

NINA MOINI: In a recent interview with host Sanni Brown for MPR's *Carbon Sound*, Minneapolis-based therapist and author Resmaa Menakem shared this advice for creatives.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Do the weird stuff. Play. A lot of the old heads ain't gonna understand.

SANNI BROWN: The playfulness?

RESMAA MENAKEM: Yeah.

SANNI BROWN: Oh my goodness.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Yeah. Laugh, giggle, make fun of each other, hug each other, tend to each other, belly laughs. You know what I mean? Inappropriate belly laughs like when you're laughing at stuff that you should be. Those pieces are the nectar of creation. Creation springs from those types of things.

NINA MOINI: That was so good we don't even need to do this interview. I think you said it all. No, Menakem has a new creation, an Afrofuturist play called *Mothership* that he co-wrote with Kristen Adele Calhoun. It's showing now as the opening production of Penumbra Theater's 50th anniversary season. Resmaa Menakem joins me now in the studio. Welcome to the program. Thank you so much for being here.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Thank you, sibling. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

NINA MOINI: You already stopped by the building to talk with Sanni as we played. You started to laugh and chuckle when we played that for you. I'm curious what was the spark of creativity that led to this new project for you,

RESMAA MENAKEM: *Mothership*. Yeah. First, I was asked.

NINA MOINI: That helps.

RESMAA MENAKEM: That's the first thing. I was asked by Sarah Bellamy, and then the next piece is that I think pressure and squeeze sometimes can spurn beautiful art. The resistance spurns beautiful art. And we're all experiencing a lot of pressure and squeeze right now, and so this naturally came out of that.

NINA MOINI: Can you tell us a little bit just of the plot of *Mothership*?

RESMAA MENAKEM: Yeah, yeah. So it's basically about a ravaged world and Black people still existing in it and Black people moving towards liberation and what has to happen in order for that liberation to actually emerge.

NINA MOINI: And that's what Afrofuturism is all about.

RESMAA Yeah, yeah, yeah. Afrofuturism really-- shout out to one of my ancestors, Octavia Butler, who really talked about how Afrofuturism in its essence is seeing yourself in the future. And if you watch a lot of sci-fi and a lot of-- there was only one Black person on *Star Trek*. And we have to really write ourselves and imagine ourselves into the future. Regardless of who else-- who is trying to thwart that from happening, we have to see ourselves in the future.

MENAKEM:

NINA MOINI: The ship in *Mothership* is sentient--

RESMAA Yes.

MENAKEM:

NINA MOINI: Meaning it has consciousness. We're hearing a lot right now about artificial intelligence every day in the news, the risks it poses to humanity. Is your mothership a reference to AI or how do you see it?

RESMAA Yeah, it's a reference to AI but not artificial intelligence. It's ancestral intelligence. It is the reaching in and back for things that are sustaining, that are tied to creation, that allow for generativity to be present along with decay, along with peril, along with possibility. All of those things take place in the ancestral realm, not the artificial realm.

MENAKEM:

NINA MOINI: So much of your life's work has been focused on helping people heal in various ways, through your art and through your words and just the idea of healing minds and bodies from trauma linked to racism. How does theater fit into that work?

RESMAA Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So any artistic endeavor I think can aid us in what I call playing with the imaginings, playing with imagination. When you-- when you're being hurt and persistently being hurt, sometimes you can't see a future. You literally have to imagine it. And imagination is a power in and of itself.

MENAKEM:

And so for me, art helped to spur that. It's one of the reasons why this structure, why the structure of colonialism and white supremacy and sexism is one of the reasons why one of the first things they go for is the artist is because that idea, that seed of imagining yourself and imagining liberation will actually create cracks within the current structure. And so for me, my nonfiction writing, my fiction writing, all of that is part of the same soup for me.

NINA MOINI: I think people don't how much it takes to imagine and then what that really takes for people sometimes to be able to imagine. And so--

RESMAA Especially if you're still being brutalized. Like as a woman, if you're still continuing to face-- and especially as a Black woman-- continuing to face misogynoir, it's really hard to imagine yourself not facing it. And so this is where community comes in. This is where other art comes in is that the other art can say, oh, I can dream into that, too.

MENAKEM:

NINA MOINI: I also don't want to talk about-- you've been working on a TV pilot that you're going to be presenting soon. You're doing a lot of different mediums of your work. Tell me more about that.

RESMAA So much of my work a lot of times has been focused on nonfiction writing. And when Sarah asked me three years ago to do the-- to do *Mothership*, I didn't what it was going to germinate in me. And it just started-- things are just starting to come out.

MENAKEM:

And so this Friday at the Capri Theater, I will be showing a television pilot that I wrote a sci-fi television pilot. So I'm inviting people to come if you want to come and watch it. It starts at 7:00 at the Capri Theater. And it's about what we've done is we've taken the idea of invisibility from a sci-fi place and then married it with the idea of Ralph Ellison's invisibility so how people are rendered invisible in a structure like this.

NINA MOINI: One of the things we've touched on a little bit but I want to hear more about is this process of co-writing with Kristen Adele Calhoun. How was that for you?

RESMAA
MENAKEM: It was beautiful. It was-- anytime I get to work with a Black woman like her who is so open and so just amenable to ideas, you could-- a lot of times you can do stuff collaboratively with somebody, and all of a sudden you find out, oh, they are not amenable to anything. They don't want to hear any of your ideas. And she was just so open and gracious, and we'll continue to work together again I'm sure.

NINA MOINI: Somebody told me that when you're writing though that you do like a voice note or voice memos. I love that. Tell me about that.

RESMAA
MENAKEM: See, I can't write-- when one of my friends told me who's now my manager said that I should write a book, in my mind, the way that we have been conditioned to think about writing a book is like Hemingway or James Baldwin. You just sit down and mint julep and stuff.

NINA MOINI: It's like birds-- yeah.

RESMAA
MENAKEM: And you just you go at it at the computer or typewriter. I tried to do that, and all of my works sounded mechanical. It sounded like I was editing before it actually--

NINA MOINI: I get that.

RESMAA
MENAKEM: --got on the page. So one of the things that was introduced to me was actually talking into a recorder, sending it to a transcriptionist, having them give it back to me. And then edit that. And that's why my books, if you've read any of my books, it sounds like I'm reading or it sounds like I'm talking to you. The reason why it sounds like that is because that's the way-- that's the cadence in the way that I speak.

And so all I do is just once I get it out on the paper, I edit it, I move things around, I push things around and stuff like that, and then I publish it. And so all of my writing is like that.

NINA MOINI: Well, that's part of creativity, too, figuring out what works best for you.

RESMAA
MENAKEM: Exactly.

NINA MOINI: What is your process--

RESMAA
MENAKEM: Exactly.

NINA MOINI: And you don't have to do it the way maybe you always thought or other people did it.

RESMAA
MENAKEM: That's right.

NINA MOINI: So the play opened last week. It runs through October 4th. What are you hearing from people? Is it always fun to hear the reaction?

RESMAA MENAKEM: Yeah, it is. I was at opening night and one of the-- and I'm going to be there tomorrow at-- for the show tomorrow because they will have question and answers. So after the play is over, I'll be sitting there and people can ask questions.

It's really wild sitting in the audience and having people laugh at something you actually wanted them to laugh at. You know what I mean.

NINA MOINI: It's like phew.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Yeah. They got it.

NINA MOINI: A little relief. Yeah.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Or cry or shudder or one of the things that happens in the play is that people are-- the actors are asking each other to breathe and the hum and do stuff like that. And then to hear people in the audience do it with them. It's wild, man. So this is my first play, and I'm having a ball.

NINA MOINI: I'm so happy for you. Thank you so much for coming by *Minnesota Now* and sharing with us. Resmaa Menakem, we really appreciate your time. Thank you.

RESMAA MENAKEM: Appreciate you, sibling.

NINA MOINI: Congratulations. Resmaa Menakem is a Minneapolis-based healer and author. He co-wrote the play *Mothership*, which is showing now through October 4th at Penumbra Theater.