



Dreaming Big

A Conversation with Jayne Benjulian and Taylor Mac

“I was an authentic failure,” Taylor Mac said. “I wanted to work in theater, but they wouldn’t have me.” Now Taylor wants to throw the most generous theater party ever given, a party that invites us to come as we are. He wrote *The Lily’s Revenge* to build his own community. Or communities: in New York, San Francisco, Glasgow, Edinburgh and New Orleans. Taylor’s dreams are big dreams. His idea of community is 360 degrees: The audience is asked to consider the meaning of community, as are the actors. For example, Taylor doesn’t audition: he has a conversation with people who want to be in the show. Thus we have performers in *Lily* who are strippers and vaudeville performers

as well as veteran equity actors. Although all are professional performers, some are not professional actors; when they came to the first day of rehearsal, they'd never been in a play before. Just as genres of theater mix in *Lily*, communities of artists mix, evidence to Taylor that people are capable of dispatching their compartmentalized norms.

A flower wants to marry a woman but can't because he's a flower. For just about anyone who can breathe in San Francisco, that story is a metaphor for gay marriage. To its creator, that's not all. If the flower is a metaphor for gay marriage, then gay marriage is a metaphor for how we create myths to foster or tear down community. *Lily* is a work of great ambition and scope, yet it is completely accessible. The great human comedy—our flaws, our failures and our fears—is its subject. Other than Taylor himself, Magic is *Lily's* first producer. Its great, messy ambition, its sexuality and raw openness, its romance with the ordinary, and its dream of what America is and might be recall Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, another self-published American epic.

Like the five-hour long days of the Japanese Noh plays, in which actors and dancers performed five plays in a day, with Kyogens or clowns cleansing the palate between performances, *The Lily's Revenge* lasts a long time. In each act you may be sitting next to someone else. You may have dinner with someone you don't know. So in a wedding you may sit at a table with someone you've never met—a friend or relative of the bride or groom. At times you are a silent observer, at other times a participant. You dance, you table hop, you chat, you witness the ceremony, and in this way you participate in the making of a new family.

JB

The last time we spoke, you said to me, “the most wonderful thing on stage is authentic failure.” What does that mean to you?

TM

You know, perfection is incredible, perfection is vocal athletics. Perfection is what we see on *American Idol*, in my mind, or when we go to the opera and we see those voices

hit those notes, and that kind of theater—that Laurence Olivier style of acting, where the technique is so perfect, at least his earlier stage acting... you see that, and you say, wow that's perfect, that is a physical feat. That's the Olympics, that's like stage-acting Olympics. And it's interesting to watch, it's fascinating to watch, and it's inspiring: look what a human being is capable of. But there's not a lot of vulnerability in that, I think. If you're brave enough to fail on stage, authentically fail, not like pretend fail but actually fail, there's nothing braver than that. I don't want the work to be so perfect that it stops being human. It starts being an exercise in perfection. People talk about the perfect play all the time, and I just think, what are they talking about? Oh, that's one of Shakespeare's flawed plays. Oh come on, all of his plays are flawed; that's why they're so good. If they are perfect plays, I don't want to see them—I don't care. I don't know what that is, a perfect play. There's got to be room for vulnerability somewhere. It's saying something to me that the creators are risking more than just applause, the standing O. at the end of the show. If I see a piece of theater, and I feel they're risking, they've figured out that the applause isn't what's important. There's nothing better than watching someone come out of authentic failure and still manage to tell the story and still manage to do their craft, having gone to that really dark place of failing.

JB

People have said, in advising writers, go to the dark place, go to the place you are most afraid to write about.

TM

To write my plays, I say, what is the one thing I don't want the audience to know about me? And I say, okay, that's what this play is going to be about.

JB

Metaphorically.

TM

Yes. You can turn it into metaphor and protect yourself in some ways, but if you risk, the audience will care and see themselves in it somehow. But you don't have to only go to that dark place—I feel that's true, but that's not all of what humanity is. If that's all you do, then maybe you're not exercising the full range of who you are as a human being and as an artist and as a storyteller. The idea is to go to that dark place but also to be able to go to the light place as well, which is sometimes more difficult for people.

JB

For months and months we've been talking about Taylor, the playwright, Taylor the creator. Today in rehearsal, hearing you sing, I was struck by your voice: Taylor, the performer.

TM

I love that you guys came across me as a playwright, instead of a performer, because usually it's the opposite, and people pooh-pooh my plays because I do drag. Or because it makes people laugh. Aristophanes was always dismissed—anyone who makes people laugh gets dismissed. But that's not all the work does. It's not just some romp. It's not just shtick.

JB

It is part romp.

TM

And I'm a huge fan of a romp. But that's not all it is.

JB

Is performing what's driven you to write?

TM

I think I just had things to say, and I wanted to say them. I was spending all this time asking for permission to be creative—as an actor auditioning, that's what you do: you're asking for permission to be creative... Everybody said, being an actor is hard, you have

to audition and get things, and I thought, okay, well, I think I can get jobs from auditioning, but what I didn't understand is that I wouldn't be able to get the audition. You cannot get auditions as an actor unless you are situated in a pretty good circumstance.

And so I spent almost 10 years in New York trying to audition for things and not being able to audition, because I didn't have an agent, couldn't get an agent because I couldn't get an audition for an agent, couldn't get the roles, because without the agent you can't get the audition. I spent thousands of dollars trying to network, sending out postcards and telling people what I was doing, all these off-off-Broadway plays, working non-stop, but not getting paid for it, occasionally finding my way in... and being in the worst movie I've ever seen, this Sci-Fi channel movie called *Crimson Force*—I play a Martian priest named Zoo—and it's the worst movie I've ever seen. After all these years of trying to get the audition and finally getting it, your prize is to be in the worst movie you've ever seen. That is not a life that I wanna live. That's when I realized: you have to make your own work.

JB

So you made your own work, and then you produced it.

TM

That's how it started. I wrote a play, and I was pretty proud of it, and sent it around, and I would get feedback things from people...and this one reader wrote: There is nothing good about this play.

[Laughter ensues]

I got tons of letters from these people. Well, I spent all this time working on this play, so I produced staged readings, and they were going over really well, and I worked with Romulus Linney on it. He was the first playwriting mentor I ever had. Slowly, I was inching my way into the theater community, but the access was so intense, it's so hard for people who are clearly—this is their calling, this is what they're supposed to be doing. It is so hard for them to get access to the institutions. It is one of my goals and aspirations

for my career to try to figure out a way to break down those walls a little bit more so are institutions are not acting like palaces. I am not the only one doing this.

JB

How will you do that?

TM

There's a really neat artistic director at the Nuffield Theatre in Lancaster, England; his first season, he said, I'm not going to curate the season. What we're going to do is, we're going to ask 30 artists we've worked with in the past to nominate artists whose work they'd like to see here, and anyone whose work gets nominated twice, we'll do. So I got to perform there. I think that if theaters really want to create interesting theater, they have to open it up to people who are out there doing it and who need the opportunities to become better. Where's the bar, where's the hang out space? Where's the common space where you can invite anyone to do anything? The lobbies need to be opened up for people to be doing their work. Instead of creating the palace with the box office in front, the lobby, and then you walk in, and it's a theater. I'm kind of well known in New York at this point, and I don't have access to the major institutions in New York. And I find it disturbing. It shouldn't be as hard as it is, especially if you've clearly proven that you know what you're doing.

JB

Is that why you didn't audition performers for this work?

TM

Yes.

JB

We had conversations with people, and checked references and talked about craft.

TM

I feel like, if somebody comes highly recommended, if you sit down with them and you fall in love with them as a person, and you see them in work, and you love it, that's all you need—that you need to trust artists, people who have dedicated their lives to working on their craft, that they have something to offer.

JB

And auditioning actors?

TM

People don't want you to play the role any more, they want you to be it. You have to walk in and be the role already...they are concerned with perfection instead of being interesting.

JB

I can see all kinds of reasons for that. If a director sees someone who is the role, he can be assured of success.

TM

Right, right, right. As opposed to saying, this is a collaborative art form, everybody brings their vision to the table. If you don't want your vision to change, you shouldn't work in the theater. Everybody comes in, and we see what we can do. That's trusting. I am not the only one talking about trusting. Lots of people are talking about this. But the audition thing is violent. People shut down the minute I say, don't audition for this. We did not audition for *Lily*, and I am so proud of that. And that first reading, I felt so vindicated. Had we auditioned, we wouldn't have gotten a better cast.

JB

Many of those performers are people the five directors loved and brought in because they are who they are.

TM

It's like scouting for sports. I saw Khamara [Pettus] and Marilee [Talkington] in Marissa's play [Act 2]. I love them, I want them, if we can get them, let's get them in the play. I scouted with Phonique [Monique Jenkinson]... I feel totally vindicated.

JB

Why did you decide to have an entirely local cast?

TM

It's a play about community, so if you plop down your community from somewhere else, it feels like you are showing off your community instead of building it, so I wanted the audience here to know that the performers are part of the world they live in.

JB

Lily has a "hey kids, let's-put-on-a-show" feel.

TM

The winning float in the parade that wasn't sponsored by a bank ...with full-on glue and glitter but gorgeously done with a human aesthetic—as human as can possibly be.

JB

When was the first time you dressed up to perform as a woman?

TM

I don't perform as a woman. I perform as me in a heightened circumstance. I say, what do I look like on the inside? What do I look like when I'm not hiding? When I wear my jeans and my T-shirt, that's when I'm hiding; that's when I'm blending in with everybody else on the street, and I could just pass as a regular guy. Nobody would notice me. But on stage, you need to stand out in some way, whether it be the circumstances of the play, or the character you're dealing with is extraordinary, or an ordinary character in an extraordinary circumstance, and that's gonna make you stand out in a play. In a performance—some people call it performance art, I just call it theater, because it's all

theater—the material can help you stand out, but also what can help you stand out is aesthetics. And so, I said to myself, what do I look like on the inside? What am I normally hiding? And it turned out that it was this conceptual drag. It was this masculine and feminine and highly theatrical pastiche of this creature. That’s what I am on the inside. I am never pretending to be a woman when I’m on stage.

JB

That’s remarkable.

TM

What?

JB

Dressing up to expose what you feel on the inside. That’s brave. Where’d you get that? Most people would not expose their insides like that.

TM

But that’s my job. I’m a theater artist. It’s like saying it’s brave for firemen to run into a burning building. Well, it is. It’s way braver than what I do. But it’s their job. I’m not saying they shouldn’t get kudos for it. That’s what you’re supposed to do as a theater artist: risk things.

JB

Why did you write this play now?

TM

Why I wrote the play now is this growing movement of the Tea party, the Bush years, this strong movement to take us back instead of allowing us to live in the present moment and drive this culture forward. Today is the day legislation is being created against the counter-culture. Anti-gay marriage agendas use tradition and nostalgia as an argument for oppression. For example, “Marriage has always been between a man and a woman.”

JB

Lily dismantles theatrical rules—the stage, the audience, time, the curtain—to unpack societal rules. Why is that important?

TM

Rules are used to keep us docile and imprisoned in the past. I wanted a new myth to help us live in the present. I'm not experimental; I'm traditional. Realism has only been around for about 100 years. Think of epic theatre versus short, short theater.

JB

Let's talk about scale and duration.

TM

I love long form.

JB

Why?

TM

I fell in love with it while working on *Lily*... I've noticed that as the culture is getting more and more prone to fast entertainment, plays are getting shorter and shorter. Given, the Greek plays were only 90 minutes, but they did them in one day. It feels like our culture is getting smaller, smaller, smaller; it's getting reduced, reduced, reduced.

Working on *Lily* I fell in love with long form because I see that the audience comes with a different expectation... They're making a commitment. It's more investment in the experience. And it often takes more than 90 minutes to break someone out of the routine of his day—90 minutes isn't always enough to break you out of eight hours of working. There's more room in long form for heterogeneity, to explore a range of ideas... *Death of a Salesman* cannot be a 30-minute play or even a 90-minute play.

JB

Who's gonna come in from Long Island or New Jersey to see a five-hour play in New York?

TM

People do, and that's the point. We can't make theater based on what the audience wants to see. We went to school, we've been studying our craft, making and learning it our whole careers so we will know what the audience wants to see. The audience wants to see *The Lily's Revenge*—they just don't know it yet. You have to cultivate that curiosity in the audience you have.

JB

When you go to a wedding, it's usually about a five-hour affair. You're asked to be a silent observer but also a participant: you stand for the bride, dance at the party, meet the wedding procession, eat together.

TM

And that became interesting to me, to ask the same things that a wedding asks of its audience.

JB

Lily messes with the iconography of the wedding dress: the princess dress, the perfect dress. We see the wedding dress a million different ways; nothing is at it is or should be. Why?

TM

If the play within the play happened, if the Great Longing Deity had its play—if the Lily hadn't come to the theater today—then we would have gotten the Great Longing Deity show, and we would have had the pretty white wedding dress at the end of the play... but the Lily comes to the theater, and everything changes.

JB

And why the wedding structure?

TM

I got this from Sondheim: The content dictates the form. It's not the only way to work, but it's the way I enjoy working. I say, okay, what's this play about? This play is about traditions and myths and how traditions and myths can be used to tear community down or foster community. It's about how it's time for us to start creating new traditions and new myths in order to help us live in the present moment so that we as a collective can dream the culture forward. And it just seemed to me the big issue happening in our country was Prop. 8 and gay marriage. And that was one of the things that led me down the path of thinking about how traditions and myths are used in our culture, and I went to the wedding of one of my dearest friends, Kat. I've known her since I was 10—she's in the show. It was my first lesbian wedding, and I was very pooh-poohey about it, and I found it to be an emotional experience when I went. I was very judgmental that way about weddings. We're queers. Aren't we supposed to be above weddings? Weddings are really asking for community.

JB

And community is?

TM

I belong.

JB

What is drag?

TM

To me, drag is the story you are telling. It's all drag, the saying goes. You wear audience drag if you're an audience member. You wear construction drag if you're a construction

worker; you wear flower drag if you're playing a flower in a play; you wear female impersonation drag if you're a female impersonator drag queen. It's all drag. People have told the story of the hero's journey many times. How did they tell it? *Oedipus* is a hero's journey. How was *Oedipus* told back in its day? Now how are we gonna tell the story today in its present moment? Gay people were in the closet a hundred years ago. So of course, marriage was between a man and a woman. The story people need to tell today is, anybody can get married.

And you can use a wedding to say, we're getting married. Celebrate us. Thank you. Or you can use a wedding to say, we're reaching out to you, we want you all to be part of our world. And I do say this in the play: weddings are essentially bad community theater. You see the father in law stand up, and he doesn't know how to give the speech and it's so painful but also so glorious. He's not a public speaker, but he's being brave enough to speak in front of people. It's both just horrendous and the most inspirational thing ever. And one more thing—I don't think I'm ever going to have a wedding, so I thought, well what would my wedding be like? And it is *The Lily's Revenge*.

JB

A year from now, The National Theatre of Scotland will produce *The Lily's Revenge*. Will you perform in that production?

TM

Yes. In Glasgow and London.

JB

And in the fall of 2012, Aimée Hayes will direct *Lily* at Southern Rep in New Orleans. You won't perform in that show—it will be the first time you turn *Lily* loose. What will that be like—to have it performed without you?

TM

I have one more time [in Scotland] to get the script in the kind of shape for a production without me—because scripts have to be in a different shape for when you're not involved in the production for people to understand. You know, I'm filling in a lot of the blanks here.

JB

Things you can write in the stage directions.

TM

Or places I could alter the dialogue, just to help, I'm filling in the blanks. That's part of the process in doing it this time and in Glasgow, to get it in the shape that it needs to be in for people who don't have access to the playwright.

JB

What is *The Lily's Revenge*?

TM

The longest strip tease known to man. It's my wedding. It's my hope. Please come gather around. Let's say, oh, look at all these things that have come before to create the present moment. Look at all these amazing things Japanese Noh did; the Elizabethans with their blank verse; vaudeville numbers; burlesque; Beckett. Now let's figure out how we can do them in this present moment. It takes the entire play to do those things, up until we pull the Great Longing down. Now that we're here in the present moment, what do we do with it? We ask the audience to consider.