

DEMAN Live: DEMAN Weekend-ish featuring “black-ish” & “grown-ish”

Intro: Dave Karger

Welcome to DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, Duke alum and host on Turner Classic Movies. DEMAN is the Duke Entertainment, Media and Arts Network. And it's the University's hub for the creative industries. On this show, you'll hear a past episodes of DEMAN Live, which includes panels and one on one chats with alumni. Thanks so much for listening, and enjoy.

John Brown 04:29

Good evening, Everyone, and welcome to DEMAN Weekend-ish. My name is John Brown, and I am Duke's Vice Provost for the Arts. Some of you may have joined us in person last year at the 10th annual DEMAN Weekend on campus. Well, I know we would all rather be in community together tonight. Thank you for joining us here on zoom. You know COVID-19 has demanded we reinvent how we present arts programming and DEMAN Live is truly a meaningful way to connect and support the Duke community in this moment. Before we begin this evening, I really want to thank our partners, the Duke Alumni Association, and especially the Duke Black Alumni, the Department of African and African American Studies at Duke, the Career Center, the Chronicle, and the Duke Global Education Office. And a special thanks to our student collaborators. At the end of tonight's conversation actually really acknowledge the students in the student groups who assisted with outreach, and also will reveal the lucky student winner of our air pod giveaway. Tonight, we'll hear from our talented alumni panel, and then we'll open up questions for questions and answers from you, our audience, and after the conversation, we invite you to tune in to season seven premiere of black-ish tonight at 930 on ABC and on abc.com. First, however, it's my pleasure to introduce our panelists and our moderator. I'll take a moment now to introduce them briefly. And you'll find their full and illustrious bios in the event invitation. Joining us tonight we have Ritza Bloom, A writer for grown- ish.

Ritza Bloom 06:17

Hey there. Hi. Hi, everyone. Thanks for having me.

John Brown 06:21

As Ritza describes it, quote, I was born to loving yet loud Haitian immigrants and just barely survived the many oddities from Floridian childhood, end quote. She studied sociology in theater at Duke before moving to LA in 2013. She's a staff writer for grown-ish season two, and she currently writes for a family show on Apple TV. Next, we have Robb Chavis, co executive producer for blackish.

Robb Chavis 06:52

How's it going? Great to be here.

Transcript

John Brown 06:55

A graduate of Duke and Harvard Law. Rob is a television comedy writer working on shows across several major networks including blackish on ABC , Superior Donuts on CBS and the NBC shows, Truth Be Told and Bad Judge. Thank you again for joining us, Robb, and for being such a champion for DEMAN. Please also meet panelists Vanessa McGee, executive story editor of grown-ish. Vanessa, also a Duke alum, grew up in New England wanting to work in the music industry. She says that her parents told her to find something more practical. Now she's a TV writer. And as she puts it, the joke's on them. She's written for the game, Green Eggs and Ham, grown-ish, and is currently a supervising producer on Dave. Again welcome, Vanessa.

Vanessa McGee 07:49

Thanks. Hello.

John Brown 07:52

Now it's my pleasure to introduce tonight's moderator, Mark Anthony Neal, the James B. Duke Professor and Chair of the African and African American Studies Department. And most notably, my friend. Mark is the founding director of the Center for Arts, Digital Culture and Entrepreneurship at Duke where he offers courses on black masculinity, popular culture and digital humanities. Mark is the author of several books, and the host of the video webcast, Left of Black. He's also an excellent moderator. And we're so pleased to have him with us here again tonight. So now Mark, it is my pleasure to turn it over to you.

Mark Anthony Neal 08:31

Thank you, Dr. John Brown. Hey, how's Ritza? Rob? Vanessa? How are y'all doing this evening?

Ritza Bloom 08:39

Excited to talk to you, Mark.

Mark Anthony Neal 08:41

So what do folks who spend time in the writers room do when they're not in the writers room? What does your downtown downtime look like?

Vanessa McGee 08:53

Oh, gosh. Guys, I mean, it's a lot of it's a lot of worrying. I mean, what I you know, I can get right into it. What I tell people who are like, how do I become a writer, one of the first questions I asked them, or one of the first thoughts I have is, you know, make sure you want to live this lifestyle because there's a lot of downtime to this career. And you know, you can spend a reading or watching TV or whatever,

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but there's just a lot of anxiety. And there's a lot of like, how did I do today? Or how am I gonna do tomorrow? Or will I ever work again? Or, you know, whatever it is, or why won't they stop texting me? I don't know the answer.

Ritza Bloom 09:37

Yeah, no two echo what Vanessa just said like, I think I had to realize that being a writer means that you're kind of an entrepreneur in your own way. So you do get a lot of downtime. You do get hiatus, but it's always like my friends and ideally myself who like find ways to work and create our own stuff during that time. Helps to bridge those gaps. And I don't know if you all both feel this way, but I feel like as a writer so much of what I do is inspired by real life. So you live life and you like, like a truffle pig sniffing for stories hopefully, find something.

Mark Anthony Neal 10:09

And Robb, particularly now as a producer and executive producer. What does that time look like for you that might have been a little different earlier in your career?

Robb Chavis 10:18

Yeah, I mean, I think for me, one of the biggest things that happened this year, kind of as you move up through the ranks, you know, there's times in your career where you walk into the room, and you're just there to be funny, or you're just there to pitch jokes and react to what happens in the room. And this season for the first time. I walked into the room and knew what my title was and knew what my responsibilities were. And I was like, Oh, my God, this is on me to make sure that we get great stories, and we have a great conversation and something actually happens. So yeah, this year more than ever, I'm just trying to stay prepared and stay on top of stuff. And just be ready for all of the things that have to happen in the writers room and make sure I've read everything and seen everything. And I'm anticipating questions, and I'm on top of things just you know, learning to get my arms around more and more things. But as Vanessa and Ritza both said, I didn't realize that this was as much of a hustle business as it is. But you've always got to be hustling. And if you're not writing, you've got to be meeting people and talking to people and building your network and making sure people know what you're doing and where you are. So I spent a lot of time doing that.

Mark Anthony Neal 11:38

Thinking about all of your careers as undergraduates, what in your undergraduate experience prepared you to do what you're doing now, right to make sure that no courses in screenwriting, you know, for instance, you know, all of you went to a liberal arts got a liberal arts education from a school like Duke that prepares you for many things, but not necessarily to go into the television business. So what was that transition like for you from your undergraduate experience into the industry?

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Vanessa McGee 12:10

To answer in, Oh, I'm sorry, No, go ahead. Go for I will always need to go first. By the way.

Mark Anthony Neal 12:19

I was gonna start with Ritza, since it's like more brand new for her....more recent graduate.

Ritza Bloom 12:27

Thank you, Mark. Yes, I'm recent. Just kidding. But yeah, so I feel like the lifestyle of and I know, Duke, if you are offered so many things, whether it's clubs or classes or extracurriculars and stuff. And I was definitely that student that was like, my parents are paying for this crap, like, let me do everything. This damn degree and make sure I get every experience that I want out of this place. And so I think just the act of juggling a lot of things and a lot of different commitments to what Robb was just saying, like, whether it's meeting people, whether it's participating in clubs or classes, or just being active, and learning how to find time for myself and self care, while also just having a lot of, you know, interests in a lot of different places, that was helpful for me in the transition of like, learning how to start my own career and figure out how to juggle a couple different things at once.

Mark Anthony Neal 13:19

How about you, Robb?

Robb Chavis 13:21

You know, I think for me, and especially because I kind of took a longer path to get here, heading to the law school before deciding to become a writer. You know, in undergrad, it was just reading books, and I was a English minor and and, you know, learning story that way, just absorbing as many things as I could. And then, you know, having a business background and going into law, and all of those things, just that responsibility and the drive and wanting to be in charge of things and learning how to run things. And just getting my arms around responsibility, I think, because of what we all just said about how entrepreneurial this business is, learning to have your own drive, learning to set your own standards and timelines and stick to them and continue to push. You know, Duke is teaching you a lot of those skills in the context of doing other things, but it's absolutely that kind of drive. And you know, when I'm mentoring students at Duke, and I'm working with students now, seeing that drive in the students that I'm working with is going to translate well into this business because you can't drop the ball. The most important thing to do is keep the trains running on time. And so just learning to stay on top of things and keep it moving. I still use all of those skills every single day.

Mark Anthony Neal 14:53

Now, did you focus on entertainment law when you were at Harvard Law School?

Robb Chavis 14:57

I thought I was going to, ya know, you go in thinking that you're gonna have a cool legal job. And I got to a law firm, we found out none of them are that cool. Which, you know, a summer at a law firm could have taught me that as opposed to three years and studying for the bar. But, I mean, I went into intellectual property, which kind of felt entertainment law adjacent and like, I'd be doing something, but it was a litigation position. I left there and was in-house counsel at an ad agency ad agency. So I got a little bit closer to the entertainment business or closer to Dre. Yeah, absolutely. Definitely goes into the character of Dre. Which, which it seems like I'm faking all of those things. When I talk about how closely I match up with Dre having worked in advertising, and I've got kids and you know, all of those things. But it just all of that process exposed me to life experience. And, and as you mentioned, having done something else before coming into this job, and having those life experiences. Give me more stories to tell, give me more people to think about give me more situations to talk about and characters to draw from and all of that. So, um, you know, I try to tell people not to aim at this too early, go live life, have a full life, and that's going to be the most valuable thing in the room.

Mark Anthony Neal 16:27

How about you, Vanessa?

Harry Jones 16:29

I mean, I agree with, you know, a lot of that. I guess Robb. I could just word for word repeat everything Robb just said.. Um, I mean, I designed my own major Duke because I did know pretty early that I wanted to I want to work in music or film and ended up kind of landing in TV. But, um, I should I basically also majored in philosophy, like I took enough credits, because I took an intro to philosophy course when I got here, and I just really loved it. And I think that that's the the sort, of course, that or a course of study that that benefited me the most just in that it was the first time I had ever been encouraged in an academic setting to really break down a text, not to just like, learn, you know, like rote learning and regurgitate for an exam, it was more like here is a text that's existed for 2000 years, find the flaws in the argument, and come up with their own counter argument. And, you know, I had just never, I'd always been like a very good student, obviously, because I went to this school, but I had never really thought of it that way. And when you go into a writers room, especially one of the ish rooms, you know, you do really have to, you do have to find flaws and things and you do have to kind of argue your point of view. So I, you know, that I've used every single day, I feel like since I, the first day of intro to philosophy and every course after I'm very grateful to my professors in that course, but that and then also, um, you know, just, you know, the kind of social and emotional IQ that goes up when you're just surrounded by very smart people at a, you know, wonderful institution, because you're going to go into a writers room, and you're going to be there with a lot of very smart people. And, and they're going to have, you know, big egos and lots of you know, their opinions and think that

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they are right, and then you're gonna think you're right, and, you know, and being in that environment for four years is also you know, it's it's helpful. It's good training.

Mark Anthony Neal 18:28

I mean, do you find yourself when you're in these writers rooms, is for all three of you, you know, arguing right, finding the flaws. Are there moments where folks around the table, it's like, oh, it's them damn, Duke people again.

Ritza Bloom 18:43

Harvard, Harvard, thank you. The Yale and the Harvard's. We're nice.

Harry Jones 18:50

Comedy is infested. We're all comedy writers. It's infested with Harvard people.

Mark Anthony Neal 18:59

And so you've all worked on on the ish brand, the ish franchise. And it's hard to believe it was six years ago that black-ish launched, right? It doesn't seem like it was that long ago, but yet the show seems as though it's been on forever. And it was really groundbreaking, right in the sense that it took on issues of race, and we really hadn't seen taken place on television. Really, you have to go back to Norman Lear, and All in the Family, back in the 1970s. And then Kenya Barris was ambitious enough to decide and I'm gonna do another show. And then I'm gonna do another show, but before a little bit, talk about, you know, in your mind, what the, what the ish brand is, what it is brought collectively to television, and how you felt, you know, being a part in terms of crafting that storytelling.

Robb Chavis 19:48

I just start with that one just to talk about, you know, as you said a moment ago talking about having arguments in the room. That is if that's not brands that the ish are built on, I don't know what it is, it's like, we're kind of trained that you don't have a story. And less, it kind of starts a hot fight, like when somebody brings up something. And there are four or five points of view where everybody's passionate. And you know, I didn't overlap a lot with Kenya, but he kind of. he pushes you, if you have an idea, he'll push you into the corner on it. And I can make you defend yourself to make sure you really believe what you're saying. And if you can do that, then he knows he's got something. And so we still do that we still bring up topics, and people will say, I like it for this, and I don't like it for that. And this is what I feel is this kind of person. And like I said, when it kicks off an argument, and everybody's having fun, and everybody's yelling over each other, we know we've got the beginnings of an episode that we can tell. And being in an environment where it feels safe enough to say anything. You know, I say it's a lot like therapy, I say stuff in the writers room that I don't say, at home, or to my family or any of those things. So being in a safe environment where you can share those things and talk about those

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things and talk about your kids and talk about my wife and all of those things in a way that's real. That's how we get the kind of stories that we like to tell.

Mark Anthony Neal 21:31

Let me follow this up real quick for Vanessa, because, you know, let's bring up the elephant in the writers room. You know, you're writing for black themed shows, but you're not black. And so how do you go about navigating that space? In the writers room on a show? Like, like grown ish?

Harry Jones 21:48

Yeah, it's, it's, and with the caveat that I wrote on the show that was that...the game on BET show, I would not consider grown-ish a black show.

Mark Anthony Neal 21:59

It's more multicultural than black-ish, yeah...

Vanessa McGee 22:03

We have a very beautiful, good looking. They're so beautiful, um, but as annoying. Um, yeah. So first, you know, first, I'd like to say that, you know, no one runs a room like Kenya. And, you know, he had already left for Netflix by the second season of grown-ish. I was on seasons one and two. And he just runs a very, very interesting room. And one of my favorite, sort of like, mantras is something that, you know, he told me, which is, one of Kenya's like, sort of sayings is, don't be afraid to leave a conversation different than how you entered it. And I think that, that's just a great sort of thing. It's great for it's great life advice. It's great writing advice. It's wonderful writers room advice, this idea of like, I have a point of view. And I'm not going to die on this hill, I'm going to be open minded enough to hear and to listen, because as he said to me multiple times, he's like, when you argue you can get emotional, whatever, but you've got to listen, if you're not listening, you're shutting the conversation down. And that's why he's so good at running a room like this, where there are conversating you know, these emotional arguments and everything, you never really lets it get out of hand, because he's always listening. And you can say the craziest thing, and I've heard people say, the most bonkers things in these rooms. And all Kenya will be like, they'll be like, that's interesting. Let's talk about that. And then all of a sudden, you're talking about this point that you thought your immediate reaction was, that's insane. No one would ever think that and then suddenly, you're like, maybe I think that. Maybe that's how I feel. Um, so having said that, um, so yeah, so so not being black on a show that's, you know, that, you know, in rooms that are largely black, I will say, I will say I've gotten the most heated argument or not even heated the most like deathly quiet argument I've ever gotten into in a writers room was about the definition of the word diversity. And it was because somebody in the room was kept saying, like, person of color, and they met black. And I was like, these are not the same things. And the thing is, I'm looking I'm on one side of the table, literally, and there's maybe five or six, you

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know, black writers in front of me and that's not an easy position to be on. To be like, Hello, you know, hello, you know, you know, black people were talking about race and I think you're wrong on is not easy. But you know, that's also part of the reason you have a diverse writers room and diverse means that you know, many different things. So, I think it can be, it can be sort of intimidating. It can be you know, that elephant in the room, but in the end, you know, writers rooms are these spaces where you your most valuable asset as a writer 97% of the time is your point of view. And so representing that, as flawed as it is as problematic as it or whatever it is, you know, that's what that's what you're bringing to the table and you can't you can't be scared of that or else you shouldn't be there.

Mark Anthony Neal 25:25

Ritza?

Ritza Bloom 25:26

Yeah, definitely to echo what both of them just said, I coming straight from, you know, college and having done all my internships and stuff, and then landing and grown-ish as my first space as a staff writer. I honestly find it refreshing I think sometimes right now, discourse is so lens through your own view, and you will often are only talking to people who agree with you anyway. And so to be in a writers room, we are encouraged, especially with the Kenya's brand to be challenged, you're encouraged to defend your opinion, was kind of cool just to sit there and watch and learn from and I have to praise Vanessa, because I was there for that bite. And I was there for some other moments. And I will say as a staff, right, your job often is to like support, but also listen and learn. And so at that time, I there were so many moments where Vanessa would fearlessly like defend a point of view. And internally, I'd be like, yes, girl, yeah. But I just, I couldn't have quiet. So I just I appreciated how fearless she was, I learned a lot from just being in that environment, about defending your point of view, but also being open to growing and learning. And I think I just wish that more spaces had that mantra than just writers.

Mark Anthony Neal 26:32

I'm gonna say what you Ritza for a second. Since we were just talking about diversity. And you came into grown-ish through an ABC Disney program that specifically targeted underrepresented people in the industry. And the two questions, I have one, you know, Why is it taking so many of these networks so long to understand that they actually do need more more diverse viewpoints? And now that you're kind of in this in this space, do you think these programs actually are effective in terms of diversifying the kinds of voices and images that we see on screen?

Ritza Bloom 27:06

No, totally both great questions. I mean, you know, all of us are Robb, myself and Vanessa are people of color in some way. And I feel like you know, Duke...Hmm, can be a little bit of an ivory tower, as they

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call it. And so, for example, I do remember my high school someone writing in my yearbook, just remember, you only got into Duke, because you're black, have a great summer. And, you know, some of that training I was prepped for by having gone to Duke, but yeah, no, I mean, obviously, diversity is an issue in so many different places, not just entertainment industry, but definitely also there. And the program is very helpful for me, I was an assistant before and getting to have a seat at the table and be at the room. Um, I feel like they can be effective, but it depends on the person. It depends on if you're willing to adapt and learn. And listen, I there are people that were in my year, the ABC program, who maybe had a bit more of a jarring experience when they first got into a writers room. But I remember they did a lot of training like what are you going to say when they say you're only in this writers room because we're a diversity hire, what are you going to do, don't freak out and stuff. So they I felt like I was prepared for having to be that person. And I also felt very lucky to have my first room be such a diverse space like in the ish brand. I think that's par for the core for Kenya's shows so

Mark Anthony Neal 28:25

But I mean did you ever feel as though when you're in this space that you know it since you can't stab somebody in the neck in that moment. But you might go home and sit and think about the fact how you're going to stab them in the neck the next day. And I know Vanessa mentioned the kind of anxiety that comes with it earlier. I mean, are you you know, do you feel as though there's a way in which you can disconnect you know from the tension of the writers room, you know, to have some semblance of peace in your personal life?

Ritza Bloom 28:51

Those commutes were great, I would play my music, I was going from Burbank to the west side. I had a whole albums worth. I wasn't an eye of the storm as often like maybe Vanessa, maybe Robb in there jobs, I was just like kind of sitting and listening. But yeah, those commutes are helpful.

Harry Jones 29:10

I will say also another very I listen, Kenya I love him so much. What a funny place to say that he is a maniac a full on maniac, but I love him so much. But he has given me so many like fun mantras or good useful mantras. And one of them too is you know, like New Day, New page, and I have really taken that to heart too. You can really build up a lot of grudges on a job if you don't watch it. And I I remember that every morning when I walk on set or I walk in a room of writers room or wherever it is if I've had an argument with somebody the day before, if we haven't like kind of like you know, put it on ice or whatever, just like talk or whatever. It's just gone. You start over you don't have time for these sorts of things. Like when you're trying to all move together toward one goal. I find that to be a very useful piece of advice and I think of it often.

Mark Anthony Neal 30:00

Transcript

Thinking about your careers as far and the various shows that you worked on...was there something that you were responsible for writing directly or was involved in the writing of something that when it came to air, you know, you sat back and kind of pause and wait, I can't believe we did that.

Ritza Bloom 30:21

Robb?

Robb Chavis 30:26

I'm trying to think of specific examples. You know, writing is such a collaborative process that you know, the episode with your name on it isn't always necessarily your idea or your soul work. And I think that the great thing about these shows in particular, you know, I wanted to work on black-ish from the moment I read the pilot, season one, and it took me three interviews, to actually get on the show. The first two times, I didn't make it. And part of the reason that I wanted to write on it so much is all the other shows I was on, bad judge, I probably got that job because I had a legal degree. And even though I kept criminal law notebook in my desk, so that when they asked a legal question, I could run back, take a take a bathroom break, and run back and check on some stuff to make sure I didn't get it wrong. Ya know, Truth Be Told, was a good show, but it had a bunch of different perspectives that it was trying to service. Superior Donuts was a little bit closer. But it kind of had one black lead character that I was trying to help tell stories about. But on black-ish, I felt like all of me mattered. You know, my part as a father, my feelings as a black man and my feelings as a guy who worked in a corporate environment in advertising. As a black father to a 14 year old girl and a son, and someone who was married to someone who was as high of an achiever as I was. So many of the pieces of me I get to use. And so for me, that's why it still feels important for me to work on this show, and why I still even on set when I've seen the jokes, eight times watching Anthony or Tracee perform the joke, laugh out loud, and I still enjoy watching the show, even though I've been on set when we're filming it. And I've seen it in editing. I enjoy the show, because I feel like it's important. And it's important to black families. It's an it's important to black people. And so there's so many little pieces of my life that show up in the show that it's hard to kind of pinpoint one thing because I'm doing my best to pour as many parts of my life into it as I can.

Mark Anthony Neal 33:09

For those of you who've worked on multiple shows, well you've all worked on multiple shows, how do you know when to move on? Is it simply a better hustle? Or, you know, is it fueled by creative differences? Or is it feel by just it feels stale? Right, if you want to try to do something else, but what have been what has been some of the motivations if they were in fact, your motivations are moving to other shows?

Harry Jones 33:40

Transcript

Do you want to do it, Robb?

Vanessa McGee 33:41

I've only had to do it once. You know, because The Game wasn't it's set to last seasons. It basically was like done and you know, I've been fired. But so the only time I really had to do it actually was when Kenya called me and said, You know, I know you're on a show. Have they asked you back and he said, yeah. And he said, I want you to come work on my new show. And I had stupidly actually, here's a terrible story. When I, when I was working on The Game, this is how I know Kenya. I was working on the game and he was running Diggy Simmons pilot like down the hall. And I didn't know who this guy was. And he would just like come because he worked on The Game before I did. He wasn't in the room when I was but he would come in because he knew everyone...Hale was on a Jenny was on it. And and he would just come in for 15 minutes like every day and just start talking in the middle of the room about like, whatever you know, like I know what happened on the elevator with Solange and Jay Z and we'd all be like what? And so we became friends because he was around and I remember hanging out with him one day and he he was just like, like black-ish had just been picked up like he had just done the pilot. And he was like you should come on my new show. And I said, I mean these, you know, they just hired me on this show. I feel like out of loyalty, you know, I should. I should, I should stay here like, it's just not right. And he was like, okay, whatever you think. And the idea of turning down black-ish I would have seven houses now. Like, it would be crazy. If that same year, Jerrod Carmichael was like, help me write my pilot. And I was like, No, I'm busy. Like, it's so yeah, so but it was when he called me and he was like, you want to work on my new show? He barely had to send out I was like, Yes, absolutely. Of course, I'll be there. Um, so I think at a certain point, you just kind of learn when to when to go, when to take the chances, the opportunity.

Robb Chavis 33:41

No go ahead, Vanessa.

Mark Anthony Neal 34:13

How about you, Robb?

Robb Chavis 35:49

Yeah, part of the reality of this business is most people move on because their show gets canceled. Every show I worked on prior to black-ish, I've left because it didn't exist anymore. Which is part of the, you know, part of the the insecurity that everybody was talking about earlier. And sometimes it's, you know, one time it was 13 episodes, one time it was 10. Superior Donuts ran two seasons, which was great at the time. So you know, when you get the opportunity to be on something that's got a little bit of momentum waves. It's smart to stick around. But it's also the chemistry of the writers room is very, very important to both the show and to you. Because you're in there a very long time. I see the other

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writers, I mean, that zoom, it's down in zoom. But in in normal times, you walk into that room at 10. And you go home when you're done. And in a good room that six o'clock, in a bad room, that can be one or two o'clock in the morning. And so if you don't love those people that you're spending 14 or 16 hours a day with, it can wear on you and you've got to look out for yourself, and you've got to remember why you're in it and you've got in comedy, you've got to feel funny. If you don't feel funny, or you don't like the humor, or you don't like the stories you're telling or you don't feel like you're being used correctly, it's not healthy, you might be doing it for the money, but it's not a healthy place to be for very long. And when you're giving that much of yourself, you have to make sure you're in a healthy place. Otherwise, you're, you're just gonna, you're just gonna beat yourself up the shows the show's gonna do the show's gonna do. But you have to look out for yourself a little bit in that environment too.

Harry Jones 37:50

Two things I'd like to..off of what Rob just said, I think there's it's incredibly true, obviously. But sort of two things off of that one, one of the things that I think keeps people at shows that I feel like you sort of touched on is that that's often how you you advance title wise, you stay on a show, because contractually, you will get promoted, at least every season. So a lot of people will stay, you know, I went I bounced between like maybe I think I was a staff writer, maybe four different times before I started getting promoted. And then you know, you start getting a couple like double promotions, whatever. But to make it up the end writers rooms, I say as well. They are very hierarchical. You want to go up not just for money, but also for you know, the the status in a room you have you just have more say in what you're doing. So I think that that's an important consideration with whether to stay or go. I also think that what's important about what Robb just said is that you know with in terms of liking your coworkers is that's an important thing to remember when you're trying to get staffed is that you could be the next I don't know Aaron Sorkin and Shonda Rhimes Take your pick and Phoebe Waller Bridge. It doesn't matter. If people don't want us if they can't look at you and think like I could, I could sit in a room with this person for 14 hours. They're not gonna hire you. That's a big part of it. Yeah,

Mark Anthony Neal 39:16

The stories that don't get told, everybody who wants to be a television writer.

Ritza Bloom 39:24

Just be pleasant. Be someone or say don't piss people off. Just to frickin be pleasant. That's half the battle.

Harry Jones 39:32

Don't take things personally, Don't have an ego. Just do your it's still a job, which is...

Transcript

Mark Anthony Neal 39:41

How is all of this working out for you all during COVID?

Ritza Bloom 39:46

Zoom rooms are I think they're an adjustment. So I started a new show and a Zoom Room. So thankfully, I've I've only known these people online. It's so weird because we spend so much time together and I feel like I know them but I haven't met any of them in person.

Mark Anthony Neal 40:00

Because you can't stab anybody in the neck on zoom, right? Writers room, department meetings, you know, kind of the same thing.

Robb Chavis 40:18

The Lovecraft pilot is after this.

Ritza Bloom 40:20

We weren't invited to that one, that's a different zoom. Link. We didn't get that one.

Harry Jones 40:27

Um, zooms are terrible. I hate I hated it. And there were like two or three. Dudes. It's always dudes. I work in a very dude heavy room. You know, they're always like, we should do this forever. And it's like, personally, I mean, I just just like, screw you like it? You know, whatever. Um, yeah, no, they're terrible. I wonder if I honestly am very concerned that we're in for a lot of mediocre television next spring. Oh, yeah, I think I do think the quality of the work has suffered. Um, yeah, so I hate them. And I never want to do it. Again, I'm also about to be where Robb is, which is in production in about a week and a half. And I am concerned.

Mark Anthony Neal 41:11

yeah, because Robb, you're not in a Zoom Room.

Robb Chavis 41:14

Well, so the writers room kicked off in a Zoom Room. And we did that for a while. And once we went into production, my showrunner Courtney Lilly, actually not only runs black-ish, but also runs mixed-ish. And was, you know, he's the kind of the person who was supposed to be the last filter if things are going to stage and the last person to touch things. And he was going to do it across both shows and be the only writer on the ABC campus. But then because of COVID, and the limitations and everybody's efforts to create a bubble, especially around the actors, if one of the actors disappears for three weeks, we can't shoot the show. And because he was going to be in Zone A, and talking to the actors, he could

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not go between both shows. So he reached out to me as one of the writers, and either because I'm a sucker or I want to think if you got to trust me, it might just be because I have a reckless disregard for my own life. He asked me to go inside of the black-ish bubble, and actually be there on set. So while we're shooting, I am on the studio with my face shield and mask, and staying six feet away from people. And everything is slower, and everything is harder, and everything is harder on people. And we're trying to write the scripts more simply, luckily, black-ish is a show that mostly takes place in the house. And we can write three or four person scenes. So it's not too many people around each other. And it still feels a lot like our show, but we're trying to find ways to get production value. You know, Pops and Ruby got back together at the end of last season. So we, we did a wedding episode. So I try to make that feel real, we had to try to figure a lot of things out kind of on the fly and make it happen. So like Vanessa said, everything is a little bit harder, or, you know, glad I'm still making television, glad that we've got eight episodes under our belt and, and we're getting to tell our stories, and we're keeping the, you know, 150 people connected to the show working. And comedys harder because like we feed off of each other, there's an energy that builds in a comedy room, that you know, certain bits still work on zoom. And you can kind of be funny, but it's just not the same, table reads aren't the same. You can't build this, you know, this mania of laughter that happens in real life. You're kind of guessing what what people think is funny, because he's not bouncing off of people. There's no, there's no transfer of energy. So it's harder, but I'm glad that we've got it happening.

Mark Anthony Neal 44:11

The shows that you're working on now. Are they going to reflect what's happening in terms of this COVID moment?

Robb Chavis 44:18

So on black-ish, the episode that everybody will see tonight, because it's a show that exists in the real world, we knew we had to address it, we had to be part of the world that we're in. So the episode tonight because the Rainbow character is a doctor is a flashback to the summer. It's a flashback to what it was like for her of what it feels like to be an essential worker of what it feels like to be at home while you know the your mom is going into a hospital every single day and what kind of pressures she's under, and then we do another episode we're we're kind of in a COVID world. But then beyond that, we've told everybody, you know, we're reacting to COVID in the real world of keeping everybody safe, and everybody has masks and face shields and staying away from each other, until we say action, and everybody takes those things off, because we still, we still want to be able to tell stories that lasts forever, we want you know, is only going to be on ABC once in real time, during, you know, October 2020. Hopefully, people are going back to these episodes for a long, long time. And while our actors are all very good, they can't all act just from here out. So we need their whole faces for them to be maximum, you know, maximum entertainment. So, you know, we made the decision to kind of move on once we we jumped into the real world to address it.

Mark Anthony Neal 45:51

Thank you. Were going to bring Harry Jones in now. Harry is going to moderate the q&a session. How you doing, Harry?

Harry Jones 45:59

Hey, what's up, Mark, good to see you. Ritza, Robb and Vanessa, good to see you guys, as well. So I wanted to start off about something that Mark hit on a little bit earlier. Black-ish really represents such a unique place in the sitcom canon. I'd love for you guys to talk about some of the shows that you enjoyed as a part of your journey, and how the elements of those shows have come into to assist you in your current roles.

Ritza Bloom 46:30

So our favorite shows and how they've helped us currently?

Harry Jones 46:34

Exactly. And what elements have come out in grown-ish and black-ish.

Ritza Bloom 46:40

I'll start my favorite show is easy. And I it's very controversial. So I'll fight you in the parking lot. That's fine. I love Lost. I loved it. As a show I watched every single episode, it was the first show that I like watched every single episode of and I think I'm one of the biggest themes for that show, for me at least was the idea of asking questions, and not necessarily about getting answers, but just being comfortable with asking questions. And I think as we've said in the grown-ish room, and probably as well as in black-ish room, the idea of just like, asking, Well, what if this happened? or Why do you feel that way? Or, and being comfortable with the idea that you're not going to get closure on everything in life? But we're going to have a good discussion? Are we going to ask some questions was like, really cool for me for a tie in.

Robb Chavis 47:23

I was a huge Lost fan, too. And I mean, I will say like, when I read someone's script, or something like that, or I just I read anything or see anything. My first question is, do I care? And am I wondering what's happening next? And Lost is a great, a great place to start for that. Because you are always wondering what's coming next. But like other shows, you know, it's interesting, there's so many paths to this job. And you run into so many people who did go to film school and studied things and have seen all the important movies, and can refer to things. I was like, Listen, man, I was just a regular dude. And I saw like juice, and I liked Martin. And I watched the Wayans brothers. And like, I just watched what was funny. And, you know, like, you can't, comedy evolves and you can't do, you can love,

Transcript

Cheers, all you want. But if you put a show on that has six scenes in it. It is long, rambling scenes of people just standing still and talking, it will not be on television for very long. And that show had its era and it's valuable. And it's great. And it told great stories, but things are constantly evolving. What's really interesting is when I first came here, because I'm a Duke student, and because I overdo everything and analyze everything I got here and I was like, I'm gonna watch, I'm gonna read every single pilot, everybody writes that they're trying to make them a watch every show that comes on television, or watch every single comedy. And then I got to the point where I actually started having meetings with people. They're like, what's your favorite show? And I was like, well, I've watched everything they're like, but what did you like? And I realized I had stopped liking things, because I was just watching everything. And then I just cut back to really think about the shows that I like, and having taste like taste is as important as any other skill that you could have is knowing what a good joke is knowing what makes you laugh, not letting everything go just because you don't want to hurt somebody's feelings. You know, the biggest skill you can develop in a comedy room is the ability to say a joke out loud and nobody laughs at and not shut down for the rest of the day. Just like know you've got another funny joke coming. But yeah, I just I like silly comedies that just make you laugh like things you'd be embarrassed to admit that you like. To all the you know, all the Friday movies all I just ridiculous comedies. So I like to always I haven't had an important episode of black-ish where it's like we're talking about black hair. And, and you know, this protest and like I've never had I have funny episodes, I like to go on weird romps where weird things happen. That's that's, that's what I like to do.

Vanessa McGee 50:28

My favorite shows are 30 Rock, Mad Men and Felicity, they don't have a lot in common. I don't know that any single one maybe for Mad Men, I might have gleaned like you don't have to say everything. See, like, you know, you can be quiet for a second. Um, but and I think I do think that. I don't know if anybody remembers the show South Central. Does anybody know this show? It was Larenz Tate's first roll. I think he was like, 13. It was on Fox. I think. And because...

Mark Anthony Neal 51:04

Yes, I remember the show.

Vanessa McGee 51:05

Thank you. Akil had worked it. When I went to meet on The Game. I was like, Oh, my god you worked on South Central? She was like, I'm sorry. You watched South Central?

Mark Anthony Neal 51:17

I did!

Vanessa McGee 51:18

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Yeah. Yeah, I don't know. Maybe that helped me get the job. I don't know. But uh, I also think, you know, getting my first job wasn't a matter of them thinking that, like I had good taste in TV. I think they, I told him I had gone to see Blood Orange. And they were like, ooh, you seem cool. And then I had written a blog about Drake. And they were like, you're the kind of fresh young voice when I'm so fun. I think, you know, people are, you know, young writers. I feel like, ask questions like, you know, how do you write a good TV show? How do you know, like, you know, how do you learn? How should I learn TV structure? Like, what books should I read to learn TV structure is a question that I hear from like assistants a lot. And I'm like, I'm sorry, you watch TV, right? And they're like, Yeah, I'd love to get them if you grew up watching TV, correct. And they're like, yeah, and I'm like, then you know, you know how to write TV. Like, it's, it's something that I think growing up and watching and just like you just internalize it. And so even if I haven't proactively done anything, by watching certain shows, or loving certain shows, I can tell you, you know, and it's a weird thing to say, because it's not often that like you hear it in a room or an editing suite, or whatever. But I can tell you when something's wrong. When you're just like, this, just, this doesn't work. And like, you have to have an argument for it most the time, if something's just wrong, if it just doesn't work, like you'll know. You'll just, you can feel it. And it's because you know, the medium, well.

Harry Jones 51:25

Mark, you teach amazing class on black comedy, I'd love for you to weigh in on this, too. What were some of your favorite shows? And can you talk a little bit more about what elements of prior shows that you've seen in black-ish and grown-ish?

Mark Anthony Neal 53:02

So you know, the challenge of teaching this class, it's called the, it's Dick Gregory and the history of black comedy. And so I, first of all, I do a history of black comedy, right? And I think for many folks, when they hear comedy, they think stand up comedians. They think about comedy shows, they think about films, they think about famous comedians, they know, I'm more of a satire person. So I spend a lot of time looking at literary satire, satire in terms of visual culture. And for me, because I have kind of a longer memory of television, I'm more likely to use examples from television in the 50s. Well, not the 50s, but the 60s in the 70s. In the early 80s, it's kind of reference points, right? And so for me, you know, a show like all my, All in the Family, you know, I wish I could have been teaching in the early 1970s to be able to delve into a show like that. It is one of the things I appreciate about black-ish because of black-ish consistently touches on issues and a grown-ish, which is a show I didn't think that I was like I would like you know, I was raised on you know, The Cosby Show. Why can't remember the name of but not The Cosby Show, but A Different World. A Different World and for a whole generation that that's our experience with the black college experience and I wasn't expecting the light grown-ish. But one of the things I think the grown is does is very successful is actually capture what it as right now as I have a 17 year old and a 22 year old. That show captures them perfectly. And I think it's a growth

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that we now can have television programs that have that perspective of young folks without it feeling like 40 year old people trying to write you know, for a 17 year old.

Harry Jones 53:14

Definitely. Actually made a really good point I want to expand on a little bit. So when I watched grown-ish, so much of my Duke experience I'm seeing play out there. Ritza and Vanessa, how much of your experience do you see in various characters? And how much of your experience have you been able to put into those characters and into the show?

Ritza Bloom 55:18

Um, yeah, I felt like especially when it came to the friendship dynamics. That was something that I definitely drew a lot from, from my experience at Duke, I think something that's so great about college is that you especially at Duke, you become best friends with people you've known for two weeks. And like compared to your friends from home and your hometown, you've gone through like middle school and high school with them. You've known each other for decades, sometimes, or a decade at least. And at Duke, it's like, oh, no, no, no, we're in the same class. Okay, we're besties now. So there's a lot of like, really fast get to know you go through a bunch of conflicts because I didn't actually know you. And then we're going to get to the other side of it and actually be friends now with a deeper understanding of each other that I remember from college and just valued so much when I was there. And so I think a lot of those dynamics like you'll see with like, Sophie, and maybe Jazz and stuff. I fondly remember drawing from at my time there.

Mark Anthony Neal 56:09

It's like an insecure dynamic, right, but we see the two main characters that their friendship should fall apart is like, well, because y'all didn't actually know what exactly you were his friends in the first place.

Vanessa McGee 56:24

Um, I? Yeah, I think there's a lot of I think, you know, all of the I can't speak to mixed-ish. And now I think old, is old-ish happening? That's a show. Well, at least with black-ish you go into a, you know, somebody recently asked me, you know, they were coming from, like, network comedy writing, and they were entering their first cable, comedy writing job, and they I've only ever written for cable comedy. And they said, What's that? You know, do you have any tips? And, and I was like, in my experience, I do not think this is true for black-ish. But maybe Robb, you can weigh on this. I don't know. To me, like network comedy shows are more about like, what if, like, what if this happened? Or like, wouldn't it be funny if or what, uh, you know, whereas in a cable room, I do feel like you, you very often start from a place of, Oh, my God, this happened to me today, or 10 years ago, or whatever. Because I find that, you know, on a show like, like grown-ish, or like a lot of like cable companies are often striving for, you know, what we call a grounded comedy, which, you know, so you kind of start

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with like a kernel of truth or a kernel of real life, and then you expand it into the world that you've created for the characters. So in grown-ish, on grown-ish especially, we would definitely sort of like, go around and tell these stories of our college experience, or even our adult experiences or young adult, whatever it is, and, and kind of extrapolate into plotlines that we thought would you know, work with different characters and kind of speak to different themes that we were trying to speak to?

Harry Jones 58:07

I'm also curious about the actors on the show and how much input they have, I think it's so cool on both black-ish and grown-ish, I think it's so cool that she's at Harvard, and then she's in a show about what it's like to be in college. So yeah, like, I'd love to hear everyone's thoughts on that.

Robb Chavis 58:31

I can jump in. You know, I think it's all a balance, and it's all a relationship. And it's all about trust. Because acting is a is a very weird job. Like to, to show up. And because they're, they're not, we're not shooting an order, we're not shooting a story that makes sense, like, we start on scene 14, and then they have to jump into this emotional place, then we got him in a car going someplace, like he just, it's hard to track the story. So, you know, I say all the time, especially as the writer on set, my job is to translate what we think is funny, and to emotionally track every single story to help the actors get to where we want them to be. And so as that story, jumping around, if they're not tracking, and I have to say, look, to see me for this, this is what just happened, you just got hold of this thing. So you're coming into this moment trying to feel like this. And they have input because they can't do what we want them to do if it doesn't feel real. So there will be times when you have the script and you have it in your head a certain way, where you have to have a conversation with the actor to say this is what we're going for. This is what we think this would feel like and it you know, it has to make sense for them to for them to be able to do their job. And it can be look man? Anthony Anderson is a powerhouse who can do anything. Tracee Ellis Ross is the exact same way. I guess that's like every once in a while I'm like, Oh, yes, Diana Ross', his daughter. And that's crazy. Like it is like you're literally talking to like, the black royal family in a lot of ways. And they've had long careers, and they know what to do. And they're extremely talented, and they know how to get to the place that they are. But it's also my job to be able to communicate with them. And for many people, that's scary. And for many people, it's hard to do, because that they have so much power, they have such ability, they've been doing it for so long. That that's part of the job is just learning how to do what you need to do, while allowing them to do what they need to do, and finding a way to balance those two. So they've definitely have input input into what's going on. But you also have to make sure that, you know, there are 150 people work on there, and it's 150 experts, and you have to give everybody space to do their jobs, and finding that balance and making sure that you get something on stage that gets in the editing and beyond. Because they have a lot of input on what the show ultimately looks like. It's a piece of it. And you have to like kind of work with everybody along the way. But that's what's wonderful about

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television, the writer, the writers, the center of television. In film, the directors and the actors are much more the center and the writer fades back. The writer owns the show in television, and that's one of the great things about it.

Vanessa McGee 1:01:47

Yeah, to speak to your question, I I will say that Yeah, speaking about love, like Anthony Anderson Tracee Ellis Ross, you know, we worked with them on grown-ish as well, they are unbelievable actors.

Robb Chavis 1:01:58

Um, I didn't even mention Laurence Fishburne. Jesus! Fishburne!

Harry Jones 1:02:07

They're all phenomenal actors. I think, you know, grown-ish, we worked with a younger cast. Now I'm on a show to where it's, it's, it's interesting how I think when you were working with people who aren't actually actors, it becomes a little bit different. And you and you almost out of necessity are going to write more toward the actual person, because they just they just probably don't have either the confidence yet or until they do or you know, or this or the skill set training wise to create something out of you know, nothing. So, you are probably like, I remember Luca infamously for an interview, you know, I mostly just that, you know, the writers mostly just let me say whatever I want, and I was like we do not, every single word you say into the script. I love Luca. But yeah, um, so you know, then you have somebody like Yara, who's, you know, global presence is so pervasive that, you know, you can't escape it in the writers room, you're not going to ever put Yara Shahidi the star of your show and the star of the world, I'm into a position to be on screen doing something that doesn't feel right for, you know, her as an actual person that's going to push that boundaries too much. And she's not an actor who is going to she's extremely professional. She's not going to come to the writers room and be like, I'm not doing that or I don't agree with that, you know, she's not anything like that. It's more like you it is sort of a symbiotic relationship with like the star of your show as well. There's like an understanding that you're not going to I'm not gonna ding the brand guys. I'm gonna you know, there's there's a there's a level of respect you have to have for the you know, the person who's fronting your show. So, yeah, does that answer your question? Definitely, absolutely. With so many issues, you guys bring up and, you know, really flesh out in such a frank fashion. Can you talk a little bit about the reception that you guys have gotten with your friends, critics, just people in your circle, about what you guys are writing and creating?

Ritza Bloom 1:04:35

Ah I'll jump in. I feel like one thing about the issue universe is that it definitely plays into what are people arguing about what are people staying up at late at night and can't get sleep about, like, you know, we talk and tackle a lot of different issues. And I remember after the episode I wrote aired, and

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it was a lot about women and being able to own or weaponize their own sexuality for success and the positives and negatives of that. I got like calls from, let's say, older members of my family, other generations that were like, I don't understand this, what is this Instagram? Like? Why is he making the episode about this? And what I loved was being able to say, Well, actually, you know, this has been a big discussion in feminism since the start of feminism, just about how are women able to have relationships with their own sexuality? And are we just objects? Are we able to weaponize it? And so even though it's very contentious, some of the topics that at least in grown-ish that we've discussed, I think there's something that's uniquely universal, and allows like conversations to happen from them.

Robb Chavis 1:05:39

Um, you know, I think what's been cool about being on black-ish is we usually find one or two topics a year that become part of a broader discussion, or at least we're tackling it, you know, this year, our opportunity to do those voting specials that aired a few weeks ago, ahead of the election, we started talking about this season, and we started talking about the role that black-ish could play, we felt like it was important and the network felt like it was important to, to get those out there. So we rushed and we animated half of it, because we weren't sure we could all be on the stage together and all of those things because we wanted to try to put something out there that could actually have an impact. You know, the Juneteenth episode happened before I got there. But you know, Juneteenth wasn't in your Apple calendar before that episode aired. I'm not saying that that's the reason it happened. But it certainly didn't hurt can, Kenya might say it's the reason it happened. And it probably is, but just bringing awareness to certain things. So I mean, most of the feedback I get is positive, at least two or three times a season and my mom calls me and says, Did you write that about me? Is that me? I'm like No, mom, that's that's that's all black people. Not just you, but it's it's it's largely positive. And it's nice to be. Nice, nice. Look, I've worked on shows that nobody talks about so it's nice to work on a show that somebody talks about. And you can say the name of the show, and you're like, Oh, yeah, I've heard of that. You know, it's it's much easier than the ones like I never I don't watch TV. I don't know that.

Mark Anthony Neal 1:07:30

Mark, what about you? I know it's been on for six years isn't sparked any black-ish or grown-ish? Any interesting conversations for you, either among your family colleagues or in the classroom? Some stuff have come into the classroom. I mean, the Juneteenth episode, you know, it's just it's just one of those moments. You know, the episode that did show you know, a response to the to the sixteen election. And then when it does show, raising all kinds of questions I think for many folks about you know, what, what do you do with a show that is so woke, that it's actually to work to be aired, right? At least on network television. You know, looking at you know, kid his new show on Netflix, I feel like it's it's the remix of what he maybe wanted black-ish to have been initially, but there was no way to hell it was going to happen on network television that way. Ritza and Vanessa. Music plays such an important

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role on grown-ish, from the names of the episodes to how various songs weave themselves into the plot. Can you guys talk a little bit about about that?

Ritza Bloom 1:08:39

Go Vanessa, you're the - she was the music person in our room. This moment, and she knew it. She was awesome.

Vanessa McGee 1:08:47

Yeah, that was a responsibility handed to me. Kind of spearhead that? Yeah. Yeah, so I'm not sure what aspect you you mean, like you want us to sort of speak to

Mark Anthony Neal 1:09:02

The titles actually come from famous songs. A lot of times those songs are interwoven in place in the episode so the creation of that process and how you're able to kind of do that I guess.

Vanessa McGee 1:09:11

Yeah, that's something that you know, you come up with the you come up with the episode first, obviously, you come up with the theme so the titles were chosen by the individual writers. That was really just kind of up to us, you know, whatever we you know, felt like going with and I'm blank it's Dave's I forget our music supervisors name, which I feel really terrible about. He was very, very good. Um, but yeah, there really is a music supervisors job and they don't super always appreciate you tell them when you put in the script, like do this because there's all kinds of you could be putting in a \$300,000 needle drop and you don't even know it. That's the thing with putting music in scripts, young writers, you know, it costs a lot of money if you want Kanye, in your show. Um, so yeah, uh, You know, I think it's, it's a thing you want to as a writer, as somebody who's worked on a lot of like I work on a show now that's about a, you know, a rapper I work on Dave, you know, there is, and we have so many musicians coming on this show, and it's very much a part of the show as well. Um, it's something that you want to be aware of, I think, in any creative field, it's good to be, it's gonna age you very quickly, honestly, if you don't keep if you're one of those people who's like, I don't like juice world, because me singing and rapping, or whatever it is, you know, like you're gonna sell you just, like, you have to kind of move with the era you're in and move with the times and not, you know, be a jerk about it. So it's good, I think to kind of be inspired by the different types of media around you and and you know, music and film and TV kind of go hand in hand, you just have to kind of have a light touch with it, because one cost, two: it is somebody else's job. And three, you can emotionally overwhelm your own story. If you try to pull the strings, the audience's strings too much with music versus the actual words you've written and the actual, you know, scenes you've put on in front of their eyes. So music is a great tool when you're writing but and a good guidepost. And I think something that a lot of writers use to feel cooler. But but it's, it's you have to kind of like a light touch is best.

Ritza Bloom 1:11:36

Light touch. Definitely I worked after I've grown up short on High School Musical, which is like, literally a musical show. And so there was much more important in brain to make sure that our music cues and the songs that we were writing, were, you know, married well with the scenes, but I to echo everything Vanessa just said so eloquently, like, you know, I think grown-ish wanted, wants to be current and his current and I remember, redo a big part of like pulling those all nighters with your friends, was playing that record and all this thing going along, as we were writing our papers and stuff. So grown-ish, I think, tried to capture that feeling.

Vanessa McGee 1:12:09

Yeah, and that's a big, that's a big footprint of Kenya's as well on both on black-ish as well, I mean, Kenya will, in a pilot, blow the budget on music, you know, his number one thing is casting. And then I would argue his number. The second the biggest thing for him might be music, you know, I mean, and story, I would like you to kind of take for granted the story here too. But you know, he believes very deeply in casting a show well, and I know he believes very deeply in like, half blowing the music budget early.

Harry Jones 1:12:44

That's amazing. Yeah. So Robb, I believe in on this one audience question. And 2018, there was an episode where there was a decision made not to air it. And it was subsequently available on streaming services. Can you talk a little bit about that.

Robb Chavis 1:13:02

So that episode was actually written before I got there. But it was I mean, I'm just hearing about it. And I mean, they when they killed that episode, they ripped, you could not get to it. I didn't see it until it was on Hulu. Um, but that is, you know, the game you end up playing to be on network television, like there are many, many layers of people, between you and airing because you know, it is a business and you do what you can to tell the stories you want to tell. But there are a lot of people who have a lot of interest that touch everything. And it's part of being an artist and part of being a part of this business to understand how to navigate that. Now, you know, every episode, when we have an idea, we kind of pitch a loose idea, like what do you think of that? And then I'm like, Yeah, it sounds pretty good. Let's see more. And then you put together an outline, and you pitch the outline, and they see that he likes Oh, that's so cool. And they're like, yeah, that's still cool, keep going. Then you write a script, and then they get a chance to see the script and hear a table read. And they're like, well, we kind of like these things. And that these days, can you tweak these and you rewrite that and then you shoot it and they see a cut? Again, we do and that was just one of the ones where they steered right at it. And it was a it was gonna be a big episode, I think. I think Kenya directed it. They had a Spike Lee voiceover there was

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you know, they had an artist to do the picture like it was going to be one of the big important episodes of the season. And you know, I don't know any of the conversations. Everybody's happy it aired but it's just kind of one of the things you might run into on network television or you know, episodes get pulled all the time because something you know, in dramas if they have a shootout episode out near a church and some news happens near a church and they'll pull that episode and roll it backwards. So you it's a living breathing thing we try to be thoughtful about the stories we tell we try to be thoughtful about the jokes we make and late was it late last season or? We were going to make a joke about Tom Hanks last season before COVID came like as COVID was hitting I mean written all of our episodes. And there was a Tom Hanks joke not related to like the the the joke was, we need to get that. that good medicine that Tom Hanks gets, right? and in in between us making that joke and putting it in editing, Tom Hanks was one of the first people to come down with COVID and we were like, oh god and Tom Hanks dies between now man we can't like we can't have this joke.

Vanessa McGee 1:15:52

Hey, we had Tom Hanks joke and it went to air but it was about it was basically a basically it's Young Thug in Ghana. And they're smoking a joint and and and Young Thug is like I can't believe I'm friends with Tom Hanks. Like, have you played mafia mafia. I learned how to play mafia from Tom Hanks. Whenever he suppose that he starts coughing. And then Dave is like, Are you sick? And he's like, it's just a weed coffee. He's like, you sound sick. And you shouldn't be out around people when you're sick. Like don't smell it don't want it. We're like, Oh, no. Yeah, what a strange thing both shows?

Robb Chavis 1:16:32

Yeah, um, stuff like that. You always have to be careful. And you know, you're not trying to offend anyone, you know? accidentally..

Ritza Bloom 1:16:43

Certainly not the Hanks family...

Robb Chavis 1:16:47

not the Hanks family.

Harry Jones 1:16:51

No, that's very cool. Um, for I know, a lot of people on the call or, you know, look up to you guys, is there any advice that you guys would give to anyone who you know aspires to be to be you guys want to?

Ritza Bloom 1:17:07

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Wow. Um, I would say, always keep writing, keep your foot on the pedal. If you can keep telling stories in whatever way you can try to be it. I feel like I don't know Robb and Vanessa could talk more about this than I could. But just I feel like TV right now is in a place that's incredibly introspective in a good way. So if there's a way that you can use your story, or your identity or your experiences and really embed that in the kind of stuff that you make, and that probably only helps you and oddly enough, it becomes universal, the more specific sometimes things are, but yeah, be nice show up on time. Good stuff.

Robb Chavis 1:17:44

Want to go next, Vanessa?

Vanessa McGee 1:17:46

No, I don't have it.

Robb Chavis 1:17:50

I think it's a few things. One. This job may look super glamorous from the outside. But it is not easy. It takes you a long time to get in. I love being on set. And I love working with people. But it means that I have to be at work every single morning at 730 in the morning. And stay there until we're done whenever it is, and it wears you down and you know beats you up. Don't think you're going to come up with one magical idea. And you will have a career for the rest of time. Like write a thing. Finish it, write something else. Don't think that the story about you and your family is going to be the silver bullet that makes you Steven Spielberg. Because it's not like your job is in television, like movies, maybe you can make some amazing thing and get a couple off of it before it goes away. Television is a factory job. And your job is to have a bunch of ideas and crank it out at high quality. And it's more glamorous than that. Like it's more fun than that I have a ball I I changed jobs because I didn't like being a lawyer. And I didn't like going to that job. And there's not a day that I wake up now where I don't want to go do my job and go to work. So I found my slot. It's wonderful in all of those ways. But your main job is to always be able to do more, have another idea, have another joke, have another story, have another script. Go out and meet people. You like all of those things affects your careers, not just writing everybody like coming out, as I said, coming out of Duke. A lot of people believe that just hard work is going to carry you through it hard work is a part of it. You've got to be personal, personable. You've got to make alliances in these rooms. You've got to have people who trust you and think of you when they want when they get their show. You want to be one of the first two or three people that they want to work on it and that had to be everybody. But like, you're constantly building this thing to have a career because nobody's just going to give you a random shot knowing not knowing what you can do, you have to have a lot of people vouching for you, you have to have a lot of people saying you're great at what you do, or you're pleasant to be around or you're good at a certain thing, or, you know, all of those things matter. So don't come into this thinking, I'm going to get an agent, then all of a sudden,

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I'm going to start working. Because that's not how it works. You're going to do great work, you're going to be in the grind, you're going to make a lot of things. And then slowly, you're going to start building a thing. So don't be anxious about it. Just do the work.

Vanessa McGee 1:20:46

Yeah, I'm going to kind of echo that last point. My my main advice might be at, relax and just relax a little please. I you know, somebody, some recent Duke graduate, I remember this a couple years ago, I had coffee with, she had just graduated in May, and it might have been July or something. And she was like, I really want to be a writer. But I had bronchitis for two weeks. And now I'm really behind. And I was like, Okay, okay, let's all sit down. Stop drinking that coffee. Uh, you know, and actually the thing that I remember about her I don't remember her face. I don't remember her name. I don't know what year she was don't like try to look her up. Please don't do anything to her. I don't know about her. Um, except that I remember she said that. And I remember she didn't say thank you. So I would say one relax and to be a good damn human being. Um, don't forget that these are you know, it's not just sitting in a Garret and typing your beautiful words for the you know, the world to read some day. It is a business and I you know, to echo Robb and Ritza, like you, you know, you got to know people, you got to meet people, and they got to like you and, and that's a huge, huge part of it. And you have to be pretty lucky honestly, to. Um, so yeah, relax, be it be nice, be like a decent human being and, and just chill. Yeah, just chill out. It's fun, but like, it's not the end of the world.

Ritza Bloom 1:22:15

We're not doctors for a reason.

Vanessa McGee 1:22:19

Yeah, like, if you're gonna get there, you're gonna get there, and there's not a timeline on it, it's fine. It's fine. And you have to live like to echo something that Ritza before too, live your life. Otherwise, you're gonna get to a writers room, and they're gonna be like, tell us about yourself and what stories you have, you're gonna be like, well, I've been writing 10 pages a day for the last five years. And they'll be like, get out of here.

Harry Jones 1:22:42

So before we wrap things up, is there any lasting thoughts that you guys want to give our audience tonight either from the black-ish or grown-ish perspective, and then Mark anything from the Duke perspective you want to talk about?

Ritza Bloom 1:22:57

Robb?

Transcript

Robb Chavis 1:23:01

I almost wish I could, I could go through this q&a and have like a speed round to answer some of those questions, because there's a couple quick hitters in there. But there are a couple questions in there about like transitioning from from law into writing. And the number one thing that I tell people in line with live a little is, you don't have to stick to the choices that you make when you're 19, your life is extremely long. There are lots of opportunities to do lots of things I could have said, I've already invested in law school, I'm a lawyer, I'm just going to, you know, tough this out for the next 45 years. But I took a risk, because I believed in myself. And I thought that I could get somewhere with this career. And it was hard. There are a lot of dark nights, there was a long period of time where I didn't work. And I wondered if I only got the job because I went through a diversity program. And I wasn't good enough to get a real job. And I was already I went to CBS Studios in a suit be like, I'll be a lawyer again. I'm gonna be like write on the side. And luckily, that woman just said, No, you're a writer. Let me let you talk to somebody else. And that's how I got my next job. But just remember to go for it. Like, whether it's this, whether it's something else, try things like life is about trying things and if it doesn't work out, or it doesn't feel right, stop and go do something else. Don't just do it because your parents are paying a lot of money for Duke or you have to do something important with your life. I got this opportunity because I followed the path I thought I was supposed to be on. And then I sat down with myself and tried the find the path that I was actually supposed to be on and everything is so much better. So don't feel like a failure. If you make a choice, a different choice. Don't feel like you've lost time because you have to start over, you have to figure out who you are, and honor that. Because whether it's this job or something else, that's how it's going to work the best. So, you know, just just follow that path, follow your heart. Look inside. This is all terrible. Why am I still talking?

Vanessa McGee 1:25:24

Your heart!

Ritza Bloom 1:25:27

I saw that on a mug once, Robb! Dang, like, follow your heart. If anything 2020 has taught us that life is so short and so precious that, you know, try not to waste time if you can, but also try to relax if you can, but also, you know, just do what you love and keep your foot on the pedal if you want to happen to be in this career.

Vanessa McGee 1:25:53

Yeah, and I mean, I would of course echo follow your heart that is....

Robb Chavis 1:26:00

never gonna let me live that down.

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Vanessa McGee 1:26:03

I'm gonna text you that every day until I die. have also Yeah, also, you know, be patient. I remember being a Duke. I was me a maybe 18 is my freshman year I was with my boyfriend. He was a DJ, of course, I didn't like 37 DJs. And I was like, 18 and he was shut you know, he was like a like an actual turntable. DJ. Robb, this is your fraternity brother. By the way.

Ritza Bloom 1:26:29

Robb knows him. Well, probably they probably still text.

Vanessa McGee 1:26:31

That's how I know Robb. And so and he was like, I'll teach you how to DJ. And I was like, it's too late. Which now I look back. And I was like, I was 18 years old. I was like, it's too late. Like, what was my problem? I would be a, it could be great by now. I could be I could be I don't know Diplo or something. The point is like, you're always going to feel like it's too late. Or you're too old. Or you're too whatever. Oh, the other thing I want to say. And I'm gonna say it in a very annoying way. But I'm going to mean it in a deep way. Which is that somebody once asked me another woman asked me, would you take a job if somebody hired you and you knew they did it because they thought you were attractive? And I said, Yes. Because once I get in the room, I know I can do the job. I don't care why you hire me, like I'm qualified. And I would say that, like the thing that I've heard both Robb and Ritza talk about and you know, as it folks at this panel, like if somebody says to you, like you only got hired because we're black, or whatever it is, because you're this or you're that are gay, I don't care what it is. Who fucking cares? You can't get hired for any random reason. It does not matter. You're in the room, you're there and just do the job to the best of your ability. Make yourself invaluable. You know, make yourself just a necessary part of that room. And it doesn't matter. Do not pay that said, any mind. You're there, do the job to the best of your ability. And also follow your heart.

Robb Chavis 1:28:04

Yes, you should definitely follow your heart though, right? First and foremost.

Ritza Bloom 1:28:07

First and foremost.

Harry Jones 1:28:15

Great. Um, I want to thank everybody. I'm Ritza, Robb, Vanessa. This has been an incredible conversation. Thank you guys so much for your time tonight. But also the amazing work that you guys are doing. Professor Neal, thank you so much, again, for moderating enlightening conversation. Thank you for the work that the Triple AAS Department is doing, particularly now, it's critically important. I have to thank our amazing audience for tuning in tonight.

Transcript

Harry Jones 1:29:32

And then lastly, everyone please tune in to black-ish season premiere tonight. If you haven't already checked out every episode of grown-ish, definitely make sure to stream it on Hulu. Definitely check out Professor Neal's show left the black, DEMAN live, if you haven't seen DBA and AAAS partnership on our series, black in 2020. Definitely check that out. Check that out as well. And Yeah, Forever Duke. Have a great night and we'll see you all soon.

Robb Chavis 1:30:04

Follow your heart.

Ritza Bloom 1:30:07

Follow your heart, everybody.

Vanessa McGee 1:30:09

Thank you.

Outro: Dave Karger

That's it for this episode of DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, DEMAN is a signature program of Duke Arts and Duke Alumni Engagement and Development. Follow DEMAN on social and stay updated at Duke DEMAN, that's d e m. a n.com, where you can find our full archive of episodes. Thanks so much for joining us. See you next time.

This episode was produced by me Lilly Clark in collaboration with Hear at Duke, Duke's student run podcast hub. Our theme song is Carolina by Cameron Tompkins.

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