

- Hi, friends. Welcome to Show Talks at The Fifth Avenue Theater. My name is Brodrick Ryans. My pronouns are he/him. I am joined by the lovely Nicholas Bernard. Nicholas, please introduce yourself to the kiddos.

- Hi, my name is Nicholas Japaul Bernard. I am a Seattle based actor of about six, seven years now, I wanna say. Pronouns are he/him. And I'm excited to be here.

- Yeah. Thank you for joining me. I'm also excited to be the guest host of this talk.

- Look at you.

- Let's just, yeah, let's dive right into it.

- Come on.

- Tell us about you.

- Hello there. My name is Nicholas Japaul Bernard. My pronouns are he/him. I'm a Seattle based theater artist, freelance, jumping from stage to stage as the Lord sees fit.

- You're workin. And we see it. We see it.

- We tryin, baby, we trying.

- And we're trying to celebrate that completely. So just with that, let's just hop right into it, Nicholas. You, A, tell us a little bit more about yourself. Anything else that you want to share about you. But I would also love for you to tell us about this character Ferris that you're playing in "Choir Boy," which is a joint production between the ACT Theater and Fifth Avenue Theater.

- Oh yes, absolutely. Well, me as an artist, one thing I'm like very, that's very important to me is making sure, just being, like, being able to eventually as I, you know, amass influence, to be able to try and make more spaces for Black, queer, and specifically disabled artists to, you know, tell those stories, but also like being very clear that it's not just that, like, don't just call on us when you have your Black play or that way about somebody, you know, like we can do it all. We've been doing it all. You know, there's something to be said about people who go through most of their lives pretending to be something they're not. If that's not range, I don't know what is. Truly, but, and that's something specifically with Ferris that I think I really connect with on some level. And we always, we talk a lot when we're doing like more specifically like Black things that don't have necessarily a queer lens on it. Where we just talk about this idea of code switching. I think that when you add queerness on top of that there's an extra layer. So now not only can I not let these people know that I'm Black even though they can see it, but I now have to let these people think that I'm straight, and that tug of war that's always happening is something that I really, as the kid who went to Catholic school for 12 years of all post undergrad, all pre undergrad schooling was private school. So like reading about

Ferris and like seeing him in this uniform, making these choices, trying to run to his best as he can not because he wants to run everything, but because there's a necessity for excellence when you're Black, and even a greater necessity for being exceptional when you're Black and queer.

- Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that. I feel that and understand that completely. Thank you. Really. Thank you for sharing that. I appreciate that. So with that, can you talk about the similarities as you as a person and the similarities between this character and how you've kind of merged those two identities together to actually be able to portray this role? Like what parts of you are you bringing into that space? And then do you find that there are moments where maybe you're actually taking Ferris home?

- Mm. So I know, two sides to this question. So first half, in terms of like relation to Ferris obviously being Black, obviously being gay, like I said before, going to private school in high school, and honestly before that, but high school specifically, 'cause that's, Ferris is 17. But the thing with Ferris that really gets me is that, and you know, being queer, growing up we don't realize this is defense mechanism, but being grown, having that air, there's a reason why a lot of queer kids get the "you've been here before" look from like adults and stuff, and watching Ferris navigate what he believes it means to act like an adult, to have to be the adult in this situation. You know, we're always like, you, when you're getting bullied, it's not the bully who gets in trouble. It's the person who hit him back, and you need to, what did Michelle Obama say? "When they go low, we go high." I have issue with that, and I'll talk to her about that someday. But when they say that idea of like having to rise above, and watching Ferris take that idea and take it to its ninth degree, rising above in grades, rising above in extracurriculars, rising above in being an adult, and watching him try on the skin of being an adult and how weaponizing that ability that a lot of young queer kids have, weaponizing that ability both helps him in some cases, and in other cases, definitely holds him back. In terms of taking him home with me, as an actor, I definitely find that I, because my background is originally in dance, my gateway into acting isn't necessarily as heady, and emotion, memory, whatever you wanna call it, based, it's way more physical. So I've never been one to take emotional things home with me or like that kind of weight home with me in a character. But I do find that things will live in my body. Holding my body a certain way, having to do certain gestures. So like, I'll find myself, you know, fully being me and cognizant of me and not like, you know, getting my wires crossed with Ferris's necessarily in terms of how I may feel about things in my everyday life. But I'll notice I may speak like him sometimes. It'll come out of my mouth. Even though like, we kind of speak very similarly, something about Terrell's writing that is so exceptional, but it is very, once you, like, you honor what he's writing in terms of like punctuation and where he capitalizes things, where there are line breaks, and you honor that, you start to hear the poetry, and it's literally just like, oh, this is how little black gay boys speak. This is what it is. There's a line in one of the scenes where I'm talking to another character and I ask him about how his summer is. And I say, "You bag you a honey or whatever you homies in Willacoochee call it." And when I say sterilized like that, it don't sound like nothing. But then

when you put on that spice of being a Black queer, it's like, "You bag you a honey, you bag you a honey or whatever you homies in Willacoochie call it." Like, it's all of that. It's very clearly a boy who grew up, not only emulating the Black women in his life, but also Black women like Trina and like Lil Kim. And like all these girls who like gave us these paint brushes to paint our language.

- Yeah. Yeah. Thanks. Are, I'm very curious to know, Nicholas, are there moments then, any other specific moments in the show that you can think of where you're like, "I'm gonna go home and this moment might live in my head rent free or within my body rent free for like the next five hours"?

- There is a, I don't want to give away too much. There's a scene towards the end of the play. How do I say this? There's a scene towards the end of a play where Ferris tells a particular story about his childhood that is, with the exception of the setting, is basically like line for line something that happened to me as a child. And that was a lot for me to read the first time I touched the play. It doesn't like, again, since my acting arrives in my body before it arrives in my head, it isn't so much, that's one. It isn't so much that like, I'm going to that place when I will be doing the scene and pulling from that. But more so that that will elicit that out of me if I'm not careful about it. So I guess my acting journey definitely isn't so much about like trying to keep myself from bringing that stuff home, but it's more so trying to keep the text from bringing things up in me that I don't want it to bring up.

- Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that. Thank you. Thank you. I, which actually leads me to the next question that I wanted to ask, which is, what's kind of been the hardest thing in terms of preparing for this role that you've had to face? And what's been one of the most rewarding things that you've had come up in the process of being like "I'm preparing for this role. I'm creating this character." The character has already been created before by other folks, but you're adding your own spin and your own spice to that. So like, what's been the hardest part in the preparation process, and what's been the most rewarding, and also like what parts of Tarrell's writing do you think that you're just like, "it's this," like, "this is what really needs to show up in the room when we do this"?

- The hardest part for me is actually like, in general, the hardest part for me in any show that I do, as I stated earlier, I'm very interested in creating and maintaining and inspiring spaces for Black, queer, and disabled people specifically to, just being like, like I really would, because we, 'cause that specific demographic doesn't get a lot of time, really any time, really, to shine in a theater space, whether that be experienced through text or just showing up in a space. It's not lost on me that when I find myself in these rooms like at The Fifth Avenue Theater or ACT or The Rep earlier this year, that like, I'm an anomaly, you know, like I can't, if we went through and we looked, and again, there are people with invisible disabilities that we don't know about, but if we looked through and thought about what Black, queer, visibly disabled people who have like disabilities that show up in the world that cannot be, you know, like, you know when someone is in a wheelchair, but you don't know when someone has chronic pain, like that sort of thing. Those are, how many of those have you seen? How many of those have you

hired? How many of those like continue to do work? And we're out there, but it doesn't, so it's not lost on me that, like, that's not a thing that happens a lot. But with that, the hardest part for me in any process, and specifically with this one more so with like the movement that we're doing, like the choreography and such, 'cause there is a good amount of dancing in this show. It's not a musical, it's a play with music, but there is a good amount of dancing. Is that physical work? Because I have some paralysis in my lower legs of what is called a bilateral drop foot. And I have to wear AFO braces to keep my legs at a 90 degree angle so that I have a more normal gait pattern when I walk. And that, and the reason why that is so hard is not just simply because like, "oh I'm disabled and I need to," well, not simply, it's not only that I'm disabled and I'm unable to do certain things. It also comes from the fact that before I dove head first into acting, I was working towards being more of a concert dancer. So when we're doing this choreo, it's not even, there's those extra layer of, "yes, I cannot do this. I cannot do this right now." Or "I cannot do this this way." But six, seven years ago, I not only could have done this this way, but you probably would've had to make it harder for me. So it's difficult to go from like busting out 10 pirouettes without thinking about it to barely being able to balance on one foot, and negotiating that in every show, specifically plays with music, or more so musical theater, there's always a moment, that first choreography rehearsal, where like I have to excuse myself and like go sob in the bathroom. Not because this stuff is too much, but in that same way I was talking about, I have to work to make sure that the text doesn't elicit certain things out of me. Moving in that way just automatically elicits things out of me that I may or may not want to come out in that moment. Usually not, 'cause they've, ACT and a lot of theaters since coming back have been, ACT, as well as some other theaters, have all been very good about allowing us as humans to show up in the room with all of our scars and things. But even still, even though that is the case, and I'm grateful as well as many other people are grateful for that opportunity, does not necessarily mean you want that stuff to come up in the room. You know? It's great that you're making space for it, but I don't want it to. So that's really, the hardest thing for me so far has, and we just started doing intensive choreography, and of course I had that moment, and it wells up all the time. It happened during "Beauty and the Beast," it happened during "Annie," it happened during "Rock." Like it, no matter what, if there's dancing involved, this is just something that I have to deal with. That's usually the hardest part for me. And it's been that for this show as well. The most rewarding thing I'm getting from prepping from Ferris is really just like, for the first time in a while, actually the first time ever, I will say that the character has represented me this well. That I am truly seeing myself in this character in a way that I have not before. I've had other, like I did "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" when I first moved here. And before, that was the other time where like, even though I was not going through those specific things, there were large swaths of the character that I was like, "Oh yep, yep, absolutely. This is that. This is that." Oh, just going down the laundry list of things that felt like they were coming from me and I, not that I was imbuing them into the text. And so I think that's probably, that's, not even "I think." That definitely has been the most rewarding part of getting to crack open Ferris. Yes. The specific part of Ferris that I really want to iron Tarrell's text is how smart he

is. Something that we really want to, that we're trying to explore in the room is something else that is also very much in the text is this conversation about how young Black children are often looked at as if they are older than what they are. That's how, among many reasons, that's how we end up with like 13 year olds getting shot dead by police officers. You know, like "I was afraid of him." He was only 13. 'Cause they see us as adults. They don't see us as children when we're children, if they see us as people at all. But even still, within that, understanding that Ferris is a child and he's a teenager, he's still so much smarter than every other teenager that's in that room. He's so much further along in development than every teenager in that room. Because again, when you're queer and you have to grow up putting on an extra mask to like keep people from clocking you, having to do that, to do that, you have to come to a realization to see that "when I'm a child looking at an adult, they do not see me as thus. They see me as a, if they're a homophobe, they see me as a little fag, or they see me as a grown man because I'm Black." So you already know that that's how they look at you. And so what is it? And so there's something about Ferris where he's, you don't go through your life pretending to be something that you're not and not have the ability to weaponize your personality, your essence. You know, when Ferris says things, he knows exactly what he's saying. He may not see the ramifications on the other end of that. He's definitely not grown enough or an adult enough to see that you should not say certain things the way that you say them. Finding that balance, because I am a 31 year old person playing a 17 year old boy, so it's difficult to ride that line and not just look like an adult who's up there talking to another adult. So I'm really trying to like figure out what that looks like. 'Cause I think Ferris is so much more than just this, like, not even meek, but just like, flower of a boy. Who's just, like, he's ignorant to things, but he doesn't think he's ignorant to things. And that's what I want to push through. I don't want the tell to be "he doesn't know what's going on." I want the audience to follow him along and think that "he knows exactly what he's doing." But because Tarrell's a genius, the parameters of the play do not allow for you to leave the play thinking that "yeah, he knows exactly what's going on."

- It just seems like there's so many dynamic struggles happening for this character. I can't, yeah, that fascinates me and it excites me. I can't wait. I cannot wait to see that.