

[00:00:00]

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

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. The camera crew moves into the building and set up under the fluorescent lights, pan across a sea of messy desks and budget-priced PCs. When the employees show up, they film the meetings, the break room gossip, the occasional meltdown from a middle manager. And then in between those scenes, they sit down with the employees for quick, informal interviews.

It's the premise for a show you've probably seen: *The Office*. The sitcom started in the UK where it was a smash. Then when Greg Daniels adapted it for American audiences—well, you know, it changed TV forever. It launched the careers of a bunch of actors and writers, inspired thousands and thousands more. But that premise I just described, it's also the premise for *The Paper*, which is a brand-new show you can catch on NBC and Peacock.

The Paper was also created by Greg Daniels. Instead of a paper company, *The Paper* follows a newspaper: The Toledo Truth Teller, which as the name implies, is in Toledo, Ohio—not Scranton, Pennsylvania, like *The Office*. *The Paper* features a few other familiar names and faces, Oscar Nuñez and Paul Lieberstein, for example. NBC says the show operates in the same universe that *The Office* did, for what it's worth. One of the new faces we see is that of Adam Cooper, played by my guest Alex Edelman. Adam is an accountant and a reporter at *The Paper*.

Alex Edelman is also an award-winning standup and writer. His solo show, *Just For Us*, is an intense personal examination of White supremacy with—I think I counted right—10,000 funny jokes written into it. The television special of the show, which is on HBO Max, won an Emmy last year. I'm so excited to get to talk with Alex Edelman. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome to *Bullseye*. I am so happy to have you on the show.

Alex Edelman: I'm so psyched to be here. This is so cool.

Jesse Thorn: Can I tell you something? I was looking at your bio and Wikipedia page. I do a lot of research for the show. (*Chuckles.*)

Alex Edelman: Okay, yeah. So, so excited.

Jesse Thorn: And I noticed that you—a man who is one of the stars of the new spinoff of one of the most successful television comedies of all time, who also had his own one-man show on Broadway—are... the least successful person in your immediate family.

Alex Edelman: Yes, that's 1,000% true.

Jesse Thorn: How is that humanly possible?

Alex Edelman: My father is a really wonderful and esteemed cardiologist. And in that sense, I'm sort of a nepo baby, given that I have a heart myself.

(They chuckles.)

But yeah, you know, not everyone's born with one. But my dad, he develops drug-eluting stents, and so I do comedy about that. My mother is a very salubriously educated lawyer. She's a lovely person. And my brothers are both really—you know—educated, brilliant folks in their own right. AJ is a former winter Olympian, who—as I understand it—is trying to compete again. They're all impressive. I'm the loser of the family. Sometimes people are like you know, “Well, you've done well for yourself.”

I'm like, “Not by the metrics of my immediate folks!” No. I'm a loser.

Jesse Thorn: Was there expectation in your family about what you would grow up to be?

Alex Edelman: No, 'cause I got a job at a very young age working for the Red Sox. And I was a moron then, but it was clear that I was not gonna be able to follow any sort of straight line.

Jesse Thorn: How young in age?

Alex Edelman: 13.

(Jesse “wow”s.)

Yeah. The start of the Red Sox.

Jesse Thorn: That's illegal!

Alex Edelman: Yeah! I wrote the kids' newsletter.

(Jesse laughs.)

Can you believe that? I wrote the kids' newsletter for the Boston Red Sox. And then I worked at the Dodgers and the Brewers and—

Jesse Thorn: Wait, hold on. Was there like an application process? Did you pitch them the kids' newsletter?

Alex Edelman: It was 2002! You could just show up places. That was the application process. I just kept showing up. My entire life is I just kept showing up, and then people were like, "You don't belong here."

I'm like, "Sucks!"

Jesse Thorn: I'm sitting before you— Because members of Maximum Fun supported this show, we agreed that I would wear '90s clothes for an entire interview. So, I happened to have an Oakland As anorak from the probably early 1990s in my closet.

Alex Edelman: And a Ricky Henderson hat.

Jesse Thorn: And a Ricky Henderson hat.

Alex Edelman: It's my first time meeting you. I have no idea if this is how you normally dress.

(Jesse laughs.)

I have no idea if you normally dress like MC Hammer on his day off, you know?

Jesse Thorn: Or on his day on! You know, he worked for the Oakland As.

[00:05:00]

Alex Edelman: That was, hence, my reference.

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, I happened to be wearing A's clothes. I grew up a Giants fan, but my father was an A's fan. I interviewed for an internship with the A's when I was about that age.

Alex Edelman: No way!

Jesse Thorn: I think I was 13 or 14? Maybe 15.

Alex Edelman: Did you get it?!

Jesse Thorn: 14. I did not get it. I was interviewing with the sky box team. So, I think I would've just been selling sky boxes to rich people or something?

Alex Edelman: Wow! I mean, at 13 years old, that's a pretty plum game. I loved working at the Red Sox. I loved Fenway Park. I loved being there. I got to throw out a first pitch there last year, which was a nice, full-circle moment.

Jesse Thorn: You worked there for a long—your like entire adolescence. Right?

Alex Edelman: I was there from beginning of '03—or '02, I guess—middle of '02 to after the World Series in 2007. So, yeah, from like 13 to 18.

Jesse Thorn: Wait, you left after the World Series? Like, mission accomplished?

Alex Edelman: Genuinely. My boss—well, my boss, Charles Steinberg, was leaving. And he called me in, and he was like, “Hey, this place is done.”

And I was like, “What?!”

(Jesse laughs.)

And he's like, “After you win two World Series, there's only one direction to go.”

Jesse Thorn: Do you think that winning World Series led the Red Sox fandom to curdle in some way?

Alex Edelman: *(Beat.)* You know? It robbed us of narrative. How's that?

Jesse Thorn: Okay. So, when I was a child, I had a double cassette tape of an episode of the public radio show *Selected Shorts*. It was an episode about baseball that my mom had heard and like ordered from me from the “call for a recording of this episode”.

Alex Edelman: Who was on it?

Jesse Thorn: So, it was hosted by Roger Angell and Bartlett Giamatti.

Alex Edelman: Sure, of course. Of course.

Jesse Thorn: And I don't remember which one of them said it, but one of them said to the other, “The Red Sox will run like a scarlet thread through this evening's proceedings.”

And then the other said, “And if it is a scarlet thread, it will—doubtless—snap.”

And I think there is a certain sort of victimhood that was presumed in Red Sox fandom.

Alex Edelman: Yeah, the Sisyphean nature of being a Red Sox fan.

Jesse Thorn: Right, and then you win a bunch of World Series in a row. I mean, in a space of whatever it is—eight years or whatever.

Alex Edelman: I think they might be the most successful 21st century team. I could be wrong there. But let's see, it's 2013, 2018, 2004, 2007. I don't know that anyone else has had

four World Series championships in, you know, this century. And you know, I was present for all of them in part. I was in Colorado with other employees for the World Series in '07. I was studying in rabbinical school in Israel—in Jerusalem in 2007. And my boss, when he was told I was going, said, “Fine, but he'll fly back for the World Series.”

Jesse Thorn: We gotta take a quick break. When we come back, even more with Alex Edelman. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalization.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Alex Edelman. He's a standup comic, actor, and writer. He's the creator and star of the one-man show *Just For Us*, in which he recounts the experience of going to White supremacist gatherings as a Jewish American. The televised edition of that show won an Emmy for Outstanding Writing in 2024. You can stream it on HBO Max. These days, you can also catch Alex on the sitcom *The Paper*, which is a new series from Greg Daniels, creator of *The Office*.

By the way, this interview—like all of our interviews—is available on video in its entirety. Why would you wanna watch this? Well, as a thank you to supporters of *Bullseye* during last year's MaxFunDrive, I dressed for this interview in a head-to-toe '90s outfit—including a 1991 Oakland A's anorak jacket. I look gorgeous. Arsenio Hall, I'm ready for my closeup. Let's get into the rest of our conversation with Alex Edelman, who always looks gorgeous.

You were already doing standup when you were in Yeshiva in Jerusalem, right?

(Alex confirms.)

How long had you been doing standup at that point?

Alex Edelman: I've been going to open mics here and there, but Israel's sort of where I've hit the ground running a little.

Jesse Thorn: You know, that's a very unusual...

Alex Edelman: Standup background? Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. *(Chuckles.)*

Alex Edelman: For everyone except (unclear), standup is not really something— And even he probably regretted it at some point.

Jesse Thorn: You're like, “I'll get into standup once I hit Yeshiva in Israel.”

Alex Edelman: Yeah, once I hit— Look, Boston was— I was watching a lot of brilliant comedians growing up in Boston, and some of them are still great comics today. Joe List, Mike Kaplan, Shane Mauss, Joe Wong—who's become an international star in China as well.

Bill Burr, Patrice O'Neal. They were all sort of around but already ascended when I was there.

Jesse Thorn: And that was also the home of what became the New York alternative scene—your Eugene Mirmans and David Crosses.

[00:10:00]

Alex Edelman: Guys I worshipped.

Jesse Thorn: Jonathan Katz.

Alex Edelman: Of course. Guys I looked up to hugely, guys who would come home. Stephen Wright! Some of my first open mic, Steven Wright was there. But I was— In Israel, it was also great. 'Cause, you know, this is Jerusalem in 2008. And obviously, it would be the understatement of all time to say the region goes through ups and downs. But in terms of a time to be there, I was meeting Palestinians. I was meeting Arabs, Christians, obviously Jews of many different stripes. There were a couple of Palestinian comics who performed there. I remember too, in particular, Ray Hanania and Sharif Hidayat. And they both were hysterical, and it was—

And you know, there were a couple of nights that one of those comics commenced me to go over to this thing called the American Colony Hotel, which was in East Jerusalem—which is a place that most Jewish tourists don't get to for safety reasons, depending on the time period. And I just remember like sitting in the American Colony and hearing mostly Arabic and different Scandinavian languages and being like, “Man, this—” One of the horrors of what's happening now is that it's a really beautiful region with lots of different peoples who live there. And most of the folks who live there kind of just like go about their day being part of like a tapestry of many, many, many different types of people.

And so, weirdly, it's where I sort of met the world, so to speak. You know, you learn about like cultures in one, short space. So, I'm really glad I had that time in Israel, and that comedy club was so cool.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, even within the Jewish community, you're talking about Jews from all kinds of backgrounds.

Alex Edelman: Oh, of course. And it was like, you know, you'd spend one Sabbath with the most secular Jews you can imagine, if you left Yeshiva. And then it's been another Sabbath, you know, with people who I did not agree with on a single thing. And also, it's given me a sort of hard-won understanding of—you know, hard-won relative to the American perspective; not hard-won relative to the perspective of people who live there. But like, I learned a lot about way the world works, and I learned a lot about like bias and prejudice and all the other stuff that's good to address in standup comedy. *(Chuckles.)* You know?

Jesse Thorn: Were you doing standup in English?

Alex Edelman: Yeah. There were a few nights—

Jesse Thorn: Was everybody doing standup in English?

Alex Edelman: There were a couple of comics doing it in Hebrew. Weirdly, you'd have some huge Hebrew comedians come in and trying it in English. There's one comic who would do comedy in Arabic mostly, came in to do it in English also. That was pretty cool. And so, you'd see— It was an English language comedy club, but you get a lot of people who knew the English language was— You know, where standup comedy belongs to English speakers. Like, in Europe, European comedy comes from clowning. You know. And standup comedy is almost exclusively the provenance of the English language.

Jesse Thorn: How did you end up doing comedy in England rather than in the United States?

Alex Edelman: I did my last semester of NYU in England studying abroad, which is very rare. And that was actually a suggestion of one of my professors in college who said, “You know, you might really enjoy the comedy scene in England. And so, you should go there.” And I went, and I fell really hard into the scene of people there. I really, really, really loved it. Oh my god! Josie Long! Josie Long was one of those people who's a friend of the show and a friend of yours and a friend of MaxFun. Josie had a show in England called *Lost Treasures of the Black Heart* which she did. And you had to talk about unsung heroes or forgotten treasures or something like that.

And I came and I did a sort of like a clubby standup set. And Josie was like, “Hey. You're—”

And by the way, it went well! 'Cause it's such a warm audience. And Josie sort of pulled me aside and was like, “Hey, that wasn't like great. I mean, that was a little bit like traditional. So, maybe come back next month and try again and try to do something more in the spirit of the night.”

And I did. And I just sort of fell in love with the British ambitious, fulsome, solo show model. And in New York I was sort of like... this average guy doing seven minutes. And I was like, “I think I might be like better than this. I don't know how to explain it, but I think I might like have something to say.” And I had something to say at that point about the way that Millennials were perceived. So, I wrote a show about it called *Millennial*. And I did it in Edinburgh, and it went fairly well. And so, because of that—you know—I kept coming back and stayed there.

Jesse Thorn: When you were doing one-person shows full of ideas, arguments, and narrative, did you bring those acts to the United States? And not just—

Alex Edelman: (*Chuckles.*) Not really.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. So, did you have material that—if you were in New York, and somebody offered you 15 minutes on a show—?

Alex Edelman: Oh, I never stopped doing standup. I built my shows in US clubs. I'm an American standup comedian.

[00:15:00]

And by the way, I'm arguing for like— My shows are very like laugh-heavy. I'm too insecure to go for more than a few seconds without a laugh. And it's gotta be like bam, bam, bam, bam. But that helped in Edinburgh, frankly—bringing sort of an American Comedy Club approach to British aesthetic and content. Like, I was very, very into I would say is very traditional standup comedy. And still am. I mean, I work out at the Comedy Cellar most nights in New York City. I'm in the clubs most nights. Yeah, it was always— All my stuff was—when it was, I'd say, fairly criticized by British people, it was for the exact opposite reason.

Jesse Thorn: For being glib or—?

Alex Edelman: Or it was just very comedy club. My stuff was very like joke-joke-joke-joke-joke-joke-joke. I love jokes.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Alex Edelman: I love a dumb joke. I love a silly joke. It's my job! It's my currency! I wrote a joke a while ago that was so dumb, it took a month and a half to realize it was actually too dumb to ever grace a stage. *(Beat.)* Here it is.

(Laughter.)

I don't think I've ever seen a fat horse. *(Beat.)* I don't think I've ever seen a fat horse. Maybe that's because they get four times as many steps as we do.

(Laughter.)

I know. I know! And a month and a half later, I was walking through a Whole Foods, and out of nowhere I was like, "Twice as many steps."

(Laughter.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Alex Edelman: I would say that standup comedy doesn't necessarily need to be funny, but (*a little bashfully*) my standup comedy definitely does.

(*They laugh.*)

So, yeah. But I didn't really—I didn't invest in bringing *Millennial* or my second show, *Everything Handed to You*, to the States. The only reason *Just For Us* wound up in the States was 'cause Mike Birbiglia told me it was a good idea and decided to finance it. Without Mike Birbiglia, I would be toiling away on—you know, Mike Birbiglia gave me pretty much everything. I owe him hugely.

Jesse Thorn: That show is about your Judaism and your understanding, basically, of how you fit into America.

Alex Edelman: Mm-hm. That's a really good explanation of that.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you. I enjoyed it very much.

Alex Edelman: Thanks, man.

Jesse Thorn: And how did you come to that subject? Was—? I mean, the framing device of the show and a lot of the narrative of the show is about you going to a White power meeting, basically. Just out of a sense of “I dare myself”/curiosity/whatever. “I gotta jump in the cold ocean” or whatever.

Alex Edelman: Sure.

Jesse Thorn: But a significant portion of it came from spending so much time outside of the United States.

Alex Edelman: So, people are always like, “Ah, your show's about antisemitism.” But it's about assimilation. And also, it's about how like I went to this thing—and you know, there was this conversation, if you'll remember, where people were sort of obsessed with whether or not Jews qualified as White. And to me, it was always sort of an easy answer, which was reflected by growing up in Boston. Which is—by the way, I can answer the question for anyone who asks it by asking, “Do you think being White is good?” Like, if you think being White is good, then Jews are not White. And if you think being White sucks, then Jews are the Whitest people! Who've ever existed! In fact, they might be more White than White—!

Like, Jews—it is a really interesting thing, because Americans see things in a really fascinating binary. Rich, poor. Powerful, not powerful. Black, White. And those things are often paired. And so, in 2016/'17/'18/'19, I was watching this argument play out and thought there was something to say. Which was that Jews are both White and not, 'cause Whiteness is in the eye of the beholder. And Jews are subject to some White privileges, and—by the way—have earned enmity from different communities of color in the past for opting into Whiteness.

Some of those people—James Baldwin wrote a popular essay about it. You know, my comedy kind of lives in gray areas. So, the joke is that I'm White enough to get into this meeting, but I'm not White enough to be accepted by the people in this meeting, which felt to me like a really good distillation of the issue. So, I wrote the show sort of exploring this and then really turbocharged it after I went to an event—a sort of Jewish event—where this argument broke out, and I was like, “Oh, I need to rewrite the show to be more focused on this.”

And then my director, Adam Brace, and Mike Birbiglia encouraged sort of honing down on that point. And that's how it got to where it was going. But yeah, to me, the whole show is about this assimilation issue. And it's proved really universal, 'cause everyone wonders about their position. I've never written anything so universal. Like, I hear from people—not just Jews. Like, Black people, White people, Christians. One guy wrote me saying, “I'm from a family of musicians, and it felt like you're writing just for me.” Like, it was a very interesting—very interesting response to the show.

[00:20:00]

Jesse Thorn: I feel like we are in a unique time in the multi-millennial history of antisemitism in that, in my lifetime, there was a time when I felt like, “Well, gosh, Jews are on the road to full assimilation. I don't notice which of my friends are or are not Jewish.”

(Alex agrees.)

And that was 15 and 20 years ago. Not that long ago. And antisemitism in the United States—

Alex Edelman: It's back, babyyy.

Jesse Thorn: —is back big time. And it is back in very unusual ways, in that—in the United States—it is largely driven by classic White supremacy, but much of the discourse around it is currently driven by—

Alex Edelman: What's going on in the Middle East.

Jesse Thorn: And also, evangelical Christianity—a community where there is a significant portion of people who believe that certain conditions about the existence of the state of Israel are required in order for Jesus to come back. And those people are constantly talking about antisemitism as a way to, you know, use it as a cudgel against the left, essentially.

(Alex agrees.)

And also, because of their ideas about what it takes for Jesus to come back. There's also a very real and like palpable change in classic White power antisemitism. And then there is a movement on the left that is like trying to grapple with the fact that the left—especially the movement left—has always been over-indexed for Jews. Like, Jews have always shown up in

the movement left. But also, the defining issue there now—other than perhaps the president—is the war between Israel and Palestine.

Alex Edelman: Yeah. I mean, like the truth is I was always an antisemitism minimalist.

Jesse Thorn: Maybe I should say the Israeli War in Palestine.

Alex Edelman: Sure. Whatever you wanna choose. But like there's—truthfully, I find myself like totally swamped by this. Because I see lots of bad faith accusations of antisemitism. I see very real antisemitism excused by political gripes. I see very little empathy for people on all sides. I see friends that I used to be close with who—to some friends I'm like in Hamas. And to other friends, I'm like Netanyahu. And I'm like, “Can you guys talk to each other, so I have somewhere to go for dinner?” You know, like it's a very—it's very tricky.

And by the way, people are like—Friends of mine are like, “What are you gonna do if people ask you about Israel and Palestine?”

And I was like, “I'm not afraid to talk about it.” I'm afraid to talk about it for 30 seconds. I'm happy to talk about it for like an hour and a half. Because when you live there—here's the reality. No one is going anywhere. There are Israelis there. There are Palestinians there. They need dignity and sovereignty. Obviously, the toll on the Palestinian side is monumentally—it should go without saying. But the truth is, a big issue in terms of how Jews are regarded is that they're not monolithic. Which means that looking at them through a post-colonialist lens won't work. Looking at them through a Western lens won't work. Looking at them through a lens of White/Black won't work. Looking at them through a lens of like Zionist/anti-Zionist won't work.

Like, Jews are so different and varied in their identities and their political views. And because of that, it makes it really hard to grapple with those issues with precision. And most people don't take the time to be precise. And because of that you wind up with antisemitism from all sides. And so, I think that's what's happening now in the United States. For the first time in my life, it's a really scary time for Jews—like, in any real way. Like, terrifying time to express any sort of opinion. I have big respect for people with certainty on either side, 'cause I certainly don't have it. And it's hard to know what the right balance of idealism and pragmatism is. So, like—I mean, really, really awful. And I'm glued to the news like every day. All I do is like scroll and check and read. It's a disaster.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Alex Edelman in just a minute. On the other side of the break, *The Paper*—as we mentioned—is a show that lives in the same universe as *The Office*. It's similar in format and tone. We'll talk about what it's like to create a new show living in the shadow of one of the most beloved television programs of all time.

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

Promo:

Music: A bright, playful tune.

Emily Fleming: I'm Emily Fleming!

Jordan Morris: I'm Jordan Morris.

Matt Lieb: And I'm Matt Lieb.

Emily: We are real comedy writers!

Matt: Real friends—

Jordan: And real cheapskates!

Matt: On every episode of our podcast, *Free With Ads*, we ask, “Why pay for expensive streaming services when you can get free movies from apps with weird names?”

[00:25:00]

Emily: Each week we review the freest movies the internet has to offer—classics like *Pride & Prejudice*.

Jordan: Cult classics, like *Point Break*.

Matt: And “holy (*sensor beep*), what did I just watch?” classics like *Teen Witch*.

Emily: Tune in every week as we take a deep dive into the internet's bargain bin.

Jordan: Every Tuesday on MaximumFun.org or your favorite pod place.

Music:

Free with ads!

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalization.

Jesse Thorn: This is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Alex Edelman. He's co-starring on the new *Office* spinoff, *The Paper*.

I have a question for you about *The Paper*.

Alex Edelman: Please!

Jesse Thorn: So, on *The Paper*: story about a local newspaper in Toledo, Ohio. Very small office. There's no reporters. Basically, everybody is just running wire reports and moving them around on computer screens. Your character in the episodes that I watched—the first few episodes—just being introduced, essentially. And one of the first things that is said about your character is that he's very religious. (*Beat.*) In the pilot.

Alex Edelman: Oh, I have—(*laughs*) I forgot that. Meaning we don't use birth control. That's the—I have a lot of kids on the show.

(*Jesse “ah!”s in understanding and laughs.*)

I have a lot of children! I'm a dad. I am very, very much a dad. When we were writing it, we thought it was really funny and fun. My character is kind of an idiot, I'd say. Well, that's not fair. His EQ is very high, and his IQ is like (*nervous sound*). And the reason for that is one of the other writers and actors on the show is this really hysterical actor named Gbemisola Ikumelo. Really talented writer as well. And Gbemi was developing her character, and her character is very like sardonic and over it and like couldn't care less about the— Actually a really different person from who Gbemi is. And we sit right next to each other. And so, I thought, “What would be the most annoying type of character for that person to sit next to?” It would be a really sweet, blithe, enthusiastic simpleton. Which is pretty close to the person that I am, actually.

And so, we wrote this (*laughing*) character that was a guy who's like just so enthusiastic and such a normie dad and likes to next to this cool girl who's like, (*annoyed*) “Ah, god.” She's like the queen of *The Office*, can't be bothered. And I'm just like really fun and psyched and just kind of a big kid. So, that was my guy.

Jesse Thorn: I, many years ago, interviewed Jenna Fischer, who was one of the stars of *The Office*. She's now best known as the world's most popular podcaster, parentheses, “not evil” category.

Alex Edelman: Yes. They visited it, and that was pretty cool.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, that's very cool.

So, this is a vivid memory for me, because I was still doing this show out of my apartment. *The Office* was brand new but was becoming a hit. She was kind enough to come and do an interview. So gracious. The loveliest person on earth. And one of the things that I remember hearing from her that stunned me—because I hadn't thought about it—was if a show is a documentary style show set in an open plan office, that means everyone's basically on camera for 80% of the scene!

And like, maybe in later seasons of *The Office*, there's more adventures.

Alex Edelman: I know where this is going.

Jesse Thorn: But everybody just has to actually sit there. And not only that, but many of the people who were sitting on camera were also contributing to the writing. And all of the peoples were contributing their own personae and skills to the writing, essentially. Even if they weren't putting pen to paper or typing on a keyboard. Right?

(Alex agrees.)

And I'm like—this is a very particular way to make a television show, putting everyone on camera all the time. They didn't even have internet, so they had to play solitaire on their computers.

(Alex confirms.)

But like putting everyone on camera, and rather than fitting the cast to the writing, fitting the writing to the cast.

Alex Edelman: It's really cool. In my opinion, it's a good way to make a TV show. Everyone's watching the cuts. And by the way, like we... *(sighs)* I hope this is gonna be interesting, as opposed to too granular. But like, if you're a storyteller, I do think this is interesting. I was watching the cuts. And by the way, making a show like *The Office*, you write a lot of stuff that winds up on the cutting room floor. Which is totally fine, because you find something isn't exactly in character; or you find something that's not on story; or your cuts come in long, and you have to cut down like everybody else. And by the way, you know, I imagine that with *The Office*—in fact, I know there were extended play cuts. Right?

[00:30:00]

You can go online and see. And our show—which by the way is not a spinoff, but it's set in this sort of same universe, right? It's in the Greg Daniels cinematic universe; it's in *The Office* universe. I found a lot of our cuts showing moments that were unscripted—unforced moments, reaction shots that were there as people react. And a lot of the stuff that—I've never seen such a clear example of editing and post-production being a huge driver of story.

'Cause like I worked on multi-cams where you'd fill something, and then it was airing a few days later. And you're like, “Oh my god, this is such a quick turnaround.” You know, we shot the show months ago, and watching the cuts, some scenes are totally different. They're just paced up. Some scenes breathe in a way they didn't. And a lot of that is like different people doing their thing; the documentary crew deciding when to put stuff in. And being conscious of the cameras and sort of understanding them as second characters in the scenes that we're in was a really new, unique, fun acting challenge.

Jesse Thorn: Are you self-conscious about the combination of warm room and cold room that comes from being a—whatever the relationship is between this show and *The Office*?

Because like, you know people love *The Office*. Somehow there was a second round of loving *The Office* that was even bigger than the first round of loving *The Office*. You know, it's like the—along with *Friends*, I would say—probably the iconic show of the streaming age, in terms of reruns. But that means that people are so excited to see this show that comes from that world, they're also like, “Well, this will never be as good as that thing I loved watching 200 episodes of in a row in three days.”

Alex Edelman: It's a new show. The show is a new show. It's not like a spinoff. It's not a reboot. It's a new show that's set in it. It's not like an extra season of *The Office*. This is a—I don't bother to correct people that much when they're like— When you said a spinoff of *The Office* at the beginning, I was gonna be like, (*nasally*) “Excuse me, it's not—” But like, (*casually*) it's not a spinoff of *The Office*.

Jesse Thorn: Well, there's embargoed things I'm not supposed to say about it that are things that I would say it's reasonably accurate to describe it as a spinoff, even though I understand why you would suggest it wasn't.

Alex Edelman: Meaning like Oscar's in the show. Which other thing?

Jesse Thorn: Oscar is in the show. Oscar Nuñez is in the show.

Alex Edelman: Which is a thing we can talk about, and it's a neat connection. But am I nervous that people won't like it as much as *The Office*? Like... I want people—

Jesse Thorn: Well, of course they're not gonna like it as much as *The Office*. This is the show they like the best in the world!

Alex Edelman: I've been like, “It's the best show in the world,” but it's more—

Jesse Thorn: They didn't like much of *The Office* as much as they liked *The Office*!

Alex Edelman: Of course! But like— Look, it was the coolest thing in the world to get to work on. And frankly, I took the job partially because of the people. Right? Like, I wanna work with Greg Daniels. I wanted to like a chance at like— And also, seeing this really specific craft challenge is to do something that's with the same spirit as *The Office*, but also new. I remember sometimes we'd come up with something and be like, “Ah, well we did that on *The Office*.”

I dunno, it felt like a cool way to make television. Am I nervous about the response? It'd be nice if the response was enthusiastic. But also, no one—I promise you if you don't feel like watching the show, no one will come to your house and make you. I do, as an *Office* fan myself, I like the show. So, hopefully other people share my reaction. But am I nervous? Sure!

Jesse Thorn: This show is co-created by Greg Daniels and Michael Kamen. And I've met Michael once, who came to a screening of my favorite movie that I hosted, *A Thousand Clowns*. And he was so—

Alex Edelman: What's *A Thousand Clowns*?

Jesse Thorn: He was so nice. A wonderful movie; we'll talk about it after the show. But he was so nice. He came with my friend Brian Stack, another of the nicest people.

Alex Edelman: Great writer.

Jesse Thorn: So, I have nothing but wonderful things to say about Michael Koman. Comedy writing legend. Greg Daniels has created several of the greatest television shows of all time.

Alex Edelman: 1,000%

Jesse Thorn: And has made major creative contributions to others among the greatest television shows of all time.

When you're in a writing room with somebody like that, what is an example of something that you learned from the experience?

Alex Edelman: Oh my gosh. There's a thing you're reminded of in every writing room, which is sometimes there's just like a smell test. And you're like, "It should work," and it doesn't. Or it shouldn't work, and it does. The other thing is that characters really like—I can't explain it, but it's so much more paramount than— Sometimes it felt like we'd be writing just like jokes, and I'd be like, "Ah, that bit's not gonna last." 'Cause it's like not on character. And not only— Or it feels like it's on character, but it isn't.

And also, I think Greg and Komen don't want to punish viewers. Like, there's an example. We were talking about something else, a different cultural offering. And it felt like that, in this other cultural offering, they had made an artistic choice that sort of punished the character and punished the audience for rooting for the character.

[00:35:00]

And I just sensed the distaste for that. Which was like— You know, in *The Office*, I think they actually let you have candy sometimes. And in like the British *Office*, I feel like they don't always let you have candy. And in British TV, in like—I think the reason—

Jesse Thorn: There's a meta candy, which is the romance in the British *Office*. Which is very real and is a sort of full narrative in a way that you couldn't do in an American sitcom, necessarily.

Alex Edelman: 1,000%. But I think one of the reasons that people like *The Office* isn't just that it's funny and the characters are beautifully rendered—which they are. There's also like... these are people doing their best, and things sometimes work out for them. And like, in our show, it was nice to be writing grounded show where the characters are doing their best, and sometimes things work out for them. That's a charm and wholesomeness. Too much stuff

makes it treacle-y, and too little stuff makes it cynical. And Greg and Komen had a real ear for the right balance of that.

That's what it was. Like, sometimes you do something, or you'd pitch something, and you're pitching it not just 'cause it's funny, but also there's something narratively satisfying about it. And that was a thing that really felt like had top trumps on our show.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, when I think of what's the difference between the wonderful *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *King of the Hill*, one of my favorite television shows of all time, it is that there is no less darkness or intensity to *King of the Hill*; but it ultimately is driven by heart and feelings above all else. And that's— You know, you could say the same thing even about *The Simpsons*, right? That this is a show that is jam-packed with the most ridiculous jokes that could ever exist, and ultimately it always gets back to character and feelings.

Alex Edelman: I think we watch TV particularly for depth of feeling with other people. I think especially now, you're like, “Why is *The Office* so popular now?” Because the depth of feeling on that show—love, embarrassment, loathing, care—it's so strong and primary in that show. Which isn't to say it's not primary in others. But I think we're like in a time where like we're being offered too much dystopia. I'm out on dystopian shows. Done, finished, zero. Give me middle-topias. Or utopias with reality in them.

Like, was watching *Star Trek*—the original *Star Trek*, which I had never really seen. And I finished an episode, and it started offering me dystopian shows. The algorithm was like, “Do you want some dystopia?”

And I'm like, “I just watched a show that's like truly diverse from the '60s, like a utopian ideal of people working together.” It's like a feel-good show, *Star Trek*! The original *Star Trek* is like wildly positive!

And the algorithm is like, “You like *Star Trek*. You wanna see the end of the world!”

And I'm like, “NO! I don't!” Comedy should make people feel good!

I don't know. That goes back to like wanting to be in the toy department of life. And like, you know, you ask about like what's the— I think the show is part of the— Will it be for everyone? Most shows aren't for everyone. But like I want to be in the toy department here. And like, this show, it could be a nice toy.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Alex, thank you so much for taking all this time to talk to me.

Alex Edelman: Not at all. What a delight. Sorry to get so in the weeds on certain stuff.

Jesse Thorn: Alex Edelman, folks. Catch him on *The Paper*, which starts streaming this month on NBC and Peacock.

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, 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. Here at our office, everyone is really excited that when the Dodgers win you get this code to get free Chinese fast food from a Chinese fast food chain restaurant. And the Dodgers have had a little wind streak. Of course, I'm a Giants fan, so... I have nothing but contempt for that restaurant and the Dodgers.

Our senior producer on *Bullseye* is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer, Daniel Speers. We get booking help on *Bullseye* Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com.

[00:40:00]

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 can find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones that you heard this week. While you're there, smash those like and subscribe buttons, baby!

Okay, 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.)