



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 3 (Early March 2024)

THE CREATIVE PIVOT

DAREEN BURROWS
Actor/Designer

Darren Burrows:

Hey there, Tim. How are you today?

Tim Stackpool:

Very well, as always. Thanks for joining us on the podcast, Darren.

Darren Burrows:

Thank you for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

Darren, growing up, you had a creative pedigree. Your father, Billy Drago, a very popular and in-demand actor, I think he was in more than 80 films, his wife was the developer of the Gallardo method of acting. But in your early years, were there any signs that you might develop a love of creating with your hands?

Darren Burrows:

I grew up without my father, and his wife, which I guess would be my stepmom, Silvana, was an actress, but I only met my dad when I was older, well, older, 16 years old. So I grew up with my mom and not really exposed any kind of arts or anything like that in Kansas. For people that don't know, it's the Wizard of Oz. It's in the Midwest, there's lots of wheat fields and cows and that kind type thing.

Tim Stackpool:

First of all, with your acting, where and when did that start?

Darren Burrows:

Well, that started because never having known my father and having daddy issues, like probably most kids like that. But I left home when I was 16 and went to find him and find out what he'd been doing without me.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Darren Burrows:

And he was an actor. I knew that. My mom had told me he was an actor. I went to California, I got on the bus, sold my car, got on the bus, went out there, and he picked me up at the bus station and I met him. And I was just like most, well, I don't know about most boys, but a lot of boys. I grew up interested in hot rods and motorcycles and things like that, and the only thing turned out my father was ever interested in was acting. And so I took some acting classes so I'd have something to talk to him about, basically.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Darren Burrows:

So that was kind of my first being exposed to acting. Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Did you have any sense of self-doubt or, I'm trying to be kind of diplomatic with my words here, but perhaps not feeling fully worthy, not knowing your father until that point?

Darren Burrows:

Well, I don't know. At that age, the testosterone's running pretty high. I was pretty angry, and yeah, didn't have much to lose, I guess.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So when did you start thinking about doing the work with your hands? When did that artistic talent begin to flourish?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, that didn't really come about until later. My wife and I left California and moved to Missouri, and she got me, it was about eight years ago, I guess. For my birthday, she got me a hand engraving class with a local hand engraver that I... It seemed like something I'd like, she thought, and she was right.

Tim Stackpool:

Only eight years of experience. It's incredible, intricate work, Darren. Now, how do you turn out such lovely work with such a short history in the craft?

Darren Burrows:

Well, like anything else, well, it's like I always used to tell my boys, I guess. Anything you do, that's really the only importance in finding something you like to do in life is that you then do it all the time, and doing something all the time, you become better at it. It's unavoidable. And so yeah, I do it pretty much all day long.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow. It is beautiful work, no doubt about it. What also struck me was the sketching that you do on the metal before the engraving. It looks kind of like a first draft, but when you use that as the guide for the engraving, it's almost as if you then work some magic.

Darren Burrows:

Well, I'm not a very good drawer. That's probably why.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, yes. Look, I counted, and I may be wrong, and excuse me if I get this wrong. You've got credits in more than 20 films, around 20 TV series, or thereabouts as well. There's 110 episodes of Northern Exposure you were in.

Darren Burrows:

Yeah, that's true.

Tim Stackpool:

I wonder if there was any time in that whether you felt that there was some other form of art within you.

Darren Burrows:

Well, I think all, and just my opinion, but all good art aims at the truth. And so not being a formally trained actor, that's what I always aimed at acting, and my truth and as I see things. And so I think in the same way it translates through my hands in what I perceive to be beautiful and what flows to me. And so that's the best thing, I guess, is for me about working with my hands and doing the engraving and creating the jewellery is with a film or TV show, you've got at least a hundred people on the set, and another a hundred people in post-production. And every one of them thinks they have an opinion that matters, and some of them do have opinions that matter, and a lot of them have opinions that matter more than yours.

And so it just seems like no matter how good you do or try to do or try to express yourself and your truth acting, it's always diluted and watered down to a greater or lesser degree, and sometimes to the point where you're unhappy with your work, but it's not really unhappy with what you did, but unhappy in the way it's been expressed in editing and the shot selection and that kind of thing.

When working with your hands, it's just me. I do what I want and if nobody likes it, that's fine, because I like it, and that's as good as it can be. If it's perfect, it's an offering to God, and that's the ultimate truth, and that's a target you aim for. And so when I'm finished doing what I want the way I want to do it, it couldn't be any more perfect, because it is as perfect as I could do it without someone else's input.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I was going to ask you, in our email correspondence, you appear to be a very mindful person, very aware of the sensitivities of others. And I wonder, when it comes to the pieces that you create, if you haven't communicated or committed to that level of sensitivity, does that dismay you? Do you then discard the work?

Darren Burrows:

Yeah, I do.

Tim Stackpool:

It's like, "That's rubbish."

Darren Burrows:

Because I couldn't even bear to sell it and have someone else, even if someone else thought it was good, I couldn't bear knowing it was less than it could have been. And of course, in the creative process, things happen, and you get confined in certain ways because of choices you've already made that are irreversible. And so that's not part of what I'm talking about. And some of them are better to a greater or lesser degree, but if I bungle it, yeah, I bet nobody sees that. That's probably why you think the stuff I did is so good is because I never show my failures.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. It's only ever the good stuff that ever ends up online, irrespective of whether that's art or just a projection of our best life.

Darren Burrows:

That's right.

Tim Stackpool:

Can I just go back a little bit? After Northern Exposure wrapped, you remained in Los Angeles for about 10 years or so, but eventually relocating to Missouri. Does the rural landscape there offer some better inspiration?

Darren Burrows:

I'm an introvert, really, and a lot of people think that means I don't like people, which is not true. I do like people a lot, but I think the difference, and you may know this, but the best description of difference between an introvert and extrovert that I've heard is an introvert, when they're around people, it wears them out and saps their energy and drains them. An extrovert, like my wife is an extrovert, she gets energy from being around people. And so that's the difference. So being in a city, that was just constantly drained my energy and having to... They call it show business for a reason. I was never very good at the show business part. I love the acting part, but going around all the people and all like that, that just wears me out.

Tim Stackpool:

So ultimately, that's what your motivation was to move?

Darren Burrows:

Yeah. Well, I never really wanted to be an actor, although I do enjoy acting. I still enjoy it, and suffered some modicum of success of doing it. But I went to LA for a big adventure, and at a certain point when I was married, my wife and I had four boys, trying to raise them in the city, the acting just became a job and I wasn't having a big adventure anymore. And we reached the age where I knew I didn't want to retire there, and if we didn't leave and make another life somewhere else, I was going to end up retiring there, and I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do something else.

Tim Stackpool:

You spoke about how you received that engraving course from your wife as a gift. Have you from that point on though, been pretty much self-taught?

Darren Burrows:

Well, I read a lot. I read books, and I study what I perceive to be great work that I see. And also, and a lot of that's available on social media and on YouTube. So I follow some master engravers, and it's just like anything else. You do it all the time, you become better at it.

Tim Stackpool:

But I just wonder about bad habits you may pick up, because you don't have an immediate mentor or a teacher looking over your shoulder at some point.

Darren Burrows:

It takes me longer to learn everything, doing it that way. But I'm very detail oriented anyway and suffer from being a little bit of a perfectionist, so living in that tiny world is probably a good place for me.

Tim Stackpool:

I know it takes great focus, Darren. I'm thinking you and I are close to the same age, but the one thing that really starts to annoy me working in broadcast and stuff is that my eyesight is not as good as it was. Do you have frustrations in that sense? Perhaps you don't necessarily have the physical dexterity or the eyesight that you used to?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, yeah. Well, the dexterity not so much. Well, I haven't suffered that. I don't have arthritis or anything like that, thankfully. And yes, I don't see well at all. It is definitely worse than it was five years ago, but luckily, they have microscopes and jewellery loupes and reading glasses.

Tim Stackpool:

The engraving then led to the jewellery creation. Was that a type of natural evolution, do you think?

Darren Burrows:

No, I started with the engraving, and then someone asked me, and I probably took it the wrong way, but they asked me, "Do you make your own jewellery," or "Do you only engrave other people's things?" And I thought, "Well, what do they mean by that?" And I thought: "Well, maybe I can make something." And so I started making jewellery, and things like that, and I learned all that stuff on YouTube, mostly.

Tim Stackpool:

Getting down to the practicality of your craft, what type of tools are you using?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, I got a whole shop full of stuff. I don't know if I make any money. It's like anything else. Oh, you need this thing and you need that thing. And boy, I got a whole workshop, everything from propane and oxygen for fire, and I melt my own gold and silver and forged on my own jewellery, hand-fabricate it. The engraving probably is the least equipment. For hand engraving, I use a little air-driven hand engraver. And so I have that, and my microscope, and boy, I don't know, all kinds of stuff.

Tim Stackpool:

And your studio, that's substantial?

Darren Burrows:

Well, I took over our living room. I moved all the furniture out. It's probably 25 by 20 feet, and then I got some more stuff out in the shop. I like to be in the house with it so that... Otherwise, my wife and I never see each other.

Tim Stackpool:

Is there any other tools that you've developed yourself that you've found that perhaps there's nothing in the market that you wanted and you put something together yourself?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, well, you're always modifying tools and heating something up and bending it to hold a particular thing the way you want it held. And of course, you've got to sharpen and make all your own engravers and the little chisels that you use for hand engraving and like that. So it's the further you get into it, the more you go, boy. I mean, you're exactly right. Yeah, I need this one little thing to be a little bit different.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And luckily, I think, Darren, you have the skills to be able to create those things, but how about those times that all creatives suffer, when you don't have the inspiration or the mood or just not then, perhaps the jeweller's version of writer's block?

Darren Burrows:

I'm lucky that I live on a little farm now. We raise little red Dexter cattle, registered red Dexter. I got some pigs in the back. I got a bunch of chickens. I don't know if you can hear them squawking every now and then. We got some ducks. So these days I probably only spend half of my day, and unless I'm on a project I'm deep into, but I always got to stop and go feed the animals in the evening and things that take my conscious mind off of what I'm doing and allow my subconscious to form the solution for whatever. And then the other thing is, I'm sure I'm not the only one to say this, the other thing is just work anyway. You just work. You do it because its time to do that, and you find the solution in the working.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. It's like a writer, I think. Sometimes ...

Darren Burrows:

I think writers say that.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, you open the page, and you think, "I've got 1200 words to fill here for some sort of article for a newspaper or a website." And I think sometimes all I do is just start writing. Even if the first bit is rubbish, I can always go back and redo it. But you can't necessarily do that with jewellery though.

Darren Burrows:

There's a reason that works because that's what you have to do. If you're attempting to be a creator, then sit down and create, and the solution... And sometimes it doesn't come out, but you put in a new sheet of paper in and now you're going, and it's the same thing. Sometimes I throw stuff away, but now I'm going and I get out the metal and I know where I'm going and I'm headed there, even if the first one was a dud.

Tim Stackpool:

Sometimes, however, other factors hold you back from your art. Looking at your history, I think I've got it right that you got COVID in January, 2022, pretty seriously, I understand.

Darren Burrows:

Oh, yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

That laid you out for how long?

Darren Burrows:

That was quite a while. That was almost a year to get... Well, I don't think it had to be that way, but yeah, because that was when everybody was in the middle of, well, I don't know about the middle, but over here, they were telling people, stay home until you're dying and then go to the emergency room. They wouldn't help you in any kind of early stages way. And so by the time I went in there, I had pneumonia, and I'd been in bed for a month, and so I'd lost all my... my muscles were atrophied. By the time I got out of the hospital, I couldn't even walk to the bathroom without sitting down and taking a rest with my oxygen tank. It was pretty bad. Yeah, I wasn't doing much creating then, but I was praying. I was getting closer to the truth.

Tim Stackpool:

And not long after that, apparently you suffered an injury to your arm as well.

Darren Burrows:

Yeah, I did. I was probably because I was trying to do too much, because my wife had been driving the tractor, doing all the farm work herself, worried to death about me. So, yeah, I did. I hurt my arm, I ended up having to have... shoulder, having to have surgery on that. So, yeah, it was quite a year.

Tim Stackpool:

Did you get frustrated with yourself not being able to do your practice?

Darren Burrows:

There was nothing else to do. I don't know about frustrated, but it was good, it was good. I guess a lot of people say that, but it was good. And I realised it was good at the time because I think of all the things that aren't important, and not that I thought things were important that weren't important, but you tend to get swept away in your daily, "I'm going to do this, and I'm in control of that," and trying to be in control of things. And it's really good, a reminder, a good reminder that I'm really not in control of anything, and I'm going to enjoy each day as long as God wants me to, and then I won't be doing that here anymore.

Tim Stackpool:

Thinking of the skills that you've now acquired or developed, is there a bit of a legacy you think now that you have to pass on eventually?

Darren Burrows:

No, I don't. I don't think I'm that conceited to think that. But I do wish I'd started it sooner because, well, you said we're about the same age. I start looking and going, Wow, no matter how good I get or no matter how much progression I... Not necessarily good, but no matter how much progression I make in this art form, I don't have the same amount of time to progress in it as I would've if I'd started at 10, 15, 20 years earlier than I did.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, look, again, I think it's remarkable, the quality of the work that you are turning out considering it's been an eight-year journey for you. But in terms of that, every artist has an elusive piece or an elusive commission. Is there any work of art that's missing from your portfolio? What would you still dearly love to create? Or have you done everything that you want to do?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, no, I haven't done everything I want to do. There's technical gem-setting skills I'm working on, castle setting, and things like that. And I find the interesting thing is this is probably writing or most art forms I would think, is that at a certain point, the pieces take on a life of their own. And some pieces that I wasn't that... well, I won't say wasn't that interested in, but wasn't that deep into, I'd finish. I go, "Wow, that's my new favourite piece I've done right there." And I look back and it is a gradual immersion into the piece that I didn't know was coming and I wasn't setting out to make any kind of masterpiece. And not that it is a masterpiece, but for me, I find a certain wholeness in full circle, and I wouldn't say perfection, but a certain epiphany in it, I guess.

Tim Stackpool:

Is there a favourite piece you have or perhaps the materials in that piece that make it your favourite?

Darren Burrows:

Well, I like the knife I just put up on social media.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I saw that. It's beautiful. It's beautiful.

Darren Burrows:

Thank you so much. And that's another one of those pieces that I didn't realise it was going to be that beautiful, but it's very... The thing I like about it's very process oriented. You just start out and you do the steps and pay particular attention to each line and each step of the project, if you're building a piece, and in the end, all those steps, you step back and you look and go, "Wow, that came out pretty neat," or you go, "Well, it really didn't come out at all."

Tim Stackpool:

What I found astonishing is that you show the knife and the engraving to the camera, and then remarkably, as you bring it closer, there's just this absolute finery of detail, which is astonishing to see. I'd love to see the process, but you must be working in the tiniest of spaces with the tiniest of tools to make this work.

Darren Burrows:

Oh, yeah. And with the microscope, and it's many, many hours of... where, yeah, probably if you step back, it doesn't seem like you're getting much done. But yeah, it's very detailed and process oriented, and I guess that's what I enjoy about it. The end result is nice when it comes out. And a lot of people say, "Well, that must take a lot of patience." I hear that a lot. But really it's the other way around. It builds the patience. It gives you the patience. Doing this gives the patience. I'm not really a patient person, but I've become patient doing this.

Tim Stackpool:

Can I talk about your acting for a second, particularly Magpie Funeral, which is a delightful film, the wonderful character of Sy McMurphy. What did it take to have you step out of what you're doing in your regular life and say, "You know what? I'm going to put my hand up for this movie." What did it take to take the loupe out of your hand and say, "I'm going to give this a crack?"

Darren Burrows:

Well, that's because my friend Greg Green wrote it and directed it, and he had directed me in a little Short I did called The Telltale Heart and Edgar Allan Poe. And I really enjoyed working with Greg so much, and I enjoyed the way that piece came out so much. So Greg called me and said, "Hey, I'm going to write this thing. Would you do the part?" And I said, "Well, okay, well, let me see it. And sure, Greg, I can never refuse you." And because at this point, for me, that's the part I remember about working. People see the work on the screen when you're acting, but for me, I remember what was happening that day, the people I worked with, what I had for lunch, all kinds of different things like that. And so for me, the experience with Greg on The Telltale Heart, I thought, "Yeah, I would enjoy spending some days with Greg and doing some fun stuff together." And so that's why I agreed to do that when he wrote that script.

Tim Stackpool:

So given that you were doing that, you'd established your art practice, do the two works of art, the two styles of art, the two types of art, did they get in the way of each other, in your mind?

Darren Burrows:

Well, only that I couldn't do one while I was doing the other. But really, it's the same art, really. It's just me. It's always me. All of us have a connectivity in our humanness and the way we experience life as humans. And so when someone approaches any art from a place of truth, another human, at least me, I will recognise in another artist that truth, the truth that they're expressing, and that's what will appeal to me in all varied forms of arts and styles of arts. And I can think of all the styles and different paintings, and I can be touched by all the great artists who do all the different styles of painting, and it's because of their place of truth that they're painting from. And that's the same with music and writing. And so, for me, if people enjoy my art and they enjoy my different arts, then the only thing I can think of is it's all coming from the same place. It's just a different expression or different discipline of expressing the same thing.

Tim Stackpool:

So just before we go, and I've done this with a number of other performers who have expressed their art in another practice, and I'm borrowing this from James Lipton at the Actors Studio, I'd love to ask you a few quick fire questions to wrap up. Is that cool?

Darren Burrows:

Yeah, I'll try not to get the answers wrong.

Tim Stackpool:

I don't think there are any wrong answers, Darren, but let's kick it off.

Darren Burrows:

Okay.

Tim Stackpool:

Your favourite film, apart from your own?

Darren Burrows:

Oh, that's a tough one. The first thing that pops into my head, but it's not my favourite film, is it's a Wonderful Life, but it would be a... Or Citizen Kane, maybe. That's a good one. I like the classics.

Tim Stackpool:

Your favourite actor.

Darren Burrows:

Gee, that's a tough one too. I sure like Michael Caine, and I sure like Clint Eastwood.

Tim Stackpool:

Your favourite song?

Darren Burrows:

My favourite song? How about Ave Maria.

Tim Stackpool:

A general preference. The Beatles or the Rolling Stones?

Darren Burrows:

Well, when I was younger, I liked The Beatles, and when I got older, I liked the Rolling Stones, but I probably was in a more rude place at that time.

Tim Stackpool:

An automobile or a motorbike?

Darren Burrows:

I've ridden my motorcycle all over the United States for thousands of miles at a time, but these days I only ride it to the post office or for a cup of coffee or a dessert and mostly stick to the car. So it's an age thing, I guess.

Tim Stackpool:

Does pineapple ever belong on pizza?

Darren Burrows:

Well, I've eaten it, but probably not.

Tim Stackpool:

One place you'd like to visit, but you haven't.

Darren Burrows:

Oh, I'd like to get to Rome.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your favourite word?

Darren Burrows:

Probably "Oh, boy." I seem to say that a lot these days.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your least favourite word?

Darren Burrows:

Well, "No." I guess I don't like the word "No."

Tim Stackpool:

What sound or noise do you love?

Darren Burrows:

I kind of like the silence these days, but I guess it's never really silent. I hear the train in the distance right now, and some chickens and like that, and the wind blowing a little bit right now. I'm outside, so yeah, that's probably what I like.

Tim Stackpool:

What sound or noise do you hate?

Darren Burrows:

Traffic and people yelling and screaming and angry and...

Tim Stackpool:

Outside of the arts, what profession, other than your own, would you like to attempt?

Darren Burrows:

I don't know about attempt at this point, but boy, I appreciate clean lines in anything. So, welding, masonry, building things, I think. I don't know about over there, but they don't teach any of that stuff in school anymore. I think it's a real loss, the trades. I would've liked to have been a tradesman, I think. I would've been a tradesman if I hadn't run off looking for my dad. That really messed me up.

Tim Stackpool:

The biggest surprise you ever got?

Darren Burrows:

Being a success at anything, I guess.

Tim Stackpool:

If you could do it all over again, Darren, what would you change?

Darren Burrows:

Boy, knowing what I know now, I'd probably change almost everything. I don't understand those people that say, "Oh, I wouldn't change anything." Metaphysically or theoretically, you could say, "Well that all made you who you are today, and so I wouldn't change anything." But most of my life seems trying to put a smooth finish on a big mistake. I guess I'd probably change most things, but I'd probably just goof it all up in a different way. So there you go.

Tim Stackpool:

Now I know you have a strong belief, but what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?

Darren Burrows:

"Welcome, good and faithful servant."

Tim Stackpool:

That's lovely. Darren, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today.

Darren Burrows:

It was a pleasure, Tim. Thanks for having me.