

In Proximity
Season 3 Episode 8
Azie Tesfai
Final Transcript

Azie Tesfai: I heard one of the producers—a room full of producers, and I heard one of the producers say, "Ugh, I don't know why everyone thinks they can act" out loud. Have you heard of the tiara syndrome? It's when you work really hard, and you keep your head down, and you wait for someone else to crown you, but you need to lift your head up and crown yourself.

Paola Mardo: Another first! Look at you.

Azie Tesfai: Another first.

[00:12 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today I'm talking to a real-life superhero. Azie Tesfai is an actor, writer, and producer. She is the first Eritrean and Ethiopian person to play a superhero onscreen. She was The Guardian on the CW's Supergirl TV series, executive produced by Greg Berlanti. She also wrote an episode of that show and is one of the few actors turned writer/producers. Azie is no stranger to being the first of many things as the child of immigrants and as someone who was on track to be a lawyer before she pivoted into acting.

On this episode, Azie talks about how she navigated imposter syndrome, learned how to ask for help and slide into DMs for work, and how she balances being an actor, writer, and producer all while infusing a little bit of her heritage into the stories she tells. Here's my conversation with Azie Tesfai.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Paola Mardo: Azie Tesfai, welcome to In Proximity. Thanks for joining me today. Before we start the actual conversation, we have a little ice-breaker that we're going to start with. And we found someone to send you a surprise question—

Azie Tesfai: Oh, my gosh!

Paola Mardo: Via voice memo. And I'm going to play it, you're going to guess who it is, and then you will answer the question. Are you ready?

Azie Tesfai: I—don't make me cry! Okay.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Okay. I'm going to turn it up. And here we go.

[VOICE MEMO]

2 Chainz: Well, well, well. Hello, neighbor. When are we going to start on Deep in the Dell? Wink, wink.

[VOICE MEMO ENDS]

Azie Tesfai: Tony, aka 2 Chainz.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Aka your neighbor.

Azie Tesfai: Aka my neighbor. I can't believe you guys got him to leave a voice note. That's such a funny surprise. That was the last person. I thought it was going to be, like, my first-grade teacher, so that threw me.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh. That's for next episode.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: So he said—I don't even know if I'm saying this right—"When are we going to start on Deep in the Dell? Wink, wink." What is that?

Azie Tesfai: We have a show idea.

Paola Mardo: Ooh! Are you—can you talk about it?

Azie Tesfai: We live in a very crazy neighborhood, and we have—we have a group chat. Not a group chat. The group chat's him and I. And we text about the things in our neighborhood, and I like to think that we're like Neighborhood Watch and we know everything that goes down. And so we joke that we should make a TV show about it.

Random producers around town will come up to me and be like, "So are you and 2 Chainz, or Tony, really going to do your"—and so, yeah. I'm very thrown. I did not expect that to be him.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Azie, thanks for being here. Really excited to talk to you. I mean, you've been in proximity to Proximity for quite a bit now, and we'll get into some of that later. But first, I want to reach a little deeper in the past and just talk about your growing up because I feel like you have a really interesting story. Tell me about young Azie. What was she like as a kid?

Azie Tesfai: I got “the most talkative in class” every single year, couldn't sit still, which I think that those kids are all kind of creatives now, the ones who always got, “like, doesn't sit down,” “can't focus,” “talks too much.” I was—I always have been really close with my mom. I was raised by immigrant parents. My mom was like a magical immigrant mother who told me I could do anything at a very young age as long as I worked really hard and focused and put my mind to it, that truly anything was possible. And I think that childhood belief system that was imparted on me changed my life.

Paola Mardo: I love that. Did you act or write or do any of the arts?

Azie Tesfai: No, I thought I was going to be a lawyer.

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Well, so here's the thing. Children of immigrants, which I know you understand, doctor, lawyer, or engineer is kind of what your parents tell you your whole life because they escaped war for you to do better than them. And better is a steady job, which, you know, I went in the opposite direction. I thought I was going to be a corporate lawyer for a long time. And then I interned with one and realized that I would be better served as, like, a human rights lawyer.

Paola Mardo: I'm curious if that has to do with, like, your family story. I mean, you're the first person in your family to be born in the U.S.?

Azie Tesfai: Mm-hmm.

Paola Mardo: What's it like being the first generation born here?

Azie Tesfai: There's a pressure in it that I maybe look back on as an adult that I didn't realize as a small kid. I think my mom and my family did a good job of kind of sheltering me from it. But I definitely now look back, and when you're the first of something, you don't want to mess up. And if you do mess up, that could affect the—how it goes for the rest of your family. And so I think I was very type A. This is like therapy now.

Now that I look back on it, I'm sure that my type A personality and overachiever personality came from wanting to create more opportunities even with the family and not—not mess up an opportunity from my mom and dad.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Tell me about the places you grew up in, though, because you were born here, but you also moved back to Ethiopia and Eritrea, I believe. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. So I was raised in Los Angeles, and I think, you know, the wonderful thing about my mom is I think she knew that if I grew up just in L.A. that I would probably not be her ideal child.

Paola Mardo: What does that mean?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. I was trying to be politically correct. No. We're so lucky in Los Angeles, and I think there's so much abundance and opportunity and possibility, and it's a land of dream, and to grow up in it is a really beautiful thing, actually, to be born and raised here, but, you know, what you're exposed to is what you know, and at a very young age, my mother took me to Ethiopia for the first time.

Paola Mardo: How old were you?

Azie Tesfai: Eleven.

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Azie Tesfai: And all of my family was still there. It was a very overwhelming feeling at that age to see pretty much, at that time, everyone else in my family live in a country that was so beautiful in a lot of ways but also had a lot less advantages than we have here. I remember this moment that just popped into my mind of, like, I'm 11, and my six-year-old cousin going to drink water—we were playing outside—from the fountain. And I went to go drink it after her, and my aunt yelled because it would make me sick. And then I looked, and the water was brown.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai: And so I was like, "Well, why can my little six-year-old cousin have this, and I can't?" And so, at a very young age, I think I was just aware that there were things that felt deeply unfair even in the family dynamic. And so my mom, at a young age, imparted, like, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" And so I always felt like the blessing of kind of being between two worlds was, like, how do I figure out how to blend these and make one maybe help the other in some way? And then I went to a French high school that was in L.A. that was an international school that was also in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Paola Mardo: Just going back to that whole, you know, being first-generation and, like, the pressure, I mean, you were also, like, you said type A?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: I mean...

Azie Tesfai: I've just come to terms with it.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: But you were also, like—you went to high school in Ethiopia but then got into a bunch of Ivy League schools?

Azie Tesfai: So I went to school here. I went to an international school—

Paola Mardo: Oh, okay. Got it.

Azie Tesfai:—a French school that was here but also was there.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha.

Azie Tesfai: And then, yes, I was the kid that was, like, all the extracurricular activities, prom queen, president of the school, 4.3 GPA. I was an over—it probably was, like, not healthy. And again, it's, you know, the immigrant parent thing of, like, there was no tutor that they wouldn't hire and no—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: It's like, your whole job is to do well in school so that you have the most opportunity. And my mom especially really felt like education was, like, freedom to everything. And so she's like, "This is the thing. This is the thing you need to focus on." And so I—I really—probably because I felt the pressure of it, but really, like, superseded, I think, expectation.

Paola Mardo: Wow. And you were prom queen and class president.

Azie Tesfai: I mean, I peaked.

Paola Mardo: My goodness!

Azie Tesfai: I peaked then.

Paola Mardo: How can you top that?

Azie Tesfai: I don't know.

Paola Mardo: Then you went to Berkeley.

Azie Tesfai: I did.

Paola Mardo: You went to Cal!

Azie Tesfai: I did.

Paola Mardo: Why have we not talked about this? I grew up partially in the Bay, so I'm like—

Azie Tesfai: I know!

Paola Mardo: What?

Azie Tesfai: Well, it's like, working with you guys, you have to kind of be Bay-forward.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Bay-forward, yes.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. I walked in with my Berkeley, like, you know?

Paola Mardo: Okay. Like, you wore the Cal sweatshirt or—

Azie Tesfai: I should have. That would've been smart, but yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah. What was your major?

Azie Tesfai: I did business.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Azie Tesfai: Which was like, I'm going to go to law school, but I, I think I did business because there was a piece of me that was like, I don't know if I want to do this, but I'm too scared to say I don't want to do it yet. So business felt like, no matter where I pivot, I'll use it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: So at what point did you find acting?

Azie Tesfai: Okay. So here—I'm going to—I don't know if I've ever actually said this. I'm, like, feeling free. I don't know if it's the heat today or what, but my senior year of college, I was doing my—I'm laughing because I've never said this—but I, I was doing my thesis. Essentially, I'm, like, studying postmodern society. Don't know why. And I went through, like, my first heartbreak and my first, like, love breakup. And I thought, as most do, that I was going to die. Like, I went to bed, and I was like, oh, I'm going to die from a broken heart.

And my best friend growing up was an actress, and got an opportunity to kind of audition for something through her.

Paola Mardo: So she was a professional, like, working TV actress or—

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, film, TV, mainly film.

Paola Mardo: Down in L.A.?

Azie Tesfai: Mm-hmm.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Azie Tesfai: And so I was like—normally, I would never do that opportunity, but I was, like, so excited to get out of Berkeley, to have a break. And so I was like, "Yeah, I'll come to L.A. for an audition."

Paola Mardo: And what was the role?

Azie Tesfai: It was a Nickelodeon something where I played, like, a surfer party—I mean, it was—like, did not require talent. I'll just say that.

Paola Mardo: Surfer party girl?

Azie Tesfai: Pretty much. Yeah. Yeah. And I got it.

Paola Mardo: What? Okay.

Azie Tesfai: But my mom was like, "You're not dropping out of college for a career you just thought about yesterday. You're going to finish your degree." But it was, like, enough to get me, like, a manager and then—

Paola Mardo: Wow. So you excelled at that, too. Wow.

Azie Tesfai: I fell into it by luck, and then it—I would say it was, like, easy in the beginning. And then, when I committed to wanting to be an actor, then it became hard because it was like, "Oh, you want it? Now earn it."

Paola Mardo: Right.

Azie Tesfai: But it felt very serendipitous that—that it worked out the way it did. And then I was really just going to take a year before law school to do it. That was kind of the, the—

Paola Mardo: But you were just going to do it for a year and then go into the real world or whatever?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, and then go take my LSAT and go to law school.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. But then what made you not do that?

Azie Tesfai: So my first job that I got shortly after I graduated was—this is crazy, and this never happens, but it was a series regular. I shot like 60 episodes of, like, a show that filmed in San Diego. It was with Tatum O'Neal. And I was like, this is the best job in the whole world. And I got to live on the beach with my dog, and the cast was really fun. And I'm like, if this is acting...

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wait, what was the show?

Azie Tesfai: It was called Wicked Games.

Paola Mardo: Okay. What was your—what did you play on Wicked Games?

Azie Tesfai: It was like a soapy drama.

Paola Mardo: But I feel like that's where a lot of actors, especially starting out, tend to, like, you know, hone your chops on soaps because it's—yeah.

Azie Tesfai: It was bootcamp, yeah. And we did like—so they wrote 60 episodes, and then they gave them to you on the first day, and we shot by location. So we shot for a year, 60 episodes, but you would do, like, if they were shooting the nightclub scene, so it's Episode 1, Episode 24, Episode 56. Like, we—

Paola Mardo: All the nightclub scenes?

Azie Tesfai: Like, we shot it like a film.

Paola Mardo: Wow!

Azie Tesfai: And so we would do, I think, like 17 pages a day.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai: And so it was like a bootcamp. But I loved it, and I—my first—I will say this. My first day of work, I remember I was like, how did I get here? How did this—which tends to be the way that I operate. Like, I kind of naively go into things and then, once it's starting, I panic. And I remember an exec—I think it was FOX Studios that was overseeing it—came up to me on set and was like, "We're so happy to have you!" And I turned around, and I just threw up because I

was so nervous. And he was like, "All right. Well, have a great first shoot day!" I was like, "Oh, I'm an actor."

Paola Mardo: Oh, man. I love it. I love it. That's an incredible story.

Azie Tesfai: I try not to overthink things until a minute. And then—

Paola Mardo: Then you—then you vomit.

Azie Tesfai: Then I—then you vomit, and you have to deliver because you're under contract. That is the key.

[12:14 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So when you started really committing to acting, how did your parents take that?

Azie Tesfai: Not good. My dad was very against it. My mom didn't understand it, but then once she realized how passionate I was about it, I think she fell back on her, "You can do anything." And actually, the moments where I wanted to quit, my mom was really the person, which was surprising because I think she would've preferred for me to go to law school because that made sense to tell family and friends. It was a tangible career path, and they were like, "How's Azie doing?"

"Oh, she's at this law firm," versus, like, "She's filming a soap in San Diego." But my mom was like, "We don't quit." And so that mentality, I think, you know, superseded the confusion of the career choice.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. She's like, "You chose this. Can't quit."

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, "If you're going to leave, you leave doing it," not, you know, not struggling.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah. You know, acting, I feel like, is such a—it's, like, a hard profession, and, I mean, I'm going to—I haven't said this. Well, for those who know me, I did musical theater and theater growing up.

Azie Tesfai: Oh, my gosh!

Paola Mardo: Actually, one of my earliest dreams was to be an MTV VJ. This was pre-podcast, so it all kind of makes sense.

Azie Tesfai: I actually totally, in our, like—

Paola Mardo: Did you see our set? No, I'm kidding.

Azie Tesfai: Yes, I could totally see you being an MTV veejay.

Paola Mardo: But I got into—because that's all—you know, when you're in high school or even before that, like, that's all you have, right, acting? No one tells you about directing or producing, like those jobs, the behind-the-camera jobs. I got into acting. I loved the craft of it. I actually preferred, like, the acting more than the musical theater, but I just love musical theater just as a viewer. But the more—as I got older, it just—I started to realize, like, maybe I'm not an actor, because it really is a difficult craft. And then the audition process, having to go out, put yourself out there—

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: I mean, you have to really want it. And I wanted to tell stories and not in that way anymore when I got older. So, I don't know, how did you sort of find that passion and hone it and stick to it? Because it's like a sport, almost, to really—

Azie Tesfai: It is a sport. You have to—the endurance and the resilience is pretty necessary to do it. I had someone tell me early on, "Only do this if you are okay doing local theater and never really making it by society's standards. Like, only do it if you really love the art of it, because then everything else is a bonus." And I think that shift of mindset for me really helped because I'm just—I love it. Like, I love the process of creating and being a character, and if that's an audition, then it's an audition, but that—I get to play in that moment. If that's a play, it's a play. And so then any TV thing or film project was like a cherry on the ice cream sundae, and I didn't actually have the expectation of it. So I think that that was always a good mindset. Like, if you, at the end of your life, are like, "I just was a creative, and I maybe didn't get the recognition or any accolades from it or any attention from it or great financial gain," would you still feel like you went after the thing, and you'd be happy? And for me, it was yes, so.

Paola Mardo: Was there a moment where you were like—because also it's such a subjective profession. Do you have like—I don't want to say, like, lows in your acting life. But were there moments, especially when you were first starting out, like, where you start to question, like, "Oh, maybe I should go to law school?"

Azie Tesfai: I have this audition story that is so awful. I went in for—we'll just call it a franchise procedural show that doesn't exist anymore.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Azie Tesfai: And I had a—like, such a good audition in the morning with the casting directors, it felt like, "Ooh, I feel good." It was like a—not even a big role. It's to play, like, Nurse #2, right? But Nurse #2 had a lot of medical things to say. And then they were like, "Oh, you're—this was great. Like, you're going to get this. Come back in for the producers, just a formality."

And I came in, and it was, like, there was something wrong with the lot and the—all the things. And then they were like, "No, you have to park in this lot this time," which was like a 10-extra-minute walk. Whatever, things that got me a bit flustered. I came in, and then I had to go straight in. I thought I had a minute. And I went in, and I flubbed the first take.

And casting was like, "It's fine. Let's do it again." And I heard one of the producers, a room full of producers, and I heard one of the producers say, "Ugh, I don't know why everyone thinks they can act," out loud.

Paola Mardo: Whew! Whew.

Azie Tesfai: And let's just say I never got the take right. Like, I think I did it like three or four more times, and I couldn't. And I think I said, "I'm just going to go." And it was so degrading and embarrassing, and I took in someone else's—do you know what? I never saw their face. It's, like, you're in this room doing an audition, and it's, like, dark, and then the light's on you. But I could hear them clear as day. And that was probably the—and I just remember going in the car and crying and being like, what am I—what am I doing this for?

And—and, you know, those kind of people are not why we make art, the critical and the cruel at the end of the day because I was like a—just a kid trying to get a guest star. But that was definitely a moment where I'm like, I don't—I love the art of it, but I don't know if I like the business of it.

Paola Mardo: Man, that's a—I'm sorry that happened to you.

Azie Tesfai: It's okay.

Paola Mardo: And that's—

Azie Tesfai: It made me better.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, but the business sucks, or can suck, you know?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Yeah. And I think people don't ever talk about, like, the embarrassing moments along the journey. And everybody has them, and I think the more that we can kind of normalize that it's hard, and in those moments, you're not the one that should be feeling shameful. For anyone that is auditioning and has had someone be rude to them in moments where you, like, did all this work and prepared it, and you're kind of going in to be vulnerable, like, don't let them take that away from you. And I'm, like, speaking this as if I wish I had told myself that then, you know?

[17:55 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: It's really valuable to hear, especially from you as someone who's been on this acting journey for quite a while now, because I was going to ask you if you have advice for, like, actors coming in at this moment.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, I can't imagine. I was on a show for a long time during COVID and then after. And so this whole self-taping era—

Paola Mardo: Yeah, it's different.

Azie Tesfai:—that we're in post-COVID is—is—I can't imagine starting right now.

Paola Mardo: Can you explain a little bit for people who don't really know, like, acting and what that was?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Everything's remote. I mean, even on the writing side, right? Like, so in terms of acting, you would be auditioning in the room. You would get to know casting directors. If you didn't get the role, but they loved your personality or they're like, "We got to know you a bit, so we're going to bring you in for something else." So many roles I booked were relationships that—the audition wasn't the thing, but I got something else.

And then, on the writing side, pitching in a room is similar. You go in. You have a relationship with someone who is—they felt your energy and your vibe. You were able to, like, have a real connection. And everything has moved to digital. So auditions are all self-tapes sent in. Pictures are all on Zoom. You have a tight window with pitches. They don't offer as much time.

So that human connection is lost. And so it's, it's hard because almost everything has to be more perfect.

[19:12 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So you start as an actor. Well, lawyer to actor to writer.

Azie Tesfai: Mm-hmm.

Paola Mardo: Can we talk about that? And before we do, actually, because we've had conversations about being the first of things.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You've talked about this to me a few times. And, yeah, I mean, I wrote—I wrote down some of your firsts: first Ethiopian or Eritrean person to play a superhero on television, first actor to ever write an episode for a CW show, and specifically for a Greg Burlanti show, Supergirl. Am I missing any other firsts? I feel like there were others in the—

Azie Tesfai: Probably.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: But those are big. Those are big. I mean, when you look back, you're like, "I did that." Do you—do you feel a sense of pride, or are you like, "How did I do that?" Or—

Azie Tesfai: I think I just never want to—this is my own, maybe, neurosis, but I never want to mess up so that there's not more behind me, or I always want to make sure I do the best I can so they're like, "We should give more opportunities to" whatever I'm being the first of. And that's always felt really important to me. But—but yeah, I think never having an example from my culture, specifically, of anyone that was doing anything in the creative, that feels super important to me in terms of, like, there's other things we can do. And I know I can say that, but it's maybe valuable if I do it and then speak on it. And then I always try to do, like, talks and things, especially with, like, Eritrean and Ethiopian creatives to be like, "What do you want to do? And, like, let's figure out how to do it."

Paola Mardo: So, when you were acting, you played a role on Supergirl, Kelly Olsen, who then became Guardian. Well, there's the acting side to it, but then I want to ask about how you decided to—I don't even know how it worked. How did you end up writing that episode? Because actors don't normally show up in the writers room and, like, write an episode of TV. Like, how did that—how did you find the courage to do that, honestly?

Azie Tesfai: I think I just was pretty burnt-out with acting. And I had pivoted once before. I—there was a couple years where I quit acting and ran a nonprofit accessories line and then went back and did Jane the Virgin. So I was kind of used to, when I was feeling not fulfilled, to stop versus just pushing past it. I think I have a lot of flaws, but the one thing I'm proud of is that I pivot when something doesn't feel right. I've never been scared to kind of pivot, or I have been scared, but I'll push through it.

And so I think, towards Supergirl, I definitely was like—it was a grind. And—

Paola Mardo: It was like six seasons and like—

Azie Tesfai: And like 20-something episodes, and being a superhero's, like, the coolest thing ever, but it's so hard. And it's like, I feel like—

Paola Mardo: It's hard. I mean, I don't even know what it's like. So you tell me.

Azie Tesfai: It's really hard. And, and you have to do stunt training, and then you have to shoot, and then you have to go to train to do—for fight scenes. And I just didn't realize that I naively, again, was like, "Oh, my super suit's so cool. This is going to be so awesome!" And it is a grind.

And so I think I just got to the place where I was really exhausted. And one of my best friends on the show was in transpo, and—her name's Terrel. She would joke that I would start just, like, going to work in my pajamas. And she was like, "How are we doing?"

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: LOL.

Azie Tesfai: It was like I just kind of like, "I'm here. I'm going to do"—and I had lost the kind of fire. My costar in it, Chyler Leigh, and I were very passionate about the characters that we were playing on it together. And we really dissected the material and wanted to make sure we honored our fans. We had specific fans on that show that were—it meant a lot to them. And so I just became—in the beginning, I was very passive, where I'm like, you know, that "it's not my job."

And then I was like, no, this is my responsibility. And I think I really leaned into that, like, more and more and more every season. And then, by our last season, the pandemic really allowed space for me to be like, I really want to write a sample episode just to kind of show this, like, incredible—and the superhero was a Black, queer superhero/psychologist, brilliant, like all of these intersections that I was so honored to represent that I wanted to do her right. And so I'm like, let me see if I can do this by, like, showing instead of telling or complaining or anything like that.

Paola Mardo: Can you—like, for those who haven't seen it, can you explain a little bit about what that episode was and—

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. It was post-pandemic, which incorporated George Floyd and I think a lot of trauma coming up for a lot of people, especially Black folks. And written a sample during the pandemic that had kind of similar sentiments to it.

Paola Mardo: So you just wrote it on your own. You were like, "I'm going to write basically a spec script for Supergirl."

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: "Focused on my character," or, like—

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Well, so our showrunners are really great about, like, telling us the end of the season, what's coming up, and then beginning of the season.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha.

Azie Tesfai: So we have a really clear idea of what they're doing with our characters and generally. So I—I knew what was happening, and so I tried to kind of—which, you know, that script did not get made. It was what got me to the writers room.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. So how did—can you explain how that—were you like, "Hey, showrunner, here's"—

Azie Tesfai: So I—okay, here's the real. I had gone through a lot of grief right before the pandemic. I had lost my dog suddenly in, like, a freak accident. One of my closest friends passed away in a car accident. And then a week later, it was the pandemic. So I—I had, like, heavy grief. I got into really intense kind of therapy, trauma therapy, and I started writing more just to kind of cope with the big feelings of not just dealing with immense grief but then also being in lockdown with it, which, like, how do you navigate that? I was in a different country. I ended up coming back to L.A., but at the time, I was still in Vancouver. We shot in Vancouver, Canada. They shut down the border pretty quickly. So there was no coming in and out of—of the country.

And so writing became kind of a fuel for me in that. And then, as we went through the pandemic, more emotional things happened, I think, with police brutality and George Floyd. And then there was, for me, a lot of experiences, particularly as an actress, with hair and makeup that I didn't realize was racist. I knew it was racist. I didn't realize how racist it was, the things that I had been put through throughout the years in terms of being in the hair and makeup trailer. And I know a lot of actresses talk about it, and it has gotten a lot better. But there's so much that you realize later is very degrading as a Black actress in our industry that you're subjected—you can be subjected to in that trailer based—because of your hair texture or your skin color.

And so I was unpacking a lot of that in real-time. And so writing became an outlet for me emotionally. And then I called the Jane the Virgin showrunner, who I'm really close with, and was kind of talking through a lot of it with her. I was very lost. Like, this did not come out of an empowering place. It came out—which I—I'm realizing now a lot of my art comes from really broken places, actually. When I'm good, I don't make great things. When I'm pretty rock-bottom, that's when I think everything I've sold or made has come out of that place.

And she was like—I had this idea, and she was like, "Let's develop it together." And so I actually developing a show with her based on a life experience of mine. And that was a very therapeutic experience. And I didn't write it. We brought on a writer that was one of the writers of Jane the Virgin. But she's such a genius that I—we did mini rooms together, kind of, where we were breaking story and pilot, and I was learning how to pitch. And, and I was in every single session, and I was like, "Oh, wow, like, crafting story is so incredible."

And that gave me the fire to then want to, like—oh, telling the story can be a very proactive way of fixing some of the misrepresentations in society or in self. You have more power behind the lens. And so I—I hired a writing coach like a nerd. And I'm going to be honest with you, the writing coach was awful.

Paola Mardo: I may have heard about this.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. We're friends. I—told me how hard writing is, told me, like, "It's going to be like 20 session and, like, so much money."

Paola Mardo: Like a million dollars?

Azie Tesfai: A million dollars. And I was like, oh, I knew I wasn't meant to be—writing's so hard. That's why whenever someone comes up to me, and they're like, "It's too hard to do," I'm like—I say no. It is hard, but because I don't want you to not stop because—sorry, I don't want you to not start because it's hard. And then my friend Megan, who's an incredible writer and showrunner, happened to call me to see, like, "Hey, are you crying today? Because it's the pandemic. How are you doing?"

And I was like, "I cried this morning. I'm great. How are you?" And I'm like, "I just had this call with this writing coach, and I thought I could do it, but I can't."

She was like, "You can do it." And she's, like, a very established writer and showrunner and has a show on Hulu. And she was like, "I'm going to connect you with someone in the writer's room—in my writer's room because it's the pandemic. And you can pay them what you want." And so me and this writer made an agreement, and she made it—they made it fun. And we'd meet a couple times a week. I would write material. She would give me notes. She was like, "You really just got to learn structure." And then I fell in love. And so it was like the source of, like, learning came from a very positive—and then I was like, I want to write. None of it came from me.

Paola Mardo: I think it did. It did.

Azie Tesfai: It came from, like, a supportive community mixed with trauma. Trauma plus supportive community equals art.

Paola Mardo: You sound like an artist.

[28:42 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Well, going back to the writing real quick, too, starting is hard, but being consistent, I feel like is also harder. How do you stay consistent, even now, to continue that writing habit?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Even then, I think I was going to be a writer. I was very lucky to have Greg Berlanti as a producer on Supergirl. And he did get on a Zoom with me, which I thought, when I got the text, it was, like, a prank person. And he read the script, and he was like, "So you're a writer. How do we support you?"

And I was like, "No, I'm not a writer. I wrote an episode." He was like, "Okay, reframe that. You're a writer."

And I was like, "I'm a baby writer." He was like, "Take the word 'baby' out. You're a writer." And I kept saying thank you, and he was like, "Say it once." And then he was like, "Well, what do you want?" And I was nervous, and he was like, "You can be confident in what you"—and, like, all of these little micro-lessons. And so I was like—you know, it's like practicing in the mirror. I joke, being a superhero, you have, like—for DC, at least, we had, like, superhero poses like hands on the hips, arms crossed, feet. They're just power poses, really, when you think about it.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wait, is it just, like, in a book or something that you're supposed to learn all these poses?

Azie Tesfai: Well, we just knew. So, like, when we had group superhero scenes, we were like, "Which one are you doing?" so we wouldn't all do the same one. But they're essentially power poses. And so people would think, like, "Oh, your suit made you confident." It's like, no, your superhero stance makes you confident, which is chin up, shoulders back, chest out, legs shoulder-length apart, which grounds you. So it was—you know, it's like that kind of helps you fake it until you make it in a weird way.

And so, with the writing, I was like, okay, I'm going to say these words that this person I respect so much as, like, a forced mentor is telling me to say, but I don't believe them.

Paola Mardo: Reframe that: as a mentor!

Azie Tesfai: As a mentor! See? He would say the same thing. But I—but I, I was like—I didn't believe it at first, but then the crazy thing is, he was like, "Start asking people for things, and you'll be surprised how they say yes."

Paola Mardo: Hell, yeah. Snaps to that. Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: And then around, around the same time, I had a—Susan Rovner, who was at Warner Bros. at the time, had—we were doing some work thing. And she was like, "I don't mean to be—overstep, but have you heard of the tiara syndrome?"

And I was like, "Tiara syndrome? What's that?"

And she was like, "It's when you work really hard, and you keep your head down, and you wait for someone else to crown you. But you need to lift your head up and crown yourself."

Paola Mardo: Ooh!

Azie Tesfai: And I was like, "Oh, I have that." She was like, "I know." And so, so then I was like—I started—she was like, "Try asking." And so she was kind of my first ask of something. And then I started asking people, "Can I pitch you?" or I would start DM-ing old writers from shows I worked on like, "Hey, can I"—

Paola Mardo: I'm taking notes right now. Oh, my gosh.

Azie Tesfai: "Can I pitch you an idea?" which sliding into the DMs for me is for work.

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Azie Tesfai: I was sliding into DMs of people I worked with eight years ago, and they would answer. It may take a while, but they were like, "This is wild, but yeah, here's my number. You want to call me and pitch your idea?"

Paola Mardo: Sick.

Azie Tesfai: And people, in the beginning especially, were like, "Yeah, yeah!" And I couldn't believe it.

Paola Mardo: But I have to say you also have to have the drive, and you have to be good. And I'm not saying, like, you have to be perfect at it, but I feel like you had the drive, and you work really hard. You have the ethic. If you didn't have that—

Azie Tesfai: I had the idea then.

Paola Mardo: An idea, yeah. Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. I didn't know how, necessarily, but I had the idea. And thanks to the support of those people that were like, "Just start asking," I started asking for help, which is, like, as an immigrant child, as a woman, we don't—

Paola Mardo: So hard!

Azie Tesfai: So hard. There was a script that I had written that I really wanted to do, and I had mentioned it to Greg. And he was like, "Let's do it. Let's see it." And I was like, "It's not ready." And I held onto this precious thing. And someone at the CW was like, "We'd love to see it." And I—and then, you know, the network fell apart. And I just remember I was like—I read it recently, and I was like, oh, it was good! Like, why didn't you just—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: You know? And so now I'm like, don't make that mistake again.

Paola Mardo: Do you feel like it was perfectionism or something or—

Azie Tesfai: I think, as women, many times we feel like we need to do things 20 times to do the—to be given first chance. Like, I have another friend who created a show and wanted to direct it. And she waited three seasons, and there were directors coming in who had never done it before, and it wasn't even their show. But she was like, "I need to shadow one more time," or it's that need of us feeling like we have to be so ready.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Versus, like, it's okay if we jump in and we make mistakes. And so I think, like, once I got that, I was like, I'm, I'm actually—I'm not totally ready, but I have these ideas. And I just wrote one-pagers. And I wrote these one-pagers. I asked—you know, Berlanti Productions was like my home, kind of. I had been working with them for so long. And then I had Jenny Ermin, who I had worked with for so long. And I was like, "Can you send me samples of pitches?"

Paola Mardo: You asked for that?

Azie Tesfai: Of old pitches.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai: And then I'd just study them, and then I just literally matched them with my idea. And then I would give those to writers that I wanted to work with.

Paola Mardo: Amazing. Amazing.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, fake it until you make it.

Paola Mardo: Fake it until you make it.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Slide into those DMs.

Azie Tesfai: Say thank you once.

Paola Mardo: Yes. Don't, don't slide into DMs for—for work purposes, for work.

Azie Tesfai: I mean, you can slide into DMs for whatever you want. But it really—it really—and I've had writers now message me and be like, "Hey, my showrunner's doing a project with you, and they say that you slid into his DMs. What was the wording you used?"

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Azie Tesfai: I was like, "Just ask."

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Just ask.

Azie Tesfai: Worst they'll say is no.

Paola Mardo: Yes. That's true. I've learned that, too. May have gotten your voice memo through that.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah!

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Anyway, last little things.

Azie Tesfai: This is amazing.

Paola Mardo: Talk a little bit about your process, too, because acting/writing/directing, balancing all of that, like, you know, how do you structure your days? What are some sort of tips you can give people?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You know, who want to—or multihyphenates or who just are trying to do a lot of things because right now, you kind of have to do a little bit of everything, right?

Azie Tesfai: A lot, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: I think I have like—and not—most of it's not announced yet, but I think I have like eight things in development right now, which is kind of unbelievable.

Paola Mardo: Exciting.

Azie Tesfai: And I'm doing, like, a book project, and I'm doing unscripted, and so—and I'm acting. I'm fully back into acting. And so I recently, in the last like month—so this is like a new, I guess, tip that I've learned from other people that I admire that I'm integrating—I'm trying, to the best I can, block out a—like, a half a day or a day for a project.

So what I used to do is I would have Zooms all day. I would try to block out, like, acting time versus, like, producing/writing time. But then I would get up and do a Zoom at 8:00 a.m. for one project, do one at 9:00 for another project. It was too scattered for me, and sometimes you still—I still have to do that. But I'm really trying to do, like, if I'm doing a certain project, I'll do the Zoom in the morning, and then I'll block out time to write for it or do whatever I need to do for that specific project while I'm in the mindset, and then do an afternoon for something different.

So I really try to do a block of time or, ideally, like a day. Like, I'm working on this book. I did a day the other day just from start to finish. Any meetings that came up, I was able to rearrange. And then, for acting, I block out, like, if it's an audition or if I'm filming, I block out a day to just kind of, like, get into it and focus.

[35:19 - “Good Times” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So you've been writing a book.

Azie Tesfai: I have been.

Paola Mardo: Can you talk about what it's about?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. So I am writing a DC—it's so crazy—a DC Comics kids book. They're doing kids for the first time, and—

Paola Mardo: Another first! Look at you.

Azie Tesfai: Another first, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Okay. Snaps. Yes. Exciting.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Yeah. It's really exciting. I just kind of locked—just locked my draft, like, yesterday. So—and have an awesome illustrator. And another first that is really exciting is I made the main character Ethiopian. So it's the first time an Ethiopian character has ever been featured in DC history—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai:—which is going to be very cool.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai: And she's a little girl, and so that just—I mean, it makes me emotional because I'm like, oh, I wish—I wish I had this when I was little. And, I don't know, maybe I just make art for my—for little Azie in some weird way. But, yeah, so I'm very excited. I got all the good superheroes. They were very generous and—

Paola Mardo: That's amazing.

[36:17 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Some people, like, if they ever got into a position where you're in, like acting, producing, writing, like, culture isn't always something, I guess, put at the forefront of people's work, if that makes sense. But why is that still so important to you even now?

Azie Tesfai: You know, when I was, like, in kindergarten—I grew in—and first-gen. kids, we're like—we grew up essentially in full cultural households. And I was so proud of my culture. And then I went to kindergarten, and I remember one of the first days of school, this kid asked me where I was from. And I was like, "Oh, I'm—you know, I'm Eritrean/Ethiopian." No one knew where Eritrea was. But he was like, "Ethiopia? That's the place with the kids with the distended bellies and the flies around his face." And he started laughing, and everyone started making fun of me, and I had so much, like, shame. And it was like, I had been so proud of the complexities of my culture. And I think, for the first time, I was embarrassed by it.

And I'm sad to say that it lasted years. So then I just didn't say that I was from where I was from. I think people would ask if I was, like, mixed race or this or that, and I would just say yes and not—I denied my identity for a chunk of time. I just look back on that time, and I feel like if I had some sort of example or there was something in the media that—it's still my passion because many people still only think of Ethiopia with that very wrong perspective, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Because that's the only thing that's been shown.

Paola Mardo: Right. In the media.

Azie Tesfai: In the media, yeah. You know, even in, like, pitching the project that I was—have been doing with Proximity, like, there were execs that were Black execs that were like, "I'm embarrassed to admit this, but I actually know that that's not what Ethiopia's like, but I don't have a visual that's replaced it in my mind so I still only see that image."

And I'm like, I get it! Like, our—our visual representation of what we think something is is based on what we've seen in movies and television shows, and the power that that has. So, for me, I was like, I never want a young girl from any culture, but especially from my culture, to feel the shame that I felt for probably a decade to be where I was from and to want to feel small and invisible.

Like, I love my culture, and, like, it has its complexities, and it's, you know, still a developing country. But, like, there's so much beauty and depth and history and culture, and it's never been colonized, and all this cool stuff that people don't know. And so, if I can highlight that in

everything that I do, even if it's tiny and small and it's a character name that is of the culture or a little restaurant that I walk out of or, you know, establishing a character in a—in a, you know, comic franchise book, it's important to me because I know that that hasn't shifted yet. And so if I can give my little piece of doing that, then I think it, like, feels like it's my purpose and—and why I'm here, maybe.

[39:06 - “Good Times” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Okay. So now we've come to the moment of our show where we're going to look at some pieces of your work, and you're going to talk through it.

Azie Tesfai: Oh, my gosh!

Paola Mardo: You sent us some photos.

Azie Tesfai: Oh, yes. The photos, yeah.

Paola Mardo: So—yes. No, don't worry. It's not another voice memo from another neighbor.

Azie Tesfai: I'm still thrown from the voice memo, voice note.

Paola Mardo: That's what it's there for. No, I'm kidding. I'm just going to pull it up. I have it here on my laptop. I will bring it up. We'll start with this one. Could you describe it for those who are listening to this podcast, what we're looking at?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. So I got—the first episode that I wrote, I was able to write during Christmas break. But then I got notes from the studio and the network, which is the process of television, but I was actually fully filming on set and doing stunts. And so I would write on set between stunt sequences. I would get my notes, and then I would—I think I might have an earpiece in that one, doing a notes call, actually, with Warner Bros. at the time. So I—

Paola Mardo: In your superhero helmet?

Azie Tesfai: I would put my AirPods in my superhero helmet so that I could hear Warners' notes, and then I was doing them in real-time while I was on set.

Paola Mardo: This is incredible.

Azie Tesfai: And it'd be incredible because there'd be, like, an explosion, and they're like, "Is everything okay?"

I'm like, "Yeah, it's fine. So you'd like me to change Scene 2? What, what was the note?"

Paola Mardo: Yeah. So for—for those who are watching, we'll obviously put the photo onscreen, but those who are listening, it's Azie in her Guardian superhero outfit with a full-on helmet on, the gold, you know, embellishments, leather pants, leather outfit. And then she's got a little iPad situation, and she's literally on set taking a meeting in full costume.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, doing a notes call. Yeah, yeah. It's also cool to get notes when you're in a super suit.

Paola Mardo: Oh, I bet.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: This is, like, a power move, honestly.

Azie Tesfai: Maybe, yeah.

Paola Mardo: You show up, you're like—

Azie Tesfai: I just, like, I can do this. I'm wearing a super suit.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. You're like, "How many notes do you have?"

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: There's one more.

Azie Tesfai: Aww. That was the set that we built that my character walks out of. My mom's name is Mulu, but her nickname is Selamawit. And so I had it called Salamawit's Ethiopian because it was my mom's dream her whole life to open a restaurant. And she took that money and put it into my education, all of it. She put everything. She had multiple jobs.

And she always would reference, like, "Oh, I—you know, if I'd had that restaurant..." And so I made the restaurant for her in the way that I could, which is in writing. And it was, like, very full circle that my first episode writing for television was honoring my mom who, like, sacrificed so much to give me everything I have. And my showrunners didn't know this until way later, but I actually let my mom approve all the art designs. I would text it to her.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh!

Azie Tesfai: And so they gave me four choices. So she designed her own restaurant on the show.

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. It's a little thing—

Paola Mardo: And it's on TV forever!

Azie Tesfai: It was literally, I would be on set, and I would send my mom, and I'd be like, "Mom, you need to answer now." She'd be like, "I like the first," or, "No, those are not—these are the dishes." And—

Paola Mardo: This is the first scene that your character comes out of—

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, first—

Paola Mardo: She walks out of—

Azie Tesfai: First scene of the first thing I've ever written in my life was in honor of my mom.

Paola Mardo: That's amazing. Yeah, she steps out of this restaurant.

Azie Tesfai: And my culture.

Paola Mardo: \$9.99, \$11.99, I'm just looking at the prices.

Azie Tesfai: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Oh, yeah. Good deals. Good deals.

Azie Tesfai: It's affordable! We want people to know. Go to your local Ethiopian restaurant.

Paola Mardo: Oh, please do. It's so good.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Support.

[42:10 - "Prox Recs Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: One more fun segment for you.

Azie Tesfai: Okay.

Paola Mardo: We call this Prox Recs.

Azie Tesfai: Oh!

Paola Mardo: Prox Recommendations.

Azie Tesfai: Okay.

Paola Mardo: And we ask our guests on the show to recommend something for our listeners and viewers. It can be anything related to what you do or, honestly, just anything you want to recommend. And, yeah, do you have a recommendation, a Prox Rec for the—for the audience?

Azie Tesfai: So when I was—I don't want anyone to think that I, like, took a course over the pandemic and then—when I sold my first thing, which I, I did it kind of—you know, I sold something with Proximity, and then at the same time, I sold a show to NBC that I was writing by myself with no producers. I was thrown in the deep end. I had no business doing that project, but they liked the idea enough, and they were like, "You're writing it."

I took night classes. So I was—I did not act. For about a year and a half, I quit all other work, and I signed up for UCLA—this is not a plug. They are not paying me. I tell all—anyone close to me this. I'm like, why have I never said this publicly? UCLA Extension classes, they have a screenwriting program. It's meant for people that have jobs, careers. You can do it at night or on the weekends.

Paola Mardo: Amazing.

Azie Tesfai: On Zoom. I learned the real nitty-gritty screenwriting structure stuff in that class. I give credit to, like, my first network pilot that I did on my own because I had the structure of that class. So I'd be writing my pilot for, like, Universal during the day and then taking the classes at night to make sure I was doing it right at night. But it was, like, I figured it out and I delivered—it taught me outline and story area structure and dialogue and, you know, rebreaking things, and second drafts and third drafts in a way that I didn't feel like I had to be, like, the newbie even though I was a newbie. I like to come as prepared as possible.

And so anytime someone's like, "I have an idea," I'm like, "Here's the—here's the secret. UCLA Extension." I recommend it, and it gives you a second set of eyes on your work.

Paola Mardo: Good advice. Great advice to end on. Thanks for doing this, Azie.

Azie Tesfai: Thank you!

Paola Mardo: Thanks for being In Proximity.

Azie Tesfai: This is like what we do normally. We're just doing it with lights.

Paola Mardo: I know. I know.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: And our set.

[44:17 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]