

# Natasha Lyonne: Time of Her Lives

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April 14, 2022

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In season two of *Russian Doll*, Natasha Lyonne takes new leaps in space and time to explore life, death and identity. And while her character hurtles through the decades, Lyonne herself balances acting, producing, writing, directing and showrunning.

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An interview with Natasha Lyonne doesn't follow the usual rhythm of question, answer, repeat. Her responses are detailed essays that luxuriate in tangents as she cites authors and filmmakers and then miraculously ambles back to the original point. With a Jackie Mason cadence and a voice that speaks of late nights and cigarettes, Lyonne moves around her East Village apartment, smoking and holding forth.

With *Russian Doll* dropping its second season April 20, she has a lot to hold forth about. The half-hour Netflix series blends drama, comedy and sci-fi into an existential quest that examines the meaning of life, time and identity.

The first season raised profound questions as Lyonne's Nadia Vulvokov lived and died and lived and died on her thirty-sixth birthday, at a party in — yes — the East Village. As buzzy as the show was at its February 2019 debut, it became more resonant during the pandemic, when we were all forced into a *Groundhog Day* existence. Suddenly time seemed to fold in on itself, yielding a continuous loop — much like *Russian Doll*.

"I think that season one was much more of a direct conversation with that self-destructive nature of we live, we die," Lyonne says. "And we're sort of doomed to repeat the same mistakes until we come out of it and go from, essentially, defiance to finding some sort of human connection and a way out. Then in season two, essentially my question was, 'Okay, now that we figured out how to not die, how do we go about living?'"

Covid stretched what was supposed to be a nine-month production into three years. And Lyonne — cocreator, showrunner, executive producer, director, writer and star — is excited that viewers will soon see the next installment.

"It's been in my brain, in my gut," she says. "We've been in post forever."

This season turns even more philosophical as Nadia winds up in the same East Village neighborhood — but in 1982. The subway is her time machine. "I'll tell you what I did not expect," she says in the season opener, "was for the 6 train to run through some kind of wormhole."

Of course, veteran New Yorkers might not share Nadia's surprise. Spend enough time on the Lexington Avenue Local, and it seems entirely possible that time could not only stop but reverse direction.

In the new season, *Russian Doll* also travels to Eastern Europe. Nadia and Alan (Charlie Barnett) — who are in the same inexplicable predicament of repeatedly dying, though never permanently — search their past to understand their present.

"The second season is at a different pitch," says Barnett, who's recently been seen in the Netflix series *You* and *Special* as well as NBC's *Ordinary Joe*. "It is about how we as humanity need each other to survive and to grow. And how important it is to not let it wash by."

The two characters meet in an elevator in season one, careening to a fatal crash. Like Nadia, Alan has no idea why he can't stay dead. Yet their lives, though possibly entwined, are studies in opposites. Hers is a chaotic, Bacchanalian existence, spent passing out and waking up in strange beds. His is almost a Spartan regimen, and his closet could teach Marie Kondo how to organize. Yet they both peer into bathroom mirrors, seeking The Answer.

Pausing long enough to light another cigarette and take a swig of water, Lyonne muses about how she's constantly chasing her ideas. Her thoughts race, and she sees connections others might not: how we carry history within us, how generational trauma haunts.

The actress shares much with her character. Lyonne's Hungarian maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors, just like Nadia's. But if Lyonne is sometimes wracked with doubt, she appears onscreen as a fearless woman.

Nadia strides through parks at night — in 1982, when unarmed women were highly unlikely to take that risk. Yet what does she have to be afraid of — dying? She has that down. Her living is done to the fullest; Nadia's a libertine who makes zero excuses. Her appetite for booze and drugs is either impressive or horrifying, depending on your vantage.

While it may seem impossible for one small body to consume that many substances, Lyonne laughs and says, "And yet I'm here to tell you it's possible."

The actress' old battles with drugs and alcohol have been well documented. She kicked her heroin habit in 2006 but the journey was rocky, including scrapes with the law and a court-mandated rehab. When Lyonne was at her lowest, writer-director Nora Ephron gave her the keys to her Los Angeles home. Lyonne's first gig as a child was as an extra in Ephron's 1986 film, *Heartburn*.

She went on to roles in TV's *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and in films including *American Pie* and *But I'm a Cheerleader*. But the hard living began and eventually took its toll. Fortunately, her friends rallied around. When Lyonne needed heart surgery, Ephron found her a top cardiologist. And when Lyonne was in the hospital, actress Chloë Sevigny, one of her best friends, was there with a cashmere wrap and endless love.

Now Sevigny plays Nadia's mom, fittingly named Nora, in *Russian Doll*.

Sevigny, who met Lyonne through actor Michael Rapaport in 1997, recalls, "She was a kindred spirit. We had very similar interests in music and lifestyle and attitudes toward the business, toward life. We really clicked. As she likes to say, we found our people within each other. I continue to be fascinated by her — she's so dynamic, so bright. She has so many interests. She's so good at communicating and keeping friends.

"Her own life story," Sevigny adds, "her personal story, is still kind of a mystery."

As much as Sevigny cherishes Lyonne — "I am so proud of her and try to give her confidence and love" — her character is incapable of such maternal devotion. Nora comes off as selfish and out of control, but as Sevigny notes, she's a single mother suffering from schizophrenia.

"In season two, we really lean into the connection that Chloë and Natasha have in real life to talk about the relationship of Nadia and her mom," says Amy Poehler, also a cocreator of the show and an executive producer.

"It was pretty amazing because, like most strong female relationships, your friends are sometimes your mom, and sometimes you're theirs, and sometimes you're kids together, and sometimes you're sisters," Poehler observes. "Successful female relationships change all the time. So it's very deep for Natasha to be mothered by Chloë."

Poehler recalls meeting Lyonne in the '90s, when Lyonne would watch improv shows at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, which Poehler cofounded. Like Sevigny, Poehler was immediately drawn to this "very scrappy New Yorker, self-sufficient and tiny and who talks like a gangster."

Over the years, Poehler has been quoted as saying Lyonne "was the oldest girl" she knew.

"I would revise that to say that Natasha has a real depth and wisdom that comes from a life lived," Poehler says now from her office, where the town seal of Pawnee (from *Parks and Recreation*) hangs on the wall. "In season two, what I love so much about her performance is that she plays a person who's very young, and also a person who's been here before — if that makes sense. So she has this quality as an actress, where there's some feeling that she has felt what you felt, and she has this ability to take on a lot emotionally."

And even while dealing with grave subjects, Lyonne displays humor — a hallmark of wisdom, Poehler notes. "There are people who take on big emotions in their lives or in their characters but don't have the other piece, which is the levity," she observes. "That's why Natasha is such an interesting actress."

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