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As told to Max Freedman, 2841 words.

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On surprising yourself

Theater director and filmmaker Morgan Green discusses moving on to new adventures, the power of collaboration, and being goofy in your artistic work. You're a filmmaker, and you're a co-artistic director at The Wilma Theater. Can you talk about your path, any unusual steps you've taken, and any lessons you've learned along the way?

I started in theater and discovered filmmaking kind of recently. I was an actor as a kid. In undergrad, I took a directing class, and my professor wasn't full of compliments, but she told me I had an eye. And that was kind of it. That was enough to encourage me to pursue this.

It was thrilling that I could do theater but not have to be on stage because I always got so nervous acting. I started a small theater company in Brooklyn with two of my classmates, and the three of us made work together. The first show we did, there was no director. We all created and performed in it, and I truly don't think I've worked on anything as hard as that first piece we made. That led to a bunch more self-producing opportunities.

That theater company was called New Saloon. Eventually, I started to direct work with New Saloon and not act in it. I started to get other directing opportunities, did a lot of assistant directing, then got the call to come [to the Wilma] after all of that.

New Saloon doesn't exist anymore. Do you retrospectively view it as a success or a failure, and what do those notions mean to you?

I view it as a success. It was some of the most exciting creative years of my life so far. We were making so much work so fast because we were having a lot of success and opportunities. I was also working at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] as an arts administrator. The three of us—Madeline Wise, who's an actor, and Milo Cramer, who's a playwright and performer—would see shows at BAM for free all the time. We would use the rehearsal space for free because part of my job was to schedule [it]. We had this constant loop of new inspiration and things to respond to. It was incredibly exciting.

We worked together for 10 years, and it had a natural ending. We just decided to call it. Maddie has been working more in film and TV, and Milo's in San Diego in grad school. I ended up going to film school, then coming here. We all went our separate ways naturally, but we made work together for 10 years, so it was a good run.

I don't think that theater companies need to last forever. I like the idea 13P had, where they had a planned implosion date, so they knew the whole time they existed when they were going to be done.

I'd be curious to hear more about what draws you to that.

Things can get stale. You need some kind of rejuvenation, whether it's new people, new location, new I-don't-know. But the other thing is that it's just really hard, because the work we were making, some of it was devised work. Some of it, we were creating from scratch, or deconstructing existing texts. It takes so much energy and labor to make that kind of theater. When you're not getting paid much, you only have so much stamina for that while still being able to be kind to each other. I just don't know that that's a forever dynamic.

How did you all know it was time to move on to new things, and did you already have plans to move on before you realized it was time?

We made this piece called *Minor Character*, which ended up going to the public theater at the Under the Radar Festival, and then it went to a theater in Connecticut called the Sharon Playhouse. It was this big culmination of years of work and collaboration, and we worked so hard on it, and we were really proud of this piece. When it was done, it was kind of like, "Do we have the energy to dig [into] the bottom of our souls and figure out what we want to do next?" The answer was kind of no at that time with that group. It was peaceful, and we got out before anything bad happened. [We ended the] relationship at the right time.

I didn't know what was next. I was working as a freelance theater director, so I was piecing my life together between regional shows, a few opportunities in New York, and undergraduate guest artist work. I was doing the circuit of all the schools, but suddenly, I had this space open up, this artistic space that used to be New Saloon. Maddie was doing film and TV, and a bunch of my friends who are playwrights were writing in writer's rooms. I was like, "I want to do that too. How do I do that?"

The leap from theater director to film and TV director is more difficult in some ways because you have to learn a new language. I was a theater kid, so I had a big learning curve, and I ended up going to Brooklyn College, the Feirstein School of Cinema, which is in the Navy Yard right on Steiner Studios in Brooklyn. I met incredible people there, made a handful of films, and fell in love with the process and being on set. I can't wait to make another movie now.

How does your creative process differ when you're capturing something permanently with a film versus ephemerally, for different audiences each time, with a stage production?

In a theater rehearsal process, the fun is experimentation and discovery. You're always trying new things. You have a million ideas that you throw out. That's the joy of it. Once it opens, the show belongs to the actors, and as a director, you step back, and they get to run with it.

In film, your creative process needs to happen in the preparation before you get to set. You have so little time on set, and all the details have to be prepared and come together. You can't be searching for a prop or uncertain about a lighting look. You need to know what you're trying to achieve. All of the dreaming, research, and location scouting [are] where the creativity happens ahead of the filming date. Then, you get there and you're kind of in this animalistic mode. You just have to get it. You just have to know what you're doing. You have to know all the answers to all the questions because you're so deeply enmeshed in the story. And then, you get to edit it, which is rewriting the whole thing again, and then you lock it. What you end up having is incredibly intentional.

You can't compete with the magic of live performance. I still believe in that, but as a director, there's something really thrilling about capturing a film that's locked forever as what you were trying to make.

In your official bio, you say that you celebrate goofiness and surprise. How and why have these values powered your creativity over the years?

I'm a pretty serious person, so in a way, putting that in my bio is a reminder to myself that those elements are important to me. I always use humor to try to do something. You can discover a lot through just being goofy.

Surprise, to me, is an essential element in theater because you're going to a live performance so you can have an unexpected experience that shifts you out of your norm and makes you view your own life, or the world, with a different perspective. When I sit down and see a play, I love to be surprised. I don't want what I think is going to happen, to happen. I want it to be smarter than me and catch me [off-guard].

This all makes me wonder, how much do you keep the audience in mind when you're directing, if at all?

I think of myself as an audience. I'm watching the rehearsal, I'm watching the play. I'm the audience. Whatever is funny to me, I hope will be funny to them. Whatever is beautiful to me, I hope will be beautiful to them. When you get the audience in there, they confirm or deny that you were right about what would be received. I'm not trying to please the audience. I'm trying to please myself, and that's the guiding light.

Is there ever that self-critical voice in your head that, if you come up with something you think is funny or good, says, "This isn't actually funny or good, it's just me who thinks this"?

Yes. I'm incredibly critical. I think you have to be critical to be a director. Some days, I'll think something is funny, and then, I'll be in a different mood and it's no longer funny. I have to have a high bar for what I think will stay in the play. I also have to remember that the audience is seeing whatever they're seeing for the first time, and they may not know anything about what they're seeing. I have to sometimes make myself kind of stupid to receive it, like I have a fresh brain. That's something I think about a lot.

I just went to see *School Pictures*, which is a solo show written and performed by Milo Cramer [and directed by me] at Playwrights Horizons, and I thought the play got so much better without me after I left. It's a solo show, so it's really all in Milo, but it was built on the foundation we created together and on the choices I made as director. It was an amazing experience to come back and see it. It's almost like a different show. It was so good. The timing was so good. Milo had built this whole dynamic relationship with the audience and shifted the pacing throughout. That was a thrill, but I think that's unique to my collaboration with Milo because we have known each other for so long and worked together so closely for so long.

A lot of creative people I speak with do some of their work alone, whereas I'm guessing you do most, maybe all, of your work with people. To you, what are the pros of collaboration? What are the cons?

I think more brains are better than one. The thinking power of a group of people is incredible, [specifically a] group of people whose creativity, inspiration, and impulses compliment or provoke each other. You can make magic with the chemistry of different people's brains together.

When I'm forming my design team, I'm kind of painting with people. I'm like, "This person's brain will do a funny electric shock to this person's brain. Let's see what happens." I find [collaboration] really enjoyable. As a director, I try to encourage a lot of collaboration with my design team [and] cast, and...it doesn't have to be only my ideas that we move forward with. It's something we're finding collectively.

When the pandemic started, I had the crushing realization that I had no way of being creative without other people. I lost my entire identity and sense of self because I couldn't be collaborative, because we were all locked up. The surprising benefit that came out of this is that I started writing because that's something you can do by yourself, and I had never been brave enough to write anything [before]. I like to write, but I hadn't written—a play seemed terrifying because it could be anything. The formatting could be anything.

Once I was in film school and discovered screenwriting, which is highly formatted and really about describing images—which is what I do as a director, create moving images and storytelling—I was released. I felt like I could write screenplays, and I had a few cracks at it and got some positive feedback. I'm working on a feature with a co-writer, and I have another feature that I need to do a second draft of. This is a new thing for me that started in 2020 out of necessity.

I was in film school [during the pandemic]. Every week, I had to turn in homework, so I made these little video pieces, first on my phone, and then I got to rent a camera from the school, and my roommate and her boyfriend performed in [my video pieces]. Every week, I had to make something, a response to an assignment. In that sense, I was forced to be creative. And then, I wrote a short screenplay that I filmed in the park, and [I] gained confidence from that and started working on my thesis film, One More Time with Feeling, which premiered at the Raindance Festival in London [last] October.

In your five recommendations [below], you mention a piece by Lisa Fagan, who's going to be the choreographer for Hilma, the upcoming play you're directing, and you say she's one of your favorite artists. Was she one of your favorites, and then you approached her for collaboration? Or did she become one of your favorites through collaboration?

Lisa and I went to college together. She choreographed the first play I ever directed, and we've worked together since then. We've been friends since then. We also lived together, so it's a friendship-collaboration star cluster. Her work as a choreographer is really goofy, always amazing, and kind of incomprehensible in a way that delights me. I don't totally understand how her brain works, but I love what comes out of it. It's so unique. She's almost aggressive about being anti-cliche and...I strive to live up to [her] standards.

Going back to your official bio, there's a phrase in there about directing dinnertime. I sometimes think that my only creativity happens in the kitchen, so I want to hear more about this phrase from you.

I was attempting to show something of myself, who I am. I like to organize people, events, and things. I love to plan. I love to make a grocery list, go grocery shopping, make a big dinner for a bunch of people, or cook with other people. It's very joyful for me and satisfying.

One thing I really like about cooking is that it's creative. Besides the fact that I love food, it's creative in a way that limits distraction. You can't do 10 things at the same time while you're cooking. You have to focus on what you're doing. I find, in this world, so many distractions constantly that I sometimes struggle to do that. It's relaxing to just be cooking. When I'm directing, I feel similarly. I can't direct while I'm thinking about something else or multitasking. I have to give my full presence, and it demands so much of me. That's why I included dinnertime as one of the things I direct.

Morgan Green recommends:

The new movie Past Lives written and directed by Celine Song. This is the stunning film debut of a playwright named Celine Song. I saw the movie with a friend and we both sat weeping together, immobile, as the credits rolled. I love how the cities of Seoul and New York feel like characters and the story holds complex shades of gray, how joy and pain always exist together. I would love to make a movie like this someday!

Choreographer and performer Lisa Fagan will premiere her new show in March 2025 as a Live Feed commissioned work at New York Live Arts. Lisa's work is like Pina Bausch dance-theater (the Platonic Ideal) but add the internet + hallucinogens + midnight clowns. She is one of my favorite artists and will be the choreographer for HILMA which will premiere at the Wilma in Philly in June.

The Quintet of the Astonished. Bill Viola. I took myself on a solo art date to the retrospective of his work at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2019 and this piece has been a frequent reference for me ever since.

Whack World is a visual album by Philly-native Tierra Whack. I love the economy of each visual idea and her sense of humor and the music.

My Mama and the Full-Scale Invasion is an important piece of docutheater which showed at The Wilma Theater Jan 30-Feb 18, written by the Ukrainian playwright Sasha Denisova and directed by Yury Urnov. I don't always believe that theater can "make a difference" in a concrete way, but after watching the joy restored to our community by *Fat Hamby* James Ijames and seeing the first production of *Mama*, a highly political piece, at The Woolly Mammoth in D.C., I'm feeling optimistic about the art form to move and activate our theater-going community.

Name

Morgan Green

Vocation

theater director and filmmaker

Fact

Vicente de Paulo

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