

On managing fear about a full-time art career



Writer, director and musician Nazareth Hassan discusses the role of shame, working in collaboration with others, and the fact that full-time work can come and go

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As told to Mary Retta, 1721 words.

Tags: [Theater](#), [Collaboration](#), [Day jobs](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#).

I first heard of you as a playwright, but you are clearly a multi-hyphenate and a multimedia artist and create in lots of different forms. Do you have a title for yourself? Do you mainly see yourself as one type of artist?

I usually go by writer, director, and musician. I feel like that encompasses all of the different skillsets that I have and the ways it can exist in different media.

When you were starting out as an artist, was there one form of art that kind of drew you in first?

I think music was probably the earliest form of art that I started practicing, because my dad and my grandma were musicians. I started playing piano and training as a singer. I had a brief stint as a musical theater kid and then sort of discovered directing and creating my own work in the theater and [that] kind of lit a spark under me.

How old were you at that time?

When I started studying music, I was probably six or seven.

When you have an idea for something, how do you decide what form of art you're going to make? How do you decide, "I'm going to write a play about something versus write a song"?

I think a lot of my practice is dictated by the context of my life. So I started really making recorded music in 2020 when I just didn't have the ability to perform or make plays. And a lot of the songs that I was coming up with were just a product of me learning how to produce.

I don't know if I go into it thinking, "Oh, this should be a play or it shouldn't." I think it's whatever mediums are available to me is what I'm going to gravitate towards in that moment. I have the most discipline when it comes to writing plays because I went to school for it. So I can write a play pretty fairly quickly.

In the earlier days of you teaching yourself how to produce, I imagine that was pretty solitary work. Do you have thoughts on how solo work versus collaboration changes the creative process?

I think every form of art that I practice is collaborative in some way. Performance art feels like the medium of sociality in a sense. So a lot of the ways that I think about live performance is like, what am I doing to use

our social fabric of that moment, to construct time in a certain way, to frame a certain behavioral phenomenon.

With my performance, I'm more comfortable listening and responding to things and reacting. I think about plays a lot as prompts for healing or prompts for intense rhetoric. Whereas with music, it is a little bit more private. It takes me a little bit longer to feel comfortable releasing music also. I'll produce something and write something and then bring it to another producer and see what we can make together of it so that it's not completely just me in my bedroom in the studio.

I read that you both wrote and directed *BOWL EP*, but you wrote *Practice* and then somebody else directed it. What was that process like? I imagine it's kind of a trade-off between total control, but also kind of like you were saying, feeling a little decentralized or isolated if you're both the writer and the director.

I studied directing and the reason I started writing plays was to supplement my directing education, so a lot of my favorite theater artists are writer-directors, and my artistic model was always the director as the lead artist. So it's not super isolating per se. I think it's a lot more work. The reason why I decided not to direct *Practice* was partially because of the subject matter: the play being about this director who has sort of total control and me wanting to create a room where that maybe that isn't the case, where there's the power structures in the room are in some way being diverted, even though they're still there.

But with *BOWL*, I think it wasn't as much isolating as it was a lot of pressure. The part of me that really loves to direct is the part of me that likes to be social and likes to talk about ideas and frame things with people and discover things with people. So it actually isn't super lonesome. It's just like you have two jobs essentially.

Where do you source inspiration from? Just seeing two of your plays, they were quite different, but I think definitely both of them revolved around young people who were very creative and were struggling to make a name for themselves in different ways. Do you feel like you're sourcing from other media that you've seen, your own life, or a combination?

I think it's a combination. A lot of the reason I write is that it serves as a form of processing for me. The things that I tend to write about are things that I don't quite understand, that are happening inside of me or happening around me. And writing a play specifically is a way of making those things manifest in a way that I can sort of examine myself, which is both super daunting, but also it's really helpful.

Because of that, I write a lot about shame. I think shame is probably the connecting thread through a lot of my work. I feel like shame is something that is a social emotion and it's best pulled apart or parsed through with others. The only way I think to get through shame is to speak openly and to be in an assembly with other people witnessing your shame. I think that's the heart of the work.

There's a conversation among a lot of writers and artists of: do we want to do it full-time or do we want to have a day job that's kind of unrelated and then we do art on the side. I'm curious, your thoughts on this, especially because the way that the characters in your plays approach art is so fearful and hopeful.

That's really funny. They really are afraid.

I think it's a question of where do you have the most freedom? I've gone back and forth. I'm also a teacher. I'm an educator. And I would say not at the moment, but in the past that has been my main source of income in conjunction with art making. I currently am a full-time artist, but for a while I was really scared about what it would mean to be a full-time artist. We all had to ride the wave of the ups and downs.

I didn't grow up with a lot of money or a safety net, so I feel like the pressure on me is slightly different than a lot of my peers, especially in the theater because it's really hard to make a living in the theater. I was nervous about having to make things I didn't want to make. And I think now I'm like, okay, maybe that's not the case. Maybe I can have it on my terms and have it be something that still supports me.

There is a little bit of stepping into the dark murky waters of it all. I think it's the constant sort of push and pull. Because sometimes you do need to actually be full-time in your craft to get the things you need to get done, done. But there's a cost. There's a cost to both.

Given that you are full-time making art right now, what does your week look like? I guess let's say when you're working on a play.

It depends. I have a book of poetry coming out soon. Right now, I'm preparing for a show in London, so I'm about to start redrafting a play of mine. And then I'm in the process of getting another show that I'm going to direct ready to be programmed, so I just made a pitch deck with my collaborator, [Alexander Mejía](#). And that is a piece that I'm working on with [Liz Magic Laser](#), who's this performance artist and video artist. Then I'm working on adapting *Practice* into a film, so I'm writing that as we go as well. Thankfully right now I have a good amount of free time. I just got a commission. So there's a play that I have started that I'm working on there. It's sort of sporadic.

But then I think the day-to-day is trying to remain sane in some way. Something I am thinking about is the state of the world at the moment is moving at a pace that is hard to keep up with as an artist in terms of what to respond to and how. Everything is at fever pitch to the point where it's hard to make work about current events or topicality because everything feels so absurd. I wrote *Practice* three years ago, so it was a different context. But I feel like the only way I could think to ground a critique of power was by putting it in the space that we're all entering, which is the theater.

Either right now or in the future of your career, what would success, creative success look like for you?

I think that it's two things. I think some form of stability. And I think I always want my work to elicit a polarizing reaction. That to me is a success. I think both *BOWL* and *Practice* had that effect on the audiences and especially *Practice*. People either loved it or hated it, which was exciting.

If I can manage to support myself while also making work that angers people and comforts people and challenges people, that would be a big success for me.

Nazareth Hassan recommends:

Book: *Simulacra and Simulation* by Jean Baudrillard

Film: *La Ciénaga* dir. by Lucrecia Martel

Album: *Millions of Years of Longing* by Jane Pankia

Song: "Noises" by Pinkpantheress

Performance: *IS THIS THE THEATRE OF LOVE? (or just a hellscape of masks?)* by [Wonderful Cringe](#), directed by James Wyrwicz

Name

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Vocation

writer, director, musician

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Peter Bellamy