

[00:00:08.090] - Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the matter podcast, where we celebrate the why and how of creativity. I'm Wynne 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 artists and authors that we split it into two episodes. The first episode that aired last week, we talked about writing practices Jack uses when in a lull, and also about creative attention. In this second episode, we delve into the balance of sentences. Jack, who trained as a Shakespearean actor, even recites a few lines of Hamlet for us. We talk about the responsibility of writers to their audience, whomever that may be, when they hit the publish button, and the confidence required to keep doing our best and putting things out there. Jack holds that there are no writing rules, but there are some guidelines. He shares some of his along with ideas for training as a writer. 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.

[00:01:46.760] - Wynne Leon

We know you'll love this episode. And now to continue our conversation with Jack Canfora, starting with the practice of showing up.

[00:02:19.440] - Jack Canfora

To me, a lot of writing involves not writing. I think a big part of my writing process is napping and saying, oh, it'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 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. 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.

[00:03:16.710] - Vicki Atkinson

I love that, because when you were talking just now, Jack, I wrote down two words. Well, actually, I wrote down kind of this dichotomy or this struggle. I love the idea of being inspired and the word emergent came to mind about just let it be, whether it's the characters or the pacing or, like you said, the cadence of sentences, not writing the same number of syllables, all that. But it's balancing that with the discipline, right. That, you know, you need to have it, but do you need to let it emerge and then be a disciplinarian about what you've written and kill the darlings or whatever, but you have to let it come out, be in the world before you can start to be hasty about what you do now.

[00:04:02.150] - Jack Canfora

Yeah. And this is, I guess, true in life, maybe, but I think a lot of, for me, as a writer, a lot of my strengths are, because they're my strengths are inherently my weaknesses. In other words, it's easy to become indulgent of these things. To me, maybe there are people with more natural talents. I'm sure there are many of them. So they can just maybe rely on that, just showing up and letting the stuff come out. I'm not good enough to just wait for the magic to happen. I think very few people are. I think you have to sort of build the discipline. And then I find, in my limited experience with being transported or a vessel of greatness, my very limited experience with that, I find that it doesn't happen unless you've shown up and unless you've done, put the discipline. And like Shakespeare, for example, and I can't imagine he wasn't smart enough to realize he was doing this at a certain point and kept doing it. I mean, Shakespeare is obviously unparalleled as a writing genius. I always say a couple things. I always say that's comforting to know that even he could write something like Timon of Athens, which is not a great play.

[00:05:02.780] - Jack Canfora

So I always comfort myself with that. But if you notice a lot of his great, memorable pieces of writing, he balances his sentences better than anyone else I've ever read. So literally, it's almost like his

sentences are like a scale, and he's weighing things up.

[00:05:19.470] - Wynne Leon
Do you have an example?

[00:05:21.150] - Jack Canfora
I have a ton of examples and have all flown in my head, but I promise I'll come up with one. But Hamlet has a ton of them, where he's saying, okay, the very last line of his first soliloquy, where he's complaining about how awful life is, and he's just in deep mourning. It starts with this two. Two solid flesh would melt thought and resolve itself into ado. But he goes on, he talks about how horrible things are, and then he hears people coming and

[00:05:48.260] - Jack Canfora
Then his last line is, but break my heart, for I must hold my tongue. That's the balance I'm talking about. Break my heart, hold my tongue. It's verb and noun, verb and noun. Usually that he does, and I don't think he necessarily invented it, but he certainly perfected it. And that was a. Well, he was not afraid to dip into constantly, because it works. It works very well. And so me being conscious of that in terms of calibrating sentences, for example, is never going to make me Shakespeare, but it's going to make me a little bit better than I would have.

[00:06:24.610] - Wynne Leon
Yeah.

[00:06:26.610] - Vicki Atkinson
Everything is rhythm. Everything is rhythm. Yeah. Oh, my gosh. Love that.

[00:06:33.170] - Wynne Leon
We had a question that you wanted to run by Jack about.

[00:06:37.110] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah, well, Jack, we love talking with you. And I have learned from things that you've written and from talking with Wynn that your repository of info about the Beatles is sort of unmatched. The things that, you know, is

[00:06:53.860] - Jack Canfora
Unhealthy I think, is the word.

[00:06:54.730] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah, well, we love it. And I can't help but ask, because it was all over the news, I think. February 2, the rerelease, 50th anniversary of band on the run, was released. And Paul McCartney was quoted in several different places about this more stripped down version of the album. And this notion, whether it's true or not, the word underdubbing was attributed to, you know, Wynn and I were talking about it. We're like, well, isn't that just really know, the stripped down, the acoustic? It's not something that's unique to him. But when you think about know, does it apply to just music? Or is that what Wyn and I are wondering about, is, like, underdubbing your life a thing?

[00:07:44.010] - Jack Canfora
Well, I mean, I think it is. I think a lot of people talk about wanting to live their lives in more sort of stripped. And a couple of years ago, Marie Kondo was on Netflix, and the thing she said is, throw out that everything that doesn't spark joy, which I thought was a little reductive, because that would leave me sort of naked in my apartment with no furniture.

[00:08:07.730] - Vicki Atkinson
Just a few friends. You'd have friends.

[00:08:09.560] - Jack Canfora
But that's good to know, though, that they may keep a distance if I'm unclothed, but, yeah, I think that's

true. And certainly, I think it's true in art, right? I mean, I think one of the great examples of that to me, and a great line about that is by Vincent van Gogh, who, in his letters, there's a book of his called Dear Theo, which is basically just the published letters of Van Gogh to his brother. And it's a fascinating and kind of heartbreaking read, but at one point he's despairing over sort of what he perceives to be his lack of ability and his lack of things to do right. And he just sort of says in despair to his, writes in despair to his brother how hard it is to be simple. And it really is true, I think, in life in general. There's also, I think it's attributed to. I'm going to reel off some names here, which makes me sound really erudite, but really, I just surf the net a lot. I think it was Pascal who said, my God, there's never been a more pretentious sentence in the world than the one that starts off with a clause.

[00:09:07.150] - Jack Canfora
I believe it was Pascal.

[00:09:09.350] - Wynne Leon
Wait a minute, I'm going to take issue with that because Pascal was my dad's favorite, so you could say that sentence anytime.

[00:09:17.830] - Jack Canfora
I know, but I promise you, your dad didn't start off with saying, I believe it was Pascal who said he would have found a more down to earth way of. Pompous way of putting it. But Pascal once, I think, apparently he wrote a very long letter and at the end, maybe it's not Pascal, but I think it was him who writes at the end. I'm sorry for how long this letter was, but I didn't have time to write a short one, which is. I mean, I get it. I totally get it. As someone who is a chronic overwriter. Another. I'm just going to hit the trifecta of name dropping here. Charles Bukowski, a problematic guy, but a great writer. I think he would say that an intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way, an artist says a hard thing in a simple way, and that's really what you're going for. You really want to get to the heart of things. And I think there are some forms and some books and some songs and some whatever, where little filigree, little extra thing is wonderful and needed, and it speaks to the artist's strengths and gifts.

[00:10:17.470] - Jack Canfora
For example, Oscar Wilde. You wouldn't want Oscar Wilde to cut down on the stuff. You wouldn't want F. Scott Fitzgerald to strip. Hemingway said, cut. Got me? Hemingway said that to write a good story, you need to write the story, then take away all the good lines. And if you have that and if you can do that and the story still works, then you have a story. But would you want Fitzgerald to take away all the great lines from the great Gatsby? No, you wouldn't. That would miss the point of the writing entirely.

[00:10:44.230] - Wynne Leon
Super simple question, but then if the story still works, can you put all the great lines back in?

[00:10:49.350] - Jack Canfora
Hemingway would say no. Hemingway would say no. That you don't. I mean, but Hemingway, let's face it, he was probably drunk when he said it, and being very problematic in other ways. So we can only take it with a grain of salt. But I think the point is a great point. I think it's a great aspirational guideline, is to get to the. And again, and I'm quoting everyone else, which is usually the son of someone who has no ideas of his own, but I think Lenin once told David Bowie, gave him lyric writing advice, and he says, say what you mean. Keep it simple and make it what? And that's great truth. However, a lot of Lenin's best lyrics are very poetic and very complex. You wouldn't want Dylan to keep it simple and make it rhyme. So these are guidelines to me. It's great training as a writer.

[00:11:43.450] - Vicki Atkinson
While you're on your way to doing that training, you're also trying to figure out what your voice sounds like as a writer. And what you said. This has to be a jack word, the use of the word filigree to the unnecessary. I love that. But while you're trying to find your voice, sometimes the filigree feels safe. Right. It comforts us.

[00:12:04.190] - Jack Canfora

Yes, absolutely. And I guess the phrase that people use to describe this, like purple writing, like purple prose. Right. And purple is a nice color sometimes. Right. And so I think it depends on the kind of writer you are. And I was talking earlier about, I think, your strengths becoming your weaknesses. If a writer finds that she can turn a phrase really well, then that's great. And she'd be foolish to work against that. But she always has to be aware of the fact that maybe I'm leaning on this, using it as a crutch of it. Maybe it becomes a trick rather than something, than a technique. And that's like a very subtle difference. Like I was saying earlier, I think Shakespeare was probably aware at some point that, oh, yeah, I tend to do this a lot in my sentences. But I think he kept doing it, not because he was lazy, but because it was the best thing for the moment. But the funny thing is when I'm writing, and I've been very lucky that I've had a lot of really talented actors who've stuck it out through several of my.

[00:13:06.060] - Vicki Atkinson
Can I name drop?

[00:13:06.920] - Jack Canfora
Sure, please.

[00:13:07.620] - Vicki Atkinson
Marcia Mason. Jill Eichenberry. They're like, iconic, amazing.

[00:13:13.940] - Jack Canfora
Oh, my God. They're really great, and it's an amazing thrill to work with them. And actually, Jill is taking part in this new thing that we're recording now, and she's terrific, to say the least. But they will say to me, oh, you do this a lot. And I will have had no idea that I was doing that. And then when they say that to me, I'm like, oh, yeah, that's true. Someone said, oh, I think in your plays, these are the themes you write about. And I was like, oh, yeah, I guess you're right. And I never sit down, ever sit down saying why I want to explore a theme. Because that to me is incredibly intellectual and sort of dry and pompous. Right. Because I don't ever think that when I'm writing something, I have something to teach you. And I think there are writers who come at it from that perspective. I don't think I have anything to teach anyone. I can barely use my microwave and so I laughing. But that's true. What I come from a perspective usually is, here's something that's puzzling me, or here's something that I'm trying to work through.

[00:14:19.390] - Jack Canfora
Any suggestions are welcome. So I usually start off when I start writing a play or whatever, it's usually with some sort of vague question. It's a situation that I don't think I would know how to respond to, or I don't know what the answer is. And I'm very suspicious of writers who come at you with saying, I'm going to talk to you about something and I want you to listen. All writing is that really. I mean, all of it's kind of an act of narcissism. To be a playwright is eventually you're hoping that you'll get to have people memorize things you wrote, and then a lot of people will come down, pay money for the privilege, sit down and shut up and listen to you for 2 hours. So there is a certain sort of narcissism, if you look at it that way. But that's not how I really think about it, ever.

[00:15:01.770] - Vicki Atkinson
Isn't it the difference between the human condition and writing because you bear witness to it versus wanting to preach and like, you can't do both, right?

[00:15:12.190] - Jack Canfora
Well, hopefully not right. And there are a few writers who are pretty good at being a little bit who can get away with it. Like Miller is a good one who actually clearly had morals, like a moral to tell and he could do it, but it's very hard to do. And also, I'm just as confused as everyone. So I don't come from a place where I think, oh, I figured this out to sort of borrow from the Tom Snopper quote earlier. If I'd figured it out, why would I bother writing about it? I mean, I'm writing in order to kind of figure it out and to tell, in simple terms, to tell a story. I think the minute you get, and that's in terms of fiction or playwriting, I think your primary obligation is, first of all, you have no obligations if you're writing it for yourself, but the minute you hit send, it's done in front of an audience the minute you ask other people

to read it. I think you have a real obligation to be entertaining in whatever form that might take. And that doesn't mean I'm not trying to be entertaining in a flippant way.

[00:16:06.110] - Jack Canfora

I mean, to me, King Lear is incredibly entertaining, but it's not flippant. It has to be engaging. It has to make people want to read it and watch it. And I certainly don't have the sort of ammunition where I can present something as an idea or a theory I want to walk you through and be engaging in any way. To me, I guess my confusion is one of my great attributes as a writer. I'm not really sure. Inevitably, everything I'm writing, I'm not sure what the answer to this is.

[00:16:44.250] - Vicki Atkinson

Confusion and humility, maybe.

[00:16:46.270] - Jack Canfora

Yeah, humility, occasional humiliation. And yes, I think that. But I mean, I say all this and I do believe all of it. But on the other hand, if I didn't have some confidence in what I'm doing, I wouldn't have shared anything, right? So there is a dichotomy going on here because I'm not being falsely modest. I do genuinely feel that way. On the other hand, I'm still sending people things out for people to read. So you have to have some confidence. We were talking before the podcast started, a little bit about the notion of just jumping in and doing it rather than waiting till you're ready. And so I think that's true in writing and in art, too, that in creativity, that if you wait to get it perfect, you're never going to do it, you'll never launch. You just have to sort of, at a certain point, having spent a lot of time in this podcast, talking about the importance of working and refining and editing and doing all that, I think you do need to do that. But there needs to be a certain point where you sort of quote frozen, let it go.

[00:17:50.690] - Jack Canfora

I think you have to do that. I'm all over the map with these references today. Well, someone else once said that a play or great, I think, can translate to any great work of art. Art is never finished. It's abandoned. There's a certain point where you just sort of think, I have to move on because I could spend the rest of my life trying to get this monolog or this paragraph absolutely right. And if I look at it a thousand times, I'll find 1000 things to correct. And so it requires a certain amount of confidence to just put yourself out there, but a confidence that you can think you can get it close to right, but a certain amount of humility. You just say, I think this is as good as I'm going to get it for now. And to let it go. Right. I mean, you start everything out not consciously, but on some level, you start out every creative idea out by saying, this is brilliant, this is amazing. And then you learn that, oh, well, okay, it's maybe not everything. Know, I'm not, you know, or, you know, William Faulkner or Tony Morrison, but okay, I can live with that.

[00:19:04.310] - Jack Canfora

I'm just going to do it as best. I'm so just quoting everyone endlessly. There's a great thing by Beckett where he talks about always try, always fail, try again, fail again, fail better. And I guess that would be my sort of mantra, I guess, for writing is, yeah, you're not going to be Shakespeare, kid. You're just not. But try your best. You're going to fail better, but fail better.

[00:19:27.230] - Wynne Leon

And that gets to that whole being seen thing, because you don't need to be Faulkner or Beckon or anybody else. You just need to show up and do the best job of being you.

[00:19:39.390] - Jack Canfora

Yeah, right. And that's applicable to whatever field you're. I mean, very few people are going to be the absolute greatest person in any field that they choose to be. And a lot of that is random and a lot of that is luck and timing. You can just do the best thing that you can do. I think that's your primary obligation. In addition to sort of being engaging as a writer or creator of some sort, you also have to make sure that when you send it out that, yeah, I think that's the best. I really gave it my all, and if people don't like it, obviously it's going to be disappointing for me, but I will never have to say I should have worked harder.

[00:20:18.250] - Wynne Leon
Yeah.

[00:20:18.590] - Vicki Atkinson
And this was like the ultimate invulnerability, being able to release it. I created it, but I'm going to do a Frozen thing and let it go.

[00:20:27.460] - Jack Canfora
Right. Because if you stop to think about it, talk about frozen, you will freeze up if you start thinking about, oh, my God, plays are coming, audience, people are going to see this. Newspapers occasionally will write reviews of it and they can really not like it. And inevitably some people aren't going to like it. But if you stop to think about that, oh, my God, you'll never leave the house.

[00:20:50.730] - Vicki Atkinson
But I think people get really hung up on worthiness, right? Especially you're so well read and everything you quote, we love it. We eat it all up. So stop beating yourself up about that. We love all of it because we learn when we talk to you. But I think that idea that what people have to offer creatively saying it has worth is a huge hurdle to clear because everything has already been said. Everything has been said. But how would you say it? So you have to kind of talk yourself up to get to that point where you release it from yourself. But that's not easy.

[00:21:26.130] - Jack Canfora
No, it's not. And I completely agree. That is essential in a way. You can go one of two ways. When you figure out that it's all been done, it's all been done and probably done better than you're going to do it. And you can go one of two ways. You can be crushed by that or you can say, that is so freeing, it's not going to be as good as Shakespeare. Okay? That's true of almost everyone. I'm going to still do it anyway. Whatever these things are being said, whatever these experiences are being shared, whatever is engaging about whatever you're doing, we do need constantly new stuff to be out there. And will it stand the test of time? Well, who knows? That's almost not the point. In a way. Again, it's a constant dichotomy. Right. And I think it's true of a lot of things in life where you're aiming really high, as high as you can, you're aiming for the greats, but you also kind of know and are okay with the fact that I'm not going to hit it, I'm not going to get there, but I'm going to do the best I can along the way.

[00:22:31.530] - Jack Canfora
And what I have to say doesn't have worth because I'm this remarkable person, but it has some worth because I'm a human being and I've put a lot of thought into this and devoted a lot of craft into this. And maybe it doesn't have worth, but maybe it does. And so we'll find out. It's amazing because if you're doing it right, this incredibly intensely personal, private thing that you're making public, but you then have to then do your best anyway to be not indifferent, but sort of just say, whatever happens, happens. What other people think of it, hopefully they'll love it. But the important thing is I did my best.

[00:23:08.930] - Vicki Atkinson
Stay in the game and stay in the game just because I think your words fail better. I forget who you attributed that to. But I mean, one, it's okay, I still like filigree. Filigree is the best. But that idea that you have to stay in the game, it may not go well, but keep playing, right?

[00:23:29.280] - Jack Canfora
Yeah. Another thing, I do think art is kind of a war of attrition a lot of the time, and you just have to, just have to keep moving forward and take your lumps and then get up and keep moving forward. Everyone's going to struggle and suffer. And I think the success, whatever you label to be success, and that's a very problematic word, whatever you label that, it's best measured in inches, not miles. So you have to find these successes, so called, wherever you find them. And it can be simply in that you think you've done your best, you think you've done something that is reasonably worthwhile, that someone you admire likes it, and that may be all you get. On the one hand is of course you're thinking, well, I'd like more, but that has to be enough. And that's actually a lot. It's really a heck of a lot.

[00:24:29.200] - Wynne Leon

It is a heck of a lot.

[00:24:30.990] - Jack Canfora
Sorry for the language there, but yeah.

[00:24:32.850] - Vicki Atkinson
It is heck of a lot. You shameful boy, you.

[00:24:36.640] - Jack Canfora
I know, it's a good thing I'm not quoting David Mamet.

[00:24:41.730] - Vicki Atkinson
Clean it up.

[00:24:42.600] - Jack Canfora
Clean it up.

[00:24:43.680] - Wynne Leon
So we've kind of come full circle here in this podcast, talking about all the things that creativity has meant to you and the process of doing it, and then talking about what creativity is in this world and can we bring it back and just ask you one more question?

[00:25:05.110] - Jack Canfora
I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people that at some point don't have them saying, can we just bring it back?

[00:25:12.170] - Vicki Atkinson
No, I want to bring this full circle.

[00:25:13.970] - Jack Canfora
Sure.

[00:25:14.720] - Wynne Leon
What has being creative meant to you and your self expression?

[00:25:19.790] - Jack Canfora
Oh, I think it's the sum total of my self expression, for better or for worse. I think it is. And it's also on a personal level, it's allowed me to meet people and work with people whom I consider extraordinary human beings that I am lucky to call collaborators. And friends. And it's one of these things where you sort of wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy, but you wouldn't trade it for the world at the same time. And it's hard for me to have any sense of myself outside of the idea of, well, me being a writer and me being sort of engaged in that sense. And so I think it's ultimately inseparable. And I think we sort of talked about that earlier, but it's more of a state of mind. You have to sort of be open and attuned to things. If that results directly in creativity in terms of a piece of work or just sort of an better understanding of yourself in the world, to me, they're inseparable.

[00:26:26.620] - Wynne Leon
Yeah. As you said, it's hard to teach, but important to try.

[00:26:31.450] - Jack Canfora
Yeah. Yes. Did I say that? You did.

[00:26:34.570] - Wynne Leon
Isn't it brilliant?

[00:26:35.970] - Jack Canfora
Oh, God. Yeah. I have to have been quoting someone.

[00:26:39.140] - Wynne Leon

Absolutely not. We're going to quote you because we Love talking to you. Jack, you mentioned another project, so can you tell us all the places that we can find you?

[00:26:49.770] - Jack Canfora

Oh, well, you can find me on Instagram at Jack Canfora on X or Twitter, whatever the heck it's being called now at Jack Canfora. And also, I have a Facebook page and you can check out my website, which is jackcanforawriter.com, for any info about anything you'd like to see.

[00:27:08.780] - Wynne Leon

That's great. It's so fun to talk to you. We just absolutely adore you and these conversations.

[00:27:15.900] - Jack Canfora

Shucks. This is wonderful. Thank you so much. I really had a great time.

[00:27:19.270] - Vicki Atkinson

Thank you.

[00:27:26.050] - Wynne Leon

Thank you for listening. Our music is composed for Sharing the Heart of the Matter by the exquisitely talented and duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration, please visit our site at sharingtheheartofthematter.com.