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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello, everyone. Hello and welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast. I am Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School.

Today, it is my great pleasure to be speaking to a recent alum who just completed his ALM in English earlier this year. I am talking to the one and only Nate Corddry, who is an actor from the Boston area. His credits are very long and extensive. But as I was just telling him shortly before we started this conversation, I've just been revisiting some of his work over the past several days.

And he has appeared in, among other things, the legendary Aaron Sorkin's *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. He had a recurring role in *The United States of Tara*. He also had a recurring role in the FX miniseries *Fosse/Verdon*. He was a regular on *Mom*, the wonderful sitcom with Allison Janney and Anna Faris. He had a recurring role in the first season of the HBO show *Perry Mason*.

So these are all very varied projects. I think all of us have seen Nate in one project or another over the years. And it is wonderful to be able to talk to someone who is a working actor and who just completed their graduate degree. So welcome, Nate.

**NATE
CORDDRY:** Thank you so much, Chris. That was a wonderful introduction. I'm thrilled to be here and to share about my experience at Harvard Extension. And everyone's path at Harvard Extension is unique. Continuing ed, adult education, is such a -- it has such a varied and diverse group of people who are pursuing this second part of their academic life and career. So I'm thrilled to chat with you. Thanks for having me.

CHRIS DAVIS: No, I'm delighted too. And I thought I'd just ask you right off the bat -- my curiosity speaking. And I'm sure this is something that would be of interest to students as well. As we've just seen, you've been a working actor in TV and film for many years. Oh, I forgot to mention also your appearance in *Mindhunter*, the second season of that. I know a lot of people are fans of that show. And it was a very interesting show.

But why an ALM? Why at this point in your career, life? How did you find out about Extension School? Just kind of starting off with that.

**NATE
CORDDRY:** Well, I guess I had this hunger in my brain that I couldn't satiate with book clubs, basically. And I didn't have the muscle and the experience to read scholarly articles and journals. I didn't have enough experience with sort of 'the canon'. My grammar was just OK.

But you know, I was a big reader. I was sort of a voracious reader, as a lot of actors are, because like half of our job is reading and analyzing text. If you can do that, you're sort of on your way. So I spent a lot of time with text, and words, and playing detective on what the writer's intention is.

But analyzing a novel, or a novella, or a short story, or a play -- you know, it's very different from analyzing a screenplay. So there was a -- I had this sort of desire that, like, there was a depth of my knowledge. It was just sort of empty. And I wanted to fill it. And I was lucky. I think I'd just finished *Mom*. I spent two seasons on *Mom*. I think I had just finished it when I took my first class.

And I just knew I was never going to be able to take, you know, 3 and 1/2 months out of my life and move to and live in Watertown and commute in for my class. It was just too difficult. But I still thought, like, well, maybe there's some -- maybe I'll get lucky, and I'll get a job on -- you know, I came very close to getting a job on the Julia Child HBO Max series that shoots in Boston. And it was between me and one other guy.

And it was a great script and a great part. But the other thing I desired so much was the ability to live in Boston. To live and work in Boston would be a dream. That's like the ultimate dream. And my wife kind of laughs at me, because I look at -- you know, I go on Zillow and look at house prices in the Boston area. And the prices are just as bad, if not worse than LA.

But yeah, I guess I was just in a place in my career where I was-- when you're young, and you're in your 20s, you obsess about your career. And it's all that matters. You're not paying attention to other aspects of your life. And you put all of your focus on finding an agent, getting auditions, booking those jobs, you know? It was everything.

And so I was in my 30s and comfortable. I'd sort of found a career. And I thought, OK, maybe now's the time. I have this time. I left the show. And I took my first class at Harvard Extension, a literature and sexuality course. Matthew Kaiser taught it, who's no longer at Harvard Extension, I don't think. But it was so good. And it was so hard.

And I think I just lucked out because I had his class first. And the class was awesome. And I thought, ooh, I want more of this. I so looked forward to, like -- I think it was Tuesdays when the link would come into my email to watch the video stream. It was like Christmas morning every Tuesday when the when the link appeared. I was so excited.

And I knew then. I was like, all right. I've given myself a taste of this. And I want a lot more. So why don't I keep going and see what happens?

CHRIS DAVIS: So it sounds like you did it, in one respect, for enjoyment. I mean, you -- it sounds like you value the written word. And that's a big, obviously, cornerstone of that particular degree. But I'm curious. Did you -- you know, a degree isn't completed overnight. It takes some time. Did it require some juggling for you to be able to complete the courses you needed for your degree while doing acting gigs and other stuff?

**NATE
CORDDRY:** It did. It did. I was -- and you're right, looking at my record. When COVID happened, I knew that I wasn't going to work for at least a year. And I thought, I need to -- what am I going to do with my life here? I can't audition. I can't work. You know, I would meet over Zoom and have play readings with friends, just for fun, to sort of exercise. And think I did *Glengarry Glen Ross*. I did *Death of a Salesman*.

And it was so fun because we all wanted to exercise. We all wanted to work. But we just couldn't do it. So I had always had Harvard in the back of my mind as this kind of dream. Like, imagine if I could -- imagine if I could get a degree. Imagine if I could finish this. And then because of COVID, the on-campus requirement was (temporarily) waived. And I could manage it because I wasn't working.

So I took the proseminar that fall, I think that fall. Yeah, that fall, with Peter Becker, who is just a remarkable teacher, incredible teacher, taught us such discipline, and really taught -- one of the first things he said -- we were analyzing a paragraph -- his mantra was like, what do you notice? What do you notice here?

And it's something I carry with me in my script analysis when I'm preparing for a job. Like, pay really close attention. Mind all the punctuation. If you think that you're finished searching, you're not. Do another lap and see what else that you can wring from the text.

And then once -- I think it was next spring. I was able to get back to work. The vaccines began. I think I had a vaccine in March or something. But then I was working in June or July, because the town was so desperate to get back into shooting mode. So there was a ton of opportunity.

And I went to Chicago that summer. I went to Calgary that fall. I shot something in Los Angeles. And always, always, I had my books. I worked on -- I did an episode of *Barry* when I was doing my final capstone project. And I was sitting in my trailer reading *Dorian Gray*, because I had class the next day.

And all my teachers, all the professors, were so generous and understanding with my career. There is no, like -- you can't take a day off. There's no sick days. If you're shooting on Tuesday, you're shooting on Tuesday. And there is no negotiating that. So I got so lucky. I only missed one in-person class in 2 and 1/2 years. It was pure luck.

And I would mention it to my agent. And my agent would mention it to the production managers on these series, like *Barry*, the show in Calgary called *High School*, which was a show about the artists Tegan and Sara, who wrote a memoir about their experiences growing up in Calgary when they were high school kids in the '90s. And it's a beautiful show. It's on Amazon.

And I was in an airport in Calgary, waiting for a flight, reading -- what was I reading? I was working on a paper for Literature and Nature. It's Collier Brown's class. It was a wonderful, wonderful class. Yeah, it was -- I just got really lucky that I didn't have to shoot on days that I was due to be in person over Zoom. And I just -- I don't know. I just dodged -- I dodged a lot of bullets, and read in a lot of trailers around the globe, and was able to pull it off.

CHRIS DAVIS: Seeing Nature in the 20th Century. Was that it? Yes.

NATE Yes, that was it. Brilliant class. Collier is one of the best professors I had. Wonderful guy.

CORDDRY:

CHRIS DAVIS: Mm-hmm. So one of the things that I'd mentioned to you earlier, you had participated in the 2023 graduate student spotlight survey. One of the things you mentioned, which I was so glad to -- because it's my wheelhouse -- the student services that are available at the university and at Harvard Extension in particular. You mentioned the Writing Center. Did you use that? I'm sure you did, since you mentioned it so glowingly.

NATE I did. I did. So I always was curious about what the -- you know, people ask me, like, you're getting a master's in English at Harvard Extension. Like, what are they -- what is the end goal? Because I'm probably not going to become a professor. I'm not going to pursue an academic life. Maybe later, maybe if that passion sort of overtakes me. But I just don't have the time or the bandwidth to do it now, or the ability, probably.

But the sort of goal was to write academically, to be able to learn, truly, how to publish a scholarly article. I had very little writing experience. I have a lot of actor friends who are writers as well. And I've tried it. My wife is a writer, a TV writer. And I have just the deepest respect for what writers go through.

And I myself was a poor writer. And I needed extra help. I needed extra help, not just in the sort of nuts and bolts of, like, what it should physically look like, and how to cite sources, and all that stuff that it's kind of easy to learn, but how to lay out an argument effectively with evocative language, set up your argument clearly and concisely, and never have any straw man arguments, have all the arguments based in fact, bring evidence, and bring it to a close.

The first few papers I wrote were all over the place. And I kept getting told -- I kept getting told by Dr. Becker, he was like, this is -- I know what you're trying to do. But you're not doing it. You should go to the Writing Center -- he suggested the Writing Center to me.

He said, you have really great points. And your evidence, the evidence that you're finding in the novels, is great. But you're not articulating it in your writing effectively enough. But the Writing Center was really valuable, because they cover everything. If you have a question about any corner of your writing, they have an answer for you.

CHRIS DAVIS: As I mentioned to you earlier, before we started, I think, I was pleasantly getting whiplash from watching some of your work recently, because it really runs the gamut. You are a very versatile actor. I don't think it's just any actor who could, for example, pull off some of the pratfalls in *Mom*, for example, with the physical dexterity that you do and then the very tragic story of *Perry Mason*, which, the series kind of starts with your character in very pained circumstances.

So I'd love to hear from you how you approach the craft. I mean, the work that you've done straddles all genres. I think you also have an upcoming science fiction series with Colin Farrell coming soon, right?

**NATE
CORDDRY:** Yes. Yes, it's sort of a noir-ish -- it's a really interesting shift to the sort of modern neo-noir genre of, you know, the detective who's searching for the missing girl. But there's a really interesting sort of shift in the story that makes it very different from your usual Los Angeles-based noir, contemporary noir.

But yeah. Well, I appreciate the compliment. And it's something I do -- that's my dream. And to hear you say it, it makes me feel like, all right, there's some validation from someone I don't know, who's not a family member, saying, you can do these two things.

CHRIS DAVIS: And I have to say, for our younger listeners who may -- I mean, I always kind of assume that everyone knows Aaron Sorkin. But I mean, you were one of the leads on an Aaron Sorkin show for a season. That is not something that every actor can do. Like, his dialogue is legendary for being very specific. And there's a certain caliber of actor who can do that.

So yeah, I'm very much -- I don't have a vested interest in giving you positive feedback for your career. I was just very impressed by the different variety of performances you've given in very different projects. What kind of projects kind of draw you? I know a lot of -- in the business, you know, it's out of your control. Projects kind of take shape on a timeline that is very divorced from what you as an actor might wish to see. So you kind of have to work in that realm of what's available at any given time.

But I think, if someone looks at your filmography and sees this, what would you say are some of the baseline things that you look for in projects that you've done?

NATE
CORDDRY: Well, thank you again. It means a lot to hear that. I think it's been an advantage and a disadvantage for me that I don't fit cleanly into one simple box. I do not -- I mean, I repeat genres. But I am not the -- you know, there are guys who you're like, this is a sitcom guy. And this is a guy who can brilliantly deliver a joke, whether it's a physical bit or just sort of the poetry that comes with doing a half-hour multi-camera sitcom like *Big Bang Theory* or *Mom*. It's a very different muscle. And not everyone can do it.

The muscles that *Perry Mason* required, which is -- spoiler alert, the first season deals with a murdered baby -- that was a long two days, shooting those scenes. I had a brilliant partner in those scenes. So she made it a hell of a lot easier than it was going to be. And also, the director, Tim Van Patten, who was, I don't know, one of the best TV directors -- all your favorite episodes of *The Sopranos* are directed by Tim Van Patten.

So we were in very good hands. But yeah, there's a -- producers want it to be easy. When they see your face, when they see an actor, they want the audience to not be challenged, especially in commercial -- in shows on network TV -- ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox.

Prestige television is a bit different, because there's a smaller audience. And it's a niche audience. And the audience is willing to be challenged. And they're willing to do a little bit of work. Network television is breaks between selling cars, fast food, cruise lines, everything else, drug companies. And they don't want you to change the channel. They don't want the audience to be challenged by what this character, what this actor represents.

And so network TV is a little bit harder for me sometimes, because I don't fit cleanly into that box. There are guys that I'm seeing in the audition room for projects. And I'm like, oh, that is -- you look at this face. And the stuff that's out of my control -- you look at this face. This guy has built a career based on big, broad, physical performances.

And then you see another job. And the performances are smaller and quieter. And you sort of have to -- good actors are able to sort of fluctuate their performances between different genres and different networks. And it's a challenge. But I do think it's been a disadvantage in a way, because some people don't -- because so many people-- I auditioned -- I remember, I did this movie that Paul Feig directed called *The Heat*, which was shot in Boston, shot in Dorchester, with Melissa McCarthy and Sandra Bullock.

And I was having dinner with Paul one night, with some of the cast. And he was like, I thought you were -- I was surprised to see you in the audition room, because I thought you were a drama guy. I was like, oh. Like, in my head, I thought, oh no. This guy thinks I'm a drama guy. But there are other drama guys who were like, I thought you just did *Mom* and like sitcom stuff.

So they have to be -- I have to convince them. Especially people who are new to me and who don't know my work, I have to do a bit of convincing. But that's fun for me. That's a challenge. I like to go into a room and prove to someone that I can do something that maybe they didn't anticipate that I do. I like that challenge, the sort of competitive nature. But it is -- it makes it a little bit harder, because sometimes, other actors don't have to convince the producers and directors as much as I do sometimes.

CHRIS DAVIS: Yeah, very much. I can see that being a double-edged sword and kind of being an uphill battle, although, yeah, again, maybe the converse of that is, as I said, I watched the episode of *New Girl* that you had done. I'd seen it many years ago.

But it's funny. That kind of -- you brought a lot of that into that one kind of appearance, because you are not a -- you know, at first glance, not a funny character. But no, I'm just thinking of a show like that. Not to disparage anyone. But again, when someone is very closely associated with a project like that, that's very high profile -- I can't imagine some of the regular cast members on that show, if they were appearing in a drama.

And it's maybe very unfair to say this. But I would I would find it a little-- like, if Max Greenfield just, you know, pops up in a very serious piece, I think I would be taken out of it a little bit.

NATE 100%. And that is the challenge that we all bear. And it's not -- you know, it's a challenge within the realm --
CORDDRY: pretty low-stakes challenges. But it is a challenge. Especially if you're in a high-profile show, then you are associated with that show. And breaking out of that box becomes very, very difficult. And only really skilled and driven actors are able to break out of that box.

But yeah, that's -- my dream is to be able to keep one foot in both worlds. And the good thing is that it opens up more opportunities, more audition opportunities for me, because I can do both. It's harder to book them because I'm dealing -- I have one foot in both camps. And each camp has dedicated performers who only do that thing. And they do it at the highest possible level. So the competition is very, very stiff.

I get more at-bats. But the competition is really difficult. But every opportunity is -- it's like a lottery ticket. You hope you hit. And every chance you get to audition is a chance to work. So you take that. And if you get the job, great. But trying not to ride the roller coaster of getting jobs and not getting jobs is something I didn't do in my 20s and most of my 30s. But I've gotten better at it now in my 40s.

CHRIS DAVIS: Nate, I want to end with one question, which -- I hope this isn't too broad. But I just -- I'm curious to hear what you'd say to it, along the lines of everything that we've been talking about. But what's the best part of acting to you? What's your favorite part of acting that's kept you in this field for so many years?

Is there a particular thing about it that -- regardless of the type of project that you're in at any given moment, what's the most joyful part of it for you?

NATE The community. The people. Actors get a bad rap. You know, they're vain. They only think of themselves. They're
CORDDRY: surface. They only want attention. You know, they're narcissists. And that certainly exists, 100%.

But when I discovered this community when I was in high school -- I grew up in Weymouth, in the south shore of Massachusetts, middle class, not a creative town. There was not a ton of art. We never went to see plays or music or -- you know, I didn't know what the Gardner Museum was until I graduated high school. So I didn't grow up in a creative family. I grew up with boy scouts and little league, basically. And those were my north stars.

But when I discovered this community of artists and performers, I just fell in love. And I wanted to be surrounded by these people. People were so much more open and honest about vulnerability. And they're so much more open to talking about what they're afraid of. And I didn't have that when I was growing up.

And all of a sudden -- I remember working at the Williamstown Theater Festival in Western Massachusetts. I was an apprentice there when I was 20. And there were 60 apprentices. And we took class. But we were also the run crews for the shows. And we built costumes and sets and painted things. And I just -- I found my people, you know? You find your tribe.

In high school, sometimes it's harder. But as you get out of college, and then as you grow into adulthood, you get more control about the tribe that you find. And so I think that the best part about being an actor is this community of open, honest, vulnerable people who are curious. You know, "an unexamined life is not worth living". And at the core of this art form is a sort of deep exploration of what it means to be alive.

And I will be, hopefully, forever curious about that question. And this community, so far, is the community that I've found that best is -- is most interested in answering those questions. So it's certainly community for me.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, Nate, I want to say thank you so much for taking the time to chat today. I really appreciated it.

NATE Thank you, Chris. What a joy. This was really, really fun. I'll come back anytime you want.

CORDDRY:

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the CARC Podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.