

On fearing success



Filmmaker and actor Betsey Brown on how to find criticism interesting, creating work with family and the people around you, and the fear of owning your own power.

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As told to Michelle Lyn King, 2554 words.

Tags: [Film](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#), [Success](#), [Failure](#).

Your family comes up in your work a lot, and they [your mom, your dad, and your brother, the actor and filmmaker Peter Vack] act in all of your films, playing the part of themselves. What does your relationship with your family mean for your work?

The other day someone asked me how I got into film and I felt like the appropriate place to start was my parents moving to the city. My dad moved here to become an actor. He found some success, but then he opened up an ice cream parlor and that's what brought in steady money, whereas the acting was...not as much. That was [around] the time my parents met. My mom knew she wanted to be a psychoanalyst when she was in second grade. I feel like her career is a big influence on my work, as well.

When I was in middle school, my dad decided to sell his business and make movies. Suddenly I, as a middle schooler, was seeing a 40-year-old man change careers and take a huge financial and emotional risk. I saw him struggle. I got to see the artistic struggle at a very formative time in my life. My middle school and high school years were all about watching him living the artist's life, doing odd jobs and making movies.

You mentioned that your mom's work as a psychoanalyst influences your work. How so?

Psychoanalysis is sort of the religion of our family and that really connects to my work because I'm interested in psychoanalyzing myself through art. Also, I consider my art to be very confrontational. That comes straight from my mom teaching us about how to process with others.

I love seeing your films where your family will just be screaming at one another in a way that is so clearly filled with love. It seems like catharsis, but it does make me physically uncomfortable. I feel it in my body.

I think there's something really fun about feeling physically affected by a work of art and I think a lot of that is from confronting taboos and darkness. I'm interested in having the viewer be like, "Wait. Hold on. What am I watching?"

There's another unsettling aspect of your work—a good kind of unsettling—where the viewer isn't sure what is reality and what is fiction. You star in your work as Betsey. Your mother, Jane Brown, plays Jane Brown. Your father, Ron Brown, plays Ron Brown. In your film Schegtsy Betsey, your real ex-boyfriend is the ex-boyfriend we see in the film. There's this question of—

"Did this happen? Is this real? What is this?"

Right. I was watching [your recent feature] *Actors* with my boyfriend, and there was a scene with your parents. He didn't realize they were your parents. He assumed they were paid actors. Then there was a clip from [your brother's feature film] *Assholes*, and he didn't realize it was a real movie. But I know your parents and I've seen *Assholes*. It's so interesting to me that some people might view your work and not be aware at all of the elements of it that are pulling from your real life.

That's been a criticism of my work. But I've always been about making films for basically an audience of one person. I have had this shocking moment after both *Shegetsey Betsy* and *Actors* where I was like "What? Other people even understand this at all?" Just because it's so specific. I allow myself to be so specific about my own experience. I do think some people can't find a way in. I've been doing these Q&A's after screenings and I feel like they're an extension of the movie. [In the Q&A's] I get to let all those audience members into another version of myself. I think that's an interesting extension of the work.

Do you think you're authentic in those Q&A's? Or does it feel like you're playing another part? Authentic might be the wrong word. Is Q&A Betsy a persona? I think I'm especially interested in this question with you because you're an actor. You are trained to perform.

I want to be as authentic and truthful as possible, but that does sort of sometimes...I don't know. Persona implies to me some sort of meme-able thing. The kind of persona I want to have is one of a girl who is extremely open. I want to be someone who isn't afraid to say the thing.

Is there anything in your work you are afraid to say? Is there something that feels off limits?

This is a question that I think about in regards to my mom because she is a much more private and more modest person than any of us. Because of that, I feel as though I haven't necessarily gotten my parents, specifically my mom, correct yet. I am always tip-toeing around the fact that I know that this is all such a stretch for her and the reason she is going along with it is motherly love. She does like acting, but some of the scenes that we have done and some of the moments on set have been very painful for her. That is something that is definitely not my favorite thing.

What's it like for you when someone misunderstands your work? You have a scene in [your most recent film] *Actors* where Peter is reading a review of his movie, *Assholes*—a real review—and he says something like, "It's so strange that the things I love about this film can be the things that someone else despises."

It's hard to take criticism and harder because all the stuff is so personal. It's hard to feel misunderstood at all. But I have also found that the conversations in which I am being misunderstood either in support or against the film, like it's been such it's opened up such interesting conversations.

I think criticism can make you understand your work better because you're like, "Okay, well, this is how I'm coming across, at least to some people." Their experience is real, even if it feels completely off-base to you.

Totally. Everyone is just bringing their own self to their viewing of my work and projecting their own experiences onto the film. I do like to learn about how it lands on other people and I want my work to be an invitation for an open and honest dialogue because [those are the kinds of conversations] people are having in the films.

The relationship with the audience is such an important part of my work and what I'm thinking about these days. It feels sort of clownish, because as the clown, you always have to bring it back to the audience. Clowning for me is super instinctual. I have to interact with my audience and be there. I have to pay attention to the audience.

But I do hate myself for caring about what other people think. I feel like I have [a thing] in myself where I really want to be noticed and validated and I want to make money with acting and making films. If you have the external validation, that'll probably move you to getting the good job. That's what's so weird. Of course I want

all of this stuff that feels so shallow and fleeting and disgusting. Of course I want it. Those are the things that will open up opportunities that I want. But, yeah, that's why—that's what makes me hate myself.

I used to think the goal was to reject external validation, but these days I don't think it's all bad. It can be about your work connecting with people. Like, I remember seeing *Shegetsey Betsy* years ago and it had a huge impact on me. I reached out to you and told you that. I shared it all over social media. That is technically me giving you external validation. But it's not—

No, it's not the shallow thing because what you're really saying to me is, "You're not alone or we can connect because we really relate to this thing that you made." I do feel like I had to trick myself into making *Actors* because of my relationship to external validation and wanting to be seen.

How did you trick yourself?

I wrote the first draft of *Actors* in my notebook. Same with *Shegetsey Betsy*. It was all written in journal style, and [when I was writing it], I was like, "This is private. This is for me." Using the iPhone as my way in for filmmaking helps. I'm finding every way to not take myself seriously so that I can just do the work because taking myself seriously is too much. I freeze.

Sometimes when I'm stuck with writing, I edit on my phone as a way to trick myself. I'm like, This is just my dumb phone that I order UberEats on. This is the bullshit machine.

I've also started to think of [Instagram] as the bullshit machine. Sometimes I think about what I post online. I'll be like, I'm posting so much about my movie and my acting and self-promotion and blah, blah, blah. But I'm proud of myself and [posting] is a way of showing I'm proud. I am finally feeling like I'm on a good track and I want to allow myself to be open about saying that. As an artist it's so easy to just think you're a loser. I'm not doing that.

You spent a lot of time on something and want to share it.

When I hear you say that, I'm like, "Yes, that is true." But then in the back of my head, I'm like, "I spent four years making one thing and have one thing to show for four years of work." There's a lot of fear that comes out of that because [I know that] now I have to start again. It could be another four year journey or it could be even longer or really short. Who knows?

How do you balance thinking strategically about your career—having to do things like self-promotion, having to figure out a way to make your work profitable—with the actual act of making art?

I'm currently trying to figure out an answer to this exact question. I don't have an answer yet. I have not yet been able to make money off of my acting or filmmaking. I always have a side job and I do want that to be different. I have ideas about how I can make money and not "sell out," but I think I'm not doing those things because of some sort of resistance or fear that I have about fully coming into myself. I'm coming up to this roadblock of, "Wow. I have not tried to monetize my art at all and what is that about? Why?" I think that there are ways I could [monetize] that I'm not doing and I'm questioning that right now.

Do you have any sense of what it might be?

It's fear. It's some sort of fear of owning my power. I think I'm attached to being the unsuccessful one.

Do you mean in your family?

My family, yeah. I've been really attached to being Peter's sister. I've played that role forever. And I'm so proud of Peter! Oh my gosh. I love Peter so much. I'm so influenced by him. My love for this person and the bond—the artistic agreement that we have—can sometimes bring me into a more dangerous water than I would go on my own.

It goes both ways. I want to be him, but he wants to be me, too.

You're in this exciting moment not just for your own work as a filmmaker, but also as an actor, particularly in Dasha [Nekrasova's] movie, *The Scary of Sixty-First*. What is your relationship to acting these days and how has it changed over the years?

I do feel like my acting career is going in an upward motion, which is not always how I felt. The Betsey in *Actors* is a total failure. She's floundering with acting. She has no future. I love that that part is more fictional now. While making *Actors* I was like, "God. Being an actor is so difficult and so gross. It makes me think about the worst things, the most shallow things, and it makes me feel so terrible about myself."

A lot of my relationship with acting [has been] very tenuous. Most of the time was bleak. I think is so important for actors to hear that, especially because some of the younger people from my school [University of North Carolina School of the Arts] think I'm successful or whatever, but I didn't...I didn't get any attention out of the college showcase. If you go to acting conservatory, you perform for two minutes in front of agents and those two minutes decide your fate. Will you have an agent or a manager? Will you be set up when you go out into the world. And I did not get any response from that.

[After graduating,] I was just trying to use my brother's connections. I got a couple meetings, but really I just was auditioning and feeling like crap. What kept me going was two guys that I met in school, Micah Vassau and Zach Strum. They saw in me this freak. This person who is basically willing and wanting to do things in her performance that most other people wouldn't want to do. [Through working with them,] I realized the kind of projects I want to be a part of. Ones that go places that a lot of other people wouldn't go. I want to like put myself in uncomfortable positions as an actor. I consider my performing and my acting a full body sport. It feels like this like exorcism of sorts.

It sounds like community has been a huge part of what has kept you interested in acting.

Oh, yeah. One of the reasons I love acting so much is because you need other people. You can't do it alone. It makes me think of this line from *Funny Girl*: "People who need people are the luckiest people." That's also why I love filmmaking. I love collaborative work because of what it really means to allow yourself to need someone else for real. [With *Actors*,] I needed Peter to show up for me every day on set and every day he really showed up for me. He did it because he believes in me and thinks the thing I'm making is worth his time. I just love that.

Betsey Brown Recommended:

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Watch three movies in a row by the same person. I'm about to watch my third Rohmer.

Watch some highly underrated personal documentaries such as Joanna Arnow's [I Hate Myself](#) :,), Jack Dunphy's [Serenity](#), Jonathan Caouette's [Tarnation](#), and Caveh Zahedi's [I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore](#), and Brett Hanover's [Rukus](#)

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Vocation

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