

The West Wing Weekly
0.15: Alex Graves
Guest: Alex Graves

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we've got a special episode. We're talking to executive producer and director of *The West Wing*, Alex Graves.

JOSH: We finally got him.

HRISHI: It's taken us a while. We've been wanting to talk to him for a long time. But in some ways, this is the perfect setting. We're now deep into the show and this is a bonus episode so we can talk to him about everything instead of pegging it to just one episode, we're going to talk to him about everything we've seen so far and all the things that he's done over the years on *The West Wing*.

JOSH: That's right. It's entirely possible, Hrishi, that we got played. That he was looking for a bonus episode [Hrishi laughs] and so he'd never commit to a specific *West Wing* episode.

HRISHI: He knew our plans before we did.

JOSH: I think so.

HRISHI: Well it worked out for all of us.

JOSH: Happy news indeed.

HRISHI: All right, let's get into it. Joining us now is director, writer, executive producer: Alex Graves.

ALEX: Hi. Thanks for talking to me.

HRISHI: Thanks for joining us.

JOSH: Hi Alex, I'm Josh Malina. I was on the show.

ALEX: Josh, it's great to meet you. I've heard great things and I went back and looked you up and I do remember you.

JOSH: Oh, good.

HRISHI: [laughs]

ALEX: No, I actually had, I was a little bit involved in you getting on the show. But anyway...

JOSH: Oh, I definitely want to hear that then.

HRISHI: Let's go back to the beginning of the story. Alex, where does the story begin for you?

ALEX: It begins with when I was doing my first episode of *Ally McBeal*, which was like my second or third job with a crew. Mike Listo was a producer on *Ally McBeal* and my second day on the job I had a production meeting about a dream sequence that needed to be kind of technically involved and I came in, I was very prepared, and after this meeting he called Tommy Schlamme and they were doing the first season of *Sports Night* and he said you should meet this kid because he sounds like what you've been needing on *Sports Night* because *Sports Night* was very hard to do. And of course, to me it was just like oh my God, you know, it was most exciting thing that could happen. So, I said, can I go over and see how it shot and I went over and watched Tommy filming and saw the cast and I was so intimidated by the actors. I was like, oh my God, I could never do this, but said yes anyway, so I went over to meet and to hang out on set to watch them shoot and meet Tommy Schlamme and I'd never met anybody like Tommy and I kind of fell in love with him in like five minutes, which I think is probably normal for him.

JOSH: Your first Jew?

ALEX: [laughing] Yeah, having grown up in the Midwest, he was my first Jew and I was [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah. I thought that's what you meant

ALEX: madly...thank you. And he said you need to meet Aaron and I knew who Aaron was because of *The American President*. I was a huge...I was a real fan of Aaron's. So, I went into meet Aaron, I was very nervous, and Aaron and I started talking about old movies and hit it off just like a bomb and Tommy interrupted the meeting and he said, "I'm so sorry to interrupt but Aaron, guess what? We just found the Oval Office" and I'm sitting there and Aaron's like "you're kidding" and he's like "It's in a storage facility and Simi Valley and it's the Oval Office from *American President* and we could use it" and I said, "Sorry, what are you doing with an oval office?" Because I'm thinking *Sports Night* and they said, "Oh we just finally got greenlit to do the show we're doing about the White House and we're shooting the pilot next month." And I said, "The White House?" It's like okay that's doesn't sound like anything anybody's talking about. It was really interesting and then Tommy called me about a month later and I thought it was about *Sports Night* and he said well we can talk about *Sports Night* later but we directed this pilot called *The West Wing* and I'd like to send it to you to see if you do it and he had a messenger sent with a copy of the pilot on VHS to my house and I remember watching it and I had a feeling that I still hold on to, that it was a little bit like how I felt when I first saw *Game of Thrones*, which was, I couldn't, you watch it, you went how are they going to do this every week? Because it was so ambitious just on so many levels and I called Tommy and I said, "How are you going to do this every week? Are you going to do this every

week?" And he said, "That's the plan." and I was like well count me in and they hired me to direct what became "In Excelsis Deo."

HRISHI: And what was that like? What was your first day directing *The West Wing* like?

ALEX: Well [laughs]

JOSH: What a first episode.

ALEX: That's a good question. So, I went over to do *In Excelsis Deo* and I encountered a kind of an emptiness on the show because Aaron was having his first writer's block. Aaron was writing like a scene or two a day and they would shoot a scene when it was written and then break. Anyway, so I called Arlington Cemetery and got a whole lesson in how they bury veterans and then I started shooting so first day of filming on the show, I had an ensemble scene with everybody in the lobby and it was Martin and a bunch of kids who were visiting the White House, and I had I had only bumped into Brad Whitford during prep and he had locked eyes with me as he was leaving stage and I was coming on stage and I was very nervous and intimidated. And Brad looked over at me and he said, "Hey, are you the new director?" And I said, "Yeah" and he said, "Great. You're going to be my bitch boy all week."

ALL: [laugh]

ALEX: Which, for those of us...and I started laughing. I think I laughed off and on for a week, which real it was really my intro to Brad who obviously became a really good friend of mine and is still probably the funniest person I've ever met and had an absolute blast with him. But anyway, so first day of shooting was the scene in the lobby, we're shooting everybody, and I had turn around and do an angle on Allison Janney and what I remember the most about the first day of filming on *West Wing* was I rolled on Janney and the air went out of the room and I'd never seen an actor like that, with that kind of talent. I'd just never seen anything like her.

HRISHI: Do you remember which scene it was that gave you that impression? Because you know, that's not a big C.J. episode.

ALEX: Well, that's a great point because she came in and she was telling him about, I think his name was Matthew Harrison, which is it was based on a true story that had happened in the news the previous year. About a young man who was homosexual, he was high school student who was tied and beaten to death by his fellow classmates for being gay. She comes in to tell the president that the young boy has died in the hospital and then watches and listens to the rest of the scene for like two minutes of screen time. And so, as I was going on and on about how amazing she was, just think about, she's not even talking.

HRISHI: Oh right.

ALEX: I mean, she's just standing there acting and listening and doing what an actor's supposed to do, but it was just utterly hypnotic to watch her work and that never changed. Anyway, so then I wrapped that day that first day of shooting doing a scene with Tim Busfield and Janney and then was driven to the airport, flew the red-eye to DC

and got up to shoot the Korean War Memorial sequences, and I was driven to the Korean War Memorial on three hours sleep or whatever it was and I was met by the producer there for the show, who's the local producer, they said, "We have a little problem." and I said, "What's that?" and they said, "Well, we've been given permission to shoot at the memorial but we can't have any camera equipment or sound recorded on the memorial".

HRISH: Right.

ALEX: Which was like comedically...

JOSH: Yeah

ALEX: You're just like "you're kidding? So basically, we can film here but we can't".

JOSH: You can shoot here, just don't use your cameras.

ALEX: Yeah or recording devices of any kind. And I was this kid, you know, and I was like, "Look, can I talk to the park representative", who is kind of the person in charge and they said "yeah", I went over and I just said "Look, I understand but just so you know, we're trying to film a memorial to the veterans that's completely well intentioned and about literally what the memorial's about and honor the veterans of the war. And in order to do that, I need to film over there and have the camera do this and that and have my actor do this and that and is that okay?" and they said "Huh, well let me make a phone call" and they came back and they let us on

[West Wing Episode 1.10 excerpt]

TOBY ZEIGLER: A homeless man died this morning near the monument.

JOHN NOONAN: Yeah, uh...when the weather gets down...

TOBY: Occurred to me that...maybe he slept there a lot, maybe...you knew him.

JOHN: Yeah, he was one of them. Was he a friend of yours?

TOBY: No.

JOHN: I didn't think so.

[end excerpt]

ALEX: And I kind of negotiated camera position by camera position everything that was shot at the Korean War Memorial because that was the first trip to DC besides the reshoots they had done for the pilot or, whether they reshoots are additional shooting I don't remember, and so they didn't know us, you know, Washington was like "Who...What's this TV show?" and we had a very good experience that day and after that they started to open the doors for us to shoot in certain places and it was real, it was funny, because literally I just filmed at the Palace of Versailles three weeks ago and I'm

sitting there having the same moment with the woman who is sort of mistress of the Palace of Versailles and I'm referencing *West Wing*, which she knows, and so she's like, okay Alex can run the fountains that still run on the same water system.

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: And again, I'm pulling

JOSH: How about that?

ALEX: from my *West Wing* bag like, in 2019 at Versailles. [laughs]

HRISH: That's great.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: You still got good will from an episode from 20 years ago.

ALEX: Oh, yeah. *West Wing* is always brought generosity of various kinds. Anyway, so then we shot, that whole DC shoot and finish the episode and Aaron and Tommy, and John were thrilled, and it won a couple of Emmys and they offered me the job producing and being the in-house director in the show and I passed.

HRISHI: Why was that?

ALEX: Well for two reasons, I was terrified of getting stuck in TV, which of course I did and two, we just had our first baby and I had learned *The West Wing* wasn't like normal shows and that it was kind of a 24-hour a day job and I wasn't ready to commit like that. But I was really about, I didn't know anybody. I mean, I'd gotten along really well with Aaron and Tommy, but I didn't feel like I knew enough about it so I went back and I did two more episodes and Aaron said, "So what do you think?" and I said, "Okay, I'll sign on." and that was halfway through the second season when I'd done "The Midterms" and *Galileo*. It was at the end of "Galileo" that I said I stay on.

HRISHI: Oh, wow. Okay. I didn't realize that, that all those episodes you directed...

JOSH: I was just going to ask, was that the beginning of a five-year blur of full-time commitment to the show? I mean it must have been a huge shift in your life.

ALEX: Well in a weird way "In Excelsis" was because I kept going back all season to shoot additional stuff for Tommy cause Tommy kind of apparently made the statement saying nobody can shoot for me but Alex. And so, when Tommy was doing "Two Cathedrals" in DC, I shot stuff for him on the stage at Warner Brothers to keep the show on schedule.

HRISHI: For the same episode?

ALEX: Yeah for "Two Cathedrals."

HRISH: Wow.

JOSH: Interesting. Do remember what scenes?

ALEX: Oh, I would if I saw it, yeah with some scenes...I mean this is going to sound like a joke, a *West Wing* joke, but it was scenes of people walking and talking down the corridors of the White House.

JOSH: I remember those.

HRISH: So, you took the job as the director in house and that means you also became a producer?

ALEX: The funny thing about the show, and I look back on that is that, I became a producer that morning I landed in Washington because that was, the show was so challenging to do that I think you were inherently, whether it's Chris Misiano or Lesli Linka Glatter, you were sort of standing there helping get the show produced because the directing of the show was a critical part of the show, you didn't just show up and do it, and you were very involved and how it was going to be produced.

HRISH: And that's unusual for TV?

ALEX: You know, I don't know because it was like my third job. To me it just made sense. What Aaron and Tommy were trying to do was partners in the endeavour was so ambitious at the time that it was pretty hard to pull off. I mean the average wrap on *West Wing* the first season and a half or two seasons was 4 a.m. Saturday morning.

HRISH: Yeah.

ALEX: You know, we would not wrap at six o'clock on Friday night. We'd still be shooting on the weekend to get done. And the reason was that, not only was it hard to pull off, but you were allowed to do 30 takes. I mean, one of my great stories about Tommy Schlamme and my life on *West Wing*, people have said Tommy was my mentor and Tommy was my mentor in ways, but he was really my protector and it's funny, on an early day on the show, when I was first directing, I was doing what was the opening shot of "In Excelsis Deo" and it was like a two minute long shot and it was a quadruple 360 around a Christmas tree on all the characters being introduced, and I had drawn it out like an air traffic control map. I had it so worked out in my head. It was very hard to pull off

[West Wing Episode 1.10 excerpt]

SAM: Who's playing Santa?

MANDY: Al Roker.

SAM: Playing Santa?

MANDY: What wrong with that?

SAM: Went on a diet.

TOBY: How do you know these things?

SAM: I read.

MANDY: We'll pad him if we have to. Now we have Jose Feliciano...

[end excerpt]

ALEX: I was on something like take 27 when Tommy showed up on set, and even though I was green, I was smart enough to know that it was unusual that he had come to set and that somebody had probably called him and that I might be getting into a little bit of trouble when these first days on this White House TV show and Tommy came over and said, "Hey, How's it going?" and he sat down and sort of everybody was looking at Tommy and I said, "I'm about to shoot another take," and I did another take and we almost got it but when I said cut, everybody stopped and looked at Tommy. To see if he was basically going to say, "Kid, move on".

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: Everyone looked at Tommy and I looked and waited, and Tommy turned to me and he said, "That is a great [expletive deleted] shot," and he walked off.

JOSH and HRISHI: [laugh]

ALEX: And I did five more takes

JOSH: That's awesome.

ALEX: I think it was take 32 and I got it, and that pretty much explains like my creative life on that show, which was...

JOSH: That was perfect, let's go again.

ALEX: Let's go again if I need to, and if I got it in two takes, I got it in two takes. But Tommy protected me from the studio and anybody else, even the DP's was once in a while, from any kind of restriction and I think part of it was that he knew that I wasn't an indulgent sort. I just knew what I was trying to get and wanted to get it, just like everybody else on the show and it didn't matter if it was me or one of the actors, certainly Aaron, one of the editors, if anybody on that show was trying to reach for something a little higher Tommy was the King Arthur with his sword out, standing there letting that person reach.

JOSH: By the way piggybacking on that story, I will also add that you're the only director with whom I worked during that time who did a single take of a walk and talk and I think, I think Mary and I were doing it, we finished the first take and you said, "Cut. Moving on," and everyone was like, "What are you talking about?" You were like, "I got it." And

everyone's like, "But it's a walk and talk, don't you want to do...maybe just to be safe?" and you're like, "No, I got it."

ALEX: My response to you, and this is gloves off just honest, which you and I rarely are

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: Is with you and Mary McCormack, you bet I only did one take. You and Mary together were utterly spectacular.

JOSH: That is nice of you to say.

ALEX: I used to rush to work if I had stuff with the two of you let alone the two of you alone.

JOSH: That's awesome.

ALEX: I was in love with both of you and what you were separately but also together. Let alone you guys together with the biggest troublemakers on the show and an absolute blast to work with. You'd literally be on set, and Malina and Mary would be doing a scene, and in the middle of a take one of them would go, "Is that the way you're going to do that line?" and the other one would go, "[expletive deleted] you, you bet it is." and then they'd just keep going.

JOSH: [laughing] That sounds like Mary. [laughs] No, that sounds like me.

ALEX: It was funny. It was more fun to watch them shoot a scene than it was to watch the scene.

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: It was fantastic, I mean that, those were...Josh used to do scenes with Allison and Mary and off-camera do everything he could to crack them up and mess them up and it wasn't like evil vindictive actor stuff. It was almost like Michael Jordan playing with LeBron or something. It was like, let's see if you can handle this.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: Let's be good and it was, it was a blast.

HRISHI: That's amazing.

JOSH: Well, I don't sound like a professional, but I'll take it.

ALEX: I think we just jumped into season six from first half of season one.

HRISHI: Yeah. Exactly, yeah. Let's go back. I actually want to just go back to this idea that Tommy said that you were the only person who could shoot for him. What happened between "In Excelsis Deo" and that moment, besides the episodes that you directed, what happened between the two of you that you think that created that trust for him?

ALEX: Well, I mean on the one hand I went back after I did "In Excelsis Deo," I went back and did my four episodes of *Sports Night* in a row, so I was really around.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEX: Working with them, and as somebody now who's gone on and I hire directors and I work on things where I'm supervising or around other directors, it is a challenge to find people that you can really trust to just go in and direct the stories and tell the stories properly minute to minute, and I guess he trusted me to do that, and Aaron as well, and we just had a real unspoken easy relationship from the very beginning.

HRISHI: I guess maybe we should talk about, the end of *Sports Night* I guess was the first, the second season of *Sports Night* was the first season of *West Wing*.

ALEX: Yeah.

HRISHI: So, when *Sports Night* was over, you already knew you had jobs potentially lined up on the other show.

ALEX: Well, I was working on, I was actually doing a lot of work with David Kelley at the time, but I was completely interested in doing *West Wing* just on a creative level and to be honest, and this is so utterly shallow, but one of the ways Tommy lured me to stay on the show was that they were going to shoot the 1.85 aspect ratio and for me that was gigantic!

JOSH: Nerd.

ALEX: More important than almost anything I'd heard, even the money. I was like, wait what? He's like, yes, season two we're going to start shooting wide screen and I went home, and I was like, I'm signing like on, like that's it. [Josh laughs] So yeah.

HRISHI: You know, one of the things that Josh and I spoke about recently was the fact that your background in TV was originally in shows like *Ally McBeal* and *Sports Night*, shows where things like the aspect ratio and really just the visual production of it wasn't front and center the way it's been for so many things that you've made since then. In season 7 and some of the episodes recently with that we've been talking about, we felt that we could see this transition happening and certainly there are lots of incredible visual things that you did in *The West Wing* too, but now in the later seasons, especially it feels like you can see the seeds of all the other things that you would go on to do. But I'm just wondering where did that come from? You said *Ally McBeal* was the first thing that you had directed with a crew. You have such a reputation among everybody that we've interviewed, as being this incredibly kinetic visual director, and I'm just wondering where do you think that came from when you started off with shows like *Ally McBeal* and *Sports Night*? Did you always feel like you had that inclination in you? Or was it something that you find yourself attracted to later on?

ALEX: Yeah. I mean the director of *Game of Thrones* was standing on the set *Ally McBeal* and *The Practice*, my first jobs, wishing I would be allowed to do that sort of thing and I wanted to make movies but I didn't really ever get a break in movies and ended up on *West Wing* with people...The thing is I mean the core of it Aaron and John and Tommy love movies. And so, you could try to direct *West Wing* as best you could like a movie if you were so inclined, and nobody would stop you. What happened as the seasons went by was after Aaron left and the challenge of making the show without him presented itself to those who were under contract and had to stay and figure it out, which was not fun, you had to elevate what was being written and you had to elevate the show to try to keep it somehow up where it had been under Aaron's talent and everybody had that same goal. And I also, I think that the key change in *West Wing* stylistically came out of the election and presidency of George Bush. The country changed, the division grew you know, people started saying red and blue state and all of the trigger words that built the wedge in the country and I couldn't film a romantic, cinematic, long take oriented style anymore with the kind of fragmentation that was going on and we had to go and "Game On" was the episode where I really literally, formally took this on and said, "It's over", when I wanted to put a hammer through the glass of what the show had been

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Josh, we need your tie.

JOSH: What the hell?

CHARLIE: Take it off!

C.J.: What happened?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: My wife cut it off with scissors.

C.J.: Why?

STAGE MANAGER: Folks, can I get you to the stage?

PRESIDENT BARLET: I don't think we have that kind of time.

STAGE MANAGER: 15 seconds.

[end excerpt]

ALEX: and I told Tommy ,and I went to Tommy and in some way shape or form, I went to Tommy and I said look I want to do this handheld, I want to literally screw up and mess up and turn upside down the feeling the show in this episode because organically in the story, and this is the only reason Tommy would have supported it, was that the characters were having to say we're going to turn our whole world upside down to win this debate.

JOSH: By the way, that was my, "Game On" was my first episode and it was incredibly nice for me to come into that environment under your direction. I'll always remember that.

ALEX: Well, it's nice of you to say but I should also say, since we're now at this point in our lives where we can talk about the stuff, I was so happy you were coming on because I was a huge fan on every level of you and I just so enjoyed working with you that I was just like, couldn't wait. I was like a kid, it was sort of like my buddy from the school I had been in previously was getting to come over to my school, and we were going to get to finally play soccer together. It was really fun.

JOSH: I appreciate that, and did you allude to earlier to your being part of the reason why I got the job.

ALEX: I don't think I was a reason you got the job. Nobody told Aaron Sorkin who, what actor he was going to hire on the show, but I remember he would test the waters with people and I remember him testing the waters about you and Mary-Louise Parker and just to sort of see how you'd react and it's like yeah, that's a fantastic idea.

HRISHI: We're going back and forth a little bit but let me just backtrack a second from *Game On* to the finale of season 3. That was I think the first time that someone other than Tommy directed a finale.

ALEX: Yeah.

HRISHI: He had done seasons one and two. You directed that episode and then that episode you were nominated for a DGA award I think.

ALEX: And an Emmy.

HRISHI: And an Emmy as well. Yeah, so there you're still within what as you described it as the established style of the show, do you think you would have felt ready to break the glass in "Game On" if you hadn't been sort of recognized in that way, you know the fact that you'd gotten this Emmy nomination, that this DGA nomination; did that sort of give you license to say, "Okay the established style, I've nailed that, I can move on and do something else now."

ALEX: Actually, no [laughs]. I really, it's funny my reaction to the show was every script was a new movie, so I would read, whenever I would get a script I wouldn't, I would almost wait to the read throughs, but I was, it's sort of a very special thing to read one of Aaron's scripts for the first time because I would have a very intense reaction. And so, I would try to sort of record that reaction to every single moment that I had reading the script and then bring it to life. And so, if I'd gotten the script to "Game On" a year earlier, I would have probably done some version of what I did with "Game On". It actually wasn't about confidence. I just, I shot it the way I saw it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEX: And I tried to actually, I tried very hard to not ever lose that, if that makes any sense.

HRISHI: It does.

ALEX: It's a big part of it.

JOSH: Was it ever hard, was there ever a tension between having to stick to a sort of visual vocabulary that had already been established by Tommy and what *The West Wing* was and trying to push the limits.

ALEX: Never. It was that definitive it was that, I guess in a weird way It's just we were that in sync, so we didn't have any of those. That's the thing about Tommy or Aaron is you could go up to them and say, "I know you said black but what if it were white for this reason?" and if they understood the reason they'd go, "That's fantastic, go do it." and that is-

JOSH: Very cool.

ALEX: That's great leadership.

HRISHI: So, speaking of being in sync, I was thinking about how Aaron and Tommy Schlamme and John Wells were the original executive producers on the show, and it makes sense that they had a synchronous, that they were in sync, they found each other. They sort of, they built the show together. They found each other. They chose sort of, each other to be this team. After Aaron and Tommy left, the mantle certainly fell to John Wells, but also to you and Chris Misiano. And the two of you have been working together on the show for a long time and Tommy he had described it to us before that he did a lot with sort of the two of you, but I was thinking about how you and Chris Misiano, you didn't choose each other. You were both chosen by Tommy, but you didn't choose each other and now suddenly you are making this show, you have this responsibility for this team that you didn't actually create. Was that ever an issue for you?

ALEX: Well, we can go back to this but it's interesting just for the purposes of your show that you left one person out of that scenario and we can go back to this later. But that person is Brad Whitford.

HRISHI: Hmm.

ALEX: I mean just to talk about, Chris and I's, I mean, Chris and I we never interfered with each other ever and we only helped each other if the other one needed help which was rarely. I think it was really good for John and everybody on the show that Chris and I loved the show so much.

HRISHI: But that's interesting. So, you worked, it sounds like you worked more in parallel.

ALEX: Totally. I mean we spend more time talking about our children than we did the show. I mean, I wasn't going to tell Chris, I don't like to tell anybody how to direct but I wasn't going to tell Chris how to direct and he wouldn't even tell me how to direct and we would just sort, and we would we would marvel at challenges and problems that were unique to the show.

JOSH: When did you first ponder the concept of writing an episode yourself?

ALEX: Oh God. It's funny, almost never, I mean, as the season was coming into its later years and I was looking for new challenges. I was in the writers' room a lot and I just said to John one day I'd love to try to write an episode because I was also, to be honest, I was looking to after the show and like wanting to be a writer/director and so he says, "Yeah." and I wrote an episode and he was really happy with it and we shot it. And it was actually kind of ironic because it was about creationism versus evolution which was a battle actually going on in the state, I'm from, Kansas, at the time. So it was, I was actually writing about something that was going on back where my family was.

[West Wing Episode 7.04 excerpt]

LOCAL REPORTER: Congressman, could you tell us if you believe in intelligent design?

CONGRESSMAN MATT SANTOS: I believe in God, and I'd like to think He's intelligent.

REPORTER: Does that you mean you believe it should be taught in schools, Congressman? Does that you mean you don't believe in evolution?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Can we go back again and if it's okay, I'd just like to out a couple of moments, just personal favourite moments from episodes that you've directed just to ask you about them.

ALEX: Sure. Have you guys ever talked about "17 People?"

HRISH: We did. We did a whole episode on it.

JOSH: Oh, yeah.

ALEX: I just remembered "17 People" out of nowhere. I was like, oh, wow.

JOSH: What springs to your mind when you think of that episode?

ALEX: Well, there was a great joke about "17 People" which you probably know which was that it was going to be the bottle episode and we were always getting in trouble for the show going over and shooting long days. For those of you who don't know, a bottle show is when you just shoot everything with sets and props and stuff you own. There's no money put in the episode and it's supposed to be super easy to do. Well, the problem is that the guy writing the show is one of the greatest playwrights alive and so he writes *17 People* and he writes the script that is so rich and brilliant that it has like nine page scenes that rise and fall and evolve and waste like classic films that aren't even made anymore, where you go sit in the scene like you're in *All the Presidents Men* or *All About Eve* and it evolves and evolves and evolves

[West Wing Episode 2.18 excerpt]

TOBY: *Do you receive medication?*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *I get injections of Betaseron.*

TOBY: *From whom?*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *From a doctor.*

TOBY: *None of you current doctors are aware of you condition. Mr. President...is your wife medicating you?*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *I think it would be best while temperatures are running a little high...that you refer to my wife as Mrs. Bartlet or the First Lady.*

[end excerpt]

ALEX: And so we had to rehearse, pre rehearse with the actors for, rehearsals were like an hour long, and we shoot it and it was like a big play sort of hidden inside a *Godfather*-esque darkness and it was really fun but I think "17 People" was one of the toughest things I ever shot, because for the fear of not pulling it off, right.

HRISHI: The thing about "17 People" is it does feel so much like a play. I look at an episode like that and I feel like the challenge falls so much on a director, the problem that Tommy talked about in just with the pilot. How do you make this visually interesting? How do you not just have this be a black box with people speaking and doing brilliant performances?

ALEX: Yeah.

HRISHI: But you did manage to find a way to make that incredibly visually interesting.

ALEX: Well it's funny, the coolest challenge, even today as a director, is somebody saying, you've got two people in a room and there the dialogue's good, but what's the state of mind because really directing is, "What's the state of mind of one of the characters or the characters as a group." Like what is the psychological state that you should be in when you're watching this occur?

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEX: And so, "17 People" was really a gigantic gift to me to exercise that challenge

HRISHI: The very last scene of that episode really does remind me of *The Godfather*. I was surprised you said that because that is exactly what I think of when Toby comes back to the room and everybody else is joking around and he's uh...and you close with the sound of the ball still bouncing against the wall.

ALEX: No, it's the total unabashed steal from *Godfather* with Pacino closing the door and Keaton and the ball is of course from *The Great Escape*, so we were swimming in our favorite movies there.

HRISHI: That's great. Do you remember filming the scene with Josh and Allison Janney and Mary-Louise Parker in "Privateers" when they encounter Marion Cotesworth-Haye?

[West Wing Episode 4.18 excerpt]

WILL: No. I'm just telling you that if this day ends up with me face-to-face with Marion Cotesworth-Haye, I'm going to, you know...

C.J.: Laugh inappropriately?

WILL: There's a very real possibility.

[end excerpt]

ALEX: Yes. Yes, I do, yeah. [laughs]

JOSH: That was good fun.

ALEX: That was just like, you can't believe you're getting paid to show up and do this. And that's the thing about Aaron is that, and "Privateers" is a great example, that is, Aaron was so good at knowing his cast writing to their strengths either dramatically or comedically or what have you and it was so funny to get a scene with those actors that just played to everybody's comedic strength. Like with Mary-Louise as the straight man, and Janney just laughing through an entire scene, I mean

[West Wing Episode 4.18 excerpt]

AMY: Is this a hazing?

C.J.: I swear it's not a hazing. It's real. It's real. I just laughed cause of the name. You've got to fix it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, I could have watched her all day in doing that scene.

ALEX: Fun as it gets. I mean let alone, who comes up with Marion Cotesworth-Haye as a character name?

ALL: [laugh]

JOSH: He has a particular...he has a strong name game.

HRISHI: Another moment that I love is the love scene between Will Bailey and the ice cream sandwich in "King Corn"

JOSH: [laughs] "King Corn"

ALEX: "King Corn" is actually one of my favorite episodes.

JOSH: It's a great episode.

ALEX: If I directed something that I actually like the directing, that's one of them.

HRISHI: Yeah? What about that episode makes you say that?

ALEX: Well, I was you know, I like the *Rashomon* element of the episode. And what was fun about *King Corn* was we got into doing a bunch of research about campaigning in Iowa and New Hampshire, which was a huge and still it's a huge part of the political process and dealing with the average American person and the life of being on the road and all of that. So Wells had done a really nice job and written a really beautiful script about this and I was looking for really quirky, weird individual moments for people and we were scouting, I think it was a Holiday Inn in Burbank, where we were again shooting kind of a bottle dynamic and they had this bizarro ice cream machine and I had Malina in my arsenal. I mean you take Josh Malina and you have, if you're going to have an actor stare at a machine doing something bizarre, you've got your man in Malina because he can play it perfectly [Josh laughs] and so I came up with that. It's very funny. You should have seen me editing that scene. I was like no, no, it's that frame of Malina [Josh and Hrishu laugh] that frame of the arm moving around and that frame when it goes up instead of down and it's like, I was obsessed with that. Oh, man and I think from that obsession, came a very weird, great moment that people who've lived that life seemed to like.

HRISHI: Yes, I already appreciated that scene, but then when it came time for me, I made a gif [laughs] out of the [crosstalk]

ALEX: [crosstalk] oh you did?

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: moment exchange between the two of them. And so, I was watching that part over and over again and appreciating like, the exactly how long each of those shots held, [laughs] between him looking [crosstalk]

ALEX: [laughs][crosstalk] That's very true

HRISHI: At the Carnation Ice Cream Sandwich, back to him.

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: One of the scariest creative things that ever happened to me was that I had planned it to that Ryan Adams song, and it didn't fit very well.

HRISHI: Hmm.

ALEX: And I had to really cut very carefully. I had to recut everything in that montage to make the ice cream machine work

HRISHI: [laughs] Priorities!

JOSH: [laughs]

ALEX: I'm literally recut Jimmy Smits, everybody. I was re-cutting everything to make the ice cream timing land just perfectly.

HRISHI: [laughing] That's great.

JOSH: The priorities were in the right place.

ALEX: Yes. Yes.

HRISHI: I love that that is incorporated in an episode in which you're also referencing *Rashomon* style.

JOSH: Joshomon

HRISHI: [laughing] Joshomon

ALEX: Joshomon [laughs]. There you go, he's still got it. It was finding character in the weirdest moments. Another great moment is when Janel is getting up in the morning and making her coffee and there's the shot of her moving the bathroom mat around with her feet and that was in rehearsal. She had, I said I wanted her to have wool socks on, but we were rehearsing and Janel was like, I think I'd moved the mat around like this with my feet so I don't touch the floor, and that was Janel like it was a perfect idea that we all kind of relate to somehow.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Perfect.

ALEX: Yeah, like you're in a bathroom you don't know so you don't want to touch the floor and that's again, one of the most talented actors I've ever worked with in Janel Moloney, coming up with a great little idea that I still love whenever I see that episode.

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: Do you go back and watch episodes of *The West Wing*?

ALEX: Oh, every day. No, I'm joking. No, never

JOSH: [eyeroll in voice] Every day.

ALEX: You know every once in a while somebody will say something and I'll go oh, yeah or even something will happen politically, and you'll go, and I saw "King Corn" three or four years ago and I had, I would say that I haven't seen anything really since it aired but I've seen probably 10 episodes that I did since we were on and it's funny because it's like literally it's like your mind opening up and just watching memories roll out.

HRISHI: Okay, let's take a quick break and then we'll come back for more with Alex Graves.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: I want to ask you about the two episodes that you directed that we've discussed so far, well by the time this airs our episode on "Here Today" will have not yet come out but Josh and I have already recorded it, we've already talked about it. "The Mommy Problem" and "Here Today", these two early episodes in season 7 to me are kind of opposites. The way that you've directed them specifically are so different from one another and I was wondering if you could tell us about the contrast between those two. I mean you might have already answered it with what you said about how you viewed every script like its own movie.

ALEX: Yeah, that's part of it. That's very funny that you spot that because that I remember very, very clearly that which you point out which is that they're directed completely differently. "The Mommy Problem" was a really good script written by Eli Attie about campaigning, and it was very, very in sync with the research we were doing, talking to people in Washington about campaigning, and I was really living and breathing that at the time and it was, I was excited to go out and kind of depict on the ground documentary-style narrative of people talking about charts and math and public opinion and dealing with locals and traveling and everything that "Mommy Problem" had to do with and I couldn't wait to do like my Steve Miller Band Montage was my film-like obsession of that year. I was so, I couldn't wait to shoot that and get that made and was so glad that I was able to do that kind of filmmaking, but "Here Today" was a script that I did not like at all.

HRISHI: Really?

ALEX: I didn't like it.

JOSH: Interesting.

ALEX: And I didn't think it worked well, and it was at a time when we were dealing with some of the new writing and I just didn't like the writing very much and I couldn't figure it out and I had been watching *The Parallax View* or something that Alan J. Pakula and Gordon Willis had done in the 70s and I went, I'm realizing that there is a way to direct this with such pretension and weight that it actually registers, and then I suddenly as soon as I started to lock in to visually how I was going to do it I knew exactly what the episode was going to be. But I really struggled with that in prep. It started with not liking it and turned into not giving up.

HRISHI: And your first instinct though wasn't to go back to Peter Noah and say, "Hey, I have problems with this script."

ALEX: Yeah, I think at that point I was so frustrated with some of the writers that I didn't, I just did what was, I did what he wanted, I didn't want...I had complained so much about some of the writing that I wasn't about to go back in and keep going...my thing was if you're going to complain, what's the point of opening your mouth unless you have a solution and the only solution I had was visually. So, I figured out visually how to tell that

story and did it and by the time I was done shooting, realized that I kind of found my way around to Peter's, probably his intentions, but I didn't talk to Peter about it at all.

HRISHI: Would you mind telling us with some specificity what some of your problems were with the writing?

ALEX: Well that goes into Wells', you know, season five. I mean, season five was the difficult season.

HRISHI: I guess you're looking at it with, as you said you were one of the biggest fans of the show, and so you had the same issues with that that some of the fans of the show had.

JOSH: Hm-Hmm.

ALEX: So, Aaron and Tommy are off the show and Wells sits me down and says look, I'm under contract for another year, I've got to stay. Nobody was more intimidated by Aaron not writing the show than John Wells and not because John wanted to maintain his hit but I think the show meant a lot to John and the country means a lot to John and he wanted to keep *West Wing* going and for all the right reasons and he said, "Look, I'm screwed. I mean, I just lost the greatest writer the world. And everyone's hoping I'm going to write it, and I'm not the greatest writer in the world and I'm gonna need all the help I could get." and I said, "I agree." And we kind of went at it and, it was sort of like, I think in a weird way, John was coming at it from a producer/showrunner angle in terms of running a writers' room and doing his best to hire people he thought could write the show with people like Debora Cahn and Eli Attie who were kind of new people, and they hired some of his friends, and what we got into was that his friends were writing a different show and I remember one of them saying one time in the writers room in front of me, well, let's pretend we're writing *West Wing* for Dummies.

HRISHI: Hmpf

JOSH: Ooh

ALEX: Yeah, and I almost like lifted the table up and threw it through the wall, it was sort of like it's not what, we were never doing that, we're certainly not going to start doing it now. What happened in that fifth season was that I think John was finding out do's and don'ts about how to run the show and how to create the show.

HRISHI: I'm glad you found your way into "Here Today" because, I know this is saying a lot, but it is visually my favorite episode of the series.

ALEX: Oh, that's really funny because what I'm realizing is, I don't remember it.

HRISHI: It's crazy looking.

JOSH: Huh. It's pretty great.

ALEX: Is it the one, I know that I did an episode or two where I did almost every scene in one shot.

HRISHI: This is one where there may be no shots where you get a clear view of people's faces. Everybody's shot either in shadow or in reflection or...

JOSH: From outside the room.

ALEX: Yeah. Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I really, I couldn't love that one more.

JOSH: It works.

ALEX: Yeah, I liked to make a show like that. But yeah that was just really reaching into the old mid-70s filmic style of, it's very Gordon Willis and how, whether it was Woody Allen in *Manhattan* or *Godfather* or Alan J. Pakula, whatever these directors were working with Gordon Willis, he would shoot that way and I actually watched *Manhattan* to prepare for that.

JOSH: Huh.

ALEX: *Manhattan* is shot in the most sophisticated and adult way that almost any American film has ever been shot, and it's really Gordon Willis' peak shooting what's known as a comedy, but it's a, it's a dramatic comedy and it's fascinating how that film was shot and I was sort of living in that, somehow syncing up with the script for "Here Today" when I shot it.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: Do you have any memories about dealing with an actor, in Richard Schiff who wasn't happy with this storyline and the leak.

ALEX: Well, Richard was never happy.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] There's that too.

ALEX: Yeah, Richard wasn't happy with the storyline. A lot of that really went to Wells and was between Wells and Richard and ironically, I don't think Richard complained around me that much and I was really there for Richard because I loved Richard madly from the very beginning of the series. I always felt very, very passionate I guess about Toby and Richard and that Richard would grow as Toby and I think what was hard was that the writers were running out of ideas for Toby and I think Richard and Toby were experiencing this and it was very painful.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: Alex, in season 7 you knew it was the last season of the show, right? You knew at this point that the show was ending. Your last episode in which you're credited as an executive producer is "Election Day: Part 1," did you not finish out the series?

ALEX: No, I didn't finish the series. I got an opportunity to direct a pilot in January/February of the final season and I was trying to figure out what I was going to do after *West Wing* and my immediate idea was well, I should direct a pilot or two, because I can still maintain the level of control that I have here and it seemed like a good segue potentially into movies which is what I really wanted to do the whole time. And so, I got a pilot called *The Nine* at Warner Brothers that I took and so I finished making *The Cold* and went off to do this pilot and left and was not involved at all with the rest of the season.

HRISHI: You weren't under contract?

ALEX: I was under contract but because the show was ending, I was released. I went to Wells and said, "Look, I got a pilot, I'd like to go do that," he said, "Sure."

JOSH: It sounds familiar, who else was on *The Nine*.

ALEX: *The Nine* was Kim Raver and a wonderful cast of actors

JOSH: Scott Wolf, Tom Verica.

ALEX: And you were on it.

JOSH: That's what I was working towards. Okay, we can move on now.

ALEX: [laughs]

HRISHI: We're so many years from it now, but does it feel strange to you at all, that you didn't finish *The West Wing*?

ALEX: No, because when John Spencer died, I don't know why I bring that up, it's, I never really thought of it as having anything to do with me being kind of done with the show. It was very, very hard to make the show without Aaron writing it and I loved the cast with all my heart and wanted to kind of keep going, try to make it work for you know, do what I was supposed to do. But I was ready to be done long before I left.

HRISHI: Really?

ALEX: Yeah, I don't know if anybody knew that. You know, I was ready. I wanted to do other things and I wanted to stretch, and I mean in a weird way, I was sort of probably longing for *Game of Thrones* or something, but to do something bigger and different and more challenging. So, I mean it was hard to leave but I also, I don't know how I would have gotten through like the final days of the series with Martin and Allison and everybody. It would have been so painful and emotional and yet I was ready to go. It was just a weird, it's very hard I think to finish something.

HRISHI: You've gone on to all, so much stuff since *The West Wing*. What do you think is the biggest thing that you learned from *The West Wing* that you've ended up taking with you to other projects?

ALEX: To not give up, to reach and try not to compromise. I mean, I think you're always compromising because there's never enough time or money or there doesn't seem to be, but sort of stand there and say, it really needs to go this way, or it won't be as special. My rule on *West Wing* was kind of, I had a slightly morbid rule, which is, my mother had died right shortly, the years shortly before I started *West Wing* and I remember kind of thinking, if I ever am on my deathbed or looking back, I don't want to look back and go I compromised or I just phone this in or I did what they told me to do. I think I learned the lesson of like, you've got to get it. Don't cave and go, well gee, it was tough, so we didn't really get it and whether it was casting an episode of *West Wing* or shooting one or cutting one, especially in the filmmaking aspects of it like those that I just mentioned, it was like I used to make the casting director cry because I would say we don't have them yet, you have to keep looking and she's like, "We start filming in two days."

JOSH: I want to be done.

ALEX: Yeah, and I want to be done. And I'd be like, we don't have them and then she'd have more people in and there they'd be, you know, then you go there they are.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEX: And that, the casting of that, small supporting role would elevate the episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEX: I learned all that stuff, everything I wondered about filmmaking and everything I believed about filmmaking and everything I didn't know about filmmaking got challenged and shaken up while I was doing it, so it was just a fantastic preparation for what came after.

HRISH: That's great. Other favourite stories of yours that we have neglected to ask you about?

ALEX: Oh sure.

HRISHI: What's your favorite memory from *The West Wing*?

ALEX: I was lining up a shot one day of Martin and Stockard doing a walk and talk and we were getting ready to do a camera rehearsal with Martin and Stockard and they were brought in and I was distracted with what I was doing and Martin tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Hey Alex," and I said, "What?" and I turn around, "Because I wanted to show my friend Terry," and he introduced me to Terrence Malick [Josh and Hrishi laugh] who was visiting Martin and Martin said, "I'll be right back," and he ran off and he and Stockard did the camera rehearsal and it was this big long involved shot, of course, and I said, "Cut." and after I said cut this voice behind me belonging to Terrence Malick went, "Hey great shot."

JOSH: Oh, that's awesome!

HRISHI: Wow!

ALEX: And so that's like a favorite memory. You know, it's worth really saying that when you say what are your favorite memories? My favorite memories are all the surprises that the cast gave me and what had sort of been my plan for the day.

HRISHI: And that does it for this special episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thanks so much for listening.

JOSH: Thank you Alex Graves for finally joining us.

HRISHI: Thanks, as always to Zach McNeese, Margaret Miller and Nick Song for helping us make this show.

JOSH: We are a proud member of Radiotopia. Radiotopia is a collection of the finest podcast in all the land and you can find out more about the others at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Okay.

JOSH: Okay.

ALEX: What's next?

[Outro Music]