



BILLY PORTER INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON THREE

Billy Porter, Actor and Singer
September 10, 2024
Interviewed by: David Bender
Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 39 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT: Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

BILLY PORTER:

You don't realize that you need to see yourself represented to understand yourself and learn how to love yourself. It's really helpful. You do not have to ascribe to what I choose in my life, who I am. You don't have to like it, but the demand is for the respect for my humanity, just as I respect yours. The best thing that I know how to do is live by example. I try to live by example, even right now.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Billy Porter



Actor and Singer

On My Own Terms

00:01:08:00

BILLY PORTER:

My name is Billy Porter, and I am a multi-hyphenated artist. A bon vivant, if you will. No, really, I sing, I act, I dance, I write, I produce, I direct, I do all of the things. I'm an activist. Yeah, that's me.

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INTERVIEWER:

That is you, and of course, if we hit on each one of those points, we would be here for days. But I actually want to ask you about art, which encompasses most of those hyphenates. You said art saved your life.

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BILLY PORTER:

Yes. You know, I had a very... difficult childhood. There was a lot of trauma there. There was also a lot of love there. It's a yes and. And I found out and realized early on that I was given this gift of a singing voice. You know, I started singing in church, and I could feel the transformation of the adults in the room, when my little five-year-old self would open up my mouth to singing. You know, of course, I didn't understand the power of it at five. But fast forward to five years later, and I was in the fifth grade, and I was one of those, you know, sissy boys that was bullied every day. Consistently, incessantly. And I signed up for the talent show. And I won. And the bullying



stopped. And it was in that space where I realized that there was a power in this voice for me. Something that could possibly transform my life. You know, something that could possibly give me a space to belong.

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INTERVIEWER:

I've talked to a lot of people and read a good bit about people, and particularly in the Black community, whose life is centered around the church.

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BILLY PORTER:

The church can be really confusing. When it came to the singing, when it came to that part of my ministry, and I do say ministry, I was fully embraced. The church was dangerous for me in the sense of... my queerness was unacceptable. My gayness, if you will, was unacceptable. The Bible allegedly says that, you know, it's an abomination. And I had to extract myself from that space early. I was about 16 when I left organized religion. And through the years I have remained very spiritual. You know, I took the good stuff from the church, from religion, and let the bad stuff go.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you come to this on your own at 16? Or did you have people who mentored or helped you in some way?

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BILLY PORTER:

No, I came to it on my own. You know, because I wasn't really in an environment where there were... Mentors for me in that way. You know, this is the 70s and 80s.

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INTERVIEWER:

You have an extraordinary relationship now with your mother, but was there a moment of the inability to accept the rest of you that came from her, that came from family?

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BILLY PORTER:

She had a rough time, you know. Came out to her when I was 16. And my joke is I had to come out to her three times over a 10 year period. She couldn't... It couldn't... She didn't understand how to— It couldn't register. She couldn't process it. It wasn't her world.

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BILLY PORTER:

We went back and forth for years. And it wasn't a quick evolution. The love never stopped. I was not kicked out of my house. I wasn't, you know... I wasn't disowned or any of those kinds of things. As a disabled person born in 1945, she also experienced being held down, being bound. Being chained by

other people's misunderstanding of her diagnosis, of other people's fears surrounding what she could or could not do.

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INTERVIEWER:

What was her diagnosis?

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BILLY PORTER:

It was never diagnosed. We could talk about this all the time. It's medical malpractice. My grandmother was ready to have her. There was no doctor. They gave her medicine to hold the baby back. The doctor came, forced her out. Pinched a nerve. Degenerative her whole life. Her mind, however, was always fine. And that was her plea. My mind is fine. My physical body is betraying me, but my mind is fine. Please respect me for that.

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INTERVIEWER:

Including your mother, you had people in your corner. You had people who believed in you even when you didn't believe in yourself. Were you able to receive that? Or was that so hard?

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BILLY PORTER:



You know, I had angels in my life who... Lifted me up. Held space for me. Took care of me. You know, Lenora Nimitz and Patty Hughes-Ruslander were like, no, you're going to college and you're gonna Carnegie Mellon University. And I was like, that's school down the street? They're like, yeah, top five drama school in the world. You're going there. You know I moved to New York City, December 27th, 1990 to be in the original cast of Miss Saigon. The AIDS crisis, I lived it in New York. Within a year we had lost like three or four people. You know, what I'm grateful for is that at the time that I moved to New York City, it was sort of the beginning of Broadway Cares Equity Fights AIDS.

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BILLY PORTER:

And of course the Actors Fund has been around for over 150 years at this point. And those organizations coalesced to help teach an entire generation how to activate. So I was in the middle of understanding how to be present and how to, as we're saying right now, do something. And then in 2007, which, you know, up until this year when I lost my mother, it was probably the most challenging year of my life. You know, I had already been in a sort of valley period with working. You know, I wasn't working in the way that I wanted to. February of 2007 I was diagnosed with hereditary type 2 diabetes. By March I was signing bankruptcy papers. And by June I was diagnosed HIV positive.

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BILLY PORTER:



And I truly have to say that I didn't know if I was gonna make it. I really just didn't. I had a lot of self-doubt. I had lot of self-hate. I had a lot of, you know, I became the statistic that everybody, all the haters said I would be. Um... and I just kept going. I just tried to put one foot in front of the other daily. One thing a day, what can I do? What is the goal and what can do? You know, my whole life has been about other people. This was the universe saying, God, whatever you wanna call it, take care of you.

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BILLY PORTER:

Where are you? What is your mental health? What is your... Because I can't be of use to anything or anybody if I'm not okay. And I was really working on trying to expand my art in search of my own voice. As a performer, I was considered a clown. You know, I was being hired to be a clown, to stop your boring show because I can come and blow the roof off the joint. But there's no character. There's no humanity. There's no human being. I'm just a clown. And so I had to make the decision to stop accepting that kind of work. And like I said earlier, take the road less traveled. So here I am now starting to ask myself, well, what is my classic?

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BILLY PORTER:

What do I, what do I as a Black, gay man in this world need to say? I have a story that's important. What is that? Now, first 10 years of my career, I worked and worked and worked and worked, so I didn't think the transition was gonna take over a decade. [LAUGHTER] I didn't think it was gonna lead me to bankruptcy. I didn't think it would, you know. And it's a yes and I'm so



grateful that I did it because when it did come back around for me, it has been nothing but on my own terms. My re-entrance to the commercial theater space in New York was with my favorite play. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

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BILLY PORTER:

So Tony knew me. But he didn't know, none of these people knew me as an actor. They knew me as an entertainer. They knew me as fabulous, right? So when it came time for this revival, I ran into Tony at one of the mucky muck dinners and I said, "I wanna play Belize. Just letting you know," and this is a year before. So you fast forward to a year later and nobody would see me. Couldn't get an audition. The gatekeepers, as always, had already decided who I was and what I could do. And so finally, after like two weeks, he says, "Have you gotten your audition for Angels yet?" And I was like, "No." And he said, "That's strange. I'll get on that." And literally, it was like either that night or the next day, I got a call from my agent.

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BILLY PORTER:

"They wanna see you tomorrow. And they want you to do..." I think it was four scenes. It was either two or four scenes. "And yeah, I told them you need more time." Stop. There's one role in the entire canon of anything that's ever existed on the planet that looks like me. That shit was written 25 years ago. It's my job to already know it. I have had this play committed to memory for 20 years. What scenes do they need? Don't you worry about me. This bitch is ready.

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BILLY PORTER:

I walked in, I spoke the first sentence and I saw the whole room go. An hour later, an hour I was in that room. They were giddy. It was like, well, try like this. And Tony was like well, I wanna see it like this. Michael's like [Imitating chatter] And I'm like mhm mhm. And at the end, Tony got up from the table with tears in his eyes and hugged me. And he said, "I'm speechless, this is the voice." That was my re-entrance because then Kinky Boots was announced sort of around that time. I was able to really create, I call her Ms. Lola, really ground that character in a truth that I know the world had never seen before.

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BILLY PORTER:

You know. A Black drag queen, performance artist, the heart of the play, the heart of it. Not the clown, not the side clown. The lead, the lead. It's a different conversation. You know, moving into *Pose* and hearing that Ryan Murphy was submitting me for Best Lead Actor in a Drama Series. I bucked that. I was like, "I'm not the lead. I'm a..." I'm so used to being the side person, right? And he took me to lunch. And he said, "You're the male lead of this show."

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BILLY PORTER:

"How this piece is grounded is through you, your performance, and your character." And he said, "I know how difficult it's been for you to convince people of your acting ability. And I'm here to tell you that you will never have to worry about that again. You are one of the finest actors of your generation,



period. And you are a Black, gay, out, leading man. And it's time for the world to know what that is. You are the one and it's time for you to sit on your f***ing throne."

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INTERVIEWER:

You said something earlier about how you only have the capacity to give what you have. And in order to help other people, you have to take care of yourself, which is something you said, but something that I think it took you a while to understand. Is that fair?

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BILLY PORTER:

And I still, it's a it's ever evolving, you know, self care, mental health, all of these new sort of buzzwords and catchphrases, mindfulness, all of this stuff that's sort of the ooga booga stuff that had sort of moved into the mainstream, you know. It's real. COVID equaled trauma therapy for me. Didn't even know I needed it. The mental health profession and the work that they've done over the years and how the healing that you can get from those spaces. It is so, I've just been transformed as a human being. And that's first for me. You know, it wasn't always, I didn't know that it needed to be, but that's first.

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BILLY PORTER:



How am I showing up as a human being first on this planet? The work doesn't end. So if we could transform our minds and our bodies to understand that. And not be exhausted by the thought, but empowered by the thought. Because then we will then understand how to engage as individuals for the rest of our lives. That means we have to take breaks. I equate it to like singing in a choir. And when you sing in a choir and you have like a long phrase to like hold a note. You know, and the note is supposed to be held for like a minute. You know it's called staggered breathing. So somebody takes a breath here, but the whole choir is still going. But they take the breath to recharge, then they come back in. Then another person takes a breath so they can recharge. Then they come again, then another person takes a breath. That's what I feel, moving forward, our work must emulate.

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INTERVIEWER:

Was there anyone when you were younger that you looked at and moved you so deeply?

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BILLY PORTER:

You know, it was my mother. My mother is my biggest hero. She, on paper, I didn't have much. She couldn't even get hired to have a job. You know, because her disability made her shake. She couldn't even have a job. She wanted to work. She got out of bed every single day of her life and showed up



and showed out for her life. She could have been bitter. She never had a bitter bone in her body. She loved everybody.

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BILLY PORTER:

Unconditionally, no matter who you were, even when she didn't understand it. She didn't understand me for years. And she pulled out her Bible and got in her Bible. And studied that thing and found the courage to love her gay child. When people from her community would call her on the telephone and tell her that she was going to hell for loving her gay son. She said, "No. That is not what Jesus said to do. Please don't call me anymore." She chose me. She chose us.

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BILLY PORTER:

And as a result, her life, even with her disability, she lived to see her children not only survive, but thrive. She got to see me sit inside of a success that rendered all of the haters' theories inconsequential. They have no credibility. She got to live long enough to see that. You know, I just... She's the only hero I've ever had.

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INTERVIEWER:

How does it feel when people come up to you and tell you what your story has meant to them?

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BILLY PORTER:



I don't always know how to receive it. I'm working on that part. You know, up until recently, I couldn't receive it. As you can see, sort of letting even the idea in really makes me emotional. I have... I will be 55 years old in a couple of weeks. And I can truly say to you that there's never been a time in my life where I have felt safe on this planet. Anywhere. At all.

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INTERVIEWER:

Still true?

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BILLY PORTER:

To this day. I make a wrong turn on the wrong highway and I could be killed. I want to be a part of the people who create a safe space in this world for everybody. I don't know if I'll ever see that in my lifetime, but it motivates me to get out of bed every morning. And I know that in my experience the ability that music has to heal. Like you can listen to one song, and all of a sudden you're changed. Like the power of it, I think it's one of the most powerful forms of art. I really do. There's a song by Edwin Hawkins called "This Day." It's a prayer. It's a plea. It's about the spirit. It's about connecting to the spiritual and spreading that.

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INTERVIEWER:

What are the words that hold so much power?

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BILLY PORTER:

Let me find a key and I'll sing a little bit of it. For this morning.

00:26:24:00

BILLY PORTER:

Give us this day. Our daily bread. You said you would. Supply all my needs.

According to your riches. I have but to add. And I shall be free. You gave to me.

To show someone who's lost. And help them find their way. The way to truth.

And the faith. So they can be free like me.

END TC: 00:27:39:00