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On learning how to calm the fuck down

Comedian and writer John Early discusses why the stress of doing stand-up is worth it, how working with a collaborator can keep you focused, and what it takes to bounce back from big-time rejection.

Do you find it difficult to stay efficient or productive when you're working on projects with close friends? Are there rules that you have to make to separate friend time and work time?

The beauty of working with Kate [Berlant] is that work time is very fluid. There's no true separation. We don't suddenly become super serious when we're writing together. It's constant cackling. I'm much more productive when I'm writing with another person.

Having someone there to witness the depth of your procrastination tendencies prevents you from doing those usual things. If I'm alone, I'll be insane. I'll drink black tar espresso all day long, constantly jerking off and I'll stay up until 3 AM having not done anything. And then I set my alarm for 6 AM to punish myself and work in the morning. It's horrifying. I find working with Kate so much easier because I would be so horrified if she witnessed any of that behavior.

What defines a perfect creative partner for you? What kind of people do you surround yourself with creatively?

I'm learning more and more to calm the fuck down. I think my initial grabs at creating, especially on the solo level, were very ego-driven, which is necessary, in a way. The sheer force of an ego can catapult you into productivity and frame the drive that's sometimes really necessary, especially in the beginning, to just get yourself seen and heard.

But I'm so through with that era. I've been very lucky and people have seen my work enough that it's given me more opportunities creatively. I'm finally in a place where I can write and collaborate from a place that's a little less constricting. It feels more female, honestly.

I feel like I associate my ego with my maleness and working with Kate has been a great privilege because I think she just has more of a sense of humor about herself. It is really infectious. When we're together the work just comes from a much more free, silly, sweet place than when I'm working alone. So I guess to answer your question, I like to work with women.

Do you find that you get something unique from writing, doing stand-up, and random acting jobs?

I think there is an exquisite balance between the three things: performing live, working on my own stuff, and writing with Kate. There is something good about acting in other people's stuff. When I do Search Party it's so relaxing because I have no stake in the larger creative endeavor. I just show up, memorize my lines, and then I'm just silly. Also, it is very informative to be a tool in something, and for it to not be connected to your larger vision of your career. Just to show up and help your friends tell their story and not your own. It's very relaxing and I probably learn a lot from that, subconsciously.

What do you think is most mentally draining for you?

I think live performance is actually the most mentally draining, even though it feels so good when I'm finally doing it. I'll go a very, very long time thinking that I hate stand-up or that I just don't want to perform live, I don't want to write in that way, or I don't want to throw a 10-minute set together. And then I do it and I realize that that's a huge part of what I do and I can't satisfy that urge in other forms.

You're so far removed from your audience when you're making something for TV or a film. But there's no distance with live performance. The thing that you're creating on your couch is gonna go right in front of people tomorrow. And while I find that creating my own stuff can be absolutely draining and exhausting, I always feed off that exhaustion and I truly love it and treasure it.

How has stand-up informed other projects?

Stand-up was a change. It made me a better actor. It's very bold. I'm a Southern boy and I was taught to be very polite, so there was something so radical to me about making people listen to me for 10 minutes. It broke me out of more differential patterns in my acting and my other work. It made me take myself a little more seriously and take myself less as an adaptable team player and as more of an actor with my own perspective on their experience. It gave me more of a clear, deliverable package.

You had a few scenes in Beatriz at Dinner, where you're just the waiter, but it's so you. Did you approach it like, "I have one line but I'm going to make it really count"?

Well, first of all that is so nice [laughs]. I'm wondering though... I'm scared that that's a failure on my part. Because for Beatriz at Dinner I probably should have disappeared even more and just been part of the background. I hope I wasn't chewing the scenery too much with that role.

I am so insecure about that part, which I think comes from the fact that my heroes were never the people who would transform with each role. I loved how Jennifer Saunders always felt like Jennifer Saunders. She has such a clear sense of authorship and such a clear voice, comedically. She's created so much of her own work. There's something really cool about when she's cast in other stuff and, even if the project is not moving in the same direction as her comedic stuff, the stuff that she writes, you still feel her point of view. The audience can still... I don't know, it's like a little secret or something that she's sharing with the audience when she's in other stuff. And I always love that.

Performers like Lisa Kudrow and Laura Dern have a clear opinion, a comedic opinion about the people they're playing—they aren't just open vessels through which the story can live. If that's what you're getting in my work, that's a result of me copying my heroes. At the end of the day I do consider myself a comedian or a comedic performer. It's just in my nature, no matter what I'm doing, to try to find what's funny and to see if I can bring my worldview to the acting element of it.

Do you have some sort of worldview or personal goal or mission that you try to carry across with your comedy?

I think the mission is more accidental. With Kate and me, not much thought went into our first collaboration or our videos that we made online. I would say that's true of my stand-up, and of pretty much everything I've made. And then you ideally get to this place where you have opportunities to pitch your stuff to larger platforms and then you have to start defining what you do. And you're looking at your old work, which is all made through sheer impulse, and you're like, "Oh, I guess there's kind of a through line here."

Kate and I, in our work together and also individually, are interested in the way people perform themselves, like social performance, and the ways this type of performance could fail. I'm literally repeating jargon we've written in pitch documents. We're certainly not trying to expose the raw underbelly beneath people and performance.

I find it very, very funny to watch Kate at a dinner party and I think she finds it very, very funny to watch me meeting someone for the first time, too. And we watch each other with great love. I feel safe enough with her for her to comment on the ways in which I'm being fucking phony. And there's something very beautiful and intimate about that.

People think we're making fun of people. Like our Paris video. Basically, the first video we made where we're talking about missing Paris. We get so caffeinated and we get really grandiose and we build each other up. But, I think, at the end of the day it's coming from a loving place. We have a great fondness for people that have three-inch-thick masks on. Because that's us, too. So I think maybe by writing those kinds of characters and performing those kinds of characters, it hopefully lets people have a more forgiving relationship to their own artifice.

I read somewhere that you and Kate have been working on a TV pilot of some sort?

Yeah. We worked for a few years on the pilot. We actually just went to this hotel in Palm Springs a couple nights ago to formally mourn its passing. We've been in a crisis state with it for the past year. We were finally getting it made, after it kept getting rejected on a script level. And then once we got it made, it got rejected again. We tried to desperately take it around to so many other places, and then we got the final no. I still think what we made is beautiful. We're so proud of it.

We thought the show we made was beautiful escapism from this Trump moment. We thought it was war-time entertainment. And it was queer utopia for the people who feel marginalized. It's certainly a place for them to escape right now. So we thought it was absolutely vital for this moment, but I don't know if other people thought that way... clearly they didn't. So we went to Palm Springs to mourn it, and we felt like it was very regenerative and helped us remember who we are creatively.

When people talk about the heartbreak and rejection of this industry, I'm always like, "Really? You don't have a sense of humor about it? How can you take it personally when stupid execs are the ones making these decisions? They're idiots." We both had tons of micro rejections along the way, but this... This was our biggest dream. And it was truly crushing. It was bad. I didn't sleep. There was lots of crying. It was really, really bad. But we had a little refocusing trip and got back in touch with that more brazen side of ourselves that knows what we're doing and knows the kind of creative people we are. And it's gonna be a long road for us because we don't make things that are necessarily immediately sellable in the minds of

executives.

For people who are going through rejection, it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Do you feel like you're starting to see that light yet?

Yeah. Definitely. I think we both finally feel through with this initial stage of grief. And we're both very, very excited. We have a few new ideas to find a new home for the characters that we made together in the pilot. I mean, please, I wish it had gotten picked up, I wish I was in a writer's room right now with Kate making this show. But I think the light at the end of the tunnel is that we're remembering who we are as artists.

How will this experience impact how you approach future projects?

We've always been labeled experimental comedians or alt comedians which sometimes can be exhausting and very limiting, and it's always a misunderstanding of our innate silliness. We're not going to make a fucking Marvel show. We're not gonna make shows based on algorithms that work well in China as well. Not that I don't think our stuff could do well in China, I just know that there's such a huge push recently in TV and film development of like, if someone gets punched in the balls, that tests well in China. I literally have been told that.

People say you need to add those kinds of jokes, but we're never gonna be able to do that. Not because of some sort of pretension for mass populous entertainment, we just don't know how. That's just not our thing. Rejection has given us an opportunity to realign with a more pure artistic path and get out of the death grip of the industry. And to remember we fundamentally never thought that this was that important. You can get so easily swept up in it and seduced by it, and we were.

Do you feel like you will avoid or be cautious in making a new project and going through the same pitch process?

We need time just to actually let new ideas come. You don't want to make things from a reactive place which is what we were doing the past couple months. In this frenzy after getting the final no, we were like, "Okay, it's us but we're in a small town and our parents are coal miners." And we literally were 100% convinced that was the right idea [laughs]. And it took a couple months to be like, "Absolutely not." And so I think we're both like, "Let's breathe a little bit and be friends and have fun and let new ideas come in their own time like the last one did." I know so many intelligent producers and executives who really do believe in us, and a lot of these people's projections have nothing to do with their understanding of what Kate and I do. A lot of these executives very specifically *did* understand. But it was up to weird algorithms, financial stuff, and board members who don't know us.

We're not burning it all down. We're not like, "Fuck this industry, we're gonna go independently fund everything." We absolutely want to work with these places. And it might just mean chilling out for a while and doing stuff on our own terms that further proves to these people that we can make stuff on our own and build a bigger audience. Then we can come back and stick to our guns and hopefully have enough leverage in the industry to actually get one of these things going.

John Early recommends:

Rachel Cusk's Outline trilogy. You can read them in a day. It's such readable writing. It's full of very dense, very sophisticated ideas and philosophy, but it feels like a fucking beach read. It's so beautiful.

I loved Annihilation so much. I feel very alone in my love for Annihilation. I thought it was such a zen movie. It had really beautiful ideas in it that I find very, very helpful. Especially in this moment of constant panic about climate change and the world ending.

I'm producing a play from 1978 called Marie and Bruce by Wallace Shawn. My friend Theda Hammel always wanted to play Marie. She does not define herself as an actress but she's always really identified with that role. We got Knud Adams who is one of Wallace Shawn's acolytes directing it. And Theda's doing the sound design. Gordon Landenberger is a painter, and is playing Bruce and doing set design. It's an ensemble, very wild art Brooklyn comedians and performance artists. It's going to be at JACK in Brooklyn in July.

Theda Hammel. It's the only music I like. It's the only music where I listen to the lyrics. She has an EP out called Sondheim which is her covering Sondheim songs.

Hands is an Irish documentary series about Irish craftsmen and women. Each episode features craftspeople like weavers, basket makers, ceramicists or soap makers. It's so relaxing. I find it the perfect antidote to Twitter before bed which just keeps me in a state of utter panic.


Name
John Early

Vocation
Comedian, Actor, Writer, Producer

Fact



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1