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As told to Brittany Menjivar, 2532 words.

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On taking creative risks

Playwright and director Siena Foster-Soltis on adapting a cult classic novel, working with collaborators, and handling controversial material.

Your most recent play, *Fear of Kathy Acker*, is an adaptation of the novel by Jack Skelley. How did you approach the task of adapting a cult classic text? How did you decide what to leave in and what to take out?

I had no idea what to leave in at first, because the book is so fragmented. There was also the question of, *What can you visually show onstage?* Early drafts of the script followed the book more closely. It was a larger ensemble piece—you had Boy Scouts and you had nuns and you had prostitutes and businessmen.

Deciding what to include or not came when I decided to center myself and not Jack. I would ask, *What resonates with me?* Trying to squeeze everything [into the play] and replicate images from the book exactly, in live theater—that wasn't doing the book justice. Centering myself is what led me to think, *What are the lines?* It wasn't so much [a question of] what scenes to include—it was, *What language, from [which chapter], do I want to incorporate into this scene?* The play is more like a language collage than a scene collage.

The play features a character who exists as a Siena-Jack hybrid. At what point in the process did you decide to insert yourself into the narrative?

I wrote 20 pages or so trying to make a medley of the scenes of the book, and it was coming off more like a montage. I was also becoming frustrated because I felt like I couldn't bring the narrative back to myself, since Jack in so many ways is the opposite of me. After talking to Jack more, I realized, *We have some similarities, for better or for worse, and I can center those.* [Inserting myself as a character] was my way of doing so.

I also didn't want to criticize Jack, especially when I didn't know him as well. I didn't want the play to come off as a riot piece, or to take the stance of, *The book isn't feminist, but I'm a feminist.* I wanted us to merge into this one storyteller—and then I could criticize, because I wasn't just criticizing him, I was criticizing myself. That gave me the freedom to stop being scared and do whatever I wanted.

How much was Jack involved in your creative process? How much work did you actually show him?

I didn't show him any of the script until I had a solid first draft—until I knew exactly what I wanted to keep and what I was willing to change. We went through a few drafts together. His feedback was less like, "I hate this, Siena, take this out," and more like, "This section reminds me of this section in the book." We took a lot of influence from Reza Abdoh and William Blake and artists that we both connected over.

Once we started rehearsals, he wasn't involved at all. He came to the first rehearsal and we told him he couldn't come to any other ones. He didn't really see anything until the show. He knew where it was going to go because he had read the script, but he had never seen it onstage until opening night.

Fear of Kathy Acker has been described as a proto-autofictional work. Do you see the play as a work of autofiction? Is autofiction a useful genre or label for you?

I think it is, although I fought it for a while. The fights in the play are all fights I have with my boyfriend. The entire first act is just my life. A lot of the ego-driven stuff, where the Siena character wants to become Jack to get those accolades—of course it's a little bit exaggerated, but it's [commentary

on] what the show is. I'm taking something of Jack's, and it's bringing me a different type of attention because [his book] has all this hype around it. It's kind of like a joke, especially because I had some friends giving me shit about adapting the book. I've made a lot of work about [the relationships between] girls and old men, and I got called a hypocrite by a lot of my friends while I was doing this—like, "You're giving this man a platform when a lot of your work has critiqued this." I wanted to create a nuanced take on the book, where it's not entirely sycophantic but also not a full critique.

It got kind of dramatic socially for me. Friends accused me of using the play for clout—and now they're all on board with it. But I'm glad they did—having those conversations influenced the writing a lot, in a good way.

On the note of clout—in the *Fear of Kathy Acker* play, we see that the success of Jack's book has turned him into a local celebrity. In the era of social media—and in New York and LA, where distinct, sometimes cliquy literary scenes emerge from readings and parties—more and more writers are finding themselves in this position. Do you think the phenomenon of "the writer as celebrity" is a good thing for the culture, or is the pressure for writers to have a forward-facing persona ultimately a negative? Do you feel this pressure yourself?

Realistically, it's a good thing and a bad thing. Part of me hates that there's a "scene" for writing and reading at all. My writing persona is totally reclusive. When I'm truly working on a project, I'm just not scene-y. There's a part of me that envies the people who can effortlessly do both—who are putting out work and actively maintaining this social media presence or showing face, because when I'm working on something no one's seeing me for months.

It's hard for me to maintain relationships because of that—romantic relationships and friendships. And a "scene" is all based on relationships—it feels like the relationships matter even more than the work sometimes. But it's good that people are getting recognition for the work they're making. I think most of my critiques are coming from envy or anger that I can't do the same thing. I'm either social or working, and both aren't going to happen at the same time.

I think when anything gets too scene-y, you can lose the substance. There's a danger in that. But overall, a scene to celebrate any artistic practice is a way to connect. It's how I met all my friends. It's something I'm really grateful for, especially leaving the institution of college. I feel like I meet people wherever I am because of a "scene."

You don't shy away from representations of sex and violence—two topics which are often considered taboo. When you're working with controversial material, do you shoot for a certain audience reaction, or do you let the chips fall as they may? Does controversy excite you, scare you? Are you neutral towards it?

I never feel like anything I'm doing is controversial at all until people tell me it is. I'm shocked whenever crew members are like, "You need a trigger warning." I try not to make anything explicit for the sake of being explicit. That's just where things go for me. I'm like, *That's what the story is because that's what happens in life.*

When I was writing my thesis show, *Acts of Afra*, I really kept it true to the source text. I was like, *This is what happens in the story, and I'm going to show it onstage.* But when my mom came to a rehearsal one time... We were rehearsing this scene of essentially torture. Nothing that bad happens—a character gets hot soup poured on her and she gets tied in Christmas lights—but it's kind of rough to watch. My mom was like, "Oh my god," and I was like, *Oh my god, am I doing something horrible?* Then I was like, *No, it's fine, we earned it.*

Fear of Kathy Acker is sexual because the book is sexual. I feel like I didn't bring the sex, Jack brought the sex. I brought the paranoia, he brought the sex.

In many of your productions, actors wear prosthetics or masks, creating uncanny visages. How do these special effects function symbolically for you?

The first long show I ever directed was called *The Darling Program*. I made masks for that production because I wanted each character's face to represent a different body part—except for this character "The Audience," who wore a gimp suit with a sign that said "The Audience" over her face. Seeing how effective that was visually, I [decided to experiment with masks in future productions.]

I have a visual background, especially in paintings from the medieval age. Depictions of Biblical faces and creatures really interest me. When I started adapting from different Gospels and martyrdom stories—like the Acts of Afra—I realized that masks fit those stories really well. The characters in those stories aren't really characters—they're characters existing as artifacts, representing figures or ideas. So I didn't want them to have human faces—I wanted them to look more like paintings.

I originally went to school for oil painting, and I had a mold-making job for a while. All of that [background] went into masks. In both *The Darling Program* and *Acts of Afra*, everyone was wearing masks or really intense face paint. [After directing] other shows where that didn't make as much sense, I decided that I only wanted certain characters to wear masks. Some characters in *Fear of Kathy Acker*, like Jack and Megan, are real people—but the Death Drives aren't supposed to be real. They're [supposed to represent] an idea of a woman—not a real woman, something distorted and obscure. I wanted them to have these prosthetic pieces so they would look like hot women but with something slightly uncanny about them—just the forehead is off, or the nose. Instead of having everybody in a mask because I like making masks, I want them to be

an intentional part of the [characterization.]

You talk about characters existing as "ideas of people." Are there certain archetypes you find yourself coming back to throughout your work?

Yeah. "Mommy" is the big one for me. My friend Gia [Oschenbein], who played one of the Death Drives, pointed this out in our first rehearsal for *Fear of Kathy Acker*. She's like, "Siena, all your pieces have this mom character who's the antagonist but someone we're rooting for at the same time." I often have a character who's an antagonistic evil mommy who's also not doing so well. You can empathize with her, but she's also kind of the bad guy.

Other than that, I really try to veer away from "Big Bad Guy Man Character." He's been there a few times, but he's a cliché. He wasn't in this one, thank goodness, and hopefully he won't be back anytime soon.

You've acted in several of your productions. How has your experience onstage informed your approach as a playwright and director?

That's a good question. I'm not really a good actor at all—I'm just a performer. Really, I'm like a clown—I just commit. I did clown work for a really long time. I also did performance art, which always goes back to clowning for me.

I've never been in one of my larger pieces before—anything that's over an hour. I usually stick to being behind the scenes for those. I've been in short pieces where a character has to do something crazy and I don't want to subject anyone else to that, so I do it myself. But the way the other actors in my company transform... I don't know how to do that. As a director, I can give my direction based on how I feel about the text, but seeing what they do onstage, I'm like, *That is their craft, they physically put themselves through so much to play these roles.*

I had the audience force feed me a pie in a show I did last year, but I can't get up there and cry. I can physically subject myself to whatever, but emotionally, having that full transformation [is difficult].

Unlike writing a book, putting on a play is almost always a group effort. When you set out to direct a new project, how do you determine who you'd like to collaborate with? What makes an ideal collaborator in your eyes?

Collaboration is so hard. It's what I both love and hate about theater. It's like a drug. Collaboration is what's so wonderful about theater, but it can make you want to kill yourself because you have such a particular idea of what you want, and when things aren't going well, [it's easy to think,] *Oh my god, everyone's ruining everything.*

I'm a writer before I'm a director, and I'm still learning a lot about what it takes to direct a piece because it's so hard. It's also hard working with your friends. It's a blessing and a curse—it can be the most incredible experience of your life, but it brings with it a fuck-ton of problems. When choosing collaborators, I like to ask myself, "Who do I know is going to show up and do this?" It's about trust, really. I had a lot of trust in everybody who was in *Fear of Kathy Acker*. I knew that they would show up no matter what.

Rory [James Leech], who co-directed the show, and I are like yin and yang. Rory's so physical—he's like, "We're doing breathwork and we're all going to meditate." I'm like, "What does the text say? Let's look at the source text. Here's this other reference. I'll send you this article." I think my approach comes from prioritizing writing sometimes over directing. Having Rory, a real-deal director, in there really helped the production. I love when someone's giving me direction as a performer because I'm not a super physically connected person. When I'm directing, because my actors are so good at movement, I tend to be like, "You go and do that—I'll focus on the words." I like directing, and I want to be good at it, but it's a learning curve for sure. I want to keep doing it, even though writing will always be my real passion. Rory's taught me a lot.

The "Siena" character in the *Fear of Kathy Acker* play struggles with writer's block. What do you do when you get writer's block?

Usually, if I have a deadline, I don't get writer's block. If I set my own deadlines, my fear of failure and self-hatred will power me through any project. I shame myself into writing—but it works. I get things done. I'm grateful that I usually have other people setting deadlines for me, which is such a blessing. This is part of the reason I do theater and don't write books!

Siena Foster-Soltis Recommends:

Listen through all of Johann Sebastian Bach's St. Matthew Passion (King's College version)

Bread with oil lunch

Going to track to play the ponies

Clamming

Self-restriction

Name

Siena Foster-Soltis


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