

Partners - Lin-Manuel Miranda & Thomas Kail

Lin-Manuel: When you bring in a song and it's just not good enough, Tommy goes, "Well, the good news is we have that and we can always go back to it." (*Lin-Manuel laughs*)
And as soon as I hear, "The good news is we have that." I go, "Okay, I got to rewrite this thing." (*Lin-Manuel laughs*)

(*"Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway*)

Tommy: My name is Thomas Kail.

Lin-Manuel: My name is Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Hrishikesh: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Thomas Kail are the composer and director, respectively, of the Tony Award winning, Broadway smash hits, *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*. But those are just two of the projects they've collaborated on. Their work spans theater, television and film, and they've won too many awards to list here. The story of Lin and Tommy's long collaboration begins when they *almost* crossed paths while they were both in college.

Tommy: My senior year I was directing a little play that I had written. And we were doing the student production and they gave us the gymnasium and \$52 and four lights. And then every night someone would say, "Okay, we have to take these lights over to this dorm."

Lin-Manuel: To the West-Co Cafe.

Tommy: "To the West-Co Cafe because there's some freshmen who's doing a musical called *Seven Minutes in Heaven*." And I was like, "Who is this? And why are we taking down the lights?" And they're like, "It's this kid. He wrote a musical, his name's Lin-Manuel Miranda and he's staged it in his dorm. In, like, their little cafe."

And I was like, "Well, he sounds like a disaster and he's stealing our stuff."
(*Lin-Manuel & Tommy laugh*)

Lin-Manuel: I first heard the legend of Tommy Kail when I was a sophomore at Wesleyan University. I was putting up the first production of *In the Heights*. And two fellow theater majors, who were seniors, said, "We are graduating this year and we're going to form a theater company with Tommy Kail and Anthony Veneziale," two Wesleyan alum who had already graduated, "and we'll contact you when you're graduating."

Then I met Tommy for the first time when they came to see my senior thesis. He came in, like, making a joke about tripping and then he dropped an enormous soda on the floor of the (*Lin-Manuel laughs*) center for the arts theater.

They watched my show, which was not very good, and Tommy shook my hand on the way out and said, "Enjoy this." And I went, "Thank you! Wait, was that a, did you like the show?!" (*Lin-Manuel laughs*) But then I didn't really meet Tommy Kail, for real, until the week after I actually graduated. And we met in the basement of the Drama Bookshop.

Hrishikesh: The Drama Bookshop first opened in New York in 1917. Tommy and his troupe became the resident theater company in 2001 when it was located on 40th Street with a bookshop upstairs and a 60-seat theater downstairs.

Tommy: Yeah, and we were in that bookshop basement from 2001 to 2005 basically every day, my little company. And then Lin joined us a year after we moved in there. And, (*Lin-Manuel laughs*) well there was a big transition in my thinking about him because I found him aggravating in theory. And then my friends put this CD that Lin had made, a production of *In the Heights*. And so I had been listening to the *In the Heights* CD, basically on a loop for two years, and no one else in the world had. And when I then connected with him in the Drama Bookshop basement, you know, a month after he graduated, I had a lot of stuff to say.

Lin-Manuel: Yeah, if there were a time lapse of the room, everyone else just, kind of, peels away and we are still talking about *In the Heights*.

Tommy: It was one of those afternoons that became evening.

Lin-Manuel: He had all these ideas about the show and they were all really good ideas. Like, "Oh, Usnavi's a great character, but he doesn't appear 'til, like, the fourth or fifth song, like, he should be your narrator." And it was just so confident and breathtaking, in terms of like, "Here's what I think could happen."

And I was just like, "Oh, this guy's going to take over the world, but (*Lin & Tommy laugh*) this guy's gonna help make a better show. Like, it will be a better show if I work with him."

The other thing that, kind of, emerged over that was that our hip-hop flashpoints were the same. Like, he could quote Biggie and he could quote Pun with equal fluency. And that was also very important to me, that we were pulling from the same inspiration points in terms of how hip hop was going to inform the piece.

Tommy: And so as we started talking, everything, sort of, like, collapsed and it was like, "Oh, the world was big and then the world got small. You were there, now you're

here. And we're finally in the same place." Being around Lin felt like meeting someone that's been around the corner and I didn't know existed and also was immediately on the same frequency.

Lin-Manuel: The first thing we really did out in the world together was *In the Heights*. And that's from the first readings in the basement of the drama bookshop with four actors, and then eight actors. And then venturing beyond the bookshop, just, kind of, developing *Heights* and figuring out how to get it from one act to two acts in that first year. And then we really, kind of, got cooking with gas when we found more collaborators with Quiara Alegria Hudes and with Alex Lacamoire. You know that's when it started getting bigger than just, really, the two of us kicking ideas around. But the notion that the director is in on the ground floor and helping you shape the piece was really something we discovered in real time together. I learned with Tommy that Tommy's in on questioning every detail of the writing and, "This makes sense. And this could be clearer," and that's really helpful. It's really helpful at every stage of the game to constantly be making your work better as you're making it, as opposed to, "here it is. It's done. (*Lin-Manuel laughs*) Stage it."

Tommy: One of the things about Lin that I appreciated, and I hope, in some way was, kind of, imprinted in that very first conversation we had, is my instinct was never to try to fix something that was broken. It was, "Hey, there's something beautiful that you made, let's realize it. Let's actualize it."

Lin-Manuel: Right.

Tommy: And so much of my job, as you continue months and years into developing something, is to keep pointing to those initial impulses and to remind you, and to remind us, why you started writing it, how you started writing it, and what were those sparks that hopefully will evolve.

Lin-Manuel: And Tommy's someone one who makes you want to write and is also very good about, (*Lin-Manuel laughs*) my favorite line, when you bring in a song and it's just not good enough, Tommy goes, "Well, the good news is we have that and we can always go back to it." (*Lin-Manuel laughs*)

And as soon as I hear, "The good news is we have that." I go, "Okay, I got to rewrite this thing." (*Lin-Manuel laughs*)

Tommy: And there's a spirit of generosity in the way that he works and writes, which is, he's brave enough and has enough faith to bring in something that is unformed or unfinished and say, "This is where I am." That's a vulnerable thing to do. And so I felt a real sense of responsibility and accountability to try to bring myself in that same way.

Lin-Manuel: As we're working on *In the Heights*, in the basement of the bookshop, playing around at the piano, actors coming in and out, we would freestyle about our day so far, or I would freestyle about what we were doing in the room. And Anthony Veneziale, he was like, "We should do this in front of people." And so our first production of *Freestyle Love Supreme*, it's the doodle in the margins of *In the Heights*.

And Tommy, kind of, came on and saw what we were doing and was like, "this is great. You need a structure for this to actually be a satisfying evening." And, kind of, helped us find that.

Tommy: It felt like it could have specificity to that night. Could we create something that felt like it was just for that audience so when you walked outside, you said, "You're not going to believe what I just saw"? And then someone said, "Great, I want to see it with you." Like, "Well, you're never going to see that one again. You might see some version of that feeling, but that one was just for us."

We basically worked, pretty quickly, though, and gave it a shape. And then within a year of that, we were doing a run...

Lin-Manuel: At Ars Nova.

Tommy: At Ars Nova, you know, like, which was really the first time we probably got paid to make theater in the city.

Lin-Manuel: Yeah. That was our first real theater debut. *Freestyle* was what paid a fraction of our bills while we were working on...

Tommy: For sure.

Lin-Manuel: On *Heights*.

Tommy: And I think it was very confidence building.

Lin-Manuel: One of the other powerful things that Tommy really did in the early days was said, "no," to opportunities before we were ready for them. He just, he had the confidence to say, "We don't need them, we just need to keep working." And that is a key piece of tension of like, "I want to get my show on." And Tommy was like, "I want to get our show on when we're ready."

Tommy: There was going to be a matter of years, and whether it was three or five or seven, I didn't think about, but I knew it was going to take time because musicals

took time. I just didn't want it to get wherever it was going to go too early. That was really the guiding principle for me, more than anything.

Lin-Manuel: Yeah.

Tommy: No one's ever like, "Oh, they waited too long and developed that well." You know what I mean? I don't know that you miss your moment if you really take the time. But we had so many experiences with our own collaborators who did a lot of stuff in college and then mounted it immediately and then it was gone. Like it never happened. And it's hard to get that second one.

Lin-Manuel: But because Tommy kept betting on us, by the time we opened Off-Broadway, we were ready. And I was a better writer because of Tommy's input and collaboration.

You also have to understand, by the time we got quote, unquote, like, "real producers," the conventional wisdom is, "I'm the composer and you get a more experienced director to mount this first timer's show." So, you know, I'm in the position of auditioning the material, but I can't be fired because it's mine. Tommy has to prove himself at every reading and at every at bat. They gave him the chance to succeed and he succeeded every time.

Tommy: There's just not a lot of young theater directors who have people around them vouching for them or authors saying, "No, no, this is my person." And I had a composer who said, "This is my person."

Lin-Manuel: Yeah. And we were all able to, kind of, cross the finish line, this creative team, all making our Broadway debut together.

Tommy: The one thing that I appreciate about Lin, the *one* thing, (*Lin & Tommy laugh*) is that because it feels like we have been, somehow, connected to that initial conversation, for all our conversations, there's no ins and outs, and beginnings and ends in any tangible way. There was a period of time where we would talk to each other on the phone on the way home every single time after *Freestyle* for *years*.

Lin-Manuel: We would, kind of, deconstruct it every night.

Tommy: Yeah. That's another real driving force for the two of us, that also is something that unifies us. And I think that that ethos was something that was applied to *Hamilton* and in a way where it had *Heights* underneath it, it had *Freestyle* underneath it. And so we stepped into that in this, sort of, the adult version of ourselves, the show that we really worked on for all of our thirties was *Hamilton*.

- Lin-Manuel: I read the Chernow book on my first vacation from *In the Heights*.
- Hrishikesh: Lin's talking about the biography *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow. And that's the book he adapted into a hip hop musical.
- Lin-Manuel: And so I talked to Tommy about it and I thought, *it's such a weird idea that let me write the proof of concept that is a concept album*. The same way *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a weird idea; rock musical about the last days of Jesus's life. And the way Andrew Lloyd Webber worked on that was he did the concept album first. And then it was staged as a theater piece later off the success of that. And that was my dream for it, it was like, *let me write killer hip hop songs that tell the story*. But then a funny thing happened was, I wrote that first song, I was invited to perform at The White House, it took me a year to write the next song. And I performed it at a *Freestyle* evening.
- Tommy: And afterwards, as everybody was buzzing and going upstairs to have a little bit of wine and cheese and saying nice things to Lin, I thought, *here's my opportunity. (Lin snickers)*
- He was like, "Oh, this cheese is really great. People seem to like the song." And I was like, *(Tommy laughs sarcastically)* "You're really writing slowly." *(Lin-Manuel laughs)* And I just said, "We're going to be very old by the time you finish this if you don't pick up the pace. So let's find somewhere, six months from now, and work on a couple songs a month and see what we can do and see if there's anything there."
- Lin-Manuel: And he never said, "I'm directing the piece." It was just, he was picking up where we left off in our partnership of setting a deadline and let's see what happens if we set one.
- Tommy: And so, the next day Lin called me and I could hear on the phone that he was lit up. He was like, "I think we have a place. It's six months from now. What if we do this, this and this?" And I felt something ignite. And so that became the work over the next couple of years.
- Lin-Manuel: With *In the Heights*, we were creating an original story. We were discovering the characters and the story at the same time. But with *Hamilton*, we had this very clear narrative. We had the spine of a life to draw from, at least in terms of the events. Our take on those events, and our take on those characters, that was, sort of, the challenge, but we had a shorthand.
- Tommy: I remember one moment in particular that, sort of, speaks to how our friendship and our working relationship had evolved. Do you know the story I'm about to tell?

Lin-Manuel: I think so, which is after that reading.

Tommy: Yeah, yeah.

Lin-Manuel: Yeah. So we did that reading where there was a version of Act One and it was songs from *Hamilton* and scenes in the middle, and Tommy and I didn't talk for two days. Which is *crazy*. Like, we talk 10 times a day.

And I think the first thing we said to each other, and we almost had it at the same time, was, "Why does this more fully realized version of Act One with scenes feel less like the thing we're chasing than just 11 random songs in order?"

We kind of realized regular speech doesn't make sense in the context of this. And that was a really scary realization to make.

Tommy: And I remember this other time, there was an actor that was singing and performing a song that Lin had written and so we couldn't talk because this person was singing, but I had a thought during the song. And I looked at Lin, and he nodded. And I was like, "What?"

And he was like, "I know."

And I was like, "No you don't."

And he said, "I do."

And I was like, "Well, then write it down and show it to me."

And he, like, wrote the thing down and then the person finished singing and he, like, unfolded the paper and I was like, "Yeah, that's actually exactly what I meant." (*Tommy laughs*) And it was just like, it used to take us a lot of language to get to a thing. And now it was just like a glance.

Lin-Manuel: I got it.

Tommy: Yeah. And that's something that's only forged out of the previous 10 years of just constant conversation.

Lin-Manuel: Tommy and I have 50 other things we're working on and the *Heights* movie was something that had its moment for us to work on, and we weren't going to work on it in that way anymore, and I wasn't going to be in it in that role anymore. And so, it was evolving into a new thing.

Tommy: You know and I'm not working on it with them in the same way, but none of that has an impact on my feeling or desire for what I want the outcome to be.

Lin-Manuel: And also, we'd been working together on *Fosse/Verdon*.

Tommy: Right.

Lin-Manuel: Which is a really interesting hybrid of the way we'd worked together because I did not write on *Fosse/Verdon*. I got a book my friend wrote and handed it to Tommy. And Tommy lit up with the screen possibilities of it. And then I was there to support him as he made it; being at the pitches, finding the right home for it, and just being a sounding board, but you were really in the thick of it.

Tommy: Our work with other collaborators has only broadened ours. And so that's always felt like one of the exciting things. Is that he can go off and have an adventure and then come back and bring that into the room. And no one buys a ticket faster to something that I'm making than Lin's not in than Lin, and the same thing with his stuff.

Lin-Manuel: My 10 year advantage on everyone else was that I met Tommy Kail when I was 22-years-old. That shorthand, and that trust, and that ability to share whatever we were working on and put it on the table together, puts you ahead of the game.

Tommy: Back then I didn't know what the future looked like, but right now I still feel all of that past. I mean it still travels with us in such a meaningful way.

Lin-Manuel: That's really how you make something that's bigger than yourself; by trusting more people than yourself and trusting the right folks and folks who are going to elevate it. And Tommy is that person for me.

Tommy: Having that two decades in now, it moves me. And I feel like all of the things that we've done are, in some way, deeply connected to those first conversations.

Lin-Manuel: We just started talking and never stopped.

("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Hrishikesh: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Tommy Kail are partners. You can watch filmed versions of all the programs they talked about on streaming channels. *In the Heights* is on HBO Max, *Hamilton* is on Disney+, *Freestyle Love Supreme* and *Fosse/Verdon* are on Hulu, and Lin's film directing debut, *Tik Tik Boom*, is on Netflix.

Tommy isn't on social media, but you can find Lin on Twitter, @lin_manuel. By the way, the drama bookshop where they had that first conversation? They now co-own it.

Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I've produced and edited this episode and I made the music. Maureen Hoban is my co-producer. And Chloe Parker and Casey Deal are the production assistants. *Partners* is a Mailchimp podcast made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.