

In Proximity
From the Archives
Juel Taylor, Tony Rettenmaier, and Sev Ohanian
Season 3 Episode 30
Final Transcript

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo and today we're going back in the archives with Sev, Juel and Tony.

[0:14 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Today is another From the Archives episode. Our team is working hard on new episodes for you. And in the meantime, we brought some oldies but goodies from the past into your feed in the present to listen and learn more and have fun, of course, because what else do we do on here, right? Okay, but before we get there, I want to say thank you so much for supporting our show. If you like In Proximity, please subscribe to our YouTube channel. Hit that red button, subscribe, if you haven't already. Like this video, leave a comment, hype the video, send a link to a friend. It all helps. And if you listen to us on an audio podcast platform like Spotify or Apple Podcasts, you can follow us or subscribe to us on those platforms, rate and review us as well, and leave a comment.

Today's archive episode is with Sev Ohanian, Juel Taylor, and Tony Rettenmaier. Sev, as you know, is a Proximity Media founder. He's also a writer and producer. His credits include Searching, Missing, Run, Iron Heart, and most recently, Sinners. Juel and Tony are the screenwriting duo behind films like Creed II, Space Jam: A New Legacy, and They Cloned Tyrone, which was Juel's directorial debut. They're also attached to write the new Hot Wheels movie to be directed by John M. Chu and produced by Bad Robot. On this episode, Sev, Juel and Tony got together and really talked shop as these amazing writers and producers and filmmakers. They talk about their screenwriting process, how they work together, the art of the pitch—do not miss that segment—and how Juel and Tony went from student filmmakers to one of the hottest screenwriting duos in Hollywood. Here's Sev, Juel and Tony.

[2:02 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: All right, guys, let's do our Get Reel section of the interview. Tony, why don't you start off by taking this first one and opening it up?

Tony Rettenmaier: Okay. What's a recent purchase under \$100 that has significantly impacted your life?

Sev Ohanian: I got one. So, if you know me, this is not a surprise, but I'm really big on productivity devices and things that help you optimize, get more efficient. I got totally targeted by the algorithm on Instagram, I think, for this little thing I bought. It's like 30 bucks, I think. It's essentially a timer. You put it on top of your desk, and you literally turn—

Juel Taylor: Oh, like a egg—like a egg timer?

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. Exactly. You turn it to the right, and it'd be like five minutes, seven minutes, whatever, and it just starts ticking down. The idea is, ah, shoot, I've got to do this thing I've been putting off, or, I haven't been able to, like, wrap my head around this thing, you just turn that timer, and until that thing goes to zero, you're kind of, like, psychologically compelled to do the job. I have found it to be really helpful.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. I saw the video for that. It looks really cool, too. So, like, it looks super satisfying, and it—

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. It feels - it feels pretty cool just, like, turning it. Yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. Okay. Let's see. I have a very non-exciting one that will maybe save my life, maybe. I saw one of my friends recently, and she's like, "You're getting old. You need to wear sunscreen." So she sent me some sunscreen from Korea. And so I've been putting that on these last three days, so, I don't know, maybe it'll save my life from skin cancer or something.

Sev Ohanian: You are glowing.

Tony Rettenmaier: Stop. Thank you.

Juel Taylor: I'm thinking. Literally, the only thing I can think that I bought in months is, like, probably a video game.

Sev Ohanian: What game?

Juel Taylor: Probably Baldur's Gate 3, but I haven't played it yet. The last game that I bought that I've been playing finally is probably Jedi: Survivor.

Sev Ohanian: Ah, man.

Juel Taylor: So maybe you could say that.

Sev Ohanian: All right. Let's open up the second one.

Juel Taylor: All right. More creative-oriented question: What do you do to get through a creative block?

Tony Rettenmaier: I know the—the in-the-moment one and the holistic one, I think.

Sev Ohanian: Ooh, okay.

Tony Rettenmaier: Because when we get in a creative block, we usually just keep bullshitting. And I feel like if we just keep talking about it enough, it accumulates enough mass that, like, you know, it becomes a sledgehammer.

Sev Ohanian: That's great.

Tony Rettenmaier: You can break through or something. That's a great metaphor. And then, holistically, I know, like, if I'm feeling kind of, like, strained or whatever, I know if—like, if I exercise, if I make time to do, like, a stupid hobby or something and do something like read consistently or go see a movie, I know if I do all those things, I think better. But even knowing that, it's hard for me to, like, keep that schedule sometimes.

Juel Taylor: No, for sure. I mean, yeah, I think definitely, like, brute force repetition in terms of, like, find a way to be cool with bad ideas, you know what I'm saying? Like, I think with, like, getting through a creative block, a lot of times, it's like, you kind of filter in your mind, like, "This isn't good," so you don't write it. Or you know what I mean?

It's—I think it's—everybody kind of self-edits like that a little bit, and I feel like the more—the more you can purge, like, the things that feel stupid and you can kind of get them out into the atmosphere, like, you know what I mean? The closer you start to get to, like, "That was stupid, but something about it was actually kind of interesting," you know what I mean?

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. I mean, I really relate to the idea of brute-forcing it because—I don't love this expression, but, like, what we always do is go "Gun to your head, don't think about it, don't deliberate. Just you have to give an answer to overcome this problem," and it's usually a bad one. And oftentimes, there's a lot of prefacing like, "Hey, worst idea ever, but what if"—I think the scary part about creative blocks that, like, you don't often hear about is the, like, indecision that comes with it of, like, if we're trying to accomplish a story beat, for example, and, like, it's like, there's no way that we can pull this off because if we pull it off in this way, the movie becomes unrealistic, or it's wrong for tone, or, like, whatever other issues it causes.

There's always, like, a fear of, like, well, should we just be doing this thing instead? But if we could pull this off, it would be so amazing and, like, that, like, ah. And, like, you know, with my writing partner, there's always—like, one of us tends to be the negative one of like, "Well, it's not possible. We're not going to figure it out." And the other one tends to try and be like, "Okay, but what if? But what if?" And it always feels like, if you ever solve the hardest creative problem, it ends up being, I think, like the most satisfying part of watching the movie.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. For sure.

Juel Taylor: Funny enough, ironically enough, we literally had a stupid—like, "That's stupid, but this actually might work" if the thing we thought about through just sheer repetitive brute force actually comes to, like, work in terms of just the logistics. If it works, I think it would be one of the more interesting parts of the movie.

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Juel Taylor: It's, like, the last thing we kind of came to yesterday was, like—

Sev Ohanian: I love it, man.

Juel Taylor:—"That just might work."

Tony Rettenmaier: But certain things, they accumulate a certain amount of mass, and they become super important.

Juel Taylor: On Tyrone with the underground?

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Juel Taylor: It's funny because in post, it, like, changed anyway a little bit. We were arguing forever about, like, something that, like, really bothered me so much.

Sev Ohanian: Tell me. Tell me.

Juel Taylor: But Tony was like, "It don't matter." They wake up. They go back to the character's grandmama's house, and they, like, spend the night after they saw something crazy. And they wake up the next day, and they eat lunch, and then they do this, like, tail-and-surveil where they follow this van around, and then it leads them to church. At church, they find this elevator, they go underground, and they come up into a club.

Tony Rettenmaier: Just to clarify, so they go down like after lunch, in the afternoon, and when they come back up later in the script, it's night.

Juel Taylor: Come in, like, a nightclub.

Tony Rettenmaier: Late enough at night that the club's, like, packed.

Juel Taylor: The timeline bothered the shit out of me, right? It was like, it don't make sense. They just ate lunch. How they in the club?

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Juel Taylor: Like, you know, it's like, how many—and, like, the real world logistics of, like, club not going to fill up, like, at 8:00 at night. You know, if you come and—it's a strip club in the movie, but that was for COVID reasons. But, like, in the—in the script originally, it was just a club. So it was just a mass of people in there. You're like, how much time did they spend

underground? Like, did they spend six hours down there? Eight hours down there? Because it was, like, they just ate lunch.

Tony Rettenmaier: So it didn't bother me.

Juel Taylor: It didn't bother him. He was like, "Nobody's going to care."

Tony Rettenmaier: It didn't bother me, and I was like, "No one's going to care." It really bothered him. We spent a couple days on this.

Juel Taylor: Because—oh, my god.

Tony Rettenmaier: Movie comes out, no one's ever mentioned it.

Juel Taylor: Nobody ever mentioned it.

[08:21 - KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: So how did we meet? Because I'm pretty sure, Juel, I met you through Tony. And, Tony, I think we met—we were at USC around the same time, but I think we really met when we were doing those indie films together.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: I think we met on Take Me. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. Because I graduated and needed a job and wanted to see what, like, a real set was like. So I found, like, a PA gig and went on Take Me.

Sev Ohanian: That's right. So this is like 2016, '17. I was producing some indie films, and Take Me was a movie I made with the Duplass Brothers. And it was a very low-budget film shot in L.A. by director Pat Healy, script written by Mike Makowsky, starring Pat Healy and Taylor Schilling. It's honestly, like, a phenomenal script, great dark comedy. And you were one of our PAs, and I remember genuinely, like, talking—and Natalie, my wife and producing partner on that film, I remember her just being really impressed by you.

Tony Rettenmaier: You guys were really cool to all the PAs, too. And, like, you guys recognize that, like, most of the PAs on that set, they wanted to do other things, you know, like PA-ing was their foot in the door. So you've read some of my scripts and stuff.

Sev Ohanian: Well, yeah, I don't remember how it happened, but I was reading one of your scripts. I was blown away because I was like, yo, this dude should not be PA-ing. Like, he should not be driving a truck around, you know, cleaning up the trash or whatever you were doing. It was like, Tony needs to be, like, behind a laptop writing scripts so I can produce them.

And then, shortly after Take Me, we did make Searching, and you were a PA on that, I remember, for sure. And—and, you know, that was a very unique set for a lot of reasons, and I remember just kind of flagging in my head, I'm like, Tony's a writer I should track. Like, you know, maybe one day he'll write something that I can produce. And it wasn't that long after that that our paths were united when it came to Space Jam: A New Legacy.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. Yeah, because I think we pitched Tyrone before we got Space Jam, right?

Juel Taylor: Yeah, yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: We pitched Tyrone, and then because of our pitch for Tyrone, which is like, we pitched with arts and crafts, like a tri-board that you get from, like, CVS, and it had all the scenes kind of outlined on it. And so I think Spring Hill thought like, "Oh, these guys at least know structure." So then they brought us in, and that's when—I think that's when you met Juel.

Juel Taylor: I feel like I met you once before then.

Sev Ohanian: Well, I remember actually, you wrote a script at USC that had an Armenian character in it who had a shaved head with the name Sev.

Juel Taylor: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Sev Ohanian: And I was like, how do I sue this man for writing me—because I used to have a shaved head. And I was like—oh, and then we meet—and then I think you guys had him be, like, a very disturbing character who was, like, a—

Tony Rettenmaier: Wasn't he a mob boss?

Sev Ohanian: He was, like, a backstabbing, like a—

Juel Taylor: No, no, no. No, he was a little kid. He was one of the—what? Look at him trying to—I wrote that. Shout out to Siavash.

Sev Ohanian: That's right. That's right.

Juel Taylor: One of my professors wanted me to write a script with him.

Juel Taylor: So I wrote that script with—

Sev Ohanian: It was good.

Juel Taylor: With my writing professor.

Sev Ohanian: So can you guys talk about how you two linked up to begin with?

Juel Taylor: Yeah. I mean, we—we were in the same semester at USC. So we were in the same cohort. We actually didn't have a lot of classes together except for these big seminar classes. But we used to work out together. You know, so we used to go to the gym together. And so we would just be talking about stuff for writing classes—

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. You can't see us on the podcast, but we're not—we're not—

Juel Taylor: We're not—yeah. We ain't buff, you know?

Tony Rettenmaier: We're pretty—we're lanky dudes, so it didn't really work out.

Juel Taylor: We didn't go into bodybuilding, but, you know, we up in there, like, benching and whatnot.

Sev Ohanian: Did you guys happen to see each other at the gym, or you guys were like, "Hey, do you want to go work out together?"

Juel Taylor: I don't even know how—I think we—if I'm not mistaken, we would just bump into each other at the gym because we was both just going. And so that naturally become like, oh, you know, we all generally have similar schedules.

Sev Ohanian: So how do you guys go from lifting weights to writing together?

Tony Rettenmaier: So we weren't lifting too heavy of weights. Let's make sure we're not, like, misrepresenting ourselves.

Juel Taylor: I think really what it was, I feel like—shout out to my homegirl Shada. Like, my homegirl was in writing class with him, and she'd be like, "Tony be writing these amazing scripts in class."

And I was like, "Damn, he cold like that? He ain't nicer than me, though," you know what I'm saying? I'm like, "Let me read you something," you know? But we would just be hanging out at the gym because I would be there, you know what I'm saying? And so we would just naturally, like, "Hey, can I get a spot?" And that would just kind of naturally go to, like, "All right, you working out, you know, Monday, Wednesday, Friday? All right. I'm going to meet you here. We're going"—you know? That way, I have a workout partner. And I just remember asking him to read something one time, and it was like, damn—

Sev Ohanian: I'm just picturing you, like, on the bench press, like, made an error, like, "Hey, man, can everyone do their thing while I work this out?"

Juel Taylor: At a certain point, it was like, so the inciting incident—so you really thinking about—you know, you're, like, in the middle of, like, bench-pressing, talking about the break into Act 2. But like, nah, for real, though, I don't remember specifically when, but I just remember hearing that he was a great writer, though, and I was wanting to read something. Just being naturally competitive, probably, was like, let me see what's up, you know? And then reading it, being like, damn, he cold.

So, at that point, I feel like we just started to talk about the scripts that we was writing in classes. And so we would just be working out like, "All right, well, what you think about this story point?" And then he would be like, "Oh, I was thinking about doing this," and that just kind of continued.

Sev Ohanian: So you guys were writing your own projects at the time but still referring to each other for help on your individual projects.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. And then we graduated, and, you know, joke always is, just like, you graduate film school, no one's willing to give you like \$50 million to direct your opus, you know? But writing's cheap. And USC does, you know, a good job of, like, everyone that goes there wants to be a director, and USC's like, "That's great. You should also learn how to do something else."

So, like, I gaffed little commercials. I PAed. Juel did sound work. But neither of us were good enough at those things, you know? So we just took all our spare time to write together. And we would—first, just to write, we entered a whole bunch of competitions and stuff just to give ourselves deadlines because that's the thing you—you realize you miss when you graduate school is just, like, the—the impetus to write then as opposed to just putting it off until you feel inspired or something.

And one of them, it was like an ABC half-hour pilot submission. We just said, like, "Oh, want to just write this together?" And so we just wrote that one together, and it's way more fun to, like, sit in a room joking with somebody than, like, sitting alone at a computer trying to write. And after that, we just like—oh, we just kept writing together.

Juel Taylor: It was a Last Man on Earth spec.

Tony Rettenmaier: Oh, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: So then was the next, like, evolution of you guys' careers Creed II?

Juel Taylor: I mean, like, first it was, like, Fellowship, technically.

Sev Ohanian: You guys wrote a spec pilot, and it got into a Fellowship?

Juel Taylor: So it was—I got into the Universal—

Tony Rettenmaier: He got into it, yeah.

Juel Taylor:—Fellowship.

Sev Ohanian: Got it. Just for folks listening, Universal Fellowship, is it like a directing thing?

Juel Taylor: It's a screenwriting—

Sev Ohanian: Screenwriting.

Juel Taylor: Feature-length.

Sev Ohanian: And you wrote something by yourself?

Juel Taylor: For most of them, we actually wrote different scripts. So what we—we would do, like, when we applied to all these different competitions and Fellowship, we would sit in a room and break the stories. I would break his, break mine, and then we would go and, like, write them separately, you know, and, like, "All right, well, Tony almost done, so I got to hurry up," you know what I'm saying? Kind of race to make sure we both finished them.

And, you know, just for clarification, breaking the story, of course, is when you figure out the nuts and bolts of what actually happens: how A gets to B gets to C gets to D. So, you know, man comes in house, you know, then what? You know, and breaking the story is really finding that then-what, or as, you know, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the but-therefore, or, you know, a lot of people have different ways that they kind of define it, but it's—it's that process.

Tony Rettenmaier: It's outlining.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. So for most of them, we would break all the stories and then go write them separately until we did the half-hour comedy spec. It was like, "Man, that was actually a lot more fun." And serendipitously, I got into the Universal Fellowship, and that—you know, like, everything just cracks the door a little bit, you know what I'm saying? So you—you have a couple meetings with people because they—you know, there's, like, one blurb on Deadline or, like, a little blurb on Variety, and then it gave you just enough legitimacy, barely, that, like, you weren't, like, a completely random person.

Tony Rettenmaier: So, like, reps and stuff would contact him, and he met a couple of them, and he would tell them, like, "Oh, yeah. I write a lot with this one dude. Do you want to meet him, too?" And so I met some of them.

And then there was one agent that ultimately did want to sign him, and he said, "Oh, great. Do you want to meet Tony, too?" And I don't remember who it was, but the dude was like, "I don't know Tony." So I remember he said—like, he didn't want to meet me, so Juel didn't even sign with him.

Sev Ohanian: That's crazy.

Tony Rettenmaier: And I told him at the time, no, like, do it, you know? When you're starting out, being repped seems like the be-all, end-all, right? And it's not quite, but, like, it's definitely a huge step. So, like, I even remember, at the time, like, thinking, like, "Man, if I can just get repped," right, "then my career will start." So it meant a lot to me that, like, he had the opportunity to get repped, and he didn't do it just because they wouldn't meet me, you know?

Sev Ohanian: Man, that's crazy. That's such loyalty from you, Juel.

Juel Taylor: Oh, no.

Sev Ohanian: And that rep probably regrets the heck out of it now.

Tony Rettenmaier: I always remember it, you know?

Juel Taylor: Oh, no. I mean, I'm sure they doing—they doing good.

[17:29 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: It sounds like you guys are producing quite a lot of scripts out of school. Like, you guys really put the work in while you had your side jobs, I'm assuming, to pay some bills and rent and stuff like that.

Tony Rettenmaier: That was because we entered these competitions. That's, like, if we ever, like, talk at a class, that's almost, like, one of the number one advice we give is that, like, especially starting out, like, quantity has a certain quality to it. You know, you could spend like three years making that perfect, really personal script that only you can tell, but, like, the industry is so subjective that, like, when you finally get that script to a producer, they just might not like that material. It has nothing to do with the quality of it, but they just might not like it.

But forcing ourselves to do those competitions, we wrote like three or four scripts within as many months.

Juel Taylor: Yeah, we—more than that. Sundance, two TV scripts. I had already had a feature script. You wrote a feature script. ABC, which was two half-hour pilots. Universal was a new script. Film Independent, Nicholls, like, so, you know, we wrote like five or six scripts in like six months.

Sev Ohanian: That's amazing.

Juel Taylor: They weren't all features, though. Some of them went half-hours, you know?

Sev Ohanian: Sure, sure.

Juel Taylor: But they were all, like, super different. So I think, like, the randomness of the subject matter and, like, the genre, you know, helped us in the future because people would gravitate toward different things. Like, someone would read the indie drama script and like it, and all of a sudden, they think of us as, like, oh, we're drama writers. And then somebody read the half-hour and loved it and was like, "Oh, they a—they comedy writers."

And so you end up, like, you know, meeting people for different scripts who—and they started to look at you and compartmentalize you in a certain way.

Sev Ohanian: Just to recap, like, you guys are hardly out of school. You've produced a very high volume of very, very different types of scripts. Juel, you land that Universal Fellowship. That gets you a couple meetings around town, not a lot, a handful. That opens the door a little bit more. You get offered representation, but you deny it because they didn't want to meet with Tony. And next thing you know, you guys are meeting with other reps. And I imagine, for the reps you guys sign with, the fact that you have a whole library at this point, for being however young you guys were and so fresh out of school, that's got to be mad attractive because you guys come across as, like, professional screenwriters now. What's next?

Juel Taylor: We had a few execs from the Universal Fellowship and, like, that general window of meeting people out of that, we got to know a couple of execs at Lionsgate. One, Aaron Edmonds, you know, Dana Gills. And Aaron was the first person who reached out that led its way to, like, hey, we got this rewrite job for Lionsgate Digital. You know, and it was literally like—I don't know if we were repped yet, but it was very much like a sit down, and somebody, hey, we got a job. And it was—you know, it was a smaller movie, but we were like, give me that. You know, because we never got paid to write before, so it was like—

Sev Ohanian: That's huge.

Juel Taylor: This wasn't a big project, but, you know, like, we got excited about it all the same, you know what I mean? It was a British dance movie, you know what I'm saying? We like—and we worked in a way that we got really excited about it.

Sev Ohanian: So you guys rewrote a script?

Juel Taylor: Yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Juel Taylor: And we, you know, did our best, and they seemed, like, really happy with it. And that just kind of ingratiated us a little bit with Lionsgate, and we got to know them. And it was just the snowball thing again. By the time we wrote that, you know, just in terms of our confidence of, like, we could do the—you know, okay, I think—this wasn't that crazy—like, you know, you got to kind of see it in practice to feel like it's possible in some ways, you know?

Sev Ohanian: So let's fast-forward to Creed II. How did that job come about?

Juel Taylor: Super random. We had set up this TV show with MACRO. That's how we got to know MACRO. We was trying to—trying to be in the writers room for a TV show they had. And our sample, they wanted to buy it and wanted to make it as a show. And so we got to know them. We were actually developing that proof of concept.

And I ended up getting coffee with Steven Caple, you know, Steve Caple, Jr. who directed Creed II, just did Transformers. There's a film called The Land. Just, like, amazing director, and he went to USC with us. And he was a few semesters ahead of us, and so he was going when we were coming.

And socially, I knew him because there's only so many Black people at USC. So you going to know. You know, you going to know all the Black folks at USC. But I didn't know him, like—you know, like, creatively, we didn't—we'd never done anything together. And my homie Steve Love, who ended up being a producer on Tyrone, he was like, "Yo, you should hit up Steve, and y'all should connect, man."

And so I connected with Steve and just gave him a bunch of scripts and thought nothing of it for like the next six months. You know, I didn't even know if he had read them. Fast-forward to we're working on that proof of concept and basically prep because we're about to shoot it. And Tony's getting ready to shoot a short film, and, like, I kid you not, like—like, the weekend, he goes to Oregon to scout. Steve's like, "Man, I put your name in the hat for Creed II."

I was like, "Huh?"

"Man, I put your name in the hat for Creed II."

I'm like, "All right, for sure." You know, I didn't think nothing of it because, like, I ain't finna get it. So I'm like, "all right," yeah.

So I called Tony. I'm like, "Hey, Steve just said he put my name in the hat for Creed II and, like, I don't know."

He like, "What?"

I'm like, "I don't know." Went to his house, you know, talked to him. That was like Sunday. By Thursday, I had got the job.

Sev Ohanian: Wow.

Juel Taylor: And so, like, by the time Tony got back from Oregon, I got the job.

Sev Ohanian: What is it like to get that job? I mean, are you meeting with the executives at the studio?

Juel Taylor: Well, so, like, basically Monday or Tuesday—I think Tuesday, maybe, I went to MGM and met with the execs. And they were—you know, they—you know, they—they were hilarious. They were, like, grilling me. You know, they—because they like, "How fast have you written a script?" You know? "Have you made a script with pressure?"

I was like, "Yeah. Well, I wrote a script in a week one time."

"Forget that script. How can you write a script with the pressure, when Sly's got notes, when Mike's got notes? You know, they, like, ask—I'm like, hey, man, I can just leave. I just heard about this a couple days ago. So I—I didn't think nothing of it.

Sev Ohanian: And had those execs read your samples that Steven had shared?

Juel Taylor: Yeah. And so, they liked the script, but they just didn't think. Like, it was like, this is a big job. They called—actually, shout-out to Sara Scott at Universal. So I was in a Universal Fellowship. They call Universal. Sara Scott is like, "Yo, he was great. We loved him." They call Charles King. We had just set up a TV show. Charles King, like, we love him, you know? And so, again, it wasn't, like, completely random, you know what I'm saying? And so Steve was just, like, adamant. He was like "man"—for whatever reason, and I, to this day, won't know. He was just like, "Man," it's—that's why I'm on.

Sev Ohanian: But wait, wait. Were you rewriting a script, or were you writing a new one from scratch?

Juel Taylor: Well, it was—it was both, right? It was like they had previous drafts, but Steve wanted to do a page one.

Sev Ohanian: Got it. Got it.

Juel Taylor: So it was like—it's a Rocky movie, so you know you going to run up the steps, you know you're going to have the training montage. It's a little easier to structure it because the structure is seven movies deep by now. So you know—

Sev Ohanian: Right, right, right. Did you guys write it together?

Juel Taylor: Yes, but, like, unofficially, right? So it was, like, the worst-kept secret at a certain point. But, like, I didn't know to tell Steven. At first, I'm like, damn. And so right away, I go to Steve's house the first day. We just kicking ideas, and just I'm at his house all day. And I'm like, "Yo, it's cool if Tony just come by and just—you know, just kick ideas."

He's like, "All right, cool. Whatever." You know, so, like, Tony came the next day, and then, at the end, he's like, "Is Tony coming tomorrow?"

[24:43 - Juno Arp Stinger by Ken Nana]

Sev Ohanian: So this opportunity presented itself. You had that personal connection to Steven. He had read all your scripts. And when push came to shove, the people that were going to hire you for this job, they were able to call people in your past who can all vouch for you.

Juel Taylor: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: So it may seem like, you know, you got out of school, next thing you know, you're writing this, like, sequel to a hit movie, but, like, it really was all those steps you guys were taking that all pay off in this moment.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. It's writing all those scripts, honestly.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. It's very serendipitous.

Sev Ohanian: All those scripts.

Tony Rettenmaier: It goes back to, like, that little bit of quantity. You know, like, it helped.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah, yeah, because that quantity is what makes you come across as a professional. So you've written Creed II. It becomes a hit movie. It's fantastic. And this is around the time that we also are working together again.

And, again, the word on the street was that you guys were, like, great, new, hot, young writers. And I think part of it, now that I remember, was about speed. I think it was, like, you guys had this reputation of, like, you know, these guys work fast, they're full of ideas, they have a great, like, commercial sensibility. There's, like, a coolness to your guys' writing. Could you guys speak about how that reputation maybe was built? And, like, how much of this has to do with you guys pitching around town?

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah, because I feel like if people said that, and I know that was a little hyperbole but—

Juel Taylor: It's definitely hyperbolic there.

Tony Rettenmaier: But I—but I think it's because of Tyrone because when we—we had pitched Tyrone around town by then.

Sev Ohanian: That's what it was.

Tony Rettenmaier: And Tyrone kind of came about because a producer friend of ours, Bryan Smiley, brought us in to Sony to pitch a remake of the movie Last Dragon. And so we—we pitched it. They ultimately didn't end up taking it, but, like, in that pitch, he said, like, "Hey, don't you have, like, an original idea that you always wanted to do?"

Juel Taylor: Yeah. So he wanted us to, like, write it on spec, but we had just started to get work for the first time. So we—we had this idea, and we just—it was just, you know, like an elevator pitch, like, "Oh, it'd be great to do this detective Scooby Doo movie." And like, Ryan and then this exec, Josh McLaughlin, who was at Focus at the time, when I was in the Universal Fellowship, I had kicked the idea to him, and, like, the idea to Bryan.

And they'd always just, like, check back in. "What's up with that They Cloned"—you know, it wasn't even called They Cloned Tyrone then, but, like, "What's up with the idea? When you going to do that?" It's like, ah, well, you know, we working for the first time, so who knows when? And then that's when, like, Bryan, after that Last Dragon pitch, was like—

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. He was like, "Come in in a week," or maybe—it was less than a week—"and I'll set up a meeting with some execs, and you guys can pitch it."

And we didn't have anything other than just, like—he had said once, just like, "I kind of want do a movie about, like, clones in the hood." And so we basically took from—I think that meeting was maybe on like Monday.

Juel Taylor: Yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Something like that, and we were meeting with them on Friday. And so, like, just from Monday to basically Friday morning, we just, like, broke the story, and we put it on a tri-board, very, like, you know, arts and crafts, with every scene outlined and all the sequences organized. And we stayed up all night Thursday night and then went to the pitch because, you know, like, in Hollywood, when someone wants something, everyone wants to make sure they don't miss it.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. There's a big fumble going around, yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. So our reps did a really good job of, in those interviewing days, while we were breaking the story, they kind of, like, stoked the flames, and on Friday and Saturday, we had a ton of meetings around town. And we literally drove from one to the other. Stephen Love came and drove us, like, from one to the other, and he was, like, in the room pitching with us, too, and stuff.

And that, I think people like the Tyrone story, and so I think if people were talking—like, I think it came from that original idea.

Sev Ohanian: I think so, too, and, like—I mean, what's great about it is, like, that movie and that premise and that pitch, I'm sure, it's so unique but at the same time, familiar. Could you guys speak about what you guys actually do in the room when you're pitching?

Juel Taylor: It depend on the pitch, but with that one, in that one, I think we broke the most conventions. We had to break the story. We had to figure out what we was pitching. It was, like, wanted to make basically a bootleg Scooby Doo movie. And so all we knew was it was a detective movie, and we had some thematic synergy, but we didn't, you know, know what the A to B to C was.

So we didn't have—we never practiced the pitch. We finished gluing the last notecard, making the Spotify playlist, finished making a little slide show, and then we had to leave, you know, and then just practice it while we driving, you know, like, "Okay, go over—look over the story," you know? So it was a very—in a lot of ways, one of the more freestyle pitches. But it taught us a lot, though.

Sev Ohanian: Okay. So Spotify, you guys were playing music? To set the mood?

Juel Taylor: Oh, yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Mechanically, logistically, the way we did it is, like, we would get there first, go in the room. We had a playlist that would just—would be playing in the room. So, when the execs come in, they have—listen to music.

Sev Ohanian: That's great.

Tony Rettenmaier: And then we asked to use whatever screen was in the room and put up just a rotating slideshow of, like, images that we thought were, like, germane to the movie. So we never referenced the images or anything like that, but—

Sev Ohanian: It wasn't like, "Our main character clip," like nothing like that?

Tony Rettenmaier: No. It was just cycling automatically.

Juel Taylor: Stuff from like, Boogie Nights, Jackie Brown, I mean, all kind of—but then also, like, different, like, just photography stuff like Todd Hido.

Tony Rettenmaier: I think a lot of music—yeah, music video stuff, too, was in there.

Juel Taylor: We had a lot of screenshots from Heavy Metal in there. We had some Kahlil Joseph stuff in there. When the Quiet Comes, like, Flying Lotus. We had, like, music videos, photography. We just had still shots that felt like it had a certain aesthetic vibe we liked.

Sev Ohanian: Did you guys assign? Like, "Okay, well, you can cover"—

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: "You'll start, Tony, and then Juel will go." Like, how did you guys—

Juel Taylor: We broke it into sequences.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah, because we—we write with eight sequences. That's how we, like, organize our stuff. So he did Sequence 1, I did Sequence 2, he did Sequence 3 like that. And we walked through the whole story.

Sev Ohanian: And then your producer was also in the room, you said.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Juel Taylor: Yeah, Steve Love was in there.

Tony Rettenmaier: They would ask, like, logistical questions, and then—so Stephen answered those and stuff.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. And I mean, I think—like, again, it—I feel like what we learned, though, when we were pitching, you never know how somebody—like, we thought the first pitch was terrible. We was like, "Oh, fuck." It really felt like we just completely, like, dropped the bag. And we got a offer, like, while we were driving to the second pitch.

Sev Ohanian: That's crazy.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. We were driving to the other one, we were saying what we could do better. We need to do this.

Juel Taylor: We were coming—having a come-to-Jesus as we were leaving.

Tony Rettenmaier: We needed to make it shorter somehow.

Juel Taylor: We were driving, having a straight come-to-Jesus.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Dude, that's incredible.

Juel Taylor: And got an offer on the way.

Sev Ohanian: Like, you're expecting the guy to be like, "What did you guys do in there?" but he's like, "They want in." That's awesome.

Juel Taylor: And—but that's kind of somewhat tangential to the thing that we learned in terms of like, I think—we had a visual aid, this board with all these notecards. Like, the writing's too small. You can't, like, turn around and, like, look at it and read the thing. So, really, I think, like, it was very casual and conversational in terms of the way we pitched it, which is why it was so long, you know? But, like, one of my teachers said, like, you know, "Man, what's a movie that you really loved?"

And, like, when you tell somebody about that movie, like, for me, Godzilla Minus One, for example, and, like, when you describe it, when you trying to get somebody to go see that movie, remember how excited you are when you're like, "Man, bruh, I just"—you know what I mean? Like, dog, like, you have a different kind of enthusiasm when you trying to convince somebody to go see a movie that you just saw that you loved.

Even though we—we probably messed up a lot of, like, story points, and we probably skipped beats, and we over elongated beats, we pitched the whole thing like we just saw Godzilla Minus One, you know what I'm saying? And so that enthusiasm in terms of—that we were pitching it like—

Sev Ohanian: Yes.

Juel Taylor: Fontaine, right? You know what I mean? Like, we pitched it in a way that made it seem like we thought it was the shit.

Sev Ohanian: That's such great advice. Honestly, I think even having your notecards with the sequence and outlines, I imagine that's probably just a nice peace of mind for these execs, of like, "Oh, these guys have done the work. Like, we're not just buying, like, you know, a whisper. Like, there's actually an outline, almost, at this point."

Tony Rettenmaier: I think it serves twofold. One is our very conversational style, I think, works as, like, makes you excited and everything. But, like, having the visual aid also allows them to kind of track where they are in the story because, like—

Juel Taylor: Because we would—we would, like, bookmark it, like, an inciting incident. We would try to make sure that we bookmarked when we were breaking into Act 2. So you could look on the board and see, oh, they're right around here. Like, you know, they could track—

Tony Rettenmaier: Because that's—that's the things, is, like, when—when you pitch ideas or stories, and someone's listening and is like, "This is a long time." And then you hear us like, "And that's the end of Act 1." Oh, shit.

Sev Ohanian: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Tony Rettenmaier: You know? But if you can—if you're looking and tracking it, I think you're right. Like, it does impress upon this idea that they have a sort of a structure that they're adhering to. And I do think that board led to us getting Space Jam, honestly, you know, like, because just the execs seeing that, like, we knew structure goes a long way.

Sev Ohanian: Again, I got to say, man, professional. Like, you guys come up being casual, putting your conversational pitches and stuff, but it overwhelmingly comes across like you guys do the work. You put your heads down, even if it's all happening the night before the pitch, you are going to get the job done. You actually do your homework as far as, like, structurally knowing what the organization of your story is. Like, that stuff, I think, comes across. More than one place, I imagine, is sending in offers at this point.

Juel Taylor: Yeah.

Sev Ohanian: And then, you guys ultimately—I remember this was, like, a big splashy deal you guys had. It was in partnership with MACRO and Netflix.

Juel Taylor: It wasn't MACRO and Netflix at first. We actually pitched it twice. We pitched it the first time to all the places, and we actually closed with MACRO because they offered us the most, like, contractual protections in terms of, like, there were no kill fees. And you are pitching to be the director, and so naturally there's a—there's a little bit of—I mean, some places didn't offer because they wanted the script but didn't want—

Sev Ohanian: You as a director.

Juel Taylor: More or less, me as a director, right?

Sev Ohanian: Sure, sure.

Juel Taylor: And why would they? I mean, I—if I was them, I wouldn't hire me to do it, right? Like, so I don't know what they was thinking, right? And so, you know, in the studio, it's, like, they got to protect they ass. So it's like, there's kill fees of, like, okay, in the event that we hire another director, we'll pay you this much. I was like, "Oh." You know, it's like, you don't think it's going to happen, but, like, MACRO basically offered us no other writers, no other director, if you don't make it, movie don't exist. And so, like, they had a lot of—a lot more shared control of the IP and, like, just a lot of more, like, that type of stuff, peace of mind.

And so we went with MACRO, and then once we realized that the budget—we hadn't written a script yet. And so once we wrote the script, and then they budgeted it out, and they were like, "Okay. We want a producing partner," we want a financing partner, really, right? And so then we went back to all the studios, and that's when we ended up with Netflix.

[35:08 - In Prox Theme Stinger by Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: I remember around this time, you guys also had this huge sale of a short story that you wrote. And I remember being really impressed because at this point, we'd already been working together on Space Jam, and I saw you guys were really, really strong on Final Draft on writing screenplays for the big screen or television. But the next thing I know, the word is you guys had written, like, a 10-page short story called By All. That also blew up, and it ended up landing you guys a really nice deal, as well. What compelled you guys to suddenly switch gears and write a short story?

Tony Rettenmaier: When we're in writing mode, we spend a lot of the day together. You know, it's like 10 or 12 hours every day. And that sounds impressive, but, like, we're really probably only actually writing for like three hours, right? Like, the other hours are just, like, watching stupid YouTube videos or, like, just bullshitting about random stuff. And one day, we were bullshitting about something and this idea came up.

The short story is about more or less, like, crowdsourcing justice. And so I think that was an idea that we had that we thought was cool but, like, either didn't want to invest the time into making it into a script and, in addition to, didn't know if other people would like it. At the time we wrote it with the intention of, "Oh, maybe this could be a Black Mirror episode." You know, it's a small commitment of time. We just wrote it, sent it to our rep, said, like, "Oh, maybe this could be a Black Mirror episode." And then they liked it and ended up—again, they—they, you know, really earn their 10 percent because they are the ones that, like, stoke the flame of that, you know?

Juel Taylor: Tony's being modest because Tony's a machine when it comes to short stories. We talked. We had this idea. Tony's like, "Hey, I wrote a little something. Read this and revise it." And I was like, "Huh?"

Sev Ohanian: So, on your own, you'd gone and written, like, these 10 pages, essentially.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. Tony did.

Sev Ohanian: That's incredible.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah, but it's sort of like—

Juel Taylor: I don't want him giving me credit for—you know what I'm saying? Like, he wrote it.

Tony Rettenmaier: But the idea came from, like I said, just these bullshitting conversations we have. I mean, short stories are fun to write because you can—again, it's just the ease of getting an idea out. Even the idea of writing short stories came from—we were in a general meeting, and people were talking about this short story that was going around that sold for \$1 million. It was called Life Sentence. And I was like, I got to read this.

So I asked one of the execs to send it to me. And it's about, like, 20 pages double-spaced. I was like, man, this sold for \$1 million. This isn't a complete movie or anything. It's really just an exercise of a concept, right? And so that's why I just decided, oh, take some time, write this thing. And what I think we learned from the process of that going out is that, like, there is a benefit sometimes to sending out something that's not a script because everyone can see their favorite version of it in what you send out, versus, if you send them a script, they see exactly what it is. They can decide if they like it or don't, you know? Even if you sell a script somewhere, like, it's a collaborative process, right?

But the idea of selling a short story, like, that collaboration is even heightened. So everyone kind of saw their favorite version of the movie in there, and it's a low investment of time on our end compared to a script. So now we always give the advice, like, if you have a concept that you like but maybe you're not sure of or—or even you don't know what it is, just try writing. Take a week. Write a 10-page short story, you know?

Sev Ohanian: I mean, it's still impressive because, like, writing a short story is writing prose. Like, that's not what you guys went to school for. You know, writing a screenplay's such a specific thing. But I know, like, just another benefit of a short story is, like, as a executive, it's a little bit interesting because you're submitted screenplays all the time. It's very rare to get a short story submission, especially from—at the time, you guys had already made a name for yourselves, like, with the Tyrone pitch, which, by the way, that whole Tyrone thing was like, one executive who you guys had a connection with asked you to come pitch it. But you guys had these smart reps who turned that into, like, a whole thing, and now you guys have the Creed II credit behind you, you have the Tyrone reputation behind you, and now you come out with a short; it's huge.

Tony Rettenmaier: We're always, like, very conscious of what you just said. It's, like, we know, like, execs get a ton of scripts all the time, right?

Sev Ohanian: Yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: So we're always, like, very conscious of, like, how our stuff is presented, and presenting it in a interesting way, like—like you said, a short story's one way, or we make a lot of websites.

Sev Ohanian: So that's what I wanted to get to. You guys have a pitch presentation style that I've literally never seen. And we were talking about working together on a project with a major studio using a piece of IP that exists. And I remember being like, "Yeah, yeah, I want to read the

treatment or outline, you know, like, send it to me." And I was expecting to get a PDF in my inbox, but what you guys sent me was a https, like website.

It was—you guys literally had made a website that essentially reads like a treatment because you're scrolling down and kind of like, continuing the story, but because you had designed the website, there's, like, images that are loading at certain points. There's music that's playing at certain points. And it was, like, incredible!

And, again, I just want to stress again, especially for folks that are listening, like, it sounds like I'm talking about a lot of style over substance, but at the end of the day, your substance was always very strong. Like, it was—it was always built around something that you guys had written, and I'd love to hear what you guys—like, what got you guys into these websites? Because I know there's a project that you guys are writing right now, you guys have been sending it out as a website, that's not a treatment.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. But that's just a—that's just us being stupid.

Tony Rettenmaier: It was—it was actually one of our classmates, Edson Oda, who—he made a few years ago called Nine Days, which is great, but for another project, he had made a website because he came from advertising. He was in advertising in Brazil. So, like, even his approach to certain is just slightly unconventional, and he sent this website for something. I was like, that's a great idea. And then so we made websites. We made one for Riotville, which included the short film that Juel shot for it.

And we just realized that, like, the barrier to an exec clicking a link in an email is less than the barrier to clicking a PDF and opening it up. You know? Always in, like, ux design, they always talk about, like, ease of clicks and everything. And it's just less intimidating, I think, for someone to open up a website that they can easily scroll down, that has some music and some media, than it is to open a 100, 200-page script and read it.

Juel Taylor: Or even a five-page, just densely packed Word document where you just see Times New Roman just—you know.

Tony Rettenmaier: And you can—when you incorporate other media, you get across, like, tone, which I think, like—tone is something that Juel's amazing at, right? And I do think it's one of the things that's, like, not talked about a lot but separates good scripts from great scripts. And, like, when we mention our pitch where we included the images and the music, that was all to set, like, the tone, you know? And that's something that you can also do on a website by just the images and the music you choose.

Juel Taylor: Yeah. I think that's something—like, again, like, one of the things we learned from that Tyrone pitch specifically is that, like, people don't necessarily—they might walk away with a few plot points that they remember. Like, if you were to go in a room and pitch something. Let's say it was a 20-minute pitch. They might remember, like, that cool train scene or when the

avalanche happened or, you know, the fire, but, like, by and large, they going to forget the details of that story.

And I think, like, the thing that sticks with them, you know, if you can somehow create a tone and vibe, it's like, the mood of the movie, the feeling of the movie or the TV show, whatever you're pitching, that's much more likely to—to stick in their subconscious than, like, the details, right? Like, they'll probably forget everything but who's the main person's name, what's the big set piece, and, like, the comings and goings of the plot, they're going—it's going to be in one ear and out the other, anyway, no matter what it is.

And so if you can leave an impression, a tonal impression, like just something that feels a little bit more visceral, they are much more likely to want to hear more, or they might buy it in the room—you know what I mean? It's like, if they get wrapped up in the feeling of, like, the tone because we all have movies that we—you know, when I think of *Big Lebowski*, it has a vibe to it, you know? If I think of *Boogie Nights* and—or these movies that we tried to emulate the feeling of, like, you're in this world that's been, like, very specifically created for this particular project.

And I think, like, a lot of movies that we were hoping to be in that language of, you know, have very strong, like, tones and very strong, like, vibes. And so, like, trying to get that to stick to the room as you leave, and they just keep this feeling of, like, "I don't know what it is, but I like the—I want to see something that feels like that."

[43:29 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

Sev Ohanian: So we're going to do our Prox Recs section. For all of our listeners out there, what is something you've read, something you've watched, something you recently purchased or discovered, anything you think is worth a recommendation.

Tony Rettenmaier: A book I read recently that I really like—it's not a hidden gem because it's, like, the most popular book this year, but it's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*. I really liked it.

Sev Ohanian: Is that about the video game designers?

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah. It's a—it's a, like, unconventional romance between two video game designers that kind of grow up together, you know, mid-'90s to early '00s. And I loved it. I read a ton of sci-fi, and I don't read a lot of straight, just like—you would categorize it just as a drama or, like, a romance. But I thought it was so genuine and nice. And there was even one chapter where, like, I almost got teary-eyed. I'm not, like, an emotional person, but this one chapter—and if—you know, movies can do that relatively easy, but for a book to do that to me, I was like, damn. So that's great.

I read—Murakami had a—he's a long-distance runner. He has a book called *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, and he relates running to his writing process that I thought was

really good and inspiring. Those aren't, like, hidden finds. It's one of the biggest authors in the world and, like, one of the biggest books right now. But I liked them.

Sev Ohanian: Nice.

Juel Taylor: I snubbed something that I really loved that I saw lately, and—and they asked me, like—somebody asked me to write these, like, you know, favorite movies and TV shows of the year. And it was one that, like, as soon as I sit down, it's like, ah, man, I forgot BlackBerry. That's a great movie. You know, and I was like, I got to give BlackBerry some love because ain't nobody talk about BlackBerry. But I really loved BlackBerry. Like, it was great.

Sev Ohanian: I'm going to recommend a video game.

Tony Rettenmaier: Oh, nice.

Juel Taylor: Oh, okay. I'll probably go try to look it up.

Sev Ohanian: Called Twelve Minutes.

Juel Taylor: Oh.

Sev Ohanian: Have you guys played this?

Tony Rettenmaier: No. But it's an Annapurna game, right?

Juel Taylor: It's an Annapurna, right? Yeah.

Tony Rettenmaier: Yeah, yeah.

Sev Ohanian: Yeah. Brilliant. It's a time-loop game, like in the vein of Groundhog Day. It's literally set in the span of 12 minutes. You play a guy coming home to his apartment with his wife, and shortly after, there's a knock at the door, and Willem Dafoe shows up as a cop who basically tries to kill you. And every time you die, every time you leave the apartment, any time you try and do almost anything crazy, it—like, it resets the time.

So it's a brilliant video game because it kind of leans into, like—video games in general, like, you kind of can, like—if you die, you reload, right? Like, the same idea of a Groundhog Day but in the tiniest span possible. And the lengths of story you can pack into what happened in 12 minutes, it's so brilliant. So it's worth a play on PlayStation, Switch, whatever.

Tony Rettenmaier: We say it all the time, like, indie video games are so creative. Like, they—they really, like, put films to shame in terms of innovation and stuff.

Sev Ohanian: Thank you so much, Tony, Juel, really appreciate having you guys on our show.

Juel Taylor: Appreciate it, man.

Tony Rettenmaier: Thank you. This was fun.

[46:28 - In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

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 is by Ludwig Göransson.

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

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]