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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. My next guest is Bruce Vilanch. You might know him from the Y2K reboot of *Hollywood Squares*, where he cracked wise alongside Whoopi Goldberg, Coolio, Martin Mull, Bobcat Goldthwait, Gilbert Godfried, among many others. If you don't know him by name, you probably know him by his look: his famously distinctive colorful eyeglasses, his blonde Prince Valiant haircut, and his ever-present novelty t-shirt. Bruce Vilanch, that's our guy.

He maybe is the friendliest human in the world. He is sharp as a tack. And as fun as he is onscreen, he really shines in a writer's room. For 14 years, he was head writer of the Academy Awards. He spent two and a half decades writing on that program. He has also worked on countless TV shows, dating back over 50 years. He's a master of writing for Entertainment programming—big E. Variety, things with big, brassy musical numbers, where stars turn to the camera and wink and make a little joke. Sometimes that stuff is great. I mean, Billy Crystal at the Oscars, Bette Midler in between songs, Lily Tomlin in a TV special, all that kind of thing.

And then sometimes it isn't. And that's what Bruce Vilanch's new book is about. It's called *It Seemed Like a Bad Idea at the Time: The Worst TV Shows in History and Other Things I Wrote*. It's about the *Star Wars Holiday Special*, the *Brady Bunch Variety Hour*, Paul Lin's Halloween special, and a dozen or so other absolute disasters. We're gonna get into 'em, along with the hits. Let's go to the stage, and me and Bruce Vilanch.

Transition: Bright, thumpy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Bruce Vilanch, welcome to *Bullseye*. I am so happy to have you on the show, and I enjoyed your book so much.

Bruce Vilanch: Thank you. I'm so glad; I've been to the Bullseye before, just not this one.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: Were you trepidatious about writing a book about the worst things you've ever made?

Bruce Vilanch: *(Cackles.)* No, I didn't wanna hurt people's feelings, but as I wrote them, I realized that most of these people are dead. So.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

It would be — if I hurt their feelings, it's gonna be a spinoff, obviously, for a series. But no, it came out of all these podcasts that I did with people much younger than you and I, who had seen television shows that I wrote before they were born. And they encountered them on YouTube, and they all wanted to know how did this happen? Who said yes to this? And have they paid their debt to society? Important question. And so, I kind of was tickled that they wanted to know about this stuff. 'Cause you know, I really had thought we had buried them all. Obviously, the graves were too shallow. Because the internet brings everything back up that you ever did and that just bites you so. After I had done a few hundred of these, I began to realize—I think there's maybe a book in this about how I wrote all this stuff, and I survived to talk about it many years later.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's hard for somebody who's on the younger side—and the first things in mass culture that I remember is like *Cheers*—to understand that there was a world of mass entertainment on network television.

Bruce Vilanch: And it was mass, because there were no options. There were— in most cities, there were the three networks and maybe the public station, but it wasn't like today where there are 500 channels, and you can look at *Avatar* on your watch, and the special effects are fabulous if they don't get in the way of the time display. So, back then it really was—people did gather to watch things. You couldn't tape them and look at them at a later time, it was what was called appointment television. You know, at eight o'clock Sunday night, Ed Sullivan came on with whatever new discovery he brought on and whatever established star he had on. It was a cultural moment for everybody.

Jesse Thorn: When you decided to get into comedy, was that the kind of show business that you imagined yourself being in, or did you imagine yourself being in—you know, making Nichols and May or something?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, I imagined myself in the (*with a flourish*) theatre. I imagined myself being Neil Simon, who would crank out one play after another. But actually, you know, before Neil Simon, there was Abe Burrows and there was Kaufman and Hart, and there were all these comedic playwrights who I emulated. And it didn't work out that way. I mean, I wrote stuff.

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I had one big Broadway flop, which is in the book, *Platinum*, and that scared me back to television. And I admired Nicholay tremendously, but you know, they were in improv comedy, which was really brand new. I mean, it was a whole new concept that you got up there and just did stuff. Because everybody's act in those days was so honed, mostly because they would do three sets a night in different clubs. And I mean, all the Catskill comics were like that. So, I was never a performer in that regard. So, it wasn't anything that I aspired to.

Jesse Thorn: Did you think you were gonna be cool? That's my real question.

Bruce Vilanch: Oh, cool. You know, I held out hope. I never was cool. You know, I was a fat kid. I was not athletic. I had a life of the mind. And when you're that thing, as Whoopi has often said, if you can tell them a joke and make them laugh, that gives you a head start. I mean, you can run. Or they realize, you make them laugh, and so you kind of are the jester.

Jesse Thorn: I imagine that was doubly true for you in the middle of the 20th century when you were a kid—as not just a fat kid, but also a gay kid.

Bruce Vilanch: I was a gay kid. But I was a bi kid, which, you know, the whole thing just didn't exist. I mean, I always liked girls, and I always envisioned myself having a wife and kids and a picket fence. And as I got older and I realized that was not where my desires lay, I realized that I couldn't be authentic with a woman. And she deserved better than somebody who couldn't be authentic with her. So, I followed what I really liked. (*Chuckles.*) So, when they say gay is a choice, I said, yes, it is a choice; but it's a choice to be true to yourself, to be real, and not to be a double-lifer or somebody opposing.

Jesse Thorn: You grew up outside New York City. Did you get to go to the theatre as a kid?

Bruce Vilanch: Oh, yeah. I grew up in Patterson, New Jersey, right across the George Washington Bridge. And my mother—my parents were both huge theatre freaks. My father loved musicals.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you, Bruce. All New Yorkers need to list at least one bridge or freeway, as though non-New Yorkers know what that is.

Bruce Vilanch: That's right. Well, it's important, because for a while—

Jesse Thorn: Did you take the Van Wick, Bruce?

Bruce Vilanch: We did. (*Chuckles.*) No, I mentioned it because Chris Christie closed it for a time. So, it's a cultural landmark now.

Jesse Thorn: That's true.

Bruce Vilanch: Right. So, we'd go across the bridge and see everything. And my father invested in musicals. He loved musicals, and he was a doctor, and he just liked going to opening nights.

Jesse Thorn: In Broadway musicals?

Bruce Vilanch: Broadway musicals. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: So, did he have the kind of money to do that with?

Bruce Vilanch: (*Chuckles.*) Well, you know, it wasn't that much. I mean, at the time, you could get in—I mean, now you have to bring \$1,000,000 to the table, but at the time it was 5

grand, maybe. And he loved Mary Martin and Ethel Merman and invested in all their shows. They were called angels, and there were hundreds of them. But they didn't get what happens now with the Tony's, where if you come with \$1,000,000 dollars, suddenly you're a producer, and you're above the title of the show, and you get to race down the aisle if the show wins and elbow out the other people who are also producers.

Jesse Thorn: Did you go see shows that your dad had money in?

Bruce Vilanch: Oh yeah, all the David Merrick musicals. The first—well, the first show I saw was a musical starring Carol Channing, called *The Vamp*. It was—and we got friendly as adults, and she would keep saying me, “Why do you keep on bringing up that turkey?!”

(They laugh.)

Because it really was. It was called *Delilah*. It was based on a real thing, which was Theda Bara. Theda Bara was a huge—a vamp in silent movies. And she was really a Polish girl from the Bronx, I think. And it was about the creation of this character. Carol Channing played this girl. And of course, the idea of Carol Channing doing anything silent is hard to imagine. *(Laughs.)* But I just fell in love with her and it, and the whole idea of show business. But I did see—*Fannie* was the second musical, which is where I first saw Florence Henderson.

Jesse Thorn: Why did you move to LA?

Bruce Vilanch: I moved here because—to write a TV series. When I got out of college, I got a job at the *Chicago Tribune*. I was Gene Siskel's junior critic, and I criticized everything. I wrote about everything else. I interviewed all the stars coming through and stuff. And I met Bette Midler. She was just starting out. She was on Broadway in *Fiddler on the Roof*, getting married every night. And she took a vacation and came to Chicago and did her act, and I knew her manager, and I wrote about her. And I told her she should talk more on stage.

She said, *(nasally)* “You got any lines?” And I began writing for her. And 50 years later, I still am.

Jesse Thorn: What was it like to see her act in Chicago when maybe you didn't really know who she was?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, she was at a club called Mr. Kelly's, which was a very hip nightclub where, you know, Nichols and May and Shelley Berman and all these people came out of. Bob Newhart. And she was opening for Jackie Vernon, who was a deadpan comic. His whole act was things like, *(dry and monotone)*, “When I was a child, I was unwanted. Now I'm wanted in 13 states.” And the audience came to see him, and she was the opening act, and they didn't know who she was.

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But she came out and she was wearing toreador pants, Capri pants, and a sash, and a blouse unbuttoned to the waist, and no bra. Which she said to me, “This is my feminist statement.”

(Jesse laughs.)

And after I began writing for her, I began writing for a lot of other people. 'Cause I got known as her associate. And at the same time she had a dresser whose brother was Tim Hauser, who'd started a band called The Manhattan Transfer. They were a singing group. They just retired after 50 years. So, we put the act together, and she got Arnold Ertegun, who ran Atlantic Records, to come down and sign them. And Fred Silverman came. He was running CBS at the time. At one point, Fred—who was from Chicago—ran all three networks. We were waiting for him to take over PBS to see what he would do with that. It never happened. But he was at CBS, and he hired the transfer to do a summer replacement series for share.

Jesse Thorn: And they were like a nostalgia—like, a new version of a nostalgia act. They were doing like—

Bruce Vilanch: At the time. They were four white kids doing '30s, '40s, and swing music, '50s do-wop. It was like the world of jazz where everybody's blended, there's no color. They were carrying on with that. And they would come on looking like something out of a nightclub scene from a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers picture and sing all these songs. And they were phenomenal singers. And it was interesting. And they went from there, being a nostalgia act. And then they became a jazz act. And then they did every single kind of music. I mean, if you look at The Manhattan Transfer catalog, it's staggering, because they've done everything. And they brought me out to LA in 1975 to write this show.

Jesse Thorn: I looked at some Manhattan Transfer videos on YouTube, because they came up in your book. And in the one that really struck me, they were not wearing Fred Astaire clothes. In fact, the woman who was singing lead was wearing what I can only describe as a... *Star Trek* themed romper?

Bruce Vilanch: That was their—yeah. They had a period—

Jesse Thorn: Like, with shorts.

Bruce Vilanch: Yes. Right. Well, that was—it was a thematic thing. That was when they were doing the *Twilight Zone* theme as a—they put lyrics to it. *(Sings a bar.)*

Music: “Twilight Zone/Twilight Tone” from the album *Extensions* by the band The Manhattan Transfer.

When I hear this melody

The strange illusion takes over me

Through a tunnel of the mind

Perhaps present or future time, oh, oh

Well, outta nowhere comes a sound

This melody that keeps spinning 'round and 'round

(Music fades out.)

Bruce Vilanch: But that was the thematic. That's not how she was, you know, going around. But they changed their look. They did an album called *Brazil*, and they came out in, you know, Carmen Miranda kind of things. And they were amazing. They were, you know, the Zael Egg of pop music. They did everything!

Jesse Thorn: More still to come with Bruce Vilanch. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* for MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bruce Vilanch. You might have seen him on *Hollywood Squares*. He was a regular there. He's best known as a comedy writer who's been at it for over 50 years. He's written for the Oscars, the Grammys, the Tonys, Bette Midler, Billy Crystal, Robin Williams, dozens more. There's even an entire feature documentary about him. It's called *Get Bruce*. He has also worked on some real stinkers—his words, not mine. He recounts his time working on projects like the *Star Wars Holiday Special* in his new book, *It Seemed Like a Bad Idea at the Time: The Worst TV Shows in History and Other Things I Wrote*. Let's get back into my conversation with the delightful Bruce Vilanch.

When you were writing on one of these variety specials, what was the job?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, the job is to showcase the star, always, and to put them with other people they could be comfortable with. And it was them as the host of a show, and then them in various sketches with other people. And sometimes it was—if they were very musical, it was just duets with other people who were very musical. I mean, if you had Cher and Nancy Wilson, you probably didn't put them in a sketch. You had them sing something together, 'cause they were two interesting vocal styles.

So, it varied from show to show. But if they had a particular talent—singing, dancing, whatever obviously you had—you showcased that, and you wrote around whatever that was.

Jesse Thorn: Was The Manhattan Transfer the first of those that you wrote for?

Bruce Vilanch: Yes, it was.

Jesse Thorn: What was funny about *The Manhattan Transfer*?

Bruce Vilanch: Not much, and that was a problem.

(Jesse affirms with a laugh.)

They were great studio singers—and say this with no malice whatsoever—and they knew it.

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They were not natural-born performers. Tim Hauser kind of was, but—and Alan Paul, who was in the original cast of *Grease* on Broadway, was. But the girls weren't. Janice was a great arranger and a great singer, and the original girl, Laurel Masse, was a beautiful singer. And then Cheryl Bentine, who was with the band for 45 years, and they still referred to her as the new girl, she was more of a performer than the others. The problem was that when you had the original four, it was difficult to put them in anything comedic, because that wasn't their bent.

So, what we did was we built it around numbers. And we would have a lot of physical comedy and silent comedy happening while the numbers were going on. They did a song called “Aurora”, which is a Brazilian—not a real Brazilian song, a Hollywood Brazilian. *(Singing.)* “Aurora comes from Rio de Janeiro. She dances in Little Street Café.” So, it told a story, so we could cast them in it and have another story happening.

Jesse Thorn: So, one of the shows that you worked on in this mold was the *Star Wars Holiday Special*.

Bruce Vilanch: Yes. Of legend.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Music: Slow, emotional orchestra music.

Luke: Chewbacca!

(Chewbacca brays.)

Chewbacca, we were so relieved to hear you were alright.

(More roaring.)

Han: All of you are an important part of my life, pal. I'm glad I could be here.

Leia: This holiday is yours, but we all share with you the hope that this day brings us closer to freedom and to harmony and to peace.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: This is something that my 13-year-old is obsessed with.

Bruce Vilanch: Wow! Alright.

Jesse Thorn: How early in the process were you involved?

Bruce Vilanch: Once George sold it to CBS, I was brought in. They started staffing it up.

Jesse Thorn: So, this is something that George Lucas brought to the network.

Bruce Vilanch: Yeah. To put it in context, *Star Wars*—what we now know as *Episode IV: A New Hope*—was actually the *Star Wars* movie that had been out for 18 months. And he was about to start shooting *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, but he wanted to stir the pot. And CBS said, “What do you wanna—we wanna do anything *Star Wars*.”

So, he told us later, he told me he had 10 stories that he had written. Six of them were gonna be movies, and they were—with a 30-year hiatus between them. And then he had four other stories he sold to various platforms, and this was the last one. And he sold to CBS, and it was—he envisioned it as an original musical. If he had thought about it, I think he would not have sold them an original musical starring the wookies, because they speak no language. All they do is they sound like—

(Jesse and Bruce both attempt wookie noises.)

Like, people who hit their elbow in the funny bone. *(Pained undulating.)*

Jesse Thorn: Or a hoarse husky.

Bruce Vilanch: Exactly. Or husky horse. *(Giggles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Or a husky horse! Yeah. That's fair.

Bruce Vilanch: And they can't move in those costumes, so they can't dance. So, they can't sing, they can't dance, they can't speak. And every—

Jesse Thorn: Also Bruce, like not to put too fine a point on it, but even if it had starred Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker? Still probably a bad idea to do a musical *Star Wars* thing.

Bruce Vilanch: Oh probably, yeah. But I really think that he thought that it would be something in the kin, you know, but not part of the canon. You know. It would, you know, be a thing. And I think that Carrie and Harrison and Mark were brought in later in the process when he realized he had to have real *Star Wars* elements in the thing. I don't think that was the initial conception.

But once he had sold it, it staffed up. They called and said the *Star Wars Holiday Special*. And I have to say two things. One is that, when the first *Star Wars* came out, a lot of people—we all acknowledged it was a blockbuster, but we did not think that it was the greatest thing ever. It was—yeah. I mean, it reminded me of things I saw as a kid that Republic Pictures made, that you saw Saturday mornings. And it was a high-end budget version, but it was a big success. It had not become the Scientology of the nerds, which happened later on, after the internet came in.

Jesse Thorn: And to some extent it makes sense, because of George Lucas's obsession with old-time showbiz-iness. Like, the Republic serial connection could just as well be, you know, 1930s musicals in the same way, that same kind of nostalgic way.

Bruce Vilanch: That's right. Exactly. And it had a parody quality to it with the wipes and the talking robots, you know, joshing each other and all this kind of stuff.

Jesse Thorn: It definitely rides the line between homage and camp.

Bruce Vilanch: Yeah. Because it wasn't until the Empire that the Jungian analysis came in, and the Joseph Conrad of it all came in, and so it was kind of a carefree franchise, we thought. And there was a lot of that, a lot of, you know—

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There was a *Battle of the Network Stars*, where they actually put, you know, comics in tracksuits and had them do shotputs and things.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you're making a *Star Wars* musical special, how do you choose who is going to stand next to the wookies and talk, since the wookies can't talk. 'Cause you have to have costars.

Bruce Vilanch: Right. Well, you try to have the tallest person you can find, because then the wookiee doesn't have to bend quite so low.

(*Jesse agrees with a laugh.*)

Because they're not good at bending.

Jesse Thorn: Because it's be Bea Arthur, Harvey Korman.

Bruce Vilanch: She's tall. They were both tall, but mostly, it was Art Carney at first. Because the network would not let us use subtitles, this being 1978. And you know, people didn't even go to the movies with subtitles. They would go see dubbed versions if they went to a foreign movie at all. And we had to bring on an interpreter, who would also—'cause the wookies just didn't speak, you know. It's like (*wookie warbling*). And the interpreter would understand what they were saying. Because it is kind of amazing that everybody in a galaxy far, far away understands English. Even if they don't speak it, they somehow understand it.

Jesse Thorn: But you need a Penn to the Teller to get the words to the audience.

Bruce Vilanch: (*Laughs.*) Right. Exactly right. And Art was Penn, and Bea was Penn. And they all were Penn'd in at some point, in every way.

Jesse Thorn: Was there a point where people working on the show realized what they had stepped in?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, George—after the first meeting, George kind of said, “I'm out.” And he had a director who he had picked, who had never directed a TV special before. He was Canadian and very talented and went back to having a great career in Canada, but he was wrong for the apparatus of a TV special. And so, eventually he was gone after a few days and a pro, Steve Bender, who had directed the *Elvis in Hawaii* special—which was legendary—he came in, and he kind of took the reins.

But everybody who was working on it, they were variety show veterans and Broadway veterans. Joe Layton, who directed *Sound of Music* choreographed and directed a lot of shows on Broadway. But bit by bit, we began to realize it was—unwieldy was the word for it. We were doing something, which we knew—I didn't know how it could work, but we didn't care, because it was so campy and ridiculous. And even Harrison never got into the spirit of it. He showed up for George, but when he was playing Han Solo in his scenes, he gave it his all. He was the real deal. And of course, my favorites were the guys—the wookies and the robots, you know, who were actually being known for the first—shown around for the first time in something else. So, they were a great deal of fun.

Jesse Thorn: I once got to work with Charo.

Bruce Vilanch: Ah!

Jesse Thorn: It was the highlight of my career.

Bruce Vilanch: She's fun.

Jesse Thorn: I was working with Paul Reubens as Pee-wee Herman, and we said to Paul, “We need a guest on this show. Do you think Charo would do it?”

And he said, you know, “We'll give her a call.”

And she came in. She hadn't seen him in like 10 years. Came in, said, (*high pitched*) “Oh! Peewee!”

(*Bruce laughs.*)

Gave him a hug and a kiss. And then she turned to me and my colleague, Julia, who were standing there. And she said, (*impersonating Charo*), “His name is not really peewee, but he says I could call him that. Hehehehe!”

And I was like, ohhh, this is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me in my liiiiife!

Bruce Vilanch: She's always Charo. I mean, she's very, very smart. But she has that character. And she carries through with it in life.

Jesse Thorn: And you wrote on a Charo sitcom, right?

Bruce Vilanch: Yes, it was a pilot for a Charo—I guess you could call it a sitbar, which was a—occasionally they program things like this, and they don't usually work, but it was a situation comedy with a variety show element. The only time I remember it really working was Jack Benny, before. Where she played herself, and the story was she had a weekly television show, and there were guest stars. And part of it would be her life at home and schmoozing with the guest star. And then they would do something that was on the TV show. So, the most interesting of any of those is Jack Benny and Marilyn Monroe, which I recommend to anybody who wants to see what it's like when it works.

Jesse Thorn: Or *Larry Sanders*, people could watch *Larry Sanders*—the greatest television comedy of all time.

Bruce Vilanch: Well, exactly. *Larry Sanders*, that was a parody of all of that. Right. A parody of all of that. But with Charo, it was weird. It was—she'd done a pilot before called *Charo and the Marine*, which I said, “This sounds like a porno. You don't really wanna go with that title.” And so, it was, then *Charo and the Sergeant*. (*Laughs.*) Okay. That could be a, you know, German Shepherd, who knows. So, that was where she was a fish in the small pond. She was a fish outta water. She was married to a Marine and had to be a Marine wife on the base, and that was a little too much. So, this one was just Charo being Charo.

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And we did a special; we did an hour version of it with Mike Connors from *Mannix*.

Jesse Thorn: One of the funniest guys in show business!

Bruce Vilanch: And that was kind of what—he was amusing, because he was playing against type. It was crazy. It was nuts. It was the '70s. He played George Washington in a

sketch. I mean, it was ridiculous. And we did very well. The pilot aired very well, but the network didn't see how it would play every week. And so, they paid us all off not to do it. Which is my favorite kind of—pay or play. Passive income is wonderful. Just wonderful. I live for passive income now.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) When you're writing for Charo, I imagine that the advantage is you really have something to write to.

Bruce Vilanch: She's very specific. I mean, her fractured language, her malaprops, you know. I mean, she's still using a line in her act about politics that we gave her. That was, (*impersonating Charo*) “I don't understand these American politics. These Republicans are Democrats.”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

It still gets a laugh.

Jesse Thorn: It's funny! Charo's funny!

Bruce Vilanch: Yeah, she's funny! And the idea that she is still naive about all these things. You know, she is this childlike creature, 'cause she basically looks the way she always looked. I mean, whatever her maintenance program is, it's fantastic and no doubt rigorous. But she's in terrific shape, and she coochie-coochies everywhere. And coochie-coochie can mean anything. You know, it can mean what you probably think it means right away, and then all kinds of other stuff it can mean.

Jesse Thorn: You worked on the Letterman-hosted Oscars, right?

Bruce Vilanch: Yes, I did.

Jesse Thorn: I guess my question is: what was that experience like?

Bruce Vilanch: (*Laughs.*) We were standing backstage in the middle of the show, and I said, “Are you having fun?”

He said, “I think I'm in a hostage situation.”

(*Jesse cackles.*)

He was out of his element. And what Johnny Carson said to him the next day, he told me, was, “Well, you know, Dave, when I did the Oscars, I didn't do (inaudible).” You know, so he didn't try to bring any of his stuff onto the Oscar show, and Dave tried to bring some of his stuff onto it. And that was moderately successful in the house. The press hated it, and they picked on Uma-Oprah, where he kept resaying their names. And I said to him in rehearsal, I said, “I don't think that's a good idea, because—you know, Uma's sitting there. She's

nominated; her career could change. She didn't need to have her name being made fun of by TV Boy.”

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

David Letterman: I've been dying to do something all day, and I think maybe we can take care of this. Oprah?

(Scattered laughter and applause.)

Uma?

Uma, Oprah. I feel much better.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Bruce Vilanch: And you know, and he said, “Well, she's been on the show, so you know, they know each other.” So, you know, do what you're gonna do.

Jesse Thorn: You tried to stand between David Letterman and a funny sounding word. That's a dangerous place to stand.

Bruce Vilanch: I did, I did. But much to his credit, he owned it. And for the next year, he would do jokes about Uma and Oprah. And then the following year, Billy hosted, and he was doing—it was the year of *The English Patient*, and we did a film clip inserting Billy into the nominated movies. And then there's a scene in English patient where I think Ralph Fiennes is running across the sand, and somebody's in a biplane trying to shoot him. And that was Dave. And he was going, *(through radio crackling)* “Uma! Oprah! Uma! Oprah!” And he couldn't wait to do it. I mean, before they finished the sentence, he said, “Yes. Can we shoot it in New York?” Which we did. And he could stop doing the jokes about it, because—you know—time had moved on. And this was his way of saying, “I know. I screwed up.”

Jesse Thorn: The other day I walked into the video store by my house, and they were watching the Paul Lynde Halloween special.

(Bruce cackles.)

It was Halloween time.

Bruce Vilanch: It was about to say, it couldn't be the other day. That'd be—(*giggles*).

Jesse Thorn: It was in October, I will admit.

Bruce Vilanch: Well, that's the thing. It comes back. It's like *Star Wars* and the *Brady Bunch*. Every year it comes back, Halloween.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Paul Lynde: So, you wonder why I love Halloween. (*Chuckles.*) When you're shaped like a pumpkin, it was easy to love Halloween.

(*Audience laughter.*)

And I do love Halloween. In fact, this year I made a resolution. I promised my housekeeper, I said, “Margaret—”

Margaret: “I'm gonna love Halloween this year.” Right, Mr. Lynde?

Paul Lynde: Right. I'm gonna be nice to every kid who comes to that door.

Margaret: Mm. Sweet as a bowl of cherries!

Paul Lynde: Well, it's better than being the pits.

(*Laughter.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: There's no shortage of character in Paul Lynde's onstage persona.

Bruce Vilanch: Oh, well—but it's that one character. It's the one—it doesn't go far. You know? He is the guy—he has one scene where he won't give you the bank loan, or he somehow screws up your life.

[00:30:00]

Because he is that kind of negative presence. It starts— You know, his big first thing was *Bye Birdie*, where his whole career was summed up in, (*nasally*) “Nobody respects me!”

And his child says, “I respect you, Daddy.”

(*Dismissively.*) “Who wants respect from a 10-year-old?!”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I mean, that was him. I mean, it was never enough. He was never—

Jesse Thorn: When you say that was him, you mean that was him? That wasn't just him onstage. That was him.

Bruce Vilanch: That was Paul! It wasn't—no, that was—that encapsulated his persona.

Jesse Thorn: That, plus some antisemitism.

Bruce Vilanch: Well, that was offstage. I mean, that was offstage, and that was after a cocktail. Or two cocktails. He was nervous without any— At one cocktail, he was brilliant and funny. Two cocktails and it was like the Wannsee Conference. It was like—you know, it was not good.

(*They chuckle.*)

Jesse Thorn: He's so funny in it. Like, he is so funny.

Bruce Vilanch: He really is. And he does a sketch with Florence Henderson where he plays like the Sheik, Rudolph Valentino kind of Sheik. And he's actually acting. I mean, he's doing a character. And so is she! I mean, Florence Henderson is playing like—I don't know, like (*poshly*) a very, very high-tone, *Downton Abbey* kind of British woman.

And they're both acting their brains out doing it. And it's really—it's actually funny.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a quick break. Don't go away. When we come back, Bruce and I will talk about the kind of TV specials that he excels in making and why they aren't on TV much anymore. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Fun, exciting music.

Kirk Hamilton: Say you like video games—

Jason Schreier: And who doesn't?

Maddy Myers: I mean some people probably don't.

Kirk: Okay, but a lot of people do. So, say you're one of those people, and you feel like you don't really have anyone to talk to about the games that you like.

Jason: Well, you should get some better friends.

Kirk: Yes, you should get some better friends, but you could also listen to *Triple Click*. (*Click, click, click!*) A weekly podcast about video games hosted by me, Kirk Hamilton.

Maddy: Me, Maddy Myers.

Jason: And me, Jason Schreier. We talk about new releases, old classics, industry news, and whatever, really.

Maddy: We'll show you new things to love about games, and maybe even help you find new friends to talk to about them.

Kirk: *Triple Click*. (*Click, click, click!*) It's kinda like we're your friends. Find us at MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. This is *Bullseye*. I'm talking to comedy writer Bruce Vilanch.

You have always been out. What was it like for you to write for these kind of showbusiness avatars of gayness who were generally closeted?

(Bruce chuckles and agrees.)

People like Paul Lynde and Rip Taylor, right? When you were a young man, like how did it sit with you?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, I got the difference between a performer who's out there on the airwaves and somebody who's back in the room writing. And while eccentricity and flamboyance was always encouraged among people who were in show business, I didn't have to go out there and sell myself as a character that you could have in your home. And back then, our rule always was "if they get it, they get it; if they don't, it goes right over their

heads.” Because so many people didn't think about gay people. I mean, if they had a gay guy in their family or a lesbian in their family, they just didn't think too much about it. It was, “Oh, they're eccentric.”

And it was only when we started coming out after Stonewall, when it became a movement—which was at the beginning of my career in Hollywood—that it became an issue. 'Cause everybody was in the closet. And then when it became a thing like, “Well, you don't have to be,” that's when these issues came up. So, I mean, I was always aware of what we were doing, but those were the strictures. And you know, I felt for them. But at the same time, there wasn't a mass movement to come out, and nobody was pulling people out of the closet. And you know, you could do it to yourself as you misbehaved, which was easy to do—you know, at a bar or on a corner or any of those things, where cops— Once cops got you and it was the public record, it was public record.

Jesse Thorn: You also wrote for the *Brady Bunch Variety Show*.

(*Bruce confirms.*)

Which was a kind of backstage/onstage hybrid show of that classic style. And you know, the dad from the *Brady Bunch* was a gay man in real life. Very closeted.

(*Bruce confirms.*)

So, what was it like for you to watch that very different version of Hollywood closeted-ness?

Bruce Vilanch: Well, it was strange. I mean, the funny thing is that he had done an episode of *Medical Center* where he played a trans character, which was very early on. But he was a funny comedian and a serious dramatic actor.

[00:35:00]

And of course, he couldn't come out as a leading man. That would end his career, because the prevalent theory was that the audience can't separate the actor from the character. But the subtle way of saying it was, “Can he kiss the girl?” That was always what they would say. But in the case of Robert, his sexuality ran very deep, and he didn't really admit to a lot of it himself. But in addition to that, by the time I came along this was like the third iteration of the *Brady Bunch*. And it was still in—it had never gone away from the public. The reruns were out there and.

And he had become, in the course of it, a surrogate father to those kids—some of whose families were depending on them for revenue streams. And he felt they were not being well represented. And so, he would step in. And the idea that he would come out and people would know about that, he would be like a pedophile. He would be—it would be that. He was truly invested in those kids. And they were all like teenagers at that point and older. But still, it was something that he couldn't really do and maintain that. And he was still looking over them—you know, watching over them. Which was really sweet.

Jesse Thorn: Do you still believe in the kind of entertainment that these shows represent?

Bruce Vilanch: That's a very good question, because I think that the era has certainly changed. But you know, SNL does this stuff, but they do it all kind of tongue-in-cheek. I don't know anybody who's actually coming out and doing it for real. I mean, now when they do it, it's a spectacle. You know, like Mariah Carey with, you know, a million boys and all that kind of stuff. Or Cher. But the particular combination of comedy sketches and hosting and medleys and all that is kind of dead. I think it's kind of viewed as old-school.

Jesse Thorn: What about the kind of entertainment that's being made for everyone? 'Cause there's not a lot of that kind of entertainment left.

Bruce Vilanch: Do you have an example? (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, that's what I'm saying! Like, we're talking about shows where you had Paul Lynde do a country number.

Bruce Vilanch: Right. Well, that was because at the time, we had to do something for every demographic.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that there still is or should be room for that?

Bruce Vilanch: I think it'd be wonderful if there was. I doubt that it'll happen, because we're so fragmented now. You know, a show in those days had to get a rating of about 17,000,000 people. I mean, the idea was to get 30, because you got a third of the market, but you could survive if you got above 17. Now if you get 4 and a half—I mean, the new *Hollywood Squares* gets 5 and a half million people, and they're thrilled that they're getting that big a number on CBS at eight o'clock at night.

Jesse Thorn: Do you have an idealism about it? Like, do you think that there should be a place for Bette Midler singing ballads and then making a joke about a bathhouse right after?

Bruce Vilanch: (*Laughs.*) Yeah! But I mean, I think she still could do that. But I mean, I don't think that interests her at the moment. But it's different, and it gets continually—it gets more fragmented, you know. So. Events that people will watch—I mean, Tom Brady being roasted on Netflix by Nikki Glaser made Nikki Glaser a star. And that's because Tom Brady's a huge star, because sports are bigger than anything. You know, Celine Dion came back at the Olympics, because sports are bigger than anything. So, that seems to be the great equalizer.

Jesse Thorn: There's a glancing reference in your book that I needed to explicate on the air before we leave. What is George Hamilton's cure for hiccups?

Bruce Vilanch: (*Cackles.*) George Hamilton's cure for hiccups—you know, I can't remember anymore! It was hold your breath. I think that was it. It was just—you can try and drown them, or you can just hold your breath. And if you just continue holding your breath, they'll go away. I don't know, because I have a whole new thing now. I had a lap band, and I lost

100 pounds with a lap band. And when you start hiccupping in the lap band, that means that your little pouch is full, and you shouldn't eat anymore.

In other words, you're looking at the cheesecake, and you say, "I'd like that."

And your lap band says, "Yes, you can have it. It'll come right back up, but you can have it."

So, that's what hiccups mean to me. So, I've forgotten, 'cause I have not been able to use that as a cure for hiccups anymore.

Jesse Thorn: Bruce, thank you so much for talking to me on *Bullseye*.

Bruce Vilanch: Ah, this was great. Thank you.

Jesse Thorn: Bruce Vilanch. His new book is a hoot and a half, just like Bruce Vilanch. It's called *It Seemed Like a Bad Idea at the Time: The Worst TV Shows in History and Other Things I Wrote*. You can pick it up at your local bookshop or at [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org). And I mean, if you wanna watch the *Star Wars Holiday Special*, you can go find it on YouTube, you stinker.

[00:40:00]

Transition: Relaxed, jazzy synth with a syncopated 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 as well as at Maximum Fun HQ—overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. It is not raining here in Los Angeles. But boy, was there just a giant thunder clap! So, we'll see what the future holds. 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 Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis.

Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://djwsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was 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 *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you will find video from just about all of our interviews—including video of the delightful Bruce Vilanch and Christina Hendricks in full. Why not share one of our interviews with a friend of yours this week? Go to YouTube, search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. You will find our interviews there. 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 fades out.)