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From St. Thomas Summers to Broadway Lights: Lamar Richardson Nominated For Tony Award

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Actor and producer Lamar Richardson sees himself as an "honorary St. Thomian", having spent some of his formative years in the USVI. By. LIA CHANG

A son of immigrant parents with roots firmly planted in the Virgin Islands is celebrating significant recognition in the world of theater.

Lamar Richardson, recently nominated for a Tony Award for his role as a co-producer of the musical New York, New York, is at age 30 one of the youngest black producers to be shortlisted for the prestigious recognition. Though he was born in New Jersey and raised in North Carolina, his family migrated from Antigua to St. Thomas in 1968, a piece of personal history he relates to with pride.

New York, New York is a 2023 musical that is loosely based on the 1977 film of the same name directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Liza Minnelli and Robert De Niro. The show had its world premiere on Broadway at the St. James Theatre in a production directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman, with previews beginning March 24, 2023 and opening on April 26.

“I grew up spending summers in St. Thomas with my maternal grandmother, Petrinella (Mary Ann) Francis, and I also lived with her at one point during my childhood,” Mr. Richardson told Consortium journalists in an exclusive interview. He said much of his youth was shaped by excursions to Red Hook, Nadir, Smith Bay and Contant Knolls, and added “some of my fondest memories are there, and I consider myself an honorary St. Thomian.”

Mr. Richardson described his nomination for Best Musical as a surreal moment after a decade of pursuing his acting career and after finally reaching what he considers a pinnacle as a producer. “I am still processing everything because it really hasn’t hit me just yet. I am very proud and humbled by this amazing recognition,” he said. The actor/producer says he watched the nominations live on CBS with Gayle King and was ecstatic when he heard the show announced. “It’s been a labor of love for everyone involved, and it’s great to take in all of the celebration at this moment.”

For Mr. Richardson, the nomination is validation of his years of effort. “I am the son of immigrant parents and I have now put Antigua and St. Thomas on the map in a major way. I stand in the gap for all Caribbean artists to show what is possible in today’s world and the undeniable importance of art in our culture,” he passionately affirmed.

Mr. Richardson started his production career just 11 months ago after a decade of being an actor. Years ago, he received the opportunity of a lifetime when Phylicia Rashad of The Cosby Show offered him the role of Sylvester in her theater production of August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. According to Richardson, since then “I’ve always been committed to advocating for and supporting the theater. This pivot to producing was the perfect way to capitalize upon all of my strengths and interests.”

Mr. Richardson made his co-producer Broadway debut this past fall with Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. He describes this experience as historic, noting that it was the first time the production was done on Broadway with an all-Black cast. “This was a momentous occasion for me as I literally was a part of history in the making,” says Richardson.

These accomplishments have been brewing for a long time, as Richardson’s passion for theater was ignited from an early age. “I grew up in church performing as a kid and always doing plays and skits over the years,” he shared. In college, he became involved with the Black Theatre Ensemble later performing in Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro. He went on to perform in several plays in New York city as well as television appearances in shows such as HBO's Boardwalk Empire, NBC's New Amsterdam and CBS' FBI.

While acting and producing are his life’s passions, the road hasn’t always been easy. Speaking on his experiences of co-producing New York, New York, Richardson explained, “A lot of my job involves finding financing for the show from investors. Broadway shows cost millions of dollars to get on stage... and we are responsible for representing the show and advocating on its behalf to secure funding.” This proved challenging in a post-Covid economy, but everything seemed to come full circle on opening night a few weeks ago. With a great sense of pride, the Tony-nominated producer observed, “New York City changed my life and afforded me the opportunity to chase my dreams, and this show is the culmination of everything coming to pass.”

Despite the challenges encountered along the way, Richardson says the gratification is immense, as he remains touched by the thousands of lives affected, changed, and inspired by the shows he help to produce. “Art heals and saves lives, and I am a firm believer in its power to change humanity for the better,” he stated. In that vein, he has offered the following advice to aspiring creatives in the Virgin Islands and the diaspora: “With God, all things are possible and it doesn’t matter how you look, where you’re from, or what you may perceive as limitations because you can still accomplish your wildest dreams.”

He added, “Ignore the naysayers and keep pressing forward and never give up on you. Always bet on yourself and know that you are worthy. There’s nothing you can’t accomplish and the best is yet to come!”

Apart from his newfound role as a producer, Lamar Richardson is still actively working as an actor, appearing in an episode of CBS’s Blue Bloods airing next week, and a role in Richard Lawson’s film Black Terror, coming out in a few months.

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