

THE HAMILCAST

EPISODE 320 JULIUS THOMAS III PART 1 TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Hi. I'm stage and stage's Lin-Manuel Miranda and you're listening to The Hamilcast.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:18] Hello everyone. Welcome back to the Hamilcast. I'm Gillian. Today I am joined by Julius Thomas the third of the And Peggy tour. Hello, Julius.

Julius Thomas III [00:00:27] Good morning.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:28] I never ask people to sing, so the fact that you just threw it out there. Hi. Good morning.

Julius Thomas III [00:00:34] Let's just start on a strong party. Let's just start strong.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:38] Before we go any further, can you please tell me your pronouns?

Julius Thomas III [00:00:42] He him.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:43] Wonderful.

Julius Thomas III [00:00:43] I'm. But I'm for any. As long as you approach me respectfully, I'm good with whatever you call me.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:48] You got it. That's not a problem here on the show. So you have I'm going to read some of your credits. I'm sorry if that's going to make you uncomfortable. Sometimes it does

Julius Thomas III [00:00:56] No, I love it.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:00:57] You're NAACP Theater Award nominated actor. You are one half of the critically acclaimed entertainment team, The Kings of Soul and Swing, which we're totally going to get into. You made your Broadway debut in The Scottsboro Boys, and you were in the 2012 revival of Porgy and Bess, Berry Gordy and Motown TV appearances, Modern Family, Sesame Street, a just you're all over the place. You just have like a ton of theater credits four Broadway shows, six national tours, a host of regional theater appearances.

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You're a teacher and you are currently Alexander Hamilton on the And Peggy tour.

Julius Thomas III [00:01:29] It's so crazy. I mean, I love to go back and read it just to remind myself where I've come from, how hard I've been working over all of these years and see the fruits of my labor. Acting is such a weird job and we get so insular and feel like I'm not achieving enough because we see everybody else winning Oscars and, you know, doing all kinds of stuff. But I have been really blessed in my career and in my life, and so whenever somebody reads out the stuff like that, I'm like, Wait, that's me. Wow. Yeah. Thank God

Gillian Pensavalle [00:02:01] Well, thank you so much for being here today. You're in Denver.

Julius Thomas III [00:02:05] You said I'm in Denver. Yeah, my first time playing Denver.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:02:09] How do you like it?

Julius Thomas III [00:02:09] It's beautiful. I mean, I don't get to see much of it as of yet just because I'm doing 80 billion shows. But the mountains all around are really pretty. I've been driving around, you know, doing my little errands here and there, and everybody is really friendly and speak. And, you know, if they recognize me from the show, they're very happy to come up and say hello. It's been a lot of fun.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:02:30] That's nice. How long have you been there with Hamilton?

Julius Thomas III [00:02:32] This is week five of six. So we'll finish out this week. We'll have one more to go and then on we go.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:02:39] How are you doing? Just in general. How are things?

Julius Thomas III [00:02:42] Things are good. I mean, we're in a really lovely rhythm. It's hard to believe that we're already talking about what's coming up next, like contract renegotiations and things,

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all kinds of stuff like that are coming up. And it just it seems like we just got started after the pandemic subsided and we were able to come back to theater. It seems like we just got back, but we're already close to seven, eight months in and that's insane.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:03:09] I know. It's it's March again. March is such a.

Julius Thomas III [00:03:12] Like a watershed moment.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:03:13] Yeah, yeah. Like March. Like March was when the lockdown started. In March was when Broadway shut down in March. And it's March 16th, 2022. Like, it's kind of wild to think about it like that.

Julius Thomas III [00:03:24] It is wild. On the 11th we celebrated like the year, you know, like that was the that was the day that we got the notice that we would be shutting down and everybody was like, Oh, it's going to be two weeks, it's going to be fine.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:03:36] It's going to be a two week vacation.

Julius Thomas III [00:03:38] And then 18 months later, we're like, Where's, where's my job?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:03:42] So this is what I ask everyone. I would love to hear your life story because one, I'm just interested in it. And two, you have a lot of pride about where you're from and where you went to school. So I would just love to hear how you became Julius Thomas the third.

Julius Thomas III [00:03:58] Oh, okay. All right. I'll do my best to do my best to make it interesting.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:04:02] I know it's it's not as scary of a question as it may sound to you right now.

Julius Thomas III [00:04:07] So I grew up in Gary, Indiana, and I like to say it's Steal Town USA, smack dab in the middle of the Midwest. And the most important part to me is home of the Jackson five. The

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Jackson five were from there. They lived on Jackson Street. I grew up on Jackson Street. I had a ton of the same teachers that the Jackson, you know, the older Jackson brothers had when they were in school. And a lot of times they compared me to to the J five like I'd get from my music teacher, like, oh, you remind me of a young michael, which is blasphemous, blasphemous, but it sent me down the path. So like really being obsessed with the Jackson five and all of their music and just sort of like their life story. And then we had the movie that came out later on and in my childhood, and so they were a big pivotal part of me, sort of like beginning my whole music exploration as well. My dad is a minister, my mom is the treasurer of the church that I grew up in. And so the the lens, the other lens through which I started with music and performing and things of that nature was in gospel and like leading praise and worship and directing the choir at like age ten. And I was just super obsessed with music and not in any because the tradition of black church is call and response. It is mostly oral. It is not picking up a piece of sheet music and learning how to read music and stuff like that. So I had a really fantastic ear growing up, even though I had no idea what the mathematics of music actually was. Do you know what I mean?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:05:52] Yeah.

Julius Thomas III [00:05:53] So sort of this like natural ability to sort of pick up music really quickly. I hear a song once or twice and I could replicate it and that sort of became the my door into singing in front of people. And I can remember the very first PTA meeting that I sang at. It was like one of my very first performances. I sang The Rainbow Connection along to the vinyl. I'm dating myself the vinyl of Kermit the Frog in the PTA meeting.

Julius Thomas III [00:07:15] And I got up there and what ended up happening, I think we were having some issues and I had heard this in church somewhere and I'm like six years old and I stand up and I'm like, I'm sorry, everybody. We're having technical difficulties. And the whole place just like erupted into laughter and they figured it out. And then I sang along with Kermit the Frog, and it was thunderous applause.

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Gillian Pensavalle [00:07:35] How horrible is that? You're even vamping for the crowd. I love it.

Julius Thomas III [00:07:40] Yeah. I mean, we we figured out very early on that, like, this is a thing that you got to figure out how to do. And yeah, that was sort of like the launching pad of where I started it all. And high school was where I fell in love with musicals. I was a track and cross-country runner and I swam in the off season, but I didn't really love swimming and I was trying to find something that would like, allow me to not have to go home and just sit in between track and cross-country season. And they started my freshman year. They started a musical theater program and auditioned. And the very first show that I auditioned for was Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat as a freshman. And would, you know, I booked Joseph. So that that was that was the boat. That was when the bug was bit. I was like, who is this Donny Osmond and how can I be exactly like him? Yeah. From there, you know, it just sort of steamrolled. I did eight more shows during high school, but when it was time to go away to college, I decided I wanted to do something a little bit more practical. I had been singing. Everybody knew me as the kid who sang, and I was eager to sort of like separate and differentiate myself in a way from that thing. So I went to school for physical therapy.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:08:53] That's what my dad does.

Julius Thomas III [00:08:54] Oh, yeah?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:08:55] Yeah, that's so funny.

Julius Thomas III [00:08:56] Listen, he needs to teach me some stuff. I want to go back to school for it.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:09:00] He is a listener of this podcast he would love. He's a doctor of physical therapy here in New York. He would. I mean, and he loves teaching. He taught for a long time, too. So he would be like, All right, Julius, let's go

Julius Thomas III [00:09:12] Yeah, I went for like two and a half years before I discovered that, like, it wasn't going to be it for me

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this go round. Like, I was doing really well and everything except for my major, which was biology, that was my pre major before I was going to move into physical therapy for my masters and I, you know, I hated it. I hated biology. I got a D the first time I took it to see the second time I took it acing everything else and the national tour of RENT came to my school. And I remember going and sitting in to the sitting in the theater and being like, Man, I don't know what I'm going to do with my life. Like, I really want to work on people. Like, this whole physical therapy thing was about me helping other people be active and passionate in the thing that they do get back and be rehabilitated into the thing that they love to do. Dancers, performers, athletes. And I sat in the audience and I like noticed that people around me were, like, laughing and crying and having this real cathartic moment. And I said to myself, Oh, my word. These actors are working on these people. Like they they're literally working on them as they sit in these seats. And it's an instantaneous, instant gratification type thing. And it's not the way that I thought that I would be working on people, but I could do this.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:10:31] Wow.

Julius Thomas III [00:10:33] It was like my a-ha moment.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:10:37] It's not the way I thought I'd be working on people, but I can do this. Mind explosion.

Julius Thomas III [00:10:43] Yeah. For me to. Oh, for me. I mean, that next semester I was like, cool. Dropping my full scholarship.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:10:51] Oh, shit.

Julius Thomas III [00:10:52] Yeah, yeah. Dropping my full scholarship. Moving halfway across the country to a different school that I've never even visited, because one of my teachers was like, If this is what you want to do, you should go here. And I was like, Okay, I'm going to do it. And just like left.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:11:05] And where is that?

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Julius Thomas III [00:11:06] Wichita State. Nobody's heard of it unless you love bowling, baseball or every once in a while basketball. But I love my school and it was the perfect place for me and I'm working so hard to put it on the map. The best way that I can

Gillian Pensavalle [00:11:22] Is going to say, I mean, listeners who follow you, we know about Wichita and Wichita State. That's what I mean. Like you have so much pride about where you're from, your hometown and where you went to college. I'd love to hear why it was so perfect for you, like your whole experience there, because I also think it's important for listeners to know it doesn't have to be New York or L.A. or wherever where you train. I always think it's really important to sort of shatter all those all that those stigmas about what is, you know, prestigious or whatever, like what works for you, works for you, and look at you now. So I'd love to dove into that.

Julius Thomas III [00:11:54] Yeah. So, I mean, Wichita came to me, it was almost sort of serendipitous the way that it happened. I was singing not a music minor when I was at my first university, and they recognized that I had some abilities and some talent, but they were mostly in opera school and me coming from the the gospel world, they were like, Oh, we don't really know what to do with you and you don't really want to sing like us. So you can take these music classes and learn about music and all that good stuff, but like, we're not really going to put our hands on you in any real substantial way. And one of my choir teachers, once she figured out a heard that I wanted to switch and do musical theater, she was like my her then excuse me. But then Dean was her husband. The then dean of fine arts at Wichita State was her husband. And she said, You would do really well at the school. They would love you. It's a great musical theater program. It's budding. You would get a lot of attention. Why don't you check it out? And I didn't need to. That was like everything that I needed to hear in that moment to get me where I felt like I needed to go. So they had a national student exchange program and I went, and these people, when I tell you that the people in Wichita enveloped me and like wrapped their arms around me to this day, I just had four or five different people, different groups of people come to see the show here in Denver from Wichita, including my college professor, you know, a woman who was my first company manager at a theater that I worked at there. These are these are my family. Wichita is like my home away from home.

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So that's why I rep it so hard, because they they literally set me on the path.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:13:45] That's beautiful. I'm really struck by that.

Julius Thomas III [00:13:48] It still hits me, too, you know? And they didn't just send me out and, you know, take my money and send me out into the world like a lot of universities do. They still keep in contact with me. I've received several awards from the university. They contact me to be in commercials that I can then put on my real to put out into the world and say, Hey, I'm also a commercial actor and a television actor and all this other stuff. They even though I'm long out of school, they are still pouring into me. And so I can't help but be grateful and to love them. And it's the least I can do to put in my bio in a playbill Wichita State grad because I am so proud, you know? Yeah. And Linda Starkey was the head of the musical theater department. She's actually one of the people that just came to see me. She's she's like a she's like an opera. She's literally like one of those aunties that. Saw the potential in me also saw that I needed to be have a finger wagged at me every now and again. And she wasn't afraid to give me those moments. Like there were moments where I didn't understand the protocols and she'd be like, You got to get yourself together because this will not fly when you leave here. Like she would literally tell me sometimes to shut up because I'd be talking too much or like busy trying to be social and stuff like that. And I and I appreciate it. It was hard at the time to, like, be an adult and hear other adults telling me what to do and disciplining me. But not now. I think back on those moments and I'm like, Had I not learned how to shut my mouth in situations, where would I be? How many jobs would I have lost? How many jobs would I not have been hired for? Because I just didn't know how to take a correction. And then there was Marie King, who was over the opera department, but took an interest in me as far as my acting was concerned. I think acting was the place where I struggled the most. You know, I'm black. So I had my natural rhythm and I sang all of my life growing up. So I had a natural affinity to understanding how to use my my instrument. But acting was a different story. Acting was really tough for me and is still to this day the thing that I worked the hardest at. I gladly to today say that I am an actor who sings. But when I first came out of

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college, I was a singer who danced, and if the paper bag was wet enough, I could act my way out of it. But there weren't a lot of wet paper bags in Broadway. On Broadway, you know, you really had to be able to get your get your get your point across and to be able to tell a story. And Marie sort of took the reins in that way. And then there was one other gentleman, his name was Drew Tombrelo. And I think of Drew in two different ways. And I and I and even if Drew heard this, I know that he would appreciate it. Drew pissed me off in the worst ways. When I was in college, he was that acting professor that never settled for anything less than my best. Even on days that I thought that I was doing my best, he was like, This is garbage. You have to do better. And he was not afraid to say things like that. One after one performance. I can remember and thank you for this, Drew, if you do hear this, because it still sticks with me to this day after singing my heart out in this one, one scene study class that I was having, I can remember Drew saying to me, Based on what I've seen, you will not be able to sustain yourself as a musical theater performer. You won't. And in that moment. And I think that he knew that I could handle that because in that moment, I could have been crushed. I could have ran back to physical therapy. I could have quit. I could have cried. I could have gone through a whole mental breakdown. As many of us actors do. But what it did for me was make it made me go. I'ma show you. Don't you worry about what I'm going to be able to do when I leave this place. Because I promise you, what I will do is eat and perform. Mm hmm. And it's been a point of pride to be able to think in my brain. Back to that moment, like he told me the answer was going to be no. And I worked my butt off so that the answer would be yes or maybe or next time or whatever the the next level up from no was. And and those are those are three of the teachers that really their lessons still are applicable to everything that I do, including in Hamilton. And I'm really grateful for them.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:18:27] So what happened after Wichita?

Julius Thomas III [00:18:30] What happened? Okay. So I yeah, I had senioritis by the time I got to be a junior, but I knew that I knew that I did not feel ready as a two and a half year musical theater major and a two and a half year biology major, I knew that I was still catching up. And I knew that I wasn't ready to go to New York. That wasn't something that I was very interested in any way. I visited New

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York. I thought it was big and dirty and unfriendly, and I visited in the middle of winter in Brooklyn and stayed on somebody's couch in a like eight bedroom apartment with barely any heat. And I was like, That's. I don't think that's life for me.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:19:14] Yeah.

Julius Thomas III [00:19:14] I don't I don't I don't think that that's going to be where I'm going to thrive. And I miss my family. I miss my I missed all the birth of my nephews. I just wanted to go be near home. So I went to Chicago. And Chicago was amazing because it made me feel like a small fish in a medium sized pond. As opposed to a tiny fish in a gigantic pond with Audra McDonald. You know, like, I just I just didn't feel like it was time for me to go compete in that pool. Hmm. And so Chicago was a great place for me because it had really great rules that said, even if you're not equity, if there is time to see you and you get here early enough, we are going to see you and you're going to get the opportunity to audition for us. And you know what I did? I drove my home from Gary, Indiana, at 4:00 in the morning to every audition that I saw it. And I stood in line and I was always the first man in line, and I was one of the first non-equity people to be seen. And my hard work and my diligence and the the work ethic that those people that Wichita State put in me. Was the thing that set me above when it came to some of my cohorts in the equity world. And within three months of me getting out of school, I booked my first equity gig.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:20:32] You have such a keen sense of awareness about not just yourself, but the situation around you. Do you feel that

Julius Thomas III [00:20:43] Yes. To a fault.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:20:44] Okay. Right to a.

Julius Thomas III [00:20:46] Fault.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:20:46] I understand that too.

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Julius Thomas III [00:20:47] I am a self over analyzer. I'm one of those people that like four years down the road, I will be thinking about some of the answers that I gave in the Hamilcast interview and learning from that mistake. Do you know what I mean?

Gillian Pensavalle [00:21:01] I do. I mean, I do. I do. My husband, Mike, also says that he will sort of like he'll just be walking. It'll be a gorgeous day. I'll be walking around and like, oh, god. Then that thing he said in third grade, it all comes back. Just this this haunting, you know? Yes, I can relate to that. I think it's a very relatable thing to just be sort of haunted by your own nothingness, like I. Here's here's an example of how we do this to ourselves all the time. All of us. I was listening to a podcast called Dead Eyes. Have you heard about this podcast? It's about this guy who got it's a long it's a whole I could do a podcast about the podcast, but this actor 20 years ago got fired. He booked Band of Brothers, that HBO miniseries. And the day before he booked it and the day before he was supposed to shoot, he got fired. And the reason he was told through however many channels was that Tom Hanks, the director of the episode, said he had dead eyes. Now he stopped acting for a while. 20 years later, he makes this podcast to kind of get to the bottom of what that means. And it becomes a podcast about one, of course, getting Tom Hanks to come on and a lot about what it is to be an actor and how horrible it can be and how confusing it can be and how in your head you are. But it's also a podcast about memory. That was 20 years ago. So what happened? And the creator of Lost was on and he was saying, he goes, this is this is something he when he was in grade school, some kid fell down the stairs in school, like in between classes. And this guy, the creator of Lost laughed. He's like, it looked funny. And I didn't. I just laughed at it came out and he goes, It haunts me to this day that I did that. When Facebook became a thing, he got a Facebook account specifically to track down this kid and apologize and say, it haunts me. I think about it constantly. The kid who fell down the stairs had no recollection of what had happened. It was the bigger deal to the person who had the sort of visceral reaction and then felt horrible about it for decades. And he goes, But Connor, he says to the host of the podcast, because I still think about it, he goes, It's totally cool. Did this guy like was like, all right weirdo I think lost his great like I it's fine you're not I'm not I was never mad. I don't even remember it. I don't even know what you're talking about.

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But it almost made it. It almost haunts him more because of that. And when I heard that story, I was like, we are just beating the shit out of ourselves on a daily basis, aren't we? Even when someone says It's okay, don't worry about it. Still, we obsess over it. Why is that, Julius? I don't know.

Julius Thomas III [00:23:31] It's true. That guy, your husband and I would form a really great club. Yeah, that's all I'm saying. We could sit around and be crazy all day long, right? In the best way. No, I think that the why we do it is. Why we do it is is largely, I think because of empathy. Especially when you are creative. Your job is empathy. When you are an actor. Your job is to be able to step into other people's shoes. To be able to realistically portray or embody what someone else might be feeling in a moment. And so for me, that's I think that's a lot of what this stuff is. I've always been a people watcher. I've always been a watcher of my own behavior. I grew up in a very devout Christian home. So you are taught from from jump that like how you are perceived in the world is based is a part of how you get into heaven, which is or else, you know, so. So it makes you and whether or not that is true or not, we believe that that is true or not. It makes you hyper aware of who you are and how you are perceived. And then add on top of that, being an actor and reading these scripts and trying to put yourself into the mind frame of these people. And I'm currently I just currently read The Piano Lesson, which is a show that they're bringing back to Broadway. And I'm sitting here just like empathizing with these characters and trying to figure out how I would feel in a moment where, you know, these crazy situations are happening with me. So it's I think it's all about empathy. I think it's necessary in order for us to not be a sociopathic society. And I also think because we are a flawed people, we take it to the extreme and we think about things that happened in the third grade that no one else is even remotely remembering. So makes more of an impact on us. But that makes us good, empathic humans.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:25:31] Yeah, I would agree. So then you said you booked your first equity gig. What was that?

Julius Thomas III [00:25:35] It was the 25th annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.

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Gillian Pensavalle [00:25:42] Two singing moments already. Okay, so tell me. Tell me about that.

Julius Thomas III [00:25:46] Oh, that was that was really interesting. It was my first big show that I was auditioning for. No, I take that back. Wicked was the first big show that I auditioned for in Chicago, and that was an interesting experience, all in and of itself. But this was interesting because I could tell that these people really liked me and I walked in to the audition really green, not knowing anything about the show, not having done having done a tiny bit of research that I could, learning about the composer, the stuff they teach you to do in college, but never having seen it and just going in and being me and singing. And I can remember after my first callback, we were in this very interestingly shaped audition room that was Bleachers Risers, and you had to walk past the bleachers to get out. So that means that the people on the bleachers could not tell that you were still in the room. And I'll never forget James Lapine was sitting and I had no idea who James Lapine was at the time. So green, sitting up in the bleachers and I just finished singing and acting my little heart out. And before I could get out of the room, he went, Uh, not bad, but I booked it. And they, you know, the, the, the casting director came out was like, Julius, they like you a lot. They just think that you're a little subdued. And I was because I was super nervous, and I was going in there feeling green. And when I went, I felt nervous and green. I made myself small. And what I what I really needed to do was make myself much larger. And so really go for it and really shoot for it. And through some coaching, we got there and they, they ended up booking me as the swing for the majority of the men for that show. And I did that show for two and a half years in many different, different incarnations. The Chicago company and the national touring company paid off. Sallie Mae told her to kick rocks. Traveled around the country. Left the country for the first time with the show. I mean, there were so many firsts. And I just look upon it. I have some really amazing friends. I look upon it with such fondness.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:27:54] I'm just I'm fascinated by you. I could listen to you all day. I love your outlook on things.

Julius Thomas III [00:27:59] Thank you.

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Gillian Pensavalle [00:28:00] You're welcome. Yeah, that's that's all. So then all of these first and then what came next?

Julius Thomas III [00:28:06] After that, I decided, okay, I had been at an out of Chicago. I'd only worked in one show for two and a half years, and I had been in Chicago for a big chunk of that, but only in one show. So whoever came to see might have seen me in the show, might not. So I didn't really get to make much of a foothold in Chicago like I would have liked to. And I said, If I'm going to start over, I know that I can book now. I know that I have the skills. It's time to go ahead and try New York. And so I went to New York with two bags and whatever little chump change that I had after paying off Sallie Mae and sat down there for a couple of months and it wasn't long. Before I booked my second show, which was the national tour of Xanadu, which surprise, surprise took me back to Chicago.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:28:56] Of course.

Julius Thomas III [00:28:57] We went to I moved to New York just to go back to Chicago. But we we toured through La Hoya, Chicago, and then Japan. So it was a very cool nine month tour on a very fun show that was only 90 minutes long. And I loved every single second of it. Every second of it.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:29:17] How did you like Japan?

Julius Thomas III [00:29:18] It was amazing. I considered moving. I was like, Oh, look at all these polite people. This a very clean society. This like there's so much about manners and honor. And even the people that that worked at McDonald's were hustling and, like, had pride in the work that they were doing. And it felt really great. Felt really lovely to live in a place where people took pride in everything that they did.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:29:45] Yeah, Japan is one of my top places in the world that I want to visit. I just find it so beautiful from what I've seen. And I was just talking to DeeJay Young from the Angelica tour. He had a wonderful experience in Japan and couldn't speak any higher about it, really. So it's interesting. It keeps coming up in my

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conversations and when I ask like, How is Japan? So far? You've both said, I almost live there forever.

Julius Thomas III [00:30:13] It was amazing. The language is a lot harder. It's Spanish. The languages is is a big barrier. But everybody is very eager to speak their English with you and to have you speak your broken Japanese with them. And I would go to the smaller areas of smaller towns where, you know, where most of the tourists go off to see the the temples and things of that nature. And I almost felt like a celebrity because people would just they would stop me. They would want to take pictures with me. And I know it's because they probably didn't get an opportunity to see very many people like me, tall, six foot, 150lbs black guy. And so it was it was it was a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it. And all the clothes fit me really well.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:30:56] Yeah.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:30:58] Slight.

Julius Thomas III [00:30:59] Slight. Yes.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:31:01] It's so funny. I had a very similar story about people saying, like, your skin color is you're so beautiful. And yeah, you.

Julius Thomas III [00:31:08] Honestly, it happens a lot whenever I leave the United States. So I tend to try to get out of the United States as often as I can just to go experience people appreciating all these brown golden tones.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:31:19] Yes. Well, I will tell you, even over virtually your skin is glowing. So I'll say that. Gorgeous. Thank you again. Drop the skin care routine.

Julius Thomas III [00:31:27] I think I am in great company. Great company.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:31:32] And then what came next? Scottsboro boys? No.

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Julius Thomas III [00:31:35] What came next? No, not yet. After that was the Radio City Christmas Spectacular Arena tour. They don't even do the Arena tour anymore. I'm just dating myself all over the place.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:31:49] Did that bring you back to Chicago.

Julius Thomas III [00:31:50] Is I wish we actually played most of the like pencil Hershey, Pennsylvania. Like we were over on the East Coast mostly and mostly southern, east, southeast. And that was really cool. I had fallen out of love with Christmas, like when my nephews are really tiny. I loved it because it was a time that I really got to dig in and see joy on their faces and give to them and like spoil them. And it was really cool, but they got older and they stopped caring about Christmas as much. And so my love for it and the commerciality of it all, especially the way that our world was sort of revolving at the time, I really sort of fallen in love, fallen out of love with the Christmas spirit and doing that show and like seeing the little kids in the aisles dancing and trying to be little Rockettes and just lit up. And I would come out and sing Joy to the World. And people were I mean, they just you could just see the love in their eyes. And so it was a really cool moment to sort of like reinvigorate now because it's only three months long. There are no like, can I please go do this audition? Can I please get out to go see my family? Can I go somewhere for Christmas? Is like, no, we have you for three months and you're here doing 30 shows a day and then we're picking up tomorrow and we're going to the next city. It is very intense, but I loved it. But while on that tour, I get a call from a casting office, Jim Carnahan's casting office, saying, We're casting this new show. It's called Scottsboro Boys. This director, Susan Stroman, is heralding it. And it's the music of Kander and Ebb. Kander and Ebb. I knew everybody else. I was like, okay, great. I can't get out to come do that because I'm on the Radio City Christmas spectacular. They don't do outs and they're like, Okay, well, why don't you just go ahead and put yourself on tape because later down the line we'll be looking for replacements or to fill in the the standbys and understudies and stuff like that. And I was like, cool, put myself on tape. Didn't think much of it would come of it. Two or three days later, I get a phone call saying, Julius, congratulations. You're going to be off-Broadway in The Scottsboro Boys. It was my off-Broadway Broadway debut. I got from a VHS, basically submission. I mean, it was over a computer, but a tape

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submission. I put my best foot forward. I created a tap number for it in the theater somewhere a while. We were on tour with Radio City and they were like, Because you put this whole thing together yourself in a hotel room, some somewhere. We knew that you had the initiative to be in the show, and we want you to come be a part of the show. So my my off-Broadway, my Guthrie and my Broadway debut were all booked by a two minute tip self tape submission.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:34:39] Let that be a lesson to everyone. I mean.

Julius Thomas III [00:34:43] It's insane. Blessed hashtag. Bless. Wait.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:34:47] Did they ask you to come up with the top number or that was your.

Julius Thomas III [00:34:50] They they just said, we need to see you dance.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:34:53] Okay. Okay.

Julius Thomas III [00:34:53] They said this show has tap in it and we need to see you dance. And the casting director knew that I tapped. And he was like, So put yourself on tape. Here's a sing. Whatever you want to sing. Here are all they gave me with were the sides. So I got on my little computer and created a garage band track for myself to sing to. I got in a studio and choreographed my own tap number and I put those slides on tape and sent it off and said, Whatever happens, happens. And three days later, I knew I was going to be off-Broadway.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:35:22] Wow. And the timing worked out that you didn't have to worry.

Julius Thomas III [00:35:25] So, yeah, there was there was a tiny little break in between which allowed me the opportunity to go pick up all of my stuff. Because remember, I only went to New York with two bags, so I went and picked up all of my stuff, got in a U-Haul, drove across the country and said, All right, I guess we're doing this. I guess we're moving to New York. And on the first day of rehearsal,

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Susan Stroman walks up to me as she takes my face in her hands and she says, Oh, thank God, honey, you look young. Because she had not even really seen me in person. So she was like, Oh, thank God, you look young because we were so we just we knew we had to have you, but we wanted to make sure that you, like, could actually fit this part. Isn't that nuts? They never even saw me in person

Gillian Pensavalle [00:36:06] For before 2020? Yes, that's crazy.

Julius Thomas III [00:36:07] Yeah. Yeah. 2009 or like late 2009. Yeah, late 2009. Yeah. Which is long before we were doing all the self submissions.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:36:17] Right. Exactly.

Julius Thomas III [00:36:17] Off tape submissions. So.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:36:19] So how was that experience.

Julius Thomas III [00:36:21] That was a dream. It was I like to tell people it's it was the perfect meeting of commercial theater and art. My first show was picketed. There were people outside with picket signs. We had to cross picket lines to get in to work every day. We were nominated for ten Tonys. After we closed, we only ran six weeks. There were all of these these like really crazy things that make people go like, Wow, you didn't win any Tonys, but it was like, Yeah, but we also set a record for the most amount of Tonys for a show that had closed, like clearly. And we were picketed and they were talking about us on the news. And Whoopi Goldberg came and came backstage and then went on The View and talked about like how important the show was. It was like it's like what you want to happen as an artist. You want your art to mean something to people, even if it's polarizing. Like at the end of Scottsboro Boys, so many people told me that that it was it was one of two things that either they couldn't get out of their seat at the end of it or they couldn't sit all the way through it, there was no in between. There was literally no one between. We were we were doing something that we really felt was important. This is a story from the history books that has largely been erased. The Scottsboro Nine were nine African-American young men who were on a boxcar traveling between states trying to find work, which in those

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days was illegal. Hopping on a train and going to a different place to try to find work. Especially if you were black. And there were two women on the car who were basically doing the exact same thing. And the train was stopped because some folks on the train were fighting. And in order for the women to not get in trouble and to not be in trouble with the law, they accused all nine of the boys of gang rape. And through many, many trials, a recant by one of the women and just a whole sort of civil rights linchpin moment. The boys either were freed or lived out the rest of their lives in jail. And it was it's just a telling of their story. And one of the reasons why it was so polarizing was because we used the device of minstrelsy and blackface in in the show, and it was an all white creative team. So at that time in 2010, we were really just starting to have an awakening as far as like who's telling what stories, how are they being told? Are people who have an experience with this history involved? And if not, then why are we doing it? And that's sort of why it ruffled as many feathers as it as it did. But the show itself is genius. It was ahead of its time, as a lot of Kander and Ebb is. Even though we only played about six weeks in Broadway, the West End, sold out, ran for forever, was nominated for many awards, I think won a couple of oliviers. And when the revival rolls around, I think people will will take to it in a very different way. Now would be a really perfect time for the Scottsboro Boys to be revived.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:39:42] What were your thoughts on those polarizing issues then and have they changed now?

Julius Thomas III [00:39:49] Yeah, great question. So at the time, I felt like we were doing something right. I felt like. What we were doing was important. And even the way that we were telling the story with the use of the black face, it was very strategic. It was very pointed in the way that we used it. The minstrelsy was also I mean, these things are a part of our history. They are minstrelsy was the popular form of entertainment for decades. And to sort of gloss over that and to not have it be told and be told in a truthful and used in a way that highlights just where we were in this country at that time, I think is is is a misstep. So it was important at the time. I am even more now convicted by it. At that time, I was nervous because I was a budding actor. It was my off-Broadway/Broadway debut and I just wanted to have a great career where people respected me and I wasn't ruffling

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feathers. And so I was nervous about the whole the the danger of it all. But when I look back now, I'm like, I would do it over again in a heartbeat. And in fact, let's go harder. Let's try to get some performances on somebody's television somewhere. Let's let's do everything we can to tell this story because America needs to hear it. I think that it's important that we continue to tell our stories and to tell them in a way that is honest so that we don't end up repeating what it is that we've gone through or forgetting.

Gillian Pensavalle [00:41:32] All right. Next week, I'll be back with Julius to finish up our conversation. We'll be talking about the first time he met Lin-Manuel Miranda, his audition process for Hamilton, his favorite moments in the show. And of course, Julius is taking questions from the Patreon Peeps. You definitely don't want to miss it. So until then, stay safe. Stay healthy. I love you. Thanks so much for listening. I'm G. Pen.

[00:42:20] The Hamilcast is brought to you by my love of the thing, TM, and my complete lack of chill. Please join me in raising all the glasses to Sir Alex Lacamoire for generously making my intro music and this custom Yorktown arrangement that I will never, ever get over. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. A big thank you to Jenson Parker Neal, my dear friend and right hand man who helps me make the thing about the thing. To become a Patreon Peep and join the best, kindest and most welcoming corner of the internet. Go to patreon.com/TheHamilcast. You can submit questions to guests, join Zoom Hangouts, get behind the scenes access and of course, my endless gratitude. On social media at the pod is @TheHamilcast and I'm @gillianwithag G-I-L-L-I-A-N-W-I-T-H-A-G. Visit THEHAMILCAST.COM for episodes, transcripts and more. You can see what's going on with Mike, you know Mike, at MichaelPaulSmith.Net True Crime Obsessed is my true crime comedy podcast with my podcast soulmate, Patrick Hinds, and we were the first podcast to ever play Broadway. Ever. Thank you so much for listening. It means the world to me. To the revolution!