

On not being afraid of failure

Composer Danny Elfman discusses venturing into new territory, taking criticism with a grain of salt, and the difficulty of understanding your own creative process.

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As told to J. Bennett, 3224 words.

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How would you describe your artistic philosophy? Is there a certain mindset that you bring to all of your projects?

I know this is going to sound terrible, but I don't even begin to understand what my creative process is. It's always been a mystery to me. I really don't have a philosophy. To me, creativity is just one of those strange, elusive things. It's like trying to grab a cloud. Often you're just reaching for pieces of it, and it's slipping through your fingers, and then at moments you actually capture parts of it. But it's like this magical vapor or substance that's so hard to identify or grasp.

That's kind of how I feel when I'm writing. I'm just trying to let my mind wander out there and see where it goes. Sometimes it just leads me in circles, and it's incredibly frustrating. But sometimes it just goes through doors in a way that surprises me, and I go, "Oh, I didn't know that was there." When I'm writing, I often tend to let what it is that I'm writing lead me, rather than the other way around. It's not something that always works, but I don't really know a good way to explain it.

I read a something Stravinsky might have said—or it may have nothing to do with anything he said, as quotes attributed to artists often end up—but it did ring true to me. The quote was something about feeling like a radio receiver. You're on the ground, searching for signals in space. That's what it feels like looking for the inspiration for a piece of work. It's like scanning out there for something to grab hold of, like a transmission. And then, when you have the transmission, you know that's what you're going to use. You never quite know when that transmission is going to arrive, but you've always got your antenna aimed at the stars.

You did musical theater early on. How do you think that experience influenced your approach to music—and to art in general?

I think it gave me a love of the absurd really early on, because this really was a crazy mish-mosh of diverse elements jammed together in a ridiculous way. It was inspired by a French musical theatrical troupe that my brother began with before he started the Mystic Knights called Le Grand Magic Circus, which was also very much a wild theater of the absurd. It instilled in me a love of absurdity that stayed with me for the rest of my life.

How do you think your work has benefited from that love of absurdity?

Well, I don't know whether it's benefited or been damaged by it. For better or for worse, in my work I've always gone between socio-cultural and political things that were on my mind, and things that were just totally ridiculous. And sometimes those elements would be put together. But it's the only link between me now and then.

Back in the old days when I wrote for Oingo Boingo, I was writing almost completely third person. I would take the mindset of a character, and I would write something sarcastic or critical towards or about that character. I don't know what that means. It might have just been my nastiness or my sense of the ridiculous—or maybe it was just self-protective. I find myself doing much less of that now. When I started *Big Mess*, I was surprised that so much of the work was as personal as it was, because I just never would have done that 30 years ago.

What were your goals when you started Oingo Boingo?

It started with no goal other than I'd been doing eight years of musical theater, and I turned on a radio and I heard ska music from England and said, "Yeah, that's what I want to do. I want to be in a ska band." It was just a total mind shift away from theatricality in the sense that the show that we had developed with the Mystic Knights was so elaborate. It was 12 people, and everybody had to play at least three musical instruments. The idea was that we would triple up either as a string band, all on strings, a brass band, all on brass, or as a percussion ensemble, all on homemade percussion that we built ourselves.

Wow.

But there were movie screens—we had animation, film clips. It was this crazy multimedia set with lots of costumes and props. So I think starting Oingo Boingo was a reaction to that, just wanting to go to the opposite extreme. Suddenly, I loved the energy of ska music and I was longing for the simplicity of, "Wouldn't it be great to just show up onstage with nothing but a set of drums, some amps, and guitars?" You're able to set up in 20 minutes rather than three days of rehearsal and three days to a week to dial in the technical stuff. It was such a *thing*, you know? That was what started Oingo Boingo.

I'm viewing your career now as a series of artistic mind shifts. You go from musical theater to Oingo Boingo, and from there you start doing film work—which I imagine involved another big mental shift.

Yeah. I mean, that was a surprise. But the thing is, no matter what I'm doing, I want to do the opposite. It's a curse. Starting a band was tough because I couldn't really follow my own instincts as much as I would have liked to because it would have meant being in a different band every two years, essentially. There almost was no two-year period where I wouldn't have liked to reset and start everything again. But that doesn't really work well for the identity of a band, so I was always trying to reign that in. But it was always a struggle.

Then, out of the blue, the film world pops in. At first, I almost said no because I had no training for that and never thought of doing film composition. But suddenly there was an opportunity, and I thought it would be interesting. Whether I succeed or fail doesn't really matter because it'll be interesting and I'll learn something from it. So I just dove in.

I think that's the best attitude to have about any artistic endeavor.

Well, I suppose the thing that most helped me in my early days of trying to figure things out was not being driven by the need to succeed. And it maybe just came out of the era and the proximity to the punk scene, but I really didn't give a shit. I wasn't afraid of failing. In hindsight, I realize there were two things that benefited me. One was the fact that I just didn't seem to care, when I launched into something, whether it was going to succeed or fail—and the lack of fear of failure is a great tool. It's a great aid. It helps one move forward if one doesn't care if one falls flat on one's face.

The other thing that helped me—again, in hindsight—is that no matter what I did, I got tons of critical nastiness. With the Mystic Knights, we were so far away from musical theater of that era, and reviewers hated us. We would publish the worst reviews, and I enjoyed that. And then when I started a rock band, we didn't have an identity—and critics hated us again. And I understand why. When you start a rock band, you're supposed to claim a bit of land. Put your flag up and say, "This is what I am. This is what I represent." And since I had no idea what that was, I never did that. And, also, that sense of absurdity made it hard for people to grasp what the hell this thing was. But fortunately, I thrived on negative energy.

How so?

It really feels like the more negative energy I got, the more motivated I got. So when I went from being in this really not critically respected rock band to film composing, the backlash I got from the film composing community was so intense that it was perfect. They didn't like that I was coming from a rock band to do orchestral composition. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was exactly what I needed. Because for 10 years I was constantly driven by, "I'll show those mother fuckers." That was the driving force of my mindset.

Looking back, that's the best thing that could have happened to me, because I'm wired the same way as Godzilla. When they try dropping a nuclear bomb on him, it turns out he comes from nuclear energy and it actually just makes him bigger. I was kind of like that with criticism at the time, especially when it came from other composers and those that I viewed as the tastemakers of what I was doing. Then it would be like, "Fuck you—you hate my guts, but you're going to be imitating me in one of your next scores, so shove it up your ass."

It took about 10 or 15 years for things to settle, because in the beginning, everybody in my industry thought that I had a ghost in a closet doing my writing for me. And the fact is, that is how most people who come from rock n' roll do it. So it wasn't an unreasonable thing to think. But I worked 16 hours a day in that period, seven days a week. I was killing myself, teaching myself how to score, writing it all down, learning how to write without training. I really, really worked hard. So my attitude was, "I don't care if you like or don't like it, but the fact that you're not giving me credit for my work—now, *that* makes me angry." And that anger got channeled into more energy that I used to work.

You must know artists who feel hurt or attacked by criticism. What kind of advice do you give them about not being held back or diminished in some way by external forces?

Well, there's not much you can say. If I'm talking to young people that are starting out, I try to encourage them that they may be lucky and fall into a sound and a way that they do what they do that would be embraced by the community of composers and tastemakers around them as being authentic. Because everything with film music, classical music and rock n' roll, the one thing that's the same is that you've got a center of tastemakers that will be considering what's authentic and what's not authentic. If you're not embraced by them, you have to be completely and totally removed from what they're saying. Because the one thing that's almost always universally true is that sometimes those tastemakers will be saying really intelligent things and relating it to other cultural things around them, but they're equally full of shit. And you just have to remember that all the time.

All artists are full of shit, too. Everybody has to remember that anytime artists are talking about their art, they're really full of shit. They're just riffing. I'm full of shit, you know what I mean? Anybody who talks about what they do is full of shit. And then if you're talking about people who write about people who do that, it's the same. Sometimes I'll read film criticisms and music criticisms and go, "Wow, that's really smart. I really like how they alluded to this cultural reference, or how this film relates to that and then relates to some past director." I'll think that's a really smart writer. And then I'll read the next thing they write about another movie and I'll go, "That's so full of shit." They're really just taking their own tastes and justifying it with a lot of cultural bullshit. And everybody's got to remember that.

You've scored over 100 films, and so many of these movies are beloved by people around the world. Your music has become an indelible part of the experience. That seems like a massive responsibility when you're creating a score. Is that a heavy weight to carry while you're working?

No, because when you're working on films, you never really know. You just give it your best. Film composers are artists but we're also craftsmen. There is a craft to what we do, but there's almost never any way to know whether it's going to be received well or not, whether it's going to get noticed or be overlooked. I've worked on many films where I thought, "Oh, this is so good. People are just going to love this." And then nobody saw it. And I've worked on films that I thought were weird, that nobody would see. And they end up being really popular.

I've also worked on a lot of bad films, but the bottom line is that no filmmaker sets out to make a bad film. With every film, you've got an idea, you've got a director, you've got a script which may or may not really show

you what the film is going to end up being. You just have to put your faith in the director, that they're going to pull it off. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. There are all kinds of reasons, but it's not for the lack of trying or wanting to. So you've got to give it your best. I'm going to make the music as good as I possibly can, which might help a little bit, but it may not help enough to make a difference. The hardest part of being a film composer is putting your best effort into something that you kind of know in your heart is never really going to work.

What do you do in that situation?

You can't turn your back and walk away, and you can't work less hard on the film. I always end up so empathetic towards the directors because they put so much of their lives into this. When it doesn't quite come together, I really feel for them. I just want to do whatever I can to help them, and I'll very often have been pulled into their energy many months earlier, before there was a finished film, and I know how passionate they are about it. Filmmaking is really a difficult and heartbreaking process, honestly. But when it really all comes together and is a brilliant film that really connects with people, that's the exception to the rule. There aren't that many of those, and it's kind of a miracle when everything comes together and makes a really brilliant film that gets noticed and recognized. It's a rarity, but you've just got to keep going and hope that those things will fall into your path regularly enough to make it feel worthwhile.

You're right—they are rarities, and yet you've obviously been a part of so many of them. What do you attribute that to?

I think it's the stars aligning, because if you follow any director, it's amazing how they'll make a really great film and then follow it with a film that is so disappointing. Like, what happened? There are very few directors who are consistent. There aren't a lot of Stanley Kubricks out there. I mean, some people will argue—myself included—that *Eyes Wide Shut* wasn't his best film. But it's not terrible, either. I mean, almost every Alfred Hitchcock film is a gem, but even he had a few hiccups. If you think of your favorite 10 or 20 directors, very few are going to have track records like that. It's more likely hits and misses. But again, it's not for lack of trying. It really is a mysterious bit of alchemy.

What about when you have a recurring partnership of really talented people who work well together, like your relationship with Tim Burton? There's a high level of consistency and quality in the work you create together. It seems like there's a recipe for success there.

Again, you never know. There are many examples of those kinds of partnerships, where the people involved definitely understand how to put things together in a way that's going to catch people's attention or hold their attention or make them come into the thing. But is it really good filmmaking or is it a bag of tricks? It's the same with art. The artist finds a place where they know what kind of paintings their critics and audience want, and they just start to put them out one after another. It's like, "Okay, I get it—when I do this and this and this and do this aesthetic in this way, it's going to be well received." But they don't really push out of their comfort zone. To me, the sign of a great artist is somebody who does something really well but also isn't afraid to venture out.

Speaking of: You started venturing out from film composing in the early 2000s and started composing pieces for symphonies and orchestras. What were the challenges of entering that world?

The challenges were almost insurmountable. They were huge because I was purposely taking on neoclassical music rather than taking a modern music approach, and that was harder. I was really entering a world that I didn't belong in, and that's what made it appealing to me. I had no business being there. And I know that when I started doing that, there were two roads to take. I know I have a strong rhythmic background and sensibility, and there is a way to write a classical piece that's purely rhythmically inspired that's not using melody or any kind of construction. And that's perfectly acceptable. But, to me, the much harder way to go is to write something that has structure and is using melody and variations on melody. That's ten times harder for me.

But I really needed to tackle something new. Moving out of my comfort zone and taking on ambitious works in a

field that didn't want me was very appealing to me. So I tried bursting in there, and it's still hard. Doing a unified piece that's 30 or 40 minutes long that's going to play in a concert hall and that has to define itself in relationship to such great masters that are playing all around you-and not be intimidated by that? It's really difficult. But the difficulty keeps me on my toes and keeps me going. I'm trying to finish a cello concerto right now, and it's killing me. Every time I do one of these, I say, "I'll never do this again. It's ten times harder than doing a film score. Why am I doing this to myself?" And then I find myself doing another one.

Danny Elfman Recommends:

Haruki Murakami - *Kafka on the Shore*

Haruki Murakami - *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*

Tool - *Fear Inoculum*

David Bowie - *Scary Monsters*

Einstürzende Neubauten - *Halber Mensch*

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Vocation

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Jacob Boll