



## Mile Square Theatre Hits It Out of the Park With “7th Inning Stretch”

### Transcript

Story by Gina Marie Rodriguez

[MUSIC: “A Little Wiggle”]

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (00:03):

This is Gina Marie Rodriguez, and you are listening to the “Jersey Arts Podcast.” Take me out to the ballgame, or if not there, how about the theater? Miles Square Theatre in Hoboken, New Jersey is celebrating their 19th anniversary of “7th Inning Stretch,” a series of seven 10-minute plays involving baseball, this June 16th and 17<sup>th</sup>. As the birthplace of baseball, Hoboken is the perfect New Jersey city to celebrate our national pastime and Miles Square Theatre, the perfect venue. Each year for the past 19 years, seven playwrights write seven, 10-minute plays involving the sport. These plays run the gamut from heartwarming to hysterical; realistic to absurd. Today I spoke with Miles Square Theatre’s Artistic Director Kevin R. Free, and two of this year’s “7th Inning Stretch” playwrights, Michelle Tyrene Johnson and Tim J. Lord, about all things baseball, Hoboken, and theater. Batters up.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:00):

Thank you all for, for joining me today. I'm very excited to speak with you about the “7th Inning Stretch.” Kevin, can you tell us a little bit about the idea behind “7th Inning Stretch” at Miles Square Theatre? Where did it begin?

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KEVIN R. FREE (01:13):

Yeah. Um, “7th Inning Stretch” has existed since the dawn of time, um, since the dawn of recorded time, and I’m surprised what, that people don’t know that. Um, but the <laugh>, actually “7th Inning Stretch” was created, uh, by the founder of Miles Square Theatre, Chris O’Connor. Uh, because Hoboken is the site of the first professional baseball game, there was apparently some argument about that, and I will leave that to other people. But it is, uh, our program, our event is an annual benefit that is seven world premier, 10-minute plays performed on our beautiful intimate stage.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (01:47):

I happen to love baseball, so I’m very excited to hear more about this. Uh, in my very limited research, I think that I learned that in 1846 is, uh, in a, it was at Elysian Fields in Hoboken was the, the first, uh, recorded baseball game. And Tim is nodding at me, so I - Do you, do you know anything more about that, Tim? Is that something that you would like to speak to?

TIM J. LORD (02:09):

So what I, what I know about it, what about it is that, um, uh, the first game, uh, that could be played under recognizably modern baseball rules was played at Hoboken, right? So the game had, the game had been, you know, created and evolved, was evolving over time, but there were a lot of, you know, different rules being played by different teams and different places and stuff like that. But the first professional game played by rules that you would recognize as a, as a, as a baseball watcher from the 21st century, if you could travel back in time, you would re-, you would watch that game and say, oh yeah, that’s baseball. That, and that’s that, that, like, again, like, I, I can’t speak to whether or not I think that’s like legend or true or not. Like I’m sure there’s some team somewhere in, you know, Iowa that’s like, no, we played the first baseball game. But, you know, but that’s, that’s like how, that’s how it is, is told in baseball lore as I understand it.

KEVIN R. FREE (02:54):

So prior to that game, the loser probably just had to walk straight into ocean. Like they probably just like, or right into the Hudson River actually, and they were dead, right? So that, that, so in Hoboken,

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once, once the professional rules happened, the losers and the winners were just regular losers and winners, then nobody died.

TIM J. LORD (03:13):

I, I, I will neither confirm nor deny that.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (03:16):

Whether that is true or not, it is now canon. So, thank you Kevin for that. Um, but I, I'm gonna ask, uh, this of Kevin again. Why, beyond just this history, uh, that Hoboken has with baseball, why an evening of short plays about baseball? Is there something about the sport that lends itself to theater?

KEVIN R. FREE (03:38):

Um, I would tell you as a person who is not a sports fan, that if, if I am near sports, I get caught up in the drama of it. The basic conflict of, you know, people striving to win something or striving not to lose something is exciting to watch. Like you know, I, I played football growing up, but I wasn't good at it. And I don't choose to watch sports when I'm choosing to watch television, but if, if I am watching it, I get caught up in that basic conflict, which is, you know, theater. And I think the, the beauty of the "7th Inning Stretch" at Miles Square Theatre is that it connects directly to the community of Hoboken because of the history of baseball in Hoboken. And we get lots of people coming to see the plays who don't necessarily know that they like theater, but they know that they like baseball and they know they like to have fun. So it is an, it is our opportunity to grab new audience members, and it is also our opportunity just to celebrate Hoboken and sport and also theater, which is what we do at Miles Square Theatre. Oh, it's like, that's why it's called Miles Square Theatre. Cause it's a theater. Yeah. Anyway, that's all <laugh>.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (04:55):

<laugh> no, I, I appreciate that distinction. Um, what I was going to say is this is the 19th anniversary of, uh, of the "7th Inning Stretch." And after 19 years, do playwrights ever run out of ideas for these baseball

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related stories, or is there always a new one to tell? How, from the playwright perspective, uh, how do you feel about writing about baseball? Um, if Michelle would like to take it first.

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (05:25):

Sure. Um, well, when Kevin commissioned me to write a baseball 10-minute play, I was like, I don't know about baseball other than I am a Kansas Citian who lives in Louisville. I live in Louisville now, but I'm Kansas City. And, and so for me as a playwright, no matter what I write about, I g- I get to the what's the heart place? So what's, what's the place where I can write something from the heart. It's all about being connected to the Royals. Like I could care less about the Royals, but I am, I, I grew up in a city and I lived there up until three years ago where everybody I know cared about the Royals. And when the Royals won, uh, the World Series in 2015, what I'll always remember is that Kansas City became a zombie town. At the time, I worked for a school and everything shut down.

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (06:18):

I'm like, seriously, school is shutting down because of the Royals parade? And when I say zombies, I mean people were parking their cars on the Country Club Plaza to walk to the parade that was down at, at Union Station. And for those of you who don't know Kansas City, that's like a five-mile walk. And you can look at people and be like, you don't walk five feet a day, but you're walking to the parade like in mass, like zombies. I'm like, okay, this is going to break the entire emergency services system cuz there's gonna be a lot of fat, overweight bodies that people are going to have to scoop up and take someplace because, you know, you're a-, oh, I'm sorry, I've just, I still have post-traumatic stress disorder that I couldn't get to my bank. Like, literally the only place I could go the day of the Royals World Series Parade was my girlfriend, a girlfriend of mine does my hair. She lived in the blackest of black, black, black part of town. I was like, since I'm off, yo off and I need my hair did, can I just come over and we can watch it on TV? And that's exactly what we did. <laugh>. So there's my baseball experience.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (07:39):

That was the best telling of a baseball story I've seen yet. So I cannot wait for the actual show. <laugh>.

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KEVIN R. FREE (07:47):

I mean, as she was telling the story, Gina, all I could think was like, how come I didn't get that play? I love the play that Michelle wrote called "The Royals," but how come I didn't get the play about the, about, about the black lady having to park five miles away from the hairdresser?

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (08:03):

That's an easy answer. That's an easy answer because you told me you wanted to celebrate baseball and that would've been 10-minutes of disdain for people messing up everybody's day to, and and for the record, for the record, the city got equally ugly and ridiculous when the Chiefs won to the point where, because I knew that was gonna happen. And at that point in radio, I worked in radio at that time, I deliberately took vacation days so I didn't have to cover that. And people were like, you know what, no I do not. I drove away from Kansas City. Ironically I drove to Louisville. That's the irony of it. And then a few months later I got a job in Louisville. But the point is, I just, and I'm biased, I mean, I'm a KU grad, go Jayhawks. So if the city shut down, because you know, the Jayhawks win, they won the NCAA Championship 2022. You know, if the city were to shut down for that, that'd be different. So that's why you didn't get that play cuz I was, that would not have been a play of celebration.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (09:05):

All of that said, I think even just honoring that disdain is kind of a celebration of baseball because many people <laugh> feel that as well. But let's actually talk about the play that you did write. So "The Royals." Can you tell me a little bit about what this 10-minute, uh, play is about?

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (09:25):

Um, the main characters, I kid you not, and this is, this is their actual names and you will probably figure out their identities from their names are Bat and Ball and it is a play about a bat and ball who live in a garage and they can't quite figure out what happened to the man who owns the house that they're, they in the garage they live in. And I don't wanna say anything more cuz I don't wanna give anything away, but it's Bat and Ball. And then there's a couple of other characters who are relatives of the person who, uh, lives in the house.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (10:01):

Wonderful. That sounds exciting. Uh, Tim, now it's your turn <laugh>. I don't know if you'd, uh, like to follow that up with a rant of your own or if we can just talk about, uh, "E.J. Flynn Hits a "Grand Slam," correct? That's the name of your short?

TIM J. LORD (10:16):

That's that, that, that's it. And "Grand Slam" is in quotes for, for the, which won't translate to radio unless we say it's in quotes, but yeah. Um, uh, no, it's, it's really funny. Um, I don't think Kevin planned this in, I know that Kevin's not a baseball fan, so he didn't even realize this, but I'm originally from St. Louis. Um, and so we have- exactly - we have a deep <laugh>, we have a deep seated rivalry that goes back to in 1985 when, uh, the Royals beat the Cardinals to win the World Series. And it's, it's a, it's a, it's a, it's another story that's, uh, <laugh> that goes, it's really hard. It's really hard to talk about even now, even, uh, like almost-

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (10:49):

It's, it's hilarious, Tim, because I didn't know that and I- my best friend lives in St. Louis and I literally changed out of my St. Louis shirt that I was wearing because I thought I should wear something a little bit like, half a bit nicer. So I'm sorry that I changed outta my St. Louis shirt, but yeah, Kansas City did beat y'all's in 1985. Sorry, I'm sorry that that's, you know, nevermind.

TIM J. LORD (11:10):

With, with, with a little help from a bad call at first place, but yeah, at first plate. But yeah, you know, like, yeah, I'm getting the whatever sign. That's fine. I understand. I'm actually right over, I'm not gonna go into that. Um, but yeah, but it's, but it's in addition to this sort of St. Louis, Kansas City rivalry, which is drama in itself, that, that Kevin has inadvertently, uh, uh, created by bringing Michelle and I onto this call. Um, I, I, I'm also completely the opposite of Michelle. I have, I grew up watching baseball. I have a great love for the game. Um, I have, I have many opinions about the, the, uh, elimination of the, or like the addition I should say, of the, the designated hitter to the National League, all of them negative, um,

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<laugh>. So, you know, like I, but I, I, I grew up watching the game and, and, and loving it and act- and the, the actually the more complicated history of my own, like, history with the game is that we lived in Kansas City until I was 10.

TIM J. LORD (11:58):

My parents are both from St. Louis originally. So I kind of grew up with both teams and it was never an issue because they were in different leagues until 1985. And literally, I think I watched Game seven with like either a blue shirt on over a red shirt or a red shirt on, or the blue shirt. I, my, my little nine year old soul was torn in two. Um, <laugh> anyhow, um, like, but we moved, we moved to St. Louis in, uh, uh, 1986. And, uh, and I, I, I have many fond memories of going to the game with, uh, speaking with my grandfather, um, on my mom's side. And so when, when, when, when, when Kevin asked me to, to write a, a baseball play, I was, I was like, yes, absolutely anything for you, because I just adore Kevin and the work that he does.

TIM J. LORD (12:38):

And I love, I love writing short plays for like, for like, like, especially like a really community driven event like this. Um, but also because like, there is, there is a tradition like an American theater tradition that is the baseball play. Like this, this like, I, and I don't know, I I think maybe because it is like, it is a still a pretty distinctly American game. Even though that's like, that's, that's shifting a little bit, but like, it, it, within the Americas at least, right? It is very much an American game. Um, and so like, there it is, like, it feels like a rite of passage for a playwright to write their baseball play. Um, even Richard Greenberg, like, like Richard Greenberg, uh, who's, you know, was not a baseball fan or became a baseball fan, um, and wrote the, the play "Take Me Out," which has had a few diff- which has had a few, like two Broadway productions of like a production under revival, you know, like back to, to Lee Blessing has a play about Ty Cobb more recently, Lydia Diamond's play, uh, "Toni Stone."

TIM J. LORD (13:29):

Um, you know, like there's, there's, there's, there's so many plays like this. Um, and so I was like, yes, yes, please. Thank you. Um, and yeah, like, and, and, and, and you asked earlier, like, like is it, is, are there, are there stories that are, you know, are there still to stories be told? And the answer is

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absolutely, because it's, it is, it is a crazy game with like all kinds of like, with a deep history at this point, right? I mean, like almost 200 years since that, that first game, right? Um, and the like, and so like, I, my, my struggle in coming to write a play was like, like, actually which of these crazy stories do I tell? Um, but one of the things that I landed like, I think Michelle like nailed it, right? Like, like you, it, when it comes to telling a good story, especially a good story on stage, it, it's all about the heart.

TIM J. LORD (14:09):

What is the heart of the piece? And I, I kept coming back to my grandfather, Edmond Flynn, who, Edmond Flynn, who, um, was supposed to try out for the St. Louis Browns. Um, but he got drafted for World War II and never got the chance. And so it was this like this, this, this idea of being like this close to like, you know, have being related to someone who could have played in the Majors or whatever. It's like, it's a really, it was a really great story. And, um, and I learned to watch the game by, by, by wa- like going to games with him, by watching him watch the games on . Um, and I, so I ended up wanting to write something that was a, that was a, that was a tribute to him and a tribute to the game TV. that I love.

TIM J. LORD (14:43):

And so I created this character kind of loosely based, very loosely based on my grandfather EJ Flynn. And, uh, and, and wanted to like, just tell a story about like, like, I dunno, like, like the, the, the seductive power of the drama of baseball. And, and, and, and I landed on sort of like, like, uh, telling a story about like all like the crazy rules that are part of this game. Like if it, like literally if, if if a pitch, like if, if a pitch gets stuck in the catcher's mask, uh, it's an automatic base. Like, like, like if you have runners on base, they just get to advance to the next base. It's like, like what? Like, like weird things like that, right? So like I, I decided to create a game, or excuse me, a play around all the crazy rules in this game.

TIM J. LORD (15:23):

And like at the heart of it, you have this like, this, this, like this, this young baseball player who's just like full of, full of charm and, and, and, and optimism and his, and his, uh, his curmudgeonly manager. Um, who doesn't like, who doesn't like the game and happens to be Kevin R. Free. Uh, <laugh>, I decided to, to add Kevin, like in a kind of a "Ted Lasso" sort of, uh, scenario where he ends up managing this

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baseball team and he doesn't love the game, but oh, by, but maybe like over the course of the, this particular moment in, in the sport, he, he learns to find, uh, a, a, a reason to love it, you know? So that's, that was the story that I decided to tell. <laugh>

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (15:59):

I love everything about that so much. And if this show is even half as entertaining as this conversation, I advocate for everyone listening to buy their tickets right now, right this moment <laugh>, because we all need to see "7th Inning Stretch." But Tim, you mentioned that this was such a, a community, uh, oriented program. And Kevin, I'd like to ask you about this fundraiser, because that's what "7th Inning Stretch" is. It is a fundraiser for Miles Square Theatre. So can you tell us a little bit about that and about the Triple Play, uh, Party Gala as well?

KEVIN R. FREE (16:31):

Yeah. Um, I, I, I'll say that when I was, um, chosen to be the Artistic Director, uh, after our founder, Chris O'Connor stepped down; I was told, well, you know, "7th Inning Stretch" is our annual fundraiser. You don't have to do it. You can, but you know, you'd have to replace it if you didn't do it. And I love new plays. I love new plays. I don't love, I mean, I, you know, I love all plays, but I, but I love new plays. I love a world, good world premiere; I love a bad world premiere. I love something brand new. I'm into that. And so, I said I would never not do "7th Inning Stretch" because it's seven world premiere, 10-minute plays. And I cut my teeth as a producer on producing world premiere 10 minute plays with the "Fire This Time Festival."

KEVIN R. FREE (17:20):

So I would, uh, so I do believe that the "7th Inning Stretch" is necessary and exciting, and it, and it speaks to what I like to think of as the new focus at Miles Square Theatre with me as Artistic Director. And that is brand new plays that connect to the community of Hoboken and the, the community at large. So this year, so going back to what it is and, and what, uh, so it's two nights of performances. June 16th and 17th. On the 16th, you, you pay the price of a regular ticket. And then, but on Saturday night, if you come to Saturday night and you get to, to attend the Triple Play Party, which has, which is a party that

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starts at seven o'clock, and there's lots of stadium food, beer and sliders and, um, finger foods of some, some sort, we have a hotdog cart in the lower lobby at which you can get a hotdog.

KEVIN R. FREE (18:12):

It's not just the cart. There's like a cart with hotdogs and like somebody manning, personing, the cart to, to sell you or to give you a hotdog. And, um, this year we're doing something very special. We are honoring the founder of the theater, Chris O'Connor, by renaming or naming our stage for the first time after him. It'll be the O'Connor stage. So I think if the people who listen to this podcast are lovers of Hoboken and recognize that the largest arts organization in Hoboken is Miles Square Theatre, then they should get those tickets for the gala on June 17th at [www.milessquaretheatre.org](http://www.milessquaretheatre.org). That's theater with an r-e.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (18:54):

You sold me when you said hotdog cart. So <laugh>, I'm ready. And I'm so glad that there will be actual hotdog there and not just the cart <laugh>. I am very excited about this. I love that Hoboken has this history with baseball, one that I didn't know about prior to this conversation. I'm really looking forward to learning everything, uh, that Miles Square Theatre has to offer at this, at this performance.

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (19:22):

But I will say this real quick, it's another coincidence is that, Tim, I didn't finish saying this because I went on a re about the, the Royals Parade, but, um, my grandfather was what made me want to write a good play. Because my grandfather, who died the year before the 85 win, and I grew up in my grandparents' house. And, um, and I usually write very female-centric black women plays that pay homage to the lineage of, you know, my grandmother and great-grandmother and mother. And so I was happy to just write something that in just a teeny little way, just, you know, was a kiss to my, to my grandfather, who I call Daddy.

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KEVIN R. FREE (20:05):

And, and may I just chime in to say that, that there is another play in the, in the lineup that was written by another Tim, Timothy Erickson, that is also based on his grandfather's story. And it is World War II. It is about a, a guy who is, who has been, who is enlisted, and his brother, who is a pitcher, his number comes up and somehow he is able to get his brother undrafted. <laugh> I dunno what the expression is. And he stays in. He, it's, he's his ti- he's about to leave the army and he stays in to replace his brother going in. So his brother is, is able to continue to be a pitcher in his hometown, and he stays. So there, I mean, I just spoiled the whole thing, but it's a really beautiful, sweet, I didn't tell you about all the characters, there's other drama that happens in it. But I just wanted to say, you know, you reach out to your friends, I reach out to my friends and say, "Hey, do you wanna write a play for this event?"

KEVIN R. FREE (21:08):

And, and I gave each person a different, some different parameters, so slightly different. And we got really lovely plays that fit together as a, as a really nice puzzle piece. It's really kind of wonderful. And you asked a question before, do, are there always stories are there still, like, do you ever run out of stories? And I will tell you that three playwrights already booked for next year for "7th Thinning Stretch," because they reached out to me and said, I want to write plays for "7th Thinning Stretch." And I thought, really? Okay, great. Love it. So it, it's, you know, I was like, yes, you're in! <laugh>.

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (21:49):

That's, that's four, because I wanna write my, um, uh, my story about the, uh, parade.

KEVIN R. FREE (21:54):

I love it! You know, nor- normally they say no repeats, but I, I repeated somebody else this year, so I think we'll, we'll, we'll, we'll let you repeat next year.

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (22:02):

I love it. I love that this conversation has spawned a new <laugh> a new play. Um, a as I was saying before, they call it America's pastime for a reason. There is so much, uh, familial lineage in these stories, and I think that's wonderful. I, I grew up with a baseball dad as well. Um, I've always been in and from New Jersey, so I was born to be a Yankees fan. I know, I know. But <laugh>, um, <laugh>, there was, it would've been blasphemy for me had I been anything else in, in the family that I grew up in, but baseball holds a very special place in my heart as well. So I'm looking forward to this. I, I love it. I love that it is supporting the theater as well. So I'm hoping I can get my tickets to the Triple Play Gala, but, uh, everybody else should jump on it right now. Can you repeat the name of your website one more time?

KEVIN R. FREE (22:55):

Yes, we are at w-w-w dot mile m-i-l-e, square s-q-u-a-r-e theater, t-h-e-a-t-r-e dot org. And the tickets are on sale right now.

GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (23:07):

June 16th and 17th. Folks, please get your tickets. I know I will be doing so, and I look forward to seeing all these shows and hopefully, uh, meeting all of you in person. Thank you so much for being here.

KEVIN R. FREE (23:20):

Thanks for having us, Gina.

MICHELLE TYRENE JOHNSON (23:21):

Thank you.

[MUSIC: "A Little Wiggle"]

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GINA MARIE RODRIGUEZ (23:22):

Miles Square Theatre's 19th annual "7th Inning Stretch" runs June 16th and 17th in Hoboken, New Jersey. For more information, be sure to visit [milesquaretheatre.org](http://milesquaretheatre.org). If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at [jerseyarts.com](http://jerseyarts.com). The "Jersey Arts Podcast" is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show was co-founded by, and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, edited, and produced by me, Gina Marie Rodriguez. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. I'd like to extend a special thanks to our guests, Kevin R. Free, Michelle Tyrene Johnson, and Tim J Lord. I'm Gina Marie Rodriguez for the "Jersey Arts Podcast." Thanks for listening.

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