

Jason Lee: The wonderful thing about storytelling, but also the maddening thing is that it's imperfect. Like it's never going to be a hundred percent accurate even when you're doing something that's very real. How many times have you told a story about an event and you remember it with such a vivid detail that it's burned into your psyche, then you share the story with someone else who was also there and there's all the details you got wrong? And it's like, "No, wait, we weren't here. We were there. And that wasn't this, it was that." But it's still the same story because it has emotional honesty. The point of the story isn't all of that minutiae because our minds can't really be trusted in that way. We're we're fallible. And so for me, it's always been about emotional honesty and storytelling to me, good storytelling, is really about creating empathy. I think when we have a story that people relate to, it brings us together. We are Jason and-

Yvonne Lee: Yvonne Lee. Wife-

Jason Lee: Husband, father-

Yvonne Lee: ... mother-

Jason Lee: ... actors-

Yvonne Lee: ... producers, and seekers.

Jason Lee: ... educators, explorers of I identity.

Yvonne 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 reverend cocktails.

Jason Lee: 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 largralanespirits.com. And as always, please enjoy.

Yvonne Lee: Responsibly.

Jason Lee: Welcome to our final episode of the very first season.

Yvonne Lee: We did it.

Jason Lee: Respect.

Yvonne Lee: Episode six, you are here with us. Thank you for being here.

Jason Lee: In this episode, we ask how do we honor identity without also exploiting it for the sake of what we might consider to be a good story?

Yvonne Lee: Master say, going be peace. Ain't going be no peace. Not long as his white folk, said the fiddler sourly, because ain't nothing they they loves better ain't cute.

Jason Lee: Was he an African or had he become a negro, as the others called themselves? Was he even a man? He was the same age as his father when he had seen him

last yet he had no sons of his own, no wife, no family, no village, no people, no homeland, almost no past at all that seemed real to him anymore, and no future he could see. It was as if The Gambia had been a dream he'd had once long ago, or was he still asleep? And he was, would he ever waken? Roots by Alex Haley page 283?

Yvonne Lee: This is-

Jason Lee: To honor or exploit.

Yvonne Lee: Jason.

Jason Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Yvonne Lee: I think I need my drink before we can even begin talking. What you got? Hand it over, babe.

Jason Lee: I happily slide you the sidecar.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: Yes. I love this drink. I really do. Cognac alone, a nice pour of cognac is wonderful, but a citrus kick with the cognac forward, it's just... You had said this earlier, you had said, it's savory.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative) This is a gorgeous drink because I love citrusy, but I do like what you said earlier about the savory of the cognac really does come forward.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: I love it. It's delicious.

Jason Lee: Somebody once... I read this recently, somebody said, for a three ingredient cocktail, the sidecar is one of the more complex drinks because if it's too much citrus forward, it becomes kind of like a margarita. You kind of lose the-

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jason Lee: ... you lose the booze.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jason Lee: Right?

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jason Lee: So finding the right for each and every taste bud, right? Finding the right balance. Like this recipe called for two ounces of cognac, three quarters ounces of Cointreau, and three quarters ounces of lemon juice. I find those ratios to be a bit too much citrus. So I dialed back and made it half, half on lemon juice and

Cointreau, and I find that to be a perfect way to tell the story of a sidecar. It's really a fantastic drink.

Yvonne Lee: That's interesting. So you change the recipe, you change this gorgeous golden recipe as I look at it-

Jason Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Yvonne Lee: ... to suit your interest and your taste. As we talk about exploit or tell the truth that is very interesting. Hello.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Welcome to our season finale of our very first season of Lagralane Spirits Podcast. Tonight... Which is why we spend so much time talking about the sidecar. We are hitting heavy with the topic.

Jason Lee: Yes, yes. This season, Yvonne and I are exploring all things identity. We revisit moments in American history through the lens of our own family's roots and the legacy of the generations that have come before us. And yes, we are going heavy and we are going deep, we're going in. And why? Because storytelling can be a weighted anvil that drowns us to the depths of the deep, dark, sea, or it can be an albatross that carries us to the bliss of the high heavens.

Yvonne Lee: Jason, that was the most beautiful poetry. What's up? What's going on? What's you doing? All right people.

Jason Lee: Thank you love.

Yvonne Lee: Do you remember watching Roots when it came out as a mini series in 1977 on TV?

Jason Lee: Yeah. I'm of the generation, we are of the generation, right? Like I definitely have my recollections and memories of when Roots first came out, but also truth be told I was six in 1977 and a couple years later we moved to the Philippines-

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jason Lee: ... in 1979. And so my memory, sometimes it's... It's kind of like when you see a photograph where you get told a story and then all over a sudden it becomes your memory, right? Like I definitely had a... Like for me, I remember my adopted mom handing me Ebony Magazines and Jet Magazines, and that was her way of connecting to me as her son and for me to embrace my culture and my black roots. And I do have a strong connection to what Alex Haley did with both his book and what became the mini series. That's my connectivity to Roots. What about yours Yvonne?

Yvonne Lee: It's interesting. Like, I don't think I remember. I remember hearing about roots, but I think with like a Filipino mom and a black dad from the South and having like one of those big ass televisions that you had to get up and go and change the channel, all of that. Like-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: ... we just didn't necessarily... Of course when you're a kid during that time you're the remote you go and you change it, but it wasn't really until they reboot the whole thing and re-imagined it that I actually had heard of roots. And so, it was as if I had a precursor to it just learning about it through school and conversations that I would have, but I never at that time, like during that time I was still very young and my mom had two younger... I had two younger siblings, but I didn't really actually know a whole lot about Roots until later on when technology had sped up and I was able to access the information faster through social media, through even just like even being older and understanding. So, it is an interesting thing to actually feel like at this time of my life to experience Roots in a completely different way.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: And I feel like that story held a lot of truth that at that time of my life when I'd heard about it, I didn't know that I was ready to accept it or take it in.

Jason Lee: Yeah. Several years later when I was in high school I came across a wonderful history teacher in my high school here in Chicago, and his name was Bill Doby and he taught the African American history class. And he had such an awesome way of introducing the material to you and making it personal and making it immediate to you. And that's what I think Alex Haley did with Roots. I think he honors history with Roots. Anybody who takes on the story, right? Like, or attempts to explore the story of how we got here, what we've been through, right?

Jason Lee: There are other explorations that can possibly go towards the exploitation route, right? Like I remember reading Manning Maribel's exploration of Malcolm X. And he goes personal in my Malcolm X is not here to either defend himself or agree. And he goes on a personal route, and with all due respect to Mr. Maribel, I feel that that is a kind of an exploitative route to tell a story, kind of a national inquirer route to tell a story that could become across as exploitive. So I hope the type of a exploration of history that we are doing comes from an honoring lens and not an exploitive lens, and that's what this episode is all about. And I can't wait to get to the conversation with our dear friend, brother Kemp Powers.

Yvonne Lee: What I will say though, as you were speaking, I do remember hearing about Roots and I remember even as at a young age or even when I was in my teens and I hadn't actually had the opportunity to watch or listen or to read, I remember feeling this sense of validation, this-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: ... validation of history being told and the possibility of history being told in a way that had not been opened up in high school, that had not been opened up in college, even though I heard about it before college, but it was like, "Oh, there's more that someone hasn't told me and I need to go find out what that is."

Jason Lee: For those that don't know, the mini series Roots was based upon the book by the same name, Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley. It was published in 1976. His dedication reads, "It wasn't planned that Roots would take 12 years, just by chance it is being published in the bicentennial year of the United States. So, I dedicate roots as a birthday offering to my country within which most of Roots happened." And I just love that historical exploration. We are trying to do a similar type of exploration, both personal and macro here at Lagralane Spirits. And I just I'm moved by that attempt now all of these decades later.

Yvonne Lee: But what a gracious offering, don't you think Jason, is such a gracious offering. I remember when we were reading this speech, Frederick Douglass' speech, we did this for Laura Douglass Theater-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: ... and how he talked about how wonderful the country is but at the same time was-

Jason Lee: His famous 4th of July speech.

Yvonne Lee: ... ticking.

Jason Lee: Yes. What is the 4th of July-

Yvonne Lee: Exactly.

Jason Lee: ... for he American slave? Yeah. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Right. And here we are, this black man, who's saying this is a birthday offering. This is to say, this is who you can become. This is who you can be. We have some beautiful people. Look how gracious we can be in this moments. Oh my god.

Jason Lee: Somebody said recently, right? Like somebody said exactly... Somebody said our problem is we love too much. Your problem is you hate too much. Where's the middle ground? So Haley was conducting interviews with Malcolm X for Playboy Magazine, and those interviews he turned into the material of his first book from 1965, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. And a little cool kind of, well, I like to think it's kind of cool. We'll see if anyone else really does, if you do my love will see. So, I was cast in a play written by Kemp Powers where I had the opportunity to play the role of Malcolm X in One Night in Miami. I had the opportunity to play the role in three different cities, Los Angeles, Denver, and Miami. And part of my research was to read out loud Haley's Autobiography of Malcolm X to get cadence, to get sound, and to-

Yvonne Lee: Oh, wow.

Jason Lee: ... get the life. So as you know my love, my wife-

Yvonne Lee: I didn't even know this part. I didn't know this part.

Jason Lee: Well, our family lived with that play from 2013 to 2018. And so, I deep dove into that. And it was an extraordinary research. Alex Haley's work is for me very informative and very respect and very honorable and not exploitive at all. And that is my connection to Kemp Powers, because Kemp by casting me in his play in the world premiere that became this awesome movie as well years later, it's been a fun journey. So I'm excited to get him talking here in a little bit, but the book of Roots is 688 pages long, 688. Now later when we talk to our guest tonight, my brother Kemp Powers, we talk about how folks is just getting to know black folks, right? Like-

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Jason Lee: ... we've been studying white people and Europeans for... And we've all... I'm a classically trained actor. I've done Moliere. I've done Shakespeare, right? Like I've been studying Euro sensibilities for decades, but people, they don't know us. This book tried to let folks know about black folks. So, my question love my question, and it is a loaded one on purpose. Is, did Roots misfire or light it up? Did it exploit or did it honor?

Yvonne Lee: I think that just to get the platform, there's a bit of exploitation that comes out of it, can someone else benefit from telling this story? By large I feel like it honored. I mean it certainly reached someone like me, my cultural family that was looking for identity, hearing about it, seeing it, seeing Laura, seeing his face and going, "Wow, he's three shades darker than me and he's here. He's not just on my children's television show that I was watching. He's here on this screen as an actor, as a storyteller telling the story that was important to him." For me, I don't know that I'm privy to all the exploitation of the story but for me personally it has grounded me in a way even without even having read all of these 688 pages, just knowing that the story is out there and the pathway that it created for me to be able to make my own choices.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: I feel like it honored.

Jason Lee: One thing about the books that are 688 pages, the first draft was like 5,000 pages, right? Like, so I mean the amount of research, right? We have talked a lot about the responsibility we hold as storytellers to get it right. Right? We want our identities represented properly. We want the whole truth to be told, not the half truth, not the white truth, but the people's truth. Roots is Alex Haley's identity story, his ancestry story after all. We've done similar research in the first several episodes of our own podcast to explore our origin stories. Are we, or are we not... Well, let me rephrase that. Are we honoring or are we exploiting our history? And to what end if it is exploitive?

Yvonne Lee: I think the one thing, is it when a person knows themselves, they will be able to understand whether they're exploiting or they're telling the truth?

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Are you trying to appease someone for personal gain, or you're trying to tell a story for the gain of the masses of the community?

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: And I think that's how you tell the difference between whether you're exploiting or whether you are really telling the truth. Is that, are you in service of yourself or are you in service of the greater good, and how do we make others through our own experiences of understanding who we are and understanding our identity?

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: How do we make others uphold the truth to stereotypes and nod to new narratives?

Jason Lee: For our audience, we had internal conversation earlier on about Alex Haley's quote that started up this episode and the use of the N word and we are very conflicted about and cognizant and aware of language and the use of terms and the use of words and descriptive terms. We're trying to deep dive into story and share from our unique lens, what the world looks like to us. And I feel like now is the time to do that. I feel like there are audiences out there. There are individuals out there ready and willing to... And wrapped audiences out there ready and willing to listen just as I am audience member to other cultures who explore theirs. And I feel that is the way to bring together a unified story.

Yvonne Lee: The thing is that anybody wants to walk into a room and be their authentic selves, and feel like they belong there and be able to show up with everything that they have in their whole history. And it shows up into the room and then there's acceptance and there's love and there's understanding all of those kinds of things. And I think that where exploitation begins is with somebody who doesn't know who they are, but they know they need to be somewhere else than where they are.

Jason Lee: Or they're to trying to appease a power structure. They're trying to appease-

Yvonne Lee: Well, for sure.

Jason Lee: ... somebody. Yeah. They're trying to earn something.

Yvonne Lee: It's called the white... It's called this idea, this fake idea of white being white structure which robs white people of all of their own. We've talked about in early episodes about-

Jason Lee: Yes. The chain in power, we talked-

Yvonne Lee: about that.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, absolutely. About like your own history and where you come from in order to gain something else. And so for me, the difference between exploitation and telling the truth is like, do you know who you are? Have you taken into consideration all the things that you've learned in your life? Yes. And the point of this podcast for those who are listening is that you are empowered to tell your own story and know that it's a worth. And really that's the reason that we're even doing all of this. If you've made it this far, if you listen to everything, that is the point of it all. Listen, I keep saying this and I'm going say it again. We are the new storytellers. You must be prepared to show the way as we forge ahead to showing others who the hell we truly are. Right? I mean, right. And by the way, in our last episode we chatted with filmmaker Jacqueline Olive about being the authors of history, and she touched on honoring and exploiting also.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: So, I want you to get the full experience, so please be sure to go back to episode five if you missed it and soak up the knowledge she dropped.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: She was amazing. She's a sincere storyteller talking about the history of our country from her point of view. And in the end when we're telling history, it's about point of view.

Jason Lee: Erica Alexander touches on this.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: I mean, these sisters really brought it. I mean, and I'm thrilled to add in a strong male voice as our next guest Kemp Powers, to add to this awesome launch of this podcast idea that we're exploring. It's just been really, really cool. And so this is the segue into bringing in our guest writer, playwright, screenwriter, journalist, and now director, brother Kemp Powers.

Yvonne Lee: We're so excited to have Kemp here with us. He began as a journalist. He is now a screenwriter, co-director, and playwright. Kemp wrote a theater play One Night in Miami, which had its world premier at the Rogue Machine Theater here in Los Angeles and starred our very own Jason Delane as Malcolm X.

Jason Lee: Me.

Yvonne Lee: Yes, Jason. Kemp adapted One Night in Miami into a film with the same name directed by the amazing, beautiful, gorgeous Regina King and Kemp received the best adapted screenplay nomination for the film, our friend Kemp co-directed and co-wrote the animated Pixar film soul which was nominated for multiple academy awards and won an Oscar for best animated feature. Our friend recently joined the directing team for the sequel to Spider-Man into the Spider-Verse, the sequel alongside what Joaquim Dos Santos and Justin K. Thompson.

Jason Lee: Well, tonight we are thrilled and honored and proud to be talking with our good friend playwright, screenwriter, extraordinaire, and just really honestly, an all around great dude, Kemp Powers.

Yvonne Lee: Yay, Kemp. Welcome.

Jason Lee: Thanks for joining us, man. Thanks for joining us for this.

Kemp Powers: Thanks for having me here.

Jason Lee: I know you're very busy, man. How's everything going? What's you been up to? What can you speak to?

Kemp Powers: Things are pretty, yeah. Things have been busy. Right now I'm in the midst of directing the sequel to Spider-Man, the Spider-Verse. And that is-

Jason Lee: Wow.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Kemp Powers: ... that is like three full-time jobs wrapped into one. Don't ask me how I'm doing it, but at the same time I'm also polishing off a screenplay that I've been working on for the better part of the past year. I can't talk too much about that, but it's another project I'm pretty passionate about. And the nature of the beast, you always have few things that you have in various stages of development, because you never know what's going to-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... pan out.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: There's really no sure things in this business. You know what I mean?

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: So, people think it's the idea and they don't realize it's all about the execution. That's the hard part .

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: So, just continuing to do what I do.

Jason Lee: I'm flashing back to when we first met, I'm flashing back to gosh the spring of 2013, you had a world premier play in auditions over at the Rogue Machine Theater in Los Angeles. And I'm remembering, I got a Facebook friend message saying, "We're looking..." From a dear friend. Saying, "We're looking for a light skin actor to come audition for the role of Malcolm X." And I was like, "Show me

where, tell me the address, show me where to show up." Then she sent a copy of your script of your play. And I read it. And little did you know or little did she know, not only am I a huge historian civil rights person. I'm a huge Bob Dylan fan. So in the play, I got to a scene where you have Malcolm X leaving an argument in a motel room to go buy a Bob Dylan record to come back and make his point. And I read that and I was like, "Oh man. I know brother Malcolm was much taller than me and much thinner than me but well, I got to give this a go." And you cast me.

Yvonne Lee: I remember when Jason read that part and I was like, "Okay." There's not even a chance that I could say, "But babe, we got all these babies. We got all these kids, how are you going to do this?" But he was gone, he was gone. I was like, "I can only be here to support."

Jason Lee: And then we did-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Jason Lee: So we did your play that summer. With blessings, I was able to go with the production to Denver with it. We went to Miami-

Kemp Powers: in Miami-

Jason Lee: ... with it.

Kemp Powers: You did it in Miami as well, right? Yeah, exactly.

Jason Lee: Yes I did in 2018. Me and my family lived with that piece of yours for a good five or six years. And then to see what, what you and Regina were able to do with the movie. I mean, it's just really been amazingly cool seeing all of this success land on the lap of a really, really good dude. And so I'm just thrilled. We're thrilled to know you, man. We're thrilled to have you here, man.

Kemp Powers: Thanks man. Well, I mean, that whole experience, that journey has been... That's the textbook definition of a labor of love. You know what I mean? Because-

Jason Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: ... I think people in their remembrances of the story, they would see it probably as a constant ascent. The reality is it was a rollercoaster. That play and the film version has been both embraced and abandoned so many times. There's so many close calls. There's so many transfers that didn't happen.

Jason Lee: Yeah, sure.

Kemp Powers: It didn't go to the West End. It didn't go to the Broadway. It was kind of like considered. That's the thing about theater, and the life cycle of a play is people are quick to declare plays done or over or having run their course, especially if they don't hit certain benchmarks. And-

Jason Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: ... I guess ignorance-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... really is bliss, because I hadn't really been aware of all those things. I think maybe if I had been aware of all these unwritten benchmarks I might have given up, but because I didn't know any better I was like, "Oh okay, well, they don't want do it. No big deal. I'll just do this here." And of course, when it wasn't really until after the play did not transfer to the West End, after an incredibly successful run in London at the Donmar which got us an Olivia nomination. And I mean, I was like, "Wow, we did it. We're going to go to the West end. This is like a dream." And because of a number of different factors that didn't happen, you see it once again. It's like, "Oh, once again there's no more interest in the play."

Kemp Powers: And that's when I first thought like, "Oh well, maybe I should adapt it into a film." Like honestly, if the play had gone to the West End and Broad I probably wouldn't have adapted into a movie.

Jason Lee: Interesting.

Kemp Powers: It's just-

Jason Lee: Interesting.

Kemp Powers: ... it was a story that I wanted to tell. And for a long time to be honest, I couldn't see it as a film. It was only because throughout that entire life cycle of the play, I was also very slowly building my chops in film and television that-

Jason Lee: Yes.

Kemp Powers: ... by the time that moment landed, it was like, "Oh, I think it can be adapted into a film, but only if you let me adapt it." Which is something that in 2013, I wouldn't have been able to say that or do it-

Jason Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... to be perfectly honest.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: I wouldn't have been able to pull off in 2013. I needed six, seven years worth of screenwriting experience to-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: ... be in the place, to adapt my own work, and to also be in the place mentally where I wasn't so precious about it. So I was happy to let some things go from the play in order-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... to make it a better film script, because that's the other thing about it, is I mean, people who see the film, the vast majority of people who saw the movie have not seen the play, because again-

Jason Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... my play wasn't this... It's not a play that ran in a hundred cities. I mean, it's had-

Jason Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... maybe a dozen productions total all over the world. People are not familiar-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... with it. So, I think they're going with the assumption that, "Oh, this is probably just exactly the same as the play with a couple of little additions." And it's like, "Oh, it's actually really different." Like I-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: ... did, I kind of tore it down to the studs. I'm pretty pleased with how it turned out.

Jason Lee: Do you think your experience or not to think, how did your experience in the writer's room of say a Star Trek or... I know if I had the story correct. A sample of One Night in Miami led you to Soul, correct?

Kemp Powers: I got brought on Soul because soul has a really incredible production department. They have some production executives who are always kind of scouring the field looking for new writers, and that's just the way Pixar operates. And I believe it was a producer who was at Chanin, who I had met with years ago, who liked my writing. And I pitched them several ideas that they didn't want to do but they just remembered me and my voice, then said, "Oh." When Pixar went out, it was like, "We're looking for writers to maybe work on this film we've got." Code name Soul at the of time, that it was this executive that actually said, "You should take a look at this Kemp Powers guy I bet." And this was... I can't even believe she remembered me from years earlier. And so they contacted my agent and the only sample really that they had to share with them was my theater writing, my playwriting.

Kemp Powers: So they sent them One Night in Miami, which really peaked their interest in me as a writer. Then they asked, "Well, does he have anything else? Does he have

any comedy writing?" And then the second sample they sent them was actually a pilot that me and a friend had sold to FX that had never been produced. So, it's basically my play and my work that didn't get made that got me the job writing on and eventually co-directing Soul. And I think it's just because my writing displays my strong voice. And it's probably part of the reason why I didn't succeed in several of my first writers' rooms, because the reality is I was on Star Trek season one and they let me go. You know what I mean? Like they were... But so it's like I suffered one failure after another in television, either getting bounced out of writer's rooms or working on shows that were not getting made, not getting green lit.

Kemp Powers: And so I really just... I was kind of starting to wonder to myself like, "Wow, maybe this isn't going to work out for me. Because even the shows that I pitched and sold, couldn't get made on the air. But again, it's about finding the people who get you, and-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... there's probably no place in the entire business that values original distinct voices more than Pixar. And there's this huge mystique about Pixar where people don't know, what is the formula? What do I have to do? What kind of sample do I need to be into the Pixar? And it's like there is no one thing, all that matters is kind of you, because Pixar does this investment not in an idea but in the people, it's all about the person because if they believe in you and they believe in your voice, then they believe that you could write a story about a rat that wants to cook, and it's going to be good.

Jason Lee: That's right.

Kemp Powers: You see what I'm saying?

Jason Lee: That's right.

Kemp Powers: Like so many-

Jason Lee: That's right.

Kemp Powers: So many of their ideas are on paper. So out there that no one would want to make them, but it's their belief in the artist, their belief been the storyteller that makes them-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... cool with it. I mean, the idea of Soul, I mean, some of these I-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... you could just run down the list. I mean, yes. There's rabbit tui. There's Wally. I mean, there's up where it begins with a couple finding out that a woman can't have children and then-

Jason Lee: Is dying.

Kemp Powers: ... is dying and going through-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... like-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... like there's so many of their stories, their ideas that-

Yvonne Lee: I've watched all of those movies.

Kemp Powers: ... are on paper.

Yvonne Lee: All.

Kemp Powers: Yeah. But they're-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... but they're not sellable, they're not sellable ideas because it was never about the idea. It was about the storyteller. And that's how I describe myself. People like playwright, screenwriter, director, whatever, I'm just a storyteller. The medium might change.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: That's the only thing that changes is the medium. And I try to tell the story in the medium that best suits that story. And I think it's only because I was a journalist for close to two decades that I'm flexible in that way. And that I don't feel like, "Oh, it's got to be television. It's got to be film. It's got to be theater." I do love theater, but I don't have to tell you guys theater is not something that any of us can make a real living doing. And it's not even about money. It's just it's sad that there's no working living playwright who doesn't also either teach at a university or-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... are right for film and television. There is no one, no one, it doesn't matter how many Broadway productions they've had that you don't have to supplement it. And despite that, we love theater so much that we still just throw ourselves at it. The first thing I did after I finished... After *Soul* and *One Night in Miami* both came out within 60 days, was I dove right back into a new play? Like, that's the first thing I did. They're like, "Oh, so what are you going to do now?" It's like, "Oh well, there's this play I want to try to get, get up in stage during the pandemic." And thankfully-

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... the folks at Center Theater Group were really cool and we did one of their first COVID safe recordings of the play over at the Kirk Douglas Theater. But theater, no one would know who I was as a storyteller. I don't think if not for theater, because that was the first medium that allowed my pure, honest voice to be seen and heard by an audience, the same voice that was often told it wasn't valid or it wasn't legitimate in so many other mediums.

Yvonne Lee: I love what you're saying in terms of being a storyteller because it doesn't necessarily put the self at the center. It's about what you're trying to communicate to other people, right? Because if you-

Kemp Powers: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Yvonne Lee: Otherwise, you'd just be driven by ego and then you would've left a long time ago.

Kemp Powers: Right. Exactly.

Yvonne Lee: And so I feel like this episode is about like, when you can have that point of view as a storyteller, how do you maintain integrity in storytelling? And when you're telling a story, are you exploiting it for the sake of a good story and how do you uphold the truth and all of that? And even though you can't at make money in the theater in the way that we can, I can feel that you can in other spaces, I can feel like it's a place that actually allows you to explore what those things are with a little bit more latitude.

Kemp Powers: Absolutely. I agree. I mean, it's an interesting question because for me it's really about emotional honesty, because look, the wonderful thing about storytelling but also the maddening thing is that it's imperfect. Like it's never going to be a hundred percent accurate even when you're doing something that's very real. How many times have you like told a story about an event and you remember it with such vivid detail that is burned into your psyche, then you share the story with someone else who was also there and there's all the details you got wrong. You know what I mean? And it's like, "No, wait, we weren't here. We were there. And that wasn't this, it was that." But it's still the same story because it has emotional honesty, the point of the story isn't all of that minutiae because our minds can't really be trusted in that way.

Jason Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: We're fallible. And so for me, it's always been about emotional honesty and storytelling to me, good storytelling is really about creating empathy. I think when we have a shared sto... When we have a story that people relate to, it brings us to together. So, there's a certain type of story that I like to tell, and that translates into pretty much all the work that I do, whether it be a play or a film, if there're people who would say like, "Wow, there's like no common threads in any of her writing, because you write about just about everything." I'm like, "Actually there is a common thread and it's that I'm trying to generate empathy."

Kemp Powers: We've kind of endured the better part of almost 20 years of snark and cynicism. And there's nothing wrong with that, I've enjoyed as much of the clever snarky, cynical shit as anybody else. But I have to say in seeing the result of that, not just on our generation but on our kids, it kind of bombs me out that they missed any sincerity or earnestness at all. And I do remember before we went into the cynical years, we had a lot of earnest years too.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: There was nothing cynical about growing up watching Sesame Street.

Jason Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: There was nothing cynical-

Yvonne Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... about watching fricking Punky Brewster. Great stories I just think promote empathy. And that's really all of it because it's been even before the 2016 election. I mean, we've just been in a quite a divisive period and the battle lines are drawn and I'm as guilty as anyone else for being pretty hardcore in some of my personal and political beliefs. But unless we want an outcome, that's just like mutually assured destruction. We have to find a way to connect on the things that we have in common. And I realize that when it comes to my entertainment, I don't segregate my entertainment the way I segregate my social life. That's for sure. There's a whole series of TV shows and movies that I watch, that I have to watch with headphones on but I'm still enjoying the hell out of them, that might be considered not appropriate anymore. You know what I mean? Because it's still speaking to life and a reality that I recognize. So again, it's emotional honesty.

Kemp Powers: Integrity for me has never really been a problem because I had like no expectations of any kind of success. And the few times that I tried to bend and contort myself to fit myself into some shape that I didn't belong or someplace I didn't belong a hundred percent of the time, it was a disaster. It was a disaster[crosstalk 00:39:28].

Yvonne Lee: I love that you just said that Kemp. I love that you just said that because you know what that does for us, it brings us to our cocktail confession. Are you ready for that part?

Kemp Powers: I am ready.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: I'm ready.

Yvonne Lee: Okay, Kemp is ready for his cocktail confession. So, you're talking about this place and telling stories and as you just said, we hold the power to tell our own stories but it sounds like all these different things are pulling you, how do you

honor your own identity in the story that you craft when you know all of these things that you've just talked about that are happening in the world, and how do you get a story made and the ups and downs and the rollercoaster, is the play going to go to West End? Is it not? What's going happen? How do you honor your own identity in the stories that you craft?

Kemp Powers: It's interesting because it sounds really simple but I know who I am, and it took me my whole life to know who I am. I'd say most people work overtime to never know who they really are, but it's through the challenges that I've had to face from being a very young man to my challenges in adulthood, through death and divorce and losing everything and hitting rock bottom and just being alone that I've gotten to spend a lot of time alone with myself, and I came out of that really knowing who I am. And people try so hard to pretend that they know everything and everyone, I'm the opposite. I don't know anything or anyone except me, but I know me really, really well. I know what I can... And that's a great power because-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... if it's not going work for me, I will walk away. I am not one who likes to speak just to hear the sound of his own voice. It largely contributed to my failures in early writers' rooms, where it was very much about squeaky wheel gets the grease. I'm not a very squeaky wheel. I don't say much, but when I say it, people tend to listen to it because they know it's really measured and they know it's coming from an honest, like very, very real place. And that's really all it is, is that I know myself and the things that are super important to me, there's almost nothing that's more important to me right now at this stage of my life than how the work that I have done is going be perceived when I'm no longer here. And I'm a little bit older.

Kemp Powers: A lot of people get into this creative business when they're super duper young, and we all have room to make mistakes. And a lot of people have things that they're like super duper embarrassed of. I don't feel like I can afford to have too many of those things. And I don't want something where I said, "Well, I didn't want to do it. I knew it was a disgrace, but I had rent to pay." I would just not pay my rent and get evicted. You know what I mean? And that's not a easy thing for people to say like, "I've got kids-

Jason Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... just like you've got kids."

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: So, I'm not saying this as some 18 year old that it's incredibly terrifying to say no and walk away from things, but I've just found that I can live with myself better-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... when I just feel like my soul isn't being eaten away.

Yvonne Lee: You know what? I want to say one thing, in terms of like when I saw One Night in Miami and in terms of your own entity, what I loved about it was that it offered another identity of black maleness that I just wasn't seeing. Do you know what I mean? Like the different ways of embracing blackness as a male and the way that you come into it, did you find that missing in the narratives that were out there? Because I feel like what I saw with One Night in Miami in particular, and then of course it carried on with Soul was like this other way of entering into the humanity of being a black male. Like, do you feel... Do you understand what I'm saying?

Jason Lee: Do you bring yourself to your work?

Kemp Powers: I bring myself into everything I do. And yes, in the cases of those two films, I very much felt that it was missing, which makes the execution of them that much more difficult. But I always also believe I know the life I'm living, I know the friends that I've had, the conversations that I've had with so many different other people like me. And despite the fact that sometimes you'll write a character and someone would say that like, "Oh well, that character's not believable. That character's not realistic." Which I've heard a great deal of for years and years and years. I knew those characters were real because we were those characters.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Kemp Powers: we talk, we like to say things like, being black is not a monolithic idea. But that's a talking point that I don't think people have really played out in terms of their decisions and how black characters have been executed.

Yvonne Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: Even a lot of times by black creatives in Hollywood, because there's a lot of money to be made in lowest common denominator stuff, in low hanging fruit. There's a lot of money to be made in that. And I'm not begrudging anyone doing what they're going to do, but I'm just saying like, isn't it amazing how the way the difference in how young black people were perceived pre and post a show like Atlanta, the idiosyncratic black nerd who's also got like thugs in the family, but all... You know what I mean? Like it's not-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... it's not like, okay, they're either aristocratic Jack and Jill or they're living in a housing project, with like-

Jason Lee: That's right.

Kemp Powers: ... nothing in between.

Jason Lee: That's right.

Kemp Powers: And so, you watch a show like Atlanta, and it's like the main character dropped out of like Yale, his cousin's a rapper. And he has to like go to his uncle's house who's a super smart guy who keeps an alligator in his house. And it's just kind like to me that that feels more like real life even though that show is deposited and marketed as twin peaks with rappers.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: But it actually feels hyper realistic to me despite some of those fantastical elements, and that's all it is, is just like you have Donald Glover and his team just kind of executing a story that feels very real to them. And it's about convincing people to let you, or if they don't let you doing it anyway, again, that was the power of theater, right? The power of theater was I got to tell a story that I'd sincerely do not believe anyone in film or television would have let me tell One Night in Miami the way I told it, no one would have. It was only the... I had to do it in play form in order to prove the concept and prove that it wouldn't[crosstalk 00:46:49]

Jason Lee: To bring it to life.

Kemp Powers: Yeah. You have to just do it on your own. If it had been something that you pursued as a film, that story would have never been told that way. I do believe that much. But now that it has been, I feel like it opens the door for other people. I think people... This country is still getting to know us after over 400 something years. They're still-

Yvonne Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... getting to know us. You know what I mean? Like they're-

Jason Lee: That's right. That's right.

Kemp Powers: But we know white Americans, but white Americans and everyone else in this country is still getting to know black people.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: And that's something, it's important to remember, is that as a community and as individuals, they still don't know us. And we are showing more and more of ourselves every single day but there's still so much of us that hasn't been shown. And so I'm just showing the part of me-

Yvonne Lee: Right.

Kemp Powers: ... that I think represents a sizable amount of people like myself as well. I know because these people are my friends.

Jason Lee: What I've always admired about you Kemp too, in your storytelling is that's a very brave approach, right? Like I know some of your past stories that we've shared throughout the years, and I guess this is leading me to my next question which is using life in storytelling, using yourself in storytelling when life happens

whether it's joyous or tragic, how do we take the lesson that we... How do you maintain your voice and your braveness and your enthusiasm for showing yourself through the art of your writing? How do you take the lessons from the event that occurred in the past or whatever it is without exploiting that event, right?

Kemp Powers: I mean, it's not easy to tell the story period. I don't really do... I used to go and tell stories on like the Moth and sto-

Jason Lee: Yes. Yes.

Kemp Powers: I would stand up in front of an audience and just tell a true story. And I don't do that anymore. It's just something that I stopped doing because I always really wanted the story to stay in the room with the people who I'm talking to, and it was not something that I really wanted to just like go wide. I just wanted to talk and have a conversation with people. And there's something about being in a space with someone when they're telling something personal, but also it's very painful for me to... Whether it's true or it's based on something real. I was telling a friend of mind that like with every project that I get completed, I feel like I die a little bit because it's like I have to put a piece of my soul into it.

Kemp Powers: And it sucks because it's you. So, when people are not... Nothing you ever do will be universally loved, but when people start tearing your work apart and saying how much they hate it, it feels like a referendum on you and who you are as a human being. And that really painful. So every time I do something, I'm just kind of like, "All right, I'm a little more dead." It's like a little bit more of my soul is gone. That's the reason why I don't see myself doing this for more than another five or 10 years to be perfectly honest, because I love what I'm doing but it takes a lot out of me.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: It really, really does. It's excruciating work and it's not easy. And once it's done, I have this incredible feeling of satisfaction that I got it completed, but the process of writing it and making it, it's really excruciating for me sometimes because I am... People say, "Don't ever take it any of this personal is just..." And I don't know how.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: It's like-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... when an artist is in a museum in the gallery, it would be like you walking in and spitting on their painting. You know what I mean?

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: Like, "Oh, don't take it personal, it's just spit."

Jason Lee: It's spit.

Kemp Powers: No way. No, it's me. It's me up on that canvas.

Jason Lee: Yeah. Correct me if I'm wrong Kemp, but I remember early conversation in the rehearsal room of the world premier of One Night in Miami, you were saying you were having these conversations in your mind that the four men were having in the room back in the day, right? Like so to-

Kemp Powers: Yeah.

Jason Lee: ... to explore that-

Kemp Powers: Yeah, it was-

Jason Lee: ... is really cool.

Kemp Powers: ... it was a conversation in my dormitory. Absolutely. It was a conversation.

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: That me and my buddies had in our dormitory, but I just reverse engineered those words and those debates back into the mouths of the men who inspired that way of thinking, because each man inspired a very specific way of thinking. And then the challenge was about creating a characterization of each of them that I felt was respectful and honored-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... each of those men, but everyone's not going to agree on that. Some people are going to-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... I'm sure take offense to... They want to see their heroes the way they want to see them.

Jason Lee: The way they want to see them. Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: But that wasn't the story that I was trying to tell.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. I have a question like when you talk about like as artists, we're putting ourselves out there and whatever the critics are going to say, or the people in the room are going to say whether it's on a national platform or in a room where there's only 10 people, are you able to differentiate between people who just have a perspective about what a judgment or understanding or no experience in being a black person and being a black male, and somebody who's actually like looking at the art for what it is? Does that ever get confused? In terms of bringing your identity to the table, sometimes you walk into the room like, is it their bias that they're unable to see what's actually being said, or are they actually able to look at it for the art that it is?

Kemp Powers: Another wonderful thing about theater is that almost no one's going to go to a play who isn't at least like genuinely curious about the like... Like when you're releasing a movie or a TV show, there's a certain segment of trolls that if they just see that it's got black people in it, they're going to give that shit one star on rotten tomatoes and just talk crap. Like they hate it before they've even seen it and that... But that's par for the course for film and television and it doesn't bother me as much. I've found that criticism in theater has always been a lot more thoughtful.

Kemp Powers: I think that even when I disagree with, or I'm annoyed by someone's comments, people tend to work really hard to kind of explain where they're coming from. And again, I might have some feelings about it, but again, you put your work out there, it's going to cause a reaction in people. It just is. If anything, the people who are super duper, passionately negative, all that says to me is that, man, it really got to you. You know what I mean? Like-

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... that's like-

Jason Lee: You pork something.

Kemp Powers: ... okay, now my work is living up in your head rent free. So-

Jason Lee: You're going to be thinking... You're going to know my name. You're going to be thinking about me. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: Yeah. So like in a weird way, that's almost like a compliment. You know what I mean? When it's you, you look at the work of certain artists and people don't have lukewarm reactions to certain people. It's either passionately pro or passionately against and that's okay. Again-

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... it's an interesting... I know that's not a great answer, but I don't really parse out much of the criticism. There's been one or two things that it's when it's comes from someone who's kind of positing as though they're coming from this place of intellectualism and their criticism is just wrong. It's just wrong on so many levels. That's the stuff that might get to me. But I've gotten pretty good at just kind of saying, you know what? It's easy for me to bite my tongue and just kind of keep on living my life because-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... it's like, everyone thinks this is easy and I always say, go right on out there and do it yourself and-

Jason Lee: Do it your damn self. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... knock it out of the park. And it's great. One of my favorite Jay-Z songs begins, "Mothe fucker's saying they made hoe. So I say, okay, then make another hoe." You know what I mean? It's-

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: ... just like, if you think that it's just like I stumble into ideas and just shit falls on me like Forrest Gump, and it's that easy. Then go on head and endure the pain of trying to get your work up on stage and up on screens and up on television and get back to me about just how easy it is to navigate that.

Jason Lee: Right along those lines, man. Keep getting your work on stages and on screens, we are rap audience man. We are avid participants. Obviously I lived with your One Night in Miami, in three different cities, man. Thank you for that opportunity. That was a blessing that I will always remember. I can't wait to see what you got coming down the pike next man. Just continue-

Kemp Powers: Yeah.

Jason Lee: ... continue blessing us. Yeah.

Kemp Powers: I'm trying my best, man.

Jason Lee: No, you're doing it. You're doing it.

Yvonne Lee: You are. And you are an example of like the one thing that you said, and that's the one thing that I... That's why I knew that One Night in Miami was going do well, is that in terms of identity you were like, "I know who I am."

Kemp Powers: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: So I can. I know who I am. I know where I'm from. And that allowed you to weather all the other stuff.

Kemp Powers: Yeah, absolutely.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Kemp Powers: Yeah, absolutely.

Jason Lee: Well, Kemp Powers. Thank you, sir.

Kemp Powers: Okay.

Jason Lee: Thank you for being here with us. And I hope you can come on back in season two and bless us with more of your time and insight and wisdom in this wild, crazy show business that we're in. Keep telling your stories, your voice is strong. And thank you.

Kemp Powers: Thank you. Thank you. Hopefully I'll have something interesting worthy of talking about in a year.

Yvonne Lee: You will.

Jason Lee: Say word, man.

Yvonne Lee: Your connection to history and the way you teach us through your work is just, it's all awesome. Really.

Kemp Powers: Thank you. Thanks a lot guys.

Jason Lee: Cheers. Cheers, my friend.

Yvonne Lee: Cheers.

Kemp Powers: Cheers.

Yvonne Lee: Well, Jason, we did it.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: We open doors with our team, turned on bright lights, and chewed some bats out of Beffries.

Jason Lee: okay. Okay, Jane air. But yes-

Yvonne Lee: You're welcome.

Jason Lee: ... we did. And I'm proud of us. I toast to you and to our audiences. And will it be baaaaaack.

Yvonne Lee: See you next season. Please keep telling your own stories as you listen.

Jason Lee: And-

Yvonne Lee: And-

Jason Lee: ... drink-

Yvonne Lee: ... drink responsibly.

Jason Lee: Responsibly.

Yvonne Lee: This podcast is produced by the Lagralane Group. We would like to thank Lagralane Spirits co-producers and writers, Courtney Oliphant and Peppur Chamber-Soraci, co-producer Matthew Soraci, podcast coordinator Amanda Dinsmore, sound designer David B. Marling, the Launch Guild and Toby Gad for his original piano improvisation.

Jason Lee: We'd also like to thank Podcast Haven and our guests Kemp Powers. Remember to grab our sidecar recipe and show notes by going to logralanespirits.com, and we'll see you next time. We'll see you next season. And if you love the cocktail or the episode, make sure you rate, review, and subscribe on apple podcast or

wherever you listen. Please drink responsibly. Please drink responsibly. Please drink responsibly.

Yvonne Lee: Oh my God. You suck. You're so bad at this.

Jason Lee: You don't continue. Please.

Yvonne Lee: I am continuing.

Jason Lee: No, it's like please drink responsibly.

Yvonne Lee: Listen, we got to go to bed.