

APT Conversation #2 With Tsholo Khalema & Jan Jennings

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feel, theatre, important, test, panini press, opportunities, talk, safe, terms, mental health, people, artists, conversation, production, panini, understudy, requirements, care, masks, banged

SPEAKERS

Jan, Tsholo

Tsholo 00:02

Hello, hello, everybody. My name is Tsholo Khalema and I continue my APT conversations with the artist named...

Jan 00:16

Jan! I'm sorry,

Tsholo 00:18

Yeah!

Jan 00:20

I'm so sorry, hello everybody

Tsholo 00:22

Don't be sorry! You express yourself how you want to

Jan 00:26

I don't know, I felt - I felt hyped up when you did that, with - you gave me a blank and I had to fill it.

Tsholo 00:32

We can't We can't be shy about saying our names

Jan 00:36

You're right

Tsholo 00:37

You know? It's - this how we gotta move, confidently you know

Jan 00:41

Yeah my name is a gift from God. So I have to show up.

Tsholo 00:44

It does and you are a gift. Are you okay? Yeah. Okay, just banged casually into my desk. Oh ok, I'm sorry that happened. Bad desk. Okay, cool. Um, you've been good. Did I did I ask that question already? Because I feel like how are you?

Jan 01:04

Apart from banging my knee on my desk I'm actually very fine. I feel like life is getting busier and busier. And just trying to keep on top of it. Like my calendar is really colourful right now.

Tsholo 01:21

I hear that.

Jan 01:21

I just gotta remember to check the calendar. But everything's okay. How are you? What are you up to?

Tsholo 01:27

I'm really busy, you know? It's late. And I'm in Ottawa right now.

Jan 01:35

Oh yeah, you are.

Tsholo 01:36

Yeah. So it's, you know, it's one of those things that you got to do what you got to do.

Jan 01:43

The hustle

Tsholo 01:44

It's the hustle. I'm currently also in a run.

Jan 01:47

Oh my goodness

Tsholo 01:48

I'm in two places at once. No, I'm just joking, I'm not in two places at once. Um, it's I think it's something that we'll talk about with today's topic, actually. But yes, I am currently in Ottawa. Things are tiptop. I'm tired. But today's topic. Are you ready for this?

Jan 02:08

I'm so ready. I'm so ready. What are we talking about today?

Tsholo 02:10

Adapting to evolving health and safety requirements.

Jan 02:15

Ooh, this is a good one. And it's like, I feel like perfect actually, because I just, Well, today - today, I just had training. I'm actually a COVID officer for a play that will be running next month. So this is pretty on brand for the day I had today.

Tsholo 02:41

That's really amazing. So check this out. Um, 2020 came this huge thing called the panini press.

Jan 02:49

Yes, you used my word!

Tsholo 02:49

Yeah, of course, I used the word! I remembered from last time. So we have this panini press that sort of like turned the world upside down. We talked about how you know, it influenced theatre and the digital world. And now we're going to talk about like how we keep ourselves safe. But it's not just talking about the panini press. And - it's also talking about other evolving health requirements that we need as artists as well. I feel like we can get into that. I mean, that also is like mental health. Yeah, that's also, you know, health as a human. You know, and the idea of the show must go on - all of those kinds of things. I think we need to talk about how the panini press sort of changed the, the wave of how the - how do you call it, the projection? - of how things are gonna go, in terms of theatre or how things are going in theatre - I think so and I felt like it also has changed the sense of urgency that people have, because people are honestly just tired. And so I think people are actually really saying, like, No, I actually can't do this right now. And so yeah, I'm excited to get into these topics. And - conversate! Yeah, so like, okay, so like, in 2020, I pretty much stayed home, you know, because I was like, as - I mean, I was really, it was really a strange time. It was a scary time. Oh, yeah. It was a lonely time, you know, and I literally was like, I was home by myself. I couldn't go visit my parents because they're older and I don't, I don't want to risk my parents. And traveling was really prohibited back then. Um, so the only thing we had really, back then was just the masks idea, of wearing masks. There was no real testing of understanding what it is, like, I don't remember ever having that. Um, there was there was no vaccine back in 2020. There was no vaccine at all in 2020. Maybe it came later on, but I don't remember ever - There was just a lot of like, stay inside, and don't go anywhere. It was such a strange time. You know what I'm saying? So like, you mentioned also like that you, today, had training as a COVID Officer. What does that entail?

Jan 05:25

What does that even mean, right?

Tsholo 05:26

What is - what is? What - There's a new job created!

Jan 05:30

Listen, my resume is very interesting.

Tsholo 05:33

Yerah! Cause I'm like, you're an artist, you do all these other things, I don't know if we have to introduce ourselves again. But I feel like, I feel like they know now. But like, yo - you also have created like - not you, but like, there's a new job that's been created within the arts. And can you talk more about that?

Jan 05:52

Sure. Okay. So, I don't know if you've seen that sometimes plays have to stop running because somebody has gotten sick. And while everybody tries their best, and tries their due diligence to make sure they're healthy things happen. And so insert the COVID officer. Sounds real serious, and it actually is, because my job is to make sure everybody is tested, you know, before entering the space for rehearsal, or even the show, so that there is no risk of a show being canceled, and everybody can enjoy what they came there to watch. And so really what that entailed was me going to training, learning how to properly do a COVID test on myself first. So that I can give the actors or others, the tech team, the directors, all of them the proper instructions to do the tests in front of me. Yeah. And thankfully, there was PPE for the officer, so we kept ourselves safe. But really, and truly, it meant putting the swab all the way down your nose and looking up to the sky, and asking if there's any symptoms that they've exhibited in the past, you know, a couple of hours or a few days and stuff like that, even asking if they self-tested at home, was something I had to ask. And we had time training - until that we had timers, like you put the swabbing solution for two minutes. Great. And then after you put it on the rapid test, and wait 15 minutes, and after the 15 minutes, if we get a clear, that's when we can tell the actor, whoever, you're good to go, you can take your mask off now. And it didn't end there. We also got trained to watch. I was like the COVID police, if you're coughing, I'm watching you, if I see something that's suspicious, like, you look a bit tired, it looks like you might be exhibiting some sick symptoms, I have to go to the stage manager and talk to them about that. And even if they tested positive, it was my job to discreetly go up to them and let them know that they are positive. And so they can remove themselves from the space. And then I'll test them three more times. And after that, if it's still the same result, then I would have to go to the stage manager and they can make a decision whether to either remove that person or shut down the whole day. And so because of the nature of the job that I am training to do, you know, it's very serious. And like, I feel that it's necessary, and I don't like feeling like I'm a COVID snitch for lack of a better term, but we have to keep ourselves safe, cause some shows get canceled and all these things. And you know what? Like, yes, safety is so important and keeping people safe are so important. We also have to keep in mind the audience who may have bought the ticket, right? They bought a ticket to come see you on Wednesday, but the show's canceled. What if you don't have time to watch it next week? You know, and so this is just trying to ensure that everybody's safe and happy and and can enjoy theatre again. Um, and, and in an as normal way possible, if normal even exists anymore, but whatever this time is right now. It's just trying to make sure that people have an opportunity to see live theatre again. And so. Yeah. I won't lie. I was a little bit nervous. But um, we also have to, when we start - when we actually get into the job, we also have to self-test everyday and send proof that we're good. We're good, you know. I also happen to be triple vaccinated. But still, anything can happen, right? And so like I would, I would have to test before I even go to work, when I start. So that was COVID tr- officer training.

Tsholo 10:20

Wow, that's intense. I feel like it's intense, but it's so good. And in the fact that theatre companies are taking that initiative to make sure that whoever's inside the room is safe, so that they can feel free to do the work. I know that for for The First Stone, what they did is that everybody had an understudy. So I thought that was such a brilliant way of also helping the production sort of stay safe, so that the whole production doesn't have to shut down in case somebody has to be out, for example, why I'm in Ottawa, right? I double-booked myself in, in different ways, right, I am in a program, a directing program. And I was also in The First Stone, so what they did is that they had an understudy, uh, do the role while I was away, which took the pressure off for my own mental health, and also, like, really took the pressure off having to jeopardize the production or jeopardize an opportunity for myself. I was grateful, like I, I as a Black trans man, um, opportunities don't always come, you know, I'm always out hustling for new opportunities, always trying to learn new things. But I have to take opportunities as they come. And I was just blessed enough to work with New Harlem Production. Donna Michelle St. Bernard, who is just such um, a leader in terms of even like, care for, for staff - care for cast and production team - care for everybody that she works with. And I think that's really, really important. So like, that's another way of doing it is having understudies and companies investing in that. It's a little bit costly, I'm sure, I don't know the logistics of things. But still, it's - it gives other people opportunities to be able to perform in case that happens in case somebody gets sick with something. In case something because like, understanding like theatre, there's been this concept of the show must go on no matter what. So and so's auntie blah, blah, blah, passed away. You know, we still have a show to do. I'm sorry that happened, but but that can't happen, because artists are also humans. Right? And so we need care, we need to realize that our lives outside of our - of the art that we create is also very important. That has to be seen, you know, and so yeah, anything to add to that in terms of like, how important it is for these adapting, evolving health and safety requirements, how how important they are in terms of like, safety.

Jan 10:47

So, I know you touched upon mental health. And I wanted to ask you, you know, you talked about double-booking yourself. Was there ever a moment of guilt, like feeling like, you shouldn't be able to have all the things at one time? And did that affect your mental health in any way when considering all the things and actually trying to do both at the same time?

Tsholo 14:11

Oh my god, I felt immense guilt. I felt undeserving, you know, I struggled with it. And it wasn't up until I had a conversation with Donna Michelle about the situation, where it just felt like she supported me. And I wasn't made to feel guilty for for double-booking myself. It wasn't an intentional thing to do that. But I wasn't made to feel guilty or, you know, dismissed in any way. She just simply said, you know, just give me a few hours. Let me talk to the team and see what we can do. And they came up with the strategy to help me. And it - I think that's what changed the way I thought of, of myself and the way I thought of the situation, because I literally felt stuck. And there was no other way. No other conversation I had helped. And so having somebody that is willing to understand your situation and willing to find - help you find ways to resolve it, it was just really, really amazing to me. And it really made me feel seen. It made me feel heard. It made me feel like you know what, like, mistakes happen. But life goes on. And

that nothing - everything can be fixed. You know? And I guess it's the right people that, you know, that, if you're willing to fix something, it can be. I really liked the concept of "Yes, And" - and that comes from improv, you know, of like, you know, moving along, instead of stopping the situation. "Yes", period, you know, or "no", period. It's like, no, it's "yes, and, can we figure something else out". You know? Like, is it possible? Right, so yeah.

Jan 14:17

I think it's really important that people really realize that we are not just artists, we are people first. And so that means life is gonna happen. And sometimes there are some really great opportunities that happen to happen at the same time. And I just want you to know that you shouldn't feel - next time, don't feel guilty for living your life according to your rules, because everybody is. And when you don't think that you can, too, you might miss out on some amazing opportunities, you know? Because people always have to figure out how to work through things, the - they may not say it, but they always have a plan B. And so like, you were accommodated. And I think that's awesome. Because like, this is the only life we have. And if we don't live it on our own terms, then what - then what's the point? You know? And so I heard something the other day where it's just like, no more apologizing for things. More like, if something's late it's not "Sorry, I'm late". It's like, "Thank you for waiting for me". Because really, and truly life happens. And like as a parent, even with my mental health, sometimes I may want to perform at an event. But I can't. Even though I have committed and said I can, if my child gets sick, I have to prioritize that and, and really not feel bad about being a mom. You know, and yeah, in my heart, I may feel terrible. But in my mind, I'm doing the right thing by my child, you know, and so it's just like, I feel like, the art industry has to have more compassion for the people that make the art. You know, because, it's not easy balancing everything. And somebo - sometimes, like Shonda Rhimes said, sometimes you're gonna, you're gonna be juggling things, and sometimes a ball will drop. And it's just choosing which ball drops at which time. Like, you may have to be, I don't know, at a photo shoot for 12. And that means you might miss, you know, the, the 2pm concert at your kid's school or something, for example. And then other times, it's like, you have this event and it's like, no, I'd rather stay home and play with my kid. And it's just like, not apologizing for living. We can't apologize for living. And we don't want to hurt our mental health, either, by always jumping to everything that everybody wants from us and not doing what we actually want. I think it's so important to honor what the inner voice is saying to you. And not what the man is saying to you. And so I really commend you on doing the - all the things at one time, because it worked out, right. It did. Okay.

Tsholo 19:36

Yeah. It worked out. It worked out. I mean, it's working out. Yeah. Yeah, it's just like, at the end of the day, I value people that see humans first. I learned so much from working with New Harlem in terms of community care, and caring for the cast and caring for the team, the creative team as well - is that there is opportunities to put money aside for people to, to self care. Right? For understanding that we might be diving into some really, really hard information, information that could be very triggering. We're talking about child soldiers, we're talking about children dying. And for me, that's really hard. But having a company that cares first about how we self care, how we take care of ourselves, whether it's therapy, whether it's getting a massage, whatever you need - is really, really important. Because as an artist, I feel cared for. I feel cared for that I didn't have to worry about being double-booked, I feel cared for that, when I go to rehearsal, I have the space to breathe, you know? It was hard work, but we were taken

care of, and all companies should really invest in, in humans like that, and looking at artists as humans. Yeah, um, do you have any last words in terms of adapting to evolving health - our health and safety requirements, you know, even though mental health is - things are not really like requirements right now, like you don't go into a space and demand that companies give you some, you know, some space or something for you to take care of your mental health - it's still I feel like a requirement for us to exist and to survive in this world, especially as artists that are, you know, creating stories that are sometimes hard, but still using that energy, you know?

Jan 22:05

I would say, in terms of like health, and like having requirements, and like adapting to safety measures, or whatever that long title was - sorry I don't remember all of it. But I'd say the biggest requirement you should have is of self. Never be afraid to advocate for what you need. Because if the show must go on, it must go on in, in a healthy way. And continue to wash your hands everybody. You know, continue to use your hand sanitizer, keep yourself safe. Until the panini is no longer panini-ing, and, you know, do things that make your heart dance, and that also is good for your mental health. You can't always just be working, and doing all the things and not doing things for yourself. So don't forget to honor self. In everything that you do, always try to - if it's even two minutes to just do a silly dance or something, do something that you enjoy. You can't forget yourself in any of the processes. And that's really what I would say, if you take anything away from this conversation from me. Don't forget about yourself.

Tsholo 23:33

That's right. And also, our conversation last time was talking about digital productions and creations. That's another way to keep yourself safe.

Jan 23:43

Oh yeah! Of course!

Tsholo 23:44

If more theatre companies would just invest in making those productions as well as the ones that are live. But again, that requires more money, that requires our governments to invest more in the arts and so forth. And that's a whole other different conversation. Thank you so much again, my gosh,

Jan 24:03

You're welcome! I hope you get some rest tonight. Like, I appreciate the conversation, even in the midst of all you're doing. Have a great time in Ottawa.

Tsholo 24:13

Thank you for staying up with me.

Jan 24:15

Oh you're welcome.

Tsholo 24:16

I'm having a great time. We had dinner last night and tonight. We had great workshops and - or today we had great workshops. But I am a little bit exhausted. It's really late and yeah, we will talk I guess when I'm with you? Live?

Jan 24:36

Ooh, that will be fun. Okay. I look forward to meeting!

Tsholo 24:40

Till next time.

Jan 24:41

Take care.

Tsholo 24:42

Thanks for coming!

Jan 24:44

Bye.