

THIS ISSUE

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

—Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

In the sciences, the concept of failure is a natural part of experimentation. If you want to learn how a process works, or develop a new one yourself, the scientific method demands that you try, fail, and try again.

But in the arts, failure is often seen as a dirty word—no one wants to be responsible for a critical or commercial flop. But without taking risk and pushing boundaries, art would remain stagnant, and the creative spirit would be wasted on our own fears. As filmmaker George Lucas said in a 2013 interview for our *Art Works Blog*, "If you're creating things, you're doing things that have a high potential for failure, especially if you're doing things that haven't been done before. And you learn from those things... [F]ailure is another word for experience."

In this issue of *NEA Arts*, we'll speak with individual artists, entrepreneurs, and critics about their relationship with failure. Told as edited, first-person musings, these pieces offer personal insights into the fear of failure, whether failure can be helpful to the creative process, and how failure, either real or imagined, has contributed to current success. Taken together, these voices show that maybe—just maybe—failure isn't such a dirty word after all.



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TONI MORRISON

WRITE, ERASE, DO IT OVER

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



Talking to Toni Morrison about failure is a bit like talking to Einstein about stupidity: it's incongruous, to say the least. At 83, Morrison is one of the world's best-known and most successful novelists, her awards list crammed with the heavyweights of literary prizes: among them, the 1988 Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award for *Beloved*; the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 (the last U.S. author to receive it); the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012; and most recently, the Ivan Sandroff Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Critics Circle. As these accolades piled up, Morrison continued to work full-time as an editor or a professor of writing and literature—she wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), while teaching at Howard University and raising two young sons on her own. Since then, she has written ten more novels (*God Help the Child* will be published later this year), several children's books, two plays, and a number of nonfiction works. In all her projects, her words are at once incisive as a knife and poignant as a lullaby, weaving mesmerizing narratives that probe the complexities of the African-American experience.

▲ Author Toni Morrison being awarded the 2011 National Book Festival's Creative Achievement Award.

PHOTO BY KRISTINA NIXON/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



▲ Toni Morrison served on the NEA's National Council on the Arts from 1980-87 as well as on panels for the Literature Program.

NEA FILE PHOTO

The NEA has a long relationship with Morrison as well. She served on the National Council on the Arts from 1980-87 as well as on panels for our Literature Program. We were pleased to catch up with her by phone in January, as Morrison mused on the concept of creative failure.

Defining Creative Failure

As a writer, a failure is just information. It's something that I've done wrong in writing, or is inaccurate or unclear. I recognize failure—which is important; some people don't—and fix it, because it is data, it is information, knowledge of what does not work. That's rewriting and editing.

With physical failures like liver, kidneys, heart, something else has to be done, something fixable that's not in one's own hands. But if it's in your hands, then you have to pay very close attention to it, rather than get depressed or unnerved or feel ashamed. None of that is useful. It's as though you're in a laboratory and you're

working on an experiment with chemicals or with rats, and it doesn't work. It doesn't mix. You don't throw up your hands and run out of the lab. What you do is you identify the procedure and what went wrong and then correct it. If you think of [writing] simply as information, you can get closer to success.

Getting Started

Writing for me is thinking, and it's also a way to position myself in the world, particularly when I don't like what's going on. It's extremely important to me. [Confidence] came with time. I knew I always was compelled to do it, but I didn't know how essential it was to me.

I wrote the first book because I wanted to read it. I thought that kind of book, with that subject—those most vulnerable, most undescribed, not taken seriously little black girls—had never existed seriously in literature. No one had ever written about them except as props. Since I couldn't find a book that did that, I thought, "Well, I'll write it and then I'll read it." It was really the reading impulse that got me into the writing thing.

Success in the Morning

I used to get up before sunrise. I'm very, very smart in the morning, and everything is clear. By noon it's over. Then as the day wore on, I got dumber and dumber. That used to be my habit. I thought I did it because I had small children and I wanted to write before they got up. But then when they grew, I was still doing it and still preferring it. Not anymore because I'm too old. I'm 83, so some of those habits have changed.

Recognizing When Something Isn't Working

[Personal] errors, I just have to let go. There are many of those. If you're a parent, God knows there's nothing you can do about it now. In writing, for me it's where the meaning lies and where it doesn't, where is it too much, or where is it not true, and then I go and rewrite it. I usually write sections by hand and then put them on the computer, print them out, and then go over them to see what's not there or what's there that is just clogging it up. You become adept at that. There are things that I've written and pieces and parts of things that I have written that I would like to do over and fix, but it's too late because they already printed it. You realize that later.

The book that I really wish I could revise is the first book I wrote, *The Bluest Eye*, because there's a character in it to whom I didn't do justice. She was just a mean girl. But why she was, or what she was thinking—her inner

life—I did not explore at all. I just let her stand as a person for the other girls to be mad at. So I always wanted to go back and rewrite that part.

Responsibility to Characters

I try really hard, even if there's a minor character, to hear their memorable lines. They really do float over your head when you're writing them, like ghosts or living people. I don't describe them very much, just broad strokes. You don't know necessarily how tall they are, because I don't want to force the reader into seeing what I see. It's like listening to the radio as a kid. I had to help, as a listener, put in all of the details. It said "blue," and I had to figure out what shade. Or if they said it was one way, I had to see it. It's a participatory thing.

[My characters] have never failed me, but on a couple of occasions I have either been deeply thrown off my game, or I took the easy way out. Some of them get greedy, and they're powerful characters. They somehow can take over the book. When I did *Song of Solomon*, there was a character in there whose name was Pilate. She was very important to the narrative, but she really threatened me in a sense. I just made her shut up, and told her this is my book, not hers. I gave her some leeway in a couple of scenes toward the end, and during the funeral of her daughter. But I do know that her presence was large, overwhelming, and the book could easily have turned into *Song of Somebody Else*. So that was one where I was actually intimidated and defensive about a character that I had invented. She was over-invented. And then there's Maureen Peal in *The Bluest Eye*.

Learning Not to Overdo It

Some writers whom I admire say everything. I have been more impressed with myself when I can say more with less instead of overdoing it, and making sure the reader knows every little detail. I'd like to rely more heavily on the reader's own emotions and intelligence. It's like writing sex scenes. What you do in such a scene is open it up so that the metaphorical language can stimulate, so that it's not clinical, it's not surgical. Then the reader can fill it out or take it in or remember it. But the rest [of getting it right] is just keep doing it. You just do it again and again.

Failures In Contemporary American Literature

I may be wrong about this, but it seems as though so much fiction, particularly that by younger people, is very much about themselves. Love and death and stuff, but *my* love, *my* death, *my* this, *my* that. Everybody else is a light character in that play.

When I taught creative writing at Princeton, [my students] had been told all of their lives to write what they knew. I always began the course by saying, "Don't pay any attention to that." First, because you don't know anything and second, because I don't want to hear about your true love and your mama and your papa and your friends. Think of somebody you don't know. What about a Mexican waitress in the Rio Grande who can barely speak English? Or what about a Grande Madame in Paris? Things way outside their camp. Imagine it, create it. Don't record and editorialize on some event that you've already lived through. I was always amazed at how effective that was. They were always out of the box when they were given license to imagine something wholly outside their existence. I thought it was a good training for them. Even if they ended up just writing an autobiography, at least they could relate to themselves as strangers.

Stumbles Along the Way

Stumbles loom rather large, the more I write. You know this is the wrong route but sometimes you choose it anyway, and then when you go over it, you just carry it out and scratch it out and do something else. But they're very important. It's like hitting the wrong note. You have to do something else. In a musical score, if you're singing or you're playing an instrument onstage in public, and you hit a wrong note, you can't say "Oops" and leave the stage. You have to make something out of that error, do a really powerfully creative thing. You may go down a different road. If it's public, you have to have that ability, that gift to make a mistake look creative. With writing, you can always scratch out the knowledge. You write and erase and do it over. ▲

GEOFF NUTTALL

Finding Balance with the St. Lawrence String Quartet

INTERVIEW BY DON BALL



The St. Lawrence String Quartet celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2014 as one of the premier ensembles playing classical and contemporary compositions. They have released award-winning recordings of works by Robert Schumann, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and Dmitri Shostakovich, as well as by contemporary composers such as John Adams, Osvaldo Golijov, and Jonathan Berger. Since 1998, the quartet has been the ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University, working with music students and collaborating with other departments on myriad topics. The ensemble also has been a featured artist on many NEA-funded projects over the years. We recently met with Geoff Nuttall, first violin and co-founder, as the ensemble prepared for their performance at the Library of Congress' annual Stradivari Anniversary Concert. He spoke about how taking risks in chamber music—and its inherent potential for failure—has helped the group succeed over the past two decades.



Working with Composers

When you're working with composers who are alive, which is about 30 percent of what we do, your main goal is to somehow get their creative vision out to the audience. And some composers are more particular than others about how you go about doing that. Our first and most important goal is to make him happy in terms of, "That's how I wanted it to sound," or, "That's how I wanted the audience to feel at that moment." So failure, for me, is if a piece isn't well-received. If people go, "You guys did fine, but it's not a great piece"—that's our failure, not the piece's failure.

I remember when we premiered John Adams' first string quartet (and it's a beast). It's really hard, and we worked to learn it and get it out there. We didn't get lost in the premiere. Right after the concert, John came back and said, "You know, there's a section here, it's just not working. I'm going to cut it." This was like a hundred measures of the most difficult music in the whole piece. We automatically assumed that's a failure. We failed, because we didn't make it work. He said, "It's not that. It's about the shape of the thing." But that was a really interesting example of maybe if we'd done it better or more convincingly, then he would not have changed that work of art.

Recording versus Live

The fear of failing on a record is horrible. That's why making records is so hard. Because it's not the moment in time. The great thing about live music is this sense of improvisation and discovery and risk-taking. Yet I'm convinced that if you're going for it in a way that the audience can understand, it doesn't really matter if you mess up or not. It's the act of going for it. On a record, it's there for posterity. So for me, the fear of failure on a record is sometimes debilitating, because constantly your brain is going, "Oh, this is going to be out there forever," and so you have to get away from that. The hardest thing for me about recording, and I think for a lot of people, is to not be careful. The danger, of course, with all this technology, is that they edit out all the good stuff, the snorts and blood and crap, which is part of the excitement of a live performance. So recording is one type of fear of failure, which is really prominent and not fun.

For me, playing live—nerves are always there. When they limit what you can do, it's bad. You play for 25 years in a string quartet, play 100 shows a year—but it took a couple years for me to not be non-functioning because of nerves, which is just fear of failure. It's not even something you can put your finger on. There are all these different ways to get around that, but the most obvious and simplest one to explain is you go out there and you

▲
Geoff Nuttall,
co-founder and lead
violinist of the St.
Lawrence String
Quartet.

PHOTO BY ADAM KAMPE

◀
**The St. Lawrence String
Quartet—with guest
artist violist Hsin-Yun
Huang—rehearsing
Mozart's String
Quintet in G Minor
(from left: Geoff
Nuttall, Mark Fewer,
Christopher Costanza,
Huang, and Lesley
Robertson).**

PHOTO BY ADAM KAMPE

play enough times that you start to feel comfortable in that environment. I think I'd be sort of freaked out if I didn't get nervous. But you want to channel that energy and be just enough on the edge before you fall off to make the act of creation exciting.

Unusual Influences

I have 10,000 LP records in my living room. So I listen to music all the time. It's really cool to hear the old Busch Quartet recordings, or Adams' early *Nixon in China*, to hear what's going on there. Recordings are an incredible resource, but I find myself being more inspired by Dylan and Johnny Cash and Miles Davis and blues singers and opera. So a lot of the influences are much more eclectic. A string quartet is officially really about being together. You really want to be unified and blended together. I remember being inspired by *Nashville Skyline*, the Bob Dylan record. He does a duet with Johnny Cash. It's such a great record, and they're not together at all. They're totally doing their own thing, but it's unified and really powerful at the same time. That was a great lesson on ensemble playing. Because if each one of the duet is doing their own thing in a really committed and convincing way, even if you're saying the same thing, which they were in that case, it can be more powerful. Imagine if those guys were in tune and together for that. It would be terrible.

Here's a great example of failure. If you're really trying to be together and in tune and you're not, that's failure because people can tell you failed. But if you're totally committed to sing something that happens to be different and not quite the same in terms of intonation or inflection or timing than your colleague, then that's powerful, even though it's officially a failure from a string quartet point of view. So for example, listening to Dylan in general, but that song in particular, is a really interesting and powerful learning tool about the art of ensemble playing.

Fear of Emotional Failure

It is not possible to sound any good in quartet without many, many hours of playing together and practicing and learning pieces. I'm constantly telling students that. But they forget that that's just the first step. The hard part is to go take that tool, ensemble playing, and make the music really vital and invigorating for the audience that they're playing for.

That's why performing is so cool. You have to have the ability, depending on the situation, to go to the place that the composer's asking you to go to.

The fear of emotional failure, I think, is really hard for young people especially. Because you have to go to places sometimes that involve putting stuff out there emotionally that's not part of who you are, whether it be openly elated or brutally angry or devastated. In great music, that's the whole point. It's about emotion and it's about connecting to emotions from music. Many times, the problem for young players is not that they're not great. It's that they're afraid to go to these places, to take themselves emotionally to places that may be embarrassing, that may involve some sort of personal failure. It's one thing to say, "It's happy music. Then I'm going to use more vibrato or something." No. The first step is to be able to take yourself to that place. And the hardest thing is that you have to do that over and over and over.

Finding Balance

You have to find a balance between thinking you're tremendous and thinking you're horrible. Because if you go one way or the other too much, then you're going to fail. Over-confidence is almost worse than not being able to function because you think you suck. It's a constant self-awareness and ability to realize what went wrong and how to fix it, or you're not going to get better. That's the great thing about music—you get better as you get older. I'm going to be 50, and I'm better than I was when I was 25.

That balance is a constant one. And without the confidence to think you're doing something interesting and you have the ability to trust your instincts to connect to the music, to the audience, you will fail. But if you're not constantly second-guessing your ability intellectually and emotionally and musically, technically, you won't get any better. You may just reach a point of mediocrity.

So failure's crucial; it's just that there's no other way. You can't escape it. It's constant. The trick is to not let your failures affect the emotional experience of the audience. If you really go for it and fail, it's okay. If you don't go for it and fail, that's all people remember. So that's really important and interesting in the balance as well.

A longer version of this interview, as well as video of the St. Lawrence String Quartet in rehearsal, is available at arts.gov.



PERRY CHEN

The Role of Creative Failure

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



When Kickstarter co-founder Perry Chen first had the idea for a website to fund creative projects in the early 2000s, he was living in New Orleans, composing electronic music. “I wasn’t really in the position, nor honestly very interested, in going and making a website and running a start-up,” he said. But if an idea is good enough, it tends to stick around, demanding your attention. Chen eventually teamed up with co-founders Yancey Strickler and Charles Adler, and the three spent years trying, stumbling, and pushing forward to make Kickstarter a reality. Since its launch in 2009, the site has seen stratospheric success, funding 77,000 projects through \$1.2 billion in pledges—the largest and most successful crowd-funding website to date. After establishing an ecosystem designed to help creative ideas succeed, Chen stepped down as CEO in December 2013 to focus on his own creative pursuits. In the past year, he helped launch Dollar a Day, a website to help people discover and support charitable organizations; served an artist residency with Laboratorio para la Ciudad in Mexico City; and exhibited his project *Computers in Crisis*, an archival investigation into the Y2K phenomenon, at the New Museum. We recently spoke with Chen about the idea of risk and failure as it relates to his career as an artist and an entrepreneur.

Defining Creative Failure

[Failure] is so tough to define. My definition of creative and artistic failure would be if you have a vision for something and it doesn’t come together as you thought it would. [It’s] not because you know people judged it a failure, or that it somehow succeeds or fails. The thing that would be most worrying to me is if you saw something in your head, you had a vision for something, it was clear to you, and then when you went out and worked on it, what you produced was off somehow. Your instincts or your ability to execute are off or mis-calibrated. Since I rely so much on that vision of something, and then work my way there over time, I think that would be most like a failure to me. Even with that, you know you’ll learn and you’ll get better and you’ll recalibrate why is it that you weren’t able to execute to get there.

Dealing with Risk

There is always the ego risk that you do something and people don’t like it. But I think when you’re starting out, your momentum and your idealism push you through when your ego is more fragile. As time goes by, you get older and you have more confidence because you have been able to do things and bring visions to life and get a good feedback loop. Hopefully when you get past your state of idealistic momentum, you’ve reached the point where your maturity and your confidence help push you through moments where you might feel the risks too easily becoming doubts.

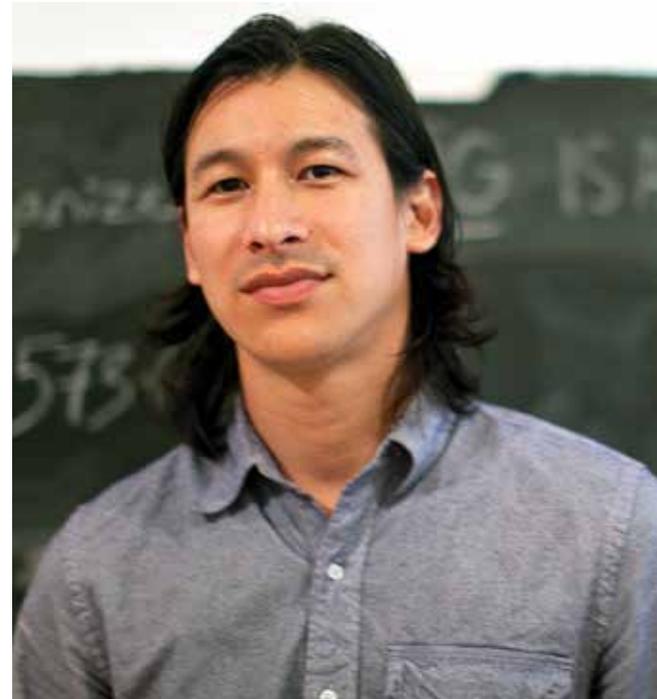
Also, generally, I think we struggle to properly assess risk, and people are often too conservative because of the various possible consequences of pursuing something—financial consequences or ego consequences. I think about the consequences that people very commonly faced throughout human history. Small decisions were often life and death: I’m extremely hungry, but do I eat this berry, which may be poisonous? This is not to

say feelings of anxiety about risks aren’t real, or the risks themselves aren’t real. But many types of risk are overblown by cultural conservatism and social fears that should hold less power.

What Failure Could Have Looked Like For Kickstarter

There were several years of working toward [Kickstarter] before we got it out there. I didn’t work on the web; I hadn’t even worked at a start-up before. So it was many years of figuring it out, visualizing it, and working toward that vision. I think as we got toward the launch, it was really all about pushing that button and it existing, and having made it through that journey of creating this

►
Kickstarter co-founder
Perry Chen.
PHOTO BY FRED BENENSON



thing. It wasn't about what happened any day after that. It quickly did become that. But I think because of how long it took, and because of how challenging it was to get there, for me and for my co-founders, I think the worst thing that could happen is you work all those years and you don't even get the thing to exist. And there are moments where that's possible. You don't have a lot of money. You're working another job while you're trying to do this. You're trying to get people to help you. There were points in the year or so before launch where I was like, "If we could just get this thing out and it exists, that will be satisfying. That will be great." The worst thing would be if you can't even get it across the threshold. It is a classic thing with people who work in isolation, or in small teams doing creative work. It's done without [the public] seeing things. People see things when they are released and when they come out and when they are exhibited. So if you are talking about this thing to your friends and your family for years and it never happens, that would have been the worst thing. That would have been a pretty good failure.

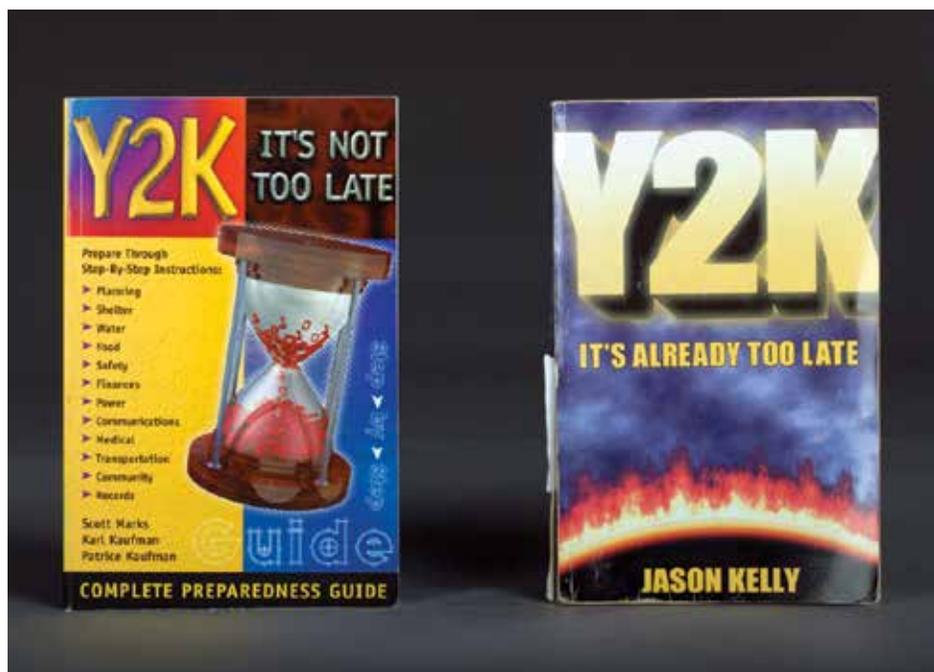
The Anxiety of Failing

I remember when I gave a talk at the ITP [Interactive Telecommunications Program] at NYU in early '09. Maybe there were 15 people who showed up. I was terrified. Fast forward many years and I've done my share of speaking to much larger audiences, and it's nothing like that. But I really remember that first time. The anticipation and the anxiety around possible failure or possible embarrassment, in my experience, has always been worse than the actual thing. It's always good to remind yourself that. Even when I speak now, you do always get a little bit of jitters. Once you get onstage or once you start talking, that part of the brain shuts off and you're just going into the flow. You're saying what you're going to say. It just all kind of fades away.

When you play music—I used to DJ—once you get the first record down and you get through your first mix, you're like, "Okay. There's no difference between being in my house and being here." Anticipation seems to feed our fears, and mix with imagination to create and shape our own anxieties.

Improving through the Creative Process

As an artist you're very demanding on yourself. You see all types of things that you think you could have done better, or that you want to challenge yourself to do. Setting high standards, high expectations—it's a very self-critical life. You're often your own hardest critic. You practice. It's a journey. Through executing well and through executing poorly, you get better. You see things



more clearly. You hone your instincts. It's critical, and part of everybody's journey when they're working on any craft or any art, is to get better at it, and then also to appreciate it. I don't know the person who everything they do is something that they're thrilled with. So much of being able to work a thing really hard, and bring a vision to life, is the satisfaction you get because the process itself wasn't always smooth. Your first attempts didn't always pan out exactly how you wanted. It's a cliché, but it's not just about [the work] you lay out there. It's also the practice and the journey to get there.

▲
Selections from Perry
Chen's 2014 exhibition
Computers Crisis, which
included photographs
of books about Y2K.

IMAGE COURTESY OF
PERRY CHEN

CARLOS MURILLO

SUCCESS AND NOT SUCCESS

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE



▲
Playwright Carlos Murillo.

PHOTO BY ANDREA TICHY
FOR THE THEATRE SCHOOL
AT DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Award-winning playwright Carlos Murillo describes writing as “a natural instinct that I was born with.” Raised mostly in New York, Murillo studied acting briefly in college followed by a round of internships at several New York City theaters. He describes those early years as “my training ground. Since I didn’t do the MFA or that journey, it was more of an apprenticeship by fire.” Currently based in Chicago, Murillo heads the playwriting program at the Theatre School at DePaul University. In his own words, here’s Murillo on why he believes trial and error is critical to the creative process, and why he prefers to think of failure as “not success.”

On What Defines Success

You have to look at success in different ways. In terms of career trajectory, I think longevity and staying in it for a significant period of time—anyone who does that is, in my mind, successful, whether they're doing it on the scale of Broadway or even on a community level. That longevity and being able to be vital and creatively alive over a long stretch of time is very important as a measure.

Project to project, I tend to think of success from an internal standpoint as, "Does what I make approach what I had envisioned for it? Does it come close to it?" And it never quite does, I don't think.

There's a lot of failure built into the process of making something. If, once it's out and ready for public consumption, it approaches or just brushes what I think its possibilities might have been when I started, then I feel like that is success. Also, there have been a handful of times in my career where somebody has come up to me months later or years later and said, "You know that play I saw of yours? I had a dream about it." That, to me, has always been a great measure of success because I feel like somehow the work really penetrated in a very deep way, where it's become part of a subconscious life of the person who experienced it.

Failure, "Not Success," and Trial and Error

I think failure is such a tricky word. I think there's success and not success. When you're working on a piece, at least when I'm working on a piece, 90 percent of what I write does not end up in the final play. There's a ton of material that is locked away in boxes that are attempts at scenes, attempts at trying to massage out an idea, attempts at different versions of scenes to really get what I'm going for. There's one play I wrote where there were 32 different versions of one particular scene. To me, that was a very exciting process, because each version failed, yes, because it didn't do what I ultimately wanted it to do. But once I had gone through the process, I was able to synthesize everything that I learned from each of those and write what turned out to be a pretty good version of the scene. So I feel like [trial and error] is an intrinsic part of the process, and I think failure is such a pejorative way of looking at it. I like to think of it more as a "not success," or attempts to get closer to what it is that I'm after.

I'm working on a new play and I wake up in the morning, and I'm like, "God. I don't know if this is anything." I recognize I'm in a certain stage in the process of writing this play where things are a little difficult, and I can't

quite see the full picture, and I'm not quite grasping a form yet. But I know that I have to go through this process in order to break through to the other side. Sometimes it requires taking a walk. Sometimes it requires spending a couple of days doing something else. Sometimes it requires saying, "Okay. I'm going to give myself permission to write really badly for a while."

The Transformative Power of Failure

I think you can either be crushed by failure and do something else, or allow it to make you more resilient. There's a play I wrote 15 years ago that had a lot of buzz when it was floating around in literary offices, and its first production ended up at a smaller alternative theater. It was a very, very, very difficult process, because I felt like I had a lot of stake and skin in that play, and it didn't get the bigger production that I had hoped it would get. That sort of knocked me out for a couple years. I was a little bit devastated by that, and it was difficult to really commit to the next thing that I was writing. I was also a lot younger, so I had less perspective in terms of the long-term picture.

I got out of my funk about a year later and started working in a totally different way than I had previously, and it sustained me over I think three or four plays. It resulted in a completely different approach to writing, a different kind of stylistic approach, and a completely different form. It was almost like I became a different writer. If that initial process had gone really well, would my writing have taken the direction that it took in the subsequent years when I was coming out of a despairing moment, where I felt like I had to reinvent myself and rethink my approach to my writing and my work? Or would I have tried to repeat myself, or kind of do the same thing, or build on what was successful about that particular project? So I think failure helps you with the idea that you have to reinvent yourself in a situation where something doesn't go the way that you thought it should or would. You have to rethink what your point of view is, what your starting points are, what the nature of your work is.

Teaching the Importance of Failure (or "Not Success")

A student will bring in ten pages, and nine-and-a-half may not be very good. But there's that one moment, or that set of three or four lines, or that one gesture that's implied in a stage direction, or one turn of phrase, or one moment that feels like, "Let's pick at that and grow that moment." I've seen many plays emerge from moments like that, where a student is working on something and there's a little seedling of an idea, or a little

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Scene from Repertorio Español's production of *Your Name Will Follow You Home*, written by Carlos Murillo and directed by Jose Zayas, November 2014. Production sponsored by MetLife.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL J. PALMA

seedling of something that's true or resonant in a piece of work, and suddenly that's the key or the entry into something. They have to embrace moments where things aren't working and where they can't quite see the full picture or where they're confused about where the story's going, but at the same time have the will and energy to plow through and see where they can go with it.

I think it's the hardest thing to teach, that within each thing you're creating, no matter how you feel like you're failing within that particular exercise or that particular framework of what you're working on, that there's

something in there that's opening something up in you. That's a very hard thing to teach, but I think it's also something that is incredibly valuable, not only in artistic creation, but in all endeavors that involve some level of creativity. ▲



SARAH KAUFMAN

Waiting for the Art to Unfold

INTERVIEW BY VICTORIA HUTTER





▲
Dance critic Sarah
Kaufman.
PHOTO BY TONY POWELL

For an artist, few things can seem more devastating than a poor review. They can sway public opinion, sometimes to the extent that people will avoid reading a book, attending an exhibit, or buying tickets to a performance. But if art critics hold such tremendous power in their pens, how do they know when to wield it? What does failure or success look like to the trained eye? Sarah Kaufman has been the dance critic for the *Washington Post* since 1996, and snagged a Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2010. In the fall, she'll publish her first book, *The Art of Grace*, which will look at the concept of grace in the arts, in the body, and within social interactions. We recently spoke with her about failure on the page, on the stage, and why sometimes it pays to look at failure through the long view of history.

Failure on the Page

An interesting opinion that some people hold [is] that dance criticism itself, in some circumstances, is a failure. In her book, *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture*, author Ann Daly says, "Dance criticism is always a knowing act of failure, a futile effort to suggest with words what the body offers." Daly also posits that dance "confounds the linear parade of words." I disagree. Dance criticism, like any other type of arts criticism, is about using one art form to interpret another. You're using words to investigate, explore, engage with, and analyze another piece of art.

That said, it's true that dance is not necessarily something that prompts people to think in language. It's pre-language. It's deeper. How do you capture the essence of it when the experience is emotional and visceral? One reason dance criticism is appreciated is because it is so hard to articulate, even to yourself, what moved you about a performance or what didn't move you.

Ultimately, how you capture dance in words is part of the gymnastics of dance criticism. I face that every time I sit down to write. But because I speak the language of dance writing fluently, I'm confident that thoughts and feelings will pop up while I'm watching that I can then shape into a good review.

There's a trust with the readers of the *Washington Post* or any other outlet. They look for your review. They want to know your take on it, and you have to provide that. If you fail to provide the review, that's a breach of trust. So I don't think there is any inherent act of failure in chronicling dance. The failure would be *not* to write about it. Then we would all lose one means by which dance does not disappear.

Failure on the Stage

As for what failure looks like on stage, there are many shades of gray. I love to see a bold effort even if what is created isn't a seamless product.

I would say the worst type of failure is boredom. If a work is aimless, if the intent seems to be to frustrate the audience, if it doesn't feel honest—those pieces are going to be problematic for me. But, I don't see that very often. Every now and then something comes around that feels like it needs more time in the cooker and more feedback.

And then there is the topic of dance editors. I do think choreography can benefit from an editor, from an outside perspective. Just bring someone in, show it to them, and get a true opinion. It would be up to the individual choreographer who those people would be. I'm imagining you have a friend who's a theater director and can really chart whether a dance's emotional moments are landing. Is there something true and living in what's happening or is it just a bunch of frill?

Patience

I'm a big advocate of patience. You have to have a lot of patience to be a dance critic for this long. The communication between artists and audience is both direct and subtle. You can't go to it expecting a performance to be like a Broadway show where it's clear which are the funny points, the dramatic points, and the tearjerker points. I rely on my own sense of patience a lot in terms of waiting to see what will unfold within a piece.

But then there is failure, longer-term, within the context of history. *The Nutcracker* of all things was a failure when it first came out in 1892. The composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky thought it was a complete bore, far worse

than *The Sleeping Beauty*. The choreographer Marius Petipa became ill in the midst of its creation so somebody else had to take over for him. The audience didn't love it and it wasn't performed for years after that. What does that say about failure?

Look at Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. That's probably the quintessential failure, such a failure it disappeared. We like to think it disappeared because it was so radical and the audience couldn't take it, but maybe it was just a bad piece. We don't know.

Merce Cunningham's dancers were pelted with tomatoes and worse when they went around Europe in the 1960s. And more recently when his company performed *Sound Dance* at Wolf Trap shortly before he died, people were still getting angry. Lights flashed into the audience. David Tudor's composition felt like a roaring cyclone with machine gun fire. Loud and angry. And yet, I found it exhilarating. So is it a failure?

On Broadway, look at the December decision to close *Side Show*. I found that show so moving, so engrossing. This is another occasion when patience should come in. There's an expectation with a Broadway musical that it's going to be razzmatazz and funny. But if it deals with real life, the dark side of the soul, people may love it when they see it but they may not buy the ticket in the first place.

Little Dancer that premiered at the Kennedy Center is another show that dealt with some tough topics, showcased a shadowy, seamy side of society, and yet it also clarified a complex situation. Who knows what the future of that show will be? But it goes to this idea of being able to wait until an artist can really unfold their intentions both within a piece and even across the life of that artist.

Courage and History

There is something to failure that isn't entirely bad. You can have an interesting failure that is bold and distinct but perhaps doesn't gel, but the work sticks with you. You turn it over in your mind afterwards. In those instances, at least someone had the intent and courage to persevere and get something on stage. Intention and courage are good things.

I look at somebody like Mark Morris. There are some works of his that I like better than others, that move me more than others, but I always feel he's being honest, no moments that are just glossy or cheap. That works

with writing too. You want to express your honest opinion, your honest feelings.

You can talk about failure in so many ways. I do think one failure is with dance leadership in jettisoning its history, not investigating and not bringing forward more interesting pieces from the past. There's just so much richness. Now, there's such a drive toward premieres. You have to have premieres in your program. You have to have premieres in your season. Dance is a fragile art form and there's not a good way to preserve it but continually dancing it is the best way.

Just looking in the American canon, I'm thinking about pieces by the Christiansen Brothers. Ballet West was in Washington in December with Willam Christensen's *The Nutcracker*. I noted in my review that one needs to go see an older piece like that with a different set of expectations, a little bit of patience. We all like vintage things. They're a little more finely crafted, perhaps, not so glitzy. There are different qualities that you appreciate. Why can't we appreciate that on the stage as well? Outside of America, there are choreographers like Léonide Massine—where has his work gone? He was a huge star. Or Bronislava Nijinska. So that is an area I'd love to see some of the leadership tackle.

Vulnerability and Humility

We're all drawn to vulnerability. Psychologists call it the Pratfall Effect, which means when you fall, you stumble, you slip on a banana peel, you make a fool of yourself, that can be the moment that most moves people. You don't want to be considered a failure, or to have a string of failures. But we can appreciate seeing someone strive, make that leap of faith.

And sometimes when you go for something and it doesn't all completely come together, still that effort has real meaning for people. Look at Jennifer Lawrence when she went up to accept her Oscar and she fell on the stairs. It just made people love her all the more.

Vulnerability and humility are what we look to art to provide, pulling us back to our human selves when we let our energies, our thoughts, and our to-do lists pull us in many directions. But to pull back to something very true and honest is a great value of the arts. And sometimes, you can't do that without showing some cracks and some flaws. So in the end, failure can be inspiration. ▲



GENE LUEN YANG

FAILURE CAN BE FRUITFUL

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BETTE



In 2006, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* became the first graphic novel to become a National Book Award finalist and to win the American Library Association's Printz Award. According to Yang, however, his next project was less successful. He and his collaborator, Lark Pien, spent several years in rewrite mode after his editor broke the news that the nearly finished comic simply wasn't good enough to publish. Yang pushed through, however, and since then, has garnered a second National Book Award nomination for the two-volume *Boxers & Saints* (which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize) and developed the graphic novel iteration of Nickelodeon's popular cartoon *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, among other projects. Yang was also a featured speaker at the 2014 National Book Festival Gala, where he spoke about how the fear of failure is a stumbling block to telling more diverse stories.

Yang, who had aspired to work in comics since grade school, also teaches creative writing at Hamline University. In his own words, here's Yang on how his definition of success has evolved over the years, and what Spiderman taught him about failure.

How to Define Success and Failure

There's a certain definition of artistic success where you're doing something that's never been done before, or pushing a medium in a way that it's never been pushed. And when you do that, inevitably, you're going to hit failure because the reason why it's never been pushed that way is because it's a bad way to push it. But you'll never find out until you do it. So you have to give yourself the freedom to do that. I'm a firm believer that you should feel as free as you want to be in that first draft—free to fall on your face. If you feel like you need to get a perfect first draft out, you will never take risks and you'll never experiment.

I think there are two levels on which failure operates. There's the artistic level and the more practical level, and you can fail in one way without failing in the other. I think that the easiest way of defining failure in terms of money is whether or not you break even. But you can have a book that doesn't break even at all that's still successful as a piece of art. Success in terms of a piece of art, I think, is to make a comic that gets the reader to the last page. But if you're doing something new and different that maybe has never been done before within the medium, I think that would be a success as well.

I always hope that it'll break even for somebody, either my publisher or me or both. I really think it's like a marriage: in the beginning you're in this honeymoon phase and you think it's awesome, like, "This will be the best book I've ever done." And then somewhere along the [process] I feel so close to the project that I'm lost and I can't really tell if it's good or bad. At that point, I have to push through to the end or I would never finish a book.

How Success Can Change with Age

When you're working in a medium that was once on the brink of extinction, you cannot define success in terms of money—because there is no money. You're going in for other reasons. If you had asked me at the very beginning, when I started making comics as an adult, what success would be, it would just be simply to tell a story that is compelling enough to get the reader from the first page to the last, where the reader wants to find out what happens at the end.

Now that I have responsibilities that I didn't have when I was in my 20s—I didn't have kids that I have to put through school and that I have to feed—I feel like money has to [be] part of the equation. Even if you don't want it to be, the financial aspect is still there. And it's crappy because even now, even though comics are so much more popular than they were in the '90s, even though graphic novels are this big thing within the American book market, they're still kind of a crappy way of making money. If you really want to make money, this is not the way to go.

On Knowing When to Trash It

I have a group of beta readers that I rely on. They're made up of friends and family and my editors, and I take their feedback very seriously. If they tell me something is not working, if a lot of them tell me something is not working, then I'll listen.

Whether or not it's time for edits or the trash can, between those two choices, I think my bias is always toward edits. I'm an outliner, and if I'm able to complete an outline for a project from beginning to end, I feel like it's almost like a marriage, like I need to see it through. One of us has to be dead before we part ways.



Graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang teaching.

PHOTO BY BRIANA LOEWINSOHN

Managing the Fear of Failure

When you're teaching writing, you become much more conscious of how you yourself deal with fear because you want to make sure you're not a hypocrite. The thing I tell my students at the beginning of every semester is they have to decide what [project] they want to pursue that semester. Usually they'll describe two or three to me, and there's one that they describe very easily and another one that they're more hesitant about, that you can tell they're super excited about but also really scared of. That's always the one I tell them to go for. In my life, with my projects, I try to always to do that too now. If I weren't part of Hamline, I don't know if I would be doing a nonfiction comic by now. I think I may have just given in to the fear and moved on to something different.

I think ultimately it takes a certain amount of courage to get anything done. Failure is always going to be nipping at your heels [with] every draft that you do, even the final draft. There are going to be pieces that are failures. There are going to be pieces that are not as good as they could be. I think a lot of what it means to be a writer, a lot of what it means to be a creative

person, is learning how to confront that and push through it.

I think every person who's done something creative has felt the fear of failure. If you've actually finished something and put it out into the world, especially in the age of the Internet, somebody must have trash-talked you. I think we've all had to push through those feelings of inadequacy and those feelings of being a sham and not being up to the task. I think that writing is like a constant wrestling match with self-doubt. You have to be used to it. You have to treat it like a friend. If you don't figure out how to live with it, you're going to end up stopping.

Learning about Failure from Spiderman

I think Spiderman is an awesome example. He has a great character arc in which he started off in failure. His whole origin theory centers around the death of his uncle. He had this opportunity to stop his uncle's killer and he didn't do it. The very first thing he did as a superhero was fail, so his entire career is built on that one failure. It just shows, I think, that failure can be fruitful. Good things can come out of failure. ▲

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Draft panels from Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints*.

PHOTO BY GENE LUEN YANG



JANAI BRUGGER

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



2012 was a very good year for soprano Janai Brugger. At the age of 29, she won Operalia, the World Opera Competition and the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, two of the most prestigious opera competitions in the world. Since then she has performed with the Met and Los Angeles Opera, has sung under the baton of legends from Plácido Domingo to James Conlon, won the 2014 Sphinx Prize, and will soon be making her debut at London's Royal Opera House. Yet even as her resumé is developing into that of a bona fide opera all-star, Brugger actively works to conquer the self-doubt that every perfectionist faces. From flubbed lines to errant notes, every performance is rife with potential challenges that must be overcome. In her own words, Brugger describes how her attitude toward failure has evolved throughout her career.

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Janai Brugger as Liù in
Hawaii Opera Theatre's
2013 production of
Turandot.

PHOTO BY CORY LUM



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Soprano Janai Brugger.

PHOTO © WWW.
KENNETHDOLIN.COM

Defining Failure and Success

Failure for me is when I feel that I'm not doing service to the music—when I know I could be doing more. Failure is when I'm not 100 percent focused or giving it my all, and if I don't learn something from the experience. There's always something to learn. If I don't allow myself that, then I feel that I failed.

Success is if I walk off that stage and I feel that I gave it everything that I could. It's not about singing at a certain level opera house. It's not about winning competitions. Those are amazing things and wonderful opportunities that help your career. But the successful part for me is taking risks and giving my heart and soul to whatever project that I'm doing.

Managing Failure as a Young Singer

[Competitions] are a huge part of what we do in singing. I was always hoping I would advance, and when I didn't, I took that as a personal attack. As an opera singer, your instrument is your voice. That's something that you don't just pick off a shelf, or go shopping for and say, "I want to sound like this." It's a gift that you're given that you have to keep working on as you get older. So when you don't advance, it felt, as a young singer, that it was personal, like they don't like my voice and I sound bad.

That became too overwhelming and too much to handle. So I had to change my thinking. I realized that out of not advancing—or not getting that part—something else came, and it was usually the better thing for me.

In the long run, you can't please everybody. Everybody has their own taste and their own opinions about what they want. It doesn't mean that you're an awful performer or an awful singer. It was such a relief, and such a release, to just enjoy myself out there onstage or in a high-setting competition.

The Vulnerability of Live Performance

With every artist there's a weakness, and the scary thing is having to show a weakness in front of an audience. There are things that you're good at, and there are things that you're not so good at, but you still have to do it. It's still a work-in-progress, but sometimes it has to be a work-in-progress in front of an audience. It's a vulnerable thing.

I put a lot of extra pressure on myself because I want to nail this part, or this phrase, or this particular aria that moves in a way that's very hard for me. I'll practice and practice and practice, and some days it goes great, and some days it sounds like absolute—I can't even say the word. In my mind I'm thinking, "If in that practice room I have hits and misses, what's going to happen when I go out on stage in front on audience?" That level of anxiety was becoming the center of my focus, and I've had to learn to push through that and to redirect. If you focus on those moments that are weak, it becomes so obvious to not only those that are listening, but to yourself as well. That's all that you hear. You make mistakes on things that are really easy and that you've done in your sleep because you've focused all of your time and energy on this one little thing.

Working through Setbacks

Being onstage is a terrifying thing and a thrilling thing equally at the same time. For the first few minutes before I sing, the jitters are there. But once I get out there and I sing the first couple of notes, I can relax. I try not to see everybody out there, but just to tell the story and go into the zone. Even in the zone you make mistakes, things happen, but I think that's the beauty of it. People are going to see me for me, and hopefully will be moved by what I did. I always feel if I'm able to touch at least just one person, if I can make one person out there feel what I felt, or I can bring some joy to them with my voice, then it's all worth it.

There are those days where I'm not feeling my best, or things aren't working the way I want. You can't really prepare for that. It's embarrassing at first, but afterwards in my dressing room, I just have to laugh about it. If I cry or get upset, then it makes it very hard for me to want to get back out there. If you let those mistakes, or those moments when you're not your best, dictate everything, then it makes it very difficult to go back out there and do your job. You've got to give yourself credit. That's the beauty of live theater. You don't know what's going to happen. You just go out there and do the best that you can.

Finding Strength in Weakness

With every role, there's always a part that's challenging for an artist or a singer, whether that be vocally, technically, mentally, or an emotion that you try to convey with the character. For me, I'm working to get my voice to move more. I know what my strengths are and what my weaknesses are at this point, in my voice and in my technique and in my career. I'm being challenged now to take on roles that emphasize this weaker part of my voice, at least what I feel it is. As artists, we strive to be perfect. I've had to really work on that to realize that I'm not perfect, and that all I can do is do the best I can. I find the challenge of particular roles, of particular reaches of my voice, will only make me stronger. If I keep hiding from it, then it's never going to get better. Then I'm missing out on these amazing roles and characters that I could be playing, or pieces that could be absolutely perfect for me, because I'm allowing fear to dictate what I do. I can't do that as an artist. I look at it as a great challenge. I'm finding that with these roles that I'm doing or being asked to do this year, it creates a pride and learning. It's opened up a whole new world of repertoires.

Advice for the Next Generation

Failure is always a big concern, especially when you're young and you're starting out. It's hard feeling that you're not successful, or you're not advancing as fast as your friends and colleagues. The best advice I received as a young singer is that you have to follow your own path and not try to be on anybody else's. You just have to trust that your path is what's right for you. Every setback is a huge learning experience, and means that some other door will open. Have faith and trust in that. I want to make sure that the new generation of young people, especially for opera, understands that failure is not a bad thing. It's a huge learning experience. Your failures still open doors for you.

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**Janai Brugger as
Pamina in the Los
Angeles Opera's
production of
The Magic Flute.**

PHOTO BY ROBERT MILLARD





ONLINE



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As part of our online content for this issue, which you can find by scanning the QR code or visiting **arts.gov**, we talk with dancer Nichole Canuso about the difficulties of a career in dance; listen to the St. Lawrence String Quartet in rehearsal; and chat with comedian Paula Poundstone about what failure is like in comedy.

Don't forget to check out our Art Works Blog (arts.gov/art-works) for daily stories on the arts across the country.

(Above) Philadelphia dancer/choreographer Nichole Canuso's work *Fail Better*, inspired by Samuel Beckett's *writings*. PHOTO BY JACQUES-JEAN TIZIOU/WWW.JJTIZIOU.NET

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