

On being seen for who you are



Actor, comedian, and dancer Sunita Mani discusses being protective of the creative process, sticking with your ideas, and making time for gentle things.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 2441 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Acting](#), [Dance](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#).

You've had a very full plate lately. Can you tell me about some of the things you do to manage stress when you're really busy?

It's really inconsistent for me. I value my independence a lot, and being in highly collaborative situations as an actor or comedian, where you're really absorbed by the group, I cherish the opposite of that—just going on walks or no pressure doodling and writing. The blank canvas of a page can feel really daunting as a creative person; I challenge myself to translate some of that anxiety and creative energy onto the page.

So, carving out spaces for low stakes or no stakes creativity?

Yes, definitely. Long walks, I love running. I love indulging in not being home—getting to be in new places. But I wish I had better practices of reaching out to people. I stay in my little alone, isolated bubble, and that's fun and nice, but I do feel like feverish text exchanges with dear friends are so fun and funny. Calling my partner or some of my closest friends on the phone for a walk and talk does the soul good. Not profound things, just gentle things.

What are some things that you struggle with in terms of work-life balance?

I think watering my personal relationships. It's a struggle between me and my partner. Long distance sucks.

You got married recently, right?

Yeah. I got married in 2018 and it really has been in tandem with my commitment to being very available for work. It's been a struggle to always say "yes" to the job and to new things, while also making sure I'm a good partner. I need my person and it is hard for me to balance when they need me. I find that when I get insecure about the job, I can reach out to my partner, he's always available and always there for me. I just want to be able to reciprocate that as much as I can when I'm on set for 12 hours a day.

And in general, the creative process can feel so precious and it's hard to let people into it. It's this weird thing of [feeling like] I need to protect it and I also need to let him in more, too. I'm definitely struggling with that sanctity of the process and the art-making, while also just having normal integrated relationships—making time in that process to be like, "Yeah, I have to be home at a certain time to reach my partner." That's definitely something I struggle with.

Can you explain a little bit more by what you mean when you say protecting the sanctity of the process? What's a time that it's paid off?

God, I hope it pays off. I don't know. When I was on GLOW for example, it was a very involved process with 15 other women and we were constantly in conversation about each episode and why our characters were doing what they were doing. It felt like I was at the fucking U.N. or something. It was an ensemble that was so important. The make believe can start to feel so real and you want to just put your best intentions into it. I am so open to that and open to the people that it's hard for me to shift gears back into normal life. Like, "Oh can you send me that mail? I guess I do need to open that." But I think that's part of growing up and not putting so much pressure on one or the other. Work and life, they're both fluid things that are messy. For me, the mess that happens in the artistic process, it feels more sacred, where everything is safe and beautiful and we're all in it together and nothing can hurt us. I've had the joy of working on projects where it feels very much like this safe bubble to protect.

It seems like there's a bit of a balancing act that you have to do between really surrendering so that you can inhabit this character and fully live in this world, while still being tethered to the actual world and your real self in your real life.

Totally. I find it hard to make those spaces for myself when I'm not on a job. When I'm at home with downtime and trying to write or dream, it's like you turn on the radio and you hear the day's news or you're confronted with some intense energy on the streets. It's hard to translate what you're filtering in the world into artistic expression sometimes. So when I get that opportunity on a dance gig or an acting gig, I feel like I'm literally flushing all of that out into it.

Part of me loves that and thrives on it, and then the other part of me is like, that's not very healthy. So I struggle with that balance a lot, but I think it's getting better because I'm putting less pressure on myself to figure it out and be perfect. As much as I embrace flaws and stupidity and goofiness in the work, I also am very critical of myself and have a very high standard of what I do.

You've mentioned writing a couple times, and I'm curious what your aspirations are when it comes to writing, or how that fits into your creative identity?

It's a new thing I'm embracing: saying I'm a writer and I write. I'm working on a TV show and it's been brewing forever in different forms. It feels new to put myself in the position of (both) creator and performer—it's a project that I want to also act in. So in some ways it is very tied to my roots as an up and coming comedian who would write characters for themselves and there were no rules, and the way you put yourself out there was you had to do it yourself—but on a bigger scale of asking other people to pay you money and attach their support to it, which is a different vulnerability. It's so terrifying and so exciting.

I've always felt like the notebook, the pen and the paper, that's the key. Like, if I have a pen and a page, then I'll figure it out and it'll be okay. Even if that means just in life. It doesn't have to be an artistic product coming out of it, but for me it's my little secret or my little superpower that I've always kept in my pocket. But it's new [for me] to face the page forward and read the story aloud to the audience. It's like, 'How dare you?' It's something that's just emerging and I'm trying to now ride my little notebook like a surfboard and just go with it.

That's awesome. I'm really excited to see what you cook up.

Thank you. I'm really excited, too. It takes forever to have a good idea and is always catching up to the artist. You're so ready with the impulse for whatever is coming out of you, and then it has to be concrete for so long. That's when you can prove that it's real to other people. And then you're like, 'Wait, hold on. Do I even believe in this anymore?' It's just a constant battle of believing in something and believing in your thing. It changes my timeframe of life.

Also being able to communicate what's in your mind to the outside world - even if you have the idea, if you can't communicate it effectively to where other people can see it in their mind's eye, that seems like the hardest part.

It really is a miracle to me how films get made, where every aspect by the time I walk into the room as an actor and I'm looking at the bookshelf of my character and the set design and the costume, I'm just like, "This vision is so cool. It's so cool that it had to be translated with so many people with the same vision or with the same goal." I do always want to be a part of that. That's really exciting to me.

As an actor, part of the job is putting yourself out there, and risking rejection and failure on a fairly regular basis. And maybe you've gotten every audition that you've done. But how do you consider rejection or how do you deal with it?

Yeah, putting yourself on tape, preparing for a character and falling in love with that person or with the idea—it happens so quickly. Going from "I got an audition," to "Oh my god, I love this person." "Oh my god, I get to travel to Berlin for two weeks?" "Oh my god, I have to get this role." I just start spinning into a dream so quickly that when I don't get the role, it feels so personal and I go into comparison mode of how other actors are booking, how old I am, how I feel like, "Oh, maybe if I were younger, or maybe if I were more famous, maybe if I was more attractive in some ways or more conventionally beautiful." It's so stupid but it's so inevitable for me to go through that for a minute.

Has it gotten easier as you've gotten more success in the industry?

Totally. And the parts get more interesting—that has made it better for me to not go into a dark space because it does feel like, "Okay, well this work is good, this is elevated." "Oh, I'm just excited that I'm considered for this kind of project." "Oh, it's so cool to be in this pool of actors." But yeah, I'm also still in a space where I can let my brownness or being an Indian woman be like, "Oh, that's why I'm even getting considered for the role." I use it against me. I use my own diversity against me instead of it being just an opportunity, or just nothing at all. It can be a little bit of a mindfuck, but it gets easier for sure. And thank god I feel inspired to work on my own shit. I think that has changed a lot, like, "Well, it's okay, you have work to do. You have other work to do as well."

You have a pretty diverse set of skills through which you exist as a creative person in the world: comedian, dancer, actor, writer. Do you have an underlying goal for yourself as a creative person or for the things you want to put into the world that guides you.

I find that, performing for me, whether it's capital P "Performing" or capital A "Acting," it really has been a survival tool and it has been about reaching people and making people feel good. A lot of that has come from me being uncomfortable in situations and me feeling bad about myself, but wanting to reflect that back into something shiny and fun and happy for people. Because you get that back, and you get to change that moment for the good hopefully. The undercurrent of joy and surprise and surrendering to the circus of life has always been what I'm attracted to and what I would like to put back into the world.

As much as the personal is political, I do feel like absurdity and joy and mystery is a better escape. I don't want people to just totally throw their hands up and resign to the fate of the world, but I do feel like that positive escape can really help. And so I hope to continue putting that into the world and let that affect me so that I can put it back into the world. Because times are heavy, they're really heavy.

We need joy. And people who work in the arts are culture-makers, which ultimately does transform the world.

Totally. It feels vague to be like I want to transcend all of these identity politics, but ultimately that's the goal in a way. So much of my path has been about representation, and I love that. It has been my whole life, but it's also why I am the way I am. I want to put all those labels aside. I think everyone just wants to be seen for who they are. So it's this constant push and pull with how I feel like I'm perceived, and how I want to be perceived. I'm very playful so I want to keep that in play all the time. And I hope ultimately people aren't taking away that like, "Oh, this Indian woman."

Just to be seen as an artist and a maker and not just through the lens of representation. Maybe it's just where

we're at in life and in culture right now, but it's obvious that it's my lens. It's obvious that it's the lens of an Indian American woman. It doesn't have to be the defining [lens]. It starts to just become just part of it. Whereas I think I was going through a phase of really trying to obliterate it. Obliterate that definition or tokenism, but now it's like who cares. Just do the work. It's so distracting. It can be so distracting and pressurizing, so it's like, let me just scoot that off the table or flick it off like a little bug or something and it can fly away.

Sunita Mani Recommends:

Lights off and listening to the midnight show on WQXR (New York's Classical FM station) as a bedtime ritual. Midnight is about the time I'm winding down for sleep, and this show is a soothing primer for dreamies.

It's basic, but I love to purge my closet. I'm also sentimental, so I tend to hold onto everything, which means getting rid of stuff is a big event for me. It's kind of a 2-in-1 therapeutic punch: Purge and shop (we say "retail therapy!"). You can be subtle or you can go bold! You can be a person who wears vintage leather ties!?

Cookies for breakfast. I cannot get over it. Ok, other words for cookies are tea biscuits and biscotti, but the point is, basically you're eating cookies with your hot coffee or milky tea and it's heaven.

Lucrecia Martel movies! *La Cienaga*! *A Headless Woman*! *Zama*!

Dinner for two at Sofreh in Prospect Heights, sit at the bar.

Name

Sunita Mani

Vocation

actor, comedian, dancer, writer

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