

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR. <i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:12	Music	Transition	“Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Tre’ve ll and Jarrett speak, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jarrett Hill	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jarrett Hill.
00:00:21	Tre’ve ll Anderson	Host	And I am Tre’ve ll Anderson. Jesse’s out this week, and the MaxFun podcast <i>FANTI</i> is taking over.
00:00:29	Jarrett Hill	Host	Coming up next, Tre’ve ll, you’ve got a guest. Who are you talking to?
00:00:31	Tre’ve ll	Host	Yes, I spoke to Katori Hall, who is a well-revered playwright who’s transitioning into television now with a adaptation of her play, <i>P-Valley</i> . The name of the play is a—the—the P stands for a word we can’t say on NPR, but she’s known for a lot of her plays. In particular, <i>The Mountaintop</i> . It won the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play. And it reimagines Martin Luther King’s last night on Earth at the Lorraine Motel. And here in <i>P-Valley</i> —have you had a chance to see it yet, Jarrett?
00:01:04	Jarrett	Host	I haven’t gotten to check it out yet, no.
00:01:06	Tre’ve ll	Host	Okay, so let me tell you. This is the new show that everyone needs to be paying attention to. It is set in a fictional Southern town in the Mississippi Delta. And it’s a show about sex workers and strippers. And my favourite character, by the name of Uncle Clifford—she is a non-binary, uh, individual who owns this strip club called, “The Pynk.” That’s P-Y-N-K. I got a chance to talk about a little bit of that character with Katori. We’re gonna throw to a clip right now. In this clip, Clifford gets a visit in her office from the queen bee of the club, a dancer who goes by the name of Mercedes, played by Brandee Evans. She is the most popular dancer in the club, but now it’s time for her to retire.

00:01:48 Clip

Clip

[Electronic whooshing sound.]

Speaker 1 (from *P-Valley*): Mercedes's last dance.

Hmm.

Speaker 1: After seven years, huh? Mm, took you long enough.

Mercedes: Well, my 401(k) in need of spending. Besides, 25 retirement age for a stripper nowadays, so...

Speaker 1: Who gonna take over your Sunday night set?

Mercedes: I don't know. By come end of the month, no more Mercedes Sundays for me. *[Bleep]* you crying?

Speaker 1: Heifer, ain't nobody crying over your baby-neck-smelling *[bleep]*. What you gonna do when you leave?

Mercedes: What I already do. *[Beat]* Count my money.

[Electronic whooshing sound.]

00:02:26 Tre'vell

Host

Welcome to *Bullseye*. Katori Hall, thanks so much for joining us.

00:02:29 Katori Hall

Guest

Hey, hey! Thanks for having me!

00:02:32 Tre'vell

Host

So, there's so much to talk about—

[Katori laughs.]

—when it comes to *P-Valley*.

00:02:36 Katori

Guest

Too much.

00:02:37 Tre'vell

Host

I...it's—*[chuckles]*—yeah, I really enjoyed the show. But the series is based on a play of yours. How did you first come to the idea of exploring this world of—of strippers, um, in this fictional town?

00:02:50 Katori

Guest

Sure. So, you know, I'm a Memphis girl through and through. Very much about my Southern roots.

[Tre'vell chuckles.]

And what's so interesting is that a lot of people don't know just how popular strip clubs are down South. Like I—I actually grew up sneaking into strip clubs—

[Both chuckle.]

—like, with my sister. And, you know, frequenting these places where you running into family members, you run into friends. And I had all kinds of celebrations at the club. Like, whether it's your birthday, a bachelorette party, a bachelor party. There's even been a baby shower that was there at the strip club. You know, it's definitely a space where a lot of cultural collisions happen.

And when you go inside—and I was always just, you know, inspired by what I would see. Like, most people think, "Oh, it's just about taking off clothes." But, like, these women, when they're up on that stage, up on that pole, they're heroes. They are doing some of the most athletic things I have ever seen in my life. And so, having been exposed to that environment socially, I kind of kept it always in the back of my mind.

And so, you know, fast-forward to when I was, like, in my 20's in New York City. And I decided I was going to start taking pole dancing classes, because I had been so impressed by the—the Cirque-du-Solei-esque, um, tricks that these women, you know, were doing up on the pole. Uh, in those places that I—I grew up around. And, so I remember going up to that class and child, I almost fell out—

[Tre'vell laughs.]

—'cause I got so nauseated. I could not pull my body weight up on the—on that pole. I was sliding down. I thought, "Oh, I'm supposed to put oil on my legs so that I can, you know, get up there." No. You ain't supposed to put no oil on your legs. You—*[breaks off, laughing]*

[Tre'vell chuckles quietly.]

—you supposed to, you know, put chalk on your legs.

00:04:42 Katori Guest And so that was the day when I realized that this art, this craft is hard. It requires training. It requires you to be an expert. And so from that moment of trying to physically try it myself, that was the entry point for me, because I really wanted to showcase and demonstrate to the people, like, “This is a craft.”

Um, so I started this kind of research phase where, for six years, I went to like 40-something strip clubs. Interviewed just as many women and really cultivated, uh, very strong personal relationships with these women. In fact, I celebrated my 30th birthday in the women’s locker room in Sin City in the Bronx. Because, you know, um, there’s a—there’s a sisterhood that is, uh, behind stage. And so, all of that culminated into a play, uh, called, “[Bleep]-Valley,” that was produced in 2015 at Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis. And when I saw that play onstage, I very quickly realized that it was not a play.

[Tre’vevell laughs as Katori continues.]

That it was a TV show. ‘Cause it had so much going on—even the reviewers, they were like, “We love this—this play, but whoo, child, it got a lot going on.” It was sprawling. The characters had legs—like literally and figuratively—for days. And so I wanted to switch mediums and—and I very quickly pivoted to, um, the—the TV space. And so I ended up pitching it and STARZ bought the idea. And so for four years, I developed the series version of the story. And it was an amazing experience, because, um, you—you learn a lot about *[chuckling]*, uh, yourself, uh, when it comes to switching from playwright to, you know, TV creator, showrunner. It requires you, um, to be a much more collaborative person.

00:06:03 Tre’vevell Host Yeah.

00:06:04 Katori Guest But I’m so blessed that I had that opportunity. And—and so it’s really been a—a true blue odyssey. It’s taken me ten years to bring this story to the masses. And it—you know, it—it all started from me just being that—that Southern gal, sneaking into strip clubs down in Memphis.

00:07:00 Tre’vevell Host Could you talk to us a little bit about the—the process of research and having conversations with some of these women? Um, how did they respond to your interest in telling some of their stories?

00:07:12 Katori Guest So, you would think that some random *[bleep]* woman walking up into a strip club, saying, “Hey! Can you tell me about your life? Like, what’s your real name?” You’d think that I would, like, be very quickly shown the door, right? But I think because no one ever came in asking them who they were and why they did what they did, um, and speaking to them like they were human beings versus objects, there was a very quick, you know, response. Like, “Girl, let me tell you!”

[Katori laughs and Tre’ve ll chuckles warmly.]

You know, they’d be like, “Let’s sit down at the bar.” You know, to the point where, you know, there was a moment where the manager came by, was like, “Uh, you need to be twerking. Like, why are you sitting down?”

[Both laugh.]

You know, I’m talking to this woman, um, like, “Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about it. We working. We working.” You know. Um, it— it—and I think it had a lot to do with me just coming inside of this space and seeing them and seeing that they were just like me and talking to them like they had a life and that they weren’t just a pair of breasts and—and a big bottom.

I...very quickly moved from the stage to backstage, uh, and into the locker room, because of the fact that I was always very...*[exhales]* open about why I was doing this, in terms of being able to—to tell a story that truly came from a place of empathy and wanting them to have agency in—in the storytelling as well.

It was like, if you can give me your truth, I promise that I will take care of that like the baby that it is. It is so precious. Truth is so precious. And I promise to be inspired by that, so I that I can use fiction in order to tell, um, more, deeper truths. And I really felt every dancer that I spoke to really got quickly on board with that goal, because they themselves have felt the hand of subjugation. Felt the hand of being misrepresented. All the shame that a lot of them carry because of the shaming that our society does to women who dance for a living. Um, and so they really were in—just as invested, if not more invested than me, when it came to sharing the true stories about the—the dance world.

00:09:38 Tre’ve ll Host I love that journey you just painted for us. And I want to particularly zero in on something you said earlier about how in the South, the strip club is a very, like, integral location in a lot of our communities. Um, I’m from—

00:09:54 Katori Guest Absolutely

00:09:55 Tre’ve ll Host Charleston, South Carolina, but I came of age—uh, I went to school in—in Atlanta. Shoutout to Magic City.

00:10:00 Katori Guest Mmm. Yes, Magic! *[Chuckles]*.

00:10:01 Tre’ve ll Host Um, and so—*[laughs]*. So, you know, the strip club is such an integral part of so many of these particular communities. But at the same time, I also feel like strippers and sex workers more broadly are kind of under-appreciated, right? People don’t—

00:10:16 Katori Guest *[Emphatically]* Mm-hmm.

00:10:17 Tre'vell Host —look at what they do as art or as athleticism, when it really does take—you know, you're engaging the entire body when you are, you know, on—on that pole. I'm wondering for you, where does the show—for you—fit into this broader conversation about, you know, how we look at and treat sex workers and—and strippers?

00:10:39 Katori Guest So, for me, this is a love letter. It's definitely coming from a—a place of empathy, because we know that these woman have been dehumanized. You know the—the world of stripping has been stigmatized. And for the fact that we live in this patriarchal society where all women—*[chuckles]*—have to kind of struggle for respect. But, you know, more so with, you know, the broader term we use, “sex workers,” and then specifically, “strippers”—um, this whole idea of, like taking your clothes off for money is—is just something that we don't want to embrace as this kind of, you know, a society that I would say participates in respectability politics.

00:11:17 Tre'vell Host Mm-hmm.

00:11:18 Katori Guest Um, we always want our—our women—particularly Black women—*[chuckles]*—um, to be shown in a specific way. And, you know, for me, I want to say, “To hell with that.” I—having been a woman who grew up loving women and thinking that all women's lives matter, I really wanted to show that, you know, these women are human. Um, unfortunately, you know, there—there are choices that not all of us, um, have access to. Not everyone grows up with wealth. Not everyone grows up with everything being given to them. And so a lot of these women are dealing with economical situations where the only choice is to participate in this exploitative space.

And so this definitely is not a glamorization project, in terms of looking at this world. This is a humanization project. Just because I—I know that there's this long history of hypersexualized images that all women are pushing against. And I just really want audiences to understand and embrace the humanity of these women.

00:12:25 Tre'vell Host You mentioned that when you first saw, um, the play stage that you immediately knew that it needed to be on television. What has translating it to TV allowed you to do that perhaps you couldn't do onstage?

00:12:40 Katori

Guest

So, I'm a tell you something. It's real hard to be up on a pole and say a monologue.

[Both laugh heartily.]

I remember just, you know, we would go up into rehearsal and we had a group of women who actually had a lot of pole dancing experience under their belt. I remember the young woman named Megan Rippey who—who played Gidget, she had been pole dancing for almost—I would say, like, six years at that point, even before 2015. And so to see this woman, who had trained as an actress, you know, while holding her body weight up on that pole, sometimes with one hand, and then having to do, like, a ream of a monologue was just—um, it was a learning experience. Because thank God that she was able to—to—to do it for the most part.

But, um, I really wanted to use the medium of television to really kind of lay out just the—the majestic quality of exotic dancing. Um, truly should be an olympic sport. Um, and so with the TV medium, we were really able to, um, elevate it even more. We were able to use, you know not—not only our actresses, who, uh, had a long time training so that they could do some of the tricks, but we ended up getting these—these body doubles who, you know, took us to another level. And so, you know, it's the magic of television where you can be up on the pole—the camera like—was like—you know—in the eyes of the dancers. And so I felt as though the choreography that these women, um, learned really allowed us to see just how hard this particular craft is. And so that was probably, like, you know, the first thing that the—the TV version of the show really underscores.

00:14:41 Katori Guest Um, and then in terms of just thinking about the story—you know, the fact that not only is this a—a show about the women, but the—the men who come into this space. You know, some of them are broken. Some of them are—are dealing with their own issues. And this becomes like this space where they can kind of escape into. And so the fact that we had a longer space to really delve into these people's lives and—and, you know, their characters changed.

I remember Uncle Clifford started off as a trans character. And so, over time, um, we shifted Uncle Clifford into the non-binary space, just because we really wanted that character to really feel equally masculine and feminine. And also, you know, I don't—I don't get a chance to see genderfluid people on screen very often. And I felt like this particular choice really allowed for that representation to happen in the premium cable space in the way that I had never seen before.

In terms of just, you know, the story, we ended up, uh, weaving in mystery. We were able to just really pull it out like Laffy Taffy, so that episode after episode, you're coming back week after week, seeing how these characters transform.

You know, with the play version, you only get, what, two and a half hours—in my case, three hours—of—of a too-long play.

[Tre'vell chuckles.]

Um, you know, in—in terms of the—the laboratory, um, that you're—you're putting in front of people. But, you know, this—the tact that we're going to hopefully have years to tell the story of this little strip club that—that could, um, is just an amazing blessing. Because, there's—there's so many stories to tell.

00:16:29 Tre'vell Host Even more with Katori Hall right after the break. Don't go anywhere. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:16:36 Promo Promo **Shereen Marisol Meraji:** A Minneapolis business-owner's daughter is called out publicly for racist, anti-Black tweets. Fighting to save his business and trying to make amends, he calls on a prominent Black Muslim leader for help. He's an Arab Muslim.

Imam Makram El-Amin: And I said, "Brother Makram, I'm here to learn. Tell me what to do."

Shereen: To hear what happens next, listen to *Code Switch*, from NPR.

00:16:58 Tre'vell Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Tre'vell Anderson.

00:17:01 Jarrett Host And I'm Jarrett Hill. We're covering for Jesse this week.

00:17:04 Tre'vell Host Right now, we're listening to my interview with Katori Hall, the award-winning playwright of *The Mountaintop*, who's created this new STARZ show, *P-Valley*, based on a play of hers. It's a drama set in a Mississippi strip club, with a host of great characters like Uncle Clifford, the gender non-conforming character, who uses she/her pronouns. It's airing right now. Let's get back to the conversation.

00:17:28 Tre'vell

Host

I feel like, you know, *P-Valley*, it's—it's a story about survival, about morality. There's some greed in there, some trauma. Um, but for me, I think the—the thing that shines the most is this idea of, like, the particular brand of, like, Black femininity that is explored—

[Katori makes a thoughtful sound, then makes a couple of affirming sounds as Tre'vell speaks.]

—in the show, um, and particularly the ways it manifests across genders, right? So, you mentioned Uncle Cliff, um, as character who is non-binary. Um, and to your point, as someone who is also non-binary, I love seeing someone who looks and—and shows up in the world like me on TV. Um, and beyond that, a character who's as much a protagonist as the cis folks in the story right? They're not just the—the sassy best friend or in the periphery. Could you talk to me a little bit more about, um, centering Uncle Cliff's story as well as the other women's stories?

00:18:23 Katori

Guest

Yeah. You know, I always joke about this to my—to my friends and even to the writers. I'm like, "I kinda made a show about strippers so that I could have this, uh, protagonist called, 'Uncle Clifford.'"

[Both chuckle.]

And then things like, I feel as though it's just as much about them as it is about Uncle Clifford. You know, starting off, you know, Uncle Clifford is a mixture of so many of my living ancestors. I always say that Uncle Clifford is inspired by my mom, my dad, and my real Uncle Clifford. You know, and no—none of them is non-binary, but just being able to—within one person—um, have the spectrum of expression and—and this whole idea of what is masculine, what is feminine, and how we all kind of had that within ourselves.

But Uncle Clifford just has this interesting way of being all of that at once. And I really wanted to—to show people the power in embracing all sides of yourself. And, you know, I just feel as though you—with this character that not that many people, um, have seen, I feel as though this is a moment to normalize people that are in my reality and just in the world. And so, um, it's been this great gift to cultivate this character and work with the writers on how we would center her transformation.

It's very—what's very interesting about Uncle Clifford is that even though Uncle Clifford, um, is definitely genderfluid, Uncle Clifford embraces the pronoun of, "she." Um, but still also will never let go of the moniker, "Uncle Clifford." Those choices in itself basically represent and articulate to an audience how Uncle Clifford is always going to be embracing the feminine and masculine in—in the way she walks in the world.

[Tre'vell makes a couple of affirming sounds as Katori continues to speak.]

In terms of the storyline around Uncle Clifford, you know, we see that Uncle Clifford has inherited this club from her grandmother and that this club used to be a juke joint and that she's trying to figure out a way to sustain herself. And just like so many people who are within the LGBTQ community, this thing of your identity—particularly down South—is a battleground. It's political. And so I always feel like Uncle Clifford is one of the more revolutionary characters that we have. Because, despite this patriarchal, sexist, racist, homophobic space that she grew up in, she's demanding that people accept her for who she is. And she does not shun away from the mirror. It's—she's always just—just herself. And you just gotta take Uncle Clifford as Uncle Clifford is. That—watching this character kind of walk in the world and be embraced by the other characters to me is also a kind of revolutionary thing.

00:21:25 Katori Guest One of my favorite scenes—particularly in episode two—is...or—I mean—just—you know—I would say in all the episodes, you know, she has a worker, uh, named Big L, who, you know, looks very, you know, hyper masculine.

[Tre'vell chuckles, and then makes a couple of agreeing sounds as Katori continues.]

Doesn't seem like he would be chilling in tight quarters, you know, the office with Uncle Clifford, but yet there's this sense of great respect and—and the fact that even Big L chooses to talk about Uncle Clifford in the pronouns that she has chosen for herself to me is a—is a level of respect.

And this show is about the people who have been misrepresented, who have been cast aside by society, whether it's sex workers or people who are trans or non-binary. We...we want to be able to very clearly say to the world that our society is complicated and there's diversity within diversity and we all can live in a place in harmony if we were given that opportunity.

So shows like this, I think, just really give audiences an idea as to how human different people are. And it puts you in the living room with them. It brings these people inside of your living room, um which I think is a—a very privileged position to be in. Particularly because a lot of people don't get an opportunity to engage with folks like this.

00:22:50 Tre'vell Host Yeah, and I think to—to one of your points, one of my favorite things about Uncle Clifford is that, you know, Uncle Clifford is accepted by everyone in the community as she is, and they uh—uh, quote-unquote, “allow” her to move through the world in the ways that she wishes. Um, and the fact that Uncle Clifford isn't, like, you know a young, spring chicken, I think helps illustrate this idea—

[Katori laughs.]

Not to say Uncle Clifford's old—

00:23:16 Katori Guest 38. 38.

00:23:17 Tre'vell Host But—*[breaks off, laughing]*.

00:23:18 Katori Guest 38 years old. It's—it ain't old, *[inaudible]*. It ain't old.

00:23:21 Tre'vell Host *[Chuckling]* But what I'm saying is, you know, I feel like so often when we talk about LGBTQ people, particularly trans folks and non-binary folks—

00:23:30 Katori Guest Mm-hmm.

00:23:31 Tre'vell Host —often times it's seen as if we are, like, this new trend. As if we just, like, dropped out of the sky a few years ago—

00:23:35 Katori Guest Oh, no. *[In the negative]* Uh-uh.

00:23:36 Tre'vell Host *[Katori makes a few affirming sounds as Tre'vell speaks.]*

When, you know, folks like us, right, have existed in these communities, even in some communities, right, where it hasn't necessarily been the easiest for those of us LGBTQ but we've always been your business owners and your neighbors and—and everyone, like that that's one of the things that I love, uh, about Uncle Clifford.

As we move on, I want to play another clip from *P-Valley*. Here, we're gonna be introduced to Autumn—played by Elarica Johnson—who's keeping a few secrets to herself. In this clip, Autumn is trying to get inside of The Pynk, but she's having some trouble getting past a flirtatious bouncer.

00:24:14 Clip Clip *[Electronic whooshing sound.]*

Bouncer: That'll be 30, little momma.

Autumn: But that gentleman just paid 20.

Bouncer: Yeah, well that how much it cost for a pretty *[bleep]* like you.

Autumn: That how you give compliments 'round these here parts?

Bouncer: I just a politicking near the paint. Uncle Clifford rules. No funny money, no bullets, and no *[bleep]* chips.

Autumn: No...chips?

[Crinkling sound, like paper being unfolded.]

Autumn: Look. Take this 20 and my e-mail.

Bouncer: Mm, your e-mail. Hmm. Yeah, it's gonna be like that?

[Electronic whooshing sound.]

00:24:48 Tre'vell Host *[Katori laughs. She then makes a couple affirming sounds as Tre'vell speaks.]*

[Amused] One of the things that I love the most about that scene and the entire series are the accents and the vernacular. As someone from Charleston, South Carolina—like I said—uh, Charleston is a place where, like, the Black community has a very specific accent. A very specific way of speaking. Um, and so I have to say it felt a little bit at-home for me to hear this accent—these types of accents, these types of vernacular employed throughout the entire show. Talk to me about that decision to—to lean into that.

00:25:19 Katori

Guest

Absolutely! So anytime you go to a Katori house show, you gonna get that Katori house experience. And what I mean by that is, you know, I am a woman who honors her Blackness and honors those Southern roots, basically in everything that I do. You know, growing up, I often—I was the quote-unquote, “only one,” in a lot of spaces. You know, not always the only woman, but oftentimes the only Black person. And I remember, you know, going to class and—and being told that people didn’t understand me. And so, you—you learn how to—in acting school, I remember very specifically my—my vocal instructor working very hard with me—

[Tre'vell chuckles, laughing more as Katori speaks..]

—to change the way I said, “pen.” I’m like, “Yeah! You know I need to—you know, I need a pen!”

“Like a pi—like a pin to pin your—your—your dress?”

I’m like, “Nah, a pen to write with.”

Uh, and so you—you grow up feeling ashamed about this thing that makes you you. Like, our tongue, our way of communicating, it is beautiful. The African-American vernacular oftentimes comes under fire as—as seeming dumb or—or, you know, like, “They speaking broken English.” And it’s like, “No, we speaking English. We just speaking it in a flier way than you are.”

[Tre'vell chuckles.]

So, I had those experiences of, you know, feeling ashamed as to how I—I spoke. And so, when it came to having this opportunity to use linguistics to world-build this show, I—I really had to embrace my roots. And I had to show that this is a—a music. Um, this language that we created, you know, this—this fusion of dialect and accent and—and—and lingo it—it’s a—it’s a beautiful kind of oral gumbo that we’re making. And I just hope that, you know, week after week, people come to—to feast upon this amazing buffet of new words and new phrases that we are serving up.

Like, everybody be like, “What is skrilla?!” And I’m *[inaudible]* be talking about skrilla all the time, you know. That’s a word that I grew up saying in Memphis. Like, I’ve been saying, “skrilla,” ever since I was 13 years old. And so, you know, little moments like that—these nods to a very kind of local lingua franca—is...is what makes *P-Valley* so special.

You know, I—I remember sitting down with another press person. They were like, “Oh my God, I had to watch the show four times.”

00:27:54 Tre'vell

Host

Oh, Lord *[beat, then starts laughing]*.

00:27:55	Katori	Guest	<p>And I was like, “Oh, you loved it?!” And he was like, “No, it’s <u>because</u>—because I love it, <u>but</u> I also didn’t understand what they hell people were saying sometimes.” And so, it demands that you stop what you doing. You can’t be looking at the computer or looking at Instagram when you’re watching this show, because there is an— an entire new slanguage that is being dropped into your ear. So, yeah, I—I really am happy that STARZ embraced this—this very strong choice.</p> <p>You know, I think of a show like <i>The Wire</i>, and I—I remember the first time that Snoop came and we—the—you know, the introduction of Snoop as a character, and I was just like, “What did she just say?!”</p> <p><i>[Tre’ve’ll laughs.]</i></p> <p>“I don’t know what she just said!” But she was serving up that B’more. That s—you know, that sound that was very specific to—to that community. And there are other examples of TV shows that have really put new slang and highlighted all the diverse ways in—in which we as Americans speak. Um, and so I was just, um, with STARZ, they—they really—there was a conversation once about, like, “Do—should we use subtitles?” And I was, like, “Ah-ah-ah! ‘Cause that would be racist!”</p> <p><i>[Tre’ve’ll giggles.]</i></p> <p>“These Black people are speaking English. Like I said, it’s just a little bit more flier than your English.”</p>
00:29:20	Tre’ve’ll	Host	<p>And there’s nothing wrong, right, with demanding your attention, right—</p>
00:29:24	Katori	Guest	<p>Absolutely not!</p>
00:29:25	Tre’ve’ll	Host	<p>—in—in terms of these particular types of Black stories being put on screen.</p>
00:29:30	Katori	Guest	<p>Absolutely not! You know, we are focusing on a <u>very</u> specific corner of—of the world. And in a very specific community that, you know— it—it’s—it’s all these isms clashing. You know, there’s—there’s racism, there’s classism, and there’s sexism. There’s all of it, you know, stirring this pot. And, you know, language is this political statement in the midst of all of that. You know, we are—we are a stolen people. Our—our mother tongues were snatched away from us and so I think it’s a form of resilience—</p>
00:30:04	Tre’ve’ll	Host	<p>Mm.</p>

00:30:05	Katori	Host	<p>—um, that we have had and that we have been able to carry a sense of African-ness in the way that we—we—we communicate with each other. And the fact that, you know, sometimes we don't even need a word. We just need a look</p> <p><i>[Tre'vell laughs.]</i></p> <p>We just need a look, you know, suck of the teeth. We—we—we just need to—a particular sound. Um, that just goes to show you just how, you know, we—the way we speak is music. Um, and that's why rap came from—from, you know, Black and brown folk. So, it's been incredible to—to work with the team and to make sure that the actors understood everything that—that was being said. And, you know, there was dialect coaches that were employed. They really worked very hard on, you know, hitting the bullseye in terms of the authenticity of this world.</p>
00:30:53	Tre'vell	Host	<p><i>[Katori makes several affirming sounds as Tre'vell speaks.]</i></p> <p>I love that. I think through the—through the accents and the vernacular, that's one of the ways that, um, I get a sense of authenticity to the show. And in addition to that, there's also some of the—you know, the—the—the sordid parts of our community that we don't really talk about that you all are addressing head-on.</p> <p>The first one—I feel like—being colorism. Um, and the ways in which colorism, um, not only manifests itself in kind our our everyday lives, but specifically within this world, where you have one stripper who's fairly new and she's light-skinned and she's—she's treated in a particular way even compared to, you know, our queen bee Mercedes.</p>
00:31:34	Katori	Guest	Our headliner. Yep.
00:31:35	Tre'vell	Host	You know, right. Who is—who is a darker-skinned Black woman and has the—you know, she's the most acrobatic out of everyone and really puts on a show. Could you talk to me about, like—were—were you intentional about making sure to—to build that into the characters?
00:31:50	Katori	Guest	We were incredibly intentional, uh, in regards to...talking about colorism. Because it a—it affects us til this day.
00:32:00	Tre'vell	Host	Mm-hmm.

00:32:01 Katori

Guest

Like, I—growing up, you know, I remember I'd be walking through the mall with my—with my girls, and I—you—you could kind of, like, keep a tally. Like, I think I'm cute. I think I'm cute.

[Tre'vell laughs, then makes a few affirming sounds as Katori speaks.]

You know, I got nice—I got a nice face, a nice waist. And it was so interesting to see all my—my, you know, more fair-skinned, uh *[chuckles]* friends would always get the—the looks or—or, you know get a—get a little more invitations and—and—and they'd be like, “What your number is?”-’s. There was a lot of that. And I’m just like, “It’s not because I’m less attractive. It’s just that everyone has kind of imbibed this Eurocentric idea of beauty within their culture.” Like, uh, thi—it’s not just, you know, within the African America culture. It’s also, you know, um, the Indian companies. Um, you know they—they are just recently kind of looking at all these skin whiteners.

And so, yes. You know, across the board, you know, globally, we’re always been—we’ve always been reaching towards this Eurocentric ideal. Um, and so, you know, particularly in this strip club, I have seen—and there’s been lots of conversations—there’s even been, um, strikes, particularly up North, where dancers got together and they started striking against the clubs, because the Black women were leaving with less money and it had everything to do with the fact that these men were coming in and they were putting their money towards, uh, the—the woman who were as they—you know, as they call, “light brights.”

Um, it is a unfortunate and pervasive issue within our community. And I really felt like the—you know, the—using the strip club as a way to—to—to really kind of lay it out was—was one of the ways as to which we—we show that, you know, this show is not just about dancing per se. It’s—it’s about so many different things. It’s about all the isms that affect us within this society. And so to have Mercedes from jump be like, “All she did was lay up there looking light.”

[Tre'vell laughs.]

And then Uncle Clifford was like, “Well, that’s what yellow girls do.” Like, they don’t have to work as hard because of the privilege of—of—of lighter skin. There’s white skin privilege and there’s light skin privilege. And, you know, as we know, the—the closer you are to whiteness, um, there—the more privileges you have. Um, what’s interesting is, I think Autumn is well-aware of that privilege.

00:34:24 Tre'vell

Host

Mm-hmm.

00:34:25 Katori

Guest

And she's well aware of—of the gaze, that male gaze and how she can kind of use it to her advantage. And we see her kind of, like, lean in—and lean in to that and—and accept that privilege. But it is interesting to see a character who kind of knows how the game is being played, 'cause she's—she's—she's one smart cookie. And—and so I really did want to—to be, um, intentional, uh, about discussing, you know, the—the emotional impact of colorism on our society and—and specifically black women.

You know, Ms. Mississippi—as beautiful as she is, right, she looks in that mirror and she craves, you know, a lighter version of herself. We talked to the—the actress Shannon Thornton—who plays her—about those insecurities and—and, you know, she herself can kind of speak to being this beautiful, chocolate, brown-skin woman and—and still, because of, um, this society and because—because of that focus on this Eurocentric ideal, um, has felt less than her—her lighter counterparts. And—and so I thought the strip club space was the kind of the perfect place to really show how these characters push up against that and try to—to find a mirror that really feels loving, uh, within that space.

What's really cool is that you have Uncle Clifford, who I think—who—who ends up saying it—I think Mercedes calls—calls Uncle Clifford a, “midnight blue—“

[Tre'vell chuckles softly.]

—and then Uncle Clifford just, you know, shoot her the side-eye and is like, “And? You know, I'm proud of my midnight blueness.”

00:36:02 Katori

Guest

[Tre'vell makes a couple of affirming sounds as Katori continues.]

So, you know, I think it is beautiful. Like in implicit ways we're showing how, you know, there are people who are darker skinned who take pride in—in their appearance. But I also think, you know, that's because there's a mixture of male privilege that Uncle Clifford has access to, which makes it okay.

Uh, 'cause, you know, there was a time when everybody was like, “Oooh, the light-skinned brothers is out and the chocolate boys they always in.” With, you know, with—from your Wesley Snipes to your Idris Elba's, you know color plays—plays differently depending on how it is tied to, um, your—your sexual identity.

So, it's been an amazing playground to talk about an issue that has been so taboo sometimes within—within our culture. But I think, you know, now it's—it's—it's very—it's—it's—it's good to have those kind of open and honest, transparent conversations about the issue of colorism. And, you know, thank God we have, like, characters who can kind of speak to that.

00:36:58 Tre'vell

Host

[Katori makes a few affirming sounds as Tre'vell speaks.]

Yeah. As we begin to wrap up, I'm interested particularly in how you all approach this show, um, in terms of bringing kind of a woman's gaze to these stories about, you know, Black women, queer men in this—this—this fictional town. Um, I know that all of the directors for each of the episodes of the first season are women. What was the importance of you, uh—what was the importance for you to—to make that decision in terms of who's going to be controlling the gaze of the camera?

00:37:32 Katori

Guest

Absolutely. You know, the—the female gaze was the uber goal of this show. We knew that we were stepping into extremely tricky territory with doing a show that's centered on the strip club world, because, you know, as a Black woman, I've inherited this—this huge box of hyper-hyper-sexualized images about myself. And if I was going to do a strip club show, I would be running the risk of filling that box with more images, like perpetuating this—this stereotype of Black women as Jezebels instead of these, you know, complicated human beings.

I was well aware and—and that's why I—I felt so much responsibility in making sure that we did not add to that box, but that we actually kind of, you know, struck out on our own and created this space where we could be honest about this very vulnerable group of women, um, who are—are—are dancers.

And so, you know, when it came to conversations with—"Who are we going to give the privilege of helming these episodes?" You know, we always came back to women. Because these particular female directors have already been investigating the female gaze in their previous work, and—and when they came to the table during the interviews, they had ideas as to how we were going to make sure that even beyond the writing, uh, we were going to make sure that this wasn't about leaning into gratuitous nudity or making su—you know, men the center of the story. Like, even with the camera work, we have made sure that people feel as though they're stepping into the high-heeled platforms of our female characters.

You know, for example, you know, we talk a lot about instead of focusing on how the women's bodies looked, we were going to focus on what the women's bodies could do. And that's why dance, um, is—is—is so beautifully visually articulated, um, in the piece. You—you will notice that we—there's not a lot of, like boob shots—*[laughs]*—in our show.

[Tre'vell chuckles briefly.]

Like, we—we show that women are naked. That—that's part of their job. That is the—the requirement to work in this space. But it's about the athleticism, and focusing on movement and motion instead of just, uh, breasts and bottom. We talked a lot about embedding the camera in—you know, inside of the experience of the women. Um, the fact that there's a lot of kind of P—POV shots, uh, where you really get the woman's perspective. I love that moment when we're with Autumn and she's walking through the club—you know, that first night—right behind Mercedes, and you see, you know, her eye roving across the crowd, taking in that all in.

00:40:15 Katori

Guest

You know, from the male perspective, it would just be like, you know, like, “Let me throw some money.” Like, she—that’s an object onstage versus a real, sentient human being who’s going through this—this first time experience and—and is in awe. Those particular choices were so helpful in making sure that people understood that this is from the eyes of these women.

And there’s no judgement placed on how they’re experiencing things, or—or what they’re going through. There’s just kind of this very honest approach to how they walk in the world. And so I think that that went miles to making sure that the show didn’t feel, you know, just exploitative. Like, we were already telling a story about an exploitative space. But, you know, when you place the camera in the eyes of your female characters, you get a sense of how this exploitative space can actually also be a space of liberation for a lot of women.

In episode two, I remember we had a moment where we ended up re-shooting a scene just because we felt like, you know, the nudity was getting in the way of us, you know, taking in a particular conversation. It was actually this lap dance that *[inhales deeply]* Autumn was doing for...it was Andre and—and—and the character Corbin. You know, they’re going over this business deal and, you know, she’s overhearing it and, you know, when we initially shot it, we just shot it as a one-er. And so all we saw was just this female body, you know, laying on the laps of these men.

So, when we got a chance to re-shoot it, we made sure that we weren’t going to do a one-er. That we were always going to kind of be like in on her face and in on her listening to the conversation. ‘Cause that was the story. That was the story point that we needed to get across. And so I was grateful that we kind of went through a moment of—of failure, where, you know, we were like, “Okay.” I always call that episode, “*[Bleep]-gate [laughs].*”

[Tre’veil chuckles.]

‘Cause we were just like, “*[In the negative]* Ah-ah. You know, *[stutters]* it can’t be about, uh, the body. It gotta be about the story. And so it—it was, uh, a defining moment in terms of how we were going to move forward and always make sure that we were placing story and character development before we were kind of looking at the nudity and looking at the women’s bodies.

00:42:40 Tre’veil

Host

And for the—the folks who aren’t as familiar with your work prior to *P-Valley*, I just want to run down a few of the things on the extensive, well-received, you know, well-lauded—

[Katori laughs loudly.]

—résumé that you have. Um, you were the bookwriter—*[giggles]*—bookwriter and co-producer of *Tina*, the Tina Turner musical. Um, *Hurt Village*, which is your play about a young rapper, her mother and grandmother in a Memphis housing project. You’re adapting that for film/ Um, and then—

00:43:08 Katori

Guest

Mm-hmm.

00:43:09 Tre’veil

Host

—*The Mountaintop* is probably what a lot of people might, uh—

00:43:11 Katori Guest Yeah.

00:43:12 Tre'vell Host —know your name from. Um, which is about a chance encounter between Martin Luther King, Jr. and a maid. It won the 2010 Olivier award. Um, in all of those and so many of the other works that you've done, Black women have an integral role.

00:43:28 Katori Guest Mm-hmm.

00:43:29 Tre'vell Host They're—they're centered in a lot of these stories. As we go, I just wanted to talk to you a little bit about...the intention behind centering Black women—

00:43:40 Katori Guest Hmm.

00:43:41 Tre'vell Host —in all of the stories that you do. And—and—and why you think it's important to do so.

00:43:47	Katori	Guest	<p>Absolutely. You know, when I was in acting school, I remember we were given an assignment. The assignment was, “Go to the library and find a—a play that has a scene for you and your scene partner’s type.” We were two young Black women. And I remember going to the—the <u>Columbia Library</u>.</p> <p><i>[Tre’ve ll chuckles.]</i></p> <p>They know they should have had some, but anyways. I remember going to the <u>Columbia Library</u>, and we were pulling down all of these—these plays and—and there were no plays that had a scene for two young Black women. And I remember going to my teacher and asking her, you know, “Do you have any suggestions?”</p> <p>Ten seconds went by, twenty seconds went by, forty seconds went by, and she could not think of a play that had a scene for two young Black women. And in that moment, I decided, “Well, I’m gonna write those—those plays then. I’m going to write those stories. I’m going to write a new American Theatre that sees me in the reflection that I know storytelling can be.”</p> <p>And so, for me, it’s just really always been this mission statement to center Black women, because I’ve—I know that we have been historically relegated to the footnotes of history. I know that we are constantly battling the Goliath of misogynoir in our—in our country. And I really feel as though storytelling is a tool for humanization. And that’s why Black women are so misunderstood, because we haven’t been able to be the queens and—and sheroes of our own stories.</p> <p>And—and to be able to—to kind of utilize the power of storytelling to create a moment of empathy for a group of people who have been dehumanized and misrepresented and—and <u>ignored</u> for so long, is just a—a gift to me. You know, I descend from slaves. My <u>mother</u> actually used to—to pick cotton. Like, it’s not that long ago. Like, the—the cotton fields are—are still working. <i>[Chuckles]</i> You know, and the—and the fact that I have a 65-year-old mother whose hands pulled those cotton balls out for—in order for her to, um, get enough money for her—her—her school clothes for the year, and the fact that all I have to do is, like, you know, raise a pen and write me and my sisters and my brothers in—into their own histories—it’s my responsibility.</p> <p>I just feel as though your ancestors went through too much for you to be silent and for you to not use your gifts. And so, for me, storytelling has been a way to be resistant and to be one of the ways in which we kind of create empathy and use storytelling as a powerful, uh, megaphone for not only Black women, but Black people in general.</p>
00:46:43	Tre’ve ll	Host	I love that. Katori Hall, thanks so much for giving us some of your time.
00:46:46	Katori	Guest	Oh, thank you for having me! I appreciate it! Loved it <i>[chuckles]</i> !
00:46:51	Tre’ve ll	Host	That was Katori Hall. Thanks so much for joining us. I love how she has just, like, incorporated, you know, what we would consider to be Ebonics or AAVE into the show. Make sure you check it out and watch <i>P-Valley</i> on STARZ right now. It’s super, super, <u>super</u> great.
00:47:07	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

00:47:09 Jarrett Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. I am Jarrett Hill

00:47:12 Tre'vell Host I'm Tre'vell Anderson. *Bullseye* is produced out of the homes of each of us and the staff of MaximumFun in and around greater Los Angeles.

00:47:21 Jarrett Host Where there are children playing outside in the pool all day long next door to me.

[Tre'vell laughs.]

I don't know what you've been experiencing as you're recording from home. But I'm—there's always children's laughter and screaming outside.

00:47:32 Tre'vell Host Well, my upstairs neighbors, they love to move furniture at all hours of the night for some reason—

00:47:37 Jarrett Host *[Laughs]* What?!

00:47:38 Tre'vell Host Um, so shoutout to them. This show is produced by speaking into microphones, obviously.

00:47:44 Jarrett Host *[Chuckles]* Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio, and Jordan Kauwling are associate producers. We also get help from Casey O'Brien.

00:47:52 Tre'vell Host Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW.

00:47:57 Jarrett Host Our theme song is by The Go Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

00:48:03 Tre'vell Host And you can always keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube. Just search for, "Bullseye with Jesse Thorn."

00:48:08 Jarrett Host Aaand you can check out our show, called, "*FANTI*," F-A-N-T-I, which, as we said, is a portmanteau of, "fan" and "anti." Basically, the things that we love, but have some challenges around. New episodes of the podcast come out every Thursday, wherever you get your podcasts. *[Beat]* And, as Jesse might remind us, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:48:28 Tre'vell Host But we don't! So, bye!

00:48:30 Jarrett Host Bye!

[Both giggle.]

00:48:33 Promo Promo **Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]