

On trusting yourself



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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2207 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Theater](#), [Comedy](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Anxiety](#), [Adversity](#), [Failure](#).

You are the kind of performer who does a little bit of everything—singer, dancer, actor, comedian, writer—which one assumes would allow you a certain amount of freedom. Is there a dark side to being a multi-hyphenate performer? Does it make it harder to focus?

Totally. For me, dividing the time between being creative and being administrative is also insane. Often it's just easier to say yes to everything, because then you don't have to deal with the feelings that come with saying no to something or the fear of missing out. Or the fear of burning a bridge or hurting somebody's feelings. It keeps you constantly busy, so you don't have time to think about anything else. I feel like I'm pretty good at saying no now. Actually, that's a lie. It's a total lie. But I'm better at it than I used to be.

When you're a performer living and working in New York City, it can be exhausting trying to piece together a living from doing all these different little projects. That's another reason why it's hard to say "no" to things that come along.

It is *really* exhausting. For example, one of the reasons that I decided to make this current show I've been doing, [Boner Killer](#), is that it would be a lot smaller than the show that I made before. Touring my previous show required 11 people. And we did tour it. And it was awesome. It felt very well supported, and we had a great time, and it was a lot of work. But there were a lot of people handling different things, and so the dispersion of labor was good.

For this show, it just seemed like it would be a lot easier to tour a show that's only two people. And if we could make it so that we're the only two people that have to go, then we'll get to go everywhere, which was true, but then you have just two people doing *all* of the labor. We have somebody that is a tour producer as well, but he works remotely, so it's not the same as having somebody on hand. The entire time that we were in the UK we were working all day long and all night long. We didn't do anything else. The level of details are insane. We didn't have any days off, really.

So not only are you handling all of the tech stuff, but then you also have to perform. This show is actually super personal. It's emotionally rigorous and athletic. It's also really intense for me to perform because it's scary for me to interact with the audience. I love it, but the content of the show is delicate and I'm pushing them around. I'm up on the edge of what is okay, standards-wise. I know people who do these kinds of shows all the time, but it doesn't come naturally to me. It's a thing I've had to learn how to do. It takes everything, and I want to give it everything. But when you have to do tech rehearsals for 10 hours before the show and, you know, suddenly have to learn how to be your own lighting designer, it's intense. I don't regret it, but it's fucking intense. I would rather go on tour than not go on tour, but it was a learning process. We learned we have to bring another person next time.

Everyone wants to stand out, to develop their own specific voice as an artist, but when you have a particularly quirky sensibility and aesthetic, do you run into the problem of people not really knowing what to do with you?

That's exactly every slightly or extremely weird person's dilemma. That may be part of the reason that I write my own material—it helps me feel like I have control over my life and my career. If I had to depend on auditions, or if I were waiting for other people to put me in their work, I think I would have a lot of anxiety about that. Making my own stuff has allowed other people to understand how I can be integrated into their work as well. I'm creating a perfect fit for myself. I love being in other people's stuff *and* making my own stuff. I wouldn't want it any other way. It helps me feel balanced about power dynamics.

What is the experience of performing in other people's material like for you?

I work best with people who would like to hear my thoughts about what I think my body would do the best at, given the text and the situation. But I've also been schooled in that department. There have been instances where I think I know better, but then I just do what they're asking me to do, and then I'm like, "Oh, well there's a reason why this person's on the outside of the thing. They're looking at the big picture, and they were right about that." I know what it's like to be in that position. So

yeah, there's a time to open your yapper and there's a time not to.

When you're interested in making work that addresses queerness and issues about the body and is also funny and strange, is it easier to just write your own material?

Well, I don't need somebody else to do that for me. Because I'm doing it. So it doesn't have to be a queer project. I think it's luxurious to be in someone else's show and only have to focus on the performance and get to be some other character. It's like, *God, please*. The problem is that there's a lot of straight people that make really shitty work. But there's a lot of queer people that make shitty work, too. It's just that the best stuff usually smells a little queer. Not always, but, you know.
[laughs]

An actor recently told me that when you're going to school to study theater or performance or whatever, you never anticipate how much of your energy is going to be spent convincing people to let you do the thing that you're good at.

That is energy I don't enjoy spending. I'm pretty averse to auditioning. I never do a good job. In fact, I've never gotten anything from an audition. Once I'm in a role, I'm committed and I make my entire life about it. I was in a big musical this summer, which was a part of this series called "Encores!" at New York City Center. And I was in *Assassinating*. When they cast me, they didn't make me audition, they just offered me the role of Squeaky Fromme. It was arguably one of the best moments of my life. To just see the all capitals of OFFER, and know that I had somehow bypassed the hell of the audition.

When you know you have to audition, you're just thinking about it for like 48 hours before. There's no way to think about anything else. I've also auditioned people, so I know what it's like from both sides. Some people are amazing at it, and they let it roll off their back. It's an experience thing. Once you do like 200 of them, I'm sure you get real good at it. But since I avoid them, I've never crossed that bridge. You can't take any of it personally and yet, that's all you can do. Take all of it personally.

Do you have a regular way of working, whether it be writing music or writing prose?

Kind of. I actually don't like to work at home. I like to work in a rehearsal room. I like the idea of a bare space, basically. A place without any other distractions. I really feel like I'm there to work on the one thing. It's not like when I'm at home working and suddenly I'm distracted by "Oh, I really want to paint that pipe on the ceiling gold." Like, I don't get to paint the pipe gold in the rehearsal room.

I focus a lot on singing now, on vocal technique and warm-up. I feel like allowing that kind of space in my body, in my throat, in my resonators, calls some of the shots of what the text and the melody will be and how it fits into the story, or the joke, or the theme, or the conceit of what I'm writing. I try to journal a lot, and notice what my brain is leaning into in order to decide what I should be working on. I try not to be too heavy-handed about beats or plot points or stuff like that. I try to let it come from the body or the memory or a combination of the two.

New York City can be a supportive place, filled with opportunities, but it can also be intensely competitive. How do you keep that cutthroat competitive aspect of this business from creeping into your work?

If I know that I'm in a sensitive place in that way, then I don't go to see people's shows that would be at all similar to me. I can do this thing where I'm watching a show, and just because of the place we live in and the scenes we run in and our ages, I'll suddenly be like, "Oh my god, this person is doing the exact same thing that I feel like I'm writing right now!" Even though somebody else would look at those two projects and feel like they are not related on any level. If you're self-obsessed enough, you'll somehow just decide that *everything* everyone else is making is the same as what you're doing. When I feel that way I'm like, "Nope, I'm not going to see any shows." It's hard for me sometimes, but I also feel like I need and want to support my friends whose work I'm really invested in. So this is something that I have to get over all the time. I'm always happy that I did. Still, it's easier for me to see music or go to a poetry reading or something. I don't feel competitive with it because it's too different.

What kind of advice do you have for up and coming performers who might be pursuing a similar path?

Well, I'm really happy about my career and the choices that I've made, artistically and aesthetically. And I feel like I have fucking rock-solid integrity, I will say that for myself. I do not have rock-solid business skills, I do not have rock-solid stress and anxiety management skills. However, I have learned to trust certain things about myself, and that's something I tell people. Trust your feelings. Knowing when a thing feels right and knowing when it feels wrong is important. Knowing when the show starts to develop its own brain and life and universe, I feel great at that. I feel excited to do it.

I teach a fair amount, usually undergrads. I'm always teaching a lot of women. There are a lot of women in theater programs and

art programs and they are *always* the ones that are being told to dismiss that gut-level little voice that's like, "This is what I'm actually thinking about." Women are often told their interests are trite or stupid because that's just what it is to live in this world that fucking loves dick and war. Whereas I'm like, "Where is the *My Little Pony* in all of that?" Your intimate, personal feelings are not trite. It's my fucking pleasure to be like, "Actually, your journal entry *is* the thing. Perform it." Just get better at being as engaged as possible with the world around you, and yourself inside of it. Trust yourself. Give yourself permission to just be who and what you want to be. Make work about that.

So just trust your gut and try hard, basically?

Yeah, but there's no way to know that without just fucking fail, fail, fail, fail, failing at it. I mean, failure is such a boring old trend now. Everybody knows that failure is the key to everything. But then what's next? If we know that failure is the way to get anything done that feels good, then it's about getting the space to imagine the actual utopia that follows it. So yes, fail, but also allow yourself to imagine what could come next—not the perfect world inside of this world, but the perfect world that seems impossible. *That* is the thing that I hope comes out of a million failures.

A selection of live performances by Erin Markey:

HURRICANE SANDY – Erin Markey with Kenny Mellman & Emily Bate

"Grenade" – Bruno Mars cover from "Our Hit Parade" at Joe's Pub

"My Heart Will Go On" – Celine Dion cover from "Our Hit Parade" at Joe's Pub

"Baby" – Justin Bieber cover from "Our Hit Parade" at Joe's Pub

"Saving All My Love For You" – Whitney Houston cover from "Our Hit Parade" at Joe's Pub

Name

Erin Markey

Vocation

Writer, Comedian, Performance Artist, Singer





Sin Bozkurt