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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](http://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 is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Lisa Kudrow started in comedy as a member of the Groundlings, the legendary improv troupe. From there, she got a shot at joining the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. Came pretty close, but ended up losing out to Julia Sweeney. A few years later, she got another big break: a chance to star alongside Kelsey Grammer in his new TV show, *Frasier*. She was gonna play Roz. They even got as far as taping the pilot before she got recast again. Third time's the charm though, right?

**Music:** “Friends’ Theme Song” by Why Everyone Left—a playful, upbeat song.

*So, no one told you life was gonna be this way*

*Your job's a joke...*

(Music fades out.)

**Jesse Thorn:** That's right, baby! In 1994, Lisa Kudrow was cast on *Friends*, and it ended up being one of the biggest sitcoms ever. Through that show's 10-year run, Kudrow played Phoebe. Phoebe was a little dopey, but essentially sweet. Probably *Friends*' most beloved character. Kudrow has since gone on to balance that sweetness with darker themes. She earned an Emmy nomination in 2005 for her role in *The Comeback*. She played an actress, more or less defined by her narcissism. She received another nod for the same show in 2014. These days you can catch her on the Netflix dramedy *No Good Deed*, alongside Linda Cardellini, Ray Romano, and Abbi Jacobson.

Now, what you are about to hear is a vintage *Bullseye* interview. We had to dive deep down into the cellar and blow off a lot of dust to bring it back. Oh! Ope, still some dust on there! Hold on! (*Blows on it.*) Kudrow and I talked in 2012. Let's get right into it.

**Transition:** Playful keyboard music.

**Jesse Thorn:** I was excited to read that you come from a family of neurologists.

*(They laugh.)*

I'm sure—

**Lisa Kudrow:** That is exciting!

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, it's exciting for me, because I've relied on neurologists for much of my life. Because I am a—I get migraines. And your father, I know, was a headache specialist.

*(Lisa confirms.)*

You actually worked with him a little bit. Did you have anybody in your family who got migraine?

**Lisa Kudrow:** I think we all did. And I know that's what made my father decide to, you know, exclusively research and treat headache.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's kind of a terrifying thing. I mean, I remember my mother got migraine before I did. I only started getting them when I was about 10. And I remember—you know, my parents were divorced, so I would be with my mom. And when she would get a headache, it was genuinely terrifying to me, because it was sooo debilitating.

*(Lisa affirms.)*

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Like, a three day—she was out for three days in a dark room. And you know.

**Jesse Thorn:** One time she like fell over on the street.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Oh! Really?

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it was—yeah, it was super— When it was at its height, it was super intense. Luckily, you know, since she's gone through menopause, it's been reduced dramatically. But it's a really scary thing to see people that you love—when you're a kid, and you don't necessarily get what's going on—

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right, in intense pain. Yeah. My father had every type of headache, I think. Almost. *(Laughs.)* Well, no. He definitely had classical migraine kind of with an aura, you know, that precedes it. He also had cluster headache, which is—

**Jesse Thorn:** He got both!? That seems like a bit much.

**Lisa Kudrow:** The cluster headache is definitely a curse for sure. It mostly happens in men, and people who get it describe it as, “It’s like a red-hot, glowing poker being forced through your eye.” And it can last—it lasts about an hour. But in that hour, there’s an anxiety when you feel it coming on that’s also intense. And luckily— I mean, he found that you could—a patient could just inhale oxygen for, I think, ten minutes. And then it’s gone. So, that’s great.

So, these cluster patients had to like walk around with (*chuckles*)—just in their trunks of their car or in their office in the corner—these oxygen tanks, so they can get rid of an attack. But that’s what made him go into headache. And now my brother is David Kudrow, and he took over the headache practice. He’s fantastic.

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**Jesse Thorn:** Now, you said, “We all did.” Did you?

**Lisa Kudrow:** I did. I haven’t in a long time, but I would get a migraine if I went to Disneyland as a kid. Which is too bad, ‘cause it’s exciting. (*Laughs.*) But it would be just—it would be a little too much. And then I’d come home and have, you know, a horrible migraine.

**Jesse Thorn:** They say that it’s sort of a neurological oversensitivity. That it’s—that when—that a person who gets migraines’ brain wants to be in a sort of static state. And certain things that change, it freaks out over. Or something like that.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Oh, that’s interesting. Well, I mean, I remember—you know, from listening to—you know, my father would, of course, lecture a lot on it. Yeah, after—

**Jesse Thorn:** Just at home? Or—?

(*They laugh.*)

**Lisa Kudrow:** No, not at all. You know, to other doctors—

**Jesse Thorn:** “Thank you all for coming here.”

**Lisa Kudrow:** (*Giggles.*) Right. “I said sit down and listen!”

No, he didn’t do that. He didn’t. But no. After, you know, fasting. If you don’t eat—or you know, people would get them on weekends sometimes. Well, migraine—a real migraine—for women, they generally didn’t get them, except— You can’t get them more than every two weeks, really. Then it’s another kind of headache, if you’re getting them more frequently. You can’t get a migraine every day.

**Jesse Thorn:** You grew up in Encino, California, not far from here. And—

**Lisa Kudrow:** Well, Tarzana, technically.

**Jesse Thorn:** Tarzana.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah. Right next door. (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** And you went to college at Vassar and were not an acting student there; you were not an acting major there.

**Lisa Kudrow:** No.

**Jesse Thorn:** And I got the impression that maybe part of what led you into doing science in school—which is what you did—was that you wanted to do something that was—I don't know, serious? That you wanted to do something that felt like it was not a frivolous thing.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Uh-huh. It felt important. I mean, it felt like knowledge worth having, you know, well into adulthood. And something that you could study, and it could be very fulfilling. And I thought it was also such a creative endeavor too, you know? That you have to be pretty creative to come up with theories about how things work. And I mean, I saw my father doing it. You know, like I said, it was mostly doing research and treating patients. And it just looked—it looked really thrilling to me. And then the information—you know, when I was in high school and first took sort of a real biology class—(*stammering*) I mean, I was hooked! I was really hooked. I thought it was the most fascinating thing.

**Jesse Thorn:** But was it competing at the same time with a latent interest to either be funny or be an actress?

**Lisa Kudrow:** No, not at all. But not at all! Not even a little bit. No.

**Jesse Thorn:** Really?

**Lisa Kudrow:** The answer to that is no.

**Jesse Thorn:** I read somewhere— It was an interview related to a teen-themed movie that you did, where you described, sort of specifically, a very painful adolescence?

**Lisa Kudrow:** Seventh grade was, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughs.*) Specifically?

**Lisa Kudrow:** Specifically. Like, maybe—

**Jesse Thorn:** What happened in seventh grade?

**Lisa Kudrow:** Like, the seventh grade, the last—you know, second semester. Well, I had friends that dropped me. I mean, they decided (*chuckling*) they didn't wanna be friends with me anymore!

**Jesse Thorn:** My wife was telling me about this different stuff that happens with middle school girls, and it blew my mind!

**Lisa Kudrow:** Ohhh, it's so vicious. And you know. But for me it wasn't even that. Well, the guys were vicious. I did experience some really vicious, awful, almost criminal—and possibly criminal if I cared to really look at it. *(Chuckles.)* Realistically.

**Jesse Thorn:** And you wanted to crack open the code books and take a look at the municipal codes, the state codes, *(inaudible)*—

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Laughs.)* No, I didn't. I just thought—I remember— You know, one time I was literally attacked. I was attacked by—I was in seventh grade—ninth grade guys. I was late to class, and they attacked me. And I remember— And one of them was popular, and he watched his less popular, nerdy friend attack me. And I remember telling the one friend I had left—

*(They chuckle.)*

—that, you know, this thing happened to me.

And she went, “Oh, you take everything so seriously! I know that guy. He's really nice.”

*(She takes a deep breath.)*

Okay, so the world, it's upside down. I mean, it's all upside down, and nothing makes sense. And—ugh. You know, it was—that was what was so devastating was just you have no control. And people— These are like wild animals, and it's not safe.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:10:00]

This is not a safe world.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you good or not good at the stuff that you have to do to—? You know, or did you just remove yourself, nerd style?

**Lisa Kudrow:** This is— Where?

**Jesse Thorn:** Because here's the thing. You're very personable.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** In fact, you made a brilliant career out of your personable-ness, in addition to your acting skill—but your just general likable-ness and prettiness. *(Laughs.)*

**Lisa Kudrow:** Oh, thanks.

**Jesse Thorn:** These are essential qualities that you have. And so, I wonder about that.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Well, I wasn't pretty at all in junior high school. At all. I mean—no, there were plenty of, (*nastily*) “You're so ugly,” and you know, “You're so—”.

(*Jesse “wow”s.*)

The thing that saved me— What I did was— This is where acting comes into it, is that summer I took a play production class which was writing sketches. And it wasn't very serious, you know, but it was just fun. And I did meet kids in there, which were in a different group. And you know, maybe—if you're looking at levels—on a higher level than the people who dropped me even, maybe. And you know, I became friends with them. Because, you know, I was funny, and I did write fun sketches. And so, I just, you know, worked hard at getting these new friends. So.

**Jesse Thorn:** I was gonna ask you about that. Because I think that it's—you know, socially, it's easier for an adolescent girl to say, “I want to be an actress” than it is to say, “I want to be funny” or “I want to be a funny actress.” And I wonder if that was ever—you know, if you were always—your goal was funniness as the key?

(*Lisa confirms.*)

'Cause in my case—you know, I did sketch comedy; I went to acting school. All I ever cared about was funniness. I did not care about actual acting aaat all. Zero. Right?

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Yeah. Yeah. No, that's right. I mean, the—you know, when I was much younger, in grade school, then I was imitating Lily Tomlin doing Edith Ann, you know. And I would get it down perfectly. And you know. (*Laughs.*) And to me, that was the real prize, was getting to make people laugh and being funny. Because I mean—you know, because. Who wouldn't? That's obvious.

**Jesse Thorn:** Right. It's the best. It's the best. That's correct.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah, it's obvious. Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) And my whole family was funny, but I was the youngest by a lot. And so, just sort of developmentally, my humor was really not up to par.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

I couldn't keep up with my family.

**Jesse Thorn:** They were making all those neurology jokes.

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Giggles.)* No, they're really funny! Really funny. So, yeah. So, at least here with some peers I could—

**Jesse Thorn:** And that's where synapses fired! Am I right?

*(They laugh.)*

**Lisa Kudrow:** Well, it is! And like, “Well, this is really fun!”

It's when I got to high school and took my first biology class and started thinking ahead—I was really good at thinking like 20 years ahead. And it's weird, but—

**Jesse Thorn:** That's an unusual characteristic for a high school student.

**Lisa Kudrow:** For a high school—for a 10-year-old!

*(Jesse agrees.)*

But that's the weird thing about me. And I did decide though, when I was in high school, that I don't wanna be an actor. I don't wanna be the mother who's an actress. No good could come of that for that poor child, or all my children that I'm planning to have. And for my husband. And then who do you marry? You have to marry another actor. Well, that's also no good! *(Laughs.)* You know, I rejected it with both hands that that's not a possible life choice.

**Jesse Thorn:** I remember having that same sort of string of thoughts when I was in high school at my, you know, arts high school where I was doing theatre, where I thought—I remember thinking— They would always say like, “If you wanna be an actor, you have to be willing to blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And the humiliations, and the da-da-dadada.”

And I thought, “Oh, okay. I'll just do a different thing. I guess.”

*(They laugh.)*

“I do have some skills in other areas.” But then I—you know, then I ended up sort of doing something tangentially related, because it felt much more achievable through incrementalism, maybe.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Well, something tolerable. You know? Yeah. Something survivable.

**Jesse Thorn:** But there must have been some point when you were in your early 20s that you— Because after college, you worked as a researcher with your dad for a while.

*(Lisa confirms.)*

And when you thought that the math worked out for you to just take a swing at doing something creative, even if it was kind of crazy and awful—

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah, that's exactly right. I mean, I thought, “This is the time! You're 22. You don't have any—you don't have a mortgage. You have no like real world responsibilities. This is exactly the time that you give that a try.”

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And you know, I just didn't—I saw myself—again, you know, 20 years later—with my kids and feeling regret for having never even tried. And I just thought, “That's what you have to avoid. You have to avoid regret.”

**Jesse Thorn:** We've got more to get into with Lisa Kudrow. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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**Transition:** Bright synth with a syncopated rhythm.

**Jesse Thorn:** It is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Lisa Kudrow.

I was so excited to read that one of the things that motivated you was the fact that your brother's best friend was Jon Lovitz. And Jon Lovitz's not only—I love Jon Lovitz. I think he's hilarious.

**Lisa Kudrow:** He's hilarious.

**Jesse Thorn:** Just one of the funniest guys. But I have to say that part of what delighted me was the idea that he's a real human being.

(They laugh.)

Because his public persona does not seem like a real person at all! And I've never seen him even at 90% of that public persona. Like, only 100% of him Jon Lovitz-ing around. And so, the idea that he could be a real person in real life that actually inspired someone to do something in real life was amazing to me.

**Lisa Kudrow:** (Chuckles.) No, he's a really good person, and he was so encouraging. It was so nice. And you know—look, I had grown up with him, and I'd seen him struggle. I mean, he was a theatre major in college and took acting classes and would audition. And he was not giving up, and it looked like it just wasn't happening. And then he got *Saturday Night Live*. And I thought, “Okay, so it's not just—”

Like, I thought there was some sort of like supernatural magic. You know? David Hasselhoff is a star because he's—there's some like magical powder on him or something.

**Jesse Thorn:** He's got the Hoff.

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Chuckles.)* Well, you know. And I just thought there's those people who make it, and then everyone else who just never will. And then when I saw that it's actually a person I know, and that he just—he never gave up, and he just kept working at it and working at it, and— And I don't mean like kept trying and trying, I meant working at it. You know? He didn't stop taking classes. And you know, he just kept—“That's fine.” You know, dealt with the rejection really well.

And I just thought, “Okay, so it's possible then. I mean, maybe if I just keep working at it, then it would be a possibility.”

And I told him I wanted to be an actress, and he said, “Okay, great. Here's what you do. Go to the Groundlings. The most I ever learned was at the Groundlings, and I think improvisation is crucial.”

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you learn at the Groundlings, which you did go to?

**Lisa Kudrow:** I learned everything. I think. I learned so many things. There's—

**Jesse Thorn:** The Groundlings is the famous Los Angeles comedy theatre known for improv and character sketch.

**Lisa Kudrow:** And sketch comedy, yeah. I learned—I mean, technically—how to write. Because I think there's no better preparation, honestly, than writing a three-minute sketch where every single line has to move the story along, give you information about the character, and then be funny or set up a funny. And in three minutes, you have a beginning, middle, and end. And I think just in and of itself, that's a fantastic writing exercise where you just learn to like, you know, cut out all the loose stuff that isn't moving it in a single direction.

And then improvisation, I think, is really valuable for acting. You have to really listen and respond. And I think at the core, that's what acting is. And then commit; just stop thinking about everything else. Be a person; don't play at being a person. And then the information's just gonna flow out if you do that.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of the things about doing comic improv—I mean, I guess most improv in the States is comic, but—is that you have to learn to recognize almost subconsciously what is funny about what's going on, and then drive that. Immediately. Because otherwise it will be boring.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yes.

*(They laugh.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** So, you have to—they call—

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I mean, in improv, they often call it “finding the game”, but you have to recognize what that thing is about what's going on that's special, and then push it. And you have to do that on stage immediately if you wanna be any good at it. And that's a—you know, that's a— And you have to throw yourself into it. You can't talk around it.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Mm-hm. Right. I think for me, the funny was in my mind going, “Well, that's absurd. And then what's more absurd than that being absurd, is that this person thinks it's perfectly fine. Or is trying to convince everyone that it's perfectly fine.” So, I think I've gravitated to those characters. You know, that's sort of been the running theme for me, and that's sort of, that's how I approached Phoebe. You know, because— It's just, that's absurd.

Her mother killed herself, and it's all sad. But what's absurd is that she's, you know, treating it as if—“Well, you know how it goes.” As if everyone's had their stepfathers in prison, and then you live—you know—in a car with a crack addict. You know how it goes. (*Laughs.*) So, that's been my sort of in to comedy.

**Jesse Thorn:** I wanna play this clip from the pilot of *Friends*, which I just watched yesterday. And this is sort of your big scene, your big character establishment scene. And it is basically exactly along those lines, where—

**Lisa Kudrow:** That's the monologue?

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. So, everyone—

**Lisa Kudrow:** That was the audition piece.

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh, wow!

So, everyone is sitting around the kitchen table in this scene, consoling Jennifer Aniston, who's just showed up and is super upset because she left her fiancé at the altar. And then you bust out with this. (*Chuckles.*)

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Phoebe (*Friends*):** Give her a break! It's hard being on your own for the first time.

**Rachel:** Thank you!

**Phoebe:** You're welcome. (*Pleasantly.*) I remember when I first came to this city. I was 14. My mom had just killed herself, and my stepdad was back in prison.

*(Laughter.)*

I got here, and I didn't know anybody. And I ended up living with this albino guy who was like cleaning windshields outside Port Authority. And then he killed himself!  
*(chuckles nonchalantly).*

*(Laughter.)*

And then I found aroma therapy. So, believe me, I know exactly how you feel.

*(Laughter.)*

**Chandler:** The word you're looking for is: “Anyway!”

*(Laughter.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, that is an amazing scene. It is such a terrifying string of specifics. And as I was reading—I went on Wikipedia and read the character description of Phoebe from *Friends*. And it basically was— You know, there's parts where they describe all your relationships with the other characters. But the intro two or three paragraphs, the nut of this thing, was just a list of nightmares. Just horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible, horrible things, all one after the other. And it seems like the—you know, the juice of this character was retaining that lightness in the face of this string of horrible nightmares.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right, exactly! That's exactly it. Yeah. Very optimistic. Or you know, in complete denial. But that's a good coping mechanism sometimes.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's funny, because it strikes me as exactly the opposite of someone who—at 10—has the mentality of a 30-year-old.

**Lisa Kudrow:** I kept saying, “Are you sure that I should play this part?”

*(Jesse laughs.)*

“I have no— I mean, I have no point of reference.”

I mean, I did find people, you know, that I had known that could help me along. I just mean inside my head. Like, oh, I had a friend in college who was kicked out, and her parents wouldn't pay for her to go, and she had to work in a nursing home and clean up after old people and all this stuff. And she was no idiot, but she would also be very light about, “Oh,

*(chuckles lightly)* the other day, Martha did the funniest thing,” and it's this horrible, sad story!

*(They laugh.)*

You know, this woman with dementia who couldn't do something, and she had to help. And this young girl has to clean up after all these old people. That was her job. And so, I definitely drew on this girl. I thought that is just the definition of resilience to me. You know? Like, not—there's no state of victimhood for Phoebe or this—you know, this friend of mine. And I think that's what's really admirable. So, I did have a lot of admiration for Phoebe, even if she didn't have any information—like, real information, reliable information. *(Chuckles.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Was it strange to—I mean, one of the things about being on a sitcom is—especially the kind of sitcom that you were on, you know, where a multi-camera sitcom is shot, in a lot of ways, like a play. It's more linear than a single camera show.

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So, you basically come in once a week. You went in once a week for ten years, seven months out of the year or whatever, and lived in that.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Once a—?! What'd you say? One day a week? No. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Oh, I mean, you come in onstage; you're shooting one day a week. And I mean, obviously, you're doing table reads and rehearsals.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Rehearsals, yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** But you are in front of an audience doing that thing all out, once a week for a year—for 10 years, excuse me. I have to imagine that, you know, it must affect you to be in that for so long.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah, I imagine it did.

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughs.)* Do you have any perspective on how it did?

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Laughs.)* No. I don't. I don't think I do. I love structure. So, this was perfect. I mean, of course. Yeah, it's perfect for any actor who'd want a steady job with a huge paycheck. Yes. Of course. Duh. You know. *(Laughs.)* That's my big insight. “It was perfect!”

I think—but what was unique is that the six of us weren't tired of it. You know, we really had fun together, and we were like our own mini union also, when it came to negotiating our contract and stuff. But everything just banded us together. We had extremely—these tight bonds, you know? And then just had fun and really—and learned a lot from each other. I learned a lot from those five other people.

**Jesse Thorn:** Gimme an example of that. Like, something that you feel like you learned working on that show with those— 'Cause it's certainly an exceptionally talented group of people.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Mm-hm. One thing I learned is— You know, because I was a good student, when we would rehearse, and the director—say it's Jimmy Burrows—is trying to get our attention to move on to the next scene, or you know, "Let's try it this way," and the actors are talking or playing with each other. They were playing with each other, like messing around. And it was horseplay in my head. And you're not listening to the boss. We're not listening to the dad, the boss, the teacher. You know, like, "You guys, we gotta move along!"

**Jesse Thorn:** And James Burrows is the king of dads. The king of comedy dads.

**Lisa Kudrow:** He is, but he—

**Jesse Thorn:** The legendary director of every great television sitcom ever. (*Laughs.*)

**Lisa Kudrow:** Well, yes. Okay. Yes. That is who Jimmy Burrows is, right? That's right. Directed and executive producer of *Cheers*. You know, before that: *Taxi*, *Frasier*. And he did, you know, the first 10 or 12 episodes of *Friends* too.

**Jesse Thorn:** He's done alright for himself.

**Lisa Kudrow:** He's done alright. He was the guy who, the head of the network said, "What do you think?", and he'd say, "Now, this is gonna be a hit!"

"Okay." And they'd pick it up.

You know, he was that guy. But what he understood, and the other actors understood that I was clueless about was: no, no, you have to—there has to be horseplay. Because you have to keep it light. This is not serious. This is not a classroom. And you're not learning surgery. And you have to keep it light and playful. You have got to be playing. And whenever I would be a guest star on a show, and I would see the actors, I'm like, "Well, these were the people who didn't do well in school. Because look at them! Look at all this horseplay. No one's paying attention. We need to move along."

And it took me until *Friends* and maybe into the second season when it finally clicked for me, no, no, they all know what they're doing. They're right. You have to keep it light and fun. And so, I finally got with the program.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you ever self-conscious about the fact that *Friends* was so committed to light fun-ness? Because it is pretty much the lightest, funnest television sitcom ever. (*Laughs.*)

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Was I what? What was the first part?

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you ever self-conscious about that? Did you ever wish that you were making *The Great Dictator*?

**Lisa Kudrow:** *ER* or—? Oh. Um, no. No, I didn't. Because people loved it, and that's what you're there to do. You know? I mean, (*chuckles*) you're there to entertain people or to make them laugh. And they were laughing, and so it was working, and a lot of people were tuning in for that. And then I think it really—some of us, I think we did see it as like, “It's just a sitcom.” Not next to other things, but just in the scheme of things, “It's just a sitcom, you know, that we're lucky enough to get to do.”

But after 9/11, people would stop us with almost tears in their eyes saying, “You don't know how important it was to laugh after all that.” And I did understand, because I had the same experience watching *Will & Grace*. I was so—it was the first thing I saw that wasn't news related. And I remember being so confused watching it thinking, “Oh wait, this is in New York. Oof. God. Alright. So, how many people did they know in either of the towers? Oof. 'Cause this is in New York.” Then I went, “Oh no, no, no. Wait, no, this is probably shot before 9/11. Oh, good. So, that won't come up until later on.”

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And they went, “Oh, no, no. This is a different reality! It's never gonna come up. This is safe.”

And I was so grateful.

**Jesse Thorn:** I was watching *The Comeback* this week, which was an HBO show that you did I think in 2004, 2005, something like that.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Not light. But good!

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. And—it's great! I hadn't seen it. And the thing that impressed me about it was—you know, the show is structured as the footage from a reality show being shot about a sitcom actress who's making a return to sitcom acting after 10 years of career doldrums. And the thing that surprised me about it was I think I expected something— You know, a lot of shows like that are... They essentially use that—they use that reality feeling to ground silliness.

You know, I think the American *Office* is a great example. It's a brilliant program. About as good as it gets. And often what they do is they use that aesthetic feeling of “you are there” in order to help you buy into something really silly happening. Or even, you know, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which is as good as a sitcom gets. You know, I mean, it's totally ridiculous. (*Chuckles.*) But because it has that feeling, you feel—you buy into it 100%.

The thing about *The Comeback* was that it's brutal!

(*Lisa agrees.*)

It's not a—I mean, some silly stuff happens, and there are jokes—like, joke-jokes sometimes. But—

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. I thought it was hilarious, but also really brutal.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. I mean, I was surprised that, at every turn where you could have deflated the emotional stakes with a jokey-joke or just something happening happy, you didn't. *(Chuckles.)*

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right, right. Because this was—right. 2005. It was only the second year of *Amazing Race*. The only like reality bios were Anna Nicole Smith and *The Osbournes*. But you know, I had seen *The Amazing Race*, and I couldn't believe my eyes that there were people like vomiting and crying on TV. And I thought, “Well, it doesn't get more humiliating than that. And you're trading that humiliation in for wwwhat? I mean, after this show is over, you're gonna do what? I don't understand. I think this is dangerous. I think it's really dangerous to, you know, trade in the spotlight for your dignity.”

And Michael Patrick King definitely agreed, and we just felt there were so many things that we could address in that. And we thought it would make it all a little easier if this were about an actress, because at least she's signed up for that, you know? But that she's just chasing the spotlight instead of anything real and something that can carry on into the future fulfillment, you know? And she didn't need it! She had a husband who had money. She had money. You know, she didn't have to pay the rent. And so, she had to throw herself into the most humiliating thing, which is a show called *The Comeback*.

And yeah. And just watching her chase it and swallow all this horrible stuff just so she can stay in the game. And didn't care. And it was fine. She was tough. That was actually—that character was a very strong person, I thought.

**Jesse Thorn:** Here's the thing. I mean, I think that often that kind of character—a character whose reach is bigger than what they can grab and is a little tragic—is played the way that say, you know, Will Ferrell in *Anchorman*. They're played as a buffoon. And maybe there's a—they usually have—if they're the main character, they're sweet in their aims. But they're a buffoon, essentially. And so, you just laugh at how much they fail at things. And there are moments where you laugh at your character in that show, but that is not the main thing that's going on in that show. *(Laughs.)*

**Lisa Kudrow:** I think it depends on how many times you've seen it. *(Laughs.)*

**Jesse Thorn:** Okay. In my first watch of it—right?

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah, yeah. Brutal. Like, standing in the doorway, I don't know if I could watch another second. It's too—

**Jesse Thorn:** It's very painful to watch you go through this.

[00:35:00]

And I don't know. I mean, the pain felt like it was grounded in something, for you or your co-creator or something. And not just like it was a projection of— You know, you weren't just making fun of Anna Nicole Smith or *The Osbournes* or something.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. Here's what's crazy—you know?—and how much I don't know about myself. I wasn't in pain portraying her. Even when the camera's super close, and she looks like, “I dunno what to do next,” like a little panicked, or— That hurt, but it hurts for a split second. And then, “Alright, well I gotta get outta this.” And so, then it was just spinning. Then the look was meant to show (*chuckles*) just spinning. “It's okay. Gotta make it okay. 'Cause I'm not gonna quit.”

And you know—and for Michael too, it was just watching— I think for both of us it was just people who won't open their eyes at all. You know? It's another form of denial. It's like, “I want that, and it's okay. And I can justify whatever you throw at me. I can justify why it's okay.” And she's very phony and thinks that she's getting away with being funsy. But she's not! She's not getting away with it. We can see you're so phony! And I don't know, all those things. There's a lot to it.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll finish up with Lisa Kudrow after a quick break. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

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### Promo:

**Music:** Playful rock music.

**Dave Holmes:** Oh my gosh, hi! It's me, Dave Holmes, host of *Troubled Waters*—the pop culture battle to the ego death. Okay, everybody. Word association with *Troubled Waters*. First one to fumble loses. Go.

**Riley:** Comedy.

**John-Luke:** Panel show.

**Christian:** Guests.

**Riley:** Celebrities.

**John-Luke:** Games.

**Dave:** Oh, sound rounds!

**Riley:** Improvised speeches.

**John-Luke:** Puns disguised as trivia.

**Christian:** A very niche *Flash Gordon* clip.

**Riley:** Umm, Chappel Rowan!

**Dave:** Oh no, Riley, I'm sorry; she will not return our phone calls. I am afraid you're out.

*(Failure buzzer.)*

**Riley:** A girl can dream.

**Dave Holmes:** Oh, but dreaming will not earn a girl any points.

*Troubled Waters!* Listen on Maximum Fun or wherever you get your podcasts.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

**Jesse Thorn:** It is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Lisa Kudrow, star of *Friends*, *The Comeback*, and now *No Good Deed*. Kudrow and I talked in 2012. At that time, she had just wrapped the second season of a show called *Web Therapy*. She played a therapist who conducts her sessions online, usually for no longer than three minutes. The therapist is kind of a terrible person. *(Chuckles.)* It's a very funny show with some spectacular cameos. You can watch it on YouTube.

Since *Friends* ended— I mean, at the end of *Friends* you were purportedly making \$1,000,000 an episode. So, you just made a real like Scrooge McDuck level of money making that show. And God bless you for it. I kind of feel bad when people complain about how much a famous person makes for doing something. I'd rather they get it. They're actually involved in making the thing. Rather than, you know, Mr. Sony.

*(Lisa chuckles.)*

*(Scoffing.)* Ah, Mr. Sony!

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Laughs.)* Oh, Mr. Sony's a nice guy. Mick? Mick Sony?

**Jesse Thorn:** It's Mrs. Sony that you gotta worry about. She's a real conniver.

**Lisa Kudrow:** She likes shoes.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, you had a squajillion dollars, and so you were in a position to—which is weird—that you could just do something. But on the other hand, you still have to live in an entertainment landscape where you are still an actress, where someone still has to cast you in something, often.

[00:40:00]

Or say yes to something that you've created or co-created.

*(Lisa confirms.)*

So, you're in sort of a weird—*(chuckles)* you're in sort of a weird netherworld. Because you could just stop making things. If you wanted.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Right. If money were the driving force. Right.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. But you still live in this world where you have to, at least to some extent, get somebody to sign off on something before you can get it.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah. Except for a web series.

**Jesse Thorn:** Right! So, is that how you ended up in web series? You're just like, “You know what? Maybe I'm just gonna make a thing that I like.”

**Lisa Kudrow:** Yeah. It ultimately became that. I mean, we just had this idea that was absurd. You know, people are doing a lot of stuff on the internet, and wouldn't it be funny—because it's absurd—if, you know, someone offered therapy. But only three-minute sessions. And the three minutes was—let's see, because of like web series, a webisode, people don't like to watch things for longer than, let's say, like a three-minute sketch. So, okay. So, how do we justify that it's three minutes? 'Cause the therapist will only offer three-minute sessions. She thinks 50-minute sessions are boring! Cut to the chase. “Outta the whole 50 minutes, I think three minutes of it were only really helpful. So, let's just have those in the sessions I'm going to do.”

Like, none of it makes sense. It's just really—that's a horrible idea! And then it's the internet. So, you don't know. I mean, anyone can just say, “Oh no, I'm a specialist in this. Because I said it.”

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckles.)* I wanna play a conversation from the show. It's between you and Lily Tomlin, who plays your mother. And I think it's just another really lovely illustration of your penchant for self-flagellation in your work.

*(They giggle.)*

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Clip:**

**Putsy (*Web Therapy*):** Remember when you were a little child, and you used to try to climb— Well, you were never little, really. You were always too pudgy. But you would try to clamber up onto my lap and cuddle? And, um, I know I should have cuddled you, and I blame myself for not cuddling.

**Fiona:** Well—

**Putsy:** But it's not really your fault if you weren't appealing. And you were always eating something, you know, sticky and gooey. And I just wish that I had those days back. I would so treasure them.

**Fiona:** Aw. Well, that's a darling thought.

**Putsy:** I just wanna sweep away this dysfunctional debris that exists between us!

**Fiona:** That's how I feel. And I think little children are sticky and gooey and unappealing.

**Putsy:** I-I—yeah, but I do think that children, even little children, realize when their mothers are rejecting them.

**Fiona:** (*Dismissively.*) Do you? Well, I never felt that way. It's odd; that's never how I felt. I always felt like you were—

**Putsy:** I know. (*Casually.*) You're not perceptive, and you never have been.

**Transition:** A whooshing sound.

**Lisa Kudrow:** (*They laugh.*) And that's her mother. We had to explain how Fiona became Fiona!

**Jesse Thorn:** I feel like if I was—and you know, this may be just me—but I feel like if I was on *Friends* for 10 years, and it was my job to be one of six people who are America's favorite people— You know, like they're just—no matter what they did, and they did negative things, but the goal— One of the premises of that show is you want to be friends with these people. That there would be a part of me that was just like, “I just want to make—from now on, all the things I make are people's enemies.”

(*They laugh.*)

**Lisa Kudrow:** I know it looks like that's what I've done, huh?

*(Jesse cackles.)*

I know. When I look at it objectively, it looks like that's what I've done. But!

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughing.)* Does this come up in your web therapy sessions?

**Lisa Kudrow:** *(Laughs.)* I don't have web therapy sessions. But no, not yet. Maybe it's an interesting thing to get to. But I think— You know, the truth is, as I was in the Groundlings and creating characters, they had to push me and threaten to kick me out if I didn't finally do a ditz. It never dawned on me or occurred to me to do a dumb girl, and they had to push really hard. And then that became sort of, “Oh my god. That's the easiest way, though, to get a laugh.” You know, if you're auditioning for a role, and it's Secretary or Waitress, then just make her dumb! Because any line can be made funny if she's dumb.

And then, next thing I know, it's almost all I was playing. Which was fine. I didn't find it frustrating. I thought each dumb character I ever played, you know, was a different color of dumb. So, that was really interesting to me.

*(Jesse laughs.)*

It was fine. But my sense of humor really is—it's people who are dumb in a different way. Like, they don't see how horrible they are. They don't see how narcissistic they are—misguided or, you know, manipulative. That, to me, is what is so funny.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's about like a blindness.

[00:45:00]

**Lisa Kudrow:** Mm-hm! Yeah. And that doesn't mean dumb. *(Chuckles.)* You know, like fully dumb. It's just those blind spots that everybody has about themselves. And that's what I'm amplifying, because to me that's what's really funny. I mean, we purposely had Fiona—she used to work in the world of finance. That's why she's so— There's something very self-serving and greedy about her, and doesn't think about how will this impact others, “What?” *(Chuckles.)* You know, not at all!

And it's just fun to explore all that, all those areas that are like different parts of our world and society and our politics and all of that. That's just really fun. And the thing is, I don't have the requirement that it needs—thank god—that it needs to be a huge hit like *Friends* was. I know enough to know that that was like lightning in a bottle. You know? I think we all understood. We were there for 10 years, you know. Like, well, this doesn't come along ever. So, this is really lucky. You can't expect for that to happen again. So, you might as well just have a good time, *(chuckles)* and do what you wanna do, and see how many people show up.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Lisa, thank you so much for taking the time to be on the show. It was really a pleasure.

**Lisa Kudrow:** Thank you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Lisa Kudrow from 2012. Her Showtime series back then, *Web Therapy*, is very funny and available to watch on YouTube. You can also find her on the new Netflix show *No Good Deed*.

**Transition:** Up-tempo, jazzy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created in 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. I am at MaxFun HQ right now, and I can hear a helicopter hovering outside of our window. Why? Because thousands of our neighbors have gathered in the streets in and around MacArthur Park to protest unjust deportations.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, who's also known as DJW. You can find his music, including the music he makes for this show at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](http://DJWsounds.bandcamp.com). Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. The song is “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 our interviews—including the ones you heard this week. 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](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*

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