

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.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “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.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. David Mitchell and Robert Webb met in 1993. They were college students at Cambridge in the UK. They were doing <i>theater</i> and when they worked together, they realized it really clicked. So, they took to the stage as a double act: Mitchell and Webb. Stage shows turned into TV writing gigs; TV writing gigs turned into their own sketch TV shows. <i>The Mitchell and Webb Situation</i> , <i>The Mitchell and Webb Sound</i> , <i>The Mitchell and Webb Look</i> . Then, in 2003, they starred on the British sitcom called <i>Peep Show</i> , which helped make them international names.

Peep Show is sort of like *The Odd Couple*. There are two roommates, one sloppy, the other uptight. But instead of being shot like a movie or a set on a stage in front of a live audience, the camera in the show is mounted on each character’s head, literally. Every shot is a point-of-view shot. You see what they see. And when you are looking through their eyes, you can also hear their thoughts. Also, unlike *The Odd Couple*, *Peep Show* is deeply, deeply dark. There are very few good people, and no character really grows or changes in the show’s nine-season run. You can credit that, in part, to the writing of Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong. Jesse went on to create the HBO show *Succession*. Anyway. *Peep Show*’s final episode aired about six years ago. Mitchell and Webb sort of went their separate ways for a while. Then, recently, they reunited with the sitcom *Back*. It just started its second season on IFC.

Now, in a moment, you’ll hear a clip from *Back*, but first I do want to mention that while this interview is mostly fun joking about fun jokey stuff, it actually concludes much more seriously. I ask Robert Webb about some controversial tweets he posted in 2018 and later deleted. Those tweets were critical of a charity which provides care and support for transgender and gender-nonconforming kids. That portion of our conversation has a very different tone and is obviously about some very sensitive issues. We wanna make sure that you’re not caught off guard. Also, worth mentioning that David Mitchell and Robert Webb were recording their ends of our conversation locally, but they declined to provide us with those audio recordings. We were recording a backup with our video conferencing software, but that backup started about a minute into the conversation, so you will get a little bit of extra intro.

Okay. All that having been said, let’s turn back to *Back*: the Mitchell and Webb sitcom. The show follows foster brothers, Stephen and Andrew, and their long struggle for control over the family pub. In this scene, Stephen—played by Mitchell—has just returned home from his time at a wellness center. He runs into his foster brother,

00:03:30	Sound Effect	Transition	Andrew—played by Webb—at the family pub. Stephen becomes irate when he discovers that Andrew paid for his treatment. Music swells and fades.
00:03:32	Clip	Clip	<p>Stephen (<i>Back</i>): You paid? For me to stay at Lynam Abbey? Not Mum?</p> <p>Andrew: I had the means and Helen felt—</p> <p>Stephen: Great. Terrific. I thought it was Miss Havisham, but it was you. Big [<i>censored</i>] Magwitch.</p> <p>Andrew: Magwitch actually helps Pip to fulfill his dreams.</p> <p>Stephen: I know my Dickens, Andrew. Don't you dare try to out-Dickens me or it will be the worst of times. That's Dickens. I'm being clever.</p> <p>Andrew: I genuinely just wanted to help you.</p> <p>Stephen: By gaslighting me into thinking I'm ill, then paying to put me in a facility so you can gaslight everyone else into thinking I'm ill?</p> <p>Andrew: Stephen, I admit it. In the past, I've dissembled and played with the truth, but I've changed. Truly. All I want to do now is help people.</p> <p>Stephen: Go [<i>censored</i>] yourself. You can't get into my head anymore, Andrew.</p> <p>Andrew: I don't want to get into your head.</p> <p>Stephen: Oh yes you do, but you can't! Because I've changed the locks. I still know you. I see you! I'm looking at you right now!</p> <p>Andrew: I know you are.</p> <p>Stephen: Exactly. I'm staring directly at you.</p> <p>Andrew: [<i>Whispering.</i>] I'm aware of that.</p> <p><i>[Mysterious violin music plays.]</i> Music swells and fades.</p>
00:04:30	Sound Effect	Transition	
00:04:31	Jesse	Host	For my first question, I asked David if he's exhausted by playing—as he once said—“unsympathetic, intelligent losers”. His answer was an unequivocal “No.” He said he has no sympathy for actors who don't like to be typecast.
00:04:48	David Mitchell	Guest	Just take their type out of it. It means you don't like to be cast. Take what's going. Take the opportunity to show off for money that fate is giving you. And also, I don't like challenges. I like to feel like I know what I'm doing. I know what faces I'm pulling, and this is—this is the way of milking a little bit of sort of wry amusement out of this miserable scenario.

00:05:12 Jesse Host I feel like, for a lot of actors, David, there's a moment when they go to maybe their fourth or fifth audition and—you know, for, like, screenwork. I think of the stage probably a little different, but for screenwork, and you like look around the room and you see the same three or four other people that you see from other auditions and you're like, "Ohh. This is the kind of guy I am."

00:05:39 David Guest *[Laughs.]* Well, I'll tell you the kind of guy I am. I'm someone who never gets a job from an audition. What I do, is I get to know talented writers and my relentless, nasal moaning gets into their heads and they end up typing it and then they—with me in mind. And the thing about me, as an actor, is I'm more like me than anyone else on Earth. I think. So far. If someone crops up—

00:06:07 Robert Webb Guest You are a leading—a leading world expert at being you, actually.

00:06:12 David Guest Exactly. So if that's what they want, I will get the part, even on a bad day.

00:06:18 Jesse Host Robert, your character is an almost or maybe—I guess we'll call it a maybe sociopath?

[Robert hums thoughtfully.]

00:06:26 Robert Guest Maybe a probably sociopath? I don't think we've... yeah, I don't know what that says about me, either, that I just slipped seamlessly into—I mean, he's—sometimes I think he's—we haven't really—I think we found it—we thought it was quite important not to decide whether he was just this very harmfully needy person who went round, you know, needing everyone's approval and caused a lot of trouble because of that or whether he's just insane or the devil.

[Jesse chuckles.]

00:07:13 Jesse Host And I certainly haven't decided. I mean, in the first series, sometimes we would do two takes where the—I would do something, you know, kind of reasonable and you'd think, "Okay, maybe he's just this guy. He just wants people to love him." And then I'd do another one that was more pushing down on the gas of being a maniac, which of course is a lot more fun.

00:07:13 Jesse Host Here in the United States, double acts are somewhere between just barely a thing and not a thing. And in the UK, there is a very long tradition—you know, not just onscreen where you guys have done most of your work, but onstage. You know. You can go to a—go to a comedy club or a comedy show and, you know, one of the five acts or one of the six acts might be a double act. Which, you know, hasn't been the case in the States since the fifties and sixties. When you were young people, did you like double acts?

[They both thoughtfully agree.]

00:07:50 Robert Guest Yeah. Um, I think we both liked—I don't know if you've heard of Morecambe and Wise?

[Jesse denies.]

Who were a sort of—they were this terrific, quite traditional sort of end of the pier, sort of variety double act and they were on TV in the—in the seventies and eighties when we were growing up. And

then the slightly more modern, there was Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry. And we watched that—I think we both watched their—we weren't—we didn't grow up in the same house, but we've pieced this together.

[Jesse and David laugh.]

You know, retrospectively we under—we've found out what we were doing when we were little. Uh, yeah. I think we both loved *Fry & Laurie*, so, yes. There were—there were people around that we both liked, but I didn't think either of us had the intention of, you know, being in a double act. It wasn't like, "I want to find my comedy husband, out there." I think if we'd met two other people that we thought were funny and made each other laugh and wanted to write and perform with, we'd have been in a triple act or a group or troupe. But as it was, it was—it was just David and me, that seemed like the most efficient comedy unit. *[Chuckles.]*

00:08:57 David Guest

There were so many double acts on British TV. It was—there was Morecambe and Wise and Fry and Laurie of different eras, but also *The Two Ronnies*, Smith and Jones. It was absolutely the standard unit, particularly of sketch comedy, on British TV. Obviously, there's the *Monty Python* group and that stuff, but that much very much the exception. In general, though, were these double acts. And so, I think—yeah, without thinking about it, it was—we just thought, "Well, that's an obvious thing to have a go at." And it's—and, you know, if you're thinking in terms of sketches on TV, which was the form of comedy that certainly I think we both thought of first as a thing to have a go at—you need two people talking to each other.

And so, I think if you're not thinking—a lot of people go into comedy because they imagine being standups and going up to a microphone and trying to make audience laugh. But for us, more obvious was, "Okay. It's a scene. It's a shop." Or something. And so, you need two people talking to each other.

00:09:53 Jesse Host

Was that always your act? I mean, before you were working onscreen, when you were whatever it was, doing shows on the stage in the dining hall in university, were you doing scenes onstage? Or were you doing "one guy's the smart guy, one guy's the dumb guy?"

[David and Robert both try to interject but cut themselves off.]

By the way, I love "one guy's the smart guy, one guy's the dumb guy." It sounds—that sounded snide. That's, like, one of my favorite things ever.

00:10:22 Robert Guest

[David laughs.]

Well, the funny thing is, by the time we got a sketch show on TV, we had already played Mark and Jez in *Peep Show*, and we had a sort of a running, behind-the-scenes kind of thing where we would sort of play versions of ourselves and we kind of slipped into Mark and Jeremy, there, and that seemed like the most obvious way to write those things, where I was the dumb guy and that was—that was *[laughing]* very enjoyable. And Dave was the uptight guy. And the—*[laughing]* I'm not—see how I even now won't allow David to be the smart guy?

[David laughs.]

00:10:57	Jesse	Host	David was the uptight guy, and I was the less uptight guy. Um.
00:11:01	Robert	Guest	To be fair, he's also the snooty guy.
			<i>[Laughs.]</i> To give him his due. But when we started, we would write whole shows—we would, like, put on hour-long, two-man shows where we would have this wild plot involving supervillains and spies and rent boys and all kinds of stuff. And we would play all the characters. So, we would always be onstage playing a pair of characters and then there would be lots of quick changes as one person went off and changed. And there would be—there would be jokes about the fact that there aren't enough actors to play all these characters. We were doing that when we—yeah. We did that at university and in rooms above pubs, you know, after we left as well.
00:11:40	Jesse	Host	I feel like rooms above pubs is a really—having a few times done sketch comedy in clubby environments rather than theatery environments, it is real tough to put over <i>[laughs]</i> in that room.

[They laugh.]

			'Cause a standup can always address the crowd. You know? Like, when there's another thing going on, like people are getting drinks or whatever, if you need to get focus back to the stage, you can always do it by directly engaging the audience. But when you're doing characters, you're doing sketches, it's a lot harder to do that. You just have to kind of power through.
00:12:16	David	Guest	Yes. I think there's definitely a problem if the audience can see each other as clearly as they can see you. They will start to wonder whether the conversation you're having on the tiny stage that's a foot higher than everywhere else isn't necessarily more significant than a conversation they might be having with each other. And yes, you've totally destroyed this supposed, you know, "Oh! We're having a pizza in Hell!" Or whatever brilliant idea it is. It's ruined if you have to turn to the people and go, "Can you shut up, please? And no, I'm not a <i>[censored]</i> ."
00:12:48	Robert	Guest	The funny thing is that when you—if you're doing a—like, a scene, like a play type—fourth-wall type thing, if you break out of that because you have to, you have to address the audience, they find that disproportionately impressive than if you were a standup just working on his—on their wits all the time. It's like if you're sticking to the script and then you—then you break out for a second, they go, "Oh my god! They are alive! They aren't—they're not just acting robots!"

[Jesse chuckles.]

			And they're really impressed. So, it's a superpower to be used very sparingly.
00:13:20	Jesse	Host	One of the challenges I remember most vividly from doing sketch in a standup club was you, like, get onstage and when you're sound checking you realize you have to figure out whether you're gonna walk around holding the microphones or just have the mics in stands.

[They laugh.]

And just make it so that the scene—in the scene your character doesn't move very far from the microphones. *[Chuckles.]* Like, which one is worse for the suspension of disbelief?

00:13:52 Robert Guest *[They laugh.]*
Acting with handheld microphones, I think I'd erased that from my memory, but I—yes. That definitely happened at least twice.

[They laugh.]

00:14:02 Jesse Host
It's—that was really bad!
You learn real quick that the wireless lavalier microphone is not a technology to be relied upon. *[Laughs.]* Like, you can bring them if you want, but it's not gonna—it's—the sound guy's just gonna look at you and go like, "Well, we've got mics onstage."

[They laugh.]

00:14:35 David Guest
What did each of you notice about the other when you were, you know, in your late teens or twenty years old or whatever—when you met—that made you think, like, "Oh, I wanna—I kinda wanna stick with this guy."
Well, I think we thought that each other was funny. I think that was the—I think we were doing—

00:14:40 Robert Guest
That was the clincher.

00:14:41 David Guest
You know. We met auditioning for a show at university, a pantomime—a sort of comedy version of *Cinderella* we were auditioning for. And in the audition—we both got into the show, but in the auditions, we thought—I thought Rob was, you know, really funny and I didn't expect him to be as funny as he was, because he looked quite cool. He had that long hair and an earring, which I took to be cool. And I thought, "Oh, goodness me! And yet, funny. Cool and funny!"

00:15:11 Robert Guest
I blew his mind.

00:15:12 David Guest
I know! And I—you know, I'm—cool and funny is not something I've managed, you know, some would say either of. But so, I—and then—and we were in this exciting student theater environment and looking to do comedy and believed that we could do it as a job, and so I think we sort of spotted each other and thought, "Well, let's try and write some words just for the two of us to say to each other."

[Robert agrees.]

I mean, in a—in a—in a show, not in a romantic sense. That sounds like scripting a date.

00:15:43 Jesse Host
Not like a *Cyrano de Bergerac* situation.

00:15:46 David Guest
No. No.

00:15:47 Robert Guest
Not yet.

[David chuckles.]

No, we wrote—the first sketch we wrote was not very good, but we had a hell of a good time doing it. We were really making each other laugh, even if no theoretical audience was ever gonna laugh at that particular sketch. And we just—we just got along like that.

And then it turned out that wasn't a fluke and we—eventually we did write some good sketches. And also, onstage, we—you couldn't help noticing that there was a sort of not quite—not telepathy or anything like that, but there was whatever that thing is. People use the word chemistry; they probably overuse it. But I always sort of knew what David was going to do or was doing without necessarily looking at him. And it wasn't the—it wasn't always the predictable thing. In fact, *[laughing]* I'm not saying, "I always knew what David was going to do; it'd be that usual thing that he does."

[David laughs.]

But there was a sort of—some sort of *[annunciating intensely]* complicity going on and that was—yeah. We—I sort of thought that was probably valuable and rare and a good thing.

00:16:50 Jesse Host

Do you remember what the first thing you wrote together was?

[David confirms.]

00:16:53 Robert Guest

Yes. It was called—it was called "War Farce" and it was a sort of—a sort of—the idea was that somebody had written a bad thing, which was a farce set in the World War One trenches and that they were trying to do it—trying to make the first world war sort of funny in a kind of, "Ooh, vicar, my trousers have just fallen down" kind of way. With songs. And I think we tried to write a song as well. Did we? Yeah. Yes. I think it was—it was—basically, we said, "Let's take the genre of the West End farce," which was not a genre we knew at all—

00:17:20 David Guest

[Robert and Jesse laugh.]

00:17:30 Robert Guest

Or anything about!

00:17:31 David Guest

Yeah, and that's the trouble. When you—when the thing you're parodying is something you're almost entirely ignorant of, that's a bad starting point. Because we might have realized—

00:17:38 Jesse Host

I mean, you had both served in the first world war.

00:17:40 David Guest

Oh, I mean absolutely! When it came to the—you know, the reality of the trenches, we were—I mean, we were—let's say, considerably better informed than we were about the tradition of farces in the West End. But I think a key problem is revealed by the fact that we put a song in, because anyone who's seen even one of the famous Whitehall farces of the 1970s would have told us that they don't have songs.

[Jesse laughs.]

It just would be like saying, "Oh, here's our parody of a Western. Look how everyone's on bicycles."

00:18:13 Robert Guest

Yeah. There's also the fact that neither of us could play an instrument.

[Jesse laughs.]

Neither of us at the time thought that we were particularly strong singers. And I don't know what on earth—and we had no musical—I don't know what on earth we thought we were doing! But anyway, we had *[chuckles]*—we had a good time going, *[singing in*

monotone] “It’s all in a day’s war. That’s what the war’s for.” Or whatever it was.

00:18:34 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* Did you, like, record the melody into a tape recorder? Like, how did you—what was the composition process of a song for two non-singer, non-instrument-players?

00:18:45 Robert Guest *[David stutters a few times but lets Robert answer.]*

00:18:47 David Guest We didn’t—we’ve never done it before or since! I don’t think there was a tune. I think the idea—we thought someone would provide a tune, you know, further down the line. But it was sort of, like, just some rhyming couplets where we’d rhyme the word “war” and the word “for” and—brilliantly, I’m sure you’ll agree.

00:19:04 Robert Guest That’s the only memorable bit. That’s as good as it got.

00:19:08 Jesse Host Was there something that went really well for the two of you that made you think, “Oh, wow! Like, this could be a real thing.”

00:19:17 David Guest Yes. I think. Well, we did—after a few—I suppose a few weeks after we’d first written a couple of sketches together, we decided to write a show to put on at university and—which we did. And this was the first of our pairs of characters, crazy adventure thing. And we wrote—

00:19:37 Robert Guest It was called, um—it was called *Innocent Millions Dead or Dying: A Wry Look at the Post-Apocalyptic Age [With Songs]*, which just goes to show, we carried on. We persevered with the songwriting thing and that show *[chuckling]* had at least two songs and David couldn’t remember the words to one of them for the first three performances.

00:20:00 David Guest *[Laughs.]* And the thing is, we wrote the show, but we didn’t rehearse it. And it was—so, we—on the first night, we were really frightened, because we’d sold quite a few tickets. And so, we—our dream of using the first night as a sort of rehearsal was collapsing. And so, we did—we did—we couldn’t really remember much of the script we’d written. And—but nevertheless, it went very well in front of—admittedly, in front of probably largely drunken students. But they really laughed, and it was great fun. And it was—so, we did sort of think, “Oh, we’re onto something here.” That—I remember worrying that it wouldn’t go so well when we did learn the script. But we learned the script and it also went down well.

I mean, it was a bad lesson in a way, ‘cause it was a sign that you can get away with it with zero preparation, which you don’t—you can’t, often. But it was also a sign that there was something—there was, you know, the chemistry thing. That cliché. It was sort of evident to us.

00:21:07 Jesse Host We’ll finish up with David Mitchell and Robert Webb after the break. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:21:18 Promo Clip **Music:** Bright, cheerful music.

Linda Holmes: Whether you’re looking to discover a new series to binge, find your next great read, or check out that movie everyone’s talking about, NPR’s *Pop Culture Happy Hour* podcast is your guide to all things entertainment. Every weekday, we keep pop culture in high spirits. Listen now to the *Pop Culture Happy Hour* podcast from NPR.

[Music fades out.]

00:21:39	Promo	Clip	<p><i>[The sound of pages turning.]</i></p> <p>Music: Mellow synth plays in the background.</p> <p>Mallory O’Meara: Brea, what’s your reader wheelhouse?</p> <p>Brea Grant: Uh, woman on a journey, space, post-apocalyptic roads, and magical food. Mallory, what’s your reader wheelhouse?</p> <p>Mallory: Werewolves, haunted houses, weird fiction, and uhh, books set in Florida—for some reason.</p> <p>Brea: We’re <i>Reading Glasses</i> and we wanna know what your reader wheelhouse is.</p> <p>Mallory: We can use it to help you find more books that you love.</p> <p>Brea: Aaand avoid books that you don’t! So, whatever you like to read about and however you like to read it—</p> <p>Mallory: —we wanna help you read better.</p> <p>Brea: <i>Reading Glasses</i>. Every Thursday on Maximum Fun.</p>
00:22:14	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p> <p>Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i>. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guests are David Mitchell and Robert Webb. For almost 30 years now, the two have performed as the comedy duo Mitchell and Webb. They’ve starred in shows like <i>The Mitchell and Webb Look</i>, <i>Peep Show</i>, and <i>Back</i>—which is just entering its second season on IFC.</p> <p>Well, let’s play a little bit of <i>Peep Show</i>, which was the wonderful and so funny television show in which the two of you starred for... something like... 10, 12 years? Nine seasons over quite a number of years. You were a duo of roommates, on the show. And Mark, who was played by David Mitchell, is a socially awkward loan manager with a cynical outlook on life. Another intelligent but unlikeable <i>[laughs]</i> schlub.</p> <p><i>[David agrees.]</i></p> <p>And Jeremy, who’s played by my guest Robert Webb, is a slacker and a musician without talent. And the show also starred Olivia Colman and was cowritten and created by Jesse Armstrong. So in this clip, Jeremy’s band just got their first paid gig ever and he is celebrating at a restaurant, with Mark.</p>
00:23:33	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:23:35	Clip	Clip	<p>Jeremy (<i>Peep Show</i>): Uh, sorry. Excuse me. I ordered three pilau rice and three peshwari naans.</p> <p>Mark: It’s alright, Jeremy. It’s alright. I changed the order. There’s always rice left.</p>

Jeremy: It's not alright! Bring us three pilau rice and four peshwari naans, please. I've shared enough rice with you, Mark. I'm in the big league, now.

00:23:59 Sound Effect Transition

Mark: Four naan, Jeremy. Four? That's insane. Music swells and fades.

00:24:00 Jesse Host

[Laughs.] So, I mean, one of the things about this show is that the characters are abrasive at best. And *[chuckling]* I have a friend who really loves the show, as do I, and is a writer for a very successful network television sitcom, here in the United States. And a good one, too. And he asked me to ask you something along the lines of, "My entire life is having executives write notes to me that say, 'Could we make the characters more likeable?'"

[They laugh.]

00:25:07 David Guest

"And—or 'Could they be nicer?' or 'Could they be warmer?' The group of you *[laughing]* writing these shows and working on these characters really leaned into making them unpleasant over a really long period of time. Was there ever a point when you thought this moderately successful sitcom could be a really successful sitcom if we just... if we just had somebody save a cat from a tree?" If I may say it, dreaming of something moderately successful becoming something very successful is very New World.

[Jesse and Robert laugh.]

00:25:23 Robert Guest
00:25:25 David Guest

That's not—not what we do in Europe. If it's moderately successful, you go, "Well, that's—I'll take that. I thought it would be a disaster." Oh—
We thought everyone would die! *[Chuckles.]*
Yeah. Moderately successful. Brilliant. Don't mess with moderately successful; it goes to crap.

[Jesse laughs.]

So, I think that's the first thing. There is less pressure, I would say. There is a tradition of nastiness, in British—well, every part of British life. We're a horrible, horrible country. But there's a tradition of nastiness in British comedy. It is—there's a deep suspicion of attempts to make characters more likeable. And probably to too great an extent. I think we underrate the comic and dramatic power of characters being loveable. Because we love watching American shows where that—you know, I love Homer Simpson, even though he—you know, he doesn't exist. And I definitely am fonder of that show than if he was just sort of relentlessly dysfunctional, you know, in a way that wasn't likeable.

But I think—but I think we sort of feel the authenticity—if it's comedically authentic, it must be really bitterly nasty, is our sort of kneejerk thing. So, it's harder for the execs over here to say, "Make it more likeable," because they know that that's going against comic orthodoxy or the—or British comic orthodoxy. So, I think there's less pressure on that. And we've got a lot of shows here. You know, like the classic *Fawlty Towers*, which is—you know, a brilliant six hours

of comedy set in a hotel and very much have got a mainstream audience. And, you know, the central character of that is deeply, deeply unpleasant and unlikeable and yet people sort of warm to him and they'll sort of root for him in a weird way. So, there's a bit of that. A bit of precedent for those characters working in shows that are—that get mainstream appeal.

00:27:18 Robert Guest And in terms of success, there was also less pressure from that point of view, as well. Because it—the reviews were always good. The audiences weren't massive, but they were—they were very *[chuckles]* loyal. They were always there. And, you know, it was a late-night show on Channel 4, which is not one of the sort of—it's not a—it's one of the main channels, but it's not enormous. And it was—we were sort of allowed to kind of plod along in that—in that way. And we knew that the scripts were very funny. So, as long as the scripts carried on being really funny and the show was really funny, we didn't really—we weren't given that much cause to worry about a massive audience. We were sort of allowed to *[chuckles]*—in a very—maybe it is quite British—I just say plod along in our usual—we were allowed to plod along and that's what—that's what we wanted to do.

00:28:09 Jesse Host *[David laughs.]*
So, part of the conceit of the show is that it is a—essentially a first-person show. It is from the, like, literal camera point of view of the characters, but it also has voiceover narration from the inside of the characters. You know. The thoughts are made audible to the audience. How's it different to—I mean, I'm sure that that whole thing started feeling like a trap around the eighth episode that was written. But, like, how is it different to look at making comedy from the first person rather than from, you know—from the third person?

00:28:53 David Guest Well, I think definitely—in terms of the sheer practicalities of shooting something entirely in POV shots, that there was not a day when we didn't think, "Well, we know why that isn't how things are normally made."

[They chuckle.]

We know that in a deep way that perhaps no one else in the world knows. 'Cause it's just so impractical and difficult and the lighting and—you know. Ugh. It takes forever. So, I think we did, a lot, think, "Why couldn't we just shoot this scene normally." And it's just—you know. And then you get to interact with the person you're acting with rather than sort of—you know, guess how they're gonna play it. But on the—

00:29:34 Jesse Host And I mean, part of you—when you say that everything was shot in point of view, not only was that literally the case, but I think for a fair amount of the material, it was—it was cameras, like, physically attached to—like, literally from the point of view. Like, cameras on hats and shoulders.

[Robert confirms.]

Like, I know that at some point it developed into what we—once in a while, we can shoot over somebody's shoulder and say that's the point of view, but like—there were, like, cameras on hats.

00:30:02 David Guest There were cameras on hats. Yeah.

00:30:04	Robert	Guest	<p>For the first series, yeah. There was a—there was a little micro camera mounted on a bicycle helmet and so <i>[chuckles]</i>, yeah, we were doing like that. And you'd sort of duck down so that the helmet was at the—was at eyelevel rather than at forehead level. And it was just bizarre. And then we realized that actually, the quality that we—of the—of the video that we were getting from that was so poor that they were degrading the video when they shot it with a proper camera so that it could look equally rubbish. And then at that point they realized, "Let's not have the—"</p> <p>But at one point there was a—there was a driving scene where Jeremy's driving around Croydon and I was—and I'm the one—of the two of us, I can—well. That's why Jeremy was driving and Mark wasn't, because Mark can't drive, and neither can David. Anyway. So, I was driving and also filming David with my forehead cam and this wasn't on a low loader or anything. I was actually driving in traffic and then you would do this, like, 30-minute take going round and round and round and that—or at least, you'd go round and round and round for half an hour and get four takes or whatever—and then they'd review that, because they couldn't watch live 'cause the technology was—you know, it just wasn't there. And then they'd go, "The problem is, you don't seem to be filming David properly. You're not really moving your head right over to the side and getting—"</p> <p>"Well, can we think why that might be? It might be because I'm trying to concentrate on not crashing the car!" So, you know, in the early days we were doing—and it was much more—it was much more difficult then, in the first few series, anyway because of cables. It wasn't until I think series five, six, seven that the camera didn't have to have a cable coming out the back. So, not only were they trying to hide all the lights, because you've got this POV camera swinging around, you know, 180 degrees. They also have to hide all the cables. And it was just—it was just a nightmare. We got through directors of photography. I don't think anybody came back for the first four or five series. <i>[Laughing.]</i> We got through them; it was quite a high turnover because they all just had a breakdown trying to shoot that show.</p>
00:32:11	Jesse	Host	<p>I mean, it's not like you guys invented dramatic irony or anything, but it does seem to me like a particular kind of humor to—for the audience to be seeing the world from the characters' perspective while also knowing the—knowing the world from outside of the characters' perspective.</p>
00:32:35	David	Guest	<p>That's absolutely right. And the other side of the premise that I think we didn't ever tire of and that was tremendously useful to the show and is one of the reasons why the episodes are so sort of—sort of tightly packed with jokes is that hearing the thoughts, that is hugely comedically and dramatically useful. Because you can drop a scene if it wasn't really funny and just sort of fill the audience in with the thoughts of the person going into the next scene. And you can add jokes and you—it's—that—you know, for me, that's the side of the—of the premise of it that's hugely sort of useful. And every program I make, you know, that does—you sort of think, "Well, you can't just totally cut things <i>[chuckling]</i> in the same way. You have to tell the story through action." And you actually don't in <i>Peep Show</i>. You can cut action if it's not funny.</p>

00:33:32 Robert Guest And I think that contributes to it being such a rude show, because people obviously are thinking things that they would never say apart from—I mean, apart from Jeremy obviously. When we would go in and record those voiceovers, David would have, like, three pages and I would have, like, half a page, because the difference is Jeremy does say everything that he thinks and so, *[chuckling]* he had comparatively few unvoiced thoughts. Whereas Mark did actually have a filter. So, yeah. He was always doing that.

00:34:02 Jesse Host You know, I mentioned that Olivia Colman was also one of the stars of the show. You've worked with her in many things. I mean, she had a very long and fruitful comedy career before she became a super-famous—a super-internationally famous actor. Did you like look at her being a, you know, a weirdo on a sitcom and think, "You know what's in this person's future? International stardom."

00:34:33 Robert Guest *[They chuckle.]*
We weren't that surprised, honestly. I'll go that far. 'Cause from—as soon as we met her, actually, she was one of the funniest people we knew and also one of the best dramatic actors as well, when she was—you know, in—when we—when we were students. So, it didn't come as that much of a surprise. And actually, given the provocation of her winning an—of a direct contemporary winning an Oscar, I don't feel that much of—that much bitterness or hate, actually. In fact, I'm still waiting for the internal backlash where I start writing, you know, spiteful letters to her. I haven't—that hasn't happened yet. I'm only delighted that it's gone so brilliantly.

00:35:20 Jesse Host I'm jealous of my friend's WGA award and I'm not even a television writer.

00:35:28 David Guest *[They laugh.]*
I mean, the thing I—that show, the sort of pantomime of *Cinderella* that Rob and I met during the auditions of was also the show we met Olivia Colman on. Just this stage show at university. And I—I mean, I remember it about being in a scene with Rob and Olivia and thinking *[chuckles]*—having previously done a play at school, thinking, "Blimey! This university drama is—this is really—these people are good!"

[Robert laughs.]

Which was an entirely false impression, because I didn't realize that I was onstage with, you know, someone I was gonna collaborate with for decades and is a brilliant comedian and a future Oscar winner. You know. Because actually, a lot of university drama is really terrible. But at that moment, I just remember in this pantomime—we just doing this pantomime of *Cinderella* and these guys are brilliant!

So, I've—yeah, I think we both thought that she was absolutely as talented as it's possible to be from the start. I, nevertheless, was surprised she won an Oscar, because in my experience there's no justice in the world. So, the fact that she deserves one doesn't mean she'd get one. But she does deserve one and she's got one! So, that's nice.

00:36:42 Robert Guest Actually—and actually winning, you know, from a performance that contains humor, which is quite—it's quite rare, isn't it? Because

00:37:07 David Guest anything—you know, you get this in movies—and also, I think, in
00:37:10 Crosstalk Crosstalk literature—that if something is capable of making you laugh, it is
quite often despised, because, you know, we can all make each
other laugh. And you kind of go, “Well, that’s not—that’s not difficult.
Ted down the pub is funny.” So, no one’s giving him any awards.
Everyone likes a bit of silliness, but, now come on—
Robert: Yeah. So, uh—I mean, come on, let’s—

David: Let’s break out the endless misery and then give each other
some awards.

00:37:19 Jesse Host **Robert:** Let’s be very—yeah. For being—who can be most solemn.
Robert, one of the reasons that the second season of *Back* came a
few years after the first was that you had a pretty major health
crisis.

[Robert confirms.]

00:37:38 Robert Guest How did you find out that you had a heart condition?
At the cast medical, where you—so, you’d turn up and the doctor,
you know, it’s usually a very routine, kind of perfunctory thing for the
insurance, basically. And he put his stethoscope on my heart and
pulled a very alarming face and then—you’d think they’d go to, you
know, medical school, they’d teach them—that’d be the first week
would be, you know, the, “How to keep a straight face when you
hear something deeply alarming,” in something. Anyway. He didn’t
do that.

00:38:06 Jesse Host When it’s in fact the opposite.
00:38:07 Robert Guest He really—he really went—
00:38:08 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* They teach them face-pulling.
00:38:10 Robert Guest He really went for it. It was like a gurning competition.
00:38:11 David Guest Particularly—yeah, particularly if it’s a heart condition, you’d think.

[Jesse and Robert laugh.]

00:38:17 Robert Guest That’s the last thing you wanna do, is to make someone jump.
Yeah! It really did give me quite a shock, which is not what you
want. Anyway. It turned out I had—he said, “What have you been
doing about the heart murmur?”

And I said, “What heart murmur?”

And then it turned out after a few scans that I had—my mitral valve,
which is one of the valves in your heart, had prolapsed and it wasn’t
doing its job. It was just flapping around uselessly. And the heart
had grown and remodeled and was doing all kinds of weird things to
keep the show on the road. And I was given—well, a cardiologist
said, “You’re not gonna have a heart attack in the next fortnight, but
if we don’t do something about this in the next two, four, or six
months, this heart will fail.”

And I went, “Oh! Okay then.” So, I had to have heart surgery. So,
after that consultation, I went in—which was the day before we
were supposed to start filming—and then I went and did, I think—I
don’t know, eight or nine days of filming. And then I thought,

“Actually, this is a bad idea. I should probably go home and rest before the operation.”

And then, yeah. About a week after that, I had the operation and then it took me four months to recover. And then we filmed the rest of—well, we started filming the rest of the show and then we had to stand down for COVID. So, there was another few months and then finally we finished it. But that’s why, you know—that first delay was because I was tremendously poorly. But I’m very well, now. Thank you.

00:39:45	Jesse	Host	What led you to not address or disregard the symptoms that must have come—?
00:39:52	Robert	Guest	Well, there weren’t that many—I mean, I was feeling tired, but I just kind of put that down to being 47. And also, I was drinking a fair bit and I still smoked, like an idiot. So, I was just leading a very unhealthy lifestyle. And I did get the odd chest pain, but it wasn’t terribly dramatic. I just didn’t know that that was—that that was going on. So, yeah. So, it—I was—I was very grateful that they—that that got spotted at the medical.
00:40:23	Jesse	Host	I gather that you’ve been sober since?
00:40:25	Robert	Guest	Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they’re not really—I had a—it’s a weird thing, because you mentioned these two things at the same time and people quite naturally make the connection. The mitral valve failure is not based on—doesn’t happen because of lifestyle. It’s a congenital thing. It’s a birth defect. I had two cardiologists and a surgeon tell me that and I chose to believe them. In fact, I was very relieved to hear that. But at the same time, when I came out of hospital, I had a—you know—newfound respect for my internal organs. And I, you know—I wanted to be on my own side, as it were. And, you know, I was—I’m a swot, really, at heart, and I wanted to be top patient. I wanted to impress the doctors and do—have a phenomenal recovery. I didn’t just want an okay recovery. I wanted an <u>amazing</u> recovery!
			And so, they were all very pleased with me. So, I don’t drink anymore, and I certainly don’t smoke, obviously. And I do proper exercise and all that stuff.
00:41:17	Jesse	Host	Did it change other parts of your life? I mean, that’s a—that’s a big change.
00:41:23	Robert	Guest	Yes, huge change. And I—because I think since school, really, where I was feeling quite rebellious about PE, physical education, and games and I was so bad at football. And I think I came out of school with this anti-exercise kind of feeling and kind of, “Oh no, we’re the—we’re the people who read books and do acting on stage. We don’t do exercise. That’s for other people.” And I—it was an idiotic attitude and I kind of—apart from dancing, I always liked dancing. But apart from that, I wasn’t really—I didn’t really live in my body until I started exercising as I recovered from the operation. And now I go for a run three or four times a week and really enjoy it.
00:42:07	Jesse	Host	But—so, that’s one of the bigger changes. It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with the British comedy duo David Mitchell and Robert Webb.

At this point, I want to give you a heads up. There’s gonna be a pretty abrupt tone shift in this interview. You’ll hear me ask Robert

Webb about some Twitter posts he wrote criticizing a British charity called Mermaids, which supports transgender, nonbinary, and gender-diverse children. Mermaids has been targeted by people and groups who oppose gender-affirming medical care for trans children in the UK. Things got a little tense in the conversation. We're presenting the next segment basically as it happened. So, you might hear some awkward silences. Also, if those issues are something to which you are sensitive, we thought you should know in advance. Okay. Let's get back into it.

I wanna ask you about something a little intense. Right up there with having gone through heart treatment. So, a couple of years ago, Robert, you tweeted about a piece in *The Times* of London that was very critical of an organization called Mermaids—which is an organization that does education and advocacy and aid around trans kids. And you were pretty pointed in your retweet of that article, as well. And at the time, Mermaids was kind of like... being targeted and ended up having a big government grant it received reconsidered. It was ultimately upheld but went into, like, review. Um. So, you were asked about it—so, you—the tweet was deleted. You were asked about it relatively recently. You were asked whether you regretted the tweet by *The Times* of London. And you said, "Not really. On the other hand, I started to say something, then I stopped. And that means everyone can rush in to fill the blanks. 'He's a transphobe. He's a [censored]'. Once you say, 'I'm not transphobic, but—' it's a disaster. It just seems unlucky that you can't acknowledge that there are going to be competing interests here and there without that becoming, 'You're a bigot.'"

Um. I guess, given that you said you don't regret the tweet, did it—does it still, like, reflect how you feel about Mermaids or organizations like Mermaids?

00:44:38 Robert Guest

No, I mean, Janice Turner wrote this column. I can't even really remember what her specific objections were, but they made sense to me at the time, and I retweeted it approvingly. And then it was a kind of—there was this feeling that if you criticize a charity, that is—or the way a charity operates or its methodology, that is the same thing as criticizing the client base. It's like saying if—you know, if I've got a problem with the way Oxfam's been operating, it's because I hate poor people in the third world, or... And it's kind of like—it started to feel like if you—if you criticized Brexit, it's because you hate Britain. Or if you criticized Jeremy Corbyn, it's because you hate poor people. It was just a really weird way of looking at it.

And the whole debate is really overheated. And it's impossible to really talk about this or say anything even remotely reasonable without what I say being used as a vehicle for another round of defamation and abuse, really. So, it's not a topic I tend to dive into anymore, at all really.

00:45:43 Jesse Host

[Beat.] It's kind of scary for me, because I have two gender nonconforming kids, one of whom is transgender. And... I know that when my oldest kid came out to me, when she was in kindergarten, I was really reliant on an organization called Gender Spectrum that does many of the same things that Mermaids does. And you know, the—so many people don't understand the—you know, what the best practices are for caring for trans kids. And, you know, the kinds

of criticisms—I think people react in an overheated way because, you know, there are a lot of trans people who... weren't supported when they were kids.

[Robert agrees.]

00:47:13	Robert	Guest	You know? <i>[Beat.]</i> I know that—I know that you had talked about talking to them, to the folks at Mermaids, when all this happened. Did that ever end up happening?
			No. No, it didn't. Um. No. Because—I mean, it wasn't—it wasn't a... it just wasn't a conversation that I wanted to carry on getting into, because the reaction was so strong. It was as if I'd said, "I hate trans children." Which of course I don't. I mean, it—do I have to say <i>[stammers]</i> —okay. Maybe I do. You know. That is not how I feel about the situation. It was just—it was a—it was critical of the way that Mermaids was conducting itself.
00:47:47	Jesse	Host	<i>[Beat.]</i> Do you mean specifically the way that—
00:47:49	Robert	Guest	<i>[Interrupting.]</i> I can't remember, Jesse. Really.
00:47:51	Jesse	Host	—the organization...? Yeah. How do you feel now?
00:47:53	Robert	Guest	It was kind of the—it was the end of 2018 and it's not something that I really want to talk about.
00:48:04	Jesse	Host	<i>[Beat.]</i> I mean, do you feel like it's appropriate to affirm kids' gender identities?
00:48:10	Robert	Guest	Sure. I mean, I think it's on a case-by-case basis, but I'm not really an expert. You're a parent and you've got firsthand experience.
00:48:25	Jesse	Host	<i>[Beat.]</i> Okay. I'm—I know it's—I know it's a really tough thing to talk about and, uh... a thorny thicket to wade into, given how intense people's feelings are about it. So, I appreciate you talking to me about it. Um. Is there—is there anything that has been left unsaid that you would like to say?
00:48:46	Robert	Guest	No.
00:48:49	Jesse	Host	Okay. Well, Robert and David. Robert, I'm sorry to <i>[chuckles awkwardly]</i> end on such a tough note, but I didn't—I didn't wanna leave it—I didn't wanna leave it loose. I enjoy and admire your work so much, both of you, so thank you for all of that and thanks for the great new show and thanks for talking to me.
00:49:13	David	Guest	Thanks very much.
00:49:15	Robert	Guest	Thanks.
00:49:17	Jesse	Host	David Mitchell and Robert Webb. Their show <i>Back</i> is airing now on IFC.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and all other major doctors' groups in the United States recommend care for gender-nonconforming kids that affirms their stated gender identity. If there's a gender-nonconforming child in your life, my family has received caring and invaluable guidance from the folks at Gender Spectrum. They provide resources and training around gender and kids, not only for families but also teachers, doctors, mental health workers, and other professionals.

You can find Gender Spectrum online at [GenderSpectrum.org](https://www.genderspectrum.org).

Our company, Maximum Fun, has been proud to support the work of Trans Lifeline. If you are transgender or gender nonconforming and you need emotional support or are facing a crisis, you can find

them online at TransLifeline.org or you can call (877) 565-8860. (877) 565-8860.

We'll have those links and more on our website: the *Bullseye* page at MaximumFun.org.

00:50:33 Music Transition
00:50:36 Jesse Host

Relaxed, jazzy music.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, this week, the completely barren, Charlie Brown Christmas tree-esque tree in my backyard burst to life like a caricature of spring. It's now entirely covered in green leaves and it all happened within the course of a week. Nature is really something.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Special thanks this week to Jerry Holmes, Evan Urquhart, and Danielle Kurtzleben. Our thanks to all of them for lending us a hand.

Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it. You can also keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there.

And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:51:55 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]