Framing *the* Hammer

THE PODCAST
FROM 4A Arts

Transcript

Ep. #119: JAMES BROWN III, “The Art of Building Community"

(00:00)

GAVIN LODGE: Welcome to “Framing the Hammer,” the podcast by 4A Arts, American Alliance of Artists and Audiences. We aim to change the narrative around arts, culture, design, and craft for American society to ultimately influence how elected leaders at the local, state, and federal levels support and fund them. On Framing the Hammer, we chat with artists from throughout the creative economy to advance this social movement we are trying to inspire. Our guest for this episode is JAMES BROWN III, a friend of mine with whom I performed in a Broadway show, "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" so very many years ago, huh? How did that happen? But that isn't why we're chatting today. James is also a writer, a film director, a producer, and now a real estate developer. James currently is the President and Co-founder of Story House Village.

(00:39)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah.

(00:53)

GAVIN LODGE: A sustainable planned community in Sheridan, Wyoming, where he eventually plans to have a development of houses along with a movie soundstage catering to the multiple films and TV shows produced on the landscape of Wyoming, Montana, and frankly, throughout the Rocky Mountains. He's touched multiple elements of the creative

economy, and that is why he is here today and, might I add, serves on the Board of Directors of 4A Arts. Welcome, James. Thanks for coming.

(01:23)

JAMES BROWN III: Thank you for having me.

(01:26)

GAVIN LODGE: So what childhood artistic experience put you on the path that you're on today?

(01:32)

JAMES BROWN III: Hmm, such a good question. I think there are two that really stick out in my mind. The first one must be fourth grade/fifth grade. I went to a private school in LA. It was an all-black private school called Marcus Garvey. Very strict, but awesome foundation for my education. One of the academic competitions we had, if you won, we got to go see the filming of the Grammys that year.

(02:11)

GAVIN LODGE: Wow.

(02:13)

JAMES BROWN III: And so I won and we got through the rehearsal before and then the show after. And that year, Janet Jackson was performing. And so we were sitting front row for her rehearsal and she was doing the song “Alright”. And that just has stuck in my mind being such a moment of “I would love to do that”. Still not thinking that I would do that.

(02:23)

GAVIN LODGE: Amazing.

(02:42)

JAMES BROWN III: And the other one that sticks in my mind is one of the first plays I did, and this would have been maybe first grade, was a show called *Stone Soup,* based on a children's story, something with Native Americans and the stone and the soup. And I don't remember, I can't remember the fable or the parable, but I played the Native American that carried the stone.

(02:57)

GAVIN LODGE: Sure. yeah.

(03:12)

JAMES BROWN III: And I had a stone in my back pocket of my costume. My costume wasn't fit properly. And the day of the show, the stone weighed my pants down and my pants fell down. So that might've been the beginning of my Broadway Bears career as well at first, whatever HR first grade.

(03:35)

GAVIN LODGE: Wow, I was not - that was not where I was expecting that story to go. I figured you lost the stone and had to improvise or whatever. But that's hilarious. And talk about talk about traumatic. I mean, that's amazing. And -

(03:43)

JAMES BROWN III: I lost my pants. Yeah, I guess it was not traumatic in a bad way because, you know, years later I'm on Broadway.

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GAVIN LODGE: All right, so...I gave a little bit of an intro of what your background has been in the very varied path that you've walked to where you are right now. But could you actually just tell us about the path that brought you actually specifically to Storyhouse Village?

(04:13)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, so I spent almost 20 years in New York after undergrad. I went to Brown, and as an actor did 12 different Broadway shows, and really fell in love with the arts and fell in love with storytelling in particular. And as I explored the other mediums of storytelling, I started to costume design, fashion design, I founded two lifestyle magazines, one of which was like the Vanity Fair of Broadway. I started producing TV and film, and then I started writing. And all of those things felt like... Every experience I had to that point fed into my ability to tell stories and to tell them in different ways and to see both the macro level of the story as well as the micro level of the story. And I knew that being a storyteller was my future.

About a year or two prior to the pandemic - I was in *Harry Potter* at the time - and I knew that I was, I think, done with my career as an actor and was ready to start a career as a writer, as a screenwriter. So I planned my exit from New York and from “Harry Potter”, pandemic hit, perfect time to move to LA, start writing. And my producing partner at the time, we had started a production company together. We...shot a film called *Early Light*

in Sheridan, Wyoming, that was about two veterans getting PTSD therapy through equine assisted therapy. So because it was site specific, we shot the film in Sheridan.

We partnered with an organization called CHAPS, which is an equine assisted therapy ranch. 20 % of the money we raised to shoot the film, we gave back to the organization. And in turn, they allowed us to shoot the film on their ranch, use all of their horses, their wranglers. And they even started to connect us to the community at large, the city council. We brought a bunch of money just to the city itself, brought a crew of 22 people.

And then the success of the film in the film festival market really just...I think it made it seem really real for them. And then they asked us to be on the board of this veteran village project there that was building tiny homes and community center for vets. And the next thing we know, we're sourcing land. We went from a smaller plot of land to this, what we own now, this 240 acres, you know, here we are building a sustainable community. But really that was the path there.

(06:45)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(07:12)

JAMES BROWN III: And, you know, we named it Story House Village, both, I think, figuratively and, like, literally. And my approach to the, to my role at the company and to our company and every aspect of it is that everything is a story to be told, right? We're creating community for families to move there, to start their story or to continue their story. It's multi-generational, so we want them to continue to write their story there. And then, obviously, on the film side, we're producing films, and we're creating a space for other networks and studios and streamers and producers to come and shoot.

(08:03)

GAVIN LODGE: The storytelling aspect is so fascinating because you could be seen as, you know, just another developer in so many different ways, but, that storytelling aspect seems like it would be very different from what...what other developers would say, but is this, is that it? Is that an element of development that you've ever seen that people bring, say, a philosophical or soul filled aspect to development?

(08:32)

JAMES BROWN III: I think you're seeing a little bit more these days because..we're starting to think about sustainability. We're starting to think about intentional living. So we are seeing a little bit, but.

(08:46)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(08:51)

JAMES BROWN III: I'd like to think that our approach is unique and that our approach is changing hearts and minds and business people when it comes to our live work play community that we're building. Yeah.

(09:07)

GAVIN LODGE: So many elements of this I want to dive into, not the least of which is the creative economy aspect of frankly, dollars and cents being brought to the area. But also, the way you and I have talked about this project for years. And the way I explain it to other people is: James is building a movie studio in Sheridan, Wyoming. But really, you're approaching it from a different way. It's almost like you're going bottom up versus top down or whatever, that you think of this first as a community and then the, the sound stages will come later, right? But why in that order?

(09:44)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, I actually just got off a call with, well, not a pitch angel investor, but they are invested. We were able to execute and they're going to close, so it's exciting.

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GAVIN LODGE: Congrats.

(10:02)

JAMES BROWN III: Thank you. But that came up, and so...I pushed us, I pushed our company and our board and our team to consider ourselves a real estate development company.

That is the, that's the foundation of our company. That's the backbone. And right now it's the major revenue generating aspect of the company. And so we are building this 240 acres...that's work play community.

We are also right now we have a 47 acre property in Montana under contract that we plan on buying by the end of the year that has 400,000

square feet of building on it. That's turnkey ready to be sound stages. So we're already scaling to that the entertainment aspect of the business, but even when we look at that acquisition and the sound stages, I'm still pushing us to see that as a real estate play. It's commercial real estate. We're buying space, we're renting space. The use of the space is film production. It's actually not so different than hospitality as a commercial real estate play where we are renting space, renting rooms, services, right? The services here are the...

(11:06)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(11:24)

JAMES BROWN III: ...equipment, post-production, you know, those kinds of things. And having that lens or that frame has also been easier to sell this to our investors because they understand real estate. They understand this is the price per square footage. This is the demand. And rather than having to sell a real estate investor on the film industry, which is like, wait.

(11:40)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. Right.

(11:53)

JAMES BROWN III: ...or having to sell a creative. I mean, this is such a generalization, but having to sell a creative on the dollars and cents of film, as opposed to this is a hard asset of 240 acres and 47 acres that we purchased for X price and we can now rent or sell for X price. Like wrapping your brain around that is a lot easier for whether you're in the industry or not.

(12:26)

GAVIN LODGE: So what infrastructure already exists in the region for switching back to film, the film industry, what infrastructure exists there already in the region, not necessarily story house village.

(12:39)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, so...None. I mean, it's really the answer to that. Which is why the demand is this, which is why we wanted to bring it. “Yellowstone” did their print photography. Paramount had a foothold in Missoula, Montana, which is where our new acquisition is going to be. But

those studios that they were using, they only used. So any outside production companies or the...

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(13:10)

JAMES BROWN III: ...there's lots of, there's thousands of filmmakers in Montana and in Wyoming area, but they couldn't utilize those studios. And now Paramount has moved most of that cinematography down to Texas, but the work crews still exist, the film crews exist, the ancillary businesses exist. Montana has a tax incentive. So let's bring the infrastructure to meet that demand.

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GAVIN LODGE: So then, can you dive back into what is the infrastructure that you're going to be bringing and furthermore, what is the contribution that you'll be making to the creative economy in that area?

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah. So in Montana, the great thing is, like I said, there's already 400,000 square feet of building. It was a lumber mill that shut down in May. Working lumber mills, that meant 120 workers lost their jobs. We learned just in May. Yeah. Yeah.

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GAVIN LODGE: Uh-huh. you say it closed just in May of this year? Wow. And wait, sorry. Specify for me: how was Yellowstone using it, if it just closed in May?

(14:22)

JAMES BROWN III: Yellowstone was using a separate property, but in the same city. Yeah. But this was an actual particle board lumber mill that Rosebird Products owned. And so 120 workers lost their jobs in May. We learned of the opportunity in February under NDA that it was closing. They hadn't let the workers know, the city didn't know. So what we found exciting about the opportunity, what ultimately the sellers did...

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GAVIN LODGE: Got it. Okay.

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JAMES BROWN III: ...is that we were pitching to them, we wouldn't be destroying their lumber mill, just clearing out all the machines, having 45 foot span buildings cleaned out, that's perfect for filming. Not only that, we have a vocational training arm of our company that can now transition those workers to become film crew. It's all...blue collar work, carpenters, electricians, woodworkers, builders.

And so literally in three weeks, we could take 120 people and make them grips and electricians and carpenters on the film set. And now they have steady work at much higher salaries, better benefits, safer, and they get to work on different films and TV throughout the years. So the story of that was really exciting.

And so we know that in this, I think speaks to it. One of your next questions is we know that we can create over 435 jobs from these film studios. And in a town like Missoula, in a town like Sheridan, that's a significant number of jobs, right?

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GAVIN LODGE: That's amazing.

(16:19)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah. And so, and a lot of the research that we've done, we have a great woman on our team, Nicole Bautier. She's our chief business development officer, but she's done a lot of market research showing the impact of film to a state, which is why a lot of these states are adopting tax film incentives because they understand the economic impact of bringing film to a state. So that's really our angle of one, increasing the tax incentive in Montana, and then getting a tax incentive in Wyoming.

(16:32)

GAVIN LODGE: Sure. Mm-hmm, which doesn't exist right now.

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JAMES BROWN III: It doesn't exist at the moment, yeah. Which is why we're kind of rolling the build of the film studios in Sheridan. Yeah.

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GAVIN LODGE: That's kind of surprising. You're creating, back to specifically Storyhouse Village versus Missoula, you're creating a company town, kinda. I mean, is there a model for this having happened

anywhere else in, I don't know, history or anywhere in the country that where it pops up around a film industry, for instance?

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JAMES BROWN III: Yes. Tyler Perry actually was about to do it and then the pandemic hit And so he didn't expand the way he was going to. It would have been in Georgia, yes. And then there's a studio that's called Trilith that's also in Georgia that's by the Chick-fil-A owner. And it's something, it's similar, but we, I believe, will be the first that have kind of modeled it from the beginning as that. And so it's exciting either way.

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GAVIN LODGE: Would that have been in Georgia?

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JAMES BROWN III: Mm-hmm. We know it doesn't exist in the Mountain West region. We will be the largest subdivision in Sheridan and potentially in Wyoming with the Storyhouse Village.

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GAVIN LODGE: The vocational aspect, at what point in the process did you think, “whoops, we need to train people” or rather, or it's an opportunity. We could, we get to train people. I mean, where did that come in in the process? Because it seems like the kind of thing you could easily think after the fact.

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, no, it came from the beginning because...we knew that the crews didn't exist, right? If there's no industry there, what are you gonna do, right? Production companies are willing to ship in the actors and the creatives, but they're going to need the local film crew to support the project. It's just way too expensive these days. And we also knew just based on...

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: Like my dad is one of our co-founders and one of our lead investors who's been in the industry for 40 years. So having a mind like that with us at the table has helped to shape us being able to look

around the corners and just see what blind spots we might be missing. And we knew early on that that's gonna be one of them that every company is gonna say, “okay, great, we'll come film there. Do the film crews exist?” And if they don't, that's going to be a barrier to entry for sure.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. How has Sheridan and the surrounding community embraced Storyhouse Village?

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JAMES BROWN III: They've been awesome. I think I'd be lying for sure if I said that there weren't obstacles and that's to be expected when you're building a new business in a smaller town. What we've done to combat that and to ingratiate ourselves and integrate ourselves in the community is really take the time, take the last four years that we've built these relationships, built confidence, built trust in the community.

And I think again, going back to...the story we wanted to tell. In the same way that if I'm sitting down to write a screenplay and I'm thinking about every aspect of the story, it was the same for us here. What story do we tell this community that gets them on board? How do we build something for them and with them? And so, you know, that's been a big part of our push.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(21:02)

JAMES BROWN III: We've been creating like little committees where we literally get random residents from the town and say, “if this were built, what's something you need? What's something you wish existed in Sheridan?” And when you start to do that, it feels like they have some sort of buy-in, they have some sort of stake, they have some sort of say in what's being created.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: And then it just helps to smooth some of those tensions that may exist. Now, of course, there's always going to be those

folks that are like, “No”. But at the end of the day, they need 4,200 lots of housing. They're in a housing crisis. And we're helping to solve that, which is why we're doing it. I mean, we wouldn't be doing this if there wasn't a demand. We are really trying to help that because...

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GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. Even there in Sheridan, Wyoming,

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JAMES BROWN III: ...and it's 4,200 lots of everything from attainable housing on up to two acre ranch homes. I mean, the majority of that 4,200 lots is actually single family homes that are in the like 450 to 750,000, you know, range. Like that's, so you're like, you can't complain about not having housing and then be upset when someone's trying to bring housing.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Were there any surprises? If you think back about those committees with local people asking for their needs and wants, do you recall any, I don't know, standout needs that were expressed?

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JAMES BROWN III: I mean, think most of them make sense. mean, like, they're like, we want a Chick-fil-A, we want a Costco. Yeah. Whole Foods. Yeah. There hasn't been anything out of pocket, at least not yet.

(22:51)

GAVIN LODGE: Right. Yeah. We often reflect at 4A Arts about how you don't necessarily need to be a “traditional artist” - and I put that in quotes - as an adult to have benefited from an artistic background. (Also, I would argue that everybody is an artist in their own way.) And I definitely teed you up for this answer, but I'm curious: what about your artistic experience, how it influenced you to be successful in this current journey.

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah. I mean, certainly in a direct way, part of my role at the company is overseeing every...all of the creative of the company. And that's everything from the marketing to what projects we decide to take on in terms of film and TV to the, to literally writing our design guidelines, residential and commercial design guidelines for the 240 acres, what it's going to look like, what the, you know, it's going to be a

modern farmhouse theme throughout. I'm on the architectural review committee. So every developer and builder that builds a house or an apartment building has to go through me to make sure it fits in with the full theme. So I work directly with our architects, with our engineers, on that. So my experience in design, you know, helps that directly. But I think indirectly, it also helps being an actor for as long as I was...

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: ...being able to tell stories, being really comfortable with improv, that has helped immensely in the hundreds of pitches I've done for my company, for my scripts. And because you're talking to real people and no matter how many times you tell the story of the company or you're selling to an investor, something changes, their energy changes, their questions change. And we're in this age where, just like we're doing right now, most of these pitches are happening via Zoom. They're not always in person. So oddly enough, my experience with TV and film, understanding how a camera works, understanding what the difference is if I lean forward, is if I lean back, all those things come into play when I'm pitching to an investor in a meeting...

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GAVIN LODGE: Yeah.

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JAMES BROWN III:...having to control a room that's not even a room, it's just, you know, eight squares of people. So, I think I use that every day.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: I'm so grateful for those experiences because we didn't bring it up, but right now getting my MBA at Wharton. And most of my classmates come from either finance or tech and consulting. That's really kind of the majority of my class.

But we've had lots of projects in which we've had to pitch to investors, we've had to do presentations, we've had to write stuff. I see them all clam up, not all, but a lot of them clam up or a lot of them have nerves or

they're not used to standing in front of people, they're not used to giving presentations. And that's something that comes as easily to me as breathing. And that's all because of my time on stage. So.

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GAVIN LODGE: So very many auditions at Ripley Greer to have to move through.

GAVIN LODGE: You believe the arts deserve more support from our elected officials, right, listener? You're listening to this podcast, so I'm guessing you do. if so, please take the time to check out 4aarts.org and consider giving a little donation to support our movement to change the narrative around American arts and culture. Give now at 4aarts.org and thanks.

GAVIN LODGE: Alrighty, so for a change of tone and just some sheer fun, you were in 12 Broadway shows, which is amazing. Can you share with us a couple of your favorite memories? I know that that spans, I mean, I'm looking at you and laughing, because I know that is, the stories are endless, but nevertheless, for our listeners, can you share a couple of favorite standouts? Besides being with me...

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, I mean...

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GAVIN LODGE: ...on stage in “Priscilla Court of the Desert.” Obviously.

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JAMES BROWN III: That goes without saying. Yeah, there's a couple that pop to mind. I mean, quick ones first. Obviously, working with Stephen Sondheim, one of my favorite composers of all time, and that being my Broadway debut, Working on “The Frogs”, and him writing the music for it. Unbelievable, you know, to have had that experience.

Being on the Tony Awards, specifically “Memphis”, you know, we won that year, we were nominated for 11. We may have won seven. Performing that performance and winning and it was a special year. That comes to mind. But the two real stories that I have are one from “Color Purple” and one from “Harry Potter”.

So “The Color Purple” is one of my favorite stories to tell. We were in production rehearsal for it. And our producers tell us that tomorrow some cameras are going to come in just to get some B-roll. So we'll do, you

know, “Africa”, we'll do “The Color Purple” and we'll do like one other number. So we're like, okay, cool. They're like, “Wear something cute? You know, look good, but like it doesn't have to be crazy. It should be rehearsed. It should be rehearsed.” Awesome.

So the next day we come in, warming up. We kind of run through the numbers that we're going to do. And they're like, okay, great. The cameras are here. So the camera crew comes in as we were working, and they start kind of, we're still warming up. They're like, “We need five more minutes before the other producers come in.”

We're still warming up. They're getting like B-roll footage of us warming up and stuff, which are chatting. And then they're like, okay, the, the, the producers are here. So, you know, let's get ready. The doors open up and Oprah walks through the door. And the cameras are on us to get our reaction of Oprah walking through the doors. And I mean, we freak out. Like it was genuinely wild.

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GAVIN LODGE: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

(30:02)

JAMES BROWN III: So we learned that it was her cameras, not like some b-roll. It was like, and she was announcing to us in real time that she was coming on as a lead producer and that we were going to be on her show, like in like literally like a week, we were flying out to Chicago. She still had a show at the time and we were going to be on her show to perform two numbers. So that was like just a...

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GAVIN LODGE: Alright. Wow.

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JAMES BROWN III: ...crazy story working with Oprah. She was amazing. She was actually around a lot. Gail even more. We called her Auntie O because like she was around that much that she would come literally take her shoes off and just be in the theater with us. You know, we got awesome gifts for opening night from her and you know, it's crazy. And then the other wild story is from Harry Potter.

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GAVIN LODGE: That's pretty epic. Wow.

(31:02)

JAMES BROWN III: It was like in between the first year and the second year of the show. Initially the show wasn't owned by the Universal brand. It was, I forget the production company. So we were not attached to the films in any way. We still did cross promotional stuff for it, but Universal didn't own any part of it. So was really just because of JK.

At some point a deal got done that Universal bought some percentage of the show. So that meant rebranding the show, like all the font went to the film font, like the front of house, all that stuff, all the merch, switched, too. And the way that they announced to the world that this was happening, they literally took over Times Square and all the LEDs, literally all of them in Times Square, created this huge announcement that utilized all the LEDs in a real integrated way, like the mentors and it was crazy.

So obviously we were all there, you know, they had set up a stage for us on those red steps and had, they had hired ad folks in Harry Potter-type costumes, you know, passing stuff out. And then this huge presentation that was like 10 minutes long, that was like a little mini movie that announced the show was like switching branding. Yeah, probably hundreds of thousands of dollars for this...

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GAVIN LODGE: That's pretty astounding.

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JAMES BROWN III: ...campaign to switch it over to the Universal branding of it all. And then obviously that ratcheted up the amount of cross promotional stuff we did for like the “Fantastic Beasts” movies and yeah, so.

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GAVIN LODGE: Listening to you here, you're beaming and smiling broadly. I'm going to get a little philosophical and just asking what is it can you say that makes your life most meaningful?

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah. I feel so lucky and so fortunate and so grateful that...I've gotten to make a living doing stuff that I'm passionate about. And the reason why I say “stuff” is because it's been so varied, right? Every aspect of my career post undergrad has truly been something I wanted to do, that I desire to do, that are millions of people's dreams.

And I'm so fortunate that I've gotten to do that, gotten to pursue it, that I continue to get to pursue my passions and being able to wake up every day knowing that what I'm going to work on today means something to me and actually changes a lot of lives. I think the arts change lives.

So spending 20 years as a Broadway actor, as a TV and film actor, knowing that millions of people have seen the stories that I was a part of telling, that changes lives. That has changed those people's lives mostly for the better. That's exciting.

And in the same way, I'm building a community that's going to have 2000 units, that's going to have potentially 2000 families living on it, telling their story that like “this is where I raised my kids and that hill that slid into the lake is where we, you know, sledded every winter and we jumped in the lake every summer.”

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: I'm so grateful for that. So grateful. And that really, not everyone has that, you know, and not everyone can say that about their careers. Not everyone even has a career. Some people really truly just have a job. And I don't take that for granted.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, I just, it does make me a bit emotional sometimes thinking about it because that's the truth and that isn't everyone's truth. You know, when the point hit me as an actor where I no longer...where I no longer had that same perspective for doing Broadway, where I was like...

Yeah, so can the 12th-over show, I can get a 14th. Right, like that. It was when I knew that there was time to move on. When I knew that, yes, I still loved it. It was still, I still could understand that not everyone can have a Broadway show, but it no longer felt like that on, in my bones and on my skin. It didn't feel the same way. And then that was the time that I knew that I needed to refocus and pivot to something that gave me that again.

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GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

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JAMES BROWN III: ...that made me see just how fortunate I was to have those opportunities.

(37:05)

GAVIN LODGE: What do you think is art's purpose, if not to make money?

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JAMES BROWN III: I suppose the low hanging fruit is to inquire you know, I think. And yeah, maybe that's, maybe that is the macro answer. If we dig a little deeper. Arts can mean different things to different people. You know, in times of kind of political strife and war, arts can serve to educate, art can serve to escape, right? They can be a way to escape from the realities that exist. They can be a vehicle to educate.

And sometimes I just think art is there to bring joy. Like sometimes it's just so that we can smile. I have a tattoo of my arm that says “choose joy”. And I do believe that that is a good, a big part of what art is for. I have some really close friends. My best friends are all artists and they're creators and they're now kind of in the director choreographer world. And they're also writers.

One of them in particular is in the middle of developing a musical. And when I first saw a version of it out in Berkeley, I remember leaving the show crying, like crying almost hysterically. And not from tears, but literally from joy, because I was seeing a show that had a cast of all Black people, and the show wasn't a period drama. It wasn't about slavery. It wasn't a bio musical about someone's life. It wasn't connected to a canon of music that we all know. It wasn't making a huge political statement. It was literally a show about two people falling in love and one person not being able to, based on their circumstances, not being able to stay in the relationship.

So it was really a love story. And I couldn't have been more excited that we had a product, that we had a musical that was just made you feel good. It didn't have to make some huge statement about the plight of Black people and our history. I didn't have to relive racism as for entertainment. You know, like I got to go to the theater and see a show that just was a love story and saw Black people on stage celebrating life and celebrating love. Yeah, there was drama and obviously conflict. We need conflict, but ultimately it was a joyful story.

(39:46)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. Right.

(40:15)

JAMES BROWN III: ...and so talking, he asked me a lot of, you know, give notes as they're in the development process. And so I've seen some other iterations of it as they've developed it. And I keep saying to him, “Make sure that the show does not lose its joy.” Like you can deepen it and that's okay, but everything doesn't have to be this huge sociopolitical statement.

(40:34)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(40:45)

JAMES BROWN III: And to me, that's art. To me, art doesn't always have to do something smart. Sometimes art can just make you that [indicates Gavin laughing]. It can just make you smile. It can just make you, know, like... And that's all kind of art, right? Whether it's a painting or a poem or a building, right?

(40:53)

GAVIN LODGE: Ha ha ha!

(41:12)

JAMES BROWN III: Sometimes it can just be for entertainment. It can be just to make me feel good. It can be just to make me feel sad, but not because you're sad because you know, Black people were enslaved for 200 years, right? We know that. I don't know that I have to see - always have to see black people on film doing that to feel like art.

(41:24)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. Well, speaking of a whole lot of things that you just said right now, I want to bring this back to just some sheer lighthearted joy. You danced with Michael Jackson. my God. And you know what? In all the years that you and I have known each other, I've never once heard any stories of that. Can you just give us a little anecdote about what was that like?

(41:50)

JAMES BROWN III: I did! Wild. It's one it was now 23 years ago that's first of all crazy my first job after Brown.

(42:11)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah.

(42:18)

JAMES BROWN III: I did not think that this was what I was gonna be doing. I went to the audition as part of psych research that I was doing. And the first day of auditions, the choreographers just took a liking to me. They didn't know who I was. I happened to match physically with one of their favorite dancers. So we looked like bookends together. And in the audition, we were dancing next to each other, totally coincidentally.

So I'm making it through, was a week long of auditions, callbacks, callbacks, callbacks, final day was at midnight. Michael is on video by conference watching us. We're all in the line of height order. Our head shots are on the table, so they're moving them around. We can't really hear, obviously, what they're talking about. And then the choreographers went down the line and they're like..."Thank you, please stay, thank you, thank you, please stay, please stay", whatever. So the thank yous were left out of the room for the rest of the day. Then Michael was like, "Welcome to my 30th anniversary tour.

(43:32)

GAVIN LODGE: You got it in the room. That never happens.

(43:34)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, yeah, fully in the room. I was like literally at midnight. And the experience was just wild because not only were we dancing with Michael, but we were also dancing with the major pop stars at the time because it was, it was, it was a tribute to Michael. The first half were other stars doing some of his songs to the tribute to him. The other half was him performing. So we were dancing for everyone, including Michael. So it was like Whitney Houston at the time and Destiny's Child, Missy Elliott...

(44:09)

GAVIN LODGE: What? That's crazy.

(44:19)

JAMES BROWN III: ...yeah, wild. Usher. And yeah, I mean, and the crazy thing, know, working with Michael was unbelievable. I was 20 years old and he had- he just put out the Rock My World album. He hadn't performed in a while. The first thing we learned with him was "Beat It."

And to be in a room where, like we learned it ahead of him coming into the studio.

Once he got there, he was gonna, then it was like, give us notes and like throw us around. I mean, that's literally what happened. So he got there and we're going over to, like, well known section and he's giving us notes. And he's, I mean, he was in it. There was no pretense. There was nothing weird like he was in the room ready to work. He is a musician. He was a workhorse and so professional and so warm and so amazing obviously we weren't going to, you know - clubbing after with him.

But when he was in the room he was in the room and we were there with him and it was amazing. You know never forget that time especially because we were the last folks to truly perform with him on that scale. We didn't, you know, he passed before the "This Is It" tour opened. Crazy.

(45:35)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm. How did the experience of performing this differ from performing in a Broadway show?

(45:49)

JAMES BROWN III: Oh, god, it's like, not even apples and oranges, it's like apples and, you know, lint I guess. It could not be more different. Yeah, Madison Square Garden.

(46:04)

GAVIN LODGE: Yeah, size, obviously.

(46:06)

JAMES BROWN III: To be performing with Michael Jackson standing next to you and tens of thousands of people screaming, passing out, crying, thinking like the whole thing. No pop star living has that. Beyonce does, I mean, yes, Beyonce's huge, Taylor Swift's huge, but no one has ever been affected...

(46:15)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(46:422)

JAMES BROWN III: ...by an artist the way Michael Jackson has affected fans. I think part of that nowadays, because of the media, so it was a different connection to the star. Whereas with Michael Jackson, the thing

is this, there is a huge wall between the audience and he's such a star. So to feel that energy from tens of thousands of people and...

(46:53)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(47:09)

JAMES BROWN III: ...with Michael Jackson, not to say that his dancers were as star-powered as he was, but in some ways, kind of, right? So we were receiving that same energy and it was intentionally given to us in the audience. It's an unbelievable feeling. It just is. And...

(47:18)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm.

(47:38)

JAMES BROWN III: ...nothing in the 12 Broadway shows that I've ever done has ever come close.

(47:45)

GAVIN LODGE: Did you ever get to relate to him in a way that you weren't talking to a superstar and just talking to a fellow performer on the stage?

(47:55)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, I think every time he was in rehearsal, was that. 100%. And any of the “extra” were from his people. You know, they kind of created this allure. And luckily, we only saw them as they were kind of bringing him in. And then they left. And it was just us, Michael, and the choreographers. You know, sometimes he would bring his kids in. They were super cute. They were young at the time. But working with him was no different than working with “Dad.”

(48:08)

GAVIN LODGE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

(48:35)

JAMES BROWN III: Sutton Foster you know what mean? Yeah, Gavin Lodge exactly. Yeah.

(48:35)

GAVIN LODGE: All right. Thank you for indulging that. If money were no object, how would you spend your time?

(48:52)

JAMES BROWN III: Traveling on a beach. Going on cruises with my family. Making films. Yeah. Making films, making TV, writing for sure.

(48:59)

GAVIN LODGE: Great. Mm-hmm.

So finally, what cultural experience are you most looking forward to right now? Whether it's something next week, next month, next year?

(49:29)

JAMES BROWN III: This one is related to my business. So one of the biggest draws to Sheridan, Wyoming, is their rodeo. Happens in July. It's one of the largest rodeos in the country. And so we're going to do a big investor event for the rodeo next year.

We're going to glamp on our property, like put up big tents and have our investor, you know, nice tents and have our investors stay on the land and, you know, we'll take them to rodeo for the week.

And I am pumped for that. I haven't been yet. I've never been to a rodeo. I can ride a horse. I do have cowboy boots. But yeah, rodeo for sure. I'm excited for that because that, I mean, that truly is the Mountain West culture, cowboying. You know, we've got a couple of cowboys on our team, legitimate cowboys on our team, is really, really, really cool. And yeah, I'm pumped for it.

(50:31)

GAVIN LODGE: I mean, I know there's a million different ways of being able to define art, but there's an awful lot of art to rodeo. That's for sure. That's very cool. How cool. James, thank you for spending this time and sharing so much. And I think it's really awesome. The projects that you are building and creating opportunities for people to experience life a little more authentically and humanely connecting with each other through the experiences, stories that you were telling.

(50:37)

JAMES BROWN III: Definitely. Yeah.

(51:01)

GAVIN LODGE: So thank you for being part of the team. Really appreciate it.

(51:04)

JAMES BROWN III: Yeah, thank you. Thanks so much for having me and I look forward to more.

(51:12)

GAVIN LODGE: Framing the Hammer is written, produced, and edited by 4A Arts. Thank you for listening and check us out again. Thanks.