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(ADVERTISEMENT)

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. How many TV episodes has Shonda Rhimes written? It's got to be hundreds, right? Maybe 1,000? She's created seven shows: *Scandal*, *Private Practice*, and *Grey's Anatomy* among them. *Grey's Anatomy*, of course, is one of the longest running primetime television shows ever. Pretty much everything that Shonda Rhimes has made has been watched and adored by millions. She's gotten awards, praise, Emmys, the NAACP, the Writer's Guild, the GLAAD, even Michelle Obama is a fan.

Look, I could go on. But instead, let's just agree Shonda Rhimes is beloved and accomplished. Imagine the amount of work all that took—the number of days and nights staring at a blank screen, then an outline, then a draft, rewrites, shoots, writers' rooms, over and over and over again, hundreds and hundreds of times. What if I told you that despite all her accomplishments and her accolades, Shonda Rhimes is only just now starting to feel like a success? That, along with a bunch of other stuff, is what she told our correspondent Jarrett Hill in this interview we're about to play for you. It's from last year. It's kind of astonishing to think that there is basically no level of success at which you are immune from insecurity.

A year ago, her newest project was *Queen Charlotte*, a spinoff of *Bridgerton*. It was produced by Rhimes and her company, Shondaland. *Queen Charlotte* was nominated for two Emmys and took home one. The third season of *Bridgerton* just premiered last month. So, *Queen Charlotte*—like *Bridgerton*, it's a period drama series set in the Regency era. But instead of the *Bridgerton* family, the show focuses on the Queen herself, and on her rise to prominence and power. Here's a clip from the show's pilot. In this scene, a young Queen Charlotte is set to marry a man she has not yet met. It's an arranged marriage. She's traveling with her brother, Adolphus, to meet her new husband. And she doesn't seem too thrilled about it.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Adolphus (*Queen Charlotte*): You give the appearance of a statue.

Charlotte: Statues are works of art. Art is beautiful.

Adolphus: Art can be beautiful to gaze upon. You are ridiculous to the eye.

Charlotte: Is there a point?

Adolphus: You have not moved an inch in six hours.

Charlotte: I am wearing lyonnaise silk, encrusted with Indian sapphires, working with overlay of 200-year-old lace. Apparently, too much movement can cause the sapphires to shred the lace. If that were not enough, the gown sits atop a bespoke underpinning made of whalebone.

Adolphus: Whalebone?

Charlotte: Yes. Whalebone, brother. The bones of whales. Whales died so I could look like this. All the finest corsets are whalebone. You would know that if you knew anything. If you'd ever paid attention, you would also know that's the problem with whalebone is that it is rather delicate and also very, very sharp. And of course, I'm in the height of fashion, so this corset is quite snug. So, I give the appearance of a statue, ridiculous to the eye, but that is because I cannot move.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jarrett Hill: Shonda Rhimes, welcome to *Bullseye*! How are you?

Shonda Rhimes: Good. Excited to be here.

Jarrett Hill: Thank you for being here. I got to check out the first couple of episodes of *Queen Charlotte*. And the first thing I kind of wanted to ask you about *Queen Charlotte*, before we really talk about you and your career and writing—I'm curious about how the vision for *Queen Charlotte* began for you. I know that *Bridgerton* obviously is the origin story of Queen Charlotte, but Queen Charlotte has really kind of developed into her own kind of—her own series and her own story. So, how did that really get started for you? How did you start seeing it?

Shonda Rhimes: You know, Queen Charlotte, as played by Golda in *Bridgerton*, the actress in *Bridgerton*, was so dynamic and so interesting to me. And I felt like I was always drawn to watching her, and I wanted to see more when even when we'd leave scenes. And it really made me start to think about how she grew into that power, how she became such an amazing three-dimensional person. And also, the real story of Queen Charlotte and King George was—you know, we're sort of doing fiction inspired by fact, but that real story was so exciting to work with.

Jarrett Hill: In one of your interviews recently—I was watching a lot of different interviews, and you talked about owning power. And you actually just used that language now, talking about *Queen Charlotte*. And I remember watching *Queen Charlotte* in *Bridgerton* and thinking she was so interesting and unexpectedly funny. And there was like—

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There always seemed like there was a little bit more there beneath the surface. And I always kind of wanted to be like, oh, I definitely want to know what she's thinking there, or how she came up with that, or what that was. Can you talk about how you see Queen Charlotte as a figure, as a person?

Shonda Rhimes: Oh my gosh. Especially when we meet her when she's young, she's very naïve. But she still has a sense of, as you could hear in the clip—she still has a sense of very strong duty and what's been done to her. She understands that her power doesn't exist yet. And watching her sort of come into it was really fun. But she does—she has this amazing sense of humor. She's, you know, very witty and quick with a word and knows what she wants. She just doesn't know how to get what she wants when we first meet her.

Jarrett Hill: Talk to me a little bit about how you wrote this. I will tell you that I, as I—I've been a journalist for 20 years, and I started screenwriting a number of years ago. And the way that I started doing that was by taking your masterclass, actually.

Shonda Rhimes: Oh my gosh!

Jarrett Hill: That was a really transformative moment for me. So, getting to kind of understand a bit of your writing process was illuminating. And I'm curious about how you attack this story.

Shonda Rhimes: For me now, I think I'm in a process where instead of, you know, writing lengthy outlines and doing a bunch of stuff, I really just start writing and see where it takes me. You know, I do all my research. I know what world I'm in. So, I feel educated about that. And then I just start writing and truly see where the story goes. I try to follow the characters to where they should go, which is so much fun for me. And I've been doing it that way for, I don't know, 15 years or so. But it's the only way I can write at this point.

Jarrett Hill: I remember in your masterclass, you said something that was really, really freeing for me. I've always gotten down on myself about getting started and having a difficult time of like, okay, it's time to write. Let's do it. And in the masterclass, you said something to the effect of “My writing process is getting a glass of water, getting some headphones, turning on some music... getting on Facebook, and then maybe Instagram, and then maybe Twitter, and then maybe opening the document, and then looking at this.” And I was like, oh my god, I'm not crazy. Like, I'm not doing this wrong.

Talk to me a little bit about what you've learned about writing, even in the last decade—as you've kind of gone from one network to another.

Shonda Rhimes: You know, for me, the process is still almost the same. You know, you think that—I don't know, I always had this like magical idea that, you know, you just sit down, and at some point the writing just comes out. That does not happen still. I do have all these little rituals I have to do. Now it's like maybe I need to watch 20 minutes of this comedy or something before I write. I add things on. But as long as I end up writing that day, I feel okay, and I feel successful.

It's really hard to get started for people. It's really hard to get started for me, even now. I procrastinated writing the beginning of *Queen Charlotte* for I don't know how long, seriously. But I always feel like once I'm writing, once I'm in it, I'm swimming, and I'm good.

Jarrett Hill: You referred to writing as being your food and as your air and like as essentially lifeblood for you. Does it still feel that way all these years in as a writer? Or has that started to shift and change? Or how do you think about that?

Shonda Rhimes: No, it definitely still feels that way. I mean, I have kids and life, but the reality of it is when I'm sitting down and I'm writing, it truly is like no other feeling for me. I feel whole in a way that I just don't feel in other places. So, yeah, it's still my food and my air. And I hope it continues to be that. Because when writing stops being fulfilling, then I'm going to have to stop doing it.

Jarrett Hill: I watched *Queen Charlotte* and immediately thought to myself, even with *Bridgerton*, and thought how is it different for you now—writing at Netflix and doing, you know, content for Netflix and obviously you can cuss and have, you know, different kinds of sex scenes maybe. But I'm curious about how you approach it differently, if you approach it differently, thinking about Netflix and a streaming audience as opposed to a network audience.

Shonda Rhimes: You know, I always used to say that when I was at the network, I was writing a specific kind of show, like Shondaland for that network. And now that I'm at Netflix, there's no sort of brand that I'm creating for their specific audience, because their specific audience is the world, which is fascinating. So, I no longer have to worry “am I going to speak to my audience correctly, or in a way that they're going to want to hear it?” There's a lot of freedom there.

Jarrett Hill: You referred to writing *Grey's Anatomy* initially as laying track for a train that's already coming down, that's on its way. Does it feel that way for you with *Queen Charlotte*, or is it a little bit different now that you don't have like a network air date coming and stuff like that?

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Shonda Rhimes: You know, I used to be responsible for 70 hours of television a season, which meant that—I mean, literally every eight days, there's a new script for three different shows. Every eight days, there has to be a new script that comes out, so that they can start to prep it for production. That's what I meant by laying track for a train, because that train really is coming no matter what, and you have to have the track there. The scripts must be there.

This is very different. You know, you're making—you know, *Queen Charlotte* is, I think, six episodes. So, you're making six episodes. And you can sort of write them completely, see what the whole picture is, and then hand it over to production. There's no—you know, and once production starts, you don't have that frantic, “Oh my god, what's next? How am I going to do this next?” You get to enjoy the process of making something.

Jarrett Hill: How has your life changed since we've seen you kind of transition to Netflix and really releasing different kinds of shows? How has it been different for you as a person?

Shonda Rhimes: I think before I didn't necessarily have time to enjoy what I was doing, you know, while it was happening or enjoy any accomplishments when they came, because I was so busy. Now I feel like I get to sit back a little bit and enjoy, and I feel like I have a lot more creative time to write. Which, that was what I was supposed to be doing in the first place, but I found myself doing all kinds of other things that weren't writing. And now writing is the focus. It's wonderful.

Jarrett Hill: What does enjoying it look like?

Shonda Rhimes: To me—I mean, I have time to take walks and think about things. I have time to read novels and think about things. Things that—I mean, I think when I left the network, I had 127—I counted—books piled up around my bedroom that I had been planning to read and never had the time to read.

(Jarrett laughs.)

So, now I spend time reading, I go to the library, I get to really have a life. And honestly, you can't be creative when a life of your own isn't sort of happening. You can't—what are you going to write about when you're not in the world? So, now I have time to really be in the world.

Jarrett Hill: When I started *Queen Charlotte*, there's pretty quickly a conversation about race that starts. And in researching you and like knowing your work over the years, I've heard you talk about always reading the news and being very tapped into what's happening in the world around you. And as a journalist, I have had a difficult time staying plugged into the news over the last few years. It's like burnt me out. How are you thinking about like staying engaged with the news and trying to stay current as you're also writing these stories? Because there's definitely some moments in *Queen Charlotte* where I was like, “Hm. I feel like I could maybe see some inspiration coming from there.” How do you think about news consumption and staying current?

Shonda Rhimes: For now—and I think this started sometime during the pandemic—I stopped for a while. I pulled back, because the news really was just increasingly more disturbing and depressing. And you know, I didn't want to sort of sink in that. I wanted to be entertained. I wanted to watch something that made me feel good. And so, that's where that kind of writing for *Bridgerton* came from. But more importantly, now I really sort of limit it. Like, I have one thing I read. I have a five-minute little NPR morning thing that I listen to. And that's it. Because otherwise I'd make myself crazy with all of it, and it would fill my mind. So, I'm trying really hard to step back from it.

Jarrett Hill: I can relate to the feeling crazy by staying too tapped in. Can we hang out there a little bit? I'm curious about like making the choice to stop watching news. For me, it was feeling burnt out and exhausted and being a person with depression and anxiety, like suicidal ideation even, at its worst points, right? But once I turned it off—I remember it had only been like a couple of days I wasn't watching, and then it was a week, and then it was a few weeks,

and then it was months where I hadn't turned it on. And I started to feel myself feeling differently. I'm curious about going off of news. What was that like for you? How did it have an impact?

Shonda Rhimes: I want to say it had a huge impact. Because for me, it wasn't just that I would listen to it and feel upset and anxious—which I know is huge and really happened to a lot of people around me. I would also like—I have this enraged factor that happens. So, I would listen to the news, and I would really get angry about what was happening. And would I try to figure out like what can we do to stop this? And how can we—? And I realized that I was literally sort of like eating myself alive by listening to what was happening, because it was so bad. And that just wasn't healthy in any way, shape, or form.

And I really wanted to let it go to give myself a chance to experience the world without the doom and gloom. The other thing that you notice is how much they focus on just the doom and gloom and not on other aspects of life. Which... you know, I wish it wasn't that way. So, I sort of took a break, and the break was good.

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Jesse Thorn: We're going to take a quick break. When we return, we'll have more of Jarrett Hill's conversation with Shonda Rhimes. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Shonda Rhimes. She is, of course, the creator of *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*. She is the producer of more than a dozen other TV shows. You can watch the third season of her latest show, *Bridgerton*, on Netflix.

Interviewing Shonda is our correspondent Jarrett Hill. Jarrett is also a journalist and author. When Rhimes and Hill talked last year, she'd just launched the *Bridgerton* spinoff *Queen Charlotte*. Let's get back into their conversation.

Jarrett Hill: I wrote down, I was like—I'll probably say this at some point. Shonda, you could cure cancer and world poverty and hunger, and I would also remind people, “She also created *Scandal*.”

(They laugh.)

Like, I just want to make sure that people remember that. What do people approach you the most about from your work? ‘Cause I imagine people have various different points of entry for you.

Shonda Rhimes: They do. And what's fascinating to me is, after 20—19 seasons, heading into the 20th, it's still *Grey's Anatomy*. And I think it's because now that it's—you know, it's on Netflix. Kids are discovering that show at 12 years old. Like, fans have given birth to fans. Kids discover that show at 12 years old, and they watch the whole thing. I thought that would end at some point, but it's not ending. They're still doing it. And I know they're still doing it, because every once in a while I'll be in a grocery store, and a bunch of 12-year-olds will start following me around. And I'll realize, oh, they know who I am.

(Jarrett laughs.)

'Cause nobody else cares, but they do. So, that's the one I think. And by the way, so many young women went into sciences and became doctors because of that show, which is a really amazing thing to be proud of, and I hear about that a lot.

Jarrett Hill: Are you thinking about impact as you're writing various different kinds of shows or figuring out content? Are you thinking about that, or are you really wanting to be creative? How are you processing that?

Shonda Rhimes: You know, I never really think about how it's going to be received. I try really hard to think about how I want to put it out in the world, like how I want it to look, how I want it to be. But when you start thinking about how other people are going to take it in—for me, that's—you know, that stops me dead creatively. I can't work in that way. I sort of have to keep my responsibility to the story, not to the outcome of the story.

Jarrett Hill: You talked about writing within guardrails kind of helping to be able to kind of explore the creative. Like, knowing—and you said this in your masterclass—knowing the ways that I need to—the perimeter, essentially, of what this story is and where we're going, and I have an assignment. How did you figure the assignment for *Queen Charlotte*?

Shonda Rhimes: Mm. I'm not sure I think in assignments anymore. But I did—you know, I did set some parameters for that show, because I knew that I wanted to talk about the older women—and now they're not old, but the older women of *Bridgerton* in a different way. I wanted to bring them into a *Queen Charlotte* world and be able to—you know, the show is set in two different time periods, *Bridgerton* time period and then the Georgian era. And you're seeing them when they're young and at their current age. And I really wanted to get to explore that and see how those women sort of came into their own and who they are and listen to them talk about their lives, their sexuality. You know, all of that.

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Jarrett Hill: You said you don't write with assignments anymore. I want to hang out at “anymore”. I'm guessing that was a Netflix transition. But when you say anymore, how and when did that change?

Shonda Rhimes: There are real guardrails in network television. And they're not, you know, arbitrary, and they're not for bad reasons. They're trying to get to an audience in a certain way. And they have broadcast standards and practices that they have. My job was to try to—

not my job, but one of my jobs was to try to tell a story while remaining within their guardrails, but tell the stories I wanted to tell. Which meant telling a lot of stories that made them nervous, but in ways that they couldn't actually say shouldn't be done.

Jarrett Hill: I want to go back, because I also read your book, *The Year of Yes*. And I was really intrigued by you deciding to say yes to everything that year. And I went back and watched your Dartmouth commencement speech. And I was curious about how, after that year of yes and then doing the book and then having to talk about it for a long time I'm sure, how is yes showing up for you now—yes or no showing up for you now as you're moving through life?

Shonda Rhimes: The aftereffects of saying yes are still with me completely. You know, all of the things that I learned and the way I approach things that scare me, those have all really changed because of that experience in a real, true way. I've become comfortable with being uncomfortable. You know, I'm not a giant extrovert. I don't want to sit in front of giant audiences and talk. But now I'm comfortable with the fact that I'm uncomfortable with it, if that makes any sense, and I can sort of sit in it. And then now a lot of my *Year of Yes* learnings that I learned are about saying no, just saying no and having no be a complete sentence and just feeling comfortable with that. Feeling no guilt.

Jarrett Hill: I thought about the *Year of Yes* moment and thought about how people would try to take advantage of that and be like, “I heard you're saying yes to everything!” What was like the drawback of saying yes to everything? (*Chuckles.*) Or had you gone through that year not telling people? Like, how did that go?

Shonda Rhimes: I didn't tell people, but then the book came out. And literally everybody who asked me anything, the first way they started the question was, “I know you're saying yes to everything,” as if that meant I was guaranteed to say yes to things. And then I really did have to learn all the different ways to say no. I still say yes to some things, but truly like there is no “yes to everything” anymore. That became a little overwhelming. Although, I recommend anybody try it, at least for a year.

Jarrett Hill: A year of—I was thinking to myself, I'm like—I say yes to too much stuff sometimes, and then I'll get into things, and I'll be like, “Why did I say yes to this?” So, it's like, I probably need a year of no, of a year of being like chill out.

Shonda Rhimes: Oh, that's true. I think the year of no would do a lot of people some good right now. I agree with that.

Jarrett Hill: I would love to know a little bit more. You talk about being an introvert and not liking doing press. And I—when this came up, I was like oh! We have an hour with Shonda? That's really cool. I know that a lot of people feel uncomfortable in front of people and getting up and speaking, and most people aren't doing press. But talk to me about what that is. Like, what that anxiety or un-comfortability is with interviews and press.

Shonda Rhimes: You know, for me talking to people before—I will say this, before, talking to people I didn't know about me always felt like a really stressful experience. I would—you know, my hands would be shaking. I would somehow feel like, you know, you could—I was

like, “They can all see me sweating crazily.” It just wasn't a comfortable space for me. I wasn't used to it. I lived my life in writing. I lived my life in books, and doing that was stressful. Now though—and I don't know what this is, I will say. I discovered in this last week, which is the first time I've been doing anything in a long time, I'm completely fine! Which I found shocking. I kept waiting for that moment when I was going to go, “Can't do it, shutting down. This is too hard.” I'm fine this time. So, we'll see how long that lasts. But I've been enjoying talking to people and doing these interviews.

Jarrett Hill: Well, the first thing I wanted to ask you, but we started with a clip. I wanted to ask you like what's in the room, right? Like, what's happening with you right now? And you said in this last week that's been kind of eye opening for you, to be doing press and not feeling uncomfortable. Unpack that a little bit. What is—how is it now to be like, “Oh, maybe I'm not afraid of this anymore. Maybe I don't feel so uncomfortable”?

Shonda Rhimes: What I've found is that I'm trying to find aspects of it that I enjoy and really focusing on the aspects that make you happy or make you feel joy. It sort of counteracts. I mean, it's something I should have learned years ago. It counteracts all of that panic and fear for me in a lot of ways to really just focus on, you know, the conversation.

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Not “am I doing this badly?”, which was a lot of it. It was a lot of self-criticism going on in my head.

Jarrett Hill: I remember learning that like public speaking was the number one fear that people have and feeling really unclear about why that was. ‘Cause I was a kid who always wanted to get up and speak in class and answer the question and all of that kind of stuff. And so, now when I work with people who are learning to do public speaking or media training and stuff like that, it's interesting to me to see like the different places that that comes from, right? Some of it is I was scared in class. Some of it is my parents didn't, you know, let me speak up a lot or something like that. Do you have an idea of where that started for you, of like now wanting to get up in front of folks?

Shonda Rhimes: You know, I have a very large and very verbal—I was going to call them loud. They wouldn't like that.

(Jarrett laughs.)

I have a very large and very verbal family. I'm the youngest of six. My parents, you know, were very engaged in our growing up. We had a very noisy household where everybody spoke, and everybody felt comfortable. And I did too. I mean, I really did. I just couldn't translate that outside the home. You know, I was always like what do all these other people mean? And maybe that's because I honestly had such a comfortable, happy like little environment to live in that when I stepped out of it, I just felt uncomfortable. But I think it got worse after I got out of college.

You know, I got out of college, and then you're very new and unsure in a world in which you're supposed to make your way. And I was terrible at selling myself. I was terrible at the “making my way” part. And I think a lot of it came then, when I really had to be out in the world describing myself to people, being myself for people, showing people who I was to get a job, it was just painful.

Jarrett Hill: How did you get through that? Like, how did you—what were you telling yourself? Or did you have messaging for that?

Shonda Rhimes: (*Chuckles.*) I don't mean it was painful for me. I know it was painful for them. I mean, people I've worked with later were like, “Wow.” But for me, I think I just—what was lucky for me is that, in order to do a job as a writer, I had to provide them with something I'd written. So, in a way, that sort of saved me from—you know, I'd have these meetings, and they'd be terrible, but they'd read the script, and they would see what was there. That really helped me, because I couldn't pitch a story to anybody to save my life. And the stress was just too much.

Jarrett Hill: I'm guessing that pitching stories now is a lot easier.

Shonda Rhimes: I don't have to pitch anymore.

(*Jarrett laughs.*)

So, that's the beautiful thing that's come out of this is now I'm in a place where I don't have to do that anymore. Because, truly, in the beginning, I pitched *Grey's Anatomy* with a paper in front of my face, reading aloud in a monotone. And if anybody interrupted me with a question, I had to start back over again at the beginning. Like, it was that bad. And my hands would be shaking, and I'd be sweating. And it was just bad. So, not pitching it anymore is one of the things that I feel is one of the best gifts I've been given.

Jarrett Hill: I've heard you talk about having an idea and like—even if you're not pitching it to a network, but like taking it to people and like being curious about what the questions were that they'd have about it, or—you know—trying to figure out what was working or what wasn't. While you're not pitching to network now and like have a lot more control, as you're even like pitching your ideas to friends or people who might be interested in watching these kinds of things, does that feel different for you now as well?

Shonda Rhimes: That definitely feels different, but also they're friends. So, I have the advantage of they're not thinking horrible things about me while I'm talking, or whatever it is I'm believing in my head. What's nice is that I don't necessarily pitch a whole idea. I'll say, “I'm thinking about writing blah, blah, blah,” and I'll try to tell some facts about it. The more facts I can tell, the more I know I'm interested in it in a way that I didn't know before. And the way they react, even if it's that nice smile that says, “That seems great,” I know whether it's good or bad. It really helps me to say something to other people and then watch them take it in.

Jarrett Hill: Hm. I feel like watching people take in your content is—to me, it has been nerve wracking. Like, I don't want to look, I don't want to—like, it's very anxiety inducing actually. But do you feel that same kind of thing now when people are watching what you've created, since you've been doing it for so long now?

Shonda Rhimes: No. And I don't necessarily watch a lot of people watch what I created. That's not a thing. Like, it's not like I stand there and watch the audiences take it in, or even at a screening. But my oldest sister, who is the person who told me I never said yes in the book, but my oldest sister is the person for whom every show I've ever made, I've shown her first. Because she doesn't give a wack about how famous I am or what I've been doing. She doesn't find me important at all. But she also has this weird ability to watch a show, and from watching her, I know exactly where the problem points are. I know exactly if it's going to be successful or not.

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And she's not afraid to criticize in any way, shape or form. So, my oldest sister, Dolores, is my best critic at this point.

Jarrett Hill: Well, one of the things I was thinking about with you is I saw a headline that said you're the first woman to create three shows with 100 episodes, which was a pretty phenomenal moment in history. And as you're saying, like there are moments when you can tell if it's gonna work or not depending on how your sister is responding. I'm like, well, what didn't work?! Like what isn't hitting? Like, talk to me about a moment when it didn't really work.

Shonda Rhimes: I mean, I'm lucky in that all the shows that I created so far have worked—that I personally have created—because she's really harsh. But I have been like working on an edit, like a final edit to something before it's done and ready to give to the studio, the network, the public. I will show her those things. And she'll be very clear. She's like, “I didn't understand any of what happened here. That didn't make any sense to me.” And I will go back and make changes based on that. I shouldn't be saying that. My boss (*inaudible*).

Jarrett Hill: Well, no! I mean, I'm gonna make sure that we send this to your sister as well, but like I—

(*Chuckles.*) When you're getting that feedback of like, “This didn't make sense, and I didn't understand that,” I feel like sometimes for writers and creators, they can take that really personally. But I know that this being your sister, I would imagine that you don't take it as personally. Talk to me about taking notes and feedback though.

Shonda Rhimes: You mean from other people other than my sister?

Jarrett Hill: Both, actually.

Shonda Rhimes: From her, it's fine. She's as brutal with everybody, you know. And in terms of like shows she's watching, shows she's seen, like she will tell it like it is. You know, she's

like, “This didn’t work for me, and I don’t want to watch it.” And she’s very much in line with what other people want to watch, I find. For other places, I really believe that there’s value in a note. The note itself might be wrong, but it does signal that there’s some misunderstanding somewhere, that something could be clearer, that maybe you should look in a different direction. I don’t take notes that tell me how to fix things, but I do really take in when someone says, “This was confusing for us,” or “Is this who the character is supposed to be? Because we see this.”

Jarrett Hill: Hang out there a little bit more, about taking notes and not—I’ve not heard anyone phrase it that way of like, “I don’t take notes on what to do, but more so kind of hearing like what issues are arising.” That’s intriguing.

Shonda Rhimes: And for me, it’s don’t walk into my office and hand me your solutions. I just need to know what the problems are, because recreating it and fixing the solutions is a creative job. And that’s my job, not, you know, some executive’s job. And the people at Netflix have been really respectful of that. And there was a time when I was, you know, doing network television where I just didn’t take any notes at all. I just was like, “I’m not reading them. They’re not coming into my email box.” And that, not totally the most mature way to go, (*chuckles*) but it helped me then. And now, I’m definitely at a place where I feel more open to hearing criticism, to understanding why something’s not working, to hear that people wish I’d done something else. I’m fine with that now.

Jarrett Hill: Something I don’t feel like we spend enough time giving appreciation for, for folks like yourself—we often think of you as a writer and a creator and this big boss, oftentimes. But we don’t often necessarily talk about leadership specifically. And I’m really curious how you think about leadership. You talked about “don’t come in my office with that”, right? And that made me think about you as a leader. But like, how do you think about yourself and leadership, more specifically?

Shonda Rhimes: That was something I had to learn and learn on the job really quickly. I mean, I went from being a woman who sat at home in her pajamas and wrote movies to being somebody who had—you know, walked into an office, and I had 350 employees suddenly, and then I had 700 employees, and then I had 1,000 employees, and it’s grown. So, for me, there’s a real responsibility there, and I had to really learn what it meant to be a leader. Not just, you know, “You’re in charge, so everyone should listen to you”, but really how to make sure that things like my sets were, you know, comfortable, happy places for people to be, to take in the other ideas of writers in a writer’s room, to be able to communicate what I was thinking to a director, to empower the people around me to do their jobs instead of trying to do them myself.

That really gives people ownership of what they’re doing. But I worked on that. I learned about it. I read a lot of books. I thought about it very hard, because bad leaders are everywhere. And I don’t mean that in a bad way, but there are bad leaders everywhere and there are not very many, you know, especially good leaders. And I wanted to be one of the good ones.

Jarrett Hill: How did you approach that? Like, how did you come in thinking—? Because I remember years ago that you had like a no (*sensor beep*)hole policy, right? And like, you

don't want people on your sets or on your shows that don't have reputations for having good character or being good people.

[00:35:00]

How did you start approaching like your own leadership principles over the years?

Shonda Rhimes: They grew as I grew. I mean, there were—I would say I made a ton of mistakes as I went on, but I was really trying. And when we reached a point where I fully understood that if I'm not on set, and the set's still being run badly, that's on me. It's not on the person who's doing it, because those people reflect you, and you've put them out there to be your representative. And if they're making everybody's lives miserable, you're responsible for that. So, for me, a lot of it was really understanding that you both empower people, but also watch over people to make sure that they're, you know, conveying what you believe, not giving lip service to it.

Jesse Thorn: We got so much more to come with Shonda Rhimes. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

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Sequoia Holmes: I'm Sequoia Holmes, pop culturist and host of the *Black People Love Paramore* podcast. Contrary to the title, it is not a podcast about the band Paramore. Each episode, I—along with a special guest cohost—dissect one pop culture topic that mainstream media doesn't associate with Black people, but we know that we like. Tune in every Thursday to the podcast that's dedicated to helping Black people feel more seen, here on Maximum Fun.

(*Music fades out.*)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Our guest is Shonda Rhimes. She's being interviewed by Jarrett Hill.

Jarrett Hill: I've heard you talk about how cool it was—but also exciting and maybe weird—to have an idea and then see it like happen at such a large scale. Can you talk a little bit about what that feels like to be able to have something in your mind and begin to imagine it, and then for it to like completely manifest itself in front of you?

Shonda Rhimes: That's always still magical to me. I mean, it really is. The set of *Queen Charlotte* was so beautiful and so opulent, and so much of it was built and was there for us. I

never get over the feeling of writing like “INTERIOR, QUEEN’S BEDROOM, DAY”, and having them build an actual replica of *Queen Charlotte’s* bedroom. You know, those things are spectacular to me and very exciting, and it’s part of the fun and the magic.

Jarrett Hill: I feel like whenever I’ve had an idea and we brought it to fruition, it’s always been exciting and a little bit miraculous and... a lot of different kinds of feelings. But you’ve been doing that now for so many years. I’m intrigued that it still feels special. And how do you maintain that?

Shonda Rhimes: It’s always—I mean, I don’t know how I maintain it, but I was excited when they built me an OR for *Grey’s Anatomy*. I was excited when they built me an Oval Office that I played in a lot. (*Chuckles.*) When they—when we did *Scandal*. Those spaces—you know, standing in a space that is built for a young queen, for instance, is really empowering somehow, because you realize that you’ve made this happen. And I sort of can never get over the idea that I’ve made this happen, that I said something, and then all these people brought their artistry to bring it to life. I’m always grateful for that.

Jarrett Hill: Yeah, I have a friend who’s an actor who was on a network show and talked about coming to set and seeing how many people there were hanging lights and designing set and doing props and all this and recognizing like how much bigger than him it was. And that’s always stayed with me, as I’m moving through the world and working on things. How do you think about, you know, it being bigger than you and it going out into the world and having value for folks?

Shonda Rhimes: Well, first, I’m a person who keeps saying to people, you know, a writer doesn’t create something. Like, I write what’s a lovely blueprint, and then all of these other incredible artisans like make it a 3D experience for everybody, like a real experience, breathe air into it. And when I think about that, somehow that’s more magical to me than the fact that a bunch of people are going to see it, the finished product, because I’m always—I’m not necessarily terrified about that.

[00:40:00]

But I’m trying really hard to rein in my feelings about it, because I’m not responsible for how they feel. Like, I’m not making them feel a certain way. And I want them to be able to feel however they want to feel. It’s a hard line to walk.

Jarrett Hill: You were saying how you don’t feel responsible for like how people feel, and I think that’s such an important, powerful piece of it, right? Of being able to understand like “I don’t control how people respond to the work that I’m doing and putting it out”. I feel like a lot of creators are often worried about what people are going to think, how people are going to say—what people are going to say, what the response is going to be. Have you always been that way? Or is that a place that you’ve grown to?

Shonda Rhimes: I’ve definitely not always been that way. But at a certain point, it became really clear to me that when you believe the good things people have to say about you, then you’re also obligated to believe the bad things they say. You’re putting too much weight on that. And I wasn’t willing to put that much weight on the bad things people had to say. For a

long time, I felt like I hadn't made it, like I was still climbing and trying, and it made me really worried about other people's opinions. And at a certain point, I sort of decided I'm okay. I no longer need to worry about those things.

Jarrett Hill: I'm curious how you think about the history that is you, right? The fact that you exist and have made history in the ways that you have and had such a thumbprint on so much of the world. How do you even begin to start to think about that?

Shonda Rhimes: I was making a face while you were asking the question, because it's the legacy question, right? How will you be perceived, you know, years from now? What kind of footprint have you left? I cannot begin to answer that question. I'm not in a place where I want to spend time examining, you know, whatever the legacy is. I'm in a time still where I'm still creating. It's still crazy to me that I'm now the OG showrunner here.

(Jarrett laughs.)

But it's amazing to me. But I do feel comfortable enough in my space to keep going. And I feel like I've reached a really wonderful place, where there's no fear in creating at all. Like, my creativity just feels like it can go, and I don't have to spend time being afraid of how it will be perceived or whether or not they'll want to make it. So, to me, I'm just—I'm still making stuff.

Jarrett Hill: There's no fear in the creativity at all.

Shonda Rhimes: I feel like I've reached a point where I don't have to be afraid of making a mistake. I feel like I'm at a place where making a mistake would be completely fine for me, because it's not going to define me. You know, there was a period of time when you're, you know, the first Black woman this, the first Black woman that, that it's stressful. Like, you feel like you have to be perfect to a certain extent. And now I feel like, okay, I was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame—that's not a brag, but—by Oprah Winfrey. And that was the moment about 15 years into my career where I started to feel like, okay, you can relax. And that was not that long ago. But when Oprah tells you're good, you think you're good.

Jarrett Hill: *(Chuckles.)* Thank you so much, Shonda. We really appreciate your time today. *Queen Charlotte* is an exciting new show that's going to be out for us to be able to kind of indulge in and sink our teeth into. So, thank you for your time today.

Shonda Rhimes: Thank you. It was good to talk to you.

Jesse Thorn: Shonda Rhimes. As we said, you can catch the latest season of *Bridgerton* now on Netflix.

Our thanks to our correspondent Jarrett Hill for talking with Shonda. Last year, along with his friend Tre'vell Anderson, Jarrett co-wrote *Historically Black Phrases*. It's a terrific book.

Transition: Bright, cheerful 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—as well as our offices on beautiful MacArthur Park. Here at my house, I'm about to get a visit from my friend, Mariel Reyes, who worked on the show for a year. She was one of our first ever interns and a wonderful pal. She's visiting from New York City. Hi, Mariel.

Our 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, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is called “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for providing it.

Bullseye is on Instagram. We have pictures from behind the scenes and videos and more. Find us at [@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.

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