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

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org 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. So, I don't think that it is hyperbolic for me to say that my next guest... lives for the movies. Growing up, Alonso Duralde would memorize showtimes out of his local newspaper. He would beg his mom to take him to the repertory theatre to see *Citizen Kane* one whole town over. Adult Alonso Duralde is a film critic and arts writer. He's worked for *The Wrap*, *The Advocate*, MSNBC, and many other outlets. Alongside Drea Clark and Ify Nwadiwe, he's the host of our very own movie show, *Maximum Film*.

Alonso is also an expert, maybe the expert, on Hallmark Christmas Movies, but we're gonna have to save that for another conversation so that we can focus on this. He just published a terrific new book. It's called *Hollywood Pride: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Representation and Perseverance in Film*. Like the title suggests, Duralde looks at the history of film through a queer lens. He talks about the different ways Hollywood has, and hasn't, portrayed queerness on screen. And he tells the story of queer writers, actors, and directors—some of them household names, some you may never have heard of. It's a great time, great read, great coffee table book. I can't wait for you to hear about it. Let's get into my conversation with Alonso Duralde.

Transition: Bassy, percussive synth.

Jesse Thorn: Alonso Duralde, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you, friend.

Alonso Duralde: I am thrilled to be here, both in the physical space and on the program.

Jesse Thorn: I don't know much about your own personal history with movies, other than the fact that you're the person I know who sees literally every movie in existence.

(They chuckle.)

Alonso Duralde: Oh, believe me, I have friends who put me to shame in that regard, but I'll take it. I'm a lifelong obsessive. I was pretty much doomed from the start.

Jesse Thorn: How lifelong are we talking about? Are we talking about since you were 15, or are we talking about since you were four?

Alonso Duralde: Three. Three/four years old.

(Jesse laughs.)

I learned—part of how I learned to read, in addition to watching *Sesame Street*, was I would go into the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* every day, and I could tell you what was showing at any movie theater within about a five-mile radius of my house. I wasn't going to movies yet, but I knew they were there, and I was just already kind of into them. I liken it to that scene in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, where the kid sees chess being played in the park for the first time. And he comes home, and he makes his own chess board with like stuffed animals or whatever. There was just something about movies, however I was absorbing them from television and other places, that I just—it immediately set off some series of neurons in my brain. And it's just been a thing I've always been super excited about.

And then when I was nine years old, my oldest brother graduated from college. He'd gone to Harvard in the early '70s. And that was this moment where—that's like the *Casablanca* revival, the Marx Brothers revival. A lot of it came out of repertory and scholarship that was happening there. So, he comes home with all of these books about Hitchcock and MGM and Greta Garbo. And nine-year-old nerd me is just devouring this stuff and combing the TV Guide and circling when movies are going to be on. Because this is pre-cable. This is pre-VHS. I'm just having to go with what I've got. And then luckily, Atlanta had one repertory theater that was on the other side of town. But every so often it was a treat where we'd all pack in the car and go see, you know, *Notorious* or something. When I was 11, I begged my mom to drive me there so I could finally see *Citizen Kane*.

(Jesse laughs.)

This is the dorkiest origin story on earth, I know.

Jesse Thorn: It's not like you want—you were like, “Mom, take me to see *Last Action Hero*,” or something. It's *Citizen Kane* that you're begging to see.

Alonso Duralde: (Laughs.) Well, 'cause—I mean, look, I could see *Star Wars* in the suburbs. Like, we had theaters showing that stuff. But like, you know, *Citizen Kane* never seemed to come on television when I was looking for it. I kept reading about it. Everybody said how important it was. And so, finally it was like, I gotta see this thing. And so—and she took me, bless her.

Jesse Thorn: What was your first experience of queerness in movies? Explicit or implicit.

Alonso Duralde: Yeah, I mean, implicit, I'm sure there were a lot of—you know, there's always, you know, Edward Everett Horton in a Fred Astaire musical or some kind of like arched eyebrow innuendo. The one that really stuck with me at a time when I was beginning to figure out my own queerness and probably like terrified me—I blame this movie for extending my stay in the closet. There was an early '80s thriller called *The Fan*.

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And it starred Michael Bain from *The Terminator* and *Aliens*.

Jesse Thorn: This is not to be confused with that other movie called *The Fan*.

Alonso Duralde: The De Niro *Fan*, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: The classic of San Francisco Giants cinema.

Alonso Duralde: Exactly. No bobbleheads in this one. But there is Lauren Bacall as a Broadway star. Michael Biehn plays a stalker of Broadway star Lauren Bacall. And at one point he needs to fake his own death to throw the police off his trail. So, there's a scene where he goes into a gay bar. He picks up a guy who's kind of his general appearance. They go to the roof of a building. Michael Bain's new friend begins to fillet him off screen. Michael Bain pulls out a straight razor in a pink plastic sheath—I always remember this detail—slits the guy's throat, sets the body on fire, leaves a suicide note to try and, you know, fake out the cops.

That moment stayed with me for a very long time. (*Chuckles.*) And it was the first time I'd seen anything resembling like male sexuality, male-to-male sexuality in a movie. And it was just like, “Oh! That's what happens.”

Jesse Thorn: Where were you in your life when you got comfortable enough with your own identity that you sort of explicitly, in your own mind, started to investigate the queer history of this medium that you were completely obsessed with?

Alonso Duralde: Oh, I was still in high school and very, very much in the closet. I didn't come out until the very end of college. But I remember distinctly standing in the library reading Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* standing up by the shelf. Like, I wasn't going to take it to a table. I certainly wasn't going to check it out, but I would just stand there in the place in the library where that book lived and just read, read, read. And yeah, that was—my first reading of that book was in shifts, standing in the middle of the stacks.

Jesse Thorn: In some ways, *Hollywood Pride* is like a follow up to that book.

Alonso Duralde: It is. I mean, it's definitely one of the forefathers here. I'm standing on the shoulders of a lot of giants here, but the thrust of the book was to sort of mixed. Because *Celluloid Closet* is about on-screen representation and the way that sort of queer narrative as depicted in movies—mostly American movies, but not entirely—has evolved over the decades. And so, I wanted to capture that. But at the same time, I was also trying to tell the history of all the people, of the LGBTQ+ artists who made early Hollywood happen, who've made all of cinema happen in one way or another. You know, and then eventually there's the sort of—the meeting of two rivers where it's like, oh, queer feature films made by queer filmmakers. You know, which really changes the game.

Jesse Thorn: I feel like, in the 1980s in particular, the AIDS crisis sort of fed into gay visibility in broader popular culture in a variety of ways. First of all, it fed, you know, groups like ACT UP and stuff and broader pride movements who were really using that crisis and recognizing that crisis as a time when visibility was really necessary. That it was an emergency to be visible. I think also in show business, as people who were famous were

getting sick and dying, it made it more conspicuous how queer the creative community in Hollywood was.

Alonso Duralde: Definitely. Yeah, I think—you know, Elizabeth Taylor always tells the story about how she would get so furious when people would say like, “Oh, you know, it's what they deserve” or you know, “the right people are getting it” or whatever.

And she would say, you know, “Without a queer influence, like there is no art.” You know, there's no music, there's no painting, all this stuff over the centuries. You know, Fran Lebowitz famously has said that, you know, without the influence of queer artists, that American culture would basically be *Let's Make a Deal*.

(They laugh.)

So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Fran Lebowitz is really funny.

Alonso Duralde: So, yeah, I think it did, you know, certainly highlight that fact. But at the same time, like Hollywood was—as often it often is—you know, running scared, being as conservative as possible. And so, whatever like small political gains were starting to be made in the '70s after, you know, the Stonewall Riot and the Black Cat Riot here in Los Angeles and other sort of protests and uprisings around the country, AIDS suddenly like slammed a lot of people back in the closet and really made people nervous about queer material. And so, it gets to this place where, in the mainstream anyway—you know, you have this, bubbling up in the early '80s of films like, you know, *Victor/Victoria* and *Making Love* and *Personal Best*.

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By the end of the '80s, nobody wants to tell those stories at all. And if they are, it's almost entirely in an AIDS prism. You know, TV movies. These very, you know, earnest TV movies about people dying of AIDS, and how does it affect their straight family members, and that kind of thing. To the extent that when Harvey Fierstein makes a movie of his Broadway hit, *Torch Song Trilogy*, and it comes out in 1988, even though it is set almost entirely in the '70s and early '80s, all these straight critics are like, “Well, why isn't AIDS mentioned in this movie?” Like, they couldn't perceive of a story that's about, you know, gay men not being also about AIDS.

It's a double-bladed sword. On the one hand, obviously, we lost a lot of people. And it was devastating. But I think it also kind of threw a spotlight on the kind of casual discrimination in this country about queer issues. And because it was such a pressing issue and one that, you know, had to be addressed and quickly, it did politicize the queer community in a way that nothing really had beforehand, and I think brought the community together in a lot of ways. Because you had, you know, trans people who were also dealing with AIDS. You had lesbian caregivers, you know, who were—you know, when at first they weren't as affected by HIV, but they were taking care of the gay men in their lives. And it—you know, organizations were created. Not just ACT UP, but more sort of like legal and political and social and

medical. It did, you know, create the gay community as we know it now in a lot of ways that I think wouldn't have happened had we not had to come together to deal with this, you know, crippling pandemic.

Jesse Thorn: We've got even more to get into with Alonso Duralde after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm here with critic and film writer Alonso Duralde. He's written for *The Wrap*, *The Village Voice*, MSNBC, and many others. We're talking about his terrific new book, *Hollywood Pride: A Celebration of LGBTQ+ Representation and Perseverance in Film*. Let's get back into our conversation.

One of the actors who is featured in your book, who is someone that I had not thought about at all until four weeks ago and have thought about a lot in the last four weeks, is a guy named Stephen Stucker. Now, I just happened to have interviewed Zucker, Abrams, Zucker, recently—the writer/directors of *Airplane!*, among many other movies. And in their book about *Airplane!* and their careers, there's a lot of stuff about Stephen Stucker. And for folks who've seen *Airplane!* and don't remember him, he is the kind of bald guy with the earring who is the only character in all of *Airplane!* who seems to be in on the joke. Like, he is just a total, insane chaos force in every scene that he's in.

Alonso Duralde: *(Laughs.)* Yes.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Speaker 1: Boss, head man, top dog, big cheese, a head honcho, number—

Speaker 2: Captain! Look at this!

(They pass a newspaper around.)

Speaker 1: The passenger's certain to die.

Speaker 3: Airline negligent.

Johnny: There's a sale at Penny's!

Speaker 1: Alright, I'll need three men up in the tower. You, Neubauer? Come and see us.

Johnny: Me, John, Big Tree.

Speaker 1: Stand by, Stryker. We're going to the tower. Good luck.

Speaker 2: We're going to the tower.

Johnny: The tower! The tower! Rapunzel! Rapunzel!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: This is a dude who, at least according to the Zucker, Abrams book, is a guy who—these three dudes are squares who came to LA from Wisconsin. Like, they're just dorks, you know. They're just dorks who like silly jokes, and they're just the most culturally boring straight guys ever with no interest in anything other than silly jokes. Like, no interest in—no perspective on the world other than “wouldn't it be great if there were silly jokes?”—right? And when they're casting in LA, Stephen Stucker shows up literally in gold lamé. Like, not hyperbolically, but like in gold lamé that's open down to his navel and just is Stephen Stucker immediately. They have no idea how to incorporate this into what they're doing.

Alonso Duralde: Now, is this for *Airplane!* or for *Kentucky Fried Movie*?

Jesse Thorn: This is before *Kentucky Fried Movie*. This is for their theatre company.

Alonso Duralde: Oh, wow. Oh! The Kentucky Fried Theatre. Okay.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And so, this dude shows up and they're basically like, “We don't know what this is. This is completely different from what we are doing, but this is so great that we'd better find a place for it.”

(They laugh.)

[00:15:00]

Like, he's like smoking cigarettes with a cigarette holder and like the whole nine yards. Right? Just a completely wild chaos force. He ended up dying of AIDS. But when he was sick, for the years between his diagnosis and his death, he was very public about his diagnosis—which is something that was not true for a lot of people who were sick at the time.

Alonso Duralde: Oh no, absolutely not. I mean, you know I think we tend to forget now with time, but the movie *Longtime Companion* gets its title from the fact that was the euphemism the *New York Times* would use for someone's same sex partner. Because so often in obituaries, nobody died from AIDS related complications. They all had pneumonia, or they had cancer, or they had anemia, or like some other kind of medical thing—which they did indeed have. But it was—you kept that quiet. People—there was a panic about am I going to get it shaking hands or sharing a water glass? There was a lot of ignorance and misinformation floating around. And a lot of people in the industry certainly, they felt like if they wanted to keep working, they were going to have to keep mum about it. And

Stephen Stucker was a real hero, and he went on *Donahue* and talked about it. He went, you know, to the press and talked about it. And you know, I think paved a way for people later on to be more outspoken about their HIV status and about living with AIDs. Which was a thing that lot of Americans were either thinking, “This is never going to affect me. I don't know anybody. This is for them. It's not an issue in my life.” Or they thought, “Well, you know, you get it, you die. That's it.” And so, Stucker was out there being like, “Hi. You've enjoyed me in films. This is where I am right now, and I'm alive, and I'm taking care of myself, and other people are too.”

Jesse Thorn: And who could be more alive than that guy? (*Chuckles.*)

Alonso Duralde: Very alive, exactly.

Jesse Thorn: But when he passed away, his death was not reported as being of complications from AIDs.

Alonso Duralde: Yeah, even for all of his efforts in that regard, when *Variety* ran the obituary, they didn't mention what the cause of death was. And in fact, another obit in the *LA Daily News* did point that out and pointed out *Variety* looking it over. And I think there was this sort of agreed upon silence going on within the film industry. So, an industry publication like *Variety* is like, “Well, we know, but we're not going to say. Because—” You know, whereas other people are like, “He said it first and loudly. And by not bringing it up, you know, you're making it awkward now.”

Jesse Thorn: One of the people I was really interested to read about was an actor named J. Warren Kerrigan. And I knew nothing about this man. Tell me about him.

Alonso Duralde: J. Warren Kerrigan was one of the very first movie stars. You know, the movies went through this period where actors weren't identified at first, you know. And so, there's kind of a sudden—a breakthrough early on where like, okay, we're going to start identifying these people so that they can, you know, have fans, and you can follow them from film to film. And J. Warren Kerrigan was this handsome, charismatic, macho leading man star of like, you know, action stuff. And all of the coverage about him talks about how devoted he is to his mother, how much he loves his mother, how close they are, how she lives with him. But what a regular guy he is, all the same. And, you know, a regular Joe.

And he is a huge, huge star of—you know, like we're talking the mid-teens, the 1915. You know. Pre-talkie cinema. He gets in a little bit of trouble at the beginning of World War I, when he makes an ill-advised statement to the press, basically saying that, you know, regular people should get drafted before artists and the important folks. And that kind of, you know, diminished his star for a while. But then he came back and did another big movie. But by about 1925, he's done with the picture business.

Jesse Thorn: He had been the star—he is the star of the first version of *Captain Blood*, the movie that was remade into the Errol Flynn swashbuckling classic had been made in the '20s, with Kerrigan as one of the stars.

Alonso Duralde: Yeah. And you know, actually that becomes a history of like, you know, silent movies—you know, *Ben-Hur* and *King of Kings* getting remade as big talkies. But yeah. So, he's a very big deal, and then just kinda walks away from it. And never—you know, he doesn't have a sham marriage or anything like that, but also is very quiet about his private life. And it's just like, you know, loved his mother, so close to his mother.

Jesse Thorn: And has a partner who is apparently often referred to as either is his secretary or gardener.

[00:20:00]

Alonso Duralde: Yes.

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: I read. I'd love to have a live-in gardener.

Alonso Duralde: That's the stuff!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I think that one of the contributions of queer criticism and the queer understanding of film is because the artist's intent and the lives of the artists are often substantially unknowable. You know, let's say—especially before, say, the '80s.

(Alonso agrees.)

As you said, the evidence, such as it is, is pretty modest. And the very idea that it is evidenced suggests that it's like a case that needs to be proven against someone. But those films, especially before the '80s, are rarely explicit in their queerness. That is to say, not sexually explicit, but like specific. And so, investigating this issue—I presume as a critic for you, but certainly more broadly cultural—requires an understanding of the way that this art has an artist's intent, exists as a text, and that the meaning of that text exists in the viewer as much as it does in the imagination of the artist. And that's something that I think is special about queerness, because it can be invisible, that it requires that understanding of us as people watching things to realize, “Oh, a huge part of what art is is about how the audience experiences it.”

Alonso Duralde: Yeah, definitely. I mean, my joke has always been that, you know, this is one of those things where you can't find birth certificates or land records that are going to tell you the thing you want to know. That you have to sort of rely on, you know, in some cases, interviews given late in life or memoirs or diaries or whatever. But more often than not, gossip basically becomes the currency. And you have to sort of trust your sources and figure out who knows what they're talking about and who's got some kind of backup with, you know, persons living or dead who can attest to these things.

But I've really come to appreciate over the years—the show that I do, you know, *Maximum Film*, our sort of standing tagline motto is it's not just three straight, White guys talking about movies. Over the years, I've really come to appreciate perspectives from different

communities. One time I was researching a podcast episode about Howard Hawks's *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, and I was astonished at how many male critics who loved Hawks and wrote extensively about him—your Francois Truffauts, your Peter Bogdanoviches—just sort of dismissed that one as being this sort of light, nothing kind of movie.

And it's not until Molly Haskell comes up and other women are writing about it, and they're talking about, no, this is a Howard Hawks buddy movie. But instead of being two cowboys, it's two showgirls. You know? And putting it in the context of his work, putting it in the context of, you know, American film in general. And you know, certainly Black film critics have made me appreciate not just Black cinema, but, you know, *Steamboat Willie* in a way that I hadn't really thought about before. You know.

And so, if I can be a part of that conversation and just sort of say, “Hey, you know this movie, and you've seen this movie in this way. May I suggest you might also think about this movie in this other way?”

Jesse Thorn: I want to talk about movies from the last 30/35 years that are specifically queer in their themes and subjects. How do you feel about the movies about mostly gay men that relatively mainstream Hollywood released in the late 1980s, early 1990s—as that became an acceptable subject matter, as people were wearing red ribbons to the Oscars? You know what I mean?

(Alonso affirms.)

Like, how do you feel about the *Philadelphias* and the *Bird Cages* and stuff?

Alonso Duralde: You know, I really try to—it's funny, you know, I talk about you have to sort of understand previous eras and be forgiving of them. And I was there for those, you know. I have more of a first-person stance. The person I was in the early '90s was kind of annoyed with those movies in different ways, because we'd already had—you know, the new queer cinema was happening at the same time. So, like once I've seen *The Living End*, it's hard for me to go back to *Philadelphia*, you know.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Speaker 1: *(Weakly.)* What do you call 1,000 lawyers chained together at the bottom of the ocean?

Speaker 2: I don't know.

Speaker 1: A good start. *(Strained laughter.)*

[00:25:00]

Speaker 2: Excellent work, Counselor.

Speaker 1: I thank you.

Speaker 2: It was great working with you, Counselor.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Alonso Duralde: Looking at it with historical perspective, it was absolutely the right movie for the right moment. If you wanted to get a mass audience in to see a movie about AIDS and about a gay man with AIDS, you got to put Tom Hanks in there; you got to put like America's boy sweetheart in there, you know, dealing with it. Is he going to never kiss his hot husband played by Antonio Banderas? He is not. Did that annoy me at the time? Absolutely. Does it still annoy me? A little. But!

Jesse Thorn: Alonso, Antonio Banderas sat in that chair that you're sitting in right now one time. And I, as a straight man—all I wanted to do was kiss Antonio Banderas.

Alonso Duralde: Right?!

Jesse Thorn: He's the most beautiful human being on Earth! Gee whiz!

Alonso Duralde: It is a universal sentiment. But I get why they didn't do it. You know, again, you're getting that audience in there that you could not pull teeth to get them to see, you know, *The Living End* or other sort of—you know, these angry, low budget queer movies that were really like—that I was excited about at the time. But if you want to get them in to see this sort of, you know, issue movie, which is what *Philadelphia* is—you know, you are accommodating them. You are giving them the Denzel Washington character to take them on the same arc that a lot of audience members are, where they're like, “Who is this guy? Ew, gay, ugh.” And then like, “I get it. I see you two are in love. You are being wronged by the system. This is an injustice.”

You know, that movie is crafted to appeal to and bring along and maybe, you know, help evolve the people who would never in a million years want to see it. And it was important for that, and I praise it for that. *The Birdcage*... (*Sighs heavily.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(*Clinking silverware.*)

Armand: Alright, first, get your pinky down. It's up again.

Albert: Alright. (*Sighs.*)

Armand: And your posture. (*A smacking sound.*)

Albert: (*Squealing.*) Oh my god! Are you crazy?! What are you doing?!

Armand: Stop screaming. I'm teaching you to act like a man.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Alonso Duralde: You know, look. Mike Nichols and Elaine May are geniuses. I love Nathan Lane, the late Robin Williams. I mean, like there's a lot of great stuff going on there. That movie never spoke to me at all. Because it—to me, *Le Cage aux Folles*, the original French film from the '70s is I think so cowardly for the moment. Because you've got these two characters who have been a couple for decades, and they never show any kind of affection to each other. And again—and this is a French comedy. Like, I think they could have gotten away with that, and it would have been okay. But they just—they skirted that, and that's probably part of why it became a hit in this country and elsewhere.

But by the time we get to *The Birdcage*, I was really not needing that story anymore. But I'm sure for like some closeted teenager who went to see it with their parents, it was for them what like *Victor/Victoria* was for me, watching it on cable over and over again. So, I get why people like that movie. I get what they take out of that movie and why it matters, you know, in the overall cultural sense. (*Sighs.*) But for me at that point, it just—it didn't speak to my experience as a gay man dealing with, you know, not just AIDS, but civil rights issues and other stuff. And not that I didn't want to see a comedy, not that I didn't want to see a farce, but it was so broad and so safe that it just—it was never my movie.

Jesse Thorn: I think it also speaks to a certain kind of track that became kind of ubiquitous in Hollywood at the time. And like, I've been thinking about this, because I saw *Dicks: The Musical*, which is very funny. And Nathan Lane is great in it. And Nathan Lane has been talking a lot more lately about what his experience was of being in show business at that time. And obviously, there aren't a lot of more talented comedy performers than Nathan Lane. And Nathan Lane's comedy is frankly not super culturally specific such that it would like alienate people who don't get it. You know what I mean?

(*Alonso agrees.*)

Like, it's pretty accessible. He's a pretty broad performer, you know. It's pretty easy to see, right? But Lane, in part because of that film, ended up in a—I was about to call it a lane, but let's call it a category, of just like gay guy that was so limited at the time in show business that it kind of ate up his film career.

[00:30:00]

That was like the lane that was available for gay actors who were out, was like “gay guy” as the whole—as what the character is.

Alonso Duralde: Yeah, you can be Gay Neighbor or like, you know, Gay Friend or, you know, Wisdom Spouting Drag Queen. It was a pretty short list of options there.

Jesse Thorn: One of the movies from that time that was relatively mainstream, though not a Hollywood production, that I went back and watched recently is *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* has like a profoundly racist caricature in it.

(Alonso agrees.)

And is very specifically, I would say, Australian profoundly racist caricature. Like, very culturally specifically racist. And it also, obviously, stars a cis, straight dude in Terence Stamp.

Alonso Duralde: Yes, as a trans woman.

Jesse Thorn: Stipulating those two things—like, this is a movie that I saw when it came out, and I guess I was 13 or something. 14, I don't know. And I was prepared to be forced to reevaluate it in the context of what I know now as a 40-something, rather than as a young teen. And what I found was, oh, I love this. Like, I love Terence Stamp and his character. Which, you know, I have personal reasons to believe that trans people should play trans characters.

(Alonso agrees.)

But it's such a beautiful performance, such a beautiful character.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Speaker: But in some strange way, it takes care of us. I don't know if that ugly wall of suburbia has been put there to stop them getting in or us getting out.

(The other character sobs softly.)

Come on, don't let it drag you down. Let it toughen you up. I can only fight because I've learned to. Being a man one day and a woman the next isn't an easy thing to do.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Alonso Duralde: I think that any movie made, you know, 20/30/80 years ago, you have to—you know, you have to provide it with a little bit of slack. And you can go in knowing audiences of that moment viewed it in a far different way than we view them now. And we're just gonna—we're gonna ride through that part, and it's gonna be okay. You know, and if we have to fast forward through it, we will even do that. You know, you could fast forward

through the racist caricature of *Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and there's a lot of other things to enjoy there.

And the young people now who are angry about that stuff and refuse to watch it and tell you that, you know, you're part of the problem if you still find anything to enjoy in those films—I hate to break it to you, but 50 years from now, the culture that you think is above reproach right now is going to bother somebody. And probably like either actively or passively offend somebody somehow, because that's just how the cultural evolution works. You can either dismiss an entire era of filmmaking, or you can just sort of work around it and be like, “Well, that's a thing they thought was a good idea. We know better than that now. But let's just move past it.”

Jesse Thorn: I think the thing that was special as I watched *Priscilla* a year or two ago, was that—you know, for a movie from the early 1990s about a trans lady in a giant shoe on a bus with a 20-foot train flying behind her, it is so kind to its characters. There is no need for it to be like a powerful message about—capital S, capital I—Social Issues in that kind of *Philadelphia* way. It's a character that's comfortable being about human beings dealing with human problems, and it's also really funny. (*Chuckles.*)

Alonso Duralde: Yeah, no, it's a very entertaining film. And you know, I remember at the time even sort of having the conversation about “won't it be great when we can have gay characters who just are?” You know, it's not about them being gay. It's not about them coming to terms with it, or the problem they're causing for other people by being gay, but just part of the landscape. You know, I think it was Quentin Crisp who said that the ultimate victory for queer rights is to make gay people boring.

(*They chuckle.*)

You know, and so—yeah, if we can just sort of be there, and be there in a comedy or in a drama or in a whatever, and it not be the focal point, the focal issue of it. I think that for a long time, that's what we were fighting for. And we're seeing a lot of cinema now that reflects that, where it's just—we're part of the landscape.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a quick break. On the other side, me and Alonso will talk about one of my favorite documentaries, *Paris is Burning*—a legendary classic.

[00:35:00]

It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Upbeat, quirky banjo music.

Dan McCoy: I'm Dan McCoy.

Stuart Wellington: I am Stuart Wellington.

Elliott Kalan: I'm Elliott Kalan.

Stuart: And together, we are *The Flop House*: a long-running podcast on the Maximum Fun Network where we watch a bad movie and then talk about it.

Dan: And because we're so long running, maybe you haven't given us a chance. I get it, but you don't actually have to know anything about previous episodes to enjoy us. And I promise you that if you find our voices irritating, we grow endearing over time.

Elliott: Perhaps you listened to one of our old episodes and decided that we were dumb and immature. Well, we've been doing this a while now. We have become smarter and more mature, and generally nicer to Dan.

Stuart: But we are only human, so nooo promises!

Dan: Find *The Flop House* on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get podcasts.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is film critic and writer Alonso Duralde. He just wrote a new book called *Hollywood Pride*.

Can we talk for a second about *Paris is Burning*?

Alonso Duralde: Yeah!

Jesse Thorn: *Paris is Burning* is one of my favorite movies of all time.

Alonso Duralde: Good choice.

Jesse Thorn: A movie I saw as a—maybe even as a kid, and saw relatively recently as well. For folks who haven't seen that movie, what is it?

Alonso Duralde: So, the director Jennie Livingston is telling the story of the Harlem balls, which are these competitive drag events. If you watch the show *Pose*, it's set in that world, and actually Livingston directed at least one episode of that show. And so, you know, it's the late '80s when she's telling this story. So, you have this community who has—you know, they're dealing with poverty, they're dealing with HIV, AIDS, a lot of other things. But they

are taking care of each other. You have these houses, you know. They're kind of the teams of these ball competitions. And—

Jesse Thorn: But they're also—because people are, as you said, taking care of each other, because they're often alienated from their families of origin and their places of origin, they're families.

Alonso Duralde: Absolutely. Yeah, you have people who were kicked out of their houses for being trans or for just being—for being queer. And so, yeah, they have found a new home, you know, in the city. And you know, these competitive balls—you might be thinking, oh, it's, you know, fabulous gowns. And yes, that's certainly in there, but you also have these categories like “executive realness”, where—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, just shout out to executive realness. I love executive realness so much.

Alonso Duralde: You know, school girl. You know, where you're very specifically trying to pass for these different strata of society.

Jesse Thorn: But also, sort of enact them, right? Like, it's not just a direct representation of those things. But just, as with all forms of drag, passing is one of the qualities in it. But like, there's also—I'm just thinking about executive realness, right? It's people in business suits. And like, it is about expressing whatever the essence of that way of being in the world is.

Alonso Duralde: Right. Instead of voguing, you'll have somebody coming out with a briefcase. And the way they'll sort of unfold and refold the *Wall Street Journal* is their—that's the voguing for executive realness.

Jesse Thorn: Right! It's so cool!

Alonso Duralde: (*Chuckles.*) Which is amazing. And it also sort of serves this reminder of, you know, if you are an impoverished Black person in New York City in the late 1980s, are you going to get—is that Wall Street job going to get offered to you? Probably not. And so, you know, you are enacting it. You know, you are enacting it as this sort of like aspirational thing to show your full capability of doing so and of passing, as you say. And you get to know the house mothers and some of the performers. And it's everything from what they call Butch Queen, First Time in Drags at a Ball—which is self-explanatory—to trans women.

You know, you see—you follow Octavia StLaurent as she goes out into the world to like an open casting call for like the Eileen Ford agency.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Octavia St. Laurent: This is my idol, Paulina. Someday I hope to be up there with her. If that could be me, I think I would be the happiest person in the world, just

knowing that I am—that I can compare to Paulina, to stand next to her and to take pictures with her. And I look at her here, and I'd say she's seductive, and she's alluring. I look at her there, and I say she's sexy and provocative. I look at her here, and I think that she's childish and little girl type, you know. And I look at her here, and it's the same. And I look at her here, and I think of wicked beauty, you know. That's how I see her. I admire her. You know, the red-hot fire of hair and... the whole bit.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

[00:40:00]

Alonso Duralde: It is a beautiful portrait of a community. It has a lot of exuberant performance in it. There is tragedy as well. I think there are very few queer films that have had the ongoing resonance of *Paris is Burning*. Like, first on, you know, *America's Next Top Model*, it became the language of how they would talk to models about posing and about, you know, doing the things that—the elements of voguing essentially. And then, you know, *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Pose* and all of these other places. And so, so much of slang and kind of fashion ideas and performance ideas really come from what *Paris is Burning* brought to a mass audience.

Jesse Thorn: So, as a gay guy who has basically been living as a film critic since you were four, who's never had a different career aspiration and has never had a different career, this is in some ways the project of your life, right?

(Alonso laughs.)

But it's also the project of your life. Like, it's also a thing that you did recently—you know, on the one hand, you've been watching movies and I'm sure thinking about them in terms of their queerness for your whole life. On the other hand, at some point you started writing this book and realized, "I've really got to be on top of this. I want to get this right, because this is the thing I care about most in the world." I wonder how what came out of this reconsideration was different from what you imagined it be when being when you went into it.

Alonso Duralde: You know, I had kind of a little roadshow version of this in my book. You know, when I was working at Outfest, one of the programs that Outfest does that I think is so great is called Outset. And it's a program for filmmakers between the ages of like—I want to say 15 and 25—to come in. And they take classes with screenwriters and with cinematographers and directors and actors and really learn all of the mechanics of filmmaking. And then at the end of the course, they get into groups, and they make like five short films.

But it became a thing where the person coordinating it would ask me to come in and do like an hour where I would sort of walk them through the history of LGBTQ+ cinema. So, I had that version at the forefront of my mind. But then, yeah, you sit down and do it, and it's like, "Okay. Well, I didn't know about this or, oh, I should probably throw this in as well." And it becomes more and more involved. And yeah, there is that pressure of like I don't want to

screw this up. (*Chuckles.*) I want to get this right. I want to get my facts straight. I don't want to exclude any major people or films.

And then also having to sort of realize that you've got 130 years of cinema to pack into—you know, between two covers. So, yeah, I don't know what the answer is. I gave it my best shot, and I hope people like it.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Alonso, it's always really great to see you. And thanks for this book. It's such a cool book. I learned so much. I had such a great time reading it.

Alonso Duralde: Oh, thank you, Jesse. It's great to be here, and I'm delighted you enjoyed it.

Jesse Thorn: Alonso Duralde. His great new book is called *Hollywood Pride: a Celebration of LGBTQ+ Representation and Perseverance in Film*. It's a great time. Very pleasant book to flip through and find out about something that you'd never heard of before. Also, we mentioned this previously, but Alonso is every week on the Maximum Fun podcast *Maximum Film*. It's a really fun, smart, and funny show about the movies, different movie every week. Great show. You should listen to it.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a fast beat.

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 then I—but the mosquitoes were getting in. So, I got like sheer curtains, and I hung those in front. I'd also think 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 in 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.

[00:45:00]

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 signoff.

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

(Music ends.)