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## The Haunting of Night Vale ... and NJPAC

### Transcript

Christopher Benincasa:

This is Chris Benincasa for The Jersey Arts Podcast. Next Friday, June 24th, the team behind the hit podcast series Welcome to Night Vale brings its live show, "The Haunting of Night Vale," to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, New Jersey. According to the New York Times, "The news out of Night Vale sounds like what might occur if Steven King or David Lynch was a guest producer at your local public radio station." The arts and culture magazine Vulture called it, "The foundational institution of the fiction podcast genre."

Here's a clip from one of their early and most popular episodes, "Faceless Old Woman."

*Did you know there's a faceless old woman who secretly lives in your home? It's true, she's there now. She's always there, just out of your sight, always just out of your sight. Because you cannot see her you were probably completely unaware that this woman likes to sift through photos of you and your loved ones. She softly touches each face as if wishing it were her own, or perhaps claiming it as her own, or perhaps simply cursing that person. It's hard to say, you've never seen her doing this.*

*The faceless old woman who secretly lives in your home does lots of things. Ever wonder why your web browser's history is filled with Bing searches for, "pictures of dead wolves," or, "the melting point of birds"? Or why sometimes your shower drain gets clogged with organ meats, or why sometimes you hear crying from behind the walls, or scratching at the front door, or you awaken to find long silver hairs on the pillow next to you. Or maybe you've never noticed any of those things, you've lived your life to this point completely oblivious to this old woman who has no face, and truth be told, I think she's probably harmless. But maybe you shouldn't sleep in your home anymore, just in case.*

Christopher Benincasa:

That was a clip from episode 26 of Welcome to Night Vale, "Faceless Old Woman." Next Friday's show at NJ PAC is also the last performance of their current US tour, and it's happening just a week after Welcome to Night Vale's 10th anniversary. We recently spoke with co-creator and writer Jeffrey Cranor, and cast member and live show MC Kate Jones about hitting that 10 year milestone, life on the road and

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in the recording studio, and what it's like when your quirky, spooky, funny podcast suddenly gets millions of new listeners.

Christopher Benincasa:

So you've been touring nonstop since March, and you get to take a break after this upcoming show at NJ PAC in Newark before heading off to tour Europe. You folks totally look like a band in your tour photos, what is a Welcome to Night Vale tour like? And Kate, why don't we start with you?

Kate Jones:

Welcome to Night Vale tour is such a whirlwind of so many emotions. So seeing fans who have been this long time community that's very welcoming and loving, they're so excited to see us. It's a very emotional show, they get very emotional, we get very emotional, and then sometimes the schedule can be quite a lot, so it's a lot of emotions riding high, and then low, and then you're stuck at the airport, and then you're mispronouncing the word Michigan over and over again and people think you're unwell. But it's a wild ride.

Jeffery Cranor:

Well I am at home now, I'm not on this leg of the tour, I will be later in the year on the tour. But yeah, when we started this show, when Joseph Fink and I started writing the show back in 2012, it was this really fun thing, people would email us as it started to get popular and tweet at us, and things like that. But when we started taking the show on the road in 2014, just as Kate said, you start seeing all the people that are listening to your show, and it's just wild to have fans. And we have, I feel like all of these years of touring, these hundreds of venues we've been to, we get commented more than anything that we have the nicest fans in the world, and we're very lucky people. It's such a delight to actually feel the energy of people from the stage, and after the show, of just how much Night Vale has meant to them over the years.

Christopher Benincasa:

Welcome to Night Vale celebrated its 10th anniversary this month, congratulations, that's amazing. Jeffrey, after 10 years, do you think about Welcome to Night Vale differently than you did in the early years? Has your take on it changed at all?

Jeffery Cranor:

Not too much. I mean, when we started making the show we said we could do whatever we wanted with it as long as we just followed strict continuity, meaning that the people in the show age and grow and change. And so it's been, more than anything, I feel like I know the town really well, like I've lived

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there for 10 years, I feel like a native of the town. I know that sounds a little hokey, but the growth of Night Vale has nothing to do with solving big mysteries, there's no puzzle box story to unfold, there really is just a town to be a part of, however weird and mysterious it can be.

Jeffery Cranor:

So in a lot of ways it hasn't changed other than just my relationship to the characters as a writer. Just watching Tamika Flynn, nine years ago was 13 years old, so this is a kid who when we first wrote her into the show was at a summer reading program at the library, and is now a senior in college. So it's really fun to watch characters age and change and grow like that, so in that way the show is completely different, but also just the same as it's always been.

Christopher Benincasa:

Kate, you're the MC for these shows. How did you end up in that role?

Kate Jones:

Well, it's a wild ride, and it is really delightful because at first the audience is so kind and polite when I get on stage and I tell them who I am and that I'm hosting the show, they're very ecstatic because they've left their home. But then they realize they've known me for eight years, that I'm a voice that they've heard as a character in Night Vale, and then they lose their minds. And they're so loving and giving, and it's really the best MC gig I could have ever hoped for, they're incredibly generous.

Kate Jones:

And how did I get that gig? Well, I've been performing with Jeffrey, Meg, and Cecil, we've known each other for an eternity, and I think the reason I was offered this role is because one time Meg and I were on a tour during Hurricane Sandy and we got stuck in Iowa, and the two of us jumped to action to fix the entire problem for everyone that we were on tour with. And so I think Meg and Jeffrey and Joseph have a lot of confidence in me being able to tour manage, to MC, and to perform in the show, and to make sure everything goes according to plan.

Christopher Benincasa:

What is the Welcome to Night Vale origin story? It's such an interesting story empire, how did it start and how did you build it?

Jeffery Cranor:

Well, when Joseph and I, as Kate just said, so many of us that work on the show, Cecil, the narrator, and Kate and Joseph and me and Meg, we all found each other through The New York Neo-Futurists Theater

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Company in lower Manhattan back in the late aughts, and Joseph and I wrote a play together, we both met each other through the neo-futurists, and we wrote and performed this play about time travel together at St. Mark's Church back in 2011. And at the time we were both listening to a ton of podcasts, so when we would have writers' meetings to make this play, half the meeting was just talking about, "Here's the podcast I'm listening to," "here's what I like," and whatever.

Jeffery Cranor:

So once the play was done, and the play was a ton of fun, but the play also requires a lot of time and a lot of money, and you have to be present, and all of this, so we were like, "Let's do something a little bit simpler," and so we made a podcast. And it came about because Joseph wrote this series of weird paragraphs and had our friend Cecil, with an amazing voice, record them, and he sent it to me and he was like, "I don't know, what do you think of something like this?" We didn't have a map for the town or the characters, Cecil didn't even have a name yet, and it just was so beautiful and funny and weird, it really creeped me out, and I loved it, and so I was like, "Sure." So we started drafting the first several episodes and putting it out.

Jeffery Cranor:

The way it grew started pretty organically in just putting it out online, we started a Twitter feed and a Facebook page to try and promote it, friends probably sharing with friends, and then about a year in it just blew up. I mean, I really do mean that, the curve of listenership went from 150,000 downloads in the first full year we had it out, and then in the 13th month alone was like 2.5 million. And what happened there was Tumblr, and I can't really explain that any further than some tipping point happened and it really took off, and suddenly we had a lot of listeners.

Christopher Benincasa:

On your site you joke a lot about being into weird and creepy stuff. How do Welcome to Night Vale people, your team, find each other? What is the spooky, creepy tie that binds?

Jeffery Cranor:

I don't know, that's a good question. I mean, I think our tie is, I think because we met each other through performance art, I think our tie is live performance more than anything else. Cecil and Joseph both love horror movies, and they've gotten me into the horror movies as well lately. We were just talking the other day backstage, Kate, and I think Kate is way less into horror films than we are.

Kate Jones:

That's true.

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Jeffery Cranor:

But I think we all just love good writing and we love performance, and so even though Joseph and I are writers, we like writing small bits for ourselves to be in the show. We wanted to make sure early on that we, knowing somebody like Kate we're like, Kate can do a thing, let's make a character for Kate, that sort of stuff. We just want a way to perform, and the podcast was a way to keep doing theater without having to fully produce a live play, which is a whole bunch that not a lot of people get to see. So I think that's the connection. I don't know, what do you think, Kate?

Kate Jones:

I mean, I don't care for scary, but creepy is fun, and I think the draw for me is that Welcome to Night Vale is such great storytelling, and for me it's like, what is this arc? Who are these people? Do I have an emotional connection to them? And this whole community is so loving and giving and welcoming of so many things that I think it's just created this really powerful little universe where everyone can be who they are, and I really love that. I grew up with gay dads, so knowing that there's a world out there where everyone can be accepted and loved and live a full and fulfilling life is really important to me and really meaningful.

Christopher Benincasa:

So, as I mentioned earlier, the Haunting of Night Vale is currently on tour. Without spoiling it, what can you tell us about these live Haunting of Night Vale shows?

Jeffery Cranor:

Well, I will tell you the best I can. I mean, the Haunting of Night Vale came about because of our obsession with a couple things, one haunted houses, just a fun haunted house story, and then we posited the question, could a house be haunted before it was even built? And so when we started writing the script Joseph and I went from that, and then combined it with another love we have which is just hotel television when we're on tour, which is late night HGTV and watching reruns of The Property Brothers, so what if Cecil and Carlos were building a new house, and it was haunted, and it was part of The Property Brothers TV franchise. So that was the run up to that.

Jeffery Cranor:

But yeah, it's about family, it's about what haunts us, and it's a little bit spooky, but a lot funny, and it's energy. We want to use the live show not just to read a podcast script, but to make a show that utilizes all of these talented performers and the energy that they give to the audience, and the energy that they can receive from the audience, that back and forth is so important for live theater.

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Christopher Benincasa:

Does anyone on the Night Vale team believe in ghosts or have any real ghost stories? What about you, Kate?

Jeffery Cranor:

Kate just nodded.

Kate Jones:

Yeah, I do believe, I do believe spirits can become trapped here and have unfinished business. I haven't had anyone write to me personally on a mirror yet, or try to make clay with me. But I have had some experiences where things that... Like feeling the cold around something happening. When my grandfather died we heard my cousin speaking to him in her bedroom, and she was only one and a half years old, or two years old, so we have some spooky moments in my family, yeah.

Jeffery Cranor:

I don't have any actual ghost stories, but yeah, I do, the same as Kate, I do believe that there are some form of spirit of the souls of people left behind. I don't know that it works quite like eye holes cut into a sheet sort of thing, or your classic vengeful ghost spirit bit. But yeah, I think it's hard to imagine that we live in a world where so many people have lived on this earth that we're not around some type of spirit, however benign or benevolent or malevolent it could be.

Christopher Benincasa:

Do either of you have a favorite episode, or just some favorite moments?

Kate Jones:

My favorite, so Cecil is super trained, professional actor, he's lived and breathed this, and it's always been tangential for me. And going up against Cecil on stage is really challenging because I am not as practiced as he is, and I think my favorite moments are when he gets me to break, when I just have a complete meltdown because he is so funny and I can't contain myself, and I have to turn up stage and hide my face in the script. But the audience, I think, thinks it's... Because we all know each other, we've all know each other a long time, and he tries to get me to break, so it's a fun moment where everyone sees us as ourselves, trying to mess with each other, I think those are my favorite moments.

Jeffery Cranor:

When we put this show up earlier this year, we did our first show in Washington DC of this tour back in March, we only got to do this show twice in 2020, in early March 2020, before we had to shut it down,

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and that two years off, two years not getting to be in a theater, on a stage, or in an audience. When we did that show in DC, yeah, at curtain call I was teary. That was one of the most meaningful performances I've ever had of this show, this particular Haunting of Night Vale means a lot to me, one, because I think it's a great script, but given the two year hiatus it had, bringing it back it felt like a brand new show. And I think it's a really beautiful script, it's one of our deepest, still being very, very funny, but it's a very deep script about family, and about what community is, and yeah, that relaunch of this particular show was one of the most meaningful things we've done for Welcome to Night Vale.

Christopher Benincasa:

Jeffrey, I'd like to end with you. What else do we need to know about the Haunting of Night Vale?

Jeffery Cranor:

I think the biggest thing I try and communicate to everybody is that we write these live shows to be accessible to anybody, that you don't need any prior knowledge of Welcome to Night Vale, so if you want to bring a date, or a roommate, or a mom, or a cat, or whatever, somebody who's never listened to a podcast even, it's built to tell its own story. And if you are a longtime listener, it's all brand new stuff, it's not like we're coming on and just doing a revival of episode 28, whatever episode that is.

Christopher Benincasa:

Okay, Jeffrey Cranor and Kate Jones, thank you so much for doing the podcast.

Jeffery Cranor:

Thank you, Christopher.

Kate Jones:

Thank you, thanks for having us.

Jeffery Cranor:

Thanks Katie, bye y'all.

Christopher Benincasa:

The Haunting of Night Vale comes to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center next Friday, June 24th. For more info go to [njpac.org](http://njpac.org), and to learn more about the Welcome to Night Vale series, go to [welcometonightvale.com](http://welcometonightvale.com). 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).

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Christopher Benincasa:

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