On feeling understood

Writer and performer Annie Hamilton discusses narrativizing her life, searching for a mentor, and her conviction that she's right about her words.

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As told to Sammy Steiner, 2407 words.

Tags: Acting, Writing, Money, Failure, Process, Creative anxiety, Beginnings, Mentorship.

How has your experience in front of the camera shaped the way you approach writing?

The most valuable part of what I sometimes view as my wasted 10 years in Los Angeles [pursuing acting], is that I read so many scripts. When I got auditions, I would read the whole script. I wanted to do the best job I possibly could because I was so committed and loved acting so much. I can't believe I ever felt that way. Not all actors in the audition, to brag, read the script. I auditioned 400 or 500 times. I must have read that many scripts. I've never taken a writing class or read a screenwriting book. I think just knowing how other people write taught me how to write a script.

Did you get ideas for your own scripts while reading the scripts of others?

I didn't know that I was ever going to write one. Towards the end of my time in LA, like eight years in, I made a short film. The film was basically about me: a day in the life of an actress. It showed me getting my SAG card and then masturbating in my car all over Los Angeles. I showed it to my bosses and they were like, "Don't show this to anyone." I didn't pick up writing a screenplay again until three or four years later, but I was writing all the time to make myself feel better, in my Notes app or on Twitter. The best writing advice I have—which is the worst writing advice of all time—is that you have to get paid in order to write something. Otherwise, how are you going to have the impetus to do it? I guess there are some screenwriters who get pleasure, or the same kind of catharsis that I get from writing prose, from writing a screenplay. Writing a screenplay for me is not total catharsis. It's not the thing that I'll write when I'm drunk, desperately sad, and feeling so single that I'll pull up the final draft.

When you sit down to write a script, where do your ideas come from?

I draw from personal experience. The first movie I ever wrote—I've only written two—hasn't been made yet, and I hope that it will. A24 asked me, in true A24 fashion, to write a high-concept comedy. I didn't know what that meant. They told me to watch *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. I called my manager after a week of thinking. I had three weeks to prepare, and I didn't want to take the meeting. He said, "They're never going to call you again. It's A24. You have to take the meeting." I just didn't want to make a fool of myself. I didn't think of an idea for another week. The only idea I could come up with was that perhaps I overline my lips so crazily, get lip surgery in Los Angeles until my lips grow, and grow like Dumbo and I fly away. Then, two days before the meeting, I thought of the movie idea. It was an extension of how I felt about my open relationship, but I turned it into a *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

I think all writing is autobiographical. I think it's bullshit when people frown upon autobiographical work because it's the most interesting to me. I'm just not a sci-fi lady. Hemingway has that quote that's like, "each sentence has to be true," and I believe that in writing. I have no laws with lying in the rogue real world, which

is unfortunate and something I have to work on. But when I write, everything has to be honest. To think of ideas, usually [I use] something I'm dealing with in my own life. I know some people work from a theme or a feeling, but I need circumstance. I need to know the beginning, middle, and end. I wouldn't just write about jealousy. I'd write about the time that I had a threesome and it went awry, because I know where it starts and I know where it ends.

How do you think writing from an autobiographical lens shapes your professional voice? Is that different from your personal voice?

I have very little boundaries, so I'm figuring it out. I think there's a difference between my public voice and my private voice. In terms of professional and personal, my professional work is personal and my personal life is my professional life. I think my professional voice is better than my personal voice, to be honest. I wish that I didn't hang out with anyone at all and everyone just read my writing, and I existed that way. When I'm writing, I can say exactly what I want to say so there's no threat of being misunderstood. In life, I'm often misunderstood because I don't even know what I'm saying, and I'm lying. I think one of the worst feelings on planet earth is just someone not understanding you.

Do you hope that somebody feels a certain way after reading your work?

I don't think about the people reading it. There's no audience to me because I don't see the audience. I think about the editor, and I think about the subject.

Has your understanding of yourself evolved through your writing?

I don't think writing has necessarily taught me about myself. I'm very self-loathing. I don't like myself most of the time. But when I narrativize my life, I can look at it and feel a bit more pride than I might normally. It grounds me, but I don't know if it teaches me about myself. What teaches me about myself is messing up in real life, because then I have to learn from it.

I'm someone who thinks about themselves all the time. The dialogue never ends. The script I just wrote is about my childhood, or the moment when I was 15. After I wrote the draft, I talked with the production company about it and they were talking about the character as if she was a character, not me—she doesn't have my name, and she is a *character*. They said this thing that stopped me in my tracks because it was so savage and true: "Everyone wants her crazy around, but no one wants to actually engage with it." I thought, "That's how people feel about me."

How do you handle critique when you are dealing with personal narrative and experience?

Not well. I wish I had a process or a special coping mechanism. I've gotten better at this, but in the past it would be to get fucked up and fuck someone. Truly. I've been taking a lot of baths. Water sort of stops my overactive anxiety. If I submerge my body in water, then I feel a lot better. But I don't cope with critique well. Actually, I know how I cope with it: by screaming, yelling, being pissed and angry. Then having a meltdown privately, realizing that I made a fool of myself by being stubborn and screaming, and then apologizing to the person that I screamed at.

I wonder what it is about water.

It's just such a grounding presence. Relaxation is, whether I like it or not, the best place to be creative. If you're relaxed, then you're listening to your impulses, and your impulses have an easier time being read. It's not that they're not there before, it's just that the neuroses and anxiety… there's so much gook in your brain that makes it hard to hear yourself.

Is writing a solo experience for you?

Yes. The first movie I wrote was with someone else; I'll never do it again. I have the stubborn conviction that

I'm right when it comes to my own words. I've never felt that way about anything. That's how I knew I wasn't an actor. I would watch movies and my actor friends would say, "I could have done that part better." I never felt that way. I've never watched a movie and been like, "Could have smashed that over Jennifer Lawrence." With writing, I really do think I'm good at it. I think I'm right more than anyone, including producers and editors.

When you experience writer's block and don't have someone to bounce ideas off of, do you have writing practices that you turn to?

I hit writer's block every day, aside from the first movie I wrote which took three months. I don't think I wrote [for a while after that]. I wrote articles and things to get by, but I didn't write another movie for a year. I had writer's block for that entire year. When I finally pushed myself to get down to it, I wrote it in two weeks.

To get ideas, I walk and listen to music. For a movie, I like playing the soundtrack of the movie so that I can see it and visualize it. If I had enough money, I would fly to Tokyo three times a week so that I can make it my WeWork. I love taking cabs, listening to music, and going over the Henry Hudson or Williamsburg Bridge. I come up with ideas when I smoke pot. Then I get paranoid and have to stop smoking pot. For articles, I never have a shortage of ideas. It's always easy to figure out something to write. It's just harder for a larger idea… Writing is writer's block. You sit down and nothing comes. Limitations really help me think. When A24 told me to write a high-concept comedy, it helped eliminate so many of my other ideas. It made my brain shrink, and therefore expand because I had to work around something that I viewed as an obstacle. I actually really like when I'm given very rigid rules or when there's a prompt.

Do you have fun with writing?

It feels like agony. The best feeling on planet earth is after I've written something I think is good. I read it back, pat myself on the back, and think, "Job well done." Every other part of writing—even though it's a privilege to get to call that my job—is painful, humiliating, sad, and lonely.

Do you have a mentor?

I've searched long and hard. I keep thinking I've gotten one, and then realize that we're friends. Years ago, my psychiatrist said that I should get a mentor. I couldn't think of anyone who was doing work that felt in line with mine. Then I came across Spalding Gray, who was the first American monologuist. They called him the waspy Woody Allen. He would sit at a desk with a glass of water and speak his life out to an audience. He committed suicide, very sadly, so he can't be my mentor. Reading his diaries really felt like a mentorship, and also a scary one because of the end of his life. There's one director that I talk to all the time and love laughing with. He reads my work and gives me notes. He could be my mentor, but he feels like more of a friend.

Who do you choose to take advice from?

People are throwing advice at me all the goddamn day, and I take so little of it. My shrink. I know he's right. Do I take the advice? I don't know. Certainly not my parents. I trust my friends and my manager for people-related advice.

What about writing advice?

I don't take it from anyone. I'm really surprised that I feel that way. I think it means that I have grown into myself a little bit more. Also, I found the right thing for me to do. I didn't know this feeling until three years ago, and I don't think I got this staunch about it until one year ago. With acting—and I wanted to be a ballerina until I was 18—I only trusted other people. I didn't trust myself at all. My work is explicitly autobiographical. No one knows it better than me, so I don't care. I have this belief that if something is as close to the bones of the truth to what actually happened, then that specificity will reach people. Whether or not people have had an experience that's similar, the feeling comes alive more because it's so explicit and specific.

It's said that "good artists copy, great artists steal." Where do you draw the line when it comes to drawing inspiration versus imitation?

What have I stolen from? I don't think it's conscious. As of now, I don't know if I've stolen anything because I'm just getting started. When I look at an artist's work, their most original work is often at the beginning of their career because they're just getting all of the baseline stuff out. My personality is directly lifted from five different things. I saw *Annie Hall*—my personality is directly Diane Keaton's in a botched, worse way. I was obsessed with Martin Scorsese movies growing up… or maybe it was Leonardo DiCaprio movies, like *The Basketball Diaries*, so I started smoking, spitting, and walking a certain way. I loved Jim Carroll in high school. I loved a lot of drug addicts, so I aspired to be a drug addict, and then lightly became one and had to get rid of that. My personality has been shaped by art rather than my work.

How do you measure success? Is it a moving goalpost?

My vision of success right now is to get one movie made. I don't even care if it's good. To be able to pay my rent on a nice one-bedroom that has no mice and light. When I was an actor, I was jealous of everyone and everything. The jealousy nearly ate me alive. Now that I write, I feel that I'm a contributor to the world in a unique way that only I can be or do. That zapped a lot of the jealousy out.

Annie Hamilton recommends:

Anastasia Kobekina: this cellist I am OBSESSED WITH

The movie *Stage Door* with Katharine Hepburn and Ginger Rogers

This album: David Batteau's *Happy In Hollywood*

Michaela Coel's book: *Misfits: A Personal Manifesto*

Kat Von D Lip Liner in Chestnut Rose (formerly Lolita)

Name
Annie Hamilton

Vocation
writer, performer