



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

## Billy Porter savors his breakthrough

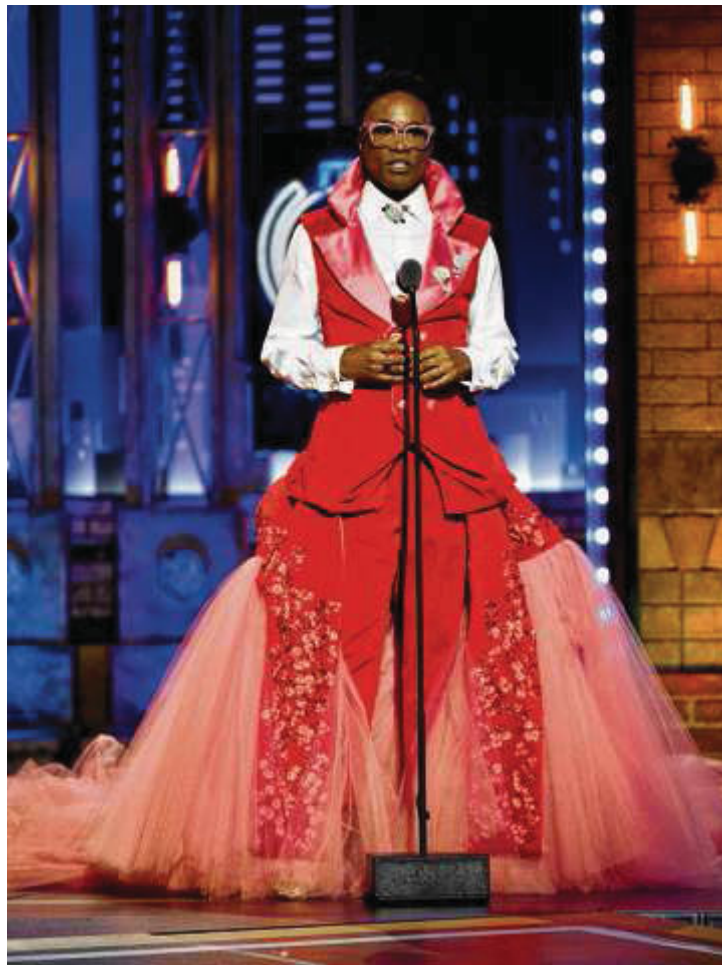
►PORTER  
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couch in a green room after a recent rehearsal, his animated personality and infectious laughter on full, flamboyant display. He discusses how his roller-coaster career began its initial ascent when he landed on Broadway as Teen Angel in “Grease!” in 1994. “There I was, stomping’ and prancin’ around like a Little Richard automaton on crack with 14 inches of orange rubber hair on my head and spacesuit glitter all over my face,” he says. Despite his powerful pipes, he struggled afterward to break out of what he calls the “gay clown” pigeonhole, and he spent years in the show business wilderness.

That prompted him to ask hard questions and find other outlets for his creativity. He recalls what director George C. Wolfe would tell him: “You can’t wait for people to give you permission to practice your art. You have to be doing it all the time.”

“The push to go deeper into my creativity came out of necessity, out of the lack of work,” Porter says. “Then the question became: What do I do? And the answer was: Do it yourself. Which meant to create it yourself, write it yourself, direct it yourself.”

So he wrote an autobiographical solo musical “Ghetto Superstar,” which was staged at Joe’s Pub in 2005, and an autobiographical play “While I Yet Live,” inspired by his mother and a grandmother who raised him, that was eventually produced off-Broadway in 2014. He also starred in plays including Suzan-Lori Parks’s “Topdog/Underdog” in his home-



THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES

town of Pittsburgh in order to stretch himself as an actor.

Porter’s fortunes began to turn when he fought to win the part of nurturing, no-nonsense nurse Belize in a 2010-11 off-Broadway revival of “Angels in America” (“Belize is who I am,” he says). Two years later, he created the role of indomitable stiletto-heel designer Lola in “Kinky Boots,” marking his comeback on Broadway after a 13-year absence and earning a Tony and a Grammy (for the cast album).

Still, nothing could prepare

Porter for the later-in-life stardom of the past year — thanks first to his game-changing role as emcee Pray Tell, mentor to a group of gay and trans characters in the New York City drag ball scene in “Pose.” The part earned him an Emmy nod for lead actor in a television series; the awards will be chosen on Sept. 22. Then there’s his newfound status as a red carpet phenom. He wowed fashionistas at this year’s Oscars with his floor-length, Christian Siriano velvet tuxedo gown. Then he turned heads by showing up at



JOJO WHILDEN/FX VIA AP

Billy Porter (top) directs a rehearsal of “The Purists.” Porter in a scene from “Pose” (above) and at the 2019 Tony Awards (left).

the Met Gala in May in a golden-winged catsuit and head-dress.

“I’m shocked, a little bit, that it’s happening like this,” he says, rotating his head in an extravagant motion. “There’s a mainstreaming to my career that I dreamed of but got very comfortable with not happening. But I just never gave up!”

And he’s thankful that theaters like the Huntington allowed him to practice his art when he wasn’t on top of the world. “The Purists” is the third play he’s directed there after Wolfe’s “The Colored Museum” in 2015 and “Topdog/Underdog” in 2017. “It’s a wonderful creative home where [artistic director] Peter DuBois has given me the space to work on the other side of my creativity, which is directing,” he says. “The process of creating and excavating the narrative is very fulfilling. I just love it! And

### THE PURISTS

Presented by the Huntington Theatre Company. At the Wimberly Theatre, Calderwood Pavilion, Boston Center for the Arts, Aug. 30-Oct. 6. Tickets from \$25, 617-266-0800, [www.huntingtontheatre.org](http://www.huntingtontheatre.org)

We have to choose grace and peace and love. That’s what you see these people in this play doing in real time.”

McCabe says that when Porter signed on to direct, “he wasn’t the icon that he is right now. But still throughout all the hoopla of ‘Pose’ and everything else, he stuck with it.”

Like the characters in “The Purists,” Porter says he’s always had to fight for space. He fought to carve out a career. He fought to play Belize. He fought for Lola. And he fought for Pray Tell, a role that was created specifically for him. He was originally asked to audition for the small part of Damon’s dance teacher, but he convinced the series’ producers to carve out a bigger role. “I actually was around then. I went to balls and lived in those circles. I lived through the AIDS crisis. I authentically know all of this.”

The series, which has broken ground for putting black, brown, queer, and trans characters at the center of its storytelling, “is everything that an actor ever dreams of,” Porter says. “I get to do all of the things that I was never on the list for before. No one ever saw me that way before. It’s life-altering.”

During his darkest days, Porter says, “I had my hand on the doorknob to bitterness, as George Wolfe says. But you have to find a way to not go there because bitterness is death.”

He faced a choice to stew in that anger and frustration — or regroup, figure out a next step, and keep pushing forward. The upshot? “There’s an expansion that happened for me that I don’t know I would have had I come out of the box and won my Tony Award at the age of 25. I don’t know that I would be writing and directing and believing in my own vision. I had to make my own way, and I’m really glad about that. Because it’s all on my terms now.”

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then, I guess, the control freak in me likes being in control!”

In “The Purists,” a clash of cultures erupts when a former star rapper Lamont (now down on his luck), influential DJ and radio host Mr. Bugz, and Broadway-loving Gerry battle over their divergent musical passions, old-school versus new school primacy, as well as racism, homophobia, and misogyny. But when two younger female emcees square off in a spontaneous rap battle, sparks and opinions fly and questions are raised about friendship, acceptance, and tolerance.

Porter calls the play a “kitchen stoop drama about five very different people from very different walks of life who come together and choose to love each other through their differences, love each other through their conflicts. We have to choose in this world to be kind.

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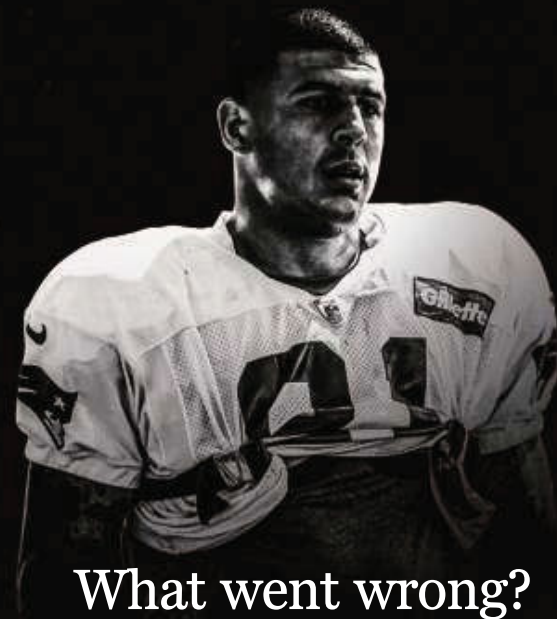
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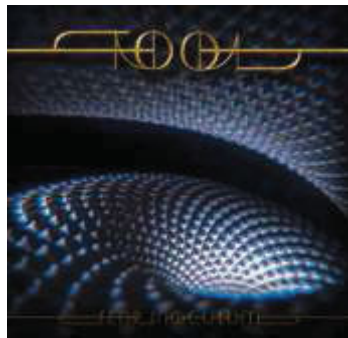
### ALBUM REVIEW

## Tool returns with a vengeance

By Chris Triunfo  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Open a newspaper from 13 years ago and there might be a story about Nintendo’s new state-of-the-art Wii gaming system or a feature on Barry Bonds’s journey to 715 home runs, surpassing the great Babe Ruth. Stories about Saddam Hussein’s death sentence and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would be inescapable. And hidden in the arts section, there might be a music review (much like this one) of what many assumed would be Tool’s final album. Now, in 2019, Tool has returned with “Fear Inoculum,” an 80-minute prog-metal fever dream that proves the band is back and better than ever.

The release of 2006’s “10,000 Days” prompted Aus-



tralian music critic Patrick Donovan to call Tool “. . . the thinking person’s metal band . . . a tangle of contradictions.” Now, it seems like those contradictions are unfurling, and the band’s purpose and musical execution are at their crispest and most refined.

The title (and opening) track slowly crescendos and becomes increasingly layered un-

til it reaches an impressively mixed guitar solo at the four-minute mark. This is where a song usually ends, but this is Tool, so who are we kidding? The 10-minute track, which is the longest song to ever make it onto Billboard’s Hot 100, ebbs and flows in intensity (and time signatures) seamlessly.

The rest of the album continues in the same fashion. On songs like “Pneuma,” “Culling Voices,” or “7empest,” listeners may encounter Maynard James Keenan’s falsetto serenade and percussionist Justin Chancellor’s soft darbuka-inspired rhythms creeping in the background. Let 30 seconds go by, and guitarist Adam Jones will have taken the stage, battling Keenan’s screaming to see who’s the loudest. Meanwhile, songs like “Mockingbeat,”

“Chocolate Chip Trip,” and “Legion Inoculum” serve as brief, synth-heavy experimental interludes — reminders that we’re not just dealing with another dull prog-metal outfit.

One of the big questions surrounding the release of “Fear Inoculum” was how, and if, the band would address the past 13 years. But it’s apparent that not much has changed for them. If “10,000 Days” gave fans a band that was scared of the future, then “Fear Inoculum” gives them one that is rising from the ashes, still anticipating the worst but more determined to make their message heard. Now, people may take them just a little more seriously.

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