

[00:00:04.970] - Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the matter podcast, where we celebrate the why and how of creativity. I'm Wynn Leon, and in this episode, Vicki Atkinson and I are talking with Edgerton award winning playwright, musician, and writer Jack Canfora. Talking with Jack is like attending a masterclass on creativity. In fact, our conversation with Jack is so rich with both writing practices and nuggets about authors and artists that we split it into two episodes. In this first episode, we talk with Jack about depression and creative expression. Jack reveals a couple of his brilliant ways to experiment when he's hit a creative lull and he shares his writing routine when writing is flowing and when it isn't. Because, as Jack says, you never know when the inspiration will show up. His answer about whether he writes Longhand will have you giggling right along with Vicky and me. He tells us what is hard to teach and important to learn about creative attention, and he shares with us a delightful story about the beautiful song Eleanor Rigby that exposes an intimate insight into the creative process. With all the food for thought and inspiration, we know you will have plenty to chew on until the conclusion of our incredible conversation airs next week.

[00:01:38.350] - Wynne Leon

We love talking with the brilliant and funny Jack Canfora and leave each conversation a little bit smarter, much more inspired to hone the craft of writing and in awe of a master creator. We know you'll love this episode. Hey, Jack.

[00:02:06.570] - Jack Canfora

Hi. How are you?

[00:02:08.190] - Wynne Leon

Vicki and I are so glad to see you. We are such fans of yours. It's so fun to be able to talk to you.

[00:02:15.690] - Jack Canfora

Well, likewise, and I'm thrilled to be here.

[00:02:18.080] - Wynne Leon

Well, that's great, Jack. You've been really open about your struggle with depression.

[00:02:24.090] - Jack Canfora

Yeah.

[00:02:24.500] - Wynne Leon

And we're really wondering, does creativity at all give you any reprieve from depression? Whether it's writing or listening to music, being somebody else for a while, that.

[00:02:37.250] - Jack Canfora

Always does the last part. It depends. I think it does. It might be better to say, or for me anyway. It might be more accurate to say that being creative in various forms is in a sense necessitated by depression. In that for me, and I can only speak for myself, and even then, barely, I think that I wouldn't have needed to become a writer unless I felt something missing. My pet totally unproven theory is that most artists are artists because there's something they feel inherently endemically missing. And I think there are many exceptions to that rule. You can find examples of artists. E. Cummings apparently is one who is very optimistic and happy by nature. But unfortunately, I think some of the cliché about the suffering artist is true to a degree. I think the mistake that's easy to make is that I think a lot of people think, well, unless I'm suffering, I can't be creative. And I don't think that's true. I do think there's a man I'm friendly with is a very well known comedian. His name is Gary Gulman. He just has a new special out in HBO, and very funny guy.

[00:03:51.280] - Jack Canfora

He says in that special something, the effect of every one person show should be titled "mommy look" and boils down to if one mother could be bothered to look up from her people magazine when the kid is on the diving board, there'd be no theater departments in America. It's a way of sort of finding that sort of audience where I think that you, in some fundamental way, don't feel you're being heard

appropriately or enough. Maybe the chicken and egg thing, maybe some artists are, and maybe I'm one of them, are so narcissistic that no amount of listening is enough for them. But I do think that my depression has informed every aspect of my life, and I think it's a real trap to fall into, to romanticize depression in some ways. Like the struggling artist thing, there's really nothing romantic at all about it. Having said that, I would say that whatever qualities or talents I have to whatever degree I have, them, I think have been probably sharpened by my depression in many ways. I think that it's a very cruel, very strict, but I think sometimes a very effective teacher. And again, I'm not trying to romanticize it because I think it should not be something to be embraced or romanticized, but I think I'm a lot more empathetic as a person than I probably would have been if had I not suffered from depression.

[00:05:12.810] - Jack Canfora

It's a great leveler for me, anyway. It makes it almost impossible to be really arrogant for any length of time because you know that just getting out of bed some days is a victory, and it's like climbing Everest. So to me, it's a great leveler in that sense. It sort of attunes me to other people's. And this is making me sound like I'm this great, sensitive person. And I can line up a list of people who tell you that's not so true, but I think that it makes you more tuned to what's going on with other people's behaviors, because it's sort of like depression becomes sort of like a canary in the coal mine a little bit, in that you have to sort of be able to read the room a little bit, because the world feels like an overwhelming and intimidating place at times.

[00:05:59.410] - Wynne Leon  
Right.

[00:06:00.180] - Jack Canfora

So there's not a single aspect of my life that I can honestly say that depression hasn't influenced me. And when I connect to art, you mentioned listening to music before. I think it's very true. When I connect with something great piece of writing or great piece of music, it does make me feel less alone. I think that's maybe ultimately, if you had to be incredibly reductive about it and boil down to the meaning of art or the point of art, I think it would be like to show that we're not alone.

[00:06:25.280] - Wynne Leon

Right. Well, that we are here. Your first point? I'm here, I'm showing up. I'm trying to be seen and heard and less alone, which the two sides of the same coin.

[00:06:38.390] - Jack Canfora  
Yeah, I agree completely.

[00:06:39.760] - Wynne Leon  
Yeah.

[00:06:40.620] - Vicki Atkinson

I think what you said, Jack, about a lot of people talk about highly sensitive persons and the connection to depression, and kind of that desire to be seen, to feel whole, to be recognized, is a motivation, but it's not just about that. I think what you said about reading the environment and the people around you and kind of absorbing a lot of things, it's one of the things that Wynn and I really appreciate about what you write, because you have an ear for bringing feelings forward in things that you write and dealing with complexities of people's feelings and those observational skills. But it's hard, when you're not feeling well yourself, to shed some of that and then just think about yourself. I'm speaking for myself. I can get really wrapped up in everyone else's swirl and lose my way in terms of trying to be directed. But that's such a super skill that you have, being able to do that and then translate it into your writing.

[00:07:42.060] - Jack Canfora

Well, that's very kind of you, and thank you for saying that. I do think it's maybe a bit of a chicken and egg thing. I mean, in a sense, maybe I've had to become more sensitive because of depression or whatever. Or maybe I'm more depressed because I'm able to pick up on people's feelings a bit, and I

think one feeds the other. It becomes really, at times, unpleasant feedback. But yes, I think there's probably truth in that. Absolutely.

[00:08:07.160] - Wynne Leon  
Yeah.

[00:08:08.650] - Vicki Atkinson

Well, do you have tricks? Because one of the other things, Wyn and I, because we want to know all the secrets. One of the things that Wyn and I appreciate about you is that you have a lot of creative channels open. And so when we think about Jack Kenford's, body of work. We can think about the comedy that you've written. You're a playwright, you're an essayist, you're also a musician and did the opening kind of theme song for our podcast. And you've done Shakespeare and you've taught. So when you're feeling like you're stuck, is there something in particular that works for you to kind of channel switch or change lanes when one thing isn't being productive, or is doing that too much kind of counterproductive?

[00:08:51.590] - Jack Canfora

Well, I think it's different for everyone, and I think I've written about this before, that I really don't believe that there are maxims and there are absolute rules because I think people vary, but I think that there are some useful guidelines. It's funny you mentioned that, because I'm in the midst of a period now where I sort of feel like the itch to write, which is hard to describe, but it is almost like an itch, an internal itch, but I cannot think of anything to write. And so I guess it's a form of writer's block. I tend to think of writer's block as you know what you want to say, but you just can't figure out how to say it. And for me, the problem has always been more like, what do I want to talk about? I find that in a very technical way for me, for example, if I'm writing a play and I'm hit upon a scene where I'm not sure what's going to happen next, for me as a writer, creative writer, personally, for me, that is the biggest hurdle. What happens next? So plot, I would argue, is the hardest thing for me, whereas for others, it's dialog or other things.

[00:09:53.820] - Jack Canfora

What I find for me in that particular regard, and I think it's probably translatable, is I will just start writing to myself, almost like a journal entry, and writing about it, just writing. Well, here's what the characters are doing and here's what's happening. And I find sort of getting that little bit of distance and writing about it in the third person as best I can, as an audience member might perceive it. That generally frees me up a little bit.

[00:10:19.340] - Vicki Atkinson

Because you're doing less evaluating while you're writing. Does it give you.

[00:10:24.310] - Jack Canfora

I'm less inside of myself. Anytime I can get vacation time from my head is a blessing. And I do find that to be useful, even for me personally, something that makes me. It's a little helpful, like when I'm suffering from a real bout of sort of despair or depression. It helps a little bit sometimes for me to just sort of stand outside of myself and say, okay, well, right now I'm feeling hopeless, and there's no sugar coating it. I feel absolutely hopeless right now. But this is a moment. Just sort of like, watch myself, if I can, from the outside, and say, okay, well, I'm feeling hopeless right now, but it's 230, maybe at 330 it'll be slightly different. But in terms of creativity, use the word tricks. And I think tricks is frankly, even is a more refined way, putting what I do a lot of the time, that's one way of doing it. Sometimes this happens more with music. I don't consider myself like a serious musician or songwriter. I haven't dedicated myself to that in the way I have, say, to writing. But when I try to write, say, songs, for example, and I am stuck, what I will do sometimes is I'll listen to another song and I'll think, well, obviously you don't want to plagiarize that, but you want to find something in that.

[00:11:45.670] - Jack Canfora

You think, oh, I can build from that. There's that great quote variously attributed to Picasso or Elliot, is that poor artists borrow, great artists steal. It's just a random example. So I just recently wrote a song, and it's fine. It's not going to make anyone forget the great songs of all time. But I just heard a new

song by Billy Joel. It's the first song in, like, 30 years. And if you haven't heard it, to me it's like, among his better songs, it's a brilliant song. And my song is nothing like his in terms of song or, frankly, quality. But one of the things I noticed about it, because I'm not a trained musician, is I thought, well, the tempo is not the tempo. The time signature seems odd to me. And I realized it was something called six eight time, which is not quite Walt's time, but it's not quite irregular time. And so I said, well, let me try putting it. Let me see if I can write something in that time signature. And so it's just you give yourself this little challenge just as almost like a thought experiment. Let me see if I can do that in that time signature.

[00:12:46.590] - Jack Canfora

And I'd love to say I came up with something brilliant. I didn't. But what it did is it at least got me to do something. And so sometimes I'll do that as sort of an exercise. Yeah, well, it helps also if you have a lot of free time. And I have at times where I will, for example, there have been times where I have to get the feel of what a really great play or piece of writing is. I will take a play by, let's say by Chekhov, and then I'll write it. But I'll write it in my own language. In other words, I'll steal the story and the characters. And I guess the fancy word for that is I'm adapting it for the modern audience. But it's really what I'm doing is I'm trying to just for myself and no one ever sees it is just get inside the dna of a really great piece of work and get a sense of what it feels like to write it. That sounds silly, but it's kind of something I find helpful at times. So I believe very much into diving into other people's work and seeing what I love about it and seeing, instead of saying, okay, I'm going to take this idea, I tend to focus on one thing.

[00:13:59.340] - Jack Canfora

What's one thing about this work that I find really interesting? Let me think about one thing and see if I can develop something around that. Sometimes I find that helps.

[00:14:08.500] - Vicki Atkinson

I love that because the idea of rhythm and cadence and pattern, right, really comes through and it can be just like a tiny little nugget and you peel that away. But everything is rhythm, really in life. Everything.

[00:14:22.340] - Jack Canfora

That's so true. That's so true. And another example of serious artists, really great artists, but of course, I'm going to mention the Beatles at some point because I'm a Beatle fanatic. When McCartney wrote Eleanor Rigby, which is really mostly his composition, and he went with his producer George Martin to figure out how to score know for strings. And McCartney can't write, he can't notate music, he can't read written music. So he and Martin had to do it. And it's a great score. And part of what's distinctive about that score is a sort of staccato sort of the strings. And Martin takes that, he admits, whole cloth from the soundtrack to Psycho, the stabbing scene, the shower scene in Psycho. And so he lifts that idea and he puts it into Eleanor Rigby. Now it's unrecognizable. Now it's a completely different piece of art. But now, as soon as I mentioned it to you, you're like, oh, yeah, of course. That is where that's from. And along those lines, something else about the song that I think is interesting about learning creativity is McCartney had the song in his head and he wanted to come out with, and he had most of the lyric he couldn't get the name of the character, trying to think.

[00:15:34.350] - Jack Canfora

And he had in his head Miss Daisy Hawkins. He's like, that's no good. And he had been working on a film with an actress named Eleanor Bronze. Eleanor is a good name. And then he was out, and he saw a sign on the street said, rigby, and sign he said, rigby. I like that sound. So it's Eleanor Rigby. And he got it from there. But it turns out. Out. Turns out that we find out years later, someone discovered that in a churchyard in Liverpool, which is where John and Paul would frequently meet up halfway between each other's houses, there is a grave of an Eleanor Rigby.

[00:16:03.530] - Wynne Leon

What?

[00:16:04.400] - Jack Canfora

Yeah. And McCartney had been presented that fact, like, in the 1980s, and he's like, really? It's like, I had no idea. But then he realized, I must have had some idea. I must have had some idea somewhere. And this is something I think it's hard to teach, but it's important to try to learn is obviously young Paul McCartney was observing things and open to things, even unconsciously. That, to me, is like more of a mindset of me trying to absorb things, because really, everything creative is a sort of repurposing of your own experiences. Like, they say that in your dreams you can't dream anything, that you haven't, on some level, experience. It's just a weird sort of mishmash of them that sometimes distorts it and puts it out of context. But that's the only way we receive information. The more channels you have open to receiving things, to be open to things and observing things and taking anything as an idea and then building from it, I think the better off you are. So that just happens to be a particular song that I think has a couple of great lessons about creativity in it.

[00:17:12.510] - Wynne Leon

Incredible lessons. I think I've seen, whether it's an Instagram photo or something, of you writing longhand. Do you write longhand?

[00:17:23.860] - Jack Canfora

Sometimes I don't, for the most part. I'm sure I have. First of all, I have unbelievably bad handwriting. I have, like, the handwriting of a serial killer riding on a bike, basically, is the best way to describe my handwriting. It's really disturbing and ugly. So I try not to write longhand often. When I was younger, I did write out at Longhand a lot. I try to keep a journal, and I will do that in a book. And there's something very nice and tactile about that that I really like. However, because I write poorly and apparently I hold the pen wrong. And I do all sorts of things wrong, apparently, but it actually becomes hard for me to write after a while because my hand gets tired. And so I've very much adapted to writing on the computer. I honestly don't know what kind of writer I would be if the computer hadn't come along, because I'm a terrible typist. And when I'm writing, too, certainly anything, whether it's a blog post or a play, I am constantly rewriting. Like, someone will say, well, how many rewrites do you go through? And there's no way to answer that.

[00:18:30.950] - Jack Canfora

The short answer is probably hundreds, because as I'm moving ahead in a story or in a piece of an essay or whatever, and I keep on thinking about what to do next. Sometimes if I hit a bit of a, I wouldn't call it a wall, but I would call it, like a lull. That's natural. You're like, okay, well, I'm not sure exactly where to go next. Inevitably, I'll go back and I'll reread, and I'll reread, and I'll reread. And every time I reread, I'm like, well, that word doesn't work. Let me take that word out. And this word should be switched for this one, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So 100 million things. And so by the time I've, say, written a play, which could take six months, there's almost literally countless times I've gone back and I've switched things and I've switched them back, and then I've gotten rid, and then I've put them back, and then I've got taken them out. And then the actor says, oh, no, I think we should put that back in. So in other words, there's a million of these things. So if I had to type it out in a typewriter, it would be physically excruciating, because I cannot type to save my life.

[00:19:24.290] - Jack Canfora

And also, the form really affects how I approach it, because if I were typing or even writing out by longhand, I wouldn't have the luxury of constantly going back and revising and constantly going back and revising. So, for me, the cliché about writing is rewriting is very much true for me.

[00:19:42.170] - Vicki Atkinson

Are you doing some doodling and some annotating when you're doing that, Jack? Are you drawing, like, mind maps about things when you're trying to. I love your point about, how did you put that?

[00:19:56.190] - Jack Canfora

It's a stall, not a lull, not a wall.

[00:20:00.900] - Wynne Leon

Yeah, but do you draw pictures?

[00:20:03.810] - Jack Canfora  
No, I can't draw. I can't draw at all.

[00:20:07.030] - Vicki Atkinson  
Doodling?

[00:20:08.090] - Jack Canfora  
No, I'm not a doodler. I'm a dawdler, but I'm not a doodler. But I'm an inveterate dawdler. But, no, I don't doodle. You talked about maps and putting things out. A lot of writers swear by that. I don't. There are great writers and mediocre writers who map everything out ahead of time. And there are great writers and there are mediocre writers who don't, who sort of see where it takes them. An essay is a bit different when you're writing, obviously, a piece of prose. When you're writing something in fiction, it sounds almost detestably new agey and whatever. But I do find that if it's going well, you feel a little bit like a channel, and that the writers are sort of the characters rather sort of doing a lot of the writing for you. And I found early on that if you resist where the characters want to start, in other words, you start writing something, you're like, well, this isn't where I planned it was going to go. Inevitably, they're right and you're wrong, and you need to sort of follow what they're doing. I do not map these things out. I mean, I'll take two examples.

[00:21:14.700] - Jack Canfora  
Arthur Miller, an uncontestably brilliant playwright, would map everything out. He'd outline the whole thing before he'd start writing it. Tom Stoppard, another uncontestably brilliant writer, once said, well, if I knew how a play was going to end, why would I bother finishing? You know, you have great writers, two tremendous writers who are doing things in completely different ways. So I think it's a question of what kind of mind makes you most comfortable. And some people are comforted by order and by a sense of like, a roadmap. I know where I'm going. Other people are like, that's constricting. I'd rather just sort of see what happens and make it up on the fly. And that's not to say, and I'm more of the second part. But having said that, like I said, I keep on going back and rewriting 100 times. So it's a little bit of both. I try to be unbelievably indulgent of myself when I'm writing, and then I try and be incredibly, brutally harsh to myself when I'm editing. It takes that sort of dichotomy, I think, because if you're judging yourself while you're writing, unless it's really egregiously bad. You should just kind of just say, well, just go with it, and I'll deal with it later.

[00:22:21.880] - Jack Canfora  
But then you go away for a while, like a day or what have you, or even in a couple of hours, and you come back and then you're looking at it. Well, now, you better be really ruthless. Now, you better say to yourself, you're better than this, or you'd like to be better than this. They'll get rid of that.

[00:22:41.840] - Wynne Leon  
You've just given a great segue into one of my favorite phrases. First of all, you're brilliant, and I love your writing, but you have this way of putting together phrases that just stick with me. And I'm thinking of two. We were talking about the theater, and you were talking about a concentrated dose of emotion, and that is a phrase that stuck with me. It's been a year since we've had that conversation.

[00:23:07.110] - Jack Canfora  
Thank you. Yeah.

[00:23:08.190] - Wynne Leon  
And another one that sticks with me is calibrating sentences. And it seems like as you're talking about this writing and rewriting, that some of the thing that you're doing is very much so.

[00:23:25.800] - Jack Canfora  
That's the editing process, and that's the rewriting process. And when inspiration strikes you and you sort of ride that wave, nothing is better, but you can't wait for that wave because they're very rare, at least for me, at least a little world of my head. You have to just show up and start doing it. And the calibrating comes later. So calibrating might imply that ahead of time, you're mapping out what you want. And that might be for some people. For me, it's not, though. For me, it's putting it out there and

thinking, well, how do we clean this up? How do we make the, and I'm very much a rhythmic writer. Even in my essays, in my head, I'm hearing a certain rhythm of things. And so very much it's about calibrating. It's too many syllables for that joke to land. You want to stay ahead of the audience, obviously, when you're writing a joke as much as possible. And so therefore, the fewer syllables, the better. Although, again, that's not always true because it depends on the rhythm of the piece. So it's things like that. I mean, to me, that's the fun of it.

[00:24:23.670] - Jack Canfora

And I think that if you don't love doing that, love that part of it, then I think you're in the wrong game to a certain degree. And having said that, there are very few writers of any stripe, or artists of any stripe that I know of who don't have days where like, oh, God, I just want to not write right now. I think for me, a lot of writing involves not writing. I think a big part of my writing process is napping and saying, oh, what's on Facebook. Or the unfortunate thing is that I write on my computer, but it's also attached to all these distractions and I'm very easily distracted. And so there are days where and I sort of resign myself to say, out of every ten days of writing, let's say seven days will be fine and passable and I'll slog through it. It won't be anything inspired or great, but it'll be workman like and fine. One day will be like, wow, this is great. This is just going so easily. And you feel in that moment like, I'm the best writer ever. And then a day later you're like, nah, calm down.

[00:25:30.070] - Jack Canfora

And then in two of those days are probably nothing of meaning gets done. Nothing of meaning gets done. The only problem is I don't know which one of those days the inspiration is going to show up. So I have to show up every one of those ten days.

[00:25:41.550] - Wynne Leon

And that is the end of this first half of the conversation with Jack Canfora. We are so grateful that you showed up. Please return next week for more of the master class on writing and creativity with this award winning playwright.

[00:26:01.490] - Wynne Leon

Thank you for listening. Our music is composed for sharing the heart of the matter by the exquisitely talented duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration, please visit our site at [sharingtheheartofthematter.com](http://sharingtheheartofthematter.com).