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On facing your fears

Actor, writer, and comedian Sabrina Brier on finding the confidence to perform, avoiding the limitations others place on your work, and dealing with the pressure of being a creator.

I feel like all art forms are pretty vulnerable, but stand-up in particular can be pretty brutal. As a performer, how do you find the confidence to present yourself and your work to the world? What's your process for that?

It's interesting you bring up stand-up, which is certainly not how I would identify myself first, but of course, yes, I agree. It's probably one of the most vulnerable things I've been delving into the past few years.

I really don't have stage fright when I'm in a play, right? When I was growing up doing plays or anything that exists in a fictional space, it was less vulnerable to me. It's like, "Oh, I'm existing within a fictional world." That sort of protects me and allows me to perform, be crazy, and throw myself on stage.

Whereas doing stand-up feels—I'm doing a characterized version of myself—but it feels a little bit more real, more raw. It's just you up there.

I really am not the biggest stand-up girl in the world. This is something I'm doing to flex the muscle, to get myself out there meeting other artists and connecting with fans in person. So I thought, "How do I make that work for me?" An element I have brought into my live shows is that I make it pretty theatrical because that is really where my background is.

I got into making it so fictionalized and making it a character because I could feel that the fictional world is where I am most comfortable and feel the most free to really explore.

Creating some distance, kind of like a persona. Would that be fair?

Yes. I definitely would use the word "character" over persona because again, I think the persona aspect of it exists maybe on my [Instagram stories](#) or my captions. Yes, to your point, when I'm [tweeting](#), I always feel like it's a version of a persona.

You direct and act as well. I think it can be hard for people sometimes to navigate between industries in the art world. There's concern about being pigeonholed, and so I was curious how you deal with other people's limits on you? Or people not necessarily seeing the craft that goes into something like a TikTok, but it's really a comedy sketch that you've written?

Yeah, totally. Looking back on the early days of content, it was definitely something that frustrated me. I went into content creation very much with the goal of getting myself out there creatively to then parlay that into other things eventually. So certainly in my first approach there was the business element of, "Okay, I know I'm doing this to get myself out there because this is a tough industry, and I need to figure out a way to get myself out there."

At the same time, I was also just creatively frustrated and coming from a place of feeling invisible. I was getting to a point in my life creatively where I wanted to be able to share more, to connect more of what's in my head to the outside world. Looking back, one lesson I definitely take away is you really just have to put the work in and let the work speak for itself for a long time. Because I had so much frustration at first about like, "When is this going to translate? When is someone going to recognize this in the way I need them to? When am I going to book something? When am I going to be thought of as an artist in the way that I want to be thought of?" Now that I'm further into the process, I can see that those things really, they will come, but they're a result of the work. The work really comes first. And of the ways I think that I've been able to un-pigeonhole myself—yes, it has a lot to do with my own branding and my own curation of the way I put myself out there—but it also really I think came from just the consistency of the work, until one day I woke up and realized that the people around me and the incredible followers were really picking up what I was putting down in a very real way.

So a lot of the credit for not getting pigeonholed goes also to the devoted, smart, very engaged and analytical audience that has followed me in what I do, who are really the ones who went, "Hey guys, yes, this is making us giggle, but let's unpack this because there is something really interesting going on here."

Then because I have these goals, I go, "Okay, great, so this is what we've got going on. Okay, let's take these same elements and let's put them into a live show." Because again, I did that with the full knowledge of, "Hey, I have a theater background. I'm not afraid to get up on a stage. This is something I can do. Let me show them this too, right? They're engaging so much in this way, let me show them this too. Let me try to do TikTok in a different way. Let me bring things to Twitter and bring things to the audience in different kinds of ways."

So much of your comedy, I think, is about more everyday, but still really highly intensely emotional, social interactions. So I'm curious, does comedy make you think of those interactions differently? Is it a way of making a statement on those moments? Is it a form of escape? Just how does it function in your life? What's your relationship to comedy as an art form?

Yes. I think something my mom—who has written a lot of forms of comedy in her career—has taught me is that behind a lot of comedy there's usually an axe to grind. So in terms of escapism, yes, there's definitely an element of that for me. If I'm experiencing something that really frustrates me there can be a catharsis in terms of, "I really hate this thing that this person made me feel, let me turn that into something." Sometimes it's a form of escapism when it comes to my own bad behavior and things about myself that I find frustrating, the way that I emotionally experience things and wishing I could do it in a different way. Therefore, creating something out of that as a way to kind of get that off my chest. So yes, to the escapism. On a fun note, it has definitely allowed me to experience things and go, "Okay, that was crazy. But yeah, I'm going to have to put that in my notes app because that's good. That's some good stuff right there."

What's the most challenging or intimidating part of being an artist for you, and how do you deal with that?

I have always created things and made things and always wanted to do that, always wanted to perform, always wanted to create a fictional world to live in.

I am now at a point in my life where some of my dreams are seemingly coming true, and part of those dreams have a lot to do with having an audience to experience those things that go on in your imaginative brain and having a place to put them. But with that dream coming true comes that pressure, especially coming from the internet where so much of rising from the internet has to do with the people who are uplifting you. So as a creator, you always are having a relationship with an audience. But I think as an internet creator, it's just so much deeper and so much more in your face and you can see it in front of you. I think wanting to measure up and create what my audience wants to see is something I really care about. It's something I know I will mess up at points and probably already have. I would say that's the challenge.

And then what's the most rewarding part and when do you feel that the most?

It's so fun when, something I've been noticing a lot recently is when people come up and say, "Oh, I love your stuff." I'm like, "Thank you so much." Then they go, "You know what video I really love?" And it's something so niche that I personally thought of as a failure. Like, "Oh, that one didn't go that viral." "Oh, I remember posting that one."

I was with my sister and we had such high hopes about it and it just didn't hit. And we always look back at that one like "I thought that was funny." Now given, my standards are probably too high because my version of that is maybe 300,000 views, which is still a lot of views, but to me, if it didn't necessarily hit as a big of a cultural impact as I wanted it to, I might've been sort of disappointed by it or kind of thought of it as, "Well, was that a waste of my time in a way?"

Though, of course, nothing ever is, but so then to have someone come up to me on the street and that's the one that resonated with them, it's just such a reminder that there is no wasted time because for all you know, yeah, maybe that one video didn't get you that many followers or didn't get you something so tangible, but here's a person coming up to me on the street telling me that video was the one that really resonated with them and really made them a fan. It kind of connects to the challenge of it all. It's like, okay, well that's what matters to me.

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. You have some big projects coming up and that have recently come out. I was curious how you deal with pressures of projects that are a bigger scale—your Abbott Elementary guest appearance, your upcoming Netflix is a Joke special. How do you deal with being part of those really iconic legacies?

I think it was September 2021 the first time someone came up to me on the street and knew who I was based off of my work. Everything that's happening is so exciting and it's the elevation of my work that I've been gearing toward. I am filled with gratitude. At the same time, I feel that I've been on this journey for a while now. The first moment that someone knew who I was from my work, like I said, that was always the dream. So it's kind of, for me, felt like this slow on ramp of just putting my head down, focusing on the work, listening to the audience, trying to just build this thing as much as I can and see where that takes me organically.

It has taken me to this point that is so exciting and so amazing. I think the way I process it is just, "Okay, let's keep going." Because to me, work is work, all this work has been important to me. It's been just as important to me when I was making my silly little New York centric TikToks that kind of didn't really make sense in the beginning. It's all kind of the same journey for me, and it's equally important

for me. Every tiny thing I do is of the utmost importance to me. So I think in terms of how I handle the bigger projects, I'm ready for them. I've been waiting, I've been ready, I've been ramping up, and I'm just kind of ready to keep taking things one step at a time and see where the natural path takes me.

You've really earned a reputation as a girl's girl. You interrogate female friendships and approach them with a lot of respect and seriousness, which is pretty rare. Was that an intentional choice or do you just naturally look to your life for inspiration?

In terms of intentionality, I think that goes back to the audience thing I was saying in the beginning. Was I going, "I'm going to telegraph to people that I am a girl's girl"? No, but in the creative process, I did start to notice that when I took some real life inspired elements of my personality and friendships and infused those into the sketches, it was really resonating. So it was intentional in the sense of my life really is about female friendship. That really is a huge element of my life.

I grew up primarily in a house of my mom and my sister who are both creatives and both loud and crazy like I am. I went to a summer camp where I lived outside in tents and it was all women running around together. Then I went to a women's college. So women have always been center in my life. It's so amazing it's resonated with people and it just goes to show that you do have to be creating from a place of truth and a place of what really, truly is your real-life perspective. I do just think the reality of my young life at the moment is that I have a lot of incredible friends who I go to for advice, who come to me for advice, who really feel like my life partners at this point in my life. It just kind of was only natural that those were the topics I was going to be hitting as I explored more ideas online.

Sabrina Brier Recommends:

Follow the iconic @its.michele.ok on TikTok

The Right to Sex by Amia Srinivasan

Chappell Roan's The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess

Stephen Sondheim's Passion

Buffy the Vampire Slayer the original series

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