

BWW Interview: The Echo-ing ASCENSION of Ahmed Best

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by Gil Kaan

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The Echo Theater Company world premieres D.G. Watson's *ASCENSION* October 5, 2021 at the Atwater Village Theatre. Echo's associate artistic director **Ahmed Best** directs this immersive, interactive, sci-fi mystery thriller featuring Karen Sours Albisua, Leandro Cano, Samantha Cavestani, Elise DuRant, Steve Hofvendahl, Gloria Ines and Charrell Mack.

Gil Kaan had the opportunity to pose a few questions to Ahmed, a black-belted *Star Wars* innovator.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Ahmed!

As Echo Theater Company's associate artistic director, were you instrumental in acquiring *ASCENSION* for its world premiere?

Yes, Daryl Watson is a fantastic playwright and friend, so when the word was out that we wanted to commission a play from a Black playwright, he was the first person I thought of.

How did you first hear of Daryl and *ASCENSION*?

I directed a few of Daryl's plays. One was *THE TRAGEDY*, which was done with Ammunition Theatre Company, and the other was a virtual one act called *REMEMBER THE LIGHT RAIL*. He and I had been talking about jumping back in as soon as theaters opened. This was a perfect opportunity.

What's your three-line pitch for *ASCENSION*?

ASCENSION is an on stage interactive sci-fi thriller about questioning reality and surviving through loss. It's something we've all been dealing with the past couple years.

Are all of the *ASCENSION* cast and creatives members of Echo? Or did you hold auditions for non-members?

They are not all members. But they will soon be.



What was your very first Echo Theater project when you joined eleven years ago?

I don't remember my first. I believe a play called **BOB** directed by Chris Fields was one of the first.

What was the first thought that came to your mind when you were offered the position and responsibilities of associate artistic director last year?

Theater has always been where I feel the most at home and I hadn't had a physical theater that I could call home since I left New York. So, when I got the position, I wanted to help build that home theater.

What's the good word on the Directors LAB you're directing?

There's a lot about this business that for some reason is a secret. One of those is the process of directing theater and the many things that go into that. The Directors Lab is a place where we can share process and methods as well as mentor those who are interested in directing.

Can you tell us of what's in store for Echo Theater's upcoming season?

Some really great work. The Echo has always been a place that takes risks in the space.

How significant to you was voicing the character of Jar Jar Binks in a number of *Star Wars* projects?

What's important to me about Jar Jar and my place in ***Star Wars*** is that Jar Jar was the beginning of a new way to realize movies. I was not only the voice, I was the actor, the movement, and the design creative collaborator to the **FIRST CGI MAIN CHARACTER IN CINEMA HISTORY** as well as the voice. What needs to be emphasized is my contribution to a brand-new method of performance that was created by George Lucas and all of us on the design team. I was a large part of that. Often times Black artists are left out of the credit for the work that we were instrumental in creating. I was the first actor to do what is now in



every blockbuster motion picture. I am also the LAST BLACK ACTOR to ever have a leading CGI role in motion picture.

Tell us some of the fond memories you have of performing in *STOMP*.

STOMP was as much me as I have ever been on stage. However, the fondest memory by far is performing with and falling in love with my cast mate and now wife, Raquel Horsford.

What gives you more gratification: acting onstage? Or being one of the creatives behind?

I love both equally.

You have a black belt in Machado Brazilian, Jiu Jitsu and Filipino Escrima. How often do you currently take the mat?

As much as I can. I'm mostly passing down what I know to the younger generations. But, I'm still dangerous for about a minute thirty seconds, LOL!

What's in the near future for Ahmed Best after *ASCENSION*?

I would love to mount *ASCENSION* in spaces like THE SHED in New York City and build out a fully immersive interactive experience. There's a space between traditional plays and movies that I believe plays like *ASCENSION* can live. The ticket price is just as much as a movie ticket, and you get live action and extended reality virtual elements. I think this is a wave of theater that will be accessible and excite audiences that love stage, screen, gaming and virtual reality. There's so much potential for *ASCENSION*. I'm looking forward to more iterations of it.

Thank you again, Ahmed! I look forward to experiencing your *ASCENSION*.

For tickets for the live performances of *ASCENSION* through November 18, 2021; log onto www.EchoTheaterCompany.com

