

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:13] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:20] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is the wonderful and brilliant Christine Baranski. She's an actor with an incredible resume. She went to Juilliard. She was on Broadway in *The Real Thing*, *Rumors*, *House of Blue Leaves*. She's won two Tony Awards. On the hit sitcom *Cybill*, She was the title character's best friend, Maryann. She won an Emmy for that one.

She's an iconic character actor with a distinctive look that commands your attention on the screen. She is—and this is not a word I use lightly—a legend. In 2009, she got a part on the CBS show, *The Good Wife*. It was a legal political drama that starred Julianna Margulies. Baranski played Diane Lockhart on the show, a partner at the firm where Margulies's character worked. Critics loved *The Good Wife*. Millions watched it. And when the show wrapped, Baranski got her own spinoff: *The Good Fight*. And once again, critics loved it. Millions watched it.

When I talked with Baranski last year, *The Good Fight* had just started running its sixth and final season. That's on Paramount+. *The Good Fight* is a drama like its predecessor, but it's also funny—as in this clip, which kicks off the show's fourth season. Diane wakes up in an alternate reality. President Hillary Clinton is in the middle of her first term in the White House. Polar bears are thriving again. The rainforest is saved. A cure for cancer is on the horizon. And Diane—well, Diane is a little confused, and her coworkers are concerned.

[00:02:02] **Sound Effect:** Music swells and fades.

[00:02:05] **Christine Baranski:**

*(Diane laughs for a little too long.)*

**Alyssa (*The Good Fight*):** Are you alright, Diane?

**Diane:** Alyssa! I have never been better. Don't you know that cancer was cured!?

**Speaker 1:** Yes, but the administration's not telling us how. Or when.

**Alyssa:** Luca is worried about you. Should we be?

**Diane:** I don't know. I just—I had this weird dream!

**Speaker 2:** Luca said that Trump was president. How'd that go?

**Diane:** Ohhh my god, he kept called Nazis “very fine people”. And he did a senate campaign for a child molester. And he put children in cages.

**Speaker 1:** Why?

**Diane:** Immigration policy. And, uh, antisemitism and racism were on the rise.

**Alyssa:** And where were the Obamas during all this?

**Diane:** They had an overall deal at Netflix.

[00:02:43] **Sound Effect:** Music swells and fades.

[00:02:47] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckling.*) Christine Baranski, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so, so happy to have you on the show.

[00:02:52] **Christine Baranski:** I'm delighted to be here.

[00:02:54] **Jesse Thorn:** *The Good Fight* is such a wonderful show. It's also like—for what—you know, look. It's on a streaming service, but we'll call it a network television program. It's so deeply odd in that it lives in this world between just a pretty straight, prestige-y legal drama—a very high quality, traditional, narrative television program. The world—the real world. It has a deep interplay with the real world.

[00:03:31] **Christine Baranski:** Or the unreal world now, I say.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:03:34] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah! And then, also sometimes really weird stuff happens, like you talk to the ghost of Ruth Bader Ginsburg or whatever. (*Laughs.*)

[00:03:47] **Christine Baranski:** Any opportunity to work with Elaine May. That was actually my idea. Not that—Ruth Bader Ginsburg was not my idea, but I thought who can play it? And then I thought, oh my God, Elaine May. That's history.

[00:04:02] **Jesse Thorn:** It's a good venue for, you know, you or Wallace Shawn is in it. He's wonderful in it. Alan Cumming used to do it. Like, these are performers with—who bring so much—(*chuckling.*) I don't know what the right word is. Verve?! Does that seem right?

[00:04:23] **Christine Baranski:** Well, there's verve, but they're quirky. You know, these are mostly New York theatre actors. They're all character actors. I mean, Dylan Baker played that utterly creepy guy, the wife killer. There was just a revolving door on brilliant guest actors, and our series regulars were no slouches. And in the final year, our final year, we got Andre Braugher—who is really a marvelous actor, but he's damn funny. When you see season—what is it? Did we make it to ten?

[00:04:56] **Jesse Thorn:** Six. This is six. Yeah.

[00:04:57] **Christine Baranski:** Six? But I mean, he's marvelous. It was just an embarrassment of riches. And the Kings knew, especially with covid—you see, all of these theatre actors were home. They couldn't work in the theatre, but we were managing to work on film with, you know, very strict protocols. But we did go to work, and we kept people safe. And that was true of *The Gilded Age* as well. We had to wear masks. We were tested every day. But we managed to do our work in front of a camera. And so, all of these marvelous actors in both these shows, really, were available. And one of the great things about *Good Wife—Good Fight* was just—it was a repertory company for great actors and actresses. And they all did their turns, and they were judges and lawyers and various victims, whatever. And you know, it was—I will miss that probably more than anything.

[00:06:00] **Jesse Thorn:** Christine, you're a very serious actor, and you do a lot of serious acting in the show, but also—you know, I went on Twitter and said, “Christine Baranski's coming on *Bullseye* today. What should I ask her about?” And sometimes, to get it to show up better on Twitter for people to talk to me about it, I'll go into the database of gifs that they have—little animated gifs on Twitter. And if you type in Baranski into the database of animated gifs, it is a treasure trove of disapproving takes that knows no end.

(*They giggle.*)

The world of Christine Baranski onscreen giving looks.

[00:06:48] **Christine Baranski:** Lady Disdain. Isn't that what uh, Benedick calls Beatrice in *Much Ado*? Lady Disdain. Yeah, I've got some attitudes; that's for sure. I call them bad-itudes.

[00:07:01] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckling.*) To be fair, like it's not exclusively disapproving. There's a few like looking up and downs. There's some fantastic different—but that is like—that is the intersection of very serious acting. Because none of these are anything but, you know, character driven. It's not as though these are random things you're throwing into spice things up a little bit. But it also is like a—it's a very classical skill. I mean, it's like the kind of thing that—(*chuckles*) it's the kind of thing that my Commedia dell'arte teacher would've made us practice, you know?

[00:07:41] **Christine Baranski:** (*Chuckles.*) Well, you know, let's face it. I've been acting—I went to Juilliard in 1970. On the way here, I passed my alma mater, and I thought, “Man, that's—” ‘Cause it isn't possible it was 50 years ago. But I've played a lot of different roles, and of course you tend to get cast at what you're good at. And it seemed what I was good at was, you know, women with attitude or sophistication or kind of putting a certain top spin on a line reading, so it just went over the net exactly right. Like Neil Simon or Tom Stoppard.

And I sort of refined that, because you do tend to refine things when you get to do them over and over. But with *The Good Fight*, what I loved is—you know, I didn't start out—Diane didn't have these characteristics when I was cast. She was, you know, the head of the law firm, along with Will Gardner—Josh Charles' character. And I think she was meant to be an antagonist to Alicia. And I think over the course of a year or so, the Kings discovered that I

had a sense of humor. I had certain aspects to my personality that they decided to use. And by the time we did a spinoff of Diane and made it *The Good Fight*—you know, you had scenes with Diane kind of going crazy, living in the Trump era where she, you know, laughed a lot. There was a one whole episode where I was in court, and I couldn't stop laughing.

[00:09:15] **Sound Effect:** Music swells then fades.

[00:09:16] **Clip:**

*(Diane snorts a muffled laugh and chuckles.)*

**Judge:** What? What is this? What? What is it? What is she doing? Uh, your co-counsel is laughing. Am I missing something here?

**Speaker:** No, your honor. We've been stretched really thin recently.

*(Diane continues laughing helplessly in the background.)*

**Judge:** Oh, right. I heard about that whole baking soda scare.

**Speaker:** *(Murmuring.)* Diane. Diane. Diane.

*(Normal volume.)* Yeah, thank you. Thank you, your honor.

**Judge:** Is she alright?

**Speaker:** She's just pleasantly surprised, your honor.

*(Diane's laughter gets louder.)*

**Judge:** Yeah.

*(A door slams.)*

[00:09:46] **Sound Effect:** Music swells then fades.

[00:09:47] **Christine Baranski:** They discovered that I had a great laugh, and they incorporated that into the character. So, I thought, over the course of 13 years of playing Diane, I got—thanks to the writers and the Kings—I got to use a lot of the skillset sets that I've acquired over the years, just doing—you know, all the things that I've done.

[00:10:09] **Jesse Thorn:** We've got so much more to get into with Christine Baranski. Stick around. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

[00:10:17] **Transition:** Chiming synth music with a steady beat.

[00:10:22] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Christine Baranski. She's an Emmy award-winning actor, star of *The Good Fight* and *The Good Wife*, a Tony Award-winning Broadway star. These days, you can also hear her voice in the new animated comedy, *Praise Petey*. It's about a young woman who inherits the family business, which is—in this case—a cult. When I talked to Baranski last year, *The Good Fight* had just kicked off its sixth and final season. You can stream it on Paramount+. Let's get back into our conversation.

You went to theatre school at Juilliard.

*(Christine confirms.)*

What led you to think that you could and should go to theatre school at Juilliard?

[00:11:09] **Christine Baranski:** Well, my grandmother—I lived with my paternal grandmother, and she actually was an actress in the Polish theatre, in Buffalo. It was rather like the Yiddish theatre in New York. It was—we lived in a Polish Catholic community. There was a very strong Polish section to Buffalo, and they—my grandmother and grandfather both were actors and did plays in Polish and some of them in English.

But I lived with a very vivacious woman who, you know, she was very expressive, and she loved the arts. And my father took me to see singers and dancers that were a Polish folk troop. And so, I developed a feeling for like the magic of performing arts and people who were that way. And I actually—I was quite shy when I was young. It's amazing. I became an actor because I really was very, very shy, up until about the sixth grade. And then—anyway, I began to sort of come out of myself, and I started doing plays in high school, like so many people. I went from being backstage and helping out to, you know, standing in the wings thinking, “God, that really looks like fun.”

And I got cast in a few things. And then, I—while I was in high school, I read about a program sponsored by the New York State Council in the Arts, and it was a theatre workshop for kids from all over the city. And I auditioned for that, and I got in, and suddenly I was going across town to the University of Buffalo to be in this workshop with kids who were not Polish Catholic kids. They were—there were Black kids, there were Jewish kids, there were—we were doing African drumming and African dancing and improvisation and street theatre. And this was the late '60s. So, you can imagine we were doing a lot of anti-war stuff.

Anyway, then I became part of an experimental theatre company. By the time I was a senior in high school, it was called The Company of Man, and we performed in the old Pierce-Arrow Plant. And I think my first real professional play—I was in a two-character play called *The Master*, and I actually wore an American flag as a mini dress with white Go-Go boots.

*(Jesse muffles a laugh.)*

And I actually got a really good review from the university's school paper. Anyway. So, I'm already filled with excitement and passion. And I think I had enough people, including my high school drama teacher and the teachers who were doing this workshop—enough people

told me, “You should really do this,” that I did read about the Juilliard School in the *Buffalo Evening News*, and I thought—just thought, “Well, that would be my dream.” So, I auditioned, and I hadn't heard from them at all. And I'd already heard from Boston University that I was accepted to their theatre department, and I'd gotten rejected at NYU. And then, I had the courage to call Juilliard and ask, you know. And they said, “Well, we're—” I could do the voice, but, um—(*adopting a posh trans-Atlantic accent*) “You know, terribly sorry. You've been waitlisted. You have this speech problem—impediment that we feel is very difficult to correct. Now, it's possible because of, you know, the space between your two front teeth that, you know, air is going through there and creating a slight whistle.” (*Laughs.*) “But perhaps if you had your teeth capped and went for speech therapy.”

So, basically that's what I did. And my mother, who was really—could not afford to do this, but she got my—she took me to an orthodontist, and I got my two front teeth capped, and I went for quite a few months of speech therapy. And then I re-auditioned. So, you know, it's a fun story, but it was kind of thrilling, because I had to show up months later and go into the office of John Houseman, who was a very formidable man. He was the law professor in *Paper Chase*, if you remember. He was—that's the way he was. He was really intimidating. And the speech teacher and the voice teacher, they were all there. And they handed me a page full of—it was a paragraph of nothing but Ss. And I had to do this. And god, it was just—

When I finished, the voice and speech teacher, her back was to me. And she was staring out the window. And John Houseman said to her, (*snootily*) “Well, Elizabeth, what do you think?” And Elizabeth Smith just nodded her head. She didn't say anything. And then, Houseman said, (*snootily*) “Congratulations, you've just been accepted at the Juilliard school.”

(*They chuckle.*)

It was pretty thrilling stuff. You know, I was 18. It was—it still is thrilling for people when they get into Juilliard. They say it's just the most thrilling thing, because it's like winning the lottery. It's actually rather like winning the lottery, 'cause what are the chances you get in? They—what, did they have 24 kids? From all over the country? And now the competition's even worse—exponentially worse. I was only group three. They had just started the drama division. But it still remains one of the great moments—one of the great days of my life, and I got great training from all of my teachers at Juilliard.

[00:17:12] **Jesse Thorn:** I was reading a *New York Times* profile of you from 10 or 20 years ago, and there was a late paragraph with a sentence at the end—this is like 4/5<sup>ths</sup> of the way through this story—that just casually mentioned that your career had been shaped by the fact that you weren't beautiful. (*Laughing.*) Now, I was—first of all, I was like, “Well, that's a catty remark, *New York Times* feature writer.” But I think I was—I also will say, as someone who may have to some extent romantically imprinted upon you, as a teenager watching *Cybill*, I was surprised to hear that description. (*Chuckles.*) And you know, it led into a quote of you talking about not looking like a movie star.

Did you feel that way about yourself from—? You know, I mean, to start your career at Juilliard with, “I had to fix my teeth,” you know what I mean?

[00:18:20] **Christine Baranski:** Yeah. Yeah. And I was—I'm glad you brought that up. This was the style section of the *New York Times*, and I happened to be with—the writer was Kathy Horan. And she was—she wrote, you know, the fashion stuff. And it was the day or the day after Elizabeth Taylor passed away. And so, there were all these images of Elizabeth Taylor, and I think all I said to her was, “I never got a job, an acting job, because I was beautiful.” I got acting jobs maybe because I was sexy or foxy or had a certain kind of what you call verve or a kind of energy or, you know, stage presence. But I—

[00:19:06] **Jesse Thorn:** I can confirm—I can confirm those things.

[00:19:09] **Christine Baranski:** I don't—I didn't ever—and I said, “In a way it was good, 'cause I didn't have a shelf life.” You know, I didn't—it was like once that look was gone, it would be, “Oh, I don't have a career anymore.” Because it was never a commodity, but, unfortunately, the title then of the piece was, “I Was Never Beautiful”, which kind of implied that I was not happy with the way I looked. And in fact, I think I'm perfectly fine. I think I'm attractive. Am I Liz Taylor? No. Uh, who is? And back then, movie stars were like Liz Taylor or Sophia Loren. You didn't see—you know, by the '70s, they were making quirky movies.

But I had never imagined myself as, you know, wanting a film career or that kind of “I'm up on the silver screen”. What I wanted when I left Buffalo was to be a theatre actress. And I played beautiful women onstage. You know, I played attractive women onstage. And then, as you say, *Cybill*—you know, Maryann was—you know, she was pretty great looking. But you know, I think the point was that I didn't—it was sort of a blessing. I didn't—as I grew older, I became in some ways more comfortable with myself and with the way I look, because it was never like an issue. “I'm going to lose my youth. I'm going to lose my beauty.” I mean, I just turned 70, and I've never been busier. So, you know, it's been a continuum for me to just keep working and playing different roles.

And Diane Lockhart, I think very attractive woman. Well-dressed, well-spoken. But I didn't get that role because, “Oh, well, you know, she's—” (*Laughs.*) You know, I didn't get the role because of my looks. I think I got it because of my resume and because of—I mean, she needed to be attractive certainly, but you know—you know what I'm saying. It wasn't the sine qua non of my career.

[00:21:15] **Jesse Thorn:** I was certain you were gonna say, “Here I am 70 years old, and I've never—” You start—you said, “I've never been” to say you've never been more successful or—I thought you were just gonna say, “I've never been hotter.”

[00:21:30] **Christine Baranski:** (*Laughs.*) Well, that too. I mean, it's not for me to say, but I do—in our final season, I'm part of a love triangle. I have two men in my life that I have to decide which one. And I've, you know, had this marvelous marriage with Gary Cole, who's such a guy-guy, and we had a great onscreen chemistry. And people loved the fact that this was a marriage between two people well over 50 who were still kind of hot for each other, and you know, they didn't agree politically. But clearly something was clicking. And so, I was happy to have that to contribute to all of the women over 50 who think life is just over. My life just kept getting better and better, my personal life.

And I think Diane's was a very vital, active, professional life, and her personal life was complicated. But you know, she wasn't sitting home alone and, you know, crying into her Scotch—some bitter woman worrying that she's, you know, childless and that she's, you know, got no personal life. Diane was pretty active.

[00:22:43] **Jesse Thorn:** We've got plenty more to talk about with Christine Baranski. After the break, she'll tell us about her relationship with the great Stephen Sondheim and how she connected with him many times as a collaborator. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

[00:23:00] **Promo:**

**Music:** “Medicines” from the album *Exhilarating News* by The Taxpayers.

**Justin McElroy:** Hey, Sydnee. You're a physician and the co-host of *Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine*, right?

**Sydnee McElroy:** That's true, Justin.

**Justin:** Is it true that our medical history podcast is just as good as a visit to your primary care physician?

**Sydnee:** No, Justin. That is absolutely not true. Uh, however, our podcast is funny and interesting and a great way to learn about the medical misdeeds of the past, as well as some current, not-so-legit healthcare fads.

**Justin:** So, you're saying that by listening to our podcast, people will feel better?

**Sydnee:** Sure.

**Justin:** And isn't that the same reason that you go to the doctor?

**Sydnee:** Well, uh, you could say that, but—

**Justin:** And our podcast is free.

**Sydnee:** Yes, it is free.

**Justin:** You heard it here first, folks. *Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine*, right here on Maximum Fun: just as good as going to the doctor.

**Sydnee:** No, no, no. Still not just as good as going to the doctor, but pretty good.

**Justin:** (*Softly.*) It's up there.



(*Music ends.*)

[00:23:45] **Transition:** Chiming synth music with a steady beat.

[00:23:49] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is actor Christine Baranski.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was dealing with some real tough stuff in addition to the tough stuff of the pandemic. And there weren't a lot of things that broke through to me enough to feel like they mattered in culture. And one of the things that did was the streaming Stephen Sondheim tribute in which you participated. So—

[00:24:26] **Christine Baranski:** (*Touched.*) Oh. That did break through, didn't it?

[00:24:31] **Jesse Thorn:** It really felt like it meant something, you know?

[00:24:34] **Christine Baranski:** I was stunned, yeah.

[00:24:35] **Jesse Thorn:** I think partly because, you know, Sondheim had passed away in his '90s. And so, it was an extraordinary loss, but also one that everyone—and you know, the greatest genius of American musical theatre and a vibrant presence—but also one that like I think people had thought about, “Well, what will happen when that happens?” You know, like, it wasn't as though—it wasn't as though he died at 27 in a motorcycle accident. And so, it was this extraordinary event that meant so much to people when they were hurting so bad and was so painful. But also, maybe people were, in a way, ready to have a celebration of his life. You know what I mean?

[00:25:32] **Christine Baranski:** Totally. And there was acute poignancy to—I mean, every decade he'd have a massive Stephen Sondheim's birthday celebration concert, but his 90<sup>th</sup> one, that it would take place at a time when people couldn't be together. You saw all these great performers alone in their apartments, somehow singing—looking out a window singing, in the bathroom, singing.

I was singing “Ladies Who Lunch” in a back office. And it was so poignant, I think because he writes so deeply about human loneliness. You know, the song “Being alive”, that's—you know, he hit on that deep inner loneliness and sense of reaching out, trying to connect. And somehow—because it was done virtually—there wasn't that, you know, sense of buzz in the audience and we're singing a showstopper, and then one great performer and a red dress brings down the house. And then, there's another great performer! This was just so quiet and haunting. And when it was shown, he was sitting with his beloved, Jeff, in his living room in Connecticut, and he was watching all of these performers that have performed his music.

And it was just a love letter from all of us to Steve. And I agree with you. There was a real resonance there that I wouldn't have expected in a virtual situation. I mean, when I heard about it, I thought, “Oh my god, how are we—how are we gonna do this?” You know? And I always wanted to sing “Ladies Who Lunch”. And I never got to play that role. And then, Patti was gonna do it. And I went, “Well, that's the last word. First, there's Elaine Stritch, then there's Patti. I ain't gonna do that.” And so, I thought, “Wait a minute, maybe if I just did part

of the song and we divide it in three—” Because Meryl was like, “Oh my god, what—what am I gonna sing?” And so, we split it in three parts. And so, it wasn't that kind of showstopper of one person carrying the song. It was just the three of us who adored Steve, who actually took him out the year before for dinner and said, “Steve, we've gotta do this once a year.” And instead of going out to dinner, the three of us were in our individual homes recording this song and then serving it up to him (*laughing*) in his living room.

It was—and we all—and the three of us just thought, “Oh, okay, this is gonna end our careers. This is so bad.” I mean, we were all just doing our individual parts. We didn't know how it would be edited. We were just listening in a—you know, to the orchestration in our earbuds. And we all had to howl that “IIII’ll drink to that!” and my grandchildren are upstairs trying to sleep, and Grandma's howling and doing primal screaming, singing “Ladies Who Lunch” over and over. It just was—it was very funny, and—you know—doing it, we just didn't know if it was going to work. We just knew it was gonna go out there, you know, out there in the world, in that crazy virtual world where millions of people might be privy to it.

So, the fact that it went well, and he was thrilled, and it just was—it was such a final love letter to him from all of us in the Broadway community.

[00:29:26] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of that finale with—

(*Christine reacts with surprise and laughs.*)

Now I gotta say—look, if you're gonna go up onstage with two other people to sing this iconic song—right?—first, you gotta deal with, well, Meryl Streep is not just a great actor but one of the most famous movie stars of our time.

(*Christine laughs.*)

Right? And—but I feel like, if it was me and I was you, I'd be like, “But you know what? I'm better for this than Meryl Streep, no matter how good she is.”

(*Christine laughs.*)

So, she—not that she's wrong for it! But you're like, “I was born to do this, and so that'll be fine.” But it's the Audra McDonald part, which is like when she sings her verse—which is the third verse—she's such an—she's such an extraordinary singer! (*Laughs.*)

[00:30:19] **Christine Baranski:** I know. We said, “Give the high parts to Audra.” Absolutely. “Give her the big stuff. She'll lay into it. She'll land it. We'll just be funny with our glasses and our attitudes.”

(*They laugh.*)

[00:30:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, you know, Elaine Stritch was one of the greatest—her performance of that song is one of the—truly, one of the best things in the history of American culture. But like, she can't sing like Audra McDonald, you know what I mean? (*Laughs.*) So, anyway! This is the end of the—this is the end of that performance.

[00:30:48] **Sound Effect:** Music swells then fades.

[00:30:49] **Clip:**

**Music:** “Ladies Who Lunch” from the musical *Company*, performed by Christine Baranski, Meryl Streep, and Audra McDonald.

*[AUDRA]*

*So, here's to the girls on the go*

*Everybody tries*

*[MERYL]*

*Look into their eyes and you'll see what they know*

*Everybody dies*

*[CHRISTINE]*

*A toast to that invincible bunch*

*[AUDRA]*

*The dinosaurs surviving the crunch*

*[ALL]*

*Let's hear it for the ladies who lunch*

*Everybody rise*

*[MERYL]*

*Rise*

*[CHRISTINE]*

*Rise*

*[AUDRA]*

*Rise!*

**Audra:** Happy birthday, Steve!

*[ALL]*

*Rise!*

**Christine:** Happy anniversary, Steve!

*[ALL]*

*Rise!*

**Meryl:** We love you, Steve!

*[ALL]*

*Cheers, Steve!*

*Rise!*

[00:31:46] **Sound Effect:** Music swells then fades.

[00:31:47] **Christine Baranski:** (*Laughs.*) I got goosebumps remembering that.

[00:31:53] **Jesse Thorn:** It's such an incredible song. I mean, it's so funny—obviously—you know, and there's 1000—you know, there's 1000 moments of Sondheim words, where you're like, “Oh god, how'd he come up with a word like that there?”

[00:32:10] **Christine Baranski:** Mm!

[00:32:10] **Jesse Thorn:** But I think that—you know, like a lot of songs in that show, it is—you know. There is this thing that it is, which is like it's about brassy dames. It's about women, not who are resilient and making the world work for them as best as they can; it's also about the fact that their resilience is in the face of a world that will not bend to their will and in the face of mortality.

[00:32:54] **Christine Baranski:** Oh. Oh, indeed. It's that feeling of feeling useless. Where do you—where do you put your energy? You know. You spend your husband's money, and you go and hear Mahler, and you—you know, you affect an attitude as an armor. You know, that tough attitude. And it just hides deep, deep loneliness and a sense of isolation and purposelessness.

But you know, again, that he spoke of that—I mean, it's a deeply painful song. So many of his songs are rooted in that deep pain or longing, and yet the lyrics will like move you past that. He'll just channel it into wit and acerbity and a kind of brilliant smartness. And I think that a mistake that's made often with Sondheim is being overemotional with it. You don't need to—it's like Shakespeare. You don't need to actually work that hard at it. You need to be clear about—you need to trust the words of it and have all of that other stuff underneath—all that pain, all that ambiguity, whatever. But I've seen Sondheim's songs ruined when the performer cries through the whole song or is so angry that you can't even understand the lyrics.

Yeah. But anyway, I had the pleasure of doing quite a bit of Sondheim, even though I never did anything on Broadway. But he was a wonderful person to find yourself in a room with, in a rehearsal room with. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:35:02] **Jesse Thorn:** I read that you showed up to his house with a pizza a couple times during the pandemic, before he passed away.

[00:35:08] **Christine Baranski:** No, we threatened—we—Marilyn and I wanted to visit him, because we all lived in Connecticut. And a few times, we had dinner with him. And then, covid hit. And was it like, “What? We can't even—you know, how are we gonna do this?” And I remember writing to Stephen saying, “Look, Marilyn and I will bring pizza. We'll sit out in your yard. We'll be miles away from you. Can we just like see you?” (*Laughs.*) And it turned out that we were actually able to go to a local watering hole and have a nice dinner.

But he had to be so careful, of course, during the whole quarantine. So—but we had some marvelous dinners before he passed away. I was really happy. Because Marilyn and I did *Into the Woods* and *Mamma Mia!*—and so, there was the Sondheim connection, and he was a neighbor. So, we had some wonderful evenings, I'm happy to say. Got to know him much later in his life, but he didn't scare me near nearly as much as he did through most of my career, you know? (*Chuckles.*)

[00:36:12] **Jesse Thorn:** He had become somewhat more frail, I imagine. (*Laughs.*) You had to know you could take him in a fight.

[00:36:18] **Christine Baranski:** Well, I wouldn't say he was—his mind was always formidable. I think his manner could be off-putting; he could seem abrupt, but I'd been in a rehearsal hall enough times with him to realize that really what he was was utterly exacting. His genius was really how much he cared about details and getting a syllable, a note, exactly right. What is that word? What is that moment? What is that note that is exactly right? And utterly meticulous. And if you asked him about anything—why this and not that?—he could give you an answer. He—you know, he really worked! He was a very thorough craftsman.

And when he was in the rehearsal hall with you, he wanted to help. He could be—you know, because he was Steve, and his—you know, he had that actually marvelously low, resonant voice. And when he spoke, he had really a kind of incredible authority. And you know, that face with that hawk eye that kind of like looked at you a certain way. But actually, he was very much a collaborator. He wanted to help his performers. And when I did “I'm Still Here”, I did the concert version at City Center. And he gave me a wonderful note. He said, “You don't have to work that hard at that. This is—” You know, so he encouraged performers to be simple and truthful.

And above all, he encouraged performers not to worry that much about how you sounded. He didn't care that much. Which, you know, the success of Elaine Stritch—no, she couldn't sing “Ladies Who Lunch” like Audra McDonald. You could argue it's not a song that you need to sound beautiful. You need the thinking and the attitude to be utterly precise and come from a deep place. And that's what he valued most was the acting of his songs.

[00:38:34] **Jesse Thorn:** I wanna ask you a frivolous question to fit it in before we run out of time, which is: I have some buddies that work on late night comedy shows. Something that I've heard them talk about is—before Don Rickles passed away—when Don Rickles would come in to do the show—even though they're all, you know, seasoned comedy people with many of them former standups or current standups and, you know, certainly comedy writers who've all—all very jaded. Everyone just really wanted Don Rickles to call him a hockey puck one time. (*Laughs.*) You know what I mean? Like every—and Don Rickles was—he was very great. By all accounts, he was great about making sure everyone got a chance to be called a hockey puck. And I wonder if you have encountered your own in your own life the expectation that, as you move through your actual human, personal, and professional life, that there are people surrounding you who you can tell just need to, one time, briefly receive a disapproving glance from you?

(*They laugh.*)

[00:39:52] **Christine Baranski:** I think I did it with Elon Musk, didn't I?

*(They laugh.)*

[00:39:57] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, he is earned it.

[00:39:59] **Christine Baranski:** I know. That's so funny. Uh, yeah, he got the Lady Disdain look. That's for sure. *(Laughs.)*

[00:40:05] **Jesse Thorn:** He got a full stank eye.

[00:40:09] **Christine Baranski:** Well, what's so funny is I play this character on *Gilded Age*, who—that's exactly how she would've looked at Elon Musk. It's the old money vs. new money, and I had sort of a Thom Browne cape on. It was a marvelous. Male/female kind of white-tie thing, but it was a cape, and it looked like I had this black cape. And I was giving him this glare. And it's just a very funny photograph. I have it in my bedroom now. My kids gave it to me as a Mother's Day present.

*(They laugh.)*

I'm sure I've looked at my own children with—in that way many times. *(Chuckles.)*

[00:40:54] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, Christine Baranski, I've taken up too much of your time, but I sure—I sure appreciate getting to talk to you. I love your work so much.

[00:41:00] **Christine Baranski:** Oh! Thank you for all the things you got into. We covered a lot of ground. Thank you for being so thorough and thoughtful, and it's a pleasure. A real pleasure. Thank you.

[00:41:11] **Jesse Thorn:** I didn't even make you sing any Polish folk songs, Christine.

*(She laughs.)*

I thought about it.

[00:41:16] **Christine Baranski:** Next time.

[00:41:18] **Jesse Thorn:** Christine Baranski from last year. Every season of *The Good Fight* is streaming now, on Paramount+. You can also catch Christine in *Praise Petey*. It's an animated sitcom about a young woman who goes from the big city to a small town to take over her dad's cult. It also stars Annie Murphy, John Cho, and the great Stephen Brut.

[00:41:41] **Transition:** Playful synth with a steady beat.

[00:41:43] **Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun in and around greater Los Angeles, California. At my producer Kevin Ferguson's house, he and his neighbor are gonna replace the stereo in his car. I support this.

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 Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, the great Dan Wally. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us in those places. Give us a follow. We will share with you all of our interviews, and I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

[00:42:43] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*