

On interrogating yourself and your work



Playwright Lucas Baisch discusses holding a healthy dose of skepticism, the utility of discomfort, and the figure of the trickster.

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As told to Theadora Walsh, 1865 words.

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Your new play 404 Not Found spends time considering utopia. I'm wondering if you think of utopia as a hopeful prospect?

I'm going to sound like a loser for a second, but the etymological root of utopia translates to "no place." I learned that years ago and it demythologized a lot of what I assign as hope...the reaching towards something impossible. Because I work in theater, because I'm a playwright, asking myself to grapple with lofty ideas like the impossible or the unstageable is important when beginning a new project. What exactly is a world of betterment? Will we, as a public, ever be satiated? What sacrifice comes with that satiation? I think about this quote from [Roberto Bolaño](#) all the time, "We dreamed of utopia and woke up screaming."

Hope's always striving, it's always in relation to something that has not yet been actualized or come into existence.

Right. Hope presents you with your lack. Hope presents you with the thing that you're missing. So maybe, as an action, I find hope alongside loss can be generative, but utopia feels like a false target.

What makes you hopeful?

Playing games, being stupid. I don't know, finding new rhythms in my day to day, avoiding monotony, embarrassing myself, tripping over myself, making mistakes, meeting new people, eating new food, those kinds of things. Hope comes from a consistent relationship with the journey, the process, the trajectory, never landing in a place of stasis. Hope is welcoming the puzzle of time, enabling the Rubik's cube or the prismatic narrative so that you can be constantly turning, constantly seeking new perspectives. Otherwise, a kind of complacency is drafted. I feel like the reason I keep making work, and the thing that I seek in other people making work, is a defiance of an established status quo. Maybe that's a hopeful thing. Recognizing that there are new lines of logic to be extrapolated. I never want to feel like I'm ahead of a piece. And then when it comes to collaboration, *that's* the central tenet of making theater. It's what allows me to be artistically ambidextrous as a playwright. This form is at once a literary and performance-based art. Collaboration is the hinge there. Collaboration is the thing that alleviates me from being by myself, the prospect that excites me when I enter a rehearsal room.

What you're saying makes me think about a generative, non-reactionary opposition that opens up space. Do you think about that when you're making work?

I think that shows up in a few ways. Holding a healthy dose of skepticism is always good, and something I'd never want to release. That includes being skeptical of institutions, organizations, of myself. That shows up in my

writing too: characters arrive as trickster figures, preying on disruption as their central action, there to reorient.

Do you want to talk a little bit about the motif of the trickster and why it's important to you?

I read *Trickster Makes This World* by Lewis Hyde in grad school by way of my teacher Lisa D'Amour. It was formative for me because it mapped out the trickster archetype in early cultural mythology, but also left room for those tenets to be applied to contemporary figures, or even forms themselves, like theatre. A trickster methodology welcomes deviance—or any kind of transgression—as having a political reinforcement or existing as a measure of identity. That felt really resonant with me because there's so much ambiguity in my life (in my queerness, in an ethnic-cultural identity, in the shifting places I call home). The idea of the trickster is that they live at the boundary between the worldly and the otherworldly, between heaven, earth, and hell. They are figures that are constantly seeking tools for invention. I think of the coyote. I think of the monkey. I think of the raven. A lot of my understanding comes from indigenous folklore. But then I also think of stories like Rumpelstiltskin, or high fantasy lore, the troll under the bridge, witches, demons, Prometheus, Mephistopheles, and Doctor Faustus, people who are trying to barter or gamble to change the trajectory of events.

Are tricksters parasitic?

Not necessarily. I think they can be. Hyde claims they often fall into traps, have accidents, or come upon chance encounters. There is an innate resistance here to the pre-ordained. I think about Jean Genet as a trickster. He was very famously a thief. I think *The Maids* is one of the best plays ever written, harnessing the narrative tool of role play. Genet and his friends were obsessed with that news story of the Papin sisters who murdered their madame and her husband, and were then found naked in bed together. Maybe a theft of real life events and subsequent obfuscation of that reality can be considered parasitic. Maybe more writers should strive to be parasitic.

Maybe being parasitic introduces a new approach to need, to abetting lack and reaching towards hope. An experimental approach? How do you think about experimentation? Experimental theater?

Lately I've been thinking about artists who talk about experimental theater as this homogenous descriptor, but I'm often like, "What is the experiment and how are we engaging with it right now?" My relationship to time and space is so askew after the last four years, but that's thrilling because it has allowed things to burn and things to seed. The experimental thread I'm following in my own work might just be a consistent shifting of perception. In my everyday life, I am milling through all of these stimuli set against an intense economic instability. When I pair those things, memory gets really fraught. Time gets fragmented. Time as a concept is layered. It doesn't move in one direction. There's synchronicity in worlds that are impossible to map. I love that "not knowing." I love not knowing if I believe in god or if I think my synapses are mis-wired. It's jolting. Being able to replicate that dizzying feeling for an audience member is really special. The language I often use is that I hope to endear some audiences with a sense of bliss, but then I also wish to present them with their dread. These aren't mutually exclusive states of being.

No, they're directly tied. You arrive at bliss through dread. How do you make work without becoming overwhelmed?

Oh, I'm overwhelmed all the time. But I believe there's a generative state in which you can be overwhelmed versus pure nullification. There is something beautiful about acknowledging the feeling, and going, "Okay, what are the things I'm stunted by? How do I tame this feeling through the questions I'm trying to ask?"

You can use writing as a place to find answers to your own questions?

Yeah. That's often the pursuit when I'm sitting to write: how am I trying to coax out the things that make me uncomfortable, or embarrassed, or terrified? That's actually a common exercise in contemporary playwrighting—to write from a place of fear. Many writers follow that tradition. Lately, I'm thinking more about embarrassment and pity.

That's interesting. Do you think you're afraid of embarrassment and pity?

No, they're just things I feel often. I have a lot of social anxiety. And I think because of the state of the world and its impact on performing arts I've felt a lot of self-pity in the last couple of years. I want to shake out of that, so part of the task involves understanding how I relate to pity. I'm reading all these texts trying to diagnose it, though it's so subjective, of course. Scholars use such funny systems of evaluation. I think Barthes first compared pathos to compassion and then settled on it being a distancing technique, which I talk about in the interview at the end of *404 Not Found*. I think I'm invigorated by the question, "What is the power we wield in pitying something?"

How does this recent play explore pity?

I've been working on this play for three and a half years. The root of it lives in my own strange feelings of comfort I find in abject circumstances. I've always found horror movies really cathartic, and as a result the play features Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise as a central character. I've had this relationship with Freddy since I was six years old—my older brother and his friend showed me the movie. I was mortified.

Let's learn about your relationship to Freddy Krueger.

It's so fucked. In 2020 I was having a particularly hard time sleeping, though I've navigated these bouts of insomnia my whole adult life. At the beginning of the pandemic I started having these dreams about Freddy, which I had had when I was very young. He was arriving in my subconscious so frequently that I eventually made a deal with him. I was like, "You can live in my dreamscape, but you can't hurt me." I have distinct memories of always looking at his feet because I was so scared of his face. So zoom back to the early pandemic days and this was all resurfacing. My therapist was like, "You should write about this." And I said, "Okay."

That feels related to what you were saying earlier about discomfort, and how adjusting perspectives lets you modulate your relationship with brutality.

Totally. It's the delight of director Wes Craven's *Elm Street* movies. There are nine films in total, and they oscillate from being legitimately terrifying to incredibly campy. Over the years these movies were being made, Freddy becomes a cartoonish figure and the political goings-on of the world resurrect themselves in such goofy ways. I remember in one movie a kid smokes too much pot and gets slashed up — a real Reagan remnant. So as I wrote while rewatching the franchise, I was able to cartoonify this experience of fear. The play mostly consists of monologues. I think in one breath, there's an attempt to strategize over, "How do I talk about violence in theater without replicating it?" But then really grappling with the horrors of the world, I think there's a lot of power to talking about punitive onstage. Shame, embarrassment, pity—it all lives in the psychic landscape of the viewer. This can be a hard confrontation, but I think it's also a deeply personal one.

Does *404 Not Found* end with bliss?

It offers a fake utopia. It offers a notion of escape. But, it also offers a time loop that's forever revolving: an exposure to the constructions of time we've built in order to distract ourselves, to appease our shortcomings, to save us from ourselves. This awareness, of the destructive and the negligent, is probably what helps me escape my own ego.

Lucas Baisch recommends

Walter Scott's Wendy graphic novel series.

Dalia Taha's play Fireworks.

Professionals of Hope: The Selected Writings of Subcomandante Marcos.

Wong Kar-wai's 1997 film Happy Together.

Spend some time writing with your non-dominant hand.

Name

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Vocation

playwright

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Haley Schwartz