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As told to Maryam Said, 3270 words.

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On mess as a learning process

Director and poet Kit Zauhar discusses learning from messiness and revisiting the same themes over again.

I really want to just start off by saying I really loved Actual People. I watched it, I believe last year, and I was just really in awe of just how raw it is and the way that you kind of explore intimacy in such a very beautiful, delicate way. So I wanted to ask, how do you prepare to write your work?

I'll have an idea or I'll have-and this is for anything, this is for scripts or for prose or whatever I'm writing-it's like having a crush on someone, but better because you actually get to make everything happen and come to fruition how you want. But I have this build up in my head for a few weeks or a few months even. Everywhere I'm going, I'll just be thinking about lines that I really like or ideas I really like for scenes, and let all that keep building up, marinating in my head, until I feel so compelled to sit down and write it. Usually I'll have some loose notes and ideas. A lot of times I'll just have a phrase or scenes in my head that I like and then I'll just start writing it. I don't really have a ritualistic relationship with writing. It's just something that's always felt really enmeshed in my day-to-day life.

Are you the type of person to whip out your phone and write it in your notes app? Or if you have an actual journal, as in physically writing it down?

More so when I'm just thinking on a subway ride or while I'm walking, suddenly something will come into my head and I'll just keep thinking about it. It usually doesn't leave my head. Oftentimes, I do think if something leaves my head, it wasn't that important or special to begin with. A lot of times the things that stick really stick, and then there's something I just keep thinking, marinating on.

I really relate to that. Especially transportation, I think that's when artists do a lot of their work. You're ruminating and these ideas that live with you, they just need to be expelled through your artistic endeavor. I think I read something about how Actual People is not technically a personal film, but there elements in terms of scenes were certain people?

Yeah, of course. I mean, I think something that's really common, especially for women who do autofiction, whatever you may call it. There's this idea that everything that they write really happened because I guess people just assume that women lack imagination, I guess. I'm not really sure why.

So I think it is autofiction. I'm in it, just in the way that Rachel Cusk is in a way, in her own literature. Sheila Heti is in a way, in her own literature, Lena Dunham is in a way in her own work. So there is this kind of blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction. Also, my little sister's really in the film, and plays my character's little sister. But what I like to say is that if my film were a body, the skeleton would be a part of reality. But the flesh and the fat and the marrow and all of that other stuff that is seeping through it and building the skeleton out are fiction. In another interview I did, I think for Screen Slate, I say that a film is something that I constantly feel like gets resuscitated. It gets resuscitated through the script, it gets resuscitated through editing the film itself, and it's something you're constantly breathing new life into. I feel like that makes sense. But yeah, it's not my real life.

I think you use the word "messiness" and I think that's such a great word. What does that word mean to you and how did that play into making the films or even thinking about films and your own process?

I think in terms of messiness, a lot of people use "convolution." Is that a word? It's almost like a defense mechanism. Simple, straightforward things are really beautiful, but they also lay bare truths in a way that can make them feel more exposed. I think especially when people are young and afraid, they lean into the convoluted methods of getting what they want because I think a part of them is really questioning if they really want it. So you have a convoluted journey, you actually create more obstacles for yourself

to get through so that you have more time and more messiness before you reach this goal that maybe you don't want. I think that so much of young adulthood is wading through these knotty situations that you've brought upon yourself. Because that's actually, in some ways, psychologically easier than just dealing with something straight on. With my character, she really wanted to be with Leo, this guy. It was an easier way to do it, right? For instance, she could just have a frank phone call with him, a discussion with him. I see messiness as a necessary sort of way of learning how to actually be in the world. And that doesn't mean that I am not messy now or I don't expect people to be messy now, but it is something I associate with fear, honestly.

Are things quite scheduled or strict?

Well, for one, there's not really any improvisation in this script, in the film. So everything you're seeing is baked into the script already. I think I'm a fan of contained chaos in art, but this idea of everyone going off the rails and doing whatever they want terrifies me. I just also think it's actually such a luxury to be able to let things like that happen, because that just means time and time is money on a film set.

Totally.

Were the methods to get there a little messy at times? Yes, definitely. Which I think is more just in experience and lack of funds. I think I'm a big fan of letting actors take their time. Even though I love shows and movies where people are talking at each other at rapid speed, I've always liked when you get to see a thought process behind what a character/actors going through before they say something and having them contend with their own inability to transform thought into language or contend with their inability to be as articulate as they feel in their head. Those are ideas that I really like seeing play out. Maybe that's another element of the messiness that you're sensing, but that's in the writing. I'm trying to translate that failure of thought to language through the writing process so the actor is able to act it out as opposed to actually have to create that whole experience for themselves to get there.

You're really going through every moment and thinking through these characters. What do you connect most with film in terms of characters or the storytelling in general?

Well, I'm really not interested in any of the duality of good versus evil like-

Like Marvel.

Yeah, I don't know. Even in a lot of contemporary independent cinema, there's a lot of this idea of someone we're clearly supposed to be rooting for, whether that be socioeconomic or cultural or racial sort of signifiers that a character's putting out. And I find that very boring. People can be poor and shitty, people can be of color and suck. For me, it's not that interesting if we keep perpetuating these trite notions of what a good person is, what a bad person is. Everyone kind of can suck and also be wonderful and brilliant. It just sort of depends on context and social settings and a lot of other more interesting psychological factors.

I'm drawn to movies where people feel very real to me, and I mean real in the way, that I feel like I walk away from the movie not necessarily knowing more about morality or having this central thesis, but I know more about people. I just understand how people are a little more, and that's something I really like. I really love Hong Sang-soo's movies, Marin Aude's movies. I like movies a lot that are a lot about intimacy and strange interactions. I really love Miranda July's work. And so for me, that's really what I gravitate towards the most. And I really also really don't like when movies feel like they think I'm stupid. Always happens, can happen a lot, especially in American movies.

I find a lot of times women are trying to prove themselves and have to justify their work in ways that are male-approved in a way. Sometimes it's just nice to tell stories like you said, that just don't have any of that stuff in mind. Also, it's funny that you said Miranda July because one of my favorite movies is that movie called-

You, Me and Everyone We Know.

It's an incredible movie. And it did remind me actually of parts of where you're kind of like, yeah, you're seeing the ugliness of the character, but it's so real and it's so beautiful in itself and it's relieving. I know you've written books and poetry. Do you have a different approach or is it all coming out of the same place?

I think all my writing will always have to do with what's going on in my life or just things I'm interested in. Right now I'm working on a novel and it's honestly such a reprieve in some ways. I go back and forth sometimes and I'm like, "Oh my God, writing a book is so hard." It's just so fun tapping away at the interior, the living room. You don't have to give a shit about what the living room really is, that'll happen later.

I love writing prose because I think it works with the rhythm of your mind as opposed to the rhythm of a narrative that everyone is going to have to get on board with. It's different when you're writing a story, you really get to choose sort of what fixes you and what is happening and what you're focusing on moment to moment. It can feel much more atmospheric, I think. That's been really, really fun.

I think all my work as of now, I don't want to speak about what I'm going to think about in 10 years. That feels a little bit naive. But a lot of my work right now revolves around desire and intimacy, and through the context of being a young woman, obviously, and then also the context of someone who's really preoccupied with these things, which I think is something people don't mention. You can be really preoccupied with certain things, but not be a person who in their day-to-day life, day-to-day social life is like... Historians or whatever aren't necessarily preoccupied with the minutiae of what happened during Stalingrad or day-to-day, who they are.

I think that's kind of just archiving this natural progression in life that you're living.

Yeah, I like that word. I think I'm archiving obsessions, archiving desires and archiving my feelings that are sort of happening in real time through the work. And I'm in a privileged position where the work I'm doing is obviously very related to all of that, so I kind of just transferred it over there.

When you find you're done a certain piece, you finished a script or you finished a piece of work, what are the feelings once you're done?

I don't feel much. I think it's hard just because all of it is actually such a continuation. I shot *Actual People* a few years ago now, but something I still talk about and think about and I'm associated with. So that's the beautiful but harrowing part about it, it's never really over.

Yeah, for sure.

Yeah, that Jeff Buckley lyric.

I love the little plug.

But it really is never over. You're never done with this piece of art. It's almost like this person that becomes a part of your life and you have a history with it also is the splitting off of a part of yourself that you're always going to have history with, which is I think beautiful in some ways, but also just means I don't feel that precious about any of it because I know it keeps existing if it's meant to.

Do you ever revisit a certain situation? Write about it from a different perspective or a different angle that you've kind of, I don't know, have received some sort of prophecy from, I guess?

I think there are certain dynamics that I find myself in constantly that I like to write about and explore and exploit to a certain extent. I think there's a very certain way certain men interact with me, which is just always sort of titillating and funny to me to write about. There's certain archetypes that consistently reveal themselves in my life through different people, and those are the archetypes I keep revisiting. I think there are archetypes, even within my work, I think, sort of a cocky attractive white guy, which is a hard person to not have in your life ever. I also think there are certain other dynamics that I feel come into play. Those are situations that I am constantly turning over, but I don't think it's necessarily recycling. Life is not a bunch of random events. There are patterns and you start seeing them and you start reveling in them sometimes and it's fun to revel in them in sort of an artistic way that feels creative and allows you to see things sort of more macroscopically.

Have you ever experienced writer's block, and how do you maneuver around that?

I don't want to sound like, I don't know, a spoiled brat or whatever, but I really haven't ever.

I'm someone who's juggling multiple things at once. So usually if I'm feeling a bit, I just don't really want to keep working on something, I can switch over to something else and work on it. But I mean, I think the closest I felt is just sort of being frustrated at my ability to translate emotional things, like specificity into language. When I get there, I can feel very frustrated at myself. But I think in those situations it's helpful to read poetry, to just read something that feels different.

It's just when things aren't working, you're pushing yourself and pushing yourself. I think the thing that imagination really thrives on is distraction. That's sort of what imagination started off being, right? Everyone is like, it's a distraction from the real world, a distraction from childhood, I don't want to call it traumas, but childhood nuisances and anxieties. When I'm feeling just down in the dumps for whatever reason, it's just helpful to give myself a distraction. I think having gotten better about that in the last few years, it has actually made me a better writer. I think people also have this idea, that feels like a very a masculine idea for me as well. This idea of, oh, you have to be toiling away at your... God forbid you have a typewriter or something, you're toiling away at your keyboard for hours and hours and are just, I don't know, not eating, smoking cigarettes or whatever and not drinking water. It's like, I don't want to do that. So I think a lot of actually writing is sort of de-romanticizing what people think being a writer is. Honestly, the only thing you can do as a writer to really prove you're a writer is write.

Being a director, have you learned a lot of things since your first film, into your second film. and now in making your next film?

One crucial thing is just that you're always sort of expanding your vocabulary of how to talk to people, talk to actors, talk to your DP, talk to producers, talk to everyone, right? I am always just trying to be better at articulating what I want from people, because that's ultimately what being a director is. It's just an articulation of ideas that can be followed by talented people who are more talented than you, to a

certain extent, individuals who are doing this thing. I think that's one thing I'm always learning.

I think something that everyone still gets tripped up on is not being attached to things that look cool, but just being attached to the story. I think that's also brain melt from being an online generation.

I love camaraderie. I love being friends with everyone I'm working with, and that's something that I've been fortunate to be able to carry through. And I think even as I make bigger projects, it's something I really just want to fight for is for there to be camaraderie on sets. I'm really not interested in working with "divas" or difficult people. Or thinking that being difficult can be outweighed by talent because, I think, in general, making a movie is such a joyful, fun process, and if people are not on board with that ethos, I would find it very difficult to work with them.

As I get older, parts of my personality start to settle down a bit. In *Actual People*, I mean, my brain was just fried in general, and I was really anxious and sort of jumping out of my skin. Whenever anything fell to pieces for a second I was just like, "Oh my God. Of course, here we go." Sometimes I still do that in my real life, unfortunately. But I think on set, I've just been able to really be like, "There's no mess that cannot really be cleaned up, hopefully." I've not encountered something so catastrophic that's not. Really having faith in the universe and other people that everything will ultimately be okay has been helpful.

Kit Zauhar recommends:

New York Review Books. The best in the game in my humble opinion. If I am at a used bookstore their covers are what I gravitate toward because I know that even if I don't like it I'll appreciate it. Some recent I've loved: *Talk* by Linda Rosenkrantz, *First Love and My Phantoms* by Gwendoline Riley, *Loved and Missed* by Susie Boyt, *Abigail* by Magda Szabo.

Tuna melts.. Right now, specifically, kimchi tuna melts. People who think tuna melts are gross need to grow the f up! That's like thinking brussels sprouts are nasty. Are you five???

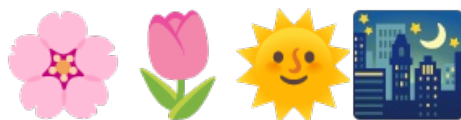
My MUBI Notebook tote bag. I honestly thought this tote would be relegated to this giant overflowing pile of film related tote bags that I can't part with because of sentimental value but I use this one quite often and think it's quite classy! Specifically MUBI Notebook, to tell the world I am not just a film girlie, but one who reads and writes. It's surprisingly sturdy and spacious.

Sunscreen. For the love of god just wear it.

Emojis!!!! When a friend texts me a bunch of emojis in a row my heart SOARS. Using emojis will make your



life, and your recipient's life, a little sweeter.



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Fact



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