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As told to René Kladzyk, 2467 words.

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On reminding yourself the world needs your art

Choreographer and director Nina McNeely discusses the myth of originality, learning about yourself through collaboration, being aware of the tools at your disposal, and finding strength in failure.

In your career you've done so many different types of collaborations, can you share what you've learned about how to be a good collaborator?

One of the things I learned early on is a way to communicate that doesn't push down other people's ideas. Instead of saying, "Oh, I don't like that idea. I think we should do this," I learned to say, "I love that, and what do you think about this idea?" To softly insert your ideas without stepping on other people's ideas, which I think served me so much later on in big jobs.

Being a successful artist has so much more to do with communication than talent—I think a lot of people would be surprised at that. It's not always about raw talent, but how you can navigate relationships with different people.

Another thing I learned is that not everyone is as obsessed with their art as I am. So I can't expect people to be thinking about it all day and all night after our meetings. Everybody's different, and some people are fine to contribute their ideas in the moment and then go home and just relax—and that doesn't mean that the people that take time for themselves are not good artists.

It sounds like one of the lessons about communication has to do with not having too many presumptions about other people's working styles. Is that right?

Yeah. You learn a lot about yourself and your own practices through collaborating with other people. Also you learn that other people can be more gentle to themselves and set boundaries for themselves within a project, which I really respect and I learned to do that for myself more.

A lot of the pressure I've felt has been put on by myself, even thinking that you need to one up yourself every time you make something.

I'd love it if you could talk a little bit more about that, because I feel like setting boundaries is so hard, especially when you hold yourself to a really high standard.

It's so hard.

What are some of the ways that your approach to doing that has changed over time?

Say someone needs me to make an adjustment on something or they want to see a refreshed treatment, and I'm like, "I'm in rehearsal all day." Part of me thinks, "Well I'm getting home at 5:00 PM, then I'll start working on it." And the other part of me is like, "But you need to eat dinner and take a moment because you just had rehearsal all day. Why don't you say you can work on it tomorrow?"

I remind myself I can determine when I choose to sacrifice my time to do the work, and I'm probably not going to come up with the best ideas if I'm hungry and stressed out. I'm probably going to come up with better ideas if I come home, eat dinner and get some rest and do it the next day.

Do you have any creative rules that you've set for yourself? Or guiding ideas that you revert to when you're in doubt?

Sometimes rules will come up while I'm choreographing a piece. I recently did this duet that I really wanted to be this story about someone that was kind of desperate and thirsty for human connection, and the other person was a bit cold, but also knew they were going to give in to the person eventually. I could feel myself wanting to revert to [the fact that] if they do a synchronized section of movement it's going to be awesome because they're both dope dancers. But does that help tell the story or is it just going to be nice on the eyes?

And so I made a rule for that piece that I wasn't going to do any synchronized choreography facing the audience, because that didn't serve the story. It depends on what the piece is and I'm sure musicians deal with this too, if you've made enough things you know what works, and sometimes it can feel like a formula.

Which I think is interesting. Sometimes you do have to pull out your bag of tricks, and that's not bad. Sometimes that is serving what you're doing. But sometimes it does feel like a real betrayal of what your intention is. Something is telling you to challenge yourself beyond using a formula. I had a friend once tell me that I didn't need to reinvent the wheel every time I made something—to maybe even repeat themes or ideas that are a signature of yours. But I think that's the torture of being an artist, going back and forth from those standards that you're setting for yourself.

So maybe it's being aware of what your go-to tools are, but thoughtful about when you use them?

Yeah.

I love the most recent video you did with Doja Cat, and wonder if you can tell me about the creative process for that?

Yeah. Her creative director and stylist [Brett Alan Nelson] came to me originally because we had just worked together on another project that I was choreographing. I wrote two treatments to make one big story and then we had a meeting. [Doja Cat] liked my ideas, but she said, "I'd love to discuss making a video based on these paintings that I've painted." And I was very open to that, so she showed me some of the paintings and I co-directed the video with her.

She had some ideas of how to bring the paintings to life, and then, after that Zoom, I wrote a treatment based on the paintings that she had presented to me. We jumped into it and it was an awesome experience. Everybody on the team was incredible—from the art department, to the [director of photography], to wardrobe. Everything was very seamless and I loved it, because I like to think of the work that I make as moving paintings.

There's a certain style of films, like Fellini for example, that you could pause at any time and it looks like a gorgeous painting. So I was really excited about making something that didn't have to be pressured by having so many setups and so many edits and all of that stuff, and we could take our time and make it feel more like a painting with slower moving longer takes.

Everyone was on the same page about that. It was really nice to be able to let an image breathe and let the artist's words shine through. Working with someone on that level and someone that communicated that clearly—everyone was very open and communicative on set and that made it really smooth.

I want to switch over to talking about the business side of things. You're a freelancer, right?

Mm-hmm.

Can you tell me just a little bit about the journey you've been on as a business entity?

Yeah. I've gotten much better at separating being an artist and being a business person, I really try and make sure I'm in both mindsets. I think another thing that artists should remind themselves of, is if you are good at coming up with ideas you're going to continue to be able to come up with ideas for the rest of your life. So not to be too precious about projects, especially if your original vision is maybe getting diluted and changed. It's not life or death and it is a business.

That is such a tough lesson though.

Oh, it's so rough. It's painful, it's horrible, and I think a good way to handle that is to always make your own projects on the side. Even if it's small, even if it's with barely any budget, just something that you can 100% control, having at least one or two a year.

Yeah. So the whole kill your darlings thing, but have a couple darlings that you know can't be killed?

Yeah, exactly. Because then it's not just a bunch of disappointment. I mean, also one of your two little darlings might fail if you're really experimenting and that sucks. But I also feel like failure is what makes you stronger, especially if it's your own personal work. You know what I mean? Then that means you're really trying to evolve and you're not stuck, you're not a one trick pony. So I think that being able to switch back and forth from artist mindset to business person mindset—at the end of the day you're an artist that's also selling the product most of the time. So not to treat every single one of your projects like it is your darling or your baby, because it's going to be too painful if you're emotionally

invested in every single thing.

One interesting thing growing up as a dancer, our lives are based on so much rejection, that you get to a place where instead of taking it personally, you just realize that you weren't the right person for the job and you're able to let it go. I think that's been really helpful. If you haven't been rejected that many times, then it's actually pretty hard for people. So I think that's one nice thing about having a dance background is that it really gives you a thick skin.

Can you share with me some reflections on types of situations that make you feel most fulfilled creatively? What are the things that fill your wellspring?

Well, off the top of my head, yesterday was my last day of brush up rehearsals for this Melanie Martinez tour. So I choreographed her tour—they just finished the whole big North America tour a couple of months ago, and it was such a short time to come up with everything. Like a week to do 14 numbers, which is psycho. We just had rehearsal to brush up everything, and my heart was just singing the whole time, seeing what the show looks like now, after [they had done] 30 shows. The dancers had created their own stories within the framework of it, they seemed so connected, almost like a dance company that's been training for years. There is just this synergy that you could never get from having a week of rehearsals. There's something so unique about that experience of being on stage together every night, relentlessly and brutally.

The show's really hard, they barely have a break, and it was just incredible to see the work elevated by the dancers—how they needed to keep it interesting for themselves doing it over and over again. You could really tell they found moments where they always smile at each other at this one part, or they hold each other in a different way every time because they're being experimental and trying new things. I don't know, it was just incredible to see that, I felt like I should have been paying for it instead of me getting paid to do it. You know what I mean? Because it was just so awesome. It's awesome to see your hard work pay off and for your original vision to get elevated to a level that you could have never imagined by the artists that are performing it, and by Melanie herself.

Is there any really valuable advice you've received that you'd like to share?

The first thing that comes to mind is that a friend of mine said, "Being a starving artist is a choice and that you don't have to be. You can be a smart business person and still be an artist." I see it all the time with young dancers and other young creatives, they'd much rather do artistic work than do commercial dance or something like that.

I think that you can be a smart business person and a really good artist at the same time, and they can totally coexist. You can get to a place where the power of saying no is what makes you even more money on jobs.

And sometimes people just want a little dash of what you do and that's okay too. I think that's a big one. I've always had that in the back of my mind when I feel like, "Am I selling myself short? Or am I doing something that doesn't really represent me?" It's like not every single project has to, but there's a fine balance of when to stand up for yourself.

Always ask advice and talk to your other artist friends. Sometimes we're very isolated as artists, and sometimes I'll go through long periods of not talking to my friends about things, and I'll be in a big doubt wave and sometimes my friends remind me that I've been working really hard for 20 years and that I should give myself some fucking credit. You know what I mean? That always helps.

I had a friend the other day, I was really going through some turmoil and she was like, "Dude, your crown is so crooked right now. You need to put it on straight." She was like, "No matter what you choose to do, just know that the world needs you to do it." I was like, "Damn, I really needed to hear that."

And we're not in competition with each other as artists, we totally can help each other and we should reach out to each other instead of just being isolated and letting the doubt take over.

And the third thing that I talk about to young aspiring choreographers, is that I think there's a myth about originality. I felt all of this fear when I was younger when I did something that reminded me of someone else's work. Even if it was just a single move, I'd be like, "Ew, no, I'm not going to do that. That looks just like this person and I want to be original." And I remember always battling that. Once I started letting all of those influences be a part of me instead of rejecting them out of fear of taking other people's work, the originality started to come.

We're all a unique recipe of influences, and no one on earth is going to be the same as you. No one has the exact same experience as you. So all of your influences are what make you who you are and it's okay to express those.

Nina McNeely Recommends:

The scent of fresh violets

The music of Marina Herlop

The film Juliette of The Spirits by Federico Fellini

Chinese black vinegar

The Creative Act: A Way of Being by Rick Rubin

Name


Nina McNeely

Vocation


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Fact

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