

# On getting comfortable with the interests that freak you out



Ventriloquist and actor Sophie Becker discusses being self-taught, avoiding competitiveness as a virtue, and embracing a craft that, at first, creeped her out.

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As told to Clare Schneider, 1966 words.

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**Let's just start with you and Jerry's meet-cute.**

I got into Ventriloquism during COVID, but it was actually right before COVID when I joked that it'd be so fun to learn ventriloquism. I remember it was the last party I went to before the pandemic. At the party, I was with friends, and I was saying one of the first phrases you say with ventriloquism, which is, "I like to hike." It's an easy phrase where you don't use your mouth that much. We were all laughing about how actually kind of good I was at it.

Then Jerry and I met because I used to go line dancing in the East Village. While I was there, I met a guy named Nick. I was talking to Nick about how I got really into ventriloquism, and Nick was like, "There's a dummy in my closet. I'll lend it to you." Then I met Nick in East Village Park. He showed up to the park with this yellow suitcase, took Jerry out, and showed me how to use him.

**And then you just took him home?**

And then I took him home. But that day in the park, everyone was stopping to talk to Nick, Jerry, and me. I was like, "Oh my god, this is so magical." I think before, I was insecure about the fact that I was into something that was kind of weird or creepy. A lot of people called it creepy. That day was really affirming because when we were in the park, all these people kept coming up to us, and they were really curious about what it was because no one had seen ventriloquism in person, and it's so exciting to see.

**It's such a physical, technical skill. The illusion of speech requires such control when you're on stage. How do you know when you're getting better? What does practice look like?**

When I first learned, I lived upstate with my parents, and I would just walk down this road and talk to myself. No one knew that I was doing this because my lips weren't moving, and everyone was far enough away that no one would ever hear me.

It was kind of the perfect thing to learn. But it was also very private, because I feel embarrassed easily about practicing something where I don't want someone to see. I feel very protective of it. With ventriloquism, I didn't have to feel that protection because no one actually knew that I was practicing anything. It was like I was just walking down the street.

**How do you go about writing for you and Jerry?**

Our writing so far has been very personal—it'll be whatever's happening in my own life that's giving me anxiety or that I'm really excited about. Or something that I wish I was or wish that I could do. Like, I want to be a successful actor. So I made Jerry my manager.

Or maybe I'm feeling weird about my height. Jerry is the perfect person to make jokes about that with because he is incredibly short and I am incredibly tall.

**In a lot of your performances, you include some history of ventriloquism. Why is that significant to your work?**

I love talking about the history of ventriloquism because I think people look at ventriloquism and they have an immediate gut reaction. They're weird objects. There's something about the figure, and I get it.

There was this moment in the '70s and '80s when people made so much content and movies and shows about evil dummies and dolls. I call it anti-dummy propaganda. That's really what people think of when they think of dummies. But there's a whole history before that that's really fascinating. I mean, they were always pretty creepy. I think that's why people were attracted to them in the '50s. There used to be so many ventriloquists, but because of how media changed, now we are really dwindling.

**A dying art.**

Yeah, but it is also a fascinating art with a rich history. There are some amazing ventriloquists, and I think people think of bad ventriloquists when they think of ventriloquism, but the ones that are good are really exciting. When someone gets a dummy moving really well, it's so cool because you're really just a puppeteer who wants to share the spotlight. And so when the puppeteer is really good, it's amazing to watch.

**Do you have a community of ventriloquists?**

The community is so small, and when I started ventriloquism, five ventriloquists immediately added me on Instagram the second they saw Jerry Mahoney. It's also important to know that Jerry Mahoney is like an Elmo. Jerry Mahoney is a famous dummy. It's the dummy I have. But when I went to a ventriloquism convention in Kentucky, there were five other Jerry Mahoneys'. It's incredible, and I can't wait to go back. The community is really sweet and really, really supportive. When I started doing it, people reached out, and they were like, "I can't wait to see what you do." I was like, "Oh, this is my kind of person." I actually don't like competition that much. I would prefer being around people who are just really excited and that's what ventriloquists are like.

At the convention, I was having a drink at the bar, and this one guy was like, "Magicians are so cliquey. You're so lucky you're at the ventriloquism convention. You're so lucky you're a ventriloquist."

And then I went to a magic show recently, and it was all men, all very cool, suave. And I was like, "Oh, magicians learn magic to be cool, suave, and get girls to like them." And ventriloquists learn ventriloquism because they just want someone to talk to, and that's why they're so sweet. No wonder I learned how to do this during COVID in one of the loneliest times. It was the perfect thing. Now I have friends all the time. I never have to make friends again.

**Has your understanding of yourself as a performer and artist changed since you became a ventriloquist?**

Yeah, with Jerry I'm talking, but sometimes it feels like when your idea is outside of yourself and someone else is giving it to you, then it can feel more clear. You can be like, 'Oh, that's a bad idea,' or 'That's a good idea,' faster. Sometimes it just gives me more clarity in a way. Does that make sense?

**Yeah. When you practice with him, do you know what's working and what's not because of that externalization?**

Well, there's so much technical stuff in the writing process. Some words [or phrases], I just can't say.

**What's a word [or phrase] you can't say?**

"Bottle of beer." That's a classic one. But also, I think if we say something that ends up not being funny on stage, I'm like, "Oh, he said it." There's this thing where I don't have to take responsibility for my bad writing because I'm like, "He wrote that."

**He can be the embarrassing one.**

Exactly. And I think that has freed me from an insecurity that was maybe paralyzing before about performing, and also it just gets me on stage way more. I don't have to wait to get an audition or for someone to ask me to be in their project. I get to go on stage whenever I want. I was so envious of comedians for so long, not that I think of myself as a comedian, but I was so envious of comedians because they get to practice on stage all the time. They just get to practice being in front of people and feeling comfortable with it. That's what this has really allowed me to do, which is why I really like it. I think that it makes all of my work better because I'm just more comfortable, even though I'm still kind of hiding behind this doll.

**Sometimes in your performances, there's a sexual dynamic between the two of you. Where did that come from?**

Okay. I... *[laughs]*

**You're turning red. You're blushing.**

I'm blushing. It just happened so naturally. It's just so funny to me when Jerry flirts with me. I think part of it's because I'm trying to think of what the dynamic between a man and a woman is. I'm like, "What are those dynamics?" This is kind of the dynamic, typically. In my mind, Jerry's an old-fashioned man who loves beautiful women.

When I first started working with Jerry, I was newly single, and I think I was just like, "Great. Now I am this beautiful woman with this dummy." It felt really depressing and funny.

**To perform desire?**

To be like, this is what I have now. This three-foot wooden man who loves me.

**You often invite other artists to perform with you—you put on variety shows. What do you like about the variety show as a medium?**

You're trying something new and it's quick. If I go on stage and it's like maybe not the best show, it's just 10 minutes or 15 minutes, so the pressure's really low. Also, I like working with people who have very niche interests. The variety show lets me do that because who doesn't want to randomly watch a contortionist?

**How have you managed lulls in your creative work? Like times when you were either discouraged or bored?**

I think that ventriloquism was a response to a lull in work, because when COVID happened, I had just finished a play that I was happy about. Then COVID happened, and I was like, "Oh, I'm never going to be on stage again, and I'll never be on stage with someone else."

I also have lulls every time before I perform. I don't go out and I isolate myself, even if it's the smallest thing. Maybe it's not the right thing to do, but I kind of like it. I like being really quiet before I perform. And then I love that feeling of the release of all of that tension.

**Do you ever just hang out with Jerry?**

Weirdly, the only time I really do that is late at night when I get back from a party, then I'll be like, "Oh, Jerry, there you are."

**You're in the mood.**

There was a moment that I feel is important. When I got Jerry, he was in my room, and I was really freaked out by him. I hated that he was in a suitcase under my bed. I hated that he was in the room. My roommates wouldn't let him in the common space, so he had to be in my room and knowing that he was sitting in my closet staring into space—everything freaked me out about it for the first week.

Then one night, I got home after a couple of drinks, and I was like, "God, I just have got to pick this thing up." I was talking, I was just practicing. And his eyes move back and forth, and they're very uncanny. Then I just locked eyes with him, and I was like, "Oh, this isn't freaky anymore."

**Sophier Becker recommends:**

Vent Haven ventriloquism museum in Kentucky, and, if you're really committed, the amazing Vent Haven Convention.

Nina Conti's Her Master's Voice.

The Jim Henson Exhibition at the Museum of the Moving Image (And all of their other exhibits)

Watching (almost) any past Broadway show for free at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center <3

Taking a ferry

Name

Sophie Becker

Vocation

ventriloquist, actor

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