

# On believing in yourself



Playwright Jeremy O. Harris on experimentation on Broadway, going with your gut, and why retaining your voice can change audiences.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2626 words.

Tags: [Theater](#), [Writing](#), [Success](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Mental health](#), [Process](#).

**I believe you only experienced your first Broadway play just a few years ago?**

Yeah! I went to shows in Chicago instead of going to New York. I didn't have a real situated community in New York that could have given me all of the ins and outs of scamming the system to get cheap tickets for Broadway shows. Moreover, the shows that I could afford a ticket to were generally not the shows I wanted to go to. One of my friends had tickets to see [A Doll's House, Part 2](#) at the John Golden Theatre, which is where my play ended up going. He went to Juilliard, and Juilliard students get free tickets to a bunch of Broadway previews, so I tagged along with him.

**That makes me think about the concept of wonder and how ideal that can be for tapping into creativity. If you're too informed about something, you might not actually want to do it.**

Absolutely. Almost none of my favorite playwrights ever went to Broadway. Even being this playwright who's had this huge public presence and a lot of excitement around their work, the only saving grace is that a lot of people also said that they hated my play. If everyone had just come out and said, "Jeremy is a genius. This play is perfect. We love it. There's no controversy," I would have replied, "I'm not a real artist because all the playwrights I find to be real artists have some complicated reception in how people navigate their work."

The idea of being a populist author, which is what it would mean to be a playwright on Broadway, was really foreign to me. All I wanted was to be an indie experimental playwright because that's one space I had 100% not seen a black playwright thrive in. There were black playwrights who were experimental, and were doing experimental things, but there weren't black playwrights that were able to do experimental things with their own theater companies in the way that [The Wooster Group](#) did, or even [Young Jean Lee](#).

I'm benefiting from a moment where there's an opportunity to fill that hole in the ecology of New York theater. A lot of artistic directors have started to do it by programming experimental or on-the-fringe work in normal seasons. Audiences are starting to understand it in a different way than they would have a couple decades ago. Even the fact that Tina Satter has one of the most successful off-Broadway shows this season with [Is This A Room](#) is telling about where an audience's taste is moving right now—or was moving before the COVID-19 situation.

**Does the intention of experimentation have to be put into an experimental genre box for audiences?**

I think that's shifting, even in popular music. For me, music is always a barometer for public opinion. An artist like [Lil Uzi Vert](#) being one of the most popular young rappers right now is exciting because it's showing the audience for pop music wants illegibility more so than they want what [Camilla Cabello](#) is saying—and that's not to say what Camilla Cabello is singing is very simple. But it does mean that there seems to be a lot more energy around someone like Lil Uzi Vert who has the type of lyricism and the flights of fancy in who he decides to

associate himself with that are wildly more experimental than anything else you hear on a pop station.

**You co-wrote the movie *Zola*, signed a deal with HBO, and are a co-producer of *Euphoria*. You've clearly branched out to other types of writing, but what was it about theater that drew your attention first?**

I've always enjoyed the thrill that I got doing theater. Growing up, I had a lot of anxiety disorders. The only space of expression where I didn't feel those anxieties well up and disable me were when I was doing theater. My main source of medicine or treatment for the anxieties that were crippling me in every other part of my day was when I'd step out on a stage. I've always been chasing that drug and wanted to be a part of it, a figure inside of it because it gripped my imagination in a litany of ways.

**How do you make sure that you keep true to your voice while working on different projects?**

The biggest thing I can do for myself is protect my light in whatever way I can. But if for some reason I get away from my voice, I have to also give myself grace in remembering that a lot of my favorite writers got away from their voice for whatever reason at different points in their careers. Kanye West was one of my favorite artists ever, and I talk about him all the time. People constantly say, "He's so conservative now, blah, blah." I'm like, "You obviously haven't read enough about transgressive artists and what happens in the mid- to late-career transition." Many of those artists get away from their voice and start engaging with conservative ideas. Look at Bob Dylan as a great example of that. He took a left, and immediately was like, "I'm Christian now, and here's what I think." That was around the same moment for him as it is for Kanye right now. There's something about the maturation of artists that I find really interesting.

**What other rewards do you earn from your creative practice, and what has it taught you about yourself?**

One of the main things I've gotten out of this work is the community that comes from being a theater-maker. There are very few jobs where you have to actually sit in a room in conversation with your collaborators for weeks on end. Every time I do a new project my circle gets bigger. It's really exhilarating to me. That's all I've ever wanted.

**What is the trait that you most enjoy about the way that you work?**

A lot of people have said they admire some semblance of bravery that they see inside of the work I do, and my disinterest in what people might think of what I've written. I don't ascribe that to any sort of bravery, but I do ascribe that to my many years of not being treated for multiple things, having to walk through the world feeling different, and articulating that difference unabashedly in order to try to get the help or resources I needed.

When I don't like the writing I'm doing, I feel like Jeremy the writer is wanting to hide something for Jeremy the person. That can manifest itself because Jeremy the person doesn't want to be embarrassed that maybe they aren't as good at writing as other people want them to be, which is an anxiety that every writer has, especially a writer that has success early.

You constantly have some imposter syndrome. You think, "I'm not supposed to be here! Any move I make will reveal the mistake of this entire enterprise!" That's the main thing that I try and stamp out as a writer because what I like about myself is that most of the plays I have written, I wasn't writing thinking that I was a genius or that anyone else would say I was a genius. I was writing because that was what I wanted to see. I wrote down what I wanted to see unabashedly, and I didn't worry about whether an audience would be shocked by this thing or that. If I don't want to see the play I'm writing, there's literally no reason for it to exist, which is one of the hard things about being a writer.

**How has the experience of COVID-19 altered your perception of the physical space of a theater?**

Assembly is very difficult for artists and audiences right now, and it is probably going to be difficult for a

significant amount of time. I don't know about you, but I don't see myself wanting to go sit around 600 people, or even 20 other people, anytime soon.

I've been very loudly in a camp of artists saying this is a moment for us to actually reflect on the future of our industry, to look at this as the opportunity to reframe our understanding of what theater is. That's why I don't feel any pull to make some wild proclamation around what makes a theatrical event necessarily theatrical. That has shifted in history multiple times, and we're in a moment that necessitates a shift if we want the idea of theater-making to exist. It might have to become some hybrid; maybe theater becomes hosting a meeting with seven other people in *World of Warcraft*. There are opportunities here for what theater can be that are outside of a building. I don't want to limit my own imagination of what it can be by telling myself that I have to keep thinking about what theater has been.

**I was so moved by the Blackout performances that you organized for *Slave Play*. It embraces theater, while making it a space that adapts for people who may not have felt welcomed or represented.**

We can talk about all the ways that theater is not welcoming racially or class-wise, but the fact that theaters have so few seats dedicated to those with disabilities is insane. That means that if you're a disabled patron who also has a full-time job and can only go see a play on Thursday February 20th, you have to hope that you are one of three disabled people who want to see that show that night, and not one of six—because if you're one of six, you probably aren't getting a seat. What happens for that patron who wants to see *Slave Play* but couldn't go the one night that there was an available seat for a disabled person?

I'm thinking about how we can look at this moment when no one can get to the theater as a way to make a theatrical experience over the next 40 years that is more welcoming to people who are disabled, or people whose bodies generally just don't fit in the seats that are very small and very impractical for most bodies. My body feels uncomfortable in theater seats because I'm 6'5". There will most likely come a time when my knees won't be able to take going to a theater six nights a week, and I'm going to have to figure something else out.

**Has your vision of making a change in art shifted since you first started writing?**

If anything shifted, it's my naiveté that those shifts could happen quickly, or that people would be super receptive to those shifts. I was naïve in thinking that a lot of the issues were that the right people hadn't said the right things yet. A lot of people have been saying these things. It just takes a lot to get people to listen. I'm seeing that every day, and it's draining to ask people to listen. I wasn't ready for how draining it could be. People listen more the more you succeed.

**So how do you define success?**

There are all these different markers of success. *Slave Play* hasn't won any significant awards, but my plays have gotten the type of attention that very few 30-year-olds get for their debut plays. People take notice of that. When you tell people you're going to do a play on Broadway, without celebrities, and actually ask young people, black people, and queer people to come see your play, they might laugh. But when they see it work, they think, "Maybe we should listen more." Those little successes are what make people take note of what you have to say. One thing that I think is a marker of success is the fact that I'm able to take care of my family in some way. Another marker of success is that I'm happy sometimes. I think that's a good thing. Markers of success are difficult because they mutate constantly.

**How quickly does your creative process take shape?**

Normally, having a title makes the idea start to form really quickly. But then the maturation of that formed idea takes months and months of reading and talking to people. I love to tell people my ideas, and watch them grow inside of their imagination. Before I even start writing, I'll go to my roommate, who's one of my drama teachers, and allow the idea to get bigger, and bigger, until the play is ready to burst out of me at the end. Then I go and write it down.

**Do you have any rituals around your writing that you have to stick to?**

I don't really shave while I'm writing. I'll shave when I'm done working on something big, but again, I don't always stick to that because life happens. Sometimes I have to go to an event or there's a photo shoot and I have to go shave. Or maybe my mom is coming to visit, and she's like, "I don't want to see you unshaved." You just have to be like, "Okay, mom."

I really hate being unshaved. I think I look so gross. But it's like, "I guess I'm just not going to shave this week, and maybe that'll give me some extra help to finish a scene."

**What is something you wish you had heard as a young playwright that could help as a resource for kids now?**

The biggest thing is knowing that you already have it. The thing you're looking for, the affirmation you're thinking that I might be able to give you in this quote—you already have it. The biggest thing about being a writer is you have to have a brazen overconfidence that you have the "thing," no matter how many people tell you you don't. The more you're able to believe that and move with that belief, the more honest your voice will be.

There's no professor that can tell you if you have it or not. There's no playwright who can tell you if you have it or not. The only one that can tell you that you have it is yourself, and so just remember that you do. Be fiercely protective of your autonomy as an artist.

If I didn't have my own gut instincts telling me that I was a worthy artist, then a play like *Slave Play* would have never happened. Going to a place like Yale School of Drama is a gauntlet. It's a lot of people telling you all the time that your work doesn't make sense, that your work isn't this, or your work isn't that. If I wouldn't have said I like my work the way it is, then *Slave Play* wouldn't have gone to Broadway.

**Jeremy O. Harris Recommends:**

Lemon (directed by Janicza Bravo)—Janicza is one of my favorite filmmakers and this stunning debut co-written by Brett Gelman is an achievement on par with the best Roy Andersson films.

A text chain with Tyler Mitchell, Kelsey Lu, and Moses Sumney—really been enjoying the discourse we've had here and it's been a highlight of quar.

Crunchyroll—streaming Madoka Magica, Neon Genesis Evangelion, Psycho-Pass, Attack on Titan, and My Hero Academia from the same place.

3 Hole Press—One of the best theatre presses around

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins—been rereading him a lot this quarantine.

Name

Jeremy O. Harris

Vocation

playwright, screenwriter, actor

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Quil Lemons