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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. Our next guest this week, the great Isabella Rossellini. She's being interviewed by our pal, correspondent, and Isabella Rossellini superfan: Louis Virtel. Isabella Rossellini was born into European film royalty. She's the daughter of director Roberto Rossellini and actor Ingrid Bergman. She's probably best known as an actor. She's had acclaimed parts in movies like *Blue Velvet* and *Death Becomes Her* and *Big Night*. Her appearance on *30 Rock* as Jack Donaghy's ex is the stuff of legends and memes today.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Bianca (*30 Rock*): Oh, damn it, Johnny! You know I love my big beef and cheddar!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: But I mean, that's all kind of unfair. Rossellini isn't just a terrific actor. She's a model, a performance artist, an accomplished singer, and even an academic. Five years ago, Isabella earned a master's degree in animal behavior from Hunter College in New York City. And when I say that, I don't mean an honorary degree. I mean a real, turn in papers and get them graded master's degree. Most recently, she's lended her talents to voice acting. When we talked to her in 2022, she'd just starred alongside Jenny Slate in the movie *Marcel the Shell with Shoes On*. It's a good one. Slate plays the film's title character, a tiny talking seashell with red shoes and a single googly eye. Marcel is the subject of a documentary.

Isabella Rossellini plays Marcel's nana, Connie. Connie lives in the backyard of the house in which Marcel lives. She's a little forgetful, and as you're about to hear, not quite clear on the concept of what a documentary is.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Marcel (*Marcel the Shell with Shoes On*): Oh, it's like a movie. But nobody has any lines. And nobody even knows what it is while they're making it.

Filmmaker: Mm.

Marcel: No?

Filmmaker: That's sort of a way to put it. Yeah. No, I just am making a little video portrait.

Connie: About Marcel?

Marcel & Filmmaker: Yeah.

Connie: A document—a film?

Filmmaker: Uh, yeah.

Marcel: It's like the truth, kind of. It's a movie!

Connie: And it's the truth about Marcel!

(Filmmaker chuckles.)

Marcel: I mean, I hope so! I guess he could really spin it and make me look like a total—

(Bright, warm music fades in.)

Filmmaker: So, this is your garden out here, huh?

Connie: Yes!

Filmmaker: It's beautiful.

Connie: Thank you!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Louis Virtel: Isabella Rossellini. It's a thrill to talk to you. And it's especially a thrill to talk to you in the context of this movie. Because *Marcel the Shell* is a hard concept to wrap your head around if you're not familiar with the YouTube videos.

Isabella Rossellini: *(Chuckles.)* Right. When I was offered the role, I went to see the YouTube short films about it. And I found it charming. But most of all, I really liked the story of how the film came about. Jen was at a wedding, and she felt a little bit intimidated and started to play with this funny voice. And Dean then created Marcel. And they made a short video that was put in YouTube that went viral. And so, they made more videos. And then they were offered a book deal. And now they are making a feature film. And I thought

that this was such a modern story about how artists come to bring their narrative, come to make films. So, I was interested to meet a new generation that starts in YouTube and ends up in the movie theater. And so, *Marcel* was charming.

It was an interesting process. We improvised a lot of dialogue. And so, generally as an actor, you're given lines, and you memorize them, and then you have to make them come out of your mouth in a spontaneous way. Here we are going—we are given an outline. For example, we just heard the clip where—I am a shell, and I'm old. I don't know what a documentary is. I don't know the difference between a documentary and a feature film. And they're trying to explain it to me. And so, we improvised, but we—that clip that was maybe 30 seconds long, we might have improvised for two hours about it. And then Dean selected the words and put it together and then created the animation. So, it was a completely different process than a regular film.

Louis Virtel: Yes. And it's unusual how much improvisation is going into this, you know, an animated movie. What's your favorite thing that came out of the improvisation on this movie?

Isabella Rossellini: Well, I think I like to experiment. I like to do things that are new and unusual. And for sure, that was—I've never worked as an actress like this, you know.

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Again, you're generally given a script that you have to memorize word perfect, and if you change a word, the writer is not happy. And here instead there was—the writing came after you said many, many, many things. And then it was put together by Dean. And it took him two years to go through these hours and hours of improvisation. It was unusual, but there is a spontaneity. I also think that when you improvise, there is a lot of spontaneity. You know, because you're not memorizing anything. And in a stop animation and animation and drawings, maybe the voice has to be incredibly authentic. The expression of the voice has to be incredibly authentic to bring that character to a real life. So, the voice, I think, is very important, although we remember the character of Marcel and the grandmother as a drawing. But I think the voice is what gives them the truthfulness that you believe that they are characters.

Louis Virtel: The process for making this movie took seven years, and you did the voiceover work for this years ago now. Three years ago, four years ago?

Isabella Rossellini: I know! Yes. I thought that they were kidding, you know. Because they started in YouTube, and they were very young. And so, I said, “Well, maybe, you know—maybe it was a dream, and it'll never come to be.” (*Laughs warmly.*) Because sometimes you do work with a lot of young people, and they're trying to make a film. But you know, it's so difficult to make a film that it never comes to be. Yes, it took seven years. It's incredible.

Louis Virtel: Is there anything that made it into the film that you completely forgot about? I mean, if I recorded something three years ago or four years ago, I can't say I would have a sharp memory of what the movie even was after a while.

Isabella Rossellini: No, I—the same. I forgot. I forgot what were the improvisations. I remember that we did some improvisation at my farm, I live in a farm. And they wanted to do some improvisation at the farm. And it didn't make it into the film, but at a certain point, crows started to go, “Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah!” And—because they saw a hawk, and they were chasing the hawk away. That is what was happening in reality. But that sound allowed me and Jenny to improvise. Oh, the crows! Let's hide, because the crow might eat the shell. And so, also I think Dean occasionally wanted to have something completely new that he would surprise himself. Not only the outline—now Marcel is—“the grandmother is trying to convince him to do the interview for television”. You know, that was the outline. And we talked, and then we improvised about me trying to convince Marcel to be adventurous, to try new things.

But I think also Dean sometimes needed—because seven years is a long time, so I think also Dean needed to be surprised. And so, we did an improvisation, and all of a sudden the crow allowed him to have a scene where the two of us, as shells, were vulnerable to the environment. Crows, mice, dogs. The dog made it. (*Chuckles.*)

Louis Virtel: And what you're saying is you recorded some of this in Silver Lake in Los Angeles and also at your place on the East Coast. And while that gave Dean plenty of surprises, did it add an extra layer of spontaneity for you too?

Isabella Rossellini: Yes, because—you know, if you improvised for—we improvised, not for one or two hours; we improvised for a whole day. You know, we were in Silver Lake. They had, I think, a house of a friend, and we stayed there. And we would take a break for lunch. But Dean wanted to record everything, even lunch, because maybe at lunch we would say something—a sentence. “I'm not hungry, I don't want to eat, I've eaten enough”—that he might use. So, he constantly recorded everything. I don't know how he had the patience to listen to all these words and edit. I wouldn't have had that patience.

Louis Virtel: It's also satisfying to see you do comedy again, which has been sprinkled somewhat liberally throughout your career, but it's probably not what you're primarily known for. Is it satisfying, particularly, to be funny?

Isabella Rossellini: Yes! Although I—you know, yes, it is. You know, when I do my own films, they're always comical. So, I do like it. (*Laughs.*)

Louis Virtel: Is there a particular film you've made where you felt the funniest? Or TV show appearance?

Isabella Rossellini: *30 Rock* was pretty funny.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Upbeat, brassy music.

Bianca: Are you going to marry him?

Liz: Oh, hi! What?

Bianca: Are you going to marry Jack?

Liz: (*Awkwardly.*) A-ah. I don't know! We've talked about it.

Bianca: I can tell from the way he looks at you that he's serious. He's gonna get you pregnant right away, I'm sure! (*Giggles.*)

[00:10:00]

(*Liz chuckles politely.*)

A little late-in-life baby he can parade around Nantucket. The whole thing makes me wanna vomit!

Liz: Oh, no, you know—

Bianca: (*With sudden rage and disgust.*) I can take the models! The Rockettes! The Shakira! Because ultimately, I know they are going to leave him! But you?! You can actually make him happy. (*Crying.*) And that makes me want to sit on a knife!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Louis Virtel: *30 Rock* in particular taught me something I didn't know about you, because that— And I want to say it was during the first or second season, so it's not even like the reputation of that show would have been widely known yet. And it goes at such a, you know, whip-smart speed. Was it fun to jump into that particular comic dynamic? And was it difficult?

Isabella Rossellini: Sometimes I find it difficult to play a small role, because on a set people become—especially on television series that last so long, five months, six months—they become like a family. And then you come in, and everybody knows each other. They're not shy. And you know—and I am shy. I make mistakes, I get embarrassed. And we are not friendly yet. You're not friends yet. So, I find sometimes that playing a small role, it's harder than playing a longer role just because you're shy. And also there is a mood on the set, and there is a style, and there is a rhythm. And you don't know that. And so, when you arrive, you have to really quickly adapt and try to guess how they work and adapt. But it's easier if you—it's easier to play a part that is a little bit more substantial than a very—you know, than a part that you go for a day or two on a set.

Jesse Thorn: So much more still to get into with Isabella Rossellini. When we come back from a quick break, she and Louis will talk about why she is attracted to working in experimental film. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Isabella Rossellini. She is, of course, a beloved actor and performer. You've seen her in dramas like *Big Night* and *Blue Velvet*, in comedies like *Death Becomes Her* and *Marcel the Shell with Shoes On*. You can see her in the brand-new Italian thriller, *La Chimera*. It's out now. Interviewing her is our friend and correspondent, Louis Virtel. Let's get back into their conversation.

Louis Virtel: Clearly, most of the stuff you've done is experimental in some way. Which leads me to believe that you must be largely bored with the things you are offered. That there's not, you know, that experimental edge to everything you get.

Isabella Rossellini: Well, no, I'm not bored. But I think there are two main reasons that made me be in experimental film. First of all, I come from experimental film. My father was considered an experimental filmmaker. His name is Roberto Rossellini, and he worked right after the war, really changing film—making something that looked like a documentary, but it wasn't a documentary. It was reenacted things that he had seen in his life with actor and non-actor. And his style, his new style of film that he made, was called near realism. My father was extremely experimental.

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And so, I'm not intimidated to jump in and do something experimental. And then the fact that I was a foreigner, and I had an accent, I always felt a little at the margin. I always thought, well, I can't be on a regular big Hollywood film, because most of the time there are not that many foreign actors. They are Anglo Saxon speaking, but you don't hear many foreigners who have an accent. And so, I thought—when something was offered that was a little odd, I thought, well, let me do it! Because I'm not going to get any of the big films. And in fact, I did sometimes big films, to my total big surprise. (*Laughs.*) But I did—I continued to do both.

Louis Virtel: Your mother, for people who don't know and need to be told immediately, was Ingrid Bergman, star of *Casablanca*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Notorious*, among other unbelievable classics. How likely are you, just at any given time, to watch the movies of either of your parents?

Isabella Rossellini: Well, nowadays it's much simpler. You know, they're all in the Criterion Collection, which I absolutely adore. And I'm hooked to it. I watch the Criterion Collection every day. And it's moving to me that I can see my parents' films whenever I want. Or you know, my mom worked with Hitchcock, with Fleming, with Bergman. And if I want to see more of that director, I could easily access today. When I was a little girl, I had to wait for a retrospective in a movie theater to do it, and they don't do retrospectives every year. So, sometimes you wait 10 years to finally see, you know, the film that my father did during the war, because I was born after the war. And they were very famous films, and people talked about it, but I had to wait until they were presented in an art movie theater or in a museum for me to see it.

I think I was 12 years old when I saw *Casablanca*, my mom's film. Because it didn't—you know, it came out when I was not born. And then finally, when I was 12 years old in Italy, they gave a retrospective of my mom. So, every night—it was a retrospective every Wednesday night. I remember they showed ten films of my mom, and every Wednesday for ten Wednesdays, I saw my mom's Hollywood films. So, I'm very grateful that today you can access all these whenever you want.

Louis Virtel: When I think of Ingrid Bergman's filmography, she doesn't have too many, you know, I guess broad comedies that stand out. But one movie I love in particular that she—at first, the role seems like it's gonna be smaller or less thankful than the other comic roles, but then it really blossoms, is *Cactus Flower*. And I was wondering if you had any particular good memories of watching that movie, 'cause her personality in that just, I think, flourishes. She's so—it's such a joy to watch.

Isabella Rossellini: She was so happy to play a comedy, because they often made her play the romantic lead. You know, she was very beautiful, but she was considered a beauty—an accessible beauty. The girl next door. So, she always played a little bit the girl next door, the good girl. And she was happy when she had to play a nasty character, like in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. And then as she grew older—and Mama was very simpatico; she was very funny. She could finally also do comedy, as she did in *Cactus Flower*. She was very funny in *Cactus Flower*. I'm sorry that she didn't do more comedy, and I think she was sorry too. She would have wished—she wished to have done more.

Louis Virtel: You really remind me of your mom, specifically in interviews. When I watch interviews with her, she has the same kind of witty, fun flair.

(Isabella laughs.)

And yet, on the silver screen, I really can't think of many roles you've done that either she would have taken or would have even been in the realm of for someone like Ingrid Bergman. Do you ever—can you think of any roles you've taken that remind you of your mother?

Isabella Rossellini: No, but I also haven't done films in contrast to my mother. You know, I think it was a new generation of filmmakers. Like, my mom liked directors that have a very strong hand, that are very author-like. And so, once you work with these directors—the films, they really have their signature, whether it's Hitchcock, or David Lynch, or Martin Scorsese, or Bergman. They become very strong signature of the directors. So, partially, if I had done a Hitchcock film, maybe you would have said, “Ah!” You know, there is a similarity. But it's the director—and we favor these kind of films. I think we, both Mama and I, regard films as an art. And so, originality and new points of view becomes fascinating, rather than something that you know is going to be commercially successful, because it has the good guy, the bad guy, the little romantic.

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You know. Once you do something which has all the ingredients to make it successful, it's less interesting to us. And it's also probably a European tradition.

Louis Virtel: I can't stop thinking about how long ago it was that you recorded this stuff for *Marcel the Shell*. And I was wondering just in general, has there been, in particular, a movie you've worked on where you worked on it, and then it took however long it took for it to come out, and you were surprised by the final product? Like, in a way, you were—

Isabella Rossellini: Probably *Marcel the Shell* has the prize for that.

(*Louis laughs.*)

At a certain point, I thought it wasn't going to come out. Sure.

Louis Virtel: Because you've made so many movies where there's a specific, theatrical feel. And I feel like on the set, you wouldn't have been able to predict what that was. Or it must have been described to you, but you couldn't, you know, tangibly see it. You know. For instance, I don't think *Blue Velvet* could have been described to me in the abstract while making it.

Isabella Rossellini: Well, this is the problem that one has, you know. So, if you work every day, you more or less start to understand the style. But the script is never the final product. A script—for example, *Blue Velvet*—yes, the story was there. But the power of the images of David Lynch, who's also a painter, is so powerful. And the film is all this sequence of imagery. It's also the narration, but narration is not so important for David. In fact, sometimes you can't really follow the story, and yet you are afraid, and yet you are—you feel romantic. So, he's interested in the mood and the mystery of what causes that mood. So, if you read the script and try to seek narration and try to seek—you're lost. But if you work with David, then you understand something that sometimes cannot be expressed in words: that he's seeking for mood, atmosphere, more than narrative.

But it takes a few days to be with the director or other actors to understand their style, their genre, and then to adapt. But this is also the great pleasure of being an actor is that you really take trip into people's mind. And if their minds are great, like Tina Fey or David Lynch or Bob Wilson, it's a fantastic journey. But as you're taking it, you're also hesitant, and you're a bit shy, and you have to— But I am open to experimentation, and I think that's why I always end up with this experimental film, whether it's *Marcel the Shell* or Guy Maddin, or *The Saddest Music in the World*. Or even David Lynch, who when did—when he did *Blue Velvet*, it was considered very avantgarde. It just wasn't a classic, as it is today.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Discordant, unsettling music.

Dorothy (*Blue Velvet*): Who sent you here?

Jeffrey: Nobody.

Dorothy: I've seen you before.

Jeffrey: I sprayed your apartment. I took your key. I didn't mean to do anything except see you.

Dorothy: What did you see, tonight? Tell me!

Jeffrey: I saw you come in and I saw you talk on the phone.

Dorothy: AND THEN?!

Jeffrey: You got undressed.

Dorothy: Do you sneak in girls' apartments to see them get undressed?

Jeffrey: I haven't before this.

Dorothy: Get undressed. I want to see you.

Jeffrey: Look, I'm sorry. Just let me leave.

Dorothy: (*Furiously.*) NO WAY! I wanna see you! Get undressed!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Louis Virtel: The vigor of this movie, how did he create the atmosphere that would produce a movie like *Blue Velvet*?

Isabella Rossellini: Well, he produced it by creating enormous friendship and trust. Because we were talking about rape, ritualized rape, crime. A woman that I played, a battered woman. But he did an incredible, extreme situation. And then when I meet the character played by Kyle MacLachlan, Jeffrey Beaumont, I—and he's younger than I, I become the character played by Dennis Hopper. I become the executor of the crime on Kyle. Because I exercise power, because I'm powerless in front of Dennis Hopper. But with the opportunity to have a younger boy, I can exercise that muscle.

So, she's crazy. I mean, she's a very convoluted psychological character. And if there wasn't a total trust and a feel of friendship and protection, it would have been very hard to play the part. We're still very good friends, you know, with Laura, Kai, David, and I. We call each other family.

Louis Virtel: No, Laura is also a stone pro in that movie, and it's one of the first starring roles she really had.

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I hope people revisit it also in the future, just specifically for Laura Dern in addition to all the other great performances. But I want to say about *Blue Velvet*, it's one of the few movies I've

seen where I actually find some of it too scary. Like, Dennis Hopper is too frightening for me to rewatch.

(Isabella laughs.)

And obviously you're an intimidating presence yourself in certain ways, but have you ever been just intimidated by the kind of power that an actor brings on set?

Isabella Rossellini: There are films that I can't watch because I'm too scared. But it's not *Blue Velvet*, maybe because I've done it. And when I watch it—when I watched *Blue Velvet*, I watched it recently, because it was an anniversary. I don't know if it was 30 years or 40 years. And it was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, so I went to see it and present it. And I sat down and looked at the film; I hadn't seen it in 20 years. And I thought, wow, it still feels modern. It still feels avantgarde. And that surprised me. But it also fills you—I don't really watch many of the films that I've done, because you always get a little nostalgic. You know, you see that scene and you say, “Ah, I remember that day. We did this, and then we all went to dinner, or this happened.” And so, it brings up a lot of memories, and nice memories! But still, it's always a little bit sad. I like to look forward instead of backwards.

Louis Virtel: It's interesting that you say you're specifically forward-looking—not anti-nostalgia, but not seeking out nostalgia. And yet, you also say you watch the Criterion Collection every day.

Isabella Rossellini: Oh, but I don't watch my films. I watch others.

(They chuckle.)

I watch—I love to see— So, at the Criterion Collection, what I love is that it really treats films like an art. I can't say that about Netflix and Amazon. I'm grateful that on all these other platforms you can see a lot of films, but they are not curated. It's a bin with everything, and unless you know what you're looking for and how to put an order, they certainly don't give you any indication. And Amazon has the stupidest thing in the world. It's something called Trivia, that you press a little button, and it tells you the mistake in continuity. That enrages me that you can look at a film of John Ford or Hitchcock, and the only thing that came—and they paid somebody to look at this stupidity?! And you miss the big picture. These are the new Michelangelos, these are the new Raphaels, these are the new Picassos. Cinema has to be recognized as an art, and we're just saying, “Oh, look, there's this little thing that is a mistake.”

Who cares? You'd never find that in Criterion. Criterion treats cinema with enormous respect. And also, it teaches you to watch films. Because you watch—you select a director, and you find interviews with the director, with critics, with actors, and it's very well curated. So, it gives you an enormous satisfaction. And I've seen more films. Because I might watch, I don't know, a Fellini film, *Amarcord*. But then because they give me so much information, I might see also another film of Fellini that might have not been very successful, but they give me the key to understand what was the search that Fellini was making. And maybe it is not terribly successful in this case, but it is still interesting. So, I'm a huge fan of Criterion Collection, and

I hope that Amazon and Netflix will learn from them to do the similar curation of their collections.

Louis Virtel: Have there been any other satisfying deep dives of directors you've enjoyed recently?

Isabella Rossellini: Oh, I've done it—I started with covid, so now—and I continue it. So, now it's a couple of years that I—and I have a film group, and I watch more film than the film group. At the beginning, we watched, you know, four films a week. And then we would do Zoom and comment. And now everybody's back to work, so we do one film a week. And sometimes we take a break because everybody's got too busy. Now we have a break in July, because everybody's traveling for the holidays or work, so we resume in August. But I generally watch more films, because I wake up very early in the morning and watch Criterion Channel. So, and then—I mean, other people suggest things, but I think I'm the one that suggests most. And I'm the daughter of Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini, so I know a little bit more than the others about cinema.

Louis Virtel: It should be noted that you live on a farm with some delightful animals that I've seen on your Instagram time and again. What does living on a farm provide an actor? Do you get something specific, spiritually or otherwise, from living where you live?

Isabella Rossellini: No, I also have—I'm also a scientist. I'm an ethologist. I've studied animal behavior and conservation. So, I want to be with animals. And in fact, when I write as an author or a director, all my work—whether it's *Green Porno*, or now I have a new monologue that is coming out, called *Darwin's Smile*.

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It's always about animals. So, as an actress, directors can use me for whatever they see in me that corresponds to their character. But when I write and I direct my own things, it's always about animals. So, living in a farm for me is my lab, where I'm close to them, and I can see it. So, I enjoy running a farm.

Louis Virtel: What was the beginning of this particular interest? Like, what was the moment you—I don't know, a light bulb went off, and you thought, “I need to get into this in a serious academic way?”

Isabella Rossellini: Well, I always liked animals since I was a little girl. And then my father, when I was 14 years old, gave me a book that is called *King Solomon's Ring* by Konrad Lorenz. Konrad Lorenz was the founder of this new science of animal behavior, ethology. And he won a Nobel Prize for it. And father read the book, and he knew that I loved animals, and he gave it to me. And yes, that was the little lamp that went on. And I said, “I want to study this.” But when I was in my 20s and the right moment to go to college, it wasn't really—in Italy, it wasn't yet formalized. It was zoology; there was biology. But I was interested in behavior. I was intimidated to do a lot of chemistry and all that. And then, anyway, I became a model, and I loved that too, and became an actress.

But then, as I grew older—and so, there was less work as a model and as an actress, and ethology now is presented in schools—I went back. I had time. And my children were grown up. They were moved out of the house. So, I went back. So, I am a scientist recently. I graduated. I got my master's degree three/four years ago.

Louis Virtel: When I think of like the kindred spirits in my own life, they happen to be people who have literally like the same job. Like, they're also entertainment-obsessed comedy writers. I'm wondering, who are the people you have found to be kindred spirits? Because absolutely nobody has had the career track you've had, and the leaps between universes you've had, and the—you know, the lineage you've had. So, I was wondering, who are the people, I guess specifically in show business, you've found yourself really relating to?

Isabella Rossellini: Well, I'm very friendly with David Lynch and Laura Dern. Very. We love each other. My best friend is a teacher at Columbia University on Human Rights and International Laws. I have a friend who is—Camilla, who is a film editor. Another very good friend of mine is a nurse who is now, you know, in his 60s, and he's taking a PhD in alternative medicine, meditation, and all that. That also is fascinating and very experimental. So, these are my friends.

Louis Virtel: I think people would be surprised to learn that your first movie was in fact with your mother, and in fact you were co-starring with Liza Minnelli, who's was being directed by her father, Vincent Minnelli.

(Isabella confirms with a chuckle.)

What was that experience like as a—you know, as a first big screen acting performance?

Isabella Rossellini: It was pretty difficult, you know. It was very—so, I didn't think I was gonna be an actress, but mama often made films away. And so, we didn't see her for two or three months. And finally, she made a film in Rome, Italy, where we lived. And she was delighted to play an Italian character, the Contessa Casati. And she spoke Italian beautifully, my mom, because we were Italian, my dad is Italian. And we had mama home for three months. And so, my sister—I have a twin sister, Ingrid—went every day on the set. And Mama played a character of a kind of a crazy lady that would put on a lot of makeup and never take it off. So, her eyes are all, you know, full of mascara.

So, my sister helped her with that makeup. Because you didn't need a good makeup artist, you needed a bad makeup artist. And my sister, Ingrid, could be with my mom all day long, and she was very happy. And Mama, she dies in the film. And people tell me and my mom that we resemble each other. And Mama thought he would be interested that while she died, I played a nun that goes to her bed—that she sees her face herself young. And so, she asked me to play the role, and Vincent Minnelli liked the idea, and Liza accepted it. But I was so intimidated to play with everybody, and I didn't speak English very well. And the film was in English. I had very few lines, but I still remember it as very nightmarish. And of course, the producer had photographers, because it was a little bit of a story that could appear in gossipy newspapers. Oh, Isabella Rossellini, the daughter who resembles her mom, is playing—

So, I remember the day being very paralyzingly intimidating. *(Laughs.)*

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But I'm glad I've done it.

Louis Virtel: What was it like to witness Liza Minnelli and her father on that set? Were there any parallels between your relationship with your father? Was it like looking into a totally different universe?

Isabella Rossellini: It was looking into a different universe. Vincent Minnelli is completely different than my father. Also, he was quite old. I could see the love of Liza to her dad and the devotion to her dad, and I could understand that. Because I am also a devoted daughter to my father. So, in that I saw the tenderness. I think the father was old and had not worked for many years, and Liza wanted to make a film with her dad. And she had just gotten the Oscar for this extraordinary film, *Cabaret*. I did a Bob Fosse retrospective with her in my early morning. And so, in that moment, she had the power to make her dream come true, which was to work with her dad. Because she had worked with her mom a long time, many times.

Jesse Thorn: We have to go to a quick break, but stick around. We've got even more to get into with Isabella Rossellini. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Maddy: Find us at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts. Bye!

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Isabella Rossellini. She's the star of classics like *Blue Velvet* and *Death Becomes Her* and the movie *Marcel the Shell with Shoes On*. She's being interviewed by writer Louis Virtel.

Louis Virtel: Another strange moment in your filmography that I've always been curious about is *White Nights*. You don't get too many movies with someone like Mikhail Baryshnikov and Geraldine Page and Gregory Hines! Yeah.

Isabella Rossellini: And Helen Mirren.

Louis Virtel: Right, Helen Mirren, right at sort of the onset of her becoming the Grand Dame we know. What was that experience like?

Isabella Rossellini: That was really great. It was one of the first films that I've done. I've actually done it before *Blue Velvet*. I've been a model and a very successful model, but I wasn't thinking to become an actress because my mom was Ingrid Bergman. And I thought, you know, I'll always be compared to her. I'll never be good enough. And maybe it's better if I just stay a model. And then I was interested in animals with this dream to eventually make films about animals, and I was following that path. But my mom herself said, you know, you should try to make films. She was dead by the time I did *White Nights*. But she always told me, you know—because I'd been offered film, and I always turned them down. And she said, “Just the adventure of it. You should just do one for the adventure of it.”

And then *White Nights* came. Taylor Hackford, a fantastic director, offered me the part, and he was with Misha Baryshnikov, and I played Gregory Hines's wife. I would play a Russian, that Gregory Hines marries, a Russian woman. He comes to live in Russia. And I met them. I liked them. I'm a very good friend of Baryshnikov, and I was a very good friend of Gregory Hines, who died really too young. And so, I dared doing the film just to see. I remember working with a fantastic photographer called Richard Avedon, and he said the same thing as my mom. He said, “You know, they're offering you a film, and you're turning it down just because you're afraid of being compared to your mother. But that's nothing, and it's a new director, it's another actor, it's a new era. And you prevent yourself from having an extraordinary adventure and knowing all these incredibly talented people.”

And I thought he was right. And so, I did the film. And then after *White Nights* came *Blue Velvet*. And *Blue Velvet* established my reputation as an actor, although it was very controversial. But it established my reputation as an actor more than *White Nights*.

Louis Virtel: Do you take anything still from your years as a model? What was the lasting impact for you personally on, you know, being such a successful model for Lancôme?

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And did it add anything to your acting arsenal?

Isabella Rossellini: Oh my god, everything! A lot! I mean, it's very similar. You know, Avedon said, you know, modeling is a little bit like being a silent movie star. I'm not photographing your nose, your eyes, your perfect mouth. I'm photographing emotion. There is no beauty without emotion. So, it was acting. I was acting in front of the camera. Bruce Weber, Peter Lindbergh, Steven Meisel, Fabrizio Ferri, Avedon, Penn. But you have no words, because there is not a dialogue when you do still photos. And that also made me think, well, but if I am a successful model, maybe I can evolve and become an actress. And I did. And then when I become an actress and you work with many directors, that helps you say, "Oh, I always wanted to make films about animals." That experience helped you learn and evolve to become a writer and director.

So, everything leads to other things.

Louis Virtel: Speaking once more about your mom's filmography. A movie I watched with a bunch of my friends that you would think would just play like an austere drama where we all sat in silence, but in fact, we were screaming at the TV, loving it so much, being in the movie is *Autumn Sonata*. And the intensity of that drama but also the like the power of both their personalities—we're talking about Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullman. I was wondering if that movie had any particular—if you had any particular love for that movie? Since I personally now find it to be a scream.

Isabella Rossellini: (*Laughs.*) It's funny that you say that. You know, it's interesting. It was done as a serious movie. I mean, Ingmar Bergman doesn't do comedy. But it was shown recently at the Berlin Film Festival, and Liv Ullmann was there to present it. And I was the president of the festival. So, I went, you know, as an homage, of course. It was my mom; it was Liv Ullmann. And I talked to—I presented the film with great reverence, and then Liv Ullmann came and talked. And she said—she made me laugh so much. She said, "Well, Ingmar Bergman never really reconciled himself with the fact that women have career. He made a film about a woman who had a big career, and therefore she neglected her daughters, and the film is all about that."

And she told a very funny story. There is a big scene in the film where Liv Ullmann, who plays my mom's daughter, has a long monologue. And she lays it out to the mother, how much you neglected me, look what you've done to your family in the name of your career and all this. And so, the camera, they first did the close up of Liv Ullmann. She had all these words to remember. And so, they started with that. And then when they reversed the camera, mother had to react, Bergman said, "Now, Liv is going to do the same thing. How would you react?"

And my mama said, "I would slap her." What?! You can't slap her! Mama said, "I would slap her! It's a boring daughter. I do my career." So, she took the defense of women that had the

career, and she started fighting with Bergman. And Liv Ullmann said, Bergman was not used to being contradicted, because he was revered as a great genius. And they storm out, the two of them. You could hear them scream in the hallway, and everybody on the set was looking at each other. And then mother came back and did the scene, and Liv Ullmann said, "I couldn't believe this teaching, not only of acting, but this teaching of humanity." Because my mom played a character with just a rage that she wanted to slap the daughter who was accusing the mother, "You've done this, look at me, poor me, blah, blah, blah." And the rage that women have to having to swallow always the accusation of, you know, that the first role you have is your family, is bringing up the children. And if you do anything that isn't just that, you're punished for it. And you see the rage in my mother's eyes. And that was a big lesson for Liv.

Louis Virtel: And I guess my final question is, do you have a dream personal project you'd like to do in the future, maybe concerning animals? Because I really think there should just be some sort of Instagram live feature where we watch Isabella Rossellini just monologuing about things we don't know about animals.

Isabella Rossellini: *(Laughs.)* Yeah, I mean, this farm for me is a lab. It's a lab of ideas. It's not only my lab of ideas but other people's lab of ideas. I'm friends with an artist, Lia Chavez, who has medicinal plants.

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And she's creating teas, and she's creating oils. And quite interesting, her research. And Patty Gentry, who is renting three acres out of my 30, has been a chef for 25 years, and now she's growing these absolutely incredible vegetables for great chefs, but also for the community that can come and buy her extraordinary tomatoes and peas. I would say she's the Picasso of vegetables. I am very interested now on my chickens, but also on fiber and wool and the fact that there is a lot of breeds of animals, sheep—you know, there is the merino sheep. And that's almost like a monoculture. It's a very soft wool, and it's great, and that's the only sheep there is around. But there is a lot of other breeds that are forgotten, and I have some breeds here that are endangered breeds—the species is not endangered; it's the breeds. As if we decide to just have labrador, and we will neglect all the other dogs, so you lose the pugs, you lose the dachshund, you lose the Chow Chows, you lose the hunting dogs, you lose the herding dog, and you just have labradors. You lose a lot of talent. You lose a lot of things.

So, my collection of animals at the farm is becoming more and more about these endangered breeds of farm animals and studying their benefit. And I'm creating association with Parsons School of Design and also their School of Fashion so they can come—the students can come and look at the different wools and decide to maybe work with small farm. You know, what we've done with farm to table might be done with fashion. You know, farm to fashion. So, that's my next experiment.

Louis Virtel: That seems like a perfect experiment. I can't imagine anybody else fronting that but you.

(Isabella laughs.)

So, I'm thrilled when it finally comes to fruition. Thank you again for this chat, my god. What a pleasure to talk about your career, your family, everything you do, everything you are.

Isabella Rossellini: Thank you so much. It was fun to talk to you.

Louis Virtel: What a pleasure.

Jesse Thorn: Isabella Rossellini, everyone. You heard her discuss *Marcel the Shell with Shoes On*. You should watch that movie. It's great. It's really something else. You can also see her in the Italian thriller *La Chimera*. That's out now. Thanks so much to Louis for interviewing her. Louis Virtel, also the cohost of the very funny podcast *Keep It*, which you can download forever, and a writer for *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, where he occasionally performs. One of the funniest guys there is. you should go check out Louis's other work.

Transition: Bright, easy keyboard.

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, I just had a visit from the shutter guy. It turns out it's kind of hard to get shutters that operate. Everybody's shutters are just these shutters that you like staple to the side of your house. It's very weird.

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 DJW, Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". Written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and Memphis Industries, their label, for providing it.

Bullseye is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). I am on Instagram, [@JesseThornVeryFamous](#). We also share our shows on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. So, go smash that subscribe button on YouTube. Share an interview there with someone that you think might enjoy it.

I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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