonne Huff Lee: Cheers. Taking action creatively is about using your voice to stake your claim in this time and space. We all have our own stories, our own family's history, our own playground of art and our own perspectives about whose narrative needs to be told.

Jason Delane Le...: It is up to us to reframe, reclaim, and maintain who we are and how we want to be seen. It is up to us to self support our history.

Yvonne Huff Lee: So, go. Take the torch, use your voice, tell your story, and then let us know where we can read it, see it and screen it.

Jason Delane Le...: Cheers, my friends. Thank you so much for listening and...

Yvonne Huff Lee: Please drink responsibly. This podcast is produced by the Lagralane group. We would like to thank Lagralane Spirits' co-producers and writers, Courtney Oliphant and Peppur Chambers Soraci, co-producer Matthew Soraci, podcast coordinator, AJ Dinsmore, and Liam Allen for their original composition and vocals.

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