Karishma Bhagani:
This is the value that I find in this community. It is a sort of microcosm of what the real world is and what it has the potential to be. And so it's really informed the way I think about my little art world, as being in conversation with the medical industry or with economics. This community has been really valuable in that way where I can be myself and I can be honest about my gaps in knowledge and also receive the same kind of generosity and say, "Yeah, I'm happy to help you this way. Can you help me with this?" That kind of exchange has been really, really valuable.

Hello, my name is Karishma Bhagani. I use she/her pronouns, and I'm a member of the 2021 Cohort of the Knight-Hennessy Scholars. I'm a third year PhD candidate in the Department of Theater and Performance Studies, and I'm Practicing Producer of the Performing Arts. I imagine a world where art is the central force of our lives, bringing us together and encouraging us to empathize with multiple perspectives.

Taylor Goss:
Today we're speaking with Karishma Bhagani, a PhD candidate in Theater and Performance Studies. During our conversation, you'll learn about Karishma's upbringing as a fifth generation East African, pursuing a degree in theater and history in the US, using the arts to center conversations about change, and so much more.

Willie Thompson:
Hey, what's up y'all? It's Willie Thompson. I am a member of the 2022 Cohort of Knight-Hennessy Scholars, and I am a current MBA 2 in the Graduate School of Business here at Stanford.

Taylor Goss:
And I'm Taylor Goss. I'm a member of the 2021 Cohort of Knight-Hennessy Scholars and I'm pursuing a Master of Arts in Music Science and Technology and a Master of Arts in Public Policy.

Willie Thompson:
With that being said, y'all heard the introduction. We've got Karishma here on the pod, in the flesh, and you guys can't see this, but she's in a bright red blazer, killing the game with a brooch. Is that a cat?

Karishma Bhagani:
Yes, it's a cat.

Willie Thompson:
It's a beautiful cat brooch.

Karishma Bhagani:
It belonged to my mother.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow.

Karishma Bhagani:
It's a 20-year-old brooch.

Willie Thompson:
That's amazing. So that brooch is about to graduate college.

Taylor Goss:
How did that brooch end up on your lapel?

Karishma Bhagani:
Well, I decided that I'm a brooch person and then asked my mother if she had any, and she opened up this collection, unbeknownst to me, and just displayed all of them. She's like, "You're allowed to pick three." So I picked a peacock, I picked a lizard and I picked the cat. So clearly there's a theme here, but she seems to like her insects and animals, I guess.

Taylor Goss:
I like that a lot more as a personality test rather than the BuzzFeed quiz or the EIFJ thing.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah, if you was wear a brooch, what would it be and why?

Taylor Goss:
What animals would your brooch be?

Karishma Bhagani:
Exactly.

Willie Thompson:
It actually reminds me of Madeleine Albright, who did brooch diplomacy.

Taylor Goss:
That's right. Have you heard of this, Karisha?

Karishma Bhagani:
Oh, this topic has not been broached up to me before.

Willie Thompson:
That was good. That was good. So Madeleine Albright, the first woman to be Secretary of State, I believe, in the US, so she used to wear brooches when she would go on her diplomatic trips. And so she had this tradition and legacy of wearing these ornate brooches to signal certain things. Anyway, you can google it. It's pretty dope.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, I think she kind of threw shade with them occasionally.
Willie Thompson:
Oh yeah, a hundred percent.

Taylor Goss:
It was a statement brooches. Oh, okay. So what statement is your brooch telling us today for this podcast?

Karishma Bhagani:
Oh, I don't know. I don't know that I, it's... Okay, there's a story behind this brooch because it fell once and there was a cat tail. Cat had a tail, but now the cat does not have a tail.

William Thompson:
So that's not a tail. So are those his hind legs?

Karishma Bhagani:
Yes. So it's supposed to be a happy cat because the tail is supposed to show.

William Thompson:
I see.

Karishma Bhagani:
But it doesn't look like a happy cat 'cause the tail is not showing. But I don't know, I'm feeling as perched up as this cat is for this podcast today, let's say that.

Taylor Goss:
That's beautiful.

William Thompson:
That is beautiful. And we're really glad to have you on. Thanks to listeners for indulging this, aside. I mean, before we even get into the amazing Imagine A World statement, just how are you doing? How's life?

Karishma Bhagani:
Things are good for the most part, as I was thinking about the Imagine a World statement, I was thinking about the state of the world and how we're just going through what feels like the hardest moment that we've experienced post-COVID. And I don't know that we're really in a post-COVID world, but the thing that gets me up every morning is knowing that the work that I do as an artist does have the potential to change the world. Especially in the world that we're living in today where there's so many polarizing opinions and perspectives, it just feels like creativity is the center of what's going to keep us going.

William Thompson:
I love that.

Karishma Bhagani:
That's how I'm doing.

Willie Thompson:
That's fair. Before we get into this Imagine A World statement, obviously you're here in Stanford, but we want to talk about the world you're born into and the world that you come from. So can you share with the audience where are you from and what was your journey here to Stanford?

Karishma Bhagani:
I'm from Mombasa, Kenya. I was born and raised in, it's an island city. I don't even know if it can be called a city because it's tiny. Everyone knows everybody. I recently learned that I'm actually fifth generation East African, and so my roots have been in East Africa for a very long time, tracing back to Dar es Salaam and of course further into South Africa with the trade routes and the indentured labor and mercantilism between the Indian Ocean, well trade essentially. My great-great-grandfather came as a railway worker and from the other side of my family, my great-grandfather came as searching for business opportunities. So that's how we landed in East Africa, and that's been home for me for a very long time, even before I was conceived, even before the womb. So that's where I come from and that really has formed a really core part of who I am today in terms of the kind of work that I do and the way that I position myself because there is this perception around the world that Africa is Black.

And I think it's really important of course for us to recognize that because it comes with a lot of violences, deep-seated tensions from communities around the continent. But I think that there are a lot of other stories and a lot of other narratives that are missing, and I am really passionate about being able to bring those to the fore in the work that I do. So that's where I come from. I grew up in this small town and went to the same school from nursery all the way to high school.

Willie Thompson:
Whoa.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yep, same campus. It was a beautiful, beautiful campus. I went to the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa. I pursued the IB program from the primary years program all the way to the diploma, and then I moved to New York out of all places in the world. So it's from what feels like the smallest city in the world to big city, bright lights kind of life to pursue this degree in acting at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

So that was a very big shift for me and huge culture shock. And of course I refused to accept it 'cause I thought, "Okay, it's fine. I'll adjust. I'll adjust. You have to persevere. You can't talk about culture shock, you can't talk about how difficult it is to be away from home." It was really, really tough. But it also opened up the world to me in terms of what was possible career-wise.

Taylor Goss:
When you were growing up, what was your relationship with art like?

Karishma Bhagani:
So I actually grew up dancing. Not many people know this, and I guess now the whole world will know this, but I grew up as a dancer. My mom often joked that I learned how to dance before I learned how to walk. So she sent me for a lot of dance classes as a kid. I started dancing when I was about two. I did ballet and tap and I'm classically trained as well. So Kathak and Bharatanatyam, and I never really
finished any of those forms of training. So in classical Indian dance, there's this moment that you have, which is kind of like a coming of age moment for young women around the age of 16, you do what is called an Arangetram. It's like your graduation for dance where you do a couple of different repertory sort of performances and then a couple of original forms of choreography that you've trained with, with your guru.

But it's quite an expensive endeavor. It's almost as expensive as paying for a big, fat Indian wedding. So when the time came and I said to mom and dad, "Okay, so should I do this thing?" They're like, "Well, look, it's going to be very expensive. We can't afford it. If we have to fly judges in from abroad, I don't think this is going to work."

Taylor Goss:
Oh, wow. Okay.

Karishma Bhagani:
So I left the education incomplete and as I reflect, as a kid, I pursued a lot of different hobbies in the arts as well as sports and whatnot that I left incomplete. And as a child, it felt like I would never have the opportunity to go beyond my academics and be this well-rounded person. But in retrospect, I think that's what really formulated the core of who I am as a person. There's a politics of incompleteness that exists in my work, but that has made me more of a conscious producer in the performing arts today because the people that I work with come from similar backgrounds and come from similar sort of life stories.

So as a practicing artist who didn't necessarily get to fully complete any kind of training, I'm extra conscious of making sure that the spaces that I curate or create or help produce are as well-equipped as possible to make sure that those around me can complete whatever they need to complete. So that's, I guess, how art influenced the work that I do today.

Willie Thompson:
I'm going to let that sit for a second. That was good.

Taylor Goss:
I love your thoughts on leaving things incomplete and what sounds to me like comfort with uncertainty, potentially, or comfort with diverging perspectives. Did that lead directly to acting for you? So you pursued this degree in acting in NYU. Why did you decide on that degree and why NYU?

Willie Thompson:
And maybe also to that, why'd you add history? I sort of feel like there's this, even seeing your PhD journey, you have a minor in the PhD. I know you can have a minor in a PhD, but I sort of see this supplemental or this exploration of what can complement sort of your experience in academia. So if you can also tailor this question, just include why history as well.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah. So I thought that I would become a lawyer. When I was five years old, I said to my parents, I'm going to Harvard on a full scholarship, very Legally Blonde kind of journey.
As a five-year-old does.

Karishma Bhagani:
As a five-year-old, of course. I mean, what else would a five-year-old be thinking about other than going to Harvard for law school? So that was the dream. And of course then when the moment came to apply for school, first generation college student from a low income family, and so I didn’t really have folks in my family that I could look up to or talk to about the application process. So it’s only once I started applying that I realized, oh, if you were going to pursue this degree in the US, you’re going to need an undergrad and then take pre-law classes before applying to law school.

So I thought, okay, well in that case, what am I good at? Or what could I see myself doing for four years without feeling like I’m going to fail? And acting was the only thing that came to mind. Drama. I used to love doing theater as a kid alongside dancing and tennis and netball and badminton, and I used to direct a lot of shows in school. And so I thought this would be a nice way to pass the time for undergrad. And then of course I immediately regretted it because the auditioning process was just so rigorous and so grueling, and I had never been through anything like this before.

But in hindsight, I’m really grateful to have gotten the kind of training that I did at NYU under the acting program. It’s there where I realized that the impact that I wanted to make as a lawyer, I could make through the arts. And it goes back to what we were talking about earlier. Art can be the center of the discussions and the conversation and the change that we want to make in this world.

So started off with this acting career, and I was in the experimental theater wing, so lots of stuff was being thrown at me from the avant-garde world that I just never had experienced before.

Taylor Goss:
Black box theater vibe.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah, completely. Everybody comes dressed in black and talks about how they just had these artistic moments in the middle of their dreams. And I was just sitting there like I am dreaming about home and making sure that I finish my assignments on time and still trying to struggle to experience the hustle and bustle of the city and trying to find my way around and make sure I don’t miss the train and make sure that, you know, all of these things. Long story short, I kept wanting more. I kept wanting to see the bigger picture, what’s bigger than just acting?

So some of my advisors, Catherine Coray and Kevin Kuhlke, advised that I take directing classes, ‘cause that’ll give me a bigger scope, I’ll be able to sit back and watch what happens and help sort of string things together as it were.

Started doing directing. Really fell in love with it, but more like a hobby than an actual career. And so towards the final year of my graduation, I thought, okay, so what is it really that could be bigger than directing? How can I really think about the structures and the spaces in more depth and detail? Because again, I was finding that I was often the only person from my context writing about my stories and my perspectives. And I knew that there were a lot of other people who had potentially more interesting stories to tell than mine.

So how do we create a space where more Africans can tell their own stories from different perspectives and different backgrounds and bridging different kinds of arts? And that’s how I got into producing. I worked with the Nairobi Musical Theater Initiative first as an intern and then became their associate
producing director in 2019, right before the pandemic. And so that was really my entry point into the producing world.

Willie Thompson:
And I've heard you talk a bit about the difference between directing and producing from your mentor Roberta Levitow, I believe, who said that directors are sort of architects, producers are sort of people who construct. And so I'm wondering to your point around the Imagine a World statement about art being centered to the conversation. What is your take on where art is now in our ability to have conversation and how do you think about bringing people into a context and experience that they're unfamiliar with?

Because as an African-American, for example, I think a lot about August Wilson and what he did with the Pittsburgh Cycle and being like, "Oh, wow, this Black man wrote a play for every decade in the 20th century about Black life and how that's been an outlet to center sort of Blackness in America in a way." So I'm wondering for you just to that point, where is art now and how do you bring people into that?

Karishma Bhagani:
It's a great question. I do not think that the conversation about where art is now can be had without a conversation around equity and equality and the differences between that. You can not have a conversation about what kind of art has the potential of changing the world if that art does not embody the multiple perspectives that exist in the world. And I think that we are still at that place of decolonizing a certain kind of canon in different parts of the world, right from even thinking about the systems and the circuits that exist. Broadway Market, for example, what work exists in the Broadway Market and which perspectives is it privileging? It's not enough to say we're having work that is done by and for people of color, it's not enough. I think that it's important to recognize that we've come a really, really long way, and this is where, going back to your previous question, my interest in history sort of sprung up.

I think it's really critical for us to acknowledge the things that have happened in our pasts and learn from them so that we can avoid imposing the same kinds of violences in our future, but that also positions us in a place to think about who has a seat at the table and then what kinds of seats are those seats. Some people have high chairs, some people have stools, some people have ladders. How do we make sure that the person who's on the ladder can actually equally have the same kind of relationship with the person on the stool? Those levels are completely different, but that they can be on the same table and they need to, in order for any kind of productive conversation to happen.

Willie Thompson:
You spitting, girl. My brain's going two different directions. I'm trying to figure out which way it's most conducive to the conversation. One really quickly is could you just elaborate on what it means to decolonize a canon? We talked about this in the Kay and Lydia episode about people who are in PhD programs. You ask them a question, you can tell them they thought about it extensively, and there's a lot of thought behind it. And sometimes a lot of my friends who are in PhD programs are like, "I'm in this program to bridge the ivory tower with communities and people who might not have access to those spaces."

And so one, would just love to embody some of that and bringing this theory into practicality and how you think about it and defining decolonizing a canon. And then, I'll save my other question for later because I think it'll fit in somewhere else. So let's go with that one real quick and then I'll pass off to Taylor.
Karishma Bhagani:

Yeah. Well, there are many approaches, but the two that speak to me that are resonant in this moment are informed by both the rigor of the theory that we’re learning in class and then also just the reality of what exists on the ground. As I mentioned earlier, I practiced on the continent. I’ve produced a couple of festivals, independent shows, as well as have a portfolio of artists that I essentially work with to help them imagine their work regardless of the stage that it’s at. And this work is not just touring locally, but regionally, and then also transnationally. I think of course, first and foremost, when you think about a canon, you think about the works that come to mind immediately, the Eurocentric realities in America, the America-centric realities, and what is an America-centric canon which avoids or excludes the voices of people of color, for example.

And again, I use that as a very blanket statement, kind of. So I think one of the first steps is to think about expanding the canon and thinking about, for example, works like August Wilson's to be included in this kind of discourse, but it's not just enough. It's never enough, but it's not just enough to add work to the canon. I think it's also important to have a decolonial lens with which to understand the canon. Right?

Willie Thompson:

Oh, okay.

Karishma Bhagani:

So it's not just about let's add more material, but it's also what lens are we looking at the material through? That lens is determined by a Eurocentric understanding of the world. Linear storytelling structures, for example, and not tributary, longer non-plot driven structures that still then becomes a colonial way of thinking about works that maybe might benefit from a different way of being assessed or being read.

So that would be my very gut answer to how do we think about decolonizing a certain kind of canon? And in practice it's also important to acknowledge the institutions within which we work. Right? Of course, at some point in the coming years, the way institutions exist is going to change. I don't know if it's going to happen in our lifetime. And so in our lifetime, how do we use the resources, education, and networks that we have to work within those institutions to alter them from within because they will burn down eventually. But before that happens, how do we use the space to make the thing happen the way we want it?

Taylor Goss:

In the interest of engaging in some non-linear storytelling, you've mentioned a little bit about a few of your mentors. You've thrown out some names of some of your mentors and in entering these institutions that you're talking about and beginning to understand them, but also comparing them with the world from which you came, who are some people that shine especially brightly in your story?

Karishma Bhagani:

Wow. I think we might need a whole series on that.

Taylor Goss:

This is the challenge of the podcast time limit.
Karishma Bhagani:
Right. Exactly, exactly. Well, I don't think I'll be able to name all of them, but I will-

Taylor Goss:
Sure, of course.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah. I will say that from the household to my professional world, I've been surrounded by a bunch of really, really powerful women ever since I've grown up, starting with my grandmother, who was the culture keeper of our household, the managerial mind who would make sure everything was done to perfection in raising us and in taking care of the entire household. And of course, I would be remiss if I didn't mention my mother either. The two of them collectively sort of raised me to be the woman that I am today. Both teaching me that there are paths to independence that are different from the kinds of stories in lives they led, but also reminding me to stay grounded in my values and in my culture and in my family.

Of course, that family has expanded to include women, friends from all around the world, just different people both in the professional and in my personal life. You mentioned Roberta Levitow, who I really think is really, really special to me because she opened up the world professionally for me to think about producing even as a career. And she's one of my mentors who has unabashedly told me the thing I needed to hear in the moment. And it's oftentimes been very, very hard for her to say things and for me to hear them. But I always look back at the kinds of advice that she gave me because they've really shaped who I am today, and this is just one, this is just one person. And there's so many other women that I'm thinking about at the moment that I'm sending all my love and affection to as you ask me this question.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, Christian Tanja, who's on the admissions team, would always talk about how people have constellations of support. So I can imagine that there's a whole galaxy out there of folks.

Karishma Bhagani:
Absolutely. Absolutely. You feel it in different ways, you know? The departed as well, those that I haven't met. My great-grandmother, for example. You feel it in your bones sometimes just walking and you realize, actually there's this aura around me that's just holding me and making sure that I'm protected and taken care of and taking the right path.

Taylor Goss:
That's beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing.

Willie Thompson:
So based on that reflection, I now will go to the second question that was on my mind. How supportive was your family of this pursuit of the arts, considering the fact you've been talking about law school since the age of five, and not to get tethered to the single story too much, but I think one of the single stories by immigrant families or international families is like, so you want to go do the arts and you want to make a living with that. Are you sure?
And so how did that experience play out for you and how has it changed since undergrad to now? Because you're pursuing a terminal degree, I didn't even know Stanford, to be honest, I didn't know Stanford had a PhD program in what you're doing, which maybe that's limitation of my imagination, but how has that process been for you and your family in light of all the support they've given you and all the ways you've talked about?

Karishma Bhagani:
I'll actually, I'll take it back really quick and tell a story that my mother recently shared with me. She's the oldest daughter of her family, and she sees herself as this rule-following, law-abiding human. She did everything she was told to. She took care of everyone she needed to take care of. And then she said to me, she said, Karishma, the day I was born, I realized, oh, the day I was born. So as in the day she gave birth to me, she realized that if she continued to do that, then I would be raised doing nothing but following rules and following normative structures that would continue to replicate a certain kind of oppression that my people face. And so she said, "I had to start breaking the rules so that you could see what it would be like to have no limits to your imagination."

And that really stuck with me when she shared it because I think that's the thing that inspired me to even think that I could pursue something different from a doctor, engineer, lawyer or some kind of money-making endeavor. And to that end, both my parents have been nothing but supportive, and I've been so grateful to be able to have the kind of open relationship that I have with them to say, "Hey, I want to pursue a degree in the arts." And it was not a straightforward, "Yeah, yeah, definitely do it." We sat down and we had a conversation and we came up with a plan of, "Okay, so how is this going to work? How do we think about whether or not this is going to be something you can sustain yourself on?" And my dad really, really championed that. He sat down and he said, "Look, you have our support no matter what, you know that, but let me ask you how you are going to think about what you're going to do once you graduate."

In that way, I really hope that whoever's listening to this, if it's somebody who is looking to pursue some kind of career in the arts and doesn't necessarily have the same kind of support, I just want you to know that it's not impossible. It's a great life out there. It's hard and it's definitely a choice, but every career and every kind of path will come with its own challenges. But the people you meet along the way and the joy that there is and being able to be in the same room and make work and have friends that become chosen family is very unique I think, to this career and to this field.

Taylor Goss:
That is so great. It's funny you saying this, it's making me think about my family. I'm a musician primarily, and I've always felt that my family has been similarly supportive. And it's such a blessing to feel that not only do you have your family support, but also their encouragement and you were saying that, and their help, in understanding what can this world look like because it's not always the most sure or stable thing to create a career in making change through the arts.

Karishma Bhagani:
Absolutely. I know we've had this conversation before that I think it then becomes our responsibility to create that kind of space for those that might not have it in their families. And so I'm in awe of all the work that you do to foster that kind of network and community on our campus and in our community as scholars, but also in the world.

Taylor Goss:
That's very sweet. And you do the same work, and I'm so glad that people who are listening can hear that encouragement from you because you are a very encouraging person who carries around this welcoming into the world of art with everywhere you go. So I'm appreciative of that.

Karishma Bhagani:
Hugging you from across the table. Thank you.

Willie Thompson:
Amazing.

Taylor Goss:
At the point where we left off in your stories, in a chronological sense, you've entered these institutions, you're thinking about how to change them from the inside. You are supported by your family, you're creating this constellation of support. When you start thinking about your graduate program and applying to Knight-Hennessy, where are you with your art? What are your priorities and what was your mindset when applying to Stanford?

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah, there is a very big division between academia and praxis in the performing arts.

Taylor Goss:
Absolutely.

Karishma Bhagani:
And that was really the large motivator for me to apply for the PhD. I was also, it was in the middle of the pandemic, and I was thinking, "Okay, so what are the kinds of communities that I want to foster and how will I be able to do that and do the work that I want to do in the coming years?" And it felt like graduate school was the right thing to do in that moment. So I only applied to one school because also I thought to myself, this is a gamble. I don't know if this is the path. This is one option. So let me just...

Willie Thompson:
Shoot your shot.

Karishma Bhagani:
Exactly. We have a phrase, throw the ugali on the wall and see if it sticks. Ugali is one of our staple dishes back home in Kenya. And as we're making it, to see whether or not the texture is perfect, often we'll take some out of the sufaria, out the pot, and throw it on the wall. And if it sticks, then you're good to go.

Willie Thompson:
Is this a rice dish or?

Karishma Bhagani:
It's made of flour.
Willie Thompson:
I'm getting hungry.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah, maybe post podcast, I can... teach it.

Willie Thompson:
Hey, look, you're on the record now, so...

Karishma Bhagani:
We will send photos to our listeners after.

So yeah, so I only applied to one school and then I thought to myself, okay, well there's this scholarship opportunity at Knight-Hennessy. And once I learned about it, I realized that actually this is the space that I need to be in if I really want to think about how the arts can make an impact in other fields and in other landscapes, global landscapes. I remain the only theater and performance studies scholar within our community, so I really, as I graduate this year, I really hope that we have a couple more, because I really think that the humanities community and then of course the artist community is quite small, but I think quite powerful in our little community here. So I really hope that it continues to expand.

But going back to your question, that felt like one of the paths that I wanted to pursue to really think about, have conversations not only across industries, but even within our own, because there's that difference between academia and practice. And if we were to have a more fluid conversation between both of these worlds, I think the quality of both works, both academic publications as well as work that's on stages, would be positively impacted, make a huge difference, I think.

Willie Thompson:
Can you exemplify a little bit of this tension for me? Because in a lot of ways, what you said confirms how I initially think of sort of terminal degrees in other fields, even in the humanities, where I think of a PhD in English. I'm like, all right, cool. I sort of see where there's a relationship and there's symbiosis there, and in the art, it sort of feels like, to your point, most of the people I've met who've done theater, aren't in academia. And I'm wondering if you can talk more about examples of that rift and how the work you're doing right now will lead to building this connective tissue that allows for what you talked about earlier.

Karishma Bhagani:
Well, for starters, I think the perception is often that if you go to pursue a PhD, you're intending on teaching. And I think that's great, but I think that there are other possibilities that one could pursue after getting a PhD. And that's really what I'm interested in thinking about how once I have my doctorate, I could go back into the producing world and not only write about ethical decolonial producing practices that can inform academia, but also do them on the ground, actually learn from scholar, artist-based practices. So I think Stanford's program is actually really well positioned in that way because they speak of creating and producing the next generation of artists, scholars. And I really think that embodies the idea of being able to bridge academia and praxis.

Another example I think is that universities increasingly can become the spaces for development of new work. The industry here in the United States is not significantly funded, but it is much better funded by the government, for example, than many countries in Africa. And so the circuits, the Broadway circuits
or the sort of regional theater circuits exist very separately from state universities, for example, or private universities like this one. And I think that performance studies departments or performance spaces on campus could be that breeding ground for industry professionals to come into this space and work with students, have conversations about whatever aesthetic choices have been made on stage, but also be able to provide resources for very early stage developmental works. And I say that because it's usually the works by marginalized populations, low income populations, international populations that don't receive the kind of funding from commercial markets at the development stage, which is then why they're not considered for these large commercial markets.

But the university can be that kind of space because the university boasts and preaches ideas of decolonial thought more often than not. And so if we're learning that in theory, then why not bring Middle Eastern voices, African voices to the space and see it in action? I say Middle Eastern and African because that's a lot of the work that I focus on here. And we've been doing a lot of staged readings and a lot of other workshops around some of the place, coming from these regions. So that's why Middle East and Africa came up as the first two.

Willie Thompson:
And that also shows up in your work, Haldi and Honey.

Karishma Bhagani:
Oh, you've done your research.

Willie Thompson:
A little bit. That's really encouraging to hear. I've never heard someone pitch the university as a platform for this idea of validation and experimentation and decolonization that I find very resonant.

Karishma Bhagani:
Well it's another example of working from within, right? These institutional setups are complicated and problematic and add all of the words there that express some of our sentiments in this space. But they can also be space for protest. They can also be spaces for resistance. And we have seen that around the world with movements like Rhodes Must Fall and Gandhi Must Fall. Those all happen from university contexts.

Taylor Goss:
So since arriving at Stanford and entering the Knight-Hennessy community, how has Knight-Hennessy and the people around that you've met around Stanford contributed to your vision of this change-focused world and art?

Karishma Bhagani:
I think it goes back to what we were talking about earlier, which is that this community is so diverse, not just in terms of where people come from and their backgrounds, what they study, but just even in one body, in one person, the different forms of thinking, the different ways of relating with the world are enough to engage in conversations that can span hours, but teach me so much about topics and regions in the world that I have no idea of. And yeah, the community is a microcosm of what the real world is and world has the potential to be. It's really informed the way I think about my little art world as being in conversation with the medical industry or with economics.
As a producer, for me, the business side of the arts is of utmost importance. So if we're thinking about commercial work, how do we make sure that there is a return on investment? How do we make sure that, and I ask these questions to myself all the time, how do we make sure that the work that we're putting on stage is actually, the labor behind it, is recognized and we're able to make some kind of profit out of it that can be shared. And if it's not a profit-making piece, then what are the other values and how can we think of creative partnerships across industries and regions to make this work happen?

So I think that being able to have these kinds of informal conversations, have a brain trust of friends in this community has been really valuable in that way. Where I can be myself and I can be honest and about my gaps in knowledge and also receive the same kind of generosity and say, "Yeah, I'm happy to help you this way. Can you help me with this?" That kind of exchange has been really, really valuable. And it's also fun.

Graduate school is hard. I think a lot of times these conversations focus around, okay, community, how are you building a network of academic support and this and that? But it's like, guys, I just want to be able to put my feet up and have a glass of wine with a couple of people that I love because life is hard and I'm not getting enough sleep. And so it's so nice to have those people that I know that I can pick up the phone any day and say, "Hey, Geraldine, are you free? Can we hang out?" Or "Hey, Kay, are you free? What are you doing? We need to talk."

Willie Thompson:
Talking about some great names there, some good folks.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yes, yes, yes, yes. So many, Hari Yashwin, like so many other loved ones of mine here.

Taylor Goss:
And as you've mentioned, you're of course a student studying theater, but you're also a practicing director and producer. And Willie mentioned your piece, Haldi and Honey. And I'm curious to know, could you talk about a work that you felt particularly proud of or that particularly excited you that you'd like to share?

Karishma Bhagani:
Yeah, I'll speak about Haldi and Honey, because I think it's a piece that goes back to again, what we were saying about the university as a space that could be the breeding ground for new work that we can experiment with.

So as part of our second year in the Theater and Performance Studies Department, which by the way, we have exams each year, like qualifying exams each year.

Willie Thompson:
What? You have a qualifying exam every year?

Taylor Goss:
Wow.

Karishma Bhagani:
Yes, my friend. Yeah, we do. We have a first year paper, a comprehensive exam in the first year, a performance and a candidacy paper in the second, orals in our third, a prospectus in the fourth, and the dissertation.

Taylor Goss:
You're a strong person.

Willie Thompson:
My goodness.

Karishma Bhagani:
I named that to say that sometimes I think there's this perception that pursuing a degree in the arts, film studies, or music is just, yeah, you get to put your feet up and watch movies all day.

Taylor Goss:
Not the case, not the case.

Karishma Bhagani:
Or, oh, how could you not want to play the violin 24 hours a day? Or how could you not want to be in the theater? It is as hard as a chemistry degree, if not harder. And this is not to compare, it's just to say that there's a lot of labor that goes into this work. And for me, I cannot sit in a cinema for fun anymore, right?

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow. I'm so sorry.

Karishma Bhagani:
I cannot watch art for fun anymore. So then the labor of developing new hobbies that are no longer things that other people go to is a tough one too.

So anyway, so Haldi and Honey, I mean, was part of my second year candidacy exam. We did the graduate repertory performances and we're expected to create a work that is new and related to our research in some way. And so I pitched a project that I could direct but also produce because I was really interested in thinking about building partnerships across campus that could take me through my future years. I hope to direct a main stage show in the coming years. That's a musical that I've been working on with Aleya and a couple of other colleagues, that's a brown-black love story in Kenya. That's one of the core focuses of my research as well. So I thought, let me take this opportunity to experiment.

We raised some funds to invite Aleya to spend a month with us on campus as she wrote a new story. And her and I were focused on, we both lost our grandmothers at similar moments. And as you know, she is one of the big reasons, my pillar. She's my pillar and continues to be. And so we wanted to create a piece around that idea of grief and grieving and losing loved ones that could speak to a universal audience. And also she'd been thinking about also situating what it means to be a South Asian in Kenya today from an intergenerational perspective. And one thing that was of priority to her was to have works for older women. We just don't see older Southeast Asian women on stage in the same way. Those were our little ingredients, as it were. And then we just got into the room and made the work.
And it was a draft, it was a sketch. For me, that was a big step in my own growth because I'm so used to having work on stage that's done, that's complete. And this I think is part of being a former British colony, being educated in that way, that it has to be at the best possible level. Otherwise you're not positioning yourself for excellence. Breaking that for me was big. It was a sketch, it was a piece of work that still had a lot of dramaturgical flaws that still needed to be developed, but we had the opportunity to experiment with it and bring in an audience and see how they'd respond. Had a talk back, and we're at that stage now where we have enough meat and enough material and enough content to then go into our next stage of rewriting in the hopes that a theater will pick it up later on, or that we can have a premiere in Kenya.

So, I wanted to provide a different angle there to say that I'm proud of that work because it helps me let go of perfectionist standards.

Willie Thompson:
I love it.

Karishma Bhagani:
But also position the university and my research as a space for me to just throw the ugali on the wall and see what sticks.

Willie Thompson:
In sticking, it is. I can't wait to see this hopefully on the circuit somewhere.

Taylor Goss:
I think that we are friends, so if you could hook us up with tickets at some point, that would be appreciated.

Karishma Bhagani:
Front row seats!

Taylor Goss:
This is recorded. This is recorded.

Willie Thompson:
All right. A meal and an in-kind contribution to see a play first hand. I love it.

Karishma Bhagani:
Anytime, anytime.

Willie Thompson:
Well look, I know we're coming up on time here, so let's transition to some of our closing questions that folks are probably familiar with. A key part of this Knight-Hennessy experience is this idea of improbable facts. So I think you even sort of started talking a little bit about this earlier in your story about dancing before you, never crawling, just dancing. And maybe you have something that you want to say about
Mississippi Masala and Denzel Washington. But just, what is some improbable facts about you that would be cool to share or to hear from?

Karishma Bhagani:
Folks that are listening, for context, we just had a 15-minute-long conversation before this podcast about how a world where everybody was some kind of manifestation of Denzel would just be a great world to live in, very hot world to live in, literally, and otherwise.

Taylor Goss:
It would make it more difficult for some of us. I'm just going to say.

Willie Thompson:
For sure.

Karishma Bhagani:
I don't know that Denzel in any other form is better than the Denzel in Mississippi. It's a beautiful film. Anyway, I picked up three languages at a go as a kid, so my mother was very strategic about how she wanted me to learn these languages. So the minute I started speaking or babbling, she only spoke to me in English, grandparents only in Gujarati, and my dad and the folks that, at the shop, were working around the house and would only speak to me in Kiswahili. So I picked up those three languages at a go. But it's also what explains why I keep mixing things so much. So a lot of my friends say that in one sentence they can hear about four accents. And that comes from having trained in the British system, for example, and then speaking these three various languages, all of which have different intonations. And then I picked up French and Hindi and Urdu later on. So that added another layer of just lots of accents going on. So if you can't understand me, I don't blame you.

Willie Thompson:
No. The mic is on. We hear you clearly. Yeah, yeah.

Taylor Goss:
So as we're closing and wrapping up here, the final question we like, final question...

Willie Thompson:
Once you get a lisp.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. I picked up an accent during this conversation. To close, what advice would you have for other people applying to Stanford and Knight-Hennessy? What would you say to them?

Karishma Bhagani:
Probably the most cliche thing, which is be you, but also treat the applications as an opportunity for you to connect with yourself more than a means to an end. Graduate school is not for everybody. The application cycle is hard. And even if you really, really, really want it, and you really, really believe that you're the best candidate possible for whatever program or for Knight-Hennessy, instead of having that
be your end goal, think about the applications as a way for you to learn about what your pitch statement for the rest of your life will be for yourself.

And that can change over the years. But I think for me, writing that Knight-Hennessy application and thinking about it like that, allowed me to think about what it is I want to do with the rest of my life. And it was that learning opportunity that I found very valuable. And then of course, cherry on top when I got in, but that's the advice I would give. Be you and use this as a way to learn about yourself more than anything else.

Taylor Goss:
Beautifully said. And I'm so glad that you have found yourself in this community and that we can learn from you and your light and that you can bring this change-focused artist vision to Knight-Hennessy. So thank you for being here, and thank you for spending time with us and for sharing your story and your vision with the audience of Imagine A World.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, we love it so much. And yeah, the hyphenate artist-scholar.

Taylor Goss:
I know. Artist, scholar, practicing producer, director.

Willie Thompson:
All the things.

Taylor Goss:
Great friend, funny person.

Willie Thompson:
No, yeah, she had jokes for days. Fashionable.

Taylor Goss:
Very fashionable. Let's go back to that. Let's emphasize this beautiful red jacket that unfortunately you can't see right now.

Willie Thompson:
Denzel's a devil in the blue dress. She's an angel in a red jacket. Well, cool.

Karishma Bhagani:
Well, thank you.

Willie Thompson:
You're welcome. And to be clear, you're completing, which is basically finishing Knight-Hennessy, but you're not leaving Stanford.
I joke with my friends that I might just be here when their children are attending, so you just never know. I still have a couple of years to go.

Willie Thompson:
Okay.

Taylor Goss:
It will be a great service wherever you are.

Karishma Bhagani:
You're very kind. Thank you for creating this space and for opening this opportunity up for us to tell our stories. It really, really is beautiful, and I love each of the episodes, so thank you.

Willie Thompson:
Thank you.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine a World, where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields, challenging the status quo, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie Thompson:
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