

Defining Creativity S1E13: Dev Meenagh transcript

Debbi: Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining me for this episode of *Defining Creativity*, a podcast that explores where and how creativity is found. I'm your host, Debbi Ponella, a creativity researcher, cultivator, and devotee. On today's episode, we're joined by...

Dev: Hello, I am Dev Meenagh. I primarily consider myself to be an actor, but I also write. I've done stand-up comedy. I've done improv. And basically anything that involves some kind of free thinking, I've dabbled in.

Debbi: Well, Dev, thank you for being here with me today. I really appreciate it. I'm excited to hear about the many ways that you embrace and use your creativity. So, let's just jump right in and just give me an idea. On a normal day or with one of your many areas, how do you use creativity?

Dev: I feel like I use creativity in some way every day. And one of the things that makes it so creative is that not every day necessarily has a particularly creative task at hand, but I find a way to do it kind of in a different way or just do something differently with it. If I get to act, then that's always a great day. And that's obviously kind of my main home base. And then I write a lot. Sometimes it's a full-length script that I'm working on. I've got a couple of long works that are in development. Some of them I plan to finish next month.

Some I think, okay, in a few years, I'm going to really like finish that one, or some will be up there as my magnum opus. And then I like to do a lot of crafts. I like to paint. I like to make little figurines out of clay, anything like that. So, it really is anything that I can do, I guess, to express myself. I find that a lot of the things I do kind of start from almost a contrarian place.

And I know I'm jumping ahead a little to how I would define creativity, but that's kind of the gist of it for me is just looking at something that has explicit directions to go right and going left. And I think some of that comes from just, I'm an extreme right-brained creature. I am very outside-of-the-box thinking. It's not a lot of lateral or logical thinking. It's very, a little bit scattered and all over the place.

One thing that I've kind of noticed that I'm very good at because of that, which I've done with you before, is escape rooms or any kind of a treasure hunt type things. I do a lot of those. I just did an escape room yesterday. And my mind really kind of latches onto those things where you have to think outside the box and just think of another way to do something. And those kinds of things just sort of find me, really.

Debbi: And that's fantastic. As far as the other side of that, you even mentioned some of your writing, right? You have the long term, you have the short term. So, you're doing all this divergent thinking, you're just have all these ideas. How do you get them to come together? How do you focus them and do the convergent part of it?

Dev: [3:21] Not easily, for sure. I think I'm always looking for something to make or do or turn into something else. And because of that, I get distracted a lot with one thing and say, Oh, but what about this thing? Or why don't I do this next? And when I do have to focus, I work really well with deadlines. And I work really well collaborating with other people because anything that I'm making just because I think it would be a good idea when there's no set goal with it or timeline or any exact sort of end goal, that can be very difficult for me.

But when I'm working with other people, I don't want to let my partner down, or I know that they're going to bring this part, so I have to bring my part. So, I work really well with collaboration and, and some sort of structure, because my process doesn't involve a lot of structure. So, any kind of outside structure, I really respond to. So say that for acting, if I have an audition, then that's beyond me, I have timelines, I have rules, I have instructions, and I can work within those constraints, but I'm not very good at giving myself those constraints.

Debbi: So yeah, boundaries can be really good, right? And I love the way that you talk about making connections, because that's what creativity is— the things expected, the things that aren't expected, and making new connections. As far as the collaboration, working with people, how do you approach that? Talk to me about collaborating with people, trying to merge your process and your perspective with theirs.

Dev: It can be tricky because a lot of times you might meet someone that is a friend, someone you respect or enjoy their work. And that doesn't mean that your processes or your ideas are going to really blend together very well. I've definitely worked on projects with friends. I've filmed a couple of scenes with different friends and sometimes it just doesn't go the way you think it will go. And part of that is sometimes you have to really be clear about everyone's roles.

And that can be hard because when you are thinking or putting something together, your mind goes into a lot of places. You want to sort of have creative control in everything. I've been on sets as an actor where my job is just to act, but they're trying to figure something out with blocking or a prop that I have such a good idea for, but that's not my place to say. And I know that I kind of have to hold back unless they sort of open the floor to that.

When it comes to writing specifically, I usually look for people when we're kind of talking about ideas and we sort of are thinking the same way or at least thinking in the same volume because sometimes I'll work on something where I'm thinking very big and someone else is thinking very small or maybe just more practical even. And I think that you just have to have the same ultimate vision.

If you're working on anything, it has to be a combination of practical, possible logistics, but at least your ideas and like, the feeling and the emotion of it has to at least be in line. And it really is just a matter of trial and error as well. I have some of my best friends in the world that I would never work with in a professional capacity. And then I have some people that we're not even that close, but I could bang out a script with them.

I got stuck in an airport last week for about 16 hours overnight. And I made friends with someone who writes plays. And we were talking about some of the things I've written, some of the things he's written. And we both had some weird out of the box ideas that just kind of went hand in hand together where we were saying we should write something. And I barely know this guy, but just listening to the ideas he's come up with, you can tell that there's just some sort of a common thread or common point of view.

Debbi: I love that. And the fact that you're so open to just finding someone who has some commonalities in an airport. So as far as the creativity and how you look at life and look at people in relationships, when you're acting or some of the capacities you've already mentioned, a lot of it's dictated, but you're finding your own voice. How does that go beyond like acting into your interacting with people, seeing their perspectives, yet finding your own voice and having that be important?

Dev: [7:45] A lot of it kind of comes from a, I think a place of curiosity. I think that I kind of approach everything with this strong sense of wanting to know more, wanting to go deeper. So when people are doing things, even if it's the most ridiculous, strangest thing, instead of just having a big reaction, sometimes I see that and I'm just curious about what could possibly have happened to cause that, or where could they possibly be getting that reaction from?

And that ties into things like psychology. It ties into empathy. It's all these little kind of feelings that I've always had a sense for. And curiosity is a really big part of creativity because creativity is all about an output. And the input of that has to be a point of view, a psychological assessment, an idea, a feeling. There's so much that you have to put into that. So in my day-to-day life, I'm just very curious. I'm very curious. I'm very interested.

And not just in things that would be described as typically interesting, but in the mundane, in things that are very quiet and things that are very small that just catch your attention because you think there's always more there. There's always more going on. And not just with people, but things, like something like just staring at a cloud that looks a little bit different than all the other clouds. You know, you can take things in from anything. So just having a very open mind and open eyes, I feel like I absorb things like a sponge sometimes, which also, of course, has its pitfalls.

Debbi: Right, exactly. But no, I do think that you're able to, like you're saying, take in more. You see the world more broadly. You see more of it, that you can appreciate those quiet things and maybe those things that are overlooked by someone else. Then going the other way, do you find that you use those things then in your creative output?

Dev: [9:41] Absolutely, because that's what fuels it. Coming up with an idea, coming up with inspiration, coming up with a result, it doesn't just come out of nowhere. In a way, people think, oh well creativity, you just kind of pull it out of thin air, but you use everything you have, and you use your point of view, and your frame of reference, and all of that is so necessary.

And that's why everything that you see that's creative, it's different depending on who's looking at it, depending on who made it, depending on who helps with it, all those things, they just creates this one final result. And it's not always about the result, but what's behind it, what it stands for. You know, we talk about art in museums sometimes, especially modern art you'll see, and it might not be technically the most difficult in terms of artwork, but sometimes you'll hear about what was going on, or where this was made, or what was happening in the painter's life, and it just creates this context for it. You know, it's all, it's complicated.

It's funny because the more I say it, the more it starts to get down into this spiral of just like, it's a lot of complicated things that all come together, and it's a little bit hard to nail down, which I think is kind of the point of this conversation. But you know, yes, I think that everything that comes in helps put something out, and I think that everything I've ever created, worked on, written, performed, everything has little, little notes of things that I've done. And I can tell you certain things where it's like, oh this was inspired by this, or this reminded me of this, or you know, this line made me think of my grandmother. All these sort of inspirations from everywhere.

Debbi: Yes, kind of the point of the podcast is to nail it down, but I think even more the point is you can't nail it down, because it's different for everyone, because everybody brings something different to their moment.

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: [11:32] Just out of curiosity, you're talking about modern art or any kind of art, are you one of those who want to know the context? Do you dig deeper?

Dev: It depends. I do like to interpret things, and if I can find out the artist's interpretation. I don't really like when I hear an artist say, whether a writer or someone with a poem, or you know, the ending of a movie or a play, where they say, oh it's up to the audience to decide. I don't like that, because I know that that person has their idea of what happened, and I like to know what it is.

Even if it's just, you know, they say it after the fact, I do like to know what was their intention or what was the actor's intention, because everyone goes into it with an idea. For example, I don't know if you've seen Hamilton, but at the end there's that moment where Eliza gasps at the very end, and if you look up what that means, Lin-Manuel Miranda says it means something different to everyone, but I know he knows what it means to him, and that's what I'm curious about.

It's like I might have an idea of it, but it's mine to sort of feel a certain way about, but the actual product, it's not mine to decide what it means, so I like to see it and take it as I will, but also know what the writer intended, because whatever the writer intended, that's going to inform other things, you know? That's gonna inform a larger bit of the work, so I'm just not a fan when they say, oh it's up to you, or it's supposed to be vague. I guess when it comes to art, I also just don't like vague. I like very sharply defined, I like very clear-cut, very here's the idea, this is what this is.

Debbi: [13:22] Huh. Well, so let's flip that on its head, and as the writer, do you write with an intention and you want your reader to understand a specific thing, or how do you want them to engage with your work?

Dev: I think I want to create sort of an atmosphere when I write, so it's the feelings, and it's sort of the cast of characters. I want to feel like you know who I'm talking about. Again, art is always going to affect people differently, and I'm very open to anything I do having a different effect or a different result, especially when writing, but the actual what is happening, I like to sort of keep clean, because I think it's hard to form an opinion on something if you don't have a clear-cut view of what's happening.

I think that it's the person receiving the art that is supposed to sort of have an interpretation of what happens, so if there's not like a base foundation for me to build my interpretation off of, that's I guess where I'm getting out with that.

Debbi: [14:26] I was also thinking in the way that as an actor, if you've written a play, so this is your creative work, and then somebody is putting it on its feet, and you're not the actor, and you're looking at it, where is that fine line that they get to have their creative voice as this is their creative expression? But in a way, it is collaboration, like back to what you were talking about, as far as the final product. So, it's this process of a collaboration of your words coming out of their mouth and their actions. So that would be interesting, just reflecting on that. And I know you've been on both sides, because you've been the actor, too.

Dev: Yes. It's very tricky. It's very, very tricky. And most of the writing I've done has been more personal creative writing, or I have had things I've written put up on their feet by other actors I know and friends and performed. It's tricky for me, because a lot of the stuff I write is intended to be performed by me, because I'm not a hugely successful actor. So, it's important to me, if someone's going to get an opportunity from my writing, it really needs to be me, at least at this stage.

But I do need to improve upon that going further, especially one of my goals in the next year or two is to sort of put my writing out a little more professionally. It's very tricky, because I do write with a very clear, strong intention for how it's going to be performed. I think that I'm open to interpretation. It doesn't have to be said exactly how I would say it or anything, but there does have to be a sort of creative understanding of the character, because you can interpret things different ways.

But if you're missing something that I consider to be such an important part, for example, one thing that I filmed with some friends once, the character is supposed to be very sad and very angry. So, if it's being played and we're missing that sadness or that anger, that's going to be tricky for me. Even if the interpretation they're doing might be realistic, it's tricky for me if it's missing something that I consider to be such an integral part of the character or the piece.

But at the same time, it also, I guess, depends on if I think it's better, if I think that what they're doing with it makes it better. And I know as an actor, there have been times where I've been allowed to improv or add my own touch or say, hey, what if she does this instead? I did a short film once where there was a girl who was supposed to be meeting her favorite band. It was set in the 60s. It was a very cool little short called *The Tip and Grinds*.

I was supposed to be this obsessed teenage fangirl. And they have a scene where someone's telling her to leave and she just leaves. And I mentioned, hey, do you think maybe she would fight a little harder to stay? And they liked that. They thought that made sense, especially for that was a character that was a bit of a side character. So when it's a smaller character like that, that's not the one that maybe has the most attention from the creative team. So that's where it's my job to sort of fill in those blanks or add in those moments. It's a process. It's a collaboration.

And it all really just depends on your comfort level, how you're feeling about the result. Because again, being creative, it's the process that's important to the creator, but it's the result that matters to everyone else. And sometimes you have to remember that sometimes there might be an easier way to do something or there might be a detail that you think would be cool to include, but it doesn't really affect that final product.

And you have to know when to kill your darlings, as they say, which basically means when you have to cut something in a creative process that you really like and think is really special or really cool or something that means a lot to you, but you need to cut it for the greater good of the piece, which can be hard.

Debbi: Right. And I think part of the whole picture there is the flexibility and the understanding. And if you understand how valuable the process is, then you've grown, you've had that experience. It's part of who you are at this point. And so even going through that artistic process is developing new things and who knows what will show up, right?

Dev: [19:00] Yeah. And it's, it's also tough because when it comes to that artistic process, it doesn't always just flow out of you. Part of what's so hard about being an artist is that if you want to be an artist in a more professional or real capacity in the world, the business side of things contradicts the creative side so strongly. I've always said I love being an actor, I hate being in the acting business though, because having to sort of build a brand and market myself and pitch myself is in such competition with the side of acting that I like, which is that sort of emotional and passionate side. And that can be tough.

Or when it comes to writing, in my mind, it was always, oh, well, I have fun writing. It just kind of comes to me. But if you actually want to finish a piece, you're going to have to sit down and write even when it's not coming to you. You're going to have to edit when you don't want to. You're going to have to give yourself that structure that seems like it's in competition with that creative side of things.

So it's tough. It's definitely tough. And everyone, everyone knows that feeling of just today it's not happening. And that's why I do think working with other people or getting involved in anything that will give you more of a deadline, like whether it's signing up for a competition or some sort of pitching to someone, just because you can always just keep pushing it back if it's just for you. But when you you're forced to give it that little bit of structure, sometimes that's when things really get done. And that creative side of you just comes out in the result.

Debbi: [20:33] You had mentioned stand-up is one of the things you do. How does the approach to stand-up differ than some of the other types of creative expression that you're talking about?

Dev: It's very different. And I will clarify, like I very lightly dabble in stand-up because it's tough. I think of myself as being a funny person. And I know I've written things that are funny or land. But stand-up, it's not just about being funny. And sometimes it's almost impossible to put your finger on why something works or doesn't work. There were a couple of jokes I had in like a five-minute routine that I was doing at some open mics. And one night, everyone laughed. The next night, no one laughed.

And there's absolutely no knowing why. Is it the way I'm saying it? Is it the actual joke? It's so hard to figure out why something works or doesn't work. The only thing I can be sure of is that if you get a laugh every time, you know, that joke's working. And sometimes the crowd just doesn't want to laugh. In the comedy scene, especially in New York, the open mics, the audience is other people that are there to do the open mic. And it gets a little competitive. And sometimes it feels like, oh, well, people don't want to laugh at anyone else because they want to get the most laughs.

So that process is tough because you sit down and you think, OK, what do I think is funny? But the way that you would say it's funny for stand-up is so particular. It's different than if you were writing a script. It's different than if you're even just writing a tweet or something. The sort of literacy to stand-up comedy is something that I don't think I've cracked correctly. But I usually start with a combination of things that have happened to me lately that are funny.

And then the other half of my list is things that have just happened to me that aren't necessarily funny. And then I take the things that are already funny and think, um, is there an even funnier twist I can put on it? And then the things that are normal and what is funny in that normalcy. When you think about your favorite stand-up comedians, it's sort of a combination. Sometimes they're just telling a story that would be funny, like coming from anyone, but they make it even funnier with how they present it or what they point out about it.

And then there are things that are just so mundane, like they went to the grocery store and they got their groceries, but they find humor in it. So, I definitely do not have that code completely cracked, but it's a challenge and it's scary because I'm also a creature of validation. And when you get up and do a stand-up set, when you bomb, you bomb. And again, you can't tell, do they just not like me? Do they not like the jokes? Did I say them too fast? Did I say them without enough energy? It's really hard to sort of nail that down.

Debbi: [23:32] Well, and there's so much ambiguity involved and you have to be able to sit there and live in it and be okay with it. And you were saying it's scary. Just to get up there, you've got to make yourself vulnerable. You can't do it without being vulnerable, but also then you're exposing yourself and you're making it something that you're sharing that's a part of yourself. So how do you deal with that? I hate to even say rejection because it isn't.

Dev: It is in a way, though. It is.

Debbi: Yeah.

Dev: Well, compared to acting, when I'm rejected as an actor, I've been doing that long enough to know that even though sometimes I really want it and it's disappointing, I don't take it personally. I've heard stories of people getting turned down for a role because they look like the director's ex-wife, you know, or because the lead guy is really short so they need someone even shorter. There's so many factors that go into rejection, in acting.

And then in writing, you know, when you get rejected it's such a saturated business and, you know, maybe your email didn't even get seen, maybe your script didn't even get read. So, it's pretty easy not to take that personally. But stand-up it's you and it's things that you think are funny, so that rejection is a lot harder. And that's something where I have to think of it a little bit more, tapping into the left-brain side of things, where it's like: well, it's not that they didn't think I was funny, they just they just didn't get it tonight. I have to sort of frame it like that. And it's so weird because sometimes there will be a joke that I'll tell several nights in a row, and no one laughs.

But then I'll tell my friends about it and I'll say, oh well, you know there was this joke and it was such a dumb joke it never landed where I said this and then I said this and everyone will laugh and for some reason, when I'm presenting it as a bad joke that no one thinks is funny, it gets way more laughs than when I'm just saying, hey, you're supposed to think this is funny. And some of that is also just the psychology of you know, if you go to a famous stand-up comedian show, you're expecting them to be funny. It's like you're assuming it will be funny, so everyone just kind of laughs.

But when you're going to an open mic you're assuming this might not be funny and it's harder to change that. I guess it just comes down to not taking it personally either, because open mics are just sort of a weird place to gauge things. I also think to myself, okay, well, that didn't work, but what will work? And I think it makes it easier that stand-up isn't necessarily my top priority. I'm not trying to necessarily be a stand-up comedian. That's why I do say I dabble in it.

So I think it makes it a little bit easier when it doesn't work out. It's like, okay, well, maybe that's not for me, but I also I'm very confident that I'm funny and I just think, okay, well, maybe I just don't translate in this arena. And I always think of, Tina Fey has said before she hates stand-up. She doesn't like it. She's not good at it. So, I always just think of her, and I say, well, she's very funny and we all know she's funny, so it might just be a matter of that might not be my thing,

Debbi: Yet you keep doing it, or at least dabbling in it. So how do you feel that you're growing or what you're getting from those experiences?

Dev: Kind of like I said before, I think it's that curiosity of, well, that didn't work, but how can I make it work? 'Cause there's a few jokes that I've tried in a lot of different ways where eventually I sort of figure it out: oh, it wasn't funny when I said it like this, it's funny when I said it like this.

I think I'm just sort of obsessed a little bit with figuring out, the literacy that comes with stand-up comedy, figuring out even though there's not one right answer to what works, what doesn't. It's that curiosity that kind of keeps me going back and saying, well, maybe this time they'll like this joke, maybe this joke just needs some rewriting. And then there's also jokes where eventually you have to say this just isn't working, this just never works. Maybe I'll get some retweets if I tweet it. Maybe it'll be kind of funny in conversation, but it's just not landing in a stand-up format. So, a lot of it is just me trying to figure out what works and just being a little competitive with myself and being a little competitive with the version that I told the night before.

Debbi: And so how does that then translate to how you sit in the audience and you're watching from that perspective?

Dev: [27:53] There have definitely been times where I'm sitting there and I'm thinking a little bit more analytically, instead of just laughing at jokes, thinking, oh, that was funny or that wasn't funny. Or occasionally there'll be something like: there was a guy who brought a lot of his friends and he was telling jokes and they were all laughing very genuinely at his jokes and I didn't think any of them were funny. And I was thinking, do they really think he's funny? Are they laughing just because they know they're supposed to? Are they laughing because they know him and they're similar to him, so they also think that's funny.

So sometimes I'm sitting there a little bit analytically, but there's also just moments where everyone laughs and there are times where I don't know why it's funny, but I know it made me laugh. Maybe someone will tell a joke that involves something that I'm not super familiar with, but you still laugh because you just know it's funny. Something about it is just working and I think that kind of side of comedy, that's sort of ambiguity to comedy is. It's just so interesting and it's everyone has a different idea of what's funny but at the same time there are some things that just work. So, I think that that is me just being a little bit, you know, trying to figure it out and wanting to figure it out and just wanting to get it.

Debbi: [29:08] All right, let's switch gears here for a second. You haven't mentioned it, but I know of you working with kids and being really, really good with that. So, talk a little bit about that. How does you, your creative self, inform you interacting with kids and how you approach that?

Dev: Yeah, I think kids sort of bring out a good side in me and because of that I can bring out that side for them as well, because I've taught kids gymnastics, art, music. I've taught preschool before. I've a nanny for several different families and I remember myself at that age pretty well. I have some pretty strong memories of when I was younger.

And, kids are so open and so free until they learn not to be, and the ages of kids that I've worked with are very young, where they still have that, where they'll just do anything and kind of seeing that really raw, unrestricted ideas can be really exciting, because sometimes you'll say, okay, maybe we're acting out a little skit and it's like you're gonna be a bear, and they say, okay, and he breathes fire and he's riding a bicycle and he only eats ice cream and it's like great. That's great.

I think that I'm able to really help encourage some of that because I'm open to it. I'm open to anything, especially anything we can make sense of, and anything where it's like, okay, well, if he does all those things, why does he do all these things? How can we make this a bigger, a bigger story, how can we make it make sense? And kids are very into play-based learning, and I think creativity is play-based. I think being creative isn't sitting with a pen and paper, even though that might be what actually happens, there's play involved, at least happening in your head. It's like a playfulness where you're playing with different ideas and you're moving pieces around, and so I think that's really helped me work with kids because of that. It's just I'm very inspired by them, so I think that really feeds me. I think seeing a kid do something interesting, I think it really gives me a lot of ideas and it frees you up, you know.

Debbi: Yeah. Get rid of some of those inhibitions.

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: [31:33] So you said you kind of remember some of when you were that age. What were some of the things that you remember helping cultivate, foster, nurture your creativity as you were growing.

Dev: I specifically remember that any time we were doing an art project and a teacher gave an example like, okay, we're gonna draw fruit, for example, you could draw an apple. So many kids would draw an apple, and I would never do what the suggested recommendation was. And that's something that I've carried with me as an adult. Whenever I do any kind of project and they say, for example, maybe you could do this or that.

I get auditions sometimes where they want you to improv and they say, maybe you do this. I will never take the suggestion. I refuse to take the suggestion. I have to do something that they have not thought of, and that's just something that I've always felt really strongly about. I don't necessarily like being told what to make, so if they say, try this, I'm not gonna try that.

When I was in, I think, second or third grade, we did watercolor landscapes and I think every single person did a sunset that involved reds and blues and yellows reflecting in the water and these really beautiful, like colorful things. And I did a dying tree on a stormy day and it was all gray and brown and black.

Debbi: Amazing.

Dev: ...because I didn't want to do what everyone else was doing and I was trying to think, okay, well, what's not the obvious choice? And I think that is how I define creativity, is not the obvious choice. Because once it becomes the obvious choice, it's not creative anymore, it's the standard.

And I've done that with art projects, I've done that with school projects, work projects, just anything where I can come up with a different way to do it. Even if I'm just complicating it for myself, because there have definitely been times where there was an easier route and I chose the more difficult route just for the sake of doing it differently. I always feel better with that as a result.

Debbi: Amazing. I'm seeing a common thread here, because I think at the beginning you were talking about: if you're supposed to go right, I go left. So, yeah, there seems to be some consistency and in that, I think being creative has a certain rebellion to it.

Dev: [33:51] I think there's a rebellion to it and I think creative thinking is all about just going outside the box, and I think the box is constantly redefined based on what everyone else is doing. So, it's not necessarily just me thinking well, I want to be different. It's just what else is there? What has not been explored? Or even like, how can I take this thing that is very normal and just turn it on its head? And that's something I feel comes up a lot like I was saying before. It's very helpful in things like escape rooms or riddles, treasure hunts, where you have to sort of think differently.

It's all about just thinking, how can I make this work? How can I make this fit what I need it to do? How can I do this differently? And there's a rebellion to that. There's a rule-breaking sense to that. And it's even more, the more pressure you add to it, the more rules you add to it. Where I was saying before with constraints, that's where you have to be even more creative because you have to work with what you have and sometimes you want to think outside the box, but you're still restricted in some ways.

So, everything starts to get topsy-turvy. It sort of feels like tie-dye. That's what creativity feels like to me, where everything just sort of blends together and creates something new.

Dev: [35:06] Something I want to touch on, just because you mentioned as an actor and everything, I just want to touch on why I wanted to be an actor in the first place. And what I always felt was that I felt very burdened by certain parts of myself growing up. I was definitely a bit quirky and that always just felt, that felt like a burden. It felt like I was too loud. It felt like I was just never saying the right thing or too hyper or too big or too physical or theatrical.

And I happened to try acting sort of out of nowhere. I tried acting in something for a community thing and I felt like that was the place where everything that had always felt like a burden to me made sense and where all of it no longer felt like a burden. And that was something that just changed everything for me because it felt like that was a place in performing where all those things... They weren't just okay, they were celebrated. They were strengths.

And that does bleed a lot into some of the other endeavors I've taken on and also just obviously growing up, once you get out of school, it's a little bit easier to feel confident in some of those things as well. But when I'm acting, I like both getting into the psychology of my character and putting myself into that place. But I also like knowing that I'm having an effect on whoever's watching it. And I like thinking, how is this getting to them? What is this making them think too?

Because when you watch a really good performance, it can just do so much to you. It can take you somewhere and people can react to it differently. And it is that curiosity, that psychology, because the way I've been trained to act is very, not just putting yourself in their shoes, but really going there and sort of on a psychological level, simulating the experience as much as possible. So, when you're really in the heat of it, I'm not just acting like something terrible happened. I really am having that physical reaction as if that thing is happening.

And it is a curiosity because there are things I've done in acting that have never happened to me, things I've never experienced, but that I still am able to sort of conjure. My acting teacher, Anthony Abeson, always used the term conjure. And he would talk about how in the ancient days, they would do these rituals to make things happen. Like, if they wanted rain to fall for their harvest, they would do these rituals that were basically acting out the rain coming down and then them harvesting to sort of manifest it and conjure that up.

And he was saying there's power in that storytelling and that manifestation. And those are sort of the ancestors of the modern actor. So, I'm not entirely sure where I'm going with that. But I just think it's important to sort of touch on how it all comes together. Because I think sometimes these creative things do just end up being viewed a little bit flatly, maybe, or especially with actors. I've met actors that say, I want to be rich and famous. And that's their inspiration. And they might be, they might get success from that. But, there's so much to it and there's such a process to it and sort of a power to it that I don't always think is given its fair recognition.

Debbi: And part of what you said that is so meaningful to me is that you found what made your things that made you different or that were struggles. I forget the perfect word that you use...

Dev: Yeah, burdens.

Debbi: The things that you might have felt were burdens were actually what made you special and made you fit. And you found a home and you found that voice. And that's part of what drives me is that I want people to find that. Whether it's acting, because obviously not everybody's is acting. But I believe that everybody has that creativity. They need to find a way to express it. And it can manifest itself in so many different ways. And so to hear your successful story of that and just the fact that you can say it's successful.

Again, we're talking about definitions. Success. What is success to you? Is it the being rich and famous? Is it landing that Broadway or movie role? Is it going through the process and expressing yourself and finding these moments and this way of being that allows for that creative expression?

Dev: [39:35] Yeah, and I think to add to that, you know, acting was sort of where I found the place where I fit, but then as I've gotten older and matured and become more confident because of acting, it's also given me the strength to not need to fit anymore. It's sort of I found a place where I fit, but then I also found the strength to step forward and not care if I fit and use all those things in a way where it doesn't always fit somewhere. And I'm confident in that and I feel good about that.

Debbi: Well, and here's a segue for you. Speaking of fitting, let's talk about clothing. It sounds random, but what I'm thinking of is one of the first times I met you was at Comic-Con.

Dev: Oh, yeah.

Debbi: I've seen you at many Comic- Con.

Dev: Yes.

Debbi: So, speaking of fittings, I'm not talking about costumes in a play, but I am talking about cosplay.

Dev: Yes.

Debbi: What a creative expression for you. And to be totally transparent on this, I have seen cosplays with you and my son, Tony, and friends, Michaela, just fantastic things that you've done. Talk to me about that.

Dev: [40:44] Yeah. Cosplaying is a little bit of everything for me because it kind of plays into the acting and the entertaining where you're sort of embodying a character. But I love making costumes. I love the makeup and sort of really getting deep in there and seeing how far I can go. I love taking on that persona and kind of just landing it because leading up to Comic-Con and what I do and I'm always so bad about time management. So a lot of times I'm pulling all-nighters right up to Comic-Con and it'll be 5 a. m. the day of the con and I'm painting myself green. I'm trying to put in contacts and I'm not good at doing contacts or, you know, like styling a wig or, you know, making armor. That's one of the most fun things for me.

And I think part of it is I am not a skilled enough costume maker to get into that professionally. A lot of it is staples, glue and a prayer. But I'm good enough to make a great costume for myself. And so I think that that's one of the only avenues where that sort of effort is appreciated, because if I get invited to a costume party for Halloween, I go and other people are wearing like, you know, cat ears and a T- shirt. And that's not really the right venue. So going to a convention like Comic-Con is the only time where that sort of effort is appropriate. And it's funny you mention it because Comic-Con is coming up in a little over a month. And last year was still some COVID issues and I was immunocompromised. So I didn't go last year and the year before was canceled. So it's been about three years and I have been missing it so much. And I've got a few big cosplays planned.

Yeah. It's another way of expressing yourself. I love the process of making something, especially, you know, I don't have the funds to make some really detailed, crazy thing. I have to really get creative. I don't have the resources. I don't have the know-how. So I go to the craft store and I'm pulling things and just saying, OK, well, maybe this weird figurine can be turned into this crown or, you know, and taking things and just really repurposing them or figuring out how to do it with the time and the materials that I have.

Debbi: I've been to New York Comic Con, which is where I've seen you and seen this group of amazing individuals I was just referencing. This place is huge and there's all these people all dressed up. What is that like to walk around?

Dev: [43:02] It's fantastic. It feels so comfortable because there's a like-mindedness amongst everyone, because just by the fact that everyone has chosen to be there and especially when people are dressing up, it's sort of we're all adults who have chosen to dress up as these crazy characters for this crazy convention in New York City on this day. And it feels like a really uniting community. And just everyone enjoys the intellectual properties that you're dressing as the characters and everything.

Everyone appreciates the intent behind it, the creativity behind it. And sometimes you'll just see someone do a take on something, you know, they'll cosplay, but they'll put a twist on it, or they'll have made an accessory or the way they did their makeup. Or there are just some really cool interpretations and it just feels like sort of an art show in some ways. But then everyone's there for the same reason and everyone's there in these crazy costumes, but they're just there to have fun. It feels kind of like a playground.

Debbi: What is the favorite costume you've ever put together?

Dev: I think the one that I did with my friends Mikaela and Cherry in 2019, the last cosplay I did, was "Children of the Forest" from *Game of Thrones*. We had prosthetics on. We had contacts in. We painted ourselves. Our hair was sprayed. That was probably, in my opinion, the most impressive cosplay we've ever done. It's tough because now, once you do a certain cosplay, you feel like you gotta top yourself every year a little bit. And there are certain ones where it's like, I don't know how to go further than that. There's some work involved to it.

So, you know, at the end of the day, when my contacts are stuck in my eyes, and I'm dyed green at the edges, and I can't get the paint off, and the costume is stuck, or I've got hot glue gun scars all over my hands, I think,

okay, next year I'm gonna go a little simpler. But then next year comes, and all I can think is, what's bigger than this? But eventually, it's gotta top out at some point. But the one I have planned for this year is probably bigger than that. So, we'll see what happens. It's gonna be a biggie.

Debbi: I look forward to pictures.

Debbi: So, you mentioned COVID. With COVID, the question could be, where does being an artist fit in? And if it doesn't, then how do you deal with that identity being something that just can't be what you're doing, and maybe is considered unnecessary? Or how do you adapt? How do you get through that?

Dev: [45:31] It was tough. It was very tough, because the acting industry was pretty much shut down. And when it came to things like writing, because at first, when the pandemic started, I said, well, I'm gonna write a great piece during this. But then, I felt so uninspired. Everything I sat down and tried to write was, oh, there's a girl, she can't go outside, she's stuck in a room. It all just felt a little tinged by what I was experiencing, because I pull a lot of inspiration from things happening around me.

I like to go to a coffee shop when I write, and kind of just see people and things and little happenings, and they sort of start to flicker ideas. And, you know, when you're doing nothing, that's all you kind of come up with. But it was very tough, because it made me sit back and think, what do I want, and what's important to me when everything else is gone? Everything outward was gone, and I think I'm someone that really draws from the outward. But this was all just left with me at the bare bones and thinking, okay, what would I want? If this was what life was like for the rest of my life, what would I want and what would I need?

And I did feel creatively a bit stumped during that time. But in terms of the necessity of art, I do think people turned to art at that time. You think about how people turned to books, to music, to TV, especially... TV and movies were... People were watching everything. I think that that was the time where people needed to consume art the most.

And that's what's hard as an artist who has not quite landed in the professional sphere, because being an artist, it's not about the recognition necessarily, but there does have to be a reaction, you know? There does have to be a response. If I paint a picture by myself alone in my room and hang it on my wall and no one ever sees it, it's not that that's an invalid experience, but putting your art out and receiving something back, receiving ideas back, receiving criticism even, like receiving something and affecting someone in some way, even if one person sees it and says, that made me feel something. That's kind of an important part of the artistic process, at least for me, that's something that's important.

And that's what I was saying with acting. That's something that really draws me to it, is that feeling that I'm affecting someone or I'm influencing someone or I'm having an effect. So that was tough on me during that time, but I mean, I just, I watched so many shows. I listened to a lot of new music. I was reading a lot of think pieces and articles and different things, and I was taking in so much at that time. And even though I wasn't able to create a lot, coming out of that back to a place where I can, I feel like it's given me so much more to work with.

It's really, it's sort of like I stocked up on all this fuel and all these feelings that I now have to work through. It is pretty cool to kind of get to work through those things now and sort of use those things. Because it also was nice that I've kind of been going, going, going, pursuing some of these things for the last 10 or so years. And that was the first time where I didn't have to feel like the business was moving on without me, because it was at a full standstill. There was a little comfort in that and just taking a break and thinking, what do I want to do? And I have a lot of friends that quit acting during the pandemic. They realized that they didn't want to keep doing it. They liked not doing it. And a lot of them moved out of the city. And for me, I just couldn't wait to get back to it.

Debbi: One thing that you said there, too, that I find sort of interesting... No, I find it really interesting, is you're talking about art and creativity, but that there's a reaction. So, it's almost like almost all art is collaborative.

Dev: [49:11] Yeah, because the full experience of it is once you put it out, once you put it out and get something back from it. And that's why it can be tough when you're in a position where not a lot of people are viewing it. Right now, I mean, if I write something and I send it to my mom and she loves it, that means something to me. Even just that one opinion on it and that one reaction and that one sort of feeling, that means something. So, I think if someone was locked in a room for their entire life...

They wouldn't have a lot to draw from if they were trying to create something. I don't even know if the brain can just conjure something out of nothing like that, but even if they did, if no one could react to it, that would be such a stunted process. It's like human interaction happens through art and through creativity and through those things.

Debbi: And that's all making connections. And...

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: ...connecting with other people, connecting with your environment... When you're stuck inside, that's hard. Connecting ideas and just experiences to draw from.

Dev: [50:10] Yeah, I think that I connect to myself by making art and I connect to other people by sharing my art.

Debbi: [50:23] Another way that you've had to learn to persevere is you've had to deal with cancer.

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: And... Not easy. You're on the other side of it now.

Dev: Yes.

Debbi: But how did your self as a creative being, how did that inform the process of going through this part of your life, those challenges?

Dev: It has definitely allowed me to go deeper, I think. I think that it has recontextualized my emotional intelligence. I think before there was, okay, this is what rock-bottom feels like, this is what the lowest we can go is. And then, when I went through treatment, it's when you realize like you can go so much lower and still survive. And, there were parts of treatment that just felt so bad and so impossible to get through that I did get through, and being able to kind of pull from those low lows it definitely helps me.

You know, as an actor, it's like I thought that I could go there before and it's like, oh no, now I have some places I can go to. And, it gives me new lows to access and reference and to pull from. But it also gives me higher highs because when you do go to such a low, it recontextualizes what is a high or what is a good day. I just said this to someone the other day that I had so many bad days that a day that's just okay now feels like a great day.

A day when nothing happens feels so great, and it used to be that a day was never good enough, but now it's like this is a great day. Nothing bad happened. So, it just recontextualizes everything for me emotionally and it gives me sort of feelings to tap into that I just I don't think I really had access to before. And, the script I'm working on right now, is about my experience with cancer because, being someone who is younger, I'm not at the normal age for this to happen. I have a very unique point of view on the experience and it's a story that only I can tell.

I think that's part of creativity too, actually, is, what can only I bring a fourth, and that can be hard to find because you know everything has been done one way or another, but occasionally you just strike on something where you're so confident that this is something that only you can give to the world. And that's how I feel about this script I'm working on because it's about my cancer experience, but it's a comedy. And there aren't any works out there that are about cancer, that are funny, because people don't want to laugh at cancer. But I'm gonna give them permission to because that's also something only I can write, because only I know that experience. You wouldn't feel comfortable laughing at something that someone that hadn't gone through it wrote. So it's giving me some material to pull from and that was one of the silver linings.

One of my friends said to me when I was kind of in the, in the heat of it. She said to me, I'm so sorry you're going through this, but I'm so excited to see what you turn it into.

Debbi: Amazing.

Dev: That's something I have felt really strongly. That's something I've really felt, that I'm excited to see what it brings forth. And it's a little off-topic, I guess, but weirdly enough, where I'm at now in my quote-unquote journey, I actually feel better now than I ever felt before diagnosed.

Debbi: Wow.

Dev: And that's something that... I mean, there were times, especially last fall, last winter, where I thought, oh man, like I'm never gonna get back to normal and I feel better than normal. I feel better than before. And that's just... There's so much to use there, because it changes your perspective, it makes some of the little things that sort of held me back or the little worries go away, and that just frees me up so much to do so much more.

Debbi: Something I like to ask people is about what inspires them. But I'm just... I knew some of this because I do know you and let me tell you, when I saw the video of you ringing that bell, it brought tears to my... well, out of my eyes.

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: Beautiful. But, asking people what inspires you and hearing just your talk, you're inspired by the good, the bad, the normal, the everyday, the incredible. You get... You draw inspiration from so many places and I just have to say for me that you're an inspiration because of that.

Dev: Thank you.

Debbi: You truly are.

Dev: [55:02] Yeah, I think some of that I get from my mother, just because she was someone that would stop and be like, oh, what a beautiful leaf. You know, it's like I'd come home and a leaf would be hanging on the fridge by a magnet because she just thought it was such a special leaf. Or you know, like she's someone that kind of sees things like that. And I'm just very riveted by the world and people and life.

And the more that I have to live and the more that I sort of interact with the world, the more that I just find that I just think is interesting and interesting and cool and confounding and amazing and terrible and just things that I want to interact with further.

Debbi: I'm right there with you. That's why we get along.

Dev: Yeah.

Debbi: I see that. I get you. All right. Well, I have taken up a lot of your time and I am so, so thankful that you spent this time and had this discussion with me. The last question, even though you've answered it in various ways.

Dev: Yes.

Debbi: ...is, how do you define creativity?

Dev: Yes. I'm gonna see if there's a succinct way for me to put it, but I think creativity is just taking everything you have and making something new with it. Taking and creating something new. Or, now let me think of a better one. Hold on, I can do... I can do better than that. I think creativity is an openness. I think it's an openness to take in and to put out and to interact, and I think it's a rebellion. I think it's a communication. I think that creativity is just taking everything out there, every feeling, every person, every interaction, every dream, every nightmare, every snack, even, just everything that you're experiencing, taking it all in and putting it out into something new. And that can be anything. That can be a sentence, a poem, a drawing, a movie. It can be... It can be anything. It's that output. It's that output that just makes something new and something that only you can put out.

Debbi: Beautiful.

Dev: It's not the most succinct answer, but it's... That is the cliff notes of, I think, what I've been saying. It's interesting in it and it can't be defined. It can't be nailed down because it just exists. And I think that even the people that think that they aren't creative at all, I think it exists in everybody and, yeah, we just have sort of rigid definitions of it.

Debbi: I think so too. Honestly, even in doing this podcast *Defining Creativity*—how dare I? Because is there a definition? You know? Truly, what it is, is not defining it. It's using that curiosity and exploring it and finding it and digging and, you know, seeing all the ways that it manifests itself, and... You certainly manifest creativity

in so many ways. So, I look forward to the play. I look forward to pictures of Comic-Con now. I can't wait to see what it is.

Dev: It's gonna be a doozy. It's like it's a month and a half bad and I already regret it. It involves paints, it involves fur, it involves fake limbs. There's a lot to it, but I've got a lot of things in the works and a lot of things that I want to make.

Debbi: Well, more power to you in all the ways, and you, as I said, are an inspiration and...

Dev: Thank you.

Debbi: I wish you only the best and look forward to more interactions in the future.

Dev: Thanks. You as well.

Debbi: [58:29] That's a wrap for episode 13, my discussion with actor, writer, stand-up comic, improviser, and free thinker, Dev Meenagh. I'm so grateful for Dev and for you, the audience, for tuning in. Additional thanks to August Fackler for composing and recording the music. Join me next time as I talk creativity with social worker and instructor of social workers, Carlene Quinn. Meanwhile, be open to possibilities, make connections and embrace your creativity however it manifests itself in you.