

Active Hope - A podcast collaboration

Episode 2 Transcript

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: My name is Marc Bamuthi Joseph. I am a poet, I'm a dad, I'm an educator.

Kamilah Forbes: I am Kamilah Forbes. I am a storyteller, a director, a producer, a wife, a mother, a daughter, and the executive producer of the Apollo Theater.

Paola Prestini: My name is Paola Prestini. I'm a composer, I'm a mother, a wife, and a collaborator.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For the Kennedy Center.

Paola Prestini: For National Sawdust.

Kamilah Forbes: For the Apollo Theater. This is Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: This is Active Hope.

Paola Prestini: This Active Hope.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hey, hey, hey, hey, what's good family?

Paola Prestini: Good afternoon. Hi.

Kamilah Forbes: Hey.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Hi. What an outstanding pleasure to be with you all again. We're here to not only take the energy of the last year but to metabolize it in some way towards healing.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Thinking about art, creativity, and of course hope as an instrument of transcending. So that's actually what's on the agenda for today. All three of us use our bodies in order to leave it. Art is a means of getting free. That is if we assume that freedom is an outcome of the body, that freedom isn't something to be legislated. And if freedom can't be legislated, neither can art, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But on the other hand, we live in a country of free bodies and also of incarcerated bodies. There are more than three million people in jail in the United States of America, of those three million Blacks and Latinos make up 56% of the prison population. We know that Black children in particular make up 32% of the young people in this country that get arrested.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: They make up 42% of the young people in this country that are detained, and they make up more than 50% of young people whose infractions are waived directly to criminal court, which means that they are tried as adults. And we also know that there's more than \$80 billion a year that is spent on prison. So what's clear is that there is a design of the carceral system.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And that, that design works, that system is working. But the three of us are here to explore how the arts might design systemic freedom. That there's something about the words in our own practices that enable us to consider a systemic freedom design. So maybe that's where we start today. I just want to shoot a couple of questions as you see what happens.

Kamilah Forbes: Shoot away!

Marc Bamuthi Joseph:

My first question is what is the art's role in conflict resolution? The second question is, what is the role of improvisation in unleashing the kind of genius that corporate intellect cannot? What is the role of the arts in unleashing a kind of genius that politicians cannot? And then the third question is, what are artist's role in reimagining rights, and particularly the rights of the body?

Paola Prestini: These are great questions.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Word.

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: I mean, I just get goosebumps, there's such poetry in the questions. I think I want to dive in around the question around the art's role in improvisation. But I think it also addresses your first question too, is this idea of freedom, right? I think that art making inherently when done right, can be a completely democratizing tool. When done right, I have to stress that.

Kamilah Forbes: Because in order for true improvisation or true collaboration to take place, we all have to feel as though, and not only feel, but truly stand in equal footing. We have to erase boundaries of hierarchy for true collaboration to happen, right? And I think about that a lot as a director, because when I'm in the room with actors, it is about making sure that I hear every note that they have to share to the table.

Kamilah Forbes: Because otherwise it's just Kamilah's interpretation versus these 15 brilliant minds or 30, however many people are sitting around the table to add to the stew. And in order for improvisation to be... And that's improvisation, even that art-making even within theater, those structures when designers come in, how do we improv?

Kamilah Forbes: You bring a piece of the stew, I bring another piece, you add to it, I add to it, and now all of a sudden we're cooking and the notes are bouncing back and forth with one another in a really beautiful way. A top-down structure does not work in that environment. It allows everyone's genius to bubble to the top. And that's what's I think is exciting about this idea of the creative circle being a truly democratizing tool, which truly allows you to bring your full self to the table. All of who you are to the table.

Paola Prestini: I love that. I've been thinking a lot about how do we find peace in a moment that's so complex. And in terms of the best piece, it's usually an outcome of reciprocal adjustments. And we'll hear Van Jones talk a little bit about that. But when there's been, we hear those statistics, such an oppressive system, then what? Right? Then what?

Paola Prestini: And so, what I've been thinking about lately is a lot about the body, and how sometimes in moments of great conflict words don't suffice. It's a touch, it's a hug, it's the kind of liberatory act of dance, right? And when you're incarcerated, you don't have access to any of those things, right? It's a system of taking away, not of healing.

Paola Prestini: And so I think in terms of arts at the table, improvisation, the skills that we bring of risk-taking, this idea of constantly up for critique. Even the action of creating something new that forces you to imagine something that doesn't exist can be so beautifully imposed on the self of saying, "I can through social imagination, through moral imagination, imagine a different self."

Paola Prestini: And that's where I feel like coming to the table with these skills and with this imagination and with this kind of lifelong training of being an artist, which can't really be codified and it's not exactly taught in schools, is actually really useful in the idea of freedom design.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I've been tripping for a long time on the question of choreographing social justice. And I grew up in choreography, I grew up dancing and what we do is kind of snatch these thoughts out of the air and codify them in a way we make them objects. Sometimes they're oral objects, sometimes they're narrative objects, but we make something tangible out of the ephemeral.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Justice has always seemed like this ephemeral thing. Freedom has always seemed like this ephemeral thing. Like the reason why our politicians can manipulate language to their own liking, is because the concepts that they're evoking are kind of chimeras, they're the stuff of myth, they're this Pegasus kind of things, you know what I mean?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Freedom lives in the pink cloud somewhere. But artists, take the pink cloud concept and very often we make time-based or object-based reality out of that. And so I think we can take freedom, an ephemeral concept, and make it almost mathematical. Mathematical and inspiring at the same time. But there's a lot of questions about how we get to author that freedom and under what auspices or under what context we can share, disseminate, replicate, and normalize our creative conceptions of what freedom really is.

Kamilah Forbes: This seems like a perfect opportunity to quite frankly to share a piece of your work Marc, *The Just and The Blind* which was commissioned by Carnegie Hall in 2019 with two other brilliant collaborators, Daniel Bernard Roumain, and Drew Dollaz. So let's get inspired and get free.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: If you're a Black boy with no game, they should put an extra dot on your driver's license. Like the organ donor dot, the Black boy with no game mark that signals a greater propensity for bad decisions. How do you earn the ability to manage the scale of your bad decisions? How many colossally bad decisions do we all make as teenagers?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Like going to Georgia State that day with Trev, just wandering campus with bolt cutters and dreadlocks in tow. I wasn't going to steal bikes. I was just being a lookout in the parking lot while Trev stole bikes. How many dumb motherfuckers are guilty of just looking out for they dumbass friends, doing the exact wrong thing in solidarity?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That is actually, I think the for real, for real definition of being 16, is doing the exact wrong thing in solidarity with your people. And also learning all the words to pop songs with those

same people, and purple haze. And let's just sit in my car in the parking lot and knock the bass on that new Makaveli tape, zone out to the music, and mute the real world interface innervation.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Wonder close your eyes, let your mind wander under the honest thunder of the 808 like Jordan Davis with his boys, feeling the summer in his bones, suffering the consequences of sitting still behind the wheel. Still. Still, this is your life, son. It's not a game. This is your right, son. 16 is the intersection of the Central Park Five and the 45th president. The very thin line between the just and the blind.

Paola Prestini: That is powerful.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And word.

Kamilah Forbes: It takes you through so many emotions, right? It's interesting we started talking about this idea of freedom because when I think back on those moments, when I really felt free was the innocence, childhood, youth, right? But also to know that that is particularly as a Black youth, you become the biggest target, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: And how your body, instantly gone, can be taken away at that very moment in which you feel the most free, the very moment when you feel the most agency, the very moment.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I mean, that was the impetus for the whole work. That really the impetus for the whole work *The Just and The Blind* was my kid getting his learner's permit. Because he was so excited and I was excited too, we want our kids to bounce. We want our kids to go drive and get us some ice cream. But particularly as you're raising a child of color, you're raising a young Black male, that three, four, five block drive to the Safeway to go get some ice cream is a hyper policed roadway.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And so while my kid was on the precipice of enjoying this new kind of freedom through mobility, at that very same time, what was happening was he was entering his prime suspect years, as I am leaving mine. And *The Just and The Blind* was really born out of that tension. Yeah. That tension is something that I think has spurred many conversations.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But I wonder how you think about it as mothers, as parents think about the balance between letting your kids roaming free and also wanting to do a little bit more than protect them. But protect them with information, weaponize them with the information to know that freedom has its limits.

Paola Prestini: I've been thinking about this a lot with my son, mostly because I feel like the world that we're living in right now is at this deep intersection of gender and race, and all the kind of inequities that exist there. And he is growing up not blind to any of those lines, not blind to the power that comes with the male body, or perceived power that comes with the male body.

Paola Prestini: But furthermore, one of the things I've been thinking a lot about is where people go when they feel the checks and balances haven't listened, and where people go to power, and how

people find power. And it's interesting because I think this generation goes to social media because there aren't checks and balance specifically for issues of sexual violence or race.

Paola Prestini: And what happens is that this culture creates a different kind of imprisonment for people who don't go through due process because of that. And so while you need that power to be able to express what's not right, it's a conundrum because in the end you end up in this place of, can you really call for abolition and yet also be stringing somebody up in ways that are not through due process?

Paola Prestini: Understanding that it's usually people who are oppressed, who go to those extremes. So these are the things that my son growing up in a social media laced reality, we talk about it, we have to.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I love talking to the two of you so much, maybe more than insight, we have these questions. And honestly, it's part of my mental health diet at this point. It's part of my hope diet to engage with folks that are willing to ask questions like this. We're really fortunate to have a conversation with another individual.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The folks that are listening to us know Van Jones is a CNN commentator, know that he's a New York Times bestselling author, knows that he is a rabble-rouser, troublemaker. And also knows like us that art is essential instrument in not only activating hope but moving us towards the logistics of American promise. So what we want to share is a little bit of the conversation that I had with the good brother Van Jones. So why don't we roll that right now?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I'm here with the incredible intellect, good friend, and I'm really appreciative of you, Van Jones, for joining us here on the Active Hope podcast. Where we want to begin today is just with a kind of open imagining of freedom. And we often think of freedom as ephemeral, we think of it as a legislative reality, but on the podcast, we think of freedom as an engineerable phenomenon.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Which is to say that if we can design a system to deport us and we can design a system to incarcerate us, then we can also design freedom. So the first question for you is philosophical. Do you think that it is possible to choreograph social justice? Can we design freedom? And if yes, what are the materials or the DNA building blocks for you of a freedom design?

Van Jones: Well, it's a liberating question. There's some freedom just in the question. And just stretching into trying to answer the question gives you some freedom right there. The freedom I think that we always have some access to is the inner freedom. That you get from meditation, from prayer, from therapy, from yoga, from reading ancient scripture, from being in community with others, listening to a certain kind of music.

Van Jones: And for me, I used to think that change was bottom-up, the radical folks, challenging the system. That's a part of it. Then I was in the White House for a while, we were trying to do a top-down, from government-down and that's a part of it. But I think the most important transformation and the most important freedom is inside-out.

Van Jones: It's bottom-up plus top-down times inside-out. How much inside-out personal transformation are the people who are trying to make the change happen? How much of that have they done? Because then, the bottom-up social movements and cultural movements, and the top-down

technological plays out of Silicon Valley and out of Wall Street and out of Washington, D.C., all those can only get you so far.

Van Jones: It's those two times, not plus, times the inside-out transformation and the ability to achieve freedom in oneself. Whether you're in the jailhouse or the White House, and you know I spent time in both places. How much freedom can you find in yourself in those places? And then you can expand freedom for yourself and others through those places.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We talk about freedom where I lead with freedom because, our belief is that the state of incarceration is in very many ways the antithesis of a state of freedom. But I know that you're working really hard through the REFORM Alliance in response to that. So I just would love for you to talk a little bit about what you're doing tactically in response to the current design of the carceral state.

Van Jones: Well, you have to start with some messy truths that people don't want to deal with. Starting in 1988, both political parties became mass incarceration parties. If you're a younger activist in 2020, 2021, you might think that while the Republicans want to lock us up and the Democrats want to lift us up.

Van Jones: You have a hard time maintaining that view if you know the full story, it's still very difficult I think for most progressives to understand, 80% of Black folk are locked up in Red States. They're not locked up in Brooklyn. They're not locked up in Brooklyn. They're locked up in Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee.

Van Jones: So you have to move the Republicans. You have to deal. You can't just march in Brooklyn and say, you're going to end incarceration. You got to pass the bill in Louisiana, as we have done, that's hard to do. You got to pass a bill in Georgia, as we have done, that's hard to do. And so when your constituency has no freedom, when my core constituency can't vote, they're locked up.

Van Jones: They can't march, they're locked up. They can't tweet, they're locked up. Getting that constituency any relief at all requires a completely objective, almost clinical evaluation of their peril. And then you begin to figure out how can you take this nail out of their hand, this nail out of their hand, this nail out of their foot, this nail out of the other foot?

Van Jones: So they could begin to have some freedom. But that's why, as you know, you've known me for almost 25 years. I've been working on this for 25 years. People say, "You're not woken up, Van Jones not woken up." I say, "I woke before y'all had alarm clocks."

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Well, I've been there. I've been there. We have known each other for a long time, cut our teeth in some of the same places, including the Bay Area, where culture is a prime instrument. I have to say that one of the underlying beliefs here is that art and creativity often do get segregated out of leadership paradigms in this country, that art is often thought of as decorative in implementation strategies.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So I'm wondering if you could talk about that a little bit. Like what is the role of culture in your strategy and how can culture play a more central role in prison reform?

Van Jones: Well, I mean, I think from the work in the Bay, you can't do this work. You can't do it with normal legalistic crap. I can't help but remember being in the Bay, we would go to city council meetings, mobilizing, protesting, whatever. And I had a lot of grease, I would show up my brief and I would have blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and I would go up there and it would make 0.00% difference. The only times we won was when a young poet.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Van Jones: You think about an Amanda Gorman, everybody knows that name now, thank God that at least one young Black poet of her generation, that everybody knows, you can just refer, but we had them by the bushel. I mean, we had wheelbarrows full of Amanda Gormans and we still do. I mean, young folks, young Filipina poets coming out of East Oakland, who could just walk up to the microphone in a two minute period and just shut everybody up. Because there's facts and there's truth.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. Say that.

Van Jones: There's facts and there's truth. There's law and there's justice. And these have very little to do with each other. I thought I was going to justice school when I went to Yale and I went to a law school that has nothing to do with justice. It has to do with rules and regulations and details and facts and bureaucracy.

Van Jones: And it doesn't matter what the outcome is as long as you checked all the boxes, it could be the most unfair thing. It'd be a stench in the nostrils of God, that brother's going to prison, and that cop is getting off. We had young sisters get up there reading out their diary, their journal. And we won because once these young artists got finished talking about what was going on, nobody could argue, nobody could say anything.

Van Jones: And so we saw from the beginning that the preachers had some power but not enough, the politicians had some power, not enough. The lawyers like me had some power, not enough. The power was in the people and the people's power was best expressed through their artistic creative expression. And then when I got to DC, I was completely bewildered.

Van Jones: Because all of that soul power and art power, that's not how DC works. And I still don't think we ever learned how to translate that soul power into policy power.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I just have to say right there that now I find myself as working in Washington, D.C. this is where I'm speaking to you now. I'm the vice president of Social Impact at the Kennedy Center. And I remember those slogans, I remember those campaigns in the Bay Area, I remember Upset The Setup. And many of those groups [crosstalk] speaks obviously, poets like Chinaka Hodge, Jason Mateo, Biko Eisen-Martin. Much love to all those cats.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Part of what we're trying to do is construct a different setup. The idea is that there is one function for artists, which is as communicators of a particular message. And I think what I want to move towards is artists being integrated into the co-design of systems themselves. Which is to say that the artists vision a future for us, work with the political class to construct policy and artists are also working with folks in different sectors to communicate.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I'm just going to ask you to respond to two things super quick. The first is, a little piece of art that comes out of these ideas that we've been talking about. This is an excerpt from Asha Bandele's, *The Prisoner's Wife*. And I just want to hear you respond with maybe just like a couple of words, like what are the first things that come to you?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: She says, "Have I said what it sounds like when a heart breaks inside a prison? It doesn't sound like a crash and it doesn't sound like a shatter. When a heart breaks inside a prison, if it sounds like anything at all, then it sounds like a scream that's trapped in a building caught on fire. Have I said that prison is a fire that seems to always be able to roar the loudest, to spread the furthest, to swallow the most, and to spare the least."

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Those are the words of Asha Bandele. And you talked earlier about humanity, a kind of evisceration of the humanity and certainly of the enfranchisement of incarcerated individuals. What were some of your gut reactions to that passage?

Van Jones: Really kind of a survivor's guilt.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Van Jones: Yeah. Of so many of my peers going into those slave ships on dry land. And so many of their sisters, mothers, lovers, baby mamas, wives bearing that weight.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Van Jones: While I was spared.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Van Jones: Whenever I go into prisons, I'm usually going into male prisons. So all I see is thousands and thousands of Black men, most of whom are smarter than I am. Most of whom are better looking. Most of whom were stronger. Most of whom were better entrepreneurs. Most of them were better leaders than me. But I'll never have to compete against them nor will Elon Musk, nor will Zuckerberg, nor will anybody else.

Van Jones: Because they've been taken out for doing stuff that all of those people did when they were in college. The most lawless people I've ever met were fraternity white boys on campuses, the most lawless, most drug abusing, the most sexually predatory, the worst. But nobody called the cops on them. So they got a chance to get off drugs and learn and move on. So when I hear that it's... It was just very humbling and it's why I just can't let this issue go.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. I'm so thankful for your work. Brother, the podcast is called *Active Hope* and that's just my final question for you: What is giving you hope right now? What is activating your hope right now?

Van Jones: We're going to look back and say, this was reparations. The government is going to have a very hard time doing anything. but because the protest movements of 2020 touched the hearts of so

many people, some deeply and some in a shallow way, the private sector is going to try to figure out what to do. You're going to see something called almost like a fair chance.

Van Jones: And you think, "Well, that's not reparations, reparations... Ah, hold on a second." Black people have done so much for so long with so little, that we can damn near do anything with nothing. So if you give us something that looks like a fair chance at access to capital, add corporate board seats, at fair hiring, at any of this stuff, it's over.

Van Jones: We'll take it. Thank you very much. We'll take it from here. And by the way, everyone will be better off, not just Black people, the unique genius of Black resilience and innovation and creativity is that when we rise, everybody rises. It's a remarkable, the core of our spirituality is hallelujah anyhow. Hallelujah anyhow, no matter what'd you do to us, you're not going to take our joy, you're not going to rob us of, like, hallelujah anyhow, we're going to keep on rising.

Van Jones: And when we rise, everybody else rises too. And I love what you said about the place of the artist. I think the artist should be imagineering and architecting not just policy, but the economy too. I think there should be art. I think there should be no corporate board that doesn't have three or four artists on it now.

Van Jones: Don't tell me what you can do with a spreadsheet and whatever, because these spreadsheets have been documenting our demise for 200 years. What can you do with... [chuckling] You know what I mean? What can you do with liberating the human creativity and potential at a time when we need that? We no longer live on the planet we were born on.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That's real.

Van Jones: Okay, it was a hundred degrees in the Arctic this summer. There were parts of the Arctic were hotter than the Sahara Desert this summer, and then this fall it's sub-zero in Texas, and Alaska is moderate. That's not the planet you were born on.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Right.

Van Jones: So you've got to unleash levels of human genius, creativity, innovation, and resilience that the corporate guys and political guys can't do. Corporate men and women can't do. Political men and women can't do. That comes down to the mystics and the artists and the visionaries, a whole different set of people.

Van Jones: And so I think you're correct it's not... But I would say now hearing you say it, don't just do it on Washington, D.C., do it in Wall Street and Silicon Valley too. Because that, what you're talking about needing to be unleashed, needs to be unleashed in policy and finance and technology and every place else.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Beautiful.

Kamilah Forbes: Wow.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Okay.

Kamilah Forbes: Oh, it's getting hot in here. [crosstalk]. I mean, like where do we start? I mean, there's law and there's justice, there's fact and there's truth.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Kamilah Forbes: That was really powerful what Van shared about the city council meetings and those opportunities of when art takes hold and the power, right? Of people to listen. So I also wonder for us as cultural leaders, as artists, where do you both personally and within your organization, see your role personally in this fight towards restorative justice?

Paola Prestini: That's a great, great question. I think a lot about this, and it ties back to two things, one, which is this idea of conflict resolution. And if you're going to put yourself in a position of power, you have to accept that even if you're scrappy, even if you've suffered inequities, you're going to then be seen as a person in power, which is complicated.

Paola Prestini: And so with Sawdust for me it was really important to create a space that was constantly shifting. That was constantly changing. That was responsive, where we don't get it all right. But then at least we challenge the oppressive powers in our industry that are still there, that have not changed at all, that hide behind the word excellence and that we just constantly push against it.

Paola Prestini: And so I guess the truth is I don't dream yet of policy change, I just think about disruption, because I think we're still there. But what gives me hope is I do see especially right now in this generation of art makers, a willingness to address issues and to put themselves out there and to question and to completely redefine what success looks like.

Paola Prestini: And I think that's a really powerful and inspiring place to be in. Let's listen to an example by Samora Pinderhughes, he created a project called The Transformation Suite. And the Suite paints a musical picture of the current state of social inequality and injustice in the US. Let's hear an excerpt from the last movement of the piece. It's called Ascension.

Jeremie Harris: We who feel lava in our eyes and hearts, find it hard not to shake or scream. The cool that we have learned melts quickly, receding into the false air that kills us to breathe. In lost languages of love with, eyes dim and souls open, we pray freedom and truth. Hear my cry, oh, Lord for America's sins as if she knows not what she does.

Jeremie Harris: Send us word through the trees and the birds, for they stand toughest to the wind and touch closest to the sky. Let us find strength in the charge of our blood, and the chill of our skin. We stand on broken glass with bloody feet, ready to run, revolt with hot hearts of courage tired of confusion. Give our thoughts wings, wrap us tight in rings of resistance and let us fly. [music break]

Jehbreal Jackson: [singing] Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' forth to carry me home. [scat singing and vocalizations]

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Beautiful. There's who we are as artists, and maybe that speaks a little to the public imagination. And then there's who we are as arts administrators.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And the design of the institutions that we participate in, the communities that we participate in, vis-a-vis our cultural institutions, and the idea of a cultural institution as a social incubator.

Paola Prestini: I love that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That when, think about an audience coming in to see a show and Kam, I remember being part of *Between the World and Me* at the Apollo Theater. And after the show is over, you had the production team create a scroll of Black bodies that had been taken from their families vis-a-vis extra judicial violence. And the audience just stayed...

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph:... In the theater and just watch the name scroll up for nine minutes. Now think of that inspiration as a renewable resource. I think at *Sawdust*, at the Apollo, at the Kennedy Center, we traffic in inspiration.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So there's one role in kind of thinking about prison reform in terms of what we make.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: In terms of our codified art and then there's another role which is, what can we do with inspired bodies? How can we systematize the trafficking of inspired bodies towards a more just and liberated culture?

Kamilah Forbes: So it really becomes that question of inner freedom. Where does the idea of inner freedom and these other concepts of freedom really do meet?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: Where are those moments where they meet?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. And can we be intentional about them?

Kamilah Forbes: Can we be intentional?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Is the thing. Like the inspiration actually, isn't the final outcome.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right. That's right. That's right. That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Inspiration is a resource for the final outcome. And from a design perspective, you can think about your relationship to community members, to stigmatized communities, to artists, to audience members. You can think about how we work, how we deploy that entire creative ecosystem intentionally towards a more just future.

Kamilah Forbes: Well, let me ask you guys this, how practically? Because we have this a lot and at the Apollo. I'm always at an intersection as an artist and a cultural administrator, right? Like I have my artistic whims, which sit very closely to my civic and social responsibility, right?

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That's right.

Kamilah Forbes: And then also as an arts administrator, how we navigate... What are those practical conversations of what the crossroads of those two freedoms meet with your teams inside of your institutions?

Paola Prestini: I mean, so in general, I'm deployed in the organization to think kind of at the macro level and to be thinking ahead and strategically and programmatically. But where my heart lies is in the micro communicative relationship building, mentoring, impactful moments where you can see the change happening.

Paola Prestini: And I think that's the kind of abilities that we bring as artists and as leaders, right? Which is the ability to function on a macro scale to say, "We don't need to follow the same design as whatever the people are doing, but at the same time zero in to remember that everything is personal," right? The communities you've built are personal. The people who trust you, it's personal.

Paola Prestini: That's the reason that we're able to do what we do, because somebody has trusted us. And so right now, Sawdust has always lived on the brink of extinction because it wasn't built to thrive. And I feel like on one hand what's really stressful about that is that you always know that you could be extinct. But on the positive, it also gives you this feeling of, well, then we should just do it, we should just try it. What's the worst thing that can do? You just fail.

Kamilah Forbes: Let's just jump.

Paola Prestini: Let's just jump. And that is very much again pulling on what all three of us know that you live on in terms of the arts. You don't know where your next paycheck is coming. You don't know how you're going to... You live that way. And so that I think is this macro and micro relationship building.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: I really do think that there is something to the kind of, articulating what are the transferable skills that we embody everyday as artists that could potentially heal and be transferred, in terms of reimagining the justice system. And that leads me to something which is... I was on a phone call two days ago with our councilman.

Paola Prestini: And you know I've been thinking about what gives me hope? And the closing of Rikers gives me hope. That gives me hope. That's a tangible thing. But he actually said to me, he said, "Would you and your colleagues be willing to sit at the table in the reimagining of this complex?"

Kamilah Forbes: Wow.

Paola Prestini: So here I'm asking the two of you, would you be willing to sit at the table in the reimagining of that complex? Because then these ideas, they become real.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I kinda refuse to believe that I'm weird. I don't think thinking about justice for all peoples is weird or some fantasy. It's not recklessness, but there is a kind of dreamers unlocking. We are not, and God bless us, but we're not the "What if it fails?" people.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Paola Prestini: No.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We're the, it might fail.

Kamilah Forbes: Sure.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But what if it works?

Paola Prestini: That's right.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: We're those people.

Kamilah Forbes: I think that art is something that is innate to who we are as human beings, right? We come out the womb singing. We sing before we could talk.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Word, yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: We dance before we can walk. So it takes a certain amount of fearlessness, but yet the rest of our lives are training ourselves out of that reckless abandon. What is called, what is now looked at as reckless abandon, right? It takes a certain amount of fearlessness to return to that sense of freedom.

Kamilah Forbes: And it's almost like it's been trained out of us as we grow, that natural human instinct is just stripped away. But I also, this idea that you both started to touch on in regards to artists at tables, at certain tables, in certain conversations. Bringing a sense of, hmm... possibility, a visioning of possibility, to spaces that may not have that sense of freedom, it seems so right on.

Kamilah Forbes: I mean, I think right at the end of you and Van's conversation, you guys really started to talk about this idea of what corporate boards and... Right? Like we all... Look, we all run nonprofits, we're all leadership in nonprofit organizations. We have corporate boards with people who do not come from our field, but who have major stake and say so and what it is that we do.

Kamilah Forbes: Where is that reciprocal? Where are the tables that we are also sitting at as artist, as arts administrators at cultural doulas. In order to bring what we bring to the table as visioning our own future, our community's future, our city's future, our country's future, right? Like I'm curious in that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: I love it. Sometimes Kamilah you'd be saying stuff that just it's like a Bootsy Collins, just make me want to...

Kamilah Forbes: You just feel the beat.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It's like a Clyde Stubblefield, just make me want to just screw up my face, like, ew, it's crazy that the cultural doula just did that. That was the Bootsy baseline just now, that was just the wicked lick. But yeah, the part of the interview with Van, we work with boards and their lawyers on our boards. And there are politicians on our boards and there are these scions of industry that are adjacent to cultural institutions, we need that intelligence.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: But we also started talking about, well, where is the artist intelligence on the corporate board? How many artists are on the board of Citibank, or the board of Boeing, or other corporate entities? And why is it important that it goes both ways? And it's not again, just about a sense of hope but it really is about the deployment of a particular kind of intelligence in political and corporate structures.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And germane to what we've been talking about today to think about if we go back to this idea that an artist uses the body in order to leave it, then where is the artist on the board or in the design structure of the prison industrial complex? In all cases, this is not a zero sum game, this is not about absolutes.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: In the most democratic way possible, it's about a conversation about how we think of human beings and at what point human beings are discarded or not. In the case of an art space or in the case of a corporate space, it's can we have a bottom line, a successful bottom line and also work in ethical compliance, ethical and inclusive compliance that doesn't completely eliminate the possibility for a thriving future?

Paola Prestini: Right. But bottom lines are also complex because if you look at some of the greatest... Always when I say greatest, I mean also flawed but interesting and great structures. Like if you take El Sistema, right? That was actually a system created in Venezuela for the wellbeing, understanding that bringing music into impoverished neighborhoods would actually heal.

Paola Prestini: But that wasn't funded through corporate funding or private funding, it was funded through the government and the social wellbeing aspects of the government. And I think we do need to think about if art can indeed influence all these different sectors of society also needs to be funded in different ways.

Paola Prestini: And I think even more that after COVID. I'm going to just tell you about one thing transitioning us into our last few minutes together about what has given me hope. And as a young woman who is one of our Toulmin creators her name is Brianna Mims and she's this incredible choreographer. Among other things, she's working on a gaming system that promotes conflict resolution and wellbeing.

Paola Prestini: And I actually wanted to play a clip from one of her other projects. It's a small sample of the soundscape to a 20 minute long piece called Jail Bed Drop. It includes spoken word, movement

installation, and art. The work contextualizes and facilitates a space to explore interpersonal accountability, and reflect those values back on our criminal justice system.

Paola Prestini: The soundscape was created by Adam Drayson and features the voices of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Brianna Mims herself. Let's hear it.

Brianna Mims: From the perception of the multisensory human. The intention behind an action to turning its effects.

Mumia Abu-Jamal: There are more than 300,000 prisoners in California alone.

Brianna Mims: Every intention affects both us and others.

Mumia Abu-Jamal: The situation that bordered on fascism.

Brianna Mims: And the effects of intentions extend far beyond, the physical world.

Paola Prestini: Woof. Brianna Mimes. To me seeing young artists reimagining ways to deal with deep complex issues, I think is just one of the most hopeful things. But what about you both, as architects of the imagination what's giving you both--

Kamilah Forbes: I love that.

Paola Prestini: -- Hope right now?

Kamilah Forbes: I think about architects of the imagination. So there's a brilliant artist, another musician artists that we work with who his name is... He's Stefon Harris. Brilliant, brilliant, world-class vibraphonist. And he's been working on this app that actually improvises with him. It improvises like him.

Kamilah Forbes: There's such ingenuity in that. Because when I think we think of technology, we think of something that is systematize. Not something that is, when I think of improvisation, that is free. And at its core, Stefon is a jazz musician. So his whole jam is about jazz, is about this idea of this very democratic pop process of being, of creating art, of building art, of building music, of everyone is equal when they're on the bandstand.

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: So to build a tech environment that also mirrors that world is, I don't know, it's just phenomenal. It's phenomenal to me.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For me Paola, love gives me hope. And in a very specific way, I'm working with the composer, Carlos Simon on a new opera, what we're calling a pocket opera.

Paola Prestini: Nice.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: For the Washington National Opera project that we're doing called Monuments. And the culminating moment for the opera takes place on the steps of the Supreme Court in June of 2015, as the Supreme Court is ratifying marriage equality. And there's something pretty incredible as I was going back through, that is spoke in the decision.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: The Supreme Court says, and I think this is Justice Kennedy. He says something like the nature of injustice is that we may not always see it in our own times. That the generations that wrote and ratified the Bill of Rights and the 14th Amendment, they didn't presume to know the extent of freedom in all of its dimensions.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So they entrusted to future generations, a charter protecting the right of all persons to enjoy liberty as we learn its meaning. Which is to say that liberty is in and of itself a living, breathing, and evolving thing that we mature into the moral arc. And the idea that love is something that is protected under the 14th Amendment.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That love is actually a part of the American Dream, is a part of the American promise. And that thought that we continue to learn the meaning of liberty gives me hope. And the idea that love is an American right.

Paola Prestini: That gives me hope. I love that.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: That gives me hope.

Paola Prestini: That gives me hope.

Kamilah Forbes: That's huge hope. Huge hope. Me too.

Paola Prestini: Well thinking about just this very last piece that we're going to experience, but to take it full circle back to improvisation. And really at the heart of improvisation is the idea of reimagining and positive liberty, right? This kind of sense of freedom of trust and of the ability to come together through many different places and create something.

Paola Prestini: We're going to hear Tanya Tagaq, Tanya is an incredible human being. This is from the very opening night of National Sawdust and she works with four brilliant improvisers, they had never met. And what I love about her is she draws on a well of experience to give voice through her imagination. She's also a writer and not just a singer and composer.

Paola Prestini: But to the systemic violence that's occurred against Indigenous women throughout time. She also uses her social media platform in ways to activate issues of right and intellectual property in very complicated ways. But again, thinking about what will you do to be heard? How far will you go? She is someone who is a dear friend and who I admire and who gives me hope as well. So here we go.

Tanya Tagaq: [Improvised throat singing with cello, drum, and guitar accompaniment].

Kamilah Forbes: Wow. I mean, you know what is amazing. What I kept watching is just how much active listening was happening between the two, between all of the musicians and how they would check in with one another. And when there was a crescendo happening, there were cues being sent.

This is where we're going... And it's again, it's that spirit of improvisation that if there was not listening and an equal weight given to everyone sitting on that stage, it would sound like a cacophony of just sound versus this emotional emotive moment that we just went through.

Paola Prestini: Cathartic.

Kamilah Forbes: Yeah, a cathartic, right? Because they were all mixing the cauldron together.

Paola Prestini: Exactly.

Kamilah Forbes: And that was incredible. And it's incredible, they've never played together.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: And if that doesn't tell us the power of communication through shared voice and experience and art, I mean, I don't know what does.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: It also tells us something about play.

Kamilah Forbes: Yes, yes, yes.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: And we evoke the word fearlessness earlier.

Paola Prestini: Yeah.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: So it is the active listening. It is the willingness to play, but it's also the trust.

Kamilah Forbes: Trust, that's the word!

Paola Prestini: Exactly, yeah.

Kamilah Forbes: I was like, it's the trust. It's the trust!

Paola Prestini: It's the trust.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah. It has to be the "yes, and."

Kamilah Forbes: It's the "yes, and," right? The cipher is a circle. I know that I will be caught at some point, you know what I'm saying? Like I will not fall in this circle.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yes.

Paola Prestini: That's right.

Kamilah Forbes: There is trust there. If I also have the fearlessness to just get free and let go. Whatever that let go means. So there's a lot of lessons to be learned in that process.

Paola Prestini: There is.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Yeah.

Paola Prestini: Well, thank you to you both.

Kamilah Forbes: Absolutely Paola. Thank you, Paola.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Catch you on the other side.

Kamilah Forbes: Take care.

Paola Prestini: Till soon.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Peace.

Paola Prestini: Today you heard artistic selections from Daniel Bernard Roumain, Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Asha Bandele, Samora Pinderhughes, Adam Drayson, Brianna Mims, Tanya Tagaq, Nels Cline, Jeffrey Zeigler, and Glenn Kotche. Special, special thanks to our guest Van Jones. Our producer is Sapir Rosenblatt and our project manager is Paige Lester.

Paola Prestini: The live event for this episode was hosted by the multimedia team at the Kennedy Center. I'm Paola Prestini here with Marc Bamuthi Joseph and Kamilah Forbes. This is Active Hope. Thank you for listening.

Jehbreal Jackson: [singing] Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home. [music fades out]