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Jesse Thorn: Hey gang, it's Jesse. Before we get into this next *Bullseye* interview, I wanted to give you a heads up on something really exciting. We are ringing in 25 years of *Bullseye* all through this fall. 25 years! I started this show in my dorm room when I was 19!

What does that mean? Well, we will have a whole month of special shows, new and old, this Autumn. And we're also going on the road, bringing you three very special anniversary live shows. Thursday, October 16th, we'll be at LAist in Pasadena, California. I'll be joined by Roy Wood Jr. and Jason Mantzoukas. We will have music from Rebecca Sugar, the creator of *Stephen Universe*. And! Comedy from the great Aparna Nancherla. Saturday, November 1st will be at the Kuumbwa Jazz Center in Santa Cruz, California. I will be talking with Adam Scott, Boots Riley, and Glenn Washington. We will have comedy from Scott Simpson. Finally, on Saturday, November 15th, we'll head to the Pit in New York City, the Pit Theater. My guests: Jad Abumrad from *Radio Lab*, H Jon Benjamin from *Archer* and *Bob's Burgers*, comedy from Josh Gondelman, music from songwriters Kristin Anderson-Lopez and Bobby Lopez—the latter of whom is an actual EGOT. It is going to be an extravaganza in all three cities.

I hope you will celebrate with us. Go to MaximumFun.org/events for info on all of it. That's MaximumFun.org/events. And thanks.

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. In the TV show, *Slow Horses*, if you just look at the premise, you might not be that excited. It might seem kind of old-news. That premise is, roughly: take a bunch of British spies whose British spy bosses deemed them unfit for service, cast them off into a cruddy building to do busy work—a sort of spy Island of Misfit Toys. And then, wouldn't you know it, those lovable screw ups actually turn out to be good spies who do big missions. Again, that is like the rough outline of the premise of *Slow Horses*. And you know, it's not without charm, but it doesn't exactly break ground.

But I am here to tell you, listener, *Slow Horses* is the best! Why? Well, you have Gary Oldman. He plays the lead, Jackson Lamb. That's the boss of the bad spies at the bad spy building, Slough House. Jackson is very frumpy, super gross, and very funny. This is a sort of action-drama character who possibly farts more than any action-drama character in the history of media? I think the previous record was zero, (*chuckles*) possible one. Anyway, the point is Gary Oldman is wonderful on the show. Kristin Scott Thomas as Diana Taverner—the boss of the good spies—is also great. Everyone brings it on *Slow Horses*. Big cast. Everyone's great.

But there are lots of good shows with good actors acting in them. *Slow Horses* is special. My guest this week is Will Smith. He is not that Will Smith. He's a different Will Smith, the creator and showrunner of *Slow Horses*—which is based on the book series of the same name. It was sort of his dream project, because— Well, it's two things. On the one hand, there's all the spy stuff. Double agents and coverups and veteran spies haunted by ghosts of the Cold War. You know, like Jean le Carré type stuff. And then on the other, there is the people. Many, if not all, of the characters are career driven—or sometimes career obsessed. But they're also caught in weird cul-de-sacs that render them ineffectual, hopeless.

It's not unlike *Veep* or *The Thick of It*—two of the best television shows of the last couple decades and two shows on which Smith worked. Of course, one big difference between *Slow Horses* and *Veep* and *The Thick of It* is that on *Veep* and *The Thick of It*, the worst thing that one character can do to another is usually like yell at them in public, embarrass them. In *Slow Horses*, they can—you know—murder them with poisonous powders. So, yeah. Two things, and a weird, brilliant mix of those things. I'm so delighted to get to talk with Will Smith, the show's creator. Let's get right into it.

[00:05:00]

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Will Smith, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show. I'm such a big fan of *Slow Horses*, and I'm thrilled you could come in. Thank you.

Will Smith: Oh, thank you so much! That's lovely to hear, and I'm so happy to be here.

Jesse Thorn: I get the impression that you got involved in this project because you were such a fan of *Slow Horses*—or the books, which are *The Slough House* books.

Will Smith: I actually didn't know the books when they were first put in front of me. And at that point there were only two books in the series. And I think Mick had been—I think he'd been dropped by his British publisher. But he'd had sort of a kind of cult following in the States, and this American publisher hung on in there. And then he found another publisher in Britain. So, it wasn't the kind of juggernaut that it is now, but I could see that it was an absolute no-brainer in terms of adapting it. I mean, just from the first—from the opening, I just thought it was just such a brilliant twist on the genre with the kind of—the fake bomb threat at the beginning. That it's all a training exercise, I thought, was just a fantastic rug pull.

And then, you know, Slough House was just such a genius invention, and Lamb was just this incredible character, and then all the other characters there—you know, the way he goes into their personal lives, and you go home with them. It just felt like such a kind of rich stew of all the kind of influences, all the things I love. Like, yeah, Mick and I are both huge, le Carré fans and fans of the spy genre. And then with the kind of caustic wit of it as well, it just felt like something you could— You could see all the influences, but it was something entirely new and its own thing. So, it was like, yes, of course. (*Chuckling.*) Let me at it.

Jesse Thorn: You started your career as a standup and a comedy writer. Did you always aspire to this kind of exciting, plot-driven content?

Will Smith: Yeah. I mean, I sort of was—you know—slightly mad, probably, and greedy in that I always wanted to do it all. Like, when I was a kid— Like, Laurel and Hardy completely changed my world, and then John Cleese changed my world. And you know, in terms of comedy influences and things I really wanted to do. But at the same time as that, you know, I was just obsessed with Spielberg and *Star Wars*. And then as a really cool teenager, I got into Victorian literature.

(They chuckle.)

So, I was also into kind of, you know, George Elliot and Charlotte Bronte and Thomas Hardy. So, it was all these things, and I wanted to kind of explore all those avenues. So, you know, I did standup and bits of acting. You know, I wrote a novel. And I was always thrillers as well, and action films and action books and all that kind of stuff. But it was—the Carré I came to quite late. I think I was probably in my 20s, and I'd always quite ignorantly dismissed him as sort of an airport thriller. And then I read one and was like, “Oh my god, this is literature.” You know, he's an amazing writer who happens to write about spies.

Jesse Thorn: I have a friend, Jonathan Ames, who was for a long time a sort of comic essayist and short story writer, sometimes novella writer. Wrote some TV. And more recently, he has written hard-boiled crime novels. He's written three hard-boiled crime novels. And I was delighted by this, because he's a real weirdo.

(Will bursts into surprised laughter.)

And it's so exciting for a real weirdo to write a genre piece, because they are genre pieces, but his weirdo-ness brings so much to it. What do you think is the difference between a genre piece that is exciting to you—a comedy guy/literature enthusiast/et cetera, et cetera—rather than what might pass for exciting to your worst uncle?

Will Smith: *(Laughs.)* That's a brilliant question. And I think, for me, the answer is that in genre writing, if the characters are saying the things that characters say within that genre and doing the kinds of things that characters do in that genre, then to me it feels slightly limiting. And you just don't believe it. And I'm very kind of boring and traditional *(laughs)* and probably unimaginative, but for any kind of piece of fiction—whether it's kind of, you know, a book or a film or a TV series or a play—I just have to believe it. So, I just wanna believe that these people are real and these things happened and be transported in that way.

And you know, so the more convincing and the more rounded the characters are, the easier it is to do that. And so, for me and certainly with Mmick's work, it felt like he had kind of real characters that you might find in literary fiction, but they were in a spy novel.

Jesse Thorn: So much more still to get into with Will Smith, the creator of Apple TV's *Slow Horses*. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with the British TV writer and comedian Will Smith. He has worked on classic comedies like *The Thick of It*, and *Veep*, both of which were created by Armando Iannucci. Smith is also the creator and showrunner of *Slow Horses*, an action spy thriller starring Gary Oldman and Kristin Scott Thomas.

[00:10:00]

You can catch all five seasons of that show now on Apple TV+. Let's get back into our conversation.

Years ago I interviewed Marianne Jean-Baptiste, who's like obviously one of the great actors of the world. And she had worked for years on a procedural TV show here in the United States. And I asked her about this TV show, because I figured she would say what actors usually say, which is “It's great to have a job that I know is going to be there next week.”

And she said in a very— The tone might not have matched what I'm about to say, but the content did.

(Will laughs.)

“No, it was awful.”

(They laugh.)

And I think the specific— Look, she's the loveliest woman in the world, and I'm sure she was grateful for the job. I don't wanna— If you worked on the show with her, she appreciates you. But the thing I think that was the most brutal for her was that in a procedural television show—and in genre television in general—if it's plot driven, one of the biggest jobs of the characters is to explain the plot to the audience.

(Will confirms.)

Which in real life, no one explains what's going on to each other... ever, essentially. And that is not something that comes up on *Slow Horses*. Is that a specific choice? Is there a rule, “We can't have characters tell each other what's going on”?

Will Smith: Yeah. Well, thank you. That's amazing that you feel that way. And I think that's— You know, you and she have landed on another difference I think between kind of genre and— I don't know what you call what *Slow Horses* is if it isn't a genre piece. I mean, just a kind of drama I suppose. Or thriller. It's how Mick approaches it as well. It's a character piece. It's driven by the characters. So, when Mick writes it, he's not thinking of, you know, the plot and then making the characters do the things that suit the plot. He's thinking of where the characters are emotionally, what's happened to them, what interesting pairings he can

make that he hasn't done before, or what new people can bring in if he's just brutally slaughtered a favorite character.

And I kind of— You know, we all try and take that on into the show. I mean, you'd never want— An actor never wants to feel like they're explaining the plot. It's gotta feel like that the character is saying that thing at a moment that is truthful for that character in the way they're communicating to another character, not because they're telling the audience something. So, you just try and bury it and hide it in as kind of the fun, imaginative ways that you can.

Like, I know one of the things—if I remember it correctly—that we did in series two, where we had all these Russians, and the note was “It's quite confusing, all the Russians. Can we try and make it clear for the audience who all the Russians are?” So, we did this pickup scene where Min and Louise were leaving her flat, and she's saying, you know, “Right. You remember who we're meeting?” And he immediately gets the name wrong. And she's like, “Oh, for god's sake, how many times?” And then holds out the file with a picture and goes through the names of the people they're meeting. (*Chuckles.*)

So, it was a way of telling the audience who everyone is, but you're building it into a character moment. And you're using men's sloppiness and forgetfulness and lack of professionalism as a way of smuggling in the exposition. So, you're just always looking for things like that.

Jesse Thorn: I was thinking of this; you worked on the television show *The Thick of It*, which I think, you know, stands with like the *Larry Sanders Show*, among the very best character comedies that have ever been on television. And one of the things about *The Thick of It*, which is also one of the funniest shows I've ever watched, is that there are almost no jokes on *The Thick of It*.

(*Will agrees.*)

There is the running joke of “what is the most creative profanity that could be created”?

(*They chuckle.*)

But I think that the special thing about *The Thick of It* was you must have been actively avoiding jokes in the program.

Will Smith: Yeah, I think— I mean, that's Armando. Again—and that's really what I've taken from years of working for him.

Jesse Thorn: And this is Armando Iannucci who made that show and with whom you worked on *Veep*, among other shows. Yeah.

Will Smith: Yeah. He's just a truly wonderful mentor and friend and a genius. So, again, another thing I carry with me from that is— And I think it was on *Veep*, not *The Thick of It*, but I remember him saying to me he'd cut a line. It was a really funny line. I can't actually remember the line. But he said he'd cut the line, because he didn't feel the character would be

trying to be funny at that point in the story. And again, that's—if it's extraneous, and you feel like crowbarring it— And he's ruthless like that! You would get really funny stuff, and he'd like, “I don't believe it at that point.”

So, yeah, I think *Thick of It* is similar to *Slow Horses* in that they're both funny shows. And *The Thick of It*, much funnier than *Slow Horses*. It's not primarily a comedy. But yeah, there are no jokes.

Jesse Thorn: How would you describe the kind of funny that *Slow Horses* is?

Will Smith: It's sort of dark. Oh god. It feels just— It feels lame to go, “Oh, it's dark humor.” I mean, I think they've all got different things going on. Like, I mean, Lamb's is obviously insults. River, there's a lot of comedy for him trying and failing. (*Chuckling*) Rodddd's just an idiot and just a hilarious kind of blundering idiot that everyone kind of slightly pities and doesn't wanna kind of set him straight, because it would crush him. So, I mean, you've got lots of things going on.

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So, it's hard to pinpoint. I mean, I think there probably is a— here is a sort of *Thick of It* connection, just partly 'cause of me. And also, I know Mick loved that, and I know that's partly why they approached me was 'cause the kind of short pitch for the show was kind of, you know, *Smiley's People* meets *The Thick of It*. And so, it is kind of backbiting. It's kind of— You know, the other way you could describe it as a workplace comedy set in the spy world.

Jesse Thorn: Gary Oldman's character, Lamb, is the boss of the *Slow Horses*, the head of this office of various types of rejects. And his character is very disgusting. (*Chuckling*) That's one of his primary qualities. He has many personal qualities besides, but like one of the top ones is: he's freaking gross.

(*Will agrees with a laugh.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Lamb (*Slow Horses*): I'm going back to bed.

Speaker: Would you also consider a shower?

Lamb: Yeah, it's a tempting offer, but I don't think that's appropriate right now. I mean, apart from anything else, my team just died!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: It's one thing for disgusting filthiness to be in one of your primary character's qualities in a book. It is a much more vivid experience to see it on screen. So, how do you decide how you want him to be, physically onscreen that we're looking at? I'm thinking of closeups of his feet, for example. *(Chuckles.)*

Will Smith: Yeah. There's the feet; the hair is not washed regularly, I'd say. *(Chuckles.)* Probably doesn't brush his teeth. The clothes seem to be on kind of quite a low rotation of outfits, but.

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* He has none of the qualities of a disgusting, dirty person on film, typically. Which usually a disgusting, dirty person on film looks like a child dressed up as a hobo for Halloween.

(Will laughs.)

Like, they have that kind of like fake dirt on them. You know what I mean? And he's genuinely distressingly gross looking.

Will Smith: It's the grease, isn't it? I mean, it's actually— If you go back to series one, it's 'cause it's definitely been added and layered, and—you know, there's more texture to that. Like, if you look at series one now, it's like, “He looks quite dapper and svelte, almost!”, in comparison to the kind of greasy, disheveled mess that he is at the moment. But that's Gary. I mean, Gary loves that. Gary loves it. I mean, Gary's just amazing. He loves the character detail and just living it and feeling the textures of things like that. So, that'll be him with Lucy Sibbick—the Oscar-winning hair and makeup designer—just sort of greasing the hair more and the skin and just— And Gary's—you know, he's—I'm gonna put it nicely. He's bulked out. I can do that, as though he's kind of exercising for the part.

Jesse Thorn: You're doing muscle moves for our radio listeners.

Will Smith: Yeah. I'm doing muscle moves. *(Laughs.)* Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: You're doing muscle man moves.

Will Smith: But you know, he's put on a little bit for it. But he's still not— Well, that's the amazing thing about Gary is he's not the size that Lamb is in the book, but he conveys it. But yeah, I mean, Gary just loves being dirty and disgusting *(laughs)* with all of that.

Jesse Thorn: You know how they're always saying in hackneyed film criticism like, “The city...”

Will Smith: Is the character. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: “—is actually a character in the film.”

Will Smith: *(Laughs.)* Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: In *Slow Horses*, I would say that the farts are a character in the program.

(Will laughs and agrees.)

How do you decide how to deploy the—again—genuinely gross farts? Comic, but also sincerely gross.

Will Smith: Yes. Well, I mean, the farts were in the book. And I remember early on there was a kind of, “Are you gonna do the farts?”

It was like, “Oh yeah.”

I mean, that's—

(Jesse laughs.)

'Cause it's a part of the character. Again, you think it's in the spy genre, but we've not had a farting spy before, have we? I don't think. Who can seemingly do it on demand.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(A sniffing sound and a grunt.)

Lamb: I'm Sorry about that.

Speaker 1: About what? *(Beat.)*

Speaker 2: *(Scrambling away in a clatter.)* Oh my god. *(Coughs.)*

Speaker 1: That bad? I really think you should see a doctor.

Speaker 2: Oh, I think you gave me lung cancer.

Speaker 3: Was that a fart?!

Lamb: Yeah, mostly.

Speaker 1: I know what you're doing, Lamb.

(Coughing continues in the background.)

Lamb: I'm expelling excess gas!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Will Smith: I mean, the thing with the farts is— I mean, there's a couple of things I find really interesting. One is that people think he farts all the time. And actually, it's only kind of two a season maybe. You know. And season five that's coming up, we had three. We've cut it down to one, but it's an absolute belter.

(Jesse cackles.)

So, you'll really enjoy that.

Jesse Thorn: Braggy, but okay.

(They laugh.)

Will Smith: Yeah, it's— Yeah, no. Well, it's story-based is the really fun thing about it. And again, it comes back to character. It's like— It's part of Lamb's character.

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It shows his disregard for people. It shows he's slightly given up. He doesn't care what people think of him, and he'll use it to kind of deflect or to offend or put people off or whatever it is. So, it's more about—choosing who he does it in front of says a lot. Like, in series two—I think—when he is down in Molly's basement, Molly's one of the two people towards whom he expresses any kind of affection. The other being Sam Chapman, I think. And Molly comes back in, and she's like, “Oh my god, you didn't.”

And I think he tries to waft it away. And he says something like, “Oh, I didn't think you'd be back so quick.” It's like he tried to do the fart when she wasn't there. So, that's him— You know, he can play nice. But other times if he doesn't like you, he'll just let rip in front of you.

Jesse Thorn: I'm imagining a classic like television writers corkboard full of 3x5 cards, but the 3x5 cards are just different types of fart.

Will Smith: Different types—*(laughs)*. I don't know where they get them from. I mean, it's amazing what— You know, they conjure up all these things, the sound team. And you just— you know, in post. And you're like, “Wh-where do you source this from?! Where do you *(laughs)*— Where you get all these fart noises?”

But no, it's a lot of fun. (*Laughing.*) That aspect to the character is—you know, it's one of his signature characteristics.

Jesse Thorn: Obviously, a lot of the plotting of the television program comes directly from the books. But what have you learned about plotting working on a show where plot is absolutely essential?

Will Smith: That's great. No, that's a fantastic question. I learned a lot with having Graham Yost—you know, the incredible showrunner of *Justified*, which was one of my favorite shows in the last 20 years, and he worked at *Silo*, and he worked on *Band of Brothers*. So, he was in the room with us. And you can't have it off screen, and you can't just have him talk about it. You've gotta see it. And so, that led to the opening that we did at Istanbul where you see the character and then see her die, and then you kind of understand his grief and rage and how that carries him through the show. So, you know, it's—

Not having people explain stuff; it sort of comes back down to the exposition stuff. Like, if you wanna avoid the exposition, show the audience what's happened so that they can see, and they don't have to hear it from someone else. So, that was a big part of it. I mean, I definitely—I know I learned a ton of stuff making it. And I just feel I got better and— You know, and also there was like five years when we were trying to get it away. And I've always sort of said, you know, I'm glad we had to wait that long. 'Cause I had five years working for Armando. And so, you know, again, it's a better show for me having to wait.

It's also—it's kind of making sure that the audience aren't too far ahead. And that's always a slight dance, 'cause you always want Lamb ahead, but you don't want the audience completely left behind. So, it's—I mean, a lot of the times— One of the things I do find, if you are kind of explaining something or hitting a run of stuff, you'll end up sort of hitting something five times to explain it. And then—but you know you gotta cut that down to three in the edit. So, it's like you kind of wanna have a surplus of material to explain the plot, and then you can pull things down as you go and say, “Oh, we can hold that back, and we can change that.” And actually that's good confusion.

Jesse Thorn: How do you judge whether the audience will be able to follow?

Will Smith: I mean, it's sort of gut. Which isn't very helpful. I do always think, “Is my mum gonna understand this?” And if we have a twist moment as well, I always think, “Is my mum gonna guess this? Or am I gonna be sitting next to her, and she's gonna go “OH MY GOD! I didn't think that would happen! Or I didn't know he was so-and-so,” or whatever it is? And so, you just wanna think of the audience just getting the basic information and how it's hitting them. I know that the clues are there.

And again, sometimes— This is another thing, that sometimes I would sort of say something in a line or have something in a line that I think explains something, but actually it doesn't. And if you miss the line, you don't get it. And then you wanna build that out into a run of scenes or to just dramatize it more. So, I think that's always the thing, is making sure— If you dramatize it and you make it a character thing, then the audience know, and they feel it. And you kind of want them to be with the characters and be on their journey. So, it's all about making it feel real and plausible.

Jesse Thorn: There's a standup comedy cliché that someone walks up to the microphone, and they say, "I know what you're thinking. So-and-so had a baby with so-and-so." And the reason that cliché exists is because, when you're a standup comic, you have to address the audience's presumptions about you. You have to know what they are and then address them.

(Will agrees.)

I watched some very funny standup that you did. This is 20 years old probably. You walk up to the microphone and did five solid minutes about looking fancy, posh in British terms.

(Will laughs and agrees.)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Will Smith: I mean, I'll tell you, it's absolutely useless having a voice like this if you're ever trying to get a car repaired really cheaply.

(Laughter.)

No, no, no, no. I walk in, and straight away they just see a big sign above my head saying, "Holiday." *(Chuckles.)* Well, I'll try and dress down by maybe wearing some of those trousers with pockets on the knees. Hm. You know, things with zips and hoods. But it makes no difference.

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As soon as I open my mouth, they just see buckle shoes, silk stockings, and a big hat with a feather in it.

(Laughter.)

I may as well just go in and go *(in a cartoonishly snobbish British accent)*, "Fix my car for the shiny six pence, you rough-hewn man of granite! And sit and tell me tales of street fighting! No, please! Let me live through you, my brutish, pagan whatever!"

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Was that your experience of the world? The fact that you had— You know, there's another *Thick of It* episode where a character says to your character, “What did you ask for when you went to the hairdresser, the Disney prince?”

Will Smith: Disney prince. (*Laughs.*) Yeah, that was a line from a friend of mine. Seann Walsh—a great standup—said that to me and I put it in the show. So.

Jesse Thorn: Was that part of your experience of walking through the world as an adult, that people made assumptions about what kind of guy you were?

Will Smith: Absolutely. And that— 'cause I grew up in Jersey, the Channel Islands, which is just off France. It's 11 miles by 4. It was a wonderful place to grow up. But obviously, you know, it's slightly removed from the rest of the country. And when you leave Jersey and you move to the mainland, people just assume you're a millionaire. So, you kind of have that. And then, you know, I always— I mean, I didn't go to Oxbridge, but it sort of sounded like I did. So, I always used to say that I had all the resentment and none of the social and professional advantages.

But when I went onto the circuit— 'Cause I was slightly naïve. I was just like, “I wanna be a comedian, 'cause I kind of always wanted to be a comedian.” As well as an actor and a writer, all the nonsense that I wanted to do. But comedy was always a massive thing for me. And I used to make films and do magazines and do sketches and stuff with friends of mine. And then when I was at university, they weren't there. So, I was like, “Well, I'll do standup now.” And Ben Elton was a real hero of mine, and he'd done standup as a way of getting into writing. So, I thought, “I'll do this.” So, I was sort of going onto the comedy circuit. And then— You know, and my kind of tradition is kind of, you know, Cleeve and *Python* and not the nine o'clock news. So, it is that kind of Oxbridge comedy tradition is what influenced me.

And then you hit the circuit, and I loved the circuit because it was just so eclectic. And you're meeting all these people that, you know, I would never come across in any other kind of walk of life. And you know, there were kind of, you know, dentists and doctors and lawyers doing standup, and then there were kind of lorry drivers and ex armed robbers and—you know, whoever. And even though you kind of—you came from all these different backgrounds, you still had that kind of that Venn diagram bit in the middle that you loved comedy, and you thought about things in a similar way, and you had similar experiences. So, to this day, there were people who I probably only ever met kind of ten times in my life that, you know, I did shows with or did car journeys with that I still think of as really good friends! (*Chuckles.*) Because you can bond really, really quickly.

But you've also got the kind of perception of the audience. Which is, you know, “Why are you doing this? You don't speak like everyone.” You know, I wasn't the traditional kind or the obvious kind of voice on the circuit at that point. It was a bit more rough-and-ready. And you just think—well, you have to address it. You have to—you know, if they're thinking it, you have to puncture that. Otherwise it's gonna be in their minds, and it's sort of a distraction. So, if I'm sounding posher than the other people on the bill, I'm gonna make a joke out of it. And it also disarms them. And it—you know, if they are gonna yell something, you've already done it. So, it's sort of slightly getting the punch in first.

It's a very powerful thing to just be yourself. And I think you can connect with people much more easily if you're just honest and open and you're not withholding those things about you. I mean, that said, obviously the persona I had when I was doing standup is a heightened version of a part of myself. It's not the whole of me, but it's some of me. And it definitely gave me a comic persona that I could play on.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, that's interesting. Because you know, when I talk to standups, the rule of thumb is: you spend your first seven years of standup trying to figure out who you are. And you've done five shows a week for seven years—which is, what? Almost 2,000 shows—then you know who you are and have a voice.

(Will agrees.)

That voice that you're describing, you say it is a part of you. But it's as much about how people see you as it is about who you are.

Will Smith: Yes. You're playing off the preconceptions, and you're kind of leaning into it as well. It's like if people are like, you know, “Oh, you seem a bit posh,” you really go for it, and you get really snobbish or whatever it is for kind of shock value or comic effect or whatever. You know, however the joke is working. But it's also— When you were talking there, it reminded me of something another friend of mine said that—again—another thing I really carry with me that I do think applies to my whole approach to drama/comedy writing and certainly to *Slow Horses*. I remember him saying to me, “It's not about the jokes; it's who you are in between the jokes.”

And that is just so, so true. Because once you have the persona, you can kind of talk about anything. Whereas when you're still trying to find yourself, and you're doing kind of a pun here and a political observation here and a kind of long anecdote here and something else, you can feel your kind of, “Who are you, and what is the style?” But when you have the persona, it's just an extra thing that the audience could feed off.

[00:30:00]

If you have a certain look when you come on stage, then that's the thing—it sort of infuses all of your worldview and your jokes.

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

Promo:

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song.

Jesse Thorn: Hey, gang. It's Jesse Thorn, host of *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. We are ringing in 25 years of *Bullseye* this fall. That's right, listener. 25 years. I started the show in my dorm room at UC Santa Cruz. What does that mean for you? Well, we'll have a whole month of special shows—new and old—for one thing. We are putting on live shows in Los Angeles, New York, and Santa Cruz. We've got guests like Adam Scott, Roy Wood Jr., and Rebecca Sugar, just to name a few. I hope you'll plan on celebrating with us. That's MaximumFun.org/events. Thanks.

(Music ends in a chorus of cheers.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with the English writer and comedian Will Smith. He's the creator of the spy thriller *Slow Horses*.

You're working for a company in California—where I live—and you're making a show about British people written by you, a Brittain, starring British actors.

Will Smith: *(Laughing.)* I think I know where this is going.

Jesse Thorn: *(Chuckles.)* Do you think of yourself as making a show for Americans?

Will Smith: Oh, that's interesting. I thought that was gonna go somewhere else. I thought that was gonna go “What gave me the nerve to think you could write a show like *Veep*?”

(They laugh.)

Or write on a show. It wasn't my show. But I— No, the American thing is interesting, 'cause we didn't know— We always thought the show would appeal to British people. But then I always sort of come back to that thing that Mick had his first kind of bite of an audience in America. So, people latched onto that, and that they liked the kind of Britishness of it. And again, it sort of ties up with what I was saying about standup, that I think if you're authentic and the characters are true to themselves, people will respond to that. You know, in the same way that I love watching not just specifically American shows, but that they're specifically regional American shows, like *The Wire* and *Sopranos* and *Mayor of East Town*. Again, that was like, “Oh, I've not seen people from this area and this different landscape.”

And if it's true to itself and it's interesting, I think things can travel. You know, that's— So, we didn't really... I mean, you can't cater to it is the other thing. It's like we can't be writing it and thinking, “Well, who's the CIA station chief that we're gonna bring in so that the Americans will watch it?” And it would sort of—it could unbalance it. And also, we wanted to be true to the books. You know, the books are very, very British. And so, you kind of stick to that and cross your fingers, really. But I think you can only really make it good for you. You've gotta kind of push out all the kind of other noise and the expectations. And that's something I try really hard to do, so that it's just—you're just thinking about the characters,

and you're just thinking about what you're doing in front of you, and you're not thinking, “Oh, how's this gonna play in such-and-such a place?” You've just gotta make sure the thing in front of you is working.

Jesse Thorn: Do you like to watch dad shows?

Will Smith: Oh yeah. Yeah.

(They chuckle.)

I'm not gonna name any of them though. But yeah, bad films were— You know, when I was growing up, we (*unclear*) it. We loved watching kind of—

Jesse Thorn: No, no. Not bad. Dad. Dad.

Will Smith: Oh, dad! (*Laughing.*) Sorry! Dad shows. So, what's an example of a dad show? A kind of...?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think the ultimate example of dad media would either be something related to Tom Clancy or, more fancily, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, starring Russell Crow.

Will Smith: (*Laughs.*) I love that. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Clancy, I love *Hunt for Red October*.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I was about to say *Hunt for Red October* is the other— Like, anything on a submarine.

Will Smith: I love *Master and Commander*. I love the film. I've got the first two books, because I'm like, “I know I'm gonna love those,” and I've just gotta find the space and time to—

Jesse Thorn: It's just a list of knots, Will.

(Will cackles.)

It's just a list of knots. A 300-page list of knots.

Will Smith: And sails. (*Laughs.*) There's so many of them, but I know I'll go for it. No, I'm totally into dad stuff. And I like— You know, when I've been saying, “Oh, you know, the difference between genre and drama,” I really don't wanna denigrate genre. 'Cause you know, I grew up on watching that kind of stuff—Saturday night kind of American telly. I still love that. That's still in there. And anything that— As long as you're watching stuff or reading stuff, it doesn't really matter. It's whatever you want to go with, really. And there's value in all of it. But something that's just fun and a romp is—you know, is terrific.

Jesse Thorn: Will Smith, thank you so much for coming on *Bullseye*. It was so nice to talk to you, and I love your show. I can't wait to watch more.

Will Smith: Thank you so much. It's been an absolute delight.

Jesse Thorn: Will Smith. Look, I fawned a lot over *Slow Horses* in this interview, but I'm going to take one last opportunity to do so.

[00:35:00]

It is one of the most fun shows on television. Catch all five seasons of it on Apple TV+.

Transition: Bright, chiming 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 world headquarters, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. We're gonna be leaving MaxFun World headquarters and moving to MaxFun World Headquarters 2 in downtown Los Angeles. So, we'll miss you MacArthur Park.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson.

[00:40:00]

Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. Special thanks this week to Rob Double at London Broadcast Studios for recording our interview with Will Smith. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. She always stands at the ready when I beg her to book the showrunner of a British Show on Apple TV+. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://www.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.

Follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where you'll find video from our interviews—including of the interviews that you heard this week. Great way to share an episode of *Bullseye*. If you liked one of our interviews, go type it into YouTube and forward it to a friend. 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.)