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Jesse Thorn: Hey, *Bullseye* listeners. It's Jesse. It's MaxFunDrive time. That's the time when Maximum Fun, the company that produces *Bullseye*, asks you to become a member and support our work. It directly supports the production of *Bullseye*. There is nothing that more directly supports the production of *Bullseye* than you becoming a member. So, go to MaximumFun.org/join.

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. There aren't many actors who can straddle the worlds of high art and blockbusters as deftly as my guest, John Malkovich. This is a guy who—I mean, he has starred in an acclaimed Broadway rendition of *Death of a Salesman*! He has been the star of countless indie dramas. Perhaps his greatest role was in *Con Air*. And he was even in a *Call of Duty* game. And there could be no greater example of that genre of actor: great in everything. Distinctive, compelling, unforgettable. You don't have to think too long and hard about why back in 1999, Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman decided to make a bonkers brilliant comedy called *Being John Malkovich*. Like, I don't know, if it was *Being Dermot Mulroney* or something, it might have been good, but it wouldn't have been the same.

Malkovich's latest project is a TV show called *The New Look* on Apple TV+. It's about two of Malkovich's greatest passions: high stakes drama and couture. This is a man who can dress. *The New Look* takes place in Nazi occupied France and tells the story of how France's fashion industry navigated a terrifying and inhuman reality. Malkovich plays Lucien Lelong, French couturier and mentor to Christian Dior. In this scene, Lucien has asked Christian to design a ball gown for the wife of a high-ranking Nazi. And as if that weren't enough, the client wants an in-person fitting.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Clip:

Lucien (*The New Look*): Layering is a very evocative notion. The customer asks that you be there for her fitting.

Christian: Please, I don't want to be involved in anything other than the design.

Lucien: She asked for you personally.

Christian: (*Beat.*) I'm incapable, I'm sorry.

Lucien: Christian, you must go. We can't afford to have these people turning on us.

Christian: We send a seamstress.

Speaker: Christian, she has specifically requested you.

Christian: Why?

Speaker: We don't know why.

Lucien: We're sending you.

Christian: Now that I have her sizes, I can make a dress for her without having to do a fitting.

Lucian: I ask for so little—

Christian: And in this case, you ask too much.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Jesse Thorn: John Malkovich, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you here in the studio.

John Malkovich: Thanks for having me.

Jesse Thorn: You look like a million dollars.

John Malkovich: As do you.

Jesse Thorn: I wasn't saying that for you to say that, but I do appreciate it. Can you tell—since our audience are at home and can't see you—can you tell me what you're wearing here?

John Malkovich: Well, just my sneakers from On, which I've worn their sneakers for years. Then these pants are probably from a line I used to have, which is—these are probably about 10 years old. And this jacket is from R45 and the shirt's an old one from my line. And the sweater is from someone called Billy Reid. And the tie I got at a place in Venice Beach, but I don't even remember the name of it, a little place.

Jesse Thorn: The pants are the most distinctive element here. I mean, you got a lot of elements. But the pants are the most distinctive element. And as I'm sitting here, like the thing I'm noticing about them is their texture. And I've read you describe yourself as being nuts about textiles. Was that a big part of the appeal of designing for you?

John Malkovich: Yeah, sure. I mean, I've been a fabric collector for a long time. And yeah, I do love them. This is from a great Italian designer who has a company called Lyria, and he's called Riccardo Bruni, who did the fabrics—a wonderful fabric designer. But yeah, that was a big plus for me too. Twice a year, you go to a fabric fair outside of Paris, which is the big one really in the world, I suppose.

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Called Première Vision. And that happens in—I guess it's kind of late February, early March, and then in the autumn. And you just see millions and millions of pieces of fabric, so.

Jesse Thorn: Was your interest in fashion and clothes one of the things that attracted you to *The New Look*?

John Malkovich: Yeah. I would say so. The executive producer is a very old friend of mine who I've worked with many times, Lorenzo di Bonaventura, and he—with Todd Kessler, the writer—came to see me. I was doing a film in France, actually. I was in rehearsal for a film, a French film, in Paris—which then I went off to shoot in Brittany, and they proposed the idea. And I said okay, and they sent me a couple of scripts. But yeah, that was a big—that was a big element in the decision to do it, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: What about it in particular?

John Malkovich: Well, strangely enough, it was something I didn't know much about—that kind of during the occupation of France—which I knew some degree about, of course, and had read things like *Marianne in Chains* and things like that. But I didn't really know much about that period. And I knew nothing about the lives of Dior or Chanel. A friend of mine had once asked me—she was developing—it's the woman who was behind the film of *Dangerous Liaisons* that I was involved with, Ileen Maisel—and also another film I did with her, called *Ripley's Game*. She wanted to do a film about Yves Saint Laurent many years ago.

So, I read the book about him. And his life I knew a little more, but I really didn't know much about Dior. Balenciaga I knew, because I'd been to his museum. Balmain, not so much. And Cardin actually bought most of the village where our house is in France, so I had met him once and knew a little about him. But just the learning about it, I thought, was quite interesting.

Jesse Thorn: In *The New Look*, you can really feel the corporeality of making garments. Like, that there's people there, and the scale is so relatively small that the stakes are immensely high. And that kind of sets up the world in which your character lives as the head of a house that has to decide whether to take the money that they're Nazis are offering for clothes.

John Malkovich: Sure. When I first talked to Lorenzo, the executive producer, and Todd, the showrunner and writer—who also directed a couple of episodes—the idea about Lelong I found intriguing was really he was the person who was instrumental in keeping the French fashion industry based in France—and of course, most particularly in Paris—rather than

moving it to Berlin. In the end, we didn't focus much on that story, probably for a (*inaudible*) of reasons. But yeah, as Todd said yesterday—I thought this was an interesting remark—of course, when the Germans invaded and took over a huge part of France very, quickly, and you had the kind of rump state of Vichy left, they really didn't know would that be a week, a year, 20 years, 30 years. You really don't know. And I think much of France—which like England, like Germany, for that matter, as well—were devastated in the first World War. And Lelong made his accommodations, let's say, I think, in the same way that Chanel did. Dior didn't so much, because he had—as the series reveals—a sister in the resistance who'd been taken by the Nazis and tortured, etc.

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But many people made their accommodations with the occupation at that time, and Lelong was one of them. And I think that's what he felt he had to do to keep the business going.

Jesse Thorn: Were you into getting dressed when you were a kid?

John Malkovich: Yeah. Yeah. In fact, my brother and his friends—my older brother, the thing that they had fun doing was throwing bottles or cans at me out of a car, depending on my outfit choice. And some of which were pretty provocative, you know—Madras on Madras, etc. So, yeah, I always had an interest, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: How old are we talking about?

John Malkovich: Probably then I would have been like third grade, however old that is, or so. Second grade, third grade, fourth grade.

Jesse Thorn: We have so much more to get into. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is John Malkovich. He is an Academy Award nominated actor, as well as a director and producer, and one of the best dressed guests we've ever had on our program. His latest project is the TV show *The New Look*. It tells the story of the legendary couture fashion houses of Paris during the Nazis' occupation of France. It's streaming now on Apple TV+. Let's get back into our conversation.

I saw you tell a funny story on *The Conan Show* about losing weight when you were an adolescent, late adolescent I guess. You were like 13 or something and were full height, which is like 6'6"1", something like that, and overweight—maybe 40 pounds overweight. And you lost weight by eating only Jello for a time, like months.

(*John confirms.*)

You were quick to clarify later on in that time you were adding fruit to the Jello.

John Malkovich: After like three months, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Which is good, because I didn't want child-you to get scurvy.

John Malkovich: Yeah, I probably could have, and I doubt that was very good for me. But I had read that Jello was only, I believe, 230 calories. I don't know where I read that. I don't think it was on the back of boxes then. Maybe it was, I don't know. But I had read that. So, every morning I would make a thing of Jello, and then I'd eat it when I came home at night after school or after football practice or whatever it was. And by that method, I lost 70 pounds in about four months.

Jesse Thorn: Andy asked a question—Andy Richter asked a question that I think was really trenchant. And on television, you move very quickly into the topic of there being several flavors of Jello, which I recognize. But the question was: where were your parents?

John Malkovich: Our parents were not, um... my mother had a master's in psychology, surprisingly. And my father majored in both journalism and art at the University of Missouri, but they were the original laissez-faire parents. You know, we were never told to go to bed. We were never told—you know, years before *Taxi Driver*, I remember my mother crossing me in—

Jesse Thorn: John, there is no positive story that starts “Years before *Taxi Driver*, I remember my mother—” (*Chuckles.*)

John Malkovich: No, no, it's only bad stories. But my mother suddenly said—I was 17. I was a junior in high school. Suddenly said to me, as we crossed paths in our house, “Don't you have homework?”

And I said, “Are you talking to me? Never talk to me like that.” Because my mother had no idea what grade I was in, no idea what I did or didn't do at school. And you know, I had no interest whatsoever in homework or anything I learned in school, really—at least maybe until university. But they just didn't get involved in stuff like that.

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Jesse Thorn: What was that like for you?

John Malkovich: You know, I can't answer what it was really like, because that almost sort of presupposes I had an idea that it wasn't normal. I mean, I knew my parents weren't like my other friends' parents, but that was normal to me—to go to bed when I felt sleepy, to do schoolwork if I felt interested or for some reason, it was something I had to do, which really never happened. So, I don't think it's easy to grow up in a family where you should decide, as a small child, what you should and shouldn't do. It seems to be a kind of evocative but maybe overly daring way to raise children, but that's how I was raised.

Jesse Thorn: Did you know what kind of life you wanted to have before you left home?

John Malkovich: No. You know, I kind of—I think I wanted to be like a baseball pitcher but ruined my arm by the time I was, you know, 10 or 11, playing against kids a lot older and throwing harder than I knew how. Because, you know, who was going to tell you back then how to throw a baseball properly or something? No, I went to school, went to university. No idea what I was going to do. I ended up doing theatre. I had a girlfriend who was a very good actress, ended up doing theatre. And then I transferred to a different university, and that was a university where a number of the young people I was in school with decided they wanted to start a theatre, and they asked me to join them. And I did.

And if that hadn't have happened, I could have seen myself maybe teaching or something, but in a more academic aspect of theatre, maybe. Not so much maybe performing or directing, which I ended up doing. But they asked me to join them, and we started a theatre in Chicago, and then the rest of my work then evolved or maybe devolved depending on how one looks at it—but kind of evolved from there. And if they hadn't asked me, I'm not sure—maybe I wouldn't have done it at all, and I would have done something completely different.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Hey, *Bullseye* listeners. It's me, Jesse, and I'm also joined by Jesus, one of the producers of *Bullseye*.

Jesus Ambrosio: Hey, everyone! How's it going?

Jesse Thorn: So, you've been working on *Bullseye* how long? Six, seven years?

Jesus Ambrosio: I believe about six years. I started on Halloween in 2017.

Jesse Thorn: And you started in our production fellowship program, which is—

Jesus Ambrosio: Yep, that is correct.

Jesse Thorn: Like basically, you can't go to college—or maybe you can to some extent now, but you can't really go to college and major in podcasting. So, rather than have an unpaid internship program, we basically set up a one-year fellowship program for folks who might not otherwise have the opportunity to get into the podcasting industry, which can be pretty tough to break into. That is a fully paid program where people learn how to be podcast producers. You went through that program, and you've been working here ever since. That was years ago now.

Jesus Ambrosio: Yeah, that was years ago! I had that year-long fellowship. I was offered a job here at Maximum Fun, and I love it. It's really, really fun to work here and make really fun and interesting stuff and talk to really interesting folks for the radio and for the podcast.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah! And you're now a worker-owner, just like I am, of MaximumFun.

Jesus Ambrosio: That's right. I sure am!

Jesse Thorn: *Bullseye*—we talked about this in the last episode, but *Bullseye* is very unique in the public radio landscape in that our show is distributed to public radio stations around the country by NPR, for which we are immensely grateful. But we are the rare nationally distributed public radio program that is really and truly completely independently produced. We make *Bullseye* at Maximum Fun, a company that I founded that became a worker-owned co-op last year. Always have made it. I mean, this show stretches back, for me, to my college radio show. Like, (*chuckling*) I've been making this show every week by myself I was 19 years old.

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And it's a big production these days. I mean, like Jesus, you're the person who's primarily responsible for editing the show.

Jesus Ambrosio: Yeah, for the most part. I mean, we have Richard and also Daniel who help out and edit interviews, but I mix the show every Friday, and I make sure that it gets out for our radio audience and also for our podcast audience every week. And yeah, I love the editing part of my job. It's why I got into radio. And it can take a lot of time, and it takes a lot of resources to make these things possible.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I don't know if podcast listeners realize that when you listen to the podcast version of *Bullseye* every week, you are getting a specially-tuned version of the content of the show specifically for podcasts. So, like when we make the radio show, it has to have these certain qualifications. It has to be 59 minutes long, 58 minutes long, whatever it is.

Jesus Ambrosio: 53 minutes and 58 seconds. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Thank you, because of the news hole. I forgot about the news hole. Right, so it has to be this exact specific length. It has to have breaks in these specific places. We are constantly reintroducing the show in case someone just sat down in their car and turned on the radio. Like, all these things that are specific to the radio version of the show. The qualification for how we cut the show for the podcast is, if we have a great interview—like the interview that we're in the middle of right now—if we have one that we're really passionate about, we're not cutting to time per se. We're making an edit of all the stuff that we think's worth listening to. And that's like a whole separate project. (*Chuckles.*) Like, it's a whole additional edit of the interview.

(*Jesus confirms.*)

In 2024, media doesn't exist unless you directly support it. Ads and stuff, they're just not cutting it. Social media has destroyed that market. It's really rough out there for people trying to pay journalists' salaries based on that. And we have a show we're really proud of and that you probably like. And if you want it to keep existing, become a member of Maximum Fun by going to MaximumFun.org/join.

Jesus, you've been working on this thing a long time.

(Jesus confirms.)

Is it just because you couldn't get a different job?

Jesus Ambrosio: *(Chuckling.)* No! I love working for Maximum Fun, and I love talking to cool and interesting people. I mean, the MaxFunDrive for me is always a really good time to remember some of the folks that we've talked to in the past year. Just last year, we talked to Patrick Stewart, we talked to Cheech Marin, we've talked to Tom Hanks.

Jesse Thorn: Jesus, we went to Ann-Margret's house. *(Laughs.)* Ann-Margret's house that used to belong to Humphrey Bogart?!

Jesus Ambrosio: Oh my goodness.

Jesse Thorn: Like, they were like you can interview Hollywood legend Ann-Margret, but she doesn't want to travel, so would you be willing to come to her place? And we were like, "Yes."

(Jesus laughs.)

So, we packed up all our equipment and went to AnnMargaret's house and had an incredible conversation with an actual, genuine Hollywood legend.

Like, I'll tell you this. Jesus, for me, one of the highlights of the last year on *Bullseye* was I had gone to this classic soul concert. Which that's like one of my special interests, like I've always—my whole life—been a real classic soul nut. And it was Barbara Mason. Barbara Mason was one of the headliners. The other one was Brenton Wood.

Jesus Ambrosio: Love Brenton Wood. Love him.

Jesse Thorn: Right. So they're both like 80 years old, and Brenton Wood is this sort of specific—like, he had national hits, "The Oogum Boogum Song"—you know.

(They sing.) Oogum, boogum, oogum, boogum, boogum now—

But like, more than that, he is like an LA legend. You know, made his career in LA. And when I got to that concert, I realized was specifically a Latino and particularly Chicano legend. And I was like I bet we could get Brenton Wood to come in. He's 80, but like I bet he'd do it. He's on his farewell tour. And not only was it a great conversation with this dude, but like we all play it cool. on *Bullseye*. You know what I mean?

(Jesus giggles.)

None of us are like—we got these celebrities coming in all the time, and they're used to people loving on them and bothering them and stuff. And we just try and let them—you

know, take a picture of our social media and let them go. But Brenton Wood was in Riverside or something like that in a studio.

Jesus Ambrosio: Yeah, yeah, I think I know where you're going with this.

Jesus Ambrosio: And at the end of the interview, Jesus comes on the line, just in the voice that you're hearing—Jesus's sweet little voice—and says, “Mr. Wood, I just wanted to tell you how much your music means to me and my family. Every family barbecue and get-together my entire life, your music was the soundtrack.” Those kinds of moments—

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And I'm sure that you at home, listening—there's people that have been on the show where their work meant that much to you. And I know like for me, the reason that I still do this show all these years later is that I really believe in art and popular culture. Like, I really in the stuff that we cover on the show. And I really believe that it deserves respect and consideration. And when we invite people onto the show, I consider that to be me saying, “I think this is important. I think this is worth your time. I really believe in this person and their work.” And I'm really proud that like—I'm 20 years in—that I still get to sometimes have those conversations with people that mean to me what Brenton Wood meant to you.

Jesus Ambrosio: Yeah, definitely. When we have folks on *Bullseye*, it's because we care about them, and we think that you'll like them. And we're excited to share these conversations with you. And it means a lot to us to have these folks on, and we're sure it means a lot to you when you get to discover something new—a new book, a new movie, a new TV show. Think about what that means to you in your life and how it adds value to your life.

Jesse Thorn: But like all of these people are human beings, you know? Like, but they're people! You know, they're charmers, they're gifted, they're special. But I think one of the things about our show is that it's a way to connect to really gifted artists about their work, like not ignoring their work. It's really about their work while also acknowledging these are people. You know what I mean? Like, human beings make special things.

John Malkovich: Yeah, and we can't do it without your support.

Jesse Thorn: Exactly. This is, as we said, a truly independent production. We're the little guy in public radio, without a doubt. And the reason we're able to punch above our weight—you know, the reason we're able to get the Tom Hankses and Patrick Stewarts in here is because we have the staff to support it. And the reason we have the staff is because you support us by going to MaximumFun.org/join. It is quick and easy. And we're really grateful when you do it.

Let me ask you this, Jesus—before we go. If you were going to recommend one URL to our listeners right now, what would it be?

Jesus Ambrosio: MaximumFun.org/join!

Jesse Thorn: Alright, let's get back into John Malkovich, the legend!

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: You got a lot of attention right away in Steppenwolf, the theater company that you and friends founded in Chicago when you were just out of school. Were you comfortable with that?

John Malkovich: You know, it's so—that's hard to answer, because that's so long ago. And I think Steppenwolf was, in its initial phase, a company of people who I think really loved each other and had great respect for each other's work, but also kind of a company of rivals, let's say, in another way. And I think that held true for a long time. I think I was comfortable enough with the attention I got. And I think I could say I loved when my colleagues got attention. I wasn't maybe super happy about being singled out, but I also thought, “Well, it's just a matter of time until the other people are noticed, you know.”

And I think for the most part I was right to have that notion, because mostly they all got noticed quite a bit in the years to follow.

Jesse Thorn: You're from a place a lot closer to Chicago than to LA or New York or Paris. Did you think that you were going to make your life as a stage actor in Chicago?

John Malkovich: Well, you know, we were kids. When they asked me, I just thought, well, that's about the dumb—you know, it was the mid-'70s, sort of recession, et cetera. And I and everybody else, I think, thought that was about the dumbest idea we'd ever heard. All our instructors thought that. I'm sure it worried our parents sick. You know, although mine never said anything. (*To himself, with a chuckle.*) Maybe it didn't worry them at all. I have no idea, but—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I was about to say, if they weren't worried about you eating Jello every day as your only food, then I'm not sure that—

John Malkovich: Yeah, then maybe they don't even care that—yeah, that I was about to become an actor.

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But I never imagined a life that I've had. I mean, I grew up in Benton, Illinois. If somebody would have told me, “You'll direct plays in Paris and London, and you'll tour in operas in Rio de Janeiro and Finland, and you'll do this and you'll do that,” I'm not sure I would have known what plays were, point A. But it's too absurd really to think about and still seems absurd to me, really.

Jesse Thorn: When you were in Chicago, did it feel like you had really gotten out of dodge?

John Malkovich: No! I loved my hometown growing up. I just—once we started going off to New York and then a number of us had, let's say, successful trips to New York, then we went into movies and television to some extent, et cetera. But I was very happy in Chicago. We didn't make any money, because we had regular jobs and had to put our money into the theatre. But I didn't think much beyond that. I liked the work we were doing. It wasn't always good, but sometimes it was very good. So, I don't know, my life, my life, is/was more or less shocking to me. And kind of remains so. But I also don't think about it much, and maybe that's why it's like that. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: I read you saying two things that I thought were interesting in comparison. One was—I think it was in a Reddit AMA, somebody asked you like, “What's the point of acting or the goal of acting?” And you said self-expression. And I also read you describing your role as an actor to be an empty vessel. So, what's the point where the self-expression part of acting connects with the empty vessel part?

John Malkovich: Well, that's a great question. And how I would explain it is like this. When I said empty vessel, I probably just should have said empty. If you're in a good play, a good production of a good play, and... then that's like hanging on to a runaway train. You don't force something on it. It forces you to hang on to it. So, empty to the extent I see a lot of people—for instance, I've worked with some actors or actresses who shall remain nameless, who need to work themselves up in a state to do thing A, B, C, D. The material makes me do it. I don't have to worry about, “Oh, how will I get angry, or how will I cry?” Or how will I do all these things I know actors worry about constantly. I just let it happen.

Jesse Thorn: There's this David Mamet book about acting that's really a hoot and a half. And if I was going to summarize his primary thesis in this book, I would say it's basically, “The actor's job is to say the words loud enough the audience can hear them.” (*Chuckles.*)

John Malkovich: Well, you know what? I've worked with David and loved David. We did—not his last play, but we played together about four years ago in the West End called *Bitter Wheat*. And, you know, theatre... it's such a—probably kind of an addiction. I never get tired of doing a good play. I'm never bored. And people ask me, “How do you do this? Or how do actors do this for a month?” And even theatre actors like, “Oh, I could never run a play for three months.” You know, they do four weeks, six weeks, something like that. I never really felt that. Maybe when I did *Death of a Salesman* on Broadway, which I had already done in Chicago just a couple of weeks after my dad died.

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And probably I had some kind of odd relationship with the play even because of that. Generally, I never feel that. I really never got tired of it, never got sick of it. Because it's alive every night.

Jesse Thorn: Do you feel that way when you're acting for the screen?

John Malkovich: Movie acting is more—it's more take-to-take. Can you do something in take B that improves what you did the first time? But of course, movies don't really have

momentum behind them. They don't have the power of the whole story behind them. It's something you have to provide every take.

Jesse Thorn: Or even giving something in the second take that's simply different from what you gave in the first take. Those choices will ultimately be made by that director and editor.

John Malkovich: That's right. Not by me. And before I did *Dangerous Liaison* with Steven Frears, he came to *Burn This*—the play I was doing on Broadway. The first thing he said—so, he came backstage after, and he said, “So, why is it actually your never good in the movies?”

And I said, “Well, really why? Because I don't control them. I edit my own performances on a stage. I do what I want, and that's of course not the case in a movie.” There are all kinds of other people making the decision that this moment pairs with this moment. Me, I would never have paired that moment with this moment, but that's also something you have to accept in the movies. And I'm not saying it's a—it's not a criticism of either directors or editors. I've worked with some wonderful ones. I've been very thankful for them, but it's just a fact of I can do that myself, and would I prefer to? Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) And I've spent thousands and thousands of nights in my life doing that.

Jesse Thorn: We've got a lot more to get into with John Malkovich. When we come back from the break, he has said in the past that he can't really take pride in his work. And I would not be a useful NPR interviewer if I did not ask him about that, because it's interesting. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with actor John Malkovich.

I want to play what truly may actually be my favorite moment in a movie. This is something that gives me about as much pleasure as anything in the history of cinema. It's this scene from *Burn After Reading*. And your character has quit his CIA job to write a memoir. His wife is divorcing him, everything is falling apart, and he's unemployed and in a boat—living in a boat, a small boat—and plotting his comeback, and watching a workout video.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Upbeat, tropical music.

Recording: Up, up! And down! Up, up, and up! Up! Now let's add the abs, right here. (*The recording continues in the background.*)

Osbourne (*Burn After Reading*): I'm bigger. I'm better. I'm bigger than ever. I'm bigger. I'm back. I'm better, I'm back. Than ever, I'm back. You (*sensor beep*), I'm back.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

John Malkovich: Now see, that's amazing. I didn't remember that at all.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughing.*) You don't remember doing step aerobics while saying, “You (*sensor beep*)”?!

John Malkovich: Yeah. No, I really didn't. I happened to see—when they were choosing the NCAA final teams for the playoffs, my nephew sent me a video which was making the rounds of Florida State students and fans and alums and what have you, which was also from my part in *Burn After Reading* about whatever it was—“This is political,” and I kind of put myself on a cross when I get fired or disciplined or whatever happened.

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And they were using that meme to say that they politically got robbed and weren't going to be in the playoffs and all that. But I didn't remember that at all, because you know, I don't—I love working with the Coen Brothers, and I loved working on that, but I don't really watch movies with myself. I just don't. So, I didn't—you know, I don't kind of almost ever see anything. If I see it the first time, which is a big if, I don't ever see it after.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have fun doing fun stuff like that?

John Malkovich: Yeah. Oh god, yeah. Yeah, they were great to work with. Very smart. And with a fantastic specificity, which I love—especially in the cinema—that they really know exactly what they want. And not in some kind of controlling way, but in a very specific way. Because I've always felt one of the things you have to do or try to do when you're a movie actor is you have to kind of read the director's mind. And some of them are very much counter punchers. So, you kind of have to say, “Okay, either you tell me what you want, or I'm going to do it like this.”

So, I like ones who are quite specific in how they see a particular thing.

Jesse Thorn: I read something you said and identified with it but in a sad way, and I wanted to read it back to you and see how you feel about it. You said, “I'm not someone who can really enjoy or even feel a sense of accomplishment about anything I've ever done. I'm just not the type.” Do you still feel that way?

John Malkovich: (*Casually.*) Yeah, sure. Because I don't think... I don't understand the notion of pride. I mean, if by pride, you mean that I take care about something? Okay. Then I understand what you mean. But if you mean, “Oh, wow, I really—blah, blah, blah,” it's just a foreign thing to me.

Jesse Thorn: But can you feel comfort and security in stillness or in regarding what you've done?

John Malkovich: Usually, I'll feel dislike for what I've done, more as an actor than as a director. I will often feel I should have done this or that, but I wouldn't classify myself either as a neurotic. It is what it is. And in a movie, it's done, and there's no going back or looking back. In theatre, of course, that isn't the case. It's never done, so I can say I absolutely love this production, say, that I directed. But I may hate it the next night, for very good reasons. Because it's living, and it has good and bad nights and off and on nights. And I try not to have those as a performer, because people have come. They've paid X number of dollars. They've hired a babysitter. They got on the train or drove in. They parked their car. They did their job. They're there, and you better compel them.

And I guess I couldn't feel pride about it, because that's your job. That's what you're supposed to do, not drive them insane with boredom or rancor or hate, but to do something that makes them forget about themselves for a while.

Jesse Thorn: I hope we haven't driven anyone insane with boredom or rancor.

John Malkovich: I hope not, too.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. It was really good to talk to you.

John Malkovich: My pleasure. My pleasure.

Jesse Thorn: John Malkovich. His new show, *The New Look*, is streaming on Apple TV+. Before we go, (*chuckling*) the staff of *Bullseye* would like to offer you some Malko-Recs! That's John Malkovich recommendations, I think. Senior producer Kevin Ferguson says you might really like *The New Pope*—

[00:45:00]

—an HBO drama that starred Malkovich and Jude Law a few years back. Our producer Richard Robey really loved him in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* from 2005. And I'm gonna be honest, I like the movie *Burn After Reading* a ton, it's a very fun movie. But even if you just go to YouTube and just watch the one scene where he's doing step aerobics in his boat, it's truly one of the greatest things that's ever happened in the history of cinema.

Transition: Upbeat, funky synth.

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. The wind has been crazy here. Somebody's mad at us.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, aka DJW. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation", written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. 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.)

Jesse Thorn: Thanks so much for listening to our episode with John Malkovich, the man, the myth, the legend! *(Laughs.)* You know, had Peter Dinklage on earlier this week. You know who inspired Peter Dinklage to become an actor?

Jesus Ambrosio: Was it John Malkovich?

Jesse Thorn: You nailed it in one.

Jesus Ambrosio: Oh my goodness!

Jesse Thorn: It was seeing John Malkovich in *True West* was what inspired Dinklage to become an actor. If you enjoyed that interview and the work that we do, we hope that you'll become a member of Maximum Fun by going to [MaximumFun.org/join](#).