

Research the Resonates
Villanova CLAS Podcast
Episode 4 Transcription
Youth and Identity: Scholarship Takes Stage

HOST: Chelsea Gerrard

Guest 1 (AW): Adrena Williams '19 MA

Guest 2 (JI): James Ijames, MFA

Intro Music: *Come, just as you are. Hear the Spirit call. Come just as you are. Come and see. Come receive. Come and live forever.*

AW: The play opens with a scene of the students in the youth group, their all singing a song together. And one of them is a new member of the group. He's come in from sort of a city, not too far away. He comes in not sure about his beliefs.

HOST: That's Adrena Williams. She recently graduated from the Master's in Theatre program at Villanova University, where she was the dramaturg for Villanova Theatre's production of "Youth"—a play a play about a young church community wrestling with issues of identity, sexuality and faith. The play was written by James Ijames and directed by Edward Sobel, both of whom are professors in the Theatre department.

Ji: Hi, I'm James Ijames. I am an assistant professor of theatre at Villanova University and I am the playwright of "Youth." I grew up in a youth group not unlike this youth group. It was very small in a very small town right outside of Charlotte, called Bessemer City. And I don't know, I was home and I was at church and I was sort of like thinking about all of the things that I learned while I was in that youth group, and like everything you sort of learn. Um, and I was kid who most of my friends that I had really close relationships with were at church; They weren't really people I went to high school with. Although, I did have friends in high school. So I wanted to write something that explored that, but also, not critiqued it—entered into conversation with it. And so that's how it started. It really was just a play that was gonna just sort of like explore youth groups. And then the character of this kid, who's sort of mysterious and who can perform miracles essentially popped in my head. And that's when the play sort of took off.

HOST: You're listening to Research that Resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Chelsea Gerrard.

In this miniseries, we're talking to research teams who are exploring topics at the intersection of youth and identity. I sat down with Professor Ijames and Adrena to talk about the research involved in writing and producing "Youth."

Ji: In the theatre, my research is in how form—and by form I mean how I write the play, how I structure the play, how I lay the scenes out—is in conversation with content. So, always trying to find the right form for the content, and in the case for this play, really looking at the structures inside of church service. Like there's devotional service and there's Bible study, and how do all of these organizing events structured together help

me tell this story about loneliness, help me tell this story about being a queer person inside of an evangelical church, and does one survive that? What container for that content will encourage the audience to explore that idea in a new way? That's hard to come up with, right? That's a really difficult brain project, and so the playwright is...I'm a playwright that deals in the relationship between form and content – some are not, some right—This is a play. It starts on Monday and ends on Tuesday. It's a straight line and there are some jokes in the middle. I tend to go—how can I make this as difficult to make as possible, so that when you meet it as an audience member, you have to do some work.

HOST: A dramaturg is sometimes called a theatrical researcher. For older plays, this would require a lot of research into past productions casting and directing choice. But this was a new play—so Adrena's research looked a little bit different.

AW: In preparation for the production, I looked at the way that youth groups function in the church. I looked at like how youth pastors are—well Ed specifically was interested in sort of the economic functions involved, like how youth pastors get paid—

Jl: If they get paid.

AW: Cause, yeah— what I've learned was that they're often not making very much, but they're being asked to do a lot.

Jl: Yeah.

AW: And then the money that they do make—it's softly encouraged to put that back into the church, so they're not making much at all. They almost always have a second job of some kind. I also looked at how youth groups are holding up. They're on the decline. They are fewer young people in youth groups because young people are leaving organized religion altogether, and then there's no next generation to come into those youth groups. That was my first branch of research, and I remember that I researched all of the songs that you had in the scripts as they kept changing. I looked up all the sort of Bible verses and references that you put into the script, so that the cast could have a reference that they could go to if they were curious what that was that they were referring to or talking about.

HOST: When writing the script, Professor James read texts by theologians and pastors but also interviewed young people about their experiences.

Jl: I started reading theologians, pastors, that had slightly unorthodox ways of thinking about evangelical Christianity. People like Carlton Pearson, um Nadia Weber Bolz is actually a Presbyterian minister, was someone else that I read; And they had these, what I found really exciting and really inclusive and really accessible ways of thinking about Christianity, and sort of just like meditated on those things quite a bit. And then, just started doing actual research with folks and saying, "What was your youth group experience like? Do you remember this? Did you sing these songs?" So it's weird. It's like you're doing a play about people who are in high school led by someone who's probably maybe slightly younger than me, played by people who are in graduate school. So

there's like this urge to like play towards the idea of young, as opposed to trying to remember what that felt like. And I know for me in writing it was constantly asking myself, "Am I being honest, or am I commenting, or critiquing, or judging what a young person sounds like, how a young person speaks, what a young person values. And so I had to like really go to talk to some young people; You know, my partner teaches at a high school, and I was like, "Can I talk to some...[laughter]... just like sit and listen." And it was fascinating to just listen to what is really high stakes for young people, which is not drastically different from what's high stakes for me, it just comes in a slightly different container—and sort of exploring those things without judgment, without mocking it. To celebrate what it means to not know the answer and be on a quest to figuring out the answer—and marrying that with religion, which is this big question of humanity. Why are we here? Young people are like grappling with that on this really micro level day-to-day: what's my purpose? What's the next thing that I'm supposed to do?

HOST: For each character in the play, that grappling and search for identity looks a little bit different. Here's Adrena.

AW: As far as identity, in the play, I think if you look at, including Dave actually, the one single adult character, each of the characters is going through their own quest to figure out who they are in relation to their faith. If you look, Jennifer is on a very specific quest, different from everyone else. Wyatt and Reggie are on these two paths that are gonna converge in the end, but they have to get there first. Dave is an adult who feels like he's already found his path, but maybe it's different than what he thought it was. So it's all very individual experiences.

HOST: The way that this play portrays young people is distinct, which interestingly isn't something Professor James initially set out to do. Rather, that evolved through the ongoing work between him, Adrena, and the director.

Jl: Specifically, in the theatre, plays that are written towards and about young people that are not cynical and not about how awful they are, is rare. Um, and so that was something that was, that I didn't even realize that I was doing until it started to happen.

AW: I think I also want to say about wanting to write a story about young people that wasn't cynical and about how they're awful, is a turn that sort of happened while we were working on it because the first draft that I read, Wyatt was like borderline unpleasant.

Jl: Yeah!

AW: He was very aggressive. Aha, and that changed a lot once we actually started rehearsing and rewriting.

Jl: Mhmm.

HOST: For those that have never been a part of a theatrical production, this may come as a surprise—this idea that the play can significantly evolve and change as the playwright,

dramaturg and director work together in a production. This was certainly the case for Professor James and Adrena.

Jl: I, uh, anytime I rewrote something in the process I sent it to Adrena and the director, so that before it got to the actors or anything, so that we could sort of be on the same page about where I was going and what I was thinking. And, there were times I would write something and Adrena would go, "Um. Uhhh... I'm not..." [laughter]. Which was helpful 'cause I'm like, "Oh, OK!" Cause, the playwright is like running on the ground and the dramaturg is bird's eye view looking down. It's like, OK, I see what's happening and I can tell you that you're about to like run into trouble here. And I'd also say like for a new play, which is different from a play that's been done a bunch, especially if the playwright is alive and kickin' and still writing the play as you're working on it, which is very much what was happening here, they become sort of like the institutional wisdom of the play. Like, well back in draft five, remember when you did that? Well if you bring that back that makes this thing that you're doing in draft ten make much more sense. And that's always really exciting to have someone who remembers the play in all of its iterations.

HOST: Working on this play with Professor James has been a culminating educational experience for Adrena and it further solidified her interest in dramaturgy. Here she is again.

AW: I mean, to be honest, James is part of the reason I applied to this program, so I'm always excited to have an opportunity to work with him. I took his playwriting course last year, which primed me, somewhat, to work with him as a playwright. I had also read or seen some of his other plays; And I came in here knowing I was interested in dramaturgy. I like that I am leaving, doing the thing that I came here to do; Like I didn't come in here and realize, "Oh no, this is not what I should be doing." Everything I did sort of brought me to becoming a better dramaturg, and then I was able to use all of that in this process.

HOST: Thanks for listening to research that resonates. If you haven't listened to our first miniseries on sustainability, be sure to check that out on Apple Podcasts, Google Play and Spotify.