

# On redefining what it means to be successful



Playwright and screenwriter Tarell McCraney discusses why the theater is still such a vital mode of storytelling, the value of reflecting your own experiences in the work you make, and why you should always know exactly what kind of life you're chasing after.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2988 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Performance](#), [Theater](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

**You run the playwriting program at the Yale School of Drama. Do you find teaching to be beneficial for your creative work?**

Absolutely. I very much wanted to learn how a program like the program that I myself graduated from can create a viable, practical place for writers to practice. Particularly playwrights. Playwrights and screenwriters—writers who deal with dramatic action and performance—often don't have a place where they can practice their skill. There are very few programs where people aren't just writing scripts and someone's reading them and adjudicating how well they're made, or how effective they are. For us, the best part about being in the program is that you get to see your work jump up on its feet and go from page to stage, or into a rehearsal at the very minimum. I think that there's nothing more important than that.

That sense of collaboration also breeds community, and as a person who is deeply interested in making sure that communities thrive—and that art helps the community thrive—I'm trying to find ways to inoculate those communities from the pressures that performance can sometimes create. I want to make sure that the process is protected, and I want to learn those skills so I can help other communities in their process.

**You studied acting when you were younger, and you recently experienced huge success as a screenwriter with *Moonlight*, but your primary vocation continues to be writing plays. What do you think it is that makes you so well-suited to that kind of work?**

Again, I love community work. I love to work with people. I love to collaborate on the art and on the vision. Sure, I think I have some pretty good ideas, but the best idea in the room should always win out. When that environment feels safe for artists to create, there's nothing more magical than watching other artists be drawn to the same flame that you were. The thing about playwrights, and oftentimes even the majority of TV writers, is that we don't actually enjoy the siloed work of working alone, handing in a piece of work, and then walking away. We actually enjoy the collision that happens when you work on something by yourself at first, but then come to the table or to the screen and know that there are other people who are going to breathe life into it in various ways.

Some people get frustrated by losing the kind of vision that they had at the table or at their desk. I rarely do, because again, the vision is usually wide enough to fit many members of a community. There's just been very few times that I get frustrated or feel like something isn't working. When everybody with good intention or good faith is working on it, something magical happens.

**Your play *Choir Boy* will have a new run on Broadway in 2019. Do you view the play as a fixed thing—a concrete document—or is something that you can continue to change and evolve forever?**

As long as you're living, the play continues to shift and change. I mean, it may not be radical, but I like being able to change things, and to make sure things still feel relevant. As long as you make work with people in it, the work will always change. People are always changing, the audience always changes. You know, theater is different from night to night, and so sometimes you don't even have to change the words on the page. You change staging, you change the production values...and something shifts, and it's sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Regardless of how much you might want to keep it the same, it is always changing.

**Adapting something from the stage to screen can be a tricky business. You adapted your own work for the screen with *Moonlight*, which worked beautifully. How was the process of moving that material from one world into another one? Are there things that can happen in a theatrical experience that simply can't be replicated in a film?**

There are definitely things that can happen on stage that cannot happen on screen, simply because the actors on screen are not actually in the room. Just by virtue of them not actually being there physically, it's different. Likewise, in the cinema there are things that can transpire on screen that surely can't happen on stage, or can't happen that seamlessly on stage, although technology moves us closer to trying to bridge that gap every day.

This doesn't make the two things equal opposites, it just makes them different genres that share the same love of storytelling. It doesn't make them enemies, either. I think a lot of times people try to do that thing where it's like, "Oh, video killed the radio star, and now film has killed the theater." That is just not true. There are people who want their storytelling in a visual way that only the screen can provide, but there's still a hunger for the kind of storytelling that theater provides. It's just not necessarily as readily accessible to people. Part of that is our fault as theater makers. It also has to do with who we invite to tell stories and the ways in which we're engaging with that notion. Especially in America, we have infinite ways of telling stories and infinite stories to tell. There're so many roots here in the ways in which American theater can function and *should* function.

**In America, the theater exists in this odd cultural space. Depending on who you ask, theater is either experiencing an incredible renaissance or it's slowly being killed by tacky musical adaptations. Are you someone who feels like not enough people care about theater?**

No, I don't think that's true. I've never thought that was true. I think there are people who care a great deal about theater, and again, it depends on what those people mean by "theater." If they mean the great white way, and how many season tickets that we sell to our regional theaters, then sure, those numbers are diminishing. But there was a time in this country where we thought every community needed to be able to support their artists to tell the stories of that particular community. We sent out workers to help people, via The Writers' Project, to help people in those communities tell their own stories. Some people thought, "Oh, this is just to help pacify starving people who were destitute from the Great Depression and need some kind of entertainment to distract them"... but isn't that all art anyway?

But eventually we moved away from that notion of community theater and thought, "Well, only people who are fed three times a day and have a job and can afford theater should be able to enjoy stories about and around their community." That's where we fucked up. We stopped thinking it's important. I grew up in Homestead, Florida and if you go to Homestead you'll see all of these migrant workers who are from various parts of Central America and South America. And they tell stories. There's literal storytelling, there's joke telling, there're songs, there's music. You go to Little Haiti and their cultural center, there's a band coming down the street making music, doing plays, and doing dances. Theater, live performance, and storytelling are alive and well in marginalized communities.

I think about a TV show like [Page](#). The ball community has been telling stories, finding ways to exhibit art and culture to itself, for itself, about itself, for almost a hundred years now. And we're just catching on, you know? In my 20s I was always trying to get my friends to go with me to a ball, and now everybody wants to write about a ball. That's amazing. That's great. But we're not looking at the lesson. The lesson is this: it's not that people don't care about live performance or live storytelling or narratives that people can go and engage with, it's that we have commodified it in a way that now means we can only think of "theater" in this very tight, narrow view. We say, "This is what qualifies as theater," when in truth, you go across the plains of America and you can witness all manner and all variety of theater. You see all the different things that it can mean.

And yes, it's community theater. I mean, Shakespeare told us with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that sometimes the plumber is going to want to be in a play, and he might even steal the show. Everybody doesn't have to be royal. You don't have to invite the President to every show you do. I think the moment we let go of that and realize just how wide and varied and beautiful the tapestry of theater is in America, we will then not have to engage in these really weird conversations where we're like, "Oh, well, no one cares about that." That makes

no sense.

Look at Snapchat. Look at Vine. Look at Twitter. Look at all the ways in which people are telling their stories every day. People streaming their lives, literally, on Instagram, are telling their stories. I mean, people will literally put their Instagram on “live” and tell you a story. There are those who are trying to tell you and me and everyone else that those forms of storytelling are not relevant, that nobody likes that. Well, clearly that’s not true.

**When you’re working on something that speaks for, or is perceived to speak for, people who have commonly not had a voice in the culture, or when you are making art that speaks to an experience that is commonly ignored—particularly queer people of color—it’s unavoidable that people will have strong opinions about it. There is also often this feeling that you’re somehow bearing the responsibility to speaking for an entire demographic of people, when maybe you’re just really writing about your own experience.**

That is always the thing. That is the gift and the curse of being an artist. I only write about my own experience. I just hope other people can feel connected to it and see my humanity through it, and hopefully their own. When people come to the work and have different ways of interpreting it, you just have to anticipate that and accept it. You know that they’re going to stare at the frame and paint onto it the many things that they feel, and sometimes they’re close to what you intended, and sometimes they’re way off. And even sometimes when they’re way off, their perception is actually fascinating.

But you know, you kind of get used to it eventually. I don’t mean used to it as in, it can’t hurt you anymore, or stops making you feel a glimmer of pleasure or excitement. Those things are human, and people will greet you with aggression or gladness and you can’t help but be affected by that. I remain human always, but at the end of the day I know that me trying to cop or take on their interpretation of something is usually not going to work out well for me. The focus of writing is always something like, “This is an experience that I had that I’m trying to extrapolate on.” If I don’t fully understand it yet, I’ll try to research into it so that I can connect to it, and bring it to light from a place that is intimate to me. You just hope and pray other people see it, or people engage with it it.

**In light of everything that happened with *Moonlight*, and in light of the other work that you currently do in academia, do you find it increasingly difficult to organize your creative life? Has all the attention impacted the way that you tend to work?**

My creative life is chaotic anyway. It’s always been chaotic. So no, I don’t have a problem trying to order it, because it’s just always been chaotic, and I’ve always had to make room for that. When you’re sculpting out of wood or rock, you kind of just know that you’re going to make a mess, and that you’re going to have to clean up the shards on the floor afterwards. My writing life is like that.

**For a young person, perhaps someone just out of school, who is writing plays and trying to get their work seen, or trying to figure out what to do next, what advice do you have?**

Well, it depends on the student and it depends on the person. I always try to look at their work and help them assess their situation based on the type of work they want to do. One could say, “Oh, you want to write plays? That means a very specific thing. Let me point you in the direction of the ways in which we’ve made plays for the last hundred years, or the way we’ve celebrated a certain kind of play for the last 50 years, or the trend that we’re currently experiencing with plays in the past two decades.” You could do that.

My fear in doing that always is that there’s a brilliant artist who doesn’t see themselves or the type of work that they’re looking at doing reflected in that world. Or maybe I don’t even fully understand what they are trying to do, or I’m ignorant to what this artist is doing. I try to guide them to follow their instincts as much as possible. If you really want to make art for a living, that can be a challenge. I say that you really have to find the way for that art to make you happy without it or you necessarily being celebrated.

If you need to be celebrated, that’s not the same thing as being an artist. Yes, artists like to be celebrated, but again, that’s a fleeting pleasure. That pleasure is not going to sustain you, because the moment you’re celebrated for one thing, then everybody’s always waiting on the next thing. If you’re expecting that work to be just as celebrated as the thing you did before, then you get into this habit of just trying to make the same thing over and over again. And again, you’re chasing being celebrated, and not the intimacy and impulse of what you created or what you’re trying to create and communicate, which is what you really want to do.

Personally I’ve always known that if I could have a house and do little plays in the backyard for me and around 15 people, I’m pretty sure I could be happy for the rest of my life. You have to find what that is for you. You have to find that patch of “I could be happy for the rest of my life doing X” for you... and then follow it. If that means every now and then reading a poem at the local poetry slam, but still working your 9 to 5, that’s okay. Nobody should be able to tell you differently. If that means you write a song for another artist and that artist sings that song and you love hearing the words that you created, but then nobody knows who you are, but that’s what you love, that’s okay. That’s perfectly fine. If you love teaching students every day and helping them write and perform their own plays in front of their parents or for the other students, and that brings you joy, you are still an artist.

And not only is it valuable, but it’s essential and important. You know what I mean? It doesn’t make you any less of an artist than someone who just made \$50 billion on a film. It’s still in the world, and it still is feeding you. It doesn’t negate that. I try to get people to lock into what that vision of success or happiness means for you as early as possible, because it can get hard to maintain it. It can get hard to keep it, especially when you get offers to do other things, or people are telling you, “You’ve got to go to school.” You don’t got to do nothing. If that’s the trajectory that you want to be on, and you think you can find nourishment from those places, that’s great. But again, you have to know what you’re actually chasing. You have to know what star you’re actually running after.

**Did you feel like you were able to lock onto that for yourself pretty early in life, or was that a hard thing to come to?**

I locked on early. I think, if anything, that’s what is sustaining me. Yeah. It’s sustaining me now, because I can always go back to that same part of me and say, you know, “I really just want to put a deck on the backyard of my house in Liberty City and put on a show.” And that would be just fine.

**Tarell Alvin McCraney recommends:**

I have so many colleagues who are really just extraordinary. [Dominique Morisseau](#) and [Katori Hall](#) and [Marcus Gardley](#) and [Tanya Saracho](#), [Antoinette Nwandu](#). There is a dancer named [Jamar Roberts](#), who created a ballet at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater which I think is one of the best things I’ve ever seen. I feel very lucky. I get to live in a time where there are a lot of artists, particularly of color, Black artists, a lot of women and queer-identifying artists, who I can feel like I’m in conversation with, or at least standing next to, which feels great.

Name

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Vocation

Playwright, Actor, Screenwriter

