

**In Proximity**  
**Aleshea Harris**  
**Season 3, Episode 37**  
**Final Transcript**

**Paola Mardo:** The story—I mean, it deals with heavy themes, but you also explored this in a fun movie genre. Revenge thriller, what made you want to do that?

**Aleshea Harris:** Part of the reason that I wrote *Is God Is* is that I'm frustrated with certain representations of Black women in narrative. And so I didn't want to be doing the thing I'm frustrated with by making a story that was hyper-realistic. And so the humor needed to live alongside that.

[0:29 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** You're watching and listening to *In Proximity*. I'm Paola Mardo, and today I'm talking *Is God Is* with Writer-Director Aleshea Harris. Aleshea Harris is an award-winning playwright, TV writer, and filmmaker. She was a Pulitzer Prize Finalist for her play *On Sugarland*. *Is God Is* is her feature directorial debut, which she adapted from her Obie award-winning play of the same name. The story follows twin sisters Racine, played by Kari Young, and Anaia, Mallori Johnson, on a road trip through the American South to fulfill a mission from God. In this world, God is their estranged mother, played by Vivica A. Fox, no less; the mission: to make their daddy dead, real dead. He's played by Sterling K. Brown.

I could say more, but honestly, the best way to watch this is to go in without knowing too much. In the pages of Aleshea's original stage play, she describes the story as an epic that takes its cues from, quote, "the ancient, the modern, the tragic, the Spaghetti Western, hip-hop, and Afropunk." Aleshea subverts, interrogates, and plays with expectations within these genres and narrative styles, giving her Black women characters the space to just be. And there are so many standout performances here with a cast that includes Janelle Monáe and Erika Alexander.

I talk to Aleshea about her writing process for film and theater, how she worked with producers Tessa Thompson and Janicza Bravo to make the film, how she sharpened her storytelling style through playwriting and spoken word, and how she made the jump from the theater to a first-time feature filmmaker. Here's my conversation with Aleshea Harris.

[2:20 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Welcome to *In Proximity*, Aleshea Harris.

**Aleshea Harris:** Thank you.

**Paola Mardo:** I'm so excited to have you here today. This podcast will come out a little bit later, but I do want to sort of highlight for the audience that you're literally speaking to us on opening day of your new film, *Is God Is*.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** Your directorial debut, actually.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** How does it feel?

**Aleshea Harris:** It's exhilarating. It's overwhelming. It's been a long time coming. Like, it just—many, many things. I just feel mostly immense gratitude for the journey that I've been on as an artist throughout my life and the people who helped make this movie happen.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that. So *Is God Is* started as a play that you began writing in 2014. Really dove into it in 2015.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** And then, I guess, first performed as a play in 2018, and now it's 2026. It is now a movie.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Back in 2014, when you were thinking about this, did you ever think of this as something that would end up on the big screen?

**Aleshea Harris:** Absolutely not. I didn't even—I wasn't even sure it would be produced as a play.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** So, if you look at the play on the page, the language is very performative. There's a lot of performative typography because I was writing it for the readers' experience. Like, I just was going, you know, hog wild with, like, what I could do with the letters on the page to help endepen understanding of the play. So no, no, no. Not at all.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow. Can you talk about that typography?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure.

**Paola Mardo:** Because, you know, folks might be hearing about this project as a film first. But when you do watch the film, there is text onscreen—

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:**—which I did want to ask you about. So talk about the style of typography that you do in your plays and in the film and why you choose to do that.

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. So I did this style of typography in *Is God Is* specifically. It's the first play where I really did it, and I was inspired by—there's a graphic version of *The Bald Soprano* by Ionesco, and I also had a mentor in grad school who's the poet and librettist named Douglas Kearney who is a visual poet. So, between those two artists, I felt like I had a kind of permission to use, as another dimension, the letter, the actual letters of the text to play with and help an audience, you know, to understand what I was trying to convey.

You can see this in the movie, as you mentioned, and the reason it's in the movie is because I wanted to find a way just to honor it in the movie, right? So there was an organic opportunity with the twins—what I call "twintuition," their, like, secret language between them, just to sort of have these subtitles brought in and, and, like, you know, it's a nod to the play for those who've read it.

**Paola Mardo:** I just want to say I saw the film. I truly loved it. I did not know what to expect going into it, really, which I think is probably the best way to go in because it's a wild ride. There are big themes and ideas you're exploring, but I actually really appreciate that it's in-your-face but not, if that makes sense.

**Aleshea Harris:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

**Paola Mardo:** And I think, like, what I got out of the story maybe will be something different by another audience member.

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure.

**Paola Mardo:** Like, different people will take different things from it. It's revenge thriller. It's action. It's comedy. It's dark. It's twisted. It's gore. But it's a lot of fun, and it's currently, I believe, at 98 percent on Rotten Tomatoes right now, so critics are loving it. I feel like you were thinking about the audience quite a bit in making this film. Were you, and who were you thinking of?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. That's such a great question. I was thinking about the audience, but I have this sort of principle for myself that, like, I am my first audience, and I—it has to meet my standard, and I'm sure it will meet other people's. If it meets mine, then other people will be feeling it. So I was excited to reach people who were interested in something that's a little quirky, a little daring, a big swing. Certainly, I think people have named that, like, fans of Tarantino might be fans of this, people who like something that has a register that's kind of

mythic, epic, and people who don't mind a little blood, getting a little blood in their eye. Yeah, and people were excited by a story that's, like, female-driven. I really was thinking about women and especially Black women for this. I really want them to like—I want us to like it and to feel affirmed by it. So.

**Paola Mardo:** That's amazing. Actually, the play, before the actual script pages, there's a page that reads, "This epic takes its cues from the ancient, the modern, the tragic, the Spaghetti Western, hip-hop, and Afropunk." Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. So the first germ of the idea for this story was that I wondered what would happen if I made—created a play that was inspired by ancient Greek tragedy, but it wasn't—it was set in a contemporary context, and it was, like, populated by Black people. So that simple premise was an exciting space to start from, and that's where I sort of built it, and all those other genres kind of folded in. So Spaghetti Western, I think we could feel in the film, and certainly it's in the movie, some of the tropes we play with. Some of the archetypes are certainly being played with. Hip-hop is an art form where there's a lot of remixing and revising, and certainly I'm remixing the Western inside of this. I'm remixing the revenge tale. There's a lot of revision happening, and I don't know, compensatory taking of vengeance in the narrative for women, for Black women.

And then, when I say Afropunk, I know that there's that festival, which is, like, really cool, but the first time that I encountered Afropunk was in a documentary by James Spooner that I saw way back in the day. And then I went to a concert in Orlando way, way back in the day, like way before the festival. And so there's a sensibility inside of it. It's, it's like people who are counterculture inside of a counterculture. So they're Black, and they're marginalized inside of punk culture, and there's something really grimy but beautiful about that sensibility, that culture, and that space. And so that's woven into *Is God Is* because these, these girls are certainly counterculture, certainly marginalized, and making do.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. Can you talk about the archetypes or maybe elements that you sort of mentioned just now, whether it's the girls, the twins, or other characters in the movie?

**Aleshea Harris:** With the twins, I think there is a bit of a familiar archetype of, like, the one who's soft, you know, the, the—I don't want to call her good because I don't judge them that way, but there is one who's softer and a little more passive. And then we have the rougher one, the tougher—you know, the one who's ready to take on the world, a little more aggressive.

**Paola Mardo:** Right. So that's Anaia is the softer one.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Paola Mardo:** She's called The Quiet One.

**Aleshea Harris:** The Quiet One. She's not silent, but she's quieter than her sister. She definitely is down to get into the fray to back her sister up, which, you know, we see in the story, but she's not—she's not like Racine. So Racine is the The Rough One.

**Paola Mardo:** The Rough One, yes.

**Aleshea Harris:** And Anaia is the quiet one. And then we have their father, who is called interchangeably Man, simply Man, or, like, The Monster. And this is the archetype, in some ways, of, you know, a bad guy that we've seen. He's not like Snidely Whiplash, but he's, like, a cool, confident, attractive man who's also horrible.

**Paola Mardo:** Kind of charming?

**Aleshea Harris:** And very—so charming.

**Paola Mardo:** But also creepy.

**Aleshea Harris:** He's charming but creepy. There's a lot going on there.

**Paola Mardo:** And then can you talk about the mother character, who's also God?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. Yeah. So the twins actually name her God. She is a strong but spurned woman. I haven't seen anyone quite like her because I don't think women are given the space to be this deep-down, like, grimy, sort of embittered and acidic and, like, no holds barred in their desire for blood. But she does have, you know, a sort of—there is, to me, a bit of an Earth Mother vibe. I mean, it's a rough Earth Mother, and she is—you know, a matriarchal divine feminine is evoked, I think, in her visual presence. Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah, but it's so interesting. She's that mother character, very motherly, Earth Mother, but, yeah, I found that character very fascinating.

[CLIP: IS GOD IS DIRECTED BY ALESHEA HARRIS, ORION PICTURES AND AMAZON MGM STUDIOS, 2026]

**Ruby the God:** There's something I need to ask y'all to do, but I don't know if you're up to it.

**Racine:** We up to it. We can do anything. We strong. Ain't we strong, Naia?

**Anaia:** Yeah.

**Ruby the God:** I'm going to keep this real simple for you. Make your daddy dead. Dead. Dead.

[CLIP ENDS]

**Paola Mardo:** I feel like this is that kind of movie that it's fun to watch the first time, but I also want to go back and keep watching it because I feel like I'll take different things from it every time. I also just want to acknowledge it is your feature directorial debut.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** And you literally killed it! Like, literally. It was an amazing story. It looked good. It sounded good. And, you know, I haven't seen the play, but I've seen photos of it, and just to see sort of the evolution of it onto the big screen is quite incredible.

**Aleshea Harris:** Mm-hmm, thank you.

**Paola Mardo:** Can you talk about how this project started, like the movie version? Because I also saw you worked with Tessa Thompson and Janicza Bravo. Like, how did this project come about, and how did you work with those amazing artists and filmmakers?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure, sure. So I met with a few folks and was interested in working with Viva Maude, which is Tessa Thompson with Kishori Rajan and Linden, which is Reva Marker. So—and Janicza. Janicza had been in the mix for a while. She had read the play, and she is actually the person who said to me that I should direct it, she and actually Jeremy O. Harris, who are, like, a mutual friend sort of said separately, "You should"—

**Paola Mardo:** Also a playwright.

**Aleshea Harris:** Also a playwright, that's right. Love Jeremy. And he's an early champion of this play. He was, like, giving it out all over town. So I—had it not been for Janicza and Jeremy saying, "Aleshea, you should direct this," I don't think I would've wanted to take it on.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** I wouldn't have thought that I could. But it was other people seeing that and feeling like I was capable, and these were, like, good taste. These were discerning people. And so I trusted that, okay, this is something that I can do. Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Why weren't you sure that you could direct it? You have directed plays.

**Aleshea Harris:** I—not really.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, really?

**Aleshea Harris:** I've never directed *Is God Is*, and I never directed in, like, I would say, like, a truly professional context. I would direct, like, a workshop of my play, which is not something that's, like, an audience is paying to see, usually.

**Paola Mardo:** Got it.

**Aleshea Harris:** Or, like, very small, sort of community productions of things, maybe, but, like, I haven't. Not really. So, so this was a first foray, and it just felt like such a huge job. So I link with these producers. They were—they were supportive. I adapted the script. They were very supportive of me being the director, which is important to note because, again, if, you know, they had raised their hand and been like, "I'm not so sure about this," I might have been like, okay, yeah, you're right, I shouldn't. Like, let's give this to a more experienced director. But, but they were on board.

So we went to the studio. It was like, "Aleshea's directing it," and the studio was on board, too. So yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Amazing. And what made you feel—because there are a lot of folks who watch this who are maybe emerging filmmakers. Or maybe they are working but, you know, we love hearing these origin stories. What made you feel like you were ready to direct?

**Aleshea Harris:** Well, I, as a playwright, have very specific ideas about how my story should be performed. Not every playwright is like that. Some of them, I think, are more comfortable handing it over and walking away. But I kept having this experience of, like, being in the room and, like, wanting to tweak performance, wanting to tweak the set, and I think I definitely frustrated some directors because it was so—you know, there was so much energy, I think, from me.

So that's what it was, was the level of—control is a weird word, but the level of influence I wanted to have over how it was performed because it takes years to write. For me, these plays, you know, it takes years off and on. And so sometimes it could be a little frustrating when it's performed, and it doesn't feel right because the theater world is very premiere-centric. Once you get that premiere, it's kind of we're done. It's not like a movie where it can continue to have a life on streaming and—it's different, right? So, so it would feel like something tremendous had been lost if the play went up, and it didn't feel like it was saying what I wanted it to say.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow. So how did you prepare to direct the film version of your play?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. So I watched film, went back and watched films but tried to watch them like a director and think about how they were created. What were the things being done that made it work or maybe not work to my eyes? I literally got *Filmmaking for Dummies*.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, my gosh!

[LAUGHTER]

**Aleshea Harris:** Literally went and bought that book.

**Paola Mardo:** Like the yellow book, the actual—

**Aleshea Harris:** The yellow book, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Amazing.

**Aleshea Harris:** It was like, why not? Just get this book. You know, I listened to interviews and things. I talked to Janicza, who, you know, was a mentor, mentorly presence in those early days. I just kind of tried to grab everything that I could. There was a lot of, like, YouTube video watching. But there's no amount of video watching that could have prepared me for actually what it was.

**Paola Mardo:** Were you able to get on a set before your set?

**Aleshea Harris:** Well, not, like, in prep for this film. I'd been on a set twice in my life before this set. Once was on an episode of Gossip Girl where I played myself.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that. Sorry, what?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah! I play Aleshea Harris, the playwright. Again, it's like, Is God Is gets a shout-out.

**Paola Mardo:** Amazing!

**Aleshea Harris:** It's really cute but awkward. And then I was on a student film. Back at Cal Arts, I was in somebody's film. So that was it.

**Paola Mardo:** Very cool.

**Aleshea Harris:** So I did not get on a set until it was time to make this movie. And also, just the people around me, I have to say, my heads of department were genius people who were, of course, more experienced than I was. And they, and especially the DP, I think, really enjoyed teaching me about filmmaking, and the first AD. So I was learning a lot on set, and I could see that people kind of got, like—you know, they got a little excited to, like, bring the new kid in. So that helped.

**Paola Mardo:** The team effort of making a film is also very fun. It sounds like it was a very collaborative set that you were on.

**Aleshea Harris:** For sure. The set was divine. I loved the set.

[16:13 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Well, I want to ask you about direction, and I guess we'll start with actors. So we mentioned the characters of Racine and Anaia, played by Kara Young and Mallori Johnson. Man, their chemistry was amazing as sisters and twins. I felt like they really brought those characters to life. They had that twintuition. Yeah. Can you talk about casting them? And also, just directing them as twins, what direction did you give them to make them feel like real sisters and twins who went through this really traumatic experience together?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Casting Kara and Mallori was—it was a bit of a journey. Called a bunch of people in. Mallori had been in the mix, and I remember telling casting to call Kara in because I had done one of those workshops. I directed a workshop that she had been in, and I loved working with her, and I knew her, how brilliant she was from around the way. So I had—you know, they were paired with other people in their auditions and callbacks, and they kept—I mean, tremendous actors came in, but they would sort of be so much stronger than the other person they were in scene with, they'd kind of eat them up a little bit. It wasn't until I put them in scene together, and I could see that they—suddenly they were equally yoked and matched, right?

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** And they had tremendous chemistry. I think they knew each other in passing, but just to see them in this very emotional scene—I had them read the one when Racine is trying to convince Anaia to go on the journey, and just to see how they took care of each other, really took to each other, were very soft with each other in the room, I was excited. So that's how I knew that they were right. And I needed people who could, like, hold down the—this is not an easy job. You could see how much they had to, like, run, drive. Like, we're in the Louisiana heat, prosthetics. Like, I just knew—a tight schedule, 25-day shoot. I knew that we needed people who were responsible, competent, and, like, you know, down for what this was going to be. And I'm always excited to platform folks who need more flowers, you know? So, so yeah, so I cast them. And then we did work, you know, on Zoom. We did text work, and they're theater folks like I am. So I think we were all really down for, like, diving into the text in a—

**Paola Mardo:** Can you talk about what text work is?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. So we sometimes call it table work in the theater. You read the text, and you break down absolutely everything, any use of, of language, the actors, any question they have about their character, any musings that they have. It's really to build a foundation for building character together and for working together. It's also a great space to build rapport. I really wanted them to, like, get to know each other and have time together. So they did that, and, and, yeah, and then on the ground in New Orleans in our prep, we had more rehearsal time. So, like, they were in their bodies. I had a movement person come in and work with them a bit. And, yeah, yeah, we did a good amount of work to prep.

**Paola Mardo:** That's awesome.

[19:06 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Let's talk about Vivica Fox. She did play God, or the mother character. You know, she's had many iconic roles, but because we're on this Tarantino revenge thriller sort of thread, I can't help but think of Vernita Green in Kill Bill—

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:**—that she played. But this is a different role for her in a revenge thriller. Can you talk about what it was like to work with her?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. It was wonderful to work with her. I'm so glad that she agreed to do this. Vivica is, is a boss, as we know, and an icon. So I needed someone for this role who could handle the size of it, someone for whom if we said, "This person is playing God," people could buy it, right?

**Paola Mardo:** Right.

**Aleshea Harris:** And I think Vivica has that kind of presence and that kind of career. And we know that she's such a dynamic actor. And, of course, as you mentioned, she has—in the cultural memory, she is Vernita Green. She's also her Freddie, I think was the character name, in Set It Off. So she's played a woman who's kind of in the universe of the mother, of God in this film. Working with her was spectacular. She was, like, on set, ready to go. She was so game with those prosthetics. It was especially hot in the house. I just want to name this. There was no air. We couldn't run the air for sound in the Louisiana heat, and she just rode with it. And she was able to play, like, the deep emotion of the scene, the grief and the sorrow, and also the humor. There are bits of humor inside of that, and the, like, sass of it, too. So, yeah, many colors. She's a joy to work with.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. Yeah, she had prosthetics and then a mask over it, too.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yep, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** And she's, like, covered.

**Aleshea Harris:** A lot going on!

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** Layers and layers.

**Paola Mardo:** And Sterling K. Brown plays The Man or The Monster. I don't think this gives too much away, but when we first meet him or see him, we don't really see him. We see him in, like,

far away wide shot or parts of his face. What was it like to work with him? And also, why the decision to shoot him in that way?

**Aleshea Harris:** So Sterling, again, I got really spoiled with these actors. I'm not lying when I say that they were all a wonder—

**Paola Mardo:** I always want to go one-by-one through all of them, but we'll, we'll—yeah.

**Aleshea Harris:** We could do that. Like, Sterling is, is wonderful. He's very joyful. The first time we talked on the phone, he was so psyched to play this role. He's, he's, like—he's exceptional. He comes ready to go. There are a million different colors he can play. Throw anything at him, and he's down for it.

So I shot him that way—you know, it's in the script. I always knew that I wanted this because I wanted to have him be a bit of a specter. And I think that there's something about just showing bits of the person that makes his presence more sinister. It also creates, you know, a kind of mystery, and the audience has got to, like, wait until the end to get the full measure of who this person is. Also, there's a kind of a Frankenstein way that we learn who he is in the story. We get a little bit at each stop of the twins journey, right? So it kind of rhymes with that. And then, when we meet him, you know, it's a surprise. It's meant to be surprising. So what I'm doing is sort of subverting. I'm building up one idea and then doing another thing when we first meet him. It was very intentionally.

**Paola Mardo:** That's awesome.

[22:16 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** I want to talk about music, as well. I felt like it underscored the emotions of the story quite well.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** You worked with—there's a Proximity connection in this, Joseph Shirley—he was also was a composer on Creed III—and the artist Moses Sumney.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yes!

**Paola Mardo:** Has he made—has he composed for film before?

**Aleshea Harris:** This is his first.

**Paola Mardo:** Okay. Cool.

**Aleshea Harris:** As far as I know, this is his first time doing it.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Can you talk about, like, yeah, how you worked with them on the score and what direction you gave?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Joe and Moses, bless their hearts, were so patient with me. There was a lot of trying to find the, the aural language of this film. What is this music? And Joseph and Moses were really committed to doing something that felt as fresh and daring as the story felt. They were so prolific. I mean, like, Joe was sending stuff. He'd be up at midnight sending me things really quickly. It was insane. And Moses, as well, and recording things just beautifully. I don't know. We tried to find a tapestry that would support the story and sort of shift and mold itself depending on what was going on in the story. I was really big on, like, let's not give things away. Like, don't—let's not have the sound be too sinister before the big thing happens so that it was surprising. Like, it was a very specific conversation that we had, and they were—they were really, really great. I hope to work with them again. Excellent.

**Paola Mardo:** I thought it was wonderful. Can you talk about, like—I mean, how would you describe the sound? And what did you sort of give them as—did you give them playlists, or did they send you ideas? Like, how did that work?

**Aleshea Harris:** It was, like, all of the above, I think. I, I would describe the sound as, like, industrial but, like, sort of Western hip-hop about it. There's, like, a bit of guitar in there that I think is really beautiful. There's a very bassy element, and this is in the composed music. The music that—the needle drops, you know, kind of move in different directions, but they hold hands. We were very intentional about, like, it needs to feel like it's all of, of a piece, you know?

**Paola Mardo:** I love the needle drops. There's that scene with the twins. They're driving.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah!

**Paola Mardo:** And Racine's, like, rapping to the song, and it's like—

**Aleshea Harris:** Guillotine by Death Grips.

**Paola Mardo:** It's so good.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Did you pick all the songs?

**Aleshea Harris:** I did. I did pick the needle drops.

**Paola Mardo:** Okay. Can you talk about that?

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. So the first needle drop is Leikeli47, I believe. Yeah, Miss Me, and it's such a great song. This is the song when the girls are going off on their journey. It's just buoyant, and it's also kind of like—she's saying, like, miss me with the bull, you know? And that energy, I think, is in the spirit of the twins and of this movie. And she is just an amazing emcee, and that song is just—it's fire.

And, and then we had—Guillotine is another one, Death Grips. So this is a moment when one of the characters is really, like, ramping up in her aggression. And I think the music—and if you listen to the lyrics of that song, there's, you know, great parallel between the two, and it really just embodies or helps to express what's going on with that character.

Yeah, there's, there's also Groovy Flute, but that's when the girls are journeying. Their mother has given them the task, and they're journeying to their first destination. It's just a very—this one, this needle drop feels very Tarantino-esque to me. It feels sort of like the kind of thing that would be in his movie, I think, the most, and we were all very excited by how vibrant and, like, peppy it was.

[25:44 - “Juno Arp - Stinger” by Ken Nana]

**Paola Mardo:** I love hearing about your process and any descriptions you have about the scenes and songs. What were some of the films that you watched?

**Aleshea Harris:** Okay. So I'll just say the easiest is Kill Bill. I watched Mother, Bong Joon Ho. I went back and looked at Amélie closely.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** There was a—there was a lot. I thought a lot about O Brother, where art thou? because, you know, there's—you know, it's a road movie. It's also inspired by an ancient Greek poem, and I think they did such a great job of crafting, like, a singular world that feels like our world but different. And that was what I wanted to do in my own way. So that was, like, a big part of it.

I went and looked again at, like, Moonlight. I mean, everything I thought was good, essentially, I went and took another look at, tried to study.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that. I want to ask about, speaking of its own thing, the text on screen, so the twintuition. I've heard about twins having this sort of way of knowing what the other is thinking or, like, knowing how they feel. I think you illustrated it so beautifully and kind of funny, also. There are funny moments, as well, dark moments. Yeah. Can you talk about that? I don't think I've ever seen anything like that before in a movie.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. I mean, to me, it was just creating another dimension there. It was a space for humor. I think it is more weird or unusual to people than I expected it would be. To me, it's just—I don't know. I guess it's inside of my sensibility, but was just another way to also signal to the audience what kind of world we're in, that it's a little offbeat, a little bit strange. Also, I'm going to shout out Joe and Moses again because the music they built for that, we worked really hard on, and I think is gorgeous. Yeah, it just felt like, you know, another space where we could just deepen the story and sort of get at a thing that maybe the twin couldn't say aloud. I mean, literally what they couldn't say aloud. But also, there's something in the way that the letters are laid out that's meant to convey a sense of desolation sometimes, right, or utter loneliness, particularly for, like, Anaia.

**Paola Mardo:** And was that something that you had scripted in your screenplay or that you decided in the edit?

**Aleshea Harris:** Oh, I'd scripted it in the screenplay. So we framed up—you know, we shot it for, for space in the frame. We also shot it with language just in—you know, it was a failsafe, but, yeah, that was the intention.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, so there are versions of that scene where they spoke?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, where they speak.

**Paola Mardo:** Interesting.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** So the story, I mean, it deals with heavy themes: domestic violence, abuse, trauma, generational trauma. But you also explored this in a fun movie genre, revenge thriller. Yeah, what made you want to do that?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. You know, I didn't sit down and say to myself, "You're going to explore very heavy themes in a fun, funny way." All of this is, like, I'm reflecting, you know, and trying to articulate what the thing was. It just was an expression of something that felt very honest and true to what I needed to express at that time. I think it's important to have humor inside of this story because part of the reason that I wrote *Is God Is* is that I'm frustrated with certain representations of Black women, Black people and Black women in narrative. I think people still have a very limited view of what that is and can be. And so I didn't want to be doing the thing I'm frustrated with by making a story that was hyper-realistic, right? There's a very bad version of *Is God Is* that could exist that's just heavy, heavy, heavy, no humor, a total, like, dirge. And so the humor needed to live alongside that.

But it's largely intuitive. I mean, I just, like, went with my gut. You know, I go back, and I draft, and, you know, craft and, you know, as a good storyteller does. But it was really just, like, these are the things I think are funny, you know? This is how I think this should work.

**Paola Mardo:** What I also found interesting is that, while it is a violent movie, or there are scenes of violence, it's not gratuitous. It felt like you—like, that felt very intentional. Like, there were scenes where violence happens behind a car, or you don't see it all; you see a little bit of it. Was that in the play as well?

**Aleshea Harris:** No, that wasn't in the play. In ancient Greek theater, often you don't see the violence happen. You see the result of the violence. So, in the film, there is a nod to that. The thing happens inside of the—in the room, you know, behind the cars, you say, and then we see later, maybe, what happened to that person. So I was thinking about that.

I was also thinking about, being very careful about my depictions of violence against women by men, in particular. So all the stuff that Dad does to Mom, we don't need to see all of that. We can engage other senses, you know, have the frame be his body in the doorway. Like, that story, with the sound, right, that does the job probably better than something else would.

I remember Janelle especially was like, "What are you doing with the violence against women? Like, we want to be careful about those depictions." And I was already thinking about that.

[30:45 - In Proximity Theme Stinger by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** What do you want the audience to feel after they watch the film?

**Aleshea Harris:** There's a level of immensity—but hold on. Let me say—let me say—because I usually resist answering these kinds of questions, and I want to say a little bit why. And it's because it feels, like, so impossible to me to have a hold of anything that the audience could feel because I don't know who they are and what they came with. If someone is, like, a misogynist, you know what I mean, I don't give a damn what you feel.

**Paola Mardo:** True, true.

**Aleshea Harris:** Real talk. But I do hope that what the story does—I hope that what it does is that it is a useful place for catharsis for some people. I hope that it—it throws down the gauntlet of, like, this is what story can be, this is what story centering women can be, this is what story centering marginalized peoples can be. Like, we—you know, it can be anything. And I hope that people, you know, feel affirmed by it, maybe. Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. And also just have a fun time at the movies. Hello!

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right! It's a good time. Thank you. Thank you for that.

**Paola Mardo:** Definitely something that should be seen on the big screen.

**Aleshea Harris:** Mm-hmm.

**Paola Mardo:** Are there any favorite reactions or surprising reactions you've gotten from the audience since you've been screening the film?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think—I think one that I sort of just named or hinted at is people have said that they experienced catharsis. There was a woman in an audience, I don't know, last week when I was at a Q&A, and she said her sister had been dealing with some domestic violence issues and that she, you know, had a lot of rage at the person who committed these acts and that watching the movie allowed her to release something, right? I've had—I've had that a few times, that people are like, "I was able to, like, let something go." That's really powerful to me that this story could do that. That is, I think, the most surprising reaction to the movie, and gratifying, I have to say.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. So, if you want some catharsis—

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

**Paola Mardo:** Is God Is, just highly recommending right now.

[32:39 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** I want to go back a little bit to your origin story.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** You started in the theater, but before that, you did spoken word?

**Aleshea Harris:** Oh, my gosh.

**Paola Mardo:** Can we talk about that and how you got to spoken word?

**Aleshea Harris:** Definitely. So I—actually, I was doing theater as an undergrad at the University of Southern Mississippi, and when I graduated, I needed a way to make theater that was simple and cheap. And I'm not the most patient person, especially back then as a youngster. I was even less patient. So I needed a way to do it that was super quick, and spoken word appealed to me because I could write something and perform it the same—you know, that night and have the immediate reaction of the audience. It was like tapas of theater, right?

**Paola Mardo:** Tapas, love that.

**Aleshea Harris:** So—and I got to really, like, learn, you know, what spoken word was and how—you know, I got competitive. Like, I took it very seriously, and I actually have to credit that

art form for where I am and the way that I write now. The reason that there's so much poetry inside of it is I really got a taste for something and the rhythm of language and the way that language impacts the body of the person speaking it back then. So I'm really specific because, I think, in part of that time as a spoken-word artist in Florida. Shout out to Tampa Bay, woot, woot!

[LAUGHTER]

**Paola Mardo:** Shout out! I love that you brought that up because I did see—I think it was a class or something that you spoke in, and you talked about how people have talked about your work as almost like a score and that you also care about not just how the words are said by the actor but how the audience perceives it.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** And I feel like it's very visible in even your film that you care about words and how they sound.

**Aleshea Harris:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

**Paola Mardo:** Then you got into more theater.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** Did you perform as a kid in theater or do any of that before college?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. In high school, I was in community theater, for sure. I did, like, Rocky Horror at one point.

**Paola Mardo:** Hey!

**Aleshea Harris:** I played Janet. I loved it. The theater bug had bitten me. Performance and the arts was something—

**Paola Mardo:** I get that.

**Aleshea Harris:**—that was definitely with me as a little girl and has followed me.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that. We love theater kids on this show.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yay!

**Paola Mardo:** I may have been one. I was once an understudy for Maria in West Side Story.

**Aleshea Harris:** Oh, wow!

**Paola Mardo:** Way back when. My acting days are long gone.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's amazing.

**Paola Mardo:** But filmmaking isn't always the first—at least for me, I didn't know directing—or I didn't know any kind of film job was possible. You only saw, like, the actors.

**Aleshea Harris:** Right, right.

**Paola Mardo:** Or growing up, I saw theater. So I don't know if it was the same for you, that that was sort of what was around you, that inspired you to get into the arts.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, I think it was the actors. I think it was performance and also just what it meant to craft a story. Like, even as a little kid, I had my little makeshift books, you know, pages stapled together, and I would write. And I was very serious about Barbie doll play. Like, it was intense for me. The—

**Paola Mardo:** Oh!

**Aleshea Harris:** I was crafting story.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, like as you're playing dolls, you're, like, making a play out of it.

**Aleshea Harris:** Exactly, but making a story. My younger brother would just watch me. He was entertained, so maybe I was directing, like, as a kid.

**Paola Mardo:** Captive audience.

**Aleshea Harris:** Writing, directing—yeah. So, so I think there was something in me that maybe is a little innate where I just came here as a person who loves to craft a narrative. I love to, like, put an event next to another event and build a character, and it's something that just developed throughout my life. But, yeah, to what you're saying, yes, acting first. I don't think I was thinking about who or what a director was very much. It's really—it really started with watching the performers and then thinking about the writing. And now I think even a step back and looking at being a director.

[36:19 - Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** Can we talk about your writing process then?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Where do you even begin? Whether it's *Is God Is* or anything else you've done, what are sort of your must-haves when you write?

**Aleshea Harris:** You know, it varies project to project but largely, I have what I call a "flash," which is an image or an idea. So the flash for *Is God Is* was, you know, if I were to write a play, ancient Greek tragedy, but, you know, people who look and speak like myself. And then I just try to follow it. What I tend to need is a lot of space and quiet. I'm not someone who's going to, like, go to work and then go home and write. I need to know that I have like a week of just basically white space ideally these days. Back when I wrote *Is God Is*, I didn't have it. I made it work, but I guess I'm a little spoiled now. I live alone, very intentionally. I have for most of my life. And, you know, I write on computer. I used to write on book, but I write directly on the screen these days. There's a lot of image work. I love to gather images. Like, I'm serious about a Pinterest board.

**Paola Mardo:** Ooh, like a mood board. Pinterest! Oh, I love that.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I go hard on a Pinterest board. I have a few for a few different projects right now.

**Paola Mardo:** Yes. Yes, I have done the same.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Yeah?

**Paola Mardo:** Because it's so good.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yes!

**Paola Mardo:** It's so good.

**Aleshea Harris:** There's no substitute for it. And it, it can teach you about your project, I find. It's like I'll see something and go, "Oh, that's what"—I've literally, like, seen a video and gone, "Oh, that's the chorus for my play. What those people are doing is what"—

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** And so you're pulling from—because I like editorial images on Pinterest, like photo shoots and things like that.

**Aleshea Harris:** Sure. Sure, sure.

**Paola Mardo:** What do you pull? Is it videos or—

**Aleshea Harris:** Editorial, sometimes it's videos. Not strictly Pinterest, so sometimes it's a YouTube thing. And, you know what, sets for theater pieces. Like, sets that are interesting, I have a whole file of those because they're so interesting that I'm like, I could craft a story for that environment, for that set.

**Paola Mardo:** It sounds like the early part of your writing process, you're collecting imagery. And then, when you start the page work, I guess, the writing, yeah, how do you—do you just sit in your room and, like, force yourself to eke some words out? Or, like, how does it go?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Well, usually I'm excited. So I sit down and I—and I, you know, put some things on the page, try to let it be bad. Sometimes I do the thing where you—you know, you set the timer. In fact, I have to do that because I have—I have tendonitis so I can't sit there forever. But I'll set a timer, go, go, go. I'm really big on talking to myself when I'm writing. I'll literally get up and walk around—this is why living alone is very useful—and talk through the problem in the script, right, or what I'm trying to figure out, and it really helps me to figure things out and also to speak as a character sometimes, you know, just to, like, put my voice on it and try—

**Paola Mardo:** Do you ever record yourself, or do you just speak aloud?

**Aleshea Harris:** I have a very few times, but not really. I don't think I need to take it that—I also wouldn't want anyone to find it.

[LAUGHTER]

But I have to say, the images live alongside. So they aren't just in the early part. I was recently working on a play, and I would start my writing session by going back to the images, just look at them again to sort of remind myself of the textures of the world, you know, the grass, how people dress and the angles of the bodies, and then go into the writing. Whatever I feel like I need, I'll go ahead and do.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. Do you outline or storyboard?

**Aleshea Harris:** I do. I outline. It's very loose, though, because I find that, for me, the best story happens in the writing. I can't, like, bird's eye view. I do. It helps to give it shape and, you know—

**Paola Mardo:** And structure.

**Aleshea Harris:** And discipline and structure, right? I definitely will do something if it's a better idea. I don't feel like I have to do the thing because I said I would. I will, like, redo the entire story, rebreak a whole new character if I think it will make the story stronger.

**Paola Mardo:** Wow.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's part of the reason it takes forever. But I'm like, you can't know that there was a better idea and not honor it because you're too lazy to, like, do it.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, yeah.

**Aleshea Harris:** So, yeah, so I go hard in the pain. Tendonitis.

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah. It happens.

[40:17 - In Proximity Theme Stinger by Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** You mentioned, before we started rolling, there's a song you were listening to when you were writing *Is God Is*.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yes! That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** Talk about the song, and why.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, so—sure, sure. So the song is *Bitch Better Have My Money* by Rihanna, and it really was the video and the song, right, because the video—there's a narrative in the video.

**Paola Mardo:** Oh, classic. Yes.

**Aleshea Harris:** It's amazing.

**Paola Mardo:** It is kind of a revenge thriller.

**Aleshea Harris:** It absolutely is! It absolutely is a revenge thriller. It's beautifully shot. You know, it's funny,. It's dark. It's, like, very wicked. And from what I understand, it had to do with a real experience that she had. So I was addicted to that, and it became sort of my song, my jam as I was writing the play. And they—and in the premiere of the play, they played it. It was a little distorted, I think, but a little bit of it, like, somehow in the sound design of the premiere, the world premiere. So.

**Paola Mardo:** That is my pump-up song for sure.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that song. I love that you—now that I'm just thinking about the music video, it is very much, like, women taking charge.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. On the road.

**Paola Mardo:** Doing what they need to do on the road!

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right.

**Paola Mardo:** Getting their money. I love that. Do you—do you ever create playlists when you write?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. I, I do. I do. I definitely created a playlist for this, for the movie. A lot of Leikeli47, a lot of DoeChii, just very—it was, like, a lot of aggressive, like, can the man, like, aggressive women hip-hop, women-centered hip-hop was definitely in the mix. But there was also, like, some Nancy Wilson and Nina Simone, so different—you know, different flavors.

**Paola Mardo:** For the tender moments.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, for the tender moments.

**Paola Mardo:** That's great.

**Aleshea Harris:** Valerie June, yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** I love that. I just want to ask, too, the difference between your writing process and directing. Like, in directing for a film, what did you have to do to prepare yourself?

**Aleshea Harris:** Writing is such a solitary act, right? It's really just self-maintenance, whatever I need to do. If it's, like, get groceries for the week and don't—I literally will stay in pajamas for days, you know?

**Paola Mardo:** That sounds amazing, honestly.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah. Yeah, so it's just—it's very solitary. It's just me and the page trying to make sure that I stay true to what I—what I write, true to my impulses, but also having discipline and shaping up a story that will make sense to other people. And then, for prepping for the film, you know, in some ways, it was like, I don't even know what I don't know. Some of it is just going to have to be instinct, talking to people who've been here before but being sort of light on my feet so that when I'm on set, I'm, you know, stooped but, like, crouched but, like, ready to spring, you know?

**Paola Mardo:** Yeah.

**Aleshea Harris:** So I, I prepared for meeting heads of department by watching a lot. I would watch things that, like, a production designer had done, a D—a lot of watching, like, what DPs had done. I would look at their work before I would even, like, interview them. I wanted to have a sense of, like, who they were and what they had done, if I could.

And then I would speak to them, and what I was looking for was, like, sincere excitement about the project because that enthusiasm is, like, fuel when people are tired, you know what I'm saying? Right?

**Paola Mardo:** 100 percent, yes.

**Aleshea Harris:** You can't—you can't fake that. And also who—a lot of times, the production designer and the costume designer are presenting images. So, when their images made me more excited about the project, like, I knew, you know? Like, Angelina Vitto, the costume designer, she's brilliant. She should be studied. But, like, I was so excited to see what she took the script and decided the world should be, what cues she took from me. So, yeah, so it was a lot of, like, talking to them, articulating, like, what this world was. I was honestly a little bit worried about how to achieve the tone because it's so—

**Paola Mardo:** Well, I wanted to ask you about that.

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Can you talk about—do you create a lookbook?

**Aleshea Harris:** Yeah.

**Paola Mardo:** Do you define it through words? Like, how—yeah, how would you get that across?

**Aleshea Harris:** All of the above. And it's speaking ad nauseum about it. I had a lookbook, which people got even before I spoke to them about whether or not they would work on the movie. So they had a sense of, like, what, what my vision was. And then I spoke with them about it, offered more comps. I had tons of image files, like hundreds of images.

**Paola Mardo:** Do you send them the Pinterest links, or no?

**Aleshea Harris:** I, I did. We would share, in fact. We sort of started some together, but I think, to this day, I'm still sharing pinterst and links with the costume and production designers.

**Paola Mardo:** Secret boards!

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right, our secret Is God Is boards. Yeah, so it was a lot of, like, exchange. And then, like, as things were being built and wallpaper was being purchased, I would go and look at it, you know, go and look at the car. We'd ride around in the car, talk about it, you know, because the thing lives in abstraction in a way, and you've got to go—it's tactile, you know? Like, what does it feel like? What will it do? So it was a lot of just conversation throughout.

[44:50 - Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

**Paola Mardo:** So we've come to our final segment. It's called Prox Recs, where we ask our guest to provide a recommendation. Usually, it has something to do with your work. And it's interesting here. I think—well, you're one of our first playwrights. We have had playwrights before, but playwright and director. So it can be about either of those works that you've done or all. It could be a book, movie, really anything that could inspire, sort of, our viewers and listeners to continue their learning after watching this podcast.

**Aleshea Harris:** I'll recommend something that I did mention in this podcast.

**Paola Mardo:** Cool.

**Aleshea Harris:** And it is the graphic version of *The Bald Soprano* by Eugene Ionesco. It's a beautiful, beautiful book. It's a weird book. And I think, what I love about this book is that it, it gave me permission. So I think I would encourage people to just take a peek at that wild, wacky, absurdist text and images.

**Paola Mardo:** Is it a graphic novel, or is it a book? Because when you first said it, I was like, I'm going to have to look this up. So what is it?

**Aleshea Harris:** It's a graphic book. So it's like an art book. It's hard to get, right, or very expensive online, but you can find the images online. It's not, you know, the size of a graphic novel. It's, like, larger than that.

**Paola Mardo:** Cool. Is it a narrative or—

**Aleshea Harris:** It's an absurdist narrative.

**Paola Mardo:** Okay.

**Aleshea Harris:** So people—

[LAUGHTER]

**Paola Mardo:** Okay.

**Aleshea Harris:** If you know anything about absurdist theater, it doesn't make sense, but it's a reaction to trauma, is what a lot of people attribute to absurdism. So I think that certainly there's something to be said about the absurdist gestures in *Is God Is* being reactions to a kind of trauma.

**Paola Mardo:** Great. Cool. It's sort of another piece of tapas that you can take after watching *Is God Is*.

**Aleshea Harris:** That's right. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**Paola Mardo:** Well, thank you, Aleshea, for being on the show. It was really a pleasure to meet you, and congratulations again.

**Aleshea Harris:** Thank you very much. It's been an honor.

[46:52 - 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

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]