

[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 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. Look, I'm going to be honest with you. It's the kind of pitch that you might hear about on one of those TV shows that make fun of show business. Maya Erskine, who is my guest this week, stars alongside co-creator Donald Glover in a dark, high stakes, prestige, serialized adaptation of *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. Yes, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, the 2005 blockbuster where Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie play married contract killers who end up having to kill each other.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: High octane rock music.

John: Are you out of your mind?! What is wrong with you?

Jane: You're what's wrong with me!

John: You're (*inaudible*) in Vegas!

Jane: Oh, that's better!

John: Stop! Stop it! Stop!

Jane: No, that's much better! That's great!

John: Stop it!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: It's a fun movie. It's also goofy and maybe a little corny. I think that's fair.

Mr. & Mrs. Smith, the TV show, though, is not that. In fact, the showrunners and stars—well, none of them really watched that original movie. They took the premise, and they ran with it. What kind of people would sign up for that kind of job in the first place? What kind of partner would someone like that make? And also, if you killed somebody, where do you hide

the body? Like, actually, practically speaking. Glover and Erskine are both great in it, Erskine especially so.

Before this latest project, she starred in and co-created *PEN15*. That is a hilarious and brilliant coming of age comedy in which she and Anna Konkel, who are real grownups, played middle school aged versions of themselves. In *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, Erskine plays Jane Smith. She's guarded and a little chilly, used to being underestimated, competent in just about every area. Let's play a clip from the first episode. John and Jane are on their first mission. John, who is played—as we mentioned—by Donald Glover, reaches to put an earpiece in Jane's ear, and Jane mistakes the gesture for something more intimate.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Jane: Oh, woah. Um. I should be clear, I'm not in this for the romance.

John: It's just an earpiece. I'm just trying to put it in.

Jane: Oh, sorry.

John: Is that okay?

Jane: Yeah.

John: I'm sorry.

Jane: No, I'm sorry.

John: Is that okay? I didn't say anything. That was my fault.

Jane: (*Chuckles.*) No. Go ahead. I thought you were—

John: Yeah, I know. You want to do it?

Jane: No, do it, please.

John: Alright. Looks good.

Jane: Yeah?

John: Yeah.

Jane: Thank you.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Maya Erskine. (*Laughs.*) Probably the most thrilling clip we've ever played on *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

(*Maya laughs.*)

Action packed there. Welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

Maya Erskine: It's so nice to see you too.

Jesse Thorn: You know, I was thinking about the last time you were here, you were talking about your previous show, *PEN15*. And I was thinking that like considering one of the shows is a comedy in which two adults play middle schoolers that dwells on the most difficult and unpleasant parts of being a middle schooler, and this show—*Mr. & Mrs. Smith*—is thriller, where two adults play beautiful adults in a beautiful apartment, traveling the mountains of France and Italy to murder people and stuff and do spy things, that they actually have a lot in common. (*Laughs.*)

Maya Erskine: Yeah. There are a lot of things that are in common! I mean I think touching on the masks that you put on in both scenarios. You know, as a 13-year-old, you're constantly putting on masks, trying not to show your vulnerability, who you are. And I think the same goes for Mr. and Mrs. Smith, these two people who are kind of searching for their identity in this big world and find connection. But they're also in a job where they have to mask it constantly.

Jesse Thorn: And also just this—the simple—the vector between loneliness and intimacy, right? That like that is what adolescence is. Like, you're like, “What am I if not completely different from anyone else and a total nightmare freak?”

Maya Erskine: Exactly. I think that's probably why I was drawn to *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, because I'm always drawn to anything that, you know, touches on what I feel. Which can be like I'm an outsider; no one's like me. So, this, you know—

[00:05:00]

—feeling like reject of society, and looking for that connection. But as I do these projects more and more, I'm finding that I do have connection with people through doing this.

Jesse Thorn: I'm sure that when this show came to you, you know, to some extent, its reputation preceded it. Because it was originally going to be a collaboration between Donald Glover and Phoebe Waller Bridge, and you know, it had been showbusiness news that it wasn't going to be, and so forth. At the same time though, if someone had sent me a note that said, “We're making a remake of the film *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* as a prestige TV show,” I would have said back to them, “That is dumb. What a bad idea”, I would have said.

Maya Erskine: (*Cackles.*) What a bad idea. Yeah, it is. I mean, remakes in general are tough, and no one likes to watch remakes. But I think if you were telling me like we're remaking *The Godfather*, I'd say stop. And I—(*struggles for words*).

Jesse Thorn: Well, I mean, so here's what I'm thinking about it. I'll outline my thinking on this, right? Like, what makes for a good remake? Maybe a great premise with poor execution, or something where it didn't all come together, or just a great thing that you hope you could do great again. And I'm not going to ask you to speak of the quality of the film. I think it's okay! And so—but it's an okay thing where almost all of its okay-ness comes from the fact that it is the two most charismatic movie stars in the last 25 years, in Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie.

Maya Erskine: Totally. I think—well, first of all, so when I was approached about it, I didn't even know that Phoebe Waller Bridge wasn't involved. Even when I signed on, I didn't really know that she—like, when I was saying yes, I thought she was still involved. I didn't know for about three or four phone calls what my involvement would be. So, really, it was just hearing from Donald his pitch about what this show and this iteration would be. And it just was—it felt like it just shared the same name as *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, but it was its own story. It was its own tone, its own world. And so—

Jesse Thorn: And this is Donald Glover, who's both your costar and was the co-creator of the show.

Maya Erskine: Yes. Yeah. And I—you know, I was already such an admirer of his and Francesca Sloane, the showrunner, the other co-creator and Hiro Murai, who I knew would be directing the first two. And so—and also Phoebe Waller Bridge. And I just thought that their take on this IP was just a really exciting story to be told. And you know, the references he was using and how he described the pilot. He referenced *Children of Men*, of like that first big explosion, how that would be like the first big, real moment in the pilot where you're like, oh, this is real. These people can get hurt. This isn't just some like movie, big explosion, they look beautiful right after. It's real life for these two. So, I don't know. I didn't think about the remake part of it really, because it just felt like its own thing.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so the show's been out long enough that I'm going to give away the first 10 minutes. So, there's sort of a feint towards this being a really traditional action spy show in that it opens on a sequence with some glamorous, attractive spies who then die. And while I'll stipulate that you and Donald are more relatable than Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie—god bless them—it is a beautiful show, and you two are beautiful in it. And I wonder if you were prepared for that or excited about that, coming from working several years on a television show where you tried to make yourself as weird and gross and uncomfortable as possible.

Maya Erskine: You know, I'm more comfortable in that scenario.

Jesse Thorn: In the bowl haircut of *PEN15*?

Maya Erskine: In the bowl haircut. Yeah, I think that gives me more freedom. It's when I'm in anything where there's the expectation to look beautiful—whatever that means—that tends to like dampen my spirit sometimes. (*Chuckles.*) So, I had to really fight through that and find

my confidence and power in just being okay with, you know, looking how I look and trying to look beautiful. And maybe not everyone thinks that, but that's okay. Like, this is what I'm going for. That was a—that was almost more vulnerable for me than *PEN15*.

Jesse Thorn: Had you done full glamour on screen before?

Maya Erskine: I had in like some TV shows, you know. Like—and it always felt uncomfortable. Like, I always felt like I couldn't move my head. Like, if I would move, then I would ruin the hairdo. And I, like—

[00:10:00]

I didn't know how to sit comfortably in it. But it felt fun in this show, because I knew we weren't trying to go for Angelina Jolie status. It was this character's version of beauty and Glamour, and that felt achievable and attainable.

Jesse Thorn: I read an interview with Donald Glover, and there was just this offhand mention he made of what was involved in being shirtless on camera.

(Maya chuckles.)

It was like drinking orange juice and then like not—but not drinking water and like doing pushups right beforehand and these things.

Maya Erskine: Yeah, you don't drink water, I think, like the day of the shoot. Probably the night before as well, so you just get really dehydrated, and then you drink orange juice right before, and it like sucks your skin in close to your muscles. He just was describing this to me, 'cause I had no idea he was doing that. I didn't want to do any of that. Because I think for me—I had just had a baby. And so, I was trying to get to a place of just pure strength, like able to hold myself up. I felt wrecked after birth. And so, I just wanted to believably be this person, but not need to be like a Marvel superhero. 'Cause that wasn't who she was, but Donald got really ripped. And we were at the same gym, and he went like full force. And yeah, he needed to take that shirt off, because he worked really hard for it. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Were you hurt when you gave birth, or just broken emotionally?

Maya Erskine: *(Laughs.)* I think I was so prepared for the birth, but I was not prepared for post birth. Like, I had no mental preparation for that. I feel like I just didn't know enough about it. And I feel like we don't talk about it enough. But yeah, like the healing process after for me was really tough and kind of a big shock. And I'm sure some women have it even tougher. But I just—it took me a while to kind of reacclimate into this new body and this new life, really. And so, it took—you know, I feel like I'm just starting to feel like myself again. And then I got pregnant. So, you know, we'll start that process all over.

Jesse Thorn: What was it like for you emotionally?

Maya Erskine: Not great for the first two weeks. I think I had baby blues, because I wasn't sleeping. I wasn't taking care of myself. I didn't know how to also like form any boundaries, emotional boundaries, with people wanting to come over. And it was just—I felt really out of control. And I was falling in love with this—it felt like my heart was outside of my body, and I couldn't protect it, and I couldn't protect myself. I just was really lost for a bit. So, yeah. And then I had to jump back into work like three months later. And you know, that was tough too.

Jesse Thorn: Did you know that you were going back to work when you were pregnant? Or did you get the job while you were pregnant?

Maya Erskine: The first pregnancy?

(Jesse confirms.)

Yes. I did know, because we—I got pregnant during the pandemic, and we had just—we had two weeks left of filming *PEN15*. So, I always knew we had to go back to that. And one of them was like the episode that I directed. And so, I had to finish that. And we were editing up until pretty much when we each gave birth and edited after that and then filmed again.

Jesse Thorn: So, had you—you're saying... had you just found out you were pregnant when the pandemic shut everything down?

Maya Erskine: No, sorry, I got pregnant like in the summer.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. Still.

Maya Erskine: *(Laughs.)* And Anna was also pregnant, so we both—yeah, went through that together.

Jesse Thorn: Anna, the co-creator of *PEN15* and costar.

Maya Erskine: Anna Konkel, yes. And that was a great save in a lot of ways, but it—yeah, it just was—it was wild, 'cause we had to go back to set to finish filming and our bodies looked even crazier. And you know, we were both breastfeeding in our bowl cut and braces and then going back to set and yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Much more with Maya Erskine, the star of *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, still to come. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Maya Erskine. She is a comedian, writer, and actor. In 2019, she co-created the terrific comedy show *PEN15*, in which she and fellow creator Anna Konkel star as lightly fictionalized middle school versions

of themselves. These days, you can catch Maya in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. It's an action thriller, sometime comedy, in which she stars opposite Donald Glover.

[00:15:00]

It's streaming now on Amazon Prime. Let's get back into the rest of our conversation.

Your character on *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* is—of this pair, of these two spies who have come together out of nowhere, the more responsible and practical of the two. Each is foolish in their own way, and they're both hyper competent in many ways as well. But she is constantly operating from what seems to be a position of alienated terror and like giant castle walls around every element of her emotional and personal life. You seem like a nice lady.

(They laugh.)

Maya Erskine: Thanks.

Jesse Thorn: You're a pretty warm presence. Was it hard to get to that?

Maya Erskine: I felt like it was—at least in the beginning, we were finding the exact... there was a lot of fine tuning in the beginning when we were filming the pilot and the second episode with Hiro. Because, you know, part of the appeal of the show is the chemistry between these two. But you also don't want to give too much and flirt too much. And so, there was a lot of ranges that we would play with of holding things in and holding things back. And I turned to Sigourney Weaver's character, Ripley, in *Alien*. Like, the way that she's able to hold in all of that fear, but you can still read it, but she's just so composed. That was such a good reference for me. Because, you know, I think Jane has so many emotions and so many things going on, but she has to present almost as if she's sociopathic and has no empathy for people, and that's her way of surviving.

And it's hard for me, because I'm a total over-sharer and want to just hug everyone with my body and my words. And I couldn't do that with her until the final episode. So, that was a fun challenge for me and empowering. And also, a good lesson like of, *(chuckling)* yeah, you don't have to say so many things, which I do too much.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think regular spy behavior involves a lot of like, whatever, machine learning on audio transcripts of—you know. But at least movie spy behavior, action movie spy behavior, is very sociopathic.

Maya Erskine: Yeah, I think it has to be. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: And it is on the show.

Maya Erskine: Yeah, but she has—you know, she has these little things about herself that shows that there's some care. Like, after killing John Turturro's character, it does affect her, though it does turn into a sex scene. But it does affect her emotionally. And she has a jar of

these, you know, marbles for every kill that she does, because it's—you know, extremely significant for her.

Jesse Thorn: She's trying to get a pizza party.

(They laugh.)

Maya Erskine: Yes. But I—you know, that's why I think the ending is so satisfying, or at least was satisfying for me to do. Because she got to reveal everything she was feeling throughout and some truths about her history and background. But yeah, it's fun to lie, because I'm not good at it in life.

Jesse Thorn: You're a professional actor.

Maya Erskine: I know, but it's different than—for some reason with my friends and with my family, they can tell the minute I'm lying. Because my nostrils flare and my—like, I can't hide it. It's really weird.

Jesse Thorn: You went to Tisch at NYU, the arts college at NYU, where Donald Glover also went. He's a few years older than you.

Maya Erskine: Yes, he is.

Jesse Thorn: But he also was a member of a sketch comedy group called Dereck that was successful—I mean, at least in a sketch comedy context—when they were 22 or whatever. *(Chuckles.)* Like, they made a really funny movie in their early 20s themselves. What was it like to have people that had gone just before you being actually successful in show business?

Maya Erskine: Yeah, it was definitely inspiring. I mean, I just remember—I don't think I caught on to Dereck Comet until I saw like a couple of sketches online. So, I might've been a senior at that point.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, they were like one of the first sketch groups to really be successful on YouTube.

Maya Erskine: Yeah. I think that was actually a huge—so, it started with that, but then also some of our friends—Alex Anfanger, he created this web series called *Lonnie—Next Time on Lonnie*, and that was really big, and then Ben Stiller saw it.

[00:20:00]

And then, you know, got in touch with them. And then they got a show on Comedy Central. And you just saw all of these people from NYU and friends and peers, you know, making it from these web series. And so, that for sure is what, you know, felt like a way in. Because I think for me, I was doing theatre and auditioning to no avail. Like, going to these big open

calls. And they wouldn't even see you if you hadn't gone to grad school. And finally, it was Anna Konkel who was like, "I think we need to make a web series." And—

Jesse Thorn: And you guys were buds from college.

Maya Erskine: Yeah, we were buds, best friends. And so, that was what started everything for us.

Jesse Thorn: Everybody wants to hear the comedy that they made when they were shortly out of college. I know I'm really excited about a future time when someone is interviewing me and says they have some clips of Prank the Dean, my sketch comedy group, to play.

(Maya laughs.)

But I do have a clip of you and Anna Konkel in a web video that you made in 2012.

Maya Erskine: Oh no. Oh dear.

Jesse Thorn: This is two buddies, and they're talking about how Valentine's Day went.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Becky: I just want to say to you, Happy Valentine's Day.

Jen: Happy V Day.

Becky: Happy Valentine's Day.

Jen: Happy V Day. Did your boyfriend get you stuff for V Day?

Becky: Yeah! What did he—? Did he get you—?

Jen: He got me—

Becky & Jen: A lot of stuff.

Jen: Like, a lot of stuff.

Becky: Yeah, me too.

Becky & Jen: What'd he get you?

Becky: You go first, please.

Jen: He got me like a lot of flowers.

Becky: Me too.

Jen: (*Beat.*) And like, he got me a really cute scarf. From Burberry.

Becky: From Burberrys.

Jen: It's Burberry.

Becky: It's Burberry, actually.

Jen: Because we want to go somewhere—

Becky & Jen: Cold.

Jen: So, we can go—

Becky & Jen: Skiing.

Becky: Us as well.

Jen: Becky.

Becky: Becky—Jen.

Jen: You're copying me.

Becky: You're copying me.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

(*They chuckle.*)

Jesse Thorn: Best friends' comedy is the category. Best friends' category.

Maya Erskine: (*Laughing.*) Oh my gosh, I'm cringing. We actually have—we had a whole web series up called *Project Reality* that we've taken down, because we were just scared that it would not age well.

Jesse Thorn: Because it wouldn't be funny anymore, or because you did something awful in it?

Maya Erskine: Eeeh, uh—both. (*Laughs.*) Like, not awful, just like—yeah, just territory that probably is not going to be read well. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. A new context. A new and probably better context.

Maya Erskine: Yes. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I should take down—(*static*).

Maya Erskine: Oh no! But that's the thing. It's like—it's comedy. And we were—you know, we were—that was where we discovered— It's sad, because *Project Reality* is sort of—that's the web series we created that really—where we discovered we like to write. We like to put things together and play characters. And that's—you know, that's what started *PEN15* for us.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, when I say—like, I jokingly say best friends' comedy is the category, but like that is humor about being best friends. And so is *PEN15*. Like, it's about that... it is about that particular kind of intimacy, for good or ill. Like, not just positive vibes, but that weird kind of intimacy.

Maya Erskine: Yeah. Codependency, really. But also, there's such a beauty to it, because it's such like an unabashed love and almost like you are each other's lifeboat. Like, that is, you know, how you get through life. And yeah, it was just a really... it was a really great time. But anytime I'm with Anna we still live in that space, I feel like.

Jesse Thorn: I admire that at 13 you could express your love for your friends.

Maya Erskine: You couldn't?

Jesse Thorn: I don't know what I could have expressed my love for at 13. Maybe the Giants.

Maya Erskine: (*Laughs.*) I think that was the safest space even—but it was also the most dangerous space, because I was also, you know, heartbroken from my friends. But that's because you put yourself out there so much. And then if you're rejected, then—yeah, that's where I learned my first real heartbreak was from friendships.

Jesse Thorn: What's an example?

Maya Erskine: It was... the most poignant memory I have was—it's so silly, but it was what I thought was one of my best friend's bat mitzvah. I wasn't invited to sit at the table. If you're at the table, you're one of the best friends. And then I wasn't invited to the brunch the next day, and it was my birthday. And they all called me and were like—

[00:25:00]

“Happy birthday! We love you!” But then there they were, all my friends together without me, and I just lost it.

And my mom was like, “You know, (*censor beep*) them!” And it was really—yeah, that was just like heartbreaking for me, because it's more heartbreaking also when they're kind too. (*Laughs.*) You know? They just don't want you as much.

Jesse Thorn: I feel like that picture is really completed by the knowledge that your mom is Japanese, and her first language is Japanese. Now, I know she worked as a translator, so I imagine her English is perfect. However, I think first generation immigrant mom swearing is much more exciting.

Maya Erskine: It's very exciting. And especially when you don't hear them say the F word that often, and it just filled her with so much anger. You know, she was so heartbroken for me. See, now I'm emotional, because I'm pregnant. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, because you're also talking about something really emotional.

Maya Erskine: (*Beat.*) Yeah. And so silly because, you know, you think this is just—but I think I'm thinking of it more as a mom now. (*Chuckles and sniffles.*) It's wild that those certain memories, they—I mean, they just stay, yeah. They stay with you, those little scars. (*Sniffles.*)

Jesse Thorn: One time in high school, my mom came to school and basically told this one teacher and the assistant principal to go suck a lemon on my behalf.

(*They laugh.*)

Maya Erskine: Why? What happened?

Jesse Thorn: She like sat down and listened to this story about how I got in trouble at school, and she was basically like, “Yeah, that was (*censor beep*). That's why he said that was (*censor beep*), what are you talking about?”

Maya Erskine: (*Laughs.*) I love that. I just found out from my mom that—I guess I was at Interlochen doing a play. And there were two instances. One was where I auditioned, and he said I couldn't be Alice, because I wasn't White or blonde. And that was, you know, the first year. And so—

Jesse Thorn: For real?

Maya Erskine: Yeah, that was a real...

Jesse Thorn: Was this like—? This is like roughly like 1999 or something, right?

Maya Erskine: Yeah, just about. And then maybe in the early 2000s, then I was in another play, and he told me to do a shuffle. Like, he wanted me to shuffle as this maid and said to walk like a geisha. And I told my mom that like kind of offhandedly. And I didn't know this at the time, but I guess she had called the director on my behalf and just balled him out. And

my dad was there listening to her the whole time, and he just—because I had never heard my mom fight for me on my behalf. You know, it's just interesting to learn when you're older of like she just was like, (*furiously*) “How does a geisha walk?! You tell me how a geisha walks.” Just went nuts on him. And yeah, I think I still shuffled like a geisha, but—whatever that meant.

Jesse Thorn: When did you find out?

Maya Erskine: We just talked about this like a couple months ago. So, it's at the top of my head. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Was it like—was your dad there?

Maya Erskine: My dad was there. Yeah. And he was just letting—and she'll do that for him too sometimes. ‘Cause she'll—you know, if someone screws him over on a deal or is not, you know, paying enough or whatever it is. She was kind of like his manager and then would get on the phone and just scare them. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: What was your feeling about what their dynamic was when you were a kid?

Maya Erskine: As a kid I think—you know, my dad had to travel a lot to work.

Jesse Thorn: He's a touring musician.

Maya Erskine: Touring musician. You know, I just remember her telling us to write faxes all the time. Those were really like a big deal to write a fax to my dad. He would write a fax back. And I—now that I'm a parent working, I just feel like so much pain for my dad, because he didn't want to be away all the time. And he had to, and it's what paid for my schools and everything. And then he would come home and just be so demolished from—you know, just imagine flying so much from Europe to every—you know. And then he would get in bed and read me a story but fall asleep on like the second page, you know.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Maya Erskine after a quick break. When we return, we will talk about one of the inspirations for the weird character that she played on *PEN15*. It turns out, it was an even weirder character she created when she was in high school! It's *Bullseye*, for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Playful, exciting synth.

Ellen Weatherford: People say not to judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree.

Christian Weatherford: Which is why here on *Just the Zoo of Us*, we judge them by so much more.

Ellen: We rate animals out of 10 in the categories of effectiveness, ingenuity, and aesthetics, taking into consideration each animal's true strengths—

[00:30:00]

—like a pigeon's ability to tell a Monet from a Picasso, or a polar bear's ability to play basketball.

Christian: Guest experts like biologists, ecologists, and more join us to share their unique insight into the animal's world.

Ellen: Listen with friends and family of all ages on [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) or wherever you get podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Maya Erskine. She's the star of the new TV show, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*.

Your dad was—is—a really successful and accomplished musician, although probably not—I don't know. I was about to say not that famous, but there's a certain kind of fame if you've ever picked up a musical instrument near Steely Dan, there's a community of people who know exactly who you are, to whom you are very famous. And they know everything about you, I'm quite sure. Did that seem good to you, when you were a kid? Did it seem aspirational? Did it seem like I should do show business, because it's cool?

Maya Erskine: No, because if it did, I would find my way into—or something. Like, I he tried to get me interested in music, but I wasn't. I just liked playing make believe. So, that was just sort of my outlet. I think I looked at it like that. I didn't look at it as like, “This is what I will do for a living.” But I think because I fell in love with it from such a young age, I was like, “Oh, this is all I will be doing.”

And then in terms of my dad—you know, I went to a school with people who had like very famous parents. And so, that was interesting to see. And I think with my dad, it wasn't until I went to then a performing arts high school, which was this like big public school—that was a different thing, where they were like, “Oh, your dad is Peter Erskine.” And I—that was the first time I was sort of known for my dad and known for my brother. Because my brother had gone there before, and he was kind of famous around the high school for making this short film that everyone loved in film class. And so, it was interesting. Like, I just had the two very different experiences of finding my way on my own and then through that kind of walking in, being slightly accepted already because of my dad and brother.

Jesse Thorn: What was your experience of going to arts high school? I loved that. I loved how everybody was into doing different stuff. I still get a kick out of it.

Maya Erskine: I loved it. I mean, because it felt like college from an early age, because you had your major. So, there were so many different—you know, there were the different departments. There was music, jazz, classical. There was opera, there was dancing, there was theatre.

Jesse Thorn: Did you go to LACHSA, here in Los Angeles?

Maya Erskine: Yeah, yeah. And it was just so wildly different from my other school, and it was on a college campus. So, it felt really big, and it felt—like, I had—you know, I grew up in LA, but I grew up in, you know, near Ocean Park, Santa Monica, like very kind of smallminded in my view of the world. And then I went to LACHSA, and I like learned of all these other places like Duarte and Whittier and all these different—you know, all my friends were from just all over LA. And yeah, so it just expanded my world. It expanded my mind. And I loved doing theatre. But I also got into, you know—I just, I felt like I grew up really fast in that school.

Jesse Thorn: What kind of freak flag did you fly in high school?

Maya Erskine: I mean, so my brother calls it Graya. It's just the inner like true me. I don't really know how to describe it in words. But like right now, I'm not being Graya. I'm being, you know, a good, professional side of myself. (*Laughs.*) But Graya is in *PEN15*. Graya is like the craziness. It's just—that's my freak flag, I think. And also, I think talking about sex and things in a way that I had a lot of shame around, doing that for the first time, like that... and that's where I get into oversharing, but that's where I learned how to like cope with certain shames about myself is through joking about, you know, sexuality or anything.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have the confidence to think, by the time you were in college, that this was a reasonable thing to do with your life?

Maya Erskine: (*Beat.*) Yeah, otherwise I don't think I would have gone for it. (*Chuckles.*) I mean, I think I had a bit of a delusion about it of like, “Yeah, this is—I'm going to just keep doing this. And when I graduate, I will be a star. I will keep working and do theatre and movies.” And yeah, the reality wasn't that right away, but I stuck with it.

[00:35:00]

And you know, I think you have to have some belief to keep going with it, that you're going to be doing it professionally.

Jesse Thorn: How about now?

(*They chuckle.*)

Maya Erskine: Do I have like confidence? It goes back and forth. I feel like with more experience, I feel confident in that I'm not—I can see a difference of how I come to set or come to a job compared to when I stepped onto my first TV job. But I'm constantly in a state of like, “Oh, I'm ruining this project. What am I doing here? What am I doing?” You know,

that is something that I've realized, oh, that might just be my process? And you know, that's sort of unfortunate, (*chuckles*) but that's what I think when I'm making things. And then, yeah, I just have to keep going.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have a vision of what your career might be when you're, you know, 60?

Maya Erskine: (*Beat.*) I don't know. 'Cause I go back and forth a lot in my mind. Some days I'm like, "Oh, I'll just be a stay-at-home mom. I'm going to not do this." And then I know that I couldn't not do it. Maybe I'm directing movies in my 60s, like one every three years. That would be nice. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: You know what I'd like to be?

Maya Erskine: What?

Jesse Thorn: Just like a CCH Pounder or something. I just would love to just—

(*Maya laughs.*)

I'd love to be on a procedural television show, maybe *Fourth Build*.

Maya Erskine: I mean, that's a great job.

Jesse Thorn: (*Whispered.*) Oh, what a job that is!

Maya Erskine: As I get older, though, I do have to say like... I'm looking for that regularity again. That, you know—I'm like, oh, there's such an appeal to just showing up to—you know, just going to the stages and the lots over there, and you go every day from eight to two, and then you come home. Like, that would be nice.

Jesse Thorn: As I get older, I'm also looking for regularity.

Maya Erskine: For what?

Jesse Thorn: Regularity. Too stupid.

Maya Erskine: No, it's funny. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: No, it's too stupid. It's embarrassing. Maya Erskine, I'm so grateful for your time. It's so nice to see you again and talk to you again, and congratulations on the show. I really enjoyed the show.

Maya Erskine: Thank you so much.

Jesse Thorn: Maya Erskine. She's great in *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, which is a really cool show. You can stream it on Amazon Prime. And if you haven't seen her other show, *PEN15*—which she co-created as well as costars in—it is very different from *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*, but it is also very funny. That's on Hulu.

Transition: Exciting, percussive 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. I put curtains up over the door of my shed, because I didn't want to put—there's no place to put a screen door. And I—but the mosquitoes were getting in. So, I got like sheer curtains, and I hung those in front. I also think that those magnetic curtain mosquito net things that you can like tape or nail to your doorframe are kind of homely. These curtains, they're working pretty good. I like it. I recommend it.

This show, 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, DJW. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”. It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team, and thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram. We have pictures from behind the scenes and videos and more. Find us on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We're also on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

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

(Music fades out.)