

On the power of simply doing it



Actor, writer, director, and producer Arian Moayed (*Succession*, *Miss Marvel*, *Inventing Anna*) discusses embracing complex roles, the importance of timing, and fighting for the truth.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2601 words.

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How precious are you about your free time and your time off?

To be honest, there are so many moving parts, with the nonprofit, acting, writing, directing, producing. There are a lot of things that are happening at that level. Essentially, my schedule is to an inch of its life. We have a lot of things going on at the nonprofit, and I like to keep it busy. I consider myself more on the artist producer route than an actor. I would say 10 to 20% of my existence is thinking about acting, and the rest of it's full of the work that we make and have created for almost 20 years.

I've dedicated my life to making sure that art and art education are at the forefront of what I can contribute to the world. I really genuinely believe that theater making and educating the masses about the power of theater can genuinely change lives. Along the way, I've also been an actor and also I'm an immigrant from Iran.

Speaking of your heritage, do you feel like your upbringing reinforced that passion?

We moved to a north suburb [of Chicago] in this neighborhood called Unincorporated Northbrook. It's a poor neighborhood of basically Black and brown people, and immigrants, that live on the other side of the highway but have access to all these amazing public schools on the North side of Chicago. There was a real calling that started happening then. Being Iranian, that goes into the hard work as well. I do believe that hard work and love can conquer a lot of things.

When you launched your nonprofit theater company, did you worry that the details of the business side would interfere with your creative mind and your passion for education?

Well, we formed Waterwell when we were 22, and I'm 42 now. And to be honest with you, we really had no idea what we were doing. Every time there was an obstacle, it's like, "Oh, you have to be a nonprofit." We're like, "Okay. We'll apply to be a nonprofit." And so we became a nonprofit by 2003. Every step of the way, we just kept on going with whatever the thing was, making mistakes, and then coming back and doing it again and again and again. Twenty years later we're a \$1.3 million nonprofit.

Waterwell's mission is to tackle these massive civic-minded questions in a very new way of art. We just premiered our first movie, which was a reenactment of the show that we did that was a hit called *The Courtroom*. We just premiered it at Tribeca on Thursday.

Some people will hear civic-minded and anti-racist work as a political experience first and foremost, but how do you ensure that the work you do simultaneously fulfills your creative mind?

From the beginning, we didn't want the work to be polemic. Our artistic director, Lee Sunday Evans, recently said that the organization is about community organizing, and she's right. Even though we didn't have those tools when we were 22, or even the words like you just used, anti-racist or civic-minded or socially conscious, we were developing what that meant to us. We were trying to figure out what that means.

I think the industry respected us and thought of us as community-oriented people—but it wasn't the taste of the time. Only now has history bent towards us, which we're grateful for. Now having that vocabulary and the tools that we have to talk about these things, I really feel like it's going to become actually *less* political. I have two daughters that are in school and I can feel that there is movement towards progress.

In a way, I don't think of [our work] as political. I think of it as human. This last show that we did, *The Courtroom*, is a perfect example. All this stuff was happening on the border in 2018, and I was in Chicago doing a play at Steppenwolf. My mom was watching the news and she was devastated by what was happening, devastated because of America, devastated for the kids. But she loves America for the opportunities that it had given all of us.

So, we asked the company, "What does a deportation look like?" We then got transcripts [of deportation court cases], and we found this one transcript of a 2007 case for this man by the name of Richard Hanus. We didn't change a single word. We just condensed it down, and performed it as *The Courtroom* in courtrooms all across New York City. The piece is not a liberal piece. It's not a conservative piece. Because it's the transcript, it's just the truth. You can take from it what you want. Now, all of a sudden we have a movie version of this in which everyone comes to the table and talks about it in a way that I think is really just more exciting because it's messy. That type of work is what actually makes me a better actor.

How does that work play into the way you choose roles?

I love characters that are completely complicated, messy, right and wrong at the same time. I just love them. I just believe in that type of nuance, because human beings are complex. When I was doing a show on Broadway called *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, I played an Iraqi translator to a US Marine. Immediately, you want him to be someone that you can follow, but he does some horrific things, too. I love that there was all of this messiness in Rajiv [Joseph's] play, and I like acting around that messy.

I've met messy people, but you play them in a way that still gives a sense of fantasy and escape!

You're nailing it on the head. All of these characters have this ability to be the dark side of us as well. It's a testament to the writing. In *Inventing Anna*, Shonda Rhimes' writing and her writing team can give us an opportunity to say to Anna Delvey, "Hey, shut the fuck up." But also, if you look at the argument that [my character's] making, he's like, "Your career? Who cares about your career? I'm talking about my career." It's a testament to the writing that I can lean into both those things. Same with Stewy [Hosseini, from *Succession*]. Stewy can be so honest. I genuinely believe he is one of the most honest players on that show, and that honesty comes with costs, and that means that he'll cut your throat if need be.

Even just within the role of Stewy, your ability to tap into reality, satire, and fiction all at the same time is impressive. Bringing that depth to a character on *Ms. Marvel* is such a pleasant surprise.

That show is so good. It's just so well designed, so well thought through, and so, again, complicated. But it's also a comic book. They're trying something new. They're showing Muslim culture in a way that's also really easy, because they're linked to the mosque again. [My character] Agent Cleary in that second episode—complicated—he's interrogating this poor lady, but also pissed off that this other agent is being really racist. Again, it's a testament to the writers that the character can do both these things.

Are there particular things you need to make sure that you get your job done, to feel like you've done a good enough job for the day?

I have a real tough time with lines. I think a lot of it is actually because I was in ESL [English as a Second Language] classes until fourth grade, and I could have used more help. It got me here obviously, but yeah, I have a real tough time with lines. For me, it's command. I'm desperately trying to get those babies down. That's the biggest hurdle for me. The other is just trying to find the humanity of it all. In *Succession* when early on, [Stewy] tells Logan Roy, like, "Everyone fucking hates you." There's a little bit of like, "I'm so sad to tell you this." But also, "Here's the facts." There's a little bit of that that I try to find inside of everything.

I love movies. I love old movies. I love new movies. I love TV shows. I'm obsessed. Now that I have kids, it's very hard to watch anything anymore. But the ones that I do watch, I do love. My parents watched were black and white movies that they grew up with, so I was watching a lot of Charlie Chaplain and Hitchcock, finding that stuff really funny. I try to put a little bit of that element into my work today. It's not like I'm doing slapstick, but I understand where the jokes can maybe land.

It's pacing and tone.

Which is music. One hundred thousand percent. Like with musicians, you could be looking at notes, but you're putting something else into it. When I was doing *Bengal Tiger*, I was also producing a show with Waterwell, I was on Broadway, my second baby was three months old, we were broke. It was like a shitbox, and inside of that shitbox was this real belief in this play, and I just loved what we were putting out there and the energy that we were putting out there. So many things were going on, but I was also starring opposite Robin Williams on Broadway. And sometimes at 7:30, I'd be still at my computer finishing a grant, and then running on stage. I was realizing I was not thinking, and then I'd come right at curtain being like, "Oh, fuck. I am so underprepared right now." Then I'd come out, just going off of emotions and feelings, because my brain is not thinking about anything. Now I know a better way of doing that, but I realized what's happening is this portion of my artistry when I'm on set or in a play or writing something, I just need to not think about it. It just needs to be the heart and the guts, the other chakra, as they say.

When I was a young writer, I didn't want anyone around me. I wanted to squirrel away into a hole. I wanted to have this solitary process. But now I've learned it doesn't have to be torturous.

Yeah. For actors, our craft is just to do it again and again, and you're going to get a shit ton of them wrong. I say this to our students at our school. I say, "A great baseball player, we're talking the greatest ever, got a hit three times out of 10." And then you're a superstar. At most we're doing 1.5 out of 10. So I feel like you need to let go. As a parent, as an immigrant, I don't feel like those things are as necessary to dwell on, but you have to push through and tackle them. Again, I say to our students all the time, "The thing that you need to worry about is not the getting of jobs. You're not going to get the vast majority of your jobs. The thing that you have to think about is what are you going to do when you don't get those jobs. How are you going to deal with that?" That is actually the struggle. It's really important to remember the world is full of just punches, man. And COVID was the grand slam knockout punch of them all. But it's the micro punches, the little jabs after a while that's just like, "What the fuck, man? Leave me alone."

It's not always linear, but there is something about hard work and discipline. When you get caught up in the idea of it all, then you stop working.

Yeah. I believe in the power of doing. That's why I considered myself an artist producer. It's because the vast majority of the stuff that we've done, if I use the word "I," just know that it's not "I." It's always "we." But the work that we've done is truly doing. It's just doing it. Waterwell, on the nonprofit side, has worked alongside the veteran community for about 15 years. There are good people out there that are suffering a lot. Tom Ridgely, the co-founder of Waterwell, used to say there's two things that he thinks about life: hard work and love.

I love that. Sometimes those two things might not intertwine, but when they do, oh my god.

You can try. Remember, three out of 10.

What was some of the worst advice people tried foisting on you when you were younger and first starting out?

Obviously there are people that struggled with this before me, but when I was starting out, there wasn't that many roles that weren't terrorists. At a very young age I said, "I'm not going to do those roles at 25, 26." I think there was a big mentality of that time period of, "Do them. Just do whatever and build up that resume, get all those parts, and hopefully one time you'll be the main bad guy." I don't judge anyone for any of that. Everyone's got to make their own ends meet, and I completely understand that, but at the same time, I'm just grateful that I stuck to the theater game and told more complicated stories about our people.

I just don't believe our profession is about fame. I think [fame] *happens* in our profession, and we're put on pedestals because of it. But I don't think that is what the goal of this is. It can't be, because I've had the immense pleasure of working with some of the greatest artists, from Robin Williams to Spike Lee to Bill Murray, and I just want to say at the top of everyone's game, they all have insecurities and doubts and money problems. If we live a life trying to go after that thing, I just don't think it's going to be rewarding at the end of it. It ebbs and flows, and it's really just about a process of leading the best life.

In Iranian culture, we have a phrase: Good thoughts, good words, good deeds. If we just follow that mentality, I think at least we'll make some better decisions.

Arian Moayed Recommends:

NASA's infrared images of the universe: Just the idea that this single image of everything is actually looking at the past. My mind wiggles its way around trying to understand it.

The Kite Runner on Broadway: At my old stomping grounds, The Hayes Theater. You'll get to see some of the best actors in NYC perform this beautiful book with so much love and energy. And so many countries from the Middle East and South Asia are represented.

Hard Day's Night: I just re-watched the movie for the first time in years and I have to say it's a pretty incredible movie. It's silly and serious, full of weird camera angles that are kinda ingenious. They're all so good and funny. Ringo is especially great in it.

Daydreaming: Some of my best ideas come from thinking about both nothing and everything. Macro and micro conflicts, big open questions and sweet intentions.

Unplanned acts of kindness: It moves me when people go out of their way to help one another. That's a practice I learned from my Maman Parvien and Baba Mehdi.

Name

Arian Moayed

Vocation

actor, writer, director, producer

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