

[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. Have you ever seen *Blood Simple*? It came out in 1984. It is a haunting drama about infidelity and murder. Frances McDormand and Dan Hedaya star, along with the great M. Emmett Walsh in the role he was always meant to play: the slimiest private investigator in the Lone Star State.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Speaker (*Blood Simple*): Don't come around here anymore. If I need you, I'll know what rock to turn over.

Speaker 2: (*Cackles.*) That's good, you know. “What rock to turn over”—that's very, very good! (*Laughs.*) Give me a call whenever you want to cut off my head. I can always crawl around without it.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: And if you have seen it, you know that it is great. Beautifully paced, beautifully shot, beautifully written. You probably know also that it was the first feature film from Joel and Ethan Coen, the Coen brothers. They spent a year raising money for it, even shooting a proof-of-concept trailer for investors. Here's something you might not know about the movie: it was Barry Sonnenfeld's first film too.

Barry Sonnenfeld, the director of *Men in Black*, *Get Shorty*, *The Addams Family*, *Wild Wild West*—he was the cinematographer on *Blood Simple*. Sonnenfeld was fresh out of film school at NYU. And according to Barry, he got the gig because he made friends with the Coens, and also because—and this was probably the clincher—owned a camera. It's an extraordinary chapter in what I think is fair to call an extraordinary career. \

Along with the movies he directed, Sonnenfeld served as cinematographer on the Coens' *Raising Arizona* and *Miller's Crossing*, on *Throw Mama from the Train*, *When Harry Met Sally*. He writes about all that and more in his new memoir, *Best Possible Place, Worst Possible Time: True Stories from a Career in Hollywood*. I'm so thrilled to welcome Barry Sonnenfeld to *Bullseye*. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Upbeat, thumpy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Barry Sonnenfeld, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show, and I enjoyed your book so much.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Ah! Thank you, I'm so happy to be on your show.

Jesse Thorn: You were making an argument in favor of affectation before we went on microphone, a pro-affectation argument. I was thinking, you—look, there's some affectation anecdotes in the book, but I happen to have the book immediately in front of me. And I was like, yes, this is a man who on the cover of his own book is wearing a wristwatch on each wrist.

Barry Sonnenfeld: (*Laughs.*) Yes, I have to tell you that that affectation has done me well. There are several others that wear two wristwatches, although now it's become quite a thing, I think. But I met Brian Williams, and he had two wristwatches. And one of his wristwatches is the same of one of mine, which is the Breitling Emergency. If you unscrew a knob on the Breitling Emergency, it will send out a “rescue me please” signal on both the EMT rescue channel and to satellites in outer space. And Breitling will pay, I think, up to \$100,000 to have you rescued if you're in need of being rescued.

Jesse Thorn: When you say satellites in outer space... they would do the rescuing?

Barry Sonnenfeld: They receive the signal, then they call someone. The satellites call someone. By the way, I guess all satellites by definition are probably in outer space, so that might have been redundant. I'm sorry. I was talking about—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, on their way there or back also, I guess. But yeah. (*Chuckles.*)

Barry Sonnenfeld: The reason I got the watch is I was in a plane crash in Van Nuys Airport that destroyed a Gulfstream II. And my wife, as an expensive joke, got me the Breitling Emergency in case I was ever in a plane crash. But two things—first of all, I own other watches, and you can never take the Breitling off. Because if you do, there's something—the Jews call it Ayin Hara, which means the evil eye of God. And if you take your Breitling Emergency watch off, God says, “Schmuck! He took the watch off. Watch this.” And then you're in an avalanche or something. So, you can never take this off, but I own other watches.

[00:05:00]

Hence, the affectation of wearing two watches.

Jesse Thorn: When you were in an airplane crash—which you were—you're not a not-nervous guy. Did it cause you anxiety moving forward?

Barry Sonnenfeld: Well, Jesse, here is my theory. Every time I get off an airplane, I view it as a failed suicide attempt. That was until I was in the—I was a terrible flyer; I would wake

my wife up over Kansas when I would hear the engine sound go from mmm to mm-mm. I'd wake her up, "What's going on? We're in trouble." She explained that planes fly from one VOR to another VOR. It was very complicated. But I lived in fear.

Once I was in the plane crash—see, the reason you're afraid is because you don't know how you're going to react. Will snot be coming out of my nose? Will I weep uncontrollably? And what happened to me—and again, I was the only one on this private jet—is I put my feet up in front of me. I crossed my arms. And I said out loud, "And now I die." And then I tried different line readings. I tried, "And now I die." And then I tried, "And now I—" Anyway, I went through all of them. We crashed. The pilot, copilot, and flight attendant fled the plane, leaving me on the plane. The Van Nuys fire department had to come and help me get off the plane, etc., etc.—but I became a much better flyer after that. Because I realized, "Oh, if that's what knowing you're going to die in a plane crash is like, I can handle that."

So, it actually made me a better passenger, which is why I did not sue the company.

Jesse Thorn: Has that been true of other traumas in your life, other things that you were afraid of?

Barry Sonnenfeld: It's funny you should say that, because I recently—I'm 71, and I was thinking, "How much longer do I want to live?" You know? And I was thinking maybe I shouldn't be, you know, wanting to live that much longer. Then I went to a racetrack. We live up in Canada now. I went to a racetrack and was racing in this car. And I was the slowest guy on the racetrack, because I realized, "Oh man, maybe I don't want to die!" (*Chuckles.*) So, you know life experiences have been very kind to me, I guess.

Jesse Thorn: A life wish is what they call that.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Is it?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, sure, why not?

Barry Sonnenfeld: Why not?

Jesse Thorn: You know, as I was reading your book—which is really a ton of fun—I thought to myself like six chapters in, I know that this is the book of a cinematographer, because of the eight anecdotes that have been related to me thus far, six of them are about lighting setups.

(They laugh.)

Barry Sonnenfeld: It's very true. Yes. Not only that, but I also like to control everything. I'm a real control freak. And like, I got here an hour early to make sure that they looked at me with my glasses on. Because a lot of times I'll have my assistant say, "And Barry wears glasses."

But you still come into the room, and they go, “Oh man, I’m seeing all these—” And then you’re sitting there for 20 minutes while they’re trying to figure things out. I’m trying not to help them figure things out. As you know, I shot I think nine or 10 feature films. So, yes, I try— You know, listen. (*Chuckles.*) Changing topic briefly. I know I have to go back to work when I say to my wife, “You know, if you put the butter one drawer down in the fridge—”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

That’s when she turns to me and says, “You need to get a job really quickly.” Because I need to direct everything, I need to light everything, I need to control everything. And of course that was—it’s totally due to my mother, as is everything.

(*They chuckle.*)

Jesse Thorn: We’ve got a lot more to get into with the great Barry Sonnenfeld. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. I’m talking with Barry Sonnenfeld. He started his career as the director of photography on movies ranging from *Raising Arizona* to *When Harry Met Sally*. He directed a number of his own smash hit films, including *Men in Black*, *Get Shorty*, and *The Addams Family*. He has a new memoir called *Best Possible Place, Worst Possible Time: True Stories from a Career in Hollywood*. Let’s get back into our conversation.

Did you think when you were in film school that you were going to be a director, or was cinematographer what you aspired to?

[00:10:00]

Barry Sonnenfeld: I was pretty sure when I was in film school, I was going to be perhaps the best FedEx driver that ever there was. I just had a sense I’d be really, really good at it. Like, I’d know everyone’s names and—because—but no, I went to NYU graduate film school totally by accident. I thought I wanted to be a still photographer, then I realized it’s a fairly lonely profession. You know, you’ll have other friends in the business. But I wanted to be a street photographer like Elliott Erwitt or Garry Winogrand or Lee Friedlander. And I wasn’t that good. And I wasn’t that patient. So, my mother said if I went to graduate film school, my parents would pay for my education. So, I’m thinking three years, don’t have to look for a job, sounds like a great idea.

Oh, my mother also said—and she was totally wrong about this—that movies are just a bunch of still photographs put together. Which by the way, is so not true. And becoming a cinematographer ruined me for stills, because stills are a very specific moment. Yet, all the work I did as a cinematographer—I moved the camera through space, whether it’s *Blood Simple* or *Raising Arizona* or *Throw Mama from the Train*. I was always using the camera to tell the audience where to look. So, I was always dollying and stuff. So, when I went back to

still photography as just a hobby, my frames were always off, and they were never aligned properly. Because I was, you know, ready for the movement.

But I went to NYU. My parents didn't pay for my education. And in fact, we still often didn't have electricity. I moved out; moved to the East Village, which freaked out my mother. And then at film school, I realized I had an ability to be a cinematographer. And my father said to me, "Figure out what you want to do in life, and do it. Don't figure out how to make a living. Figure out what would bring you pleasure."

So, what I did is when I got out of film school, I bought a 16mm camera. This is pre-video. My theory being if I owned a camera, I could legitimately call myself a cameraman without being a dilettante. Six months later, I'm at a party. I meet Joel Coen. Joel says, "My brother Ethan and I are gonna shoot a trailer as if we had directed this movie, and use a trailer to raise money to then shoot the real feature." I said I owned a camera, Joel said, "You're hired." And the first day on the set of *Blood Simple*, their first movie, was the first day Joel, Ethan, or I had ever been on a movie set.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, this origin story reminds me of nothing if not this one time I talked to Werner Herzog—

Barry Sonnenfeld: Love him.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, what a delight. And—you could hardly have more fun than to talk to Werner Herzog. He just Werner-Herzogs around the whole time. It's really great. I got him to say that when he wants to relax, he likes to watch soccer, but he doesn't have a favorite sitcom. But anyway, Werner Herzog, he has this film school—theoretically, I don't know how practical and real it is. But his premise is that you should do what he did, which is he started in the film school, thought it was boring or whatever, so he checked out some equipment from the school and then quit and kept the equipment. (*Laughs.*)

Barry Sonnenfeld: Ah!

Jesse Thorn: But it's like—the thing of it is—right?—is owning that camera, which is like a really meaningful—it's a heavy—it's, at the time, a particularly big, expensive piece of equipment, even a 16mm camera—is the difference between being a filmmaker and not.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Absolutely. And not being a dilettante, you literally—if you own a camera, you are a cameraman. In fact, at some point I will play for you—perhaps when our discussion is over—my ringtone, which is Werner Herzog saying in that voice of his, "Barry, answer the phone. Barry, where are you? Answer the phone."

(*Jesse laughs.*)

We lived in Telluride for many years. Every year Telluride has a film festival. I saw Werner at a coffee shop with Ken Burns, and Ken and I went to Hampshire College together. So, I went right up to them, and I said, "Werner, you're recording my ringtone. Just say, 'Barry, answer the phone'." And he—it took like 30 takes. He would improvise and try other things.

[00:15:00]

And I had to cut, piece it together. But my ringtone is the really loud, obnoxious voice of Werner Herzog saying, “Barry, where are you? Answer your phone.”

Jesse Thorn: Barry, 100% you're playing that for me right now, on the air, into that microphone.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Okay. I'm gonna have to have one of you guys call my phone.

Jesse Thorn: I got my phone here.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Okay, you're ready for the number, but please don't let anyone else in the world know. Uh, please call *(censoring phone dialing beeps followed by the phone ringing)*.

Ringtone: Barry, answer the phone! You just answer the phone. Answer it right now! Answer the phone. Barry! Where are you? Barry! Answer the phone! You just answer the phone. Answer it right now! Answer the phone, Barry, where are you?!

Barry Sonnenfeld: Now I'll turn my phone off again.

(Jesse laughs.)

So, anyway, that took like literally 30 takes.

Jesse Thorn: *(Giggling.)* I like that there was a postproduction process on your ringtone there.

Barry Sonnenfeld: It's all about postproduction. Everything that goes wrong while you're shooting, you can correct in postproduction.

Jesse Thorn: What led you to think in film school that cinematography was something that you were good at? What was it?

Barry Sonnenfeld: I was a decent still photographer. I wasn't great, but I was decent. You know, I had—a photo I took of Buckminster Fuller was on the cover of one of his books. You know, I had things published in *Pop Photo*, remember? *Popular Photography Magazine*. And I was always a wide-angle guy. So, I viewed the world through a camera.

Jesse Thorn: Why were you a wide-angle guy?

Barry Sonnenfeld: That's a really good question. I think—here's what I think it is. At least this is what it is when you make movies. Wide-angle lenses require you to be physically closer to the person, right? To get the same size—sorry—to get the same size image of a person, you have to be closer. And I am, in case you haven't noticed, a large personality. So, by being—it allows me to be close to things. And I love that—also with wide angle lenses, I

like to center punch things. Instead of things being off to the left or right, they're dead center. And what I am saying to the audience, whether it's viewing a still photo or in the movies, is, "Pay attention to me. I'm the cameraman. I'm the guy controlling all this stuff. Yes, you think it's the actors; you think it's the director. It's really me."

And as an only child, I think that it really created—it really defined me through my lens selection.

Jesse Thorn: I happen to have watched both of *The Addams Family* movies relatively recently. And I had never actually seen the second one, which I totally loved. It's so funny. But one of the things that is going on in those movies—right?—is they live in this crazy house. And so, it could very easily... look either like a television set, or look sort of weird and tight and uncomfortable in the wrong way. And I think you really found ways to look at the inside of this weird house such that it feels like an expansive world.

Barry Sonnenfeld: A lot of that has to do with going back to lenses. Because the wide-angle lens has such a wide angle of view, even if I shoot someone in a medium closeup, you're still seeing a lot of background. And that background is in focus. It's just the physical nature of what those lenses do. Other directors might have used longer lenses; the background would be out of focus, and the house would not have been a character in the movie.

By the way, David Krumholtz, who plays Joel Glicker in *Addam's Family Values*, who falls in love with Wednesday, is basically playing me as a child. In fact, I play his father in the movie. My favorite line in that movie is he says, "Do you know what happens if my mother uses fabric softener?"

And Wednesday says, "What?"

And he says, "I die."

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: You had a pretty great run of movies as a cinematographer.

[00:20:00]

Like, a combination of very skilled, good choices, and got lucky. Working on not just those first few Coen Brothers movies, but also a couple of Rob Reiner's greatest films. You know, you were DP for *When Harry Met Sally* and *Misery*. Like, you worked on really great movies. But it occurred to me that if you take those two filmmakers or sets of filmmakers—the Coen brothers and Rob Reiner; total geniuses. Like you know, I've seen *The Princess Bride* probably 100 times. You know what I mean? But—eh, 50. 50 times. Let's not be hyperbolic. But like Rob Reiner, that's an actor and writer before he was a director. That's the—I mean, obviously, always been on sets, 'cause his dad was Carl Reiner. He started acting as a very young man. But like, that's not somebody who is there because all they ever think about is rack pans or whatever. And the Coen brothers—well, that's two guys where I bet they call each other at night to talk about rack pans.

So, what was it like to move between those two worlds and the incredibly different demands of those kinds of movies? Like, *Misery* and *When Harry Met Sally* and the Coen Brothers movies that you worked on are really different kinds of movies.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Well, I think this goes back to film school, but I never called myself a cinematographer or a director of photography. I called myself the friend of the director. So, that would mean, in the case of the Coens, I would design shots with them. In the case of Penny Marshall on *Big*, or of Danny DeVito on *Throw Mama from the Train*, or even a lot of with Rob on *When Harry met Sally* and *Misery*, I would design the shots. I did it with the Coens as a team, and to a certain extent also with Rob. But I would also say to Rob, “Does Kathy Bates’s clothing look too new? Or did they have more energy before we went to lunch, and now that it's after lunch, and they're digesting their tri-tip?” You only read about tri-tip on movie sets. It's the only time you'll ever read about a steak that's called tri-tip is on movie sets, for some reason.

Jesse Thorn: Unless you're talking about central California. Central California is big on tri-tip.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Is it?

(Jesse confirms.)

Okay. I've gotta—I'll check it out. I'll move to Sacramento.

Jesse Thorn: You go to Fresno, it's all tri-tip talk.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Okay, good to know! Again, at film school, because you had to do everything—you had to do your own editing, and you had to work on other crews in the sound department or as a gaffer—I just learned how to make movies. And I felt it was my job to help the directors about anything. So, with Joel and Ethan, it was about figuring out how to technologically move the camera in the weird ways we wanted to move. And I always had really great crews. The secret to success is hire people that are better than you, because you'll get all the credit anyway. So, in the case of Rob, I would talk to him about performance or wardrobe or, you know, design the shots with him. Different lenses. *When Harry Met Sally* was—I called it a handsome lens. Same with *Miller's Crossing* for the Coens. Neither of those were wide-angle lenses shows.

So, it's fun working with different directors, because somehow all the movies seem like I shot them anyway, and I don't know why that's the case.

Jesse Thorn: Were you worried that you were gonna accidentally start working on terrible movies? *(Chuckles.)* Like, were you aware of the lucky string you were on?

Barry Sonnenfeld: *(Chuckles.)* I had a really good string. There's another movie that few people have seen that also has a very wacky camera, called *Three O'Clock High*, directed by Phil Joanou. That was after *Throw Mama* and also *Raising Arizona*. Although the union

wouldn't let me in. So, I had to be called a lighting consultant. So, I don't have credit as a cinematographer on that.

[00:25:00]

But I was very lucky, and I probably didn't realize how lucky I was that I picked all those really great movies to work on.

Jesse Thorn: We're taking a break. We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Hey gang, it's Jesse. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Bullseye*. Did you know that there is a whole bunch of bonus *Bullseye* that you might never have heard? You can hear it if you become a member of Maximum Fun.

For example, this year we made a whole show called *Hey, What's Your Job?*, where we had *Bullseye* listeners with amazing jobs come on the show and get interviewed about how they do their work. I mean, I'm talking about like a person who makes monks' robes for a living. The city manager of Weed California came on the show. It's a little bit *Bullseye* and a little bit Studs Terkel's *Working*. It was really fun. We've even done a *Bullseye* where I interviewed someone who I had no idea who I was going to interview when I sat down in the recording booth. Plus there's behind the scenes stuff, all kinds of cool stuff.

You can listen to it all by going to MaximumFun.org/join and becoming a member of MaxFun. When's the best time to do it? Well, right now! Don't wait. So much great stuff waiting for you. MaximumFun.org/join. And thanks!

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with Barry Sonnenfeld. He has a new book out called *Best Possible Place, Worst Possible Time: True Stories from a Career in Hollywood*.

So, *Men in Black* is obviously one of the great blockbuster comedies of ever. And it is also one of the most extraordinary comedy pairs on screen in any movie, in Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones. Tommy Lee Jones was not a comedy actor. And Will Smith was not the studio's choice to play that role.

Barry Sonnenfeld: That's right.

Jesse Thorn: So, how did you end up with those two dudes?

Barry Sonnenfeld: The studio and the producers wanted Clint Eastwood for the Tommy role and Chris O'Donnell for the Will Smith role. Luckily, Clint dropped out early on and didn't

really—just read the script, and didn't want to do it. Chris was interested in doing it, and Steven Spielberg made me go take him to dinner at the—again, at the Four Seasons on Doheny. Important in my life. And I went to dinner with Chris. The problem was my wife—my wife and I read scripts together. We lie in bed, she gives me a 50-page head start, and we finish simultaneously. That's how perfect we are in marriage. And I turned to her, and I literally said, “Tommy Lee Jones.”

And she literally turned to me and said, “Will Smith.”

I didn't know who Will Smith was. I had never watched *Fresh Prince*, but Sweetie was a big fan of *Fresh Prince*. So, I take to Chris at dinner, and he tells me, “You know, he script needs a lot of work.”

And I said, “Not only does the script need a lot of work, but I'm not a really good director, and I don't even know if this material is going to be like up my alley or anything. Do you have any other projects available?”

And he goes, “Yeah, I'm circling this other thing.”

I said, “You should do that!”

(Jesse chuckles.)

So, the next day, Chris's management called Spielberg and said, “Chris isn't going to do your movie.”

I arranged for Will Smith, who I had never met, to come out to the Hamptons—where I lived, and Steven spent the summers. Will helicoptered out from a wedding in Philly, met Stephen, and got hired. The thing about Will and Tommy is you never want two funny people in your comedy. You want Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. You want Abbott and Costello. You want Lucy and Ricky Ricardo. You have two guys trying to be funny, you're dead. There's no comedy. It's a disaster. So, I've got Will Smith being really funny. And the first day I start to work with Tommy Lee Jones—and this is in the book—and he's very intimidating. Have you ever interviewed Tommy?

Jesse Thorn: No.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Oh, well, you know what? Yeah, Tommy's an interesting guy. So, he tried to be funny.

[00:30:00]

His first line of dialogue in the movie, he's talking to an alien that has flippers and a weird nose and looks like an alien. And Tommy's first line to this alien, who's speaking gibberish in an alien language, which Tommy understands, the line is—as written—“That's enough,

Mikey. Put up your hands and all your flippers.” As performed by Tommy, it was, “That's enough, Mikey. Put up your hands. And all your flippers!”

Cut. “Hey, Tommy? I think it's gonna be funnier if you don't acknowledge that put up your flippers is funny. See, you do this every day. It's government-issue. It's GI. You know, that's not a big deal to you.”

Tommy looks at me as if I should be dead. Weeks go by, I won't let Tommy be funny. I won't let Tommy be funny. His manager calls me—his agent calls me, and says, “You don't want Tommy to be funny. You only want Will to be funny.”

I said, “I promise you, the straight guy—the not funny guy—always gets a bigger laugh, because he is the audience's point of view. And you're letting the audience find out where the joke is instead of you telling them.” And I mentioned—you know, as we discussed, I shot *When Harry Met Sally*. So, I was there for the famous, “I'll have what she's having” scene. And as funny as Meg is faking an orgasm, you cut to Billy Crystal doing nothing but staring. And the audience goes from 80dBs to 180dBs off of his reaction shot. And I promised him, his manager—agent—that Tommy would be as funny or funnier than Will.

We finished the movie, Tommy sees it. We now have our press junket, and the press is all over Tommy. “How did you get to be funny? How did you know you would be funny?”

And God love Tommy, Tommy said, “The secret to being funny is stand next to Will Smith and do whatever Barry Sonnenfeld tells you to.”

(Jesse laughs.)

And wow! From Tommy Lee Jones, that's pretty great.

Jesse Thorn: You ended up making these huge movies. You know, you made, two *Addams Family* movies, three *Men in Black* movies, you made *Wild Wild West*. Like, you made a bunch of—you know, maybe *Addams Family* didn't start as this, but these big kind of blockbuster-ish movies. *(Beat.)* Did you like doing that? Like, did you like living with the idea that either this movie makes \$200,000,000, or it is a failure?

Barry Sonnenfeld: Oh, \$200,000,000 would have been a failure.

(They chuckle.)

It's funny you ask that, because coming from my career with Joel and Ethan Coen, it really—if you ask me what kind of—“if you ever were a director, what kind of movies would you be making?”, I'd say I'd be making movies like Wim Wenders. I'd be making *An American Friend* or, you know, small indie-feeling movies.

And then *Addam's Family* felt like a small movie to me until we were done making it. And then it did really well at the box office, and that led to more and more things. And obviously,

the bigger the budget, you as a director tend to make more money. So, I was making decent money on some of these big movies. The disastrous one was *Wild Wild West* was not a good movie, nor was *Men in Black II*.

And both of those two movies had a lot of the same problems, which were script and casting. Which—as we discussed—Rob Reiner says that's 90% of directing. So, I failed as a director by letting the movies go without having a good script and having really dumb scenes in them, and by not casting it properly.

So, I never thought I'd be doing these kind of big blockbuster movies. I really imagined much smaller—like, *Get Shorty*, for me, is the most Barry of all the movies. It took me six years to get it made. I read the book, the novel by Leonard Cohen, on a cruise—

Jesse Thorn: Elmore Leonard. (*Laughs.*) You said Leonard Cohen.

Barry Sonnenfeld: (*Laughs.*) You remember Elmore Leonard's favorite famous "Hallelujah". Ah, Elmore Leonard, thanks. Elmore Leonard. I read it. I had never read an Elmore Leonard book. Loved it. Made Sweetie read the book and said, "Who's the lead in this?"

[00:35:00]

And we both said Danny DeVito, who ended up not being the lead; it ended up being Travolta. But for me, what the book was about and what the movie is about is only about one thing, which is self-confidence. If you have self confidence in the movie business, you will rise to the top. And what Chili Palmer—eventually played by Travolta—had, and what Danny has in spades, surprisingly, is self-confidence.

You know, I tell the story in the book that when Danny went in to audition for *Taxi*, he knew he wasn't going to get the part. He was an unknown actor who's short, not particularly handsome or anything. So, he knew he had nothing to lose. Walked into the audition with, you know, Ed Weinberger and Jim Burrows and the Charles brothers. And he said, "Before we start, which one of you a-holes wrote this piece of crap?" Although he didn't say the word crap. But I know you bleep out those words, so I'm trying to make it without me being bleeped.

But they laughed hysterically, and he got the part. And it was all about, "I know I have nothing to lose, so I'm going to come in with total self-confidence and own the room." And that's what Chili does in *Get Shorty*. But that's the kind of movie I thought I'd be making is those sort of medium-budget—if I were lucky—medium-budget, small movies that felt kind of funny.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have a secret desire now to make parlor dramas?

Barry Sonnenfeld: I have a movie I've been trying to make for 20 years, written by Mark Haskell Smith—called, and it's the most unfavorable word in the English language; it's called *Moist*. That is hilarious, and the closest thing to *Get Shorty* that I've ever read, and I may

finally be able to make it. We'll see. I'll come back in a year and tell you if I made it or not, but we're close to maybe getting the financing to make this very small, 35-day kind of shoot. And it would be lots of fun.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Barry Sonnenfeld, I sure am grateful for all your time. And I enjoyed the book so much, to say nothing of your film. So, thanks so much for talking to me.

Barry Sonnenfeld: Oh, it's such a pleasure, and I love your show so much. So, thank—I'm so honored, Jesse, to be on your show. So, thank you.

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: Barry Sonnenfeld. His book, *Best Possible Place, Worst Possible Time: True Stories from a Career in Hollywood*, is a hoot. It is available to purchase now from bookstores everywhere or on Bookshop.org.

Transition: Cheerful synth with light vocalizations.

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 personally just got back from tour with the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. We're headed out again in November, by the way, in New England. And when I was in St. Paul, Minnesota, I got to pet a capybara. And also, I petted a sloth and a giant bunny rabbit and an emu. And I got to hold a baby kangaroo. It was great.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Roby. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. Our video editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our pal, Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWSounds.Bandcamp.com, where you can find—among other things—a compilation of music from this show. That's pay what you want. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team and to their label, Memphis Industries.

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 fades out.)