

# The Snowpeople: Interview with Olivia Lilley

written by Beach Sloth | December 11, 2020



If you're anything like me, you've been part of a scene, an artistic one preferably but any will do. These scenes grow and flourish with the help of devoted, loving participants to help them grow. DIY scenes especially serve as an outlet, an idealistic one at times, for artistic individuals to partake without conforming to pressure to satisfy any large audience. Most likely if you did partake in any such scene, you did it DIY to at least some degree for they are scattered throughout the US throughout the world and have for literally centuries. Art scenes have relied upon these DIY spaces to spark creativity and to truly flourish.

Olivia Lilley and I were part of one such scene. You've heard of it; it was

called Alt Lit. A lot of good came out of that scene and I am happy that I made so many great friends through it. I consider Olivia Lilley to be one such friend and there are countless others. Alt Lit would be considered a DIY scene for the main attributes for it were a computer, internet connection, and desire to write differently, honestly. Unfortunately, through Alt Lit and through DIY scenes they can oftentimes be a reflection of the more popular, toxic environments they originate in, incorporating self-destruction, bringing in some truly vile people who take advantage of a group's openness and abuse members. Oliva and I know those people too, or rather thought we knew them. They turned out to be horrid people.

The Snowpeople does not tell the story of the Alt Lit scene blow by blow. Rather, it is a representation of how the toxicity that has ruined so many can ruin even these DIY communities that were built with the intention of inclusion. With the Snowpeople, Olivia Lilley's intention is to perhaps prevent this from happening again and again. Nor is this a movie simply about the rottenness of DIY but also a bit of hope that DIY can reject these tropes and create something truly inclusive.

I was fortunate enough to sit down with Olivia Lilley to ask her a few questions about her upcoming film. We maintained the requisite six feet of distance and did it one better by conducting the interview in different time zones.

- 1. I am excited to see that you have written a film that depicts a bit of what DIY scenes entail, the good, the bad and the ugly. Could you explain a little bit about your history regarding DIY and what served as the catalyst for deciding to write the Snowpeople?**

In order to get to this answer, first, we have to go way back.



Back in high school, I was not your usual rebel. Yes, I rolled up my uniform Oxford shirt sleeves and wore fishnets every day with unshaven legs, but I was not in bands. I spent all of my time writing books, lyrics, and music for musicals.

That said, I also followed Fueled by Ramen's roster religiously and dreamed of the night when I might be cool enough for bands and their friends to take notice of me and invite me to their secret shows in suburban underground spaces.

Fast forward,

It's now 2012, and I'm about to graduate from Drama School with my BFA in Directing. I'm laser focused on new plays, staging concerts, and experimental theatre. However, the human I talk to the most is poet/wanderer, Lucy K Shaw, who I stumbled into at a fundraiser for one of my plays in Brooklyn. At this point, we had an ongoing [email chain](#) for a year and we visited each other's respective homes in Toronto and Pittsburgh. Unbeknownst to me at the time, Lucy was about to blow up on the Internet with her Shabby Doll House press in an internet Art Movement known as Alt Lit.

Alt Lit became the first DIY scene I was ever a part of. And it shook up my world. In my first year out of school, I was mostly homeless and couch surfing in various cities such as San Fran, Los Angeles, and Nashville. The only place I could go where I could find truly kindred spirits during that time was Alt Lit. And in each of these cities I wandered, Alt Lit people

would find me, and we would become fast friends.

Fast forward one more time,

It's now 2014. I am living permanently in Chicago, running the DIY space known as The Parlor. The worlds of Alt Lit and Chicago's DIY scene have now met and are thriving at my venue, which we nicknamed "The Chicago Headquarters of Alt Lit". I am also building my first theatre company, The Runaways Lab Theatre, and hosting Alt Lit poets in residence every few months. The Parlor was getting more and more popular every event, and it seemed like Alt Lit was taking over the world.

Then!

On March 7th, 2014, my venue was busted by the cops after an art show got out of control.



On May 1st, 2014, I moved out of The Parlor and it ceased to exist.

In Fall of 2014, several prominent figures in the Alt Lit scene were outed as rapists.

The illusion we had collectively built for ourselves in Alt Lit, in Chicago's DIY scene, and at The Parlor had fallen to pieces in what seemed like overnight.



I was left to look back and think about why.

I was left to sit and think about how I could possibly move forward.

Luckily, The Runaways literally picked me up off of the ground at a meeting and asked me what show I would like to do next. And then they waited for me to have an answer. They saved my life. They saved me as an artist. I was able to dust myself off and go on.

BUT...

That didn't mean I was going to be immune to reflection.

I thought long and hard about the dynamics that played out at all of our parties and online.

I remembered when I met these rapists in New York City in 2013 and hung out at a party with them without any awareness of their actual behavior.

I felt responsible in a way. I had contributed to creating these spaces. I was an enabler.

The first time I left Chicago since moving there was January of 2016. I had run away with my now partner, Jake Green, to save him from the Connecticut Children's theatre where he was working. We spent 4 months house sitting on a lake in Wolcott, CT. I decided I would spend that time writing.

The first thing that came out was the first draft of “The Snowpeople” then entitled, “You Can’t Win Em All”.

Writing “The Snowpeople” has been a gradual act of healing: letting go of my dead venue that metaphorically burned to the ground, forgiving myself for not being able to stop all of the bad things from happening singlehandedly, and making conscious decisions and action plans to create BETTER spaces with accountability structures.

In the years since beginning to write “The Snowpeople”, I left “The Runaways”, started “Pop Magic Productions” with an Investor/Mentor, and eventually took over Prop Thtr as Artistic Director. I started writing contracts for everything I do. I became a champion of creating rigorous, organized brave creative spaces.

“The Snowpeople” is about a time and place I’ve since left behind, but I would not be who I am today without it.

“The Snowpeople” is about taking a hard look at who we were and what our spaces and worlds were like back in 2013 – 2015.

“The Snowpeople” is about seeing why these things happened and continue to happen through today in the hopes that we might imagine and start to build better futures.

- 2. You explain how you were able to find compassion through others who helped you through the loss of the Parlor. How do you think that this sort of support structure can be encouraged for those leaving equally (or even more so) toxic DIY scenes? And how does your movie play into this sense of hope?**

That’s a great question. I think it’s really important to prioritize your relationships with other people. I’ve been putting a lot of effort and work into my relationships over the past few years and it’s made a difference in the quality of my life and my art (which I make with other people).

If you don't yet prioritize your friends, I think the first step is working to build an awareness of what is going on around you. When somebody retreats from a space you inhabit, rather than conjecture why that might be the case, look at all of the clues they have left for you. Also, maybe check in to see what's going on with them?

I think if culturally, we put more of an onus on individuals to look around them and take care of those in their community: support them in the way that they want to be supported, we would start to create new patterns of behavior and begin to spot problematic cycles more easily.

I would say I believe in personal responsibility being the first step towards community accountability and real lasting change.



In terms of "The Snowpeople", we watch as these characters desperately try and support each other in any way they can. Sometimes they fuck up. Sometimes they do the opposite of what they should, though their intentions are good. I would say even though these characters fail in many ways, everybody walks away having learned something. Some of those lessons sadly are... some of your friends will never change, will never stop deluding themselves about who their real friends are. I would say the single most hopeful moment in the film is when our main character lets go of taking responsibility for somebody else's actions. She spends a lot of this film feeling guilty on behalf of a cis white man who refuses to. The moment that she says 'fuck it' and really leaves that dude behind is the reason I have to make this. We need to see more people on the big screen actively letting go of people who are killing them and finding the strength to move forward and see hope and possibility in the world again.

**3. I like the concept of leaving people as a form of progress. Too often we**

get sold the idea of simply “forgiving others” and trying to find the good in them. Lots of art portrays the tortured artist, the one who is a jerk to everybody around them, as someone worth celebrating because the output of their “art” is greater than that of being a decent person. I disagree with this idea and I know you do too. Do you think that your movie shows the path on how to do that within an artistic community, of rejecting toxicity and finally breaking the cycle?

Yes. I think that it shows the more realistic path of stumbling, failing, trying again, really failing, fucking it all up royally, learning the hardest things, and finally courageously choosing to see yourself for your actual role in things. “The Snowpeople” is not a PSA on how we SHOULD treat each other and overcome toxicity and sexism. None of the characters in “The Snowpeople” are models of behavior, but I think by presenting these characters in the full breadth of their complex humanity, we will see ourselves and our own past and current mistakes. My hope is that everybody who sees this film leaves with a fresh way of looking at what is so difficult. This is not the film that depicts a utopian society. This is a film about folx desperately striving towards some semblance of a path towards that. And yes, I agree 100% that it’s time we stopped valuing “good art” over being a decent person.

Something else about this film that’s important to mention is that it does not shy away from what is seductive and romantic about maintaining the status quo and just keeping your mouth shut in the DIY, self-created universe. As an experimental theatre maker, I am highly aware of the performance of reality and the way we create and uphold facades. We forget that people who do bad things often get away with it because they are charismatic. We have to show that if we want to tell the whole story. The audience watching this film has to struggle, like Sara, our POV character, with what to believe and who to trust.

4. You touch upon an interesting point there, regarding charm. These awful characters that ruin DIY and inject it with a toxic culture tend to be rather charming. Even when looking at art from afar you see that there are communities that often center around this charming yet obviously flawed characters. What do you think is a good way of handling that, of standing up to the charming yet toxic folx?

The key to freeing yourself from the grasp of these folx is to no longer give them your power. Easier said than done. When they’re in your life, they love to make themselves the center. You start to see yourself the way they see you, and if they start to think less of you, you become less. You value their opinion over all other opinions including your own. The first step to

becoming... independent is to stop trying to be in their "club", stop giving them your time and attention. They feed off of the attention of others more than anything else.



I would say the next step, once you've done that, is to actively work to figure out your own tastes, your own sense of self, definitions of success etc. Once you stop listening so hard to the noise outside of yourself, then take some time to listen to what's going on inside of you.

##### **5. What do you want people to takeaway after seeing The Snowpeople?**

I want people to feel a little vulnerable and a little embarrassed because they saw themselves up there in those characters and/or someone they know. I want people to leave with insight into perspectives that they had not yet considered. I want people to leave thinking back to their own group of friends or communities and to the times when they felt they could have done more for someone else. I want this film to make people look twice at the person they see in the mirror: who they are and who they could be. I want "The Snowpeople" to leave you with the feeling that there's so much work to be done but that there is hope, and that there is something that they can do for someone else. I hope "The Snowpeople" makes people walk through the world with more awareness of the what's going on with the folx around them. I hope "The Snowpeople" makes people call up somebody they haven't spoken to in a long time and ask them how they're doing.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about the Snowpeople and your thoughts on DIY. I too had similar experiences regarding Alt Lit and other DIY scenes too. My hope is that people will see all that DIY entails and how similar it is from scene to scene. The art focus might change (folk, punk, abstract literature, etc.) but the same fundamental problem, a lack of

inclusivity, prevents a lot of these movements from truly reaching their full potential.

[Please see this film. Pretty please.](#)