Drew Droege on writing your own material



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2664 words.

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What are your origins as a performer? Did you start out in theater?

I did. I started out doing community theater in North Carolina and then continued to do it in college. I didn't always know that I wanted to be a professional actor. I always loved it, but it was never presented as an option to me. Growing up where I did, no one became an actor. I went to school to become an English Professor because I loved reading and writing, but it ultimately wasn't as creative as I wanted it to be. It was a lot of reading old dead white guys and what I wanted to do was make things.

As a theater student in college I did a lot more directing than acting. I was in a lot of plays, but I didn't really find my groove until I started creating my own material, which was later when I moved out to L.A. Then I was able to do improv and write my own characters. I started to see how much stronger I am in my own voice, creating my own material from my own point of view.

Were you always drawn to comedy?

Not originally. It's funny to think of myself as a 19 year-old in crazy elderly man makeup trying to play serious roles in classic plays. I wanted to be a serious actor and I hated it when I got laughs. I was so upset when people would laugh at me. I wanted to be Ian McKellen. I didn't really trust comedy, which is funny because I think back now and realize that my influences were really people like Carol Burnett and John Waters. That's what I really loved and now, of course, that's very much in keeping with what I do.

The rest was a pretty natural evolution. I started to create my own characters while working with the Groundlings in LA. I did that for a long time. I loved doing improv and sketch comedy, but you kind of age out of it after a while. Eventually you get tired of lugging around wigs and glasses, you get tired of wearing pizza delivery boy and cub scout uniforms. Eventually you get to a place where you wonder, "What else is there?"

Eventually I started doing storytelling shows, which were less terrifying somehow than trying to do stand up. Getting up on stage just as me was always the scariest thing, but I found that I could get on stage and tell a story. I used that as a way to develop three different solo shows. One was about horrible teachers I'd had—including Maya Angelou, who was a horrible person—and it really worked because I was also teaching at the time, so I was clearly working out my own fears with that. I did another show about drugs and how terrible I am at doing them, and then I did one about Chloë Sevigny, which led to me doing the Chloë videos. One thing led to another.

What was the genesis of your play, *Bright Colors and Bold Patterns*?

A few years ago I was invited to a wedding. A straight wedding. My dear friend who I love completely also happens to be a total control freak and she had written on the invitation that guest please not wear bright colors or bold patterns. She just wanted everyone to look nice in the wedding, but it stuck in my mind as a great title. I had always wanted to write my own version of *Love! Valour! Compassion!* or *The Boys in the Band*—a play where there's a bunch of gay men in a house together talking and being hysterical, but actually talking in the way that my friends and I really talk to each other. After gay marriage became legal I started to witness this pressure that people were now under to pair up and get married. Gay marriage is a wonderful thing, obviously, but I couldn't help but wonder if we were maybe losing a little bit of our queerness or our specialness, you know? That lead to writing this play where there's just this one character who you see talking to other people, but the other people are always off stage. He's the only one you see. It basically just evolved from that.

If you are a particularly offbeat kind of performer, is there the sense that no one is really going to know what to do with

you? That the best bet is to just create your own thing?

Absolutely. Those are the people that I've always admired and the path I've tried to follow. At the Groundlings I'd go and see people like Jennifer Coolidge back when I was a student and there was just nothing like her anywhere. She was like this beautiful, brilliant monster who just created her own path entirely. So many great people came up that way. Now you might say that someone is a Melissa McCarthy type or a Kristen Wiig type, but they created those types. They invented themselves. Those are people I got to see and work with at the Groundlings and they were always the ones who were kind of just doing their own thing. I would see them and think "That is what I want to do."

If you are a beautiful person, or if you fit into a certain category very easily, you will get work early on. You will show up to town and they say, "We need you, come be in this!" BUT if you are a carny weirdo, like I am, you have to create your own work. No one's going to call you. There is no Bridget Everett until there's Bridget Everett, you know? Like, you have to do it on your own. You have to create your own path, which is honestly more fun. It's been a struggle for sure, but it's a really exciting, rewarding one.

Other than a willingness to create your own material, what advice do you have for aspiring comedy performers or young actors?

Training, taking improv or writing classes, at any of the major places is really helpful and you can do that in almost any city. I would say if it's not your church, if you don't *really* love it, then get out. In the comedy world, it's all about meeting people and knowing people and being part of the community. That's how it works. People can call on you to be in their things, you can call on people to be in your things. You generate work in that way. It is really tricky because you do a lot for free for a really long time while you're also putting money into it, but you kind of have to. It's also about doing every show that you can and seeing every show that you can. And then it's just trying and failing a lot. And not making any money.

You do have to do other things in order to survive. I taught at the Groundlings for about 10 years, which was great. You make the same amount of money that you make waiting tables, sometimes less, but it was my privilege to be working creatively with people. I could say, "This is what I'm doing with my life. I'm creative for a living." Regardless, you just learn to multi-task. You have to be able to do a lot of things. You also have to learn how to write. Mostly I just tell people to always say "yes" to things. I mean truly take the spirit of improv and say, "Yes, I can do that. I'll learn how to do it if I don't know how." When jobs come up you can't always say, "Well, that's not exactly right for me." Especially in the beginning you have to go, "Yep, I'll learn it. I'll figure it out. I'll do it." Even successful people still need to do a lot of things to make a living in this world. I was still teaching, even when I was doing guest spots on TV. That's kind of just what people have to do.

When you keep yourself insanely busy you don't have time to panic. I think the worst thing is when you don't have money and you're desperate for something to do. It's better to be broke and busy than just broke. Also, the busier I am the better my work tends to be because I can't give it too much thought. Doing shows every night, whether it's my own or someone else's, I don't freak out if something doesn't land the way I want it to or if I have a weird show. I'm like, "Great, I'll try it again tomorrow." It's not just my one shot. I think it's good to just do a lot of things, get up in front of an audience as much as you can, whatever the context is. Inevitably, you will be better and worse at different times. There are times when you're going to be working a lot. There are going to be times when you're not really working at all.

Tell me about your experiences writing for other people.

I was a writer on a cartoon this year. It was my first time being on a writing staff. It was so fun. It came to me and I just said, "Yes." It wasn't something that I ever pursued and it happened just from knowing people in the comedy community.

It was so incredible. There were writers there that had been on a lot of big shows who were like, "This is the best writer's room we've ever been in." It was for *Big Mouth,* which is Nick Kroll's cartoon on Netflix. We basically spent about three weeks talking about our most embarrassing moments in 7th and 8th grade because the show's about puberty, so it really bonded everybody. We were very vulnerable in that room but we also laughed so hard. There were some people in that room who were so good at just lobbing one liners one after another. It was crazy how much work was put into every line on the show.

I had much more respect for writers after that experience because I'm usually on the other side. I'm usually the asshole actor who comes in and gets the script and goes, "Oh, I'm going to improvise this. I can make this better." In reality there was a team of writers who are funnier than you are, who thought about this for months before you waltzed into the room to ruin it.

You've done a lot of guest spots on different shows. How do you avoid being asked to just be the stereotypical gay character? Or has the notion of the "stereotypical gay friend" character finally evolved?

For the longest time, at least on television, they would write these requisite gay characters in the same way they might write

“the black guy” or “the woman.” It was a very heteronormative male world of writers back then, that was the worldview.

I think they often had good intentions and were like, “Oh, let’s have some diversity!” But they didn’t really ever think about real people that they actually knew in the world, so they would just write bad jokes. Sometimes you might read things and think, “Oh, this part is so flamboyant and insane but really funny and I really like it.” And then sometimes it’s like, “Oh my God this is offensively dumb.” What I really hate is when it just feels tired and lazy. It’s not like I’m as offended as a gay person, I’m just offended as a creative person.

I’m like, “Really? This gay man is drinking a cosmo?” I did a show years ago where I had to walk out with a cosmo and I was like, “You know, my step-father in South Carolina drinks cosmos now, gay men don’t really do this anymore.” There’s this other trend that’s even more annoying to me lately which is the character of the “straight acting gay guy.” Just a dude who likes dudes. I don’t really know any of those in real life either, to be honest. It’s like a joke that is funny one time. I don’t necessarily think you are championing gay rights to show gay guys who only wear pressed polo shirts. They’re married, they’re both beautiful, they have great bodies, *and* they have a baby. Those guys are so boring to me. I know people want to resist the bitchy stereotype, but at least the bitchy gay with the one-liner got to be funny.

With my show I really wanted to play a big, loud, gay, drunk mess. He’s the person we know, that we might be scared of becoming, or that we maybe have been at times. As gay people we’re afraid of writing this sometimes. We don’t want to show ourselves as being flawed or ugly. As a result, I have experienced more stereotypical gay parts or problematic gay roles that were written by gay people than I have by straight people. Because I feel like gay people are like, “Well, I don’t want this character to be *too* flamboyant, or *too* over the top. I don’t want straight people to hate this person.”

I’m saying that straight people with a brain and a soul are totally cool. They’re not out to hate us, you know what I mean? I totally believe that there are more straight people on our side than not, and smart straight people want to watch an interesting gay person, just like smart gay people want to see that. Our own internalized homophobia and the fear of not being accepted causes us to write this way, to make the gay guy not too offensive, or not too colorful and it’s just fucking boring. And I think boring is the worst thing to be.

Drew Droege Recommends

1. John Waters movies. They’ve influenced/delighted/astounded me tremendously since youth. From the shocking brilliant wit in *Female Trouble* to the poignant Sirkian parody of *Polyester* to Kathleen Turner’s truly Oscar worthy performance in *Serial Mom*, John will forever have my heart and be my number one.
2. Joe Orton plays. I saw *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* when I was in college and it changed my life. Vile libidinous murderous characters that I deeply cared for. The complicated comedy sexy horror show of it all. Then I read *Loot* and *What the Butler Saw*—this guy was such a product of his time and place, yet also miles ahead of everyone around him.
3. *The Lion And The Cobra*, Sinead O’Connor. Just try to listen to this album without jumping around your room in rage and wild abandon. It’s magical and angry and beautiful all at once. I feel ferocious power when she wails “I do know Mandinka!!” and “I Want Your (Hands On Me)” both turns me on and reminds me of my favorite scene in *Nightmare on Elmt Street 4*. There was a time in the 80s and 90s where everyone wanted to sound like Sinead. And nothing compares.
4. Indian food. The spicier the better. Lots of sauces with lamb or chicken and palak paneer and raita and naan. Yes.
5. Palm Springs. Every year my friends and I get a house and celebrate New Years while watching obscure movies and drinking wine in pajamas. It recharges me like nowhere else. It’s both tacky and calm. I set my play there as a love letter, but also a selfish escape, because I feel like now I can visit Palm Springs every night!

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Vocation
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Russ Rowland