

In Proximity
Episode 9: Jamie Carragher and Paola Mardo
Final Transcript

Disclaimer: Hi. It's Paola. And I just wanna give you a heads up. Today's guest is screen and television writer Jamie Carragher. And we at Proximity Media want to acknowledge that the Writers Guild of America, the labor union representing writers of motion pictures, television, radio, and internet programming, is currently on strike. Our company works closely with writers and we have writers in the company as well. So we stand in solidarity with the WGA and support all writers – and workers – in getting fair treatment and pay. Thanks for listening to In Proximity. Here's the show.

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to P-R-O-X.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Jamie Carragher: I really wanted to do certain writing classes in the film school, but because I wasn't actually part of the film school, I couldn't take them. So I mean, I'll give you this one example. There was a writing room class that was. I went three times. I loved it and was chipping in and being part of the class. But then I think on the fourth time that I went to the class an administrator came along and was like, you can't be here. You're not–

Paola Mardo: What?

Jamie Carragher: Yeah. Yeah.

Paola Mardo: What?

Jamie Carragher: I mean, yeah, in my imagination, they sort of take me off in handcuffs and put me away somewhere. But yeah, they just said, you've got to stop coming to this class, please.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're listening to In Proximity.

Jamie Carragher is a screenwriter who most recently worked as story editor on the fourth and final season of the HBO drama Succession. He got his start as a writer's assistant on Succession season 2 and on the HBO comedy Run, working closely with showrunners Jesse Armstrong and Vicky Jones.

Jamie is based in London, but before writing for television, he spent time in Los Angeles at the University of Southern California where he and I were classmates in the graduate arts journalism program at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.

I'm Paola Mardo, head of audio at Proximity Media and the voice you hear at the top of every episode of *In Proximity*. I'm also a podcast host and producer, and I created, hosted, and produced *Long Distance*, a narrative podcast and short documentary series about stories in the Filipino diaspora. It was part of the inaugural Google Podcasts creator program and was dubbed one of *Vanity Fair's* 10 Essential Podcasts from AAPI Creators, *IndieWire's* 50 Best Podcast Episodes of 2020, and *The New York Times* Podcast Club's 2019 Picks.

Today is a first because I get to sit down with my old friend and classmate to talk about how he got his start as a TV writer on *Succession* and how journalism school didn't quite turn out how we expected and yet played a pivotal role in both of our creative careers.

Jamie Carragher: Hi, I'm Jamie Carragher. I'm a screenwriter. I'm story editor on the current and last season of *Succession*, and I live in London.

Paola Mardo: Hey, this is Paola Mardo. I am a podcast host and producer, and I'm also the head of audio at Proximity Media, meaning I lead production and development for all of our audio projects and podcasts, including this one. And I am joining this conversation from Los Angeles. And Jamie, I'm so honored to be speaking with you today. You're actually our first international guest. We've never done, like, a cross-country conversation, but super stoked to be doing it with you. So welcome.

Jamie Carragher: Thanks. I mean, I was hoping you might fly me out to LA, but that's okay.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Season two. Season two, we'll do a follow up.

Well, we'll just jump into it. For a bit of context, you and I met at the arts journalism program at USC or University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. So we were in the, like, arts program within the journalism school. Can you tell me why you applied to Annenberg of all things, and also what you were doing at that moment in your life that led to this decision?

Jamie Carragher: So when I applied to the program, I was living in Liverpool with my parents working as a teaching assistant in a high school and writing scripts and doing little writing programs where I could, but I sort of felt a little bit stuck. And I came across this program at USC that was only one year long, and I felt that, you know, there was a possibility of getting funding for that program. I could hopefully go to USC and take some of the amazing script writing classes, but also not laden myself with three years' worth of debt that you would have to do if you went on the straight screenwriting track. Yeah, it didn't quite turn out the way I expected it to in that sense.

I really wanted to do, like, certain writing classes in the film school, but because I wasn't actually part of the film school, I couldn't take them. So I mean, I'll give you this one example. There was a writing room class that was almost like a—it was a writer's room in all sense and purposes, except it was a class. So it was sort of artificial in that two sort of senior students were developing an idea, and they had the other students as their writers. And there was a

professional writer sort of overseeing this class. I went three times. I loved it and was, like, chipping in and being part of the class. But then I think on the fourth time that I went to the class, an administrator came along and was like, you can't be here. You're not—

Paola Mardo: What?

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, yeah.

Paola Mardo: What?

Jamie Carragher: I mean, yeah, in my imagination, they sort of take me off in handcuffs and, you know, put me away somewhere.

Paola Mardo: Dude.

Jamie Carragher: But, yeah, they just said, "You've got to stop coming to this class, please."

Paola Mardo: And it's because you were not part of the film school.

Jamie Carragher: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: You were in the journalism school. I didn't realize, I guess because I was—so I ended up getting a fellowship for film criticism that was, like, a joint fellowship between the cinema school and Annenberg. So I got to take classes in both, but I also just assumed all arts students could do—because I took a class in the music school, you took a playwriting one. That's crazy.

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, I could—I could take certain classes, but this was the class that I really wanted to do because I knew that it was kind of closest to what I wanted to do professionally.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Jamie Carragher: And, yeah, those sort of three weeks that I did get sort of confirmed, like, "Wow, yeah, this is definitely the environment that I'd like to be in."

Paola Mardo: And I remember you, specifically, like you were always—I knew you, you know, had done theater, I knew you were interested in television writing. In fact, honestly, sometimes I was like, "Wait, why is he in this journalism program? What is he doing here?" Your writing was always very witty and sharp. It was really cool to see that even in this journalism program, that there were other folks who were not straightforward journalists.

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, definitely there would be moments when I would feel really incompetent at certain elements of the course, particularly the summer camp where we had to do—

Paola Mardo: Oh, my god.

Jamie Carragher:—just basic journalism skills and to do with getting interviews and vox pops. And, you know, technically, I was, like, a caveman compared to—you know, on the other side of the coin, I remember looking at you and thinking, "God, you've got so much technical ability in the audio world," that I felt very...

[LAUGHTER]

... felt very intimidated. You know, all I was doing was dropping puns in a film class, whereas you actually had—

Paola Mardo: Good puns, very good puns.

Jamie Carragher:—whereas you actually had a lot of technical ability. But, yeah, it's sometimes great to be surrounded by people with very different skill sets, isn't it?

Yeah, but LA was important for me career-wise in a different way in that I reconnected with my friend Ben Newman, who at the time was working at UTA as an agent's assistant. And we used to go and watch the Liverpool soccer games very early in the morning at this Liverpool bar. Because he was an agent's assistant and genuinely the sort of only person I really knew working on that side of the industry, I would say to him, "I'd love to get in a room somehow, or be an assistant to somebody or just to sort of get my first step on the ladder." And, yeah, I think, eventually, you know, I bugged him so much, he laid it out to me and was like, "Look, you've got no visa and no experience, so it's not going to happen."

So, at the end of the master's at USC, I went back to England. And, yeah, I felt like I'd sort of gone back to square one. I was working again at a high school as a teaching assistant. And it felt, it just felt a lot worse to be back where—to be back where I had been. And then Ben sent me a message on Facebook saying, "Do you know Jesse Armstrong?" And I was like, "Yeah, I'm very familiar." He's had a lot of hit shows in the UK for a long time, like Peep Show and The Thick of It and Fresh Meat, shows that I loved and still do.

And anyway, Ben was like, "Yeah, well Jesse's got this new show. It's not out yet. It's called Succession. They need a writer's assistant for season two. Would you like me to put you up for the job?" And I think if I could have put my head through the computer screen and nodded in front of his head, I would've done that. But, yeah, he got me the trial for the job and, yeah, I got the job. So I went from being a teaching assistant in high school to two weeks later being in the Succession writers room.

[Good Times by Ludwig Göransson]

Jamie Carragher: What about you? Because you were doing Long Distance.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I guess, bring it back to our time at Annenberg. I did that film criticism fellowship, and I really was like, "I'm going to be a film critic." My advisor for the program was Kenneth Turan, this legendary film critic for the LA Times. And we had meetings together and one time I had lunch with him at the LA Times building.

And he was like, "Anyone can do this job. Anyone can be a film critic. But, you know, what I think you are—I think you're a producer." And the reason he said that—I don't know if you remember, you know, we got to watch films and write about them for the program. One of the films was I am Not Your Negro directed by Raoul Peck based on an unfinished manuscript by James Baldwin.

And I remember there was a screening at USC that a bunch of us were trying to get into, but it was, like, packed. And I don't know how or why, but I somehow finagled my way into getting

tickets for all of us. And for some reason, Kenny knew that. He was like, "You're a producer. You know, you make things happen." And I was like, "Wait, what?" And at the time, I couldn't see what he was seeing. But I look back on that now and I'm like, "Oh, yeah."

I remember when I left the program, when we graduated, you know, I'd gained all these skills. I—you know, I was able to—my thesis was a podcast, a narrative documentary podcast about tiki bars and cultural appropriation. I was like, "Yes, I'm going to work in this industry," etc. But this was like 2017, and there were no podcast jobs, really, not a lot, not as many as there are now. And in fact, the term "podcast producer," it was so weird to say. Radio producer was a thing. I remember I would put "audio producer" on my resume, and it still felt odd because there just weren't many people doing that yet.

And I remember having sort of, like, a crisis because all I could get—like, I interned at a local public radio station, KPCC. I was making \$12 an hour after grad school, and I had, you know, loans from that as well because I had to take some on because the fellowship wasn't enough. It didn't work out exactly as I planned, this grad school thing, but I got enough out of it to help keep me going. And I was determined to work in this field and do my own thing. But at the same time, the system was hard to navigate. There were some tough moments, too, where I was like, "I don't know if this is going to work out. Did I pick the right path?" Yeah.

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, I definitely couldn't have predicted the way that it worked out. And, as I say, the year after LA, I kind of felt, like, quite angry at myself in a way. I felt that I was really sort of going round in circles and not making the kind of progress that I wanted to.

Paola Mardo: Man, I wish you called me. I wish—I wish we called each other.

Jamie Carragher: Yeah. Yeah. I think it's very easy to isolate yourself, as well, when you are going through those periods where things aren't quite working out, when actually that's probably the time when you should be doing more reaching out.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, totally, 100 percent. So after the graduate program, and I didn't plan for this, but a lot of the stories I was interested in at the time were things in my community that I was sort of, I wasn't searching for them, I was just sort of interested. And even before Annenberg, actually, here in LA, there's a place called Historic Filipinotown, and I was interviewing people about the community. That's what led me to that Tiki story in the first place because LA's Tiki bars have, like, deep roots in the Filipino community. The first Tiki bartenders were Filipino.

Jamie Carragher: I mean, people should check out that piece because it's really great.

Paola Mardo: Oh man, gosh, thank you. It's also on Long Distance if you want to check it out. But what ended up happening was there were a bunch of stories I wanted to tell about, you know, my community, being Filipino American and having lived in the diaspora, and I could never find a home for them. Like, I had pitched some, like, arts culture stuff to NPR and got rejected. At a certain point, I was like, "Well, I just want to do this anyway. So, like, why don't I just make a podcast?"

Jamie Carragher: I remember being a year out of Annenberg and seeing you with your Tiki podcast and—and with Long Distance and thinking, "Wow, you're sort of making a career here," in a way that I didn't feel, at the time, that I had that much to show at that moment, which

is—yeah, it just goes to show that sometimes you can, from afar, think that somebody else has got it all figured out and actually-

Paola Mardo: Definitely not, definitely not. It's funny. You say, like, from the outside, like, it looked like I was doing all this stuff, and I was. I was getting into these programs and got a bit of funding for the show as well. But it was also, like, a lot of work, and I had to freelance still on the side, and still podcasting wasn't quite, you know, paying as much. So it was really hard. But I think both you and I sort of figured things out.

[KN 9 to 5 by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I want to ask about where you are now. Succession, the fourth and final season, and your role is different, right? So you started as an assistant. Do you remember what the first day was like?

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, I can remember the situation quite clearly because it was a really hot summer in London, like LA weather, but in London, so absolutely no capability for dealing with the heat. And we were in this big office in Brixton, and everyone was just sweating for a long time trying to pitch their stories. But it was the summer of the World Cup and all the writers were going to the pub after the room ended. And, you know, very kindly, one of the writers, I forget who said, "Jamie, you're going to come and join us at the pub."

And I said, "No, I've got to finish these notes. They need to be perfected. They need to be put in order." And so everyone sort of heads out. And then, yeah, I remember sort of Jessie, you know, nodding at me and sort of basically, you know, saying, "You made the right choice there in staying back and doing the work on the notes. That's the thing—that's the thing that I need from you, and that's why you're in this room."

You know, people often ask me, when I'm talking about the assistant position, like, did I send in scripts of my own to get this job? And, honestly, no one from Succession read anything I wrote for the first year because, first and foremost, it's like, "Are you a good writer's assistant? And then, you know, you grow closer to these people. They become your friends and mentors, and then they ask you to see your work. But I had to prove, on top of being the assistant, that I had the ideas to really earn my place in the room.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, that's interesting because being in a writer's room sounds so glamorous, but it is a job, and there's work. Can you just talk about what the, I guess, levels are, like what your roles were every season since you started, and what each job sort of entailed?

Jamie Carragher: So I joined as the writer's assistant on season two. And the role is basically to take notes of everything that is said in the room that relates to the show and to make it make sense so that, at the end of the day, you've got, like, a really good document that will then eventually feed into the scripts. You know, so many of the things that are said within the room do feed directly into the scripts.

And that was a really tough job. Maybe it sounds quite simple in a sense, just writing things down. But, you know, when you're in a room with 10 really great, funny writers, you want to make sure that you're catching everything that they say that is relevant. And, you know, you finish one day, and then the next day comes straight after. I know that sounds pretty obvious, but each day was its own thing. You could never allow one day's work to go over into the next

day because we'd be back in that morning, and a whole new day of ideas was going to come straight at you.

So the writer's assistant job was really hard. But I was determined to be really good at that job because I knew from day one when I was in there that that was exactly the kind of place that I wanted to be in. You know, just the flow of ideas and talking about the story and talking about what different characters do in different situations, I was like, wow, this is—this is the dream.

But as you—you do find out that living the dream also has its challenges, right? So I—yeah, I worked really hard at being a great assistant. And then I felt that if I did a really good job at that, then I could just start pitching my own ideas and jokes into the show.

And, you know, Jesse Armstrong, who is the showrunner, was always so generous and democratic and let me speak up when I had an idea, and, yeah, that gave me the confidence to keep contributing. And then for season three, he made me a staff writer. And then on season four, I just got promoted to story editor. Really the difference between staff writer and story editor is a little bit—yeah, maybe you personally feel more confident because you've got the backing of the people in charge. But really, when we're all sat down just talking through ideas and pitching different storylines, there isn't really that hierarchical divide that you might sometimes get the impression of.

Paola Mardo: At what point did—do you remember, was it you who pitched an idea first, or did someone ask you, like, “Hey, Jamie, do you have any jokes?” or whatever it is? Do you remember that moment where you were like, “Oh, opportunity. I got to, you know, prove my worth.”

Jamie Carragher: I definitely became quite adept at waiting for a dead moment in the room when no one was saying anything. I made it a sort of internal rule of my own just to never talk over any of the writers when they were speaking. Like, they can talk—you know, they can sort of talk over each other. But until I am a writer, then that isn't something I should be doing. But then I became—you know, over a six-hour period of talking or whatever it is, there's always going to be a few moments in a day where you can say the idea that you've been hanging onto.

I definitely can remember the first day that I made the room laugh, and that was, like, a big—that was a big one for me. Like, I remember leaving the room that day and sort of comically fist pumping the air or something like that because I felt, wow, I made these writers who I've admired for years before laugh at something I said. So I felt like, “Yeah, I'm in the right place.”

Paola Mardo: That's awesome. Do you remember a time when you, like, bombed, like said something, and no one laughed?

Jamie Carragher: I mean, that's probably the very next day, probably that—I probably—yeah. There are some days, and again, it's talking about that sort of medium-term, long-term view. If you—sometimes you'll go into the writer's room, and you will just have a stinker of a day where every idea you say just seems to, like, curdle in your mouth, and you sort of lose faith in it. And every joke that you try and make just doesn't—doesn't work, and you just sort of have to brush that day off and come back again the next day.

Paola Mardo: Do you feel like, “Wow, I am a writer now”?

Jamie Carragher: I definitely feel confident coming out of *Succession* that I've been part of a really great room and contributed to a show that I'm really proud of, but, you know, you've still got to keep going and keep pushing yourself. I think Bob Dylan said that, "The artist should always be in the state of becoming." You haven't, like, arrived. You've got to still keep trying to find your goals and ways to push yourself. So I'm certainly not coasting off the back of it, even if I'm really proud to have been part of it.

[Prox Recs Theme by Ken Nana with Caution to the Wind by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So we've come to the part of our podcast called Prox Recs, where basically you and I share recommendations we have for listeners. It could be a book, a movie, a quote, podcast, literally anything, ideally something related to your career path or your work that has maybe helped you along the way. So do you want to start?

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, I think my first piece of advice would be to start telling people what it is that you want to do. I—You know, and I think you can even remember back when I was at USC, I would tell people that I wanted to be a screenwriter. And, you know, I told it to my friend Ben, and he remembered me when—when the opportunity came. So if you start telling people what it is that you are working towards, then people can think of you when something comes up. And whereas I feel like if you just keep it to yourself, it—you're making it—you're making it harder for yourself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And actually you just—I'm going to change my thing because I had something, but I love what you just said, and I think it'll compliment it. But I'm going to have to—it's on a card. Let me grab it. One sec.

[CHAIR CREAKS]

Jamie Carragher: Okay.

[PAPERS SHUFFLING]

Paola Mardo: So my Prox Rec is also a quote. You've inspired me to share this one. I actually have it on this little card. It's from this designer. Her name is Melody Ehsani. She's really cool. She's a clothing/jewelry designer in Los Angeles, but she's also just a really cool, interesting creative. She makes clothing for women, but it's very empowering. And there's, like, little messages in the tags and things that sort of, like, uplift you. It's weird to say, but, like, if you wear her stuff, you know what I mean. But when you purchase things from her, they send little postcards, too, with these interesting, kind of uplifting sayings, which I kind of love. And this one says—and I've kept it because I do love it—it says, "You already are what you're looking for."

And I don't know, I kind of like that because I feel like we're always searching for that moment when we can finally call ourselves a writer or a producer or whatever it is. But it's like, no, no, no. If you're doing the work, you are the thing. And so just keep doing the work.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

Paola Mardo: Jamie, well, thank you so much for being on the show. It was really cool to hear about your journey since we met. And—and, yeah, I can't wait to see what else you do next.

Jamie Carragher: Thanks for having me. I feel like we need to get a cocktail at a Tiki bar next. That's what we should do.

Paola Mardo: 100 percent.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media. If you like the show, be sure to follow, rate, and review it on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app, and tell your friends and loved ones to do the same. You can do that right now. Send a link to someone who you think might really like this conversation.

Learn more and read transcripts of this episode and others, plus get links to the projects we discuss, on ProximityMedia.com. Don't forget to follow @ProximityMedia on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.

The show is produced by me, Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant. Audio editing for this episode is by Cedric Wilson.

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity. Meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

Jamie Carragher: Yeah, I mean, finishing things is really important, as well, I'd say.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

Jamie Carragher: Maybe prioritize, like, less projects, but finish them because that was definitely something I used to do when I was younger, is I'd start like 25 different things in a year. And then there was one year when I was like, "No, I'm going to finish four things this year."

Paola Mardo: And you did it. Did you? You did four things?

Jamie Carragher: Probably not. Probably didn't.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: And if you didn't, it's all good. It's all good. Just, just keep going.