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In this episode of TA(L)KING DIRECTION, Artistic Director **Gabriel Stelian-Shanks** and Associate Artistic Director **Nilan** speak with **Snehal Desai**, Producing Artistic Director of East West Players. Located in L.A., East West Players, now entering its 56<sup>th</sup> Season, is one of the longest continuously-operating theaters of color in the United States. A former Drama League Fellow, Snehal discusses what it's like to be a leader of such an institution in our current times and his vision for the company and its future.

Editing Services: [Catalin Media](#), @catalinmedia

## **SPEAKERS**

Snehal Desai, Nilan , Gabriel Stelian-Shanks

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 00:07**

Hi folks, welcome to TA(L)KING DIRECTION. I am Gabrielle Stelian- Shanks Artistic Director of the Drama League.

**Nilan 00:13**

And I'm Nilan, Associate Artistic Director of the Drama League.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 00:17**

Hi Nilan together again, today, I'm really excited. We're going to be speaking with a personal hero of mine, our colleague and the artistic director of one of America's most exciting theater institutions. This is someone who I think is not only an amazing director and a really great artistic leader, but they're also providing a model for what I think the future of theatrical producing, can be and should be. I'm going to begin, though, by talking about the legendary company that he



leads. The company is East West Players in Los Angeles. It was founded in 1965 by nine AAPI artists, and it has over the last 55 years I mean, what an accomplishment. It has explored Asian American works. Asian American world premieres, mainstream musicals and plays that it has reinvigorated through the lens of an Asian American artists and community performances. But always its work has been centered at this crossroads of intersectionality and social justice. It is one of the longest continuously operating theatres of color in the United States. And I think it really has fostered an unparalleled creative exploration of those ideas of East and West which comprise its title. And our guest today, I'm so excited is there Producing Artistic Director Snehal Desai. Snehal is an extraordinary director, producer, leader on the national Theatre landscape. He's directed many productions at East West. Some of them include *A Nice Indian boy*, *The Who's Tommy*, and their upcoming revival of Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*, which was being produced before the pandemic and is their first show back after the pandemic. Under smells leadership, the company is focused on new work producing plays by some of the country's most admired writers, including Lauren Yee, Prince Gomolvilas, and the writer after whom their mainstage theatre is named at East West Tony Award winner David Henry Wong. Prior to East West Senhal worked in many places, including the Old Globe in San Diego, which has a small tie to his time as a Drama League directing fellow right here with us many years ago, we will not say how many. But he's also directed at places as varied as boom arts and Portland, the Old Vic in London and more than a dozen theaters in New York. He's a member of the Asian Pacific American Media Coalition, and he serves on the board of the consortium of Asian American theaters and artists. Please help me welcome to TA(L)KING DIRECTION Snehal Desai. Hi, Snehal.

## Snehal Desai

03:03

Gabriel. Hi, Nilan. Thank you so much for that generous, generous. Oh, I'm so humbled. And I also want to thank you for your tremendous leadership at the Drama League, particularly now the way you have kind of adapted the programs as we look forward to support, you know, Drama



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League was fundamental in helping me move to the next level of my career and to actually introduce me to East West. So I'm always so grateful.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks** 03:36

Thank you so much for that. And I will say and Nilan knows that our revision of the program, we spent a lot of time looking across the field at who we thought were kind of the organization's showing us the way forward. And your leadership of East West was a model we talked about a lot. So thank you, and thank you for the great compliment,

**Nilan** 03:57

huh? Yes, thank you so much for being with us today. So, from what I gathered, you've been working with East West Players for a while, but became, before you became the producing artist director and it feels like you hit a stride creatively and artistically and then the pandemic strikes in early 2020. And now you're gearing up for East West Players 56 Season launch, which you are quoted as calling a season that has us returning back to the stage with strength, pride and solidarity, a season brimming with powerful voices that demand to be heard. I'm wondering what has it meant to you to be a new leader during these unstable and important times? And I wonder if leaders like yourself have gotten a chance to implement institutional vision or if it just feels like you've been putting out fires everywhere.

**Snehal Desai**

04:50

You know, it has been a time of a lot of antacids. A lot of opened bottles of wine. But you know, the interesting thing that I've been telling a lot of folks, and I think this is echoing true for a lot of new artistic directors or, you know, there's, there's quite a moment of change right now in our field. And the question is, is that new incoming leader, how are they set up for success. And so the interesting thing is, you know, as hard as this time was, in terms of COVID, and adapting, I still feel like, it wasn't as bad as my first six months, you know, taking over at East West, because now



I've been in the position for a few years, you kind of know how to ride the storms. But you know, the financial challenges when I initially took over, which many of our peers and colleagues are also facing when they take over, you know, they're just very, very large hurdles. And you also, it's a very steep learning curve, right, so you're still getting acclimated to this new position, new connections, and then suddenly, you're, you know, you don't have more than two weeks payroll, or three weeks payroll out. So there's no safety net. And I feel like now we're in a place where going into COVID, we had created one of these plus players in terms of moments like this. And then I also think it was such a moment of change, right, there was a lot of time for contemplation for reflection in our field. And I think what folks are realizing is how many institutions, you know how many theaters of color in particular, have been under-resourced for so long? And how much structural inequity there is, in our field, particularly in terms of funding, and how we can go about writing that.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks** 06:44

I think when I, you know, the conversation you're having is one that I think artistic leaders are having vary widely right now in our industry. And I am always curious how people came to that conversation, how in, you know, the overuse of the word unprecedented, doesn't do a lot for those of us who are three weeks out on payroll, for those of us who are trying to figure out how to adequately resource artists and focus on people and, and create change. And I think it really comes to a story of how we came to our positions in the first place. So I guess what I'd love to ask you is, you know, having been lucky enough to be a fan of yours and watch your career for a long time. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you came to this present moment, I'd love to know, how you first come to directing and what your exploration is there. And then sort of when the idea of becoming an artistic director, entered your journey, and maybe how those things have formulated your response to our time now?

07:55



Yeah, I kind of came to directing a little bit later in my career, like so many folks. My first introduction to theater was as an actor. And when I was in college, in particular, and I was trying to see, you know, is there a career option for me here in the theater? And what might that look like, I kept running into barriers, particularly as an actor who tend to look very young. So it would be cast as the kid or the child or the friend. And particularly one casting call. I remember, I heard back from the producers afterwards. And they said, you know, we thought, we loved your audition, we would love to cast you in this play. But if we cast you then we also have to cast the adults of South Asian parents, and we don't know any other South Asian actors who could be these parents, and then also this and that. And it was just this interesting thing of I, you know, I felt very disempowered, disempowered by that moment. And also, I just had a question of, well, that, you know, you see the world in a very different way than I do. And so right. That was when I, in my junior year took this directing class with Vinnie Murphy, who runs theater Emory. And it was there that I saw that, oh, as a director, I can create the vision for the world, right, I can set who you know, what a family looks like. And I can put folks who look like me at the center of the story, even if that's not traditionally how it's been done. And so that was what was kind of really a change moment for me. I also took design stage management classes, and I was like, these are skill sets, I do not have. But it was really this idea of you know, that, you know, as the director, you're responsible for the larger vision of what, materializes on stage and also to, you know, to meet so, to me, that was what I really latched on to. And then the other interesting thing was, you know, in undergrad and then afterwards in Atlanta, a lot of the stuff I did was a site specific just by nature of, you know, couldn't pay for a space or didn't necessarily have funds to design to build a set or something like that. And in my, for my senior thesis, I did a production of Jose Rivera's *Marisol*, and it was already programmed for fall of 2001. And we had already decided to set it in this kind of abandoned mental hospital that was there that the state of Georgia had left. And it was to was doing that play, which if folks are not aware, you know, it's beautiful play by Jose Rivera, but it's set at a time where New York is under attack, right? There's a crumbling New York, because the angels are literally at war with God. And to do that show, so close to 911. So soon after 911, I just saw the power of the work, you know, is a very cathartic experience for a lot of



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folks who were still trying to grapple with what had happened. And so to me, then that was where I really saw, you know, I knew there was a power in this art form, but I saw how transformative it could be, and how, as a director, you could shape that experience?

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 11:16**

Well, and I think it's really telling that when, when there are these motivations about how theater can speak to the concerns of the world through 911 plus your commitment to sort of remove barriers, for people of color and for disenfranchised communities. The move to artistic director feels pretty natural to me, does that does that feel right to you? Like those concerns kind of just naturally moved you in that direction?

**Snehal Desai**

11:46

To a certain extent, yes. Because then the next question would become, you know, I wanted to create these worlds that I was a part of, or could see myself and folks who look like me to be a part of, but then the next question is, right, who's producing that work? Right? Who whom, you know, who am I going to get to be on board to support those projects, and that is still, you know, few and far between. And so I feel like that was one thing that led me towards artistic directorship, and then the other was wanting to mentor and support other artists of color and give them opportunities that I was lucky to have that, you know, really helped shape my career. So it was kind of a combination of that. I think for anyone who is considering it, the push pull is always how much of your day is artistic when you become an artistic director is a major frustration.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 12:40**

Tell me about it.

**Nilan 12:44**



That was such a treat. For us. We went well. Let's shift for a little bit. So East West Players was in the news last year, when during a live stream of the annual Ovation Awards, the Los Angeles stage lions not only mispronounce nominated actor Julie Lee's name, but also showed a photo of another Asian American actor. Now this sloppiness and cultural arranger, erasure was too much for snail, who along with other artistic directors of color in Los Angeles had for years petitioned the organization to recognize all partner theaters evolved in a co-production, not just a larger predominantly white institutions. The next day, East West Players immediately withdrew its membership in LSA. Many other theaters soon followed suit, and the board of the Los Angeles stage alliances quickly decided to fold. First, we want to say thank you, that kind of leadership, and action can't be easy. But thank you for embracing that choice. What was the experience like for you? And What lessons do you hope all the directors who listen to this podcast take away from that experience, which is, which was reported around the world?

### **Snehal Desai**

14:07

I want to talk about this moment, I like to kind of back things up and talk about what was happening in spring of the year in terms of the uprising and the conversation and the dialogue and the kind of racial reckoning in this country after the murder of George Floyd. And to me, what was interesting in those days and weeks afterward, was how many people you know, put out these statements, right. And in some ways, I initially had been calling for folks to say something right? I felt like a statement doesn't cost you anything. And so there were a lot of folks who were silent and we were just advocating particularly in our field for folks to say something. But then what happened to me and I think for a lot of other folks is then we started to see how empty those statements were right to me what really happened when we started to see things like Nike and Walmart, and all these corporations start to put out these statements of support. And you know, you're like, well, that is all good. But if you really want to change people's lives, in this country, if you really want to fight for equity, then what you can do Nike and Walmart is pay a living wage to everyone who works for you, right? Like you have that power to, to impact wide



scale change in this country. But instead of doing any of that, you're kind of just saying, you know, making a statement and hoping that that will shield you from anything. And so, for me, I really will. And then, you know, subsequent to that there were there in the last two years have been a lot of attacks against the Asian American community, and anti Asian rhetoric that was tied to COVID-19, and everything like that. And so again, when a lot of these things happened, we I saw folks putting out statements of support and solidarity, but I didn't know how much was really changing, right. And so for me, it's now a thing of the statements mean, nothing unless there is accountability, action and timelines to what you want to do. And so when we were in this moment with the LA stage alliance after the Ovation awards, and there were a number of issues, you know, as you mentioned, it was, you know, they they put up actresses names, or they put up photos of actresses of color, and it was not their picture, they mispronounce names, Deaf West Theatre company, had been nominated. And they had asked for accessibility closed captioning for their artists to be a part of this ceremony. And that was not adhered to. So there were a number of issues that were that happened that night, but that had in general been percolating. And to me, it was why are we paying into a system to be, as you said, erased or diminished. And if we're going to do something, then I want to do something that leads hopefully to action. And I want to also, you know, a lot of folks say they are they stand with you, but I really wanted them to start to put their money where their mouth was right. If you say you stand with us, we hope you will join us in leaving this organization. So you know, those were some of the things that were going on behind the scenes, as we, you know, at East West as we decided to craft a statement, because right after the incident, I actually saw the ceremony the next day, a lot of folks that night released statements, but again, I just didn't want to be in this cycle, where sure we make a bunch of statements, but nothing changes, right. And so that's where our statement came. And then in all honesty, I was, you know, we were like well put this out there and we'll see. Right, we'll see this may know no one may pick up on this. But what we saw was this tremendous outpouring of support from both the Los Angeles theatre community and then the national theatre community. And within, you know, a week, about 150, organizations had left LSA. And to me, that was a groundswell of so many of the other issues that folks that had with this organization, but not





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spoken up about, but also folks really wanting to stand in solidarity with us in that moment. And so it was, I think, really humbling for all of us, you know, particularly for those of us who are API artists to be seen in that way by our community.

**Nilan 18:38**

Mm hmm.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 18:40**

It's so important. Thank you Snehal to lift up what I think we internally at the drum like, you know, Nilan and I, when the door shut, and we are programming, we talk a lot about the words that are being said, versus the actions that are being taken in our field. And I, you know, I think it is really important to lift that up, and I and you just did that so eloquently. I really appreciate it. And I, you know, as I think about this being a podcast for directors, there's a way as an artistic leader that you have done that I wonder if we could talk about you as an artist in that in that capacity a little bit as well. And I'm sitting here, thinking a couple of months ago, we interviewed the director, John Doyle, on this podcast and I'm struck as you talk by a number of the similarities in what you're saying and what he was saying in a totally different context. You know, but you you are both artistic directors of companies that are wrestling with notions of America, both both historically and in your current seasons. And that you were both about to open revivals of Steven Sondheim's *Assassins*, right before the shutdown and you both made it your first production back and and when this podcast airs, it will be imminent that production. So I'm thinking about a lot of things I'm thinking, you know that the East West revival of *Assassins* that people will see, for many people will be the first Sondheim musical, they are viewing senses passing, which happened. As we record this, it happened just last week. And of course, you know, the musical, which is about presidential assassinations, you know, really resonates in new ways, after the murder of George Floyd after the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, and here you are, you have programmed this long before these events happened. And now it you know, it is as you know, in the water, as they say, of, of the work you are doing as an artist. So, as a director, I'm wondering, specifically, in



this instance, has your thoughts about the piece which you're also directing? Has it changed in any way since you first put it on the season in 2020? Do you? Do you feel the need in any way to explore the work differently, or not?

### Snehal Desai

21:11

Yeah, and then I just want to continue on the last thread in terms of the other big thing that, particularly for all artists, in this day and age is that, you know, initially after what happened with the LA Stage Alliance, you know, at the awards, the, for a set, what I what I know, I felt, and I know a lot of other folks were feeling in the moment was we felt disempowered. And to me, the question now is, when you feel disempowered, you can either just sit with that, or you can figure out how to empower yourself in a situation. And so in this case, it was well, you know, what we can do is we have spoken up against this organization or spoken to them a number of times, and they have not heard us what we can do is not pay into this system anymore. And so I just want to, you know, that is the other thing that I continue to urge artists is that it's easy for us to sometimes sit back and US sales as the not, I'm gonna say victims, but that we don't have power. But we have a tremendous amount of power with our storytelling, and you just have to figure out, you know, what I mean, how to put yourself in that position. So, you know, in terms of *Assassins*, there's a number of different things, you know, when we program this, initially East West Players has done nine productions of Sondheim musicals. And, you know, he's had a very long legacy with us, as well as a long legacy of supporting the AAPI community, you know, from *Pacific Overtures* on. And so it was something of we wanted to do *Assassins* musical, and we were at that time in the midst of a election, that line, you know, in the beginning, the sometimes the madman comes along, just was resonating throughout my head all the time. Because the country could have gone into very different directions. And so there was a lot of fear and things that were unknown. But to me, the real thing that we were exploring is that, you know, there's this line, "what about my prize?" "Right? So it's what the musical is about people who feel they're owed something that they are owed something by this idea of the American dream, and you know, how it doesn't live up to



that for them. And that, I think that still resonates today. And I think the other thing is, you know, we we cast the show, diversely. You know, we kind of did what *Hamilton* has done, what *1776* has done, so we you know, we are we have inserted ourselves in the narrative in that way. But when you look at these assassins, they are all white. Right, you know, there is a certain amount of privilege that has been afforded them in what they have kind of sought to do and also in their expectation of what is owed to that. Because I would say the expectation of a person of color of what is owed to us by this country, versus a white person is probably different. And so I think those were some of the things, the questions that we were record, you know, talking about before the production was halted, and then that I think we're going to resume with, you know, when we begin in January, I think there is to me, the other thing is this question of gun violence in this country. Right. So the other thing that really drew me to this musical is this question of our connection to guns in this country in the mythology of guns and access to that and there's this you know, All in gun song, there's this line, all it takes is a, you know, a little finger to change the world. And you know, the power that guns have. And yet the accessibility of them, you know, in our culture is something we still are struggling with, you know, in terms of these mass shootings at schools and other sightings. And so the other thing that I really wanted us to talk about, in some ways, was, you know, putting guns in the hands of folks who are not always mentally there, and what it means to say we want a gun to be in the hands of every American. And so in that question, I just actually before this, read a article in American theater about John Doyle's production of *Assassins*, which I was lucky to see and how with the recent reincarnate recent incarnation, they, John Doyle decided not to have blanks, or live gunshots, it was all pre reported. And the article was kind of about in support of that, but did New York Times review had kind of gone on the other side of they wished, you know, the musical had been more dangerous and ways that there is this one point where you're supposed to aim the gun at an audience member. And they didn't do that. And to me, that's, it's, that's all a part of that conversation, right, that we need to have. And not shy away from,

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 26:30**



we'll just say, I have a long history with this musical. It is one of my favorite pieces of modern musical theater. And I remember very intensely in the early 90s, sing a production at Signature Theatre in Washington, DC, where I lucked into a front row ticket. And I very distinctly remember there being a gun in my face less than two feet from me, because the director of that production had brought them down to the lip of the stage. That intensity at that moment was really palpable. And that was before this moment of epidemic gun violence. And so thank you for wrestling with that question. I think I think it lives large in that piece.

### **Snehal Desai**

27:18

Yeah, very much. So. And I think the, the balancing act is I, you know, for those of us who are artists, for directors, in particular, some of what we love about theater is theater that does feel dangerous on edge, even though you know, you're in a safe space, right? Or that, you know, to me, it's all about those moments where I start to shift around in my seat a little bit uncomfortable that I really kind of perk up, you know, as an audience member. And I think it's, you know, artists are going to have to make the decision as to what kind of space they want for their storytelling, and how comfortable they want it to be for audiences or not. Right, it should always be safe. But I think there is this question of, you know, how much do you want to prep folks before they come in? How much is it? Is it on us is on the audience member? To come in and ask questions about a space I think for all artistic directors, right now, that's a major thing we're grappling with is this question of, you know, warnings or trigger warnings before productions? And how far you want to go in that conversation or not. And to me the unexpected nature of the journeys that are told in the theater, is that the ride and that's why I go but I know it's not what everyone you know, what the experience that everyone necessarily wants.

### **Nilan 28:47**

I want to also point out that you have my brain kind of spinning. I've been in the musical I've seen it so many times. And when you said it's in your casting the diverse casting and hearing that



people who are white have a different prize, I just want you to I just want it's spinning its spinning in my head and now I'm looking at it completely different and hearing someone who's brand like me say that out loud in that context and have only having flashes of what that prize could be other real that I'm actually from California I was actually introduced to the one act *Marry Me a Little* by East West players and I believe it was a double bill night of musical. When I saw Sondheim's *Marry Me a Little* and Jason Robert Brown's *Last Five Years*. I think this is back in like 2017 but um that being honestly my first time seeing these pieces are that are canocilly done with white cast and creative teams seeing it done with a diverse bodies. So I guess my point As the work we do next is a major conversation in the field. And as we come out of this backed up pipeline of shows, I'm wondering what we create is more important than ever? And what kind of conversations are you looking to bring to East West players? And for your own work? Like what what kind of stories? Are you itching to tell now?

**Snehal Desai**

30:23

Yeah, you know, and I think it's an interesting balance. If you I, you know, if someone was like, there's gonna be a pandemic, and you're gonna be shut down for two years, and then you're going to reopen what would you open with *Assassins* would not be first,

**Nilan** 30:40

understandably.

**Snehal Desai**

30:43

And, you know, for us, it was both, you know, where we were in the process of this show, when things got halted the amazing talent, right, the actors, and the designers and the amazing team that what they put together with this show, that made me just, you know, want to hold on as long



as possible that we could share this. Because the other thing is, you know, actors of color will still tell you, I mean, they're, you know, we recently did *Next to Normal* a couple of years ago, I still don't know a production of *Next to Normal*. That is where the family isn't white, right? Where you can easily it's an Asian American family, and it just resonates in a deeper way. But for folks to see themselves reflected on stage, you know, a lot of folks had seen that musical multiple times where they saw it in our theater, but it just hit them in a different way. When you see yourself up there, or you see your mother or your sister, or your child up on stage suddenly. And so I think the barriers for actors of color to be, you know, viewed in non traditional ways, and these roles continue. And so that's why we continue to do you know, assassins, or we did a production of *Mamma Mia*, a few years ago, and I did not think there was anything groundbreaking about doing *Mamma Mia*. And yet it was because the interesting thing about *Mamma Mia* that I was talking to a lot of folks about is, you know, I spent a lot of time in the UK while I was in grad school, and afterwards, and the reason I loved going to the UK as an artist was that as soon as I opened my mouth, the first thing that folks saw and heard was an American, right, I felt like I was viewed first as an American. And then next was as an Indian American versus in this country, what folks see first is usually your skin color. And so to me, the interesting thing about something like *Mamma Mia* is that we took an Asian family, and they went to Greece, and what is that experience for Americans to be in a foreign country, Americans of color, you know, it just is you're viewed in a different way. And so again, we didn't, you know, we didn't dwell on it a ton in the storytelling between dancing queen, but we, you know, I think those were some of the interesting questions that happen, as the world becomes, you know, you know, more global and smaller in those ways, I still think we often see things through a very narrow lens of being. And so, you know, that is something that still resonates as why we're doing more traditional you know, musicals. But to me, as we move forward, and I think folks need joy. They need a space for community and for also for grieving and for to deal with the loss that we've all felt that I don't think any of us has still properly been able to face or had the space to deal with. And then I think the other thing that is very exciting coming out of the pandemic is I think there is going to be a lot of focus on new work. And if for no other reason, then it's logistical in that now, you know, I think this hybrid model of



theater that oftentimes streams afterwards or during a run is there is here to stay. Which is great, because it's changing up the accessibility game. And so it's not necessarily always easy to get the rights to stream a Sondheim musical or anything like that. But for new works, you can, you know, you can negotiate that from the beginning, that we're going to do a run of this play. And then we're gonna allow it to have a two week or three week virtual run. And so I think in those ways, the producing new work is just going to afford you more flexibility, you know, particularly in the digital landscape.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 34:37**

That's a really exciting future that you've just outlined. I not only in terms of the streaming but in sort of, you know what I think is so you've just named why I find your career so exciting and why I find east west players so exciting is this conscious conversation around the intersectionality of people and you know, very clearly interpolating and investigating and excavating what is possible when we bring a wider conception of humanity onto the stage and let them inhabit pieces that did not necessarily do I mean, like I've never Snehal wanted to see *Mamma Mia*, in my life more than what you just described, because it activates that piece in ways that are really theatrically and socially engaging and exciting. So I'm excited by that I'm excited by a future where I get to watch the work virtually from over here on the East Coast. It's really enjoyable for me. We're coming close to the end of our time. And so you know, we have a few sort of more fun questions that we'd love to throw out to you and discover a little more about you. You know, you are very casually talking about Stephen Sondheim and you have worked with, you know, so many great artists. I am wondering, at this point in your career, if you have some artists on your bucket list that you're like, Gee, I would really love to work with them someday. Are there? Are there people you still haven't? You know, connected within that way that you dream of?

**Snehal Desai  
36:19**



Yes. Yes, you know, I think we all definitely do. And I think, you know, I love Simon McBurney, I love the work that his company does. And I love this company Deviate, and that they work they do. And then there's obviously, you know, performers, you know, like Audra McDonald, that we've all seen on stage and that, you know, to be in the room with them, it was interesting, because I actually, I think it was Audra and Brian Stokes Mitchell, they, I think I was helping out one of the Drama League awards, and they were there. They were gonna sing a song. And I was there in the rehearsal. And it was just a thing of, like, you just saw folks who just are at the top of their game and just, you know, are able to take any song, and then just in that moment, find what the heart of it is, you know, and express it in that two minute window or three minute window. You know, and then just flawless. Anyway, there's, there's, there's a million folks, I, you know, we really enjoyed working with David Henry Wong on *Soft Power*. So, you know, I look forward to what new works, he's developing down the line. Um, you know, the other thing that I like to focus on is that, you know, we don't talk a lot about intersectionality, in theatre, and that is, particularly the next, you know, frontier is that we still, you know, East West Players is viewed as an Asian American theatre, but we really, you know, seek to be a home for all artists of color. But where are the plays, where the Asian community and the black community are in conversation, you know, where are the plays, where the Asian community and the Native community are talking about our experiences in internment camps are being pushed to reservations. So you know, a lot of that we still are very siloed, and very segregated in the theater. And I think the frontier is, you know, not just in casting, but in storytelling, bringing folks of different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities into the same room and into dialogue is something that I hope, you know, changes in the next generation.

**Nilan 38:43**

I mean, Gabriel and I can go down a whole landslide, talking about intersectionality in the theater. Yeah. And we're getting close to the end. So I want to know, what advice would you give your younger self? And especially what advice would you give to younger artists of color,





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## Snehal Desai

39:03

Direct more comedies. You know, it's that thing of, you want to do the hard hitting, you know, I want all the work I do to have a social justice aspect, but you know, you can affect change through laughter as much as you can through tears. But also comedies, you know, they are their own beast, and there is a lot of life there. But for whatever reason, oftentimes, particularly emerging directors or young, early career directors, don't seek them out. And so I very much encourage I would myself in particular, to direct more comedies, they just didn't do it for a long time. Um, and then I think, to, there was a lot of time where, throughout my life I have been the outsider. I grew up in a very small town. town in Pennsylvania. And so I was, you know, not only the only Indian oftentimes, but only the only person of color in the room or in the even in the school building. And so I very much felt like the outsider there. And then as I grew older, I felt like the my sexual orientation added another layer of outsider status. And so, so much of my life then was about wanting or trying to fit in when I was young, and wanting to be accepted in those ways. But those are the things that outsider status, those experiences are what make you a really strong director, right to give you that eye. And to stand outside, you know, what is happening and to look at it. And so I think for me, I spent a lot of time trying to deny or ignore that aspect of myself. Versus really, really embracing it and celebrating this singular vision that each of us can each of us has based on our own life experiences. And then the other thing is just be patient. I think there's a lot of I need this, I need this. I'm you know, a lot of I would say it's self competitiveness, right? So our industry doesn't tend to be overall competitive, but within ourselves, and amongst our peers, we tend to be competitive, competitive in those ways. And it's just the timing is going to take the time it takes, you know, the journey is going to take the time it takes for you, which is going to be different for someone else. And you kind of just have to ride it out.

## Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 41:41

Very wise advice. Snehal Desai. Thank you so much for being here today. We really appreciate it. It was great to be with you.



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**Nilan 41:48**  
Absolutely. Thank you.

**Snehal Desai**  
41:49  
Thank you both for having me.

**Nilan 41:51**  
Thanks for listening to TA(L)KING DIRECTION.

**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 41:53**  
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**Nilan 41:57**  
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**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 42:03**  
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**Nilan 42:15**  
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**Gabriel Stelian-Shanks 42:23**



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Thanks for listening!