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As told to Hannah Ziegler, 2591 words.

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# On fandom as a source of creativity

Writer, actor, and filmmaker Sarah Ramos on toeing the line between fan and creator, experimenting in different mediums on her own terms, redefining success, and why the Instagram comments section can be the best form of a creative community.

**You previously mentioned that going on a Mary-Kate and Ashley cruise was somewhat of a catalyst for your career. Was the intention to become an actor so you could have your own fans? Or were you looking for closer proximity to celebrities you loved?**

I definitely wanted to be in the world. I was a very obsessive kid, and still am obsessive. I like to schedule everything. I would check the TV guide when we had *TV Guide Magazine*, and find out when all the different Mary-Kate and Ashley programs were playing, like *Full House*, *Two Of A Kind*, and *So Little Time*. I felt so much comfort in that escape and wanted to be them. I thought that they were just better than I was.

**How did being a fan inform your creative work?**

It informs everything I do. A huge part of that was re-harnessing [my] fandom. Trying to grapple with the alienation or disappointment I felt in the industry kind of made me disavow my fandom days. It was only through making my own work that I got back to that joy that I initially had. That was from finding the script for this rom-com [City Girl] that I had written when I was 12 for Reese Witherspoon to star in. I produced it at 25, it was just really fun. Even with that, I had people—like my manager at the time, my representatives, and people I pitched it to—who said “no” so many times. They were like, “This isn’t a good use of your time. This isn’t going to move the needle for you as a creator.” I had another person being like, “Tim and Eric already did this.” I was like, “Well, I think it’s funny, so I’m going to do it, even though it’s not going to help my career.” Ultimately, it did help my career. My mind was blown. That was not the point at all. I learned to focus more on my joy and what actually entertains me than trying to ‘move the needle.’

**It’s interesting because I feel like many people don’t want anything to do with stuff they have written in the past. Was there an artist or work that made you feel like it was okay to follow your own path and embrace past versions of yourself?**

Mike White is a total north star. I love Enlightened so much, it's very unhinged. Another eye opening filmmaker, who's honestly not somebody I would put on my vision board or anything, in that he's not a glittery, Taylor Swiftian icon...But when I first saw Todd Solondz's movies—the first movie I saw was Palindromes—it evoked this feeling of shame and disgust that you can have with yourself that I hadn't seen declared to be cinema before. I was like, "Oh, okay. It doesn't have to just be these really serious explorations of gravitas and tortured beauty. It can be kind of freaky and embarrassing, too."

**You studied creative writing at Columbia University. What was that experience like for you?**

That was a big deal for me. It was the only time I haven't lived in California. It was after the third season of *Parenthood*, which I was a regular on. I wanted to study something that wasn't film, because I'd been acting since I was a kid. I had always liked writing and I met so many talented people there. I was taught by really successful, brilliant writers, like Heidi Julavits, and Alexander Chee.

I processed a lot of what I'd been through growing up in Hollywood—that I hadn't had time or distance or space to process—through writing fictional stories and nonfiction. I wrote a *Gossip Girl*-esque [story] called "Tinseltown." I started looking at everything as an artist, rather than just an actor.

**Did you ever feel confined to acting after doing it from such a young age?**

Well, I was writing. You look at *City Girl*, I wrote that when I was 12. It sat in a closet and no one read it for 15 or so years. I feel like I was always trying to make things. I wanted to write and never felt like I was ready. I felt like I had to shadow people. When I was 18, I co-wrote and directed a short [*The Arm*] starring Miles Heizer [co-star from *Parenthood*], my aunt and uncle and my co-director's family. That was the first time I fully made something. The whole time it was like, "Okay, this is just going to be an experiment. We're not going to submit it to any festivals." Ultimately, we did submit it to festivals and went to Sundance, but I needed to lower the stakes for myself for all of these creative endeavors.

**You have such a singular vision with projects like *QuarantScenes* and your *Autograph Hound* zine. How important is consultation and collaboration to you? Do you often ask for second opinions?**

It depends. With *QuarantScenes*, it was like *City Girl* or the first short—an experiment. The first one was *Bring it On*, which I had memorized from my childhood. The second was a request from a friend for *The Morning Show*. After that, I went back to Mary-Kate and Ashley and did Megan Fox in *Holiday in the Sun*, which Matt, my partner, wasn't familiar with. I'm seven years younger than him. I kind of had to say, "Well, this plays on a loop in my head sometimes. I can't forget it, so I'm going to do it." You have to harness the passion, otherwise there's no point.

**Is there a target audience you have in mind when you're putting out your projects?**

I would say I make [stuff] for myself first and foremost. I'm always pleasantly surprised when I find people who appreciate something that I might assume would be niche, but it's actually not.

**How does it make you feel when someone tells you that you're underrated?**

I love it. I don't care. I just made my Instagram bio "underrated." A huge part of being a child actor and playing the daughter in multiple network TV shows is...People have been like, "I know Sarah." But they don't, really. There's so much else that I'm capable of that I've always wanted to do. So I appreciate any appreciation.

**How do you define your success now?**

Tough question. That is a question that has kind of haunted me ever since I started going to therapy. Growing up as a kid who was obsessed with celebrities...A lot of the adults in my life and the people in my community, whether they would admit it or not, really valued fame. Being on TV made me special and shiny growing up. I've had to do a lot of inner work to separate myself from that and try to understand what it is about the people who I admire [that] makes me admire them. It's not just that they're successful.

There are plenty of famous people who are conventionally successful, who have a million awards that I'm

like, "Yeah, they seem phony or they seem boring," or any number of things. My concept of success is still evolving...The Kacey Musgraves song, "Pageant Material" goes: "I'd rather lose for what I am, than win for what I ain't."

**I remember when you released your *Bring It On* TikTok last year. I thought it would go viral. It took some time for people to see it, but you have been really active on TikTok lately and the videos are blowing up now. So, I'm wondering how your relationship to technology and social media has changed?**

I can sometimes use social media, or in the past maybe did more, to compare and despair or look at what other people were doing that was succeeding and be like, "Okay, I guess I have to do that." What I've learned during this quarantine is that that's not true. Without the internet...People would just think I was Haddie Braverman [character from *Parenthood*]. That has been my venue to express myself. [The *Bring it On* video] is a year old. I've been posting my photos with celebrities for longer than that. Like, when I got paparazzied watching Kim Kardashian get paparazzied, that was in 2015.

This has been an ongoing journey that I've been able to explore. In a weird way, I feel like people were way more ready for it during the pandemic. They were more accepting of weird things. Somebody just wrote about how I was productive during the pandemic. Except for Quarantscenes, I was planning to do the *Autograph Hound* book beforehand. These have been ideas that I've been planning to do. It just seems like the world is more ready for them. But I definitely use the internet to hone my creativity.

**Timing is interesting. Do you find nostalgia factors into your work's success? You post a lot of photos from the 2000s, and it seems like 2000s nostalgia is at its peak now.**

I feel like 2000s nostalgia has been at its peak for years. When I was doing *City Girl* in 2017, I was following all the 2000s Instagram accounts. There are more of them now, but I have a theory that people who were obsessed with pop culture when they were growing up maybe were hiding from something or were lonely and looked to that as a refuge, so it's really potent. Our connection to that is really strong—not like a crutch, but a coping mechanism.

When I looked back on *Charlie's Angels*...I watched it a few years ago, and it was when I was thinking a lot about 2000s nostalgia and my childhood. I was like, "These are some of my best memories—watching this shit from when I was a kid." That is both kind of sad and really joyful. We will always want to go back to that feeling.

**How do you keep up the stamina and maintain the same passion with all these different projects, whether it's a Quarantscene or a short film or a podcast?**

It's not the same amount of effort with every project. That's part of why I do it. I feel like Quarantscenes are more of a hobby. It could definitely sometimes feel like, "Oh no, I have to do it." I never want to be doing [something] from that place.

I would go to school and audition at the same time, or go to school and act in a TV show [as a kid]. The audition process is something I've done my whole life, and I have a tortured relationship to. But I would always be learning lines, and I would still audition when I was at Columbia. I would go to a lecture, then have an audition, and then go home and write a paper. Auditions [are] the worst when you never hear anything back. It's offensive.

But, it's so comforting to have something to learn and focus on, even if it's something stupid that doesn't lead anywhere. Honestly, the Quarantscenes have led to more than most of the auditions, except for the ones that I've gotten, have led to ever. Instead of me scrolling on Twitter or Instagram and looking at stuff that is just going to make me depressed, I'm like, "Actually, let me memorize the scene from *Gilmore Girls* for absolutely no reason." That's why I consider it more of a hobby; it takes skill and work. And this is more of a hobby than auditioning would be; comparatively, it's the most torturous, self-harming hobby there is, because it's all about the result, rather than the performance and the fun of it.

**When you make something, how do you get to the point when you know it's good and are ready to release it?**

Being ready to release it versus it being good is different. Good is debatable. Arguably the most

successful of the Quarantascenes—'successful' going by the one people know about—is The Social Network one with Dylan O'Brien. When I watch it, I am like, "Why did I choose to play these two roles? So unflattering." I was trying something with my hair that's different for the Justin Timberlake role... It doesn't look good. I should have just worn the wig for both guys. I forgot to have a mug in my hand for the Justin Timberlake part. Dylan gets a line off. It doesn't matter and good is subjective, basically.

**Do you read comments?**

I do. I love it. There's nothing like seeing people say, "OMFG." The comments make me feel like I'm not fucking alone.

**Is that what makes it fulfilling for you? The response and the reaction afterwards?**

I feel like there is a level of connection, which is kind of what makes social media evil because they're exploiting our need for human connection...But I send out messages in a bottle to the internet, and I receive them back. That is fun and exciting. Take when Matt was like, "I don't know about the Megan Fox thing." I received a zillion messages back that were like, "Yeah, I fucking remember that." It does kind of feel like...for some reason the idea of a fan club just came to mind.

I definitely am interested in and fascinated by when people connect to work or don't. I was just getting comments on Twitter from people who were like, "This autograph hound is not accurate. That's not the actual definition of autograph hound." I realized they are autograph hounds who bring headshots to premieres with a Sharpie. They were like, "I bet she doesn't even carry a Sharpie on her." I was like, "Oh my god, wow." I just got a glimpse into a crazy world.

People are like, "How are you a fan but you're also in the industry?" We're all just people. Whether somebody is a celebrity to you is pretty subjective. The way that we act when we think somebody is famous or what we project onto them... there's a lot going on there that's really complex.

**What would your younger self think about what you're doing now?**

I think she would think it was cool. I'm looking at the Mary-Kate and Ashley picture right now...So much of acting is about having other people validate you and present you as a star. I wanted to be like Britney Spears. I wanted to be mega fucking famous for probably the same reason that people want celebrities to pay their rent—because I thought I would have no problems and everything would be amazing.

Now, I've tried to take that girl with those dreams' hand and lead her a little bit more into reality, and try to interrogate that fantasy, while still having fun with a lot of really creative people who I respect and admire.

**What are your aspirations now?**

I don't really like to pin it to any particular paths or jobs, because the better my life has become, the less it's looked like anything I could have planned for. It goes back to that idea of success—I want to be able to stay true to who I am.

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Reading Samantha Irby

Reclaiming embarrassment

Drinking out of a really big rhinestone cup

Telling people you're a fan of theirs

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Sarah Ramos

Vocation

Filmmaker, actor, writer


Fact

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