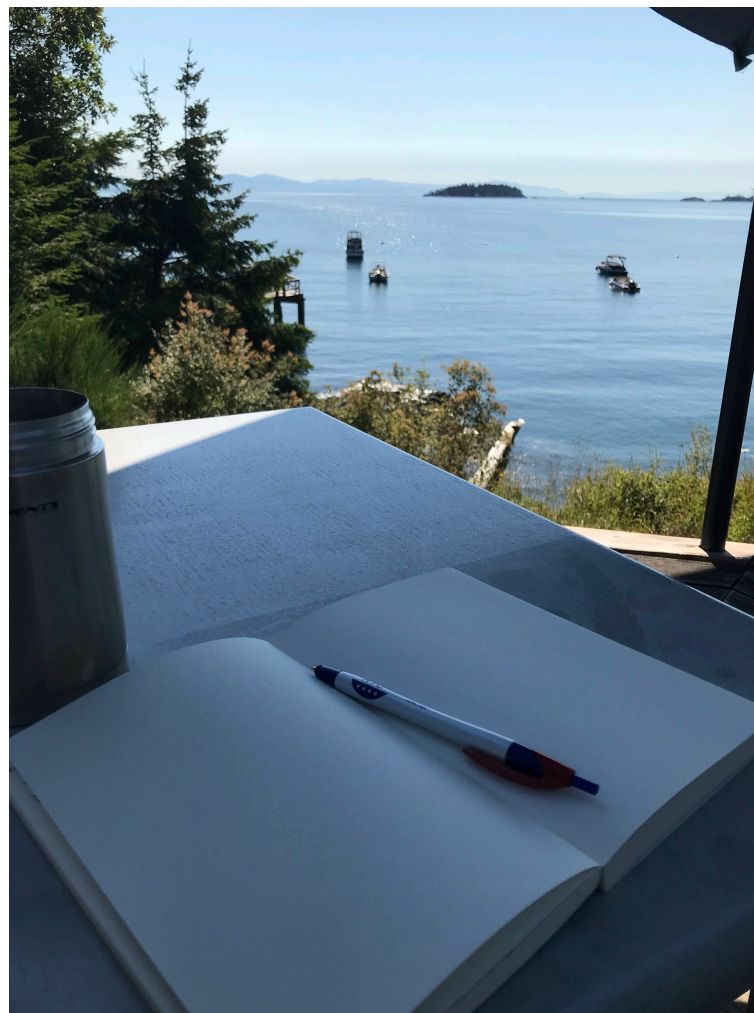


Songs for the Struggling Artist 2024



Songs for the Struggling Artist 2024

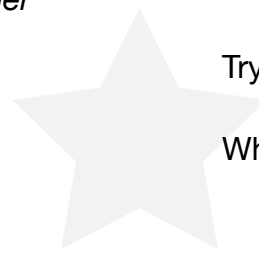
Emily Rainbow Davis

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SEO Is So Dumb

For years I'd been seeing discussions of "SEO" all over my websites. Every company seemed to want to help me improve this SEO business so I eventually looked it up to try and understand it. In case you don't have six websites the way I do, (I am a maniac. They're here, here, here, here, here and right here) or maybe you've never encountered SEO before or maybe SEO stands for "Sexy Elephant Opera" for you – allow me to explain. In this case SEO is an acronym for Search Engine Optimization. It is what you're supposed to do to make yourself easy to find on the web. People who are concerned about discoverability and visibility on the internet tend to care a lot about SEO.

I am, as someone who makes many things in this digital space, very interested in making myself discoverable so I looked into it. Most of the companies that make CMS (Content Management System) templates give their users tools to optimize their searchability.

Many of my websites, including this blog, have given me ample opportunities to improve my page's SEO. It has little boxes I can fill out and ways to boost. I never bother, really. But one time I did. I was working on one of my many websites and it made what I needed to do to improve my SEO clear. I tried to do it right. I really did. But the more I attempted it, the stupider it all became.

Let's say I had a webpage about leaves. For it to be useful in a SEO sense, the webpage's name had to have the word "leaves" in it. Call it foliage and you're not getting a SEO boost. You need to use the word "leaves" in the title. You need to use the word "leaves" as many times as possible in the text and you have to tag the images with leaves. You have to saturate your page with the word, or the clicks will not come to you.

This redundancy is, of course, the absolute opposite of good writing, wherein it is optimal to use as large a variety of words as you can muster. You will have better SEO luck just writing the word leaves over and over again than you would in writing something interesting or salient about leaves. I'm pretty sure this is a big factor in why so much stuff on the internet is useless trash. Magazines and newspapers have gone out of business over it because they're bought by people or companies that just want clicks – so they can make advertising dollars or whatever, and they privilege SEO over good writing. Owners would rather have a

bot "write" an article that generates clicks than a thoughtful essay by a person that reveals truth. But try and write a thoughtful essay while also trying to include SEO attractive words and you'll find yourself in a quandary. The SEO likes simple repetitive things. It does not like complex ideas or expansive language. It's a baby that recognizes a handful of words and can act on them.

Could improving my SEO bring more eyes to my work? Absolutely. But improving the SEO would make the work worth very little when those eyes arrived.

Improving one's SEO means making the work for robots. Writing for SEO means privileging robots over humans. And robots don't read. They just select the words they're looking for and spit out results.

People are now making things for search engines instead of other people. This doesn't make any sense to me. I just can't bring myself to do it. Leaves leaves leaves leaves leaves leaves. Not a leaf! No. Leaves leaves leaves.



There were SO MANY results when I searched for an SEO image. This one (by Merakist) is pretty, at least.

It Is So Much Easier to Not Make Things

It's December. I'm back to putting on a show. I'm doing all the things you have to do to make a show happen. I'm getting a team together. I'm casting actors. I'm writing a press release. I'm crafting a marketing strategy. And at every inflection point, I think, "Golly this is hard." I think, "Why did I get myself into this?" And at every turn in the road, I think, "Wouldn't it be easier to just not?" At every mile marker I feel sure I've made an irreversible mistake and failure is inevitable.

The fact is, it **WOULD** be easier to just not. It's always easier to not do than to do. Always! (Well, almost always.) It would be nice if the arc of the universe bent toward justice but it seems more accurately to bend toward inertia. It is really quite remarkable anyone makes anything at all! I have renewed admiration for anyone who ever had an idea and then **DID** it. It is so much easier to have an idea and then just sit around hoping something will happen with it. That is what most people do. And the reason that is what most people do is because it is incredibly much easier.

I make things all the time but mostly I do them by myself in a structure that doesn't require me to do a lot of the extra challenging stuff. With things like writing and learning new songs, I have created a structure such that I don't have to overcome inertia every time I do them. I have practices and regular routines that make those kinds of makings relatively easy. Because, while it is easier not to make most things, I find it very hard to not make anything at all. I understand this is a contradiction. But not all making is alike.

Sometimes when you're making, you can just keep making because once you've dug the trench for the water, it can mostly just keep flowing. The trouble comes when you're trying to make something new, where no trench has previously been dug. That's when you realize how much easier it is to **NOT** make something.

And the thing of it is, most things in the world are not made by one single person deciding to make a thing. Most things tend to be variations on things that have been made before. That is, there are systems in place to join in on and do, along with the many others who have done it before. No one has to dig a trench; the water is already flowing.

That's why it's easier to put on The Olympics than it is for a single artist to put on a small show. The Olympics doesn't depend on one person to make it go. The most key person in the producing of the Olympics could get sick and step out and we would still have the Olympics but if I stop pushing my show up the hill, it's going to roll back down over me. And more significantly, it will not happen. The ways it would be easier not to bother are legion.

You may wonder why do such things if they're so hard. Sometimes I wonder that too! It would be easier to **NOT** do things or even to do things that are already in motion, maybe get on the team for producing the Olympics somewhere and just be carried along by the rushing water of a giant thing in motion.

But I guess there is something very special about making something, even if it isn't easy. I bow to everyone who has chosen to make something, particularly art, with no previously forged path, with no precedent, no trench already dug. It is so much easier not to and I have new found appreciation for everyone who does those things anyway.



"Oh," you think, "they're just dancing on the street, maybe even in their street clothes. This was possibly pretty easy to do!" I know nothing about this piece but I guarantee you it would have been easier not to!

Whisper Acting

We decided to watch the second season of *The Wheel of Time* (a fantasy adventure show on Amazon) and by the middle of the show, we were laughing our faces off. This was not because the show is funny. It is not. It takes itself very seriously. But we were cracking ourselves up due to the near universal use of Whisper Acting. *The Wheel of Time* is hardly the first show to go all in on Whisper Acting but they go hard and it happened to be the show where it started to become ridiculous.

We started talking about it because the dialogue was so hard to hear or understand and yet the action sequences were loud and aggressive. We've read many of the articles and watched the videos about the trends in sound design that make this happen and have led to an extraordinary percentage of people using the closed captions or subtitles when watching TV. It's partly the sound design, sure – but it's also the acting.

So many people are whispering. Like, so many. Is this what they're teaching in acting school these days? If so, I kindly request them to stop.

Whispering is a film technique. We don't use it in the theatre much, as we have to be heard and a stage whisper is, in fact, very demanding to do. But on film, when everyone is wearing a mic, whispering is easily done. In fact, it's much easier than saying one's lines full voiced, as it can cover some gaps in performance or make a line reading sound intense, without any real effort. It's fairly easy to cover bad acting with whispering. I suspect in the case of *The Wheel of Time*, it's not because the director is trying to cover bad acting – because they're all very good otherwise – but maybe because they think the whispering makes things seem more dramatic or intimate? Or maybe because it's the trend of the current moment? Or maybe everyone's afraid of using their voices now? I don't know why they do it but I do know I felt a palpable relief whenever anyone used their actual full voice in this show.

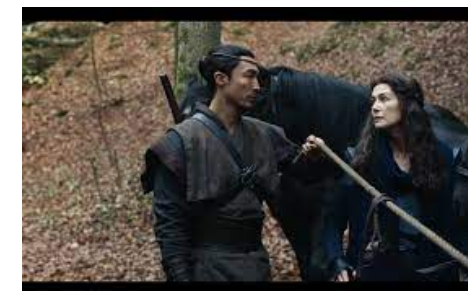
The extra difficulty with everyone whispering in a fantasy show is that there are a lot of made-up words, a lot of made-up names and places and when we can't really hear the sounds of those made-up places or people, we have no idea what or who anyone is talking about. That's when it starts to become funny.

That's when we start whispering to each other. ("Where did he say he was going?" "I don't know. It was so quiet, sounded like stosthiesfdkha?") That's why when there was a long lead up to a scene between the Aes Sedai and her warder, I couldn't resist adding some whispered dialogue as it ramped up, saying "I can't wait to have a dramatic whisper scene where we just whisper angrily at each other." Then the warder came in and he started whispering, and we fell out of our chairs laughing. It got even funnier when the whispering man banged his fist on the table in the middle of whispering. Like, you're not trying to be quiet, obviously. This is just too funny. We missed the whole scene, we were laughing so hard. I don't think that's what the showrunners were going for.

One of our favorite whispered moments was when a big group of guys were riding their horses through some dry hills. Despite the fact that horses are loud and the outdoors eats sound, these guys were still whispering to each other. That one wasn't just funny, it stretched the bounds of credulity. Just a bunch of dudes whispering on horseback as their horses loudly clip-clop over the ground.

Listen, I understand the power of a whisper. My favorite technique for getting a room to quiet down is just to make little whispering sounds because almost everyone wants to know the secret and a whisper sounds like a secret. But if you whisper all the time, you lose all the whisper's power. If you whisper all the time, people will stop listening – especially if you're telling us about (inaudible) who is going to (inaudible) in order to rescue (inaudible).

Please Film and TV makers, I beg of you, save your whispers for only the moments in which they are absolutely necessary. It's become a style of acting now somehow and it's just silly to keep doing it. If whispering is all your actors can do, get better actors! Or else I'm just going to laugh through your very serious shows.



Come whisper by a horse with me

It's the Indifference That Will Get You

There's not nearly as much criticism as I expected in this artist's life. When I got started, I really thought people would be lining up to tell me what was wrong with my work all the time. I think it's what a lot of people are afraid of when it comes to sharing their creations. What are people going to say? I know now that the thing people are most likely going to say is nothing.

I want to be clear that I'm not asking for criticism. Sometimes nothing is better than whatever catty thing someone wants to tell you. I'm not complaining about not receiving insults to my work. But what I was NOT prepared for and continue to be floored by is the extraordinary indifference to it.

It feels like – I come out on stage in my elaborate costume that I spent weeks making out of found objects and I expect some applause. I've just made a grand entrance! But – not only do I not get applause, or boos, – the crowd doesn't even stop talking. So I stand there awkwardly in my egg carton gown trying to work out what I should do. No one is particularly interested in me or this costume or the incredible character development I did for this moment. I try a little dance. I sing a little song. I try everything I can think of. And maybe one person in the back starts to get it, which is great, but then the hour we paid for in this theatre is up and I've got to get off the stage.

Most of my creative life feels like this these days. And partly that's because I'm mostly in on-line spaces where the rewards are slow and fewer. But even when I do stuff live and in person, it is very challenging to get an audience in, and there is no indifference quite like the indifference of a bunch of empty seats.

No one ever tells me they think my work is shit. I haven't had a bad review since *The Scotsman* tore my clown show to pieces at the Edinburgh Fringe. I believe the reviewer called me (or the show) “a dead frog on the road” or maybe “dead toad on the road” – if they were going for a rhyme. But at least that reviewer from *The Scotsman* showed up. She was literally the only one at that show. Our team ran around the building begging anyone they could find to come in and watch it with the reviewer. I think they found one additional audience member for that show?

Anyway – I'd almost prefer having a house full of clones of that mean lady from *The Scotsman* than the indifference I run up against almost every time I do something. At least the dead frog lady sat there and endured me, even if she hated it. It's like – criticism looms large. Of course I still remember being called a dead frog (or a toad?) even though it was over fifteen years ago. But while it hurt, that dead frog business did fire me up. I became very determined to show her she was wrong. There's something to push against with criticism. Indifference gives you absolutely nothing. It hurts, too. But in a deflating way. It's not sharp. It just makes you want to lie down in the road like a frog and never make anything again.

In a digital space, it's just a moment to be endured. When I launched the second season of *The Dragoning* a couple of years ago – after building up the release for weeks – it had zero listens for over a day and a half. It felt like finally birthing a baby after nine months of growing it and discovering it was just a handful of lint. All that pushing for a handful of lint? It was very disappointing. But a year later, we'd gone to 21 in the charts in Russia, 27 in Sweden and 85 here in the US and also, New Zealand. So the initial indifference starts to fade if you have something that continues to grow. But not everything does, particularly not the live performing arts, and it doesn't necessarily help the next time you present your new work to the world and find that there is no response.

The effect is worse when the project is big and you put in a lot of time and effort. At this point, almost everyone knows what it's like to put up a pithy little post on social media and have it go nowhere. OR to have it blow up! It's just a little thought you had and you put it up and depending on which way the algorithm is blowing, you will get a response or not. Your little remark can live or die based on who the algorithm shows it to and when.

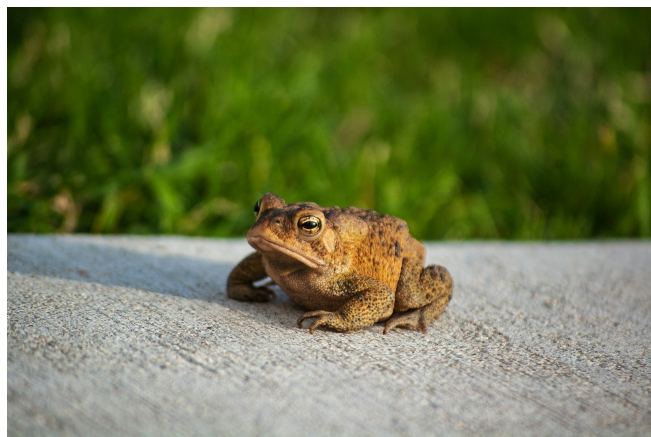
The thing is – things like an audio drama that take months of work and over a dozen people to come to fruition, show up on that same landscape. The way the internet flattens everything, a tweet is equivalent to a whole show. And tweets often do better than whole shows. If we were doing things for rewards, it makes no sense to create anything that takes any serious labor. It is easier to tweet than to write and record a song and a lot more people will read your tweet than listen to your song (or your podcast or watch your movie or come to your play or dance or any of it). People are not only more likely to read your tweet than



engage with your art, they would generally rather “like” your tweet than engage with your art. Sometimes I can feel people praying I will not compel them to deal with my art. There’s an undercurrent of “Please don’t make me read your blog, or listen to your music, or listen to your podcast, or watch your video” or whatever it is. And those of us who are stubborn just go on and make things anyway, hoping to contribute something to the world, to express something we feel is important or just continue to make art. Even though no one is asking for it and some are actively hoping we won’t make them look at it, we make it anyway. And then, inevitably, that art is met with indifference. No one calls us dead frogs in the road but still – we feel like a dead frog in the road because no one even came out to look at us.

In my experience, most people express a gladness that I continue to create – but (with some very notable exceptions, thank you!) just aren’t that interested in the creations. I have people I feel this way about, too, so I understand it. It just feels lousy. It makes it hard to motivate making anything more complex than a tweet. And the thing of it is, I think we REALLY NEED ART that is MORE COMPLEX than a TWEET! I think this is really damn important. It doesn’t have to be my work that you engage with – but please engage with someone’s art, especially the indie ones who are getting so little positive feedback. Go see someone’s something. Find something nice to say about it even if you hate it. Or don’t. And just go.

I had a friend come see a show recently and they said, “It was so....” And then just trailed off. That was all. I know they did not like it. That’s okay. They came. They weren’t indifferent to me or my work. They didn’t call me a dead frog in the road. I actually call that a win.



This toad is very much alive. Though kind of grumpy about having to watch or listen to my art.

Click the Clicks You Want to See in the World

The podcast I was listening to was about the crisis in journalism – about how so many news sites were disappearing, how so many journalists are losing their jobs and about how the landscape was changing so dramatically and not for the better. (This country has lost one third of its newspapers and two thirds of its journalists since 2005 and it is accelerating.) I was only half listening – truth be told. I was still pretty wiped out from COVID and I was dozing a fair amount. But then – after a history lesson in how journalism was funded and then how that landscape shifted and then shifted again – I sat bolt upright at a concept the guest (Ezra Klein) brought up. He said we should not think of ourselves as consumers of the internet but as generators. His feeling was that we are all rather passively engaging with the internet, without realizing that we are creating it while we do that. Basically, the idea is that we are creating with our clicks. What we engage with and look at and pay attention to is the internet we create. If I want to see local news, I have to subscribe to local news – or at the very least – visit local news sites. If I want more independent media, I have to read independent media. I can’t just wish for these things to exist.

I recognize my own behavior in this. When Jezebel was shut down, I was pretty upset! RIP the last popular feminist media! But I hadn’t visited Jezebel in ages. Truthfully, since they were bought by G/O Media – they were starting to fall apart. But even before then, I wasn’t over there much. I appreciated that Jezebel existed but I didn’t do anything to help continue its existence. (I learned while researching for this that it is coming back via Paste Magazine. Hooray for Zombie Jezebel!) As Klein said, if you want the publication to continue you have to read it. If you want the podcast to continue, you have to listen to it. If you want an internet with blogs and independent media, you have to read them. We create our own internet.

In other words, wailing about the evils of social media while continuing to scroll through it for hours, doesn’t help create alternatives. If we go through the portals of social media to get to our media, we are enforcing the need for social media to filter our media for us. I do this. And I get the internet that I create – a world filtered by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, Bsky, Mastodon, etc. If I like something, I can’t wait for it to show up in a feed,

I have to go directly to it. Additionally, Facebook has been showing people less and less news in their feeds. This has throttled traffic to news media which has, in turn, lost them a lot of advertising dollars and threatened their existence. Or killed it entirely. If I want it, I have to go to the thing and click there.

I have often thought of this from my own perspective of my needs as an artist, engaging with the internet. There are a lot of people who express that they're glad I do what I do but only a handful that engage with my work and even fewer that support it. This is as true of my off-line theatre making as it is with my podcasts, my blogs or music. I know directly what happens when people don't engage with my work. (I feel bad mostly.) But there have definitely been times where the direct line of a project living or dying is very clear. Our first season of our first audio drama, *The Dragoning*, took almost a year to finish because the funding was so slow to come in. We weren't holding episodes back because we wanted to be withholding – we just literally couldn't make a new episode until we reached the episode budget. Eventually, we got there. And the show has charted around the world. But it was clear there was a big disconnect for a lot of people between support for the podcast and its ability to be made. And it's not just about money. If more people had listened to the show, (downloaded the show, even put it on play and walked out to do something else), if we'd gotten more numbers, perhaps we could have found some funding through advertising. But podcast advertising is a numbers game and if you're not getting a minimum of a thousand downloads an episode, it's not a game you can play. I had ads on the podcast version of this blog for a week and a half and made a grand total of \$1.38. It's very clear to me, as a creator, how peoples' investment can make the life or death difference in a creation. I don't know why I hadn't really put it together as a user of the internet.

As Klein put it, "If you want Pitchfork to exist, you have to read it." Anything we want on the internet (and I would argue, out in the world, too) we have to engage with it. Ezra Klein on Search Engine:

"Every time you read one thing over another or watch or listen to or spend time on, you are creating more of that thing and less of other things, right? There is still some money that comes from just, like, your attention. Then a level above that, when you pay for anything, when you become a member or subscriber, then you're really sending a signal to generate more of that thing and not of the other."



We turned the vibrant disparate quirky internet into a series of social media sites. And if we like that – cool – that's what we have. But if we want other things, we have to engage with them and we also have to pay for them. I really want to do this. I want more art; I want to pay for more artists. (I'd love to support my fellow artists on Patreon: like Alexandra Scott, Betsy VanDeusen, Dance Naked Creative, Monica Byrne, Michael Harren and so many more.) And when I start to make a living wage, that's the first thing I'm going to do. Meanwhile, though, to create the internet I want to see in the world, I have to actually click on my values. I can't just like the funny Onion headline on Twitter, I have to click on the article and go read it – on the Onion's website. If I want more Onion, I have to read the Onion.

But this is the thing, though, I used to read the Onion cover to cover when it was a paper publication I could just pick up on the street. Now I have to remind myself to click when I see an article go by on social media. And once I get over there, I don't read that whole issue. I just read what I came for and get out. I'm guessing we're not going back to paper but it was a lot better for some things. I currently read every issue of New York magazine because I subscribe to it. It comes in the mail and then I read it. For me, subscribing means I get both local news and a way to voice my support for one of my favorite journalists (Rebecca Traister, who writes there). I know other publications languish because I chose that one. That's my current vote – since I don't really read much news on the internet. Which I guess is also a vote. But if I want the old quirky internet full of funky weird websites, I have to visit those!

Oh hey, if you need some ideas on stuff to click on, I put a bunch of links in this piece. Go to the web version and click away!



Promotional Tips for Everything

Since I have several podcasts that are now hosted by Spotify, I receive their newsletter (four copies, one for each podcast) which offers podcasting tips. I mostly ignore them, as I have read MANY tips previously and there's rarely anything new. I clicked on the most recent one though, since it was about how to grow your audience. I'm in the middle of putting out a new podcast so I figured I could use some reminders of that kind of information.

Ultimately, there was nothing in it I hadn't seen before but something about it made me think about what they were suggesting in a new way. So many tips involved making some other form of media alongside the podcast. It felt like they were saying that in order to have success as a podcaster, you had to make videos. To bring ears to your podcast, you should also write a newsletter. It struck me as absolutely absurd. In order to create one thing, you have to become expert at several others. Let me tell you, I didn't get into audio to make video. If I wanted to make videos, I'd make videos! (And I have made a couple!)

And as annoyed as this advice made me, I acknowledge that it's probably correct. I'm already doing it, honestly. For my latest audio drama, our producer has made multiple videos, some of which have done better than almost anything else we've put out in the world. I think they might help us bring people to the podcast. But I find the whole notion of having to do it infuriating. In order to create one thing, we have to now become masters of several other things to even be seen (or heard). We have to become advertisers, video makers, newsletter writers, copy writers, audio experts, etc. This is why podcasts that come from public radio stations do so much better than the rest of us. They have a staff for all those other aspects.

It didn't use to be like this back in the early days of our theatre. If we put on a show, we put on a show. That's pretty much it. We made postcards and posters, sure – but that's about the extent of it. We did the art we were there to do.

I find it ridiculous that the way to “grow your audience” in one medium is to increase your presence in another. It feels like I wanted to get better at driving a

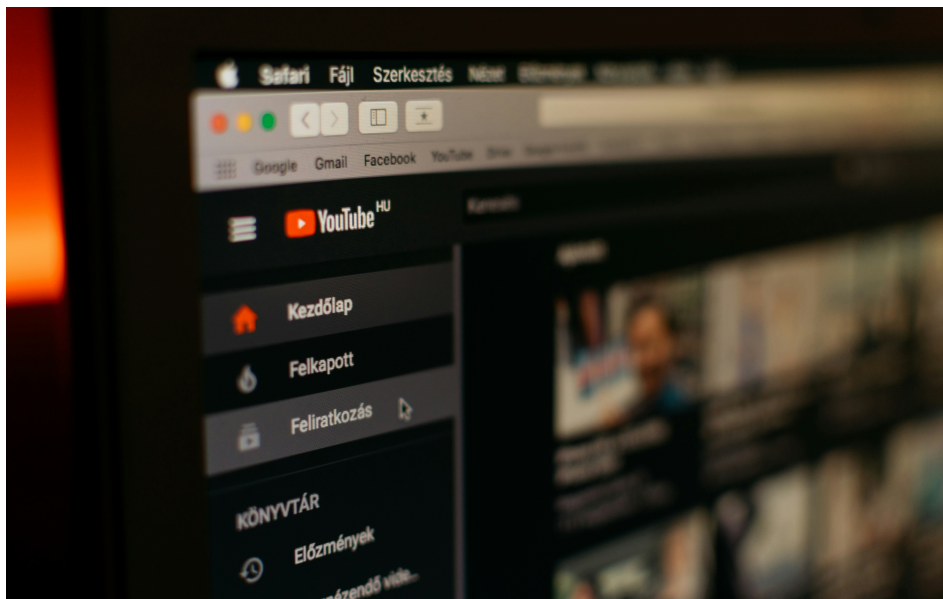
car and instead of driving cars, someone advises me to start driving boats. It just very much feels like very different things. You might say, “Well, it's all media” – but really? Driving a boat and driving a car are both driving but they are also VERY DIFFERENT. It also feels like this advice to grow a podcast by doing all these other things is essentially asking every podcaster to become a whole media studio. Make videos! Make ads! Make calculated social media posts! Interview famous people! And I see how these things help. I really do. But people do all those things for jobs these days, and I don't love my chances in competing for social media eyeballs when everyone else has training and a salary. In that podcast I wrote about last time, Ezra Klein said that the middle is competing with the huge. That is, in the fight for attention, even things like the New York Times are the middle now and Facebook and Google are at the overwhelming top. The little guys down at the bottom of the attention economy don't stand much of a chance when even the big guns aren't the big guns anymore.

The thing is, it's clear from everything I've read that no one knows how to grow an audience, especially for podcasts. It's a crapshoot, like anything.

I was just reading an article about the girl group started by mega tween pop sensation, JoJo Siwa. You'd think the people who got Siwa's career started (her mom, really) would know how to make a girl group a hit – but as the article said “The world did not pick this group...They've pulled every lever...It's been almost two years. They're not going to make it.” These people were making videos and social media content out the wazoo (and doing it mostly unpaid) and the world has mostly shrugged. Maybe instead of doing all that promotion, they could have made some more music, developed the songs a bit more (and maybe not behaved abominably to the girls, which is what the article was actually about). I don't know. But I do know that that story highlights an arts and media landscape where everyone has to do everything, where there's always another job to do, even for people who have already experienced some success.

But also, I'm not 100% convinced that a success in an adjacent media actually translates to success in the thing you're trying to promote. We got 830 views on a TikTok video but that didn't lead to any uptick in listens to the podcast or ticket sales to the live recordings. It was basically meaningless. 830 views is just 830 views on the platform it's on. Likes on your promo material don't necessarily lead to eyes or ears on the thing you're promoting.

I think of novelists now who are required to be on social media, promoting their work. They can't just write novels; They also have to create media followings and probably their publishers are telling them they should make videos, too. I doubt that most novelists are videographers at heart. Everyone's a videographer these days. And sure, I'll do it. I'll make videos if I have to because I don't make things for no one to see them and it somehow seems like the thing to do now. At least that's what everyone says but the business around it all feels pretty dark and terrible.



Go ahead! Make your videos in Hungarian! That's just as sensible, probably!

Documentary Theatre in a Documentary

Despite my swearing off Wrongfully Convicted podcasts, I found myself watching a similarly themed docu-series recently. I was maybe halfway into the first episode before I realized it was a doozy of a wrongful conviction case. Were it not for the theatre element, I might have quit watching right then. I'm glad I stuck around.

Mind Over Murder is about the impact a murder had on a small town in Nebraska called Beatrice (Bay-AA-trice). Six people were sent to prison for the crime, then pardoned and exonerated but it's still a painful and contentious issue in the town, even decades after the events. The documentary shows us people who are still convinced that the exonerated people did it and tells the stories of many of the people involved. All of that would have been enough for a fascinating documentary – but happening alongside it is a community theatre production of a verbatim style show about the situation. Not surprisingly, for this theatre maker, the theatrical element was the most touching piece. The show brings the community together in incredibly moving ways and changes minds that previously seemed as though they'd be fixed in their beliefs forever.

For me, it's a story about the power of theatre. While watching, I wondered how this theatre in small town Nebraska decided to be so brave and bold as to create a verbatim show about something so contentious. Then I wondered how this documentary team managed to find out about them. In reading about it, I was surprised to learn that the theatre piece was a part of it from the start. The show wasn't independent of the film. The director of the documentary commissioned the local theatre, hired a professional writer/director to create it and had it all integrated from the beginning. The director thought she'd track the actors' changing points of view – but it was the audience's change of view that became the most remarkable. The performance brings people together who you'd never have thought would tolerate one another. It changes minds that seemed unchangeable. You see a seismic shift happen in one night at the theatre. Why does theatre work where nothing else had? Nothing. Not the judicial system. Not film. Not time. Not important conversation. Why theatre?



I've been thinking about it. And I think it is a strange combination of intimacy and alienation. I think the alienating effect of hearing the words from someone else's mouth allows someone to hear things you'd otherwise be guarded against. For example, I cannot bear to hear Donald Trump's voice. I mute it, fast forward through it, sing over it, whatever I have to do to avoid hearing him. I have a visceral response to his voice and face. But when someone reads his words or pretends to be him, I listen closely and watch without all the walls.

For the family of the murdered woman, I imagine the six people who were convicted of the murder were similarly triggering for them. The family could not shift their opinions of them because they were always in the same bodies, with the same voices as before. But in the theatre piece, you're looking at entirely different people. It makes it possible to see them differently. That alienation effect allows you to let go of some things, I suspect.

And then there is the intimacy of being all in the same room together. You're sharing space with the actors, those characters and an audience of people who have a wide range of experience and opinions. Crying together, laughing together, can really shift things.

We are really in the room with the story when it's in a theatre.

I think, too, that it is important that it is the real words that were spoken by the subjects and not a dramatization. If a writer wrote them, then it would be easy to dismiss as a work of fiction. But when a writer has simply taken what was said and shaped it into an evening, it is very hard to dismiss. This style of theatre is called verbatim or documentary style and it can be very powerful.

One of my most profound acting experiences was doing *Fires in the Mirror*, which is a verbatim play about the Crown Heights riots. There was magic in stepping in to real people's words and ways of being. I don't even know Anonymous Young Man #2's name but he will be with me forever because I can still find his cadence and rhythm in my memory – even though it was over three decades ago. And audience members heard him, too – through me – even though we shared neither race, nor gender. I imagine that discrepancy helped them listen, maybe.

But of course the production of the play in *Mind Over Murder* was way more powerful because it was not only performed by members of the community but

for members of the community, including people featured in the story. That raises the stakes exponentially. It's brave of the theatre company and maybe that's why it has such a profound effect in the end, because everyone can see what it took to get everyone together in one space.

The documentary doesn't reveal its own role in setting up this production. I suppose it prefers to have us believe that the community itself had the idea. But I think it's kind of beautiful that one artist commissioned other artists to make something healing. And maybe some other community, reeling from some other trauma, might take up the challenge to do something like this for itself. Maybe we could find a way to fund the arts so communities across the country could create similarly cathartic and healing works. That's a project I'd sign up for in a heartbeat.



This is the line-up for the show in Beatrice, Nebraska that is featured in the documentary series.

Print This for Extra Comprehension

A patron of mine sent me a message about receiving my zine, explaining that her husband found it easier to read the paper version because he didn't really read so much on the computer. I said I understood and felt similarly – that I much preferred paper to reading on-line. Which is funny, really, because I publish most of my stuff on the internet.

This exchange made me think of a moment of transition that happened at one of my jobs years ago. It started like this: I'd been working at BAM as a teaching artist where one of my main gigs was doing pre-show prep workshops. Whenever we'd get assigned a show, we'd receive a packet of information about the show, information about the school, our contracts, and if it was available, a videotape of the show we were going to teach. It had gone like this for quite a few years when the program manager (maybe the third one I'd worked with at that point) started to email us PDFs of show information instead. And this is the moment of transition. I noticed, when I received this information this way, that I did not read as carefully, that my understanding was less. I found it hard to concentrate on what was on the screen in a way that had never been an issue with the paper packets. So I spoke to the program manager and I made a request to continue to receive the paper versions of these documents instead of the digital versions.

I felt a little like a teaching artist diva asking for that but I really did notice how much it impacted the quality of my work. The good news was that it was such a transitional moment that my program manager honored my request and sent me the paper versions for a while.

I went away to grad school and by the time I came back, there were no more paper packets to be had, and no more videotapes, just links. Somewhere between 2005 and 2008, theatre education went entirely digital. (Except for the contracts. We signed those, in person, at meetings.)

The thing of it is, it's not that my ability to read on my computer (or iPad or iPhone) has improved, I just have gotten accustomed to not reading as carefully. I still read better, more thoroughly, with more attention on paper. I take in more

details on paper. I process better. I have much more patience. On a screen, I'm always in a hurry. I skim more aggressively. My internal voice reads things there like this: "Yeah, yeah, infrastructure, sexism, oh ha ha, joke! Fact, fact...why is this article so long? Is there anything else here I absolutely need to know? Fact. Fact. I'm just gonna skip these last three paragraphs."

On screens, I usually just get the gist. On paper, I actually read most of the time. And I read much more expansively on paper. Pretty much every magazine I receive, I read cover to cover, even if I don't think I'll be interested. On screen, if I don't think I'll be interested, I do not bother. On screen, I only read a handful of things that I am sure will interest me or give me some kind of benefit. Back before everything was digital, I used to print out text to read it, to accommodate my reading skills. Now I don't bother. I just read haphazardly.

I recognize that as a writer who publishes on the internet that many people don't read these words as carefully as I'd like. I write them carefully, with pen and paper and my full attention. Then type them, later, with a lot less attention. Then publish them, with even less, into their home on the internet where I'm guessing many people read as carelessly as I do. Not everyone, of course. One of my patrons reads my work so carefully, she'll often send me copy edits. But given my own experience, I cannot expect that any of this hits everyone fully. I don't take that personally. It's not like I have a different way of sharing my work (well, except the zine). There is not really a viable alternative to reading and writing on the internet. Many of the magazines or newspapers I used to read are only available on-line now. There is no kind program manager of the internet willing to accommodate my preferences of reading paper. But I do feel like it's important to acknowledge that a lot of us aren't reading or taking in information as carefully or attentively as we could. There is a loss in this world of more and more things to read onscreen.

Words on paper, set there by pen or printer, are just more memorable. A friend sent me a letter recently and I remember what's in it more than any email I've received. And I guess, if you want me to read something carefully, go ahead and print that out for me, if you don't mind. I'm a diva for the printed word



A Day at the End of May

Preface:

This is not a piece I wanted to write. I did not feel like I wanted to talk about this or share any of the multitude of thoughts that have overwhelmed me over the last month. Some things can be private, I thought. Not all things must be written and shared.

But then – I could not write anything else. This piece, this experience, this moment was so all consuming, I could not think about other things. It was a dam, stopping all other flow. I wanted the flow to start up again, maybe through a crack in the wall or around the side – but a month went by and I was starting to feel like I might never write again. A month into this dry spell, I began to think the only way out of it was through. So, this piece may well be more than you might want to know about a health condition. It's certainly more than I wanted to write about and even more, not something I wanted to experience! But, in the interest of clearing the way so I can finally think about something else, I begin with a Day at the End of May.

*

The nurse turned pale when she read the glucometer. The whole office kicked into emergency mode and when the doc came in, he let me know I was going to be there a while. My blood sugar was super high and had been super high every time I'd been tested over the last five months but now that I was in this endocrinology office, it was suddenly an emergency. A young man came in to give me an insulin shot and asked me if it was Type One or Type Two and I gave him the biggest shrug I have ever shrugged. No one had diagnosed me yet. Diagnosis: I have Type-I-Don't-Know-Man-I-Guess-I-Have-Diabetes. Maybe ask the doctor whose office you work in?

All afternoon, I had the sense that no one in this office was prepared for someone with no previous diagnosis. They'd assume I knew how to do things I'd never encountered before, had knowledge of things I knew nothing of and could somehow retain three hours of instruction of a complicated regimen of diet and injections with no written materials. I'd entered the world of diabetes through a door that newcomers rarely used. It was a very long day in which I was stuck with a great many needles.

In addition to the shock of hearing I'd have to inject myself four times a day, and have to wear a piece of tech that my doctor would monitor from afar and have to avoid various foods and maintain a terrifying vigilance, I found that I'd also walked into a world of enormous stigma. I felt waves of shame and blame and moral failings immediately – as if I'd brought this on myself. As if I had only myself to blame. As if all my bad deeds had caught up with me to rain down irreparable diabetes upon me.

This was partly just the cultural misunderstandings around diabetes that we've all likely absorbed. I knew, intellectually, that they were all bunk – but somehow that didn't stop me from feeling them. Somehow – this situation was due to some failure on my part. I'd eaten one too many ice creams. I'd filled up on bread before dinner. I didn't take that extra walk. I instantly got the sense that I was bad, bad, bad.

And the questions about food didn't help. Did I drink soda? No. Smoothies? Not really. Any sugary drinks? Not that I could think of. And did I eat sweets? Sure – once or twice a week. “Pastry?” asked my doctor in a conspiratorial tone that suggested he knew I was mainlining pastry every day. And you know, I like pastry as much as the next person but I very much resented the notion that I had some dark pastry eating secret that gave me a debilitating four injection a day disease. When I told a friend of mine about this diagnosis, she said, “But you eat better than I do!” I shrugged at the pastry suggestion and confessed to ice cream instead.

It's like, it's a disease that everyone assumes you got by washing down Big Gulps with an all donut diet – especially if you are in any way fat – and in stepping into a diagnosis, there's a kind of stepping into that story. And plenty of people who eat only donuts and soda do not get diabetes. I wouldn't enjoy an all donut diet myself, but I feel strongly that it's not a moral failing to eat “badly.” Diabetes is not a punishment for food crimes.

But it sure felt like one when I walked into this world.

Also, a great many very fit and very healthy people ALSO get diabetes. The forums are full of people in shock. The story that this is a disease you bring on yourself doesn't help anyone. But it's a powerful story. You can almost hear it being constructed in retrospect when you get a diagnosis. You imagine people talking, saying about you, the way they talked about others, like, “Oh well, Aunt

Doris never took care of herself. Her doctor warned her about those sodas and she didn't listen and then of course she's diabetic now." With the news of my diagnosis, I heard every tut tut, every "It's a shame," every "I told you so" from all the decades past.

And I noticed an impulse to defend myself, to try and cite all the studies about fatness and diabetes only correlating not causing, to explain that genes and epigenetics were the most powerful indicators of all, that a failure of the pancreas was not a spiritual failure but a fairly common development for folks with the genes for it. But – I realized no one wants to hear all that – and operating from a place of defense doesn't feel great either. So I flipped a switch in my head and decided that I'd just lean into the stereotypes. If someone asked me how this happened, I planned on saying "I think it might have been my all donut diet. Do you think maybe that was a mistake?"

The thing is, though, no one will really ask you. The assumptions and judgements will happen out of earshot and folks will just decide you must have eating only eclairs every day all day to have ended up in this position. I know this happens because that's what generally happens to fat people (for more about this, I'd recommend Lindy West's hilarious summary of the movie *The Whale*). I don't think this is anyone's ill intentions necessarily, I imagine it's a kind of self-protective mind-trick, to think it can't happen to you because you eat so many salads or you're safe because you run marathons. But there are many marathon runners and many dedicated salad eaters with diabetes. The story that a healthy life will protect you from all ills is just an ableist myth. If there's one thing I've learned from my month in the wilds of diabetes, it's that every human body is different and every body responds to foods and exercise and stimulation differently.

I've gotten the bulk of my information from a subreddit. I tried other places but the diabetes educator I was referred to doesn't have an appointment until next year and the book I ordered just recommended paying attention to your body while eating. (Already do that, thanks! One of my jobs is about paying pretty close attention to my body. Didn't help in this case!) so the diabetes_t2 subreddit on various topics has been oddly the most helpful, if often contradictory. Someone will ask a question about foods to avoid and very quickly, it becomes clear that while a lot of people have to steer clear of white rice, some can eat it, no problem. Bread is impossible for some, tolerated well, in endless varieties of sourdough, multi-grain, whole wheat, low carb and pumpernickel, for others. I have

learned that I need to "eat to my meter" – that is, discover what spikes my sugar by noting the numbers on my CGM (continuous glucose monitor). Banana? Didn't go great. Maybe I can only do half a banana from here on out. Brown rice sushi seemed to spike me a little but maybe it was the sauce the eggplant appetizer was in. I had five bites of ice cream with no trouble but I'm worried about tortillas.

What I'm saying is, we can talk about healthy stuff but what's healthy for me might not be healthy for someone else and vice versa. A whole banana might not spell trouble for most people.

The subreddit has a lot of human drama on it as well. In addition to all the people who proclaim their super-fit healthy bonafides from before, there are also a lot of people self-flagellating, giving themselves public lashings for been "so unhealthy" before; They are convinced that they've gotten what they deserved and are now paying a lifelong price. I see a lot of redemption arcs, too. The stories of how, before, they were (health) sinners and they have turned themselves around and now they couldn't be more grateful to diabetes for helping them see the light. The dominant stories of this disease are all grounded in morality – that food is either good or bad and therefore humans who eat it are either good or bad and the bad ones get what we deserve, which is diabetes.

Because I'm the way that I am, all this led me to question the cultural history of diabetes. I knew from watching (and reading) *Outlander* (the time travel novel/show) that diabetes has been around a long time (they called it "sugar sickness" then apparently) and I wondered about that history and how people's thinking around it has changed. I tried to find some medical history – but ended up at Arleen Marcia Tuchman's book about the racist history of diabetes care, which of course I had to read.

Even in the last hundred-ish years, the thinking around who gets diabetes and why has shifted dramatically. The author begins by talking about how diabetes was once known as the Jewish Disease – sometimes with a positive spin (it's a disease for intellectual, culturally advanced people) and sometimes with a negative. But the stories over time change according to who the culture tends to be demonizing. I haven't finished the book yet but so far diabetes has gone from being a Jewish condition, to one Black people never get, to one they

always get, to one Native peoples never get, to one decimating their communities. White people have made the list sometimes (for being too rich, living too decadently or for being too poor, unable to eat right). It seems pretty clear that if there's a group of people someone wants to demonize, one of the most popular ways is to blame their diabetes on some bad behavior or another. It's a cycle that is really very shocking when you see it traveling through time.

It becomes clear why it's so easy to fall into a sense of shame when receiving this kind of diagnosis. I imagine, given the way we tend to think about health in general, that any diagnosis can lead to some questioning. Whatever you have, it's easy to wonder how it happened or what you might have done to deserve it. Certainly in this country, we treat any illness as a weakness and weakness as a moral failing. We want to be a nation of tough guys. Good people don't get sick! They're too pure and good to have things go wrong in their bodies!

But for reasons that I'm still trying to understand, diabetes comes extra loaded with all that "what did you do to deserve this?!" energy. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking if you'd just skipped that one slice of cake, you wouldn't be injecting yourself today. It feels like a large scale version of a meal where you got a little too full or you ate too much bread and now you feel bad for the rest of your life.

It would be nice if it were as simple as a one to one, you eat this, you get a disease. Then you just wouldn't eat that thing and be safe. But, of course, that would just be a poison and no one would eat it. Instead, the body is a complex system where all of us process stuff in very different ways. People around the world eat white rice. It is a staple of the human diet and for a lot of diabetics, it's worse than cake for their sugar levels. But white rice doesn't GIVE you diabetes. No one really knows exactly what gives you diabetes. They're all just guessing. It's unfortunate that a lot of the guessing is fundamentally blaming the patient. Ah, yes, it's your neuroticism, it's your decadent diet, it's your poverty diet, it's your lack of sleep, it's your stress, it's your race, it's your attitude, it's your bad choices, it's your genetics. It's definitely all that pastry.

Tips for the Rejected from Someone Oft Rejected

A friend of mine was recently rejected for a job and it stung a bit. They're someone who hadn't often had the experience of rejection, having mostly done their own thing where they needed no one's approval but their own. Honestly, I think this person is better off without this job they were applying for but I sympathize with the pain of rejection, particularly when it's for the first time, really.

As someone who has been rejected hundreds, if not thousands of times, I thought I might help ease the sting a little.

1) It's not you. It's them. When I was a young actor, doing a lot of auditioning, I kept trying to imagine what the auditors wanted and tried to provide it as best I could. I imagined they wanted a particular kind of Juliet so I would try to BE that kind of Juliet for them. If I didn't get the job, I'd assume it was because I did not do a sufficient job giving them what they wanted.

Then I became an auditor and in casting things, I realized how much I wanted everyone to just be who they were and if I liked them and they weren't right for the role, I'd look for places to put them that were a better fit. Sometimes someone was fantastic and I just couldn't find a place for them. And sure sometimes they weren't great – but someone else might think they're the greatest, so you never know. Someone not choosing you is 100% about them. You could be the most beautiful desirable breed of dog in the pound but that family is dreaming of a funny faced mutt – and they won't choose you. It's not that you're not a good dog. Those people just had other priorities. You did a good Juliet audition. They just want a different kind of Juliet.

2) That job may have never really been open. In theatre, sometimes people have auditions for roles that has already been cast. In academia, they often advertise and interview lots of people for jobs that they designed for someone in particular. So no one else ever legitimately had a shot. I'm sure this happens in other fields as well. Folks put on a show of fairness and open opportunities but it is mostly an illusion.

3) Don't take it as a judgment of your character, your talent, your skills or abilities. It's easy to feel like the fault lies with you, that you fell short in some way but even if it were true (which I'm guessing it isn't) it will do you no good to think that way. My list of rejections is very long. I have applied for hundreds of grants, prizes, residencies, writing programs, director's groups, acting jobs, creative schemes, jobs, festivals and more and I am rejected from most of them. Is it because I'm terrible and I don't deserve any of those things? I hope not. I don't think so – but even if I were terrible, even terrible people catch a break sometimes. Tell yourself whatever you need to not take on whatever judgment you might be imagining that that committee, that board, that auditor, that creative team, that hiring office might have been making about you. It's not you. It's them.

4) Sour grape it.

You know that Aesop fable about the fox who decides the grapes he could not reach were sour? I think we're supposed to shake our heads at that fox and know he's fooling himself. But I suggest using him as a role model and start fooling yourself. If you don't get the job, it was not a good job! If you didn't get the grant, it was probably an onerous reporting process. There's no reason to think about how good those grapes would have been if only you could have reached them. Tell yourself they were sour and find some tasty grapes you can reach. It's not a moral about that silly fox fooling itself. It's a lesson in how to take a loss and keep going! Good job, Fox! Find some other grapes and keep trying!

I wouldn't suggest doing this out loud to a lot of people, necessarily, as you probably don't want to alienate the people doing the choosing, just in case future opportunities are in the balance. But on your own? At home? Those grapes would have been disgusting!

5) Take a licking. Keep on ticking.

Mourn. Grieve. Allow yourself to feel the Hope Hangover. Turn off all the lights and cry in the dark. Have a Grade A Pity Party. You're allowed to feel sad! When you're done, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again.



“Can You Make a Living Doing That?”

An artist friend of mine is about to meet a lot of new people and is dreading the conversations that will include the inevitable question, “So, what do you do?”. She knows when she tells them she's an artist, they're going to ask, “Can you make a living doing that?” and it's going to make her feel bad.

I don't know why people feel like this is a socially acceptable question to ask artists but I, too, have been confronted with these sorts of responses when conversing with civilians. When I was an actor, people used to say, “Oh, really? You're an actor? What restaurant do you wait tables at?” Har, har, har. I think they meant to express some secret knowledge they felt they had about the difficulties of being an actor but it was always such an uncomfortable moment. For me, my answers were: “No, actually, I'm working as an actor.” “No, actually, my day job is teaching.” “No, actually, I'm temping.” For my friends who did work in restaurants, sometimes they felt they had to play along, laugh at the joke (which was their life) and name the restaurant they worked in.

I don't know why people think it's so amusing when they encounter artists in the wild to ask about our money. Why are our struggles such fair game? It's nobody's business whether or not we make a living doing what we do – or how. And it's the least interesting thing about an artist's life.

If you met a wizard at a cocktail party, would you ask him how he makes his money? I mean, you could, sure. But you'd be missing all the most interesting stuff. And I'm pretty sure a wizard might just turn you into a hedgehog if you asked too many questions about his finances. It's lucky I don't have the ability to turn people into hedgehogs because I would be very tempted.

Why would I be tempted? Because it IS hard to make a living as an artist. It's full of contradictions and questioning and all of us are up against it all the time. Like, unless you're Damien Hirst or Taylor Swift or Meryl Streep, you are up against it all the time, even if you're doing okay. Do you remember that story about the guy from *The Cosby Show* working at Trader Joes? It's kind of a beautiful story because people tried to shame Geoffrey Owens for his day job working at a grocery store and he just wasn't having it. Neither were many other celebrities who rushed to his defense.

He was intensely gracious about it all and I think it led to him getting a fair amount of acting work. My friends who know him tell me he's an incredibly gifted Shakespearean and an amazing improviser. But sure, talk to him about the specials at Trader Joes when you meet him at a party. You could talk to him about Shakespeare or sitcoms or his years of teaching actors but sure, ask him how he makes his money instead.

Artists don't love having this conversation about how we make a living because it is a pain point for all of us in one way or another. And it's not a secret! Knowing that it's hard to make a living in the arts in this country isn't specialized knowledge. It's an indicator that we live in a culture with some very skewed values and artists find a way anyway. Sometimes you'll run into an artist who has found a way to make a bunch of money and they will take a special kind of pride in telling you that, Yes, they DO make a living and do quite well thank you very much. I hope anyone who asks this question of artists runs into one of these rather than the rest of us – because part of the problem is the general perception that art isn't work and that it can't be compensated. But it is work and people can get paid. It's just kind of a crapshoot – and whether or not someone makes money doing it is not a reflection of the quality of the art being made. That, I can promise you.

Anyway – my friend and I were brainstorming about what she could say when people ask her if she can make a living doing that. What can she say that will stop this line of questioning but not alienate her from these people she's never met before?

I can imagine a lot of snarky replies for this scenario but I don't think that's really what's called for here. Like, it would not be cool to snap back with, "How much do YOU have saved for retirement?" and when they balk, then say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought we were asking triggering personal finance questions!"

Like, that would not win me any friends. Nor do I think I'd actually manage to say it. I'd probably just giggle uncomfortably and say, "Not really." And before too long the person is receiving a trademark Songs for the Struggling Artist in-person blog about the economics of art. This is also not likely to make me any friends.

So – what do you suggest? My friend and I talked about this weeks ago and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. What should artists such as us say whenever questions like these arise? (And they do arise, in some form or another, fairly often.) If you have asked this question, what kind of response did you imagine you were going to get? What would have made you think twice about it?

Can you make a living doing art?

Sometimes, if you're lucky.



What We Store, What We Delete

My laptop's battery has been behaving badly so I made an appointment to have it looked at. The confirmation message said I should update my software before my appointment so I set about making that happen. Unfortunately, I did not have enough storage space to update my operating system, so I had to set about clearing some stuff out.

I've had to do this many times since I bought this computer four years ago. I'm consistently running out of space. This is largely because this laptop has dramatically less space on it than my previous one did (and also the one before that and the one before that). When I bought this one, I didn't even think to check its storage as every computer I'd ever bought before had given me more space than the one previous. But apparently storage is no longer a priority for Apple. Faced with making more space, I was confronted with my own relationship to storage on my device. I had to look at what was there and decide what to delete entirely and what to store over on my external hard drive. What does it really mean to hold on to these things? What am I saving and why?

You might think this is going to be a story about learning to let go of things, about clearing out the old to make way for the new but weirdly, that's not what this experience made me think about. One of the things that I found taking up a lot of space were podcasts I'd listened to years ago. They were podcast episodes that iTunes automatically downloaded and stored. In those early days, when I liked an episode, I just, didn't delete it. I thought I might listen to it again at some point. I kept them, because I liked them. I don't do that anymore. 1) I know I am extremely unlikely to re-listen to any podcast and 2) there are so many podcasts, I just listen and move on, listen and move on. I've gone from cherishing them to churning through them.

Something about this makes me feel very sad. On one hand, it's probably good that we have become a culture that doesn't hoard things the way we used to. We don't have stacks of records or CDs anymore. We don't collect DVDs. We don't put as much value on owning things as we once did, which is probably good. But we also don't value things like music or movies the way we used to. Now that we can stream everything, we don't feel like we need to possess what we like

anymore. But we also have lost a sustained relationship with the things we like. It feels like everything has flattened out. The movies I loved are in the same place as the movies I hated. The music I love is in the same place as the music I hate. Whether I liked a podcast episode or was entirely indifferent to it, once I have consumed it, it's all gone, it's all vanished into the "listened" category. It feels like a much flatter existence somehow. Once I have watched something on a streaming platform, the streaming platform then proceeds to try and get me to watch that thing and then it tries again and then again. It doesn't know I just watched it and it doesn't care. There is no distinction between watched and not watched, no distinction between liked and not liked. There is no distinction between anything. It's all one thing. Just a sales platform, really.

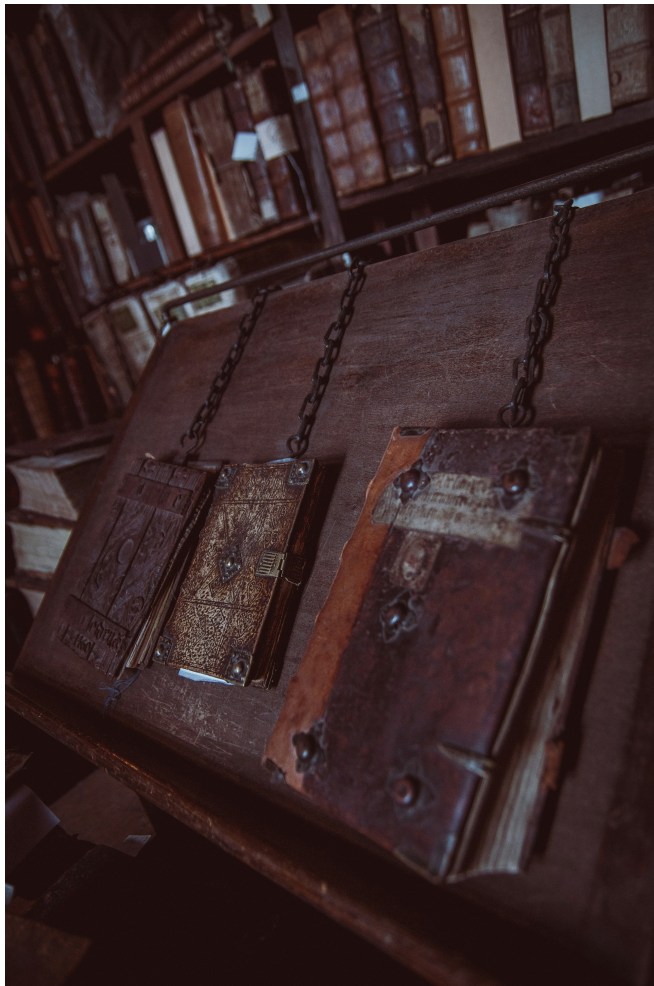
I think we have an idea now that all content will be available to us all the time, that, because things live on the internet, we can be unattached to them because we can always listen to (or watch) them again. We have an illusion that it's all going to be there forever. But it's not, actually. A lot of film and TV makers have watched in horror, as things that they spent enormous amounts of time, effort or money on, have just been removed from the platforms they were on and became impossible to find. They don't have a copy of their work because we don't do that anymore. They don't have a DVD. They don't have a digital file. The Guardian just did a chilling piece about this last week.

Everyone just assumed everything would stream somewhere forever. But it turns out streaming is not forever. It's for as long as a company feels like or as long as that company stays in business.

In the early days of digital music, I was in the habit of burning all the digital music I had onto CDs, just in case. I had very little faith in anything I could not hold in my hands. I don't do that anymore – but not because I have more faith – just because I feel more accepting of losing it all. Maybe I think I might have more chances to get it back, or find it elsewhere, than I used to.

I deleted all the old podcast episodes from my computer. I needed space for the new operating system after all. But I did pull some of them over onto my external hard drive, not because I think I'm going to listen to them any time soon, just to honor them somehow, for being a thing I loved enough to save once. And I suppose, as someone who makes things on the internet and knows my works will be forgotten as quickly as they are consumed, maybe I somehow hope there is

one sweet weirdo out there, keeping my podcasts on their external hard drive out of some affectionate desire to keep hold of something they liked – and will maybe, maybe listen to it again one day. I know it doesn't make sense to do that. I certainly don't do it anymore but I still like to imagine it. And come the apocalypse when we lose the internet but somehow still have the ability to play digital files – they'll have my works to listen to as the world burns. Anyway – my new operating system works great! Thanks for the journey, Apple!



Oh, I've read these books already. Guess I'll just drag them to the trash!

Please Don't Start Your Play Like This

It had been a long time since I'd seen a play, so I was kind of excited when the lights went down. When they came up, one of the three women on stage said, "Where should we begin?" and my head just sank into my hand in disappointment. I instantly knew the play I was going to spend the next couple of hours with, would not be great.

I noticed this particular tendency for writers to start with this question while trying to listen to every show that had been nominated for an Audio Verse Award back in 2020. Show after show started with something like, "It begins with a ship" or "How shall I start?" or "In the beginning there was space" or "Should I start with the ending?" It got to the point where once I'd heard something start this way, I knew it wasn't going to get better so I would just skip ahead to the next show.

I couldn't skip ahead while sitting in a theatre at a performance in real time, so I was compelled to stick it out and watch the whole thing. And no, it did not get any better.

Why is this a give-away that what's about to follow will not be great? Because self-consciously talking about the beginning, at the beginning, tells me the writer doesn't have any faith in their story. Starting with "What's the beginning?" is like showing your work in a math problem but less interesting. It's perfectly fine, in your first draft, to wonder what the beginning is. We all wonder where to start when staring at a blank page but a writer with skill will not put an audience through that moment of their process. A writer with skill will throw the audience right into the action or experience.

Here are some extraordinary first lines:

Who's there? (*Hamlet*)

One of those no-neck monsters hit me with a hot buttered biscuit so I have t' change! (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*)

Why do you always wear black? (*The Seagull*)

Watch me close watch me close now: (*Topdog/Underdog*)

So, Mom took off for Alaska, huh? (*True West*)

Hide the Christmas tree carefully, Helen. (*A Doll's House*)

So I said to Howard, "What do you expect me to do? Stay home and darn your socks?" (*The Women*)

Again...Step, kick, kick, leap, kick, touch! (*A Chorus Line*)

I've shat in better places than this. (*Blasted*)

Even *Our Town* doesn't ask where to begin. It just tells you "This play is called *Our Town*" – which, while it seems like it could be dull, is actually exciting in that most plays don't announce themselves as a play like that.

What you'll notice about most of these first lines is that they inspire some sense of wondering, some hint of what's to come, the tastiest morsel of what you're about to see. This is why a beginning that announces that it is the beginning is just basically stalling. It doesn't tell us anything except that the writer didn't know what to write at first.

I mean, you don't need to tell us this is the beginning. We're in the room. We know it's starting – and we want to know we're in good hands for the journey.

If a pilot got on the plane's PA system and said, "Let's figure out how to get this thing off the ground, shall we?" You'd be pretty nervous for the flight you're about to go on. A writer wondering how to start their story is like a pilot wondering how to fly the plane. We came here because we thought you'd know how to do it. We want to have faith that you can tell a story.

And hot tip: Starting in the middle will be a lot more exciting than the beginning. Write the beginning if you have to. Heck, write "It begins on the shore," if you want or even "Where should we begin". Write and write and write and then when you've arrived at the good part, go back and cut it until you can start somewhere with some oomph.

Do I have all the answers? No one does. But I do know that nothing will make me lose hope for my theatre-going experience more than someone wondering how to start. You can write what you want but if I can skip it, I will.

The Resistance Will Be Recycled

A few days after the election, I received a piece of writing in my email inbox about art and fascism. It was a thoughtful piece and good advice but I also thought, "Yeah, I wrote almost the same piece in 2016. This lady's is a newsletter, mine was a blog but the content is almost exactly the same." Did this lady copy me from 8 years ago? No. Not a chance. She's a big shot. I'm sure she's never seen my blog.

I think what we're seeing is that there's not much to say this time that we didn't say the last time our country elected an authoritarian fascist. (The same one!) We're all in the position of feeling like, "Uh, like I said the last time...making art under fascism is going to suck." Or, "You know, like I said eight years ago, I'm horrified and terrified for so many people." I have had all the hot takes already and now all my takes are ice cold. I'm not saying I have nothing to say because I am, in fact, writing all the time. I've got about four chilly blogs in the hole, but I am feeling a particular weariness of having been on this ride already and it literally made me sick so I am not interested in getting on for another round. When I read this other writer's newsletter, I kept thinking, "I said this eight years ago." It has made me feel very Cassandra-like. It is a unique and new sense of futility for me.

This email newsletter was not the only thing I've read in the last week that has made me feel this way. Lots of people are saying stuff I said years ago – and very likely they're saying things THEY said years ago as well. I just don't have the stomach for getting back on the Scrambler or whatever the carnival funhouse ride may be.

I don't know if I'm actually going to do this but, I've thought of just pretending it was 2016 again and just posting my blogs from eight years ago as if I've never posted them before them before. I don't know if this is a genius idea or a terrible one. Or maybe just another exercise in futility. After all, I wrote all this stuff eight years ago and here we are again.

Last time, I wrote a piece called *The Resistance Will Be Handcrafted*. This time I'm thinking *The Resistance Will Be Recycled* because everyone I know is fucking wrung out but a lot of them saved their signs and they still have their pussy hats

(problematic or not) and why re-invent the wheel? We'll just...rewind, re-use, re-cycle.

And it turns out, when I went to recycle some blogs, I discovered that I didn't write a word about the election last time until about a month after it happened so...I guess, even though it feels worse than before, more hopeless, I actually have more in the tank for this than I did in 2016. It's not even been a week at this point so I am moving faster. And this time I have the stuff I wrote last time to recycle when I need to.

I'm not saying it worked great last time. Obviously we did not vanquish the Great Orange Menace for good – but we did get a reprieve at a certain point. And everyone gave everything. I'm just thinking, this time, maybe conserve some energy, some steam, and just pull out ye olde protest signs from the basement and turn up for the marches that the fresh recruits are going to organize and you can support them in as half-ass a way as you want for a while. Save some juice for the long game because I'm very afraid we're either going to have to do this again again or do it in a sustained way for a long long time. This is marathon resistance now. We can't burn out in the first mile.



This ride is making me queasy just looking at it.

An Ode to Professor Bobo

A video I saw on BlueSky of a guy playing a cigar box guitar, while wearing a tin can helmet/mask, made me think of a teacher I had many years ago. That teacher told us to call him Professor Bobo (his name was Bobby Hansson) and he wore loud Hawaiian shirts with even louder wide neck ties. He had a big white and grey beard and his straight gray hair was cut a bit below his ears. He had the look of a 70s Santa on vacation. I adored him.

I took a workshop with him at Penland School of Crafts at the suggestion of a friend who was a full time student there. Even though I didn't have any particular interest in his subject matter at the time, she knew I would be inspired by his style. The class was Tin Can Artwork and today I'm even gladder that I took it than I was at the time.

The thing about Bobby Hansson was that it wasn't just his art that was his art, it was his whole way of being in the world that was art. At the time, I enjoyed it very thoroughly and found the whole experience very refreshing but now I see it as radical, brave and aspirational. I would like to live as Professor Bobo lived – joyfully, irreverently, playfully, inventively, boldly and with tremendous verve.

I don't know how he made a living. He taught at Penland fairly often, I think, and probably at other craft schools (are there other craft schools?) and maybe sometimes he sold his tin can artworks or his book but I cannot imagine any of it managed to bring in a whole bunch of money. But I literally cannot conceive of asking him about such a vulgar topic as making money.

He was a clown and a craftsman. In my class, for a finale, he handed out many of his instruments that he'd made out of tin cans over the years and we went and visited various other studios and sang "Amazing Waste" very loudly and badly until they begged us to stop. (That was our directive anyway – no one ever begged us to stop.)

Sometime after our class, he mailed me one of the most delightful envelopes I've ever received, that contained a printed out collection of photos from our class. He did not need to do that. He had not promised it. I think he maybe enjoyed working on my Can-dolin with me and my own irreverent clown energy. Or maybe he sent them to everyone.



I lost track of him over the years, though I assumed, given his age when I met him, that he might have left us at some point. (I found out that we lost him in 2015 while doing my Google today. RIP.) But I have kept that envelope he sent me, as well as my Candolin and the tin-can notebook I made in his class and he has continued to have an influence.

But in searching for some image or article or anything of Bobby Hansson to share with the Tin Can Cigar Box Man, I found this short video about him and his work and found myself newly inspired. In it, he describes having consciously made the choices he's made, as a thumb in the nose of the usual way of doing things. There was something about hearing him describe his life as a purposeful rebellion that made me admire and respect him anew. He 100% knew what he was doing. He was not an unconscious clown. He was a fully aware and intentional mischief-maker. He arranged his life as a counter-point to the dull conventional bourgeoisie ways.

He made unmarketable art, wore unfashionable clothes, made a racket everywhere he went and generally stirred things up in a jovial wacky way. If you met him, you didn't forget him. This week, after two people in a row asked me how I spent my time, I got a little self-conscious about my weirdo way of life. I got insecure and embarrassed about my unconventional days and my un-reportable hours. Then, today, I saw a video about my teacher, Professor Bobo, Bobby Hansson, and I thought, "No, dammit! I'm not counter-cultural enough! Until I have a barn full of weird art, I have not achieved my dreams."

Thank you, Professor Bobo. I play my Candolin in your honor. Maybe I'll gather a bunch of loud clowns with tin can instruments and go play in a corporate lobby until they beg us to stop.



Something I Was Thinking About on Election Day 2024

Trigger Warning: I don't think this piece is any more triggering than just living in the world at the moment but if you're not feeling like reading the words r*pe and r*pist a bunch, just skip this one, my friends.

*

It's Election Day in New York City. Astoria, particularly.

I see a guy in a Trump baseball hat. We don't see a lot of those around here and I hope we never will again but watching him make his jaunty way up the sidewalk playing his air piano, I started to think about how he's marked himself as someone dangerous, someone to avoid.

I'll back up. A tweet that Moira Donegan put out on election day really got me. She said, "I don't think we've grappled enough the psychic and dignity harm women have experienced in having a rapist elevated to a position of superlative power and authority by half the country and then kept there for the better part of a decade. "

And what it made me think about is how clear it has been made that so much of the country are either rapists, rape apologists or just generally okay with rape. Of all the terrible things that Trump is – this is the one that stands out ahead of the pack for me. A jury agreed that he committed rape and there are numerous other allegations behind that one. We don't even have to say he is an alleged rapist. At least one jury says he is. And his supporters are fine with it. They heard from his own mouth before the first election that he liked to commit sexual assault and it was not a deal breaker. They voted for him anyway. Realizing how many people this was true for was reality shaking. Are there really this many rapists out there?

And then I started to think about rape statistics and how it's about 1 in 5 women who will be raped in their lifetime and how, for so long, we talked about the women who were raped but not about the men who were doing the raping. So I guess there really are that many rapists out there. And I'm sure it's not just the supporters of Donald J Trump that do the raping. There are lefty rapists, too, for sure – but it does, it occurs to me now, draw a pretty clear line. A man in a Trump

hat is much more likely to be a rapist or a rape apologist than one who would not wear a Trump hat. This is part of the reason MAGA guys have so much trouble getting dates. It's because they're basically putting a sign on their forehead saying, "I'm cool with Rape!" which is generally a big red flag for women, just, you know, FYI.

I don't want to say Trump has done us a favor by revealing who women should watch out for – but it does make some things very clear. It is a very handy shorthand for a belief system.

And I know some Trumpy person will go, "I'm not a rape apologist; I just like his thing on tariffs or whatever." But that's the thing, regardless of what you say, we all know that you're okay with some raping because you voted for a rapist. If you voted for that lady who shot her puppy, we'd all know that puppy shooting was not a deal breaker for you. And whether or not you would shoot our particular puppy, we know that that's something you feel okay about. And we'd probably hide our dogs somewhere when you came around. Weirdly, people in this country are much more willing to vote for a rapist than a puppy killer so....uh...cool?

Anyway – I guess I weirdly started to feel grateful for how some of the most egregious rape apologists just wear their warning signs on their bodies – on their hats or sweatshirts or tees. It's like a warning label for rapists. Steer clear.



Look at all those red flags waving!

The Canon Is Stuck

My library finally re-opened post-pandemic and I went in for a celebratory look around. Though it supposedly had been re-modeled, it seemed to look exactly the same. (Except now there seemed to be no way to access the card catalogue? WTF?) I took a look at the theatre section because, you know, Theatre Nerd, and was struck by how much the selection of plays resembled the selection of plays that were in the library when I was growing up. It struck me that the accepted literary canon of theatrical greatness has not really been updated since the 1950s. When I was growing up, the theatre section looked like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. And today, the theatre section looks like mostly Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. This doesn't mean that theatre folk only read Miller and Williams but I think it does mean that the culture as a whole still only considers Miller and Williams worth keeping in the collection. There may be a scattered addition from a contemporary writer – maybe if it's a library that's really trying to expand, you'll see some August Wilson or Suzan Lori Parks or an Anna Deavere Smith. My library had an Annie Baker, even. But for the most part, in libraries and bookstores across America, the bulk of a theatre section will be Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams – maybe, on occasion, some Mamet, Albee, Simon or Durang – but most shelves will be the Miller and Williams collection. I'm curious about this.

I was talking with a poet about it because her sense was that poetry had sort of settled on its last canonical figure in the 70s with John Ashbery – maybe even earlier with W. H. Auden – and contemporary poets continue to have to be in relationship to that old guard. Are we stuck in these places because we don't canonize anymore? Was canonizing artists something we only did when they were all white guys? Do we not make a case for greatness after the 70s or even the 50s?

I have nothing against Miller or Williams. They are both incredible playwrights that deserve their place on America's bookshelves – but my concern is that they are alone there. I'm imagining myself as a young person getting into theatre now, in 2024, and going to the library, ready to read all the plays and finding that most of them were written over three quarters of a century ago, some of them older.

What would I think? And what sort of education would I be receiving from only Miller and Williams?

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It's the day after election day. It was a rough night and I'm here at a café on the Upper East Side to write through this difficult moment. It's 75 degrees in New York City in November (Nothing to worry about! No global warming to see here! Good thing no one's declared a climate emergency yet!) so the patio is more full than usual. The man at the table next to me turns his body to directly face me, away from his table. It is a full body stare.

Let me just say, being aggressively stared at doesn't really help with my writing process. Having someone six feet away trying to bore holes in my body with his eyes does not facilitate anything good. The only reason I can even set these words down now is because he finally gave up and left.

e tha



I could tell it made him mad that I would not acknowledge him but I was in the mood to make Trumpets mad today. I do not know if this guy was ACTUALLY a Trumpy one but when misogyny wins like it did last night, all the creeps benefit. All the creeps feel more entitled to women's time, attention and bodies. It becomes even more of a fight out there. It's such an old fight and we're all so tired of it.



This guy seems fine but imagine him sitting perpendicular to you and just...staring like that.

What Should We Do With All This Bad Art?

The dance piece was genuinely terrible. The dancer couldn't really dance. The choreographer seemed to have a four movement/gesture vocabulary and the "concept" was cringe-inducing. I could tell you more about it, and I'm tempted to, because talking about terrible art can be very fun, but I think any further details would start to be hurtful and maybe mean. These artists have no real power yet. They don't deserve a take-down.

I spent about a third of the piece trying to imagine what jobs these people would have in the future where they would tell their co-workers, "I used to be a dancer!" And they'll say, "Really? How wild!" And then they'll all go see the latest Nutcracker together.

If it isn't already obvious, these artists were young. They had not yet acquired any skill or vision or discernment. They were given an audience and a platform they were not ready for and it was hard to watch. Was I jealous? Absolutely. I'd love for someone to gift me a stage and an audience. I do not take such things for granted. But I also don't blame these young artists for their wretched show.

There are times when bad art enrages me, I cannot lie. Anyone who reads or listens to this blog knows that. But I will fight for the right of bad art to exist. And I think everyone has a right to make bad art. As Liev Schreiber said at a panel about Hamlet one time, "Everyone should get to play Hamlet once but we shouldn't have to watch them all." Bad art is not an affront even if it sometimes feels that way.

Bad performing arts are especially painful because they demand your time and attention. It is usually very difficult to just walk away from a bad dance piece or play or concert or performance art piece. It can make people especially furious because they feel trapped. When there is no escape from the bad art, people can get resentful and be ready to strip away all funding from all art ever. "How could they torture us like that?"

This is why so many arts grants are afraid to do a legitimate lottery. What if they fund bad art? Well, guess what – even with quality control and onerous applications and work samples, still, an awful lot of terrible art gets funded and made. Bad art happens at every level.

And some things are probably objectively bad. This piece, for example, received some of the most tepid applause I've ever heard in my life. I even saw a couple of people abstaining entirely. But most things are a matter of taste. I've hated so many things that are beloved by multitudes. I may think something's bad but many others might disagree. To some degree, I think we have to suffer through some bad stuff to get the good stuff.

But, also, we don't need to over-encourage the bad art pieces. If it's bad, we don't have to give them our grants or our space or our audiences. We're allowed to have taste and to nurture what we like and let the other things fall away. We're allowed to withhold our applause from something we hated. I don't think I've ever done this but I think I should.

In clown training, one of the things we learn is how to be honest audience members. When a clown onstage is not actually funny, we learn not to laugh. Polite laughs are not acceptable in clown class. They help no one. How is a clown going to learn where their actual comedy gold is if the audience just patronizes them politely? It's the job of an audience member in a clown context, to be honest about their reactions. I think this might be the key to dealing with bad art in general. I'm not sure how exactly because no one needs too much honesty. Kindness is for everyone, not just good artists. But I do think there's a way to be present to both good and bad art and respond warmly and enthusiastically to the good stuff and let the bad stuff drift away. Making a bad piece of art can feel like releasing a terrible stinky fart in a room. No one wants to stand near you and everyone is a little embarrassed for you, and somehow also themselves, so I don't know if there's a way to avoid this. Everybody farts and every artist makes bad art at some point. They can't all be winners.

But also – not everyone is cut out to be a clown. Believe it or not, I saw more crying in clown class than any serious acting class I ever took. This is because a lot of people cannot do it. They can't hack the failures that are inevitable and when no one's humoring you, you know how bad you're really doing. A lot of people will blame the audience.

And some artists will do the same. They'll blame the audience for not getting it. Most good artists I know though, will think, "I'm not having the impact I want. What can I do to reach them?"

But what should you do if you know the people who made the bad art? Should you tell them, like they have spinach in their teeth and they ought to be informed? No, actually. They already know, is my guess. And when they figure it out, they will eventually fall away from making art and they'll tell funny stories about it to their colleagues on their company field trips to go see the Nutcracker.



Maybe I should just get a bunch of these printed and stick 'em on bad art.



Songs from this year's podcast

Thin Line	Sugar on My Tongue
Robots	No Distraction
Wednesday	Pat Down
I Got a Name	Pick Yourself Up
The Duck Song	Purple Rain
Easy	Do My Thing
I'm Henry the VIII	You Had Time
The Safety Dance	Mandinka
Whisper to a Scream	Make a Life, Not a Living
The Great Song of Indifference	One Bad Apple
Bright Future in Sales	7:30
Good Time	Houston Dubai
Angry Johnny	Need a Little Time Off for Bad Behavior
Welcome to the Internet	Houston We Got a Problem
Selling My Porkchops	Start with the Ending
What Now? What Next? Where to?	Here Comes the Rain Again
Video Killed the Radio Star	Bobby Hansson the Tin Can Man
Internet Drama 3 - I Need Butter	Step Off
Plains of Nebraska-O	Love Me Tender
Like the Weather	Every Breath You Take
Girl You'll Be a Woman Soon	Sister Goldenhair
Black Socks	
Strength, Courage and Wisdom	
Nobody Takes Me Seriously Anyway	
Screens	
The Champion	

Songs for the Struggling Artist is at artiststruggle.wordpress.com

Podcast version Songs for the Struggling Artist hosted on Spotify and
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Emily Rainbow Davis

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