

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	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. I wanna tell you about this kids’ show that’s called <i>City of Ghosts</i> . It’s on Netflix. And I will admit, it is a little hard to explain, so I guess I will start with the animation. The characters are three dimensional. They’re mostly children. They look a little bit like—I don’t know, maybe like more thoughtfully designed Nintendo Wii avatars. The show is set in Los Angeles, which is where we record <i>Bullseye</i> . And the backgrounds are real places that thousands of people here walk through every day. The subway station in Koreatown, skateparks in Venice, restaurants in east LA. And the premise of <i>City of Ghosts</i> is relatively simple. It’s framed like a documentary and your hosts are a group of kids who are all members of the Ghost Club. The Ghost Club, as the name implies, gets reports about ghosts in the city, goes to find them, and then—once they do find them—sits down to interview them.
			The members of the Ghost Club are voiced by kids with little to no acting experience. And the questions they ask the ghosts sound genuine because they are genuine. And the ghosts and the other adults in the show are also real people telling more or less real stories. <i>City of Ghosts</i> takes the real world we live in—sometimes a scary, alienating place—and combines it with a plot device that can be even more scary: ghosts. And despite that, <i>City of Ghosts</i> —the show— isn’t scary or alienating. In fact, it’s the opposite. It’s warm. It’s inviting and illuminating. It gives the viewer—whether they’re a kid or an adult—a better idea of the world around us without sacrificing our capacity for imagination.
			That’s a tough thing to do, but Elizabeth Ito, the show’s creator, has managed to pull it off. You don’t need to take my word for it, either. <i>City of Ghosts</i> just nabbed a Peabody Award for its brilliant first season. A Peabody! To celebrate, we’re replaying my interview with Elizabeth from last year. So, let’s kick things off with a little bit of the show’s first episode. This scene features an interview with a ghost named Janet. She’s haunting a new restaurant in Boyle Heights, here in LA. Janet is voiced by Judy Hayashi. In real life, Judy is the daughter of the owners of Otomisan—a longtime Japanese diner in that same neighborhood.
00:02:43	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:44	Clip	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Cheerful synth music.
			<b>Janet:</b> Well, so my mom used to own a cleaners. So, I would—after school—go to her cleaners and I would do my homework at the cleaners until she finished. Right next to my mom’s cleaners, there was a Japanese café called Fuji Café. All the servers knew me. You know, as the daughter from next door. Sometimes my mom would go—we would go after she was done with work, ‘cause she’d be too

tired to cook at home. And sometimes I'll order just like a rice ball, and they'll make it even though it's not on the menu. My mom always, I guess, wanted to do a restaurant. She still wanted to kind of live out that dream. And because she knew the previous owner, they sold the restaurant to my mom.

**Speaker:** What food did your mom used to make that you miss the most?

**Janet:** Hmmm. I mean, I haven't found a place that I was like, "Oh, this tempura's better than my mom's." I'm biased. 'Cause it's my mom. And I love her cooking.

00:03:50 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:03:52 Jesse Host

Elizabeth Ito, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

00:03:55 Elizabeth Ito Guest

Thank you! Thank you for having me here.

00:03:57 Jesse Host

So, when you were conceiving of *City of Ghosts*, you had to figure out how to describe it to someone at Netflix so that they could give you money to make it. How did you figure that out? Like, what did you say to describe this show?

00:04:14 Elizabeth Guest

It was a tough one. I think at the beginning, it was saying—like, not overexplaining it. Kind of boiling it down to the things that should be really appealing to I think any studio to make a kids' show. That it's about something that understands—well, for one thing, it was like programming for kids that was quieter, that came from a different place than other stuff that was out there. So, I very much centered it basically saying like—I noticed, when I was trying to find things to watch with my son—who's a really sensitive kid—that there wasn't anything. Even kind of within the preschool landscape, there wasn't very much that was like quieter for us to watch together. So, I was looking for something that's similar to like the feeling of watching like old *Mr. Rogers* videos? Like, the process videos where they go to like a crayon factory or a place like that.

00:05:25 Jesse Host

So, it was really making it about what I was trying to bring to kids and see things through the way that I felt I would like to see kids—I don't know, the way kids see things? *[Chuckles.]*

Yeah, I do feel like, having watched a lot of kids' entertainment because I have young kids as well, that the surface take—the first level take is: kids' entertainment is so dramatically better than it was when I was a kid. Like, the difference is absolutely night and day. I can name a few good shows from my childhood that are actually good. Like *Mr. Rogers* and *Sesame Street*. I mean, *The Voyage of the Mimi* maybe was good? I don't know. But it's a short list. Right?

*[They laugh.]*

00:05:58 Elizabeth Guest

I think *Batman* maybe was actually good. I'm not 100% sure on that, but it—

00:06:02 Crosstalk Crosstalk

I'm really impressed with *The Voyage of the Mimi* inclusion.

**Jesse:** *[Laughing.]* I was way into that!

**Elizabeth:** Like, I'm very happy with that.

00:06:03 Jesse Host I was way into that show! I was way into the deaf lady showing tiny Ben Affleck how to gather water with a tarp, condensation on a tarp when they got stuck on an island. This was a—maybe a Canadian educational TV show about a whale boat that got—a whale science boat that got—? Crashed on an island?

00:06:22 Elizabeth Guest Yeah, I have very—very clear memories of watching that, in my junior high, like, 7<sup>th</sup> grade biology class.

00:06:32 Jesse Host *[They laugh.]*  
I think I watched it when I was staying home sick from 7<sup>th</sup> grade. So, television shows are much, much better. But often I think the way that they are better is that they follow the kind of Nickelodeon, kids' TV show revolution of the 1990s, which is that just a lot of stuff happens and it's very arresting and pretty funny, even for adults often. But it can feel a little assaultive.

00:07:15 Elizabeth Guest *[They laugh.]*  
Did you notice your kids like having a little bit—like, there's something that hooks into kids from that, but it also sometimes can leave them a little jittered by it.  
Yeah. I think I also get jittered by it, to be totally honest. Like, I mean—in the most selfish way, I make a lot of the stuff I make for myself more than anybody else. And like I honestly get really tired at how fast stuff cuts sometimes. Like, similarly, it's like when your kids are really little, they always tell you, "Don't show them stuff that cuts really fast, 'cause you're gonna ruin their brains for the rest of their lives." *[Chuckling.]* So, I think that was another factor that went into me like searching for more stuff to watch with my son that I wasn't gonna destroy his brain somehow. And, yeah, there's very few things you can find currently that—sometimes, you know, when there are things that are likeable that don't cut really fast to keep up with everything else that catches their attention that way.

00:08:07 Jesse Host Yeah. The show is also about cities generally and Los Angeles specifically. Was that always part of the idea?

00:08:17 Elizabeth Guest Yeah. From the very beginning, I think like in the same way that my short about my brother was really just centered around my personal life, I thought, "Well, I do wanna do a show about the history of LA." And then I think, as we started talking about it, there was this realization of like, "Oh yeah, this could be broader." But yeah, definitely starting with the idea that LA was a place that was really unique, and I wanted to capture how that—how that is for me. Like, why that is for me.

00:08:50 Jesse Host Do you remember seeing shows when you were a kid that were about the city in a way that you related to as a kid who grew up in LA? And I mean "the city" like broadly. Not even just the city of LA, but just the idea of cities.

00:09:08 Elizabeth Guest To be honest, like some of my fondest memories of programming that was really specific to here was like Huell Howser.

*[Jesse agrees with a laugh.]*

Like, *[laughing]* some of the first things that I remember watching where I was like, "That's my city!" were like—he went to like a peach cobbler restaurant or take out place that was really close to where I lived. And—

00:09:33 Jesse Host And we should—I'm sorry to cut you off. We should explain. Huell Howser is a—was a local public television personality whose show that he created himself was also syndicated throughout California. And he was a southern guy with a big—with a big drawl who would go to Missions and Langer's delicatessen and marvel at them in a way that is difficult to describe in its like pure majesty. Like, he's truly an extraordinary—like, the Mr. Rogers of going around and pointing at civic landmarks.

00:10:09 Elizabeth Guest Yeah. And he started with *Videolog*. Did you watch his show *Videolog* that was like a predecessor to—

00:10:17 Jesse Host *California's Gold?*

00:10:18 Elizabeth Guest Yeah! That was really early. So, like—I mean, it was even less produced.

*[They laugh.]*

00:10:26 Jesse Host And—  
That's hard to imagine. The aesthetics of the show essentially were him talking to his camera man while a long, unedited shot played of him wandering around an avocado field. And it was—it's absolutely transfixing and delightful in its ridiculousness, but also in its sincere brilliance.

00:10:45 Elizabeth Guest Yeah. So, I mean, that's the first and only thing that came to mind. And like *[laughs]* maybe like *Die Hard?* 'Cause they go to Nakatomi Plaza. So—but I remember thinking like, "Oh, that's in Century City!" So, yeah. *Maybe [laughing]* those were the first two things that came to my brain. But I think—I mean, Huell Howser and *Videolog* and all of that and that homemade-ness of what he did—I think that definitely had a big—made a big impression on me.

00:11:21 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]*  
I hosted a menswear video show, and we had a premier party for the very first episode at a friend's store in Pasadena. And somebody said to me jokingly—this was 10 or 12 years ago—somebody said to me jokingly, "You should invite Huell Howser to it." And I'm from San Francisco and we didn't have Huell Howser when I was a kid. So, I had only experienced him a few times, here in LA, since I'd moved. And I was like, "Uh, yeah okay. Fine. I'll invite Huell Howser." And I went on HuellHowser.com and found a link and sent an email and he came.

*[Elizabeth laughs.]*

And it was like we were at a house party in Vallejo and E-40 walked through the door. Like, people flipped out. And he's just there and he's like, *[in a cheerful southern drawl]* "Hi, guuuys! It's me! Huell! It's great to have everybody here! *[Chuckling.]* So! Tell me about menswear!" You know? And it was like—it was a—it was like a genuinely magical experience in my life. Because he really brought that to the world. Like, fully. I have a—I have a voicemail on my phone that I've been saving from Huell Howser for ten years. I tried to get him on this show, and he passed away, unfortunately, a month or so after he left this call while we were still trying to figure out the details. But there's something incredible about him.

And the thing that is—I mean, your show made me think of Huell Howser because it has that quality—while it has a very different

00:13:01	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>tone—it has that same quality of kind of like openheartedness to people and places. And that must have been part of what sparked the excitement about making something like that.</p> <p>Yeah. I think—you know, like there’s a lot of immigrant struggle stories. And those are definitely interesting and have a place, but I think—especially like for making programming for children, you try to think a lot about what kinds of stories are helpful to them. So, through that I think is how stuff like <i>City of Ghosts</i> helps, where it shows joyful stories. Like, with some sadness in there, but we’ve done it in a way where it’s like—yeah, within [chuckles]—within these cities, there’s so much of a depth of what you can experience. [Chuckles.]</p>
00:13:40	Jesse	Host	<p>I spent some time recently thinking about why I cared so much about <i>Sesame Street</i> as a kid. And—I mean, part of it was because <i>Sesame Street</i> is a great show. I mean, that’s why it’s <i>Sesame Street</i>. But it occurred to me that—as a kid growing up in the city—almost all of my media was about <i>Back to the Future</i> type kids. Like, kids who skateboarded from—in their cul-de-sac. Which had <u>no</u> meaning to me at all. Like, truly no meaning to me at all. And even though <i>Sesame Street</i> is set in a kind of abstracted version of New York—which was 3,000 miles from where I lived in San Francisco—just the mere fact that it had the sense of urbanity—that like everyone was there together, knocking into each other—was <u>so</u> important to me. And just that feeling of like, “Oooh. This is like when I go down and talk to the lady at the corner store.” You know? Like that feeling.</p>
00:14:51	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>Yeah. Man. I mean, [laughs]... like, <i>Sesame Street</i>—that’s totally true. And the early <i>Sesame Street</i> especially. Like—I guess what’s now like old school <i>Sesame Street</i>. The people felt not like super shiny. [Chuckles.] I mean, same with <i>Muppets</i>. Like, I think that’s why those are so appealing to me, especially the early ones. Like, there’s like a—like a crudeness to it, but it’s also still amazing to me whenever I think about <i>Muppets</i> now to like realize how much life they’ve put into this thing that’s like a piece of foam on somebody’s hand. Not to like digress onto something, but like I was watching a clip lately of Miss Piggy and Charles Grodin. And you never—like, you never once think about—he’s holding somebody’s forearm.</p> <p>[They chuckle.]</p>
00:15:57	Jesse	Host	<p>Like, this, you know? It’s not—it’s not actually a character, but it is a character. You know? Like you—it never—yeah. I don’t know. It’s amazing to me. [Laughs.]</p> <p>Even more with Elizabeth Ito still to come. Stay with us. It’s <i>Bullseye</i>, from <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.</p>
00:16:06	Music	Transition	<p>Relaxed synth with a steady beat.</p>
00:16:11	Jesse	Host	<p>It’s <i>Bullseye</i>. I’m Jesse Thorn. If you’re just joining us, we’re listening to my 2021 interview with Elizabeth Ito. She’s a write and animator who’s worked on <i>Adventure Time</i>, <i>Spongebob Squarepants</i>, and more. She created the show <i>City of Ghosts</i> on Netflix, which is a unique and fascinating program that tells the story of different places in Los Angeles through interviews with real people. The show just earned a Peabody Award in the Children and Youth category. Let’s get back into our conversation.</p>

00:16:54	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>Why did you make the choice to make the show substantially based on interviews rather than scripting narratives?</p> <p>I just really love kind of like improvisational stuff that has to do with like real people and like how we really talk. <i>[Laughs.]</i> And all the kind of funny stories that people have to tell about themselves and their lives. And finding ways to integrate that into this larger story about the city—I don't know. Like, there's so many things that I don't enjoy as much when they're kind of watered down, like when they're—when somebody else takes a story that somebody else has about themselves and they try to write it for an actor for a character. I just get so much joy out of figuring out, "How do we animate that particular person's story and that voice in this way that really captures everything that's so great about the way real people tell their stories?" <i>[Chuckles.]</i></p>
00:17:47	Jesse	Host	<p>Give me an example. Tell me someone that you talked to for the show and how you thought about how to represent them in animation.</p>
00:17:56	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>The first person that I'm thinking of is really JMD. Like he just floated into my mind, so I'm gonna go with him. 'Cause I think... when we very first started researching that neighborhood to figure out like who do we wanna talk to, what kinds of things do we wanna talk about that are happening there—I met up with him, in Leimert, and he just toured us around. And it really felt like an old friend—or he felt like an old friend—that I just had never known. So, I guess that's a weird way to describe it, but like—and there's so much about the way that he talks that, if you hear him speak and you're from there, you kind of like automatically connect like—oh, he must be from around where I came from. Like south LA. 'Cause there's a way that he talks. <i>[Chuckles.]</i></p>

So, it was sort of just everything about meeting him and, likewise, light meeting most of the people, where they became characters in the show—it was like this feeling of like, "This feels like exactly what we want to capture. This feels like the right person to play this role. This part of their story feels like it fits into the narrative that we're working on in the show." So, instead of finding an actor to act as if they're this person, let's just get them directly. And then—so, with JMD, too, it was also not only his voice, but then it was important to me like is there a way to overlap his drumming into the soundtrack of the show. Because we want it to feel like his rhythms. And then we found a way to make that happen. So, I think it was just trying to find the things that like shined to me, as representative of these people. And putting that into the show.

00:19:47	Jesse	Host	<p>Let's hear a little bit of JMD from the episode of <i>City of Ghosts</i> that's about Leimert Park, here in Los Angeles. In this scene, there's a kid detective interviewing JMD, who is—in the show—a ghost.</p>
00:20:01	Sound Effect	Transition	<p>Music swells and fades.</p>
00:20:02	Clip	Clip	<p><b>Music:</b> Jazzy music.</p>

**Kid:** What was Leimert like when you lived here?

**JMD:** It was beautiful in the daytime. At night, it was a whole 'nother life. You know? There's a lot of seedy things going on late at night. It just wasn't good. Jazz seemed to wash all that away. Music

			<p>changed everything. You'd see all of these people sitting outside playing chess, listening to music, having coffee, having conversations about worldly events or culture and things like that. And then all the sudden, the riffraff didn't have a place. They didn't have a foothold anymore. Nobody said, "Get out." They just kind of like went, "This ain't the place for me."</p>
00:20:47	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:20:48	Jesse	Host	Were you worried about making a show that... felt like tourism or anthropology?
00:20:59	Elizabeth	Guest	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> What do you mean like anthropology? <i>[Laughs.]</i>
00:21:03	Jesse	Host	I mean, like—I feel like often, when media takes on the representation of underheard voices, often the way that it's done is by giving a cultural tour of a place and describing the people as though they are aliens.
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
			And I know that like—as a young person, when I listened to public radio and there was stuff about young people, I would be—that would make me mad. Or as a person who lived in the inner city, and I would hear people talk about the inner city—that would make me mad. It wasn't just people who were getting it wrong. It was also people who were—who felt patronizing in their tone about this place or this type of being in the world that was native to me.
00:21:51	Elizabeth	Guest	Yeah. That's really interesting. <i>[Chuckling.]</i> I've never heard—nobody's ever asked me that, but the easy answer is yes.
			<i>[They laugh.]</i>
			I was worried about it a bit. I think like my version of thinking—of worrying about it was like... like with <i>Welcome to My Life</i> , my short, I had something that I understood that was easy to like kind of do whatever I wanted with, in some regards, because like I know my family so well. But when I suggested the idea of <i>City of Ghosts</i> , I think I was nervous because—first of all, there's limitations to what I know about my own city. So, there was that fear. And then like you're saying, it's so many cultures that I knew would be outside of my own experience that I was definitely pretty terrified that I was gonna do that. That I was gonna treat it like I was some sort of explorer, discovering this <i>[laughs]</i> —this new thing that I am introducing people to. And I—there were sometimes where we did have to kind of have just meetings and stuff about—you know, outlines and where we were going with them and those kinds of concerns.
00:23:13	Jesse	Host	How did you address that?
00:23:17	Elizabeth	Guest	Sometimes it was like avoiding going a certain direction. Like, for the Tongva episode, we definitely had to take a while to figure out who should this story be about? Like, who's the one who needs to learn something. Who should be the one guiding this character through that discovery? I think it was just a lot of introspective moments of like whose voice should be <i>[chuckling]</i> the most prominent in this episode and who should they be getting their lessons from about where this is coming from? So, it was like—I think initially we had started with—where it wasn't necessarily

driven by Jasper. It was driven by another kid having a question. And then, so Ako definitely was just incredibly thoughtful about it.

So, it was—it was nice to have a director where I could have these—they're not—I guess they're not difficult conversations if you're having them with the right person. You know? Like they're kind of easy conversations to have if you're talking to them with somebody who's at the same place as you are with what they're trying to do with the subject matter. So, I felt that was a really fortunate thing, to have people that I could talk to like that.

00:24:37 Jesse Host

You know, a lot of people talk about how amazing *Mr. Rogers* was, aptly—appropriately. We talked about Huell Howser and how amazing he was. And I was trying to think what it was that led me to connect the two of them in my mind, which they certainly are. And I think for me, the reason is that it's so rare to have such huge personalities, such—you know, in Huell's case, like this huge performance as well—but both bring so much to the screen, but they're also so much characterized by their kind of humility. And that seems like—that quality seems sooo evident in your show that it must have been a choice that you made. That this is a show about listening more than it is a show about telling.

00:25:32 Elizabeth Guest

*[Chuckles.]* I feel really flattered, so I'm gonna take a minute.

00:25:37 Jesse Host

*[They giggle.]*

I really love your show. I think it's so wonderful.

00:25:40 Elizabeth Guest

Thank you. Yeah, I mean, I think part of it is just that I try to enjoy having kids *[laughing]* as much as I can. But like part of that is just I'm so appreciative of how funny kids are and I think some of that comes from having a mom who was a public-school teacher. You know? And a good public school teacher. You know? Where I knew she really cared about the kids and you would hear—I would hear just when she would come home, like—I mean, just how much it meant to her to kind of listen to the kids that were in her class. Like, you know, different kids have different abilities for learning. They have different needs for how they learn. And feeling like she was always really sensitive and aware for that. So, I think like especially after I had kids, I was like, "Man, there needs to be more stuff out there for kids to like—to celebrate how weird and funny and unique they are."

And I think my feeling was like there's a lot out here that's trying to sell them something. But I really want stuff that just genuinely like gets them to laugh, gets kind of the weird—the weird kids. Like, I was a weird kid, I think. My mom would probably *[chuckles]* not like that I was saying that, but I definitely recognize some of that in my son and my daughter. So, I think of it as a good thing. But like, I'm really happy to hear that about the show, because I was also really happy to sort of have this feeling that I created a working environment that was similar. Like, I think the people that ended up working on the show all just like really appreciated having a show that also like listened to the creatives that were on it, where they had this opportunity to kind of like not feel nervous if they wanted to question something or not feel nervous if there was like something where, "What if we did it a different way?" That if they came to me to ask me about that kind of stuff, I really wanted to listen to that and I really wanted to hear it. So.

I mean, within reason. Like, obviously there's points where you're like, "Nope." [Laughs.] Like, "We can't do that." But for the most part, like wanting to feel like there was a collaborative show within animation that was kind of less of a business and more of like filmmaking. [Chuckles.]

00:28:06 Jesse Host There's an episode of *City of Ghosts* that's based in Koreatown, which is a neighborhood in Los Angeles that starts about three or four blocks west of where we're sitting right now. And when watching it, I had that feeling that you had when you saw Nakatomi Plaza in *Die Hard*. Which is like, I used to—I used to live over there. Do this show over there. And you showed—there's a part that takes place in a restaurant that is a block from where I lived. And I'm 40 years old. I've lived in Los Angeles—the most filmed city in the world—for 12 years, or 14 years, or something. And I work in entertainment. [Laughs.] And just seeing something from my neighborhood was so exciting to me!

And I thought, "Why did she choose to make this show's places real places?" Because the background paintings, so to speak—I'm sure you make it on computers—but the background paintings, so to speak, of these episodes are photographs of places. So, why are they real places and not just pictures that somebody drew that show the ideal qualities of a certain type of place for your certain story that you're telling?

00:29:34 Elizabeth Guest Again, I think kind of going down this path of doing like hybrid documentary, animated stuff—when I first started [chuckles] doing it with my short, the thought was just—well. Actually, like if I back way up, it's because I started playing with putting my drawings into Instagram, back before they had a lot of stuff where you could just put stickers in or things like that. And it got kind of a good response and I really enjoyed doing it. And then, when I got to do my short at Cartoon Network, I thought, "Well, maybe there's something to doing something like that, but animated so that when you're using—you know—real voices and you're trying to make it feel real, that you ground it by actually having the backgrounds be real." But I didn't necessarily know if that was like affordable for TV, yet. 'Cause the only places where I'd really seen that were like movies and kind of like lower budget [chuckles] versions of that, before.

And then I also just thought it would be a combo of like photos and probably like CG animation, 'cause I want them to look like they actually exist in this space. But also, like similarly, the only CG animation that I'd really seen on TV was maybe like *Garfield*. [Laughs.] And I was like, "I don't want *Garfield*, but we'll see. Maybe there's somebody who'll give me—"

00:31:03 Jesse Host Maybe—maybe Odie.

[Elizabeth agrees with a laugh.]

00:31:08 Elizabeth Guest Nermal might come into it at some point. Nermal, yeah. [Laughs.] Or Eileen—? What was—Arlene? Was that somebody's girlfriend?

00:31:14 Jesse Host Yeah. Jon's girlfriend, I think. Yeah, that sounds right.

00:31:18 Elizabeth Guest So, yeah. And then I think when we figured out that I wasn't gonna be making *Welcome to My Life the TV Show* at Netflix and I was

making *City of Ghosts*, I still wanted to keep that same idea of grounding it—like, if we’re gonna do it in a real city, can we then try something different and like maybe go out to those locations that we’re working in and not only sort of like research them by taking like field trips [*chuckles*] to them, but can we then hire like maybe like a street photographer, somebody who’s done photography in the city, to capture it so that we’re really capturing something from the lens of somebody that understands this place?

And it all worked out!?! So. [*Laughs.*] I guess that’s how we ended up with real places.

00:32:09 Jesse Host

How does it change the show, do you think, that there are real places?

00:32:13 Elizabeth Guest

I think in a—in a small but big way, it really allowed us to keep like really neighborhood specific little details. Like, honestly just keeping like the real texture of the curbs—a lot of it is the lighting. I think even though, in some cases, we enhanced, or we painted it to sort of favor a certain time of day or whatnot, I feel like there is like this—this very specific characteristic to the light in LA that because we were basing it—both using a real photo and basing it off of a photo, I think that makes it feel really, really authentic, because it is authentic. [*Laughs.*]

00:33:01 Jesse Host

How do you cast children for a show that is this different in tone from most animated television shows that are casting children?

00:33:15 Elizabeth Guest

Uuuh, it was kind of hard? [*Laughs.*] But I think, luckily, from, um... some of the experience that I had on *Adventure Time* had to do with like recording and who you wanted the voice to be. There were like a lot of things really early on in *Adventure Time* where it was like, “We want people to talk with their real voices. We want them to sound like the people that we’re asking to do the voices.”

00:33:42 Jesse Host

Which is like the opposite of animation voiceover in general. Most animated shows have a limited pool of actors who they just bring in for the day to do 25 voices and that’s like the skill that’s most prized among voiceover actors.

00:33:56 Elizabeth Guest

Yeah, and the pros are incredibly good at it. I was always like really impressed with how like I wouldn’t know that one voice actor had been all of these different characters that I loved. But like—yeah. For my show, it was like such a different thing, similar to what we would look for on *Adventure Time*. I really wanted the kids to sound like little kids, kind of like how *Charlie Brown*—old *Charlie Brown* cartoons are. And even—like, even more so, in a way, where it’s like I wanted them to not sound scripted. Like I really wanted them to sound as if they were kids that would be shouting these things out or asking these questions.

So, it was really just saying, “Okay, first like—” Honestly, we couldn’t cast real actors, ‘cause it was like this thing where if we wanted to cast non-SAG people to voice our show, we couldn’t cast any SAG people. So, that was already a limitation. So, it was saying, “Hey, we need to reach out to kids, but they can’t kind of like already be professional voice actors.” So, that’s one thing. And then another was just like kind of watching a lot of auditions of kids and working with a really good casting director to sort of like find kids who were local, also? To where we were at. So that they would sound like the kids that they were playing.

00:35:25	Jesse	Host	When you say, “local to where we were at”, you don’t mean local to southern California.
00:35:33	Elizabeth	Guest	No, I specifically mean like local to like Hollywood. I guess Hollywood could be central to a lot of the neighborhoods we touched. Like, Koreatown or west LA or Leimert. I don’t—like I don’t even know how to describe this entire coincidence except it’s just that like we picked the voice of Eva. We recorded her for a few and then we decided to set the Leimert episode at Hot and Cool Café and then it turned out her mom co-runs that place? <i>[Laughs.]</i> So, she says she’s from Leimert Park in the episode and she really is like definitely <i>[laughing]</i> from Leimert Park. So, yeah. That’s one very specific example of like very local.
00:36:20	Jesse	Host	We’ll finish up with Elizabeth Ito after a quick break. When we return, has she seen any ghosts in real life and what were they like? We’ll hear the answer in a minute. It’s <i>Bullseye</i> , from <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR.
00:36:35	Promo	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Bright, lively piano.

**Hal Lublin:** *[In an old-timey radio host voice.]* Hal Lublin here with breaking news on a revolutionary form of entertainment: professional wrestling!

*[The bell dings. A distant crowd cheers.]*

For more, we go our correspondent, Danielle Radford.

**Danielle Radford:** Professional wrestling is the craze that’s sweeping the nation! Featuring fisticuffs and colorful costumes!

**Hal:** But who can help us make sense of this world of body slams? Lindsey Kelk has the answer.

**Lindsey Kelk:** Sources tell us of an amazing podcast called *Tights and Fights*, filled with discussions of the absurdity of professional wrestling, plus all the sincerity and hilarity that you can shake a stick at!

*[Chanting and cheering from the audience.]*

**Danielle:** Listen to the *Tights and Fights* podcast every week!

**Lindsey:** Find it on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Hal:** Aaand your old-timey radio!

*[The crowd cheers as the music fades out.]*

00:37:20	Music	Transition	Relaxed synth with a steady beat.
00:37:25	Jesse	Host	This is <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with the creator of <i>City of Ghosts</i> , Elizabeth Ito. Her show just won a Peabody Award.
			How did you end up having one of the kid characters in the show be nonbinary?
00:37:40	Elizabeth	Guest	That, again, was sort of like a choice based off of kind of like my feelings about how different kids have different lives in different parts of the city. My mom was a teacher kind of on the west side,

like the Santa Monica area, which tends to be a little bit more—sometimes a little bit more forward thinking. *[Chuckles.]* But it's also just like—so, part of it was that Thomas's character is supposed to come from—they're supposed to come from west LA or Santa Monica. And I thought, "Oh, well, maybe this is an opportunity to have Thomas be nonbinary or different in some way that's a little bit more embraced on that side of town." And it was also just a combination of that plus knowing a lot of parents whose kids are nonbinary, from preschool.

And so, thinking like, "If this is a choice we can make and it makes sense for that character, let's go for it!" And it was really just that. And then telling our casting director, "If possible, can we cast for this character?" And being able to make that work out, which was really nice and surprising. *[Laughs.]*

00:38:59    Jesse        Host        My kids flipped out when they figured that out. I mean, I can't even begin to tell you how much that means to kids. And for it to be in the fabric of the show—for it not to be the premise of the show. I mean, the premise of the show's also nice. But it's not a very special episode. It's just that is one of the things about one of the kids. Just as your episode about Leimert Park is not a very special episode about the importance of jazz in American culture. You know. Although that can be great. Jazz is important in American culture. It's just that that's part of Leimert Park. Like, it was the jazz capital of Los Angeles and then it was, you know, the home to the Freestyle Fellowship.

00:39:46    Elizabeth    Guest      Yeah. I mean, I was happy to be able to do a show where most stuff wasn't a very special episode. *[Laughs.]* You know? And like I think at the end of it, honestly just like—not to be super tooting *[laughing]* my horn, but I'm like impressed at what we've packed in without having done one episode that was like where it's a highlight rather than sort of just like built in. *[Chuckles.]*

00:40:17    Jesse        Host        Do you think that this is an operation you could pick up and move somewhere else? Or do you think this is something that only works in the context of Los Angeles, the city that you were born in?

00:40:28    Elizabeth    Guest      I think it could definitely move somewhere else. I'm not sure where, because I have differing feelings about what like the evolution of it could be. At the very beginning, we had some conversations where—when it was like, "Oh, let's just hypothetically say like this show explodes and then what do you do after for the multiple seasons? Do you stay here and do more stories? Do you go abroad? Do you stay within the United States?"

At the time, I think I was just so overwhelmed with like, "I gotta make a show," that I was like, "I don't know. I have no idea." Like, maybe it only stays here. I don't even know how many episodes I'm gonna make of this show that I haven't made yet. But I think it's interesting as a travel show. I also think it's interesting as like—like, recently I've kind of wondered, "Is it funnier if it's like—what if it stayed really adjacent to LA and then the next episode after that was adjacent to wherever that was and then you just gradually got farther and farther out until it was like way out?" 'Cause like part of me envisioned like, "Is another kid starting their own Ghost Club in their city?" Like, then do you go to that Ghost Club?

So. Yeah, there's all—like, all sorts of ways that I've imagined it.  
*[Laughs.]*

00:41:50 Jesse Host  
00:41:53 Elizabeth Guest

Do you have any experience with ghosts?  
Yeah. Um. When I was about six or seven, I saw a ghost in the hallway of our house that we're pretty sure was my great grandmother, 'cause it was like a leap year and she was born on a leap year and—I mean, *[laughing]* she wasn't alive anymore at that point. So, that was another factor. Yeah.

00:42:15 Jesse Host  
00:42:19 Elizabeth Guest

Can you describe what that was like?  
I used to get really scared getting up to go to the bathroom at night when I was that age, which I don't know why I get so upset at my kids for not wanting to go in their own rooms, now that I'm thinking about that. But I—so, I had to go to the bathroom. I went to the bathroom, and I was sitting there, looking out into the hallway, and I thought I saw like a—kind of like a foggy thing. So, if—I mean, if you've watched the show then like it kind of was reminiscent of like Janet—the ghost in the first episode. And so, I just yelled to my parents like, "Somebody come help me! I'm scared!"

I think somebody was like, "What's wrong?"

And I said, "There's a ghost out here."

And then somebody said, "Go back to bed." So, that's what I did. And then the next morning, my dad was asking me about it, and he said he had seen it too, earlier in the night, but he didn't wanna come out, because he was so scared. So, he just told me to go back to bed.

00:43:19 Jesse Host  
00:43:23 Elizabeth Guest

*[Laughs.]* That's a powerful dad move, there.  
Yeah. You know, what's really funny too is his friend—recently a family friend who's lived in Eagle Rock since I was a kid—like, since before I was born, maybe—he lives nearby. So, I live nearby him, now. And he called me to say that he heard me on the—on the radio. *[Laughs.]* And—on the news. He heard me on the news. And he said, "And you know, I got chills listening to you talking about your ghost story, because I remember I came over to your family's house the day after that had happened and I came in and I saw there was a camera. Your dad had a camera set up on a tripod, aimed at like the corner. And I asked him like, 'What's this about?' And he said the whole thing and he had set up this camera because his plan was to take a picture of the ghost the next night. Like, he had set it up with really high-speed film and he was planning to like try to take a picture of it really covertly, 'cause he didn't wanna disturb it."

I don't know. Like, I thought that was a very funny like weird memory of like my dad also trying to capture the ghost the second night.

00:44:37 Jesse Host  
00:44:45 Elizabeth Guest

The ghosts on your show, though, aren't spooky ghosts. How would you describe what they are?  
*[Beat.]* I think the ghosts on my show are... they're just basically people that used to live here or like kind of people that haven't stopped living here, even though they might not have a body anymore. But they still have opinions, and they still have feelings. So, they still wanna talk to people about who they were and like what they did. *[Chuckles.]*

00:45:11	Jesse	Host	<p>Yeah. I think one of the things about living in the city, especially growing up in the city when you have a little more—maybe you probably have more sense of magic and wonder than I do. But you have this feeling of... every physical place: a building, every part of the built world, but—you know, other places in the city, too. Parks and stuff. They have all lived a life that is far beyond your life. And there have been so many lives that have passed through those places in so many ways. And you sort of—you are living with all those things at the same time, in a way. And you know, Americans—you know, Los Angeles, maybe that's 100 years or—you know, if you're talking about the Tongva people, you're talking about 1,000 years or 2,000 years or however long it was since people crossed that land bridge from Asia, right?</p> <p>And to me, as a kid, it was something that I never didn't love about living in the city—that I was in this world—this world that was like then and now at the same time.</p>
00:46:18	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>Yeah. It's a strange place that way. There's a lot of old theaters that are—that give you that feeling, no matter when you walk in them, I think. Like, Bob Baker for sure is someplace that like—there's something that's spooky about it to me, but I like it. <i>[Laughs.]</i></p>
00:46:40	Jesse	Host	<p>This is a marionette theater in Los Angeles—a famous children's marionette theater in Los Angeles that is profoundly spooky. I've seen their shows a number of times and found them to be distinctly spooky. <i>[Laughs.]</i></p>
00:46:51	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>Yeah, I think—I saw somebody saying they have their show at—like a show at Knott's Berry Farm, now, and there's something really fitting about those two things going together.</p>
00:47:09	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[They chuckle.]</i> Well, Elizabeth Ito, your show is so beautiful, and I love it so much. I'm so glad that I got to see it and my kids got to see it. So, thank you for taking all this time to be on <i>Bullseye</i>.</p>
00:47:19	Elizabeth	Guest	<p>Thank you for having me!</p>
00:47:21	Music	Transition	<p>Lively, upbeat synth.</p>
00:47:29	Jesse	Host	<p>Elizabeth Ito. Congratulations to her and the rest of the team that made <i>City of Ghosts</i> for their Peabody Award. It could not have been more well deserved. If you haven't seen <i>City of Ghosts</i>, you can watch it on Netflix. Also! Be on the lookout for Elizabeth's new short, <i>Mall Stories</i>. It's an animated documentary in a similar style to <i>City of Ghosts</i>. The voices of all the characters are real people that work at the Mongolian Grill in the Burbank mall.</p>
00:48:03	Music	Transition	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i> Bright, relaxed synth.</p>
00:48:06	Jesse	Host	<p>That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i>. <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—although, this week, I am actually recording from my friend's guest bedroom in Woodside, California, where I have gone to <i>The Antiques Roadshow</i>. Thank you so much to the <i>Roadshow</i> for inviting me. I had such a great time visiting with my mom. We met some of our favorite appraisers on that program and had a great time in the Filoli Sculpture Gardens. Now, I will says <i>[chuckles]</i> that I forgot to bring headphones with me on this trip. And so, I have borrowed some from my friend's four-year-old daughter. They are tiger themed. They're orange and they have</p>

little tiger ears on them. I am recording this, right now, on video and we will share that on social media. So, make sure to follow us on Facebook and Twitter if you wanna see me making an NPR show in children's tiger headphones.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Tabatha Myers. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme music is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Our thanks to The Go! Team and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use that.

*Bullseye* is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us there, give us a follow, and we'll share with you all of our interviews and the aforementioned picture of me wearing little, orange, children's tiger headphones. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:49:50    Promo                    Promo

**Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*