Doug: Hey, everybody. Welcome to the InVision Podcast, the Xcast. Today we have a really special episode, big topic, creativity. Where does it come from? What do you do with it? How can you find some? So we have a guest coming on, a very dear friend of mine from back in the day. But first I want to bring in my co-host and my colleague at Envision, Val Jonkoff. Hey, Val.

Valerie Jonkoff: Hey, Doug. Not your good friend from back in the day, but happy to be here. Co-hosting with you

Doug: Indeed. Someday we'll look back on this as the golden...

Valerie Jonkoff: And laugh and laugh. It'll be great.

Doug: So we got to talking and the reason we're here is you and I do a lot of the same things, but we come from such different backgrounds. We got talking about where does creativity come from? For me, I came out of theme parks. I did a little TV, I do a lot of writing, I do design, and that's what informed my creative. But what about you?

Valerie Jonkoff: Yeah, I came from the theater world, as many people in our industry do, not the improv side, the true musical theater performance world. That's actually how I stumbled into this business we call corporate show and like to infuse that as much as I can with what we do every day.

Doug: Next time, next time.

Valerie Jonkoff: On next Xcast.

Doug: I mentioned a very special guest. so one of the things that really drives my inspiration is the people I know and John Masse, who is coming on here. John and I go back many moons. Hey, John.

John Masse: Hi, buddy.

Doug: I'm going to brag on you for a second because I still am inspired by you. The first time I met you was in Vegas many moons ago. We got together to brainstorm about doing a video for IBM, about them at the Olympics. Somehow we started talking about the shape and the size of candy, and the next thing I know you're on the table and you're going off about Skittles, and I thought this guy is creative. After that, we did videos for Intel that you did hand drawings for. That piece for Michael Dell at CES was I think brilliant and again, 100% your creative genius. So I still think about you and I know you've done so many more things, and so give us a little background about where your creative spirit comes from.

John Masse: Well, I'm going to send you a check for that lovely introduction. I do remember all those projects. That was so fun. They're high watermarks in a crazy career because we had so much fun doing it. So it's difficult really to describe my creative life and my career, because everything I did informed the next move I made. I started in apparel. Before that as a passion project, I was in a rock band. I was doing theater. I was up on stages as lead, and then I fell into the advertising world, the marketing world. Somebody saw me do some storyboard work. Next thing I knew I was working with you and in corporate. I got into the Cirque de Soleil world. I was sent off to France, Japan. I went all over the world. I got into industrial design, animation. I can trace every step that I've taken in my career, but I don't know how I got there. I just know that it was a true kind of life. So if you had to describe me, I guess it would be a creative person basically.

Doug: Well, and I'm going to drop some names for you because you're much too graceful of a gentleman, but you've worked with Steve Wynn, you've worked with Franco Dragone at Cirque, you've worked with Sting, you were a Creative Director at Skechers for years, designing shoes.

Valerie Jonkoff: Wow, everybody, watch your feet. Names are dropping, careful!

John Masse: Look out. Here comes the humble brag, here comes the humble brag.

Doug: But given all that, we're dealing with a creative individual here. So Val, where do you want to go with this?

Valerie Jonkoff: Well, you set me up beautifully for something I always want to ask people just like yourself, John, of what does it mean to be a creative? You mentioned you've worked across so many different industries, you've tackled so many different projects, a creative, a Creative Director, it's become a catchall title across any industry you can think of. So what does it mean for yourself and your work that you do to be a creative?

John Masse: Yeah, no, you're absolutely correct. We joke about that often where you go to a meeting, everyone's like, I'm Tad, Creative Director, Susan, Creative Director, Joey, Creative Director. That also confuses me, because my definition of being a creative comes from a very immature place. It's that kind of essence that I'm actually thinking creatively about creative. I'm using the word to answer the word. I'm making up a world. I'm making up an idea, and it's play. It's play and it's fun. People lean into things that are fun and engaging and they lean away sometimes from things when it's medicinal facts and figures. We're just trying to communicate and there's so many different ways you can do it, whether it's stage, whether it's film, whether it's music, whether it's a book. I like to express all those parts of my life. I'm fortunate so far that people find what I do as a creative valuable.

Doug: Everyone is creative. No matter what you do, everyone has creativity. How do you take that energy and synthesize it and bring out what you do? Because again, if you're sitting in a meeting with 10 people, everyone's going to have an idea about which shade of blue this should be. How do you stand above all that?

John Masse: Over time, I've learned to listen and I want to find the person that I can play tennis with, because there are things that I can do in a vacuum, which is fine. Composition is a lonely task. Illustration is lonely. Brainstorm, ideating, coming up with a grand concept is playing tennis. So it is equal amount listening and then finding that when the ball comes to you, you can put some spin on it and you want to hit it back to someone who's reciprocal in that same spirit.

Valerie Jonkoff: A lot of what you've talked about is you're bringing your passion into it by infusing what you're doing with what you care about. I think that's my personal definition of what it means to be a creative.

John Masse: Yeah, you have to be curious. You're absolutely right. You sit in on a meeting and the client's selling you a widget and you're not excited about a widget, but something in that is going to trigger something that's instantly relatable, that's all creative is. The best standup comics talk, how about waiting in line to get on the plane? Then everyone's like, oh my gosh, I know exactly what you're talking about. That's all it is, no matter what the topic is. So when that business meeting is taking place, and it's just so medicinal, you kind of have to get in there early and say, "Look, what floats your boat?" Not say it in such a way that you're turning off, obviously you're reading the room, but you can draw a little bit of essence, because if they say, "Go away and be creative," I'm like, challenge accepted. No one wants to play tennis? Do not, do not be surprised with what you get back.

Valerie Jonkoff: But I think it is that passion piece. I've had clients that are so resistant to do some things. Guide a client that just wanted an opening moment, but they wanted the spectacle and it's a tech company and they want dogs jumping through hoops and what's the latest America's Got Talent. I'm like, why does your audience care about that? What is that getting to for your messaging? I pivoted pretty hard on a media piece that had a spoken word component to it, passionate about writing, spoken word, that personal delivery, and they just couldn't get behind it. But I was so passionate about it, I think that's what got it over the line, and it was very successful. They were like, we can't believe this worked. This was amazing. It's like, okay, well, great, we're starting somewhere. But if I didn't have that passion in what I was selling to them, they never would've bought it and we would've backed to dogs and hoops.

John Masse: Correct. Robert Greenberg, the CEO of Skechers and Franco Dragone both echo the same thing, and that's you sell yourself first and what you do second. That's what Rob would say, but Franco would say, "John, we like real people." This came from, here comes the story. Eventually the work that we did became Sting's The Last Ship, but the first design sprint that we had was done in La Louviere, Belgium. I was there for six weeks and it was just a free for all, coming up with abstract ideas, concepts, character designs, costume designs, plot points, just all kinds of phenomenal things until I had 110 illustrations up on a massive corkboard. Sting was there and he got stuck looking at my artwork, and I'm not really a starstruck person, but it's Sting and The Police. I kept on getting that weird hand shaky, lump in my throat thing that I don't usually get.

Franco, he's next to me, he's nudging me and he goes, "John, he's looking at your artwork. Go talk to him." I'm like, dude, it's Sting. He says, "John, he is just a person. We like real people. People like people. Go talk to him." That lesson stuck with me, but the execution of it wasn't exactly how I went as planned. I walked up to him and I had drawn this picture of this character with his head in his hands. He was staring at this doodle that I did, this pencil drawing. He was like, "You did this? This is really brilliant. He was like, it reminds me of a bit of William Wallace. William Blake. It reminds me of a bit of a William Blake piece." He was staring at this and he had just complimented me into my work. So I nudged him and said, "You play pretty good bass." That's what I told him.

Doug: I also think more than any other discipline in corporate or any kind of entity, creatives need to be willing to be wrong in order to get it right. You've got to give me a little bit of room here to sort of take you in a direction that you've never thought of going. Ultimately, it may not be the right direction, but I bet we're going to get a whole lot closer to something that makes all of us happy and makes something effective, if you let me be a little bit wrong now and again.

John Masse: You nailed it. You absolutely nailed it. There's Gary Zukav's book on quantum physics, the Dancing Wu Li Masters. One of the definitions of wu li is the Chinese sentence, "I do not clutch my ideas." that's something that took me a while to learn. When we go in a wrong direction and a client says, "It's not working for me," I don't defend my creative, I don't get defensive, I don't flip out. You know what I say? I said, "This made such progress, because now we know what we don't want to do." It's such a relief to me, and I'm a constant optimist. I roll out of bed, what am I going to do today? That's sort of beaten into my ego is that I'm just excited to do things.

Doug: What advice do you have for folks coming up who say, "Hey, I want to be creative. I want to show my creativity. I want to express myself?"

John Masse: There are so many young creatives that are coming up and they're calling themselves storytellers or digital creators, or they're giving themselves these titles. They're fantastic at doing these social media campaigns. There's editing, there's music, there's soundtrack, and they want to sort of graduate, move this into another realm of business. So I encourage people to specialize, to find that place where, this is me. My father told me a long time ago also, no one draws Picasso like Picasso. I saw a Picasso painting and I said, "Dad, I could do that."

He said, "Don't ever let anyone hear you say that outside of me because you sound like a dummy." Get to the point where you can say, nobody does John Masse like John Masse. Then that's why I think my phone always rings, because I think people are like, let's get that goofball. That's I think what creatives should learn, is that you need to be your own person and find your own place where you can set up a camp by yourself. Don't go to where it's packed. Don't rush to that big crazy city, man, because you're just going to get walked over.

Valerie Jonkoff: John, I hear you on that advice to younger creatives of find your voice and get out of the sea of sameness and define yourself. I think that's the hardest thing for kids these days to do, especially with how mired we are and social media and all the things. I think it just goes back to what we said at the top of... The beginning of our conversation of finding the things you really care about and you're really passionate about. I know this is such a cliched question. It's hard to answer. It's whatever. But I think it could help younger creatives like myself, if I can say that, and others listening. How do you fuel your creativity? What do you do? What's your process? Not like I have a project, I'm going to sit down with a pencil, but it's like I'm burnt out. I can't think about this anymore. What am I doing to go fill that well, fuel the creativity?

John Masse: I don't think too severely. I don't force creative. It kind of happens. If you are completely burnt out, it comes back to you. It is a muscle. So it's like stop, go for a walk. Don't look at media. Trust your brain. Trust your brain. Oh, I'm never going to have a creative idea again. Go for a walk. It really comes back to you. Because if you're forcing it, desperation is a stinky cologne. But those are the two things. It's in your brain already. Go away. Well, it's three things. Play tennis with your client. Hit the ball back. We mentioned earlier that they're creative people too, and they are. They're going to give you something that's going to turn on that light bulb.

Doug: So John, everyone is creative. Everyone's got a definition of what a story is and how to tell a story. There's a poet, Ben Okri, who says, "Where there's perfection, there is no story." So that's what I try to work with my clients on saying, "Show the audience where we are, show them what the stakes are, what their role can be, and then finally we can deliver on that story."

John Masse: The old paradigm of business communications was, I'm going to tell you why you need our product. That was the advertising. Buy a Volvo, they're boxy, but good. There was, I'm giving you the message and the story, and you're going to sit there and listen to it. The new language is the company has to quiet their mouth and let the audience tell them what their product means to them. That is a vulnerable place. But that is the new business model. That is... I agree with you. I don't know if I have an answer for it. I just know that you're absolutely correct is that you have to let the public tell you what they think of your product, and then there's a conversation. When you lose control of the message, you open up a conversation and ultimately you get better messaging. So I think that's right.

Valerie Jonkoff: I think it's right. I think it's definitely longer than 30 seconds, but...

Doug: John, must say, this was fantastic talking to you. Thank you for all the goodness that you shared with us. Val, any last words?

Valerie Jonkoff: Thank you, John, for being with us today.

John Masse: Val, great to talk to you. Doug, great to see you again.

Doug: There you go. Folks, check in on our next InVision podcast, the Xcast. John, I think this is the first of many conversations we're going to have with creatives. Again, thank you for all the stuff you've shared, and thanks for being a good friend for the last years.

John Masse: Right back at me. Right back at you. Thanks for having me, and I'm going to tune in and watch what you do next.

Doug: All right. Bye all.