

The West Wing Weekly
0.09: Casting Special
Guest: Tony Sepulveda

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to the West Wing Weekly. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina. As we head towards the end of *The West Wing* we're introducing a new monthly feature. A bonus episode that will help us discuss some stuff that falls out of the scope or the timeline of our episodic discussions.

HRISHI: So this week we're talking a little bit about the casting process behind the show. We always love to ask actors about their experiences auditioning and getting their roles. But what about the people who bring them in to audition in the first place?

JOSH: That's where the Casting Department comes in.

HRISHI: And Josh spoke to one of the people responsible for casting *The West Wing*: Tony Sepulveda.

TONY: Tony Sepulveda, Senior Vice President of Casting, Warner Bros Television. I was the casting director *The West Wing*, seasons 3 and 4.

JOSH: Which includes when I first joined the show.

TONY: Technically, I cast you on *The West Wing*. Technically. Aaron Sorkin called me and said we're going to add Josh Malina to the cast. So that's how I cast you.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: So, how did Tony end up on *The West Wing* Well he grew up in Santa Rosa, California before moving to Los Angeles for school.

[Background Music]

TONY: I went to UCLA to be an actor and I realized about halfway through the process when I wasn't getting cast in anything that I really didn't like rehearsing and I certainly didn't like the idea of memorising lines. So what I did was I started focusing on directing because I liked that better. And I didn't mind rehearsing and figuring things out. And to make myself better at theatre directing I thought I'd do an internship in casting. And I got an internship with Meg Lieberman who was working at MGM at the time. And she hired me as the day I graduated from UCLA.

JOSH: Meg Lieberman is a two-time Emmy Award winning casting director who has worked on shows like *Seinfeld* and *The Wonder Years*.

TONY: I was her assistant for about 2-3 years and then I came to Warner Bros in '88.

HRISHI: Tony was one of multiple casting directors working at Warner Bros. He worked on a bunch of shows and he was working on the fourth season of *Suddenly Susan* when *The West Wing* made its debut on network TV in 1999. And then two years later there was an opening over there.

TONY: In 2001, when John Levey was no longer able to do *The West Wing*. He and Kevin Scott were casting it. John had recommended me to take the show over. And I met with Aaron and with Tommy and then they gave me the ok. Which was great.

JOSH: I had absolutely no idea what it takes to become a casting director. So I asked Tony about it.

[Background music continues]

TONY: Casting director is probably the longest road of any job in the business because you really have to know who every actor is before you can become a casting director. You got to be aware of what they do and what they don't do, and what their strengths and weaknesses are, so that when a producer, who doesn't know them, asks you a bunch of questions you're well-equipped to answer them.

HRISHI: Tony came on for production for season 3. The Bartlett re-election campaign was going to be in full swing. You know, this is after the president puts his hands in his pockets and looks away and all of that at the end of "Two Cathedrals." So over the summer, one of Tony's first assignments was to find the actors to play Bruno Gianelli's team of consultants who were going to be brought in to help the campaign.

TONY: The first one was "Manchester Part I and II." And that's when I added Connie Britton, Evan Handler and Ron Silver to the cast. Aaron, Tommy and John Wells were very happy with, there's a certain people, there's these great theater people that it was really easy to get past Aaron and Tommy. And you just really wanted to make sure you were making a smooth transition. And I felt like we got some really good people on those two shows so I was sort of making ... I felt like I was doing alright. And then 9/11 happens ...

[Background music continues]

JOSH: Season 3 was scheduled to premiere on October 3rd, less than a month after September 11th. But as the country reeled in the aftermath of the attack, *The West Wing* scrambled to figure out how the Bartlett Administration could address it.

TONY: So on September 12th it was decided that an episode would be written and filmed and edited and cast in time before the premiere episode, which I think was two weeks later. We were still finishing an episode and we had to start casting this episode which Aaron was still writing, at lightning speed. And then I was getting the pages.

HRISHI: This is the episode that would become "Isaac and Ishmael." Tony had to cast the character of Rakim Ali, the Muslim White House employee, who gets falsely accused of terrorism. Plus, he had to cast all the students who were at the White House for Presidential Classroom.

TONY: And the kids. There's like 8 of them. Tommy and Aaron were very specific how they wanted those kids to look. And act. And they just didn't want any showbiz kids in there at all. And in those days we didn't have computerised submissions so I just had to call every kids' agency. I think the main kid that Josh Zuckerman played which was the kid that Josh sort of chides a lot and sort of makes fun of in a fun way.

HRISHI: Right.

[West Wing Episode 3.01 excerpt]

JOSH: Uh, this is the White House, the home of the President and the Executive Branch, the most powerful of the three branches of the federal government.

[Beat. One of the students raises their hands to ask a question]

JOSH: Yeah.

BILLY: Actually, Mr. Lyman, isn't it true that the Framers made sure that the Executive Branch was the weakest of the three branches? Because we were breaking off from the royalist model that put absolute power in just one place. [Beat] I mean, isn't that why they made the Legislative branch-or People's Branch-the most powerful?

JOSH: What's your name?

BILLY: [with a slight hesitation] I'm Billy Fernandez.

JOSH: I'll call you Fred. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. I don't know how long we're all going to be here, but you just made my list.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The role was key to the episode so Josh Zuckerman auditioned a few times.

TONY: I mean, maybe three, because we didn't have a lot of time.

JOSH: But, despite the time crunch, they managed to get it all done.

TONY: It was an interesting lesson because it showed it could be done. And, I think, subsequently, during the course while I was that wasn't the first time that happened. We were the last minute with filming we had to search because we did have a system in place if we had to.

[Background music continues]

HRISHI: After that Tony settled in as one of *The West Wing's* casting directors. He said that if you're a producer on a show, casting directors sort of act like your personal shoppers.

TONY: They're basically trying to figure out what suit you're going to wear. And how well you'll look in it and you give the producers many choices and you may have the clout to recommend and really push one over the other. And sometimes you don't. But at least if you show them 5 good shoots and they pick the right one you can feel that you did your job correctly. So, whenever there was a guest star I would give them about 7 or 8 choices and they would make a decision. And if, in fact, they didn't make a decision then they gave me specific notes as to why these people weren't working and then here's what you need to do when you give me the next set of 8. And that's basically how it works. And then once it's chosen, my job would be to negotiate their salary and their billing.

JOSH: Working on *The West Wing*, however, was different from other shows. It was a little harder.

[Background music continues]

TONY: In past shows that I had done you could always say the lighting wasn't that good and that's why we couldn't find actors to do it. But the pressure of *The West Wing* was that anybody would do the show. And because I had all those choices to present to Aaron and to Tommy if I didn't find the right people, it really was my fault.

HRISHI: Since there are so many characters on *The West Wing* who come back, now and then, Tony did his homework so he could keep track of them.

TONY: The thing that I remembered, when I inherited the show is that I watched every episode again. And I wrote down every actor that had played a senator, a congressman, a cabinet member ... so that if I read a script and it said Secretary of blank. I'd say 'Oh, okay I already know who that is.'

HRISHI: But sometimes the homework actually wasn't useful.

TONY: I remember reading a script and it said Congressman from Ohio or somewhere and I remember thinking "Oh good, we've already actually cast that." So I called Aaron and I said "You know we've actually used an actor for this" and he said "Oh, okay, I'll just change the state."

JOSH: Aaron didn't actually want to bring back the same actor. He didn't mean for it to be the same character. He just forgot that he'd already used that elected position in a storyline previously.

HRISHI: So, one thing we talked about before when we were discussing the episode "Enemies Foreign and Domestic," was how surprising it was that they had Ian McShane on playing a Russian.

[West Wing Episode 3.18 excerpt]

IVANOVICH: ... We need something from you.

SAM: Okay.

IVANOVICH: On his arrival, and during outdoor photograph opportunity, President Bartlet must wear overcoat.

SAM: A coat?

IVANOVICH: He must wear coat. He must wear gloves. Scarves and earmuffs - permissible, but optional.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's right. Tony told me a little bit about that. It turns out it was another casting decision that had to be made very quickly.

[Background music resumes]

TONY: One time, now this is the thing that scared me the most, I had to cast two Russian guys and I had been told at, I think it was, 7 o'clock on a Friday that they were going to start filming at 7am on Monday and we hadn't cast either one of them. And in the back of my head, Ian McShane had been pitched to me by ICM because

he wanted to do the show and they knew that there was something Russian going on because I said to them “Well I might have a role of a Russian diplomat” and I knew he could do a Russian accent. So I somehow managed to get them to sign off on Ian that night and we closed him. So he was able to show up on Monday. So that was kinda close.

JOSH: It was actually close many, many times because of how late Aaron would turn in his pages.

TONY: I think one of the funniest conversations I ever had with Aaron Sorkin which really just set me going was, I would get maybe one page or two pages and I would get a call from Lou Wells at noon that said you have to cast that this afternoon so we can shoot tomorrow.

HRISHI: That would mean that Tony didn’t always know if this was going to turn into a big role in the episode or just a few lines.

TONY: So I would have to, kind of, go into my library of people that I’d brought in before or pictures that they had sent and then I’d call Aaron I say, “Aaron, are these parts getting any bigger?” and I’d only did this once by the way and he’d say “Uh-huh, does that matter?” And he hung up. So he was kind of like “what are you talking about what difference does it make, just get a good actor.” And so I did.

JOSH: We’ve talked a lot before about how strict things were with the scripts and that there was no room for any improvisation or even just a little bit of paraphrasing. And those aren’t constraints that every actor feels comfortable working within.

[Background music resumes]

TONY: The one thing Aaron was very taskmaster about was that you do not change a word or a letter in the dialogue. It wouldn’t set him off in a bad way but it would certainly get him to the point where ‘they don’t understand the role if they have to change a word.’ And that was right. Aaron was always read with the actors which made my life a lot easier because I could just watch what they were doing. And Aaron loved reading with the actors. But also, he also knows the rhythm of the dialogue. That was one of the challenges you had, the actors had to know that when you walk in there you gotta do the dialogue the way it was written.

HRISHI: Almost everyone, even the big names, had to audition.

TONY: The only person I think we ever offered it to in the two years that I did it, was Mary Louse Parker, Lily Tomlin and Matthew Perry. And I think Laura Dern didn’t read either.

JOSH: Everyone else read?

TONY: Everybody else read.

JOSH: I didn’t read.

HRISHI: [Laughs]

JOSH: I had an inside track.

HRISHI: There you go. “cause you’re one of the big names, Josh.

JOSH: That's right. Big, big name.

HRISHI: Beside the pin point exactitude that the scripts needed. Sometimes you had to come in a guest star, nail all the dialogue stuff and do a walk and talk.

TONY: Of course, the series regulars knew how to do it in their sleep and that just made it even worse. Because, you would be the one messing it up and as a result, it would just be that much more pressure on the actor. When Mark Harman did the show I remember, his first scene was with Allison, and it was a walk and talk. And I went up to his dressing room to congratulate him on the show and I worked with him on previous series and he was just shaking over it.

JOSH: [laughs]

TONY: And it just showed you, it doesn't matter how big of a star you were there was such a, you know, an inherent love for this show that no-one wanted to mess up on it.

JOSH: But despite those challenges, or really probably, somewhat because of them, people still wanted to get cast. So many actors wanted to be on *The West Wing*.

TONY: This is the kind of thing they would want to audition for.

HRISHI: After season four ended, Tony was promoted to be a senior casting executive at Warner Brothers.

TONY: I had to give up the casting director job and become a casting executive.

[Background music resumes]

TONY: I recommended Laura Schiff who was a huge fan of the show and I knew that she would know every episode and it would be perfect for her to take over.

HRISHI: Laura Schiff, like Tony before her, and like John Levey and Kevin Scott before him would go on to be nominated for an Emmy for casting *The West Wing*.

JOSH: Tony is still at Warner Bros. He's the senior vice president of casting for the network. In fact I've been running into him recently. I have recurring role on *The Big Bang Theory* ...

HRISHI: Mmm hmmm.

JOSH: And every episode begins with an initial table read and there's quite a line up there and it includes Tony and that's where I came up to him and said 'Hey, would you come on the podcast'.

[Background music continues]

HRISHI: Oh, that's perfect. [Background music ceases] Hey side note, you and Josh Zuckerman ...

[West Wing Episode 3.01 excerpt]

BILLY: Actually, Mr. Lyman,

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Have both appeared in *The Big Bang Theory*.

JOSH: Ah, how 'bout that?

[Background music resumes]

TONY: As a casting executive, my job is to hire the casting director to cast the show and then they report to me in terms of progress. You know, how the process is going. And my job, as a casting executive, is to facilitate the approval process. So, the guest stars, I'll help facilitate their approval as well as the series regular and I'll guide everybody in the right direction so we can do it in an efficient way. The only reason you're there is if the creators are having some sort of problem getting their point across to the network or even the studio execs. And then I can be there to help, you know, represent them and explain to everybody why this is import for the producer to go this way instead of that way. And when a show runs itself you stand back. You let the creators create.

HRISHI: *The West Wing* was the last show that Tony worked on as a casting director.

[Background music resumes]

TONY: I think the rewarding thing was to be able to work with this incredible team. Because we were such a tight knit family I didn't get to work with a lot of directors. It was mostly Alex Graves and Chris Misiano and they would just sort of volley it back and forth and then Tommy would go in every once in a while. But we were all so tight. It was a rewarding experience and it was a great show to end my casting career on, you know?

[Background music continues and fades out]

JOSH: And that does it for this special bonus episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thanks for listening. Thanks very much to Tony Sepulveda, for being our guest.

HRISHI: Let us know what you thought on our website: thewestwingweekly.com or hit us up on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. You know where to find us.

JOSH: As always, Nick Song, Margaret Miller and Zach McNeese helped make this episode and they are the very best.

HRISHI: *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX. A collection of independent, creative, podcasts. Learn more about all the shows at Radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: Big thanks to Blue Dot Sessions to providing the music that we used in this episode. We'll be back next week with episode 6.07: "A Change is Gonna Come." We had a blast taping that one live in San Francisco with special guest Mary McCormack and with Roman Mars.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

TONY: What's next?

[Outro Music]