

The West Wing Weekly
4.06: "Game On"
Guests: Bradley Whitford and Rob Lowe

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*, where it is a very special and exciting day.

JOSH: A Very Special Episode...of *Blossom*.

HRISHI: I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: You may know Joshua Malina from such things as this episode.

JOSH [laughter]: Oh, man. Is there gonna be a lot of this?

HRISHI: How did it feel to watch yourself on screen for the first time?

JOSH: I'm almost embarrassed to admit I had butterflies in my stomach when I watched it.

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: And it wasn't nerves or anything, it's literally like I was tying in organically to the excitement of that job and getting that job. I didn't expect it at all. But yeah, that was like a very special time of my life, and as I started to watch it I just got, like, chills.

HRISHI: You had a Proustian moment?

JOSH: Yeah, exactly.

HRISHI: You were transported. That's great. In this episode, of course, we're talking about "Game On." It's episode six from season four.

JOSH: It was written by Aaron Sorkin and Paul Redford. It was directed by Alex Graves, and it first aired on October 30, 2002.

HRISHI: This episode is a famous one because it features President Bartlet debating Governor Ritchie. There's also some stuff about Qumar, there's some stuff about Toby and Andy, but the real headline is that baby-faced Joshua Malina makes his first appearance as Will Bailey, who's running the Horton Wilde campaign from a mattress store in Newport Beach.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

ELSIE: Will!

SAM: Will.

WILL: Ah. It's good to see you. I'll be with you in just a second. Darren and Sharon...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And he goes up against Sam Seaborn.

JOSH: Yeah. I'm realizing also, I characterize myself as an actor who doesn't like to watch his own work, which wasn't the case always, but now I'm realizing I just like watching old work, because I look younger. I thoroughly enjoyed watching this episode, and I suspect fifteen years from now I will enjoy watching *Scandal*.

HRISHI: That's interesting. For me, I have a hard time going back to old work of mine because I find it a bit embarrassing. I feel like, if I only knew then what I knew now, maybe that would be better. It probably wouldn't be, but...

JOSH: Yeah, that's interesting. No, I was thoroughly pleased with my own work.

HRISHI: I was as well.

JOSH: I feel like—cat out of the bag. I feel like people were expecting me to be horribly critical of myself or self-deprecating, and I'm sure those moments will come, but I actually think I'm pretty good on the show.

HRISHI: You don't think there is an equal number of people who might be expecting you to be...

JOSH: Possibly. I just figure—

HRISHI: The opposite?

JOSH: Perhaps. You know, perhaps—perhaps I'm not self-aware enough to have a sense of what the perception of me is. After—

HRISHI: I just think you've worked your magic on your brand that either could be an acceptable expectation.

JOSH: You're probably right. I think because my Twitter bio is "Hi, I ruined *The West Wing*"...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... that there's a misconception that I think I was not good on *The West Wing*, and that's not it. It's really more of a hat-tip to those that believe I ruined *The West Wing*—

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: —or that Will did, or the character went down, or that I sucked, but it's more of a "howdy" than "I'm one of you."

HRISHI: Later on in this episode, we're gonna be joined by a special guest, Joshua Malina.

JOSH: It's a good episode of *The West Wing*, I think.

HRISHI: Oh my gosh.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's an epic one. This opening is incredible, the crisis of confidence, and this bet that everyone has played on poor Toby.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

TOBY: I don't understand.

LEO: I was with him on the helicopter earlier this morning, and I'm telling ya, he's second-guessing himself, he's revising answers in his head—

TOBY: Leo!

LEO: I know.

TOBY: What... I don't... When I left him he was ready. I don't understand. He's ready.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, it's fantastic. I wrote in—what did I write? In big letters... I wrote "fantastic opener," especially because watching—even this is my first episode ever, so I'm sure I've seen it more than once—I still didn't remember how the opener worked, and I didn't realize, going into the Oval, that they were, in fact, tricking Toby.

HRISHI: So, this is great. So when you—when it was finally revealed, did you then go back to the seeds that had been planted previously? For example:

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

TOBY: You know you've got a ten-dollar bill there, on your clipboard.

C.J.: Yeah. I owe it to someone.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I didn't go back and watch, but yes, I thought back to it—

HRISHI: Yes. That's what—yeah.

JOSH: Although the funny part is, what she's saying is she knows she's gonna lose the bet.

HRISHI: Right! Yes!

JOSH: So, like, why didn't she just take the other side of the bet?

HRISHI: Right. It's probably a Toby-schadenfreude tax.

JOSH: There ya go.

HRISHI: That they're all willing to pay.

JOSH: Tobenfreude.

HRISHI: Schaden-Toby. There's a line here that Leo says—

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

LEO: A smart guy said that presidential elections are won and lost on one square foot of real estate.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Talking about this crisis of confidence that the president is experiencing as he's trying to trick Toby—you know, this whole game is mental. And it turns out that line comes from Eli Attie...

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: ... by way of Paul Begala.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Here's an interesting story. This is what I got from Eli—

JOSH: You tell the story. I'll be the judge of whether it's interesting or not.

HRISHI: Eli said that back when he was working for Al Gore, back in the late '90s, Paul Begala gave him some advice on how to make Al Gore feel comfortable around him, and how to show that he was gonna be a good team member. The way Eli put it, "He counseled me on how to talk to Gore and how to show Gore that I had his back." And I'm quoting now from Eli's email: "I remember him saying that Gore's headspace, his state of mind, his feeling of confidence, were everything to the campaign. Paul pointed to his head, and said, 'Presidential campaigns are won or lost on one square foot of real estate,' which I thought was one of the most profound and insightful things I had ever heard about politics, and something Paul was passing on with a great sense of importance. So, when I got to working on 'Game On,' I wanted to put that in a draft of something for Aaron, so first I called Paul to ask his permission to borrow such an

important teaching of his.” Paul Begala had no memory of ever saying it. It was just something he made up at random.

JOSH: Oh, that’s awesome.

HRISHI: It was just something he made up in the moment.

JOSH: That is, in fact, an interesting story. That’s very funny. You know what made me—watching this opening and that discussion and that phrase made me think of—it’s interesting because I was trying to lead, or trying to get Ron Klain, in our discussion about debate prep last episode, to talk about handling...

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: ... the candidate, and he kind of bridled out there. He certainly didn’t like the word. But as presented here (and I’m not saying this would be more realistic than what he has to say), and that anecdote you just shared, suggests that there is an aspect to it of trying to get your guy in the right headspace, and that that’s, or as Paul Begala would have said, that’s the major part of it.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah, you think about all the mental work that the boxing coach does, you know, all of the things they say... it’s so much more than just physical conditioning and sparring.

JOSH: Right. I mean, of course, extrapolating that is a pretty good saying for a lot of life and a lot of things we do. In many endeavors, that headspace you’re in is a big part of getting through life.

HRISHI: Mhm. It’s a great cold open. You mentioned C.J. saying—it feels like a foregone conclusion. She knows she’s gonna lose the bet. I feel like this episode is all about foregone conclusions, or really just one foregone conclusion, which is that the president is gonna win the debate. This is the episode in which we’re gonna witness the debate, but really, from that moment, you know it’s gonna happen. Before the titles come up, Toby is still a little bit spinning from the prank that’s been played on him, but right before they cut to the titles, he says, “He’s ready.”

JOSH: But you didn’t think there was any chance—I mean, asking you to think back, put yourself in the headspace of the first time you’ve seen this may be nigh on impossible, but, you know, it felt to me like it could—although I sort of remembered how it went, too—but in construction it could have been a horrible, hubristic disaster.

HRISHI: Right. They could have gotten Uncle Fluffy.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And there are these little head feints, like that of moments where there’s maybe some doubt, how’s it gonna go, but I feel like the real thrust of it starts from the cold open. There isn’t real suspense, it’s just a matter of, how much of a blowout is it gonna be? And the fact that

Toby, of the turn-around-three-times-and-spit, you know, superstition, will actually say, “He’s ready,” you know, and then later he says to C.J....

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

TOBY: I think you’re going to enjoy yourself tonight.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I wouldn’t have minded a muttered “poo-poo.”

HRISHI [laughing]: You’d think, with all the superstition among that crew...

JOSH: Yeah, I think it would’ve been appropriate. But, you know, actually, just to jump way ahead for a moment, I like, too, that Dr. Bartlet, that Abbey realizes that it’s all about headspace and where he needs to be...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: There was a lot of juice in that tie. It was like in the last seconds, just the energy getting me out onstage.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: ... and he’s saying to her, you know, the, not so much superstition with the whole Josh-tie thing, but that there was an energy to it...

HRISHI: Correct.

JOSH: ... and that there was an immediacy and an urgency; and so she cuts his tie in half. It’s kind of brilliant, like, it’s just what he needed. And he even realizes, even though at first, you know, he reacts, like, “Have you gone mad?” Like, it’s insane, and they’re rushing—it’s very well-staged and shot—but he even gives her a little pat on the butt, like he’s thanking her. He knows that she gave him the little [grunt], the little zest he needed going into it.

HRISHI: My friends and I call a little pat on a butt a “good game.”

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: And so it makes sense that in an episode called “Game On,” with all of them saying, “Game on” to the president, that he gives her a little “good game.”

JOSH: Ah, very good.

HRISHI: Game. There are some great sing-along moments. Going back to that moment of, um, where Toby says, “I think you’re gonna enjoy yourself,” C.J. says, if the president shows up, in the last debate for the last job that he’ll ever have in his life, she says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

C.J.: *I think it could be a sight to see. I mean, a sight to see.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Every time when she says that second “I mean, a sight to see”...

JOSH: You sing along?

HRISHI: Everybody—anyone who’s listening to this episode, raise your hand if you said those words along with C.J. the way that I did, and then now explain to the people around you why you just raised your hands.

JOSH: It’s making me feel like we should create a *The West Wing* Minus One. There used to be albums, it was called “Music Minus One”, and so you would play the clarinet, and you would be the—you know, the rest of the orchestra is on the record...

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: And Music Minus One—or there’s a singing part that’s missing, and we could, you know...

HRISHI: That would be great.

JOSH: We don’t have the licensing rights, but *West Wing* Minus One, where you fill in certain parts would be kind of great.

HRISHI: I mean, we could really do *West Wing* karaoke.

JOSH: Yeah, exac—That’s really what it is.

HRISHI: Yeah. Even when we were at the ATX Festival, and they played just the cold open from Episode 1, I looked around, just—because I knew it was gonna happen, and at the time when we got to this part of the cold open, so many people—quietly, it wasn’t *Rocky Horror Picture Show*—but so many people said “sudden arboreal stop.”

JOSH [Laughter]: That’s fantastic.

HRISHI: Out loud.

JOSH: Maybe at some of our live events we can encourage some of this.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: I'd like to see some cosplay. Which of course is Chief-of-Staff-play. Everybody has to come as Leo.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Very good.

JOSH: You'll throw Goldfish at the screen...

HRISHI: Mhm. Oh, back to the moment where they give the president the new tie, and he rushes out—there's a great C.J. pratfall there. Did you catch it? As they're...

JOSH: Oh, she kinda goes down in the hall?

HRISHI: Yes. As they're all rushing out, she takes a stumble. It's terrific. But my favorite part is—the laugh makes me fall, but then her recovery is incredible because after that, she's sort of trying to smooth herself out, but as part of her smoothing herself out, she keeps touching the president's hair. There's, you know, six sets of hands all trying to get him ready, and she's just sort of reaching in and just touching part of his head. It's really funny.

JOSH: She's a brilliant physical comedienne.

HRISHI: She really is. This is a weird one, but for some reason, for days after I watched this episode in preparation for this, the first time, I just kept having the phrase, "You're leveraging the *Mastico*" stuck in my head. Jordan says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

JORDAN: Qumar is leveraging the Mastico.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: ... and I don't know why, it just—I've been—again, partly my sleep-deprived state—but the phrase just...

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: This used to happen to me when I was taking French in school. Sometimes French words or phrases—I remember playing basketball and having French phrases looped in my head, and I'd be like, "Just stop"—trying to reason with my brain—"Stop saying that over and over again so I can concentrate."

JOSH: So when you get punchy, you have, uh, *West Wing* earworms and...

HRISHI: Yeah. I was working here in the studio yesterday, and I just kept saying, "Leveraging the *Mastico*" at random moments for no good reason. I have seen this episode a lot. Let's go to Mattress World.

JOSH: Ah, yes. My first scene. Not the first scene I shot, but my first scene in the episode.

HRISHI: Okay, hold your horses. Before we get to you...

JOSH: Okay, look, I'm gonna let you host. You tell me.

HRISHI: Danica McKellar...

JOSH: Yes!

HRISHI: ... guest-stars in this episode.

JOSH: This is a big deal. She was wonderful, and I think Aaron was quite the *Wonder Years* fan. I think this was a big deal for him.

[Fade in: "Original Music from the Wonder Years" (disc 1, track 6 of album *Music from The Wonder Years*)]

HRISHI: Is this why Snuffy Walden scores *The West Wing*?

JOSH: It wouldn't surprise me. I should probably ask. We should pose that question to Aaron. It could well be.

HRISHI: That's what I thought.

[Fade out music]

JOSH: Danica plays a character named Elsie Snuffin. It's worth noting that the real name of actress Kayla Blake, who played Kim on *Sports Night*, is Elsie Sniffen.

HRISHI: Is that—that can't be a coincidence, right?

JOSH: Wow. Miniature golf, part two.

HRISHI: Okay...

JOSH: [Laughter] No, of course it's not a coincidence!

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: Wait, you think deep in his subconscious...

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: I see, yeah. I thought you were suggesting they could possibly be no connection whatsoever.

HRISHI: No. No. Certainly there's a connection in Aaron's brain.

JOSH: Yes. I would have to believe, with a name like Elsie Sniffen, and Elsie Snuffin, that's got to be a conscious decision, but you never know.

HRISHI: I've been surprised by some of the things that he's told us in the past. The fact that he didn't realize that John Gallagher had been in *The West Wing* after having done an entire season of *The Newsroom* is the only reason why I thought...

JOSH: You have a good point.

HRISHI: How was it acting opposite Danica McKellar? Had you met before?

JOSH: No, I had never met her before. She was fun to work with, play off of.

HRISHI: I love the moment in the store where the little girls make the sign. This is another moment from the episode that has stayed with me. I remember watching this episode and, you know, listening to the little girls read the sign...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

GIRLS: It doesn't matter who you vote for, make sure you vote!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: ... and I was like, "Mhm, mhm, mhm," and then Will Bailey says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

WILL: I think it does matter who you vote for. What if it said, "No matter who you vote for, make sure you vote?"

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: ... and I thought, "Oh my God, that's so brilliant! That's so smart."

JOSH: I, of course, as you could probably guess, was hung up on my desire to have Will correct the grammar...

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: ... and say, "No, what it really should say is, 'No matter *whom* you vote for...'"

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I can't imagine that, having received this gift of a role, that I brought that up with Aaron directly. I think I mentioned it to someone on set, and they all looked at me like, "Yeah, that's not gonna happen."

HRISHI: Yeah. You're not adding an M.

JOSH: This is where I discovered the first difference between me and Will Bailey, that Will Bailey is more expansive of heart and less pedantic than I. It really rubbed me the wrong way, though—I'm actually stopping to fix the poster, but I leave the grammar. I leave the, uh, solecism.

HRISHI: Yes. The real heart of the message...

JOSH: Oh, yeah. No, I get that. [Laughter] No, I understand what you're saying, and of course you're right, but it still a little bit makes me... I have an inner wince when I watch it.

HRISHI: Speaking of inner winces...

JOSH: Yes. Señor Winces, yes?

HRISHI: Speaking of old King Wenceslas, I felt the hand of, uh, King Wenceslas in a few moments in this episode. I am sad to say there are parts of this episode, upon revisiting, that did not age well.

JOSH: Hm. Well, I mean, that includes me. [Laughter]

HRISHI: I was specifically thinking of a few moments where, in a professional context, people keep talking about how attractive women are.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: In the first exchange between Sam and Will Bailey...

JOSH: Oh, about Elsie.

HRISHI: ... about Elsie...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

SAM: I met your assistant. She's funny. She's very... she's attractive, too. I hope I'm not being inappropriate.

WILL: I have an assistant?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yes, he was! I mean, the answer is, yes.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely.

HRISHI: Unfortunately, you are.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: I especially like, though, is that at no point do you ever actually make the connection that he's talking about Elsie because he describes her as your assistant.

JOSH: Right, and I say, "I have an assistant?"

HRISHI: Right, and she's offscreen by the time this happens. So later on in the episode, you talk about Elsie as if he has no idea who she is, and for a second I thought, "Wait, but Sam's already met her, and he's told you that he's met her." And then I realized, no, no, right, but he—you don't...

JOSH: Could've been someone else.

HRISHI: You didn't know who he was talking about in the first place.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: So it makes sense that you would reintroduce her.

JOSH: Yeah. There's also—there's some weirdness all together about who Elsie is... you know, without any spoilers we're going to get a little more...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ... information about her that I think—

HRISHI: We—we ret—they retcon—little retcon-ing, right?

JOSH: Yes, exactly.

HRISHI: Yeah. But we—we can cover that—

JOSH: We can address at the time.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: At the correct time. One of the things I remember about filming that scene, the conversation with Sam Seaborn—I don't think this is gonna happen a lot in future episodes because—this is what I remember about every scene because I don't think I'll remember anything...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I have a lot of memories of this episode, again, I think, because it was so important to me.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And in my career and this whole—so, you know, uncharacteristically, I remember a lot of it very clearly; and one thing I remember in that scene, that conversation at the desk, that I shot with Rob Lowe, was I stop and I take an aspirin at some point...

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And I kept rushing it, and Alex Graves kept saying, “Josh, just take an aspirin!” And I said, “You know what? I feel like I’m in a three-act opera about aspirin.” Because I’m so—I’ve done a lot of things, but I come up in the Aaron Sorkin school, and anything that’s a pause, where no one’s speaking, it just doesn’t feel right to me. And he kept saying, “Look, I promise you, when we cut it, it’s not going to feel self-indulgent.” ’Cause I felt like—I felt like I was taking a five-minute break to take an aspirin! I was like, “Dude, I can’t do it this slowly.” And I realize enough—and then watching it today, like, you don’t even see it, you hear it. It’s a sound effect. You don’t even actually see the aspirin bottle.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: Clearly I’m taking something.

HRISHI: Right. I remember you telling this story abstractly. I didn’t realize it was this episode or this moment, so I didn’t think about your anxiety about this moment, but I did think about how well done I thought it was. I thought that was a nice detail, that... I like how Will kind of doesn’t have time for Sam.

JOSH: Yeah, I like that too. You’ve got this sense of priorities.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He’s, you know, he knows who he is, obviously, and he’s a big *macher*, and so he’s got to sit and have the moment, but he’s not gonna be slowed in terms of what his, uh, the urgency of his own priorities.

HRISHI: Right, and he knows, too, the kind of message that Sam is bringing.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Even just this exchange, the very first lines Will says:

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

SAM: *Hi.*

WILL: *Hi.*

SAM: *Sam Seaborn.*

WILL: *Sure. Will Bailey. You want to come inside?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's not even, "Yeah, great to meet you," or anything, it's like, "Sure." Like, "Yes, of course I know who you are."

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Um, and the delivery... it's great.

JOSH: One of the things I was watching with new eyes—not that I was unaware of this—is just, how beautiful a character, and how classic an Aaron Sorkin creation Will Bailey is. I was able to sort of sit back and watch it—even just lines like...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

WILL: *The metaphor alone knocks me down.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: There's so many great little things, things that, if I were watching for the sake of a podcast, I might even criticize as, like, [sigh], you know—sometimes I complain when he makes our heroes too much of heroes...

HRISHI: Uh-huh.

JOSH: But when it's *me*, I'm like, oh, man, look, he gave me that, he gave me that, and there are a lot of great little spots in this episode where I'm like, alright, dude, he's—he's doing his best...

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: ... to bring me in in a way that viewers would embrace the character.

HRISHI: Tell me about your approach to even just these lines, because there is such a specificity in the delivery. I mean, those first few lines that you say to Sam, I do love the delivery, and like I said, I get this whole picture of what's going on with this character and—and where he's at, and his relationship to Sam, and really the administration, in that—and it feels very far any kind of arbitrary acting choice because you have to convey all that. So do you remember how you got to that place?

JOSH: Ugh. I'd love to have a—just to serve up a juicy answer to that. The candid answer is no, I really don't. I feel like, when I read Aaron's stuff, I know what he wants from me, I know how he wants it to sound; and with really good writing, you know, you can do that elemental thing of acting, which is, you know, you have an intention. Like, basically, like what we were discussing before—Will Bailey has an agenda. He knows why Sam is here. He knows, ultimately, that it's gonna try to get him to stop doing what he's doing. And so—so the intention is to kind of just blow through it, to not pause long enough for the reality to seep in; so he's gonna keep moving, and he's gonna keep the office going, and he's gonna get out of there as soon as he can with Sam just trailing behind him. So I just felt like it was with that clear intent.

HRISHI: You didn't have a conversation explicitly about how to say those things?

JOSH: No. I mean, it very rarely comes down to anything like that, honestly, and discussion. Usually, you know, we'd rehearse the scene, block it so that it feels right to everyone and so that it feels like the story of the scene is being told, and then, uh... I think mostly you discuss beats, you discuss moments, but you don't usually get down to the point of, "I want it delivered like this," you know? Like, if—if... Something's wrong, if—if you're getting micro-directed on that level, something bad is missing.

HRISHI: Did you do a table read for this? Do you remember?

JOSH: Well, you know what, I remember my very first table read. I don't remember that it was for this episode, but I suspect it must have been. In my mind—I know the very first scene I shot for *The West Wing* was the Will Bailey press conference.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I know that for sure. But I guess—I can't really remember, but it must have been prior to that that we did a table read of this episode, before—you know, that's how they would do it—before any shooting had begun. Because I do remember walking into that room—it's the Roosevelt Room, that we see on camera all the time, at that big table, and everyone sitting there; and then in another outer ring, around that table, are all the department heads, and all the writers, and the producers—and it's a big room, and a lot of people; and I remember very, very clearly walking in, and, you know, I wasn't overly daunted, I was *psyched*, I was really psyched to be there. And I'm sure I said hi to Brad, and I'm trying to think whether I knew anybody else... I just remember John Spencer walking up to me, [imitates Spencer's voice] "Hey, how ya doin', John Spencer," introducing himself, and saying, "I just loved ya on *Sports Night*." And I don't know whether it's true, and I feel like I've heard a version of this story from almost everyone else who walked through the door, that John was just that guy...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... who would just go out of his way to be warm, to make you feel good, to make you feel like you belonged there, say something nice, and it's something I try to—and I'm sure I'm guilty not of always honoring his memory this way, but I try to do it when I'm a regular on something and not the new guy, try to remember what it feels like to be, because you're walking into a well-oiled machine when you do a guest spot on any show, or when you're new on a show. And this

was the *crème de la crème* of well-oiled machines, so thick in fourth season, having won Best Drama Emmy three seasons—this was like, this was high level. So it was very kind of him to search me out, walk over to me—I feel I had just taken three steps into the room—to put me at ease. I thought that was very, very sweet.

HRISHI: That's funny, that you mention that that's how you feel like you greet newcomers to a production, because I spoke to Bradley Whitford...

JOSH: [Laughter] Okay.

HRISHI: ... about when you two first started working together on this, and he told a story about when he met you on *A Few Good Men*.

[Interview excerpt]

BRAD: I was thrilled because I had worked with Josh in *A Few Good Men* on Broadway. Here's a little story: Going into a Broadway play is a terrifying thing to do. You get what is called a put-in—basically, you're rehearsing for two weeks with the stage manager, and then you have one run-through with the cast, who does not want to be there; and then you go on.

HRISHI: Huh.

BRAD: And you're in front of—I don't know, what is it, 2,000 people, or whatever it was. And it's... first Broadway play I've—I, I've ever done, and... it's like you're jumping on a train, and you're terrified the entire time. And I go out for this court scene—I was playing a lawyer—and I open up my briefcase (I'm facing the audience), and it is completely pasted with the most horrific pornography. And that was when I met Josh. And Josh was playing something in that. I learned later, he almost got fired for putting itching powder in the soldier who had to stand still in the tower.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Oh, God.

BRAD: No, it's incredible. It is a perverse art that he has cultivated. But I was thrilled because Josh is a blast.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, yeah. That was a little prank.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: That was onstage. That was during a performance.

HRISHI: Yes, exactly.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, first of all, in fairness, I hadn't met John Spencer yet.

HRISHI: So you didn't have his example yet to follow.

JOSH: Don't worry. I'm telling you, I learned a lesson.

HRISHI: I see.

JOSH: So let's—chronologically, let's understand that the—

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: Yeah. The play took place long before I met John Spencer on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: I have about ten minutes with Brad...

JOSH: Oh, dear Lord. I should've known you'd do something.

HRISHI: But before we play that, I want to just connect—the story about taking the aspirin is really funny because I want to just jump right into this one story that Brad told.

JOSH: Uh-oh.

HRISHI: Here's another bit from our conversation.

[Interview excerpt]

BRAD: Did I ever tell you the drug story?

HRISHI: No, I don't think so.

BRAD: This was later on. We were shooting the Camp David episode, and we had been shooting, like, twenty hours, and there was someone on the set who will go unnamed who said, "You know what's amazing? I told my doctor I was gonna be shooting, I was really tired, and my doctor told me about—there's a drug called Provigil, and it is a drug that just keeps you awake. Truck drivers take it, I think people in the army take it. And I was mentioning it to a friend, and a friend gave me one." And three of us were looking at this guy with a very powerful drug in his hand—a pill, he had a single pill—and he said, "Yeah, this is it. He gave me this pill, and apparently it just keeps you up forever." This was the end of, like, a nineteen-hour day. Josh walks into the room, doesn't hear what we're talking about, sees the pill in this person's hand, grabs the pill...

HRISHI: [Laughter] Oh, no.

BRAD: ... goes, "Oh, drugs, I like drugs," and takes the pill! It was truly one of the funniest, most amazing things I've ever seen. It could have been *anything! Anything*. He took this pill, which, like, kept him up forever, and I, like, blasted—I don't know how I—I, like, got into this hotel room—he had, like, three computers on, he was just, like, furiously gambling online. Anyway,

that was one of the funniest—and obviously, kids, don't do that at home. But he just, like, walked right in and goes, "Oh, drugs, I like drugs."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is entirely true. I've never seen anybody laugh harder, when I took whatever pill he was holding, and without asking for it to be that... I took the water he was holding, downed it, kind of walked away, which I thought—I just thought it would be funny, and I figured, eh, how bad could it be?

HRISHI: That's a self-prank, really. I mean, it's a prank.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's a goof. For more thoughts from Bradley Whitford, here's the rest of the conversation.

[Interview excerpt]

HRISHI: So, my question for you...

BRAD: Yes?

HRISHI: Do you remember the moment when you found out that Josh was gonna be on *The West Wing*?

BRAD: Yes.

HRISHI: Bring me back to that moment. Where were you?

BRAD: I took the news. You know, I took it in. No, actually, I'm kidding. I was thrilled. I was actually thrilled. I knew Josh, I knew what we were getting. I have a lot of respect for Josh, I think he's, you know, done a lot with the limited gifts he's been given.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

BRAD: [Laughter] Okay, I—I can't even do this. I love Josh. Josh is truly one of my favorite—I would like to be meaner to him, but I can't. Josh genuinely feels lucky to be working, [Laughter] and he's a joy on the set. I've said this before: basically, directing Richard Schiff is like trying to get, you know, a cat out of a tree. You know, it's—any discussion with a director is complicated, it—you know, fraught with very deep feelings. Basically, I don't know if he still does it, but all the way through *West Wing*, whenever a director said anything to Josh, he would mumble, "I don't care."

HRISHI: Right.

BRAD: Which was sort of his mantra. And I aspire to that kind of detachment.

HRISHI: For this episode, for “Game On,” the two of you don’t actually have any scenes together.

BRAD: Thank God.

HRISHI: Did you have any interaction that first day that he was—he was on the show, or were you completely separate because...

BRAD: You know, I’m sure he’s, like, you know, slap the sides out of my hand in passing by, which he does to sort of everybody, or he set, you know, my iPod, you know, to Mandarin... I’m sure he did something. It is a bizarre darkness within his veneer of joviality, or... Is joviality the word? Is that the word?

HRISHI: Sure, if you want to call Josh jovial. I’m not sure that I would go that far.

BRAD: I hate to say this, but I love working with Josh. I hate his acting, but I love working with Josh.

HRISHI: I guess you must have done the table read together.

BRAD: Yeah, I think we’d done the table read. I don’t know, what year was this of that goddamn show?

HRISHI: This was in 2002.

BRAD: So this is season four. Yeah. Well, look. As much fun as Josh is on a set, you do sort of feel like the show business angel of death is coming to the door. I mean, you know you’re on the downside of whatever show you’re doing. No, that’s not true. See, I can’t even do it.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Well, I’m curious how the news was relayed to the rest of the cast. Was it sort of like a guest-star role, where you just find out—someone says, “Hey, this part that’s gonna be in this next script, that’s gonna be played by Josh Malina,” and everyone says, “Okay, fine,” and move on. Was there already some sense, even with that first episode, that Josh was gonna have a longer relationship with the show?

BRAD: I was informed by a priest who came to my house.

HRISHI: He read you your Josh rights.

BRAD: Yeah. You know, Josh was very open about it. I don’t even remember. I think he, you know, sort of initially came in and was playing this character, and was this—gonna be a regular... Knowing Josh, Josh will come in going, “Boy, I hope I become a regular.” I mean, there’s no art to his kind of begging for work... [Laughter]

HRISHI: [Laughter]

BRAD: ... with Aaron, or, you know, directly to Tommy. Aaron, of course, loves Josh, and so you knew that Aaron was getting an instrument (albeit a Flutophone) that he was comfortable with. It was pretty clear to me early on that Josh was gonna fill that void.

HRISHI: Right. I mean, in the end of this episode, Sam gives him his tie and tells him to keep it.

BRAD: Oh, is that what happens? I should watch this.

HRISHI: Which feels symbolic.

BRAD: Yeah, it feels symbolic. I don't know—at this point, did we know that Rob was not coming back?

HRISHI: I don't know; that's what I'm wondering.

BRAD: Well, you would think that somebody on the show would know that. My memory—and I may be wrong—my memory is that they knew that that was going to happen.

HRISHI: Right.

BRAD: 'Cause I don't think he would do that to Rob. You know, and there's an uneasiness. You get very close, like, *Das Boot* close...

HRISHI: Uh-huh.

BRAD: ... doing a one-hour series. You know, it's unnerving, you know, when somebody leaves. I think we all were confused by Rob leaving.

HRISHI: Mhm.

BRAD: I certainly at one point said to him, "Don't do that."

HRISHI: Right. I think that you might have been the only other cast member who had worked with Josh. And certainly Aaron and Tommy had worked with him on *Sports Night*, but did it ever fall to you to—

BRAD: To explain him?

HRISHI: Yes, exactly.

BRAD: I think I may have insufficiently warned Allison that this guy was incredibly funny, but would probably make her cry, which happened on several occasions. And nobody loves Josh more than Allison. Actually, I hope somebody does.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

BRAD: But she loves him. But he—he'll bring you to tears. He'll find out what your insecurity is, and just joyously exploit it in public. And my lifelong task with Josh is just learning to understand his need to behave in the way he does, and not personalize it. It's almost like a kind of Al-Anon boot camp with him.

HRISHI: There's an episode of *Sports Night* where the set is possibly being haunted by a Greek ghost, like a trickster ancient figure...

BRAD: Right.

HRISHI: ... and Josh, in his role, sort of explains the motives of this character, and that always seemed to me like Aaron might have written that plot based on what Josh does, too. The idea is that this ghost provides humility.

BRAD: Are you saying that Josh provides humility?

HRISHI: It's impossible to really get too wrapped up in your own ego around him, because he'll always do something to deflate it.

BRAD: Until you watch him act, and then your ego inflates again.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

BRAD: [Laughter] No, absolutely. Josh is always walking around—you know, you see him do it on *Scandal*, too, you know, he's sort of, you know, keeping everybody honest, and reminding everybody else how lucky they are, you know, at least in terms of looks.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

BRAD: If it gets weird, he'll make fun of the weird. If it gets dark, he'll make fun of the dark, and get it out.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Okay, let's take a little break for a second, and we'll come back—we'll circle back to Will Bailey. There's another wincey moment...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ... where C.J. is talking to Albie Duncan, and they have this great conversation, and she keeps telling him, "Still, I think the other answer is better."

JOSH: Yeah. Oh, that's a good scene.

HRISHI: It's so good.

JOSH: I've—I don't remember the wincey part.

HRISHI: You know, she says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

C.J.: Still, I think the first answer's our winner. So, can I find an attractive aide and have her bring you some Schweppes Bitter Lemon?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then she calls Carol in.

HRISHI: And then she calls Carol in, and it's just icky.

JOSH: Yeah. But this—does it make you feel meta-icky? Or within the—I mean, within the world, I think they are—I think C.J. knows that it's icky. She's handling her client at that point. This is the kind of thing, maybe, this—maybe *he's* a little icky, and that's the kind of thing he responds to, so...

HRISHI: I don't know. That, I think, is splitting hairs.

JOSH: Well, I don't think it's splitting hairs. I think there's a distinction to be made, but maybe you just think it's the show being icky. See, I felt like, within that world, it's just C.J. going, like, I'm gonna indulge this guy.

HRISHI: I don't know. Maybe. It grosses me out. I think—well, certainly within the context of everything that's coming out. But even otherwise—I remember the first time that I watched this. There's actually a coincidence with what's happening right now. There were some reports—I don't know if you saw this, about George H. W. Bush...

JOSH: Oh, yes.

HRISHI: ... being handsy with several women, and they issued a statement and everything. And I suddenly remembered, when I was in college, a friend of mine, who was also in an all-female singing group, went and sang for George H. W. Bush, who is a Yale alum; and she showed me the photo that they took, the group photo, and she said, "In this photo, he has his hand on my butt."

JOSH: No! All those years ago.

HRISHI: Yup.

JOSH: Wait, when did you graduate?

HRISHI: 2000. And I said, "Really?" And she said, "Yes, and not just me—his other hand is on the butt of another girl on the other side of him." And it was just so gross and creepy.

JOSH: Oh, I'm with you! That's disgusting, that's horrible. I'm just saying, maybe Albie Duncan is like George H. W. Bush, and he's a little bit of a dirty old man, and, judge her if you will, but she's kind of indulging that.

HRISHI: I am—I will judge her.

JOSH: Yeah, as well you should. I think, actually, the companion scene to this little conversation—I don't know if it quite makes me wince, but I think it defies credibility—which is that in the spin room, after the debate, Albie Duncan is being interviewed, and he's trying to give his ten-word answer on free trade, and C.J. does him the favor.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

C.J.: I mean, doesn't he also know that Chinese political prisoners are gonna be sewing soccer balls together with their teeth whether we sell them cheeseburgers or not? I mention this because the president just reminded us that complexity isn't a vice.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Can you imagine [laughter] if Sarah Huckabee Sanders actually said that on camera to somebody? Like, it just is not a credible moment. I get, you know, I get the excitement, caught up in the moment of like, oh, she's, you know, giving him—she's throwing him a bone and letting him speak, you know, to the complexity of the issue. But the thing she actually says—can you imagine how—the headlines?

HRISHI: Yeah. All for the sake of nuance.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Okay, while we are on the subject of gripes...

JOSH: Okay.

HRISHI: You already alluded to this—the real heroism of Will Bailey is a little bit over-the-top, in that he's doing this Herculean task of managing a campaign of a candidate who's winning in a place that Democrats are unwinnable.

JOSH: [Announcer voice] And he still finds the time...

HRISHI: And the candidate dies... If the candidate were alive, it would still be an incredible task to have to manage that campaign. The candidate is dead, and he's still—and he's basically—he's running the show, he's a spokesperson. And then on top of that, he also happens to be the author of a speech that is so great that everyone is knocked out by it, on the very day that Sam happens to be meeting with him for the very first time.

JOSH: Absolutely. And he's also cleaning his oven. He's a multitasker. [Off Hrish's incomprehension] (It's advertising from my childhood.) It's exactly what I was saying earlier. These are all things that I would fault were they written about someone else's character. As I watched them, I was delighted at the heroism. No, but—but you're right. This is the kind of thing where I usually go, it's too good to be true, like, too—too much. But of course, this was my character. Just, every time the Gabe Tillman speech got mentioned, I was thinking, [whispered] "I wrote that!"

HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: "I wrote that!"

HRISHI: I like both of these details as stories about characters, and even about the same character; but to have them both happen at the same time, on the same day, just felt a little too much.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a little bit too much. One too many things.

HRISHI: I actually think of a line from *The West Wing* about, you know, a bill that's a Christmas tree, where the people just keep hanging ornaments onto it. It's called a Christmas tree because they—people just keep hanging things onto it.

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: Feels like that.

JOSH: That's good. Yeah. Well, there you go. Also, are we up to the press conference?

HRISHI: Not yet, but let's go to—there. Let's go to there. Jeez...

JOSH: "I want to go to there."

HRISHI: I'm Liz Lemon now.

JOSH: Yeah, exactly. Very good.

[30 Rock Episode 3.10 excerpt]

LIZ: I want to go to there.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That was the very first scene I filmed for this episode, or for *The West Wing*, ever. Press conferences are hard, because basically you have all the dialogue, and, you know, every now and then someone yells a question at you, and then you have another chunk. So my memory is really, really wanting that first day to go well, and really, really drilling my lines in a way that I usually don't. I'm usually very—I learn dialogue very, very quickly. On *Scandal*, ninety percent of

the time I learn it the morning of, as I'm sitting in the makeup chair. But this one, I took—it was like homework. I was like, "I am gonna show up, and I'm gonna thing done dead to rights," and I just remember that.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I was also delighted, this entire episode, to be directed by Alex Graves, who had directed me in five episodes of *Sports Night*, so I felt super put at ease by Alex. But also, in this episode, I get to utter yet another, I think, classic—certainly classic Will line, and a classic Aaron line, altogether, I think that people still will say back to me as if I wrote it, or as if I had anything to do with it.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

WILL: There are worse things in the world than no longer being alive. Yes?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's a great one.

JOSH: Which is a pretty frickin' great line of dialogue. And this is one of those things where, I mean, I devoured the script. When I got the first script of *The West Wing* that I knew I was going to be in, I was super psyched to read it, and I got to that scene, I was like, "Oh my God, I get to say this?"

HRISHI: I mean, it's not just the line. It's like watching an alley-oop, because the line comes from the reporter, "What's your point?" You see the ball sailing through the air, and then it gets dunked.

JOSH: Right. Well that's what—that's my feeling, with Aaron is—and great writing. He does all the work.

HRISHI: I love the way that he parcels out these great moments of dialogue really as dialogue between two people. You know, it isn't just, someone has written a great speech; it's not just a matter of monologues, you know, or oration. That line lands because it has this springboard to jump off of.

JOSH: Yeah, very well articulated. He's a great writer of dialogue.

HRISHI: Speaking of your fantastic preparation...

JOSH: Oh, no.

HRISHI: ... I have some thoughts from Rob Lowe...

JOSH: Oh, *no*.

HRISHI: ...on his first scenes with you.

JOSH: This is like *This Is Your Life*.

HRISHI: It is. "This Is Your First Episode."

JOSH: This one I have to hear now?

[Interview excerpt]

ROB LOWE (on the phone): I had not met Josh. I obviously knew who he was, and knew he was sort of in the Sorkin company of players.

HRISHI: Mhm.

ROB: But I felt like everybody on the show knew Josh but me. So I was excited to meet him and see what all the fuss was about.

HRISHI: And what did you think when you first met him?

ROB: I was underwhelmed.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

ROB: [Laughter] No, he was totally as advertised, so smart, really funny, and just clearly knew how to play the music, you know, which—usually on the show they did such a good job of casting that almost everybody that came in fit in seamlessly; but every once in a while you have somebody who'd come in, and you'd be like, "Do you know what show you're on?" He was like he was there forever.

HRISHI: Right.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's lovely of you, to actually go out of your way to talk to people, and very kind words from Rob. He couldn't have been nicer to me in terms of, you know, the unspoken situation of kind of passing the baton on to me. You know, it was unclear—I mean, I'll tell the story—at the point of filming this first episode, I knew the possibility of staying on as a regular was there, and that we were gonna make—do a few episodes (I think what was discussed was six), and see how the fit—how it fit. How the fit fit.

HRISHI: And people knew that Rob was leaving already.

JOSH: Yes, that's right. I think at this point it was—he was absolutely leaving. And he went on and did *A Few Good Men* soon after leaving, so he and Aaron are still on—on very good terms, and... Whatever it was, he couldn't have been nicer to me. I remember him inviting me into his trailer, and he was smoking a big cigar, and... [Laughter] He was just *Rob Lowe* on 11. And he

was nice, and laughing, and telling me stories, and telling me what to expect, and how people are, and it was all incredibly positive and very welcoming, and I thought that was very cool of him. And I was psyched to be shooting scenes with Rob Lowe.

HRISHI: Yeah. I mean, almost all of your scenes in this episode are with Rob Lowe.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Did you have much interaction with the rest of the cast on this episode, outside of the table read?

JOSH: No, I really—I don't think I did. I think I met everybody at the table read, but I think even there, I don't think I stayed to hobnob too much. My guess is I probably chatted it up with Brad for a little bit, and had some laughs, and left.

HRISHI: Because not only are your scenes so heavily just with Rob and with Danica McKellar, they're on location.

JOSH: Yeah. I even remember—I mean, this is—it's almost like a joke, given how poor my memory is—I remember where we shot the bar scene. There's a bar in L.A. on Pico called the San Francisco Saloon, and I still have a little, you know, twinge of memory every time I drive by it. Like, "Oh yeah, that's where I shot that scene with Rob." Like, it's just, the whole thing was such a pleasant experience. And then we had that little beach scene where he gives me the tie, and that was down in Santa Monica on the beach, and... It's fun to shoot on location, but I also remember I was jonesing to make it to the White House.

HRISHI: Right. Alex Graves, as you mentioned, directed this episode, and to me, this episode seemed like it had a different visual style than I think we've ever seen on the show before. So much of it is handheld. I'm trying to remember if there have been other moments of handheld—I think there have been, but there haven't been these extended—I mean, entire chunks of this episode, especially in the White House—all these scenes are shot handheld. And—like the cold open, all this stuff—it felt very different, and my theory is that it was to convey the adrenaline that was being, you know, pumped through everyone's veins as they got ready for this night.

JOSH: Absolutely. I completely agree with you. There's a grittiness, and—I think you're right, an adrenaline surge is the right way to put it—to the race. It's a different feeling from governing, and being in the White House, and daily life there, so the debate has its own look and feel, and the press conference that I give has that handheld, jerky kind of—you're just in it, you're, like, *in* the mix. And I do think you're right, that he shows a different whole kind of visual palette to tell the story of this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think it's neat, but I also found it confusing.

JOSH: Oh, you didn't like it? You found it a little jarring.

HRISHI: Yeah. Much like the camera itself, I was a little shaky on it.

JOSH: Yeah, fair enough. I actually like it. I get—I think it worked to tell the specific story of this episode.

HRISHI: Well, that's the thing: I don't think that it was poorly done or anything like that. I should clarify—I feel ambivalent about it. Because I think that it does help the feeling—I think it achieves—if that's what he set out to do, if that was the idea, then I think it's achieved. It felt like someone new covering a song that you really love.

JOSH: Interesting. Ah. It's a fertile arena for discussion, because television series—the endgame, from the network's point of view, and most people involved, is to make as many as possible; and to that end, there's a certain comfort-food...

HRISHI: Right. Same-yness.

JOSH: Yes, where you don't want to venture too far afield because you don't want people going, "Oh, that's not the show I bought into for three and a half seasons, I want it to..." But on quality shows like *The West Wing*, you also want to get quality directors, and quality directors want to push the envelope a little bit; and so I think there's some things that are growing pains with the style of a show. So for me this works, but I can understand how it might not sit exactly right to you, or take a little adjustment.

HRISHI: Right. I think it both works, and also I found it a little jarring, which I think is probably actually what it was supposed to do.

JOSH: Yeah, you're probably right.

HRISHI: Let's talk a little bit about the Horton Wilde campaign.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: There have been real-life examples of congressional races where a candidate died before the election and won. This isn't total science fiction by any means; there's been a few. In fact, one thing that's interesting is—so, sometimes a candidate will die before the election, then they'll be replaced on the ticket by someone else...

JOSH: Mhm.

HRISHI: ... but there's never been a moment where a candidate has died, and had—and their name has stayed...

JOSH: Remained...

HRISHI: ... on the election, and they didn't win.

JOSH: And they *didn't* win. Interesting. So it's actually not a terrible strategy.

HRISHI: Right. I mean, you'll...

JOSH: I mean, you have to be fully committed to the end result to get that way.

HRISHI: Yeah, 'cause then you'll—there'll be a special election, some other sort of moment, but it's sort of like extra innings. You're getting the chance to go into extra innings when you do that. And knowing that that is a trend makes sense to me, because you would only keep the name on—like, there's so much confidence in that... You know, even as Will says, you know, like, the ideas live on. You have to believe in it so much that—you have to really feel like, yes, I'm gonna be able to win, even without the candidate being physically alive.

JOSH: Well, I think in a way he's tilting at windmills a little bit, and it's a little bit of a Stackhouse approach, which is, the ideas are more important, ultimately...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... than the end result. And that's what he's saying, and he's got an opportunity to keep these worthwhile and relevant ideas out in the marketplace, regardless of the end result. And I do like—I like the anger in Will in the bar scene, when Sam has the nerve to tell him that he's an embarrassment.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

SAM: It's embarrassing, Will.

WILL: There's a campaign being waged here, and I'm not embarrassed by it. There are things being talked about, things you believe in, things the White House believes in, and they're only gonna be talked about in a blowout, and you know it. And you know there's no glory in it, and you still come here twice and tell me my guy's a joke.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There is a specific campaign that I think this might have drawn inspiration from, which is the Mel Carnahan campaign in 2000. In 2000, Mel Carnahan ran against John Ashcroft, who was then a senator, a Republican senator—this was in Missouri—and in October, just a few weeks before the election, Mel Carnahan was in a plane crash, and he died.

JOSH: Mhm.

HRISHI: But he stayed on the ticket. So I got an email through Kathleen Unwin, who handles our sponsorships from Radiotopia—she lives in St. Louis, and she has friends who listen to the podcast—and Kathleen connected me with one of her friends, Tony Wyche, who was the communications director for Mel Carnahan...

JOSH: Get outta here.

HRISHI: ... and his wife, Sarah. Side note, by the way: You may have seen the Halloween costume of the ten-year-old girl who went as mini-C.J. Cregg.

JOSH: Yes, indeed I did. Oh, no, it's their kid.

HRISHI: Tony and Sarah's daughter.

JOSH: Wow. Full circle.

HRISHI: So here are some thoughts from them. I'm quoting Sarah now: "We kept going, 'Oh, my God,' as we watched. We knew it was obviously inspired by what happened on Mel's campaign, but had forgotten some of the specific things in the episode that seemed like they had been lifted from the actual campaign, but which have never been discussed publicly, as far as we know."

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: "The one that was most striking was the conversation that took place between Sam Seaborn and Will Bailey. Tony could remember the exact timing was probably two weeks before the election, just after the memorial service; but Jim Jordan, who at the time worked for the Democratic Senate [sic] Campaign Committee, came out to collect a refund check that the DSCC had given the campaign."

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: They needed the money back to reallocate to races that were now higher priorities. Until the plane crash, the Carnahan–Ashcroft race was the single most competitive race in the country. It was the Northam–Gillespie of Senate races in 2000. And she continues: "While Jim was in the office, he said to Tony, 'You understand why I have to do this, right?' almost apologetically. Jim was our friend, and we talked to him just about every single day. He was really heartbroken for us. Anyway, Tony looked at him and said, 'Yeah, I absolutely understand. But also, we're gonna win.' And we did."

JOSH: Wow. I remember talking about the Carnahan campaign; I don't remember being let in on this private anecdote. That's quite a story.

HRISHI: Mhm. So thanks to Tony and Sarah for that.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Oh, I should say this. So this is from Tony and Sarah. Tony was the communications director, and on the night of the plane crash, he was the person who read the statement confirming what had happened to the national press.

JOSH: Oof.

HRISHI: And his wife, Sarah—his now-wife, at the time was not his wife—was the deputy communications director.

JOSH: How about that.

HRISHI: Mhm. And now they have a little mini-C.J.

JOSH: We haven't talked about Leo and Jordan and Kumar.

HRISHI: Yes. "Leveraging the *Mastico*."

JOSH: "Leveraging the *Mastico*."

HRISHI: Let's leverage the *Mastico* now.

JOSH: Let's. Why not? Would the Chief of Staff be engaging in such high-level foreign diplomacy? I wonder. I wonder aloud to you.

HRISHI: As opposed to, say, the Secretary of State?

JOSH: Yes, that—[Laughter]—that would be my amateur view. That may be who I'd go with.

HRISHI: I mean, technically the Secretary of State kind of works for Leo.

JOSH: Right, but you'd think would—maybe in the loop? [laughter] I don't know—actually the truth is, I don't mean this as a sarcastic—I wonder whether this kind of meeting... It probably does happen, but it was interesting. As I kept watching the whole thing unfold, I thought what this is like—especially, I mean, he's playing quite a game of brinksmanship on his own, and he's not even conferring with the president (who's actually engaged in the debate at the time), he's not taking any phone calls or checking in with the Secretary of State. Like, he's—Leo's, you know, going beast.

HRISHI: Yeah. Recently there was an exchange between Jordan and Leo where Leo called her out for using the phrase "cloak and dagger," but this really does feel like cloak and dagger, now that you mention—just this kind of geopolitical crisis potentially being waged between three people—you know, an ambassador, a Chief of Staff, and, just, a lawyer.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: You know, especially—it's just the three of them are...

JOSH: The stakes are rather high.

HRISHI: Really high.

JOSH: And if this doesn't go the way Leo thinks it's going to, he's gonna have some 'splainin' to do.

HRISHI: I have a question: Does the ambassador to Kumar, Nissir—does he know that the U.S. is responsible for Shareef's death? He has a line where he says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

NISSIR: Mr. McGarry, I think we are both men, and we both know there is a charade being enacted here.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's where I thought it was headed, when he said that—

HRISHI: That's what—I thought so. But then he says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

NISSIR: I understand Western politics, and I understand President Bartlet is unable to admit Israel's complicity in the death of the sultan's brother during a close election.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And so then I thought, wait, does he genuinely think that Israel did it? Because I thought the whole game here is that it's a misinformation campaign.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, I think it's gotta be that he knows what really happened, nobody's going to say it, and so he's going from one second to saying, "Look, you and I both know the truth," and then going back into playing the game.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Otherwise it doesn't really make sense to me. So I think it's just super sly, wink-wink...

HRISHI: But then Leo says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

LEO: You think the president's afraid that if he admitted complicity in Shareef's death, he would lose votes in this country?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Nissir is saying *Israel's* complicity, but then Leo says [unintelligible]...

JOSH: [Unintelligible] Yeah, I know.

HRISHI: ... the president's *own* complicity. So that made it confusing.

JOSH: Yeah, I bumped on that a little bit, too. Like, why is *he* saying it? If the other guy is not gonna say it...

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: ...then why is Leo saying it? Yeah, there's something slightly off there.

HRISHI: Or, you know, Nissir is saying, "We know there's a charade. I'm gonna speak in the language of the charade."

JOSH: Right. But then Leo snaps out of it.

HRISHI: Yeah. He's like, fine, okay, it's a charade. But it's not—we're not playing the charade because it would somehow hurt our reputation here, domestically.

JOSH: Yeah. I guess Leo just goes full cards-on-the-table.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's his move. And then, actually, I thought it was odd—you know, it was kind of funny, but odd—that Jordan's exit line is something about godless infidels.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

JORDAN: Excuse me. I have a meeting of godless infidels next door.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: I was like, why'd she say that?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That was [bleep] rude. Like, she's the—she's supposed to be the calm, like, measured lawyer.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Like, why'd you say that? That—what, you just had to be offensive on the—like, what?

HRISHI: Yup. We haven't yet talked about the actual debate.

JOSH: No, we have not.

HRISHI: Should we turn our attention there?

JOSH: Do, let's.

HRISHI: Du-lets Hill. I don't know what to say about it, because it's just—I feel like it's perfect.

JOSH: I think so too. It's exquisite.

HRISHI: It defies commentary in some ways, positive or negative, 'cause I think anything positive about it is gilding the lily, and I have nothing negative to say.

JOSH: Yeah. It's funny, I didn't write down much either, although it's, you know, arguably the highlight of this episode.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's just kind of perfectly executed. Although, you know, the only thing that I thought was funny was, you know, they have the moment—actually, and I love this moment—where I think Ritchie actually says...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

GOVERNOR RITCHIE: It's over.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You'll be back.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And I love that, the whole, just, sense of that this was the *coup de grâce*, and the election's actually over. But I also had a little bit of a “Trump, ai yi yi” moment where I felt, you know—not quite to this extent, but watching the debates between Clinton and Trump, like, I was like, okay, well, it's got to be essentially over now, right?

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Like, he was a [bleep]ing doofus who doesn't understand anything about policy, and she couldn't be better prepared. And I was like, okay, oh, it doesn't work like that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So I don't know if the world has changed, or this is just a—a nice fiction in the *West Wing* world where somebody could be knocked out intellectually in one round.

HRISHI: That's why I asked that question to Ron Klain last time, too—was, you know, how do you really determine the victor in a debate? Because I'll say, “Yeah, that person won, I think,” but then in the end they lose the election and so we're getting it wrong.

JOSH: Yeah. I guess the answer is when one of the two candidates says to the other, “Ah, it's over.” [Laughter] That's very rare, but that's the way you can really judge victory.

HRISHI: I thought of you, Josh, and your love-slash-hate when the characters all get to go around and say...

JOSH: Anything.

HRISHI: [Laughter] and then they all say, "I serve at the pleasure of the president."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: All of you serve at the pleasure of the president. I will say, this episode is called "Game On." I think they say the words "game on" a few times too many.

JOSH: It is said a lot.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt montage]

LEO: Game on.

ABBEY: Game on, boyfriend.

SAM: Game on.

[end montage]

JOSH: Pretty sure Josh has one.

HRISHI: He does, and that's really the one that I object to most. That one...

JOSH: Because Brad.

HRISHI: It's after this epic line...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: ... 12.6 out of the state budget of 50 billion. I'm supposed to be using this time for a question, so here it is: Can we have it back, please?

[applause]

JOSH: Game on!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It literally sounds like, in his delivery, the beginning of another round of kung fu battle in a video game.

HRISHI: [Laughter] And then Sam says, "Strike 'em out, throw 'em out." Which...

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: I don't know. The only—

JOSH: You're not wrong.

HRISHI: And as I said, I have nothing negative to say about the moments of the debate. The characters' reactions to some of the stuff around the debate is another matter. I really loved C.J.'s line, though...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

C.J.: It's not gonna be Uncle Fluffy.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This is the source for our lovely moment with Lin in "What's Next"...

JOSH: Yes.

["What's Next" excerpt]

You ain't gettin' Uncle Fluffy, mother[bleep]ers. WHAT'S NEXT?!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I did think, "He gave him the tie!"

HRISHI: "He gave him the tie!" [Laughter]

JOSH: I thought of you, watching it.

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: A lot of tie work. A lot of—three separate tie mentions in this episode.

HRISHI: *Panang* curry, massaman curry, green curry.

JOSH: [Laughter] Mhm. Very good.

HRISHI: I was mentally combining two moments between Leo and the president. When Leo has this really sweet moment where he walks out with the president to say...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

Leo: *There's nothing you can do that's not gonna make me proud of ya.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Aw.

HRISHI: But that's, like, a very paternal moment. It is—

JOSH: There's something that just absolutely got to me. I'm glad you remembered that. I made note, but I forgot.

HRISHI: That's funny. You know, I—we've talked about how the president and Leo play this role of sort of mother and father, and I think many people on the—in the cast have said that vibe was echoed on set as well, that Martin Sheen was like the—they were like the parents as well. But I—for some reason I have this gendered in my mind—that Leo was the mom. And so when I—when this moment happened, I thought it was very maternal, not paternal for some reason.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: But I liked that they could turn these sort of either paternal or maternal approaches to one another as well.

JOSH: Mhm.

HRISHI: It's not just with the staff who are below them.

JOSH: It's such a generous thing to say. "There's nothing you can do that's not gonna make me proud of you."

HRISHI: Really. Yeah.

JOSH: I love that.

HRISHI: But I thought in that moment, as they were out of the—to the portico, I thought, oh, right, I think Leo gives him a kiss on the cheek, and I was thinking, "*He's gonna give him the kiss!*"

JOSH: [Laughter]

HRISHI: But that's another moment from another episode.

JOSH: Ah. Spoiler alert.

HRISHI: No, it already happened.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Um...

JOSH: Things that already happened are still spoiler alerts for me.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Of all the bromances in *The West Wing*, and there are many...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ... the relationship between Leo and, and—

JOSH: It's special.

HRISHI: There is no height or depth where they can reach that will ever feel too sentimental or cheesy to me. I am here for all of it.

JOSH: I'm with you. Down for all of it.

HRISHI: Yup. Let's take a quick break, and then when we come back, let's talk a little bit more about your origin story.

JOSH: Right on.

HRISHI: Joining us now on *The West Wing Weekly*: my co-host, Joshua Malina, who plays Will Bailey, makes his debut on *The West Wing* in this episode. Josh, thanks so much for joining us.

JOSH: Thanks for having me. Do I get a pin?

HRISHI: You can have all the pins you want.

JOSH: Fantastic.

HRISHI: Alright, let's start from the beginning. Josh, how did you get the role of Will Bailey?

JOSH: My friend gave it to me! [Laughter]

HRISHI: Did you have to audition?

JOSH: I did not, actually, which is a delight—to have gotten a job on a show of this stature, that was a giant hit, without having to work for it. The extent to which I worked for it amounted to a single email that I wrote to Aaron. Just to quickly establish the framework of my career at this time, I had done *Sports Night*, but then a bunch of other things. *Sports Night* was the most significant job of my career. That ended, and I did a few other things, and then got a sitcom co-starring with Hank Azaria. It was called *Imagine That*. I was working on that show. On the strength of the thirteen-episode pickup, I bought my first house, my wife and I did, and I moved into it on October 31, 2001, right in the thick of shooting this first season of *Imagine That*. And the day I moved in, literally the day, it's Halloween, my wife's out of town—my pregnant wife is

out of town with our four-year-old daughter, trick-or-treating with our in-laws, or *my* in-laws, in Sacramento. I'm alone in my house, having a moment of great satisfaction because I've bought a house, I've done it, with my acting career; and that night I get a call saying, "Don't come into work tomorrow." And I'm like, "What? What do you mean?" "No big deal. NBC doesn't love the script, we're gonna rework it," blah blah blah. Now, long story short, we never went back to work.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: But it took six months for that to become clear. Never got paid for any more episodes, was immediately plunged into financial anxiety and self-doubt and a career wreck as I was trying to figure out how to pay for this house. Somewhere in there, I noticed in *Variety*—industry publication—that Rob Lowe was considering leaving *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: That early on? That long ago?

JOSH: Yeah. I mean, it was October, 2001 that I moved into my house and things started to fall apart, so—you know, and it was October, 2002 that my first episode of...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... *West Wing* aired. So it wasn't that...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. So, somewhere in there I read about Rob Lowe. I immediately wrote an email to Aaron, who's been a friend of mine for a long time, and I wish I had it, but I remember it—centrally, I said, "I'm just pitching here, but if he does leave, how about a less famous, less good-looking actor who'd be willing to work for less money?" Just, literally the most shameless few lines I've ever written. I sent it off, and soon thereafter I got a response from Aaron, saying, "You know, Tommy and I were just talking about this." I don't know if I believed that then, I don't know that I believe it today, but I remember calling my wife saying, "Melissa, come over here! He wrote back! Look what it says!" And I had this just gleam in my eye, like this could possibly happen. And then not long after that, I guess it turned out that Rob, in fact, had decided to leave the show, and Aaron said, "Hey, come meet me." I think he was living at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills at that point, and I drove out there. I sat with Aaron, and he said, "Look, here's what we're gonna do. You're gonna do six episodes of the show, and, you know, if you're happy, and we're happy, and it feels like a good fit, you'll be a regular on *The West Wing*." And then he said, "Now let me tell you a little bit about the character," and I remember at the time, the character was going to be called Benjamin Beatty. I don't know why. I do know that Aaron had a friendship and a working relationship with Warren Beatty. Warren Beatty has a son named Benjamin, I believe, and objected to the name—didn't want Aaron to use it, so ultimately the name was changed. And I remember Aaron telling me about this—the young guy, and like—you know—I don't know—I don't remember exactly what he said. And funny—there's a part of me—even as fantastic as this moment was, you would think I would have wanted to savor it, but I remember a part of me just wanted to leave so I could call Melissa...

HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: ... and say, "I've got six episodes of work on *The West Wing!*" But he kept filling me in, and I do remember one really funny moment where Aaron kind of slowed down and got really serious, and in hushed tones said, "Now... the character's not Jewish." [Laughter] I remember saying, "Dude, I don't care! [Laughter] That's not important to me!" Like, "Ah, I thought you were gonna tell me I'm not getting paid! I was worried there for a second." But I just thought that was funny, and there was something sweet about that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Like I might object. I was like, "Dude, I'm an actor."

HRISHI: It's interesting that he—that before he shot anything with you that he already knew that he wasn't Jewish.

JOSH: Yeah. I know we had that conversation. I have to say, in retrospect, looking back, I'm not even sure why he knew, or why it was important. I don't know if it was ever made explicit.

HRISHI: Well, I've thought about this. I have actually considered this generally. You know, knowing that you are Jewish, and how your Judaism has been a part of your moments of plot in *Sports Night*—you know, for example, that Aaron obviously has—knows this about you as well, and hasn't shied away from it in Jeremy Goodwin's character. But Will Bailey is explicitly not, I know, and I thought, why is that? And I thought, maybe is it—is there a quota issue? You know, that he thought that there's already Josh Lyman...

JOSH: I think I made a—made that joke to him. I think I said to him, "Oh, you've got Josh and Toby..."

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: "... and no more than two?" I think I actually said something like that, and, uh, maybe the answer was yes, I don't really remember. [Laughter] That part's a blur.

HRISHI: He needed some kind of Abrahamic balance for the fact that he has a Quaker playing a Jew in Brad, that he had to have a Jew playing a non-Jew?

JOSH: [Laughter] Perhaps so. But, uh, yeah, that was... You know, Aaron has been very, very good to me over the years, and this was one of those things that I—talk about a gift.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: To have Aaron Sorkin writing—creating a new role for you on *The West Wing*, this megahit that was, you know—and I was a huge fan of the show. I mean, I loved it. This was a good day in the Malina household.

HRISHI: I wonder if Emily Proctor's experience played into things to your benefit at all. You know, were they had someone who they really liked, and who was woven into the stories, and, you know, there was a chance, maybe, to keep her; but then they lost her, ultimately, and after investing so much into that character—you know Emily Proctor then went to *CSI*—that it was built into the pudding. This time around, they said, "Okay, we're gonna give you these episodes, and we're gonna—you know, we're gonna see how it goes, and if we like it, and if we like you, then we're gonna make this thing permanent."

JOSH: Yeah. You know, it's funny. When I think about it, too, I mean, it's a testament to Aaron's and Tommy's belief in me. I can't believe NBC was thrilled with the idea. And first of all, I mean, I didn't replace Rob Lowe. Rob decided to leave. I didn't come on and play his part, you know? I mean, it...

HRISHI: Right. No, hardly. I think it's just the same as, Ainsley certainly wasn't a replacement for Mandy.

JOSH: Right. So I'm always kind of—it always feels slightly off when people say, "How did you feel about replacing him?" or, "Did he care?" or, you know, "How did he treat you?" Like, it's Rob Lowe. You know, he was not concerned with me. He was doing his own thing, and he was leaving. He couldn't have been nicer to me. But when I think about it from a network's point of view—you know, I'm sure I wasn't a blip on their radar.

HRISHI: Right. Alright, I'm gonna play you the rest of the conversation I had with Rob Lowe.

[Interview excerpt]

ROB (on the phone): Hey!

HRISHI: Hi, how's it going?

ROB: How's everything, man?

HRISHI: Good! Thank you so much for doing this.

ROB: Oh, yeah! No, are you kidding? I can't let the greatest moment in *West Wing* history go by without, you know, weighing in.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Awesome. Well, tell me, what do you remember of that day? Do you remember shooting that episode?

ROB: Yeah. Here's what I remember. It's funny, *The West Wing*, for me, is one of those things that I have such a strong attachment to, and it takes me back, and I have so many feelings around it that I think for the regular person it would kind of be like if you could go back to Christmas Eve of being 14—it would be really fun for about five minutes, and then it would be really intense and weird. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Right. And when Josh came on and you had to do your scenes together, the first scenes, when you were rehearsing—did it take a lot of rehearsal to sort of groove—I know you said that it felt like he knew the material and the vibe, but in terms of figuring out the chemistry between Will and Sam?

ROB: It was just one of those things. I don't know if it's a tribute to the casting, to the writing, or to the actors, but it was one of those things where we showed up and it was all happenin'—you know, very little discussion. I think whatever—I mean I think I was probably coming at it from a really great, organic place of, like, I don't know who this guy is, right, really, but he would know who Sam Seaborn was.

HRISHI: Right.

ROB: And so he's coming with something he doesn't know about as an actor, and I'm in an area where I'm like, who's this new guy? So you kind of already are starting from an organically honest, authentic place, I think.

HRISHI: Right. Is it hard—with the feeling of the fourteen-year-old on Christmas, and it being fun for five minutes—is it hard to talk about this time in your life?

ROB: By the way—and it's good—you know, I hope nobody misinterprets it—it's all *great* intensity, but it's just overwhelming.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ROB: Because, you know, part of you is like, you wish it could be that way again. Which I think is the key to why the show continues to resonate, and why it currently is having such a resurgence, is you—you know, the viewer, you go, "I wish it could be that way again," both in terms of, you know, our actual government, or turning on a network television show and seeing something like that. And it's no different for the actors, I don't think. I mean, you know, I look at it and go, "I wish I was going to work every day on something like that," and it's just really not to be. So, you enjoy it, it's great, then—but then you gotta live in the present.

HRISHI: Right. Is there anything else about when you first met Josh over that first episode that you want to share?

ROB: I think I learned very early on from Whitford to give him a lot of [expletive deleted]. You know that famous play, *Love Letters*, where it's people reading aloud, you know, letters of love, you know—ran forever, it's very, very famous. I would like to see a staged reading of Malina and Whitford's tweets to each other.

HRISHI: [Laughter] I think we would all like that.

ROB: I mean, it's just too good. Those two should do a traveling show. So the main thing I remember was just the *unrelenting*—just tsunami of crap that Brad would give to Josh, and Josh would give back. And I have to say, you know, if it were a heavyweight fight, I gotta give Josh the victory on points.

HRISHI: Wow. That is high praise.

ROB: Is it?

HRISHI: Mhm.

ROB: You don't want to tangle with Brad.

HRISHI: That's true.

ROB: No one's saying—you don't want to tangle with him.

HRISHI: Right. But, so it was like that from the beginning? That dynamic was there right away?

ROB: Yeah, and I think it probably goes back to when they were, you know—Josh got to be in the movie *A Few Good Men* and Brad didn't.

HRISHI: Oh, right. [Laughter]

ROB: [Laughter]

HRISHI: Wow. Well, that explains a lot, actually.

ROB: Uh, yeah! [Laughter]

HRISHI: [Laughter] Rob, thank you so much. That was great.

ROB: Oh, good. I'm so glad. There's so much going on, but when I heard this, I was like, "Oh, well, come on, I gotta, like..."

HRISHI (over Rob): I really appreciate it.

ROB (continuing): "... famous moment of the show." And I love my *West Wing Weekly* swag, and my little thing you sent me, and I appreciate it, and...

HRISHI: Oh, awesome.

ROB: Yeah, it's great. Keep up the good work! It's so much fun. I'm loving the podcast. It's all great.

HRISHI: Thank you so much.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It'd be fun to get John Wells on here someday, and ask him how he felt about it all.

HRISHI: That's what I was wondering, was—obviously you'd worked with Aaron and Tommy before on *Sports Night*, but did you know John Wells?

JOSH: No, I didn't at all. And I'm excited to have him on in the future, and also talk about the transition when Tommy and Aaron left, because John Wells, in his time, would be incredibly good to me in some very specific ways that I'm excited to share down the line, and he was a wonderful boss. And I bet he will be candid, and it wouldn't surprise me, nor offend me, if there was resistance to the idea of bringing me on board. I mean, this was a hit show. There were all sorts of names and people that I think would raise eyebrows in a positive way at a network that would have been happy to be on the show.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So this was a gift to me.

HRISHI: How long until you felt the effects of that gift, in terms of—when you got the job, we didn't have Twitter at that time, so you can't broadcast immediately to everyone, "I got this job on *The West Wing*," but certainly when your episode actually aired, did you hear from people?

JOSH: You know, I don't even really remember. What I remember is—I remember—I like to read anything. If there's a review, I want to read it; if people are writing about it on the boards, I want to read it. Because I get a kick out of it, I'm curious, and I have the skin of a rhino—like, nothing's gonna throw me. So I do remember—it's funny, having talked to him—I remember TWOP, Television Without Pity, and going there, 'cause they would do these funny—they'd do a synopsis of every episode, and then they had message boards, and people *really* told you what they thought there. And just one comment that stuck out that I absolutely loved was just a reference to me as "that horrible little man who replaced Rob Lowe."

HRISHI: Mhm. [Laughter]

JOSH: [Laughter] Which I got a kick out of.

HRISHI: How about when the episode aired? How did you watch it? Did you have a party?

JOSH: I'm sure I did not have a party, and I don't remember.

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: I mean, I just don't. It's funny, I remember making the episode, and shooting it and all the specifics. I don't remember—I'm guessing I sat and watched it with my wife.

HRISHI: Maybe you were working. I mean, maybe the reason you don't remember it is because at that point, by the time it aired, you would be somewhere in that six-episode run.

JOSH: Yeah, I may well have been working when it first aired. I want to assure people I won't talk about myself this much in coming episodes, lest they feel that the entire endeavor has now taken a horrible left turn into me holding court about myself.

HRISHI: Let me ask you about—maybe you’ve already answered this question previously in this conversation—

JOSH: Or maybe I’ll do a better job this time.

HRISHI: This was now the something-eth time that you had read words written by Aaron Sorkin. You’ve talked a little bit about how Will Bailey is a little different from you, but were you concerned at all with finding a lane for Will Bailey that was distinct from Jeremy Goodwin in *Sports Night*?

JOSH: Yeah, that’s a fair question, and a good question. I don’t remember being too concerned about it. I’m sure it flibbed through my mind because they share certain traits. But, one, nobody watched *Sports Night*, so that took the pressure off—worrying that masses of people were gonna say, “He’s just like Jeremy!”

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: And two, I felt the major share of that burden lay with Aaron.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: And I do feel that there were similarities, but they’d feel—they always felt to me as distinct characters. I don’t spend a lot of time—you know, I’m not the kind of person who would have—the kind of actor who would write down, “This is what Jeremy is like, and this is what Will is like. Here’s how they’re different.” So it’s not like I gave it great thought. And when I looked back and I watched this first episode, that was something that went through my mind. I wanted to see how it felt, and to me they feel very different.

HRISHI: They do as well to me.

JOSH: There’s an energy level, and a neurosis, and an anxiety, and sort of underlying sort of insecurity-slash-madness to Jeremy that I don’t see in the much better functioning, on top of things, type A without all the baggage Will Bailey that I see in this episode.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah, to me, at least in the time that we spend with Jeremy on *Sports Night*, he feels like a junior guy. Will Bailey comes across immediately as a boss.

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

WILL: ... just a second. Darren and Sharon, where are you? Alright, this is good, but don't ever use the words "waiting period."

CAMPAIGN STAFFER: I thought the point of this statement was to support a stricter waiting period for handguns.

WILL: The point is to get one. "Waiting period" sounds like an inconvenience. Keeping guns away from felons is an issue of national necessity.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. I think Jeremy is younger in several different meanings of the word.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He's less fully formed, he's less mature, he's less ready for life in the professional workplace.

HRISHI: Right. And I didn't mean to—my question was not because I felt there was any danger of them having any overlap. It's really more at the fact that there is no overlap, that they do seem like such distinct characters. I was just trying to figure out—you know, you've got the same face, you've got this guy writing the same words. How did that happen? How did you manage to pull that off?

JOSH: Yeah. No, I think it's really—all credit to Aaron, who wrote two not incredibly dissimilar characters, you know—this guy's a producer, and this guy's a gunslinger who's looking for revenge—it's like...

HRISHI: Right, yeah.

JOSH: They're not *incredibly* dissimilar, it could be an issue, but I think he wrote Will Bailey in a subtly different vein from Jeremy.

HRISHI: Mhm. Having done so many episodes of *Sports Night*, how did this compare in terms of the difficulty level?

JOSH: That's funny, a couple people threw that question at me on Twitter, and I think I would describe them both as not difficult. I don't know, it's just—I'm not easily daunted, so I wasn't, you know, terrified or scared, I'm sure I had—

HRISHI: Your one foot of real estate was in place.

JOSH: Yes, I was definitely in the right—I was in game mode, and I was in the right headspace, frankly because I had trained for this moment. They're throwing two-minute drills at the president—I had done forty-five episodes of *Sports Night* and 750 performances of *A Few Good Men*, so I—you know, I didn't go to acting school, but I trained in the Aaron Sorkin conservatory, and it served me well when I stepped onto the *West Wing* set. I was—you know, I was confident—I'm sure I had first-day nerves, I am human—but I felt prepared. And when the writing is great, and the other actors are great, and you have a great director, it just isn't difficult. It was joy, it was absolute joy to step onto that set and to work with those people, so... Difficult is when the writing is really bad, and you still want people to like what it is you're making. And that's when—you know, when you're in the wrong gear, and you're running faster and faster but it's just not taking. And when the writing's great, you know, everything clicks, and you just—it's pretty easy. You just let it happen.

HRISHI: Mhm. That's pretty cool. Have you ever asked Aaron about his own speechwriting? You're coming in playing a speechwriter. I was wondering if you'd ever—there's this conversation that happens between Will and Sam...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

WILL: You've ghosted for senators, movie stars, I think the King of Belgium one time. Do you say anything?

SAM: No.

WILL: Why?

SAM: Because speechwriters don't do that.

WILL: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Of course, I've wondered many times—I'll watch a speech from a presidential candidate and say, "Jeez, this guy should hire Aaron Sorkin." And then I thought, surely somebody has—

JOSH: Maybe he has.

HRISHI: People have tried, I'm sure. And I wonder if anyone has actually successfully done that. Do you know if Aaron's ever written, or ghostwritten, for a candidate?

JOSH: I don't know the answer to that. You know what's the truth, too? I never had the slightest doubt that I was going to be a regular on the show.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah. And I don't know—I don't know if it's like my incredible confidence—I think—it at least felt to me like that was the deal. You know, really what he was saying is, "If you suck," you know, "don't say, 'Hey, you promised me,'" or something like... You know, like, it felt like the way this was meant to be. Or there may have been an element—I wish I could remember the exact [unintelligible]—there may have been an element where it wasn't 100 percent sure that Rob was leaving yet.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Although I think it was resolved by then.

HRISHI: It certainly seems like it. The plotting in this episode is really, we're gaining steam very quickly, setting up the fact that he'll offer to run for Horton Wilde. He'll make this promise to Kay

Wilde. And the giving of the tie—I mean, it really feels—the fact that it’s not just a campaign, there’s also this other detail of, he’s also a great speechwriter.

JOSH: Right. There was that. I mean, I guess also—when Aaron said that, at that first meeting, “Look, and after six, if you’re happy and we’re happy,” what he was saying is, if they were happy. Like, the odds that I was gonna say, “You know what, doesn’t feel like a great fit to me, I’d like to go,” were zero. So I think what he was just saying was, “We have an out.” Like, “We’re not committing to you *now* that you’re a regular,” and, you know, “We’ll see how you do.”

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Alright, let’s wrap it up, right?

HRISHI: Thanks so much for listening to this episode. From here on out, things are gonna be different.

JOSH: That is true. But not like this episode was different. We won’t talk about me that much. Although I enjoyed it; this was like, nice little, like, *This Is Your Life* moment for me. It was kind of you. I appreciated your asking people to weigh in.

HRISHI: I’ll be talking about you this much.

JOSH: Okay. I’ll be Duncan. Come join us next time, won’t you?

HRISHI: We’ll be joined by a special guest.

[Interview excerpt]

CLARK GREGG (on the phone): I’m Clark Gregg, and I played Agent Mike Casper on *The West Wing*.

[excerpt end]

JOSH: Oooh, Agent Casper.

HRISHI: For episode 4.07.

JOSH: Agent Coulsper.

HRISHI: Exactly. Until then, you can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and on our website, thewestwingweekly.com.

JOSH: Yeah, you can. You can find a cavalcade of lovely *West Wing Weekly* merchandise at thewestwingweekly.com/merch. *Chanukah’s* [guttural “ch”] around the corner. *Christmas* [same guttural “ch”] is soon after. *Chwanzaa* also coming up. You’re gonna want to festoon your tree, and your friends, with shirts and pins and hats and lovely things from our podcast.

HRISHI: This episode was produced by me, along with Josh, with help from Zach McNees and Margaret Miller.

JOSH: *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia. Thanks to everybody who made donations. We're blown away by the generosity of our listeners. Radiotopia is, of course, a selection of the finest podcasts in the land. It can be accessed at radiotopia.fm. It's made possible by PRX. Okay.

HRISHI: Okay.

ROB and BRAD: What's next?

[Outro Music]

VOICE: Radiotopia, from PRX.

JOSH: Big thanks to Adzerk for providing their ad-serving platform to Radiotopia.