

The West Wing Weekly
0.01: West Wing Reunion (Live from ATX)

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway. We'll hear from my co-host Joshua Malina a little later, because I'm in Austin at the ATX Television Festival, and instead of bringing you a recap and discussion this week, we're very excited to share with you an event that happened here on Saturday, June 11th. You're about to hear a recording of a panel called 'The West Wing Administration: Ten Years Later.' The panel is introduced by ATX Television Festival's founders, Caitlin McFarland and Emily Gipson, who've graciously allowed us to present the recording on our show. Before the panel starts, you're gonna hear a clip from the pilot episode, and then, a conversation with Aaron Sorkin, Tommy Schlamme, Janel Moloney, Richard Schiff, Bradley Whitford, Dulé Hill, Melissa Fitzgerald, and of course, our own Josh Malina, and it's all moderated by MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell, who was a writer and producer on The West Wing. If you want to discuss this episode with Josh or me, or with fellow West Wing Weekly listeners, you can leave a comment on our website, TheWestWingWeekly.com, or on our Facebook page: Facebook.com/TheWestWingWeekly. You can also tweet at us: [@WestWingWeekly](https://twitter.com/WestWingWeekly), or [@JoshMalina](https://twitter.com/JoshMalina), or [@HrishiHirway](https://twitter.com/HrishiHirway). And now, here's 'The West Wing Administration,' live at the ATX Television Festival.

[The West Wing Administration: Ten Years Later excerpt]

[CHEERING]

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

MIKE: It's a nice morning, Mr. McGarry.

LEO: We'll take care of that in a hurry, won't we, Mike?

MIKE: Yes, sir.

BONNIE: Don't kill the messenger, Leo.

LEO: Oh, why the hell not, Bonnie?

BONNIE: Five minutes.

LEO: Please. Hey, Emma.

EMMA: Morning.

LEO: Wilson.

WILSON: Hey, Leo.

LEO: Joe.

JEFFREY: It's Jeffrey.

LEO: Whatever.

LEO: *[calls] Josh!*

DONNA: *Morning, Leo.*

LEO: *Hey, Donna. Is he in yet?*

DONNA: *Yeah.*

LEO: *Can you get him?*

DONNA: *[yells] Josh!*

LEO: *Thanks.*

DONNA: *I heard it's broken.*

LEO: *You heard wrong.*

DONNA: *I heard--*

LEO: *It's a mild sprain. He'll be back later today.*

DONNA: *And what was the cause of the accident?*

LEO: *What are you, from State Farm? Go. Do a job, would ya?*

DONNA: *I'm just...*

LEO: *He was swerving to avoid a tree.*

DONNA: *And what happened?*

LEO: *He was unsuccessful.*

JOSH: *[talking on the phone] Yeah. That's fine. Just don't do anything until you talk to Justice. Ok, bye. [hangs up the phone] Hey.*

LEO: *How many Cubans, exactly, have crammed themselves into these fishing boats?*

JOSH: *It's important to understand, Leo, that by and large, they're not fishing boats. You hear fishing boats, you conjure the image of -- well, the boat, first of all. What the Cubans are on would charitably be described as rafts. Ok? They're making the hop from Havana to Miami in fruit baskets, basically. Let's just be clear on that.*

LEO: *We are.*

JOSH: *Donna's desk, if it could float, would look good to them right now.*

LEO: *I get it. How many are there?*

JOSH: *We don't know.*

LEO: *What time, exactly, did they leave?*

JOSH: We don't know.

LEO: Do we know when they get here?

JOSH: No.

LEO: True or False - if I were to stand on high ground in Key West with a good pair of binoculars, I'd be as informed as I am right now.

JOSH: That's true.

LEO: The intelligence budget's money well spent, isn't it?

JOSH: Tell them to send in the Coast Guard, Leo.

LEO: The Coast Guard won't...

JOSH: I understand! But, they're never gonna make it to our territorial waters.

LEO: Thank you.

JOSH: What if the D.E.A. suspected they had drugs?

LEO: Does the D.E.A. suspect there are drugs?

JOSH: We could make a phone call.

LEO: Josh!

JOSH: If the D.E.A. or Navy Intel thought the Cubans were bringing in drugs, wouldn't we have to go out there and search those rafts with, you know, guns and... blankets?

LEO: You look like hell. You know that, don't you?

JOSH: Yes, I do. Listen, Leo. Did he say anything?

LEO: Did he say anything?! The President's pissed as hell at you, Josh. And so am I.

JOSH: I know.

LEO: You gotta work with these people. And where the hell do you get off strutting your...

JOSH: I know.

LEO: Al Caldwell's a good man.

JOSH: Al Caldwell wasn't there.

LEO: I'm saying, you take everyone on the Christian Right, dump 'em into one big pile, and label them 'stupid'. We need these people.

JOSH: We do not need these people.

LEO: Josh.

JOSH: We need Al Caldwell. We want Al Caldwell. We do not need John Van Dyke. And we do not need Mary Marsh.

LEO: And I think there shouldn't be instant replay in football, but that's not my call, now is it?

JOSH: It was stupid.

LEO: Damn straight.

JOSH: I was right, though.

LEO: Like I don't know that.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Oh, Mr. McGarry. Have they done an X-Ray?

LEO: Yup.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Is anything broken?

LEO: A \$4,000 Lynex Titanium touring bike that I swore I'd never lend anyone.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: I don't understand. How did he...?

LEO: He's a klutz, Mrs. Landingham. Your President's a geek.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Mr. McGarry, you know how I feel about that kind of talk in the Oval Office.

LEO: I apologize.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Just in this room, Mr. McGarry. That's all I'm asking.

LEO: Yes. Oh, Bonnie. Call O.E.O.B. and set up a briefing for the Vice President. Let's coordinate with Katie Simon's office on the appointments.

BONNIE: Should I get everybody in?

LEO: Yeah! Margaret. Please call the editor of the New York Times crossword and tell him that 'Ghaddafi' is spelled with an h, and two d's, and isn't a seven letter word for anything.

MARGARET: Is this for real? Or is this just funny?

LEO: Apparently, it's neither.

C.J.: Is there anything I can say, other than the President rode his bicycle into a tree?

LEO: He hopes never to do it again.

C.J.: Seriously. They're laughing pretty hard.

LEO: He rode his bicycle into a tree, C.J.. What do you want me— 'The President, while riding a bicycle

on his vacation in Jackson Hole, came to a sudden arboreal stop.' What do you want from me?

C.J.: A little love, Leo.

LEO: [to Sam] What do you know about the Cubans?

SAM: I don't know any more than Josh. Somewhere between 1,200 and 2,000 Cubans began embarking from a fishing village 30 miles south of Havana.

STAFFER: Where are they headed?

JOSH: Vegas.

[end excerpt]

[MORE CHEERING]

CAITLIN: All right – without further ado: Melissa Fitzgerald! [CHEERING throughout] Josh Malina! Dulé Hill! Josh Malina... Richard Shiff! Bradley Whitford! Bradley Whitford... Janel Moloney. Thomas Schlamme. And the man himself, Aaron Sorkin. And your moderator, we are so thrilled to have this moderator, Lawrence O'Donnell.

LAWRENCE: I just want to begin with a moment that I don't want to let not happen in this room, and sometimes these kinds of chats go in different directions. We are all here sitting on this stage, you're all sitting there. We have relationships, dear friends, lifelong friends, because this guy [pointing at Aaron], one day, decided to sit down and start typing. Let's just thank him for that.

[CHEERING]

JOSH: And he's about to direct a movie, so let's thank him again.

[LAUGHTER AND CHEERING]

JOSH: Really enjoy your work. [LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: You know, there were—

DULE: There's no roles for you in there, Josh, there's no roles for you in there. [LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: There are 164 episodes of the West Wing and when I heard that they were gonna do a clip of some kind at the beginning of this discussion I thought, wow, that's a job, digging through all of this stuff, you're gonna do a bit of this, a bit of that, some, you know, maybe four or five things at least, maybe more. And then I saw that, what we all just saw, and I realized it's the perfect clip. That that scene, the first scene of Act I of the pilot, summarizes the show perfectly and also predicts in its way the next 150 episodes. Did you know that, Aaron, when you were writing that scene?

AARON: No I didn't. [LAUGHTER] I want to answer your question in full but first I want to address the very remarkable thing that you said before. Um, yes I sat down to write the script. But I don't write things that are meant to be read, I write things that are meant to be performed. And so what had to happen to get us here in the condition that we're in, which is to say we did a show that we loved, it was successful, and as Lawrence said, it's ten years later, we all love each other very much and we all still love remembering the seven years on stage 23 at Warner Bros. For that to happen, what had to happen was first Tommy had to come along, and bring his vision to it. For one, just one small

example, the clip that you saw, the opening, almost the opening to the *West Wing*, there's a little something that comes before it, I will never forget Tommy coming into my office as excited as a kid on Christmas morning saying, "Come with me, I want to show you something." And he took me over to our set which was still in the midst of being constructed, it was half an Oval Office, an unpainted corridor, that kind of thing, and he took me by the hand through the choreography that you just saw there. That wasn't me. I wrote the opening, Tommy found that. Tommy and I together found this cast and some others who are very sad they're unable to be here today, Martin Sheen, Allison Janney, and Rob Lowe, and someone who we all wish could be here today, John Spencer—

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: Dozens more behind them in guest cast, from Anna Deavere Smith, John Amos, Emily Procter, Mary-Louise Parker, Stockard Channing, and the list goes on and on.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: And a crew of a hundred or so people, all of them as dedicated to doing the show well as we all were, and all of them, a better group of people to spend a long day and oftentimes a long night at work with you're never gonna find. The actors that we cast, usually if you're casting eight actors for an ensemble piece you'll feel very lucky if you were right about two or three of them. You don't go eight for eight, and we did. We managed to cast eight actors, all of whom could be carrying their own show, and now I was faced with a very glamorous problem, which is I have eight mouths to feed every week, how do you not give every scene to Dulé Hill? He's incredibly compelling.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: Listen, I was always, after every episode, left slightly unsatisfied because that's what you're supposed to be. If you feel perfectly satisfied with every episode, you're not trying hard enough. But that said, Lawrence, what was your question because I did promise I was going to answer it?

[LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: I was really struck watching this scene again, this first scene of Act I, of how perfectly it represents the entire series. That if you did have to choose only one to put up there, that is it.

AARON: You're right about that. And I'm glad that that happened. Listen, we got better at doing the show from there as you'd expect. We're a pick-up team, thrown together, this is a brand new thing. I think that if you were to look at almost any long-running series that you like, you'll find that the pilot's gonna be among the weaker episodes that you do 'cause you don't really know what you're doing yet, and that was the case with our pilot. I think it's memorable just 'cause we hadn't seen that before.

LAWRENCE: This is the pilot that was nominated for an Emmy. You were nominated for an Emmy on the writing of it, he [points to Tommy] was nominated for an Emmy for directing it, it was that pilot.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: It was that pilot. He won the Emmy for directing it. Uh—

DULÉ: It was definitely one of the weaker episodes. Definitely. [APPLAUSE AND LAUGHTER]

AARON: But let's take it to Tommy. How much would you give to get that pilot back and do it again?

TOMMY: Well, by the way, I would give everything to take back everything I've ever shot—

AARON: —I feel exactly the same way.

TOMMY: But, you know, it's nice to have a long distance. I was actually really proud of it, I think for the first time, watching it with this group of people, being with this group of people again, and getting to watch that. Because part of seeing any of these things, you remember the moment, you remember not just the shots, it's like any athlete says, oh I went three for four, but in the dugout that day, this happened, you know. And I remember shooting this, and I remember asking you to include my three children's name—

AARON: --Oh that's right

TOMMY: Which is, I have three kids named Joe, Emma, and Wilson, which is at the beginning of the thing, that's what [cross talk] he says, so I thought I—

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] that's who Leo says, "Good morning" to.

TOMMY: —can't believe Aaron did that, it was so loving, and that's all I kept thinking about then. But I do think you're right, Lawrence, I do think, for me, to look back at pilots and believe, and I do think you get better, I think everybody feels more comfortable, you're sure of what you're doing, you know, but I do think that reflects the show that we did. And I think that as a pilot is an incredible testament to all of us, and probably, you know we had a week of rehearsal, which was really great, and we sort of watched *The War Room* and lots of other things so people started to feel connected. And for me it wasn't just taking Aaron and saying, "Look at this shot." It was also, I'd been working with everybody for a week and I went, "It's all gonna work, they all have this relationship." And by the way, no one had met Martin yet, do you know? They were rehearsing without Martin, which was sort of by design, I mean he wasn't... cast yet? You know? That was one of the problems.

[LAUGHTER]

TOMMY: Including, I think, the first day of shooting, his deal was still, you know, being negotiated a little bit. But um, so the point is, I'm very proud of that. And yes, I think I could do it better. I could do it better.

LAWRENCE: Janel, some of us know that weeks before your casting in the *West Wing* you had quit show business. You had quit acting, you had just neglected to tell anyone, including your agent at that point, right? [LAUGHTER]

JANEL: Yeah, I had been working really hard for ten years and had some success, but never enough to really make a living and to feel as experienced or appreciated or talented as I felt like I wanted to feel, and I wanted to do something with my life. I didn't want to just, you know, be a disappointed hostess in a restaurant. So I thought, I'm gonna do something else, and, you know, the universe, please, direct me some place, because this is really all I've ever wanted to do, but I need to give it up. And then I just kind of hung on a little bit longer and I really did give it up, I decided I wasn't gonna do it anymore, and then I auditioned for Donna. But I had already known Tommy and Aaron because I had done *Sports Night*, but um—

[CHEERING]

JANEL: —But it felt like, it just felt like it had taken too long and I was working too hard and suffering too much, and I didn't want to do it any more. But then I was just, you know, obviously so very lucky that I decided to wait a little bit longer.

LAWRENCE: Brad, you know when I, I knew your earlier work before the *West Wing*— [LAUGHTER]

BRAD: —Sorry.

LAWRENCE: —By which, of course, I mean Billy Madison, right? [CHEERING] And I'd heard you were cast in this show and I thought, "Gee, I didn't see that in Billy Madison."

[LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: But were a graduate of the Sorkin Academy, you'd done the play, *A Few Good Men*, and, we came, I know—

BRAD: --You would have seen it in *Revenge of the Tur- Nerds*. Revenge of the turds!

[LAUGHTER]

BRAD: 'Cause I really dug deep in that. Go ahead. [LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: We, um, in the writer's room we certainly started to lose the distinction between Brad and Josh. We just, you were that person and we started to think, "You know, if he didn't go to Juilliard, if he'd gone to law school, he might have one of those jobs in the White House."

BRAD: Uh, I gotta say, look, the weirdest thing about getting this job was, um, it's a miracle to get a job, it's a miracle to get a job that's not humiliating. [LAUGHTER] It's a miracle to get a job that is the creative experience of your life. It's a miracle to get a job that is the creative experience of your life that is about something. I still cannot—excuse the popcorn—

[LAUGHTER]

TOMMY: Remember, he did *Billy Madison*.

BRAD: I did. [cross talk] It's called—

DULÉ: [cross talk] And *Revenge of the Turds*.

BRAD: Right—it's called a spit take. You're welcome. But I was thrilled, and part of this is Aaron, a skill that Aaron has. There is absolutely no distinction between my political point of view and Josh Lyman's political point of view. And Aaron would pick up on personal dynamics, on things about actors. I use the word "exploit" in the best, you know, he's gotta feed the beast and he's looking at what kind of clay he's got. But I think your political point of view was mirrored in, Toby?

RICHARD: [does "so-so" motion with his hand]

BRAD: A little bit.

[LAUGHTER]

BRAD: [sarcastic] Oh wow, Richard disagreed.

[LAUGHTER]

BRAD: Never, [cross talk] never happens.

RICHARD: [cross talk] Old habits die hard.

BRAD: But yeah, and also we were lucky 'cause we could be tired, I always said that this, we realized pretty soon this is the first line of our obituary, I think that's the way the people in the White House feel so there was a lot that you didn't have to act.

LAWRENCE: Richard, I want to go back to a point that Aaron was talking about which was that difference between that piece of paper that he's typed, and then what happens when Tommy and you all put it together. What was the difference for you between your first read of that pilot script and when you finally saw that finished pilot made with everything laid in, and by the way let me just, I don't want to go another minute without saying, and once you saw and heard, you heard Snuffy's music in this pilot, Texas boy Snuffy Walden who did that music. [APPLAUSE] When all of that came together, how different was that from what you'd read?

RICHARD: Well, it's a dangerous question to ask me because I notoriously don't like to watch anything that I'm in.

LAWRENCE: You could've told me that before now, and then [LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: So it took me quite, [cross talk] it took me quite—

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] Because Dulé was ready for that question.

RICHARD: It took me quite a while to watch the pilot. I watched it again recently for the sake of Josh Malina's *West Wing* podcast. [APPLAUSE] He asked me to watch *In Excelsis Deo* which by the way was the first episode that I saw because Aaron said, "I know you don't like to watch, but I insist that you watch this one." But anyway, I went back to watch the pilot just recently and was shocked at how wonderfully everything fit together. But getting back to— including the music, including the entire cast, including the way everyone was introduced like in that scene—but what was so amazing to me about this experience, and I measure experiences, since I don't watch, by how it feels on the day, and finding my place in the ensemble was, is always important to me, and in this case, because the music of the language was so beautiful, and because it's written in meter and it's poetry, and because these characters are so distinctly crafted, finding where Toby was going to fit exactly into that music was a challenge. And I told Tommy this recently, which was interesting to him, I don't know how you're going to react, but, is that I always thought that Toby was the oboe in the orchestra, in that they play the entire music but until everything else stops, you don't know he's even there. But it's also a darker tone and it's an underbelly, and it's got deeper tones.

BRAD: It squeaks every once in a while.

RICHARD: Never. Never once. Only off camera after we're done.

[LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: Squeaked a lot then. But we all had our different instruments. And now watching it all together again, even *Excelsis Deo* especially, because everything was so paralleled and beautifully put together, the fact that the music all came together and created this incredible symphony is I think what impresses me the most and is what is most, um, I have no more words.

JOSH: [cross talk] [inaudible]--expected how you got through that without crying.

BRAD: [inaudible cross talk]

DULÉ: Something I want to talk about, and you talk about *In Excelsis Deo*, it's interesting, I'm kind of going off track a little bit but it's interesting about the journey of *West Wing*, because we were there, talking about, you know, political service, and being, civil service and being out there, and that episode was so much about veterans, and justice for veterans and things like that, and now to see Melissa doing what she's doing is, I mean for me, I didn't want to let that moment go by without talking about it, it's really impressive just going from *In Excelsis Deo* to actual, real life public service, all from, you know, what is happening on *The West Wing*.

LAWRENCE: I'm sure, Melissa, Josh Malina will cede you his time to—

JOSH: Respectfully.

MELISSA: [cross talk] Thank you, Joshua.

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] To take this perfect moment to talk about the work you're doing now, and there's a video you could introduce, which, we're going to find out if these people still have the stuff with your video.

MELISSA: Well I'll let you all be the judge of that, but I do want to say that as talented and incredible a group of artists that are on this stage today, and also the ones that Aaron mentioned, this is the most talented group of artists that I've ever known, they're also the kindest most wonderful human beings that I've ever had the opportunity to work with and be with and I'm not even joking—

DULÉ: --And Josh Malina.

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: I knew it was coming. You saw me, I anticipated it.

MELISSA: Especially Josh Malina. And they have, you know, part of the proof of that is they've all come on board to support the work that I'm doing now which is Senior Director of Justice for Vets, and I've actually moved to D.C. and I'm doing—

[APPLAUSE]

MELISSA: —Trying to live up to the characters that Aaron created. And Justice for Vets—

RICHARD: And doing so beautifully, I have to say.

MELISSA: Thank you, Richard. And not without your support. But we champion veterans treatment courts, and veterans treatment courts are alternatives to incarceration for veterans who struggle with the transition home, get in trouble with the law because of substance use disorders, mental health disorders, and/or trauma, they can receive the structure, treatment and mentoring they need through the court system to get their lives back on track.

[APPLAUSE]

BRAD: And Josh has a podcast.

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: Brad's just jealous 'cause I'm on a hit show that's set in D.C., and for him it's been a while.

[LAUGHTER]

MELISSA: Alright, Josh.

JOSH: Tell us, Melissa, so what can we do to support Justice for Vets.

MELISSA: Thank you, Josh. You can go to JusticeforVets.org and do sign up for our e-mail alerts, do sign up because there are opportunities to take action to let our elected officials know that we want veterans treatment courts. The first one was launched in 2008 in Buffalo, New York, and they have been spreading like wildfire across the country, there are now over 260 in 37 states, but with over 2 million vet— I'm sorry, 20 million veterans nationwide, it's not nearly enough, [cross talk] so we need support.

RICHARD: [cross talk] And go on the site just to, I mean, listening to the stories and hearing the stories of these vets that have reclaimed their lives and are turning it around into public service as well, it's a phenomenal set of stories that proves that it works and it should be spreading around the country.

DULÉ: And I'll just say like this has been, this, what you just saw right here, at least for me was what it was like on the set of *The West Wing*. You have, you know, passionate discussion about the words and the work and theater and the arts—

RICHARD: --And then the idiocy—

DULÉ: --And then you have the idiocy, you know what I mean, you know, the jokes and the banter back and forth, and then you have real life things of how the work we're doing on the set can actually affect real life. For me, it was a very influential time, and [cross talk] this is it.

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] And of course and then you have the video and there's someone up there who was waiting for a cue to roll some video and we'll see if Brad Whitford can still act. There it is.

[Justice for Vets video excerpt]

ALLISON: A decade of war has taken an unprecedented toll on our men and women in uniform.

JANEL: Our veterans are the bedrock of our society. They are leaders whose strength and honor place them among our community's most valuable assets. But everyone's journey home is not the same.

DULÉ: Tragically, hundreds of thousands of our veterans are suffering from the trauma of war.

MARTIN: Without assistance, the downward spiral can be quick and destructive. An average of 22 veterans take their own lives every day.

RICHARD: It doesn't have to be this way.

BRAD: At Justice for Vets, we believe that every veteran should have the opportunity for treatment and restoration.

ALLISON: That is why Justice for Vets has been working to establish veterans treatment courts across the nation.

MARY: Instead of allowing our veterans to languish behind bars, these courts connect veterans to the

treatment they need, the services they've earned, the support they deserve.

DULÉ: Veterans treatment courts hold our veterans accountable for their actions.

JANEL: By providing structure, treatment and mentoring, these courts help our veterans and their families get their lives back on track.

MARTIN: And veterans treatment courts work.

MARY: They're working by returning healthy veterans to their families, sending veterans back to school, helping them find jobs and putting veterans back into service in our communities.

ALLISON: Veterans treatment courts are nationally recognized as the most innovative and effective solution for saving the lives, families and futures of our veterans, while saving tax dollars for the American public.

DULÉ: Justice for Vets is the only national organization dedicated to the expansion of veterans treatment courts.

MARTIN: With 2.6 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is an urgent and growing need for more veterans treatment courts, and Justice for Vets is the only organization capable of meeting this demand.

MELISSA: We ask much of our men and women in uniform, and they ask little in return. It is our collective duty to come to their aid when they struggle on the homefront. This not only honors their sacrifice but makes our communities stronger.

BRAD: A donation to Justice for Vets helps put a veterans treatment court within the reach of every veteran in need.

JANEL: A donation to Justice for Vets keeps veterans in treatment where they belong.

DULÉ: A donation to Justice for Vets shows your commitment to leaving no veteran behind.

ALLISON: A donation to Justice for Vets will help save lives, restore families, and rebuild communities.

RICHARD: Get involved, and go to JusticeforVets.org.

MARTIN: Veterans fought for our freedom, now it's our turn to fight for theirs. Thank you.

[end Justice for Vets video excerpt]

LAWRENCE: Now I know—

JOSH: I auditioned for that video.

[LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: I, um—

MELISSA: In fairness, I did ask [cross talk] Josh— that is not true. He was—

JOSH: [cross talk] I never heard back. Never heard back. I gave a good read too.

MELISSA: He was doing *Scandal*, he couldn't do it.

LAWRENCE: I, um, I know—

AARON: Melissa, how come Malina doesn't support the troops?

[LAUGHTER]

MELISSA: Josh hates veterans. [LAUGHTER] [cross talk] I'm joking! I'm joking. No, I'm joking. Josh Malina actually had us come on for the podcast.

JOSH: [cross talk] Now it's really turned. Melissa's taking shots at me. Oh, next question.

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] Ok, next question, next question. So, I know how the panel feels about this but we're really doing this for you so I'm going to have to ask you, I know the panel all agrees that Josh Malina's interrupted enough already so he doesn't get a question, right? You're—

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: --And I'm comfortable with that.

LAWRENCE: Alright, alright, Josh, you know the question if you've been listening. If Richard is the oboe, what instrument were you?

JOSH: Clearly the triangle. [LAUGHTER] Underrated, overlooked, little used, but an important part nonetheless of the whole. [pretending to play a triangle] Ding! Ding! Ding!

RICHARD: That was that annoying sound I kept hearing. [LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: Aaron, as you, when you wrote this thing, NBC decided that season, "Eh we've got other things to do," they were not eager to make it, they sat on it for a year. I read it a year before it was made, my agent sent me the script and said, "Hey, you could be in line for a writer's job here," so I read it and I thought, "Wow, this is great, this is the best TV pilot I've ever read." It's over a year later when they send me the VHS cassette, 'cause the DVDs hadn't been invented yet, of what Tommy and the cast and everyone had done with it and I watched that and I saw that I didn't read those scenes the right way, Tommy read them the right way, he gave us what was there. As you continued to work with the group, how much more influence were you getting from the set that you didn't expect was coming? Actors, directors—

AARON: A tremendous amount in an interesting way. You're right, NBC held on to the *West Wing*—

LAWRENCE: Wait wait, how close did we come to not ever making this pilot the way they sat on it?

AARON: Very close. Here's what happened. Two things in a row. First of all, the first time around, I wrote fade out, typed fade out on the pilot and a few minutes later, I mean it a few minutes later, Monica Lewinsky happened, ok? So there was a general sense, we were ok sitting on it, we simply can't do this right now, people will giggle, we gotta wait a little bit. We did wait a little bit, we made the pilot. There was also a change in management at NBC. The first group of people, Lewinsky notwithstanding, they were kind of interested in it but they brought me up to the chairman's office and had some notes. I don't do any network bashing and I get this stuff but they wanted things like, you know—

TOMMY: I'll be more than happy to step in any time you need.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: You know, they wanted Josh to literally like go out in a boat and help those Cuban refugees.

BRAD: Like Rahm Emanuel in a speedo.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: This is just people talking and they had trouble with that. So there was change in management at NBC. They ordered the pilot, we made the pilot, and the pilot did not test through the roof, it really didn't. It didn't do great, and NBC was on the fence about putting it on their schedule. So Warner Brothers, very smartly, in order to sell NBC the show, they decided to invent four new demographics that had never been used in television before: households earning more than \$75,000 a year; households with at least one college graduate; households where they subscribe to the New York Times; and finally, and this is 1999, this was the most important one, households with internet access which wasn't, you know now it's every household has internet access, that wasn't the case in 1999 because we were right in the middle of the dot-com boom and those dot-coms wanted some place to advertise. That's what got us on the air, and if you were to go back and look at those episodes with the ads in them, which of course you won't, you'd see that well over half of our ad buys were for dot-coms. [cross talk] But the more important question—

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] So the internet is a force for good.

AARON: Yeah, it can be. I'm grateful to the internet for getting this show on the air, but the other question that you got, which was as we went what was I getting back from the cast that was informing the writing to get this thing going. The answer is, a lot. For instance, at the outset in the first few episodes, it was Toby and C.J. were the two characters that I was having the most difficulty getting the bat on the ball with, for reasons having nothing to do with them, entirely to do with me. I kept kind of fouling the ball back, I got a piece of it, I couldn't get all of it, and I knew how good Richard and Allison were and I knew how good these two characters were, and if I needed any reminding, Tommy would come into my office several times a day and say, you know, I think you can really give Richard and Allison more to do, I think you could really be happy with what you see. And it was an early episode called, "The Crackpots and These Women"—

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: —And what happened was, because in the pilot episode neither the character of Toby nor the character of C.J. had that much to do, there just wasn't enough meat on the bone to be able to audition them with, to be able to see what we wanted to see, Tommy asked me to just write a scene for Toby and C.J. out of nowhere with no context at all, just write a three, four-page scene for these guys to do that they could audition with, and I did. And I don't need to tell you. And by the way, Lawrence, I mean I hope we get a point to ask you some questions—

LAWRENCE: I'm not taking any questions.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: Lawrence ran seasons 5 through 7, but more importantly from my point of view, I can assure you that if there's a moment from the *West Wing* that you love and really remember, I can assure you Lawrence O'Donnell played a starring role in that moment happening on TV.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: So not wanting to let any scene get wasted, I wasn't gonna write a four-page scene that we liked a lot and just throw it out. I thought, well I have the beginning of the next episode here, here's four pages, I just need another, well, seventy-one, and—

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: --and we'll be on our way. And what happened was I really found out where true north was on Toby, which was that, you may not remember he wasn't Bartlet's first choice to be the Communications Director, and in this episode we found out why, and the reason was simply that any time that Bartlet was acting in a cowardly fashion, any time he was acting like a politician, any time he wasn't doing the right thing and knew it, when there, sometimes there isn't a right thing to do, but any time he was backing into politics and not doing what they came there for, all it took was looking at Toby to remind him and make him feel small and Bartlet, I first decided I can't have that around, and then decided I have to have that around. And we learned that at the end of "The Crackpots and These Women," and it was at that point that, you know I can't say that I got the, to continue the metaphor the full bat on the ball in every episode by any means, but I loved it, I wanted more of it, and I can say the same thing about every character in the show.

BRAD: Lawrence, I just want to say 'cause you said don't regret not saying anything, I don't want to regret not saying this. No human being will ever again write twenty-two one-hour episodes for four years, beautifully written, complicated verbally, complicated personally, funny, about something, that's eleven feature films a year, it is extraordinary. It will never, ever happen again.

[APPLAUSE]

RICHARD: That's actually just a challenge to Aaron to write another one for us please. I just have to continue on that theme, you know I'm thinking of "17 People" which happened the next season, and I remember pitching to Aaron and it turned into this incredible episode and by the way, my favorite five-arch storyline having to do with MS and how everyone, how they dealt with discovering the secret and all that. But I remember pitching to Aaron, if you ever need Toby to be stumped and trying to figure something out, that I wanna be playing with this Spalding which was a New York City stickball ball. And I pictured myself in my office just bouncing the ball and catching it as an ode to Steve McQueen and "The Great Escape." And that's all I said to Aaron and he ended up coming up with this incredible episode and this incredible storyline. I don't know if it's because of the rubber ball, but that's an indication of, all you have to do is give him a little inkling and a little spark and he ends up coming up with brilliance.

BRAD: I remember on "Noël," I remember I'd been shot and Aaron's just like cranking out this stuff, cranking out this stuff, and I knew you were gonna deal with it at some point but I remember because you very wisely, both of you thought, ok, assassination, that's over, let's move on. But I remember, you're driving in the golf cart like chugging coffee, you're like, "Hey, hey!" And I remember saying, it does feel a little weird that like I got shot recently. [LAUGHTER] And I understand that we wanna move on, but it does feel a little funny. And you're like, "Oh yeah yeah yeah yeah." [LAUGHTER]

AARON: [cross talk] Ok well—

TOMMY: [cross talk] Actually the most blatantly obvious of them all was Allison in her trailer would sing "The Jackal." That was Allison Janney singing "The Jackal" [APPLAUSE] where we were wise enough to say, Aaron, come listen to Allison Janney sing "The Jackal," and the next week on the table read, "The Jackal" was in. [APPLAUSE]

AARON: Now, this was, I enjoyed listening to this, but I did not do these things by myself by any means. There was a tremendous amount of help. Somewhere in this auditorium is Kevin Falls.

BRAD: Kevin! Wooo!

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: He's right there.

DULÉ: There he is, right there.

AARON: Kevin was co-executive producer, a job he had— *[Kevin stands]* Yeah!

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: It was a job, Kevin ran the writer's room the second season of *Sports Night* which was the same as the first season of the *West Wing* and when *Sports Night* was cancelled I grabbed him and brought him over to the *West Wing* to run the writer's room. I described it this way once in a book, uh once way, I described it once this way in a book—

RICHARD: Learn how to speak, will ya?

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: It was like if you remember *Animal House*, Hoover? The frat president who's desperately trying to keep everybody in line, we're on double secret probation, come on guys, we can't have a toga party now, that's Kevin Falls.

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: Now I understand why we got Vice President Otter. [LAUGHTER]

AARON: And it would happen because of people like Lawrence, and it would happen because of Lawrence. I'm not a politically sophisticated person. My college degree—I promise you. My college degree is in musical theater. [LAUGHTER] And often times the way an episode would get started would be me knocking on Lawrence's office door and saying, Lawrence, what are you thinking about? And you know, he'd say, let me tell you something, the census is interesting. [LAUGHTER] And I'd say, are you absolutely sure about that?

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: And he'd say, yes, 'cause listen why. And then the two of us would go to Kevin and say, hey Kevin, listen, the census is interesting.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: And then I'd be able to come back many hours later, Kevin would be working with the staff, you'd see written on the white board, "The census is interesting," but the magic marker kind of trailed off at the end of it.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: But sure enough, what Kevin and the staff would be able to get together for me is ultimately

these big ideas that you have, they've got to get small to fit in this show, they've got to get small. We can't cure homelessness on the *West Wing*. What we have to do is talk about one guy, and that one guy by the way isn't the homeless guy, the one guy we're talking about has to be the guy on our show. So we have to make homelessness that small and that personal in order for it to work on our show.

RICHARD: I wanted to back up to what you said about Lawrence because one of the great gifts doing material that's so thick and so rich and so complicated as these political issues were was that we had Lawrence to call him on set and go, Lawrence, we have no idea how Toby solves social security, I can't figure, I can't, to this day, don't understand, if I had to read it to you right now I wouldn't know what I was saying. But Lawrence would come down and explain in detail, as he still does, trying to explain today's election cycle, and the most fun that I had was asking you what this means, and then another person we had working for us was a guy named Pat Caddell, who's a very interesting man, and to have Lawrence give you his take, and then go to Pat Caddell and give you his take, and then imagining the two of them in the same room together—

LAWRENCE: That didn't happen that much.

AARON: Oh but what it did.

BRAD: You know, one interesting thing, you talk about that episode, one unexpected, I think, power of this show was maybe two million people would watch the news at night, you get like a sound bite in. We would get, at one point, I don't know, nineteen million people would tune in and over the course of an hour you would get the bullet points of a very complicated argument between computer modeling and head counts and the implications of that and the national census and on policy. Now you had to get Rob Lowe laid, [LAUGHTER], but it was—

LAWRENCE: No one's recording.

BRAD: It was an unexpected, I think, power of this show that you could get discussions, nuanced discussions, even though, the big thing about Aaron, you would always say, I'm not here to serve civic vegetables or unzip and Barbara Streisand's gonna come out and tell you how to live your life. The thing about Aaron, I think, it's the collision of C-SPAN with an impatient showman who wants, "Oh God, am I gonna lose their attention? Are they gonna laugh? I wanna take 'em on a ride, I want them to feel something, I want to hold their attention." And the collision of that with politics, which is values made real, I think made it work.

RICHARD: In those seven years, I was C-SPAN's only viewer.

[LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: Alright, I gotta do a quick story about how this dynamic worked, and it's a season 1 story and it's an episode you'll remember, and just one preface I will give to it very quickly is that I've been a lifelong opponent to the death penalty in all its forms and so I pitched to Aaron 'cause I'm noticing there's all these, there were these federal death penalty cases that are ripening to the point where they might actually have a federal execution which would put the president in the position that governors are in with that one minute to midnight clock, you know, do I make this happen or not, and I just thought, this is a uniquely dramatic thing and I want us to do it before it happens in the real world, and so I lay it out for Aaron, I give him the pitch about how this works and we get to have that thing, you know, of that one minute to midnight thing, and it took faster to say than this, and my last line of my pitch, Aaron says, I think word for word while I'm saying it, we both said exactly the same thing, ok but we gotta kill the guy. 'Cause we didn't wanna see that cliché thing, and the thing that fascinated me was, I always wanted to see people who did not have my political opinion arrive at a position different from mine. That was much more interesting for me to explore in fiction writing than just going

with what I thought. But—

AARON: Yeah, you're absolutely right about everything that you said including, yeah but the guy's gonna have to die. But here is the difference between how your mind works and mine. I'm using this as an example to illustrate what Brad just said, that mine wasn't a political agenda, it's coming more from a storytelling point of view. First of all, Tommy had been saying for a long time, it'd be great to do an episode about the federal death penalty. I wasn't getting anything from what, Tommy was visualizing something different from me. He said that and I was thinking of a guy with a tin cup on the bars, we don't do that on this show, that's not what we do. Lawrence brought sort of politics to it, his personal politics, but it wasn't until someone said, this is something interesting, you know that we don't execute people on the Sabbath? Both Sabbaths—Friday sundown to Sunday sundown, we don't execute people. And suddenly, this'll be great. The episode will take place in these 48 hours. Now, I don't know what happened, I just saw it, I liked that episode very much, "Take This Sabbath Day." Boy, everybody really did a hell of a job. We met Marlee Matlin in that episode. But—

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: That was just an awful lot of teamwork from Tommy, Lawrence, Kevin, and then Tommy directed the episode beautifully. Go back and watch it. This is a bit like somebody saying I buried Paul on Magical Mystery Tour at the end of Strawberry Fields. If you watch the episode, at the very end—it's not the very end, it's right before the last scene—Tommy goes outside the Oval Office window, ok? And it's snowing, and you'll see, it's gonna happen [pause] it's gonna take about that long to happen, ok? You'll see a reflection in the window of the guy who we never see, the, I don't know what you call him, the guy on death row, we'll see him being tied down to the table. It goes by like that as a reflection in the window while a cantor named Carol Sugarman is singing a beautiful Hebrew prayer. And if I'm not mistaken, did you win your second Emmy for—it would have been your fourth total Emmy but your second [cross talk] Emmy for—

TOMMY: [cross talk] For another bad episode I won. [LAUGHTER]

BRAD: What's interesting too about that episode that I always loved about Aaron's writing is, the most serious issue being dealt with in the most solemn way, and then I'm waking up hungover in fishing waders and like wondering why this deaf women is scream— the juxtaposition of, it's a weird writer who says, ok, here's the A story, the A story is this death penalty thing and we don't execute people on the Sabbath, and then, you know, we'll have a hungover White House guy in fishing waders, it's an [cross talk] odd mind—

TOMMY: [cross talk] I also think when you know I was talking about remembering moments? Karl Malden was the guest star of that brilliantly, and he got there first thing in the morning and he was in rehearsal, I mean, ready to go, [cross talk] so professional—

AARON: [cross talk] Eighty-eight years old.

TOMMY: Eighty-eight years old. And then he said, Tommy, come here, I want to show you something. And he said, I'm gonna use this prop, it's a Bible. I went, great, I mean, you're playing Father, you should use a Bible. He said, I used this on "On the Waterfront." [cross talk] And we were like, literally, it was like the shroud of—

AARON: [cross talk] It's his Bible from playing Father John on "On the Waterfront."

[LAUGHTER]

TOMMY: —I mean we were like can we touch it? Elia Kazan was talking to you while you were holding

it, it made me feel a lineage there. It was an extraordinary thing.

AARON: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: I wanna just, one more minute on how dynamic the feedback loop was from the set to what was happening in the writer's room and the scripts that Aaron was writing. Janel was hired just on a per-episode basis to begin with, thought to be, as we say, you know, a small part because she's Brad's assistant. And she kept turning in these performances that kept making the writer's room go, wait a minute, you know, in addition to—

[APPLAUSE]

LAWRENCE: And that was Aaron grabbing all that stuff. Tommy, were you like at the end of a shooting day saying, Aaron, you gotta see what Janel's doing here? [cross talk] Because and then she becomes a—

TOMMY: Well yes, [cross talk] but that actually went back to *Sports Night*, I said that, 'cause she did a guest shot on *Sports Night*. But, you know, I like to sort of use this before, writer's Darwinism, which is, you start to watch the evolution, that's the blessing of television, and it's also the blessing of working with someone like Aaron who doesn't have scripts so far in advance. [LAUGHTER] But that's a good thing, it really deeply is a good thing because you're actually watching these people live and breathe and become something and as that happens, the writers, the room, all of us start to see, wow this whole thing is taking place and it was so clear what was happening between Josh and Donna, and it was just sort of planted in there and then, you know, Aaron took off and the writers took off with creating this phenomenal relationship.

BRAD: Janel, did you know that was happening when that was happening?

[LAUGHTER]

JANEL: I don't think I—a lot of people said, oh, there's this thing going on with you and your boss, and I was so focused on being asked back the next week [LAUGHTER] that I was really trying to make every moment as rich and free and great as I possibly could. But the whole basis of my character before I even started day one was, Donna was drop-dead, head-over-heels, 100% would die for him, would die for Josh. And every file I signed, every policy I asked about, this subtext was, I just love you so much, I would do anything for you at any moment. [LAUGHTER] And that was what I did, and that was my choice, it was before I met Brad—

BRAD: [cross talk] —Oh that's too bad.

TOMMY: [cross talk] By the way, Brad thinks—

[LAUGHTER]

TOMMY: I was just gonna say that Brad actually thinks that's the subtext of every actor that works with him.

[LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: And that's how you know how good an actress Janel really is.

[LAUGHTER]

JANEL: I felt like it was in the part that I read in the pilot. I felt like it was there—

BRAD: --And then when you got to the set—

JANEL: --It was so, so easy because it was you, Brad.

[LAUGHTER]

JANEL: And that's true, it really was easy because it was Brad. I wouldn't have made it past the first day if it weren't for Brad, who, you know— I knew that I was gonna stay on the show, I had this amazing moment where I open up the third, I think it was the third episode of the first year and I had this long teaser, this long walk and talk with, where I was chasing Brad around saying, "C.J. wants to see you, C.J. wants to see you, C.J. needs like," "Oh I got stuff to do" and I said, "Ok, well C.J. wants to see you, she—" and then I felt really good, we got through the whole thing and I felt good, good, but I was, you know, a little dissatisfied, I thought, oh, I could do better, I could just do better, I just could do better. And I didn't have any power on the show, I knew they were really liked me, they were very friendly and kind to me, but I, you know, I was a guest of a guest star on the show, I wasn't even a guest star, I don't think. And Brad looked to me, and it was just this moment that I'll never forget. He looked to me and he said, and they said, ok moving on, moving on, and they were packing up their stuff, they were moving on to the next scene, generally there's no going back from then on TV. And Brad looked to me and he said, "Do you want another?" And I said, "Yes, I really want another." And he said, "I need another one." And so he took the—

[APPLAUSE]

JANEL: --And it was incredibly generous, and I think he, you, he really—

RICHARD: --Brad really needed another one.

[LAUGHTER]

JANEL: Maybe. But he did it for me, and I feel like that support was what gave me the freedom to really do it. And I believe that was the take that they used and I believe that it really expressed a certain thing that I just so happily got to express, and I think it just made me, I could quit my hostessing job after that.

[LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: Which, by the way, was the culture on our set, which I've since discovered, having been very spoiled on *The West Wing*, doesn't exist everywhere, where Tommy set this culture going in the beginning and as Brad said earlier today, we were all from theater, we're used to rehearsing, we're used to figuring it out, we're used to getting it as right as we possibly can, and we had the culture of, I'm sorry, we need another one, I need one more, I need one more—

JANEL: --And they let you—

RICHARD: I abused that, a little bit, I have to say. But that's the kind of set that we had, and it's a credit to the people who were running it that allowed us the freedom to feel that we were, we had proprietary relationship to our characters and to the show. And what the end result was, we took great pride in making sure that it was as good as possible, and that's a perfect example.

LAWRENCE: We have a microphone I see set up in this aisle right here for questions from the audience, and questions for Josh Malina are in that aisle over there [cross talk] where there's no

microphone.

BRAD: [cross talk] Across the street.

RICHARD: Josh will be staying later for—

LAWRENCE: Dulé, you came into the show when it was already up and running, it was a big hit, and I wanna ask you about that, what it's like coming into this thing that's already a giant hit and all these people already have their chemistry going. And I wanna just throw in a little parenthesis of, your warm-up that we all saw back stage, Dulé's warm-up for this performance was tap dancing.

[APPLAUSE]

LAWRENCE: And so he was coming to this work from a different place than the rest of the people in this cast. Tell us what it was like joining this cast.

DULÉ: Well, one, the show hadn't actually aired yet, I'd only seen the pilot, so I knew that this show could be a giant success, and even as you talk about that, I remember the night that we did premiere, the ratings had come in, and I didn't know anything about ratings, and everyone's going around saying what the ratings were, and I turn to Brad and I was like, what does that even mean? He said, it means you're going to be employed for a very long time.

[LAUGHTER]

DULÉ: But coming for me, coming as a dancer to the whole television world, connecting to Aaron's work, I heard the rhythm. I realized from the beginning that this is a dance, that this is all musical, this is one big symphony, and all you have to do is come in and play your song. You play your instrument, you come and you sing it right away, and that's what I got, this is rhythm, this is not any complicated thing, it's boom, boom, bagoong goong doong, gadoogadoogadoong, dagoonggadoong, doogadoogadoong, gadoonggadoong, doogadoogadoong, gadoong doong doong. That's how it all was in my mind.

[APPLAUSE]

RICHARD: That wasn't—I had a little bit of a different rhythm when I was going. But one of my favorite moments in the entire seven seasons was when we had the season, I think it was “Noël,” where—

BRAD: --Yeah

RICHARD: --Yo-Yo Ma came and played with us. Ok, on a break, Tommy and I were just talking about this, on a break Yo-Yo Ma is sitting there playing around with his cello which he, you know, should do, and Dulé walked up to him and said, can you play that thing you were playing earlier? And Yo-Yo Ma, who's one of the most outgoing and just generous people you'll ever meet, goes, sure, and he starts playing. And Dulé starts to try to tap along a little bit to this classical piece which doesn't have a, you know, ba buh ba buh ba buh ba buh. And he's trying to find it, and Yo-Yo Ma is like, this is cool—
[LAUGHTER] and he starts playing and before you know it, you know, Dulé is shuffling along to Yo-Yo Ma and it was [cross talk] one of the most beautiful moments I've ever seen anywhere, it was so—

BRAD: [cross talk] It was unbelievable

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: —I remember also, another quick Yo-Yo Ma thing. First of all, he showed up to work carrying

backpack style on his back his two million dollar Stradivarius— [LAUGHTER] I was like, sir, we will, you know, we're gonna record this someplace else, we will give you a cello—please, first, move it far away from me, ok? I just know I'm gonna break that thing. He wanted to play his cello, and he had to play, Tommy had to get, you may remember, a lot of coverage in that scene. Coverage means pointing the camera at people other than the people who were talking or playing a cello, so if you're all listening to Yo-Yo Ma play up here, Tommy has to get Yo-Yo Ma playing with the two of you watching, and now this group watching, and now he's gotta get this shot but maybe rack focus over here, all these things that he's gonna need to put together in the editing room. And Yo-Yo Ma was playing the Bach G Major, correct?

TOMMY: Bach Concerto, yeah.

AARON: Yeah, and didn't need to keep playing it over and over again, we had it on playback, he could have given himself a break. But he just said, no I really enjoy playing this piece. And each time he played it, he would play it to someone different, he would just look at Janel the whole time, just play this piece to her, and boy it—

TOMMY: --I will also say one other thing about Yo-Yo Ma, which was, 'cause in the morning, normally what you do is, he records it once for you in the environment you're playing, and then you play that back so that, it's an editorial reason. And I had said to him, you know, we're gonna shoot a lot, you're gonna have to do it often so I think the best thing would be to playback. And he went, you're worried, right? And I went, what are you talking about? You're worried that I won't play it in the same rhythm every time. Don't worry about that. It'll be—

[LAUGHTER]

TOMMY: And he did. We could edit any one of the takes and it would never change the metronome of it. And I remember he actually said to you, Dulé, he went, oh it's 4/4 time, don't worry, it's a 4/4 time, and all of a sudden you started tap dancing 4/4 time, and it was—

BRAD: But the other incredible thing with that four million dollar Stradivarius, the background people—

RICHARD: --Elevating in value as we speak.

[LAUGHTER]

BRAD: Yeah, it's going up. Well, we mentioned it here, so it's going up. But he was letting anybody play it, any background person, anyone—

AARON: And he was so excited to be on our set because when first he got there what it was was a lot of those, you know, the chairs with the gold bamboo backs that you see at weddings and bar mitzvahs lined up in this room with, you know, it would say, Donna, Josh, pieces of paper, so that stand-ins knew where to be so that the cameras can start working with us. And like a kid in a candy store, he was like, Donna's gonna sit here.

[LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: And he gave us all DVDs or CDs as I recall. [cross talk] He came bearing gifts.

AARON: [cross talk] Yeah.

BRAD: [cross talk] I still have the cello.

[LAUGHTER]

LAWRENCE: Alright, these people have waited in line for over an hour to get in here, they're waiting in line now—I see no one in the line for Josh Malina questions [LAUGHTER] so we will go to the microphoned line right here, [cross talk] go ahead.

JOSH: [cross talk] I forgot I was still here.

[LAUGHTER]

RICHARD: So did we.

LAWRENCE: Go ahead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Hello. End of season 4, you were leaving the show. It seemed from a viewer's perspective and from other writers' perspective that you were throwing story grenades at the whole premise of the show as you were leaving. We have the, spoilers, kidnapping of the daughter, the president leaving his seat to attend—it seemed like very dangerous story places and then, off you go.

AARON: Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Were you handing that off with—or were you surprising people?

AARON: There were two things that I were doing. The second thing—I was not throwing story grenades, I wasn't, absolutely not. It was, I'll say something I said earlier in the day, we did a thing for the Today Show. I've never seen an episode from seasons 5 through 7. Here's the reason why. When Tommy and I throughout season 4 had been talking about that at the end of the season might be the right time to leave, and you know, we watched as things developed and we thought about it and we talked about it and once the decision was made, the announcement of this decision couldn't wait because it would leak out. So we called our publicist and said this is happening now and a press release went out right away and once it did, Larry David called me and, who's a guy I've shaken hands with a few times, chatted with a little bit, he's not a friend of mine. Larry David left Seinfeld early, too, Seinfeld went on without him. And he said, listen, this is very important. You can't ever watch the show again, because either the show is going to be great without you and you're gonna be miserable, the show's gonna be less than great and you're gonna be miserable, but either way you're gonna be miserable. And I didn't believe him because Larry David is professionally miserable.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: He's really good at it. And so I had them, before it aired, send me episode 501, season 5, episode 1, on half-inch video tape, that's how we watched things then, and I put it in my VCR, which is also how we watched things then. And I don't think 20 seconds went by, I have no idea whether it was great or less than great, I really don't. I'm sure that it was great given this cast, given the people who came in behind me, given John Wells. But it just felt like I was watching somebody make out with my wife. [LAUGHTER] Ok? It felt horrible and I couldn't do it again so I don't know how the story that I started finished or how anything else happened on the show. I don't know how the show wrapped itself up.

JOSH: You don't know about the whole superpower storyline. [LAUGHTER] It's so good.

AARON: So to answer your question, I apologize to everybody else in line, it shouldn't come as that much of a surprise to you that brevity is kind of a challenge for me. [LAUGHTER] I was doing two

things. The second thing that I was doing was trying to set the table for the people who were coming in. I didn't want them to have to come back that July with a completely blank piece of paper with nothing going on. I know it always helps me when there's a little something leftover from a last episode. You can come into the writer's room and say, ok, well we've got this going on. Our favorite thing, right Kevin? Would be when an episode, when a script was too long and something lifted out perfectly and could go right in the next episode—

[Kevin speaks inaudibly from the audience]

AARON: That's right. I think there was a, wasn't there a story we carried for about five episodes? We kept trying to—

KEVIN [from audience]: Well I'm still trying to redo the Halloween episode.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: If we had time, we'd talk about the Halloween episode, which is fantastic. But the first thing that I was trying to do was this. Something happened in, this is season 1, right, what is the episode when everybody goes to the Georgetown bar with Zoey?

TOMMY: When you're making chili.

AARON: That's "The Crackpots and These Women," isn't it? No, no, no, no, no, it can't be.

DULÉ: "Mr. Willis of Ohio?" Was that it?

AARON: "Mr. Willis of Ohio." It's "Mr. Willis of Ohio." They go, they being includes Zoey Bartlet, the president's daughter. They go there and it's a new thing where Zoey doesn't want, she's a college kid now, she doesn't want her Secret Service detail right on top of her or anything, so they've made a deal with her, you know, ok just carry this thing on your keychain, it's a garage door opener, it's a button that you push, it's gonna beep us, we're not gonna be more than 50 feet from you, but we'll be right there if there's any kind of trouble. And Bartlet, a father, reluctantly agrees to this, and this thing happens at a bar. So Bartlet calls his daughter in and does what any father would do in that situation. He scares the hell out of her. Tells her how dangerous this can be. Tell her that the nightmare of the Secret Service isn't him getting shot. The Constitution has a mechanism to take care of anything happening to him. The Vice President just takes over. The nightmare is her getting abducted, getting kidnapped, what happens now? What happens when they've got a knife at the president's daughter's throat and they're saying, release these prisoners or how 'bout aim these missiles at Israel? In any event, forget about the what do we do part of it. You don't have a commander-in-chief anymore. You have a father who's gone out of his mind with worry. That guy can't be making good decisions, so what do we have to do? We have to remove him somehow using the 25th Amendment and stick him in exile, and now we've got ourselves a king in exile, somebody else over here, and what happens when the king in exile decides that the guy who's doing the job is doing a bad job? And he tells Josh or Leo or Toby, listen, get word to Fitz that I want this and this to happen. Alright, well, we've got a problem now, there's a coup d'etat underway, we've got a Constitutional crisis at the worst possible time. He tells Zoey all of these things, and frankly as I was writing it, and as Martin was performing it, I thought, where the hell's this story been? [LAUGHTER] This is absolutely fantastic. It can't, because we can't do this stuff on our show, it can't— it has to be small enough to fit in our show. So I imagined, I even left little clues, I had Anna Deavere Smith say, this is in the season finale, season 4 finale, which is called, "Twenty-five," this is not a James Bond operation, we're gonna find out that she is tied to a chair in the back of a muffler shop in upstate New York. I had recently been reading about rapturists, people who are trying to hasten the end of the world because it'll hasten the rapture, and I thought, ok, great, them, but it's certainly going to look like this was an act of international terrorism, but let's have

the whole thing be over with by tomorrow, you know, let's not drag this on for a long time, let's not start a war or anything, let's not any of our guys suddenly be members of the FBI and have guns in their pocket. But let's make sure that they're not victims. All of the characters on this show are protagonists, they're all protagonists. And one rule, one rule that you can't ever violate about protagonists—they can't be passive. They can't be victims. They have to be active. So it was gonna be, I was trying to leave the new writers, as we say in pool, a leave on the table, some stuff to clean up. I was trying to—I didn't ever wanna be over their heads saying, well this is what I intended, so I wanted to make a clean break of it and let them make these decisions themselves however they want to. Again, I don't know how they wrapped it up, but to be clear, I was absolutely not trying to burn the earth up behind me. I was trying to seed it.

[APPLAUSE]

LAWRENCE: Let me just tell you, we were thrilled. I actually had left the show for two years to create another show and that flamed up and John Wells said to me, Aaron's leaving, we need you back, we need you back. And I saw that season finale and I said, oh, ok, I'm coming back. And that first meeting in the writer's room was, it was a banquet, it was, look what the master had left us, we were so thrilled at what was on the table. Go ahead with your question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: Thank you. So there's a scene relatively early when Charlie's new, and the president's about to go on TV and he says to Josh, "I've never felt like this before," and Josh says, "It doesn't go away," which I think is how a lot of us feel and are definitely feeling right now. I was wondering if some of you could talk about, during the course of making this show, a scene or an episode or behind the scenes where you didn't feel like that before and it hasn't gone away.

DULÉ: I mean for me I would say from the first time I walked on the set and saw the Oval Office and saw Martin Sheen and saw Richard Schiff and Rob Lowe and Brad Whitford, and then, oh, wow, these are the scenes I'm about to do and it's, oh, Aaron Sorkin wrote this? I mean, the whole thing was just mind-boggling to me, just a month, maybe two months before, I had about, maybe three months' worth of rent left to pay, so I was about to be broke. So I mean, from the beginning, from the time I walked on the set, pulled onto the Warner Brothers' lot, I mean, my trailer was around the corner, you know, it used to be called the ghetto [LAUGHTER] but I would, you know, my trailer looked out and all the Friends' cars used to pull up 'cause it was right next to the Friends sound stage. So I would see Matt LeBlanc and Jennifer Aniston and everybody get out and go in and ten minutes later come back out and leave. The whole thing, I mean, from the beginning, it was, wow, and from that moment it has never gone away, an unbelievable ride, and all because of this group right here.

RICHARD: I'll tell you where it kind of went away for me. [LAUGHTER] No, this is a good story.

LAWRENCE: You don't have to.

RICHARD: Bear with me, will ya? The first time we went into the real, the first time we went into the Oval Office on set, I spent probably two hours by myself just studying all of the artifacts in there 'cause it was complete replication of the actual Oval Office, you know, the desk where John, little John John was underneath and all the artwork was the same, the couches were exactly the same. I don't know when it was, what year, but a while later, we were doing a basketball sequence in front of the White House—

DULÉ: That was the same year, like the fourth or fifth episode.

RICHARD: --Ok then it was quick. But we're doing a scene and I busted up my knee again. So I had to, the next day we were getting our first tour of the real White House and I was on crutches, and we were getting, Betty Currie was there, President Clinton was not because he was in New Zealand. But

we went into the Oval Office and I was hurting, my knee was killing me, and I went over to those striped couch and I was about to jump on it to relieve the pain, and then I went, oh wait a second, we're in the real Oval Office. [LAUGHTER] Not our Oval Office where we take naps, this is the real Oval Office.

LAWRENCE: Let's go to the next question at the mic.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Hi. I was diagnosed with MS two years ago and to see that representation on screen is incredibly inspirational, especially when you've just said that everyone is a protagonist, no one there is a victim. And knowing how precise you are with your creative works, did you try out other diseases? Why even give the president something so substantial or, you know, what was your thought process in bringing that into the storyline?

AARON: First of all, good luck to you. We'll all be thinking about you.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: And I hope you don't feel that I'm glib in talking about [cross talk] how I arrived at MS.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: [cross talk] I'm glib.

AARON: I wanted—here's what happened. Stockard Channing asked me to have lunch. She had done one episode of the show called, "The State Dinner" where she had a small role in it but Stockard being Stockard, just like Janel, made her—she was undeniable, ok? And she asked me to have lunch to tell me that she'd really love to do the show more. And I don't remember what else she said at that point, because I just started thinking, ok, wouldn't it be nice if the First Lady was a professional at something? How 'bout a doctor? An actual, medical doctor? Well, how would we find out that she's a doctor? I don't want her to just say, as you know I'm a doctor. [LAUGHTER] That's gonna be bad, you've gotta go through all the bad ideas before you get to the good one. And I said, you know what would be a cool way to find out that she's a doctor, and I can combine this with something else I've always wanted to do. Have the president have to do what the rest of us have had to do on any number of occasions. The president's too sick to go to work, he's gotta stay in bed and he's gotta watch daytime television, for, in this guy's case, the very first time in his life. But, whatever he's got, it looks like a cold, it looks like the flu, should also exhibit signs of something else that Abbey is worried about and comes rushing back from some trip that she's on because not even the president's own physician knows that it could possibly be this. And again, Stockard is still talking, we're eating in the Warner Brothers' commissary, I'm nodding at the right moments but I'm trying to figure this—and I went back to Kevin and here's where I really have to ask you to forgive my glibness. And I said, Kevin, can you get the researchers on something for me? I need just the right disease, ok? And I needed it to have the following characteristics, that it could look like this but be this and Abbey could be worried that this thing that happened could have been—and they came back to me with MS. And I asked them a couple of questions about it, and without learning very much about it at all, I gave it to Bartlet. And honestly, the magnitude of what I'd done did not hit me until the day after that particular episode aired, it happened to be twice a year we are required to appear in front of the press, ok? Twice a year NBC requires us to appear in front of the Television Critics Association, the TCA, which en masse they come to Los Angeles twice a year and have three weeks of press conferences. And that episode had just aired the night before and all kinds of hands went up and said, Aaron, where are you going with the whole MS storyline? What's gonna happen now? And then I went, Kevin? Um, what's gonna happen now?

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: You're very welcome.

LAWRENCE: Next question, go ahead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: Hi, this question's for Aaron. And I just wanna say thank you for changing my life. I live in D.C. because of you and I'm a writer because of you so thank you.

AARON: What a thing to say, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

JOSH: Plug the book, plug the book!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: My book? I have a book—oh yeah, I have a book, a small book called, *Walk With Us: How the West Wing Changed Our Lives* and it's an anthology of essays and quotes by *West Wing* fans about how different ways *The West Wing* has impacted [cross talk] us.

AARON: [cross talk] God, that's amazing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: But that's not why I came to the microphone. Yeah, so please buy it, it's on Amazon and everything.

[LAUGHTER]

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: My question is, so your writing has impacted and inspired so many other writers including me, and I was wondering if you could tell us which writers both in your past but also currently inspire you and who do you seek to emulate?

AARON: Yeah, I'm glad that's the question because, first, thank you very much, I think that we probably all wanna say thank you for that. But to the extent that our show, that *West Wing* may have inspired anyone to, any other shows that are on TV, you know, any other writers, to the extent that *West Wing* may have inspired anyone to go into public service, and you have no idea what it does to my heart to see so many young people in the audience today. People who would have been in kindergarten when this show was on the air.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: I have got to learn how to use Netflix.

[LAUGHTER]

AARON: And to the extent that we may have inspired anyone to go into public service. Baked into that *West Wing* inspiration would be all the people that came before us. So to answer your question, for me, I believe that anyone who's writing good television, I think what most of us would consider good television, is walking in the footprints left by Larry Gelbart when he did *M.A.S.H.* [APPLAUSE] and changed everything. And beyond that I think that David Chase, David Milch, David Kelley, Larry David, Steven Bochco, of course Vince Gilligan. These are fantastic writers. And by the way, the debate is long been decided on this. You know, when we were doing the show, we'd be asked the question, gee, is television starting to no longer be the red-headed stepchild of feature films? Look at all the good people working in television. That question got decided long ago. The best theater in America is on television.

[APPLAUSE]

RICHARD: Alright, I have to ask, I have to add, I think you're leaving out two of your favorite writers, Paddy Chayefsky and—

AARON: [cross talk] Oh of course, yeah, Paddy Chayefsky, Paddy Chayefsky, Arthur Miller, for sure, and William Shakespeare.

BRAD: You know, just looking into the future, I just wanna say, I know somebody who's an amazing writer now would not have written what he's written, Lin-Manuel Miranda was, is the biggest [APPLAUSE] *West Wing* freak there is and credits Aaron.

LAWRENCE: Let's try to get one question from the audience and then a quick final comment from everybody up here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5: Hi, I'm glad I'm the last one. I wanna first tell you guys thank you for being here. You're a huge part of my family. I'm 45% here for you guys, and then the rest of that I'm here for my sister. She is the biggest *West Wing* fan. She plays it in the house just all the time just so she's close to it all the time. She's too nervous to come up here. I also wanna say thank you to Aaron Sorkin because, just echoing what everybody has said but, they tell you not to meet your heroes because sometimes you're disappointed. And today you met my sister and thank you for being so gracious today.

[APPLAUSE]

AARON: Thank you both.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5: But my question is where did "What next?" come from? We say that in our family constantly. For us, it means a lot, so I was just curious where [cross talk] that came from.

BRAD: [cross talk] It came from John Wells, didn't it?

AARON: No, as a matter of fact it came from Tommy. And the reason why, "What's next" is the last line of the episode, right? It's the last line of the pilot, and then became an important shibboleth for all of the characters. But whatever was the last line of the episode, I guess it was, "Josh, don't ever do that again" and that was it. Tommy wanted, and what I had written was, the door closes, black out, ok? Tommy wanted a, and the world goes on ending. He wanted to pull back so that we could see this is just another day doing business in the White House. So he asked me, can we not have the abrupt ending, can we pull back? And so, I said, ok, and right after that, you know, Josh goes, and I had him shout, Mrs. Landingham, what's next? And we did that and then that came in "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen," it became, we saw that it actually, that "what's next" had actually started much earlier than that, that it started on the campaign.

LAWRENCE: Ok, we're officially into overtime but I do wanna get just one more question from the audience. Go ahead, you can go back to that mic and that's it, and then we're gonna come back up here, sorry.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 6: Thank you. My question is about the iconic Josh and Donna's scene, I wouldn't stop for red lights. [APPLAUSE] I wanted to know what was the inspiration for that scene 'cause it's the most beautiful way of saying I love you without saying I love you that I've ever seen, so—

AARON: Thanks. I appreciate that, I really do. I just have to chalk it up to providence. It was, most of the time in agony writing, it isn't going well and I can tell something's wrong, it's going too slowly, it's too labored. That scene wasn't. I had that scene going in, I knew I was getting there. I didn't have the

line going in, but I got there, I felt very good writing it, and I got lucky.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 6: That's beautiful, thank you.

BRAD: You know, can I just say one little thing? Aaron's life is a kind of unresolvable hell [LAUGHTER] because he needs to write and it's agony and it must be great but he feels that he might not ever get there, and part of it is Aaron's own self but it's part of the act of writing and it always makes me laugh that like, living my life in Hollywood, if I call Tommy, if I call my agent, if I call anybody, if I call, my, you know, my brother, I'll leave a message and they'll call back. You call a writer in Hollywood, "Hello?" Like Aaron's writing forty episodes a year and you'd call him and he'd go, "Hello?" 'cause he wants to stop.

LAWRENCE: I just want a quick word about John Spencer before we go [cross talk] which is we—

BRAD: [cross talk] Yes.

[APPLAUSE]

LAWRENCE: We all saw that scene that John drove us through and he did work like that every week in *The West Wing*, and then, I don't know how many years in we were, maybe it was after two years or so, he was doing a play, in LA, the Taper. And I went and saw this play and I realized, oh my God, we're using 10% of his talent. It was, he was a stunning actor to see and the range that he had. But Tommy, just, that steadycam shot, a lot of pressure on a shot like that that we saw for the actor. You have to have a Rolls Royce of an actor cruising through there because, understand, if John Spencer misses one line at any point there, we're gonna have to start all the way back at the beginning. It's not like just, ok just go back one line and start again. When you sent John Spencer on that walk, you knew who you were sending.

TOMMY: Yeah, yeah. And a Rolls Royce is almost an understatement. I mean, the man was a gentleman among gentlemen besides being an extraordinary professional, extraordinary. He was such a loving man. I mean, just a quick story. When we did "Bartlet for America," I was telling John, I was in his office telling John about the script and about the napkin and about, that he would, and he just burst out crying. And I realized the separation between that character, it's what we've been talking about, and you know, this sort of, you know, it has been written before that you know, Martin was the father and John was the mother of this family that existed. There was a maternal, extraordinary, loving quality about that man that superseded the professionalism that he had. But he was, if you look up the definition of actor, you know, you would see his picture. That's really what it was about. He just was, his craft was so important, and the craft didn't ever take away from him dealing with other human beings with the same sort of kindness that his characters always displayed.

LAWRENCE: Ok, they're gonna turn the lights off on us so, Melissa, a last word from you and then we'll just go through the panel, of course skipping Josh Malina, and— [LAUGHTER] Go ahead, Melissa, any last word you'd like to say.

MELISSA: I was a small part of this extraordinary, extraordinary show, and it has given me some of the most rewarding experiences, lessons, gifts, friendships I have ever received in my life, and it certainly has led me to what I'm doing now, and I will be forever grateful for having had the opportunity to be part of this. And I just wanted to share one quick thing that Martin Sheen said. You know, Martin Sheen never went to college, and he said to me, people always tell me about their college experiences and say that they were the best years of their lives, they just wish they had known it and appreciated it. And he said you know, those were the best years of our lives, but we knew it, and I think that's true.

[APPLAUSE]

JOSH: Ok.

RICHARD: Dulé?

[LAUGHTER]

DULÉ: [cross talk] So, for me—

JOSH: [cross talk] I'm just happy—

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: I'm just happy to be here, and one of the reasons why I have been quiet is because in contrast to everybody who's on this stage, and some who couldn't make it today and some of course who are no longer with us, I was not part of creating the fabric of this show that we all know and love, [cross talk] so I want to express—

RICHARD: [cross talk] We've all been thinking that anyway.

BRAD: No, you were part of the demise.

JOSH: I'm trying to—

[LAUGHTER]

JOSH: I was trying to do sincere, it wasn't working anyway, but all I really wanted to do was say thank you to all those people and of course in particular to Aaron who has been the quintessence of a loyal and generous friend to me personally and professionally. He's given me every professional break, theater, TV, and film that I've had, and no greater gift than to invite me to be part of this show.

[APPLAUSE]

DULÉ: Well, I'll start by saying we do give Josh Malina a hard time but just so you all know we do love him [cross talk] very much. You know we gotta give him a hard time too.

BRAD: [cross talk] We do love him.

MELISSA: [cross talk] So much.

JOSH: [cross talk] Can we say too little too late all together?

[LAUGHTER]

DULÉ: But for me, I mean this has been a journey of a lifetime, coming in and being a part of this West Wing family is the gift that keeps on giving. I remember John Spencer would always say to people when we would have some wonderful experience, he would say, you wouldn't get this on a cop show. [LAUGHTER] And those words always ring back to me every time the experiences happen. One thing I really appreciate about being a part of this *West Wing* family is, they never rested on what they did. It really was always what's next. You'd have a great episode, you'd come back to work and everybody was always like, that's yesterday, we have to raise the bar. Yes we won best drama last year, but we gotta do better this year. Tommy would come in and say we gotta do better this year. And as an artist

that really has stuck with me, I always keep trying to press toward that higher mark and I've learned that by being with these wonderful, talented crew. And I love your shirt, I gotta say, Barlet, McGarry, Lyman, Cregg, Ziegler, and Seaborn, I love it. I've been looking at it the whole time.

RICHARD: It's funny that you guys brought "what's next?" up, in fact, because when you were talking about the "what's next" aspect of it, I wrote an article once for Huffington Post called, "What's Next." And it was about Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago for the, and it was also about my son. And one of the things that struck me about Obama which is what struck me about us is that the great athletes, you know, the Larry Birds and the Steph Currys and the Michael Jordans, they never hold on that moment, they're not celebrators, you know? Larry Bird was always looking to who he was gonna guard next as the ball went in. Steph Curry's backing up, you know, looking for his coverage as the ball is going in. And there's something about the way we work together which was always, which was not celebratory like we get to do now, but always looking to what the next moment was. And it's a way of living in the present kind of beautifully because you have to focus on the next thing that's coming. All this is to say is that I appreciate now more than ever how beautiful that experience was.

AARON: They really are kicking us out of here now so, I'll let you finish it's your panel, but I just wanted to quickly say, the thing about television is you never get to see the audience, you never get to see the audience, and I just wanna tell you, it is great to finally meet you. Thank you.

AARON: Ok.

TOMMY: Ok.

AUDIENCE: What's next?

[Outro Music]

LAWRENCE: That's the last word.

JOSH: Thank you.