

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:12	Jesse Thorn	Host	I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:14	Music	Transition	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse	Host	There's a new movie hitting Netflix, this month. It's called <i>Tigertail</i> . It focuses on a father and his daughter. There's the father, Grover—he's played by the great Tzi Ma. He was born in Taiwan, moved to the US as a young adult. He's quiet, reserved, and stubborn. His daughter, Angela, is played by Christine Ko. She was born in the US and, despite the challenges they have connecting with each other, they have a lot more in common than either would like to admit. The film follows Grover's life story. When he came to the US, what it was like, what he left behind, and the pain that he carries with him.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
			It's a moving and beautiful film, written and directed by my guest, Alan Yang. Alan is ordinarily a comedy writer. He was a long-time writer and producer on <i>Parks and Recreation</i> . He Co-created the Aziz Ansari show, <i>Master of None</i> , and the Amazon comedy, <i>Forever</i> . <i>Tigertail</i> is the first film he's written and directed. And even though it's highly fictionalized, the story it tells is deeply personal. Yang's parents are Taiwanese immigrants themselves. And he said that making this film brought him closer with his parents and their culture. Let's listen to a little bit from <i>Tigertail</i> .
			In this scene, Angela has just picked up Grover from the airport. She's learned her father has been in Taiwan and that her grandmother has died.
00:01:41	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:42	Clip	Clip	Angela: I'm sorry about Grandma.
			Grover: <i>[Beat.]</i> Thank you.
			Angela: <i>[Beat.]</i> Are you alright?
			Grover: Hm.
			<i>[Birds chirp in the background.]</i>
			Angela: I know this is a hard time for you. But I really wish you had told me about the funeral.
			Grover: <i>[Beat.]</i> It was a small ceremony.
			Angela: She was my grandmother.

Grover: You didn't really know her. You never visited. The last time you were in Taiwan was when I took you and your brother, when you were kids.

Angela: [*Softly.*] That's true

Grover: It's a long trip. Very far away. And I know you're busy at work.

00:02:35 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:02:36 Jesse Host

Alan Yang, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's very nice to have you on the show.

00:02:39 Alan Yang Guest

Thank you so much for having me!

00:02:41 Jesse Host

Had you—before you made this film—ever sat your parents down and asked them about their experiences... I mean, not just their immigrant experiences, but maybe their experiences before you were alive?

00:02:58 Alan Guest

Not very often. [*Laughs.*] Basically, when I started thinking about writing this movie, those conversations started to become much more frequent, because they were at a zero, or near zero, level before that. And they weren't exactly offering up a bunch of stories from their past, themselves.

00:03:17 Jesse Host

It is kind of a weird thing. One of my—close member of my family is an immigrant, and she had a very difficult time where she grew up. And, like, those things that I know about her experience there are either jokes that she told, like funny stories that—mostly about trauma—and, like, occasionally my dad would tell me something. And you just kind of, like—like, backchannels.

00:03:43 Alan Guest

[*Chuckling.*] Yeah, it definitely oscillates between, like, one little kernel of like, "Oh, yeah, they—" Like, there's a picture of my dad, like, clearly in a military uniform. I was like, "Oh yeah, what's going on there?"

He was like, "Oh, yeah, it was hard."

[*They laugh.*]

It's like, "And what?! Oh, you were in the Army? Like—wait, you never told me about that!" Like, you're standing next to, like, a military jeep, but yeah. It's either that or really not that much. And I think, you know, maybe the exception is some other parents will brag about the hardships they went through, but my parents didn't really even do much of that. They just kind of just didn't mention it. And I knew, for a fact, how wildly different their experiences growing up were from my own, in America. But I really didn't know what they were, exactly.

00:04:21 Jesse Host

How did it manifest itself in your life, when you were a kid and a teenager? That their experiences were so different from yours?

00:04:29 Alan Guest

I just knew they were, for a fact, because I knew the rough outlines. Which is that my dad's dad passed away when he was a year old and he was raised by a single mother. And she didn't have the resources to take care of all of them, so when he was a baby everyone in the village told her to give him up for adoption. And just literally give him away. But she was really stubborn—one of the most stubborn people in the world—and she wanted to keep him. So, she temporarily gave him to her relatives, in the rice fields. And

so, he lived out there for a while, while he was a kid. Then he came back, you know, I know that—I knew that she worked in a factory. That's about it.

And I knew that all of those hardships that my dad went through were so different from my life, because I was like, "I want Sega Genesis and I can't get one! And this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me!"

[They laugh.]

00:05:57	Jesse	Host	Like, that was like easily—and then, later one, I got a Sega Genesis! So even that wasn't a very long struggle. But, yeah. It... you know, I just knew there was a difference. It was both generational and cultural. I think our lives were so different and I think—I don't wanna over generalize, because every family is different—but there is, I think, a trend in some Asian families for there to be a very clear delineation between parents and children. It's not like you're buddies. It's not like you're hanging out. I wasn't telling them about dates I went on and they weren't telling me about dates they went on as younger people. <i>[Laughs.]</i> So, I think it was—it was the same. You know? It was the same on both sides. I think sometimes people feel weird or guilty about the fact that they weren't as interested in their parents' lives when they were kids or teenagers, because kids and teenagers tend to be solipsistic. But, I mean, it's also—like, you're try—when you're trying to figure out how—who you are, it seems reasonable to me to be a little miffed that your parents had this grand scale experience that is just, like, so much of an easier explanation for why it's hard to be a young person. <i>[Laughs.]</i> You know what I mean?
00:06:35	Alan	Guest	Yeah. <i>[Laughs.]</i> It's funny. It's like, "Well, uh. I didn't have any struggles." <i>[Laughs.]</i> But I mean, obviously, that's an exaggeration, but—yeah, I mean, sometimes I think about it. It's like, yeah they had this epic life! They had a really crazy experience with legitimate struggles. I mean, it's—I think about, sometimes, the scenes that we shot in the Bronx, where it's—you know, it's two young Asian people in their 20s who are just learning English, and they're walking around the Bronx in the '70s and they look around and all the faces are white, black, and brown. There's very few Asian people. And they were struggling to make ends meet. And that is just an incomprehensible struggle to me. That is a very—a very specific struggle that I haven't seen depicted on screen, number one. But number two, you're right that like—you know, I'll never go through anything that hard. My parents took care of me. And they, you know, I went to school and then I, you know, tried to get a job. And it was—it was just very different.
00:07:40	Jesse	Host	And so, it's one of the things I'm grappling with in the film. When you went away to college—and you went to Harvard, so I imagine you must have been a pretty good student, in high school. A serious student, in high school. When you went away to college, did you already intend to have an artistic career?
00:07:57	Alan	Guest	No way! I had no idea that this was a career!

[They laugh.]

Like, I—this is totally foreign! This is so alien to anything I had any inkling of, growing up. So, when I was a kid, I loved movies. I loved TV. You know, I wasn't really allowed to watch that much of it until I was probably 14 or 15, and then I just started inhaling it to a very unhealthy extent. Or maybe, in retrospect, a healthy extent, 'cause it's now my career. But, yeah. No one I knew—I grew up in Riverside, California, which was about an hour and half from LA, but is so different from LA—sort of spiritually, economically, socio-economically, and all of those things. And so, I didn't know anyone who worked in entertainment. My parents obviously didn't. I didn't know what those names on the screen were, when it says—you know—executive story editor or whatever when you're watching *Seinfeld*. Like, I don't—I didn't know what that was!

I loved big, blockbuster movies. *Jurassic Park*, *Back to the Future*. I loved comedy. I loved—you know—*Seinfeld*, *Simpsons*, *SNL*. And I—when I went to college, I majored in biology! 'Cause I was like, "Aaah! I don't know! I'm kind of equally good at—or bad at—math and science and the humanities." And I felt like if I majored in biology, I could still keep a lot of doors open. But, yeah. I didn't know. I was mainly just terrified. I didn't know if I could handle the school, academically. I went to a big public school. Not that many people went to Harvard or schools like Harvard, so my first year at school, I just really wanted to work as hard as I could and not fail out.

So, yeah! After I managed to do okay academically the first year, I realized I definitely didn't want to work in *[laughing]* biology! I worked in a lab for a while, and I just didn't like it! So, I started doing a couple of things. I always played music, and so I joined a punk rock band. And we would tour on the weekends and we ended up putting out a record and signing to a small label. So, that was really fun. It got me off campus. And then I started writing for a comedy magazine called *The Harvard Lampoon*. Which was really sort of an important experience for me, because it made me more serious about writing and I really enjoyed the people I met on *The Lampoon*. And they were really smart and really funny. And that was when it seemed potentially possible to have a career in something creative or artistic. Because, before that point, it was—it was not possible.

00:10:13 Jesse Host
00:10:16 Alan Guest

Were you punk rock, as a teenager?

Yeeeah! I really was! So, one of the things about growing up in Riverside was, like, the cool kids weren't, like—it wasn't like the football team. It was, like, skateboarders and, like, kids who listened to ska and punk. So, I got really into, like, third wave ska and then I got into two-tone and first wave ska. And then I listened to some punk and some hardcore and it was really big! It was Southern California in, like, the late '90s, early 2000s. And so, it—yeah. It was—it was really big. And I bought a Fender Stratocaster when I was 14 years old and taught myself like four chords. I was like, "I can play, now!"

00:10:53 Jesse Host

And that's pretty much all I know, still! So, *[laughing]* that was it. Did you have an identity based around punk rock or was it a thing to do?

00:11:01 Alan Guest Uh, it was a little of both. I think, you know, I occupied a pretty interesting, sort of, taxonomy in high school. Because I think I was a little bit of a novelty. There weren't that many Asian kids. You know, my school was predominantly White, Latino, and Black. And I think, you know, quite frankly, it was de facto segregated. So, at lunch time, you know, the White kids sat over here and then, like, a lot—over here, like, a lot of Latino kids sat, and Black kids sat over here. And I wasn't any of those things, right? So, I kind of just had to, you know, learn to talk to different people and do my best to get along with a lot of different kinds of people. I remember, at some point—there were so few Asian kids, at some point a classmate of mine who happened to be Asian, she was starting to pass me notes. And she would pass me notes in class and, you know, I don't know what the deal was. I think she wanted to hang out or something.

So, she passed me a note one day that said, "Hey, Alan. How come at lunch you never sit at the Asian tree?" Because there was one tree where the Asian kids would sit. It was, like, four kids.

[They chuckle.]

And I was like, "Well! I—" Like, I wanted to branch out. It was not that—not that I didn't like you guys, I just was trying to—trying to meet different people. So, you know, I was never, like, super popular in high school, but I also did get along with enough people. You know, I played sports a little bit. I played a little bit of soccer. I played a little bit of tennis. And, you know, me and my friends were nerdy, but not super nerdy. So, you know, we had our little niche and we would go to shows. You know, I remember going to see, you know, Reel Big Fish or, like, The Aquabats when I was, like, 14. *[Laughs.]* And so, that was like—that was Southern California in that time period. It—the—yeah. So, it was—it was definitely part of my identity, but I wasn't any one thing. It was, like, yeah—you know, I kind of worked hard, did okay in school, and also listened to music, and also played a little sports. So, it was all of the above.

00:12:53 Jesse Host I have a buddy named Roman Mars, who is a podcaster these days. Hosts a wonderful podcast called *99% Invisible*. And I remember having a conversation with him. He had been a very high achieving student as a teenager. Went to college early. And was in a PhD program for some kind of evolutionary botany, or something like that. And he was working in this lab, looking at microscopes I guess, and I remember him telling me that there was a moment that he had where he realized that he liked knowing the stuff that scientists had learned. Like, that was interesting and satisfying, to him. But he did not have very much interest in doing the boring years and years and years of testing hypothesis that was involved in possibly but also possibly not learning something. *[Laughs.]*

00:13:51 Alan Guest Yeah, you gotta have patience, man! You gotta—that was essentially my story, exactly! Roman Mars, we're two peas in a pod. Because I also went to school early! I went to college early and, you know, I just remember being 17, sitting in the lab pipetting. You know, for hours! *[Laughs.]* You know, you're pipetting for, like, 40 hours a week in addition to going to class. I was like, "I don't know if I wanna do this, anymore, man! I don't wanna—I don't know if I wanna—"

00:14:13 Jesse Host *[Interrupting him.]* What is—can you explain—sorry, Alan—can you explain what pipetting is? Other than, I presume, like a 1920s *[laughing]* dance craze?

00:14:21 Alan Guest *[Laughs.]* Pipetting is like—you have a—you have a tool called a pipette that—where you—it, like, sucks in a tiny amount of liquid and then transfers it. And then you click on it like a pen and then you deposit that liquid into another chamber. So, you're just kind of moving liquid from place to place and, like, you know. You do that and you're using a centrifuge. You're using, you know—you're doing PCR. Like, I literally—I did work in a lab! Like, I do remember this stuff! *[Laughing.]* And, by the way, far more important than what I'm doing now! Because people pipetting are currently gonna cure corona virus! And meanwhile, I made a movie. But yeah!

It's like—it really—it really is—it really was not for me. And so, that was just—that's what—I just realized. It was just personal preference. And, you know, I'm really glad that I decided to pivot away and try to do something creative, because I really love my job, now.

00:15:14 Jesse Host Did you feel as though it was a place where you fit?

00:15:20 Alan Guest *[Sighs.]* Not at all! Not at all. I really had issues, freshman year, where I was scared! I was kind of like, you know, these kids went to private schools and—you know, it was really, like, “Can I hack it?” And then after I—you know—was able to do okay in these classes, these science classes, I just realized, like—'cause I didn't wanna do that. Like, I also didn't feel like, necessarily, like those kids were my people, either. And so, I wasn't like a hardcore pre-med kid or like a hardcore math kid or any of those people. And by the way, you know, if you're Harvard and, you know, you're a hardcore pre-med kid, that's—those are the most hardcore kids in the country!

[They laugh.]

They're really crazy! They're really, really good at being pre-med kids! So, that didn't feel like me, either. And so, I definitely felt a little bit out of place and hadn't found—hadn't found the people I wanted to hang out with. And I think that—you know, once I got on *The Lampoon*, I think that really helped. And I had always—you know, again, as I mentioned—loved comedy. And me and my best friends in high school loved talking about those shows. And so, ultimately it was kind of cool to get on *The Lampoon*, where a lot of those writers had actually worked. And that was a magazine I didn't know existed before I got to school. And so, it was cool to be able to get on.

00:16:32 Jesse Host That's wild. You really—you didn't hear about *The Harvard Lampoon* 'til you got to Harvard?

00:16:38 Alan Guest I didn't know, man! I guess it sounds like I lived in the backwoods, now. But *[laughs]* it really, like—it didn't—it hadn't reached me. It hadn't reached me. It was—you know, they talk about the inland empire where I grew up as sort of, like—they call it IE and it's like a place that wishes it were Orange County.

[They laugh.]

It's like—it's not even—it's not even Orange County. It's like a—it's like an Orange County that doesn't have the financial resources.

And, yeah. It was not a lot of—there were not a lot of people talking about George Plimpton in Riverside, California. There wasn't a lot of John Updike worship in my—in my neck of the woods. So, yeah. It was a really funny! 'Cause, like, I got on staff of *The Lampoon* and it was like people had—you know. People knew about it, in high school. Or they—you know, they head read the magazine. I was like, "I don't know what this is!" Like, I didn't know—I don't know why I'm here! I don't know how I got on! But I'm here and I'm enjoying it. So.

00:17:27 Jesse Host
00:17:30 Alan Guest

Did you have to, like, submit something to get in the door?
Yeah! For sure! It's an intense process. You write a lot of pieces, basically. You write little prose pieces that are like comedy pieces. And then—and then, in my case, you don't make it for many semesters. *[Laughs.]* So, yeah.

[Jesse chuckles.]

That's what ended up happening. I think the staff votes on it. You know. And that's how it—that's how it happens. So, I got on fairly late and when I got on, it was just like—you know, it was just fun for me. 'Cause I wasn't gonna be president of the—of the magazine, or anything. I was just, like, kind of hanging out and meeting people and trying to be funny. So, yeah. That was a fun experience, for me. It's funny, Alan, because you are describing—with extraordinary and typical Southern California chillness—going to Harvard. Which takes extraordinary focus and dedication. And then deciding to do the most frivolous thing that you could possibly do, which is—you know—dedicate your life to writing jokes. And then getting rejected over and over in order to do it. So, what was it that led you to think that you should put in a second submission, after you put in the first one?

00:18:00 Jesse Host

00:18:40 Alan Guest

[Laughing.] I guess I have a lot of willpower, man! I got a lot—I got a lot—I actually have a fair amount of confidence and a lot of willpower! So, I think, uh—well, it wasn't just—it wasn't just twice. I think it might have taken me three or four times to get on. And when I did, the last time I got on—the last time, when I actually got on, I was like, "Eeh, I don't know. I don't think this magazine's very good. I don't think it's very funny. I'm just gonna really phone it in." And then I made it. *[Laughs.]* So! I was like, "Oh, okay. Well, now, I'm on! So—" I really, uh, really phoned in that last submission and somehow got on!

[Jesse laughs.]

So, shout out to the people that got me on. It really, uh, really helped us out.

00:19:15 Jesse Host

00:19:30 Alan Guest

When you were on that magazine, did you meet people who were there because they intended to use it as a ladder to a career in professional comedy, as so many people had in the past?

I think some people had that aspiration, at some point. And I do feel like that was also somewhat frowned upon. *[Laughs.]* It was kind of, like—I think people didn't like when you were, like, very pre-professional. Obviously, there were exceptions. But I think the kind of overarching ethos, when I was there, was "let's be here to be here." You know, "Let's be here to have fun and write jokes and, like, hang out with each other. And it was kind of like—I think it was

kind of seen as kind of gross if you were, like, networking a lot. [Chuckles.] If you were like trying to—I don't know—like, "I'm gonna write for whatever after this!" Like, it certainly wasn't on my radar. And a lot of my friends, like, on the magazine, like—I just don't think we were thinking about it. And it was seen as, like—it was kind of frowned upon.

So, I don't know. That was just that particular era. But, you know, the turnover of that place was very rapid, obviously. So, you know, I think it's probably different from time period to time period.

00:20:23 Jesse Host

Had you decided, for yourself, that you were thinking seriously about making a career of it?

00:20:31 Alan Guest

I think, like, senior year probably it started becoming real. And—because I knew I was graduating, and I was just picking up really good friends with the other people there. And, to me, that was one of the biggest boons of being on *The Lampoon*, was, "Okay. Well, I can move out to LA. I can start writing scripts and joke packets for late-night shows and I'll be unemployed and not have any source of income and basically be broke in Los Angeles, but! If I—since I'm on *The Lampoon* now, I might have two or three friends who move out there with me. And I could have a roommate, or I can have two roommates and we're all gonna be broke and unemployed together."

And that was really—you know, it gave me a little bit of heart. And so, that's what ended up happening, is I moved out to LA with a couple of friends and we got an apartment. And, you know, I still—I—it was a long time ago, now, but I remember going out to LA. We stayed at my parents' house, in Riverside. My mom's place, for a couple—like a week or so while we looked for apartments. And we drove out there and we got a place on Sunset and Fairfax, across from a Rite Aid. And it was—I paid \$675 a month. And it was like, "Okay. Well, now I try to be a writer!"

[They laugh.]

So, yeah, it was—yeah, it was a little scary, but you know, you're there with your buddy. So, that helped.

00:21:48 Jesse Host

What was the first thing that you got?

00:21:50 Alan Guest

I wrote for a show called *Last Call with Carson Daily*, so that was my first job and I'll always be grateful to Carson and everyone on that staff, because—you know, it was talk show on at 1:30 in the morning. And in some ways, looking back, it was the perfect first job for me. Because I got to write, and I got to get stuff on the air. But the writing staff was so incredibly small that we also had to do everything. [Chuckles.] So, you know, like—it was like four writers. And so, you know, a lot of these late-night shows have 20 writers or whatever. On that show, there were three or four of us, and you would write the bit and then you'd produce it. You would cast it. You might act in it. You know, you're gonna edit it. [Chuckles.] You're gonna sort of make the graphics for it. You got—you're doing everything.

And what a great education! And again, I was lucky enough to get to that job when I was, you know, 22 or 23, and start from there. So, it was a good—it was a good education, for sure.

00:22:41 Jesse Host That is a very strange place to start a comedy career.

[Alan laughs.]

And I have nothing—like, I don't have anything—I think Carson Daily is a really talented and skilled broadcaster. Like—and always has been, and that show—which just ended, like, six or—six months or a year ago—was a very strong show, I think. But, on the other hand, if you asked me to make a list of things that Carson Daily is—and I'm really sincere in complimenting him—like... I'm sure he's avuncular, but I wouldn't have chosen hilarious. You know what I mean?

00:23:15 Alan Guest Well, I—that's what I think—someone, somewhere—I don't know where. Like, *Vulture*, or something should do a piece on Carson Daily and his history of fostering comedy writers. Because no one knows this, but there was a certain period of time where he was trying to do a little bit more comedy. You know, I think he wanted to be able to do a traditional monologue and just sort of learn. And so, I think, you know, he idolized Letterman. He was buddies with Jimmy Kimmel. And so, he wanted to try it. And so, his method of trying was really interesting. He hired really—I thought—really excellent comedy writers. And if you look at the history of the writing staff of that show, you will find—among others—Dan Goor, who co-created *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. You will find Steve Healy, who wrote for *The Office* and *30 Rock* and *Veep*. You will find Dave King, who wrote for *Parks and Recreation* and *Workaholics* and *Love*. And you will find, [chuckling] just really good comedy writers! And it's just like—I just think people don't know that! [Laughs.] You know?

Just, like we were all working there at some point in time and it was an amazing—you know—job where I got to live in New York City, and we shot in Rockefeller Center. You know, we shot on *SNL* stage for the first half of the week and what an amazing—I certainly felt incredibly lucky. And Carson was a great boss! Love that guy! [Chuckles.] No complaints!

00:24:30 Jesse Host What's the weirdest thing that you wrote for *The Carson Daily Show* that you're proud of?

00:24:34 Alan Guest Uuh, [laughs] I'm trying to remember. This is not super weird. I'll list off a couple things, 'cause they're—it really ran the gambit. One thing was just kind of a regular bit that was, like—we were always looking for what, you know, in the late-night world, they call refillables. Which is something that you can just, kind of, you know, do every week. It was basically—god, we called it Current Events Karaoke, I think it was. And so, it was—like, people would sing, and I would write lyrics to, like—you know, whatever. Like bird flu was happening, or whatever it was. And you would write karaoke. And then we had people from the staff sing it. And then, years later, like *Fallon* basically did that for his show. Called—it was called Slow Jam the News. But it was just him singing. I was like, "Oh, that's basically the same idea!" [Laughs.] It's the same bit! You know. You just sing—you just write funny lyrics and then write songs. And then do them. But we did that bit for a long time. You know. We did that bit over and over again.

There was also... you know, people would play characters, on the show. I think at one point—this was—I think this was a really, in

some ways, in retrospect, probably not a great bit to do. 'Cause it just disappointed the audience. But we did a bit where Carson said, "Hey! And tonight, on tonight's show, Charlese Theron will be here!" And people went crazy! It's like, "Yeah, wow, Charlese Theron!" And then when Charlese Theron came out, it was—it was just one of our writers, Steve Healy, and he was just, like, a 6'4", like, Irish guy. Who just, like, came out and sat down. And the bit was that Charlese was so deep into character—I think this was, like, post-*Monster*, where she was really getting into character and doing method stuff. He came out and he was like, "Yeah," and he just pretended to be Charlese Theron the entire interview.

And meanwhile, you look at the crowd of, like, random tourists, and they're like, "Where the hell is Charlese Theron!?"

[They laugh.]

This is just extremely—it was, like, the comedy of disappointment. Just a horrible idea, as far as revving up the crowd.

00:26:18 Jesse Host

We'll finish up my interview with Alan Yang after a quick break. When we come back, the actor John Cho both performed in and helped produce *Tigertail*. Then, Alan cut him from the movie. Yang will tell me what it was like breaking the news to Cho. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:26:37 Promo Promo

Music: Guitar strumming.

Speaker: If you're spending more time at home, NPR's *Pop Culture Happy Hour* is here to help. From family-friendly favorites to stream, to recommendations that will calm your nerves, we've got ideas. What to watch, what to read, what to listen to—for both old favorites and new arrivals. *Pop Culture Happy Hour* from NPR, listen and share with your friends.

00:26:57 Promo Promo

[Music fades out.]

Music: Fun, cheerful, soft music.

Benjamin Partridge: If you're looking for a new comedy podcast, why not try *The Beef And Dairy Network*? It won Best Comedy at the British Podcast Awards in 2017 and 2018. Also, I—

[Audio suddenly slows and cuts off.]

Speaker 1: There were no horses in this country until the mid to late sixties.

Speaker 2: Specialist Bovine Arsefat—

Speaker 3: Both of his eyes are squids' eyes.

Speaker 4: Yogurt buffet.

Speaker 5: She was married to a bacon farmer who saved her life.

Speaker 6: Farm-raised snow leopard.

[Strange electronic audio.]

[Beginning audio returns]

Benjamin: Download it today. That's the *Beef And Dairy Network* podcast, from MaximumFun.org. Also, maybe start at episode one. Or weirdly, episode thirty-six, which for some reason requires no knowledge of the rest of the show.

00:27:38 Jesse Host

You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Alan Yang. He was a longtime writer on *Parks and Recreation*. He created the shows *Master of None* and *Forever*. He just wrote and directed his first ever feature film. *Tigertail* is streaming now, on Netflix. Let's get back into our conversation.

What was your first job working on—I don't wanna say working on something that you were proud of, because I'm sure you were very proud of your work at every stop in your career, but when was—when was the first time you worked on a show where you felt like, "Oh. This is it. This is the thing I was trying to get to do."

00:28:16 Alan Guest

I think it was probably *Parks and Recreation* and that's for a number of reasons. You know, I had a—I did a season on *South Park* as well, which was really fun and, again, an amazing education and I loved watching Trey Parker and Matt Stone work, but on *Parks and Rec*, it was really the first time where I had a lot more input than I was used to. And Mike Schur and Greg Daniels—who co-created that show—do a really good job of kind of making everyone feel welcome and sort of, you know, allowing them to try to put their stamp on the show! And they'll hire young writers who don't necessarily have the most experience and try to teach them along the way! And so, when I got hired on *Parks and Rec*, I was a baby writer. You know, I was called—what's in the parlance of the business—a staff writer. Which means you don't really have very many previous credits. And I was, you know, I was probably 25 or something when I got hired.

And it was quite frankly a total learning experience and a learning curve, and I worked on 125 episodes of that show. [Laughs.] And by the end, I was helping Mike to run the show and I was directing episodes and having a lot of input. So, yeah. That was a—that was a formative experience for me. It taught me a lot about, not just writing, but the producing aspect and being onset and directing and working with the cast, who I love very dearly. So, yeah, that was—that was an incredibly fortunate, lucky... happy experience. And a—really a great memory in my career.

00:29:47 Jesse Host

[Jesse's dog yips in the background several times during his question.]

I get the impression from having talked to folks who worked on *The Office* and *Parks and Rec* and the various tendrils that it has sent out, over the years, that a really important part of the process on those shows—and it's one that maybe you can see on the screen, especially in *Parks and Rec*—is putting together a cast of talented and especially interesting people and then using the writing and story process almost to discover, like, what is most interesting about those people as performers.

00:30:36 Alan Guest

And, like, that is true of any sitcom, to some extent. But it's—it feels, to me an outsider, pretty central to how *Parks and Recreation* came to be what it was.

I'd say that's 100% accurate. Absolutely. And I think, obviously as writers and as show creators or showrunners—if you get to that point—you wanna have everything fully fleshed out. You wanna have it be perfect and you wanna have, you know, essentially, “Yeah, I'm gonna hire an actor embody this role.” But I think a lot of times in comedy and particularly ensemble comedy and comedy of the nature that, you know, the kind that *Parks and Rec* was—you gotta use the people you got! You know? You gotta use them to the fullest extent! And if you can tailor your characters, if you can adjust, if you have the luxury of seeing cuts and saying, “Oh my god... you know, this is what this person does. This is what this person does. Let's—let me get to know this person.”

I mean, everything from very early on, visiting Nick Offerman at his woodshop and incorporating woodworking in his character? Literally, we did that! We went to his woodshop like, “This seems, like, interesting for the character.” Or from Chris Pratt, who was a guest star, season one. He was not in the cast. He was—he was a guest star. And it was like, “You know, that character was kind of written as kind of a jerky guy who was kind of mistreating Rashida's character a little bit. And then it was like, “Wait a minute. Chris Pratt is the most likeable human being in the world. [Chuckles.] He's a human golden retriever! This is like—no one's ever met him and disliked him. Let's make the character really, sort of, happy-go-lucky and silly and likable.” And it proved to be a pretty good decision. So, you know, you got to—you got to use what you have. You got—and by that token, by that same token, it behooves you to cast the right people and really just find the right people. And if that means it's not exactly who you, sort of, envisioned when you wrote the role, then screw the role you wrote. Because you've got this real human being here.

And a script isn't a thing that people wanna read. A script isn't the finished product. A script is a blueprint. And you film the real thing with real people and so you gotta use those people. And, you know, very similarly—you know, when we did *Master of None*, we had this role written for a friend Aziz's character. You know, just like a friend character. And we didn't—we honestly were open. We were like, “Allison Jones, you're casting this show. Just send us interesting people.” And so, Allison is the best at her job. She sent us dozens—dozens and dozens of people. Men, women, all races, kind of all ages as well. And I believe the first or second person we met was Lena Waithe, who was mostly a writer at the time. She wrote for *Bones*.

And we were just like, “Lena's the most interesting person! Forget anything we wrote! [Laughs.] Let's just cast her and then make it her! And, like, have it be like—yeah! Dev is hanging out with this woman, Denise, and let's just make it Lena and just have—talk to Lena and get more about her. And get more about her story and incorporate her into it.” And you can't fake that. You know? You can't fake that, onscreen. So, it's a philosophy that I like to adhere to, as well. And, you know, you wanna sort of use the writing and

use the performing in concert with each other. And really have them inform each other.

00:33:36 Jesse Host

When you had the chance to create your own show, in *Master of None*—which you created with Aziz Ansari—did you have... goals?

00:33:46 Alan Guest

Yes. We had many, many specific goals. One of which was simply that we wanted to shoot it in New York, because we liked New York.

[They laugh.]

So, that was part of our thought process, as young men creating a TV show together. We're like, "Let's do it in New York!" The other idea was, "Let's not have it be 25 episodes a year. Let's do ten." So that very—two very simple goals, to start. And then, on top of that, I think we wanted to be a little bit ambitious with it and do something different. And we definitely had a heart-to-heart and many, many sit-downs prior to beginning writing that show, where we said, "Well, what's gonna make this show different? What's gonna make this show special? What's gonna make this show ours and feel fresh and original and something that catches people's attention?"

And so, we really thought about that for a long time. And we had the additional, very lucky break that we sold the show to Netflix and we—you know, were greenlit to make the show. And then *Parks and Rec* got picked up for another year. So, we suddenly had another year to kind of think about it more. And honestly, if we had made the show a year earlier, I think the show would have been *[chuckling]* a lot worse! 'Cause we didn't have very good ideas! And we—the show we pitched—thank you to Netflix for buying it, but the show we pitched was like, "Yeah! It's like, he's in New York and he's single and, like, he's hanging out!" *[Laughing.]* We just didn't have that—we had stuff, obviously, but it just, I don't think, was as interesting as what we ended up making, ultimately.

And so, yeah. So, when we finally got our heads together, we started talking about a lot of things. And some of those things were expanding the perspective to other characters and the parents episode was one we talked about very early on. And I think that might have been the first or second one we ended up writing. And so, that's one that takes place, partially, from the point of view of our parents and is based, kind of, on his parents and my parents' story. And yeah. So, we kind of went from there.

00:35:32 Jesse Host

I mean, it's funny, I remember watching that and I was thinking of it as I watching *Tigertail*, because really—you know, I remember the two of you doing interviews, at the time, and saying that kind of what had happened was you were—you know—doing some reflection in order to figure out what you could do, in this show that was supposed to have a personal voice and had characters that were, you know, stand ins for the two of you, in many ways. And you *[laughing]* realized that you would never have a story like your parents.

00:36:05 Alan Guest

[Wheezing a laugh.] Yeah, it would never be that good! It was essentially, you know, we had that little anecdote of my dad killing his pet chicken for dinner 'cause he didn't have enough food to eat, and I was like, "We'd never have that struggle!" Like, we're never—

that's never gonna happen to us. We're two idiots in a hotel room in New York and we get our own TV show. Like, our lives are cake.

[Jesse laughs.]

And so, that was basically one of the messages we put in that episode. And, frankly, you know—it continues to sort of be explored in *Tigertail*. I think in a very different way, but of course the kernel of an idea—which is that our parent's lives are just unfathomable and different and honestly much more epic, in some ways, than our lives.

00:36:45 Jesse Host You've made a couple of serial comic television shows, you know. The last couple TV shows you've made, *Forever* and *Master of None*—and neither of them is, you know, a yuck-a-minute laugh-fest, but they're definitely comedies. And this film, while it has a few funny character—there's that part where the mom says somebody's husband looks like a toad.

[Alan chuckles.]

00:37:11 Alan Guest That's pretty funny. You did good.
00:37:16 Jesse Host I love that—I love the reaction shot, too. Kuei-Mei Yang was very funny, in that scene.
00:37:27 Alan Guest But it's really not a comedy. And did you feel the same sense of comfort wading into that territory that you felt becoming a director? Yeah, I did. And, you know, some people have talked to me about that, before. It's like, "Oh, what made you wanna do it?" And I really felt like it came from the story, first. And the characters and the world. And what I was inspired by. So, it was very natural for me to say, "Okay, well, what best serves this story? And what genre would best, sort of, exemplify and get across these themes and deliver the emotional message I wanted to, sort of, pass on?" And it was very clear that it was a drama, for me, very early on in the process. And it was also clear from the films I was watching and what I was inspired by and the lofty goals, you know, I had in sort of making the movie and which movies were sort of, you know, touchstones. And so, yeah. I mean, I was watching Edward Yang and watching *Hou Hsiao-Hsien* and watching Wong Kar-wai. And, you know, those movies were less 30-minute comedies and more dramatic.

[They chuckle.]

So, it—yeah, it was—it was—it was less *30 Rock* and more *In the Mood for Love*. But [laughs] yeah, it was—it was—yeah. It definitely, you know, I guess maybe I should be more anxious about stuff like this, but I just kind of just, you know, charge straight ahead and try to take on the task at hand.

00:38:42 Jesse Host Was it difficult to cast the film, given that there are relatively few Chinese and certainly Taiwanese actors and—Chinese and Taiwanese American actors who are famous?
00:38:57 Alan Guest Yeah! I mean, it—look, the pool is just smaller. You know, it's not that there aren't capable actor, it's—you know, we've—I've talked about this with my Asian friends. I'm like, "Yeah, if you want a 30-somethingg white actress [laughs] you got so many options! They're amazing! They're all amazing!" You know, it's like you can cast

Scarlett Johansson or Natalie Portman or Florence Pugh or, you know, Kiera Knightley or, you know, there's—whatever. You got a million actors and they're amazing! You can—there's so many! It's like—it's unbelievable. And then if you're like, "Okay, well we want an Asian actress—or specifically a Taiwanese American actress." It's like, eehh, you might be able to name two! *[Laughs.]* Or like, four! Like, maybe! I don't know.

Like—and so, you just don't have the list, right? There's no list that gets sent to you. It's a list of zero or one. And so, you're looking. You know, you're looking. And that's why I feel really lucky to have found Christine Ko and Tzi Ma. They are so talented and so emotive and so... really, without being household names, they really understood the material. And really embodied the characters and, you know, gave me more than I thought I even wanted. You know, I just—I just—I feel really, really lucky to have them on board. And then, by that same token, it was also a challenge to go to Taiwan and find Taiwanese actors. Because the vast majority of the people in the Taiwanese section of the film are actually Taiwanese. And so, finding Hong-Chi Lee and finding Yo-Hsing Fang and Kuei-Mei Yang, it was like—okay, we're meeting these people in person. And you meet with a person and get a read on them. And, you know, find out how *[laughing]* charismatic they are! And that's kind of—that's kind of casting! You know, it's something you generally can't teach.

And so, I did a chemistry read with Tzi and Christine, in America, and I did a chemistry read with Hong-Chi and Yo-Hsing in Taiwan. And, you know, they ended up being my leads.

00:40:50 Jesse Host

Did you have the language skills to understand—there's both Taiwanese and Mandarin in the film.

00:40:56 Alan Guest

Absolutely not.

[They laugh.]

Uh, so, my Mandarin is terrible, and my Taiwanese is nonexistent. So, I was relying on a lot of translation and a lot of gut and a lot of gut instinct and, sort of, just my own judgement. And I will say, my Mandarin got better over the course of filming and I did my best to learn and I did my best to, sort of, just engage. And I realized I knew more than I thought I did. Because my parents did speak Mandarin to me, growing up. And it gets—I guess it sinks into your bones, a little bit. Because I do remember, you know, a couple months into production I was giving a note and the translator, you know, delivers my note in Mandarin to the actors. And then I guess they felt comfortable, at that point, 'cause they started freelancing and just adding extra notes. So that—the translator would give my note and then say, like, "Oh yeah, in this take pretend it's the first time you've met and act surprised and like you don't know each other."

I was like, "What are you doing?! You can't do that!" *[Laughing.]* And then, like, I said, "No! Don't do that! You can't add extra notes! Like, this is not your job." And then the translator was a little taken aback. And that's when I think they realized, and the actors realized that I could understand some Mandarin and probably more than I let

on. So, yeah! I got better! And I'm still learning. I'm using Duolingo on my phone, to learn Mandarin. So, my—it's not the best way, but it's better than nothing and I'm able to text my parents a little bit of—a little bit of Chinese, now.

00:42:18 Jesse Host
00:42:21 Alan Guest

I was about to say, have you considered just calling your folks?
Nah, that seems like a lot of work.

[They laugh.]

00:42:27 Jesse Host

I have one last casting question, which is: you cast one of the people off that short list of famous Asian American actors, John Cho, who's Korean American—if I'm not mistaken. And he's also an executive producer on the film. You shot with him and cut him out of the movie. I presume it wasn't because he did a bad job; he's a very good actor. But was it hard to have to, like, call him and be like, "Hey, uh, executive producer John Cho, the only famous person in this movie—I decided your storyline was inessential"?

00:43:01 Alan Guest

It was one of the hardest *[laughing]* things that I've ever done! It's really hard, man! And not only because of the fact that he, obviously, is a—is a big name and is a famous person and a tremendous actor, but it's like... he's put so much into the movie! And I also wanna mention Hayden Szeto and, you know, Christine also had some scenes that went with John that aren't in the final version of the movie. And they all did tremendous work! You know? They did tremendous work and it's the hardest thing in the world to tell someone, you know—you know, "You put your heart and soul into something, and you delivered. It's not like you didn't deliver."

They did—they all did great work, and John included. And the movie just, kind of, tells you what it wants to be, and you find what the core of it and the heart of it is as you're putting it together. And so, I called John and he couldn't have been more gracious. He was in Australia, at the time, shooting *Cowboy Bebop* and he said some of the nicest stuff. He said—he's like, "I've never gotten to do some of the stuff I've done in this movie. It'll always be with me and I've already used some of the stuff I learned on *Tigertail* in subsequent work. And I just wanna, you know, give you a hug at the premiere and tell you congratulations."

So, unfortunately, we can't—we don't have a premiere, but he literally texted me, two days ago, and he says, like—you know, he got to watch the film. He said that, you know, he loved the movie and he wants to support it any way he can. So... much love to John and Hayden and—for being so supportive and Christine, as well. You know, Christine still has a, you know, a great amount of scenes in the movie, but it really—it really is a testament to all those actors that they're still so supportive and so warm and, you know, we're on really good terms. You know, I had dinner with John and, you know, we wanna work together again, on something.

And so, it's really the case of—you know, I think this has happened to many movies in the past. You hear about, you know, how *Her* was made or *The Thin Red Line* was made or *Annie Hall*. Like, all these movies—you know—they changed. They changed over the course of making them, and I think that's one of the, sort of, challenges of making a movie is you can't be rigid. You watch what you have and you—and you keep adjusting and you keep adjusting

and you—and you kind of keep working at it to make it the best it can be. And, you know, you wouldn't be doing your job and you wouldn't be doing justice to any of the actors or any of the people who worked on it if you weren't constantly trying to make it the best it can be.

00:45:21 Jesse Host Was it harder to call John Cho or call Netflix and let them know that the one movie star in the movie had been removed from the movie?
00:45:27 Alan Guest *[Chuckling.]* Netflix was great! Netflix was—

[Jesse affirms.]

I couldn't believe it, man. I think—I think they saw the cut and they understood. So, it was like they just saw the—they just saw the movie and they were supportive. I, you know, again—those guys, I can't say enough about Netflix, too, because they let us make the movie we wanted to make and we're all so proud of it.

00:45:46 Jesse Host Well, Alan Yang, it's a really lovely film. I am glad that you're proud of it. And thanks for taking this time to be on *Bullseye*, especially in these unusual circumstances from your home.

00:45:58 Alan Guest Yeah! Thank you so much, Jesse.

00:45:59 Jesse Host Alan Yang! *Tigertail* is streaming now, on Netflix. You should absolutely give it a watch. Also, if you're looking for another TV show to stream, these days, Yang's series, *Forever*, with Fred Armisen and Maya Rudolph is funny, weird, and moving. You can catch that on Amazon Prime.

00:46:15 Music Transition Jazzy interstitial music.

00:46:18 Jesse Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is currently being produced out of the homes of me and the staff of MaximumFun, in and around Los Angeles, California—where... unlike Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top, I had what I can only describe as a mental break and shaved my beard off. It was, uh, unsuccessful! *[Laughs.]* Looks awful. So, uh, despite the health benefits, I think I'm just gonna—just gonna grow it right back.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien and our production fellow is Jordan Kauwling. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Dan has made a collection of music used on *Bullseye* available pay-what-you-will, on Bandcamp. Search for DJW *Bullseye*, there. It's great tunes to, you know, read a book by or whatever. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it. If you're hosting any parties with your immediate family members, at home, you should get one of their records.

And, uh... if *[laughs]*—if you have some time on your hands, we have tons of interviews in our back catalog. If you like *Parks and Recreation*, hoo boy, we have talked to Nick Offerman. We have talked to Retta. We've talked to Rashida Jones. We've talked to Adam Scott, Billy Eichner, Ben Schwartz, Jenny Slate, Dan Goor—who was also a writer on the show. He was just on our show a couple weeks ago, talking about his show that he created called *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which is a great show. All of those available on our website, at MaximumFun.org, and almost all of them available in your favorite podcast app.

00:48:18 Promo Promo

We're also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. You can keep up with the show there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]