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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

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

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.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. At some point, I'm willing to bet you've seen Paul Dooley playing a dad. Maybe in *Breaking Away*, about the small-town teenager who's obsessed with bike racing. Dooley played his dad. Or in *Sixteen Candles*, where he played Molly Ringwald's.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Jim (*Sixteen Candles*): Why do you think you're a dork? I don't think you're a dork. I don't think mom thinks you're a dork.

Samantha: Mike thinks I'm a dork.

Jim: Mike is a dork.

Samantha: (*Sighs heavily.*) So am I.

Jim: Well, if it's any consolation, I love you.

(*Tender piano music fades in.*)

And if this guy can't see in you all the beautiful and wonderful things that I see, then he's got the problem.

Samantha: I know, it just hurts.

Jim: That's why they call them crushes. If they were easy, they'd call them something else.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: He played Julia Roberts's dad in *Runaway Bride*.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Walter (*Runaway Bride*): You know the old saying “you're not losing a daughter”? Well, I'd like to!

(Laughter.)

Speaker: *(Distantly, from the crowd.)* Lose that stomach there, mate.

Walter: Maggie may not be Hale's longest running joke, But she is certainly the fastest!

(Laughter and applause.)

Maggie: Good one, Dad.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: You know one of these dads. Maybe you know all these dads. Paul Dooley, it is safe to say, is a dad legend. But he's also much more than that! He was in the original Broadway cast of *The Odd Couple*. He was in *The Second City* with Nichols and May. He was a regular in Robert Altman movies. He did stand up on *The Tonight Show*. He co-created *The Electric Company*. At one point, and this is true, he recorded an entire album of book humor. It was called *Booked Solid*.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Paul Dooley (*Booked Solid*): I personally like books that are kind of—I don't know—safe. Like *Roget's Thesaurus*. These things are kind of embarrassing to carry around. And I have them with me always, you know. It's particularly difficult on the subways, you know? Because I know last week, during the rush hour, I was on the subway. And I happened to notice this sweet little old lady near me. And I felt very bad to be sitting down. Especially on her.

(Laughter.)

So, I turned to the guy on me. And I said, “Excuse me, sir, I'd like to get up.”

And he said, “So would I.”

I said, “Why don't you?”

He said, “Well, I'm holding a lady's packages for her.”

I said, “Why don't you give them back?”

He said, “She's sitting on them.”

Well, I said, “Why don't we all get up?” And so, we did, which finally allowed the little old lady to get up off the little old man.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: *Booked Solid*. It's all about books. Seriously, Paul Dooley has done it all. He's 95. He's still working. His book is called *Movie Dad: Finding Myself and My Family, On-Screen and Off*. It's about his seven decades in show business. It's also about some of the heartbreaking trials he went through offscreen. I'm so excited to welcome the legend, Paul Dooley, on *Bullseye*. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Paul Dooley, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

Paul Dooley: Well, thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Jesse Thorn: You, before we went on the air, started talking about your long career in television commercials and radio commercials. How did you get into the commercial business?

Paul Dooley: I'll give you a little backstory. I was in New York for nine years, kind of just barely making the rent. I'd do a little off-Broadway play for a month or two weeks or two days. And if I got enough of them, I'd go into unemployment for 26 weeks. But I was just squeaking by, making \$3,000 a year in the '50s, in the early '50s. And I could never get a commercial audition. And finally, I got a few commercial auditions, but I kept failing at them. And I said to myself, “Well, I was told I was the best actor in my college. How come I can't do something that's 60 seconds long?” Well, who knows, but maybe you have anxiety when you're auditioning. I didn't think I did, but— So, I must've gone for 40 auditions, never got one. And I thought how bad can I be? It's 60 seconds! And then one day I got a commercial. The client loved it.

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It was for Fab Dishwashing Liquid. They signed me to a contract, and I made a \$40,000 a year contract after living on \$3,000 a year. And that's how I got into commercials then. Although I had an agent later, and he said, “Well, you're going to be overexposed with that product. So, nobody will want to use you.” The opposite became true, because there were only three networks and no cable at that time. So, I was on every day, often, and each one of them doing stuff for a woman's audience—like dishwashing things. So, then I couldn't do enough commercials. And also, there was a time where there were no Black actors in commercials. Puerto Ricans, Jews, all of those. It was just us White guys. So, I turned out to

be a WASP who could buy the product, sell the product, be the neighbor. So, I was just constantly in commercials.

Jesse Thorn: We found a Fab commercial.

(Paul laughs.)

It's from the early '50s. I'm pretty sure this is you. You look different now than you did in 1952 or whatever.

Paul Dooley: No kidding!

Jesse Thorn: So, let's hear it.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Salesman (*Fab commercial*): Good morning ma'am! Allow me to introduce you to a brand-new detergent!

Customer: Oh, do you give free demonstrations?

Salesman: Yes ma'am!

Customer: Please come in!

Salesman: New Fab is power-blasted under more than 300 pounds of pressure per second.

Customer: Can I see it?

Salesman: Uhh—oh! The package! Yes, of course.

Customer: Oh, it's the new blue box!

Salesman: It's all new inside, too! Not a powder, not a crystal, but a compression of cleaning energy in each tiny bead, which gives New Fab the penetrating power to get your toughest wash! Not just surface clean, but—uh—

Customer: Clean clear through?

Salesman: Clean clear through! Right! Now for your laundry.

Customer: Help yourself.

Salesman: All that? How does it look?

Customer: Well, it looks clean clear through! Like my usual wash.

Salesman: (*Confused.*) It does?

Customer: Sure! I bought New fab last week!

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Jesse Thorn: (*Cackles.*) First of all, thank you for the mime show.

Paul Dooley: Uh. I look at that today, and I seem like I'm so overacting. But that's just what they wanted him to be.

Jesse Thorn: There's—I mean, there's a couple solid bits in there. There's a part where you sort of trip over something that's pretty funny. (*Chuckles.*)

Paul Dooley: Well, at the time, it seemed to be what was kind of happening in commercials. They were a little corny. You know? By a year later, I was never talking that loud. I was never trying that hard. And I was very subtle. I guess, as long as we're at this point, I need to tell you this. With radio, on camera, and voiceover, I've done 641 commercials.

Jesse Thorn: That's a lot of commercials.

Paul Dooley: It is.

Jesse Thorn: Can I have a few?

Paul Dooley: (*Chuckles.*) They're products that don't even exist anymore. My wife is younger than me—who isn't?—but she remembers being a kid and seeing me in a lab coat at a little fish tank. Inside is a tomato plant, and there are clams hanging on it. It was a new thing called Clamato Juice. And she's 26 years younger than me, but she remembers that as a kid. It's a vivid—it's such a silly idea.

Jesse Thorn: Well, clamato's what you ask for, the one you raise your glass for, the pick me up that picks you up. If I remember correctly.

(*Paul confirms.*)

I'm just glad you never did one for powders or crystals. I hate powders and crystals!
(*Chuckles.*)

Paul Dooley: I can't even—I do have a list, because you may remember, a lot of people have this—or had it—a week-at-a-glance book this big, a tiny little book. Well, if I went to—there's always a little square in each day, but if I went to J. Walter Thompson ad agency, I'd put JWT. Because we all knew the initials, all of us commercial actors. And if I got the job, I put an X by it.

Years later, in a box at my garage, I found those things and counted it all up, and it showed how many commercials I was in. But I linked up with another actor when I was in Second City, and we sort of knew how to read each other's minds. And we overlapped sentences, and they used to think improvisers sounded more like people talking than people who left a little gap for the edit. So, we were often hired that way. So, he and I—of that 641, about 550 were with this one guy. And we were both WASPs. We thought alike. I could read his mind. He could read mine. We'd lead each other into bits. We were both straight men and comedians.

Jesse Thorn: Were you happy to be a commercial actor? Were you cool with that?

Paul Dooley: I was so thrilled with the money. I didn't care about being in a movie. I didn't try to get auditions for Broadway shows or off Broadway shows.

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Because it was—I was a rich man suddenly, compared to other actors. So, I was actually—for the money, I was thrilled. I mean, it's not artistic, but even in a minute thing, if you're good and you have good comedy timing and character, that's also creative. You're still an actor. So, I paid no attention to plays or movies or anything. And I had a family with three children, so it was great for me.

Jesse Thorn: I'm sorry that I'm so focused on the portion of your career before you became a famous-famous person. It's just you did so many interesting things! You also were a children's clown for a time, doing magic tricks.

Paul Dooley: When I couldn't join Equity, SAG, and AFTRA, the three unions, I had learned to juggle in college and did some magic. So, I used that to do a clown. But I knew I couldn't fill an hour, half hour—which is basically a mime. I'm not MarcelMarceau. So, I hired an actor, and I bought him a tailcoat, and my wife at the time put a red lapel over the lapel. So, he would spell me when I'd go off stage, and then we'd do bits together. Then I would do birthday parties for \$25, but it would take me no more than an hour.

But then there was some other work that you'd stand on the street for like 8 hours or 12 hours in front of an opening of a supermarket and hand out coupons. You're only there to attract a crowd. So, a guy came to me one day, a friend. He said, "I know a friend. He has a wife and two kids, and he's a good actor, but he's just starting out. I wonder if you could give him some of that clown work you do as a stooge on the street." Sure, have him come over to my house. It's Alan Alda. The only thing I knew about him was his father was Robert Alda, Sky Masterson on Broadway in *Guys and Dolls*.

Well, I said, “Yeah, I have pieces of costumes.” I gave him a jumpsuit, which—it's from the ankles to the—from the feet to the wrists, this one. A zipper up the front. By the time you do that, you're 90% of a clown. But I didn't have much money to put together even my own clown act. But I said—

He said, “What about the face?”

I said, “I can loan you some clown white. It's a zinc oxide kind of makeup. Or you don't have to use a white face. You can do it other ways.” But I said, “Go to the dime store and buy a little rubber ball. Cut a triangle for your nose, get a piece of elastic, put it around and tie a knot on the inside. Go to the secondhand store and find a woman's hat that's either red, green, or blue. Use that. And to make it look like you have a wig, hanging down from it is yarn, and it looks like curly hair. Don't ever take the hat off, though.” But I—for pennies or a dollar or two, I helped him put together a little clown act like that too.

Jesse Thorn: In that time, you were cast in the original New York production of the *Threepenny Opera*.

(Paul confirms.)

What role did you play?

Paul Dooley: His name is Walt Dreary. And Mac the Knife had a gang, and there were four of us. I got the job because John Astin, who was in another play with me for \$5 a week off-Broadway—then he got the job. They said Actors Equity allows us to have—we have to use Actors Equity members, but we're allowed to have a dispensation of ordering like four actors who are not in the union for small parts. So, he gave them my name. And he played Ready-Money Matt as one of Macheath's thieves and I was Walt Dreary. And you know, we had a scene here, a scene there. But it was great to be in a play, and it was at the Theater de Lys, and I only stayed for three months, because I had a job I liked better working with Carol Burnett in the Summer Theatre. But it ran seven years off-Broadway.

Jesse Thorn: What did you think of it when you got cast in it? Like, what did your friend tell you? I mean, he must have just called you and said, “I've got a job for you.” But like—

Paul Dooley: He said he recommended me to the director. I went over and met him and said sure. Yeah. I was glad to get a job. Because, of course, it's a play in England. It's called *The Gay* something. But anyway, it was in Germany on a film with Lotte Lenya and then a movie with her.

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And then when it came to off-Broadway, she was in the movie at 20, now she's 40 or 50, and she's playing the same part, Pirate Jenny. But it had a lot—Kurt Weill is the guy who wrote the music. But it's thrilling to be in it, just to stand in the wings and hear the songs.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's an incredible show. Like, but it's also not like much else. You know what I mean?

Paul Dooley: No, the Robert, uh—I forget the name in England, but it was called *The Gay* something. But it has a whole history. And Lottie Lenya is wonderful. She made records, Kurt Weill, her husband.

Jesse Thorn: Sort of terrifying, too.

Paul Dooley: Yeah. She had a song where she talked about the people who had always slighted her, that “you gentlemen may gawk while I'm scrubbing the floor, and I'll be scrubbing the floor while you're gawking, but maybe once”—and it's called “The Black Freighter”—“you've been trapped out at sea and they chain you up and bring them to me, and I'll say, ‘Now I gotcha.’” Beautiful song, “The Black Freighter”.

Jesse Thorn: (*Singing.*) The ship, the black freighter—

Paul Dooley: (*Singing.*) Turns around in the harbor and on it is meee.

Jesse Thorn: We have to go for a quick break. We've got so much more to get into with Paul Dooley. Around the time that he got some of his most iconic parts, playing dads in movies like *Breaking Away* and *Sixteen Candles*, Dooley's own family life was falling apart. We'll talk about what that was like and how he's picked up the pieces. It's *Bullseye*. From [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Thumpy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I'm talking with Paul Dooley. Dooley is an actor who has appeared in movies like *Sixteen Candles*, *Runaway Bride*, and *Breaking Away*. He's also a comedian and writer and co-created the kids show *The Electric Company*. Paul Dooley is now 95 years old. He is still working and still as sharp and funny as ever. He recently wrote a memoir called *Movie Dad: Finding Myself and My Family, On-Screen and Off*. Let's get back into the rest of our conversation.

You also, for a time, worked the door at the Village Vanguard, right?

Paul Dooley: I did.

Jesse Thorn: Who was on stage when you were working?

Paul Dooley: Well, I have a little story. My friends say to me, “You tell me that you watch Miles Davis, John Coltrane”—and then name of a bunch, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus—“for nothing?”

I said, “No, I watched Professor Irwin Corey, Orson Bean, and two or three other comics. Lenny Bruce.” I didn't care about the jazz guys. My head was in the comedy. And several times he was arrested at the end of his set, Lenny Bruce. The cops would just come to listen, and they'd take him out. He wasn't using the F word or anything, but he was making fun of the Pope and the Catholics. So, he was often taken out and put in a paddy wagon, became well known for being arrested. And one night, two people I'd never heard of came there just to do one night. They did about 10 minutes; it was Mike Nichols and Elaine May. And so, now I'm able to hear them over and over and over for a week.

But a manager named Jack Rollins, who's very famous—he was the manager for Woody Allen, a lot of people. The greatest personal manager in New York, with taste. Well, within a few evenings at the Vanguard, he brought them uptown to the Blue Angel for a week. And within a month, they were talked about all over New York, like the rage of the intelligentsia. Then later they had a Broadway show, *The Two and Only*. No, that was Bob and Ray. (Chuckles.) It was called *Mike Nichols and Elaine May*.

Jesse Thorn: *An Evening With*, yeah.

Paul Dooley: Well, they were my idols, you know. Because they're so brilliant. And I had the thrill—I've had the great experience of being directed by both Mike and Elaine. Mike for *The Odd Couple* on Broadway, and Elaine in an off-Broadway play she wrote called *Adaptation*. So, that was the thrill of my lifetime. It was like loving Buster Keaton when I was 15 and working with him doing a commercial for two days, 30 years later.

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Jesse Thorn: Let's talk a little bit about your film career. You had had little parts in movies here and there. A few lines at a time.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, they weren't huge parts.

Jesse Thorn: What was the first big part that you had?

Paul Dooley: *Breaking Away*. The stars of it were four boys who rode bicycles. But the de facto star could have been my guy. Because everything—this is a fabulous writer, Steve Tesich, who won an Oscar for the script. And everything my character said got huge, huge laughs. I was playing my father, and it was just right up my alley.

Jesse Thorn: It's one of my favorite movies, and I'm going to play a little clip from it. This is one of the—you've got a couple big comedy moments in the movie, but this is a pretty sincere one. So, the movie is about kind of this generational shift with your character's son sort of aspiring to a world outside of the working-class town in which they live. And—

Paul Dooley: Oh, good, “My kid will go farther.”

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, and you trying to figure out basically what that means for you and your generation. And in this clip, the two of you are walking through the college campus, which is—you know, the college is the sort of big, big class signifier.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, and I had been a stone mason.

Jesse Thorn: Exactly.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Dad (*Breaking Away*): I cut the stone for this building.

Dave: You did?

Dad: Yep. I was one fine stonecutter. Mike's dad. Moocher's. Cyril's. All of us. Well, Cyril's dad—(*chuckles*). Never mind. Thing of it was, I loved it. I was young and slim and strong. I was damn proud of my work. And the buildings went up! When they were finished, the damndest thing happened. It was like buildings is too good for us.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: Were you confident when you started doing dramatic work that all this comedy stuff that you had done before could translate?

Paul Dooley: I was really afraid of doing comedy for a long, long time. I mean, I'm sorry. I was so into comedy, I didn't want to play a straight part. Altman saw me in a Jules Feiffer review and hired me for *A Wedding*. I was going to be married to—I was married to Carol Burnett, who was an old friend of mine anyway. So, it was good.

Jesse Thorn: That is the film *A Wedding*.

Paul Dooley: What—? The film, *A Wedding*. And so, I had an epiphany. He lets you attend dailies. It was a theme of his. Most actors—most directors don't want you there. They want to be able to say, “Can you get a shot of her where her nose doesn't look too big?” You don't want to have the actress in the room. But he didn't like that. He wanted his actors to be there. And we all were. And uh—I forget what I was tying this to.

Jesse Thorn: You were figuring out about—that you could do drama.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, when I saw those dailies, I said to myself, “I can do drama! I can do serious acting.” I never cared about it or—you know? Then I said, “Oh, I get it. If you have good timing, it's still good timing if you're doing drama.” So, that makes you a pretty good actor. Good timing is great for even the most serious actor. Look at Orson Welles or somebody.

Jesse Thorn: You mentioned that you were, you know, two thirds/three quarters playing your dad in *Breaking Away*. I think the dads that you played were often like that dad in *Breaking Away*. Distant, recalcitrant, maybe grumpy.

(Paul agrees.)

And often the element that you bring to the role or the special thing about the role is... is being able to sell that and sell something a little warmer too.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, it has a little bit of a twist, in other words. You're appearing to be a grumpy guy, but then when you're talking to your daughter or your son, you become pretty warm, as you say.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have that with your dad?

Paul Dooley: No. He was nothing like that. He hardly ever spoke to me. He was a guy who, on his own hook, built an entire house without any help.

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I didn't know how he did that. I thought everybody's father built his own house with a third-grade education and very bad eyesight. How does he build a cabinet with a quarter of an inch or half an inch? I mean, sure, you have a plumb line, but how did he do all this? He roofed the house. He dug—spent two years, dug the basement and all that stuff.

But many years later in therapy, I'm telling my therapist about my father. He says, “Well, he may have been a man with no formal education, but it sounds like he was highly intelligent. Because how'd he do all this stuff without any help?” No, he didn't study any trade, didn't go to carpentry school. He just did it. I never really knew how. But I never saw him embrace my mother, never saw him kiss my mother, never put his arm around me. He just was busy working. Come home from the factory and go to his little workshop and continue to do things. Not... I didn't hold it against him for some reason as a kid, because I didn't know what the opposite would be. I had no way of knowing how most fathers are. So, most fathers are like that. So, that's who I played in certain movies. But I could also turn around and be a nicer father. Like *Sixteen Candles*, for example.

Jesse Thorn: When you shot those father/son scenes in *Breaking Away*, your kids were gone from your life.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, that's right.

Jesse Thorn: They had been—when you were divorced from your second wife, she kidnapped the kids. It must have been brutally difficult.

Paul Dooley: It was, but I think—as they say—if it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. Dealing with it, I knew I had to get beyond it. But you don't really get beyond it. I'm in touch

with these two kids now, but there's a ghost of their mother in the back of their mind. They don't... they still have to have a funny allegiance to their caretaker.

Jesse Thorn: You didn't tell almost anyone. After you looked for your kids and went to court, got sole custody, after a while, you just figured whatever you could do would be a trauma—you know, similar to the trauma of them having been kidnapped.

Paul Dooley: I would tear them away from the only mother they'd ever known just to—how's that going to help them? It's a double trauma. So, I just stepped back. I said, when they want to find me, they'll find me. I kept my same apartment, same phone number in New York. And then an anonymous person called me up and told me one of them was working in the animal shelter in Madison, Wisconsin—an anonymous person. I never knew what it was. I have a theory that she was a friend of my wife, and she heard the story but then maybe they had a falling out. And she said, “Well, that those kids deserve to know who their father is.” But I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: Did they know that you were their father?

Paul Dooley: Yes, they did. My son went to see—my son Adam went to see—I don't know how it was known. Maybe he told a friend of his who I was, and he said, “There's a movie coming out now, and your father's in it.” That was *Breaking Away*. So, he goes to see it, and he had to—in the scene where I'm hugging Dennis Christopher—he has to leave the theater, because that was him who should be getting that hug, and he wasn't getting it. And he went back and saw it again. But it just was amazing.

And my experience was, well, I'm playing my father in my persona. I'm hugging a guy the age of my son, Adam. So, if I'm the father and this is my son, if he's my son, who am I? It got all mixed up about embracing my son. My real son, I couldn't find. I embraced him like he wasn't my real son. So, it had a lot of layers to it.

Jesse Thorn: How old were you when your kids found you?

Paul Dooley: Well, they were gone about ten years. I was probably 40/42/43. I'd done a lot of movies. Oh, wait a minute. I was in Malta for six months doing *Popeye*. And I would have not taken that job for all that many months if my kids couldn't find me.

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So, that was 1980. Probably a couple of years later is when we all hooked up. But I was probably in my mid-40s. But I always looked younger than I did. Even now I look younger than I am.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you had your career completely transforming, because you were making those movies with Robert Altman. You were making *Breaking Away* at the same time as you are—and you're giving up your previous career in a way. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean? Like, you had had this long career making radio and television ads and doing stage work. And in a way, movies and TV were taking you away from that.

Paul Dooley: Yeah, well, I didn't mind, because—of course—movies are more important to the audience, to the public, than commercials.

Jesse Thorn: But like everything must have been upside down. Like, you say you had your work, but do you think—are you sure it was good that you had your work? (*Chuckles.*)

Paul Dooley: It wasn't good; it was probably a distraction. You can't keep thinking about how terrible your life is. It's just gonna—you're gonna be miserable and not even want to go to work, or audition, or anything. I guess I have a little bit of stick-to-it-ivity. Practicality. Go with the flow. My wife talks about me like that. She's very emotional. We're like totally different people. Introvert, extrovert kind of thing. But she says at least I'm very low maintenance, because I do roll with the punches. But you know her background with it.

Jesse Thorn: Well, she's every bit the show business success that you are.

Paul Dooley: Absolutely. More so, now.

Jesse Thorn: She created (*inaudible*) among other things—

Paul Dooley: She just had the 20th anniversary of *Wicked* on Broadway.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, wrote the book for *Wicked*. And...

Paul Dooley: Yeah. And she went onstage, and they had it on TV somewhere. She makes a three- or four-minute speech. And the audience wasn't civilians. They were everybody who had ever been in *Wicked*. 10 Elphabas, 15 Glindas, all the crew. Everyone in the audience worked in the show. They were the audience. New York went crazy for the anniversary of it. And on the Empire State Building, there was some lines from the play in red neon. And if you went to a cookie store, you'd get green cookies. Up and down Broadway, they just—it was a big PR bonanza, you know. But then she first wrote *My So-Called Life*, which is a groundbreaking film, introducing Claire Danes. Now she's writing something else for Claire Danes. It's a pilot for a TV series.

Jesse Thorn: When you described your wife calling you low maintenance and you describe yourself, earlier in your life, losing yourself in your work when you're dealing with this pain of your kids being gone—those are dad things, where if you worked in a factory, they also wouldn't not apply to your dad. (*Chuckles.*) You know what I mean?

Paul Dooley: Yeah. Although, I could play my dad in a factory. One of my favorite moments in *Breaking Away* is the clip you played of me walking on the campus. We go over after that and sit down on a stone bench, and I'm a stonemason. And Dennis Christopher, my son, is saying, "I don't care if I get into college." He said they call him—the people in town called him a cutter, 'cause his dad's a stonemason. And that's a derogatory term. "I don't care. I don't have to go to college. I don't mind being a cutter."

And I look very serious. And I say, “You're not a cutter. I'm a cutter.” One negative, one positive. And then I rubbed my hand on the stone bench like that. And in my book, I say, “His hands remembered. Remembered the stone he may have cut.”

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that you learned from... playing these versions of your dad?

Paul Dooley: Well, I always—for some reason, I never—my father was not really there. And thinking at 10 or 12 that everybody's dad's a little remote—in fact, a lot of guys at that time were—they worked in a factory. They came home. You know, that was their job. They didn't know very much of their family, some of them.

[00:35:00]

They weren't sensitive, let's say. They didn't have a pride in their children, you know. But I was—as I remember, I always felt forgiving, even though I know I was deprived in some way, emotionally. And I wish—once I left home for college in New York, I wish I had had the relationship with him where I could go back and say, “I know we didn't spend as much time together as I would like to have.” You know, to forgive him out loud and to tell him I regret that we didn't have that time together. I probably thought he wouldn't—he'd probably be frightened or threatened by it, bringing up something he obviously avoided. But I did borrow his solemnity, if you will. I'm pretty good playing parts that don't seem to have a lot of emotion. If required, I can have all kinds of emotion. Look at the Fab commercials. In fact, over the top.

Jesse Thorn: We've got to go to a quick break. When we return, we will wrap up with the great Paul Dooley. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Cheerful acoustic guitar.

John Moe: The human mind can be tricky. Your mental health can be complex. Your emotional life can be complicated. So, it helps to talk about it. I'm John Moe. Join me each week on my show, *Depresh Mode with John Moe*. It's in-depth conversations about mental health with writers, musicians, comedians, doctors, and experts. Folks like Noah Kahan, Sasheer Zamata, and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. We talk about depression, anxiety, trauma, imposter syndrome, and perfectionism. We have the kind of conversations that a lot of folks are hesitant to have themselves. Listen, and you won't feel as alone, and you'll have some laughs too.

Depresh Mode from Maximum Fun, at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Paul Dooley, the star of *Breaking Away*, *Sixteen Candles*, and more, recently wrote a memoir called *Movie Dad*.

You co-created and were head writer for *The Electric Company*. It's a very groundbreaking educational television show.

Music: "The Menu Song" from the TV show *The Electric Company* performed by Morgan Freeman and Rita Moreno.

You got soup?

We got soup

What kind of soup?

All kinds of soup!

We got beet soup, that's a sweet soup

Then there's meat soup

Parakeet soup

Shredded wheat soup

And concrete soup

And the special today: dirty feet soup!

Dirty feet? Aw, forget about the soup!

Let's see what you got in the menu here

Uh, you got sandwiches?

We got sandwiches

What kind of sandwiches?

All kinds of sandwiches!

(Music fades out.)

Jesse Thorn: Did you get that job because you had been writing stuff like it for commercials?

Paul Dooley: Largely. Some agents sent me over to talk to them. They'd been looking at writers before we created the format. And I met with them. "Tell us about your background." I said, well, I've done, frankly, hundreds of radio commercials, all humorous. And they said, "Well, we're, of course, dealing with short span of attention for children. You're not going to have a five-minute sketch, probably. The shorter, the better." If there's an animation piece, it was often a minute or 30 seconds. I said, so I'm used to working in short form. Wordplay. And so, they hired seven writers, and I was just one of many trying to create it. Then they would decide who might be the head writer. And I first used my ability basically with puns to create characters.

I thought of a guy named Fargo North, Decoder (*North Dakota*). Comma.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

Because I'm sitting in a meeting with a bunch of expert teachers—reading experts. And they said, "When a child needs to—when a child learns to encode"—meaning what letters form the words—"or decode."

I'm sitting next to another writer, and I write in the margin of my handout, "Fargo North, comma, Decoder."

He shows it to the producers. They say, "Well, let's make that a character that comes back every week, or every other week, or twice a week." Then I wrote a thing called Child Chef Julia Grownup, another pun. Oh, they love that. So, I gave them already the characters who would be on the show.

[00:40:00]

So, after about six of these characters—Morgan Freeman played Easy Reader, who was Easy Rider. And there's a whole bunch of them, maybe a half a dozen. And then I got the idea for the title of the thing on—that idea they have that when you get a good idea, it's a light bulb over your head, about the aha moment. I said, well, maybe it could be called *The Electric Company*. But I wasn't sure if I could use that. Then I went to the tail end of the show to have a book end. It was still about electricity, called The Last Word. And you see a light bulb, and you see a word that says "pull" before it says pull and give a kid a chance to read the word pull, putting two and two together. And if he doesn't have it, a voice comes in slightly after and said pull. The hand comes in, turns out the light, end the show.

And you wouldn't believe this, but I did it every day, and I needed to have 130 of them for 130 episodes. And I discovered that I was a master of variations on a theme. A boxing glove turns out the light. Twins turn out the light. Wristwatch turns out the light. I don't know how, but I did 130 of them. Shaky. I've been very good at that—variations on the theme. I just—something in my head does that. It's a challenge and I usually found ways of doing it. And that sort of bookended the show, it gave it a title.

Jesse Thorn: My comedy partner wrote on a late-night show for a while called *At Midnight* and had to write, you know, 50 jokes a day or 100 jokes a day, because it was like a comedy game show. So, they just needed a lot of jokes. It transformed his ability to write jokes. I mean, he's always been the funniest person I know.

Paul Dooley: It's an art, a craft.

Jesse Thorn: And I imagine that working in advertising where you have to come up with 30 seconds that tells a story, shows the benefit of a product, and has a call to action or whatever—

Paul Dooley: And a button, as we used to call it.

Jesse Thorn: —over and over and over and over and over—

Paul Dooley: Well, the more you do it, the more you get better at it. But I guess you have to start with some pretty good—a head for it. We used to have a—my partner was Andrew Duncan, also from Second City, and we were like two peas in a pod. And early on, we would look at what we created, and we didn't need to make a script out of it. We would improvise it and remember the best parts. But then they wanted to see—the producers, they wanted to see a script. So, as we're writing, we're trying to think what is it we do that we can make into a script? And we found that what needs to happen is what we call copy points. That's about the product. And everything is building a story and characters. So, it was almost like we would open with a couple of lines to tell them who we are and where we were. Then a copy point, and then another who we are with a joke.

And they take these jokes plus the copy points and thread them like this together. So, one guy always has to know everything about a product, and the other guy has to know nothing. Otherwise, why are they talking? So, it was a formula, really. And then we'd take something in the commercial that was a joke or a copy point, and then make it the blackout. Once we're doing an—there's an operation, and you think it's a doctor and a male nurse. And talking to me, he says, “Have you heard about the new sale at the Buick dealership?”

I said, “Oh yeah, I hear they have a lot of nice cars.”

And he said—we keep convincing one another that's a great thing to do. So, finally one guy says, “I'm going to go over to my Buick dealer now and get a car.”

And he said, “Can you finish up? I mean the operation.”

And the other guy says, “Yeah, but I don't know where my appendix is.”

So, it's—you know, those jokes just leap out and let you do copy, copy, copy, copy, joke.

Jesse Thorn: Well, thank you so much for all this time. I sure appreciate it.

[00:45:00]

Paul Dooley: Yeah. Well, I love talking to you, and you know a lot about the business and a lot about comedy. So, we're birds of a feather, really.

Jesse Thorn: Paul Dooley. His book, *Movie Dad: Finding Myself and My Family, On-Screen and Off*, is available to buy at local bookstores and at Bookshop.org.

Transition: Cheerful piano.

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. Here at my house, I missed garbage pickup day, and so my Christmas tree will live for one extra week.

The 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 by DJW, Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries. *Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](https://www.instagram.com/BullseyeWithJesseThorn). We are also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, and I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

(Music fades out.)