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

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

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

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Rian Johnson loves a good genre movie; he always has. Genre movies are great. I mean, I'm personally not a horror movie guy, per se. But if you give me a movie about a sad policeman in the '70s or like a screwball comedy where the joke is that a doctor is bad at being a doctor, I am happy as a clam. But the things that make a genre movie great can sometimes keep it from reaching fans who are outside of that world: critics, people who go to summer blockbusters, Academy Awards voters. For the last 20 years, Rian Johnson has dedicated his career to making genre movies that transcend the limits of their genre.

It started with *Brick*. That was a Raymond Carver-esque detective story set in a Southern California high school. *Looper* was a movie about time traveling hitmen. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*—which was and is the best *Star Wars* movie. And of course, *Knives Out*, the smash hit film series that blends big, over-the-top “who done it” stories with sharp, specific humor and social satire. Johnson just wrote and directed the third movie in the series. It's called *Wake Up, Dead Man*. It's set in a rural Catholic church, where Daniel Craig's Benoit Blanc investigates the death of the local monsignor. Have you seen *Wake Up, Dead Man* yet? I have. I loved it. I'm so thrilled to welcome an old friend of our program—an old friend of mine—Rian Johnson back onto the show. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Rian Johnson, welcome back to *Bullseye*. I am so happy to have you back. It's very nice to see you.

Rian Johnson: Well, I've been looking forward to this. It's gonna be—This is a pleasure, man.

Jesse Thorn: Yessss.

(Rian laughs.)

Why did you want to make a detective movie about God?

Rian Johnson: (Laughs.) Weeeell—It's about faith.

Jesse Thorn: Or at least, faith. Let's say faith, let's say faith.

Rian Johnson: Yeah, about faith. I guess, kind of coming out of the last movie—*Glass Onion*, which we had a blast making, but it was kind of like a big, broad comedy—I kind of wanted to ground this next one. And so, I decided to take the route of making it personal, and that's where

the faith thing came in. I grew up very, very, very Christian. I was four “very”s right there. That's a lot of God. Up through my childhood and into my early 20s, I was— The movie's set in the Catholic church. I wasn't Catholic; I was Protestant. I was evangelical. I was like a youth group kid. But it wasn't just that I was in like a churchy household. I was actually deeply, personally Christian up through my early 20s. And I'm not anymore. And so, it's something that I've thought a bit about over the course of my life. (*Chuckles.*) It holds a complicated place in me. And I thought, well, it seems like a great foundation to build a big, fun murder mystery movie around.

Jesse Thorn: I'm worried that this will sound like a goof, 'cause I don't intend it as a goof. But did you have—as they say—a personal relationship with Christ?

Rian Johnson: I did. Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. It's funny, 'cause every time I say that phrase, I feel like I have to apologize for it or something. But that really was— And that's not just kind of. Christian faith speak, although it kinda sounds like it. That's actually what it was. It's hard to really describe to someone who hasn't been in that space. But it is really just this—you live your life with this personal relationship. The other way I would phrase it is it was the lens through which I parsed the world around me in every aspect. It was the narrative frame through which I saw the whole world.

Jesse Thorn: You lived in a few different places as a kid. Was it something that started like from your family from when you can remember? Or was there a time when your family joined a church that changed the tone of things? Or—?

Rian Johnson: No, since before— Like, when I was little-little. Like, before memory little. My parents were involved in church, and so I just—I always grew up in it. So, no, it's kind of all I've ever known when I was a kid.

Jesse Thorn: What kind of church did you go to as an adolescent?

Rian Johnson: As an adolescent, I went to just a Protestant church in Colorado. It was—I have like vague memories of it. Once we moved to Orange County, then there was a church I went to with my parents that was kind of just a Protestant church.

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But then I found this church in Dana Point that had a great youth group that some of my closest friends from high school also went to. So, that kind of became the hub. And I was really an Orange County youth group kid, which is a very specific niche. (*Laughs.*) It's a very specific thing. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Was it like turn-the-chair-around and “let me rap at you”? Was it like chain wallets? Was there ska bands involved?

Rian Johnson: Yeah, yeah. It was all of that. It was—yeah, the youth group pastor with the acoustic guitar kind of going from like a Pearl Jam lick into like a worship song. (*Chuckles.*) And “Hey, man. How's your walk? How's your walk going?” Uh-huh.

Jesse Thorn: I grew up in the Episcopalian church, which is not that far off of the Catholic church. It's mostly geopolitical, as I understand it, is the difference. And then the body and blood of Christ. But you set this film in the Catholic church. Did you set the film in the Catholic church 'cause the outfits are better? (*Chuckles.*) Or—?

Rian Johnson: Kind of! Yeah, the Catholic Church—in terms of storytelling aesthetics—they got everyone beat. And the churches I grew up in—you know, most of them looked like Pottery Barns. You know? They were not theatrical spaces at all. And also, honestly—if I'm being honest though, also because I wanted to be able to speak directly to my experience in the Evangelical church with this movie, setting it in the Catholic church just gave me a little bit of distance to be able to kind of hit it on the head a little more. The Catholic church was very exotic to me when I was younger and kind of scary. And you're kind of taught in the Protestant world—I don't know. There's a little bit of kind of “those crazy Catholics, with their saints and their blood of Christ” and everything. There's something a little horror movie about it but also intriguing and kind of powerful.

So, stepping into the world of faith behind the Catholic Church, it was almost a little bit like Sergio Leone coming to make an American Western. (*Chuckles.*) I'm coming in as an outsider who has always had this sort of—This is sort of exotic to me. And tapping into that.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Priest (*Wake Up, Dead Man*): There's no Easter mass, I'm sorry. Y—you're welcome. Come in. Come in.

Benoit Blanc: Thank you! Thank you! I don't want to take you away from your priestly duties now, do I? Well! (*Chuckling awkwardly.*) Isn't this something!

Priest: Right? It's hard to be in here and not feel his presence.

Benoit Blanc: Whose? (*Stuttering into a laugh.*) Oh! God! Oh, yeah. (*Chuckles.*) Yeah.

Priest: You're not a Catholic.

Benoit Blanc: (*Hurriedly.*) No, I'm very much not. No.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think you like genre so much because of this commitment to the idea of (*unclear*)?

Rian Johnson: Maybe!

(They chuckle.)

I don't know. I mean, I— Yeah I don't know why it feels good to kind of have genre be one element of sort of what I have, up 'til this point, started with. I mean, I feel like— It might be that; it might be that it also— I find that having kind of like a preset gameboard between you and the audience allows me to—it gives me a structure, and it lets me then— You know. It lets me feel like I have a structure in order to go in and entertain an audience, so I can have this little conversation about God with myself in the middle of it.

(They chuckle.)

Maybe that's it.

Jesse Thorn: This one is less goofy.

Rian Johnson: Yeah! Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think it's—

Jesse Thorn: There's like a few—there's still some— There's some laughs in there.

Rian Johnson: There's still some goofiness. Gotta be a little goofy sometimes. But this one is definitely more grounded. I mean, you know, especially in relation to *Glass Onion*, which was kind of riffing off of *Last of Sheila* and *Evil Under the Sun*. This was definitely— That was one of the things I came into it like, “Okay, it'd be nice to kind of ground this next one.”

Jesse Thorn: Are you at all interested in a world where you're making like MikeLee movies? Like, are you ever— Has it ever occurred to you to make a totally non-genre-ic movie?

Rian Johnson: I've thought about it. What I feel right now specifically, more and more, is I wanna do things that feel scary. I wanna do things that I don't know how to do them, and I want to I wanna break my own process, and I want to— I don't know. I just feel like I'm in that place where I wanna try things that genuinely scare me. So, yeah everything's— I'll tell you what. I'm gonna try it all, man. (Laughs.) As long as they keep letting me make movies.

Jesse Thorn: What are the basic elements of the process that you have right now?

Rian Johnson: So, I mean, with the writing process I write very structurally. So, I sit down, and I spend a lot of time working in my little notebooks kind of outlining and figuring out the whole shape of it. It's hard to imagine not doing it that way for me.

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It's interesting I talk big about breaking process: the idea of doing what— Like, I've heard this is how the Coen brothers write. Like, you just sit down and start typing and just see where the story goes. I could see maybe trying that as an exercise. I just— For me, a lot of the joy— (chuckles) the poultry amount of joy that I do get from writing, 'cause writing's mostly miserable

(laughs)—the joy of creating a beautiful structure, I guess, and creating something—creating an ending that feels like it reflects the beginning in this mirror. Like, all of that stuff. Also, it's interesting. And that's what—

Jesse Thorn: Your brain was poisoned by going to that Robert McKee thing when you were 17 years old.

Rian Johnson: Oh, that Robert McKee thing got me, man. That's what got me. Uh-huh.

Jesse Thorn: The legendary screenwriting book, *Story*.

Rian Johnson: Are you not a McKee fan? Are you not—?

Jesse Thorn: I've never read it.

Rian Johnson: It's—*(chuckling)*. I gotta say, man. It's great.

(They laugh.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I presume it is! Everybody loves it.

Rian Johnson: It's great. But I don't know. But then again, that makes me— Just seeing those words makes me wanna sit down and just try starting to type. The other thing though I think you I have to be careful of—and this is a thing I'm sort of going back and forth with and really wrestling with—is what's the line between breaking your own process and not trusting craft? That's something that my friend—my writer friend, Scott—my writer and director friend, Scott Frank, that's something that he talks about is trusting craft. And to some extent, that's also—I don't know. What's the line between having formed a rut and knowing how to perfectly build a wooden joint for carpentry? You know?

Jesse Thorn: I mean, you're telling me this. But also, when you had a hit film—your third film, the first hit film that you made, *Looper*—you signed up to make a *Star Wars* movie. Which is the ultimate genre film. You made the best *Star Wars* movie.

(Rian "aw"'s softly.)

Then you signed up to make three more *Star Wars* movies.

Rian Johnson: I didn't sign anything. *(Giggles.)*

Jesse Thorn: Okay, well you—

Rian Johnson: I talked about it. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: And then you decided, as an escape from that, as a flight of fancy, that you would make a mystery movie of the kind where the like detective explains everything that happened at the end.

Rian Johnson: Hell yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Which is, perhaps, the only genre of film more genre-y than a *Star Wars* movie.

(*Rian laughs.*)

You know what I mean?

Rian Johnson: What are you saying? (*Cackles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And then when you made that, you signed up for two more of 'em!

Rian Johnson: Yeah. So? (*Laughs.*) I don't know! Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I'm just saying, you spent the last 30 years doing this!

Rian Johnson: Oh, I'm not saying I don't like—I started with saying I love genre. What I'm saying is like—'Cause also, for me, I also completely have just—I believe in just following your bliss. You know? And that's—Like, just follow your nose. And for example—With these movies, for example, every single one of them—Like, after we made *Glass Onion*, our contract with Netflix was like we had five years to make the next one. So, I could have gone and done something completely different next. But the most exciting thing in the world to me was the idea of making this specific movie and attempting this specific thing.

So, I don't know. I don't wanna—I think there's also a danger in second guessing that, just out of some concept of wanting to not do something that you—Yeah, I don't know. Not wanting to follow a pattern or something. I'm just trying to figure it out, Jesse. I don't even know.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think you lose anything by getting invested in the puzzle box of building a story? Especially a story that is so dependent on its puzzle-boxed-ness?

Rian Johnson: I don't know! Uh, I mean—

Jesse Thorn: Or I guess, in the *Star Wars* case, in its *Star-Wars-ness*?

Rian Johnson: No. No, I mean, that's—Look, if someone watching it feels like they don't like it as much because it has that element of it, that's fine. That's their—

Jesse Thorn: They won't. It's the best one.

Rian Johnson: That's their experience of it. But for me, or the puzzle-ness of these movies or whatever, no. For me—I don't know. For me, it's not two separate things. For me, the thing

that— Like, the spiritual center of what actually gets me excited about making a movie, it's not like I then build a puzzle box around that. For me, I can only start a process when kind of the gears of—for lack of a better word—the puzzle box thing engages with the thing I care about, and they both drive each other, and their part and parcel. So, the *Star Wars*-iness of *The Last Jedi* is inseparable from the emotional core of that movie, for me.

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And all three of these Benoit Blanc movies actively engage with the mechanics—for lack of a better word, again—of the murder mystery in order to get to an emotional truth, for me. So, no. I don't ever feel like “I'm making a movie I care about, and I have to build all this bull(*censor beep*) around it so that it feels like a mystery.” I don't think I could ever do that. I feel like, for me, the mystery elements need to inform the emotional story and vice versa. They need to be infused to the point where— For me, they're inseparable.

Jesse Thorn: More still to come with Rian Johnson after a quick break. Stay with us.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with writer and director Rian Johnson. His latest movie, *Wake Up, Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery*, is streaming now.

There was a theatrical production of the first *Knives Out* film.

Rian Johnson: (*Excitedly.*) Oh! Oh my god.

Jesse Thorn: Tell me the venue. This was my first—I was like, “Oh, well probably at The Public Theater in New York or—

Rian Johnson: No! This was a small charter high school in Santa Rosa, so—whatever, about an hour outside of Berkeley. And it was a student— So—

Jesse Thorn: You mean this is the home of Charles Schultz!?

Rian Johnson: Oh! There you go. Yeah, long story short a woman who worked at the Lucas Archive in Skywalker Ranch, who I've been in touch, with emailed me out of the blue and said, “My daughter goes to this high school, and she's a senior. And for her senior project she wants to adapt and direct *Knives Out*.”

And I was like, “Ch-yeah!” I was like, “Oh my god!” So—

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) Do you have the right to say that?

Rian Johnson: I don't care!

Jesse Thorn: Okay, great.

Rian Johnson: I don't care. They can sue me! They can bill me!

Jesse Thorn: If they wanna sue these 17-year-olds, (*unclear*).

Rian Johnson: Yeah, no, they can go through me. I'll pay it out. This was worth it. Yeah, Zoe—she was awesome. And she did a great— She sent me like the draft of the adaptation she did with her friend. I thought it was great. And then the timing worked out. I was in San Francisco, so I stayed an extra night and drove up and got to see this production. And it was the most magical night for me. 'Cause I was like a high school theatre kid. (*Playfully*.) I dunno if you can tell! I was a high school theatre kid.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

And so, I got to go back—I was backstage before the show with them and did like their hype up exercise with them. And the kids—they were so good. Like, the girl who played Blanc was— She did the entire last 20 minutes of the movie, that whole final monologue, she did the whole thing word-perfect. And her accent was great, and she was terrific. Everyone in the cast was great. It was really— But more than that, it was just kind of the full-circle joy of remembering—for me, being a high school theatre kid and remembering the experiences of the shows I did. And then seeing this thing that's means so much to me done in that context with these kids— (*Warmly*.) It was a really joyful night.

Jesse Thorn: Wes Anderson made *Rushmore*. You lived it. You got to live it!

Rian Johnson: (*Genuinely thrilled*.) I know! I lived it. I gotta liiiive *Rushmore*! It was so good! Oh my god. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Let's hear a clip!

(*Rian giggles delightedly.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Benoit Blanc (from the *Knives Out* high school stage production): And yes, what you would Harlan did that fateful night seems at first glance to fill that hole perfectly. A donut's hole in a donut's hole. But we must look a little closer. And when we do, we see that our donut has a hole in its center! It is not a donut hole at all, but a smaller donut with its own hole! And our donut is not hole at all!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: You famously brought your first film, *Brick*, in under budget.

Rian Johnson: Famously. Famously. Alright. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: Famously. On this program. I probably brought it up, didn't I?

(*Rian laughs.*)

By essentially making the movie in pre-production. Like, you—

Rian Johnson: I think we spent every dollar we had on *Brick*, but we made it for a very low budget by making it in pre-production. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Right. So, like you made like a millions-of-dollar movie for hundreds of thousands of dollars by—

Rian Johnson: Well. Although, I'm gonna actually step in. Yes, but I always wanna kick back on romanticizing making a movie for nothing. 'Cause the reality is—yeah, you have to prep, you have to plan, you have to do all the work. The reality is it's easy to make a movie for nothing. You just don't pay people what they're worth. And so, that puts it on you to make sure that everyone who's signing up for it is getting something out of the experience that's gonna be worth it to them. But it's just as much work as a director to make something for \$5,000,000 as it is to make it for \$300,000. You're just not paying people what they should be getting paid.

So, that's it. That's my little— So, I just always wanna kick back on any romanticizing of making super low-budget stuff.

Jesse Thorn: You have to have a lot of control over a film that is as complicated as a mystery movie.

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(*Rian agrees.*)

There are all these elements, objects, and moments—things you have to see onscreen or just barely see onscreen, just barely notice. Like, you have to have a plan for all those pieces. Those are not things that can happen serendipitously. So, what did happen serendipitously in the process of making this movie? When, you know, you have to make sure that the light comes through the church window at the right moment in the speech?

Rian Johnson: (*Sighs.*) Well, I think where it really comes into play is with the actors, for me. And that's the process of discovery, and that's where I like to keep things liquid. The reality is, because I spend so much time structuring it, it seems like that would lead to kind of just tight control on the set. For me, the fact that the writing the words on the page is the very last thing that happens, that means I'm not actually that precious about the words on the page.

Jesse Thorn: So, you're basically *Waiting for Guffman*ing this thing?

Rian Johnson: I'm completely riffing. I'm just riffing!

Jesse Thorn: You and Eugene Levy are structuring it and then pointing at a camera and saying, "Go"?

Rian Johnson: I just hand the actors some note cards. (*Laughs.*)

"It just says, 'The color red.'"

"Yes! Play that."

But I do—I don't know. We do step onto these sets, and I always listen—I've learned to—or I'm learning more and more to step onto a set and try and be perceptive and look for the accents. But even in the writing with this one—I mean, there's a scene in the middle of the movie that I think is kind of kind of the heart of the movie for me. There's a scene with a phone call between Josh O'Connor's character and Bridget Everett, who plays a woman named Louise. And it's a phone call that kind of makes a very big turn for Father Judd—for Josh's character. And that was something that wasn't outlined, actually. That wasn't in my outline. I had a completely different thing there. And that was something where I was just typing, and it was not feeling right, and then I just let myself go, and it kind of led to this scene. And I got to the end of it, and just felt that little glow of true, kind of spontaneous discovery. Which is really nice. So, maybe I should just start typing and see what happens.

(*They laugh.*)

Cut to: "This is terrible!"

(*Laughs.*) Yeah. I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: That moment in the film is about pastoral care, in the priest sense.

Rian Johnson: Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Did you ever have any moments where you personally relied on pastoral care when you were practicing?

Rian Johnson: It's interesting, because the environment that I was in was much more—Because the youth group environment is so specific, it was more about the community of friends, and it was more about the support from that than it was the authority figure of the youth pastor or having a mentor like that. So, it was a little bit different. I mean, that specific moment I did—I'm not Catholic, but I have an uncle and aunt I'm very, very close to who live in Denver who are Catholic. And I got in touch with them when I was writing this. And I went out to Denver, and they set up a dinner with their priest—Father Scott—and like five other young priest friends of his in the Denver area. And so, I had this big dinner with like six priests. And we drank a lot of wine, and we had a great dinner, and we talked and just had this big ask-me-anything session.

Actually, one of the things that they told me about was how, when they go out just during the day doing errands or whatever, they're wearing the clerical collar. So, they can just be going to the grocery store to get milk, and somebody will come up and start sobbing to them, or someone will come up and start screaming at them and getting in their face. And that notion of being someone who's in the world and is always there kind of onstage, being of service I guess, is something I had never quite considered. And that's definitely something that I didn't—I don't know. Yeah. I didn't grow up with that kind of authority figure in my life. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Did the community that is composed of people that are drawn together to make films replace in your life the community of the youth group when you were, you know, 20 years old or whatever?

Rian Johnson: Probably! Yeah, probably. I mean, I wouldn't go so far as to say that like filmmaking replaced—I dunno—faith or something. I think it's more complicated than that. But in terms of community, yeah absolutely. Well, the other aspect of it is, you know, the friends that I was in youth group with, the thing we would do when we hung out on the weekends was we'd make a movie together. We would just start making something up, and we would just make like a dumb *Back to the Future* parody or something. We would never even show these things to anyone. (*Chuckles.*) We would just do it to hang out.

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So, in a very real way this is—yeah—the community I've got. And I worked with the same people over and over and over again for years and years. And so, that is me recreating just hanging out with friends, making a movie.

Jesse Thorn: I know that you live in a film-obsessed home. Your wife is a film critic and film historian—Karina Longworth—as well as a film podcaster.

Rian Johnson: She's not a critic anymore, she said. But yes. Yeah, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: She's a reformed film critic.

Rian Johnson: Reformed film critic. Yeah. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: Current film historian. You know, I read this *New Yorker* article that came out about you the other day. And one of the things was just like, “In the kitchen, *Arsenic and Old Lace* was playing on a tv.”

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the amount of other people's movies that are taking up space inside your head?

Rian Johnson: (*Laughs.*) No, I don't think so. I feel like—no. And if I ever do, I just don't watch a movie that day. (*Laughs.*) But no, I feel kind of the opposite. I feel excited that—The fact that sitting down, you know, with Kurt at night, and Karina's got like a pre-code movie that neither of us have ever seen or heard of to watch for her research, and putting that on and being blown away or delighted by it or bored by it or whatever. The fact that there is endless discovery there, the fact that—And first of all, it takes off the pressure of feeling like you have to know

everything. But also, it just makes it— It turns it from something that's the work of taking a burden into something that is genuinely exciting, I think. So, no, I love that. I mean, that having been said, I probably watched the same 30 movies over and over and over again.

Jesse Thorn: What are these same movies that you watch over and over?

Rian Johnson: Oh, yeah. It's just the rotating—you know, the rotating—I had *Lawrence of Arabia* on earlier today. It's just like it's— And I was like, “I've seen this movie so many times, but—” click. You know. Or *Barton Fink* or like whatever it is. It's—

Jesse Thorn: *Barton Fink* is perhaps the Rian Johnson-iest non-Rian Johnson movie—

Rian Johnson: Oh, I like that!

Jesse Thorn: —that came before the career of Rian Johnson began. (*Chuckles.*)

Rian Johnson: But what genre would you say *Barton Fink* is?

Jesse Thorn: Movies about people that make movies.

Rian Johnson: (*Laughing.*) Okay! Alright! Yeah, I'll buy that.

Jesse Thorn: With violence.

Rian Johnson: You know what movie theirs that— Not to sidetrack Coen brothers talk, but I have just become obsessed with *Hail Caesar*. I think it's— Have you—?

Jesse Thorn: I've seen it. I watched it on my computer on an airplane.

Rian Johnson: Okay. I would—I say revisit that movie. 'Cause I think it's absolutely amazing, and it is in some way sort of very much connected to *Barton Fink*. But I've become—I had like—when I first saw it, I was a little bit like, “Eh? What the hell is this?” And now I've slowly become smitten with it.

Jesse Thorn: What is an ancient movie that you watched with Karina, because she was looking at it for research, that really caught you by surprise?

Rian Johnson: There is a— Well, this wasn't for her research, but we discovered this movie together: *Ladies in Retirement* with Ida Lupino. And I'm like kind of an Ida Lupino superfan. the movies that she directed are fantastic, but I just also love her as a performer. And it's this creepy little kind of gothic story set like on—I don't know if it's on the moors. I forget where it's set, but it's set like on a misty kind of landscape. And it has murder in it, and it has— It also has a lot of humor in it. And Ida Lupino is awesome in it. And that's the sort of thing where I watched it; I was like, “I've never heard of this movie before.” And now this is something that has resonance in my head and that I kind of check in back in with every once in a while. And that's exciting.

Jesse Thorn: We've got so much more to talk to Rian Johnson about. On the other side of the break, the *Star Wars* movie that he directed—*The Last Jedi*—inspired 2,000,000,000,000 social media posts and comments from *Star Wars* fans. So, logically that suggests the question: do the *Knives Out* movies inspire similar engagement from murder mystery fans? Are there murder mystery fans in that same way? The answer when we return. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Fun, upbeat guitar.

Jordan Crucchiola: I am Jordan Crucchiola, host of *Feeling Seen*, where every week I have a different actor director or writer as my co-host. And whoever that co-host may be, it is a sure bet that we are digging deep and having a great time doing it.

Speaker 1: I love that you just said that.

Speaker 2: Yeah. I mean if I were gonna join a cult, I think this might be it.

Jordan: A fresh look at your favorite film and a peek behind the curtain at how movies get made.

Speaker 3: Oh, okay. I'm gonna tell you this full story. Okay? I almost got fired from that movie.

Jordan: You should be listening to *Feeling Seen*.

Speaker 4: I had so much fun. I love what you're doing.

Speaker 5: I hope I did okay.

Jordan: New episodes every week on Maximum Fun.

(*Music fades out.*)

[00:30:00]

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Rian Johnson. He is, of course, the director of movies like *Looper* and *Star Wars The Last Jedi*, which is the best *Star Wars* movie. He created the terrific TV series *Poker Face* and wrote and directed all three installments

of the *Knives Out* murder mystery films. The latest in that series is called *Wake Up, Dead Man*. You can stream it now on Netflix. Let's get back into our conversation.

Are there mystery nerds that have as strong feelings about you as *Star Wars* nerds do?

Rian Johnson: I don't know. If there are, they haven't yelled at me on Twitter yet, so. They probably exist. Probably. I mean, mystery nerds are their own thing. But there's a lot of—I don't know. The mystery world is as diverse as the *Star Wars* world, in terms of what people like and what they want out of it and all that stuff. So, yeah. Probably.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, it's much more diverse in what people want. I mean, it's like romance novels or genres of pornography.

(They laugh.)

Rian Johnson: The mystery world, you mean? Yeah. I guess there's crossover with that. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, there are like people who read only mysteries about cats. Or baseball. You know?

Rian Johnson: Yeah, that's true. Yeah, it's true. I'm not— We got baseball in this one! So, if you like baseball mysteries, we do have some baseball in this one. So, yeah.

Jesse Thorn: How come Joseph Gordon Levitt—just 'cause he's your close friend of 25 years or whatever it is—get to be the baseball announcer in this movie?

Rian Johnson: I can tell you wanted to be that baseball announcer, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: *(Emphatically.)* YEAH! Of course, I wanted to be that! Yes, of course! Make me a baseball announcer in your movies, America's filmmakers!

Rian Johnson: *(Laughs.)* Wow, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: I can't even get the Giants to let me throw out a first pitch.

Rian Johnson: You know, I've done it at for the Dodgers twice. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Well, I mean—obviously, I would want to do it for a team that's not evil. *(Chuckles.)*

Rian Johnson: Wooow!

Jesse Thorn: Fundamentally, on a fundamental level.

Rian Johnson: I have contributed to ruining baseball. How do you feel about that?

(Jesse laughs.)

How do you feel about that, buddy? Wooow. Uh, yeah. I'm not gonna—I'm gonna just sit back—I'm gonna sit back and smile!

Jesse Thorn: I've lived in Los Angeles a long time. I have a true generosity of spirit towards all Dodgers fans.

Rian Johnson: *(Skeptically.)* Do you, though?

Jesse Thorn: They know not what they do. It's not their fault.

(Rian "wow"s.)

It's not something fundamental about them. They've just been led astray by a trick of geography and/or being a front runner.

(Rian giggles and "wow"s.)

Either one. Some combination. Who knows? Who knows, Rian?!

Rian Johnson: The Shohei hasn't got you? It's just— It feels like it's—like, it's so exciting. It's so special.

Jesse Thorn: It's beautiful. No, it's beautiful.

Rian Johnson: Yamamoto, what he did? You gotta—come on, you gotta give it up. You gotta—

Jesse Thorn: You'd have to have a broken heart—

Rian Johnson: You would have to be a Grinch.

Jesse Thorn: —not to admire watching Shohei Ohtani play baseball.

Rian Johnson: Listen to this tone of voice you're talking in right now. *(Cackling.)* I can see you gritting your teeth!

(They both make competing teeth-grinding growls.)

“You would have to have heart of steel to—”

Jesse Thorn: I prefer Heliot Ramos! *(Slurps his drink and gulps loudly.)*

Rian Johnson: Oh wow. There we go.

(They laugh.)

Uh-huh.

Jesse Thorn: Um, okay. This movie is about, in part, an intense and powerful dad. Metaphorically a dad, without going too far into it. But certainly, you know, the monsignor in this film is an intense and powerful dad.

(Rian agrees.)

I know you had a dad who was both kind of like an animating figure in you going into the arts and also that he could be a scary guy. Not an abusive guy, necessarily. But an unpredictable guy.

(Rian agrees.)

Was that something you were thinking about when you were writing the film?

Rian Johnson: *(Sighs.)* You know, it wasn't directly. It's—*(sighs.)* I mean, I'm sure—Look, any—And especially the older you get, the more you kind of realize the mountain in the center of your psyche is your dead father. *(Laughs.)* And just you slowly kind of give into that fact. So, anything that you write or put out or think that has kind of a powerful male figure in it, you gotta tie something back to it. My dad was very, very different though than the energy of the Wix character. My dad was not—He didn't have that kind of scary us-against-them energy. He had more of an artist's sensibility almost. And it was a little bit more free-moving and free-spirited. And he wasn't mean the way that Wix is—mean to a purpose. My dad was not—My dad could be unpredictable. And as a kid he could be—

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And he wasn't abusive, but he could be scary. But he was not a mean person. So. *(Sighs.)* But you know, like I said, you realize how intertwined everything is. I'm sure there's—*(Chuckles.)* I'm sure in every scary older man that I write, it probably ties back to the mountain.

Jesse Thorn: You don't have to tell me, but do you want to tell me what you were scared of? Like, what was scary about him?

Rian Johnson: He was just—It was just kind of you never knew what you were gonna get. And he had—You know, he had addiction issues, so that tied into just an unpredictable-ness. And again, he wasn't physically abusive, but he could be—You know, he could be loud; he could yell. And he was a physically big guy. And then he could also be wonderful and sweet, and he could also be incredibly loving and caring and inspiring and was tremendously supportive. So... yeah. It's the—there's always the two sides that you're always kinda wrestling with in your head.

Jesse Thorn: It's really tough to not know what to expect from a parent.

Rian Johnson: Yeah, when you want that solidity and you want that sense of safety, I guess. And in many ways, I did grow up feeling very safe. You know? But there was always... mm, there was always that side of it.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think you are such a nice guy in part—

(Rian snorts into a laugh.)

(Restraining a chuckle.) —in part because you like grew up in this culture where the currency is being a nice guy, of youth groups? Or because being a nice guy is a great strategy to try and control the world around you when you have a parent who's an addict?

Rian Johnson: Yeah, I'm sure it's all of the above, probably. I mean—although, in youth group we were a bunch of little *(censor beep)*s, we were.

(They laugh.)

Yeah. I think youth group was the opposite. We took great delight in being the free radicals in the youth group and just stirring *(censor beep)* up.

(Jesse laughs.)

But the element that you had pointed out, in terms of growing up in the house and wanting everything to be okay—you know, that's— And again, I don't wanna paint too dark a portrait of my house growing up. It's not like it was a house of horrors or anything like that. It was mostly a very loving, supporting place. But I do think— Yeah. I'm sure that probably ties into it.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, like the first time I met you, Rian, was at a film festival in Orange County, where I came to watch your movie *The Brothers Bloom*. 'Cause I was gonna interview you. You found me—not a publicist or something. You walked up to me and said, "I guess you're probably Jesse Thorn." Right?

(Rian confirms.)

And introduced yourself to me and was nice to me. And I got the distinct impression it was not a work. You know what I mean? Like, it wasn't a—

Rian Johnson: Well, also you're talking—

Jesse Thorn: You weren't going around shaking hands. Like, you know what I mean?

Rian Johnson: But you're describing this as if it's the craziest thing in the universe.

Jesse Thorn: It never happened to me any other time!

Rian Johnson: I was like—I don't know. I liked what you did. I think we followed each other on Twitter. I was like, "Oh, that's Jesse! I'm gonna go up and introduce—" I don't know. That doesn't sound that—(*laughs*). I don't feel like we have to pin a neurosis to that behavior!

(*Jesse laughs.*)

That sounds just—I don't know.

Jesse Thorn: To be welcoming. Yeah.

Rian Johnson: Yeah. You're like, "So, what's behind this psychotic instinct you have?"

(*They laugh.*)

Jesse Thorn: Well, Rian, I'm so grateful for your time. It's always great to get to see a new one of your movies. It's always great to see you.

Rian Johnson: Thanks, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: And above all else, thank you for arranging for me to be a Disney shill.

Rian Johnson: (*Laughs.*) I'm happy to.

Jesse Thorn: That has been so—Public radio pays so poorly, but being a paid Disney shill by saying that my favorite *Star Wars* is *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*—

(*Rian makes a "ka-ching!" sound.*)

—has meant sooo much to me over the years.

Rian Johnson: Wow. That's another 35 cents you just earned right there! So.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, I get 35 cents apiece.

Rian Johnson: Right in your pocket. Dozens.

Jesse Thorn: I have made nearly \$17.

Rian Johnson: (*Giggles.*) You know what? You're welcome.

Transition: Bright, cheerful synth.

Jesse Thorn: Rian Johnson. What a guy! Total legend. You can watch *Wake Up, Dead Man* on Netflix now. If you've never seen his first film, *Brick*, by the way, it is just—What an

achievement of microcinema. It is funny and exciting and like nothing else. You can rent or buy it on demand just about anywhere.

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 in the historic jewelry district in downtown Los Angeles, California. I was just there on a date night with my wife! We stopped in the office; she hadn't seen it yet.

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And then we went to one of those restaurants that's really high up in the sky on a big, tall building. That was called 71 Above. And a very sweet young couple got engaged at the table right next-door to us, and it wasn't even cheesy. It was just very beautiful, and it was nice to see their love.

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. We get booking help on *Bullseye* from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. 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'll find video from just about all our interviews—including the ones that you heard this week. 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.)