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As told to Ariel Courage, 3299 words.

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# On finding your own version of success

Graphic novelist and artist Josh Bayer on doing the work, staying true to yourself, and not taking anything for granted.

**Could you describe what your process is for pulling a book together?**

When I first started doing longer works, I asked one of my teachers at SVA the kind of question that I now get from students a lot: "How do you do a longer project? What are the steps?" This teacher, who was very generous, said I could write him a breakdown of the script. So I wrote the script and emailed it and that was helpful. This was my first attempt to do serious work, and it was about Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity in the '80s.

I think that when you first start explaining it to somebody, that's when you might first realize that you have a good idea of the story. I used that email like it was a lifeline to take me through the project. My next project after that, I might have written it to a friend, and then after that I just started writing to myself, removing the need to tell it to somebody else. I just pretended I was that person.

I had it ingrained in me a long time ago that it's okay to write something original and not have it come to a satisfying conventional conclusion with a climax, and that's always been a guiding influence for me, for good or bad. I'm always like, "I'll just have some things happen and I'll stop it at a certain point," like a Cassavetes film, or *The Sopranos*.

Then those chapters will become scenes and the scenes become specific pages. You don't need to have a tight script at the beginning. A lot of times I'll realize I'm not really getting closer to a finished product by continuing to plan it, so I'll just start doing it. I'll have half of a story committed, then a chapter that's finished. And then another. I usually am planning the second chapter while working on the first, building it brick by brick with a loose understanding of the overall arc of the story.

With my most recent project, I'm doing about half as much prep. I guess it's become more intuitive. I'm so used to having a project hanging around my neck at all times that I'm just ready to go to the next and trust that anything that isn't completely planned will fall into place. I have a bunch of scenes notebooked, and they're not entirely in the right order, and I'm just starting to draw them going on the page and assuming that I'll assemble them in the correct order later.

**It seems like a process that leaves a lot of room for flexibility and adapting to changes as you go. Is that by design?**

I think so. I mean, I also don't want to get too big-headed. I get in over my head all the time with projects, designing a page with overly complex patterns. Other times I will get myself stuck because my process can involve so many gaps where I'm improvising. It's mostly worked, and I think I trust that if I just continue to put the pieces together without getting it nailed down, it's going to work out well.

That could be a little bit of arrogance. You try to look at artists you love whose work gets worse and worse. I wonder how much of that comes from them just starting to take it for granted that they're good.

**It's interesting to be conscious of your own potential downfall and how to avoid that downfall. What are models that you're looking at, being like, "I don't want to be that?"**

There's a thing in comics where I feel like some of the most interesting creators, especially in the mainstream, use up [their gift]. It's possible that you're not going to be an interesting artist your whole career; that you're not somebody who does good work until they're 80, like Francis Bacon. In comics, let's say that you're somebody who has 30 years of work in you, you grind it out of yourself in the mainstream industry when you're doing a monthly book, so 30 pages or 60 pages a month. Some of the more interesting creators would only be good for maybe 10 years.

People who think they're too smart, that they're never going to lose that, never going to be un compelling, they become bad. Some of them become an extreme version of every excess that they had. It happens a lot in the mainstream comics, hopefully less in the process of being more of an indie artist where you're not part of that grind. It took me four years to do my last book and four years before that.

I think success affects you. I think being famous can rock people, so it's probably ideal to be a little famous. Like known, but respected and good and not mega-big.

**You're in this comics community, publishing regularly and teaching students who look up to you. Is that your version of this 'good fame'?**

I think about that every day, whether it's enough or whether I'm looking toward external validation too much. I think I'm getting better at [appreciating] the people I love and not putting all my eggs in the basket of being a successful cartoonist. But it is massively important to me, and I've had much more validation than I ever thought I'd get. I had very low expectations about how my life would turn out. So I try to not take it for granted.

I think it could be nice if you're in demand enough that you call up a publisher like, "Hey, it's Josh Bayer. I have a book I want to do, and I'll be busy doing this other one. But if you want to publish it, I'll do that one as well." I don't really have that clout. I really struggled and scraped and made incremental success toward getting on the publisher that I'm on now, Uncivilized. They do other people who I respect.

In comics, there are more creators than publishers. It's a very crowded field, and it's very unforgiving to be an indie publisher. So hats off to anybody who does it. AdHouse went away this last couple of years. Secret Acres went away. Koyama Press went away. Other people step in and fill in the gap, but it's a lot. Being a publisher means you're responsible for crushing people's hopes, potentially.

When I was doing [the anthology] Suspect Device, I would get a lot of inquiries from people who wanted to get in there, and I would hate to have to write emails where I said no. A lot of them I'd really want in the book, so the books got bigger and bigger. One of the reasons I wanted to stop doing *Suspect Device* is because—with all the other things that we have to do—to also have to write somebody a carefully worded email rejection, that's a lot of energy.

**Do you think that experience of being on the other side of the publishing equation changed your approach at all, in terms of both making your work and getting your work out there?**

I think so. I realized I don't really want to spend a lot of that energy wearing that editor's hat. Also, when I was doing *Suspect Device*, my stuff was loud and rude, very Id. I'll still occasionally do works like that in my sketchbook. *Abysmalation* was like that: really off-the-cuff, weird stuff. I shifted more toward novels, works that weren't so alienating or confrontational.

Somebody who's going to read one of my graphic novels is ready to settle down with a big book. The hope of doing more punk rock work is that you surprise people and it's so short that even people who aren't readers appreciate it. It's less wordy and more about blood and body functions that everybody can relate to. Everybody's like, "Oh, I have a body. I can read this weird comic." It's really loud; you can't not hear it. So I moved away from that and went for more subtle work. I think doing *Suspect Device* maybe put me more in that direction.

**How do you avoid burnout, both in terms of continuing to produce work that's up to your standards and also just literally not feeling exhausted at the end of the day?**

I've had to adjust my sleeping schedule a little bit this semester. I'm getting a little bit older. In the past, I would just shotgun coffee all day and stay up until 4:00 in the morning, even if I had a 9:00 a.m. class, and just say, "I guess I'll see what this feels like tomorrow." It felt like a fun, excessive thing to do.

That stops working for you exactly the same way in your 50s. When this semester started, I was telling [Josh's partner and fellow comics creator, Hyena], "I think maybe either I need to start rolling it back and have a more moderate sleep schedule or I've just bitten off more than I can chew." And she said, "I think it's the former, not the latter." So I just continue to take it as it comes.

I'm not burned out on wanting to do comics. I saw this great interview last week with Iggy Pop where he said, "Well, I'm rich and famous, I'm a millionaire, but I didn't ask to be a millionaire. I just want to be a musician. That's all I ever wanted."

I was like, "Yeah, exactly." I don't care if I become a part of the privileged class. That would be cool and all, but I just really want to do comics.

As for the other type of burnout [where your art's no longer as good as it once was], I don't know. I think you just can't see it coming, you know?

**You just have to be a little paranoid and hope it doesn't happen to you.**

Yeah.

**For a while in your 20s, you left off with comics and struggled with a lack of response to work that you were making. That's always been an interesting arc to me, abandoning the practice and then coming back to the practice, because not everyone makes it back.**

I went to school for a year when I was 18, and I had really bad ADD and it wasn't diagnosed until I was 29. A couple years after getting diagnosed, I decided to go back to school. I started collecting credits in 2002, right after 9/11. I remember it was 9/11 because I had a teacher, Rob Roberge, who had us read an old newspaper article about a ship crashing. At the end of it, he asked us all what we noticed and we all noticed it happened on September 11th, 1901. His lesson was about context, about how you can bury the lede and misdirect somebody and they'll still get it. Then I collected enough credits to start SVA as a sophomore at 34.

I have an origin story that I think was a turning point. There have been different stages on the path of getting my bearings and getting more stabilized and being a working cartoonist. I did my first comic as a sophomore or junior in undergrad, the one about Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity. It got some pretty good response, so I printed a thousand copies of it. Of course, I sold some and didn't sell a lot, and I threw a lot of them out. My next book, *Bike Rider*, I showed to another artist, who had been an early supporter, and he was like, "Yeah, I didn't like this one as much."

I was nonplussed with the response I was getting. After graduating I went straight to grad school. In 2009, I was in grad school and a little bit all over the place. I was just starting to teach and working at [the now-closed] Cosmic Comics on 23rd Street [in Manhattan], and I was getting rusty and wasn't even aware of it.

My boss used to let me do the dry erase board to put on the sidewalk. Every time, I'd do a big illustration. I'd ask myself, "What's my style? I'm going to draw the Human Torch. Should I try to draw him really well, like Ben Marra would? Should I draw a contour drawing, like Frank Miller would? Should I make him really stylized and flat?" I'd end up doing a cross between those, these big Popeye-looking versions of Marvel characters. Customers would come in and ask, "Who did the board?" It would be so affirming. This was 2009, before Instagram and before you started to get the digital audience, which has been good for me.

That was really good for me, having to do something and commit to a style right then and there, and also seeing that people liked something I did, after doing a book that nobody liked, a sophomore slump book that I don't feel as good about.

After that, I did my book ROM, which became RM, an appropriation of the old Marvel character ROM: Spaceknight. That led to a lot of good things. The way he looks in that book is exactly the way the characters looked on those boards: small head, big rectangular body. I wanted it to look like Frank King drew it, who had a lot of big, monolithic adults with big legs and thighs and small heads. I think I was trying to sniff out wherever I was going to get a little bit of acceptance and a little bit of a prompt to go on to the next thing.

**There's a lot of debate around education and affiliation with institutions, and whether professionalizing art makes it all the same. Did you encounter this in the comics world?**

One of the things that made me drop out was reading interviews with other creators who really pooh-pooed school. The Hernandez brothers were very proud of being self-taught. Daniel Clowes said he didn't get anything from going to Pratt and would've been just as well off to go to a trade school. I was in my 20s and wanted to have the pride of saying that I was self-taught. I didn't want to go this weird conventional route.

I got a real bellyful of trying to do things outside the system. Not only did it feel futile, but I didn't really learn how to organize my thoughts in a beneficial way. Once I accepted the idea that maybe I'll see what it's like to be a student and do something conventionally, then I just put aside that part of myself that supported this fantasy of independence.

There's a creator who I was talking to at a festival years ago about the benefit of getting an MFA and they were like, "I don't want to go to school. I don't want to tell other people to go to school. School has nothing to do with how I do things." The person had been working at a food court; they said, "I would rather work at a food court than teach." It's not something I subscribe to. I love teaching.

**You're working on a project for *Uncivilized* called *Unended*, which is about an unfinished play you found in your father's belongings after he died. By contrast, you seem prolific and creatively productive.**

The big question of the story is if being a writer is so important to you, and being a creator is important to so many of us, why let yourself be undone and not have a project finished?

I was telling this to Raymond Pettibon—who I consider one of my mentors, though I don't know that he likes

my work, or really anyone else's—and he was like, "There's the other extreme, too, that you can be somebody who finishes too much work and it all goes unrecognized." But my dad was at the extreme where he ended up with a very ragged play, with a scribbled-out, rewritten ending in fragments. That's why it's called *Unended*. What's it like to not tie the strands together that would make you a writer?

It's hard not to make it a back-patting exercise, but I am really proud of myself that I'm doing books. I said I was going to do these things, and I'm doing them. He had a very different lifestyle than mine. He had a straight job and he had a family. When he retired, maybe it just wasn't there in him anymore. My dad used to say to me that he felt things less and less every year. He said, "After your mom died, I just didn't feel. I didn't love as much; I didn't hate as much." So maybe the desire wasn't there for him. I think daily life got in the way, and maybe I'm in a privileged position that I don't have some of the burdens that he had. It's funny because this conversation is probably making me see him in a more compassionate light than I have for a long time.

I remember him talking about himself like he was a writer but I never knew that he actually wrote anything. So to find out that he actually gave it an attempt was more than I'd expected. It was shocking, to be honest. He had died, I thought I knew everything about him, and then to find this writing was intense.

I'm immature enough to still be angry that he wouldn't let me make comics as a kid. My childhood narrative is that my parents came down on me hard about comics, which is a great way to make you obsessed with them. They wouldn't let me read them at a certain point. They wouldn't let me draw them, or I could draw them, but only if I met this list of rules, like that they had to [be educational, and] use real science stuff, which is really creativity-killing, especially for somebody who isn't that adept at learning. I'm amazed at how well things have turned out for me by running toward the thing that they were like, "You're living in a fantasy world, you need to think about practicalities." It's funny that the whole society is more obsessed with comics than I am; that the world that they told me I was blocking out secretly loves Marvel more than I do.

Josh Bayer Recommends:

Kristen Roupenian, *Cat Person and Other Stories*. I've listened to the audiobook about 10 times. Strongly recommend

*Michael and Us*. This is my favorite podcast by a mile. It has managed to sharpen my progressive politics more than any other broadcast. It's equally focused on terrible '90s neoliberal movies and deconstructing the culture wars of today.

*Demons*. Comic series by my partner, *Hyena Hell*. Very much a yin to my yang; her line is smooth and controlled where I'm jagged and stupid, but both are about making comics a life's work every day.

Album: Bob Mould, *Sunshine Rock*. I have grown to really love this album. This is to me at age 52 what the Replacements' *Pleased to Meet Me* was when I was 17: a sort of sad beautiful soundtrack. It's kind of a concept album about memory and idealism.

Nonfiction: Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law, *Prison by Any Other Name*. Amazing piece of cultural criticism about the prison nation, the desire to always place social problems somewhere else, and the ramifications of the surveillance state.

Name

Josh Bayer

Vocation

graphic novelist, visual artist

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