

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
Keegan-Michael Key Reaches into the Past With 'Midnight Run' and 'Electric Ladyland'
Kwame Opam
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The actor, who appears in the upcoming musical "The Prom," looks back on improv guides, Whoopi Goldberg's comedy and Diego Rivera's murals.



Image: Rich Polk/Getty Images For Imdb

The world may have turned upside-down this year, but the actor-producer Keegan-Michael Key has grounded himself in his work, finding a refuge from the isolation and anxiety of the pandemic.

For a gregarious person like Key, who is used to collaborating with others on set in projects like Netflix's "Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey," Ryan Murphy's musical "The Prom," and even "Home Movie: The Princess Bride" on Quibi (R.I.P.), conditions this year have forced him to work remotely every day.

"It's been fascinating to have just finished work before the pandemic really hit the States," he said. "I was in a very, very communal experience, working on 'The Prom.' And then the stark contrast of doing Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting and doing audio work from your home."

Digging into the things that bring him joy has helped him keep his equilibrium, he says. In a recent phone interview from Vancouver, where he's shooting a musical comedy for Apple TV+, Key walked through the 10 things he's found himself revisiting during his extra time. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

1. "Every Frame a Painting"

There's a YouTube channel by a gentleman by the name of Tony Zhou, and it's about film critique. The channel is called Every Frame a Painting [cocreated by Taylor Ramos]. I just absolutely love it, and I think it's a tragedy that he stopped making them. Of the videos on the channel, my two favorite videos would be How to Do Visual Comedy, which is pretty much an exploration of Edgar Wright and his work. And then there's one called How to Do Action Comedy, which is an entire episode about the art and craft of Jackie Chan.

I think part of what draws me to all that stuff, to both of those, is the theatricality of them. So, the stuff with Jackie Chan I find so fascinating because he talks about how he locks off shots. He doesn't pan or track. He always lets the performer do the special effects in the camera. So, seeing people actually jump and leap and fall and be struck is so dynamic and exciting to experience. With Edgar Wright, it's the opposite. He uses a lot of artistry to show the passage of time, and a person moving from one place to another using cinematic techniques. But every single episode is an absolute gem. Sometimes if I'm just sitting during the day and I'm being contemplative or I have a break, I'll find myself gravitating toward Every Frame a Painting. And it's just something that gives me a lot of joy, and a lot of edification.

2. "Impro" and "Impro for Storytellers" by Keith Johnstone

I had a director at the Second City who taught a technique about improvisation that he shared with us in a very figurative manner.

He told us this quote, and I'm paraphrasing, about an improviser's job is always to walk back, as if you're walking backward. A performer's always walking backward through space. As you keep walking backward, more things come into your field of vision.

Oh, that's a window, and that's a lamp that's now in the window. And I back up, now I see the kitchen counter. You need to see all of those things to help establish where you are.

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He got that idea from Keith Johnstone. He wrote a couple of really amazing books called "Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre" and "Impro for Storytellers." And they were just perpetual manuals for me when I was performing as an improviser full-time and also teaching. And I just find so many fantastic things about narrative and how he looks at game play and how to open children's minds and have them experience life in a fearless manner.

3. "Midnight Run"

One of my favorite movies of all time is "Midnight Run," with Robert De Niro, Charles Grodin, Dennis Farina. Martin Brest directed it. American action films at that time had quite a lot of humor in them. But the bullets were still real. And there was this sensibility that the danger was gritty and authentic, yet there was also a place for jokes. And that's fascinating to me.

If you watch "Midnight Run," it's the funniest I think De Niro ever was in his career. Everything in the piece fits together. The narrative of the piece, and also how he's reacting to Grodin. There was something very authentic about their buddy story, about the evolution of them coming together as two people.

4. Kehinde Wiley

I think Kehinde Wiley is amazing. Just talk about an artist who really effectively uses juxtaposition. And the way that he celebrates the Black experience through another older experience. Legitimizing our very existence by saying, "Why couldn't we have been any different to men on horseback with all this frippery, and regaling themselves with sashes and capes and sabers?" His art, it's so dynamic and colorful and powerful and inspiring. I can't go to an art museum right now, but I really enjoy his books so much.

5. The Detroit Industry Murals

I'm from Detroit, and there's a real love of epic that I have. In the Detroit Institute of Arts, there's a room, and all the walls are filled with these murals that were painted by Diego Rivera in the '30s. And they're absolutely magnificent. It's just these great images of all the people of the world. And then below it, almost the evolution of industry, and it's fantastic. It's just breathtaking. Absolutely breathtaking.

6. "The Great Eastern" by Howard Rodman

I read a book right on the edge of Covid. It's a piece of historical fiction called "The Great Eastern," and it's fantastic.

There was a civil engineer in the 19th century in England by the name Isambard Kingdom Brunel. And he helped build the tunnel underneath the Thames, and he did all this in the 1850s, 1860s. A ship called the Great Eastern suffered from an explosion. That's all historical fact. But Howard Rodman, the author, what he did is you find out it was actually a terrorist attack. A gentleman blew up the ship, and then kidnapped Brunel. And you find out, through the story, that the person who kidnapped him is Captain Nemo.

It's great. It's been my favorite read of the year so far.

7. "Electric Ladyland" by the Jimi Hendrix Experience

I'm an enormous Jimi Hendrix fan. I think that "Electric Ladyland," which was his third album, is an absolute masterpiece. And something that if I ever really want to get lost in a song, my favorite song on that album is a song called "1983 ... (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)." And it's like a whole big opus. And I love this song. It's one of these great songs that has movements in it. I don't even know how he makes the sound, but these wonderful sounds of, like, sea bells. Like, foghorn-y sounds and sea gulls. He paints a seascape with sound, and makes bubbly sounds with the bass guitar and the guitar. And the whole song is about being someone who's submerging underneath water, because that's going to be a place to exist in the future.

8. East Asian Cinema

I'm a big fan of kung fu and wuxia cinema. There was a movie that came out in 2002 called "Hero," which is a Zhang Yimou film, with Jet Li, Tony Leung, and Zhang Ziyi. But it's just one of the most visually sumptuous things I've ever seen in my life. Every character is represented by a color. And it reminds me a lot of Akira Kurosawa's "Ran." Which again, it's something that plays with different factions and different characters being explained by

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color, or influencing you, the viewer, by the color. It's another one of these films that I could watch whenever. It's almost like my eyes are having Thanksgiving dinner almost every 10 minutes. I've always had a kind of steady diet of those movies in my life.

9. "Whoopi Goldberg on Broadway"

I think one of the most influential things for me as an artist, but also for me seeing the world in a new way that's always stuck for me, is when I used to listen to Whoopi Goldberg. I didn't get to see her on Broadway, but my parents had the album, and I would listen to her play these different characters. And it was astounding. Here's this African-American woman who's playing several characters. She's playing a woman with disabilities, she plays a young girl who's Black but she had blonde hair. She's playing a surfer girl who, as I'm listening to it, I'm hearing her voice, I'm going, "OK, yes, this girl is supposed to be white."

And then she plays this educated junkie. A junkie who travels to Amsterdam and goes to the Anne Frank [House], and talking about, "When I got my degree at Columbia," and the audience always laughs, and she goes, "What? You think I was a junkie for my whole life?" And it's one little line in the thing, but you go, "Oh my gosh, that's so brilliant." The character becomes this fully realized human in this tiny thing. It's her using something Jordan Peele called comedic judo. She's using your expectations against you. And it's done so deftly.

10. "Laughter" by Henri Bergson

He posits these theories about why we laugh. And one of them is about flexibility and malleability in society. So that when we move through society, we all try to be, for the most part, as fluid as we can with each other. Oftentimes, inflexibility or rigidity is what brings about laughter. There are these unwritten contracts that we have with each other, that I'm going to keep this much distance from you, or I walk out of the way as you're coming down the street. You know, that kind of situation. We have these moments, small, infinitesimal, almost imperceptible negotiations with each other all the time. And when someone refuses to negotiate, sometimes the result is laughter.