

FINAL Transcript- Gary Morgenstein

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Like every other aspect of our lives, the content creation and development process for the media has been affected by the pandemic. Writer Gary Morgenstein breaks it down. Welcome, Gary. Thanks for joining us today.

GM: Thank you both for having me on.

VC: So let's start by asking you to describe your background.

GM: I'm a novelist, my 6<sup>th</sup> novel just came out, "A Fast Ball for Freedom," and I've written plays, "A Black and White Cookie," just premiered in January and it's just had its third Zoom performance and I've just launched a new TV series on YouTube, producing it on Zoom. And before that I made a buck in public relations. I'm the mad PR genius behind Sharknado. So good or bad, it's television history.

KK: Now the books that you've written, a lot of them are about baseball, sci-fi, I know one of the plays are. And now you're writing a TV series. Tell us about that.

GM: Joyland is set in the 1960's and it was such a tumultuous decade. We are the great world power, we just stared down the Russians in the Cuban missile crisis, we've got the Beatles invading, and one year later, Lyndon Johnson is going to unveil the Great Society which promises to eliminate racial justice and poverty.

VC: So is baseball involved in this as well?

GM: No, actually not. This is a basketball theme.

VC: So sports?

GM: Sports can also be the great unifier and in Joyland which is set in New York City what we do is, we look at, in Joyland, is the little people taking on the establishment and whether it's someone bringing a franchise

to Brooklyn in the new upcoming ABA, or an African American minister trying to effect social justice, people believed, still. They haven't been disillusioned yet. And that's a big underlying theme.

VC: So was this a project that you developed during the pandemic, was this, could you call this a pandemic project?

GM: Well, we had just been developing it and we had finished when the pandemic broke. And then we said, yeah, well, the project isn't finished until you execute it somewhere, and good luck with that (laughs) with the industry shut down, so someone suggested, well, you should do a table reading and I thought, Huh, how are we going to do that? And we gathered actors from London to Los Angeles, Chicago, everywhere in between, we have an award-winning Broadway performer, DeMone Seraphim, is the director and my co-creator Russell Friedman is an Emmy award-winning television executive and we set up Zoom and with the first episode which is on YouTube, and Episode 102 will drop April 26<sup>th</sup>, you have challenges, just because we're physically locked down didn't mean that our imagination had to be locked down and everyone was really in tune with doing this, I mean people are donating their time. We had the SAG microbudget agreement which protects everyone because that's what we believe in, but people are on it because they love the story. So there are obvious limitations to a Zoom production but then again, television is an intimate experience. Television, you're just staying like in your pajamas propped up in bed watching and you're inviting strangers and strange stories into your home and Zoom kind of lends itself to that.

VC: So you put together this pilot completely on Zoom, is that correct?

GM: Yes, episode 1 of eight. Season one.

KK: Now how hard was it? I mean you say you have actors, international, saying I'd love to do it. Did you have time for rehearsal? Since they are in all different time zones. How did that work for you guys?

GM: Well, it was a little funny at first for some, for the British actress, one of whom who said she was supposed to scream and the director said, "can you really give me a good scream?" and she said, "Well, it's 2:30 in the morning here, so (laughter), so I can only scream so loud without waking the neighbors. And we're always mindful of who's on what time zone and for example, we have rehearsal at seven, it's hard for our actor in Chicago on Central Standard Time, he's just finishing up work. What we're hoping for is eventually, once the lockdown begins to lift, we can actually film real scenes and weave them into the story. So what we're

trying to do is change the rules about how you develop television series. Because traditionally, you know, some people are spending a million dollars on a pilot at least. And they're also, frankly, only going through the establishment. You've gotta go through the talent agencies and all the production companies which does limit it. They wonder why there are not a lot of voices in Hollywood. Ha, maybe because you're starting out with this tiny pipeline that you have to have a special pass to get through. And so we're saying something different. We're saying, look, we're using Zoom. This is a showcase. We try to give you the concept of our story; we're producing it as best as we can within the Zoom platform and now come and let's do a traditional deal. So that's what we're, frankly, hoping for.

KK: Well, you did the first pilot episode. How many more are in the works for you?

GM: Well, episode 2 is, we're rehearsing now and that will be April 26<sup>th</sup>. Eight episodes, one a month, for season 1.

KK: And those are all written already?

GM: Well, the writer—in the writer room-I underscore singular—the writer room, in my head, I'm working on episode 104. The fourth episode. So I'm plowing ahead. Also what's fun, when you write novels, that's one thing, it's all you. Good or bad, it's just your name there. But as you know, in theater and in any collaborative medium it's a lot of fun to work with people and now when I see the actors they inspire me, which is really cool. What's interesting is we have way more people in the cast than we'd be able to get away with in traditional TV. Someone would have a nervous breakdown (laughter). You can't afford this, this is crazy. But with Zoom I could have more individual scenes with people which is also kind of cool. It's very Charles Dickens like, epic, but that's kind of nice, that's like a small advantage.

VC: So what are you doing in the time of Covid here, what are you doing to market, to try to get outlets for this series? Are you taking meetings with people? Has this way of trying to market your properties, has this changed?

GM: Well, it's still the same, you've gotta know people, and you've gotta pitch them and that doesn't change. It changes sitting in their office and so that's what were largely doing, Russell, my partner, he takes care of a lot of the business elements of the production elements so he knows people, so he's sending out the link from YouTube, he's sending out the pitch, people are responding and we're hoping as we keep going along – We

already have almost 1500 views on YouTube which is pretty good considering no one knew who the heck we are, you know? (laughter) It's really good so we're hoping that as they get caught up in it—it's also very timely. Episode 1 in July 1964 begins in the aftermath of riots in New York City after a cop has killed an unarmed African American teenager.

VC: It's amazing that the human condition really hasn't changed and we seem not to learn too much from history. Now, do you think that the process of creating and developing and marketing content is going to change as a result of us going through the pandemic?

GM: Oh, absolutely. (VC How so?). Well, certain industries are not going to be back to normal for a very, very long time. We talk about movie theaters. There will be movie theaters but I think a lot of people are going to say OK, I'll get HBO Max. That's it. \$15.00 a month.

KK: What about theater, Gary?

GM: I think one thing that Zoom has done is drag theater into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And I think that's something to be said positive. Because theater has always been ignored in the digital age with all the labyrinth of rules and regulations, but not anymore and you think about, you reach across the world, there are people who see my productions, all over. In the West Coast, London, whatever, who would never see it and I think that's really important and more people have been turned on to theater by this easy accessibility because people think well, theater is Broadway. God knows what they're going to charge for tickets once they re-open, to make up-and that's in a way understandable but it's going to be shocking.

KK: But the average person can't even afford a ticket before the pandemic, it's a fortune. But what's on Broadway mostly is these extravaganza musicals which cost millions to put up and you gotta get that money back somehow.

GM: Right, and they gouge you. But you know, what about the pipeline of off-Broadway and downtown Broadway theaters which are never going to reopen. It's as simple as that.

KK: Really, the little ones you mean?

GM: Yes. There are little theaters that are simply gone and the ones that will open—okay, so how do you justify the cost for a production if only 20 people are in the room? You can, I'm not saying you can't.

KK: But you can make a production, right?

GM: Thank you, exactly. You can't have lavish productions, even in small theaters you have to go back a to an elaborate black box which again, that's the basics of theater. Everything we're doing is storytelling around a campfire, right. Think of it, strip it all away. So maybe it's not so bad to rediscover that. But I don't think movie theaters are going to be full for a very long time and so what does that say about the cost of moviemaking, will be in the price of tickets. People, I guess, have gotten used to streaming, right, and saying OK, here I am, I'll sit in my chair, the popcorn costs me, you know, a dollar, (laughs) instead of \$8, right? I don't have to park, I don't have to ride the subway, and I don't have to worry about someone looking at their phone. There's a lot of stuff that maybe will go away and television, it's going to be interesting to see what sort of programming there is, what comes up. I think people have also gotten used to watching international programming. Right? And you say wow, that's really good, I don't mind the subtitles.

VC: The Europeans and the British really have, I think, a different standard and they're more interesting to us because it's, ooh, a different country and it's opened up a whole new area. Now do you think that once the theater community opens up—I know they established a vaccination center specifically for the people who work in that area, in those fields, which I think is terrific—do you think that things are going to be a little bit easier for the independent, the smaller producer, the smaller theatrical writer/producer, whatever, to get something put on because it is, as you said, so expensive to put up the big Broadway productions which, if you look at what's being produced it's jukebox musicals which is everything old is... old again.

GM: Yeah, but the independent, as Kathleen will attest, even when you go to a Fringe festival it costs you bucks, right? It's not like oh, it's a thousand dollars, far from it, and that kept going up. The cost of renting the theater. You have to pay the actors, the sets, if it's unions...so there's gotta be some way to bring that down, so maybe in the beginning, just because theaters will be desperate for the business, they will find some way to bring people in but you can't go back to the ways of costing \$20,000 for an off-Broadway, off-off Broadway play. You just can't.

KK: You're so right. I was told that if I wanted to do an off-off-Broadway production of a small play, my play, seven actors, it would be like \$100,000.

GM: Oh, you see? It's insane. Why? Why does it need to cost \$100,000? That's going to kill the theater because people have lost money. New York's going to lose some theater presence. I think it's going to go to other cities which is great but why not? Why should New York and LA control everything?

VC: So you think there's going to be more of a focus on the regional theaters?

GM: Yes, yes. And Zoom. And Zoom will be—what I'm doing with Black and White Cookie, we did it in January in Theater for the New City On the Air series, and then the UK theater company did it in February, now LA has done it, and Washington, and New Jersey. So, I'm trying to build buzz.

KK: How did they find out from the production at New City theater, how did they...grab your project and do it in London?

GM: I was relentless. People introduced me, or I just hunt people down, or someone, like one of the actors, who was in the production of, from Los Angeles, the original New York production of Cookie, he's in a theater company, Sky Pilot Theater in Los Angeles. So he's—Morry Schorr directed it and starred in it. And someone else who was in the UK production, Jacqueline, is based in Washington DC, she has a theater company, she said I'll do with it. You know, you introduce people and that's the way, and hopefully you build up some reviews and then there's a sense of oh, it's like opening out of town back in the old days.

VC: So that's, it seems to me that this is the beginning of kind of a new way of doing things but the bottom line for you, seems to be that as the writer, you—and you said it yourself, you are relentless. You just have to be persistent and reach out to people and do your networking.

GM: Yeah, Robert Frost said, Robert Frost said, "The way around is through." I love when people say, "I want to be a writer." But it's hard work. It's hard work just to write, and the endless editing, sitting there and pushing yourself. Unless you have famous connections you've gotta sell yourself but that's just the world and you've gotta be willing to send that extra email, that extra text.

VC: So what is your biggest wish for after the pandemic in terms of you're, in terms of this process?

GM: Oh, I guess it would be wonderful if someone would pick up Joyland as a traditional TV series and I could sit in a theater and watch Black and White Cookie. Even if there's only ten other people in the theater. You know, as long as I hear someone else breathing, right? That would be nice.

KK: I agree, I think we're all yearning for that

GM: Yes, we are.

VC: Yes, I think we're more than ready to be more of a live and in person kind of society. We're getting there, we're getting there.

KK: You have to tell us, Gary, if people, and I'm sure a lot will, want to contact you, where can they do that?

GM: I'm on Twitter at @writergary, and I'm on Facebook as Gary Morgenstein, I'm the one whose posts kvech about the Yankees so you'll know it's me and shamelessly promotes himself; and then if you want to buy my novels at Amazon, Barnes & Noble or order it from bookstore and of course on YouTube, our channel is Joyland, a new series and the new episode goes up April 26<sup>th</sup>.

VC: Do you have any advice for other writers out there who are working and getting their work out there during these times?

GM: You just have to do it. You just have to be creative; you have to think out of the box. No idea is crazy, and don't give up, because there's a lot of other people just like us out there who want to work, who want to do their art, people from all over the world want to join the projects. Just do it, and if you have any questions just tweet me or message me. I'll write you back.

VC: Great. Gary, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your experiences and your stories with us.

GM: Thank you so much both of you. It's a delight to be on your show.

VC: Thank you, and wishing you all the best of luck with your projects.

GM: Thank you.

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