On working two full-time jobs without burning out

An interview with playwright and lawyer Mary Kathryn Nagle on how pursuing two careers is possible when you're passionate about the work.

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As told to Willa Köerner, 3142 words.

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You're both a lawyer and a playwright. How do these two different careers intersect and feed into each other?

I'm a partner at a law firm called Pipestern Law. We focus on the restoration and preservation of tribal sovereignty and jurisdictions, specifically (and most importantly) to protect tribal citizens, including Native American children, who suffer from some of the highest rates of violence in the country right now.

The work I do as a lawyer is very much at the core of the work I do as a playwright. The stories that I tell as a playwright are varied, and each play that I write is unique. And yet, when you get down to it, almost all of the plays I write do focus on legal issues—especially issues related to tribal sovereignty and justice.

How do you reconcile these two different roles? Did it take a while before you realized how connected they were?

In many ways, my two careers have been intertwined from the very beginning. I have always loved telling stories. Even as a kid, I used to make up stories and get my younger sisters to perform them with me. I was an actress from middle school all the way up through college. I wrote my first play in college, but then I went straight to law school.

At that age, becoming a professional playwright seemed much less obtainable than becoming a lawyer. When I got to law school, I felt like I was giving up on the idea that I could ever have a career as a playwright. Both tracks have different structures in place that you have to follow if you want to build a career in that field. And when you're just starting out, these elite power structures can make it very difficult to figure out how to climb the ladder and make it in that field.

Just looking at the landscape of getting a law degree versus becoming a playwright, the lawyer route looked a lot easier. You go out and you go to law school and you get a law degree. You pass the bar, and then you go practice law. But to be a successful playwright in the American theater, someone already in the American theater has to decide to produce your play, or you have to get an agent who wants to represent you.

In this way, you're more beholden to the decisions of a select number of gatekeepers. I just thought, "There's just no way I'm ever going to make it as a playwright. So I'm going to put my time and energy where it's going to best be used to help my people and tribal sovereignty, which is what my grandfathers fought for. I'm going to go be a lawyer."

I made that decision and I went to law school. Of course, I still loved to write stories. I ended up writing a play every year I was in law school, and even convinced my fellow law school classmates to produce one of them with me.

Producing a play in law school was such an impactful experience that when I graduated and went to work as a clerk at the United States District Court in the federal district of Nebraska, I ended up writing and producing another play there, too.

Since your careers as a lawyer and as a playwright are so intensely intertwined, do you feel like you're always working? How do you keep from burning out?

It's very much a challenge. This is something I'm trying to deal with every day. There are moments when the burnout is much more extreme than other times. As a playwright you can somewhat control the ebb and flow of work, because if a theater says to me, "We want to do the world premiere of your play on these dates. Does that work for you?" I get to say yes or no.

But when I'm representing a client and the other side files a motion against them, I don't get to say, "You know what? My schedule doesn't really work right now. Why don't we do this next month?" It's like, "No, no, no. We're doing it."

In the last few weeks I've been traveling all over the country workshopping three different plays of mine. It's such a blessing to be able to do that, but at the same time, we've been hammered at the law firm with several briefs that we have to write. I haven't slept much. The reality of doing both simultaneously is that there are days where I can have a normal work/life balance, and then there are days where I don't get to sleep

and it’s two full-time jobs that are pushing me to the extreme. It can be very extreme. I don’t recommend it for people who need to sleep.

Have you ever considered giving up one career or the other? A lot of people have their creative practice, which is what they really care about, and then they just do the day job to sustain that. For you, it seems like both things are equally important.

You know, I actually feel that if I didn’t write briefs, I don’t know how I’d write my plays. I love writing briefs. I don’t like not sleeping, but I do love writing briefs. There’s something very symbiotic about doing both for me. I actually think that my writing gets continuously stronger because I’m writing in both forms.

I think that any writer who is writing from an artistic sensibility really benefits from having to write in another form that is the creative form’s antithesis. If you’re writing poetry or screenplays or spoken word, to write something that is the antithesis of that form will actually make your creative work stronger.

In the same way, I love being a lawyer and I love being a playwright. I think they’re both very creative and require a lot of creative energy. I can’t imagine giving up one for the other.

The signing of the Treaty of New Echota in SOVEREIGNTY, featuring Major Ridge (Andrew Roa), John Ridge (Kalanie Queypo), and Elias Boudinot (Jake Hart)

How come you’re drawn to writing plays? Why not write a book?

I love writing plays because I find it easy to write what people say. I hear what people say in my head, and then I write it down. It just comes naturally to me. I really respect people who write books. That is quite the undertaking. I have at times assisted individuals writing fiction and non-fiction books, but I’ve never written one myself. For me, the writing just comes much more easily when I can be like, “Then this person says this, and then they say this, and then they say that.”

I am pretty bad at writing stage directions. Often when I get into the writing of a play, I forget to add in the stage directions. Some directors and actors don’t care much for stage directions, but others are obsessed with them, and if you don’t put them in they’re like, “Wait a second. When does the actor exit?” It’s like, “Well, the actor could exit when the dialog ends? Or, the actor could exit five pages later.” There are dramatic choices to be made. The script doesn’t need to tell us everything that needs to happen, every single second.

I think part of what makes theater so powerful is that it’s a collaborative artistic process. It isn’t just one artist saying, “Here’s my

manifestation of what this is." It is something that culminates in the contribution of many efforts and ideas and creative endeavors.

To me, that's very exciting. When you write a play, it starts with you, but that is just the beginning. When you get to see the final product with the set design and the lights and the sound and the actors, it's really amazing. It's always so much more than you could ever imagine.

When you're writing a play, how much of it is about your interest in the creative work itself, and how much of it is about the outcome, or about what someone viewing the play will take away from it?

It's both. That's the constant tension. I'm a very political player right now. I think every artist is political. If you truly believe that your art is not a political statement, then you're probably coming from a place of extreme privilege. For underrepresented voices, their work is always going to be considered political because they've been silenced for a political reason.

Anyways, that's my whole thing. I acknowledge that my work is political. Some critics or some folks in the theater world might say that makes it less artistic. I think that's a joke, because Shakespeare is political, right?

The power of theater is that you're making a point, but you're making it through a human experience, which can transfer emotion and feelings much more powerfully than what's possible with most other forms of writing. Take a legal brief for instance. I can argue until I'm blue in the face about why a tribal court inherently has jurisdiction over its citizens from non-Indians who come onto the tribal lands and rape Native women on those lands.

When I write a play about this, the audience has to encounter the humans who are living in this world and experiencing these realities. In a brief, you're just not going to strike that core emotion that you can get through theater.

How does your creative process tend to unfold? Does it feel natural, or do you feel like you're always forcing it out of yourself?

When I'm writing a play, I usually start by laying out all the political points and plot points in a first draft. I just vomit it all in there. Then I go back and I say, "Okay, what are the personal relationships? What is the personal journey of the character that we're following?"

I need to know what the political context is before I can see the narrative unfolding. But then I go back in, and instead of hitting everyone over the head with politics, politics, politics, I figure out where I can make the story feel personal. And it is always personal. I just find I have to write the political first.

That's kind of how I approach it. It just means that I do a lot of revisions. Rewrites are everything to me. Rough drafts are really dirty and painful because I look at them and I'm like, "This is horrible writing."

Every play that I write starts off by me forcing it. But then there's that moment where all of a sudden it just switches, and it suddenly becomes a natural process. I can't predict when this moment will arise, or how it will come about. A lot of times it happens after I've been able to sit in a room with actors and community leaders, because whenever I write it inevitably seems to be a story that's stemming from a particular community.

For instance, I'm working on an adaptation of Charles Redcorn's book *A Pipe For February*, which is about his family's survival of the Osage murders in the 1920s. This play is a commission I have from the Yale Repertory Theater.

This last weekend we were workshopping it at Yale. For the first time, I finally got to sit in a room with actors who read the words out loud. And, the Redcorn family was there in the room. With everyone together, all of a sudden I felt the play in a way that I hadn't felt before.

When I write in isolation, I'm approaching everything much more in my head, and from a more intellectual perspective. But when I get into the room with the actors and a director and a dramaturg—and then the family whose story we're telling—everything starts to shift. To me, everything starts to happen much more organically. I don't know how to explain it. It's just like it all goes into alignment.

Final scene of SOVEREIGNTY, at the Ridge/Watie/Polson Cemetery just outside of Jay, Oklahoma, featuring Jim Ross (Jake Waid) and Sarah Ridge Polson (Kyla Garcia)

So with a new play, you take it into a workshop like that knowing that whatever happens in the room could cause the entire play to completely shift around?

Yes. I'm a huge rewriter. In fact, I frequently break printers at theaters. We were workshopping a play at the Kennedy Center a few weeks ago. After the first read-through, I went home and rewrote, I don't know, maybe 60% of it. We had to reprint the entire script before we started rehearsal the next day. I sent the rewritten script at 7 A.M., and when I get there at 9 A.M., they were like, "We broke the printer trying to print your script."

With so much rewriting, how do you know when a play is done?

I don't think any of my plays are done right now.

Even the ones that have already been performed?

Well, yeah. I've never had a second production. I've had four plays professionally produced. As of right now, none of those plays are slotted for second productions. I'm still rewriting them all.

I've talked to other playwrights who have been fortunate enough to have second, third, fourth and more productions of their plays. I had a really great conversation recently with Karen Zacharias and I asked, "What's the magic number of productions to really finish writing a play?" She said for her, it was the fourth production. You learn so much in the first production of your play. Truly she felt that by the time you get to the fourth production, that's when your play can really be finalized. So yeah, I have a little ways to go before I'm going to finish a play.

These days, lot of people want to make politically and socially engaged creative work. Do you have any advice for them?

For people working in the theater world, I would say: write about the thing that keeps you up at night. Write about the thing that makes you burn with anger, or with passion, because that's what resonates with you.

When you write about it, think about who—whether it's you or someone you know personally—is the most impacted by it. Really think about whose story you're really sharing, and when you can truly tell the story from that person's perspective, that's when you have something really powerful.

Do you have advice for other people looking to balance their creative work with another time-intensive job?

Time management is key. Just make a plan and stick to it. When I'm working on a play, I'm not loosey goosey with my time. I'm very intentional. Sometimes things get out of control, but if I'm writing a play, I figure out when the deadline for the draft is, I figure out what I'm writing, and I outline it. Then I make little deadlines so that I'm accomplishing something every day.

I do the same thing when I'm writing a brief. If I'm writing a play or a brief, which I will do for an hour or two uninterrupted, I don't answer emails. You can't be answering emails and writing at the same time.

Then sometimes I'll be like, "Okay, these are the two hours a day where I'm just going to get through the emails," because as a lawyer all people do is just email, email, email. I could sit here and just answer email all day and then not get anything done. Everything is a balance and you have to draw boundary lines.

I think the tough thing, too, is knowing that the more you become in demand, you're just not going to be able to do everything that's presented to you. For me, the real challenge has been saying no—especially at the law firm. We get a lot of requests for people who want us to do work for free. I think we're very blessed that at Pipestern Law we get to do a lot of pro bono work. But we can't do everything. It's actually very heartbreaking to tell people no.

Now as a playwright, I'm getting asked to come and do a lot of speaking engagements at universities and workshops. For me, that work for me is so inspiring and invigorating, but I literally can't be everywhere at once.

Just be intentional with your time and don't get caught up in the stress of both careers. Really make time for yourself to exercise, and to feed your soul and your spirit. If you approach it as, "I have these two things I have to do full-time," and you just decided to accept the stress narrative—that it's just too stressful and overwhelming to do both at the same time—then both are going to suffer.

You have to still enjoy life. If you're not enjoying life then you shouldn't be doing both.

If you could go back in time, to about five years ago, what advice would you give to your past self?

I would tell myself to never give up. Five years ago, no one was producing my plays. No one was commissioning me. Honestly, I never thought anyone would commission me or that anyone would professionally produce my plays. Now I'm becoming very produced and very commissioned and that's lovely.

I didn't give up. I kept going and I kept trying and I kept submitting my plays and I kept writing. There were a lot of moments when I was like, "Should I be doing this? This is crazy. This is just a pie in the sky dream that I should give up." I know the me from five years ago was really close to quitting.

Being a playwright or an actor—or really being anyone in theater—is so full of rejection. It's really hard to keep going at times. My advice to me five years ago would be to further encourage the "don't give up, keep going" mentality. Because after hundreds of rejections comes a really big-deal acceptance. Then you're going to get more rejections. But then you'll get another really big-deal acceptance. And you'll just keep going from there.

Mary Kathryn Nagle recommends:

· DeLanna Studi's play, *And So We Walked*

· Kalyn Fay's album, *Bible Belt*

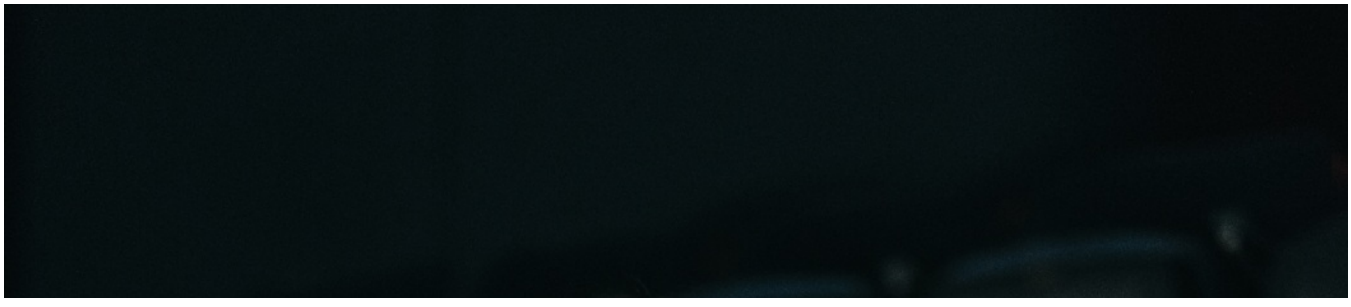
· Anything designed by Bethany Yellowtail

· The incredible baskets created by Cherokee artist Shan Goshorn

· Any play that Sheila Tousey performs in

Name
Mary Kathryn Nagle

Vocation
Lawyer, Playwright



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