

Jason Lee: We're 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 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 reverent 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 lagralanespirits.com and as always, please enjoy.

Yvonne Lee: Responsibly.

Jason Lee: "Camouflage is a game we all like to play, but our secrets are as surely revealed by what we want to seem to be as by what we want to conceal." Russell Lines, editor and arbiter of Taste, Harper's magazine.

Yvonne Lee: [French 00:01:19] Napoleon Bonaparte.

Jason Lee: Say, what?

Yvonne Lee: Oo, la, la.

Jason Lee: What'd you call me? Wait, why you talking about me? What are you talking about me in French?

Yvonne Lee: You mean in France?

Jason Lee: In French France. You're speaking French. Why?

Yvonne Lee: Because [French 00:01:46] we are drinking the French 75 cocktail, [French 00:01:52].

Jason Lee: [Russian 00:01:52].

Yvonne Lee: I have been watching Inventing Anna on Netflix, and I'm mesmerized by accents and becoming something I am not.

Jason Lee: You are mesmerized by passing.

Yvonne Lee: [French 00:02:05].

Jason Lee: While I shake up this cocktail, why don't I let you translate what Napoleon said?

Yvonne Lee: Yes, of course. He said, "It is not necessary to bury the truth. It is sufficient merely to delay it until nobody cares." Oh, my God, this one hit me hard especially when I thought about it in the context of passing, which we talked about in episode one and defined as when a racially ambiguous person of color-

Jason Lee: Usually for reasons of social mobility or to avoid death.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, yeah. That. When they will pass themselves off as white, that is passing in a historical perspective. When I think about the truth, delaying the truth until nobody cares, all I can think about is all of those white folks out there who are actually Black and will never know.

Jason Lee: Dig.

Yvonne Lee: And how this child, Anna, in this Netflix show Inventing Anna is passing for a German heiress and ain't full German nor an heiress. But she passed as one, and quite well. Excuse me. That right here is tasty.

Jason Lee: I present to you the French 75. Do you taste anything different?

Yvonne Lee: Yummy goodness.

Jason Lee: No. This drink is passing for one with alcohol. It's a mocktail. I substituted out the gin and the champagne. So it's lemon juice, simple syrup and San Pellegrino sparkling water. And you, my love, have the very first Lagralane spirits mocktail. What you think about it?

Yvonne Lee: This is lovely. It's refreshing. It's light. I love the color. Little fresh lemon always has such a beautiful pale yellow to it. This is something I could drink all day. I love it. What's in this? Oh, wait, wait, I'm sorry. As an aside, I love that more restaurants and bars are expanding their mocktail offerings, and creating really well-balanced drinks with exciting and interesting flavor combinations that don't have alcohol. It's creating access for non-drinking folks to have better experiences at social gatherings with folks who do partake.

Jason Lee: [Russian 00:04:50]. Yes. Yes. And what I love about it is with regards to our exploration on Lagralane Spirits it's about the story, right? It's always about the story, whether it's the story of the cocktail, the mocktail, the historical construct of passing, whatever identity themes we're exploring. We definitely don't want to push away our non-drinking friends. So I too love that bars are opening up to mocktails.

Jason Lee: So, the French 75 cocktail, just to give you the recipe for that, and then I'll give you the recipe for this mocktail version. The cocktail of the French 75, it's one of my favorite cocktails. It's a lovely, lovely drink. It's two ounces of gin, three quarters ounce lemon juice, half ounce of simple syrup. You shake all of those

ingredients and strain them into a champagne flute, and then you float champagne on top. If you'd like a garnish, a lemon slice garnish would suffice. That's really a fantastic, fantastic beverage.

Jason Lee: The mocktail version, or some people would call it the virgin version, basically swaps out completely any alcohol. So you would have the three quarters ounce lemon juice, a half ounce of simple syrup, and you could float in a San Pellegrino sparkling water of your choice and enjoy a non-alcoholic version of the French 75.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, either way, it sounds very elegant. The vessel that you put the drink in, whether it's the cocktail or the mocktail, it's still going to give you a sense of, oh, this is nice. When you put your food on a particular platter, it matters what you put your food on and how you experience it, how you plate it.

Jason Lee: Glass it. Yes. Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Today in season two, episode two, we are talking about modern day passing and the roles we play to gain access to equity.

Jason Lee: It's funny. As actors, we have roles to play; we have situations to become. We have stories to tell so that we may exist in character on stage. So it's interesting to explore how, when, and why we become something else and for what reason?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, I agree. We have to ask ourselves, is there a point where that is taken too far? These roles to play, when Hollywood becomes a stage, life becomes the stage. In the film *Passing*, which we'll talk to two of my fellow executive producers later in the episode, there is a quote, "We all pass at something." So what's your thing, Mista Lee?

Jason Lee: Well, I can tell you, Mr. Lee is one role I do not play. Well, I play it with my kids, but I identify as Mr. Lee, but Mr. Lee was my dad and my grandfather, my adopted father's father, Simon Lee. I will always remember my memory of Simon, of grandpa, was we'd go visit Albert Lea, Minnesota. He would be in the basement, chewing his tobacco. Then my brother and I would sit and stare down and watch him down in the basement. Then we'd go play pickup sticks. Now our kids are all about their devices, but that's how we entertained ourselves.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Jason Lee: Good memories. But I should be asking you that since one main reason why we're doing a season two is because in season one, I did an ancestry.com DNA test and learned about my identity and some other crazy things. We said season two was going to be your turn. So where are we at? Did you do it? Did you take the test? Shall we see what you've been, shall we say, passing as?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, no.

Jason Lee: I bought you two kits before Christmas.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Well, they dried out and I just couldn't. I don't know why I would just see that thing and another thought would come in my head and I'd be washing kids' hair or have to make dinner or, you know. I'm not sure what it was that I didn't want to face. Although it sometimes excited me and sometimes it made me scared.

Jason Lee: Well, what made you scared about it? Honestly. What made you scared? Did you have apprehensions? Did you have fear?

Yvonne Lee: Well, I guess I don't know why, but is someone going to connect me to somebody who committed some kind of crime years and years ago? And finally I was the connector to what it was. All that CSI stuff that you love to watch. I know it's probably not real, nobody's going to come knocking on the door and said, "We finally got you."

Jason Lee: That's real. They actually... It's real.

Yvonne Lee: They do?

Jason Lee: They're actually doing that.

Yvonne Lee: So Jason, see? I mean... But anyway, I knew we were doing this thing and somehow I said it, and so I finally spit into that little tube. It took me... I had to figure out... I was like, how does a person spit? I was drawing it out. I would try to get my tongue in the right place, make the spit come out from underneath it [inaudible 00:09:56] did all that stuff.

Jason Lee: [inaudible 00:09:57]

Yvonne Lee: I dropped that sucker in the mail this week. And now I'll be getting the text messages that it's coming.

Jason Lee: Yes. Well, since we have to wait-

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. That's how they get you. Mm-hmm.

Jason Lee: Since we have to wait for your results to come back, and all jokes and all kidding aside, there's privacy concerns and there's all sorts of valid concerns that people have about spitting in a vial and sending it off to a website to add your DNA to the some master plan. But for me, my exploration of it all has always been from the story perspective. It's a little bit different than you, my love, because I didn't know my biological parents until I was an adult. So I went searching for that story with the love of my adopted family behind me. But I went searching for the unknown. You can go to your mom, and ask her some questions. But I still feel it's everyone's, I'll go so far to say birthright, to know from who we come from. So I'm proud of you for doing that and waylaying any fears that you might have had and doing it because we've been talking about this for a couple years now. So I just wanted to say-

Yvonne Lee: It's done.

Jason Lee: -good stuff.

Yvonne Lee: We did it, and-

Jason Lee: I'm glad-

Yvonne Lee: -it's going to be revealed with everybody.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: So I promised I shipped it out.

Jason Lee: You promise you did send it out?

Yvonne Lee: Yes. I promise. Cross my heart and I hope to be a Filipino and Black baby.

Jason Lee: Okay. Okay. Because I could help you out there. There are 37 different ways to spit in a vial. It's an art. It is an art.

Yvonne Lee: Yes.

Jason Lee: But okay. Since we can't do your big reveal just yet, I have a story that's relevant to this conversation of modern passing and is directly tied to my own crazy DNA trail.

Yvonne Lee: Oo, please.

Jason Lee: Well, so our listeners from season one will recall my adoption story and my meeting of my birth parents. Well, between season one and season two, earlier this year, 2022, my biological mother and my biological half-sister both passed away from COVID complications. This was in January. My birth mom passed away in November, but my half-sister was intubated and hospitalized for upwards of six weeks. Yeah. I mean, just COVID. Crazy. The only two people I know personally who have passed away from COVID. It's just pretty, pretty strange. I share this story respectfully because they have recently passed away, but it fits this conversation. As I always say, I'm all about the story. I'm fearless in exploration of the story.

Jason Lee: Saw a photo of my half-sister. Her father was also an African American man, different dads, same mom. Much more light skinned than I, and I'm pretty light skinned, but she was much more light skinned than I and lived with her mom, our German descended mother. Well, she was blonde. She was light-skinned living outside of Kansas City, Kansas or Kansas City, Missouri, whichever one it was. I think it was the Missouri side. She had dyed her hair. It looked as if she was passing. I was talking to some family members who knew her far better than I did. I met her at our wedding, Yvonne, in 2006, but some family members would talk about her father when they would come visit, either Nebraska or Iowa, and her father in the '70s and '80s wouldn't take her outside. He wouldn't let her go play outside because he was concerned for all of the various racial reasons. So I can understand and empathize.

Yvonne Lee: Because he didn't want her skin to get darker.

Jason Lee: Didn't want her skin to get darker. Didn't want her to play with some boys or girls who would know that she is half-Black and make that an issue. Any reasons why he made that choice for her are, they're reasons. So she chose, and this is, now sadly, I will never be able to ask this question, but it seems to me that she chose to identify more so with her German heritage than with her African heritage. She was light enough for that to occur. Now, I wonder, Yvonne, your thoughts on that. Does that mean she's passing? I mean, her mother is German. She white. What do you think about that?

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. I think it depends on the group of people who are around you. In this moment, I'm trying to exercise empathy with your passed sister who has passed in a sense that if I'm in a room of white people all the time, if I want to be accepted in that space, and she did grow up with her white mother, so she's going to identify with that side to where it makes her feel most comfortable and accepted and valued.

Jason Lee: Well, remember in episode one Yvonne of this season, Monique was talking about that. Monique Marshall and her husband DeMille were, were both sharing to us their stories of identity and when the community came around them. A lot of those moments for us all happen in college when we first get out of the house. But yeah, like Monique said, her mother's German. So was mine. Our fathers are of African descent. So there's that duality. That's why, historically speaking, I would love to put myself back in time and try to say, "Yo, that's not something I would ever do. I would never pass." But I can understand why people would make those choices. I mean, it was literally life or death in a lot of situations, and it still is in certain places.

Yvonne Lee: I was just thinking of another moment, if I was going to say not passing in the historical sense, but trying to figure out where I belonged, more like that. So it wasn't this kind of upward mobility that I was trying to have in using passing. But I do remember going to Macon, Georgia for the first time, from Arizona to Macon, Georgia to visit my dad's side of the family, and I had never seen so many Black people in one place ever.

Yvonne Lee: I felt so... Well, first of all, it's from being from Arizona, I suppose. But at that time, all I could think was, "Am I Black enough right now?" I could see people looking at me and seeing that I looked different because everybody really in that space had really, really dark skin and I didn't. I think at that time I was probably wearing my hair straight. So a lot of my Filipino features were coming out. I was trying to figure out how do I blend into some place where I clearly stand out like a sore thumb so that everybody else will go, "Oh, yeah, she Black." So if there was some kind of survival, it was to not be pointed out as so different from them.

Jason Lee: Yeah. It's interesting because I'm remembering growing up in Galesburg. We moved around a lot when I was a kid. But when we lived in Galesburg, Illinois, early '80s. So I'm like 10 to 13. My older brother was a really good athlete and played basketball and football, too. But he played a lot of basketball. A lot of his

buddies on his team would come over. We'd play in the driveway and of course I'd get my shot rejected left, and right. I'd try to throw something up and they're just knocking it away. This is before we got to Chicago, the suburbs of Chicago, which was a much more predominantly white environment. But I mean, to use the various racial tropes of the time, we were breaking out the cardboard with the jam box, the beat box. We were break dancing.

Yvonne Lee:

I remember that.

Jason Lee:

We were doing all of that back in Galesburg in the early '80. That was my kind of first time understanding, looking outside of my family, my immediate family that was raising me and seeing the community. This is after my mom in the late '70s was giving me Ebony magazines and Jet magazines for me to identify, to attach me to the culture. But then I started making friends. I started seeing people, and so that shapes you.

Yvonne Lee:

Yeah, it does. Yeah. It makes me think of when it comes to your passing. So what does passing gain us today? What kind of access does it open up? What kind of sacrifices have to be made in the process? What you're saying, Jason, what you gained by not having to pass is your whole self, right?

Jason Lee:

Yeah.

Yvonne Lee:

You get to bring in that other part of you that you didn't have before. What cost me in that moment in Macon was that I didn't let other people know that I was Filipino. I'm just Black. I'm not Filipino. So I give up that part of my identity in order to survive in that situation.

Jason Lee:

I think that access is important. But at what cost? Like, if your parents named you Shaneka or Hennessy, and then you try to go on a job... There's data out there that says if you have these certain names, you're going to get passed over for Jane or Mary. Why can't Shaneka who's got a 4.0 GPA from so and so get the job? Why can't she just be herself?

Yvonne Lee:

Yeah. So this modern form of passing means that we're all trying to attain this. What did you... I think you might have said something in another conversation, white male and Yale?

Jason Lee:

Pale, male and Yale.

Yvonne Lee:

Oh, pale, male and Yale.

Jason Lee:

The American diplomats for the longest time.

Yvonne Lee:

Right. And then you might add straight in there.

Jason Lee:

Sure.

Yvonne Lee:

We're all whatever we can pass off as so that we can attain what we envision the person who has the most power. We're going to do that so that we can have access to what we believe.

Jason Lee: Let's be real. It's not just obtaining. It's surviving. In order to survive in many cases, you have to contort yourself to fit in a certain narrative.

Yvonne Lee: Do you think that your half-sister was trying to survive?

Jason Lee: No. This is an assumption. I'll answer with empathy and compassion in my heart. I have no ill will towards them. I honestly think she was more connecting with her mother than trying to survive. She was working in the tech space. She had a great job. Historically, are we all trying to survive? Yeah. I mean, anytime you go outside, I'll say this is a Black man. Anytime I go outside, I'm mindful of where I am all the time. There's always an act of survival for us all in this landscape. But there's also an identity, existential survival, I think, that's more in play than an actual physical survival. To be herself. But if you identify... And this is again what we talked about in episode one, right? Like, if her mom is German, that's how you identify, then so be it. Okay. That's okay. Right? I'm a historian. I'm not a psychiatrist. So I don't want to kind of fake like I have some answers here.

Jason Lee: But yes, I will say that she was trying to survive, but I don't think she was trying to survive physically. I think she was mentally trying to stay connected in survival to her mother who she was living with. The historicism about passing in all of the various elements, sexually, immigration-

Yvonne Lee: Gender.

Jason Lee: -namewise, gender, you name it. Race.

Yvonne Lee: Societal roles, societal identities.

Jason Lee: Fitting into the dominant culture. How do you fit into the culture and how long do you play the game in order to try to fit into that dominant culture?

Yvonne Lee: Right? Before it just tears out your soul.

Jason Lee: Before it tears you apart.

Yvonne Lee: And that is a segue into bringing in our guests, Chaz Ebert and Brenda Robinson, executive producers of Passing. I'm really excited to talk to these two women who have definitely dealt with this question of who do we have to be in these spaces that aren't traditionally made for us.

Jason Lee: Folks, what Yvonne did not mention just now is that she is also an executive producer of Passing alongside these two incredible women, and I got a special thanks, which I'm very proud of.

Yvonne Lee: We had fun on this one. It was awesome.

Jason Lee: Brenda Robinson is producer and philanthropist. She is the current board chair of Film Independent and a partner at Gamechanger Films. Robinson, also a member of Film Financing Collective Impact Partners was a financier on the Oscar-winning documentary Icarus, alongside us, among other projects. Her executive producer credits include Rebecca Hall's Passing, United Skates and the

upcoming Empire of Ebony documentary directed by Lisa Cortez. She previously was Film Independent's vice chair, and also has roles including serving on the board of the Representation Project founded by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, and advisor to the Redford Center and is board chair of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. She is also a member of the Recording Academy and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

Yvonne Lee: Jason and I have been friends with Brenda for many, many years now, both on and off the court. She is truly one of the most compassionate, elegant, art loving, loving a day at Disneyland women I know. This podcast is really just my excuse to get Brenda on the phone for an hour.

Yvonne Lee: Joining Brenda is our friend Chaz Ebert, who is a three P triple threat: publisher, producer, and philanthropist.

Jason Lee: Ah. I like the sound effect.

Yvonne Lee: Do you like my joke?

Jason Lee: I do

Yvonne Lee: Well, babe, you are well on your way to joining the PPP club. Maybe that's why you two get along so well. Chaz is the CEO of Ebert Companies, which publish movie reviews at rogerebert.com and produce shows and movies at Ebert Productions and Black Leopard Protections. She is a co-founder and producer of the Roger Ebert Film Festival, Ebert Fest, entering its 22nd year at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The Ebert Film Festival resumed at the Virginia theater April 20th to the 23rd in connection with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Yvonne Lee: For over 30 years, she has participated in film festivals all over the world. But what she most values is her establishment of outlets at the festivals where she encourages and supports emerging writers, filmmakers, and technologists with her endowment of scholarships, internships, or awards. Along with her late husband, Roger, she is the subject of the award-winning documentary Life Itself, directed by Steve James and based on the New York Times best-selling memoir of Roger Ebert. Previously as a civil rights attorney, Chaz was named lawyer of the year by the Constitutional Rights Foundation.

Yvonne Lee: Okay. Well, there is so much more I could say about these incredible women, but I can't wait any longer to bring them on. So I encourage you to read their full bios on our show notes.

Yvonne Lee: Hello, my friends. Hello.

Jason Lee: Hello, hello.

Brenda Robinson: Hello.

Yvonne Lee: Hi, Brenda.

Jason Lee: Brenda and Chaz, thanks so much for being here with us.

Chaz Ebert: Thank you for inviting us.

Jason Lee: Yeah, we're thrilled. We're looking forward to just rapping it. You guys were three co-executive producers of the wonderful movie *Passing*, Rebecca Hall's *Passing*. Let's dive right in there and whoever wants to grab this first, either you, Chaz or Brenda. How did you get involved with *Passing*? How did that come across your desk?

Brenda Robinson: Well, I have to say, first of all, how thrilled I am to be in this space. I'm so happy that *Passing* could be yet another opportunity for us to be brought together. To say that it was an honor to be a part of *Passing* really was an understatement. For me personally, this was truly a full circle moment. I first read the book *Passing* by Nella Larsen as a college freshman in African American Studies 101, and in that course just learned so much about my history that I hadn't been exposed to in high school and in beyond. I remember being fascinated at the idea that this phenomenon actually existed, that people actually engaged in this form of identity and just creating a way of existing that allowed them to infiltrate spaces and go undetected.

Brenda Robinson: So I remember going home and speaking with my mother about it and just sharing with her how impacted I was by the story. Then that's when she told me about our own family's history and experience with passing, and it relates to identity. It relates to colorism, and she then proceeded to tell me all the relatives who I'd never met, grandparents who lived as white, and the relatives we have now who pass deliberately to the point of changing names and changing circles. So to learn in that moment just how much this still persists and to think about why people make those choices was incredible to me.

Brenda Robinson: So this project then, 20-plus years later, came across my desk through my partnership in Gamechanger Films. I remember Jeri Lynn Dreyfus, my business partner, bringing this to us. I remember the reaction that I had. It was just an immediate, even before I read the script or saw anything, I just thought, "This is so important. I have to be a part of this somehow. There's so much personal meaning for me to tell this story," and of course, to be able to come to all of you, to Chaz Ebert, who has always been an extraordinary support to me and mentor and friend in this industry and in life. And you, Jason and Yvonne, us just ascending together in this industry, finding things of importance that we could collaborate on. It was really an honor for me to be able to bring this to all of you and for us to come together and decide that we would cast that vote of confidence in this story, in this director and in these voices.

Brenda Robinson: This has been a life-changing experience for me because it really showed me what storytelling is supposed to feel and what our roles can be in terms of just having impact and be able to help filmmakers be heard and to actually have their voices pushing forth issues that are so critical. It's really an incredible experience.

Jason Lee: Thank you for that context. I was an African American history major and one of my courses was literature and I too read it. It was an introduction to me on the history behind the concept of passing. So as soon as you brought it to us, it was a no-brainer for us to get involved, but Yvonne, please, grab the mic.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Chaz, would you want to tell us... We've told a little bit on previous episodes about what passing is. Do you want to give us a little bit about what the film is and maybe what has been one of the more unique experiences for you as you've gone along?

Chaz Ebert: Well, I lived on the West side of Chicago, and when I was growing up, it was very common to hear people talk about this phenomenon of passing, someone who was born Black, African American, and who lived secretly as white or sometimes South American or Italian because it was easier for them to get jobs, maybe to marry someone in a higher income bracket. In the old days, and I'm talking old days before voting was a right that we all had, someone who wanted to vote maybe had to be white. Someone who wanted to own property, someone who wanted to be admitted to institutions of higher education. There were very, very many reasons that people would choose to pass as a different race and show up, change their identity in order to be part of society.

Chaz Ebert: So we would hear many stories, and I knew I had cousins who lived in Detroit, who when they visited us, we were confused. Why were our cousins white and we were Black? Well, they were Black, but some of them chose to live as white, some chose to live as Black. But we all loved each other in our family. I wrote up an essay for the film called The Freedom to Pass. And I talked about these, when I was in my neighborhood, there were two ladies. I lived in a Black neighborhood on the West side of Chicago, and there were two ladies that we called them the two white ladies who lived down the block, but we didn't understand why they were living there.

Chaz Ebert: They lived very happily with all the neighbors, with everyone, everyone got along. But every now and then this limousine would pull up. The ladies, their names were significant. The mother's name was Adele. I thought she was about maybe perhaps 90-ish or so, and her daughter was named Miss Roebuck, like Sears Roebuck and Company. So we didn't understand the connection. Was Roebuck a descendant of the Roebuck who founded Sears Roebuck? If so, why didn't we know he was Black or why didn't we know if he was Black or... It was just very confusing to us. So-

Yvonne Lee: Wow.

Chaz Ebert: -when Brenda gave us an opportunity to become involved in this project, it was something that of course we were interested in. My only question is why was Rebecca Hall, who I knew from Vicky Cristina Barcelona, and a lot of other, why was this white English actress going to direct a movie about passing? What did she know about it? So one of the things I wanted to do first was investigate why she wanted to do it and how she was going to approach it because I didn't want it to be, maybe remember the movies when we were growing up like Pinky and Imitation of Life?

Jason Lee: Uh-huh.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm.

Chaz Ebert: And sometimes they would have someone white who was portraying a Black actress. I didn't want it to be that I wanted it to be more authentic. In talking to Rebecca and finding out that her mother was the acclaimed opera singer Maria Ewing, and Maria Ewing's father or grandfather, father I guess, had passed as white, I understood her interest in the story. I knew that she was very serious about telling it in a very authentic way. I always trust Brenda when she brings me a project, too, and I heard that you two were involved and I love working with you guys as a team. So that also, that part of it was a no-brainer.

Jason Lee: Yeah. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: I will say how I think that part of the story that you just talked about, like why would she be the person to tell this story? Then I remember thinking when I saw Vicky Cristina Barcelona, I was looking at her, like, "Hmm. There's something I recognize," but I couldn't put a finger on it. So when I heard the story, it actually made complete sense to me because I got that feeling. But I love the intermingling of how we see our histories and cultures meld together so to have someone that maybe outwardly appears white to be able to show how all of our histories come together from a very personal point of view. I think it gives us a reason to come together instead of being apart.

Jason Lee: I too share the thought whatever Brenda says goes. We love partnering with you, Chaz. We love partnering with you, Brenda. I'm just going to say this here on the podcast. I loved Lagralane's presence as executive producers with you two. I got out of the way because I loved the idea of presenting Black female faces in the seat that can help make movies get made too. So tip cap to you three for executive producing and helping Nina and Rebecca shepherd it along from that lens. It's important.

Brenda Robinson: I just have to say how grateful I am that I have the three of you to navigate this industry with. I think about finding good partners to help push things forward that are important to me, and that vote of confidence is something that really continues to drive me forward in wanting to help other people. It's nice to have. That level of support is very meaningful for me, and you all always take the time to express that at every turn. You may not always realize how much you're lifting me up by standing behind me when I find something important, and I want the same from the three of and this is why we are able to be in community with one another. I hope that that sends a message to the industry, that partnership, that collaboration-

Chaz Ebert: Yeah. It's important.

Jason Lee: Very.

Brenda Robinson: ... that spirit that we have is the best way to succeed.

Chaz Ebert: One of the things that I wanted to say about being in partnership is... I have to address this because I'm also a publisher of movie reviews and my late husband Roger was a film critic. So most times we did not get involved in production of movies. He's done it before. In fact, he wrote a movie, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, which became a cult classic in the '70s. But I'm just a producer in my soul, not just producers of television or movies. I've always been the one in the family or in my school or in an organization who pull things together. So that's just... And I'm a storyteller. I like to tell stories of what we call the forgotten people, the forgotten heroes, or forgotten stories that history hasn't told. I feel that that's part of my mission because I want to do things that encourage empathy in others and encourage kindness and compassion and forgiveness. To me, movies are one of the ways to do that.

Chaz Ebert: So I do separate out my publishing from... There's a way that we do it. We put a firewall between my publishing and my producing. But I just have to mention that because you are going to see me producing a lot more movies.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, yay!

Jason Lee: We can't wait, but yay.

Yvonne Lee: Yay

Jason Lee: That's an interesting, what could be a conflict of interest, I respect what you're saying has about setting that firewall in between.

Brenda Robinson: The industry's all the better for that.

Yvonne Lee: I think one of the reasons I was so excited to have you guys on this is because you're able to share this kind of personal history with *Passing* and share that in connection to why that story is important and why we want to produce more and why we need to be in charge of the stories that we're telling, to be crass, from the roota to the toota. That's what we need to do.

Chaz Ebert: May I? I have to say one thing before we-

Yvonne Lee: Yes, yes.

Chaz Ebert: -move away from that. I just have to mention the amazing acting jobs that Ruth Negga and Tessa Thompson-

Jason Lee: Truly, truly.

Yvonne Lee: They were divine.

Chaz Ebert: The amazing directing that Rebecca Hall did in her directorial debut for that film, and actually Andre Holland-

Jason Lee: The entire cast.

Yvonne Lee: So good.

Chaz Ebert: The entire cast, they don't get mentioned enough. So I just had to mention them and give them their props.

Jason Lee: Absolutely. I'm tipping cap to editors. I'm tipping cap to that entire movie, the whole process of the creation of that film, the performances, the editing, everything was just spot on.

Chaz Ebert: Edward Groll, the cinematographer.

Brenda Robinson: Yeah, I was going to say-

Chaz Ebert: -who just won a Spirit Award.

Yvonne Lee: Absolutely. Everyone who said, why are you filming it in black and white? And trying to tell Rebecca to do it a different way. And this ends up happening, being acknowledged for it. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. There was a lot of love on the set. I remember a lot of love on the set. Yeah.

Jason Lee: Yeah. This is going to get us to our confessional. I believe Yvonne's going to ask the question.

Yvonne Lee: Okay. Our big question.

Jason Lee: So, Brenda and Chaz, are you ready for your confessional?

Yvonne Lee: Our big question surrounds the theme of passing, as we've been speaking about, and your question is what more needs to be done so that people of color can show up authentically and not have to pass for anything?

Brenda Robinson: I think it starts with a greater acceptance of our stories and normalizing that. Now we, as people of color, are often finding ourselves having to adjust to a setting or a circumstance or an environment. I've always wondered, where does that come from? Why is that something that has become normalized? So we tell stories to humanize, and it is a way to allow other cultures to access each other.

Brenda Robinson: To the extent we can continue elevating these voices and the artistic choices that they're making, this is where those doors will be kicked open. That's what we're trying to do with our work in this space is making sure that there are obviously more seats, but that we begin to accept these things as a given, that no one feels they have to wear these masks. We don't have to hide or adjust our own identities, that they're all accepted as something that is a normal part of just the human fabric.

Chaz Ebert: So back in the 1970s, I think, I was an attorney. I was a litigator, and I worked for the equal employment opportunity commission, doing employment discrimination, litigation, representing people who were discriminated against because of their race or their age or, even back then, gender or religion. One of the things that someone told me when they knew that I was being getting involved with the movie *Passing*, and they knew my background, they said, "Isn't

it wonderful that people don't have to worry about anything like that today?" Nella Larsen's novel was in 1929. I said, "You'd be surprised even how much of today..." Things have improved. No doubt about it. I'm the first one to say that things have improved.

Chaz Ebert: But, well, do you believe that within the last two to five years, online they did a test where they would send resumes. The people had the very same exact qualifications, but they changed the names. Like, Shanekwa Jones and her resume would get passed over, whereas Sally Jones, they would look at her. So a lot of discrimination is insidious. It's something that's insinuated so firmly into the fabric of society. We are trying to overcome it and confront it and name it and weed it out. But sometimes there can be an unconscious bias that people don't even know they're carrying out.

Chaz Ebert: What do we do? We must just keep showing up as our authentic selves. We shouldn't hide who we are, what we like, what we believe in who we stand up for, what we won't take. We just have to keep showing up as ourselves, and we have to get, as I think it was Stacy Smith said, we have to get the keys to the kingdom so that women, if they are in the C suites, they're going to hire more women. I mean, we have to make the decision-making positions mirror society.

Jason Lee: It's happening in football, right? There's the Rooney Rule in professional football. There's a head coach down in Miami right now who is mixed race like myself, Black and white, and Brian Flores the previous coach of the Miami Dolphins. There's a whole thing going on in football right now, too. So this reckoning continues. And I love, Chaz, what you said about showing up, about continuing to show up as ourselves. Brenda, what you're talking about, partnering with like-minded individuals who can help to move needles to show up and advance narratives that show us in our whole totality. I'm moved. I love it.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah, me too. When I think about, too, when everybody accepts that we've grown up in a racist community, for me also being able to understand what have I internalized growing up in this racist community with these racist ideals that I don't even know that I've taken on? Sometimes when I do walk into a room with powerful people or all white people, there is that moment where I have to go, "It's okay." And I never knew where that came from until I just started kind of really understanding, like when I had to teach myself more about racism and where it came from, and this is something I had to do when I was out of high school into college. That's how long it took because it wasn't in my learning early on. It's something I had to seek out and still have moments of, have to make sure that I am not taking actions where I've internalized the way that racism can make me feel powerless.

Chaz Ebert: One of the other things, and this may sound like pie in the sky, but I'm a firm believer that the other thing that's going to change hearts and minds is, I hate to even say it, but love. We really do have to love and respect ourselves first, our families, our communities, each other. I think that sometimes something happens in a whole wave of whether it's called respect or compassion or empathy, but something happens. I think that we're at one of those moments in

history where we're going to start seeing more of it because we're going to be confronted with so many things. There was George Floyd. Here's Ukraine. Breonna Taylor. They're so many things happening that our eyes are opening. We're awakening and our hearts are opening, too.

Jason Lee: Yes. The 2020s have been one thing after the other, right? These past two years, there's been a lot going on and the reckonings continue and it is compassion. It is empathy that moves us forward. Otherwise, we devolve into the characterization of hate and that's not a place that I want to live in.

Chaz Ebert: Right.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Well, I know I say one thing that you guys have been doing, Brenda, with the Annenberg Initiative, you're the chair of that. You're in the board of Film Independent, but also Film Independent launched a fellowship partnership with Netflix. Chaz, you have all of these scholarships and endowments that you've been giving to storytellers. Those are incredible. What do you feel about the impact?

Chaz Ebert: One of the films that I was an executive producer on is called A Most Beautiful Thing. It's about the first African American rowing team in the United States. They were pursuing going to the Olympics, and I don't want to tell too much in case someone watches it. It was a team from a school on the West side of Chicago. The thing about the film is not whether they made it to the Olympics or not. But what happened to those young men who, when they started doing teamwork, not one of them... I mean, they ended up opening their own businesses.

Chaz Ebert: They ended up reaching back and bringing along some... And these were former gang members. I have to mention that. They ended up bringing along other young people in their neighborhood who wanted to do good. They were determined to interrupt the cycle of generational trauma. That's something that I just think is really important. So I try to support films that have some sort of redeeming social value. Now, I'm also one day going to probably support a film that will make some money, but right now this is what I like doing.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: I love that because the impact of that film, when we talk about what can be done so that people of color can show up authentically. I mean, it feels so simplistic to say that, but that's the core truth. That's one of the things that we do is we show young people what they are capable of instead of saying, "This is the only thing you can be." So I cannot wait to see that movie.

Chaz Ebert: Another thing about that film that was so important, Mary Mazzio was the director, but she went to Congress and testified about... She got Congressman

Danny Davis. I think he was from the seventh district in Chicago. She got him to hold hearings on whether violence is a disease. I know there's a woman in New York named Erica Ford. She's the head of something called Life Camp. Their motto is peace is a lifestyle. She's a violence interrupter. I just admire the people who go out and put themselves on the front line day after day to try to make things better.

Jason Lee: Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm.

Jason Lee: Brenda, what-

Chaz Ebert: Brenda probably has a million things coming up.

Brenda Robinson: I wanted to close with us just talking about something that all of us are thinking about in this moment. It really relates to just presenting another example of how you can have impact by presenting a narrative about a community, and that project is the Empire of Ebony.

Chaz Ebert: Ah, yes.

Jason Lee: Yes.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm.

Brenda Robinson: All four of us are executive producers. What I love about-

Chaz Ebert: Oh, again? I love it!

Brenda Robinson: -that project... Yes. The four of us and there's real representation on this project, and there's representation at the directing level, at the producing level, and at the investment level. That's what you want. That is authenticity on a story. So we're so proud to once again be supporters of a project that helps create an opportunity to present a celebratory narrative of the Black community. There are many different aspects to being Black as we see in our discussions about identity. All of these stories deserve their time. So this is once again a story... Ironically, we all have a strong connection to Chicago in some way or another. We've all spent time there and sort of discovered our passion for the arts there. Chaz and I through film and Jason and Yvonne through theater.

Yvonne Lee: Mm-hmm.

Chaz Ebert: And Brenda, we both are on the board of the Lyric Opera.

Brenda Robinson: Yes, that's right.

Yvonne Lee: Oh, yay!

Brenda Robinson: Another thing we have in common. So we believe in supporting strong Chicago institutions, has been a long time supporter of places the Steppenwolf Theatre

and Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Art Institute. I'm on the board of Steppenwolf. Jason and Yvonne have acted with ensemble members from Steppenwolf. So we have so many through lines and things in common. What I love about this story is that it really reflects 70 plus years of African American history and culture. Chicago very much is a character in this story, but all of us are characters as well. So we're so thrilled that we have the privilege of working very closely with Linda Johnson Rice of the Johnson Publishing Company family, that she had confidence in this film team to bring this history to life was something that we certainly don't take for granted.

Brenda Robinson: But for us to then have the privilege of having the dynamic duo of Lisa Cortez as our director, Roger Ross Williams as our lead producer, and for them to treat this as responsibly as they did on The Apollo, their other incredible work together, we are just grateful that we have this opportunity to showcase not only what was happening in Black culture, but what was happening in America at the time. So the film provides so much context and you see how one seminal event can lead to the next and so forth. So it's the story of just entrepreneurship and resilience that John H. Johnson, a Black man could start a company with \$500 loan from his mother against her furniture and turn it into a \$200 million plus empire. That was no easy feat. That was a big deal for that time. And now-

Chaz Ebert: It's a big deal for any time.

Jason Lee: Any time. It's [inaudible 00:55:04] yes.

Yvonne Lee: Right.

Brenda Robinson: Yes. So for us to see ourselves in those pages and Jason and Yvonne, I know you have a very close connection to that. For Chaz Ebert to be featured in those pages-

Chaz Ebert: I was!

Brenda Robinson: -we are on this podcast-

Chaz Ebert: I was, yes.

Brenda Robinson: -with living history right here. And that's so-

Yvonne Lee: So cool!

Brenda Robinson: A big deal.

Chaz Ebert: I was the first African American enforcement attorney in region five at the Environmental Protection Agency. And so Ebony did a story on me and I remember-

Yvonne Lee: Wow.

Jason Lee: Wow.

Chaz Ebert: ... the head of the department was so proud that he took the Ebony issue and he paraded it all through the office where everybody could see. Yeah.

Jason Lee: That's incredible.

Yvonne Lee: That is incredible.

Jason Lee: My story isn't as impressive. I remember to this day, my white mama handed me a copy of Ebony and that was her way and her attempt to connect with me and to connect me to my heritage. We lost her in '02, but I will always love and thank her for that attempt.

Jason Lee: Now, that attempt to led me to read a lot of ads, advertising grow cream so that was how I was able to figure out my Afro back in the day. But I meaningfully, jokes aside, connected deeply with my mom, literally, through Ebony magazine. Yeah.

Yvonne Lee: I think that was where I saw my first connection of Black beauty. I lived in Arizona. So it was me, my Black father, my Filipino mama, a couple Black families down the street. There wasn't enough for me to consume on television or in other ways. So to see these beautiful people on the cover and on the pages, but I was just like, "Wow, look how beautiful we can be." That was the part that I remember. I was not left out of the narrative because of these magazines. So I'm so happy to be a part of it.

Yvonne Lee: Last episode, we talked about how do you get into the room? One of the things that we all talked about was we all knew that when we were saying getting into the room, we knew that the room was white, right? I'm sitting here the four of us in this virtual space, Zoom room, going, "Oh, no, the room is this." I don't have to fight to get into this. This is where I belong. What more needs to be done so that POC people can show up authentically and not have to pass for anything? And we talked about self-love. We talked about stopping generational poverty and generational violence and uplifting our stories. I'll say self-love again. I think those are all wonderful things that we can focus on when it comes to showing up authentically in these spaces, whether it's a room full of white people or room full of Black people, and really creating opportunity.

Chaz Ebert: We also can't allow our voting rights to be taken away. There are laws now in different states, like in Florida, where they don't want you to teach Black history and they're talking about critical race theory as something bad. They don't even know what critical race theory is. And we have to continue to make sure that our rights are not chipped away.

Yvonne Lee: Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am.

Chaz Ebert: That's very important, too. We have to be in the financial world.

Yvonne Lee: Yeah. Well, I'd like to thank you guys all for being here with us.

Jason Lee: Thank you both for your time. Thank you for your wonderful talents and gifts that you're giving to the industry and personally. Yvonne and I love you guys very much, and we value our friendship with you and we look forward to further conversations.

Chaz Ebert: Well, thank you so much for inviting us.

Yvonne Lee: Absolutely. "Camouflage is a game we like all to play, but our secrets are as surely revealed by what we want to seem to be as by what we want to conceal."

Jason Lee: Oui, oui.

Yvonne Lee: Thank you for listening and...

Jason Lee: Please...

Yvonne Lee: Drink...

Jason Lee: Responsibly.

Yvonne Lee: Responsibly.

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