

# Proptology with Jay Duckworth

## Ologies Podcast

### April 21, 2021

Oh heeey, it's your friend's dog, who's more affectionate with you than your own dog, but it's fine, it's totally fine, Alie Ward, back with a magical, historical, artsy episode of *Ologies* that is *not* about butts, okay? So, settle down.

Today we're talking with a long-time theater legend, a prop master, a veteran of stage and screen, who has captured our hearts very recently, having started a TikTok account under the handle @Proptologist. In the last four months, a quarter of a million people have followed him to hear tales of props of yore, and fabrication techniques, and honestly, some really solid life lessons. He's a gift to the world, quite honestly. He spent years as the head of props for New York City's Public Theater. He is an Adjunct Professor of Props Design at Pace University, and he is wonderful.

Before we get into it, thanks to everyone supporting at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://patreon.com/Ologies) for as little as a buck a month. Thanks to everyone wearing merch from [OlogiesMerch.com](https://OlogiesMerch.com) and everyone subscribing and telling a friend or social networks about the show. And thanks for leaving reviews, such as this piping-hot fresh one left for me to read like a creep, by Reviewer.x, who wrote:

*very angry* (Five Stars)

*I hate this show! it's so good and now I have no idea what to be! but seriously, all of the speakers on this podcast are super passionate and it makes listening to it all the more comforting.*

*I still have the whole predicament of not knowing what to do. thanks dad ward >:(*

Happy to not help, kiddo! Who knew jobs and passion could be so interesting? Probably this guy.

So, speaking of: Proptology. From the word 'prop', from the word 'property', from a 14th-century word meaning 'things subject to ownership'. Now, I did not know proptology existed until a Twitter user by the name of Rose alerted me, and I said, "Boy howdy, hot damn, get me this proptologist." And Google was like, "Did you... need a butt doctor?" And I was like, "No. Proptologist.com. Let's just go there."

We scheduled a time and got to know each other a little while he grabbed his headphones. And sidenote, while he did, I happened to look out the window and spot a hummingbird nest!

*[Alie: Do you see that little nubbin' in the nest? That's a frickin' hummingbird's nest!!]*

So, this episode is blessed and holy.

This week we have one of the world's most beloved and only self-proclaimed proptologists, here to chat about everything from stage curses, to weathering antiques, thrifting, sanitation workers, Broadway legend, *Hamilton* trivia, museum backstages, tool belts, fake food hacks, internships, and why the arts should be the last place with a high fence. Legend, icon, sweetie-petey, master of properties, national treasure, and professional Proptologist: Professor Jay Duckworth.

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**Alie Ward:** Mr. Duckworth?

**Jay Duckworth:** [*very theatrically*] Alie Waaaard!!

**Alie:** [*cracks up laughing*] Oooh!! How are you?!

**Jay:** *[laughs]* I am so well.

**Alie:** The first thing I'll have you do is say your name and your pronouns.

**Jay:** I'm Jay Duckworth. My pronouns are he/him, and I was born in the Illini Native territory in Missouri.

**Alie:** You're a Proptologist!

**Jay:** Born and raised! *[laughs]*

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Do you have an idea how many interviews start off with me being like, "And you're a this-and-this," and they're like, "I guess..."

**Jay:** *[laughs]* Well, I invented the term, so therefore I can stake a claim in it. And actually, when I got my website, there was a guy in Florida who had Proptologist.com because he did props on boats. So I got .net, and I was just waiting, and waiting, and I would check almost every day. And after about four years he dropped it and I bought it immediately. And I paid for it for, like, ten years.

**Alie:** Yes! That makes me so happy.

**Jay:** Yeah, it was cool.

**Alie:** When was the first time someone called you a proptologist, or you called yourself that?

**Jay:** I did it, honestly, because I needed a... Okay, no one thinks about props. You start the show by getting your script and your director. And the director looks for a set designer who sets up the entire thing, and then you get a costume designer. Once you have those two major things, you look for your lighting and then sound. The last person at the last minute is props, and usually all the budget's already gone by then.

So I had to think of some way to stand out. And it was such an incredible play on words that I put it on my card. And I would always introduce myself, "Hello, I'm R. Jay Duckworth, Proptologist." And people would be like, "What the...?" And people would actually come up to me in different theaters I would work at and be like, "This is the guy! That's the guy! You gotta meet him!"

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Oh god! So you ended up making a name for yourself by making a name for your job, kind of?

**Jay:** Literally, yeah. Absolutely.

**Alie:** That's so great.

**Jay:** I love marketing. Marketing is so... It's just wonderful science.

**Alie:** You know, I became aware of you because someone saw your website, and they tweeted at me, and they were like, "You have to have him on!" Immediately I was like, "That's a... Hard Yes."

**Jay:** *[laughs boisterously]*

**Alie:** I was like, "There's no way I can't talk to this guy!" And I started looking into some of the things that you've worked on, and I'm just going to make you rattle off some of your credits; stage *and* screen. Can you tell me some of your favorite things you've worked on?

**Jay:** Sure. I mean, I've got to start out of the gate with, you know... *Hamilton* is the big elephant in the room, because in my career I've worked with some of the greatest masters and theater

royalty since the golden age of theater. I was so lucky to work with Arthur Laurents when he was still alive, and Sondheim. I worked with both of them on the same show.

**Alie:** Oh god!!

**Jay:** No, yeah. It was insane, and the first show I propped, it was... Arthur Laurents wrote the book, he also was directing it, and it was starring Chita Rivera.

**Aside:** Arthur Laurents, sidenote, legendary playwright of *West Side Story*, the musical that launched Chita Rivera, who played Anita in it, and the two collaborated for years. And yes, Jay got to work with them. Bananas!

**Jay:** This was my first prop gig. So, that was nuts. So, *Hamilton* comes along and it's just this incredible, gorgeous thing. We did a workshop for it to bring backers in and everything, and at the end of the workshop I was crying, and I walked up to our artistic director, and he said, "Yeah, it's that good." I said, "It's not that. I've never been a part of something that I knew was going to change our entire industry."

**Alie:** Oh my god.

**Jay:** And working with people that I've worked with, it's like, "Oh, this is going to be really good." "This is going to be good. This is a breakthrough for trans people... This is a musical about trans people." "This is really great, *Brothers Size*, Tarell McCraney..."

**Aside:** Tarell McCraney won an Oscar in 2017 for Best Adapted Screenplay for the film *Moonlight*, which was based on his play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. So, Jay gets to dress the sets and craft the objects that bring these stories to life.

**Jay:** But this was just... because it was so Shakesp- I'm sorry. I'm rattling on. I'm so sorry.

**Alie:** No, no! I'm all ears! I saw it in New York. I waited in line for six hours, sitting on the pavement.

**Jay:** Oh my god!

**Alie:** Yeah. So, like, I'm right there with you.

**Jay:** What did you think?!

**Alie:** Oh, I loved it. I was bawling. I mean, I went by myself, sat on the pavement for six hours. The person in line in front of me was the last person to get a ticket. And then a harried father with three small kids walked up to the line and said, "Someone can have this at face value if you want to come in with me." And I was like, "I'll take it," and I went in with him and his three kids.

I think he must've gone through a very recent divorce, and the other parent was not present. So essentially, his daughter fell asleep on my shoulder. We were way up in the nosebleeds. And I watched his kid while he went out for a smoke break. People must've thought I was his wife. But yeah, it was absolutely worth it. I got it for \$99 and I wept through most of it.

**Aside:** *Hamilton* dorks: It's okay if you cried. Also, I think about that guy a lot and I hope his family is okay. I'm gonna cry again.

**Jay:** The reason I loved it, and I'll get off this in a second, it's Shakespearian. It's our history plays done in the verse and songs of the time we live in, which is exactly... If you look back at John Gay and *The Beggar's Opera*, boom, that's it. And if you look at all of the classical plays by Shakespeare, it's the same thing.

So, yeah, I work at Shakespeare in the Park, and I work at a lot of different Shakespeare shows, and *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* I had my thumb in.

**Aside:** A rock opera, of sorts, about the guy on the \$20 bill, so, historical in nature.

**Alie:** Jackson's on the 20, right?

**Jay:** There's a lot of 'em. There's a lot of fun ones.

**Alie:** And what was the... I'm so curious what the first prop you ever started making was. I mean, are you, like, elementary school, middle school, high school theater nerd? Where did it start?

**Jay:** It started when I was *way* little, because I would steal the aluminum foil and I would make knights on horseback out of them. And my mom was just like, "What is wrong with you??" you know? And when we were little kids, the McDonald's lids had the different characters pressed into the plastic, and she was an artist so I would ask her to borrow acrylics, and I would paint those.

She was an artist and she helped revive the Mississippi Valley folk art movement in Missouri. And my father was a construction worker; he was a pipefitter. So, I learned all my art from my mom, and I learned all my construction skills from my father. So I really, honest to god, was being trained to be a prop person since I was a kid. So, I think it was Halloween stuff. Halloween is what really got me in.

**Alie:** Oh, I never thought about that being, like, not only a portal for souls and spirits, but also just for industries and artists.

**Jay:** Oh yeah, gateway drug! Halloween is literally the gateway drug. It makes the second amount of money than Christmas.

**Alie:** Yeah, there's a lot of things to acquire for it. What kind of costumes did you have? Did you have, like, gory, face-falling-off ones, or did you have, like, "I am in full chain mail I made out of bubble wrap"?

**Jay:** No, I would do zombies, and I would do vampires and stuff like that because... My mom really encouraged me. My parents really encouraged me. I'm really lucky. She would buy me makeup kits and I would learn how to, like, put makeup on. And because she was an artist, like I said, she taught me about highlights, she taught me about shadows and color mixing. So, I would do friends in the neighborhood, and my dad and mom would set up a little haunt. And this is in the '70s, so it was just, like, a screened-in porch that we would hang, like, curtains on, and my mom would dress up like a witch. So that's where I learned how to do props from there, just the fun stuff around the house.

**Alie:** When did people start giving you money for it? And what was that like to have a paid gig?

**Jay:** Oh, god. The first time I ever got *money* money for it was when I sent something out on tour, and that was the first time I ever got residuals. But as an apprentice I worked at Berkshire Theater Festival under my mentor Allen Cutler, who teaches at Rutgers University now. Come to find out, he was an ex-Benedictine monk, and he taught me everything about history. So I was getting...

**Alie:** Oh my god!

**Jay:** Oh yeah, it was nuts. So, I worked at the Berkshire Theater Festival and I just fell in love with it because it was all the nerd stuff that I needed. It was history, it was carpentry, and it was artistry, and a little bit of witchcraft thrown in, you know, because we were doing, like... I think it was "the Scottish play".

**Aside:** Quick aside, this is the Shakespearian play that rhymes with BcMeth, and according to the Royal Shakespeare Company, the bard lifted a real spell from some actual witches and put it in the play, and the witches were like, “Canst thou not, tho?” And it’s said to be a cursed production, with weird sudden deaths and accidents happening in some historical runs, so you don’t utter the play’s name in a theater. But that is where Professor Duckworth fell in love with proptology.

**Alie:** Oh wow. Oh my god, yes. You can’t say that, but you know what it is.

**Jay:** No. Yes, yes, yes.

**Alie:** [laughs] Got it! And you know, I’m so curious – this is obviously not the sharpest question – but what exactly *is* a prop? What is a...

**Jay:** No, that’s a brilliant, brilliant question.

**Alie:** Like, what’s set, what’s prop, what’s wardrobe? I know it’s, like, unionized, so there’s got to be some lines. How do you determine?

**Jay:** Well, there is no prop union.

**Alie:** [surprised squawk] Ah! That surprises me.

**Jay:** Please! Don’t even get me started. But picture... I always use this when I lecture and I use this with my class when I teach: If you move into a new apartment, anything you bring into that apartment to make it yours is a prop. And then there’s a mix between costume and props, which is called ‘propstumes’, and that is, if a dad is given a tie in one act, Act I Scene 1, and he never wears it, that’s a prop. The box, the tie, the tissue paper, that’s all a prop.

If the dad wears it Act I Scene 2, then it becomes a propstume, because we have to have a double for that prop. So it never leaves the box, and the other one is rigged so that it could be easily put on between scenes.

**Alie:** Aaah! That’s so genius.

**Jay:** Oh yeah, it’s crazy because if you try to think about how much theater is... One of my friends asked me, “Why does theater cost this much?” And I was like, “Look at your clothes. How much is that belt? How much are those pants? How much is this? How much is that? This is just this scene. This morning we were wearing something different, and then when we went out we had to eat something.” So, all those environments and all those different outfits all cost something new, and then they have to be augmented.

**Alie:** Yeah. Well, are there doubles for all props?

**Jay:** No, but there are things that are called perishables, and when we did the musical *Fun Home*...

**Aside:** *Fun Home*, if you’re not familiar, is the first Broadway musical with a lesbian protagonist, and it was based on a story by Alison Bechdel, for whom the Bechdel Test of talking female movie characters is named. Fun fact, *Fun Home*!

**Jay:** ... the newspaper had to be replaced every other day because if you start folding a newspaper over and over, the audience is going to see that that’s an old newspaper. And if anything’s eaten, that’s a perishable. If there’s a glass that breaks or anything like that, because you have to create the illusion... There is a TikTok that I did of us doing *The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* by Tony Kushner, and we had to destroy a wall every night.

**Alie:** Oh my god. How?!

**Jay:** Yeah, see, that's the thing. It was a perishable wall. We had 18 walls in prep because we lost five in a weekend. Friday night show, two on Saturday, and two on Sunday. That was pretty crazy.

**Alie:** And how long do you get to work on things? When you are going through a script, and you're going to initial meetings and saying, "You're going to need a glass here, lipstick here..." how do you track those? Do you have a Moleskine? Do you have an Excel sheet? How do you remember?

**Jay:** I always keep a Moleskine on me. Ask me to tell you that story because it's... It's part of my teaching.

**Alie:** I wanna hear!

**Jay:** Okay, I'll jump on it and then I'll get back to that. When we were doing *Into the Woods*...

**Aside:** *Into the Woods*, by the by, a Sondheim musical based on a bunch of Brothers Grimm fairytales, and Jay was propping it before it went into production on the film starring someone named Meryl Streep, no big deal.

**Jay:** So they were working out the kinks with a live audience, and one of my interns was under the stage at the coffee station with Steve Sondheim. And you know, they talked for a second or two, and he came up to me, and I was like, "How cool is that??" And he's like, "What?" I was like, "Do you know who you were just talking to?" And he was like, "No, no. I think he's on the board or something." I was like, "Kevin! That was Stephen Sondheim!" ["*Oh my god, oh my god...*"]

And his head just hung, and from that point on I had all of my interns and all of my students carry around a Moleskine notebook, and if they ever hear a name, or if they ever hear of a theater, or a writer, or anybody like that, they have to create a baseball card for that person. Like, print out a picture, so that they never miss the opportunity again. I mean, we know who the big stars are, but if you don't know the players in the field, you're lost and you'll never get that opportunity again.

**Aside:** How many of you are buying Moleskine notebooks today? All of you? I'm just checking.

**Jay:** But, I'll read a script, and create an Excel sheet, and mark off all the regular props in yellow, all the perishables in red, and all situational things in blue. So let's say if somebody says "Alie is really ritzy" as part of the script, I'll understand, like, how I have to dress your apartment. If it's a Wednesday versus a Thursday, if it's spring versus winter, how many coats you'll have, what kind of dressing you'll have around the apartment. So you have to know all of those things as the three different circles of consciousness.

**Aside:** If the note says, "Alie is surrounded by clean, unfolded laundry and yesterday's coffee mugs," that's even more props to acquire. It's potentially more expensive than being ritzy. Who knew?

Now, where does he get all of his stuff? Does he start from scratch? Is there a Narnia wardrobe closet just filled with nouns?

**Jay:** A lot of theaters have their own prop room. And the public has two different prop rooms; one is for hand props and the other one is for bigger furniture; in the building. So, you have a basic set of things that you can hold onto, but I created something called the Props Summit.

After my first year doing props, I invited all the prop masters over as a thank you, and we realized that this is something, that we didn't know each other.

So we started a yearly thing, and then all the different prop shops, like the Juilliard shop, the NYU shop, all of us started loaning stuff to each other, so we tripled our storage and it brought the price down. We were able to contact each other through emails and be like, "Hey, you did this. Do you have this?" because no one wants to reinvent the wheel.

And there's also this other organization called SPAM, which is Society of Properties Artisan Managers. It's all around the United States, and when we throw out questions to each other about, "Hey, who has been shot in the head before?" [*"It's fake."*] [*laughs*] So, once you find out those different tricks and techniques, you don't have to reinvent the wheel.

**Alie:** Mm-hmm. How much of what you do is collecting, cataloging, styling, versus fabricating and aging?

**Jay:** A lot of it is dependent upon the script. If it's a new play, we'll usually be able to get away with getting stuff around thrift stores or hitting up Craigslist. There's something called Krrb, which is 'curb'. Or if you have to make something totally new and then just distress it. So, you made something new, and it always kind of breaks my heart that we have to beat it down and, like, strip it to make it authentic. The greatest thing about... The greatest prop masters, you will never see. You will never see their hand; you will never see where they've been, and that is our goal because we want to be seamless.

**Alie:** You just want to be so atmospheric that people feel like they're absolutely in that moment and in that time, where they're not noticing things around them?

**Jay:** Absolutely. And you put in things from eras and things that are iconic so they are emotionally drawn in before the actors even hit the stage. A piece of duct tape versus a piece of lace on the back of a chair, or the side of a chair, says volumes about the person that occupies that chair.

**Alie:** Does that mean there's something, maybe like, from Goodwill in Staten Island that made it on stage to *Hamilton*? Someone doesn't realize their brass candlestick holder made it onto a Tony Award-winning play?

**Jay:** Yes!

**Alie:** What are some things that you've had to source?

**Jay:** There's this great place in New York – and I swear to god, every big community needs this. It's called Materials for the Arts, and it was run by Harriet Taub for the longest time.

**Aside:** This magical place was started by sanitation workers! New York sanitation folks, [*New York accent: "Sanitation."*] just savin' the arts.

**Jay:** And they saw so much stuff from the city being thrown away that they said, "We have to establish where kids or nonprofits can go and pick up this material." It's buttons from the garment district, fabrics from the garment district, books that people were throwing out, chairs, offices that would close and they would just throw things out.

So they established that, and then anyone who was nonprofit, or if you were a school or an arts organization, could go to that. And we use that a lot. The thing is, as soon as we get done with that, we put it right back into Materials for the Arts. And "Annie" Hathaway...

**Aside:** That's Anne Hathaway to those of us who have not gotten to work with her. And the one-person show was *Grounded* at The Public Theater. According to some still images that I

creeped on the internet of the 2015 run, she appears on stage in a jumpsuit under stark lighting.

**Jay:** She did a show, and the sand in her show, because she played an Israeli Airforce pilot, all of that sand, we sent to Materials for the Arts as a note saying, “Hey, we have this,” and it went into a park in Brooklyn. So, all these kids are running around in sand that Annie Hathaway did a show in.

**Alie:** Oh my god, I love that! And what about your work in New York, on stage, versus when you’re working on set? How is that different for a proptologist?

**Jay:** I’ve done pilots and music videos, and here’s the best way I can explain the experience. Your first day on set is the most exciting day of your life. The rest of them are the most boring things you will ever have. It’s six hours of sitting and 30 minutes of pure panic. [*“Hurry up and wait.”*] And you have to be, like, ready for anything. If somebody’s like, “I want to hold a baby at this point,” you’ve got to have a truck that has, like, a bunch of different props on it. So, it’s really... You have to plan so much and you have to have enough people around so no one’s waiting on you because you don’t want money hanging... you don’t want to be the department that’s hanging everybody up.

**Alie:** Yeah. Do the props have to differ in terms of how authentic they look? If something is seen from, you know, 100 meters away, versus if there’s going to be a close-up on it?

**Jay:** Honestly, it doesn’t matter to me and it doesn’t matter to a lot of the people that I work with, because we feel that amount of detail is absolutely important because the actor sees it.

**Alie:** Oh, wow! Okay. That’s so smart.

**Jay:** They’re out there naked and we have to support them as much as possible. The great... Yeah, so you have to do that amount of detail. Jay O. Sanders, the great Shakespearian actor, I gave him a pipe one time, and he was like, “Oh, this is nice.” And I said, “Yeah, I noticed your character’s left-handed, so that’s why it’s burned on *this* side, because when you would light it you would turn it this way and use your dominant hand instead of everybody else doing it that way.” And he was just like, “Why did you think about that?!” I was like, “I have to. I have to because I have to support you.”

**Alie:** That makes me want to cry. That’s so beautiful. That just gave me full-body goosebumps. That’s amazing. What a detail! You have to love what you do in order to go into that kind of detail for the work.

**Jay:** Oh yeah, absolutely. The stuff that I do even for myself is to keep my skills up, but also to keep my eyes sharp.

**Alie:** What does your workshop look like? Very tidy? Or are we talking absolute chaos?

**Jay:** [*laughs*] Okay... [*laughs*] [*yelling a bit*] I couldn’t find my headset!

**Alie:** Say no more! [*laughs*]

**Jay:** [*still loud and dramatic*] You answer that! Your engineer’s going to be like, “Crazy guy.”

Yeah, it’s... my desk is good, but I recently got into the folk art of the Māori and the Sepik people of Papua New Guinea, so my entire room looks like a Victorian gentleman’s club. And I use a section of my bedroom – because you have no space – as my office, as my workplace.

**Alie:** You’re based in New York...

**Jay:** New York City, yeah.



**Alie:** Where are you... I'll put this up in the beginning, but where are you from originally?

**Jay:** Missouri.

**Alie:** Missouri!

**Jay:** Yeah, I'm a little farm boy... Well, not little. I've always been a big, corn-fed guy. I was the only 8th grader with a full beard. But yeah, Missouri, small town. It was 3,000 people, and there were 61 people in my graduating class. And I think I got into theater and I think I got into the arts to play up the intellectual side, because being queer in Missouri in the '70s and '80s was very dangerous. So, I used that persona to hide who I was and protect who I was. And theater, I mean, come on. What better place to hide!

**Alie:** Yeah! No one suspects a thing. *[laughs]*

**Jay:** Exactly. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** When you got to New York, what was that like? Did you just go down the steps of a Greyhound with a piece of wheat in your mouth and a battered suitcase? What was that like?

**Jay:** Yeah. I carried a knife with me my first time I went to New York, and I walked the entire... I walked from, I think it was, like, 49th street all the way down to the Village because I was afraid to take the subway.

**Aside:** He got used to it, obviously. The city also changed over the years, and he is perfectly at home. But with covid, you may have noticed that live theater was a little bit impacted, so he left his trade to teach at Pace University, which has campuses in New York, and Westchester, and online, which is great because the only name better than Jay Duckworth is Professor Duckworth, let's be honest.

**Jay:** I teach Props and Theater History for Design, and another one which is called Creative Collaborative.

**Alie:** That's so cool.

**Jay:** And the other thing is, I've had such an advantage, working with some of the best people in the entire world, that if I did not start teaching, it would be a moral failing of mine. Seriously, my father always said, "The price you pay for living in a good community is community service, and you have to give back." And the last thing that theater needs is a 50-year-old white man running a theater department, you know? Like, a props department. So, it's other people's time.

**Alie:** Okay, I'm going to make us go to listener questions because we have one billion of them, and they're so good.

**Jay:** So crazy!

**Alie:** Like, so many. It's nuts. So can I lightning round you, and we'll just try and answer as many as we can?

**Jay:** Do you have a bell or anything that you can use to shut me up? Like, "Time!"

**Alie:** *[laughs]* No.

**Aside:** I love him and I never want to stop talking to him, but we do have to take a quick break to chat about sponsors of the show who help us donate to a cause of the ologist's choosing. And this week, Professor Duckworth would like it to go to the National Indigenous

Women's Resource Center, Inc., NIWRC, a Native-led nonprofit organization dedicated to ending violence against Native women and children.

The NIWRC provides national leadership in ending gender-based violence in tribal communities by lifting up the collective voices of grassroots advocates and offering culturally grounded resources, technical assistance, and training, as well as policy development to strengthen tribal sovereignty. Their mission is to provide national leadership and end violence against American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian women. So, a donation was made to NIWRC.org in Jay's honor. Thanks to Jay and these sponsors.

[Ad Break]

Okay, your proptology questions. You wonderful patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://www.patreon.com/Ologies) supplied me with a torrent of great questions, which we will now aim at his beautiful face.

**Alie:** Okay, Jessica Janssen wants to know: What makes a set truly-

**Jay:** [interjecting] True!

**Alie:** [laughs]

**Jay:** I'm sorry. [laughs] I'm so sorry.

**Alie:** We actually said that at the exact same time! What makes a set *truly* magical?

**Jay:** Oh! The harmonics. Harmonics in a set make it magical, and that's when you work in a play that you have sets, and lights, and costume all congruous and working together to create an emotional environment. One of the greatest set designers out there that I love is David Rockwell.

**Aside:** This guy, David Rockwell, designed a bunch of Nobu restaurants and the Dolby Theater where the Oscars are held, plus did the sets for the theatrical runs of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Legally Blonde*, and *Hairspray*, and *Kinky Boots*. He won a Tony in 2016 for Best Scenic Design for a musical called *She Loves Me*, and has been nominated for, like, six other Tonys. And he might just, you know, be eating a croissant, walking right past you. This kind of guy.

**Jay:** And he's an architect and he does theater for fun. But his stuff is *sublime*. And Riccardo Hernández, who is the Head of Design after Ming Cho Lee stepped down at Yale, but his parents were opera people, so his stuff is clean lines and very Japanese. The thing is, when you go out there, you have to strip away everything that is not for the story and you have to distill your style down so that people see that thumbprint. And once they see that thumbprint, that's how you get your voice in theater.

David Korins is the same thing. Donyale Werle is the queen of it. So yeah, it's the harmony in which you interact with everyone, from the audience to the stagehand.

**Aside:** So Ming Cho Lee, Riccardo Hernández, whose parents used to be in opera, David Korins, Donyale Werle... I really love that Jay is just giving *props* to so many people. Links to all these folks will be up on my website. Patron Rainbow Warrior, I hope that answers your questions of who some of his heroes are.

And that's all smiles and sunshine, but let's talk about annoying shit. Some patrons, including Anna G, Rafaella Litvin, Kyle Pawlik, Samantha Mitts, Ellen Skelton, Alexandria Gartman, first-time question-askers Little Bee, Katherine Trinklein, and...

**Alie:** Stephanie and 1,000 other people wanted to know: What is the worst prop that you've ever had to make or put together? Is there one that's just on your shitlist so hard?

**Jay:** I will always remember a summer stock that I had to make a cowhide trunk, and it was out of cowhide, and it... We had no air conditioning. I had to do it outside. I was sweating like crazy. The director loved it and he's like, "Can you make it look like pony?" And I was like, "I imagine if I take a trimmer to it, I could." So, I was trimming this, like with a hair trimmer, outside, and I was sweating, and the wind was pushing this cow hair all over my body, and it was sticking to me. It was the most gross thing ever! And I was just like, "I can't believe *this* is what I want to do for a living."

**Alie:** [laughs] I can just picture it. Like if you had a date roll in coconut, you know?

**Jay:** [laughs] Yes. 100%. That's what I looked like. [laughs]

**Aside:** Just like a human lint roller in sweat and bovine stubble. Mnnh. And yet, he remained just so in love with the field.

Now, this next question was a super popular one. It was asked by just a disco full of patrons, including Ariel Vanzandt, Brooke Ratliff, Dave Schuster, first-time question-asker Brendan Wood-Taylor, Diane Hayes, Manuela Quintero, Silvia T, Ira Gray, Daniel Spence, Khara Koffel, Barrie Price, RJ Doidge, Wendy Fick, Charlotte Fjelkegård, 1000th Happy Haunt, Bridget Daley, and...

**Alie:** Sammy Baker wants to know: Where does everything go afterward? Like, movies that build these super intricate, huge sets, or plays that go on? What happens? Do they get demolished? Do actors steal them? Do they go into a landfill?

**Jay:** Let's go to your favorite film, *Waterworld*, where they just blew it up and tried to sink it. And it didn't go under!

**Alie:** [gasp!] Really?!

**Jay:** You don't know?! That was a huge scandal.

**Alie:** No! They tried to sink it?

**Jay:** Yeah, they blew it up and tried to sink it, and it didn't go under, so it was stuck there. And they had environmental concerns, so it cost them more to take this thing out.

**Aside:** A little foreshadowing to an upcoming Maritime Archaeology episode about shipwrecks, hm?

**Jay:** A lot of stuff goes to prop houses. If you have a prop house, you usually rent a lot of stuff that you need specially. So, it'll go right back to that prop house, especially the couches, the furniture, the dressing, all of that stuff usually goes back. The sets usually get trashed. And that's all for film.

Broadway, they will throw it out... It'll either go in a container and go either to New Jersey or Connecticut for a tour. Or if it's at the end, it'll all get thrown out in dumpsters.

**Alie:** No!

**Jay:** Yes. Props, everything. So that's why a lot of actors take some things that they've worked with.

**Alie:** Do they ever auction it off at all?

**Jay:** We did with two guns from *Hamilton*, for the Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS fundraiser, where we took some props. It was the two guns, and I asked Lin to sign them, and they went for something like \$3,000.

**Alie:** Oh, I bet. Oh my god.

**Aside:** I looked this up, and yes, they did go for several grand. And if you missed out but you have too much money in your possession, just a head's up: The two actual guns belonging to Alexander Hamilton go up for auction on May 14th and are expected to fetch between one and four million dollars.

But if that's too rich and potentially haunted for your blood?

**Jay:** And then there's also the Broadway Flea Market where a lot of props and costume pieces are sold to people who come out to the flea. And I recommend that, once we get out of covid, just to go and be a part of that because you can meet all the backstage people. You can meet the stars, you can meet the talent, and you can also meet the people who bring this stuff together, like Buist Bickley, who's an incredible prop person; Faye Armon-Troncoso, who's great. Yeah, you get to meet all kinds of wonderful people.

**Aside:** Links to these other legends will be on my website.

**Alie:** Jessica Roth wants to know, kind of on that note: What's the weirdest prop you've had go missing? Do you ever have things that get stolen, and you're like, "Ah! I need this Ming vase!"?

**Jay:** [laughs] Well, we've had... Okay, I'm sorry to harp on *Hamilton*, but this is the greatest story.

**Alie:** No, I love it.

**Jay:** Okay, during "Burn," there is the lantern. [clip from *Burn*, Phillipa Soo, "I hope that you... Burn..."]

And inside of that lantern is two sets of matches that are two matches that are taped together. It's so that when it's struck, the one strikes the other one and it's guaranteed to light. You can never, never just send out one match. And then you take... We took a striker pad and put it on there as well. So, if that goes out on stage, they can go ahead and light it again.

Well, Phillipa Soo, who originated the role, [clip from *Hamilton*: "Elizabeth Schuyler. It's a pleasure to meet you."] It was her birthday, and somebody came backstage and grabbed the lighter that lights the candle, and took it downstairs for afterward for her birthday, to light the candles on her birthday cake. And poor Will Blacksmith was just like, "Oh my god! Where is the lighter!"

**Alie:** Oh no!

**Jay:** And Phillipa was just like, "Let's just use the matches on side." And he was like, "No, no. We can't. We have to use these..." It was there at the beginning when he did his pre-check. It was just somebody went by and was like, "Oh yeah, I'll need this later."

**Alie:** Oh no! Did it work out in time?

**Jay:** Totally. Will kept... I think he keeps a lighter on him to burn the ends of ropes. He's an incredible professional, so yeah.

**Alie:** That makes me nervous just thinking about the person who didn't realize they almost ruined it.

**Jay:** Oh yeah, on Broadway! That was Broadway! People pay thousands of dollars and it's going to be like, [*imitating trombone fail*] "wah-wah."

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Okay, Julia McDonald had a great question: At what point did movies and theater switch from using real person bones to fake bones? Maybe they didn't? We all know the story of the Pirates of the Caribbean ride, after all.

**Jay:** Well, not only Pirates of the Caribbean, but there was also... What's the one... *Poltergeist* used real bones.

**Alie:** [*incredulous*] Nooo! [*slightly horrified*] Ooooh!!

**Jay:** Fo' real. They used real bones in the scene with the pool where all the skeletons were coming up.

**Alie:** WHERE DID THEY GET ALL THOSE BONES??

**Jay:** I honestly have no idea.

**Aside:** I looked it up, and they got them from Carolina Biological Supply, which was an anatomy supplier for medical schools. Nowadays, folks use plastic ones, although it's completely legal to buy a human skeleton, and there's one at BoneRoom.com. It'll run you about \$6,000. That's a big "No Thanks" from me. I'm good without one. Thank you.

**Jay:** But I know that was, like, the last big thing. There *is* someone who donated their skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company to use as Hamlet. I don't know if he was a former actor or something like that, but I've always loved that story.

**Alie:** Yeah, that's pretty dope.

**Aside:** This skull in question belongs to André Tchaikowsky, a Polish composer, not to be confused with the Russian composer Tchaikovsky.

Tchaikowsky was like, "Please use my skull on stage. It's going to be rad. It's going to be so cool. I'm so into it. I'm going to be dead, but I'm going to love it." And it *has* been rad. A li'l spooky, but it certainly brings a vibe to the show.

**Alie:** Maggie Kinney wrote in and said: I had a friend named Zach who wanted to donate their body, not to science but to a movie set when they died so that it could be used during the movie for something really cool, like being blown up. Is that even possible? Can you even legally use a dead body as a movie prop?

And René Fuentes says: This is the weirdest question I have read in a long time, and I'm pretty sure Alie would be able to find the answer.

I don't know about that! Can you donate your actual corpse? I don't know if that's legal!

**Jay:** Well, you have to deal with your state laws. And don't ask me how I know this. But you have to deal with your own state laws, and if they have composting for a body... because some have really strict laws about how you get buried. And some people go with natural burials where they put themselves in wicker baskets, and now there's the ones where you can be part of a tree... So, it totally depends on the laws of each state and how comfortable the theater is with you donating it. You can get in a lot of trouble for desecrating a corpse.

**Alie:** Yeah. So, definitely get something in writing.

**Jay:** I hear... That's what I hear. *Allegedly*. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** Yeah! Air quotes, air quotes! [*laughs*]

That American Clare says: I love learning about prop food things like the chip bags that don't make noise. Is there anything food-related that you've had to hack?

**Jay:** Oh, that's @ScottPropandRoll, he just did a TikTok on that. ScottPropandRoll, he's a prop movie guy.

[TikTok of @ScottPropandRoll]

*[noisy chip bag obscuring dialog] It's difficult to record dialogue over a loud chip bag. [much quieter bag crunching] The prop chip bag is made out of vinyl. The vinyl bag still makes a little bit of noise, [mild rustling] but compared to regular chips, [very noisy rustling] the crinkle when you wrinkle doesn't... stinkle."*

And he's just incredible. Anybody who's listening to this, please go follow him.

There is... and it's my favorite story. John Lithgow wanted a steak for when he was playing King Lear, and we were trying to figure out, maybe we could do tofu or something like that, something that wouldn't... Because it had to be outside. It was the second Park show, your average was 90° temperatures during the day, and you had to have that waiting out for... you know, to go out on stage.

Polina, my assistant on the show, brought in a watermelon, and we started cutting it up, and I noticed that the water on the plate reminded me of blood. And I said, "Could you hand me that icing tint?" And she gave me a caramel icing tint, and I thinned it out with some water, and I made a steak out of it. And we went up to the rehearsal the next day at lunchtime and showed him the steak. I had the greatest compliment I've ever had in my entire life, because John Lithgow saw it and he was just like, "Oh my god. I hope my performance is as good as this steak."

And I got a call from my brother saying, "Do you know that John Lithgow is on *The Chew* and he just dropped your name? Like, full first and last name?"

[clip from *The Chew*, John Lithgow:]

*A couple of years ago I did King Lear in the Park, and there was a scene where King Lear eats heartily with his knights, and I wanted a big piece of meat. This was medieval England. So I asked the prop master, this brilliant prop guy named Jay Duckworth, "Get me meat that I can actually eat on stage." And he invented stage meat made out of watermelon with food coloring.*

*[Hosts react in amazement]*

**Alie:** Oh my god!

**Jay:** Oh yeah. Such a gracious human being.

**Alie:** That's wonderful. I mean, is that something that's used now, kind of, regularly to imitate steak?

**Jay:** Yes!! When he did *Beatriz at Dinner*, he had the crew call me because they were making steaks, and he's like, "No, no. You need to call Jay Duckworth at the Public Theater and find out what he did." So, the chef's joke is like, "That's a wonderful way to freak out vegetarians."

**Alie:** Yes! Actually, that brings me to one question that I have to find now. Elle McCall asks: Have you ever done any great April Fools jokes using props? Dying to know.

**Jay:** Never on stage, because like I said, it's a sacred space, period.

**Aside:** But off stage?

**Jay:** There may have been toothpaste inside Oreos that were left out on a table. So, maybe. And that's all I can say *legally*.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Hey, it's not *not* edible.

**Jay:** Exactly! Just odd they're mint.

**Alie:** Yeah, very, very minty. York Peppermint Patty Oreos.

Skella Borealis wants to know...

**Jay:** What a great name.

**Alie:** Great name, right? I'm not sure if you'll know, and I have no idea what this is about, but where is Russell Crowe's "jack strap" and how did they lose it? Is this about a jockstrap?

**Jay:** Did not get lost. It is actually in... His jockstrap was bought by John Oliver, and it went to the last Blockbuster that's still open in Alaska. It was up for an auction... Is it weird that I know this? It's so wrong.

**Alie:** Yes! I'm so glad you know that, because I have no... I wasn't if a jack strap was a typo, or if that was something that had nothing to do with jockstraps.

**Jay:** No, it was the jockstrap, and he sold it, and John Oliver bought it and donated it to the last Blockbuster up in Alaska.

**Aside:** This jockstrap in question was worn in the 2005 film *Cinderella Man*. It has its own Wikipedia page! And out of pure celestial cruelty, there are no pictures of it on its own Wikipedia page. Somebody fix that!

But elsewhere, photos show Russell Crowe's jockstrap as leathery and weathered, kind of like *Antiques Roadshow After Dark*. And yeah, John Oliver bought it for seven Gs, and then Russell Crowe donated that amount to Australian Zoo to fund the John Oliver Koala Chlamydia Ward.

But all of this merriment just was not enough to keep the lights on at the Alaska Blockbuster, so everything, all the mementos and everything, were shipped to the *real* last Blockbuster, which is in Bend, Oregon. But somehow the jockstrap went missing. So who knows? Who knows. Only the jockstrap.

**Alie:** Oh my god. We have so many good questions. Allie Rosser asked: Do you have a selection of easy-break bottles in your house for smashing over the heads of your guests? And are they really made out of spun sugar like in our dreams?

**Jay:** They used to be. They're now made out of a polymer or they're made out of a resin that's very thin. And we have a lot at our theater from different shows that have closed and... Like Sting's *Last Ship* closed and we... because of the network that we set up through the Props Summit, we were able to get them. And our promise to the community was that we would hold onto them if shows off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway needed them, we would donate to them so they didn't have to buy them because they're very, very expensive.

**Alie:** I bet.

**Aside:** I looked it up on a prop supply site, and a single breakaway beer bottle is \$18, and it does not come with any beer.

**Jay:** And also, any trick that you do, you have to have a fight choreographer, because even with that you have to hit them in a special way. It's either a pull-through or a bounce back, and you

can't be near the eyes. So you have to have all of this stuff, so a fight choreographer with a prop person, we work very much hand-in-hand. And now fight people have also taken on roles, which is just incredible, called intimacy coaches, because some people are scumbags – I'm just going to say it – and there are people who are not comfortable doing things. So now people are bringing in intimacy coaches so those scumbag directors and scumbag actors don't take advantage of other people.

**Alie:** Augh, that's great that that's started, and it's horrific to think how many times it was needed, you know?

**Jay:** Yeah.

**Alie:** On the topic of danger, Katie Yu wants to know if you've ever worked with a dangerous prop that required special handling?

**Jay:** [laughs] Yes! And I made it. It was a 13-foot guillotine that actually worked. It was a working guillotine. It was for a show called *Dedication or The Stuff of Dreams*. It was Terrence McNally and Nathan Lane. And it was taking place in an old theater; this old, old theater that they wanted to revamp. And Terrence McNally told me at the first meeting, he was like, "If that thing stops, if that thing binds up, our show is dead." And I was like, "Hey, that's great. I think it's great that you have me for this project because I will guarantee that it won't happen." And the production manager turns to me afterward like, "That's really great. What are you going to do?" I was like, "I have no idea."

But it was... When we made it, I calculated the math wrong for the weight of the blade, and the blade, the first time we ran it, the blade broke apart the bottom of the machine and stuck into the floor. And it wasn't even sharp!

**Alie:** Oh god. What is the blade made out of?

**Jay:** It was made out of metal! We trained everybody, and every night it was padlocked up.

**Alie:** That's very smart, because you *know* someone's like, [derpy voice] "Can it chop a cantaloupe?" And you're like, "Don't do that, please!"

**Jay:** [laughs] Exactly.

**Alie:** "Don't have a couple Coronas and see what it can chop up. Bad idea."

**Jay:** Yeah.

**Alie:** So many good questions. I really loved this question. Jason... [hesitates while thinking how to say the last name] Kro-

**Jay:** Alexander.

**Alie:** Jason Alexander, you may know him from *The Producers*.

**Jay:** [laughs]

**Alie:** Jason Krobatsch asks: Who handles the writing of hand-written notes or letters? Does the actor actually write it? Does the prop master? Does somebody else? And especially in *Hamilton*, where are those letters coming from?

**Jay:** Such an incredible question. All of them are handled by props people. And they're... What we did for *Hamilton*, there was a thing called Wright Right, and we took Hamilton, Washington, all of their letters, all of their script, and you can write letters in their hand.

**Alie:** Whuuut!



**Jay:** So, we not only had documents that we reprinted from... Like, we had Rochambeau's map of New Jersey.

**Aside:** Rochambeau, sidenote, was a French-born marshal whose forces helped defeat the British at Yorktown, whose full name was a real French mouthful of cheese: [*in her best French*] Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau, which is longer than saying Rock-Paper-Scissors. But back to paper, which rocks.

**Jay:** But yeah, so you know how nuts I am, so everything is totally exact. Even the newspaper that announces Burr is running for the seat is New York... This really talented young man made it, who was our intern, but it was all New York news from that month because we couldn't find the exact newspaper. But it was just nuts! You can go pretty far in it.

And when we did *Lear*, there wasn't a written language in England at the time, but there's tons of notes in *King Lear*, so we had to use Irish Ogham language, which is the Tree alphabet, and it was an early scratch. It was horizontal and vertical lines, and I did it on pieces of bark that we just sewed together.

**Alie:** Wow!

**Jay:** It was an idea of the earliest Chinese books meshed with Irish language in order to create something. Because that's a lot about pareidolia. Our minds fill in those blanks, so as long as we give something that is legitimate, that would work in that world, then you're fine.

**Alie:** And what kind of paper are you using to simulate paper from, you know, a few centuries ago?

**Jay:** Some of it is printer paper. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** What!!

**Jay:** Just printer paper. Some of it was real handmade paper, but it just wouldn't hold up, so we had to augment some of the paper.

**Alie:** Here's what I picture. Jay Duckworth, makin' *Hamilton*, just doing these letters.

**Jay:** You got it. Yep. Right here.

**Alie:** Prints it up in the right hand, and then puts it in a pie tin that's filled with coffee, and then burns the edges like a treasure map. But I'm pretty sure I'm wrong about some of that stuff.

**Jay:** [*laughs*] You're absolutely... right! No. There are jokes... Eric Hart, who is the premier scholar on props; he's written three books, he's just getting his last book out right now...

**Aside:** Eric Hart's book was *just* released this month and it's called *Prop Building for Beginners: Twenty Props for Stage and Screen*, and I will link it on my website.

**Jay:** We joke about that. "Hey, if you burn the edges, it makes it look real." Or "If you put it in coffee, it makes it look more real." That's a total joke. So, we never really do that because it's just... You always want to be an archetype. You never want to be a stereotype.

**Alie:** Yeah. So, do you have a certain, like, aging serum that is a mix of a couple different types of paint?

**Jay:** Nope. See, that's great, because no.

**Alie:** [*laughs*]

**Jay:** No, listen, and it's the same thing that a lot of people have misconceptions about. In that age, those props would not look like that. They would be new, fresh paper.

**Alie:** Oh... Smart.

**Jay:** So, our preconceived notion of how old they look is because we see them at that point. But we have to realize that these are of that time.

**Alie:** Ah! Ha-ha! So it's like when you're organizing your bookshelf, and you're like, "Hmm, only the *old* books were printed on yellowed paper," And you're like, "That's just... yellowed paper."

**Jay:** Absolutely. I spoke at the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia and they gave me a tour of everything and the backstage stuff.

**Aside:** In museums, backstage is also known as the collections.

**Jay:** Backstage in theater, that's... But they gave me a tour, and the guy who gave me the tour was so annoyed, I think, because I was like, "Oh my god. Is this real?!" He's like, "Yeah, that's real." Like, "Are these real??" Because I'm so used to making fake stuff. At one point he's just like, "You know this is a museum. These are the actual things." And I was just like, "I can't believe that!!" It was nuts. It was so stupid.

**Alie:** [laughs] I feel like that's... Like, you going back in time, meeting the Queen and being like, "That cosplay is amazing!"

**Jay:** [laughs] [snarkily] "No one would've ever had those beads. Seriously!"

**Alie:** [laughs] Oh god.

Annie Goodenough, which I hope is a real last name, but if not, it's a great last name.

**Jay:** Oh yeah. She should be in *The Crucible*.

**Alie:** I know, right?!

**Aside:** *The Crucible*, a 1959 Arthur Miller play about the Salem Witch Trials, and one character's name is Sarah Good, in case you're into historical witch fiction, Amy Goodenough, whose name is awesome and who asked:

**Alie:** One of my weird TV show pet peeves is when actors are carrying coffee cups and they look empty. Is there an important reason why, on stage or on screen... Because you can tell!

**Jay:** Oh my god! ScottPropandRoll invented a system that he can pour into the coffee cups because it has become such... That's also a joke in our community. It's like, "You gotta put something in there!" It's annoying, and it's one of those things, again, where you can't have coffee in it because it'll stain the costumes should any spill. And there's so much equipment around that you can't really have water in it. But he did something, I think it was a resin or something like that, so it had weight.

But that is such a hot topic right now because... And that actually so legitimizes what we do as prop people, that if you look at the *Game of Thrones* where they had that coffee cup out, how many people saw that, it really made me feel great about the detail that I do because people are that detail-oriented.

**Aside:** This next one was asked by Rob Hale, Naomi Adkins, Stephen Lickman, Silvia T, and Becky the Sassy Seagrass Scientist, who wrote in to Jay Duckworth: Do you love exquisite details and tiny elements of props and scenery that maybe only you and the actors get to see? Such a special part of my college theater magic techy experience.

**Alie:** And you know, a few people had questions about what you thought about props having to become more detailed or realistic when it comes to, say, TV or film, and high def and 4k,

versus the theater experience, which is really about being present, and in the moment, and believing the actor is believing they're in it. Do you have any thoughts on that at all?

**Jay:** I think that all props people have raised their art to a design phase where HDTV, and high-definition film, and stage are just the same. We all want to get the most detail, the best that we can out there because it is our name and reputation. And again, we don't want to be noticed. We will only let you see what we want you to see. So, it's very important that we make sure that the address of the actor's character is on the checks that they write in the play. That's the detail that we want.

**Alie:** We were talking about coffee cups that were empty, and this made me... I have to ask Cassie Lumsden's question: Just how creepy do you think prop babies are?

**Jay:** Oh god! The worst! The worst!! A lot of times we have to get those babies that people buy that are, like, real-looking babies. Like, latex and foam babies that *really* look like babies. And they're whacky! And now we have to do a speaker inside of them so that they have the sound. And sometimes we use remote car parts to make them move.

**Alie:** Nice!

**Jay:** Because if you're holding something that is totally... There is no baby in the world, unless you swaddle that thing, that's not going to wriggle or something like that.

**Alie:** Yeah. I was wondering that. I don't know, it was one of those shower thoughts, where I remember, like, a month ago I was thinking, "Why don't they make remote control babies that wiggle around?" I forgot what I was watching but I was watching something where a baby was distractingly small. It essentially was wrapped up like a moth cocoon and there was nothing alive in there.

**Jay:** Oh yeah, no. Nope.

**Alie:** There's that famous Bradley Cooper scene, which I still feel so bad for whoever had to just... you know.

**Jay:** The worst. Well again, I think that's one of those situations where it was like, "I want the baby in my arms." "We don't have a baby." "You get a baby!" And like, within 30 minutes you either send somebody to a store, or you pull the baby that you have out of your storage in stock and just be like, "This is the one that I never want to use."

**Aside:** Just please google 'Bradley Cooper fake baby.' It was in *American Sniper*. It hurts. It hurts me so much.

**Alie:** Yeah. I know, I cringed a thousand cringes, seeing that. I have a couple more questions from listeners.

**Jay:** Huzzah!

**Alie:** I think you'll like this question. Ian Garrett wants to know: What's it like being a frickin' national treasure? Duckworth is the best. No joke, I'm having a bit of a moment over here.

**Jay:** [*squealing*] Whaaatt! Are you... Who is this?

**Alie:** This is Ian Garrett. And then another question we have from David Phelps: Oh my goodness! Jay Duckworth is a bit of a legend! And David writes in: He recently took a pretty outspoken, though fair, stand against exploitative but nearly ubiquitous internships in theater. Has he received a lot of pushback from it, and do you think there's actual change coming on that front? David says: I'm a live theater worker right now and have considered making the jump

to movies and TV. Do you have any recommendations on how to do that? But would love to hear your stance on internships and being paid or unpaid.

**Jay:** My eyes are honestly welling up...

**Alie:** Aw!!

**Jay:** No, I really... You do this and... The one thing that I keep harping on is trying to be invisible, trying to be unseen. And for... Oh! I'm going to cry! And to have people, like, recognize your work, especially in a job that you are the last one invited to the party, [*a little teary*] it's pretty nice. Okay, I'm so sorry!

**Alie:** I love it! People love you and your work.

**Jay:** [*wiping tears*] Oh god.

**Alie:** Isn't that wonderful to know that you touch people that way just by doing the thing that you love to do the most?

**Jay:** Yeah, it's pretty crazy. I... I'm one of the luckiest people I know, to be totally honest with you.

Yeah, I did get a lot of flak, and I did get a lot of hate, and I did get a lot of shunning because I said that if theaters can't afford... Because we're moving into a new direction, and theaters are going to try to take advantage of them not having a lot of money and say, "We need interns and we need them for free." Or even worse, there are places that say, "You have to pay to be an intern at this place."

And that is criminal because we are artists telling other artists that their training is not worth... that artists aren't worth something. And it's something to get that from somebody else, but to get it from the people that you respect, the people that you admire, to tell you that you're not worth something, is probably one of the most heinous things that we can do as artists, if we don't support each other.

The reason artists welcome those who are always outsiders is because we know what it is to be outsiders, and we are taking great pains to create worlds that are safe for the people who are the 'others' and not to gatekeep our world. By making it that you have to be so fiscally sound, your family has to be so fiscally sound, that you can depend on somebody else's money in order to get a proper education at some of the best places is total gatekeeping, and it's gatekeeping at its worst because it keeps people who are disadvantaged out.

**Alie:** And it's so important that someone in a position like yours, who's so well-respected and seasoned in what you do, is bringing that up. Because a lot of people wouldn't have the privilege to bring that up, but it's also a lot of flak. That's a big risk that you're taking, you know?

**Jay:** Yeah, but how dare we say that we're inclusive? How dare we say we speak for everyone, or we want our theater to portray everyone, and then gatekeep the next generation, who have stories and who have voices that we have to hear. I mean, how many Indigenous theater pieces have you seen? How many Asian theater pieces have you seen? The ones that I've worked on have just exploded! They were so good, and people were dying to see these things!

I'm talking about, like, *Soft Power*, and then there was David Byrne from the Talking Heads, and Alex Timbers directed *Here Lies Love* about Imelda Marcos, that was just all Filipino. And it was so earth-shatteringly good. People go to a doctor when they feel sick. People go to the theater to heal their souls. And the great thing about being a prop master, Alie, is you get to also make the soapbox that you're going to talk from. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** [*laughs*] And weather it just so. That's so perfect.

**Jay:** Totally!

**Alie:** But on that note, do you have any advice for people who look up to you? Who love proptology? Who would want to do this for a living? Any advice?

**Jay:** Yeah. Find your passion. Find what you're good at. Take inventory of what you're great at and what you're not-so-good at, and exploit the things you're good at, and find the opposite side of that. So, if you're a carpenter, look for sewing skills. If you're a soft goods person, a sewer, look to do sculpting. If you're a sculptor, look to do casting, so that you have double the amounts of blades when you come into the fight.

You have a phone on you that has a camera! Take pictures of everything you do, through the process you do it, in order to show people, like, "This is what I started with, this is what I ended up with, and these are the problems that I had in between." And be crazy enough that people like you. Show up early. And do good work. That's it. And you will work for the rest of your life.

**Alie:** That's so great!

**Aside:** Be crazy enough that people like you. Show up early. And do good work. That's it. I'm telling you; his life lessons are so good.

**Alie:** And the final listener question. Leah [*with flare*] Lodevico, I think...

**Jay:** Beautiful!

**Alie:** Beautiful rendition on my part! Do proptologists carry utility belts? And if so, what would you say are the essential items in a prop utility belt?

**Jay:** Penny cutting scissors. The scissors that EMTs keep that you always have. Brushes, paintbrushes that go from really fine to giant chip brushes that you can throw away. A hot glue gun with plenty of hot glue. A small container of wood glue. Screws of various sizes. A combination square. A pencil, a pen, and a nail set.

**Alie:** Perfect!

**Jay:** That's it!

**Alie:** That's it?

**Jay:** I get done!! Y'its it!

**Alie:** [*laughs*] Okay, two more I always ask. Worst thing about your job? Thing that sucks the most. It can be anything. It can be petty. It can be huge. It can be [*grunt*]. Anything.

**Jay:** I think the thing that sucks the most is funding for the arts. It's the lack of money. But that doesn't make you more creative. The other thing... So, that's the politically correct one that I'm going to say. The other thing is people who believe that they are important. And the thing about working at the Public Theater is, there are so many... I mean, Meryl Streep started there. Al Pacino started there. *Hair*, *A Chorus Line*, *Fun Home*, *Hamilton*; all these incredible, incredible plays, so you are walking amongst giants. And a lot of the great things about the Public is that there are no egos, and if you come into that place with an ego, you will be shut down and crushed.

And that's great, and people who do try that get shut down and crushed. People who believe that they're more important... There was a director, who will remain nameless, and one of the

backstage crew said, “I really, really appreciate what you’re doing with this show. It’s great to see so many talented people created such great art.” And the director says, [*snarkily*] “Oh my god. Thank you so much. I’ve been waiting for your approval this entire time.” And eeeverybody was just like, “We need to kill this guy!” Of course it was a white man, so... So that’s what stinks.

**Alie:** Yeah, okay. Then an easy question: What do you love the most about being a proptologist?

**Jay:** The gasps. The magic when it happens, and people are like, “How do you do that?” There is a magic table in *Tempest*, and the director was like, “We probably can’t do this because there’s a limited amount of money.” I was like, “No, we can do it. You just give me one second where people pass by this table, and food will appear. If you give me a second one, I’ll give them glasses.” And she was like, “Okay, let’s do it!” And it’s seamless, and you can see that happen. Or the breaking of the wall. It’s the things that people see that... It’s the magic. And it makes me feel like a kid again to show somebody something that kind of blows them away and makes them feel wonder again.

**Alie:** Ah! You’re doing it all the time! You’re amazing. You’re wonderful!

**Jay:** [*laughs*] You are too! Thank you. Aww!!

**Alie:** I’m going to make you be friends with me forever. Deal with it!

**Jay:** Totally! Pinky swear right now! Here we go. Pinkies up!

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So ask prop masters *improper* questions, because life is short, and they are wise, and you’ll never look at any object the same way.

Follow, follow, follow Jay Duckworth at the links in the show notes. He is [@Proptologist](#) on TikTok. His website is [Proptologist.com](#). He is @JayDuck9 on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). He also has an Etsy shop called [ProfDuckworths](#) Unique Goods for Uncommon Folks. And he has a Redbubble filled with charming and hilarious t-shirt designs, and he’s [@Proptologist](#) on that.

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). I’m [@AlieWard](#) on [both](#). There’s *Ologies* merch available at [OlogiesMerch.com](#). Thank you, Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch, of the comedy podcast *You Are That*, for managing merch.

Also sidenote, quick plug for Futurology guest Rose Eveleth’s *Flash Forward* book, which comes out this week. There’s more info at [FlashForwardPod.com/Book](#). I’ll link that in the show notes because y’all love Rose Eveleth, and so do I, and I’m so excited for her.

Thank you, Erin Talbert, for managing the [Ologies Podcast Facebook Group](#). Thank you Noel Dilworth and Susan Hale for managing so much behind the scenes – or, in the collections, if you will. Thank you, Emily White of The Wordary, for making transcripts available at [AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras](#). Caleb Patton bleeps them.

Thank you, professional hunk Jarrett Sleeper and the mustachioed master Steven Ray Morris put all these pieces together. And also, Happy Belated Birthday to Steven Ray Morris, which was last week. Happy, happy birthday. We’re so glad you exist! And also to my dear friend Colleen Flanigan and my niece Olivia. Nick Thorburn wrote and performed the theme music.

And each week I confess my heart to you. At the end of the episode, I tell you a secret after the credits. And I need to tell you, this week’s secret is that I started to ask Jay a question about starting from scratch:

**Alie:** *And where are you getting most of your stuff? Do you have to shart... Do you have to start... Do you have to shart from scratch! [laughs]*

And he thought I must have really done my research, because:

**Jay:** *I sell shirts on Redbubble under @Proptologist, but when you said that, and I don't know if it's going to be edited out, but I made a shirt that said "Shart Week."*

**Alie:** *[laughs boisterously]*

**Jay:** *Remember when you said shart earlier? I was like, "That's always been sitting in the back of my mind, that I always wanted to have a shirt that said that." So I opened a Redbubble store JUST so I could make a shirt for that.*

**Alie:** *[laughs] It's going to stay in now.*

**Jay:** *[bursts in laughter] Wonderful.*

And with that, we'll see you back next week.

Berbye.

*Transcribed by Emily White at [TheWordary.com](http://TheWordary.com)*

### **More links you may enjoy:**

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**Writers, Prop masters & designers Jay mentioned:**

[Buist Bickley](#)

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[Ming Cho Lee](#)

[Ricardo Hernandez](#)

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