

00:00 Mike Karns

I was doing the last ship. It was not succeeding. In about two months. Or it closed on Broadway. Jeffrey came out of his office and he said, hey, I need you to start social media channels. I'm working on this new music called Hamilton set these channels up. This is the next one that we're going to work on.

As that show became, what it became was the same time when people started to realize that social media was more than just the thing that you underpay a young kid to do. And so here I am, like 25, 26 years old with this show. That was the biggest show of the last 20 plus years. And I was working in this area that suddenly was hot.

00:46 Ryan Newman

This is Dare to Disrupt, the podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman, and on the show today is Mike Arts. Mike is the founder and CEO of Marathon Digital, Broadway's premier social media agency. Marathon creates content and cultivates communities for some of Broadway's biggest shows, including Hamilton, Hadestown, The Outsiders and more.

Mike is a Tony Award winning Broadway producer and the co-founder of This season, a new producing and marketing company for Broadway shows. Mike graduated from Penn State in 2011 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and Stage Management and Lighting Design. In 2016, he received the volunteer of the Year Award from Penn State Alumni Association, and in 2017 he received the prestigious Alumni Achievement Award from the University.

Welcome, Mike to Dare disrupt. This is a first for us. You are the first guest we've had that's working in the Broadway theater world, and we want to thank you today for joining us. Yeah, thank you for having me. I'm so happy to be here. So, Mike, we'll start as we always do, which is at the beginning. Would you mind sharing with our listeners how you initially spent your formative years where you grew up?

02:01 Mike Karns

Yeah, absolutely. I'm from originally from Erie, Pennsylvania. I was born and raised there. I grew up doing shows at a place called the Erie Playhouse, which was a local community theater. And actually, it's like one of the most reputable community theaters in the country. I grew up working on doing shows. I was in shows as an actor.

I worked backstage sometimes, and as I got to about 10th grade, I realized that I didn't want to be an actor as my career, but I wanted to work in theater. And so at that time, I

thought that there you either worked on stage or you worked on the stage crew. And so that was sort of what informed where I decided to look and what I ended up going to school for.

02:38 Ryan Newman

Amazing. Now I have to ask, how do you think Erie ended up having one of the best theater production companies in the country?

02:44 Mike Karns

I think a huge amount of it is attributable to, a guy named David Matthews. David was one of the preeminent impresarios of community theater, and just happened to make Erie his home. And over the course of a 40 or 50 year tenure, grew it into a place that was consistently creating top level shows and nurturing young talent that went on to star on Broadway or work on Broadway.

03:14 Ryan Newman

And a lot of it is amazing. And, you know, also, Erie, I believe, is known for their their cold winters and their brutal amounts of snowfall. You get. So how do you, manage to pass the time and, and stay optimistic with all of that snow and, gray skies?

03:26 Mike Karns

Yeah, man, I love Erie, Pennsylvania. I rep two things from my past very hard. One is Penn State and the other is Erie. Erie, is it sucks for like six months of the year, it's tolerable for about two. And then for our unbelievably wonderful the summer in Erie, it's totally a beach town. So, you know, you deal with it. And snow. Snow has always been a part of my life. And so you just kind of, get used to it, you know?

03:52 Ryan Newman

And so you spent all this time doing theater and you enjoyed being an actor. What was it about being an actor that you enjoyed when you were in your in your teens and adolescent years?

04:01 Mike Karns

I like being the center of attention. I would say, like as far as being an actor, but what I really liked about theater and why I sort of decided that it was a thing that I wanted my life to be a part of was the community.

I was not super popular in like, middle school and high school growing up, and I had a, you know, a few friends, but it wasn't like I, I had big circles. And when I went and started doing shows at the Erie Playhouse, it was like I had a community of people that were misfits and eccentric and, you know, dramatic in the same ways that I was.

And we the idea of coming together with these people to make something was just something that I was deeply, deeply felt like it was a part of what I wanted my life to be and did.

04:46 Ryan Newman

The role of singing was that part of it? Was a lot of musicals, or was it more just mostly musicals?

04:51 Mike Karns

I was a musical guy, you know? I was, I was the lion in The Wizard of Oz, and I did like Ragtime and Footloose and a bunch of different shows, I think like 30 or 40 shows at the Erie Playhouse while I was growing up. So it was, you know, plays mostly musicals, but some plays as well.

05:08 Ryan Newman

So knowing how to hold a tune was obviously very important. And that's something that I presume came naturally to you.

05:13 Mike Karns

Yeah. For sure. I mean, I'm, you know, I'm not changing the world. That's why I didn't go to school for theater, because I'm like, I'm a fine singer. I'm not a great singer. But, yeah, I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed, If I still lived in Erie, I'd still do shows that the Erie Playhouse and act on stage.

05:26 Ryan Newman

Amazing. And this whole idea of being a fine singer, but not a great singer, to use your words. Was that something that you discovered over time? Was that something that was a struggle at all, or you just sort of accepted it and and was continue to move along?

05:37 Mike Karns

No, I never bothered me. I, I mostly knew that when I started to understand that the life of an actor was a lot of auditioning and doing those things, that wasn't the life style that I

wanted to have. And so I think that that was as much of a driver as, like, I'm not talented enough. It was just like, that wasn't the I didn't want a career that was just like auditioning all the time and the rejection of it and all of that, sort of coupled with it.

06:03 Ryan Newman

and so you, you wrap up your time in Erie, you're thinking about college. How did you find your way to Penn State? And I assume that the snow was not an issue for you?

06:12 Mike Karns

No, I was not deterred by the weather at all. I was really, like, seriously eyeing two schools. Suny purchase was one of them, and Penn State was the other. I went to tour Suny purchase with my parents. Obviously, it's a 40 minute train ride into New York, so that was something that was very appealing to me. And then I went to Penn State and I sat in their playhouse or big theater and watched a production of parade, which has since become one of my favorite musicals ever. And I was just blown away by the production that they had put on and the quality of the work that they were doing.

And then what what really sold it to me was that the stage managers that were, you know, students at the time, I was a senior and in high school invited me to an ugly Christmas sweater party that was happening the night that I went to tour. And my parents were, you know, super supportive, like, go have fun. And like that. It was like I realized that that was the type of college experience that I also was looking to have. In addition to the theatrical pursuits that I was interested in.

07:13 Ryan Newman

Amazing. So you're you decide that Penn State's the right place for you. You have this amazing experience when you're visiting now. You stepped foot on campus as a freshman. What are you thinking? What do you get involved in? How did it kind of grow from there in terms of your interests?

07:25 Mike Karns

Yeah, the thing I always tell people that I loved most about Penn State was that I had the benefit of both going to a small conservatory style school, which was the School of Theater. You know, it's like 250 kids in that program and specialized, individualized learning, you know, a community of people that are all very actively and passionately working toward the same goal.

And I would go back to the East dorms with my roommates who'd never been to a Broadway show, knew nothing about theater, and I was able to just have, like, the college kid experience. And so I think that that was like the thing that I was always most attracted to or most interested in at my time at Penn State, as I both got big fish, small pond of the School of theater, and also tiny fish, massive pond in the university.

08:13 Ryan Newman

So the anonymity of it all, the ability to kind of be the star, but then kind of absorb yourself back into the masses, really kind of appealed and gave you maybe the additional release valve to not feel the pressure of always being on stage and having the center of attention.

08:27 Mike Karns

That's exactly right. Yeah. For sure.

08:29 Ryan Newman

So you're you're at Penn State, you're thinking about what you want to major in, what you want to do with your career and what sort of post-college. How did you evolve in your thinking around all of that?

08:39 Mike Karns

Yeah. So when I decided I didn't want to be an actor and started to look at schools, I thought, you know, if you weren't on stage, you work backstage. And so I was fully unaware of the other sort of career paths and job opportunities that were available in the theater.

And so I went to school at Penn State for stage management and lighting design. I was the first person to double major in the management side of things, and a design tech major. And the combination of both the managerial learning and the artistic evolution was like sort of what informed a lot of my work after school. But while I was in school, that was where I started to learn that there were all these other jobs out there through various experiences that I had.

09:19 Ryan Newman

And, when you learned about this, other experiences through various jobs, what were some of the early internships or ways that you differentiated or career learning outside of the classroom while at Penn State?

09:28 Mike Karns

Yeah, my first internship was the summer after my freshman year of college. I was hired by a guy who also had grown up at the Erie Playhouse doing shows and was a talent agent for

Broadway actors. So I went and interned at that company for the summer, realized that it was not close enough to the actual making of the show. For me, it was sort of two degrees removed and so that was very informative. Oh, there's all of these other jobs out there, and this isn't the exact sort of career path that I want to go on.

I got a grant from Penn State after my sophomore year to interview Broadway directors about their pedagogy and their approach to the art, and coming out of that, I was like, this is cool, but it's kind of like the acting thing where I got to convince people to give me jobs, and it's very artistic, and I have more business interests than that.

And then I worked at a general management office, which, general manager is basically like the CFO of a Broadway show. And so I got to really learn, like the budgets and numbers and things like that. And that was where I started to say, okay, I really like the budgets. I really like numbers. I like the business element of theater. And I need to find something that will satisfy my artistic interests and passions in equal measure.

10:43 Ryan Newman

So it sounds like you really use the network from Erie, the Community Playhouse, and the. Well, it's well known to really catapult yourself into the New York scene. You know, one of the big challenges with New York is one the network in terms of breaking in.

And then secondly, the tremendous cost involved. How did you manage those things and navigate your way through, and how was your adjustment to living in the big city?

11:03 Mike Karns

Yeah, for sure. The networking thing is, what I say is my greatest superpower. It's the thing that has been more beneficial to me than any soft or hard other skill that I possess.

That has been a game changer or sort of in the journey that I've gone on. I leveraged that to get a bunch of sort of night owl jobs while I was doing those internships. So I was a bartender at Broadway shows for a while, and I was doing some, like, side hustle work for different real estate agents and stuff in New York.

But just like, you know, I, I went and sublet a room for three months, and I admittedly have had an immense amount of support from my parents. They were both teachers, and I didn't come from great wealth, but I did have an amazing benefit of two very supportive parents who wanted to help me realize these dreams. So I'd be lying if I say I didn't have didn't have a support system behind me, but I did bartend on Broadway.

11:56 Ryan Newman

That's amazing, which is really like a crush of people for a very concentrated period of time. And then the equal amount of stress to get them all back in their seats on time. How did you manage that stress? Being a bartender at a theater company is not is no joke, and very different than working in a traditional restaurant.

12:12 Mike Karns

Yeah for sure. Most of the drinks are easy, so it was like I was pouring mostly rum and Coke. I wasn't making any margaritas for people. That was a that was out of my scope of work. And the thing that was cool was I got to watch all these shows. So after you're done bartending until intermission, you just have to stand around. And so I would go and I would sit. I would watch the Broadway shows night after night. It was a cool first experience in the city, for sure.

12:33 Ryan Newman

Very cool. So now you've had this amazing background of internships. It's time to think about getting a full time job after graduation. How hard was that and where did you initially start?

12:43 Mike Karns

Yeah, I actually continued to do unpaid or underpaid work for the first eight months or so. I immediately after graduating, I went and worked for the summer at the Santa Fe Opera, which was an amazing experience. Ultimately not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. It was like the cool summer gig. And then I moved to the city.

I got an internship at the Public Theater. I also started working as a P.A. on this Off-Broadway show that was at another nonprofit theater company. By the time I graduated, I had decided that producing was the thing. That was where I wanted my long term trajectory to go and so that was the thing I was chasing after. I was trying to find jobs that would allow me to either work with a producer or learn skills that would help me to produce.

I actually got turned down for a job at the public that I was really excited for. It was in development, like fundraising for the organization, and so I took this job as an assistant, part time assistant to these two guys that were producing this Broadway bound show. That was the sort of biggest trajectory change in my journey.

13:48 Ryan Newman

And so can you elaborate on that?

13:50 Mike Karns

Yeah. So I went and worked for these guys. I was a part time assistant. They were producing this show called allegiance, which was about the Japanese-American internment during World War Two. And it starred this guy named George Takei, who's the original Sulu from Star Trek. And as part of the producing of this show, they had started social media channels for George.

I had taken a Photoshop class at Penn State because it was at 1115 on Fridays, and it meant I could sleep in, and it ended up being this wildly marketable tool that I had in my toolkit. And so I've worked for these guys, and as part of producing the show, I helped them run all of his social media channels.

The show was unsuccessful, but his social media channels exploded. I mean, there was a time when he was one of the biggest personalities on Facebook, back when like that was the platform where everybody was, and that was where I learned about social media and digital marketing and really cut my teeth doing that, which led to the future trajectory that I've then gone on.

14:44 Ryan Newman

Amazing. So you have this experience and can you talk about some of the plays you supported? And you mentioned that the one play that wasn't as successful, but how did it springboard from there in terms of other shows?

14:55 Mike Karns

Yeah. So I worked for them for like a year and a half. I left that job and I was doing other like odd jobs for people. I've worked on selling ads for this Broadway producers websites that he owned, and I did some other social media type stuff for some Off-Broadway folks. And then I had an informational interview, with a guy named Jeffrey Seller. Jeffrey is the producer of Rent and Avenue Q and In the Heights, and one of the most prolific producers of the last 30 years.

I met with him to pick his brain about producing and what my path could be, and how I could figure out a career in that realm. And his biggest advice to me was like, you got to find some way to make some money because you're not going to make any money producing. He was like, you'll make a killing, but not a living is sort of the philosophy.

And so I mentioned in that conversation that I had this background in social media and that I was doing it for some Off-Broadway clients and stuff like that, and it serendipitously

happened to be the same day that he had a meeting with the advertising agency that he was working with. They showed him like ten Instagram slides. This is like 2013.

I mean, it's like Instagram was baby, baby brand new. Facebook was caring. It was pre algorithm like early, early social media days for sure. He didn't like build ten Instagram slides. They showed him and he was like why am I paying you all this money to do this. I should just find some kid to come and run these channels.

And so his assistant called me the next day and was like, do you want to run this social media for this Broadway show? It was called The Last Ship. Sting wrote the music for it, and I was 24, working out of my backpack, no clue what I was doing and no actual expertise in social media. Just had been fumbling around in it for 18 months. And so I was like, yeah, sure. Absolutely. That was sort of the beginning of Marathon Digital, which was my first business in doing social media.

16:42 Ryan Newman

Incredible. And what's really interesting is that you, you really tactfully had what you refer to as an informational interview with Jeffrey Sellers. It wasn't like you went in asking for something other than just advice and perspective.

And so I suspect that you would agree that by having that nonthreatening approach where you're not really there to try to take something, but rather just to try to learn, that really ended up being a springboard that allowed you to then be viewed as a potential asset down the road in a way that you couldn't have possibly fathomed.

How did you how did you triangulate your way to him initially? And was it just as simple as saying, I'd love to come and meet with you? Because there are a lot of people that say that are really successful, that when somebody messages them and says, you know, I want to pick your brain, they feel like that's just a waste of time meeting. And they kind of don't typically take it.

17:27 Mike Karns

Yeah, it's a really good question. I got the meeting with him because I had done a show in Kansas City just prior. I worked as like a part time associate to the producer and the video designer, the projection designer for the show was his husband, and so I became good friends with him.

His name is Josh. On the way back, he knew that I didn't have a job and that I was just kind of figuring it out and uncertain what I wanted to do. And he was like, you should just meet Jeffrey and pick his brain. And so I think that that, like the the principle that I try to impart on

my students in this class that I teach now for Penn State is that all of those are opportunities.

Every meeting is an opportunity. Every connection that you make is a conduit to another connection that you'll be able to capitalize on. And the biggest thing that you said, Ryan, that I hit home in a major way is trying to do those meetings. When you're not asking for something is the differentiator. You're going in and explicitly saying to people, I still do this now where I say, listen, I'm not trying to sell you anything.

I'm not looking to get anything from you, I just am. I am fascinated by your career and what you've built, and I would love the opportunity to be able to talk with you. That to me is like I have by leveraging connection to get to the next connection, by when I meet somebody and I've connected with them on LinkedIn, going and seeing are they connected to anybody that I would be interested in trying to connect with now that I've made a good connection there, like all of that is the game.

18:58 Ryan Newman

Amazing. And what's really so incredible about that? Mike, is that that's applicable to any industry and anyone looking to try to level up in terms of their network. And so really incredible insightful advice there. So you're you're doing the social media gig, you're working with Jeffrey Sellers. There's also an experience with one of the biggest and most successful plays of all time.

I'm not sure if that happened at Marathon Digital before Marathon Digital. It's one word. It begins with an H, and just by saying that, my guess is every one of our listeners knows what we're talking about. Can you talk about the the big elephant in the room?

19:30 Mike Karns

Yeah for sure. So that is what made marathon. I was doing the last shift.

It was not succeeding. It was just a it wasn't a commercially successful show. And about two months before it closed on Broadway, Jeffrey came out of his office and he said, hey, I need you to start social media channels. I'm working on this new musical. It's called Hamilton. It's premiering downtown at the Public Theater. Set these channels up and we're going to this is the next one that we're going to work on.

When I interned at the public, I mentioned that I was one of the first things I did when I moved to the city. I had gotten my hands on a copy of the mixtape that when he made the demos that he had put together, I was a massive fan of In the Heights. I thought that the

introduction of hip hop as a musical genre in the space of Broadway was crazy overdue, and I felt like he was the first person to do it.

So I knew what Hamilton I knew that there was a mixtape. I had listened to the mixtape I had heard, like, these, these songs are game changing, and so I started all of those accounts. I started running them while it was at the Public Theater, and then as it transitioned to Broadway, as that show became, what it became was the same time when people started to realize that social media was more than just the thing that you underpay a young kid to do.

And so here I am, like 25, 26 years old with this show. That was the biggest show of the last, you know, 20 plus years. And I was working in this area that suddenly was hot. And so it was just like a lot of, again, serendipity and capitalizing on the opportunities that come about. But that show becoming what it became when social media became a valuable piece of the marketing puzzle, is what built my company. Suddenly everybody wanted to work with the guy that did the Hamilton social media.

21:16 Ryan Newman

Amazing. What a classic example of the definition of luck, right? Preparation, meeting opportunity. And so you find yourself now at the river delta of Broadway, social media, maybe even without an aura. Mike, because you're just trying to figure out which ways up did you at that point have the company Marathon Digital? Was it formed or were you literally just like, moving so fast? You were just like, didn't even have a structure as to how you're capturing all the revenue related to the work you were doing on the social media for Hamilton.

21:45 Mike Karns

Yeah, it's a really good question. I set it up as as Hamilton was moving to Broadway. I look back now and there were there were multiple like moments in my young life that I realized I was entrepreneurial, but my parents were, you know, unionized teachers and a principal.

And like, they worked the company, they did their time, they got their retirement. Like the idea of starting a business was not something that I was planning on. I just was chasing a paycheck until that was done and then went to chase the next paycheck. As Hamilton was coming up town, people started to call and I was like, oh, like, this seems like a thing that I can make into something.

And so that was the point at which and I messed it up, too. I set myself up as, I thought, you know, I can figure this out. I googled a bunch, and I set myself up as an S corp, not realizing that in New York City get double taxed. And I made all the sort of, you know, the young entrepreneur mistakes that if I just was not dumb and hired an accountant, I would have been able to avoid, but got it all figured out.

And just like that was it. You know, I was just sort of we were taking on as much work as I could accommodate was coming in the door. I wasn't doing any business development. It was just like the heat of Hamilton. In its first six years was enough that everybody was interested in collaborating with us. That was the fun thing is, it wasn't like the early days was less managing crises. And, you know, are we going to make payroll and more just like, how do we want to grow this thing? That's very clearly a valuable tool that people are interested in paying for.

23:16 Ryan Newman

Interesting. And so from that standpoint, as it relates specifically to the business side, by the way, classic example of building the plane as you're flying. Exactly.

With the revenue coming in, did you have to renegotiate all of your contract agreements? I mean, did you have to go to Jeffrey and say, listen, you're no longer pay me as my cards anymore. You're going to pay me as marathon digital or I mean that. And were you nervous at all about that? And did you have to renegotiate compensation or pricing terms as well, or were you able to kind of just let that flow as relates to the business?

23:48 Mike Karns

Yeah, no, it was pretty smooth. All of these people that are producers are inherently entrepreneurial in their own right. A Broadway show operates like a startup business. You create an entity, you design and and create a product. You put the product out to market and you advertise and market it and try to sell as many of the product as you can.

And if you can sell it, you keep selling it and you can't close the business. That's how Broadway works, too. It's just it's exactly the same. And so the entrepreneurial spirit of The Producers is like, everybody was stoked when I said, hey, like, I'm going to start running this through an LLC now rather than you just pay me directly.

There was no sort of issue with that. The navigation of pay and how to do that and everything just sort of came with it. I was so happy to just to be having all these new clients that like asking for more money from Hamilton wasn't a thing that I needed to do. I was

able to build the plane without needing to sort of cross some of those things. That would have been 2 or 2 or 3 or 2 level challenge at that point.

24:45 Ryan Newman

Amazing. You're growing this business, which is which seems like you really caught lightning in a bottle and you're thinking about growing and scaling the business. Did you miss not being more involved in theater at all? It directly other than on the business side, and if so, how did you start to kind of scratch that itch?

25:06 Mike Karns

No, that was the thing that I love the most because it was just when it was just me early on, like I was the guy when they did the original cast album of Hamilton, they were like, hey, we need somebody to come and take some photos and video. And so I went to do that, and we went to the white House and the company of Hamilton performed, and we launched our education initiative, and it was like, okay, we need somebody to come and take photo and video.

And so I was the guy that got to tag along with this. This was it was all the access that I wanted. And what I started to realize was that, like, the role of the marketing team is to understand and digest what the artists on stage and behind the scenes are creating, and then figure out how to go about conveying that story, the story of the show itself, and the story around the creation of the show to audiences to get them to want to buy a ticket.

I have continued to find great fulfillment out of the not right in it, but right like helping to build around it.

25:57 Ryan Newman

Amazing. And I and I love just the juxtaposition of my cards, the bartender slipping into the back of the theater in the middle of the production to watch from the back to my and the accompaniment of Hamilton at the white House to, and by the way, that white House video when Lin-Manuel Miranda and the team performed in front of Barack Obama and the white House is one of the most iconic videos in terms of production, and to know that you actually produce this...

26:26 Mike Karns

I was in the front row. It's like ten seats down from Barack Obama. I mean, the the life experiences, the amazing blessings that I have received as a result of working on this thing is just like it immeasurable.

26:38 Ryan Newman

Incredible. So you have this business, you have Marathon Digital, but you also have other business interests as well. And you've you found other ways to to express your your business interests with respect to Broadway. Can you talk about some of those other interests?

26:51 Mike Karns

Yeah, totally. So producing even when I started the company, I still wanted to be a producer. I have always the producers, the CEO of the company. I like to be the boss. It is artistic, it is business. It is bringing all of the pieces together. That is the thing that always has been like the North Star for me, as far as where I wanted my career to go. I did a handful of shows while I was building the social media business as what's called a co-producer, which is essentially like a money bundler.

So a lead producer, the CEO of the company goes and finds people that will help them raise money for the show. And in exchange for that, you get billing, which means, like your name gets listed on the playbill above. The title. And if the show wins a Tony Award, you win a Tony Award. So I did that.

I won 5 or 6 shows over the course of the ten years that I was growing the social media business, and then really felt as though I'd gotten to a place where I was ready to be the person running the ship. I had sat in ten years of marketing meetings, learning from the most seasoned to the most green producers and taking, you know, the notes of what I wanted to do and didn't want to do about two years ago with a guy that was a former marketing exact similar to me at one of the ad agencies on Broadway, we started a company called The Season with the intention of lead producing shows, developing new work, and overseeing and leading the marketing efforts that these shows are going on. So that that has been like the shift of my focus over the course of the last couple years.

28:23 Ryan Newman

And so is Marathon Digital still doing just straight social media and that's a sort of a standalone, separate operating company, distinct from the seasons basically.

28:31 Mike Karns

That's correct. Yeah.

Marathon was this when you produce a Broadway show in former times, you would go to one company and you would say, hey, you're going to be my ad agency on the show, you're going to do a website, you're in a place to put the billboards up, you're going to do the

social media. When I came in, it was like, oh, here's this specialist specialist as a 24 year old kid, just faking it.

28:52:13 - 29:13:04

Mike Karns

But, here's this specialist that's coming in and just focused on one area of the puzzle, and we found that that was a great differentiator for us where we're not thinking about 30 different things. We're just thinking about your social and digital strategy. Marathon has and continues to just do that. We just create content and cultivate communities around the shows that we work on.

And then I have like as part of the season, have built some of these other bespoke services, influencers and website and email marketing. And the key develop and all that sort of pieces of this new business to help us on both on our own shows as well as to work with other clients and on your own shows as a co-producer.

29:32 Ryan Newman

I mean, that's no small thing, by the way, you mentioned that you were just this 24 year old kid faking it might come on, you were acting. That's it, that's it. I just carried the acting skills through. Right. But can you talk more about this idea of the co-production and the fact and you, you also, by the way, just, like, casually slipped in there that you've worked on shows that had Tonys.

Can you just sort of elaborate a little more on that co-production and that experience and some of the shows you've worked on?

29:57 Mike Karns

Yeah, absolutely. So there's like two echelons of of producer, there's the lead producers, which are called the general partners on shows, and they are the CEOs. They're fiduciary, responsible for the entity. They make all final decisions.

They are the ones that are doing all of the pieces of that leadership. The co-producers are these folks that come in, they help raise money. A typical Broadway show costs anywhere nowadays from 15 to \$30 million. And so these producers will say, hey, if you help me raise some money for this show and it becomes successful, I'll give you a little bit of my profits as a result of that.

And so that's what I did on a few shows. I would go and try to find money and find investors that would come into these shows. And then as a result of doing that, I didn't have any sort of managerial or decision making power. But my name is listed above the title. And one of the shows that I did this for is a show called Hades Town.

Hades Town won the Tony Award in 2019 for Best Musical, and so I am technically a Tony Award winning Broadway producer, even though, like anybody that actually works on Broadway knows that until you're like a lead producer of a show that wins a Tony, it's not it's not the same thing. But I have the Tchotchke.

31:08 Ryan Newman

Do you have, the tchotchke, meaning the beautiful statuettes.

Mike Karns

Tony somewhere. Yeah, I have the. Yeah, I have the award in my office.

Ryan Newman

Amazing, Mike. And so, do you have an aspiration to be a lead producer on a Broadway show? Is that.

31:21 Mike Karns

Yeah. So I actually did. I actually did do that this past spring, as I had been talking to a friend of mine about producing a show on Broadway called The Last Five Years.

That's this two hander musical written by this guy named Jason Robert Brown. As I was starting the new company, he came back and said, my my friend came back and said he was, listen, I have the rights to this show. We have one of the Jonas Brothers that's interested in doing this. Do you want to produce this show with me? So that was actually my first, like, lead producing role on Broadway. The goal is to lead, produce and develop new work that we can put on Broadway.

31:52 Ryan Newman

Amazing. So with with your hand in all the tail of all these different items, when you look to the future, what do you see as the opportunity? And I do have to ask, how have you started to contemplate the AI threat in terms of original content design and production?

32:06 Mike Karns

I think that the thing that I'm excited by is that I am approaching producing with the mind of a marketer that spent the last ten years learning from the successes and failures of how to build a brand and cultivate a community around your show. I think that that is like the thing that I'm most bullish about is just that the expertise that we bring to the table is something that isn't always on the producer side of the table, and so we can add that value in the work that we're doing.

And listen to I think it's like it's not going away. And so for us, we have more aggressively just because the company is more long established at marathon, have started to say, okay, what are the ways that we're not shying away, but using these tools to aid in efficiencies for us or productivity of things that we're doing, while also acknowledging that, like if we ever used AI to create a piece of art, not only would the audience vilify us for doing so, but I would have 2 or 3 people on my team that would quit immediately.

There is a point at which that will become an unavoidable conversation, but for the time being, we are trying to acknowledge the value beyond the front side of the evolution of how we're using it, and focusing those efforts on things that improve efficiencies or data gathering, or how we're, like fulfilling the processes of the company.

33:30 Ryan Newman

Well, we're now going to go into our rapid fire segment of the show.

Mike, what will happen is I'll ask you a few questions and you'll just tell me the first thing that comes to mind in a sentence or less. Okay. What is the first thing you do in the morning?

The first thing that I do in the morning is get my kids up and get my daughter off to school.

What is your go to productivity tool or app?

33:51 Mike Karns

I would say that slack is probably the most frequent app that I use for communication with the various teams, and it organizes people. So probably slack.

Ryan Newman

What is your favorite thing about Penn State?

Mike Karns

My favorite thing about Penn State is that everywhere you go, there are people from your community and they want to support what you are doing and help you achieve the things that you want to achieve.

34:16 Ryan Newman

What is your favorite Broadway show?

Mike Karns

My favorite Broadway show originally when I was growing up was wicked, and I would now say that most likely it's a split between Hadestown and Hamilton. My wife is in Hadestown and I was a producer of it, and Hamilton is Hamilton.

Ryan Newman

What is the best advice you've ever received?

Mike Karns

The best advice that I ever received, probably Jeffrey Seller telling me that you can't make money as a producer, and that there had to be some other way that I would contribute to the creation of shows on Broadway.

34:50 Ryan Newman

What is your superpower as a founder?

Mike Karns

My superpower as a founder is networking always above everything else. And my superpower in all other areas of business is networking.

Ryan Newman

What's one myth about launching a startup that you think needs to be debunked?

Mike Karns

One myth about having a startup that needs to be debunked is that you can't be a layman and figure it out.

I believe that there are tools and people and things to help you. If you have a good business idea to see that come to fruition.

Ryan Newman

What's your favorite way to unwind after a long day? My favorite way to unwind after a long day.

Mike Karns

Spend time with my kids. I would say not necessarily unwinding, though, which is why I laughed, not unwinding, but, recentering.

Ryan Newman

Well said. If you weren't working in theater production and social media, what would you be doing?

35:44 Mike Karns

If I wasn't working in theater production and social media, I would be teaching.

Ryan Newman

What does disruption mean to you?

Mike Karns

Disruption to me, means questioning the way things are done, while acknowledging that sometimes there are reasons for that and still pushing to see if evolution is possible.

36:05 Ryan Newman

Thank you, Mike, for taking the time today to share your entrepreneurial journey with me.

Now, I'd like to hand things over to a current Penn State student, Teagan J. Boyd. Teagan is a third year BFA acting student at Penn State. She was recently in the Center Stage production of rhinoceros and is currently in rehearsal for The Glass Menagerie. She is honored to be a member of the Presidential Leadership Academy, and looks forward to continuing her exploration of acting, writing, artistry, and leadership. Teagan, I'll now hand the interview over to you.

36:35 Teagan Jai Boyd

Great. Thank you so much, Ryan. And hello, Mike. I have so many questions. The first one I'll start off with is that it seems that community seems to be a highlighted value of yours. I'm curious because community is very important to me. How do you build a culture of community and collaboration within your companies in various productions?

36:57 Mike Karns

Great question Teagan. Really good question. I believe that company culture is largely determined from the top down, and I believe that it is your obligation as a founder and a

leader of the company, whether you're the actual founder or you're just a managerial role within the company, to behave and put out the type of energy and interaction that you want the company culture to have.

I enjoy having a good time. I make sure that everybody else, even when we're stressed and busy, is also having a good time. I think that that differentiator is what makes people enjoy coming to work every day, even when it's stressful.

37:35 Teagan Jai Boyd

Awesome. That kind of leads into another question about stress. I experience a lot of burnout when I'm trying to juggle classes and the social life. And if I'm in a show, how do you refuel and how do you keep everything, in order?

37:49 Mike Karns

I enjoy the ability to switch my hands frequently. I like that the minute that I'm starting to feel bored with a social media thing that I'm working on, or a client that I'm frustrated with, I can say I'm going to just take a half an hour and not deal with this, and I'm going to put on a different hat and go deal with something else, or my producing work, or one of these new fledgling businesses that I've started.

I like that it's not the same or that I can switch it up as I'm doing it. Navigating the stress is always just a personal thing is like, how do you. The biggest thing that having kids did for me was realizing that none of this actually matters. And while I love Broadway and it defined my life and has defined sort of my journey, that it actually is just putting on plays and it's wonderful and obviously art is an important and vital thing in culture. But also, I don't need to live and die on what happens in this moment. And so I think that that that level of realism is helpful.

38:46 Teagan Jai Boyd

Nice. So what is the most difficult decision or difficulty that you've had in your career so far, and what helped you overcome it?

38:55 Mike Karns

I would say that in the early years of building my company, the first four years, probably I was in growth mode, and so I was out taking as many clients as I could and adding new employees to my full time roster, and I got to the end of 2019, ironically, like a few months before that, the pandemic.

And I realized that I had way more people than I wanted to be responsible for and was working on things as a result of that that I didn't want to be working on. The tough decision that I made was that we greatly reduced the capacity, the employee numbers at the company, so that we were able to be right sized, I suppose, which is very difficult. It's like the idea of having to let a few folks go and, and sort of just restructure the organization was challenging, but ultimately was like very worthwhile because then we didn't have to sort of stretch beyond our comfort zone.

39:59 Teagan Jai Boyd

So when I think about my future as an artist, a lot of the time I feel very uncertain. Did you ever feel uncertain about where you'd end up, and if so, how did you find certainty in the uncertainty?

40:10 Mike Karns

Teagan. I felt uncertain last week. I'm 36 years old. I've been doing this thing for like 14, 13, 14 years now. And it's like, I still have crazy imposter syndrome, especially with this new stuff that I'm doing. I constantly question and in moments of great stress, like, am I doing the right thing here? Is this the right path?

I think that the biggest thing for me, and what I try to impart on the students in my class, is you don't have to have it figured out right now. You have so much time that you it's like I felt a lot when I graduated from school. Like, I need to know what my trajectory is going to be.

I need to get that first job. That first job has to be in the path that I'm going to go. And it turns out I did like four jobs after I graduated, none of which were things that I ended up that I like now look back would have wanted to do. And it's okay. It's like it's okay to try something and it's okay to not like it.

And you could go 3 or 4 years in a career path and decide, I don't really like doing this and make a change. And you still would be a decade younger than I am and still able to have so much time. I think that that's like the biggest, again, the biggest thing I try to stress to young people is you don't have to have it figured out. And sometimes just taking the job that will be a step in the general right direction is a worthwhile thing for a young person to do.

41:31 Teagan Jai Boyd

Nice. I've heard a lot from people that I respect and professors in my life, talking about patience and learning how to be patient and like, wait for the right moment. Do you do you experience a lot of need for patience in your life?

41:46 Mike Karns

Definitely. I have significantly more patience than I used to when I was young. I wanted everything to happen immediately. Once I decided that I was going to go on a path, I wanted it to come to fruition right away. And now I would say that I am more willing to accept the pace of reality than I used to be.

42:05 Teagan Jai Boyd

Do you know when that switch was made in your mindset?

42:09 Mike Karns

No, I don't know. Honestly. I think that just like trial and error, like over the course of time, I think that probably it started with being less stressed or less impatient about things in a specific area, like producing was like I wanted. When I decided I was going to produce, I was like, I want to produce now.

And then once I started to actually understand the business and all the complexities that I didn't know and all of the things that I still had to like, learn or relationships I needed, that was that was when I started to build more patience with like, okay, like, this is going to be a road, I gotta build it. I think it was a progressive thing more than like a oh an situation.

42:47 Teagan Jai Boyd

Awesome. So it takes time. Takes time. So how do you give audiences an incentive to visit Broadway or live theater in general, in a time that online media is tends to be more accessible? This is it. This is the whole game is like when I have Netflix and I can stay at home and it's 399. What's my reason that I want to come out and I want to spend 150 bucks, probably \$300 for two tickets class, like dinner and transportation and all of that stuff to go and see a Broadway show.

And the answer is that we have to make the thing enough of an event that it's worth going to. Right? It's like, who's your favorite artist again? Who do you listen to? Like what kind of

music? Billie Eilish, Billie Eilish so Billy's Communist State College, you find out, it's like you're gonna be like, oh, I got to go.

I got to go see this, and you're going to come up with the money necessary to be able to get a ticket to that. And so it's our obligation to create an event and create something that is exciting enough that when you're coming to New York City for your holiday break or whatever, you're like, yes, I gotta. I've been saving up my money.

I got to go see this thing. And if we're not successful in doing that, the show won't succeed. So that's all of it to me.

43:56 Teagan Jai Boyd

Do you think that community also plays a big aspect in that.

44:00 Mike Karns

I think that it does. But I think that like I'm working on this new version of cats that's called the Jellicle ball.

And it takes place in ballroom culture like walking the runway. That community, the gay black queer community, is a community that has passionately embraced this show. And yet they need to sell like 10,000 tickets a week in this 1200 seat theater, eight hours a week. It's like you need to sell 10,000 tickets to this show. And so community absolutely is invaluable with building an early audience and getting early visibility.

And you can see that in a lot of the work. Like if you go to the Jellicle Balls Instagram account, you can see we've done the work to lean into that community, and you have to widen your aperture to get like my mom to come and see the show as well. And so both of those things are requirements and obligations of the the producer and the marketing team.

44:59 Teagan Jai Boyd

Yeah, I can see how that can be difficult process to find that balance of finding the community, but also wanting to invite people outside of that community. My last question is, did your time at Penn State influence your drive to become a leader, and did it give you the tools to become one in the field you're in now, or did you get most of your skills from hands on, real out in the world activities?

45:24 Mike Karns

No. I gained an immense amount from Penn State and I know that Ryan gave in your intro. You just got done doing a show you're about to do another show is like, those are all real world work opportunities. When I first started the social media company, I'd always laughed at people like, oh, you know, I didn't. I didn't end up doing at all what I went to school to study.

I was a stage management and lighting design major. It's like not marketing. There's no marketing in that. But what I have now come to realize is that I learned so many skills at Penn State, and in that program that informed my ability to do those things. Like stage managers are great at time management and organizational management and people management.

My ability to interact with people, my my networking was all that was all things that I grew and developed at Penn State. And so I think that that's my other thing is just because I this class that I teach is in arts administration, and we have people that are not theater majors, but they're theater minors. And so they come to the class and it's like the most important thing is that just because you don't study that exact thing at school does not mean that you can't say, this is what I want to do with my career, and it's a matter of figuring out what are the transferable skills that I can take from what I'm

learning, or what I have the opportunity to learn. If you decide that your junior year I'm going to go into this thing that's totally different. It's like, great, you have a whole year to take all these weird classes that can. I wish I had taken an accounting class when I was in college, because it would have helped me be better at this work that I've done that I think is the biggest opportunity is just not being hemmed in by, oh, well, I was an engineering major, so I got to go get an engineering job.

It's like, no, go get a job or go get whatever job at. That's the thing that you want to do. Just be able to network and sell yourself based on the transferable skills that apply to the job that you're trying to get.

47:07 Teagan Jai Boyd

Incredible. Thank you. So much for your time, Mike. Those those are all my questions.

47:15 Ryan Newman

That was Mike Collins, founder and CEO of Marathon Digital.

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