

Alliance Theatre Podcast Transcript – A New Season

- Chris Moses:** Hello, I'm Chris Moses. I'm the Associate Artistic Director and Director of Education at the Alliance Theatre, and this year I've been serving as the co-interim artistic director with my friend and colleague, Tinashe Kajese-Bolden. And I am so excited to share this conversation with you because it's Tinashe and I talking about all that we've planned for next season, all of the new stories, the new voices, the familiar stories that have a completely different spin, all of this planned for you for next year. So please stay tuned and enjoy this episode of the Alliance Theatre's Podcast.
- Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:** Hey everyone, I'm Tinashe Kajese-Bolden. I'm one half of the co-term artistic director team, and I'm sitting here with my friend Chris Moses. Hey, brother.
- Chris Moses:** Hello.
- Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:** How you doing?
- Chris Moses:** I'm all right, exhausted, excited and happy to be talking to you.
- Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:** I'm excited to be talking about our season and I think the way that we went about this season feels really different and new. And I wonder if... Well, first of all, when you knew that we were going to have the opportunity to plan this together, what were the things that went through your head and what were you most excited about?
- Chris Moses:** There were, I think, it was equal parts fear. There's a big responsibility to getting this right, and I know how much it means to you as well that we are serving this community in a very particular way. So immediately I think it was fear first and then elation about like, "Oh my gosh, but we get to do this and we get to do it together." And we get to think about new ways of involving our fantastic artistic colleagues on this staff, but also what it means being such a deep part of this community. And I started even seeing those relationships a little bit differently because I had to check myself every time I was out in the community in any sector, whether it was a school board meeting or a conversation after a concert or going to the theater somewhere, it was like, "How is each of the stories that we choose next year going to resonate with this group?" It became a very different way of even looking at the city, for me.
- Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:** I had the same feeling, but also because I thought about who would be missing in the mirror. And we were always asking these questions of why this story? Why now? Who are we trying to reach? Are we reflecting the community we're sitting in? And is that reflection also a global point of view? And I think you and I just bring very different world perspectives and experience to it. And what was joyful about putting or advocating for plays or stories and experiences was that we had to rigorously debate each decision because it wasn't, well, this is finite, this is what we're going to do. And I love, too, that we approached it by what is the most entertaining, most powerful, compelling story first as, and Mike's probably going to get upset, as opposed to, can we afford this? What's the size of the cast? And we started with what's the most compelling story for right now for an Atlanta audience?

Chris Moses: Absolutely. And I adored those debates, and I think what was wonderful was it kept us both honest in terms of that guiding question always pointing a way forward. It was not just about what is the splashiest or most entertaining story, but how is that going to make good on our mission? I keep going back to how audacious the idea that we exist to expand hearts and minds. If we're going to say that and believe it, which I know we both do, hold onto that as a guiding force, how do these shows really do that? And the other thing that kept coming up is we are in a really interesting, difficult time as a field of regional theater, so I didn't take that lightly. That's probably where some of that fear came from too, as we see colleagues across the country and also locally just bleeding audience members, how do we make sure that we are creating an open wholehearted invitation to return and keep those audience members? So that was top of mind as well.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: And also in that climate, there is a need to resist doing the safe and tried and true. And we are a theater that is known for being a home for new work. And I'm really proud that we kept pushing and advocating for new work to continue to be developed, even as we're inviting in new audience members that is still core and essential to who we are as storytellers, that we're always pushing form. And I think that this season we are doing that, the use and the leveraging of theater magic in this season. I didn't realize how prevalent it is in so many of our shows. And the idea of magic and imagination is an expansion in and of itself because it's pointing to what's impossible, what is seemingly impossible. And I think that is one of the exciting, while not every show is in conversation with each other, they elicit conversations that have universal meanings and longings, but from a very specific lens and a very specific culture and neighborhood.

Chris Moses: And I think we get to learn different things about how we produce with each of these shows too. That was another thing I loved that we were taking this season to do almost like a diagnostic test. What can we learn from each one of these shows that will help us for the future, that will help Atlanta for the future? And there are particular things with each one that I can't wait to find out that I think will support us going forward. Everyone has some different assumption that we are testing, some partnership that we are trying to deepen, some different way of producing some different way of telling a story, some new artists that we're inviting in. And to your point about new work, I was blown away. We've been so immersed in it, but to see the whole season together that there are so many, I think there's six world premieres in a season at a time-

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Which is really remarkable for regional theater. And I think it's also remarkable for us to be doing that many and new work that is for all ages.

Chris Moses: Absolutely.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: I think the invitation is so wide, and to your point about the diversity not just of our programming content, but how it's sitting in the real estate of our season so that the invitation is, "Hey, maybe this one particular show is going to run much longer for you, our community, to be able to engage with it over a longer runway." And then also appealing to those patrons who want to wake up on a Wednesday and say, "Hey, what's happening this weekend?" So what are those engagements that are short-lived and intense and urgent? And we can speak about them that week leading up to it. And then that's the thing about theater is once it's gone, it's gone. But I think it just disrupts this cadence of shows come on for one month and then they're gone and we're down and then we're back up again. We've changed the rhythm of how we're programming, and I hope that what that does is it changes the interaction of our community with us.

Chris Moses: Yeah, I love that part so much. And I know that is a huge burden on the staff too, to shift and change and adjust and try different things. But I'm so excited. I was just thinking about it this morning actually. We are going to be running *Into the Burrow: The Peter Rabbit Tale* for the entirety of the High Museum's exhibit of Beatrix Potter, which is three months. We never have done that. And I was always so jealous of the museum to be able to just open their doors and be like, "We're going to have this exhibit on for three months." And our show wouldn't be there for a month.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Just a couple weeks, right.

Chris Moses: So only some families or some schools would be able to see it. So by stretching and playing with the season, we're giving people the opportunity to come and do that. But then on the heels of that, what is so exciting, to your point about these short can't miss events, we will be presenting Pearl Cleage's new piece that's celebrating a time in our history and when Maynard Jackson was elected, it'll be 50 years ago on the date that we premiere that. And that is one intense weekend where it becomes a civic event, not just a theater. It's not just going to a show. It's like this is what we do to remind ourselves who we are as a city, who we want to be, remind us of a time when we came together and made some really smart, innovative choices. And it also reminds us of what theater can do, which is a simple empty stage and amazing people speaking truth.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Yeah. I love what we have has been the richness of the plays that we have, the diversity of scale, to your point about how theater and the design, the actual architecture of theater we are going from. It's the full spectrum of a bear stage and how just the text sings and the vessel of the actors is there, to all the way through an opera and then all the way through the grandeur of a Christmas carol and the scale of that Victorian set.

And then when we think about A.K. Payne's play *Furloughs Paradise* where it is in this one room and the design invitation to that is absolutely imaginative and deconstructing realism because at face value it feels like this living room play. But in fact, it is full of imagination and metaphors and just the hypnotic value of what can happen when you take realism and then do the cracked reverse image of it in a mirror. And I think just visually what that offers to is I'm hoping that we grow as artists, that it's not just for our audience but our artistic ecosystem, the opportunity that we can offer to designers and to actors and how we expand and contract in our storytelling. This season gives us so many different options that I think elevate our collective consciousness in a really inspiring way.

Chris Moses: Couldn't agree more. And as you were talking about it, I was thinking we just announced the season and are really obviously excited about all these stories, but it feels like that's only one-half of the equation. I know we're equally excited about the directors that we are inviting in because it's as much a marriage of story and time and place, but who is the one really crafting that story and that slate of directors that we have to-

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: I cannot wait to share this with everyone.

Chris Moses: ...introduce to Atlanta, to reintroduce to Atlanta is pretty extraordinary.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: It is. And I'm not sure if a lot of people realize that it is not just a marriage of artistic vision, but it's also is this a director who wants to come into our community and not just have the piece sit on top of it, but how do they want to integrate the story, the making of it with our artists and our local community members? And I think that the captains of our ships

this season, every single one of them is committed to civic service. They're committed to what is the story behind the story. And I think that we're going to be able to offer some even more robust programming around the play, which adds to this experience of coming in, the lights dimming and we gather around and see this story. Here's what I love about this process with you, Chris. You have no poker face.

Chris Moses: Yes.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: So, I know exactly how you feel. So the gift of that is that going into this, there was never going to be a strategy of trying to play a game or I get one, you get one. Every single decision we both had to sign off on before we even considered bringing it before the artistic team. And even with that, I really felt for the first time that we would present plays into in our artistic team and even with our production staff and say, "Poke holes at it. What is this the story that you can get behind?"

I felt really strongly that I wanted every staff member, if they were caught in the elevator with a patron or just even somebody who works in our building that if they asked about a play, we would be proud to talk about it. And not just the elevator pitch, but really my gut, my soul says, "This is the story I want to get behind." And I think that you and I made sure that we never brought something before the team that we didn't feel passionately about or believed that this would elevate us artistically and serve our community this year.

Chris Moses: Yeah and be willing to let go if it didn't. That's a really-

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Oh, there were a lot of things we had to let go.

Chris Moses: Oh, yeah, or kicked to next season that I'm still holding onto, which is also exciting, like, "Oh my God, there's still all these great opportunities out there that I know are good options, but maybe not at the right time." But that collaboration, I would've lost any game we tried to play. But you do know exactly where I stand on this situation, but I loved being able to be that vulnerable and open.

And Monday mornings Tinashe, Mike and I would sit down and go through it and debate and ask questions and continue to push and prod. But I think we all were very clear that what is right for the theater is always going to take priority over what might be a personal passion project. That was never the consideration. It was like what will this do for us going forward? How can we be a beacon for this city? How can we provide a sense of hope for the field of theater as well, that we have a process that is healthy right now? We're still in a dangerous spot, but I think we figured out a way to be sustainable and how can we continue to uplift those who are in the same situation?

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: I always think about what is the experience for the director and for the actors putting on this story and because my background is in both, and as an actor, I always want to consider is this an experience that they are going to grow from as well? Could doing this show be something that is not just a job on their resume, but actually this really wholehearted meaningful experience that elevates them and that doesn't just elevate them from a professional place, but also as people? And so I'm always going to look for plays where I see deep rigorous character relationships and how to get underneath the text and really bring in those muscles of craft so that that is exciting for our artists. I want our artists to be challenged and even with our designers, like reading plays that invite a scope that can test the limits of the boundaries that they've worked in before because I

know that we have a production staff that will rise up and meet them. And that's exciting to use us to the greatest capacity of what we can offer artists.

Chris Moses:

Yeah, I love pieces that take advantage of our particular art form, too, that just demand a theatricality that can shake you out of your slumber and force you to look at things beyond just the present set of circumstances, so things that will allow you and invite you to imagine a different world, to imagine what's possible. And I think the vulnerability comes from... I always want to, when I'm reading a play, leave that experience with some sense of hope for something that I didn't have before I entered that experience. So I think that might be one of the connective through lines through this totally disparate, varied season. I think each, there's something, if you dig deep enough, we're hoping you'll leave that theater a bit changed and with a bit more of a hopeful outlook on what's possible outside those doors.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:

And you know what's really vulnerable too is that we can't be prescriptive of how these shows are ultimately going to look and feel like. We've got strong responses to them. And I think that we have attached some really compelling visionary directors, but the vulnerability and the excitement is how do we show up and support them in their best way so that they can be their best selves? And that's that little missing ingredient that you have to have faith, you have to have trust that there's room enough that we've picked playwrights that haven't overridden it, but they've given enough room for there to be creative invention and trial and error so that we hold the season firmly but gently and need to show up in a way that gives room for other artists. And as artists, we understand that.

And so we're able to look at plays that might not feel perfect, but it's in their imperfection that they really speak to us as people. And so being able to speak about that with staff members who want it to feel production ready, especially with new plays and being able to have the foresight of, I know with this right team, with this right support, with this right development, we'll get to where we ultimately hope it will be. But that's the vulnerable part, especially as producers.

Chris Moses:

That's very real. The notion that this could fall apart at any moment. So if you're taking big risks on certain stories, that is one that is present, but there's also that thrilling excitement that, "Wow, if we put together the right team, this could be something unforgettable."

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:

Yeah.

Chris Moses:

It's obvious, I love this theater for many reasons, but the fact that we are so committed to producing work for all ages is what really gets me out of bed every morning. So I want to ask you, what show do you think Kingston and Kingsley are most excited about for next year?

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden:

Oh, my goodness. They're going to be over the moon Into the Burrow, the Peter Rabbit story. I think just the experience that Mark Valdez is creating such fertile soil for in just a really glorious way and my kids know our theater really well, and so the idea that we're going to transform our space, and not just the stage but outside of it, this is what, Chris, you and I have been wanting and advocating, and I feel like this is just the beginning. Watch out Piazza and the Plaza, watch out garage. We are coming for you Peachtree Street.

Our theater is going to expand off of our stage, so that's really thrilling, the idea that they could come and just spend a day on the campus and go to the High Museum and then come and see a play. As a theater, we don't often to get that all day experience that other entertaining mediums can do. And so that's really, really thrilling for me. And also the musical, the Preacher's Wife, that is a wide invitation of get up fun music that's just inspiring and there's so much magic in it. People fly in the Preacher's wife, okay, yes, I said that, come and see it.

Chris Moses: And I don't want to spoil things, but there is an Esther Williams aqua ballet and Mark Valdez's version of Peter Rabbit.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Oh, my goodness. How exciting.

Chris Moses: A toad is dancing.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: Drop the mic.

Chris Moses: For longtime Alliance patrons, what would you want to share with them about what they can look forward to for next year?

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: I think the Alliance has done an incredible job in our history of bringing rich language and poetry to the stage and not being afraid of heightened language and not being afraid of making heightened language contemporary and urgent and present. And I think that this season is going to offer that in all its glorious colors of culture and time and place and region in really unexpected ways. So I think that's never going to change.

And we also are really good at just this incredible production value that we are able to bring to every space, our Hertz space, our Coca-Cola space, all of our programming for youth and family, that is only getting tighter and better. We have such a curious and ambitious team right now that I think that we really have this great group of folks that really want excellence in every gesture that we do. And that's not going to change. In fact, I think that the imagination of how we're going to creatively solve budget restraint or any of those things that seemingly are in the face of it, there is so much imagination and collaboration across departments of how to overcome it that this season really promises. So we just closed The Hot Wing King and we had so many new audience members there. What do you think this next season is going to continue that invitation and that promise for those new audience members?

Chris Moses: I think there are so many opportunities for people to experience something transformational at the Alliance Theatre next year, people who don't even consider theater as an option, and that is intentional on our part. We're playing the long game by introducing six-month-old tiny human beings to theater from the get-go. So people can just start to equate this place as somewhere where you can enjoy this experience, where you can respond how you want to. What I want to continue to do is break down the barrier that theater as an art form, and this theater in particular, exists only for a particular group of people. This really is wide open to Atlanta. And if you come here, you are not only going to be provoked in certain ways and think about the world differently, you are going to have a fantastic time. So I would tell someone who's not been here, "Come. It is a place where you'll be invited, welcomed in, you will leave feeling fuller and more hopeful about this world." And that experience is not restricted to any one person.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: I love that.

Chris Moses: Thank you, Tinashe, not just for this conversation, but my God, for these past nine months, for being there constantly, for all of the wonderful conversations, all of the rigorous debate, all of the collaboration. It's just been joyful.

Tinashe Kajese-Bolden: It has been an unbelievable, and to be able to do it with a friend that I already thought I was close with, and we just got so much closer and just sharing our love for this city and this theater has been such an honor. Thank you.

Chris Moses: Thank you. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the Alliance Theatre's Podcast. You still have some time to join us for our seventh annual Toddler Takeover Festival, a singular arts festival for the very young that will be happening the last weekend in April. And then after that, it is time for the world premiere, the biggest show The Alliance Theatre has ever produced, Water for Elephants. I promise you, you don't want to miss this one. You can get your tickets now. Please visit alliancetheatre.org. And we will see you soon. Until next time, thanks for listening to the Alliance Theatre Podcast.