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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](https://www.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. My next guest, Steve Buscemi, doesn't need much introduction. He is one of the most memorable actors ever. He's had hundreds of parts, leading parts in stuff like *Reservoir Dogs*, *Ghost World*, *Boardwalk Empire*, iconic supporting parts in *Fargo*, the *Sopranos*, and of course, *30 Rock*. Buscemi is also a director. On the small screen, he's worked on shows as diverse as *Oz*, *Portlandia*, and again, *30 Rock*. And on the big screen, he wrote and directed the cult hit *Trees Lounge*, along with the brand-new movie, *The Listener*. It's a drama starring Tessa Thompson about a crisis helpline volunteer.

When I talked with Buscemi in 2020, he just starred in something very, very different—much dumber, just as compelling. It's a TV show called *Miracle Workers*. Each season of *Miracle Workers* tells a different story with the same cast. Season one was set in Heaven, who is run kind of like a soulless megacorporation with an absentee CEO. Steve played God. Yes, literally, God.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Peaceful, serene music.

**Speaker 1 (*Miracle Workers*):** Explain cows.

**God:** I don't wanna do this, anymore.

**Speaker 2:** Tell Mom and Dad what a cow is.

**God:** It's like a big dog you can drink from.

**Speaker 3:** And what's a dog?

**God:** A small cow you can be friends with.

**Speaker 1:** Tell them about giraaaffes. What's a giraaaaaffe?

**God:** It's just a tall dog with—

**Speaker 3:** Louder. Speak up.

**God:** (*Louder, frustrated.*) Tall dog with a leg for a neck.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** Season two takes place in the Dark Ages—in fact that's what it's called, *Miracle Workers: Dark Ages*. Steve Buscemi plays a peasant named Edward, whose last name we can't say on the radio. That's because it describes his profession, which is scooping up human waste with a shovel. Shoveler is actually the second part of his surname. Maybe you can guess the first. Anyway, let's hear a clip from this show. In this bit, Ed is training his daughter in the family business. They're just about to make their rounds in the village with their shovels and cart. But before she goes off on her own to work, Ed gives her the rundown.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

*(The sound of birds chirping and chickens clucking.)*

**Edward** (*Miracle Workers: Dark Ages*): Well, you know the shoveler's pledge: anytime, anywhere, even if it's big.

**Alexandra:** That's the pledge?

**Edward:** Yeah! It's easy to remember, because it doesn't rhyme.

*(Thumping sounds of the cart moving.)*

**Edward:** First job. Big moment!

**Alexandra:** (*Sighs.*) Okay. Let's just get this over with.

**Edward:** Woah, woah, woah, oh—woah, easy there, cowboy! I gotta teach you the technique! Alright, now, never turn your back on the cart. And always lift from your neck. The neck is the body's power center.

**Alexandra:** Why are these shovels so short?

**Edward:** Well, this way we have to stoop over more and it's harder.

**Alexandra:** But those are negatives.

**Edward:** That's the way my dad taught me! I remember what he said, just before he died of shoveling: "Son, I feel weird."

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Steve Buscemi, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's really great to have you on the show.

**Steve Buscemi:** Thank you so much. Nice to be here.

**Jesse Thorn:** How did you end up making this very specific television program with the great Simon Rich?

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, so this is—it's an anthology series. So, this is actually the second season. The first season was just called *Miracle Workers*, and it took place in Heaven, as if Heaven was a corporation. And I played God, and—but he's a very disinterested God. Not terribly bright and very secluded, kind of depressed, confused about how Earth just all went wrong, and he's ready to give it up. And it's up to his angels to sort of convince him that it's a worthwhile endeavor to keep Earth going.

**Jesse Thorn:** He's sort of like a sweatpants god.

**Steve Buscemi:** He is, yeah. He's sort of just—just kind of gave up. You know? (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** He's ready to pivot to a restaurant.

(*Steve agrees.*)

He's like, "Yeah, I'm gonna bail on this."

**Steve Buscemi:** He wants to destroy the Earth and open up this crazy restaurant somewhere in space. And the second season takes place in the Dark Ages, hence the title, *Miracle Workers: Dark Ages*. So, it's the same cast.

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And that was Geraldine Viswanathan that you heard in that clip, and also Daniel Radcliffe is in the series, and John Bass, and Karan Soni. So, it's all the same cast, and we all play different characters now. And so, if the listeners couldn't tell from that clip, I am the town (*sensor beep*)shoveler.

**Jesse Thorn:** As evidenced by your surname which, as was the custom at the time, reflects directly your occupation.

**Steve Buscemi:** (*Chuckling.*) Yes. And Geraldine plays my daughter, and John Bass plays my son. And Daniel Radcliffe, in the first season—yeah, he played sort of like this helpless angel who's like overwhelmed and—but in this one, he plays a spoiled prince who lives in a castle. And so, it's sort of a role reversal for us both.

**Jesse Thorn:** You bring a lot of kind of casual humanity to this role that otherwise could be very broad. Like, it could be a big goof around. But it requires you to do these big idea things in the plainest, most human way possible.

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, if it was just, you know, jokes, I don't think I'd be interested. But what I loved about playing God was that—(*chuckling*) you know, that he really did have, you know, this inner life that I found very sympathetic, you know. Even though he could be the biggest jerk a lot of the times.

And in this season, I loved—I don't usually get to play a dad, you know. And so, in this one I have a couple of kids. And he's—(*chuckling*) you know, he is a pillar of the community. People depend on him. And he's very proud of what he does. And so, that was—you know, that was really something that I could hold on to and just always play that.

**Jesse Thorn:** There is a scene from *Miracle Worker's* second season that I want to play that I think reflects the esteem in which your character is held by the community. So, basically, your character and his daughter are out doing their work, which involves shoveling. And the cart into which they shovel that-which-they-shovel runs into the prince, played by Daniel Radcliffe. And he is not actually injured. But long story short, in order to not embarrass himself in front of his dad, the king, he orders your character to be executed. And so, these are what he believes will be his last words to his kids before his execution.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

(*The sounds of a crowd in the background.*)

**Edward:** Just remember this life advice: if you work hard and be kind, everything will always go your way.

**Guard:** Bring out the prisoner!

**Edward:** Gotta go.

**Alexandra:** Dad! Why did you take the blame?!

**Edward:** (*Sighs.*) For the same reason I do everything. Because I'm your father. And I love you.

**Alexandra:** I'm so sorry. Everything I said, I—

**Edward:** (*Interrupting.*) No, no, no, no. It's okay. It's okay. The truth is, you're too smart for this job.

(*A long, low note swells in the background.*)

**Edward:** You get your brains from your mother. Before she died, I promised her I'd do my best for you. I taught you everything I knew this morning. And I know you'll succeed at whatever you do.

**Guard:** (*Clears throat pointedly.*)

**Edward:** (*Cheerfully.*) Gotta go!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Steve Buscemi:** And happily he goes!

(*They laugh.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I just—what's lovely about this character is like he has the toughest job that exists in the world and also does not question any of the tough parts of it. Like, he uses—

**Steve Buscemi:** No, he loves it.

**Jesse Thorn:** He uses like a dustpan to do his shoveling, a wooden dustpan.

(*Steve laughs.*)

And is completely taken aback when his daughter suggests maybe they should use a long-handled implement. He's like, "Well, stooping, that's like part of the thing! You got to stoop!" And he really finds satisfaction in the sort of bounds of his world. That like he provides this service; he does this thing. And there's literally a scene where you're walking down the street, and you say, "Could life get any better?" (*Chuckles.*)

**Steve Buscemi:** He's—you know, he's working. He's providing for his family. And now his daughter is working with him. It's—life couldn't be better for him.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your dad was a civil servant. He was a—he worked in the sanitation department in New York.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah, you know, when Simon first told me about my character for this season, as I'm hearing him talk, I—you know, I said, "Well, this guy reminds me a lot of my dad." You know, my dad did 30 years on the Department of Sanitation in Brooklyn. And we were well provided for. And you know, he didn't have the most impressive job, (*chuckles*) you know, that you wanted to brag about to your friends. But I never heard him complain. He just, you know—

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He really just—and I think he did enjoy what he did. I mean, he later became an assistant foreman and then a foreman. And he passed away about five years ago. And at his wake, I got to meet a lot of his friends that he worked with. And just to hear, you know, the stories about him and the way that they talked about him and how he really cared about the people that he worked with, and he had a good time at work. And it was a job, but he took it seriously, and I think he was—I think he felt good that he was able to— You know, he had four kids, and he provided well.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you go into the civil service, which you did as a young man, in part because of his influence?

**Steve Buscemi:** It was—yeah, it was directly because of him. I mean, he made me and my brothers take whatever civil service exam came up when we turned 18. And for me, it was the fire department. So, I took the test really kind of just to please him. But he made sure that I trained for it, and he made sure that I was able to get older copies of the written exam. Which is—the written exam, it's pretty easy, but there's always a couple of like trick questions. And if you don't study the older exams, you won't be ready for them, and you'll miss them on the test. And I scored—you know, because of that, I was able to score high on the written exam. I did okay on my physical, and my name was put on the list, and it took four years for me to get hired.

And by that time, I was moving furniture; I was trying to do standup; I had moved into the city; and I was just exhausted and just looking for a change. And I thought, okay, I'll be a firefighter. Not really understanding what the job called for. But then of course, once I took the job, I really fell in love with it and, you know, just really admired the people that I was working with. And I did it for four years, and it stayed with me, all this time.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you think about going to college when you finished high school?

**Steve Buscemi:** I did. I went to Nassau Community College for one semester and wasn't even taking any theatre classes. I was just, you know, taking some liberal arts classes. And it just—I mean, there were a couple of interesting classes that I wished I had—you know, if I could have just taken those classes. There was like a jazz appreciation class, and there was a literature class. But then I also had to take biology and some other things. And I just thought this is like high school again. And I dropped out after a semester and then figured out that, yeah, I think I do want to be an actor. I had only done a little bit of acting in high school, although it's something that I had always wanted to do when I was a kid, you know. And as a kid I did school plays and—but it wasn't until my senior year in high school that I started to like really do—really check out the theater department.

Anyway, I then—again, at the advice of my dad. He said, “Well, you should take acting classes, you know.” But I was living in Long Island. I had no idea that these things even existed, you know. And I ended up going to the Lee Strasberg Institute on a six-month—like a full-time course, like four acting classes a week and a movement class and a speech class. And it was great.

**Jesse Thorn:** We've got to go to a quick break. Stick around. Even more to get into with Steve Buscemi. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Steve Buscemi. He is, of course—well, I mean, he's Steve Buscemi! He's the star of *Reservoir Dogs* and, I don't know, *Armageddon*. Like, a million movies and television shows. He's also the director of about half a dozen films, the latest of which is called *The Listener*. It's a drama about a crisis helpline volunteer navigating the covid-19 pandemic at the height of lockdown. You can watch it in theaters and online now. Buscemi and I talked just before the pandemic, in early 2020.

I read this great profile that John Lahr wrote of you for the *New Yorker* 15 years or so ago. And he basically—he described your dad encouraging you to take acting classes in a way that I loved reading. Because you know, in my job, you hear lots of people describe what their parents' relationships were to their artistic aspirations, right? And basically, you had been hit by a bus when you were a preschooler. And there was like a little bit of money that was in like an educational trust fund kind of deal.

**Steve Buscemi:** Right. I got a settlement. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** And your dad, at least as John Lahr described it, basically said, “Look, you should take acting lessons. Don't become an actor, but you got to do something. Like, something you care about.”

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, yeah. I mean—so, here's the thing. When my dad was growing up, he had two best friends. One became a firefighter, and one became an actor. So—not that I had like a connection into the business, but I actually knew somebody. My Uncle Pete, you know; he was my dad's best friend, Peter Miller. He was an actor in the '50s. He was—you know, he had a little part in *Rebel Without a Cause*. He was in Robert Altman's first film, *The Delinquents*, and he had a great part in that. He did a bunch of TV when that was, you know, like really kind of coming into its own. And then he left, and he became an investment banker.

So, by the time I wanted to sort of go into acting, he wasn't in the business anymore. But I would talk to him. And my idea was that I had to get out to Hollywood. Like, that's where you become an actor. I had no idea, you know. And my dad was—he was trying to keep me in New York so that when my name came up for the fire department, that I would be in New York.

(Jesse chuckles.)

But he knew I liked acting, and he knew—he actually knew about acting classes because of Peter. Peter Miller went to the Neighborhood Playhouse. I think we did check that out, but then I ended up interviewing at the Lee Strasberg. But my dad also told me, you know, “Yeah, take acting classes, because it's good just for life.” You know.

And I told them that on the interview, (*laughing*) and I got a very stern look, you know, from the person interviewing me saying, “No, if you come here, you have to want to be an actor.”

I was like, “Yeah, yeah! Of course I do! Yes. Yes.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) That's like the first thing they tell you at acting school. There's like a long series of classes for the first few weeks where just basically every teacher is just giving you a lecture on why you shouldn't become an actor. But you made it through that!

**Steve Buscemi:** I somehow—you know, I mean, I had the money to pay for a full-time six-month course. And I loved it. You know, it really—

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you think you were good at it?

**Steve Buscemi:** It took me a while to even do anything in the classes. I used to just sit there. But in one of the classes, they did improvisation. And I found that I was kind of okay at that. And then once I started, you know, doing some scene work, I just felt like I—you know, that I really, really loved it. One of the earliest scenes I did was from *A View from the Bridge* with Linda Hamilton. And it was exciting, you know. And then, you know, in an acting class, you can—you know, you get to do things that maybe you wouldn't normally do in the course of your career. And it was also—I learned about playwrights that I knew nothing about, you know. So, it was a huge education for me, and it was exciting, and it was fun.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have a particular aspiration or idea of what your career would be?

**Steve Buscemi:** No. No.

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I mean, I knew I liked comedy. And I had, you know, some designs on becoming a standup, because I love standup comedy. And I would see that some standups would then get a series, or they would, you know, be a guest star on a series.

**Jesse Thorn:** This was like in the late '70s or so, when that was truly—that was like the era of get on *Carson*, get invited to the couch, get your own sitcom.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah, if you look at Freddie Prinze, he was 17 years old when he did *The Tonight Show*. And then he got his own series. I was—you know, I mean, yeah, he was young, but he had like a life experience. (*Laughs.*) I was this, you know, kid from Long Island. And I was trying to do stand up at age 18. I used to sit in the back of the Improv in New York, and just watch, you know, people like Paul Reiser and Jerry Seinfeld and Gilbert



Gottfried. And every once in a while I would get on, just late at night. But it was a great experience to like see them. And that's really what I wanted to do. But standup for me—it was hard for me to find my own voice. I didn't like the aloneness of it. And I realized, you know, once I started taking the acting classes, was that I liked being with other people. You know?

And so, a little later on, after I had moved to the East Village, I met people like Mark Boone Jr., and this wonderful comedian actor, Rockets Redglare—who was in a lot of Jim Jarmusch's early films. And we all just started to write and perform our own work. So, that was a huge thing for me—to not only be acting, but also to be writing and improvising, and then being in a community of people who were all just trying to do their own work. And yeah, this was like the early '80s in the East Village, and it was just an amazing time to be there. Because—you know, in terms of music and art, performance art, dance. And it took me a while to sort of find my way, but after a while I was in the thick of it.

**Jesse Thorn:** I actually—I found a clip of you and Mark Boone Jr., who had a double act for a long time. And I watched it. It was recorded in the late '80s, which I imagine was towards the end of your run, but it's such a great piece. It's like a 13-minute scene with the two of you. And it was like recorded on a, you know, maybe a prosumer VHS camcorder or something like that. Like, it's not the finest video, but I sat at my computer screen and watched on YouTube all the way through, 'cause I found it so compelling. And it was a lot less—when I heard that you had been in a double act, I presumed something a lot jokey-er and standupy-er than what it actually is, which is very theatrey. It's a real scene.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah, we never considered ourselves standups. I mean, it was always these little theatre pieces. Mostly shorts, but we did do a couple of feature length plays. And yeah, it was—I mean, it was always infused with humor, but the humor came out of the characters personalities or the situation that they were in.

**Jesse Thorn:** I'm going to play a little clip. So, your character is a professional panhandler. His character is sort of—is apparently maybe a professional panhandler, but is dressed very nicely relative to you. You're wearing like torn jeans and a beanie and stuff like that. And he's wearing a coat and tie. And he comes up to you as you're asking passersby for change and giving them a line about your wallet got stolen and so forth and asks you for money, which you're not nuts about.

*(They chuckle.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Steve:** *(In a New York accent.)* If you're gonna stick around here, maybe I should give you some advice, or else you're gonna die out here, alright? Look. *(Thumping sound.)* Whenever somebody passes by, even if they don't give you nothing—alright? Always say have a nice day, god bless you, whatever.

*(The audience laughs.)*

Because I'll tell you why—even if they don't give you nothing, alright? 'Cause maybe they pass you by in the morning, right? They don't give you nothing. But if you're nice to them, then maybe later on, on their way back, they remember you. People appreciate a little courte-ism, you know what I'm saying?

*(Laughter.)*

You understand how it works? I mean I—you know, I kind of know this scene. I mean, I know how to deal with people is what I'm trying to say, you know? *(Beat.)* Hey, what are you staring at?

[00:25:00]

*(Laughter.)*

I ain't no freak! Get out of here! Hey, get out of here, man!

**Speaker:** *(Yelling.)* Go on! Get outta here! Huh?!

**Steve:** It's alright. It's alright. I know that guy. It's—

**Speaker:** Come on!

**Steve:** He's a creep. He's alright.

*(Laughter.)*

**Steve:** *(Yelling.)* Hey! Have a nice day! *(Slapping noise.)*

*(Laughter.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckles.)* There was a point I read somewhere that the two of you were doing 40 minutes of material every week.

**Steve Buscemi:** We—yeah, for a while. Do you remember the club Folk City? It was this music club, you know, in the Village.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, a very well-known club.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah, I mean, mostly a music club. And—but they had like a comedy night each week, and then they had a theatre night. And we were booked for months, like three

months. And we had to come up with a new show each week. And we usually waited to the last minute.

*(They chuckle.)*

But that's when you—you know, you get real inspiration. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that is like bananas. It's hard enough to—go ask somebody that writes for *Saturday Night Live*. It's hard enough to come up with five minutes material a week, much less half an hour/40 minutes.

**Steve Buscemi:** We recycled some earlier things, but yeah. But basically we would come up with—you know, we really tried to come up with new material each week.

**Jesse Thorn:** By that point, did you think, oh, I'm going to be a theatre actor, or I'm going to be a film actor? Or were you just happy to be doing stuff?

**Steve Buscemi:** I was just happy to be doing anything, you know. The fact that I could perform was just everything to me. I mean, yeah, I had designs on wanting to do TV or—and at that time, independent film was just starting to come into its own, you know. And yeah, I wanted to work with the people that I saw around me. Like, you know, Jim Jarmusch, Susan Seidelman. You know, she was making films. And people like Bette Gordon and Sarah Driver, Eric Mitchell. And then I started to work with some of them, and that was very exciting.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you feel like you were as cool and sophisticated and accomplished as they were?

**Steve Buscemi:** Oh, no, no. I felt—I really didn't know anything, you know. I moved into the East Village I think around 1978, and—because, you know, the rent was so cheap. And it took me so long to realize that this scene was happening around me, and then I—you know, I liked it, but I had no idea how to, you know, approach it or how to get noticed. And I was very shy. And it was really just—I just got lucky that I had some good friends. One of them was a firefighter who lived in my building, Dennis Gordon. And he was a pretty hip guy, and he just knew like the places to go, and he would bring me along.

And then he introduced me to another firefighter who was an actor, Dean Tulipane. He was doing some theatre. And so, I ended up, you know, doing some stuff with him and his troupe. And slowly it just kind of snowballed. But I was—you know, I was still in the fire department and kind of juggling doing that, and then doing these shows, and then starting to do film.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your wife passed away last year, and the two of you were married for like 30 years.

*(Steve confirms.)*

You must have met her around that time.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah. We lived across the street from each other on East 10th Street. And she was also doing work. She was a brilliant choreographer, dancer, performer, performance artist, filmmaker. And she combined everything. And we literally met on the street. I have to say, I was a little bit of a stalker, because I lived across the street from—does it count as stalking if you're watching from your window?

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Well—

**Steve Buscemi:** A little bit. Okay. It's not like I was standing outside her building. But I literally would just like get up in the morning and see if she would be on the street, and I would notice what time she'd come out of her building. Then I would—I had a dog, and I would hurry up and get my dog and walk the dog at that moment, hoping to see her. And I have to admit, I also knew roughly what time she'd be coming home from work. *(Chuckles.)* And again, I'd be out there with my dog, Chief. And those were the beginnings of these little conversations that we would have. And she had actually seen—she had seen me in a play with John Jezurun, who's a brilliant playwright, director. He was doing a series at the time called *Chang in a Void Moon*. He would write a new show each week that we performed on Monday nights at the Pyramid Club. And then he was doing some other longer plays. One was called *Dog's Eye View* that we did at LaMama.

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And Jo saw that. Jo Andres, my wife. And she told me what she did. And so, I would check her out. I would—and you know, I mean, I fell in love with her when I first saw her. Seeing her on stage was just like oh my god! Like, and she's also this like brilliant performer. So, yeah, that was a magical time.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you ever dance in one of her shows? She was maybe best known as a choreographer of kind of like event dances, like performance art dances with projections and stuff like that.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah. I danced in a couple of her pieces. And she was a real taskmaster.

*(They laugh warmly.)*

But it was great. I loved the precision of her work. A lot of dancers, you know—at that time, it was more—yeah, I don't know. I really don't know a lot about dance, but more like freeform or contact improv or, you know, choreography that I probably wouldn't know how to do. But Jo's choreography was very precise and—you know, and she just taught me how to do it. And yeah, there were a couple of shows where I got to dance with her, and it was wonderful.

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to play a clip from your film debut, which was a movie called *Parting Glances* from 1986. And I watched some bits of this online today. And number one, you were very pretty. You were a pretty dude. (*Chuckles.*)

**Steve Buscemi:** Oh! Well, thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Like, your character in the film is like a rock singer, and you wear it well.

**Steve Buscemi:** Why thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** You're a very convincing rock and roll heartthrob. And this was one of the first—this film came out in the mid-'80s, '86. And it was one of the first independent films to deal directly with the AIDS crisis. And I wonder, before we play this clip from it, how you ended up being in the movie.

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, when Boone and I were doing the shows at Folk City, there was another troupe that—they were doing shows there, mainly improv. And one of the actresses was named Kathy Kinney. And she took a liking to us, to Boone and I. And Kathy and I became pals. And she was Bill Sherwood, who wrote and directed *Parting Glances*, and he had been looking, you know, to fill this role of this character of Nick. And she told Bill about me, and he came to Folk City to see me perform. And then he asked me to audition for the film, which I did. And he told me that if he hadn't seen me already on stage, he would not have given me the part based on my audition.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I guess I—you know, I guess I was terrible on the audition. But that's how it came about.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your character had AIDS and was dying of AIDS. You must have, at the time—living where you did and in that time and place—you must have known people who were sick.

**Steve Buscemi:** Do you know? At that time, I only knew one person who was sick. I had certainly, you know, read about it. And there was like this, you know, fear in the air about, you know, how bad is this going to get? And I was reading about people being sick and dying. But at that point, I hadn't known anybody. It wasn't until a few years later that a lot of our friends that we knew in theatre and the dance world and in the performance world were getting sick and dying—Bill Sherwood among them. You know, he only made the one film.

**Jesse Thorn:** I just had a family friend pass away from complications of HIV, and he had been HIV positive since about when this movie came out.

(*Steve "wow"s.*)

And had a rich and incredible life—you know, far outlived his own expectations, certainly. Anyone else's as well. But I remember even being a kid as—you know, I was born in 1981. So, this was really when I was like in elementary school, and it was really heavy. And like, I remember just—it would just be someone I knew at church was gone. You know, someone that—it was—you know, I think sometimes for people who are younger or maybe didn't grow up in urban areas with big gay populations or whatever, it's kind of hard to describe how scary it was then. I mean, like I, as somebody who had no idea basically what sex was—

[00:35:00]

'Cause I was eight or nine. Even for me, it was very scary. 'Cause it was my neighbor and my mom's friend and, you know, et cetera, et cetera.

**Steve Buscemi:** It truly was scary. And especially in the beginning, when there was so much that was unknown about it, and it truly was—it felt like it was a death sentence. If you had it, it meant, you know, you had like a year or two at best. And it really did—it kind of swept through the community that I was in. You know, we lost some really wonderful and talented people that—it was very traumatic. You know, it was really—that was, I think, the roughest part of like living during that time, you know, was losing so many amazing people.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's play a scene from *Parting Glances* with my guest Steve Buscemi. He plays in it a character named Nick, who is the ex of one of the leads—whose name is—whose character's name is Michael. And they're friends and have some feelings for each other. And Michael is caring for Nick, who doesn't really have anybody else to care for him. And this scene is at Michael's partner, Robert's, going away party. He's going overseas. And Steve's character runs into a younger guy at the party.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Nick (*Parting Glances*):** It's not Michael. He was a freshman at NYU. I'm hanging out in the Village.

**Speaker:** I'm a Columbia freshman.

**Nick:** Will you shut up a minute? So, I'm hanging out in the Village, and I'm a couple years older than Michael, and I see this Midwest, nerdy-type kid walking down a street. So, I chat him up a little bit. He don't know anything. I mean, the whole scene is happening four blocks away from where he's going to school, and he don't even know it. So, I show him around. You know, we got bar-hopping that night. Terry had this place over on Barrow Street. So, we go there. There's a party going on. Michael went wild. He almost flunked out his first year. We tore this town apart. And that's what you need. Find somebody your own age, get your hair messed up a little bit.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think you kind of made your film career with *Reservoir Dogs*, which came out a few years later.

(*Steve agrees.*)

And how did you get that part?

**Steve Buscemi:** I auditioned for it twice. The first time I auditioned for it, it was with Seymour Cassel. I was working with Seymour on Alexandre Rockwell's film, *In the Soup*, and they brought us in together. And then, I guess a few weeks later, I got a callback. And you know, like I said, I was not a great auditioner. So, I just—you know, I wasn't sure at all if I was going to get the part. And then I was invited to do a workshop of a few scenes in the Sundance lab. And Quentin was going to be there. But the condition was, you know, it didn't necessarily mean that I got the part. But I just wanted to go, and I just wanted to work on the scenes, and if I didn't get the part, fine. And it was at Sundance that Quentin told me that I had the part.

And that was very exciting, because I really felt like this is—I felt like the movie was special. You know, I thought it was really, you know, so uniquely written and very funny, but then also, you know, really horrifying. You know, and Quentin did that—you know, he did all of us actors a favor by putting our names up on the screen, you know, in like the opening credits. You know, like right below our faces. And so, yeah, that really opened a lot of doors.

**Jesse Thorn:** Stick around, more *Bullseye* around the corner from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Promo:**

**Music:** Sophisticated electronic harpsichord music.

**Travis McElroy:** Hi, I'm Travis McElroy.

**Teresa McElroy:** And I'm Teresa McElroy.

**Travis McElroy:** And we're the hosts of *Shmanners!*

**Teresa McElroy:** We don't believe that etiquette should be used to judge other people.

**Travis McElroy:** No. On *Shmanners*, we see etiquette as a way to navigate social situations with confidence.

**Teresa McElroy:** So, if that sounds like something you're into—

**Travis McElroy:** Join us every Friday, on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn.

[00:40:00]

My guest is Steve Buscemi. One of his breakthrough roles was in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*.

How did being in that movie change your career? What happened when you were in a very hot indie movie, and your name was printed underneath your face in the, you know, introductory sequence?

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, I mean, it was great. Because casting directors knew me now, and more directors knew me. But even before that happened, for me it was just a huge step to be working with people like Harvey Keitel, you know. Harvey actually—he was one of the producers on the film, and he paid for Quentin and Lawrence Bender, the producer, to come to New York to see New York actors. Because they were going to cast it all out in LA. So, if Harvey hadn't have done that, I never would have even been considered for the film. And so, just to be working with somebody like him and Eddie Bunker, who I knew from the movie *Straight Time*. That was, you know, Lawrence Tierney, and I was just starting to get familiar with Tim Roth's work.

And so, for me it was just very exciting to be in a movie like that and to work with that caliber of people and then to be, you know, with Quentin who's—it was his first film. And his, you know, enthusiasm for what he was doing was sort of contagious. You know, we all felt excited to be doing this. So, even if the film didn't, you know, make a splash, for me it was already successful. Because I just, you know, loved doing it so much. And it really felt like, oh, I'm sort of in a bigger league now.

**Jesse Thorn:** I feel like it really set a template for your later performances, in that you have a remarkable quality of sweetness on screen. And I don't know, maybe it's because you—I mean, you have such beautiful eyes, like this is one of your calling cards on screen. And maybe it comes from that. Maybe it's something you're doing on purpose. I don't know. But the fact that you are so convincingly sweet while also being able to be a murderous psychopath, really—

*(They laugh.)*

Like, I was thinking about what's the connection between the TV show and some of that past work. And it's that like you have such a convincing sweetness that like that is what—like, you had this series of roles where you were in some capacity murderous, generally. *(Chuckles.)* But like the audience wants to stay with you.

**Steve Buscemi:** But it's funny, I don't see it as—I mean, I'm glad you see like a sweetness in like Mr. Pink or my character in *Fargo*, because I don't see the sweetness in them.



**Jesse Thorn:** But I mean, like that's the thing that is special about the performances.

**Steve Buscemi:** Well, but what I do feel like is that these guys, that they're real people. That nobody, you know, becomes a criminal because they think it's, you know, cool. You know, there's something—there's a desperation behind it. And there's always a backstory that made me feel sympathetic towards like who this person might be. And so, I always try and, you know, kind of keep that in mind.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did you have to re-steer the ship away from psychopaths five years after *Reservoir Dogs*?

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah. You know, after a while, it gets—*(laughs)* I mean, I had played plenty before then too, but just not in films that people really knew. But yeah, it was sort of a thing with me. Whenever I would get a script, I would see what page I get beaten up on, or see what page that I'm trying to kill somebody, or when I get killed.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

And after a while, I was just like, I have to—I do have to steer this in another direction.

**Jesse Thorn:** You just start looking for dads.

**Steve Buscemi:** Yeah. Or comedies or something. You know, I mean, I was so much fun like you know, to work with Adam Sandler on his films. Even though in his first film, I did play a psychopath.

*(They laugh.)*

In *Billy Madison*. But yeah, I mean, I love doing all sorts of genres and characters and, yeah. I think mixing it up is really important.

**Jesse Thorn:** You have had so many memorable roles that I wish I had time to ask you about, but I want to focus on the crème de la crème, which is the time you were on *30 Rock*.

*(They laugh.)*

Which is like maybe my favorite TV show of all time. And on it, you were—

[00:45:00]

You were a private detective, a somewhat dopey private detective. Who—

**Steve Buscemi:** —for some reason, Alec Baldwin's character kept hiring.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Yes. Yeah, exactly. And it ended up becoming like this truly—well, I'm going to play a scene from it, and we'll talk about it. The episode was called “The Tuxedo Begins”. And Alec Baldwin's character, Jack Donaghy, has his phone stolen at knife point in a construction tunnel. And he hires your character, who is a—you know—55ish-year-old Steve Buscemi to recover the phone.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Jazzy, film noir inspired music.

**Lenny Wosniak (30 Rock):** You got mugged, huh, Mr. Donaghy? And you caught the guy who did it. Good for you.

**Jack Donaghy:** (*Groaning.*) Oh, no, Len. Tracy is helping me with this.

**Tracy Jordan:** But I can see how you went there! I have a criminal skull shape.

**Jack:** Len, Commissioner Kelly and I are friends. We have competing columns in *Irish Arguments Weekly*, America's only all-caps magazine. But Ray hasn't returned my phone call. And I know that you were once a police officer.

**Lenny:** I was part of a special taskforce of very young-looking cops who infiltrated high schools.

(*The music swells as we transition to a flashback.*)

**Lenny:** (*“Disguised” as a teen.*) How do you, fellow kids?

**Teen:** What?!

(*A whooshing sound as we return to the present.*)

**Lenny:** So, I'm glad you called me, Mr. Donaghy. I checked with my contacts on the force and got you this free pamphlet.

**Jack:** Len...

**Steve Buscemi:** But you know what's amazing about that is that—you know, that was really kind of like a throwaway, you know, like—not scene. It was like four seconds!

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. At most!

**Steve Buscemi:** And I'm amazed that—you know, that it's had the traction that it's had, like all these years.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) How do you feel about the lasting testament of your brilliant artistic career almost certainly being you in a backwards baseball hat, holding a skateboard over your shoulder saying, “How do you do fellow kids?”

**Steve Buscemi:** I'm holding two skateboards.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Cackling.*) Oh, thank you!

**Steve Buscemi:** I love it! I love it. And you know, that character—you know, I was—I did it—it was either like in the first or second season. And then I started directing a little bit on the show. And it was really just supposed to be like a one off. And I rarely campaigned for parts or—you know. But I remember talking to Robert Carlock, one of the creators of the show and a brilliant writer. And I sort of was planting in his ear like can we bring him back? And I saw like the look on his face was like, yeah, okay. Why not? And then he did in a big way.

**Jesse Thorn:** He's like weird priority, but okay!

(*They laugh.*)

Well, Steve Buscemi, I'm so grateful to you for taking the time to be on *Bullseye*. I've so admired your work for so long, and it was really nice to get to talk to you.

**Steve Buscemi:** Thank you so much. It was—it's really wonderful to talk to you. Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Steve Buscemi, everyone. If you haven't seen the show, we talked about *Miracle Workers*. He's great in it, along with Daniel Radcliffe. It's very funny, weird, silly stuff—the first two seasons, especially.

**Transition:** Jazzy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, the shutter guy's coming over, so I gotta get going.

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 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. And just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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