

## FINAL TRANSCRIPT

Interview: Aramie Payton

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Well, Broadway is back, and we are so excited! Recently I had the opportunity to attend a matinee performance of MJ, the musical about Michael Jackson where Aramie Payton, understudy for the part of MJ performed, and I was blown away by his performance. We are very fortunate to have him with us today. Welcome to the podcast, Aramie.

AP: Hello, hello, hello and thank you, ladies, for having me on. I'm very excited.

VC: Our pleasure. So, Aramie, this show was your Broadway debut. Do you want to talk about your journey that led up to this?

AP: Ooh, it has been a long, long road, but Broadway has always been an aspiration of mine since I was a kid. I started doing musicals—I did my first musical when I was 12 years old. I'm from Chicago, so back in Chicago, that's a big theater and performance town as you all, I'm sure, are aware, and I grew up watching my dad who was a performing artist. One Halloween me and my twin sister came to school dressed in Halloween costumes, and we went to a uniform only school and they didn't allow us to come to school that day so we had to go to work with my dad that day and my dad happened to be performing in a play, in a musical, and that was like my first time seeing him on stage and that inspired me to kind of get into the arts and from there I got into musical theater. I did "Fame" when I was 12 years old, that was my first show. I would do a musical every summer from 12 up until I was 17. I was in almost every play at my high school up until my senior year and really like loved acting. I didn't take dancing or singing very seriously although they were artistic passions of mine. I would write songs, and sing with my family and do things like that and yeah, when I got to college, I was still doing musicals. I've always been obsessed with Michael Jackson and I've always loved Broadway and musical theater, and it has always been a dream of mine was always to combine the two of those things, in some type of tribute performance to Michael in a musical theater style setting. So, I moved to New York about eight years ago and I was a teacher at the time. I started to audition for shows and would get like callbacks and things of that nature, like right off the bat so it felt like it was the right thing to do to leave my former profession to start pursuing this full time. And as soon as I left my job, I think I left my job in March and by April I had booked a play and then by May I booked a national tour and from that national tour I went on to do several regional productions and pretty much worked all the way up until the pandemic. I did three national tours and then, yeah, then MJ came into my life. I was finally able to make it to the Broadway goal that I had set.

KK: This sounds incredible. I'm curious, the national tours, what show were they?

AP: Yeah, my first tour was "Flashdance", the musical, and I did that 2015 or 16—the years are all kind of a blur and then I did "Dream Girls" and I did that over in Korea and then I did "Cruel Intentions" which was a national tour and that was in 2018.

KK: But you didn't stop. I'd like to know where you studied, voice, dance, and would we know your father if you gave us his name since he was a performer?

AP: My father is a television and film actor. His biggest credit, what he's mostly known for, is there's a biopic of the group The Temptations (VC: Oh yeah, yeah). NBC did the movie, it shows lots of times all year and he plays Paul Williams in the Temptations film and he's been in a bunch of other films and he does voiceover and he's a singer, dancer—he's a very talented artist who inspired me deeply on and off screen. And

when I studied, as a child I studied him as I was growing up and I remember when I was 12, that's when the movie came out about the Temptations and I remember getting to see that for the first time. He has a very deep scene in there where he commits suicide but at the moment I was sitting with him and watching him on screen and I remember like crying and being like scared that I believed what was happening on screen and he was holding me and he'd be like, "I'm right here." I knew that wasn't real but I was just so moved by his work, I was so inspired by that level of artistry that I was able to experience and it inspired me to try to have that effect on people which is why I started to take acting very seriously. I went to Walter Payton High School and they had a drama program called the Payton Players. I immediately auditioned for the first play and I got cast in "Picnic" and I was the only freshman in the show. It was a big deal because we had a pretty serious acting—it wasn't a program like formally but our acting students and the plays in our school were heavily lauded.

KK: I won't let you go until you tell us your father's name!

AP: Oh, his name is Christian Payton. he's very, very talented. He's a good guy. But when I got to school, they thought I was related to Walter Payton. I said no, I'm Aramie Payton and I'm here to do my thing. I loved acting so I was training very rigorously under the drama teacher there, taking the acting classes as well as being in all of the plays and that was my course of study for acting, on top of doing community theater every summer but on top of that we were doing a rigorous training in acting, singing and dancing and then it culminated in a musical, so I was doing that in the summer and during the school year studying acting and I was in all the choirs—barbershop, a capella choir, chorus. I've just always been an artistic student, and my school has allowed me to study that.

VC: Outside of these programs, any formal dance training?

AP: Ah, so dance is, dance came into my life in a most interesting way. Because I'm from Chicago, dance is just a big part of the party scene, it's a big part of like the street scene in general, so I would always see people dancing and I've always been a person who could dance---go Aramie, go Aramie—it was always that type of thing but I never considered myself a dancer. I would just dance at parties, dance at all the school dances, just what felt normal to me. And it wasn't until college—I went to the University of Illinois and I remember it was a predominantly white school, so when I got there, I remember being... Walter Payton, my high school, was very diverse. So, when I got to this predominantly white university which was really big, I was searching for a community of Black people I could connect to and the first group I saw was a dance team and I said, "Oh, I think I'll go audition for that hip hop dance team" even though I wasn't a hip hop dancer or anything and I remember they kind of like made fun of me at the audition because I did a little jump bell kick as my special skill. It was very musical theater of me! But I made the team and I ended up like becoming the dance captain for some years, and that was kind of like how I came to fall in love with dance, to build my rep as a choreographer, as a creative in that realm and it fueled me as far as like my musical theater. Like I'd been dancing in musicals but I usually played roles that didn't require...I wasn't an ensemble dancer. I was more of a featured role, or a singing lead role, something like that. So it wasn't until college that I started to dance.

KK: You mentioned choreography. Is this something that you might want to do in the future?

AP: Absolutely. When I first mentioned quitting my teaching job and booking that tour right out of it, before I booked that tour, I booked Godspell which, ironically, was the first musical that I led back in Chicago, I played Jesus in Godspell when I was 16 and then again when I was 17 because the production was such a success that they brought it back again the next year. When I got to New York and booked Godspell again, it was like a full circle moment for me in that way and I also choreographed that show at the Gallery Players in Brooklyn.

VC: Now for Michael Jackson, you certainly owned that choreography. You really rocked it. What was it like learning that choreography, working with the choreographers?

AP: Oh, it was so special. You think you know, and you have no idea, you know what I mean? Like, I've been a Michael Jackson fan forever. I think people who have known me since I was a kid would be like, you're always doing Michael Jackson moves, but you know, here I am finding out that I'm doing all those things wrong! (laughter) So it was a real treat, and a humbling experience to come into this and to learn from Rich and Tone Talauega, who worked with Michael Jackson as his background dancers and choreographers for a time. They were part of his camp and worked closely with him, studied him, and they trained us. We had like a boot camp situation where we got to practice the moonwalk, perfect it, practice sliding, and practice the little hip thrusts that you thought like, yeah, I'm doing that, but it was like no, you got to go from here, you got to stomp your foot, and they really pushed us to not just emulate but to become.

VC: It was fantastic. As I said before, I was ready to get up and dance myself! So, in terms of Broadway opening up post-covid, what's it like now with the shows coming back? Our numbers are good now in New York but there's always the possibility of having to close temporarily should the situation with Covid change. How do you deal with that?

AP: We felt a fear, or uncomfortable at the beginning in the early winter, December, January was a bit more uncomfortable and had us a bit nervous but I think lately the excitement for theater to be back has surpassed all of that fear and anxiety and I think we're all so present in the fact that it's happening right now. As a performer my whole entire life changed. I started booking back in 2016—2015, I'm sorry—I hadn't stopped working, and it wasn't until the covid shutdown that I had stopped...everything stopped for me. So, it was exciting to get back to work. And I had even booked MJ before the shutdown. Yeah, and we were working on Zoom for the entirety of the break. And so just to walk into a room, the energy of being in a room with people even though we were masked, it was just like wow, I'm standing next to human beings. Yay, art! You know what I mean? That will be eventually shown to an audience which I haven't done in two years at this point, you know what I mean? And so, I think that that, coupled with the energy of the audience every night has superseded the fear of shutdowns. We all have it in the back of our head, like anything could happen but right now we're optimistic.

KK: Did you have to audition live? This was before covid, correct?

AP: Yeah, yeah. I auditioned quite a lot for this show before I booked it, which is an important part of my story. I have been auditioning for this show since 2018 and I didn't book it until February of 2020. And then we were supposed to start rehearsals in March and the shutdown happened so it was a really rough experience for me and so right now I'm just so, so, so grateful and happy and excited to be able to do it and to give it.

VC: As an understudy you need to be prepared to go on at a moment's notice and I understand that at one point you had to go on in the second act. What was that like? And has that happened since?

AP: Oh man, I'll never forget that day! It was my Broadway debut! I'm getting a little emotional talking about it. I haven't really gotten to speak about it much, so what happened was just the actor was unable to go into the second act. The first act was successful but the actor, by intermission, the stage manager would deem that he couldn't continue the show. And so, for me, as an understudy, you spend most of your time waiting. Even in the learning process you're in the room and you're watching the experience, you're not, you rarely get a good chance to get on your feet with the group, and practice, you rehearse yourself, everything you're doing is on your own, either at home or in other rooms so the chance to be amongst the group is rare. Now for me, because I was covering the main role, so there are..."Coverage" in a show is broken down into a few sections. So as a cover of any role, if you cover a lead in a show, you could be either standby, an alternate, or an understudy. If you cover an ensemble, you can be a swing or an understudy. Now usually understudies are people who are in the show. Understudy is an umbrella term, but most understudies are on stage. So, like there

will be someone in the ensemble who covers someone who is a lead. Or there will be someone who is a lead with a lesser part that covers a bigger lead role. And then if you're offstage and you're covering someone in the ensemble—this is all tricky but this is the most simple way to break it down—If you are offstage and you cover an ensemble member, you're a swing. And swings can cover up to ten roles in a show including a lead. So initially, in the playbill I was deemed a swing. And that's because I cover Michael Jackson, MJ the lead, and I cover middle Michael who at the time was an ensemble role. Most recently, maybe a month ago, at the end of Black History Month actually, I was promoted to a principal because the middle Michael role—this was a big, big moment for me—the middle Michael role was also deemed a principal role. So, because officially I cover two principals in the show, I am now officially a standby. Now a standby is an offstage person who covers a principal. So, it's the equivalent of a swing but you would only focus on principals. And an alternate is someone who splits the role with the on-stage person. We have an alternate for our little Michaels. We have two kid Michael Jacksons who split the role throughout the week. So that's kind of like the breakdown between coverage. It varies from production to production. Ours, because we're a new production, still building, still fluffing out roles, parts and assignments, things like that. Things are bound to shift.... we've only been open less than two months and so it's an exciting time. But for me, going on in the role (laughter) of a lifetime, it really is my dream role, like this is a super, super dream come true, a mind-boggling, mind-blowing experience I was watching the show that day. To go from watching it to be told you're about to go on stage – it was going to be my first time putting on the wig. It was my first time putting on the wig. It was like a crazy, crazy, crazy experience but I was so calm and so ready for the moment. I remember they asked me how much time I needed and I was like, give me ten minutes. I just want to go on because the audience is already going to have to wait and they're already going to have to deal with a new person, you know? So, I was just excited to make my Broadway debut doing Billie Jean on stage, by myself...it was a very, very, very exciting moment. No words can describe it, I think it was like a firecracker explosive type of situation. I had just been waiting to give my iteration of this character to the world and to the cast and so I just let it all hang out.

KK: Are you doing this now, this is your role? If we come to see you, you're gonna be...

AP: No, I'm still the standby so at any given performance I could go on, there's not set schedule or anything. That would make me an alternate. But for a while, due to an injury, I had been performing the role so when you all saw it, I had been in the role for a very, very, very long time.

KK: Did you hear Hugh Jackman, just bowing and praising the swingers and the understudies, letting the world know what that is like?

AP: Yeah, that was so special because it is a rare, rare occasion for understudies and swings to get acknowledged. Honestly, but I get a lot of tags and mentions on social media where people will say, "oh, I came to see MJ and I was so disappointed that there was an understudy," or "I looked at my playbill and I saw there was an understudy on and I was like mad". But I've sat through it. It is insulting to offstage covers because just because these covers aren't on stage does not speak to their ability. To be honest, speaking to what Hugh Jackman said, understudies and swings are quite talented. They have to be.

VC: Absolutely. They have to be.

KK: They have to be! He certainly made that clear.

AP: You know they cover ensemble dancers; they cover lead roles; they have to learn all the (XXXX). It is a task. So, a moment like that to get appreciated out loud, it rarely happens. And shout out to all swings and understudies, they go on in crazy situations. You just never know what's going to happen and that's what makes theater so fun as well.

VC: Exactly. They're the heart of Broadway, they really are.

AP: They're the definition of "the show must go on."

VC: Aramie, do you do the matinees or is that kind of a regular basis?

AP: This week we resumed our regular scheduling as far as the actor playing the role consistently. So, this week I return to the on-call basis so I'm just standing by. I got lucky, to be honest, it's very rare that an offstage cover gets a stint like what I got.

VC: So, Aramie, what, in your view, what do you think is the biggest challenge in the current Broadway environment?

AP: Health. For me it's health. You have Covid, the variants of that and then you just have no one knows what people's wellness is like. So just trying to navigate staying well in a fluctuating health system, limited availability of health support. Wellness is the toughest challenge right now.

VC: So, Aramie, do you have any upcoming projects on your agenda?

AP: So, I am actually a very busy artist. Honestly, the pandemic allowed me to delve into another side of myself which is the writer/director side of myself. I began to write a new series, a scripted series, I wrote seven episodes, I was doing zoom readings and zoom performances of that scripted series—it's called "Running" throughout the pandemic, I'm very excited about that. We shot the pilot officially last summer in July. That was really exciting for me. And I shot another short film that I released in November called "Twisted" and I have another short film called "Happy Endings" that I'm currently working to get done so I can release that and then get the pilot shopped around to the networks and things like that. I've been really excited about, I've written a couple of musicals, plays, and just really excited about getting my personal art out there. I direct, I choreograph, I write, I produce. I have a couple of TV projects coming up in the fall, so ...

VC: Can you tell us about those?

AP: I can't at the moment but it is very exciting. I'm just starting to get into TV and film acting. During the pandemic I was able to shoot my first feature film, my first lead in a feature film called "Triple Threat" that came out in March of last year. I love to act but the way you act on camera and the way you act on stage are two very different things. I'm excited about building a resume that includes on camera work.

VC: Do you have any advice for aspiring performers?

AP: The first thing that pops into my head is to trust yourself and be as true to the truest version of yourself as possible. And I say that because for me, being in this role in this job right now in 2022 is the most earnest testament to me sticking to my guns. I've always wanted to play Michael Jackson and I always wanted to be on Broadway. And those were two things that I was relentless about. And I got a lot of "no's" from this production in particular that I didn't accept until I was finally able to get into the room, The thing that you dream about, it really is possible, it really is attainable as long as you say yes to it.

VC: Oh, and do you want to tell the people where they can find out more about you, the website, your social media?

AP: Absolutely. I am, the phrase, mynameisaramie everywhere. My name is a-r-a-m-i-e. It's mynameisaramie.com and @mynameisaramie on all social platforms.

VC: Well, Aramie, this has been fantastic. Thank you so much for sharing all of your experiences with us. And I just want to say, everybody should go see MJ. It is a fantastic show. And you'll have a good time!

AP: Yes, you will.... Guaranteed.

VC: ...and wish you all the best of luck with your other projects, they all sound great,

KK: We'll be looking out for you, that's for sure. We will be on the lookout, that's for sure!

AP: And I'll have another visit to Now, Let's Talk!

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