

Final – Johnny Tammaro
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Hello: I'm Kathleen Kaan
And, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: The performing arts have been devastated by Covid19 especially here in New York City. We're here with Johnny Tammaro, a New York based actor, writer and cinematographer to talk about how his life has been impacted by the pandemic.

VC: Welcome, Johnny. Welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us today. Now you've been an actor for many years. Can you tell us how you first became interested in the theater, in acting?

JT: Oh, yeah, well first of all thank you for having me Vanessa and Kathleen. This is a privilege and honor. I'm very excited about your podcast. So, I've been performing since I was five years old. Community theater, schools, kindergarten, first grade all the way up through high school and then after high school, community theater. When I was 27 years old, I was dating my wife at the time. And, she said, you do this as a hobby, and you know, she said, this is her eye, she said "you're very good, she goes, and maybe you should try to get paid to do this?" And, I'm like, "I don't know." And so she goes, what do you need? I need head shots, a resume; I have to get an agent, a manager and all this other. We'll, let's start with the head shots and your resume. It was August of 1998, and you know, I did what everybody else does. I put the head shots in the envelope and I sent everything out. And, a week later I got a phone call from the Kenny Rogers Christmas Show.

KK: Oh, my goodness.

VC: Wow!

JT: It was going to be at the Beacon Theater in the winter of '98.

VC: Oh my god!

JT: Yeah, in competition with the Radio City Music Hall Christmas Spectacular.

VC: That was your first gig?

JT: That was my first professional audition in Manhattan.

KK: That is amazing.

JT: And, I went on this audition and after the audition they said, "can you come back at 2PM to do a little choreography? I said "sure." Now, you gotta rewind a little bit. On my resume, I had Kingsley the Teddy Bear. Now, there's a mall here in Brooklyn called

Kings Plaza Mall and for five Christmases in a row, I would be the voice and the eyes and the movement of this big giant Christmas Teddy Bear in the mall. I'd be hidden in the Christmas box and I had to control this Teddy Bear, and my voice would be "Well, everyone, welcome, it's Kingsley the Teddy Bear, Merry Christmas," and I'd do all this fun stuff with this Teddy Bear. I put that on my resume. So when the guy called me for the Kenny Rogers show, he said "what is this teddy bear thing on your resume?" I told him what it was and he said, "that's weird, because we're looking for somebody to play or understudy Bruno the Teddy Bear," one of the toys that come to life in this show. Six callbacks later, and the last callback was with Kenny Rogers sitting in the room. And I'm like, "oh my gosh." Driving to the Catskills every summer to go on vacation with my Mom and my Dad and my brothers, we had three eight track tapes in the car. The GM compilation eight track tape that came with the car, Barry Manilow's greatest hits, and Kenny Rogers' greatest hits.

VC: Wow!

JT: I know this guy!

VC: So, you were like ready.

JT: Oh my gosh, it was crazy. I got the part of the understudy of Bruno the Teddy Bear.

VC: So did you ever have to really go on?

JT: Funny you should ask. So the first night of previews, we're all excited, it's our last rehearsal and it's our last song, we're in the wings in our townspeople outfits – we were also townspeople – and the guy playing Bruno the Teddy Bear, Steve Kalzerac, who's a gem, comes walking off stage, he takes off the Bruno head and he said, "I don't feel too good." And I said, "what's wrong?" And he said, "I have bumps on my head, I feel weird," and he goes backstage. Ten minutes later, the choreographer makes a beeline for me and he said, "Johnny, Steve has the chicken pox. And I'm like "huh?" And I said, "okay, so I went upstairs, I learned the song Bruno had his own song, I learned the song with the musical director, I learned the choreography really quick, I went to the line with the other toys, and first out of previews, I go on! I go all week through previews to opening night, and Steve comes back opening night. But I did the whole week of previews.

VC/KK: Wow!

VC: So, that was your first gig! So many years later and you've done many, many things right?

JT: Yeah, I was in Tony & Tina's wedding for 11 years, a couple of other off-Broadway shows, off-off Broadway, off-off-off Broadway. I've been working with a gentleman by the name of Charles Messina for the past 15 years doing one act plays and

readings and stuff like that. So it's been interesting. And then in 2016, Charles and I and a couple of other actor friends, we've been working together for awhile, we did an off-Broadway show about his life, a play he wrote called "A Room of My Own."

KK: I saw that, it was amazing and you were fabulous! Charles is an incredible writer and I know that one of the things you've done with Charles is "The Wanderer," the life story of Dion.

JT: Yeah, in 2009 or 2010, Charles called me. He said, "Guess who I just had lunch with?" I said, "who?" He said, "Dion." I'm like, Dion Dimucci, of the Dion and the Belmonts? He goes, "Yeah." How did that happen? He said, "A mutual friend introduced us. He wants to write a musical about his life, and I'm going to write it and you're going to play his father. And I went, okay. And here we are ten years later.

KK: I know we're talking about how Covid has impacted your life. Tell us a little bit more about "The Wanderer." I know it was going to open up --- where, when and what happened?

JT: Yeah, we did the workshop in 2018, September 2108 at the Baryshnikov Theater on 37th street, and it was amazing. It was like they came to see a Broadway show but all we did was peel away the sets, 'cause we had costumes, props, lights, it was great, it was a great performance. And Paper Mill Playhouse was one of the regional theaters that were there.

KK: When were you ready to open at the Paper Mill?

JT: We were going to be at the Paper Mill, May 28 of 2020 and then, we were going to close on June 28th but probably extend a week because the show is unbelievably amazing. But then, of course, on March 16th when the whole country stopped, well, New York anyway and New Jersey, and we were postponed until April/May of next year.

VC: Well, let's keep our fingers crossed that that could happen. Covid 19 has affected, obviously your work as an actor, as a performer. Are there other challenges that you are experiencing?

JT: As far as -- I'm married with my 15 year old son and he's in high school. He's a sophomore in high school, but he's in his room, in his bedroom, on his laptop.

VC: He's on zoom school right?

JT: Yeah, and you know I remember high school, and you need high school. You need your friends, you need that interaction that human interaction at that age and these kids are not getting that. You know, every day is great but there's always that one day out of all those days that he has a little bit of a meltdown. It's a challenge. I have to say, that the five or six months that we were in quarantine in the apartment, my wife, son and

I, us three really bonded, and we became closer than ever. So that was a plus. And I rearranged all my closets, everything got labeled (laughter) but it's been interesting.

KK: Well, what have you been doing, tell us a little bit about how you have acted in the meantime, how Covid has changed the natural way to go into a theater, but you've come up with something special.

JT: So around, I wanna say, the end of April beginning of May, Charles Messina, the writer and producer of "The Wanderer," he texted me and he said, "I have an idea." You shouldn't be sitting home doing nothing, you have to have the juices flowing, the creative juices going and keep on you know, creating. So they came up with this idea called "The Honeyzoomers," like the Honeymooners with a Z as in zebra. And it's in black and white and all three of us, myself, Joli, Charles we love the Honeymooners, we love The Odd Couple, we love All in the Family, Sanford and Son, like all these classic TV shows. We grew up with them. So he comes up with this idea we're going to do this sitcom called "The Honeyzoomers," and it's gonna be the first sitcom about the pandemic, filmed during the pandemic.

VC: And, filmed on zoom?

JT: Well, we thought that at first. But then, we were like, you know what? No! Let's do you with your cell phone, you film your lines in your apartment as your camera, and the Joli will film her lines in her apartment and that'll be her camera, and then you send your clips to us and Joli will edit everything together to make it look like we're in the same apartment. And, I'm like ah, okay, and we play brother and sister. I am an ex bus driver, ala Ralph Cramden, she's the funny redhead ala Audrey Meadows, but we're brother and sister and we're stuck in my apartment because she left her husband because he was cheating on her. Every week, without fail, like clockwork, we tape we film, I send, if I have to do re-shoots, most of the time I have to do re-shoots because you know, I've never done anything like this before. And I'm not looking for the things, their eye is a little bit different than my eye. I'm used to being in front of the camera, on the stage, doing my thing, and that's it. I gotta set the shot up, I gotta do the lighting, do I have my hat on, do I have my glasses on, oh my gosh, the continuity.

VC: The continuity sure.

JT: It's hard work but I love it. It's amazing!

VC: That's awesome. How are you kind of, um, you know, paying the bills during this time since ---

JT: So I knew, while we were doing the workshop in September of 2018, I kind of knew that the workshop was going to be really good, and I knew that somebody was going to pick it up and I knew we were going to be in a regional house sometime in 2020. I knew that, you just feel it. So I knew, I needed a job between October of 2018 to like April/May of 2020. So, um, I used to be one of the managers at the big Toys R Us on

Times Square with the Ferris wheel. I worked there from the moment it opened until the moment it closed.

VC: Oh really?

JT: Then when we bought FAO Schwartz, in 2009, we became, we would go back and forth to each store, and one of the managers from the FAO Schwartz store became my manager at Toys R Us and we became friendly. And in, no wait, October of 2018 he called me and said they're opening up FAO again. He says, "I'm going to be one of the managers," I go Oh, "and they want you to interview for the customer service manager position." I said, "whoa, I don't want to be in charge of anybody or anything anymore, I've done that, I don't like it, I just want to work." Are you going to have toy soldiers at this location? And he said "yes." I said I would like to be a toy soldier, and he's like "okay." I was actually the first interviewee. They had it at the Triad Theater on 72nd and Broadway. It was an audition basically, we're on the stage.

KK: What do you do to audition for a toy soldier? (laughter)

JT: What did we do? We had to pick a toy they had out in the lobby and we had to off the cuff, make a pitch for the toy, and we had to sell them the toy. Basically, talk about yourself first and the sell them the toy. So I said, everybody's going to do that – how do I make it different? So I walk down the aisle of the Triad, I get to the little steps and I purposely trip on the steps and do a somersault, turn around and go "TA DA." And they all clapped and they all laughed, then I got up and did my pitch did my little thing, introduced myself, and I left. And I go the job as a toy soldier. And I thought I was going to be a toy soldier at FAO Schwartz only until April of 2020, but I'm still there. We got furloughed from March 16th until the second week of August and then I went back. And now, I'm on the experiences team, so I not only am a toy soldier, but I can build you a race car, I can help you design your own Barbie, I can help you make your own monster, like Elmo and I can help you adopt a baby doll.

KK: Were there a lot of customers coming in during Covid?

JT: Are there as many people as should be there this time of year? Absolutely not! But are there people there? Yes, and, not only from New York.

KK: Really?

JT: You have people from all over the country because air fares are cheaper, hotels are cheaper and nobody's here, so why not take advantage?

VC: So Johnny, how do you keep positive during Covid? How do you keep your spirits up? What is your secret?

JT: Three things have helped me though this whole pandemic. For Christmas, my wife got me a fantastic Christmas present, to learn how to do transcendental meditation,

and that saved my life! Not to get too deep, but I don't do it every day like I should, but I do it a couple of times a week and it has helped calm whatever anxiety I've had, whatever panic attacks I've ever had. I don't have them anymore, and it's made me realize that, you know, that we're here and we're okay. Even though I'm not at work, I was quarantined, but we're safe, we're home, I have my son, I have my wife, everything is great. Doing "The Honeyzoomers." I mean, the fact that I was able to get up a couple of days a week and become another person, and film this series and really get into the mind of this guy and really say, I know this guy, I know why he acts this way. The fact that I was able to do that and set up the camera and do all that stuff, that made me forget about a lot of the stuff. Believe it or not, listening to Christmas music, I have been listening to Christmas music since March 16th. That helped me immensely, that's what got me through it and, of course, my wife.

KK: You know, you've been lucky in general, you've got the gig at FAO Schwartz, you've got "The Honeyzoomers." Do you have any advice for other actors that may not have the outlets, these creative outlets that you have?

JT: Before "The Honeyzoomers" began and before I started working at FAO, friends of mine and I got together, and every Wednesday we decided to go on Zoom, and read screenplays of movies that we liked. First it started out where we were just a couple, you know, of guys and girls, and no costumes, no makeup, background was just like this, and we'd do the readings. But it morphed into this getting backdrops and makeup and costumes and wow, this is great! And every Wednesday we did it, we did Jurassic Park, we did "Willy Wonka and Chocolate Factory," we did "Never Ending Story," we did all these things. That's an idea. Have a play reading zoom thing. Work on your self-auditions, get a circle light, like everybody's getting and work on those. If you don't have an audition you don't have to send it in to anybody but do it for yourself, get sides off on-line and do the sides yourself. Practice on that. Make a reel of that and just look at that and see what you can do with your performances and tweak it. There are on-line acting lessons and singing lessons you can take. And always know, that the reason we're so lucky as performers is our tools, our machines, our everything, we have is all in here, it's all inside of you so it's always with you. You have it always and you can do it all anytime you want.

VC: That's excellent advice. So tell the people where they can see "The Honeyzoomers?"

JT: You can go to our website www.thehoneyzoomers.com they can watch all the episodes, we even did some PSA's about wearing masks and washing your hands and stuff like that, those are funny cute. We have a lost episode like The Honeyymooners had a lost episode, we have a lost episode and you can also go to UTube and just type in thehoneyzoomers and look for the logo, you'll see moon like the Honeyymooners' moon on the TV show, and it will say Episode I, Episode II, in roman numeral letters, and were up to number 30 but we're only going to have nine more because like the Honeyymooners they're only doing 39.

VC: So they can binge watch.

JT: Absolutely they can binge watch. There are only like between 8 and 20 minutes long so there very short.

VC: Perfect. Well Johnny thank you so much for sharing your experiences and your story with us

JT: It's been my pleasure.

VC: It's been awesome and thank you for your excellent suggestions to the other performers out there.

JT: You're very welcome.

KK: It means a lot to people that are performers, singers, actors. And you said a mouthful when you said you have it within yourself.

VC: Yeah. So Johnny this was great and thanks again.

JT: I had a blast. Thank you.