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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. Come and join me at the table as we celebrate America's beloved holiday of feasts: Hanksgiving. Yes, that's right, this week on *Bullseye*, our guest is Tom Hanks. And basically, that's all you need to hear, by way of introduction, right? *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Philadelphia*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Joe Versus the Volcano*. These are all movies in which Tom Hanks has starred. When I talked to him about this time two years ago, he'd just starred in *A Man Called Otto*, an adaptation of the hit book *A Man Called Ove*.

He's just reunited with Robert Zemeckis and Robin Wright, the director and costar of *Forrest Gump*, for a new movie called *Here*. *Here* is a film that spans literal eons. The camera starts at one spot at the very beginning of time and stays in that one shot right up until the present day.

But anyway, *Otto*. Hanks plays the title character, Otto Anderson. And when the movie begins, he's mourning the loss of his wife, Sonja. He's not sure how he's going to move on with his life, or even if he can keep it up. *A Man Called Otto* revolves around Otto's relationship with his neighbors, specifically Marisol and Tommy. They just moved into the neighborhood with their two daughters. Despite Otto's demeanor that you might charitably call grouchy, Marisol and Tommy are determined to make friends. In this scene, they show up at Otto's door with a peace offering: some food.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(A door opens and closes.)

Marisol (A Man Called Otto): Hi! We wanted to properly introduce ourselves, because—you know—we're gonna be neighbors and everything. So.

Otto: Okay.

Marisol: Okay.

Otto: (*Speaking over her.*) Bye.

(*He tries to shoo her out the door.*)

Marisol: Are you always this unfriendly?

Otto: I'm not unfriendly.

Marisol: Okay, you're not. Nah, nah, nah. You're not unfriendly. Every word you say is like a warm cuddle.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Tom Hanks, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm happy to have you on the show.

Tom Hanks: Oh, great to be here.

Jesse Thorn: It's nice to have you here.

Tom Hanks: I'm a first-time caller. Thanks for having me on.

Jesse Thorn: Are there things that you are very grumpy about?

Tom Hanks: Turn signals. I mean, literally, put your blinker on—you know?—the person in front of you. Or here's what it is. You're coming up to an intersection, and a car is coming the opposite direction. And they're going slow and they're going slow and they're going slow. And they're stopping in the middle of the street, and you don't know why. It's because they're making a left turn. And if they had just turned on their blinkers, I would've known what they were doing. And I would understand why they were slowing down.

Jesse Thorn: I feel like it's the "I would have known—" It's not when—for me, not when someone cuts you off.

Tom Hanks: No! No, I understand that!

Jesse Thorn: Just me being held in the liminal space between knowing what's going on and not knowing what's going on.

Tom Hanks: Can be in a car full of kids, and I will unleash, (*building to a shout*) "You moron! Thank you for the use of the turn signal! Way to use your blinker, IDIOT!" I mean, I go and—when I'm in the car—

Jesse Thorn: You go full idiot!

Tom Hanks: Oh, when I'm in the car by myself, I use salty language.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughing.*) Oh my gracious!

Tom Hanks: I use baseball dugout language. And you do not want to be—because it is— Look. First of all, I was very good at driver’s training, and the first thing you learn is drive defensively. Make sure other people know what you’re doing. Use your turn signal 100 feet before you get to where you’re going. It’s very, very basic. Tell me what you’re doing. Because if I’m making a left turn or if I’m going straight and you’re slowing down to stop in the middle of the—and I don’t know why?! I don’t know why! So, therefore I can plow into you. You could T-bone me. Anything can happen. But if you had just literally gone (*makes a turn signal clicking noise*), that’s all I need!

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And then you go, and I let you go or I—it all works out fine. Follow the frigging rules, you stupid moron! Give me your license! Give me your license right now! Roll down the window. HEY! Roll down the window. I want—I want the license and registration right now. (*Through gritted teeth.*) You, sir, are not going to drive in my town again.

I’m spilling my tea as I’m talking about this! So—

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I want to be clear, because our at-home radio and podcast audience can’t see you. You literally just spilled your tea on the sofa here at The Four Seasons.

Tom Hanks: (*Laughing.*) Okay, so—so—sorry about that. So, the answer is yes, I do have some of those kind of—and that is it. Now, I’ve since made my peace with the technology that doesn’t work, the menu “press select, press—” you know, I know that stuff is gonna be screwed up all the time. But it’s the powers of somebody else when they’re behind the wheel if they don’t know the basics of simple courteous driving. That sends me over the edge.

Jesse Thorn: *A Man Called Otto* is sort of about the ways that an accumulation of the pains and fears of life can lead to anger and sort of sadness and desperation. Do you have to choose not to get involved in that, as you get older? Like, do you have to choose not to become a grumpy old man?

Tom Hanks: I think it—isn’t the trick kind of like saying, “I don’t have time to learn all this new stuff, because here’s what used to happen: I used to just dial the phone and get the number.” You know? (*Laughs.*) You never had to like, “Thank you for calling.” You know, even my own office now has—you don’t dial in directly to somebody. You dial into a recording, and then it says press one and then hold for your options.

Jesse Thorn: You don’t have the direct line? I would think, “Let’s get Tom Hanks a red phone in his home office and he picks up and—”

Tom Hanks: Beep! “Yes, commissioner?” You know—yeah, no, it doesn’t quite work that way. I think as one gets older, it’s like look, um, there’s other ways to spend one’s time, as opposed to reading the manual on how to—you know—pair some new type of technology. Now, that’s almost like—you know, look, I am a bit of a luddite. I would rather—I would

probably rather type a letter on a typewriter than have to have a long, protracted phone conversation, because I really only have one or two things to say to somebody. But that's not really the point. I think the point is, is that I got enough going on here. You know? If I have to actually go and study something in order to figure out how to do—you know, one of the basic chores of one's daily life, I'll just do it the old-fashioned way. Thanks very much. I don't—

Jesse Thorn: But we—I mean, we also live in a world where—or at least in a country that is like seized in paroxysms of, “I'm not gonna learn how to deal with new stuff.” Like, we had an entire presidential administration based on people's discomfort with the idea that the world might be different from how it used to be.

Tom Hanks: Yeah, that's dumb!

(Jesse laughs.)

I think—here's the goofy thing. I actually think—now, I'm 66 years old. I remember the first Earth Day. And it became our responsibility to stop littering. It became our responsibility to start recycling. And not only was it good business, this was also really smart and made our cities cleaner. We—I think I'm of a generation that actually learned that “Oh! It comes down to personal responsibility.” So, I have to actually like make sure that I give everybody a fair shake and I have the correct change when I get on the bus and all sorts of these other small, little things that you do in order to, what? In order to make the world progress a little bit easier. So, you can't—you can't be obstinate in the fact that, *(grouchily)* “I'm not gonna learn anything new!”

Here's a pretty good example. Like, remember when eReaders were going to just wipe books off the face of the planet? I had an eReader for a while! You know. And it worked fine, and I could get a book any time I wanted to. And I could travel—you know—with 42,000 books. You know, in a slim little volume, and I wouldn't have to carry them with me. But guess what? I read books in real time. So, if I'm going away for two weeks, I can take two or three books, *(chuckles)* and I got everything covered. It doesn't take up that much space.

So, I think we're a bit of the generation that has learned that there is a quantity but there is also a quality too that you can make a choice: what's the easiest and better way to get by it? You don't want to embrace ignorance just for the sake of making your life easier. You actually wanna make an intelligent choice about what is kind of like good and what is unnecessary.

Because there's an awful lot of people—there's also a lot of enterprisers out there that are going to try to convince you that this is actually a great thing to have.

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And all you have to do is pay us \$35. *(Laughs.)* You know. And make sure you constantly renew it. And then, your life will actually be better. No, it won't. What it will be is it'll be make your business profitable and won't really affect my life very much at all. So, I think

we're—we might—I might be of a generation that is judiciously choosing the stuff that is worthwhile and the stuff that's not.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I just wanna go ahead and say—if anybody's listening to this—only 10 or \$20 a month, you can become a member of your public radio station that you're listening to this on right now.

Tom Hanks: And that's a good deal! I'm gonna tell you right now! Okay, let's break that down! Okay, 10 or 20, how much—I listen to public radio I'm gonna say probably somewhere between one hour a day and 17 hours a day, because sometimes I just leave it on all day. Well, that's a frigging bargain, right there. And it's a bargain in real time! I'm getting my money's worth every time I turn it on. If I was to pay \$20 for a service that I never listened to or never subscribed to or never put on, guess what? I'm out 20 bucks! So, it actually—that's a judicious choice that one can make in order to make one's life a little bit easier.

Jesse Thorn: I will say that my colleague, Kevin—who's sitting to my left—used to work at a local NPR affiliate station here in Los Angeles.

Tom Hanks: Which one? Which one? The one in Santa Monica, or the one in Pasadena?

Jesse Thorn: The one in Pasadena. And—

Tom Hanks: Bad blood between those two. Bad blood!

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughing.*) I have heard!

Tom Hanks: It's like the battle between Volvo and Saab. You gotta decide. Which imported Swedish car are you going to root for? The one in Pasadena or the one in Santa Monica?

Jesse Thorn: Probably—I do appreciate that, your go to example of a like famous feud is Volvo versus Saab!

Tom Hanks: Well, you know, you could go, yeah, what are you going to do?

Jesse Thorn: It is pretty public radio, fortunately or unfortunately.

Tom Hanks: Is there that much difference between a Ford and a Chevy anymore? I'll just say this, the battle—you make a—there's one word that describes the difference between those two stations: music. One has, one don't. And some people don't need music, and some people gotta have it.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, let's talk about something else. Tom, what is an example of something that has been work for you to understand or adjust to as a grownup adult, as a person over 40 or 50, let's say.

Tom Hanks: (*Sighing thoughtfully.*) Oh, that's a myriad of things.

Jesse Thorn: (*Clarifying.*) That was important. I mean, we're not talking about, "Now you have to plug your car in."

Tom Hanks: Oh no, that's—yeah, that actually makes life a little easier, because then the only time you're stopping at a gas station is for, you know, Slim Jims and to use the bathroom. I would say it is the—it is the battle against cynicism. You know? I think it's so much fun to rag on everybody because you're in competition with them when you're younger and you're competitive and you're a little bit on the selfish—and it's really, really fun in order to make yourself feel better by essentially ragging on somebody's efforts. Not like it—whether it's good or bad. You know. Celebrating their failures and then sort of like trying to examine somebody else's success. And I don't just mean in the business. I just mean, you know, across the board.

I think, as one gets older, I think you realize that cynicism gets you nowhere. Isolation gets you nowhere. Procrastination gets you nowhere. If you don't do it, who's gonna do it? But I think the default position of an awful lot of society is saying, "I don't think that's so great. What's so special about that? You know? Why would anybody bother by doing that?" A lot of the media's based on—you know, exercises in hilarious cynicism. You know? Everybody is doing something stupid and everybody—everything is worth ragging on. And I think that you're—when you get older, you begin to appreciate effort for the sake of effort and authenticity for the sake of authenticity.

I learned a while back from somebody who—you know—is quite accomplished that there is no joy in slagging on somebody's failure. That the best thing you can say is, "Well, you know, it didn't quite work, did it?" That's the most honest appraisal you can say about anything—particularly any creative enterprise. Didn't quite work. Because as a storyteller and someone who is—look, this is my job. You know? Not only is it my job, it's my joy. When I started being a storyteller—this could be actor or, you know, stage manager when I was younger, whatever it is—taking part in the ensemble effort in order to give people their solid's worth of entertainment, failing is just so painful.

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You know? Not getting there was just—it (*clears throat*)—it rattled you and made you wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning and think, "What did I do wrong that we lost them in the third act? Or why is it that I can't break story on this one thing? What is it about this role that is escaping me, that is scaring me, that I truly don't have any faith in my ability to do that?"

Having gone through all of that, you realize that we're all just trying our best, man. And there's so much—there's so many moments of serendipity that are beyond your control and there's some times you just run out of wherewithal and instinct, and then you can only have faith in somebody else, and you can only have faith in somebody else in coming along and giving you the catalyst that gets you along there. And that, being willing to use it is worth the battle. So, I—as I'm at the age that I am now, I think I am ten times less cynical—I was at the age of 46 than I am at the age of 66. Because I just know how hard it is! And I now

appreciate people trying really hard and almost getting there. And even the ones that are kind of like—you know, didn't quite get there.

The worst thing—the worst thing I could say about anybody is, “That didn't quite work, did it?” Because I've been on the receiving end of, “Boy, that didn't work!” And what can you do except bow your head down in humble submission? (*Chortles.*) This is true. It did not work, but you only learn by your failures anyway. So, embrace that and move on!

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more to get into with Tom Hanks. When we return: he started as a comedy actor, but he's won dozens of awards for his work in drama. I'll ask him whether making that transition was scary. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(*ADVERTISEMENT*)

Promo:

Music: A fun, percussive synth beat.

Jo Firestone: *Dr. Gameshow* is a podcast where we play games submitted by listeners with callers from all around the world, and this is a game to get you to listen.

Name three reasons to listen to *Dr. Gameshow*, Kyla and Lunar from Freedom, Maine.

Lunar: Dishes, folding the laundry, doing cat grooming.

Jo: (*Laughing.*) Okay, thank you. Great.

Manolo Moreno: Oh, things you could do while listening, yeah.

Jo: I love that the reason—I'm like, “Why do you listen to this show?”, and Lunar's like, “Dishes.” (*Chuckling.*) Fantastic. Manolo!

Manolo: Number one is that it'll inspire you. You're gonna be like, “Oh, I could do that.”

Jo: That's all we have time for, but you'll just have to find *Dr. Gameshow* and Maximum Fun to find out for yourself.

(*Music fades out.*)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Tom Hanks. The Academy Award winning actor is starring in the new movie *Here*. He worked on it with his collaborators from *Forrest Gump*, Robin Wright, and Robert Zemeckis. When I talked with Tom Hanks in 2023, he had just starred in the dramedy *A Man Called Otto*, which is streaming now on Hulu. Let's get back into our conversation.

I sometimes think that, had I not backed into a radio show where I had to put something on the radio every week since I was 19—I've been doing this show since I was 19.

(Tom “wow”s.)

Since I was 19, every week I had an hour. And if I wasn't there, there could be an emergency broadcast alert, and it would be illegal for me to not be there to press the button or whatever. So, you gotta be there.

Tom Hanks: So, let me ask you a question. Let me ask you a question. Is that deadline—was that deadline good for you?

Jesse Thorn: Well, that's the thing.

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Like, I think that—to me, and I wonder if it's the case for you—if I didn't have that requisite that I had to show up and I had to have something to put on the air, because it was worse to not have something on the air than—you know, ready to go—I don't know if I could have done something and gotten better. Because I was—and to some extent am—so paralyzed at the prospect of doing a bad job that maybe I wouldn't try.

Tom Hanks: This is what is terrorizing about what we do for a living. I mean, I try to put off saying yes to something as long as possible. (*Chuckles.*) Saying yes is saying, “Okay, let's do this.” It means you are on—number one, you're on the clock. You start working from that very—from that moment. And even if you're not—even if you're not gonna shoot something for 18 months, you start working right then, and you begin the job for 18 months. Then comes the time where you actually have to go up and start—you have to start.

(*Sighs.*) That's, uh—I always wanna throw up the first day before we start shooting, because as soon as we start, it's locked in stone. And maybe you can go back and replace it. Maybe it won't end up in the movie, but your address of it is now on the record. And if you don't have it, ooh-la-la! No one knows you more than you (*chuckles*) that you don't—that you don't have it. And you might be able to fake people out! You know. You might be able to, uh, intimidate folks into buying what your goods are, but you yourself know what it is.

So, I actually in some ways envy like a newspaper columnist that has to put out a column. You know, like Herb Caen did when I was a kid, once a day. Or someone who has to put together a one-hour radio program. Because I said, “Well, you know, man, he's got a week to figure this out, doesn't he? He's—you know, can't you do this for 20 minutes? You know, do that for 20 minutes?”

But I get the pressure of the deadline. And have you ever said, “Okay! That’s the show!” and then the last thing you want to do is have to hear that show? (*Laughs.*) ‘Cause I don’t watch these movies a second time! ‘Cause I see them once, and they don’t change, man! They don’t become better with age.

Jesse Thorn: I’ll tell you this, though. I—years ago—did a show about interviewing, and I asked—I interviewed all these famous interviewers, some of whom were like my heroes. Like Terry Gross and stuff. And I interviewed Larry King. And Larry King was not one of my heroes. I have no negative feelings particularly about Larry King, but very unexpectedly I think I learned the most from talking to Larry King—who famously (*chuckles*) was ill-prepared for his interviews, let’s say.

Tom Hanks: Mm, okay, well.

Jesse Thorn: But also a guy—you know, he had a job where he had to—when he was on the radio he was doing four hours a day. You can’t prepare for that, really.

Tom Hanks: *Late Night with Larry King.* Sure.

Jesse Thorn: But like the thing that I learned from him that did not come naturally to me, that strikes me as something that is essential in acting as well, is that all the preparation in the world cannot prepare you for, necessarily—and in fact, sometimes can stand in the way of presence. And like, you can’t muscle your way through acting. Like, you have to be able to like—look. There’s preparation you can do to understand your character, understand what your character’s trying to do in a scene, your character’s goals, the body, you know, various things, right? But like at the end of the day, effort isn’t the difference.

Tom Hanks: Yeah, you don’t—yeah, you don’t get credit for moxie. You know? There’s no way you can suck it up. (*Laughs.*) You know? Years ago, when I was in—at the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival, in Cleveland, Ohio—I just couldn’t believe I had the job. I couldn’t believe that somehow someone said, “I think you should be an actor, and you should learn these lines. You should get out and do it.” We got yelled at by the director, Dan Sullivan, who’s a very well-regarded director. Very famous.

It was rotating repertory theatre. I was in the intern class with a bunch of people that I’m still friends with, and the Equity actors—the veterans that were up there, they had just opened a production of *Hamlet* the night before. And so, they had an opening night party. And so, many people were hungover and exhausted. And we were supposed to be rehearsing *The Taming of the Shrew*. And everybody was listless. Nobody was really trying hard, and it was hot, and it was—you know, it was Tuesday or Saturday or whatever it is and 10 in the morning. And everybody’s still living on their coffee. And no one is really there.

And Dan Sullivan yelled at everybody. He said, “You guys aren’t here today. You don’t understand, man. You guys gotta show up on time, and you gotta know the text, and you gotta have an idea. Otherwise I can’t do anything with you.”

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And I actually thought, “Oh! Well, there’s our responsibility right there.” If you show up on time—‘cause if you’re late, you’re gone. Period, the end. They will not put up with you being late. That’s one of the best lessons you could possibly learn. Late? That means you’re not here at all. So, bye-bye. Secondly, know the text. Now, that means know your dialogue, certainly. That’s the minimum that you need to do. But you also have to know the text. You have to know the play. You have to know the story. You have to know the intent of what all of these scenes are. You need to know what your place is in it. But the last thing was you have to have an idea. And that’s the great intangible. You don’t have a future in the rehearsal process or the shooting process unless you have an idea in your head.

Meaning not one that you explain, not saying, “I really think I would like to have a chicken on my shoulder for the course—” You know? You don’t come in with that. But you come in with a euphemistic chicken on your shoulder that no one will see that you just say, “Well, I’m actually playing this as though I have a chicken on my shoulder. And that’s why I’m so interesting in this scene.”

Now, that’s a stupid way in order to put forward this idea that unless I carry something around that is mine and mine alone, all I’m doing is saying the words and hitting the marks. Which, oddly enough, in movies sometimes works just fine. But in order to have something bigger going on behind your eyes, you’ve gotta have that idea inside yourself that no one knows, and no one wrote down. It’s yours and yours alone. That gives me faith in whatever is going to come next.

I think my job, when I’m purely an actor—when I’m in there, and I’m interpreting what the screenwriter put down on paper and what the director wants the scene to be like—I believe I can motivate anything. Because that’s my job and that’s the idea that I carry around. Because a director can say, for whatever reasons, “Go to the window. Go and look out the window.” But then I wouldn’t go and look out the window! And the director says, “Well, if you don’t go and look out the window, then I don’t have any reason to cut away to Meryl Streep in the phonebooth.”

So, well, my job is to: okay! You need me to go to the window? Watch this. What I’m gonna do when I go to the window is open it up so my chicken on my shoulder can get some air. (*Chuckles.*) That’s why—that’s why I can go. So, motivating anything like that, that is that requirement.

Now, that’s not the same thing as having a deadline. It’s actually having an open interpretation to anything that you can—that you can—that you can go anywhere that you need to. And it took me a really long time to figure that out. Some directors would say, “Would you go to the window?” And my question is would you like me to go to the—?

You know. There’s all this kind of like stuff that, whether or not you’re part of a true ensemble collaboration or if you’re just in the hands of a dictator that says, “Here’s what we’re doing here right now.” And the actor’s job is to say okay. Alright. If that’s what we’re doing here, watch this! That’s what I like to say. You need me to do this? Stand back. No one’s gonna do it better than I can.

Now, that's cocky to some degree, but it also—man, that's a hard—it's a (*chuckles*)—it's been a long road in order to get to the place where I thought I can give people—give the bosses what they want.

Jesse Thorn: Was it scary to give up being funny? And I don't mean that you're not often funny performing now, but you know, funniness is a great defense for a performer. And there have been times when you have been called on not to be funny. And I wonder if it was scary to... let go of that?

Tom Hanks: No. No, what is—it's sometimes a relief to not have to do a comedy, because it's the hardest thing there is to do. Because sometimes, it's simply not funny. (*Chuckles.*) The words as they are written are not funny. Now, it could be kooky! And it can be marketed as a comedy. And believe me, I've made some comedies that are not funny, because there is something that is untrue about what you're going for.

I will tell you, when I—when my—look. I got hired in the business because I was loud, and I was kind of funny. There was often times I was the funniest dude in the room, partly because it's a self-defense mechanism, and I was—you know—shirking an awful lot of responsibility.

But when I was doing *Bosom Buddies* with Peter Scolari, peas in a pod; he and I spoke a secret language between us.

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Gestalt, a look, a shrug, a couple of words meant everything. Because we spent so much time together, connected at the hip, making stuff that was either funny on itself or being tasked with the writers to say, "Hey, you—you know, spice this up, guys. Sprinkle some fairy dust on this for us." We had a phrase called Boys Chuffa Off, which means scenes ended with me and Peter goofing around with each other, just in order to make ourselves laugh in order to get to the end of the scene. And there was a period of time where they tried to write our chuffa for us. And we said, "Guys, give us the freedom, please, to figure out what our own chuffa is."

That pressure week after week—talk about a deadline!—is be funny at the end of the week. That—there was an awful lot of stuff that went into it. I'm gonna tell you right now, if you're having a horrible day with—you know, your family or the dentist or bad news from anybody and you gotta come in and be funny with Peter Scolari and Hilde and Buffie have to figure out how they're gonna stay in the all-women's hotel, that could be really hard in order to make fly!

The other thing that goes along with it is that a quote/unquote "drama" I think is really boring if it's only dramatic every step of the way. The great fun of all of this is to find real human behavior in—you know—in certain circumstances. And people talk the way they talk, and they have their—they have their desires, no matter how serious as a heart attack something is going on inside a film. So—inside a story.

So, it's not—the task is always to deliver unto the audience that which is enshrined in—carved in stone, as far as the—as far as the words on paper and the intent of the director goes. You have to be real! I don't wanna, you know, it's highfalutin, to quote Spencer Tracy, but I think he once said, “There's no trick to acting. You just hit the marks and tell the truth.”

And damn if that ain't what is required. And it's really hard to tell the truth sometimes when you haven't figured out what it is. Or someone is asking for you to lie and make it fake in the first place. Or if the truth isn't there in the words that you're supposed to talk about. But if you—if you're with likeminded individuals, the collaboration in order to do that—everybody works at helping you get the marks and tell the truth.

Jesse Thorn: So, you know, your parents got divorced when you were very young. You live with your dad.

Tom Hanks: Well, for the first time. They got divorced a lot.

Jesse Thorn: You had a kind of—your dad had a kind of serial family situation for you. Like, you have people who were your step siblings that you are like not in touch with or, you know.

And that is—you know, that can either lead to just total alienation or a life where you make it a priority to engage with others and ingratiate yourself. But I can only imagine that it's tough when you go to 10 different schools, or whatever it was to... and you're good at ingratiating yourself, which I presume you were—to do more than that, right?

Tom Hanks: Yeah. I can seduce a room. Yeah, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: When you became an actor, you're still young and you're funny enough and loud enough to get over on being charming—which is kind of a similar thing.

Tom Hanks: There's a danger to that. Yeah. Right.

Jesse Thorn: And you're still in a mode where you're pretty externally focused, right? Like, when you're being funny on a sitcom, you're making the audience laugh when you chuffa.

Tom Hanks: Well, yeah. And also, you also have to be funny on talk shows and stuff like that. And that's no less of a performance, but at the same time, it's—you know, it's an instinctive one.

Jesse Thorn: So, at some point—like, when you say making choices, when you say—like, “What do you want to do?” was the question your agent asked you. Like, other than “make everyone else around me happy or comfortable,” I kind of got the impression that question had never occurred to you.

Tom Hanks: Oh, dear god, no! No, it hadn't. It's like, what opportunities are out there, you know? Here's what you can do now. It's never like, "What do you want to do?" Uh. Is there a question in there?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that's a—those are parallel things in your life to have to make that choice in your work and also in your life. Like, I want to have agency, not be responsive.

Tom Hanks: Right. (*Stammers.*) That's a good way of putting it—agency, purchase. I think purposefulness.

[00:35:00]

I don't wanna waste anybody's time, and I don't wanna do anything that is so false that the manipulative aspect of it is an obvious one. So, being asked, "What do you want to do?"—if I was going to have to parse out like an individual moment since then that I can say is "This is 100% of what I was going for, and it turned out the way I wanted it to turn out," it was when we sort of like had to fight in order to do this movie called *Greyhound*. Which is nothing more than 48 hours at sea in the middle of the Atlantic, in the middle of World War II with nobody knowing if they were gonna make it or not, and I'm the captain of the ship.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Captain Krause (*Greyhound*): Do I break radio silence with a message for the admiralty? Or does that let the wolf pack know just how vulnerable we are?

Charlie: What would the message be?

Krause: Help needed, urgent.

Charlie: Help needed, that means urgent.

Krause: Needed as in needed. Just help, that's all the admiralty needs to hear for a modified rendezvous point.

Charlie: The Germans might miss a message as short as that.

Krause: I wouldn't need to take this risk if I'd been smarter, yesterday.

Charlie: What you did yesterday got to today.

Krause: It's not enough, Charlie. Not nearly enough.

Transition: A whooshing noise.

Tom Hanks: And it always came down to nothing that I said, no specific plot point that played itself out, no shot that demonstrated that the bad guys were out there, and the good guys were over there, nothing. It came down to literally what's going on right now in Captain Ernie Krause when he honestly is asking himself, "Am I making the biggest mistake ever right now?" That to me is the be all and end all of any sort of motion picture moment. It's when—and you could go back to light moments. You can go back to, you know, James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*—dear god, help me. Or you can go back to—you know—Danny Kaye, you know.

And some will be like that. You can go back to any sort of place where nothing is said. There's no dialogue, and yet everybody who watches the movie knows exactly what is going on in that character. So, like that's high country, man. And I don't—I think I've come close and not landed there a bunch of other times, but this odd amalgam—amalgam? Is that such a word? And this odd algorithm—amalgam!—you know—of a bunch of stuff that comes into a moment where I thought I was just doing what the director said, but because I was doing what the director said in a beat that was very well thought out from a moment in a screenplay that was wrestled to it—that was edited to the ninth degree. And then a very, very intricate musical score was added, and it's projected up on a wall with the right lumen count behind it, with the right amount of people in the audience, and everybody knew exactly what was going on in there.

That's what you get from a motion picture. And it took me a long time realize that that doesn't happen unless everybody gives 100% of going there. Um, yeah, you know, that's the high country. And I didn't realize that such a thing was possible, and I didn't realize how the responsibility that every actor has in it until—I don't know, three and half weeks ago. You know? I said not too long ago—I said I made 80 movies, and four of them are pretty good, and everybody says, "Ooh! Tom Hanks hates, you know, 76 of his movies!"

I said, no. I said, there's no room for self-deprecating humor in any of this. The fact is, I don't know if it's any good or not! You know? I can only—I can only go by—you know, I've seen all the movies once and they never change, and I'm neither satisfied or not. But I don't know if they're any good. And I don't know if, you know—I don't know if I got there or not. It's for somebody else to figure out, somebody else to say.

Jesse Thorn: We gotta go for a quick break. But when we return, we will finish up my interview with Tom Hanks. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

[00:40:00]

Promo:

Music: Festive synth.

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(Music fades out.)

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Tom Hanks. He's one of the greatest actors alive. You know, Tom Hanks! He's starring in the new movie *Here*, which is out in theaters. He and I talked in 2023.

I'm going to say this. You have been through all these family formations and schools and houses as a kid.

Tom Hanks: Oh yeah. And I sort of loved it.

Jesse Thorn: You were—well, we can talk about that in a minute.

(They chuckle.)

Tom Hanks: The rest of the family didn't care too much about it.

Jesse Thorn: That worries me, Tom, but we'll return to it. You know, you were married, had kids, and divorced when you were young. And you know, you were obviously great at being ingratiating. Like, loved it enough to make it your career, you're funny, and so on and so forth. But it took until you're in your mid-30s before you have this idea of, "I should make a choice for myself."

(Tom confirms.)

Did you have a hard time as a young man... you know, acting's transitory too. Like, you have these really intense relationships with people over the two months that a show plays or a movie?

Tom Hanks: Yeah, yeah. I live life getting really close to people and then never seeing them again.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, so did you have a hard time having the kind of sustained intimacy with others or yourself that's required to like make real choices that have lasting impact and make art? (*Chuckles.*)

Tom Hanks: Okay, that—you know, okay, ugh. First of all, go screw yourself with these important questions that are going to get to the bottom of my psyche! But no.

Jesse Thorn: You listen to public radio 17 hours a day; you know what I'm here to do.

Tom Hanks: Ahh, I do, I do. Yeah, for 20 bucks a year.

Jesse Thorn: Usually you have to pay somebody for that.

Tom Hanks: You have landed on something that can be one of the great crutches of doing what I do for a living is that it's transitory. You know? I get to pick up and take off. It's all done, away we go. And the most we'll have from it is some sort of memory. You know.

You mentioned that—you know, my dad was married to a very nice lady, and she had five great kids, and we lived together for about two and a half years. And my memory of it is sort of like, well, I went to school with them for a while. (*Laughing.*) You know, then we grew up. We went our—went on our separate ways. I remember the important lessons, and I remember the secure times pretty well. There was a lot of good laughs. But there was also a huge amount of confusion that went along with it.

Like, I was the youngest of eight kids. (*Laughs.*) And how did I end up here? And will somebody please explain to me why we are moving again?!

And no one ever seem to explain to me. And what came about from that is... not long after that, we started riding the bus a lot, going between my dad's house and my mom's house. And what it was is every holiday we'd be put on a bus. And there were three of us, and so my brother and sister often sat together. And so, I was the third one out. So, I always sat next to a window, and some stranger sat next to me. And sometimes those strangers were benign. Sometimes they were cheerful. Sometimes they were malevolent. And sometimes they were scary. But what I always had was the vista of the window in order to look out and daydream. And going off into other scenarios—storytelling in my own head was a very, very powerful analgesic, if I'm using the word analgesic properly.

[00:45:00]

I developed—I think really quickly—a comfort of being alone and enmeshed in a story of my own making. And it was all based on, you know—you know, popular imagery. You know. I was a hero. I was a fireman. I was an astronaut. I was—you know, I was a member of the Fantastic Four. Or I was a confused little boy who was being taken care of by benevolent, you know, grownups.

Jesse Thorn: It doesn't seem like a coincidence that 60% of your most famous roles are you being one of those things and also being terrified. (*Chuckles.*)

Tom Hanks: Well, there might be a reason that I'm drawn towards things like *Castaway*.

Jesse Thorn: You're always like the horrified captain of a boat. You know? Like, you're a regular hero thing, but also struggling with being terrified.

Tom Hanks: I think that at the age of 66, I realized that a little bit a while ago. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: But could you like sit with yourself without being in a fantastical world? Like, at what point were you able to sit with yourself and be with yourself, rather than—?

Tom Hanks: Oh! Oh, that's a very good question. And I'm going to say it's somewhere in the last 10 years or so, when I started—I have a company; it's called Playtone, and we produce all kinds of stuff. I had an idea for a screenplay that was mine and mine alone, and I ended up writing it. Now, never mind, we made the movie, and I was in it, and we directed it. It's called *That Thing You Do!*.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Mr. White (*That Thing You Do!*): The Wonders are in breach of contract.

Speaker: Sorry. I'm really sorry, Mr. White.

(Papers shuffling.)

Mr. White: Well, don't worry. No one's going to prison, son. It's a very common tale.

Speaker: Well, maybe for you, but I was in a band. and we still have a hit record!

Mr. White: Yeah! You do. One-hit wonders. It's a very common tale.

Speaker: My first time in a real recording studio.

Mr. White: You wanna hang around for a while? Okay by me. But you're out of the hotel this afternoon. Can't help that. You know, Guy, Horace was right about you. You are the smart one. Lenny is the fool. Jimmy is the talent. Faye is... well, now, Faye is special, isn't she?

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Tom Hanks: I started writing it, and I got to the end of it, and that was the first time—the first time I did something all on my own that I did not share with anybody and was not relying on somebody else to come in and impact. Later on, we made the movie. Of course,

we did. But when I was actually writing a story, that was a proactive creative desire that didn't require anybody else inviting me into the process. And somewhere around in there, I—can I call it discipline?—that discipline and understanding of the solitary effort became something other than solitude, if that makes sense.

So much of a life as an actor is waiting to be invited to go to the circus, waiting to—you know, to join the gang and put on a show. At the beginning of that, when I ended up becoming a screenwriter first and then a different kind of writer later on, that's when I think I just calmed down, settled down, and stopped trying to seduce the room on charm and instead just said, "I have this idea that I'm gonna do the hard and heavy work."

Eric Roth, who is a good friend of mine and he's a great screenwriter, and other writers that I have since become friends with—you know, they talk about writing. And they say, you know, "It's a solitary existence." (*Laughs.*) You do. You sit in a room, and you think, "Well, here's just a person in a room, and that sounds like a—"

No, it's not, 'cause your head is so filled with this big, massive thing. And not to become overly poetic, but I'm always gonna make the connection, it's not unlike—when I said, "And I really enjoyed it," I enjoyed those four-hour bus rides of looking out the window and daydreaming. Because the quality of the stories that I saw inside my own head were vast expanses for me. They were much, much bigger than being a confused nine-year-old kid on a Greyhound bus. Instead, I was as big as any story that Shakespeare could've written.

Jesse Thorn: What about being married? Like, you've been married to your wife for a long time now, and—

Tom Hanks: (*Adopting a southern gentleman accent.*) 34 years! 35 in April.

Jesse Thorn: When you're married 35 years with children, you're raising children together, you have to sit comfortably in family intimacy that you're hoping will last the rest of your life—

[00:50:00]

I ask you this mostly because it was not comfortable for me. I've been with my wife since we were 17. It's still—once in a while, I'm like, "What am I doing?"

Tom Hanks: Wow! Well, sure. Yeah. Yeah. You're gonna wear that?! (*Laughs.*) It just—you know.

Jesse Thorn: But like, you must have been forced into a position where you couldn't be transitory. Like, it must have been learning to you.

Tom Hanks: Well, yeah. That said, my son—Collin—has just turned 45. And honestly, him being born was the greatest thing that could've happened to a guy who is as big and dumb a cluck as I was. 'Cause I just would've been cast at sea. I just would've been a guy that would've done anything, would've tried any—you know—bad habit, would've developed

any vice, would've skipped out on all responsibility and just try to— I would just try to entertain myself and seduce everybody who was there. But when you have this thing that— this little boy that is this kind of miraculous kind of like creature that is both familiar and a mystery all at the same time, it required me to—

You know, I'm not saying I buckled down. You could ask all my kids, and they'll tell you, "Our dad is the biggest chucklehead on the planet, and sometimes he's not there at all." But knowing that there was something that was—you know, I had to admit this is my responsibility. I don't know how to do this right, but I know how to approach it and try to learn what goes along with it. So, when you end up having kids at an early age and you wanna see them every day—which is the case with all my kids; I would like to have breakfast with them all every single—and you know, I might just listen to them. And by the way, they might beat the living daylights out of me at the same time. And they might also tear me apart for all my faults, but they're not gonna be wrong! You know? (*Chuckles.*) They're—you know, that's gonna be what their opinions are.

And it ends up being the thing that—I'll say that it gave me a degree of focus. Because as an actor, I knew that I had bills to pay. I had to pay the rent. I had to—you know. I had to—I had clothes and food and doctor's bills that, you know, my kids needed. So, I ended up doing jobs without even thinking about it, just because they gave me the opportunity to do it. And it ended up being one of the greatest training grounds possible, because—

Jesse Thorn: But you also can't be glib in, you know, a long-term, intimate relationship in the way that you can when you step into a room to pitch a sitcom or whatever.

Tom Hanks: No, no. That—no, yeah, no, you can't. No. But you can be stupid. (*Laughs.*) I mean, you can make all sorts of decisions, and you can be—you can make yourself fraught with being—you know, too self-serving or too much in the moment. And I have to say that when it comes down to powers of skills and empathy, you know, I gotta work on that stuff all the time. Because I did stuff by myself for so long. You know, sort of as like, "Hey, dude, get on the bus, man. Otherwise, you're not gonna go up to Mom's house. So, stop complaining and get along with it." That's not the best thing for a—that's not the best lesson for a kid to learn. And it's not great stuff in order to pass on to your own kids, as well.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have to understand that you could admire your parents or like your parents—things about your parents—while also seeing that kind of, you know. My therapist would call it neglect.

(*Tom chuckles.*)

I'm not gonna say I relate to this, but...

Tom Hanks: (*Laughing.*) When I transpose my parents' life, let's say at the age of 36, to my own life at the age of 36? I didn't have a clue. I was just beginning to figure things out. I'm gonna cut my parents the same slack.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, right, but the question is—I can tell that you cut people slack.

(*They laugh.*)

At the bare minimum, you're gonna tell me that you cut people slack. But I sincerely believe that you're cutting your parents' slack.

(*Tom agrees.*)

But like was it—was it hard for you to get to the point where you could engage with the problems of that childhood that you told me was wonderful already, earlier on?

Tom Hanks: No, I said I liked it. I didn't say it was wonderful. I said—and by saying I liked it; I think I liked the variety. You know? I will tell you that, in various incarnations, I came home to a house that was not the most welcoming place in the world. Not because of any sort of malevolence, just because everybody was so much involved in their own self-drama, they didn't have room for anybody else's needs. And that's not a great thing to realize when you're 11 years old. Alright? My—the great love of my father's life—my dad passed away I'm gonna say... buh, buh, buh, buh, 30 years ago. But the great love of his life, my stepmother, his third wife, passed away just earlier this year. And I got together with my former stepsiblings.

[00:55:00]

And we end up talking about (*chuckles*) how truly horr-acious a job these people did when they first got married along with the incredible job they did with us afterwards.

Because they ended up saving my life a couple of times, and they were so gracious, and they were so forgiving, and they understood exactly what they had done wrong, and they did not feel good about it. But they were also incredibly open to—I'm gonna tell you (*chuckling*)—I'm gonna tell you how, I tell you this—at various grandparents' days, both my real mom—my birth mom—and my stepmother would come to grandparents' days to my kids' schools. And they would sit together. The idea of my mom and my stepmom sitting together was an impossibility for a vast chunk of my childhood. So much so, that I said, “Hey, it's a good thing dad's dead, because if he saw this, this would kill him seeing you guys sitting together.” And they laughed!

And the wisdom of time that goes by and the acknowledgement that we did not do everything right—and there's no excuse for it. There's no defense for it. And you can't even say, “Hey, I did the best I could,” 'cause even that's mealymouthed. All you can do is bow your head and say, “Yes, that's what the truth was.” So, when I say I cut my parents slack, I think I did it in the way any kid would to—look, I know a couple of people who said, “I would not trade my childhood for anything. It was fabulous.” And I just wanna say well your last name is not spelled H-A-N-K-S. 'Cause there's a lot of stuff that we would trade off.

But! What are you gonna do, you know? You can't change what it is. And what I—what, you know, I—and I—you know, I weighed plenty of the stuff that goes on to those moments when I felt welcome in the house and those other moments where this is the last place I

wanna be, sitting in my dinner table in my house in this family of mine. I don't wanna be here. And actually, nobody wants to be here, but here we are.

But you can—you must transpose that into that which did not kill you makes you better. And I will say this, there was no—there was no abuse. There was no physical thing. All there was was a real confusion as opposed to how to express or how to explain what the hell was going on. And shame on all of us, the easiest thing to do was not say a thing. And shame on the parents who taught me how to not say a thing.

But now, it's my responsibility, ain't it? It's my responsibility to understand that and try to come to all of my kids—my oldest is 45. My youngest is 26. And I first apologize for everything I've done wrong. "I am so sorry about everything." And then, just get into it and start saying, "Okay, so what's the truth about what's going on? Tell me more about this." That's the best I can do right now. And that's not seduction. That's literally saying, "Help me know more. Help me know more about this. Educate me if you will and come at me with anything you got."

Jesse Thorn: Well, Tom, I'm grateful to you for taking the time to talk to me.

Tom Hanks: Do I owe you \$150 for these 50 minutes? (*Chuckles.*) I mean, honestly! I don't see any plaques on the wall of this studio anywhere. Don't you have a—?

Jesse Thorn: You don't see a bachelor's degree in American Studies from UC Santa Cruz?

Tom Hanks: I don't see! I don't! I—oh! You're a banana slug, man.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, not to brag.

Tom Hanks: Pass, fail! No grades, please. My niece went to UC Santa Cruz.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you. And thank you for your work. Your success is so well-earned.

Tom Hanks: Oh, thank you! I really enjoyed talking about this. This was great.

Jesse Thorn: Tom Hanks. As we said before, you can see him in the new movie, *Here*. It is in theaters now. I hope you enjoyed spending time with me this festive holiday season, this Hankssgiving.

Our condolences, by the way, are extended to Tom Hanks on the departure of the Oakland Athletics. It's a bunch of baloney. But you know what? The weather's great here in Giants-fan country. Tom, join me and your son Collin. We're the good guys now.

Transition: 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—as well as at Maximum Fun headquarters

overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. We talked briefly about the restaurant right by our office, Doña Bibi's, sometimes called Antojitos Bibi's. It is a Honduran place, and they make baleadas—which is a Honduran specialty. But our producer, Jesus, reminded us that Bibi's also makes something called a mega baleada, which has been ordered by members of our staff and is basically the size of a card table. It is one of the most gargantuan foods we've ever laid eyes upon. We will post a photo of it on our Instagram for you to see how big it is.

[01:00:00]

That's [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#) on Instagram.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. Our video editor is Daniel Speer. Special thanks this week to Max Fun producer Valerie Moffat, who helped engineer our interview with Tom Hanks, inside the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in—you're not going to believe this—Beverly Hills. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find the music that he makes for *Bullseye* on his Bandcamp page at [DJWSounds.Bandcamp.com](#). A lot of it there is pay what you want, so go download some and enjoy it.

Our theme music, written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow us now on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as—as of this week—BlueSky. You will find video on the video platforms from just about all of our interviews. So, go search for *Bullseye* on your favorite social media app, and get special stuff.

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.)

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