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On not waiting for permission

Playwright, actor, and performance artist Taylor Mac on the challenges of making great theater, balancing multiple projects at the same time, and creating your own opportunities.

What do you think it is about the theater that makes it the best outlet for your creative work?

To me theater feels like grassroots activism, and I think we have a moral obligation to try and be present with each other in rooms—however you choose to define the room—and look each other in the eye. In that sense, I just feel like theater is the most ethical art form that there is. It doesn't mean it's always done ethically, but in terms of holding each other responsible and being present with each other in the room and having the user and the maker in the room together, theater feels like where it's at. I just really feel like that's the juice of life.

The more the user and the maker get separated from each other, the less human we become. That's basically my interpretation of how the world is working right now. Everyone keeps wanting me to work in television and film, and maybe I will one day, but the more I think about it the less important I feel that it is, because I'm ultimately a grassroots activist. I want to be there in the room, alive, with other people.

Your work has a history of really challenging the form. It's amazing to me that, even in the milieu of what we would call avant-garde theater, there is still so little work that really asks anything of the audience. Perhaps the reason your work resonates so strongly with people is because that kind of experience is such a rarity. So much popular theater still feels very passive.

I think there are a lot of people who are trying to do it in some way, and I would never want to dismiss somebody who is trying to get an audience to engage by thinking, and through simply sitting and watching. I think it's a remarkable thing to do. I utilize it often, and it can be very powerful to be allowed to be an individual in a group setting. That's something I really enjoy and I like making theater that does that. I also like making theater that reminds people that they're responsible for each other in that room together, and that they're *not* just alone in their seat.

I love making work where you can't get to the end of the piece *without* the audience. The work relies on the audience—the moment where nothing can be the same and everything changes in the room depends on what the audience does in that moment. That gives the audience a sense of ownership over their experience, but more importantly it gives them a sense of responsibility to each other and to the art that's happening

around them *and* to the profundity that everyone is trying to get to. I like doing both. I like mixing it up. I'm a little bit of a slut when it comes to technique and form and genre. I like to use them all.

Tell me a little about the way that you work. Are you someone who is always working on multiple things at once?

Yes. I don't know how to do just one thing. Right now I have the MacArthur Fellowship, so I'm fine financially and have been for the last couple years, solidly fine. I guess I could just choose one project and finish it, but I trained myself in the early days to be juggling five million projects at the same time because that was the way to make a living and to not need a survival job. You kept several things in development, because you never knew when one might be able to go up. Even now, you can try to assume you know [when something is going to happen,] but the dates always change. Sometimes they're earlier, sometimes they're later. Because I'm a theater artist—not just an actor, or a playwright, or a director—I'm doing them all at the same time, so it's just meant a lot of juggling. Presenting theaters will book in a different way than regional theaters will book. They have different timelines when they hire you or they book the show. This just has meant constant juggling, constantly making something new while you're also still performing the last show. Basically I have ten projects I'm working on right now.

How do you organize your creative life? Is it a matter of giving energy to whatever project needs it most on any given day?

Yeah, it's usually like, "What's the closest deadline?" It's just balancing. But every day you work on something. Sometimes it's really nice to have lots of different projects because if I hit a wall with one piece, I can just work on the other one instead. I'll work on that, and then that opens up my understanding of what my problem was with the other piece and then I'm able to break through that wall. That's helpful. We went to Barcelona and performed *24 Decades* and we worked with a simultaneous translator for the first time, we were doing it in English but with Catalan being spoken and translated. That changed the way I understood the piece, and understood what was happening with the it. That also helped me understand what I wanted to do with another piece. They really do feed into each other a lot.

Because your skill set is so varied, you really do get to be involved with every part of the production, whereas a regular playwright is generally just watching from the wings while someone else performs their material.

Yeah, sometimes I'm in it and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I write things specifically for other people to do and sometimes I write it for me to do, but in the hope that somebody else will do it in the future. With *Gary: A Sequel to Titus Andronicus* being on Broadway, we started with Nathan Lane but the idea is that I'll be able to play the part in a production at some point, and many other people will be able to do so as well. I'm always changing it up. But for something like *24 Decades* I have no intention of anyone ever doing it but me.

I don't know if anybody else could. When performed in full, the show lasts for a full 24 hours.. very few people can do that.

It would take somebody with a very specific kind of technique. There are very few people. They don't train you how to do this at the universities, and everyone is going to universities to learn nowadays. Even the kids who have learned to perform in the clubs haven't learned the other techniques that you need. None of the RuPaul queens could go tour it. You know? It just wouldn't work. They wouldn't be able to do it. It's very unique to what my skill set is.

When you are doing a show that is so taxing in so many ways, and really asks so much of you, how do you prepare? How do you take care of yourself in order to be able to do it?

I think juggling different projects is helpful. I think marathon training has been the way that I've managed to do it. We start by doing a 90-minute concert, then a two-hour concert, then a three-hour concert, then a six-hour concert, now we're back. I kind of rehearse it that way, where I'll start off doing an hour a day and work my way up. By the time we get to six hours, it doesn't feel impossible.

It's also about acknowledging that perfection was never the goal. In fact, the goal was to use my

imperfection as a way to tell the story. When my voice cracks because it's tired or I overuse it or I sang too loud the night before, part of the art is that the voice cracked, that I was not in control at that moment. What can I do at that point to bring the audience into focus? How can I use the fact that the voice cracked as a way to emotionally engage with the audience more? It's the concept of the work, not even just in the *24 Decades* piece, but in all the plays as well—they're all using the vulnerability of being human as a way to connect with the people who are in the room.

At a time when people complain about a 90-minute movie being too long, I love the crazy durational aspect of your work. It blows people's minds to imagine that something can actually occupy their attention for that long.

Oh, my favorite was a friend of mine who told someone she knew that she was going to a 24-hour concert and the woman said to her, "That's just selfish." As if we tie you down to the chair and none of it is about you and none of it is a gift to you, as if it's just this terrible obligation that you have to get through. As if the artist and the art is 100% indulgent. I was like, "No, it's 24 hours long because I'm trying to do something *for* you."

I can't imagine performing a 24-hour show. You must feel crazy at the end of it. Do you experience the theatrical version of runner's high or something?

When doing a two-hour concert, I have found that you hold a certain tension in your body. You try to get it all out on stage and everything, but even if I do a cool-down afterwards, it's very hard for me to go to sleep at night after a concert like that. There's a lot of tension in your body, and your body doesn't understand the difference between play and reality, so it suggests that the play maybe *is* reality. It's the action itself. If you have a scene in a play where you're sobbing and you do it eight times a week, that's a strain on your body because your body doesn't know that you're not really going through those emotions. It believes you're actually doing it for real, and that's because you are doing it for real. It's a different kind of strain, but doing some sort of cool-down is important.

For the 24-hour show, I fell asleep at the table afterwards. We came home and sat around the dinner table and started talking about everything that had happened, and then I fell asleep at the table. I actually got myself to a place where I was so exhausted that I could release that tension almost immediately. Then we woke up I think at 2:00 a.m. and couldn't get back to sleep and talked nonstop. It was really sweet, it was the best. I loved it.

How much do you feel like your development as an artist had to do with coming to New York and finding a community of people that could be involved in your work?

I don't know if this is still true now, and maybe people from other places would dispute me on this, since I know there are wonderful artists in places outside of New York—theater artists who have managed to make their art and do whatever they want. For example, this woman who I knew, Katherine Owens, who just passed, ran a theater in Dallas called the Undermain Theater. She was doing work that was engaging poetry and experimental forms in Dallas for 35 years or more. She was making really extraordinary work.

So I know that you didn't have to go to New York, but I definitely felt that for what I wanted to do and learn, I needed to go to New York. I needed to be exposed to other minds and to hang out at LaMama and hang out at the HERE Arts Center and Dixon Place and meet people like the World Famous Bob. She was in New York City. Also, because of how many artists had died from AIDS—the people who would have been the ones to shepherd the younger generation into this kind of work—at the time I came to New York, it felt like there was no mentorship. I had to kind of really dig and find them. Luckily, I found women who had not been killed by the epidemic, people like Elizabeth Swados, who could help me and pass down the information that I was longing for.

For young people who are trying to make theater, which comes with its own complicated set of constraints in terms of space and the people you need to help you realize it, what advice do you have?

I just think the theater provides such an interesting life. There's a certain pride of integrity that comes from doing it. When you submit your play to a theater and they read it and they want to do your play, that's fine, great. *however*But there's something that I have found to be uplifting and sustaining in

being the kind of artist who isn't going to wait around to get permission and who is going to make things on their own. Then you get to figure out what kind of artist you really want to be, as opposed to how your art can fit into a preexisting institution. It's given me a stronger foundation. Tarell McCraney is the head of the Yale Department, and he said he wanted to change the way submissions were working because it would be terrible if someone like Taylor Mac didn't get accepted to Yale, which made me laugh because I never would have gotten accepted to Yale, never in a million years!

My feeling is that you don't create an artist like me through the university system. It doesn't mean that somebody who goes through that system then can't come out and make their own kind of art and have a great foundation to build from, but there's no way you come out of Yale and are able to do what I do. You have to perform at the frickin' Slide Bar on the Bowery. You know? You have to perform at Dixon Place and P.S. 122 and the HERE Arts Center. You have to make it make it make it make it again and again and again under dire circumstances with no money. You have to go on tour and you have to perform in a church basement and an amphitheater and an opera house and a tent. You know? You have to do all of that and learn it all and make a life commitment to it.

If you're sitting around waiting to go from institution to institution to institution, then you don't get that range, and I don't think you're doing yourself a service. I highly recommend everybody who goes to a university then just gets out of school and starts making instead of submitting. But people are going to do what they're going to do and everyone is going to have the career they have. I can just say, my life is way better as a result of having made the commitment to make instead of simply be accepted.

Yes. So many of my formative experiences in New York were informed by going to shady gay bars like The Slide or underground performance spaces and seeing people just jump up on stage and try something out. I discovered so much amazing work that way.

Nobody gave me permission. I walked into a club one day, all dressed up, and I stood up on the bar and I started doing something. Then the person who owned the bar was like, "Will you come back next week?" And I said yes. I went to my friend's birthday party and performed a song for him. There happened to be people there who were booking performers for another thing, so they asked me if I would come. Nobody really gave me permission, it was just me going out and doing it. The bar at Slide Bar would take all the money from the drinks, they were happy to have more people come see me, and I would take the money from the door. That's how I made my living and that's how I supported the work. It was small at first, but it grew to the HERE Arts Center, with 36 people seeing *Lily's Revenge* in this small little Off Off Broadway theater. Now with *24 Decades* there are 200 people involved in the making of the show. It doesn't have to stay solo work, and it doesn't even have to start as solo work, but I found that doing solo work in the very beginning made it a lot easier to just do it. Eventually you find your tribe. There are tons of people who have done it that way. The dance community understands this in a way that the theater community has a hard time with.

You really did work your way up the ladder—from tiny Off Broadway spaces to performing on the international stage. What was your experience of having a play on Broadway? Does it in any way change what you're able to do?

I want to do it again. I really like Broadway. Broadway has been inspiring to me over the years. I also recognize that there's just horrible work on Broadway at the same time. I've seen so much work at tiny Off Off Broadway venues like La Mama or Dixon Place. Some of it is the best you've ever seen, and some of it is the worst. It's the exact same thing on Broadway. The difference is the money, but on Broadway everything costs more.

I had this experience at La Mama where I was working on the play *The Walk Across America for Mother Earth*. We lost an actor right before we were about to open. Then another actor hurt themselves and everything had to be restaged as a result. It was a kind of tumultuous rehearsal period. It was a struggle, and it was just difficult. I loved them all and would work with them all again and they were amazing, but it was a difficult process. Then fast forward however many years later to Broadway. What happens? I'm working with an actor, she hurts herself, and she's gotta be replaced at the last minute. It was kind of a tumultuous process through the entire thing. Even though it's Broadway, there's still not enough money to do the thing that we wanted to do, blah, blah, blah. It's the exact same process and the same thing ended up happening on Broadway as what happened at back at La Mama. For me it was just like, "Oh, this is no

different."

There was no difference. In the larger sense, making things is still the same. People were mean in both places, people were nice in both places. What I will say is there's more people who are nice and more people who are mean on Broadway, that's all. I'm not talking about the collaborators, I'm talking about the audience. There are more people who, when they love it, will go on to say great things about it. And there are more people who, when they hate it, will want to destroy it. They want to destroy you. There's this weird community in Broadway culture that you don't necessarily find Off Off Broadway, and if they feel like they don't understand the play or they don't like the play, then they want you to never have another opportunity again in your life. It's the wildest thing. I find that sad for them, but whatever. It's not going to stop me from working, so it really doesn't matter.

Taylor Mac Recommends

I'm working on a musical theater adaptation of Plato's Apology of Socrates. It's been in the back of my brain for maybe 15 years now to do it and I'm finally doing it because I keep going back to it and reading it. It's really just the Socratic question of how do you live a virtuous life in an unvirtuous world. It's very inspiring to me, both what's written in the book and what's not written in the book, you know? What's missing. I continually find it inspirational, so I guess that's what I would say. Go read this again.

And always Nina Simone. Always Nina.

That video of her doing "Feelings"? Oh god, it's so good. That cheesy song and she makes it just the most profound thing ever. And investing all of her heart and she's not judging it. That's the thing I love about it that I wish artists and audiences would understand more—the profundity isn't the job of the writer, the profundity is the job of the audience and the performer. She didn't judge the material, she didn't expect the material to change for her, she changed for the material. She understood that somebody had to go through some serious heartbreak to write a song that suggests that they want to live without feelings. She went hunting for the profundity instead of expecting the profundity to be fed to her. That's what I think audiences don't understand about theater. They've been trained to expect it to be handed to them instead of understanding that they have come to do the work and to be collaborators. That's what we try to do with *24 Decades*—to inspire people to engage in a perpetual consideration as opposed to simple decision making of "I like it, I dislike it."

This question of whether things are likable or relatable has everything to do with the desire to always be seen. To see yourself in everything. It's just ego. I watch people looking at themselves every single day, walking down the streets of New York. Everyone walks by a reflective surface and they check to see how they look. I know that's about insecurity and blah blah blah, it's about many different things. But also, you see yourself everyday. Do you have to go to the theater to see yourself too? The theater is an opportunity to actually see somebody else. See a relationship to seeing somebody else. I'm not just talking about performance I'm talking about audience, I'm talking about characters and people and the world. It's an opportunity to engage with other people and how you relate to those other people, sure, but ultimately it's not about ego. It's like the most egotistical art form that's not about ego. That's what makes it so great.

Name

Taylor Mac

Vocation

Playwright, Actor, Singer-songwriter, Performance artist, Director, Producer

Fact

Little Fang

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