On not being afraid to change your process

Actor and writer Tavi Gevinson discusses the pros and cons of urgency, how different creative outlets divide and overlap, and being ok when something doesn't come together.

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As told to Rona Akbari, 2566 words.

Tags: <u>Writing</u>, <u>Acting</u>, <u>Process</u>, <u>Collaboration</u>, <u>Time management</u>, <u>Inspiration</u>.

Do you ever feel like it's hard to separate your cultural criticism from your performance and art?

I don't consider myself a critic-I think I'm too compromised as an actor-but I do think cultural criticism has a place in some of my writing. Last year, <u>I wrote this essay that was partly about the Britney Spears documentary</u>. I used it to critique an argument that is older and bigger than that one doc, I used personal experience to contextualize my emotional response, and I used other sources to support my counter-argument. All that context mattered to me because I like cultural criticism that doesn't ask if a work is good or bad but finds the connections among the writer, the subject, and the world they inhabit. Even in a review of a play, <u>Hilton Als</u> might include stuff about the playwright's upbringing, plus a piece of his own history that informed how he watched it.

I've been working on the same book since I was 19 and there is this tension, like, do I use analysis and cultural context to give some personal experience greater meaning, or do I care more about staying inside of how it felt on a visceral level? It's like the wider debate about whether critical theory and identity politics allow for the nuances of individual experience. I now think this is a false choice, in part from looking to writers who've incorporated that tension into their work, like Michael R. Jackson with *A Strange Loop* or Annie Ernaux with her memoirs. To me they illustrate that there is actually a fluid relationship between visceral experience and these social structures that architect our lives. I see that as a critical impulse that I want for myself.

Do you have any systems set up when it comes to writing?

My process has changed a lot over the years and I'm somewhat haunted by the idea that I've been doing it "wrong" or still haven't found what works for me, which seems like an attitude that I would benefit from getting rid of. It sets up just another way to be wrong at something.

I went through stages. I saw <u>Sheila Heti</u> speak on a panel years ago where she said, "Anytime you have the feeling *I need to write right now*, you just have to do it." For a while, I did that. I'd start a thought in my Notes App or as an email to a friend, to take the pressure of "writing" off. Then I found it easier to have a morning routine instead of constantly taking my temperature to see if I was "inspired." I'd tell myself to do just an hour or just 100 words and that was un-intimidating enough to get me started but I would always end up doing more. That taught me that it doesn't matter if you aren't "feeling it" at first, because *doing it* changes how you feel and changes you.

Also, I try to have a good relationship with procrastination instead of just thinking "that's bad, don't do that." I see it as warming up or working up an appetite. As long as I'm doing things that are restorative (like being outside) or tactile (like chores) or stimulating (like reading), and there is space for an idea to come into my mind and I'm not staring at a screen for too long (since writing entails staring at a screen for a really long time)—then it's necessary. Especially to break up the task of writing about your own life, which can make me feel detached from reality and solipsistic.

How do you hold yourself accountable to completing the project?

When you're writing about your own life, obviously, your understanding changes and your memories change or appear suddenly. I used to stress about having other commitments that break up my writing, but along with being things I really want to do, I think it's good they've slowed the process. I had been trying to get ahead of myself and know things I didn't know yet. They also force me to manage my time better, to just get started because I only have so many hours before I have to leave my house. And they cut me off, which is good for my sanity, for imposing a boundary, and makes me clearer when I go back to the writing the next day. I guess this answer is less about finishing stuff than accepting how long they can take.

I would love to talk more about your acting and your movie idea, which I really liked.

Right—you saw me perform a sort of one-woman-show where I talked about a script I wrote and then abandoned, about a friendship-triangle between a guy in a band, his younger girlfriend who wrote a successful memoir about high school, and his obsessive fan who is the girlfriend's age. I wrote it during the last year of *Rookie* when I was 21 I was feeling weird about my role, because the site was for teens but I needed to become an adult. I was also trying to make sense of times when I was treated like an adult, but would see kids get out of school, out on the street, and feel like I was still one of them. And also, the unique power fangirls have because of their youth, particularly over the artist characters who were aging out of their own subject matter.

I lost interest. A movie is so much work. It just seems not worth it unless you're really excited. And at some point, I was like, "Okay, that was a good exercise, but I don't need that to exist." I was pleased that it could exist in this other way, in my live show, where I could distill the script to its significance in my life and recontextualize it.

And you're okay with that?

Yeah. Most things just don't come to fruition.

And that's fine for you?

I don't think it would've been fine in the midst of me writing it. I had to envision it on a screen and in a camera and I pictured specific actors and it felt very real in my head. I think of it like when you're in college, you do all sorts of things that are not supposed to necessarily have advanced you professionally, but they're worth the exercises. They're also works of art on their own. Enough time has passed that I understand these projects where if I have some big ambition for them, and they go away somehow, I'm still always happy they happened. Or even if they unfolded and they weren't great. I still learned a lot.

Also, if you've ever had the chance to look at a writer's archives, it becomes pretty hard to deny the lopsided ratio between the many things that don't get published and the few that do and are really good. It sort of makes you reconfigure your idea of "fruition."

What is your relationship with like quitting things?

I need to go down with the sinking ship. Like with *Rookie*, we tried so many things to make it work. If I'm at a party, I will make sure it's gotten bad before I leave. I have bad FOMO. I have an easy time abandoning a book I'm in the middle of reading, or canceling plans. I think I can take my own temperature and if I'm really not in a

good place to be doing something, I don't do it. I've gotten all these extensions on my book, and now I'm so glad, because I had been rushing to conclusions about things.

I think the things you feel incredibly invested in putting out immediately, it's probably too soon. Any time I've ever felt that urgency around something, it was too soon. When a friend has written something, that's like, *here's the thing that'll fix me because it'll finally give some terrible experience purpose*, I'm inclined to believe that commodifying an experience and bringing an audience into the mix is probably the last thing they need.

Like commodifying your experiences for an audience in a moment of turmoil and high emotions.

Right. At the same time, that feeling of urgency knows you better than you know yourself. I felt a kind of urgency around publishing the Britney essay and I don't regret it. It's one of the things I've done that I'm happiest that I did. It's validating for people to affirm your reality and your experience. I guess it's just never uncomplicated.

What it's like to be an actor and on a set where it's someone else's vision and you're playing a role? Is there a room for your version of the narrative to happen?

I don't really have the bird's eye view that a director or show runner or writer or producers have, which is refreshing for me. I like not being in control all the time, as I am with my writing, and I agree with the philosophy that you don't need to know as much as you think you do in order to act.

There's a misguided cultural obsession with acting as this Herculean feat of research and transformation. I want to know what the circumstances are and the tone of the piece, but I've gotten myself in trouble when I've been too loyal to my preparation or so obsessed with "disappearing" that I am more focused on my own performance than I am on the other actors. Because I can't ultimately know if my performance "works," I also have my principles that I've cobbled together from people I've worked with and from acting books that didn't make me hate myself. You're acting according to principles, not doing an impression of the performance you "should" be giving.

As for my own version of the narrative, I don't intentionally try to shape the bigger story. You learn to make choices that are dynamic but that don't contradict what's written. I think that's just the difference between the writing on the page and the writing as it is performed.

You're talking about collaboration on set, collaboration on a stage, and obviously writing is famously very solitary—or it can be collaborative, too. What is your relationship with solitude?

I love it and I always need more of it. I think part of what makes it so pleasurable for me is knowing that at the end of the day, I can meet up with a friend or perform in whatever play I'm doing—I can put my attention on other people. That helps me feel like I can go to a hard place emotionally, with the writing, if I need to.

Acting has taught me how to surrender control when I am writing. Even if I'm alone, I feel as though there is some kind of force that is, to some extent, out of my control and is going to surprise me. Stephen Shore, I believe, said when you take a photo, you're not trying to construct anything. The photo already exists and you're just trying to reveal it.

Do you agree with that?

I think it depends on the kind of photography you're interested in. But I think when I'm writing, there's a lot of artifice and a lot of consciously made decisions and things that, if I were being more of a purist, might seem "inauthentic." But I do think what makes it more fun for me is feeling like whatever I'm working on already exists and it's giving me little clues as to how it wants to appear. Even when I'm putting together an outfit, I doubt something and then I'm like, *no, if those earrings came to mind, those are the earrings you wanted*. There are all sorts of things like that where I don't know if they're inherently meaningful, but if they affect me and they create a physical change inside of me, then they're real to me.

What's your relationship with digital spaces?

Where I'm at right now is that I think Instagram basically works best as a marketing tool, which could be my work or my friend's work or other things I think people should know about. I think it's kind of ludicrous to expect it to function as a nurturing creative space or a place where people behave authentically.

I check different Twitter accounts, basically, like they're blogs. I don't sign into Twitter and look at my feed. I think it makes me worse at things I want to be better at. And I have news sites I regularly read. And newsletters.

Do you ever watch YouTube videos?

I make video playlists for friends. I also love comment sections. I love paying attention to the way people try to express themselves online.

Why?

It tells me something about human behavior. I think playwrights I love like <u>Annie Baker</u> or <u>Anna Deavere Smith</u> are really specific about the way their characters speak. In Smith's case, recreating these interviews verbatim. Online, it's hard because I do think the effect of a lot of this technology is that everyone sounds more and more alike. But there are facets of human behavior that a comment section can offer insight into, especially if it's not people who are necessarily writers or who work in marketing or whose job it is to think about how words read. The comment section on *Rookie* was so fun. And before that, with my blog, it was sometimes really fun and sometimes made me feel really bad.

I think what helped me was being able to see it all as just human behavior. When I was a kid if a comment was negative, I thought it was the voice of god, the voice of some horrible truth. Now it's easier to frame things in a more grounded way. I want to be able to get the good out of the internet. I don't want to shut myself off.

Tavi Gevinson Recommends:

<u>*Theater for Beginners* by Richard Maxwell</u>. A slim, succinct yet capacious book about acting that is "more about being a person," as several non-actor friends have put it to me.

<u>"The Uses of the Erotic" by Audre Lorde</u>. She has a lot of writing about writing but this is the one that helped me see creative instincts as fluid with the unregulated feelings that make up the rest of your life.

<u>"Elements of Style" by Suzan-Lori Parks</u>. For the form as much as the content. It just makes me want to make stuff.

<u>"Memory, Creation, and Writing" by Toni Morrison</u>. "Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way."

<u>"Why I Write" by Joy Williams</u>, from her essay collection *Ill Nature*. "The writer doesn't write for the reader. He doesn't write for himself, either. He writes to serve…something. Somethingness. The somethingness that is sheltered by the wings of nothingness—those exquisite, enveloping, protecting wings."

<u>Name</u>
Tavi Gevinson

<u>Vocation</u>
actor and writer

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