

Imposter syndrome

Archie Maddox

Eyes are on you, taking it in, taking *you* in - as a person, as a concept, as an artist. Eurgh, *artist* - that word is disgusting, better hope that no-one finds out you're a fraud; it's gonna happen one day, then what? You got no skills, this is your only option and you don't even deserve to be in this room where you can't stop sweating – does anyone notice? Is the sweat only under your arms? Have you pissed yourself, or are those sweaty thighs? Is this even happening? Shit, they just asked a question – do not come across as stupid, even though you ain't got a clue what *raison d'être* is. Why didn't you study French, dickhead?? Answer quick, don't make it seem like you're uncomfortable, act like you know what you're doing... Oh, they liked what you just said, that's surprising – a minute ago you thought that sounded like the stupidest thought you've ever thought. Shit, what did you even say? Wait, they're talking again, better listen otherwise you'll be lost, again, as always... It's over? Thank fuck for that. Now you better go off and not prove that person wrong for having some faith in you.

The above is a conversation that plays out in my head at pretty much every meeting I ever have. Tiny waves of self-doubt give way to enormous swells of dread. Despite having proven, many times, that I deserve to be in the room to talk through ideas, based on my back catalogue of work and current ongoing projects – it's always the same thing.

I shouldn't be here, they've made a mistake, I'm going to get found out.

I don't know why it is that way. It always has been for me. Despite successes (and failures, helpful and plentiful failures), I remain plagued by self-doubt. The *imposter syndrome*. I don't know how much it will take for me to believe that I actually *can* do this job, this ridiculous thing of putting words down and people wanting to read/hear/watch them. No matter what, there's a nagging little voice telling me that my time is about to come to an end and I'll have to return to my 'real life'. No idea what that could be, this is pretty much the only job I've ever had (apart from working in a funeral director's... we'll save that for another time). In a weird way, I think I need that little bit of doubt to keep doing what I'm doing. Maybe it keeps me objective? Maybe it stops me from reaching my potential? I don't know.

Whenever I have good work-related news I go through the same process. I get the news, feel excited for a short burst, which is then immediately followed by a crushing low. I think that's fear. Anxiety that I won't be able to deliver what I've been asked to. Terror that the thing I wanted is actually happening. Doubt: no matter what I do, it will never be good enough. And yet, after all the work I've done, had performed, had commissioned, got filmed etc., surely, by now, I should have more confidence in my ability to deliver something that isn't total rubbish.

The very notion of creativity demands a *certain* amount of, among other things, confidence.

In essence, you are not only telling strangers that your ideas are excellent/bold/daring/ridiculous/important (delete as appropriate) – but you are charging them (whether that be in money or time) so that they can

experience your thoughts, brought to life in whatever practice you have deemed the best vessel to express your thinking. That requires a *staggering* level of self-confidence, if not arrogance – to believe that your ideas and thoughts are so good, they should be publicly displayed. So I know that the confidence is there, somewhere, buried deep between self-loathing, disgust for the way the world is and doubt, but why is it so hard to let *that* be the voice I listen to? Sometimes, I wonder if a little more arrogance could do me some good. But then again, I don't want to be more of a prick than I already am - so that idea is out the window.

I am yet to meet a writer that exhibits any form of stereotypical 'confidence'. Well, let me rephrase - I am yet to meet any *good* writer. There are a few writers who are keen to tell anyone that will listen how amazing their new piece is. I was at an industry event recently, and I won't name names (although some people will be able to work out who this is – I'm expecting an angry email from them at some point, although, they're probably too over-confident to see that it's them, so maybe this is fine). I literally heard someone loudly tell a group of people, 'I think that this is easily worthy of a BAFTA, but I'm aiming for an Emmy because I don't like second best'. WTF? They said this about a pilot script they had written that was yet to have a production company attached to it. Strangely, I got a little bit jealous of their cockiness. To have that level of self-belief, whether rightly or wrongly, seemed incredible to me. They were so staggeringly positive - whereas my first reaction is to assume something is terrible and that it's going to fail. I don't know why that is. Maybe I want there to be a nice surprise, so if something *does* come off, it's a lovely little thing to have happened rather than a disappointment that it never happened in the first place.

The life of the creative is made up of constant contrasts. Confidence and anxiety live side by side to help give you your unique voice. For me, they pendulum from side to side (although my pendulum is unbalanced, as a lot of time is spent on the anxiety side). I can remember the first time I heard any of my writing read aloud in a professional setting. I had heard it through writing circles and little workshops here and there, but this was the first time I had heard it aloud, read by actors with a director. What I'll never forget is how out of place I felt in that room. All these people around me, they were professional, they were important – whereas I was (and still am) someone that eats Nutella direct from the jar like a ghetto Winnie-the-Pooh. I felt as if I had turned up to the wrong place, and any moment someone in that room was going to turn around and tell me, 'Listen mate, you gave it a go – best try something else'. People asked me questions, and my ideas and opinions were valued! And I didn't like *that* at all...

Imposter syndrome is a fascinating concept. I wonder how much it affects other writers. For some, surely it must be a stifling feeling that stops them from being able to do their best work. That imposter feeling of not belonging may stop people before they've even started, to save them the pain of being rejected. For me, I think that the moment I feel as if I belong, or deserve to be in a place, that's when complacency will start to creep in. That will be the time when arrogance wheedles its way past self-belief and I start being a little bit in love with my own voice (rather than casing it in self-loathing as is the case now).

In terms of process, I think that, maybe, in some crude, deep-seated (probably requiring therapy to rectify) kind of way, imposter syndrome gives me something to push against. At the end of the day, all creativity, in my opinion, comes from some sort of fight. Fighting to express yourself,

fighting to understand the world around you, fighting to be heard, whatever it is. I know that in my mind I need something to push against in order to get started. I know that's a little weird, but I think that part of the reason is that people can end up analysing things to the point of realising that they, in some way, have experienced a *form* of suffering. I can remember being annoyed at my Dad because he grew up in the seventies and got some good old-fashioned racism. In my mind I'd twisted that around to thinking, 'Man, if I had some racism, I could write about that. Why haven't I had any?' (Don't worry, in the past few years, I've had plenty of incidents – so win-win for me, I guess.)

Having something to push against, in my case, offers me a renewed conviction that what I have to say, to someone out there, might be important. I guess I just need that thing to push against in order to light a fire under my *clart* and make me see things through. Would be nice to feel like I belonged though. Maybe...

Does anyone ever truly feel like they belong? With writing, surely everyone is just playing at this thing? Everyone is just rolling the dice of fate and hoping for the best, aren't they? There can't be anyone out there that genuinely thinks that they are where they deserve to be? Or maybe that's just me and a select few others. I could be destined to always feel out of place, no matter what I accomplish; I could always think, 'Any moment, any moment now, this shit is going to crumble and I'm going to be standing there, crouched over the Nutella pot like a fool.' While I still feel like I don't belong, I'm getting more comfortable than I was – so mostly I'm starting to feel less like I shouldn't be where I am, and more like I am where I am, and that's OK. But that could change at any moment. There's still a nagging feeling of doubt, but it's less pronounced than it used to be.

Why do we all do this, though? What is it that makes us tell ourselves that we shouldn't be doing certain things? Again, fear is, for sure, a massive factor. For many, being afraid of failing in the thing that they know deep down should be the thing they are pursuing, could be such a soul-crushing experience that it brings their whole way of existence into question. We all need validation from other people to tell us that what we've produced is good – but why? Why can't that come from ourselves? Maybe it's a worry about putting yourself outside the circle of approval. If someone says what you've produced is bad and you tell them they're wrong, you're in a conflict and, for plenty of people, that's the worst place to be. In the past, I found myself trying to shape my work based on a preconception of what people wanted – in essence trying to protect myself from being rejected. None of those things ever went anywhere, because they lacked the authenticity of who I was and what I wanted to say. I was trying to second-guess what people would want, rather than putting out what *I* wanted. That's never going to come out well, is it? The moment I stopped doing that was the moment things began to happen for me. Maybe that's been my way of fighting against the doubt and showing some kind of confidence.

Is there ever going to be a point when this imposter thing goes away? Will I ever be able to walk into a room, an industry event, and think *Yeah, I should be here?* Maybe I'm keeping it around to 'stay real' and not allow arrogance to fester. But there's got to be a middle ground. There's got to be a space between arrogance and doubt where I can live at some point.

Maybe I like the feeling of being the outsider. It's worked so far, so why should I think about changing? What if that's where my powers come from

– the need to push against something, to be inspired to prove something, prove something wrong.

Maybe it will always be this way. Maybe one day, it might change and I might finally be at ease with how I make a living.

Maybe I don't rate myself enough to believe. Maybe I should. Maybe we all should. Then what might we accomplish?

Archie Maddox

Archie is an emerging screenwriter and playwright. His work has been produced at the Bush Theatre, Lyric Hammersmith, Orange Tree Theatre, Royal Court, and in New York at the New Light Theatre.

Archie's play *A Place for We* was shortlisted for the Bruntwood Prize from a submission pile of 1900 and was also shortlisted for the Alfred Fagon Award. It was staged at the Park Theatre in autumn 2021 and has just been nominated for an Olivier Award 2022.

In 2017 Archie was a part of the BBC Writers Room 'London Voices' and in 2018 he was selected as part of the prestigious 4Screenwriting course. He was also named as the writer in Residence at BBC Radio Drama London Production.

As well as a writer Archie is also a stand-up comedian and was runner up in Amused Moose Laugh Off 2014, Winner of the Bath Festival New Comedian 2014, and NATYs 2014 finalist. His debut show, *Shirts Vs Skins*

got several 4-star reviews at the Edinburgh Fringe 2016 and was long listed for the Amused Moose Comedy Award.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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