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As told to Max Mertens, 2370 words.

Tags: Writing, Performance, Film, Sex, Collaboration, Independence, Politics.

On creating your own platform

You raised the money to make Modern Whore on Kickstarter. What advice would you give people using these platforms for their creative projects to be successful?

First off, go for it. Secondly, have a plan. With Kickstarter, it's all or nothing, you have a short amount of time to fundraise however much you're looking to fund, so you need a plan. You need a plan for about a few weeks before the campaign starts. You have to have a social media plan. You have to know which outlets you're going to try to get to promote your Kickstarter. It's so much work, but it's the most incredible thing when you hit that goal.

We took inspiration from a few projects. I would say the one we looked at a lot was the success of Jacq the Stripper's Kickstarter. She crowdfunded STRIPTASTIC!. I was lucky enough to meet her in Toronto when she was on tour. I fangirled like, "I'm a big fan, we're doing this Kickstarter, we have this book called Modern Whore that we were thinking we'd like to do a Kickstarter for." She gave me some tips like "Make sure that your shipping costs are covered by the pledges, because you won't believe how much money you end up spending in shipping, and if that eats into your production costs then you're basically paying out of pocket to make the thing and to send the thing out." That was really helpful advice, and she also wrote a blurb for the book.

Now that you're working on the second edition, have you developed a writing routine?

I had to develop a new schedule for myself. I'm grateful to the pandemic for forcing me to find a schedule that works best for me. I'd wake up maybe around nine or 10 and exercise, usually with [director and collaborator] Nicole [Bazuin]—we'd do some pumping, we'd do some yoga. I would eat, maybe run an errand or something, then usually between two o'clock and six o'clock or maybe seven o'clock, I'd have four or five hours of really productive time. If I wasn't productive in those hours, I wouldn't get mad at myself. I would just do my best. If I was feeling really productive and excited about what I was doing, I would stay longer in this flow state. Then I would eat dinner and decide whether or not I would go back to it in the evening.

I was able to discover that I really only have about four or five hours that are actually productive, and to not beat myself up for doing less on any given day. This really worked for me. My editor Haley Cullingham said to me, "You can submit crap to me. It's my job to make it good, but you're submitting them so clean. They can be a little dirtier, don't worry." That was a massive compliment for me. I discovered that I just have to sit at my desk and put that time in, even if I don't write, but I have to sit at my desk and try.

You made Modern Whore film last year. Going from that, to making Last Night at the Strip Club for CBC, did you encounter any pushback in terms of what you could show or say?

Surprisingly no. We even cut a part that we thought was maybe a little too salacious that hadn't been flagged by CBC—I'd made a joke about how saying no to a man is like watching him be castrated, and my mom was like "Don't put that in, it's just so violent, and men might react really badly to it and I'm afraid for your safety." After a lot of discussion between Nicole and I we took it out, but it wasn't anything CBC flagged. It turned out everybody on that end was pretty supportive of the sex work art that we were making.

You and Nicole are longtime friends, and you also live together, does this ever present any challenges when it comes to collaborating?

No. We're close friends, but we're also reasonable people and we know how to give each other space. We don't have a massive apartment, but we do know how to get out of each other's way when necessary; we don't take it personally if we need to take our own time, take our own space. We do refer to each other as "wives" and I feel that very strongly. She's my wife and we're collaborators.

The other thing about the pandemic—especially because you have to spend so much time indoors with the people you live with—is that you really get to know the people you live with in a deeper way, for better or worse. Thankfully in our household it's for the better. We also live with my boyfriend, so it's the three of us who live here and we have a very modular relationship with each other, it's unique. I'm sure that lots of households are dealing with this: someone can be your wife one moment, then they can also be your mother, and then at next turn they're your child. That's what I mean by a modular relationship. We play different roles with each other depending on the context and that fluidity between our relationship is quite healthy. It's not rigid. It seems like kind of a crazy thing, but it's what actually keeps us the most sane.

Was there a particular moment when you realized that you had a bigger platform to advocate for sex workers' rights?

The moment that comes to mind is when we did our book launch in New York City in 2018 on International Sex Worker's Rights Day. We were at the Jefferson Library in Manhattan. It had been a former jail that had a courthouse, where Mae West had been taken because she'd broken obscenity laws trying to stage her play *Sex*. We were doing this book launch in the same room. Nicole and I organized it ourselves, and it was packed, filled with sex workers and civilians and art lovers. I was on the stage and I was reading from the book. I started talking about reviews and the sound from the audience was like "Ugghhh." The sound was one of recognition and of exhaustion, but also a twinge of delight, because we knew we were going to be talking about something that was taboo, something that we're not supposed to talk about.

Essentially these men's renderings of our shared experiences are what dictate our lives online in this sphere, and a good review can make you a lot of money and a bad review can destroy your life. When I heard that that sigh of recognition from the audience in New York City, surrounded by people that I've never met, I thought "Wow, this is so powerful." There are a lot of people who can relate to my experiences, even though I'm just one person with a very specific set of experiences, and I certainly don't claim to represent all sex workers. It was liberating to know that I was talking about something so many of us are impacted by, and it's motivated me to continue talking about these issues in a creative and meaningful way.

Tell me about how you got involved with [the sex workers' justice organization] Maggie's Toronto and what lessons you've learned from doing outreach work there.

I got involved with Maggie's three years ago now. I had a friend who was working there and she tipped me that they were hiring peers for their peer outreach program to do harm reduction with vulnerable sex workers. I was like, "I'm there, that's exactly, exactly what I want to be doing." So I went in for an interview, and thankfully I got the job and I started work there with my peer group, who consisted mostly of people who had street-based experience.

We were trained for a week. I learned a lot of things that week that I did not know about classism in sex work, and also the discrimination we tend to face when engaging with law enforcement. I went into my training as a peer thinking that sex workers could work together with the police, which is laughable now. In fact, when I expressed something along those lines during my first day of training, my peers were very quick to point out [otherwise], because I had said, "Well can't we create some sort of coalition with the police, can't we get them to understand our position?" The police would rather get a blowjob from us than help us.

Each one of them had a story about police coercion and assault and the freebies they demand to evade arrest and that sort of thing. I asked, "Shouldn't journalists be writing about this if this is such a huge problem?"—and I believe it when they tell me it's a problem—and their response is "Well no one cares about us." I found that so heartbreaking and it took me down a few notches. When you're one type of sex worker, a very privileged type of sex worker like me, who's only worked indoors, there's a privilege of being employed by an agency. The amount of discrimination in the sex industry when it comes to race and class and gender is unbelievable. So getting to know my peers who have had such different experiences in the industry than I have really, really deepened my appreciation, not only for them, but the work in general.

Once we were given the opportunity to start doing outreach, I got to do outreach to people who were working on the street. That was one of those things where I was a little bit scared at the beginning for whatever reason; sometimes you're just scared of confronting your own prejudices, and that's the fear you feel. But I put myself in that position to challenge myself, to be there for my community, and what I learned is these are people who've found a way to survive in this incredibly hostile, capitalist environment, where people are only valued based on their monetary worth. These people found a way to survive that works for them. It's not perfect, and I'm sure most of them wouldn't be doing it if they had any other comparable options, but they've found a way to survive.

What's your relationship with social media like right now?

I hate the power that social media platforms have over us; it's a strictly psychological power. I felt like I was in the death grips of Instagram in 2020. I felt like I was in a relationship with an abusive partner who didn't actually love me, and was in fact stealing my time and energy, along with my data and then selling it off to other people. Why am I putting so much energy into this relationship?

Something that happened that changed my perspective, specifically on Instagram, is I read an article about how there's been a lawsuit pursued against Instagram for spying on people through their front cameras. I thought that was so incredibly disturbing. I had an experience once on Instagram where I'd been scrolling, and all of a sudden I saw my screen and then another screen of a guy—it was just his face and he was looking at the screen and then it disappeared. I was like "What the fuck was that?" And I thought maybe I'd made it up or that I was crazy, and then I saw that article that Instagram had been accused of spying on people through their front cameras, and employees were watching people without their consent and other people started telling stories of seeing essentially the same thing. After that I turned off camera access, and then it became a slow weaning myself off the platform.

And that's on top of its anti-sex work stance. The *Modern Whore* account has been deleted by Instagram with no hopes of getting it back. I'm grateful my career's not necessarily impacted by my social media use, and may in fact be impeded by my social media use. Because I'm a writer, I already have a platform—I have a book deal and a book that's going to be out there. I would much rather be judged by the quality of my book and my writing in that book, then by my tweets or Instagram posts; those things to me are not real and they're not going to determine whether I'm an artist that survives and is known for posterity.

I've taken myself gradually off Instagram, but I am addicted to Twitter, and I hate that I'm addicted to Twitter. I would like to start to take myself off a little bit, especially because during the pandemic, I feel like people are just more hostile to each other in ways that are not helpful when we're all on the same team and we should be there to support each other. You don't want to be left out of the loop, especially in a time when there's new terms, new articles that you have to be aware of to stay current.

For instance, I didn't celebrate the deplatforming of Donald Trump, because sex workers have been deplatformed off of Twitter since its inception, and I feel like it could happen to anybody. The safest thing for me is not to invest as much of myself onto these platforms, but again I'm in a privileged position; a lot of sex workers, specifically, derive their income from their social media presence. Without it, they lose business and it makes it more difficult for them to survive. For myself, I would just like to be spending less time on it. I'd like to be less reliant on it, for sure.

Andrea Werhun Recommends:

Maggie's Toronto: COVID-19 Black Sex Worker Emergency Survival Fund

The Oh She Glows Cookbook by Angela Liddon

Shut Up You're Pretty by Téa Mtonji

Democracy Now!

Dickinson

Name

Andrea Werhun

Vocation

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Fact

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