

[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 is *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. There is a new documentary that just dropped on HBO Max. It's called *Mel Brooks: The 99-Year-Old Man*, and it is about Mel Brooks, who did—indeed—turn 99 this past June. Mel Brooks has been creating some of the funniest and most enduring comedy since the Truman Administration.

Your Show of Shows, Blazing Saddles, Young Frankenstein, The Producers. I could just keep naming classics; I don't have all day. I talked to Brooks in 2013. He was the subject of a PBS *American Masters* documentary at the time. Back then, I would record my intros with my guest in the room, which—as you will hear—gave Mel some fun inspiration during our conversation.

Let's get into it.

Transition: Bright, chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Who's Mel Brooks? I'll tell you. Mel Brooks is funny. He's the personification of funny.

(*Mel blows a raspberry.*)

He spent 60 years (*chuckling*) making us laugh. *Your Show of Shows, Get Smart, The Producers, Blazing Saddles, Space Balls.* I think that between the time my parents got VCRs when I was about seven and when I turned 15, I watched *History of the World, Part I* 100 times, probably more.

Last year, Shout Factory put out a box set looking back at Brooks career, from rare audio recordings to little-seen TV pilots. This year, he's the subject of an *American Masters* documentary on PBS. It's an honor to have him on *Bullseye*. Mel Brooks, welcome to the show.

Mel Brooks: Je t'aime, con plaisir. C'est (*unclear*). Je suis très (*unclear*).

Wait a minute. This ain't French.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckling.*) No, not at all. Not in the slightest.

Mel Brooks: This is not an interview—? You're not from Paris? Where are you from?

Jesse Thorn: San Francisco.

Mel Brooks: So, what am I doing this in (*censor beep*) French?

(*Jesse giggles delightedly.*)

Okay. Forget it. Forget what I said.

Jesse Thorn: Let's talk about your hometown. You're from Brooklyn, from Williamsburg.

Mel Brooks: I'm from Williamsburg! And you know, we used to pay \$18 a month rent in Williamsburg? I think you couldn't get an apartment for \$3,800 a month there now. It's become hip; it's become chic. It's become au courant. I don't know. Williamsburg has become very (*with a French accent*) moderne.

Jesse Thorn: Your father died when you were very young, and you had three older brothers. Right?

Mel Brooks: Yeah. I'm always interviewed about that. And I think it was— Hugh Downs was interviewing me. Hugh Downs said, “So, uh... So, you lost your father when he was only 34 years old.”

And I said no.

He said, “Well what do you mean, no? We have it that your father died when you were 2, and he was 34.”

I said, “That's true. He died, but we didn't lose him.”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

“He was in the bedroom. He was dead. But no nobody lost—you know, you don't lose people. You still regard them somehow.”

So, anyway I had a lot of fun with him. He didn't quite get me, you know? So, I had to go easy.

Jesse Thorn: Was there a point when you realized that your family was in a precarious—like, was there a point where you saw the outside world, like as a 13-year-old or something like that?

Mel Brooks: Yyeah. Not 'til I was a teenager did I realize that “Oh my god, we're poor. Better do something about that.” (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: And how did that happen?

Mel Brooks: I don't know. I think what I— You know, we had moved to Brighton Beach, because my mother— And my mother took in a boarder, and so things were easier. I think my grandmother moved there for some reason, so my mother followed her. And we had two years at Brighton Beach.

And when I was in Brighton Beach, there were rich people and poor people. And I saw some—you know, some of the kids at Abraham Lincoln High School. I was a drummer in the band, and some of the kids had really fancy apartments in Brighton Beach, near the ocean. And you know, three or four bedrooms. And it was an incredible difference. And I realized we were—we just—we still had two bedrooms, one for my mother and one for the all the boys. But what got better in Brighton Beach was that we all—(*chuckling*) we didn't all sleep in the same bed.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

And it wasn't a king! There were no king-sized beds. It was just a full. And I didn't mind it. I was crushed between Irving and Bernie. And you know, I loved it. I loved my brothers. And in the winter, it was warm. So. But I realized we are not well-to-do.

Jesse Thorn: When you were a teenager, were you aware of Hitler?

[00:05:00]

Like, was that something that was—? Did you have any family still in Europe?

Mel Brooks: There were intimations. I mean, I just— We heard about this guy, Hitler. I didn't know I was gonna make a living out of him. (*Laughs.*) I had no idea. But anyway!

Jesse Thorn: You were gonna become Hitler's foremost chronicler in song and dance.

Mel Brooks: Yeah, right. Yeah. Well, you know, when I finally did do stuff about Hitler, and I got letters from Rabbis and Jewish organizations all over America—and not good letters.

(They chuckle.)

And I try to explain that if you got on a soapbox with these brilliant orators, these dictators, you didn't have a chance. Because they had power, and they had magnetism in their speech. But if you could ridicule them, you were a step ahead. And if you could bring them down with laughter, then you were doing your job. And that was my modus operandi was to bring Hitler down with his funny salute, his little mustache. And I did a very good job at it.

Jesse Thorn: How old were you when you went into the service?

Mel Brooks: Actually, I went into the service at 17. You say, "How? You're supposed to be 18."

The Army Specialized Training Reserve—very important word—Program. You could join at 17 if you passed a test. And I did.

Jesse Thorn: Were your older brothers—? Had they—?

Mel Brooks: They were already in the army. And I think my mother could have gotten me out by simply saying, "I've got three boys in the service, and I don't want my baby in there." You know. And they would've given me a pass on it. But you know, I just wanted the excitement of being in the army, being a soldier. I studied electrical engineering at Virginia Military Institute. *(Chuckles.)* Little Jewish boy from Brooklyn sent down to Virginia, to VMI—Lexington, Virginia—the West Point of the South. Very prestigious! But they were very sweet, very kind, you know. And I loved fried chicken, and it was the first time I tasted Dr. Pepper and the first time I was allowed to have cheeseburgers. Because there was— You didn't have it very often in Brooklyn. I don't think they were famous. And I just liked it.

The only thing that was tough was you had to take care of your horse. They taught you how to ride a horse, and they— You know, you rode for a little while. They gave you a saber. You cut down bamboo poles with little flags on them. I was like, "This is silly. Just pull out a gun and kill anything in your way. Why—why were you—? W-what?" *(Chuckling.)* I didn't get it. You know? Anyway.

Jesse Thorn: You're describing it as wonderful, but it's also—you know—a prelude to going to war, and that must have been really scary.

Mel Brooks: Well, you know, I always thought it was like I was in a newsreel. It never really— There was nothing real about it, you know? I thought— It's kind of like show business. You know, they give you a uniform, and I got a little medal.

Jesse Thorn: And so—but then—and then someone tries to kill you. (*Chuckles.*)

Mel Brooks: Yeah. Well, yeah that was difficult. Yeah. And then I— You know, I think it occurred to me when finally I was in Normandy—not in the invasion; I was lucky. If my mother had given birth to me a year earlier, we wouldn't have had this conversation. 'Cause I missed D-Day, and I missed the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne. And I got there a couple months after that. I only had three or four months of combat. I know that I was a radio operator— At the beginning, before I was in the combat engineers, I was in the field artillery. And I was a radio operator, and I would be giving positions. I would start with Wilco, Fox, George, Hal, Roger. And I'd say, "Howie, there's a church. Do you see the church at the top of the hill? You see the yellow house? The Germans are in that yellow house near the church. Just shoot over there." You know? Instead of all this Wilco, Hal, Fox map coordinates for artillery.

But you know, but when we finished broadcasting, the Germans were sensational at cross finding where we were broadcasting from. And just a minute or so later, there there'd be a straddle of 88 shells exploding across the road that we were just on a minute ago. So, it was very— You know, I could have— You know. It was dangerous. The whole world was there. There were some spots in the war that were fun. Believe it or not. We were across a river or a creek from some Germans, and I heard, "Yaah-yaahah." I put it in *Blazing Saddles*. (*Singing.*) "Yah-ha, ya-ha, ya-ya, (speaking in German). C'mon. Yah-yah-yah!"

So, I picked up a megaphone, and I sang, (*singing*) "Tut-tut, Toosie, goodbye! Don't cry, Tuttie, don't cry."

[00:10:00]

And then at the end of the song, I thought I heard, "Eh, is good." I heard a little (*clapping quietly*). They liked it. You know. So, there were spots like that during the during the war.

Jesse Thorn: We're gonna take a quick break. Stick with us. After the break, more with the legend, Mel Brooks. 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. We're listening to my 2013 conversation with Mel Brooks. He is, of course, the creator of some of the greatest comedies in history: *Space Balls*, *Young Frankenstein*, *History of the World, Part I*, so many more. Brooks is also the subject of the new documentary, *Mel Brooks: The 99-Year-Old Man*. It's directed by Judd Apatow and streaming now on HBO Max.

You got started in showbusiness as a fill-in in Catskills Resorts. You had been working—I mean, it was like your summer job—right?—to be, whatever—

Mel Brooks: Yeah. We had one star in Williamsburg: Don Appell, who actually gained some fame. He wrote a play called *This Too Shall Pass* about antisemitism. Very good play which had a pretty good run Off-Broadway. It may have been on Broadway. There was not much Off-Broadway then. Don Appell then later—He began by working in the Borscht Belt in the Catskills, and he actually worked with Sid Caesar. And he introduced me to Sid Caesar. I was a drummer in the Catskills. He got me the job as a drummer, and he got me—And then Pincus Cohen, who ran the Butler Lodge that I was playing in—

I said, “Pincus Cohen?” I said, “Just use one of those names. It's redundant. You don't need two of them.”

(*Jesse laughs.*)

So—And he would call me (*swallowing the second syllable of Melbourne*) Melbmn. M-E-L-B-M-N-N-N-N. “Melbmn!”

So, he said, “The comic is sick.” That's how I became a comedian. He said, “You know all that that stuff.” Bernie—it was either Bernie or Jackie. That was your name if you were a comic in the mountains. And either it was Bernie or Jackie that was sick. And so, I took over that night.

“Good evening ladies, and gentlemen. I met a girl. She was beautiful but very thin. Incredibly thin. She was so thin, I took her to a restaurant, the maître d' said, ‘Check your umbrella.’ That how skinny she was.”

But I wanted to—Those were the jokes. I remembered them, because I was the drummer, and I heard them, and they were dreadful. And then later, I said, “I'm gonna take stuff from real life!” Because it just—I was struck by this incredible thought that familiar and human was a deep source of humor. For instance, there was a guy—head of the social staff—and his name was Joe. Uncle Joe, they called

him. And he—Joe Greenblatt or Greenbaum—and he had a lateral emission. “(*Lisp*ing heavily.) M’kay, is there any sugar? Who’s got sugar? I need some sugar! This is very bitter. I need sugar.”

So, one night I just got up on stage. Instead of saying, “(*Rushed*.) Good evening, I met a girl who was so thin—” I said, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. (*Lisp*ing.) Anybody got sugar? I need some sugar.” They all knew ‘em. They went crazy.

And I said, “Now this—!” I never got laughs like that. So, I just drew from real life, and I became valuable to Sid Caesar when he was doing his comedy, because he liked that kind of humor instead of jokes—instead of, you know, “my wife kept bugging me”—the kind of jokes that was done in those days.

Jesse Thorn: Sid Caesar is an absolutely amazing—

Mel Brooks: Yeah. Well, for me, it was kind of a seminal aspect of my career in showbusiness. I would’ve been a standup comic—or I would’ve been a performer—much earlier! It may have been over with. You know, my medium may have burned out. But it was good enough! It was fine just writing for Sid Caesar, because he was a great vehicle for my comedy, my passion, and I was very happy just to see him nail it. Couldn’t get a better guy to ride for.

Jesse Thorn: He’s a huge man and has the physique of like a—you know, a boxer or a bodybuilder before people really knew how to use weights.

(*Mel agrees*.)

Like, just a huge man.

Mel Brooks: Yeah. He had big shoulders; he had a small waist, washboard abs, big muscles.

[00:15:00]

I mean, he could be the Hulk! And you know, one time we were in Chicago, and I was writing some new jokes for a monologue for him. And at the end of every show, he would put down a lot of vodka. It was a lot of tension, you know, and he was relaxing. And we were up in his suite, and I’m trying to write. And he was smoking cigars then, and the place was full of cigar smoke. And it was two in the morning. I couldn’t breathe. And I said, “Sid, I gotta go out. I just have to go out. I have to get some air. I can’t do it.”

And he was kind of drunk, and he said, “Air? You want air? I'll give you air.”

There was a window there in this hotel, probably been shut for 30 years. He just yanked it open—(*chuckling*) you know, easily. Grabbed the two handles. It was wide open, and cold air came rushing through. He grabbed me by the collar and by the seat of my pants and hung me out the window! I could see Michigan Avenue. I looked down; there were yellow cabs. I was—(*laughs*).

I said, “So, this is how it ends.” I just—I thought—

And then he said, “You got enough air?!”

I was like, “Oh yeah, sure. I'm fine. I'm fine! No, I'm ready to work!” Right? (*Laughs.*)

So, he took me back. And he was reeeeally strong. Thank god he was that strong. He never dropped me. He had a good grip on me.

Jesse Thorn: What was it like to have as your— You know, because you ended up working for Sid Caesar for like eight or ten years, right?

Mel Brooks: Yeah. You know—well. Let me tell you a great story. A lot of people—you may have heard this before. I doubt it. So, he had finished— He was coming to the end of two years of *The Show of Shows*. 39 one hour and a half shows per season. I mean, this is— And he was getting something like, oh, I think in the second year \$5,000 a show. Which was a fortune then. I was getting \$150 a week or something, which was—for me, you know— My brother Irving was making \$37 a week, so this was an amazing amount of money! I was getting \$150.

So, I said, “Sid, we're gonna have a meeting.”

He said, “What do you mean we're gonna have a meeting? We never have a meeting! We just talk to each other.”

I said, “No, this is a meeting. We're gonna have—” I said, “We're gonna go to Alan Dix. We're gonna have dinner. We're gonna have a looong meeting, you and I. And I explained during this meeting— I said, “Sid, in six or eight weeks, you are gonna be finishing your second season. And I know— I did some homework. I know that your contract is finished, and you've gotta sign.”

You know, he said, “Yeah, well they offered me another three years. You know?”

And I said, “You're not gonna take it.”

He said, “What do you mean? What are you talking about? What are you crazy?”

I said, “No, you're not gonna take it.” I said, “You are easily as talented as Danny Kaye. Danny Kaye is a giant movie star. We should really be serious about this. You and I should go to Hollywood and make movies.”

And he agreed. He went to Max Lehman, who was the producer of the show. Max Lehman went to Pat Weaver, who created this concept of *The Show of Shows*. He was an NBC guy, and he was an NBC genius. And so, he—So, Weaver and Max and David Sarnoff—I mean, the whole, big corporation! RCA! You know, big stuff! Sid Caesar leaving? It was unthinkable, but he could! He could! The contract was up.

Well, as you know he didn't go to Hollywood and make movies 'til much later. He did make movies, but not like the Sid Caesar movies I had in mind. So, what happened—he called me; they called him in; they met with him and—(*adding context*) with William Morris's office. That was his agent, Harry Kalsheim. And they had like a six- or eight-hour meeting. It was amazing. I wasn't invited. And he described the meeting in detail. He was he had a brilliant mind.

And he said, “In the end, we couldn't say no. They were offering us \$25,000 a show.”

I said, “What?!”

He said, “\$25,000 a show. And complete control.” Because the advertising agencies had a lot more control. And he said, “No advertising agency.” You know, and he said, “It's the greatest contract. You know, I can't—” He says, “And it's for three years.”

[00:20:00]

And so, that was the end of our dream. And I finally did. (*Chuckles.*) I escaped. I went I made I did *The Producers* in New York and *The Twelve Chairs* in Yugoslavia and *Blazing Saddles* for Warner Brothers, out in Burbank. And I did it! I did it. And they're around forever. And I say to people, “Do you know *The Show of Shows*? Do you know the sketch? Do you know—?” All my great—some of the best writing I've ever done in my life with geniuses like Larry Gelbart and Mel Tolkin, and Neil Simon. And I mean, great stuff! Gone, gone with the wind. (*Chuckles.*)

But every movie I've made, even the ones that are not so well known are well known. *The Twelve Chairs*. *Dracula: Dead and Loving It*—not so well known but well known. I don't even have to mention *Young Frankenstein* or *Blazing Saddles* or *Space Balls*, because they're there forever.

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Mel Brooks in just a minute. On the other side of the break, we will talk about his work with Gene Wilder and why Wilder didn't want Mel Brooks to act in *Young Frankenstein*. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Promo:

Music: Funky, upbeat banjo music.

Dan McCoy: *The Flop House* is a podcast where we watch a bad movie, and then we talk about it.

Elliott Kalan: Robert Shaw in *Jaws*, and they're trying to figure out how to get rid of the ghoulies. And he scratches his nails and goes, "I'll get you, ghoulie."

Dan: He's just standing above the toilet with a harpoon. No, I was just looking forward to you going through the other ways in which *Wild Wild West* is historically inaccurate.

Stuart Wellington: You know how much movies cost nowadays?! When you add in your popped corn, and your bagel bites, and your cheese curders.

Elliott: Sure. You can't go wrong with a Henry Cavill mustache. Here at Henry Cavill Mustaches, the only supplier!

(They laugh.)

Narrator: *The Flop House*. New episodes every Saturday. Find it at MaximumFun.org.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. My guest is the great Mel Brooks.

There was a period in between for you, wasn't there? Wasn't there a period in between, before you made the *Producers*, that you were—

Mel Brooks: Well, yeah, I was out of work.

Jesse Thorn: How long were you out of work for?

Mel Brooks: I think we went off the year in '59. And so, in 1960 I was completely outta work.

Jesse Thorn: You were married; you had—

Mel Brooks: Well. I was somewhere in the middle of 60 when I didn't have a— We were separated, my first wife. Wasn't her fault. I was having an— Frankly, I was having a nervous breakdown, and I wasn't— I really wasn't good company.

Jesse Thorn: Where was it coming from? Just from not—?

Mel Brooks: I guess it was coming from frustration. And after being one of the top comedy writers in America, suddenly just no show no, no employment, no nothing. You know? And so, I got a few jobs. I got a job with Jerry Lewis which was good. I got a job with Victor Borge. I did *The Andy Williams Show*. I was the producer on *The Polly Bergen Show*, which was crazy. But I just worked a little in smidgens, but not really anything I really wanted to do. What I really wanted to do was this thing— I was writing a book called *Springtime for Hitler* about the— I think it was—it was the book of a show. I knew it would be a show. I don't think it was a musical yet. I think it was a play.

Oh yeah, I started as a book. I just did talk too much. It was just too much dialogue. So, I said, "Well, it's a play." Then I brought it to Kermit Bloomgarden who did *Death of A Salesman*. He's a wonderful producer and a friend of mine.

He said, "Too many scenes! Cut it down to three or four scenes!"

And I said, "I can't! It just goes everywhere."

He said, "Then maybe it's a movie. You go everywhere in a movie."

And I said, “Okay.”

So, I began writing it as a movie, and that was in ‘63, and still grabbing little jobs here and there. But I was depressed. I was outta work.

Jesse Thorn: (*A pause.*) Now, I'm surprised to hear that people were telling you, “Oh, this has too many scenes. Oh, this is too talky.”

[00:25:00]

Not, “Oh, this is about some guys who are putting on a musical about Hitler.” (*Laughs.*)

Mel Brooks: Yeah. Well—

Jesse Thorn: Because that seems like what they would open with.

Mel Brooks: Well, you know, they didn't mention that, but I'm sure that was the back of their minds. “We're not gonna do this. This guy's crazy. We're not gonna do it.”

Jesse Thorn: (*Talking over Mel with laughter.*) Did you think you were crazy for doing that?

Mel Brooks: “We're not gonna do a movie about Hitler! Is he nuts? The war is just over!” You know.

Jesse Thorn: Were you aware that was crazy? Because it was crazy.

Mel Brooks: No. No, I wasn't aware. I thought it was fine! You know, I thought it was funny!

Jesse Thorn: (*Giggling.*) Did you run it by anybody?

Mel Brooks: Yeah. Well, I mean I ran it by a lot of different people who just said, “You know, we'll let you know” or “don't call us we'll call you.” And finally, there was a guy called Sidney Glazier—G-L-A-Z-I-E-R, and his name is on the poster. And he said, “I love it.”

You know, actually he was eating a tuna fish sandwich with coffee. He said, “Tell me the story.” And in the middle of “Springtime for Hitler”, he spit out the

sandwich and the coffee, and he fell on the floor. (*Chuckling,*) He said, “We gotta make this movie.”

Music: “Springtime for Hitler” from the musical *The Producers*.

[CHORUS]

Germany was having trouble; what a sad, sad story.

We need our new leader to restore its former glory.

Where, oh where was he?

Where could that man be?

We looked around, and then we found the man for you and me!

And now it's

[HITLER]

Springtime for Hitler and Germany

Deutschland is happy and gay

[ALL]

We're marching to a faster pace

(*Music fades out.*)

Mel Brooks: Anyway, I still needed money. And I got a call from David Susskind. and Danny Melnick; they had a company called Talent Associates. And they

offered me the lead—to create and be the lead in a television show spoofing *I Spy*, you know with Bill Cosby—(*stammering*) and—you know, James Bond and spoofing his CIA.

And I said, “I'll do it, but I don't wanna be in it.” I wasn't ready. I said, “I need somebody.” And they got me Buck Henry, and I met with Buck Henry, and I fell in love with him. And we got it done. It was great. So, anyway! *Get Smart* was going, so there was an income, and I was able to get enough money to make the *Producers*. Which was not... successful. It wasn't unsuccessful. It just kind of meandered along. It was kind of considered a crazy art picture, and not— It didn't have any stars. It had Zero Mostel and this unknown guy, Gene Wilder.

Jesse Thorn: In fact, I'm gonna play your Oscar acceptance speech from the script for the *Producers*.

Mel Brooks: Yeah, it was the original screenplay. It was amazing.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. I only wish that I could play the extended back-and-forth between Don Rickles and Frank Sinatra that precedes it. But it would be a little bit too long.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Mel Brooks: Uh, I didn't trust myself in the case I win, so I wrote a couple of things here. I want to thank the Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Money for this wonderful award.

(*Laughter.*)

Well, I'll just say what's in my heart. Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump.

(*Laughter and applause.*)

But seriously, I'd like to thank Sidney Glazier, the producer of *The Producers* for producing *The Producers*. Joseph E. Levine and his wife, Rosalie, for distributing the film.

(*Raucous laughter.*)

I'd also like to thank Zero Mostel. I'd also like to thank Gene Wilder. I'd also like to thank Gene Wilder. I'd also like to thank Gene Wilder. Thank you very much.

(*Applause.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: I think that Gene Wilder is sort of the magic ingredient of *The Producers*, in that (*chuckling*) as you go through this scheme—which is obviously the most horrible thing anyone could ever do, pretty much—

(*Mel confirms.*)

—the thing that brings you through that—I mean, Zero Mostel is also wonderful in that.

Mel Brooks: Oh yeah, he's fabulous. But Gene brings it to life. He gives it life.

Jesse Thorn: Because he is— You know, he can do any of these things, and you still just believe in him! Because he is so sweet. He just—his kindness and, you know, just decent personhood shines through so brightly even if he is working on this—

Mel Brooks: (*Interrupting.*) Good for you! That's exactly how I felt about him.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

Max Bialystock (*The Producers*): How can a producer make more money with a flop than he could with a hit?!

Leo Bloom: Well, it's simply a matter of creative accounting. Let's assume just for the moment that you are a dishonest man.

[00:30:00]

Max: Assume away.

Leo: It's very easy. You simply raise more money than you really need.

Max: What do you mean?

Leo: Well, you did it yourself, only you did it on a very small scale.

Max: What did I do?

Leo: You raised \$2,000 more than you needed to produce your last play!

Max: So, what?! Where did it get me?! I'm wearing a cardboard bill!

Leo: Well, that's where you made your mistake. You didn't go all the way. You see, if you were really a bold criminal you could have raised \$1,000,000.

Max: But the play cost me only \$60,000 to produce!

Leo: And how long did it run?

Max: One night.

Leo: You see?! Do you see what I'm trying to tell you? You could have raised \$1,000,000, put on a \$60,000 flop, and kept the rest!

Max: But what if the play was a hit?

Leo: Well, then you'd go to jail.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: I heard that one of the things that Gene Wilder got you to agree to when he agreed to come be in *Blazing Saddles* was to help him make *Young Frankenstein*, and that one of the rules—as the two of you were working on *Young Frankenstein*—was that you weren't allowed to be in it.

Mel Brooks: Yeah. Right. He didn't want me to be in a suit of armor and lift the visor and say, "Hiya, folks." Yeah.

(Jesse chuckles.)

He didn't want that. So, he said, "No! Let's not do a lot of fourth wall breaking here. You know?"

Jesse Thorn: There's not—I was laughing about that because I was thinking back over your filmography. It's like, yeah, it is a very rare performance where there's not a moment where Mel Brooks turns to the audience and says, "Hey guys, here's a thing I thought of."

Clip:

The King of France (*History of the World, Part I*): It's good to be the king!

Jesse Thorn: I want to ask you a question about your comedic madcap insanity. I mentioned in the beginning, in the introduction, that *History of the World* is one of my favorite films and is a movie that I watched over and over and over and over as a kid. And *History of the World* is mostly sort of a sketch movie, and it would be hard to have a movie with more jokes than *History of the World* has. I mean, it's wall-to-wall jokes. And some of the jokes are genuinely horrible.

(Mel agrees without hesitation.)

(*Trying not to laugh.*) There's a joke—there's a part where someone says—The one that's sticking out in my mind is someone says, "The streets are crawling with Trojans," and you cut to soldiers crawling on the street. (*Laughs.*)

Mel Brooks: Yeah, right.

Jesse Thorn: That was the worst joke! (*Giggling brightly.*)

Mel Brooks: It is. It's probably—I would say—Jesse, I'd say you have good taste. 'Cause that is probably the worst joke. You know. Literal jokes are the worst jokes. And they're meant to be bad jokes! You know that. They're meant to be. I mean, I'm not caught unawares. I mean, you know some of my jokes have been so dumb and so silly and so—But they're meant to do that.

Jesse Thorn: No, there's something about the shamelessness of it and the sort of—I guess the shamelessness and gleefulness of it—that you really seem to love a joke.

Mel Brooks: Yeah. It's a bad kid giving his uncle a hot foot. You know, it's bad. You know, I like to do— Obviously, in *Silent Movie*, I do some of the worst jokes I've ever done in my life, and I'm the only one laughing! But I'm on the floor. (*Chuckling.*) I mean, you know, I love it. So, I've gotta please myself, even though I offend hordes of people. It's still— I've just gotta please myself from time to time.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) Well, Mel Brooks, we've used more than our allotment of time. Thank you so much for taking the time to be on *Bullseye*.

Mel Brooks: Well, it's my pleasure! This has been—this has been easy! The only thing that reeeeally rankles me and makes me upset about this interview is that there's no money in it whatsoever! You don't pay. You don't pay a penny!

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Transition: Bright, upbeat synth.

Jesse Thorn: Mel Brooks from 2013. The new documentary of which he is the subject is *Mel Brooks: The 99-Year-Old Man*. It's stretched by Judd Apatow. You can catch it on HBO Max. And let me just say, any day is a good day to revisit a Mel Brooks classic. How about watching some episodes of *Get Smart* today? That would make your life better. I mean, I really do love *History of the World, Part I*. It is one of the dumber ones. But, boy, is it funny. I know that we're supposed to all just talk about how great *Young Frankenstein* is, but there's nothing better than a pile of jokes.

Transition: Chiming synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—and at Maximum Fun HQ! In the historic jewelry district of downtown Los Angeles, California. We're enjoying some rain here in Los Angeles, and LA's never more beautiful than after it rains.

[00:35:00]

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun, Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel

Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from Dan Wally. You can find his music at DJWsounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It is 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 you heard this week.

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.)