

[00:00:00]

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

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://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. For a certain kind of comedy nerd—and yes, it is the type of comedy nerd that I am—it doesn't get much better these days than Cole Escola. They're a New York based actor, writer, and comedian. They've written for *Hacks*, *Ziwe*, and *The Other Two*. As a performer, maybe you've seen them on *Difficult People*, the great comedy from Julie Klausner and Billy Eichner, or on *Search Party*, where they played Chip, the obsessive stalker turned kidnapper.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Dory:** (*Horried.*) Hey, is my head shaved?!

**Chip:** (*Entirely too calm.*) Oh. Yes. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I needed your hair to make my Dory doll's hair more authentic. I was cutting it, and then it wasn't even. I got carried away, and I just messed up. But you look surprisingly great! I think we should keep this look for you.

(*Dory begins to sob.*)

(*Sympathetically.*) Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh. I know. You have been through so much.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** When they perform, Cole brings a very specific energy. They alternate wildly between insecurity and confidence, delivering one laugh out loud one-liner after another. It's unhinged in the best way possible. Imagine if Dave Foley and Amy Sedaris violently merged into one extremely funny comedic brain, and that's kind of what you get with Cole Escola. In fact, they have worked with Amy Sedaris a whole bunch. Escola played Chassie Tucker on *At Home with Amy Sedaris*. Chassie was Amy's friend, neighbor, and employee.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Chassie:** (*Sing-song.*) Happy birthday, Amy.

**Amy:** Chassie, that's so thoughtful!

**Chassie:** Well, that's what good friends do. (*Chuckles humorlessly.*)

**Amy:** Oh, there's no I in my name.

**Chassie:** (*Snorts.*) You know what? You are so wrapped up in your own little world that you are completely blind to the fact that everyone here caters to you!

**Amy:** (*Furiously.*) Well, if you wanted to know how to spell my name, you could have looked at any of the checks that you get from this show!

**Chassie:** Ugh.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** Escola's latest work, though, is not on the small screen. It's also not on the big screen. It's called *Oh, Mary!*. It's a play written by Escola, a brilliant and hilarious play. It is currently running at the Lucille Lortel Theater in New York City's West Village. And this summer, it's gonna hit Broadway. Escola stars as the play's title character, Mary Todd Lincoln. Not really the Mary Todd Lincoln who actually existed, the one you'd learn about if you read a book about Mary Todd Lincoln. Cole Escola's Mary Todd Lincoln lives in the White House and is married to Abraham Lincoln, and that is pretty much all of the historical facts contained in the entire play. (*Laughs.*)

This is a venal Mary Todd Lincoln, a deeply alcoholic Mary Todd Lincoln, a very, very, very, very dumb Mary Todd Lincoln. A Mary Todd Lincoln who dreams not of an end to the Civil War or to see her deceased children again, but rather to perform cabaret, as she did before she met Honest Abe.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Abraham Lincoln:** (*Shouting furiously.*) Not this again! You wanted out when you met me, remember?!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** Well, now I've met you enough, and I want back in.

**Abraham Lincoln:** No, I forbid it! You are not going back to that!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** It has a name.

**Abraham Lincoln:** It doesn't deserve one.

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** Say it!

**Abraham Lincoln:** No!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** The thing I love more than anything on earth!

**Abraham Lincoln:** (*Shouting over her.*) Don't you dare say it!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** Is cabareeeet!

(*Laughter from the audience.*)

**Abraham Lincoln:** Ah! That's it! Get out!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** Please, please, let me go back to it, Abe!

**Abraham Lincoln:** No! It's inappropriate! We're at war!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** With who?!

(*Laughter.*)

**Abraham Lincoln:** The South!

**Mary Todd Lincoln:** Of what?

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) Cole, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy and excited to have you on the show.

**Cole Escola:** Oh, thank you for having me.

**Jesse Thorn:** This is an obvious question, and I'm sorry to ask you such an obvious question, but why Mary Todd Lincoln?

**Cole Escola:** Oh, I was just dreading that question. (*Laughs.*) No, I was trying to actually think if I have a real answer. I don't know. That's like asking, "How do you have an idea?" I don't know why. I just had the idea, and I thought it was funny. I just wish I had a better answer for that question. Like, I wish I could say like, "Well, you know, it was 2020, and we were all so isolated. I just started doing research." But the truth is, no. I just thought of it and—(*chuckles*).

[00:05:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** I feel like what I know about Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd Lincoln—which is I have not read *Cabinet of Rivals* or whatever it's called. You know what I mean? Like I don't—only from vague inferences from being a public radio listener and high school, you know, is like: Abraham Lincoln, weird and shared a bed with his best friend, but also maybe wasn't gay. But maybe was. And Mary Todd Lincoln, troubled.

**Cole Escola:** Troubled. Yeah. And loved shopping. And they both ignored their children. But then she, I guess, was very—you know... heartbroken over the loss of her children. I mean, not surprisingly. But no, I wanted everyone to have the—I wrote the show from the same third grade knowledge that I feel the audience had. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I think one of the things that it has in common with a lot of your imaginations of middle-aged women is that (*chuckles*) it combines kind of a plain specificity with a kind of fantastical quality.

(*Cole agrees.*)

Like, it exists in a kind of odd, imaginary, miracle world, rather than as a mere kind of extrapolation of what you know about her historically. You know what I mean?

**Cole Escola:** Yeah, no. It's more me than it is Mary Todd Lincoln, the character. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** What about it is you?

**Cole Escola:** You know, I'm sort of playing out my deepest insecurities and fears that everyone thinks I'm annoying. My secret love and desire to be a cabaret star, mostly just that I'm repulsive and annoying to people, and they're talking about that behind my back.

**Jesse Thorn:** Have you ever done cabaret?

**Cole Escola:** Yeah! Yeah, and it was bad. It's boring to watch someone sing that isn't, um, great at it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you have cabaret heroes? Like, you've performed as Bernadette Peters for years.

**Cole Escola:** She's more of a concert queen than a cabaret star. I mean, you can't beat Marilyn Mae, Elaine Stritch. Dorothy Loudon has this album from the '50s of her at the Blue Angel, like her old cabaret act. Lots of just like soundboard recordings from bootlegs of, you know, these old cabaret divas.

**Jesse Thorn:** Are you like tape trading cabaret shows like they were The Grateful Dead?

**Cole Escola:** Well, now the internet has kind of ruined that, you know. Like, now you just find them. But there was like a time when I first came to New York, it was like, "Oh, you have to go to Ben's if you want to watch Patti LuPone at Les Mouches." That was fun. It was

like treasure hunting, you know. But now, you know, I say the internet's ruined it. It's made it better, easier to find those things.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's hear a little bit of my guest, Cole Escola, as Bernadette Peters. And this is Bernadette Peters at the accountant, doing her taxes.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Quirky harpsichord.

**Accountant:** And have you made any charitable donations this year?

**Bernadette Peters:** Yes, I gave all my earnings to Elaine Paige. P-A-I-G-E.

**Accountant:** That's a charity?

**Bernadette Peters:** Uuuh, well, yeah, you could say that!

**Accountant:** Do you have any paper that they would have sent you?

**Bernadette Peters:** Yes! I was sent this paper.

**Accountant:** This is insurance for an iPod. Social security number, please.

**Bernadette Peters:** Uh, three.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) What I really enjoy about this is a very specific sort of loopiness. Which is... I mean, like there's a line reading in there where he says, "Is that a charity?" And Bernadette Peters says, "You could say that." And I feel like, "Well, you could say that" is like one level of loopiness. (*Chuckling.*) And "you could say that" is like a whole other level of loopiness. (*Laughs.*) There's like—there's a few of those for Mary Todd Lincoln too, like these like—these things where it's—

[00:10:00]

It's a pretty regular joke, but you give it the weird, wrong line reading that turns it into an insane person. (*Laughs.*)

**Cole Escola:** Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you! I mean, with Bernadette Peters and Mary Todd Lincoln, both are sort of—there's just like—well, I guess Mary Todd Lincoln was a big personality. But in terms of like what we know about her as a culture, there's a lot of stuff that

can be filled in. And so—and with Bernadette Peters, it's the same. There's a lot we don't know about her. So, it's fun to make up stuff that is so obviously completely wrong.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you become interested in specifically the world of like a 50-year-old woman? Like, just the far side of middle age?

**Cole Escola:** I was sort of raised by my grandma. And I think it's, you know, an obsession with her, an obsession for all, you know, like every—this is like every gay person's origin story of like just finding the older women who will protect you during recess. And then, you know. And then they become your protector, and also you swear allegiance to them.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) I saw a photoshoot of you in your apartment, and I'll say that there were a lot of porcelain figurines.

**Cole Escola:** Well, let's, uh, be careful there. What is a lot? More than five?

**Jesse Thorn:** I would say more than two counts as a lot. (*Laughs.*) In 2024.

**Cole Escola:** Okay, then yeah. I have a lot. What of it? Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that is a commitment to an older lady lifestyle that goes beyond, you know, comic portrayals. You know what I mean? It is like a comfort in—

**Cole Escola:** Oh yeah, yeah! No, I mean, it's—yeah, it's a comfort. It's just what I like. It's just my taste. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Have you ever thought about what your life would—

**Cole Escola:** (*Hurriedly interrupting.*) Every day. Oh, sorry, go ahead.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) What your life would be like in middle age? Because you haven't quite hit it, but you're headed that direction.

**Cole Escola:** I'm a stone's throw away. Um... I don't know. Maybe I'll feel more like myself, finally. We'll never know. (*Laughs.*) 'Cause I'll never get there! I'll just stay punkish and puckish forever.

**Jesse Thorn:** I want to play a clip of you in this faux television commercial that you made for the internet. And it's you kind of in a kitchen dressed in the—you know, in the classic television commercial mom manner with a manageable but attractive haircut and—I mean, wig—and a tasteful outfit. Let's take a listen.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Playful synth.

**Ellen:** For instance, did you know that one glass of the leading brand of orange juice contains twice the amount of sugar your kids should be getting in a day? When I found that out, I—um, I (*censor beep*)ing lost it.

(*The music turns ominous.*)

I mean, I've been giving my kids leading brand orange juice their whole lives. I thought, my god, if I'm capable of that, what else am I capable of? So, I panicked. I had to get out. I took the plates off my Honda, and I just started driving, and... the sun was setting, and I would pass an exit, and I would think, Ellen, turn around! (*Beat.*) But I couldn't turn around, I... I ended up in Arizona. I put myself up at a motel behind a P.F. Chang's in Scottsdale. (*Laughs.*)

(*Ticking clock.*)

There was this gal in the room next to me. Her name was Puka, like the shell. Of course, I knew that wasn't her real name. But who was I to judge? Wasn't I hiding something too?

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) It's a really dark tale she tells.

[00:15:00]

Was there something that you were watching or something that you were thinking about when you decided to find that incredibly dark place?

**Cole Escola:** I'm just a dark person. (*Laughs.*) I just have a lot of darkness at my reach. But I've always loved and been obsessed with moms on television and wives, you know, in sitcoms and on commercials and the way femininity is marketed. You know, like the difference between—in a commercial geared towards moms, it's like, “Ooh, careful, don't slip up! Don't worry, we've got you covered.” But if it's—you know, if it's a dad in the commercial, it's like, “Hey, he's trying. Let's help him out.” Yeah, but especially things like chocolate, the way chocolate is marketed to women—as if like (*laughs*) you shouldn't, but you could. Like, “Reward yourself with one little square of chocolate.” That stuff is—it's just so funny.

**Jesse Thorn:** There's such a sadness built into it. I think of yogurt a lot, like commercials for yogurt.

**Cole Escola:** Oh, yes! Absolutely. No one has to know that I'm having yogurt at night!

**Jesse Thorn:** The subtext of that is this kind of... immense pain and loneliness of—of a life—

**Cole Escola:** (*Laughs.*) Under the umbrella of “you go, girl”.

**Jesse Thorn:** Right! Like, of a life where like your great pleasure is yogurt?! Like, no offense to yogurt. (*Chuckling.*) You know what I mean? Yogurt's nice and everything. But like it's not even as nice as it should be given how much sugar is in it, you know what I mean?

(*Cole agrees.*)

Like, it's a real B- treat.

**Cole Escola:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Dove Chocolate, just low-calorie cookies, just all things that are like marketed as like, “Ooh, ladies! Look what we did for you. You work hard! Put the kids to bed and have one cookie.” It's very funny, and it's very dark.

**Jesse Thorn:** We have more to get into with Cole Escola. Escola is nonbinary and only relatively recently asked people to start using they/them pronouns to refer to them. We'll talk about why they didn't feel comfortable doing it sooner. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Cole Escola. They're a writer and actor who has worked on shows like *Hacks*, *Difficult People*, and *At Home with Amy Sedaris*. Escola created and stars in the play *Oh, Mary!*, in which they play a dumb, crazy, cabaret-singing Mary Todd Lincoln. That play makes its Broadway debut this June. You should absolutely see it if you can. It is so funny. Let's get back into our conversation.

What do you think is your relationship to camp in portraying women?

**Cole Escola:** I don't think of it as—I'm not ever like, “This is funny because I'm playing a woman.” I sort of forget that that is a layer of it for some people watching. I forget that I'm, you know—like, I read comments that are like, “Oh, I thought that—I didn't realize that was a man!” And I'm like, oh, why would you—? A) Why do you care? And B) What—? I don't know. I just forget that that's a layer of it for people. And then as far as camp goes, I don't really know what that... what camp means.

(*They chuckle.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I think even in *Mary Todd Lincoln*, which is a big and ridiculous character as you portray her—I mean, like defined by an insane lust for alcohol and stardom and idiocy, sort of all combined together.



**Cole Escola:** Yeah. Which is all me.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Like, none of it is the classic, hyper-real version of that that usually comes from men dressed as women doing something campy. Like, whether it's straight guys or gay guys, you know, there's sort of two versions of that. But like they're both typically more about the idea of the thing than they are—the idea of the person than they are about the person, or the idea of that person's social category than they are about the person.

[00:20:00]

**Cole Escola:** Yeah. This was definitely—this is definitely about the character. Which again, it's just aspects of myself turned up to a million. And I like playing people that are just the worst fears I have about myself. That I'm too much, that I'm annoying. Yeah, mostly that I'm too much and that I'm annoying. That I'm unlikable. That I—you know, I have no redeeming qualities. Especially with portrayals of like females in history, there's this sort of—they have to have like redeeming qualities, but redeeming qualities decided on by the producers that audiences will be able to digest. It's like, okay, yes, she was a murderer, but let's have—you know, let's have this moment where she looks at her daughter sleeping, and we see in her eyes that she just wants a better life for her.

And it's like what if you just showed the ugly part? Like, what if—why does she have to have these like... (*Sighs.*) They have to have these like soft, maternal redeeming qualities, or else, you know, the director, producers, whatever, will think, “Well, then they'll hate her! Why would they root for a woman that just wants to be a star and doesn't like her husband or her kids?” Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I think Mary Todd Lincoln in your show is ultimately an appealing, likable character—despite being, you know, venal and borderline evil—because of her sort of passion and ambition and vision for her life, which is like something that is very common for male comedy characters. I mean, that's like half of Will Ferrell's characters—all the evil—you know, all the non-*Elf* Will Ferrell characters.

**Cole Escola:** Yeah, yeah, yeah! Just like a big baby, basically.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, that you like admire because they're doing their thing, right? Like, we love to see somebody do their thing!

**Cole Escola:** They're doing their thing. They're doing the thing you can't do. You know, like that's what has been so—like, what I've loved so much about doing this show is people loving this character, and I think because they connect with her ugly desires. Which we all—of course, we all have.

**Jesse Thorn:** Everyone wants to have a cabaret act. I know I do!

**Cole Escola:** (*Laughing.*) Everyone wants—exactly! Exactly. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I was surprised/touched/concerned to read you describing your hesitation to use they/them pronouns because of being concerned about being annoying. What was your concern?

**Cole Escola:** Oh, just you know, like that's my—that's always my biggest fear is that I'm annoying. That's just another example of like where my mind went when I thought about using they/them pronouns, which—as my friend sort of helped me put it—it's not so much a coming out as like a clarification of like how I've already always been feeling and operating. Not like, “Okay, now I'm living my life differently.” But I was, you know, like scared that I would be excluded from things, because people would have sort of like the same fears that I had before I started using they/them pronouns. That I would be afraid to interact with someone who was nonbinary and used they/them pronouns, because I—just a small, secret fear of like, “Don't get it wrong, don't get it wrong, don't get it wrong.” Yeah, so I just sort of was, thinking about that in regards to myself. Like, oh, I don't want to make other people uncomfortable or scared to be talking to me. But so far, no one has died.

[00:25:00]

That I know of.

**Jesse Thorn:** There's this thing that I've seen with people who change their pronouns in public, where they sometimes feel—like, I've seen people feel obliged to make it very clear that they're chill about it. And you know, obviously to the extent people are chill about it, you know, good for them. I'm glad that it's—you know, if that's actually the case, good for you. But it also always—it's always such a sadness that someone, in declaring who they are has to protect others, you know, over something so little. You know what I mean?

**Cole Escola:** Yeah. Yeah. And it is so little. It's so sad. It's just like, “Oh, don't mind me. I'm not going to take up any space. And if you get it wrong, I won't even correct you. And frankly, you don't even have to ever do it!” But for the most part, everyone's been cool about it. No one—again, I can't believe I'm saying this, but no one has died from it! Yet.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles.*) You said that fear of being annoying or too much is one that you had long before you were deciding whether to use they/them pronouns in the world.

(*Cole confirms.*)

Where did that come from? Like, did you have experiences that gave you that fear, or were you just always adjusting against it?

**Cole Escola:** Well, part of it is being that, you know, I was a very femme, gay child. And you know, was sort of guided or instructed to like tone that down or curb that. That's part of it. And also, I am just by nature sort of a—like, a brat. (*Chuckles.*) I'm a brat! Yeah. I just—I had a lot of needs that my family couldn't accommodate. You know, for like artistic outlets. You know, my family knew how to take you to T ball practice or, you know, sign you up for swimming. But like, theatre? I mean, they were great. They did everything they could. But

you know, I sort of took that on as like, ooh, I'm too much. I'm annoying, because I need a ride to a different town where they have a theatre program. Like, I'm too needy.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I mean, I think there's maybe—you know, there's a sort of spectrum even without placing judgment on it, but there's a sort of spectrum of acceptance. Like, there doesn't have to be malice for there to be discomfort. You know what I mean?

**Cole Escola:** No. No, no. It was just—and this is probably true for any kid that has like a special interest that they're like really passionate about that, you know, no one else in their family has. Like, I'm sure you can talk to, you know, straight musicians or whatever. It's just like—but then that sort of instills in you this idea that like you need too much!

**Jesse Thorn:** I think a lot about my own trans kids who are, you know, pre-adolescent. And I think like—there's a part of me that desperately wants to teach them to take care in the world, to protect themselves. And there's another part of me that desperately wants to fight that so that I am not teaching them—

**Cole Escola:** To hide themselves. Yeah, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. And I imagine that for a, you know, small, femme-y, nonbinary kid, even with non-malicious, generally supportive family members, you are kind of caught in that—kind of caught in that web.

**Cole Escola:** Yes, absolutely like just little things about like—like, “Don't tell your dad.” You know, like little things like my mom trying to protect me. But just then that sending the message of like, okay, I can't have a coloring book.

[00:30:00]

Or like I have to hide that, because it has a Barbie on it or something. Yeah. Yeah. But I guess home should probably be the place where you feel the most safe and seen, rather than where you—like, they're gonna learn the rules of society in school or like online, everywhere. Yeah. (*Abrasively.*) You gonna cry? (*Laughs.*) Just kidding, sorry.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Finally, you're expressing your true identity as a bully! Stop cyberbullying me!

**Cole Escola:** As a bully. Aww. You care about your kids? Loser. Yeah.

(*They laugh.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Have you ever been able to contextualize for yourself your extra-ness as courage? Like, the fact that you want to put on a hoop skirt, like a 19th century ball gown and—?

**Cole Escola:** No, it doesn't feel like courage, because it's just what I want. It's just what I want to do. It doesn't feel like—it doesn't feel like courage. It just feels like... like, well, yeah, why wouldn't I? It's what I want to do. It's like is it courageous to like order noodles for dinner? No, that's just what you wanted. So, yeah, I don't know.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you think that what you are describing is brattiness? I'm worried that you do.

**Cole Escola:** Uh, do I think that's brattiness? Um, no.

**Jesse Thorn:** Because you described yourself as bratty, and I was like, “Oh no!”

**Cole Escola:** No, I am. I'm a brat in—in other ways. But no, I don't think that's brattiness. I think that's just having a gorgeous vision for a creative project.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Has it been hard for you to figure out what the mode of your art is?

**Cole Escola:** Yeah! Yeah. Yes. But that's like—this play is sort of a peak of sorts of like this is like the concluding chapter of this section of my life and work as an artist. This feels like the culmination of my monthly solo sketch shows that I used to do at the Duplex, and then, you know, one-person shows at Joe's Pub, or like the shows at like—and my time in writer's rooms, and my time acting in other people's projects. Like, this feels like the thesis based on those like—whatever. I guess I started in like 2007. So, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, there's like a version of your career where you're doing character sketch stuff on the internet—which is like a pretty well-defined lane. You know, there's a lot of people who are successful to one degree or another doing character comedy to camera on the internet, right? For whatever their specific lane of people is, you know what I mean?

(*Cole confirms.*)

And you, in doing sometimes even really silly characters like Mary Todd Lincoln, like it's clear that you wanted to give them a full narrative exploration. Like, you could just go ahead and do four-minute internet sketches or 90-second internet sketches. And even before this show, you know, you were making essentially television pilots for a television shows that would be really, really hard to get to become television shows.

**Cole Escola:** That don't exist. Oh yeah, no, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckling.*) Like, for which there is no lane on television at this time.

**Cole Escola:** Correct, correct. And nor will there ever be. But I took my solo sketch stuff sort of as far as I thought I could take it. And then, I really...

[00:35:00]

The idea of doing a play really scared me in the exact right way, where I was like, “Well, this will make me grow, because it's really scary.”

**Jesse Thorn:** Was it because of the character and narrative elements? Because you had to write things for a group of people and the, you know, financial stakes are necessarily higher? What was it?

**Cole Escola:** Yeah. All of those things. You know, I wanted to make sure that the roles that I wrote for the other characters were good, not just like setting me up—that they were good roles for those actors, that— Yeah, just the financial. This is the first thing that I've ever done that's ever been produced by someone not myself, so—yeah, there's the financial stakes and just feeling like an intruder in theatre a little bit. Like, the fear that people would be like, “What are you doing? You can't do theater. You don't belong here.” And the opposite's been true. Everyone's been so nice. I always—I give everyone no credit ever.

*(They laugh.)*

I always expect the worst out of eeverybody. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with Cole Escola in just a minute. Their play, *Oh, Mary!*, is a very silly and very funny play. And so, it was natural that I asked Cole if they ever thought they might write something not silly. And the answer is no! We'll talk about why after the break. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** High energy rock.

**Biz Ellis:** This is Biz. And this is the final season of *One Bad Mother*, a comedy podcast about parenting. This is going to be a year of celebrating all that makes this podcast and this community magical.

**Speaker 1:** I'm so glad that I found your podcast.

**Speaker 2:** I just cannot thank you enough for just being the voice of reason as I'm trying to figure all of this out.

**Speaker 3:** Thank you, and cheers to your incredible show and the vision you have to provide this space for all of us.

**Biz Ellis:** This is still a show about life after giving life. And yes, there will be swears. You can find us on [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org). And as always, you are doing a great job!

*(Music ends.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Cole Escola. They're starring in the upcoming Broadway show, *Oh, Mary!*.

Have you ever imagined a world for yourself where you are a theatre actor? Where you—

**Cole Escola:** Not a theater actor, but a theater writer. Like, this play has really shown me how much I just love—I love theatre. I love—I do love acting in theatre, but I especially love writing in theatre, and I especially love... words are just so much more important in theatre than they are on a—like, for TV or movies. Dialogue is like fourth or fifth after like cinematography, or like—first is editing, then cinematography, then directing, then acting, and then finally like dialogue. And I feel like I still haven't really—maybe someday I'll try to crack writing for the screen, but I feel like I haven't done a great—haven't proved myself to myself in that medium.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you aspire to do something that isn't silly?

**Cole Escola:** No. No, not at all. I don't want—I don't need to have that. I'm not interested in that. Like, “I want people to take me seriously as”—I mean, I always put something—I try to put like heart into all of my projects. And yeah, but no. No interest in doing something that's not silly.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, like even—it doesn't have to be *The Fisher King*. Like, it could be, you know, *Broadcast News* or *When Harry Met Sally* or something. (*Chuckling.*) You know what I mean?

(*Cole affirms.*)

There's things that are fun comedies that are not silly.

**Cole Escola:** I would love to write—yeah, yeah, yeah. I guess, I have thought about like a rom com. Like, if like maybe that would be a good next project for me in terms of like film or TV.

[00:40:00]

I just don't think visually. I'm not a—like, I don't have a director's brain or cinematographer's. I think so much in words, and everything ends up being so word heavy. And then I get into the edit and I'm like, “Well, this is so boring!”

**Jesse Thorn:** I wanna—I'm anticipating people imagining me to be anti-silliness.

(*Cole laughs.*)

And I just really want to emphasize that all I really want in the world is like to watch the guys from *Stella* say words wrong. (*Laughs.*) Like, silliness is—I live for it, okay, everybody? I live for it.

**Cole Escola:** (*Laughs.*) Let's get out ahead of that, please. Please. Please apologize to the silly community.

**Jesse Thorn:** Can I play something really, really silly that you made? This is from a sort of comedy special that you made called *Help, I'm Stuck*. And this is (*chuckling*) a noir that is built around Jennifer Convertibles, the sofa bed store, and her who is also her sister-in-law, Ashley Furniture, the non-sofa bed furniture store. Let's listen.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Ashley:** Hello, Jennifer.

**Jennifer:** Oh my, Ashley, what a surprise! I thought I heard the garbage truck outside. I didn't realize it made deliveries. (*Chuckling haughtily.*) My! What a hat! Are those real slices of ham?

**Ashley:** They're silk roses, Jennifer.

**Jennifer:** Well, whatever they are, it's covering your face. So, by all means, please keep it on.

**Ashley:** After all these years, you're still jealous, I see.

**Jennifer:** Jealous? Of that ( *censor beep* ) you make?

**Ashley:** Oh, face it, Jennifer. People associate my name with quality furniture.

**Jennifer:** Yes, they do associate your name with quality furniture. Because you're built like a couch!

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Cackles.*) You know, I was—I read an article that was describing the interior of your apartment and mentioned a life size cutout of Bette Davis, who is of course like just the absolute archetypal show business diva. Like, larger than life, extraordinary, you know? And you know, maybe like alongside like a like Judy Garland and Liza Minnelli. You know, just like the true classic of that genre of person. And I was thinking about having—I watched *The African Queen* recently, and like Hepburn is—who's also sort of in that lane—completely ridiculous. Like, it's absurd that a human being would behave that way. And it is the greatest thing—like truly, spectacularly great.

(Cole agrees.)

And I was thinking about like what is it about this thing that is so absurd as to be embarrassing that makes it perfect instead of embarrassing? And it is—I mean, obviously part of it is she's a brilliant actor. But it's also like this feeling that you reflect in of self-actualization.

**Cole Escola:** Yeah, it's also style. It's just like a different style. It's stylized in a way. And then in the—you know, like the '60s and the '70s, when things got more natural, then that was just like... that's a different style. Although it's funny. You know like *Bonnie and Clyde* is like, you know, always referenced as like the turning point, you know. (Chuckles.) But then you—but Faye Dunaway is a pretty like kooky character.

**Jesse Thorn:** You mean like as a human being?

**Cole Escola:** As a human—well, as a human being, but also as an actress. Everything's very grand.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, like I think that those characters appeal to a lot of young gay men for the reason that they are unconcerned with their effect on the world or proud of their effect on the world. When I think, for a lot of young gay men, having that effect on the world can be scary and dangerous.

**Cole Escola:** Well, it's also—I was thinking about that in terms of like why do gay people love female villains so much.

[00:45:00]

And I think it has to do with expressed femininity. Like, they are so in control of their femininity and use it and execute it. And like, the heroines—like your Ariels in *The Little Mermaid*—are not allowed. They're accidentally feminine. They're not in control. It's just “Oops! Oh, I didn't—oh, my boobs are out? Oops! Like, I'm just innocent!” Like, completely stupid to their femaleness and their femininity. And so, these like female villains are just so in control of like their like liquid female movements and their makeup is always like much more intense, and like they get to really take ownership of their femme-ness, you know, like high femme-ness.

And I think at least that's what appeals and appealed to me. Like, when I think of—my favorite character in *The Little Mermaid* was obviously Ursula—and especially Vanessa when she transforms herself into that seductive, beautiful woman—far over Ariel. You know.

**Jesse Thorn:** I like the crab. The singing crab.

**Cole Escola:** (Laughs.) Yeah, exactly. There's something for everyone. A little something for the dads!



**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) I think it is an interesting like slightly different thing for a kid who is growing up trying to be really careful of their extra-ness.

**Cole Escola:** Femininity. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. Like, those two things are not the same, but they're tied together, right? The femininity and the being a lot, like worried about being a lot.

**Cole Escola:** Mm-hm. Being a lot and like being too femme. Like, just like there were so many years where I was just like, “Don't move too much. Like, just walk as slow—walk slow, move as little as possible. Don't talk too much, because your voice is a giveaway.” Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you feel differently about that now as a grown adult with the right pronouns and some show business success?

**Cole Escola:** No, I think I still move through like social situations with that same discomfort and awkwardness. Shyness, I guess? A little bit? I don't know.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Beat.*) Are you holding back during this conversation?

**Cole Escola:** (*Laughs.*) Probably. Yeah. What do you think of that, listeners!?

(*They laugh.*)

I also have a show tonight. I've got to save it for the stage, you know. I'm not getting paid for this!

**Jesse Thorn:** I understand. And I appreciate your time, Cole.

**Cole Escola:** (*Laughs.*) Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's so great to get to talk to you, and I admire your work so much. I hope people will go see your show, because it is so funny.

**Cole Escola:** Thank you. Thanks, Jesse.

**Jesse Thorn:** Cole Escola! If you are able to get out to New York City, or you already live there, do see them in *Oh, Mary!*. It is so funny. If you can't, understood. Make sure to check out Cole's social media, because they have been posting amazing, brilliant character work there for years that is so funny. And if you want to watch a TV show—man, they sure were great on *Difficult People*. Great show too.

**Transition:** Relaxed, chiming 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. Here at my house, I'm still working on my office shed. But it was my birthday! And the staff of Maximum Fun were nice enough to get me a little tiny needlepoint that says, "Shed Sweet Shed".

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer, 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 DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by the band The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

*Bullseye* is on Instagram. We have pictures from behind the scenes and videos and more. Follow us there, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). I am also on Instagram. I just started my own Instagram account here in 2024!

[00:50:00]

I had one for my menswear blog before, but this one's for radio stuff and podcast stuff. It's [@JesseThornVeryFamous](#). So, please follow me, [@JesseThornVeryFamous](#) on Instagram, and you'll see pictures of me and our guests and also my dog. I guess that's about it! Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

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

*(Music fades out.)*