

The West Wing Weekly Podcast
1.17: The White House Pro-Am

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You are listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about "*The White House Pro-Am*." It's season 1, episode 17.

JOSH: It was written by Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr, ampersand Paul Redford a-n-d Aaron Sorkin

HRISHI: Who was it directed by?

JOSH: Thanks for asking Hrish, it was directed by Ken Olin.

HRISHI: Once more.

JOSH: A Ken Olin return. And it first aired on March 22, 2000. I've almost an entire season of episodes before I have to say the F-word again.

HRISHI: JOSH, I've written my own synopsis, because I don't want to deal with the NBC synopsis [laughs quietly]

JOSH: Oh wow. You've gone maverick. This - is this going to be a full time change?

HRISHI: We'll see, see how it goes. Here's my synopsis. "The President's and First Lady's staffs feud over rival agendas. A Congresswoman who's inspired by the First Lady, attaches an amendment to a bill that the staff's been working on for a long time. Josh and Toby are courting votes for that bill. After the Fed Chairman dies, it comes out in the press that the First Lady's choice is a guy that she dated in college. Zoey and Charlie fight over not going to a club opening at the request of the Secret Service, because of death threats from white supremacists."

JOSH: Fantastic synopsis. Can we now read the NBC one and then have the listeners choose their [laughs] favorite synopsis?

HRISHI: Sure. I started off with the NBC synopsis and then I went rogue. And here it goes, from NBC. "The President's and First Lady's staffs feud over rival agendas when her public statements about foreign child labor abuse inspires a Congresswoman to attach an amendment that will surely torpedo a long delayed international tariff bill favored by the President. Once more, when the revered chairman of the Federal Reserve dies, the President is under pressure to name the former head's top lieutenant as his successor. The same man who seriously dated the First Lady in college. Away from the White House, Zoey clashes with her boyfriend Charlie, when she suggests that they not step out together at an upcoming club opening, at the request

of the Secret Service, who is concerned about the recent hate letters concerning their interracial relationship. Josh asks opinionated Toby to mind his manners prior to parlaying with important congressmen.”

JOSH: Oi vey

HRISHI: Yeah, it's a slog

JOSH: I'm going to strongly vote for your synopsis.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Also, I don't even know it that was grammat--Was that even English? Statements inspires? Boooooo NBC.

HRISHI: Where do you want to start?

JOSH: I don't know. I will say that I have very, very few notes on this episode. Actually I like it a lot. It's one of those smaller episodes I guess, for lack of a better word, that I enjoy.

HRISHI: It opens up with the First Lady talking to Jeffrey who has a pen pal who he has been corresponding with, who is in India, and he is trying to raise money to help him and his village. And it starts off with the First Lady teasing him in a way that seems like neither the kid nor I found funny.

JOSH: Abbey's got a sinister sense of humor and a weird turn of mind.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah. We will...

JOSH: [interrupting] [laughing] It's not the nicest thing she's doing.

HRISHI: And, but the kid is completely unphased.

JOSH: No, he seems to be a stone cold pro.

HRISHI: In this episode we meet Lilli Mays, who's the First Lady's Chief of Staff.

JOSH: Yes, as portrayed by the fabulous Nadia Dajani. Um, who, I think this is interesting. So she plays Lilli Mays, which brings to mind, at least for me Willie Mays, *Say-Hey*, baseball player, who famously finished his career for the New York Mets, my favorite ball club. She herself, Nadia, is a huge baseball fan. She's played in several celebrity/legends games, which could, at the major league baseball all-star game, one could call those *pro-am* tournaments and she had a baseball comedy web series. Called, that's right, "Caught Off Base with Nadia." So how 'bout that.

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: And where do we know her we know-we know her already as a mighty Sorkin player.

HRISHI: She was in Sports Night, with you

JOSH: She appeared in Sports Night, as?

HRISHI: As Tina Lake, although I don't think she had any scenes with you. She comes in as a substitute anchor for Casey. And I think the, if I remember correctly, all her scenes are with Dan and-um-Dan talking about how he's not going to flirt with her.

JOSH: Ah. I think that must be where I met her though. Because I consider her a long time friend, she's one of those people that I don't see much. I guess maybe now a Twitter friend. I must know her from the Sports Night days. She appeared in the episode "Kyle Whitaker's Got Two Sacks," which I think certainly the most scrotally named episode of Sports Night and perhaps, of any television episode ever in the history of the medium.

HRISHI: If you -if you want to skip the whole series, "Ballers"

JOSH: Oh boom. Well done, well done, fair enough.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Is that a season one or season two episode of Sports Night?

HRISHI: That's season two

JOSH: So she theoretically might have filmed The West Wing first.

HRISHI: She's instantly dislikable in this episode.

JOSH: Oh, interesting. I'm not sure I agree with that.

HRISHI: Well with the whole exchange that she has with Sam at the beginning. Talking about, "my guy, your guy." You didn't find that-that was-uh-off putting for the character?

JOSH: No I guess the answer is, I didn't. So wait, tell me why I should have been put off?

HRISHI: You know she's sort of trying to make demands about how the President's staff talk about his compromise with Congress. I think that just like she keeps calling the First Lady "my guy."

JOSH: That's funny, that didn't bother--I kinda liked that.

HRISHI: [laughing quietly] Really?

JOSH: It was clearly--I mean and it, a lot of this episode is power plays, jockeying for power and influence and unspoken largely sort of passive aggressive maneuvers. To try to get what you

want or what you want for your person, or your guy. And he's really trying to steamroll her with the greater importance of the President and his agenda. Which I'm-I'm on board with, he is the President. I kinda feel like she, Lilli, is doing her job. I don't know if it didn't strike me as-uh, uh, that she way out of line, it just like she was kind of representing her client, aggressively.

HRISHI: Yeah, yes. That's true. I didn't like her. [JOSH laughs softly in background] To me, it seems like she was being presented as an antagonist.

JOSH: This goes back a little bit though to me, this is a continuing thing where I don't automatically side where we're supposed to. Quote, unquote. Our hero guys, I'm like I don't know-

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Maybe that's just me.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Cause maybe that's what she's supposed to represent, but I kinda felt like-uh-in a lot of this episode, our heroes, quote unquote, are a little bit out of line. They are patronizing at times and overly aggressive and filled-and self-important.

HRISHI: For sure, that's definitely part of their characters. There's definitely one thing that I thought was interesting for that scene. There's a device that's employed that I usually really dislike, which is the news report as exposition.

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: And they change the channel to find out that the fed chairman, who I assume is based on alan greenspan, has had a heart attack, and he dies and you know the reporter gives us this very uh often used in film and tv. The reporter comes in and here's all the things you need to know. But it's in the story because they're watching the news and that feels a little bit like a cheap tactic. But, it didn't here, or it did at first I was like, oh, I'm surprised that they're going to this. What I like is that it gets turned around on me because it is actually about the news. But it ends with Sam saying "you just lost your news cycle." Because I'm like, that's right, they just tied it back to the conversation they just had, as opposed to it being this stand alone piece of exposition.

JOSH: I agree with you. Additionally, I was just relieved it wasn't another teledonna. I was just happy to get exposition through any other means. Actually that is one of the things that was hard to articulate but I was subtly knocked out by the writing in this episode because everything really does weave together very, very well and subtly and all the moving parts of the episode fit just right into one well made machine.

HRISHI: Speaking of Donna and that interweaving, Donna introduces this book about what life was like 100 years ago

JOSH: Yes, well that-I had a weird fascination and during it, I have now gotten to the point where I little bit treat you like I treat my dad. Which is there are all sorts of things I could think through on my own, but it's so much easier to just ask my dad.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: So there's a lot-I-I'm may be some connection that I'm missing but it feels like there's three different sets of people talking about how life used to be in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: I couldn't quite figure out a common reason why they're all having the same conversation.

HRISHI: No, this was actually, this was my biggest problem with the episode, is that there's a book that yeah apparently that everybody is reading. It's like the new Da Vinci code, but it's a nonfiction book about life in America 100 years ago.

JOSH: Right, so Donna is explicitly reading a book about how life used to be and she's having her usual cute, flirty, ongoing conversation with Josh. Then Zoey and Charlie end up having the same conversation. Are they talking about the same book?

HRISHI: I believe so. They don't-uh- say explicitly that it's the same book, but they're talking about a book that, you know, has facts of-

JOSH: Oh so they are talking about a book? Okay, I couldn't even tell if they were talking about some movie she, what, this is where my brain started to hurt and I thought I'll ask Hrishu.

HRISHI: Right - No- no, they just happen to be talking about the same book. Then later on...

JOSH: ...President Bartlet and Leo...

HRISHI: [laughing] ...Yeah, it's like what is this barn burner of a book?

JOSH: I know and it seems to be really a compendium of [laughs] of uh-- fairly trivial information, like just bullet points. It's like the book of lists...

HRISHI: Exactly...

JOSH:...about how life used to be.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: But boy is it setting our people on fire. They cannot stop talking about it.

HRISHI: Yeah. Um, that's a little bit of a weird plot mechanism that goes throughout the whole episode- but uh-

JOSH: But again, this was uh, this was filmed almost uh you know, almost 20 years ago and maybe that's how life used to be.

HRISHI: If only there were a book with a list of facts about what life was like 20 years ago. We could find out.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah

HRISHI: The only time it really felt like it had impact in the episode is the scene with Zoey and Charlie when they're talking about how they can't go to the club because of death threats and Charlie makes a you know sarcastic remark that...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

Charlie: Hey look, it says here that 100 years ago, a black guy couldn't show up to a club opening with a white girl, for fear he'd be killed

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: If that's what the only purpose of the book's presence is, I don't know, do you think that's worth it?

JOSH: Well, what I thought to myself and wrote down then, was I would have saved it for this scene. In other words, most of the scene I was going wait a minute, does this tie into the Donna Jo--? It was just so weird, that it took me out of it. If there were some subtle way to have weaved in that maybe she was studying and in one of her history class or something there was a way to save it just for that. Cause that did land and I liked it..

HRISHI: Exactly, yeah

JOSH: But it being one of three significant conversations about this book or about life as it used to be felt a little odd.

HRISHI: Donna and Josh talk about it again later on in the episode towards the end and Donna says...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

Donna: It's an interesting book.

JOSH: The hundred years ago thing?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He calls it the “hundred years ago thing.” and I was like yeah, exactly. We don’t know what the title of this book is, it’s just like, here’s a thing. A hundred years ago thing is going to be a part of this episode.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah that’s right. I wanted to go back actually the very first scene had a great little moment that I thought happened to land just right and reflect on something that Jay Carney had shared with us. He had characterized every press briefing as having that tension between the story and the focus that the White House wants to put out versus the information that the press corps is trying to glean and there’s a great little moment where CJ is not quite finished making the White House’s opening statement about the passing of Bernie Dahl and already the press corps jumps in trying to get information about whether Erlich is going to be the appointment and she just, as she says the last line of the opening statement, she just kind of sighs and..

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

CJ: ...victory and I can assure you he will be-

REPORTERS: CJ!

CJ: Miss--Katie?

KATIE: Is Ron Erlich the new Fed Chair?

CJ: There are a number of very good candidates

REPORTER 2: Who’s on the short list?

CJ: I want to be clear...

[end excerpt].

HRISHI: I thought it was a great way to highlight the ravenousness of the reporters to get at the story that they want to get that they won’t even let her finish a statement about a guy who’s just died. She’s trying to say he’s gonna be missed and they just interrupt her in the middle of a sentence like that.

JOSH: Right, exactly. They just smell blood, literally, and they’re just on her.

HRISHI: Yeah. In that scene they, end it with this, um, statement from CJ, the reason why they’re delaying announcement of who the next chairman will be is out of respect for Bernie Dahl. Which is an artificial reason that they’ve created because the President actually, he is hesitating because this guy used to date the first lady. Sam gives her the reason we’re gonna wait out of respect and Toby sort-of reviews it and he’s kinda like yeah I think that’s a good idea. But then when it comes time for CJ to deliver the like canned line, the canned response -um- to buy them some time, it feels like the TV show is trying to ask us to buy into it, the way that CJ is trying to ask the press to buy into it. Cause like this emotional music comes in.

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

CJ: We're hoping to have it done by tomorrow.

REPORTER 2: Why the delay?

[music starts playing]

CJ: Respect

[end excerpt].

HRISHI: I didn't quite get that because we know that is sort of supposed to be a manipulative tactic - That's uh fiction. So how are we going to buy into it the feeling that, oh yes, the solemnity of this moment.

JOSH: That's true but I thought the air is kind of taken out of that as she walks out and she says...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

CJ: Could I have sounded stupider saying respect

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Cause I think that was-to me that felt like a return to, I don't know if I got the desired effect that I was going for. But I see what you mean, that's an interesti--- it's a weird moment. As if they were trying to trick us, even though they have already shown us, they have already let us peek behind the curtain. So how can they try to rope us into the moment?

HRISHI: You know in terms of trying to get you to go along with what they're thinking or to the extent for what the story is that felt just a little uh-a little confusing. Perhaps Tommy Schlamme will take issue [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] Oh man better have him on sooner rather than later so the list of things that he's mad at us about is on the shorter side.

HRISHI: [laughs] There's a great continuation of the uh Sam Seaborn/Chris Traeger parallel here where Sam talks about going to the gym and Toby asks him, from what I gather in the voice of Aaron.

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

TOBY: Sam look at yourself, how much healthier do you want to be?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Because apparently Rob Lowe would go to the gym at lunch all the time.

JOSH: Oh is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Oh that's funny

HRISHI: And uh-- Aaron was fascinated by that.

JOSH: I-uh- don't think Aaron is a gym denizen.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I don't think he's a frequent visitor

HRISHI: Toby throughout this whole episode made me laugh a lot.

JOSH: That's one of those things I've thought about this episode is that, again as we said, everybody was great from the downbeat of the entire series, but now these guys, these guys are really settled into their characters and they're really inhabiting them and they can get a smile out of me or a laugh out of just like the littlest facial expression. They're just so who they are. I guess it's just Toby and Josh is desperately trying to get him on his best behavior with these three congress people whose votes they're courting even though they don't really need them and Toby just refuses.

HRISHI: [laughs] We've seen him be prickly but this is him I think taking it to a new level and also-uh-directing it so blatantly at Josh as well as the congress people. He's just absolutely refusing to cooperate with Josh's wishes.

JOSH: Yes exactly.

HRISHI: Another line that made me laugh out loud is when the President and Leo and CJ are in the Oval and the President is just talking about statistics and the GDP expansion in the government versus the global economy and Leo says...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

LEO: You know sometimes even I don't know what you're talking about President Bartlet: Sometimes I'm just making it up.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah, I liked that a lot too. I also liked in that scene in this-uh-again speaks to everyone so deeply and comfortably inhabiting their characters—I-I can tell from the first moment of this scene almost—almost heavy lidded-ness to Allison's eyes as CJ. That I can see

she is already glazed over at the—at the talks of economics from the President. Um, it's very subtle but it made me laugh.

HRISHI: Yeah. The whole scene is funny, he's- when, CJ's like [laughs]

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

CJ: I understand the oeuvre, I get the basic maison sien of what you're saying. I don't really understand anything.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, that was funny. She couldn't really even bluff [Hrishi laughs] She couldn't even bluff.

HRISHI: Staying on the President for a second. I thought it was interesting when he talks to Zoey later about the, when we first get the introduction of this point about the Secret Service not wanting them to go to a club. He doesn't say that she can't go, or even that the Secret Service don't want her to go. He says you can go, but you can't bring Charlie. You know later on, Gina talks about all the reasons why the area is so hard to secure, why they don't like it. Too many hidden corners and shadowy parts, you know that are going to be tricky for them to keep everybody safe. But it's not just that it's the geography that-uh-that they have to worry about. It's only if she brings Charlie. I thought that was interesting.

JOSH: Yeah no I thought about that too. It almost played to me as if they were more concerned that maybe the threats have been more Charlie centric, that he's the person in the greatest danger. Because of course exactly what Gina is describing would be the same security threat to the First Daughter.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: There's-I'm-it's there's some reason it's more dangerous for both of them if they're together or the way I took it is that maybe the focus of threats really were more towards Charlie, and for his sake, it's a no-go.

HRISHI: I was thinking about that, I also thought that maybe it was maybe that-um-maybe it was both of them who are threatened, but the threat only becomes manifest with the visual of the two of them together. It's only when he's there that suddenly it becomes a situation where they say, this is more than we can handle.

JOSH: Yeah I guess so and I think ultimately what leaves Charlie to what, even though it's brief, his thought is just that I'm out that this isn't going to work.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: You know, he's going to live his life the way he wants to live his life. And also I think it feels like the relationship is never going to let them have the type of time together that you need for a relationship like this. It's just, it doesn't work.

HRISHI: Yeah, I feel - I feel bad for Charlie in this episode because his anger at the situation is of course justifiable and I sympathize with it, but I also find him a little bit unreasonable because he's directing it at Zoey where it's like, she doesn't have anything to do with it. It's not her fault, but he's kind of a jerk to her.

JOSH: That's true, although, to his credit, and I think their young love and their incipient relationship is presented as the most mature of any in this episode at least. Because he comes around and realizes that he was out of line and he apologizes and she lets him in. And these for young people dealing with this extraordinary circumstance, they're fairly mature. You know, he has like a young guy's reaction, gets his back up, which I kind of understand, even if it is on a certain level, is unreasonable. Again, it's not her issue, she's not suggesting they end the relationship or anything like that. He comes to the right realization based in part on Danny Concannon's advice and-and, acts on it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: In a mature way.

HRISHI: Yeah, he gets a little-he gets some tips from both Gina and Danny. Which I thought was nice. That-that there are these other figures outside of the staff who can be these kind of voices of advice.

JOSH: That said, I also got a sense of what a bummer it would be to have your security detail always around and what an intrusion into your life. Because she's just kind of standing there and doesn't even pretend to not be listening to their conversation. You know and when they're-when they're in the booth together, she just...

HRISHI: ...Right, she just slides in...

JOSH: I couldn't help but overhearing, just I'm always around and I hear everything you guys say and so let me put in my two cents [laughing]. And also when he comes back to visit her with the flowers and Gina's just lying there with her door open across the hall. And just what an utter intrusion into one's life it would be to live with a security detail like that.

HRISHI: Yeah, I like Danny as this kind of wise, sage who's around whenever um-uh people need some outside perspective.

JOSH: Yes

HRISHI: I kind of forget about this - how prevalent it is in season one, that characters go to Danny for that sense of perspective. I guess Charlie doesn't go to him, yeah, but he gets that.

JOSH: He's there. No, you're right. It's a super insular world where a point of view from anybody who's outside that inner circle, even if he is tangentially involved, is, like, refreshing and helpful to the people who are in the bubble.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also liked the scene, I know we're jetting towards the end already. The scene in the Oval between the President and Danny with Leo as just like "I'm the guy sitting here." And uh- the President's sort of ham-handed attempt to establish a bond so then he can ask a favor that he probably really knows he's not going to get out of Danny.

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Once again, I would like to emphasize a strong personal bond we build on the campaign trail.

Leo: Oh for God's sake.

DANNY: Mr. President, did you call me in to ask if I knew who the sources were close to the First Lady?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Not just a favor, like a breach - a breach of - of professional integrity [laughs].

JOSH: Which is true, which is why he probably knows it's not going to happen and you can see on Leo's face that he knows exactly how it is going to end up. This is just a ridiculously a futile attempt. But I like that the President's considerably awkward attempt just consists mainly of just listing the cities where they chatted on the campaign trail.

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Ames, Iowa. Tusla. Skokie. Center City, Tallahassee. Albany. San Antonio. Jasper, Wyoming.

DANNY: Yes, sir.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That really made me laugh.

HRISHI: I also was thinking about how improvising is vertobin with Sorkin scripts and there's a part where Danny has to say...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

DANNY: *No, no no, no no no no*

BARTLET: *[interrupting] Danny*

DANNY: *no no no no, sir.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I was thinking that if he had to count the number of no's to make sure he got them exactly right, because whatever the number was, it was exactly right to be hilarious.

JOSH: I'm quite sure he got it word perfect.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: For that is how it works and had he not, in between takes, the script supervisor would say it was 9 no's and you did 8.

HRISHI: [laughs] Can I, there was also something in that scene and something earlier in the episode that made me feel a little bit like the specter of patriarchal condescension that sometimes pops up. Which was - well, one, the thing where we talked about where CJ is presented as not understanding anything the President is saying.

JOSH: Right, and we've seen this before as with the census.

HRISHI: Yeah, but then also Danny, who is so informed and knowledgeable, calls the Democratic Women's Caucus, the "many women of Michigan."

JOSH: I noted that too, because you know he knows the correct name for the event that he's attending. Cause he's sharp, he's a cracker jack reporter and so that really was just an opportunity for condescension.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: My mind also goes to the same area every time President Bartlet makes his, you know, sort of cute, meant to be charming, comments about his daughter dating.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It is very, you know, this not one of those sort-of things where I think many fathers are like this. So I don't think this is off-target or bad writing, That's who President Bartlet it. I keep reminding myself, as a father of an 18-year-old daughter, that while it's easy to make those jokes. There is something you know wrong about it, at a certain age you don't have to be that—the constant message that you shouldn't be involved with really anybody romantically kind of thing—that would make me happiest, is not necessarily the best message to give to your kid.

HRISHI: Yeah, not being a parent, I much prefer the parenting style of don't ask, don't tell.

JOSH: Yeah. And there is a little moment between Abbey and the President, a great scene I think...

HRISHI: ...Ugh, an amazing scene...

JOSH: ...whereas most of this episode sort of hits that part of my brain that enjoys seeing these characters act as I know they will and uh do their familiar stuff. The really new information we get, just because we haven't seen them together so much, is about the relationship between the First Lady and the President in this episode. And particularly they're playing sort of a cat mouse game throughout and then finally, in this big scene together in the Oval, we see real sparks. Abbey Bartlet is, I think, the more - at least when it comes to the dating life - romantic life of their youngest daughter. She's a little bit more-uh-realistic and she says something to the President about, well, Charlie's gone back to visit her right now and the door is closed and there's a sock on the doorknob and he's like, he doesn't even want to hear it. They have slightly different approaches to that.

HRISHI: I object to that, to that approach as well. [laughs] I don't want to imagine someone's mom imagining their child-you know-getting down and dirty. Like leave the dungeon talk out of it, but also let's not set the scene for what's about to happen [laughs].

JOSH: Perhaps not, I don't know, I give her, I gave her a little mental tip of the hat for being realistic about her daughter's sexuality. Back to that scene, to me that scene played out, I kept thinking about that Edward Albee play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, when I was watching Stockard Channing and Martin Sheen, two great actors uh you know parry and thrust and lunge and come together. It was just sort-of a great, real relationship that had history and triggers for both of them and there's real aggression there but of course there's also really a lot of love and there's unspoken stuff in their past that becomes spoken. And we just get a sense of this fullness and the liveliness of their relationship. They're fiery and they're feisty and they yell at each other. They both raise their voices at each other and they push each other's buttons on purpose and it was a great scene.

HRISHI: I love that it made you think of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, because that was, in the movie, that was Elizabeth Taylor and Stockard Channing is playing Elizabeth Taylor in this TV movie that's coming out.

JOSH: That is interesting.

HRISHI: And people often comment on how she has a very Liz Taylor kind of vibe.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah I can see that. Maybe that's what triggered it in my mind. I do love that movie. Um and it's a great play and it's great writing and I think Aaron's writing is really sharp and dense and revelatory in this scene between the two of them.

HRISHI: It reminded me of *The Lion in Winter*. Which I know from, spoiler alert, from a future West Wing episode, that movie gets referenced. So I know that-that Aaron must be a fan of that as well.

JOSH: So now we're onto Katherine Hepburn.

HRISHI: Yeah, Katherine Hepburn and Peter O'Toole, who are incredible sparring partners as estranged husband and wife.

JOSH: Yes, the twice phallically named Peter O'Toole.

HRISHI: [laughs] I've heard he's got two sacks.

JOSH: Thank you, thank you for bringing it all together. You know our podcast is really very layered and sophisticated. [both laugh] Much like this episode. Everything really ultimately reflects back.

HRISHI: I like that our self-referential, sack talk, is sophisticated. Thank you.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah, I think this scene between the President and Abbey is sort of, I think, the jewel of the episode, that scene in particular is so good and it has one of my all-time favorite moments of the uh series, I feel like that's like how I also admit to mistakes that I've made. Like I have to do it in a very – um- academic and unemotional way.

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: On that point, I can see the high ground.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Haha

HRISHI: But my favorite thing is uh when Abbey says I was wrong about the thing and she tries to make an amendment and says "However" and the President interrupts her...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

ABBEY: However

BARTLET: No "However" just be wrong, just stand there in your wrongness and be wrong and get used to it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I've definitely said it many times in arguments that I've had to have. It only really works on people who have seen *The West Wing*, otherwise you just come across like a huge dick.

JOSH: Yeah. That's pretty funny - that's pretty classic Aaron writing.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's a great point. It is really - that's a juicy, classic line.

JOSH: Yeah. I'm sure there are other things that I think I can imagine myself saying some version of that without realizing that I'm paraphrasing Aaron. Some of it does seep into my own consciousness and what's the word when you take someone else's thing? When you-

HRISHI: When you appropriate it?

JOSH: Thank you. Appropriate, that's the world that I'm looking for. I may have appropriated other Sorkin-isms.

HRISHI: I definitely have. I just steal them and call them my own for people that don't know. They say, good writers borrow, great writers steal outright and I steal outright from great writers.

JOSH: Nice, that's good. That's very good.

HRISHI: Do you know about the woman who plays Becky Reeseman, a familiar face?

JOSH: Amy Aquino. Yes I also know her. She's also one of those people - I guess when you reach a certain age or the age that I have and you have been doing this as long as I have, you know people and you don't even know how you know them. I know Amy and I've seen her and she's been a SAG officer and I've seen her on stage and I've seen her in a million things and I'm a big fan of hers and I want to say that early on when I first came to LA, I think we might have acted in some little early theatre stuff together but again, I can't even quite quite caress out of my mind how I know Amy but I am a big fan of hers and she's fantastic.

HRISHI: She was on *ER* for a while and that further cements the tie-in and crossovers between the John Wells worlds. You know, you have the Sorkin players and I think we've often come across the John Wells players like Liza Weil and other people who have had either guest appearances on both or have had guest appearances on one and then were regulars on the other. I think *ER* and *The West Wing* have a lot of crossover.

JOSH: Yeah that is true for sure.

HRISHI: Then that gave way to the overlap with the Shonda Rhimes players. I think she was both in episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* and also *Private Practice*.

JOSH: She's one of those people also who has been in everything. You do go and look up on IMDB in addition to great work on stage, she's done an amazing number of episodes on television, some great films.

HRISHI: It's a great little bit of plot, the way- that - like you were saying, how things tie in. You don't realize until that moment in the scene with her and Sam that earlier in the episode, these two separate plots. This was like what we were talking about earlier about how it's like a Sherlock Holmes case where you have two different mysteries and then it turns out they're all part of the same mystery. That the First Lady's press conference in the beginning with Jeffrey and Toby and Josh's little battle with the Congresspeople, well not battle, but they're courting their votes. These two things are going to end up becoming linked because Congressman Reesman is going to take the cue from the press conference with Jeffrey and add an attachment to the international tariffs bill that Josh and Toby are working on and Toby's whole reason for being smug is they have the vote locked up. They have 15 votes to spare, there's no reason to try and court these votes, which is why he's being such a prickly jerk about the whole thing. Now she's threatened the whole thing and now that's great. It's a cool stitching together of those two pieces of plot which could otherwise be in an excellent episode and not ever be linked.

JOSH: Yeah, that's very well said and that's, I think, what most impressed me about this episode and I should credit Laurence O'Donnell and Paul Redford as well as Aaron for a great, subtle piece of writing which doesn't hit you over the head with showiness or trying to be flashy but where all the pieces do come together and things that you've forgotten about or gloss over initially. Like that opening bit with the First Lady and Jeffrey making their statement about child labor and child slavery and I think in my mind that oh that's a great cause, you know, that they're getting out in front of and then you sort-of move on and you don't expect to come back to it and you certainly don't expect to come back to it with the thought that oh, that's going to influence other things that are important and which issue is more important and all the moving pieces that go into the realistic world of a democracy and just the complicated nature of getting through the day in a Presidential administration and the sort-of game of dominoes and how one thing affects another and I like the episodes that focus on the inner workings and aspects of day to day politics that I might not otherwise would have really considered. I really like the title of this episode, the Pro-Am and the idea of the Pros, which I guess is the President and his staff and the amateurs, the First Lady and hers and the fact that there is this real tension between them.

HRISHI: I'm really glad you brought up the title and I wanted to ask you about that. It makes me think about the scene between Sam and the First Lady. Which I imagine for Sam that can't be an easy conversation to have, to tell the President's wife that she is acting like an amateur. And and not even that it's her staff, that it's just her.

JOSH: Yeah-yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: Because I felt like Lilli Mays had been portrayed as sort of the antagonist, I was surprised that - you know it was a little moment that I was like oh. When he reveals that he thinks that your staff is top notch, it's you that's the problem. Since we talk so much about President and other titles, Abbey is referred to as Mrs. Bartlet and not Dr. Bartlet.

JOSH: I noted that as well, what do you make of that?

HRISHI: I don't know. Maybe this is a good question for listeners or researchers. Have there been other First Ladies who have been physicians and if so, were they referred to as Mrs. or Dr? The only thing I can think of is Vice President Biden's wife, Dr. Jill Biden. She's referred to as Dr. Biden, but I don't know if any First Ladies, proper, have been doctors. In any case, Dr. Jill Biden merits a Dr. but for some reason, Abbey Bartlet gets called Mrs. Do you know that in the New York Times, for wedding announcements, when they list people's titles, you know so and so is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Blah Blah Blah of you know, whatever. They will not call someone Dr. if they have PhD, they will only call someone Dr. if they have a medical degree.

JOSH: Only if they have a medical degree? Why is that?

HRISHI: I don't know, but that's their policy though. Another part of their policy is if you're sending in a photo for your wedding announcement, you have to have your eyebrows at the same level.

JOSH: What?

HRISHI: Yep. The couple needs to have a portrait and their eyebrows need to be at the same level. Little inside baseball for the New York Times.

JOSH: Is that as utterly explicable as it strikes me or?

HRISHI: Uh no, I think the reason for it is because if you have couples where their heights are very different and they're standing side by side, they want to show a picture but they want to preserve column inches. So the taller the picture to account for the height discrepancy, the fewer inches they have for the text.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: So by putting the eyebrows on the same plane, then you get to crop basically just below to the chin to just above the head and keep it pretty small. It's pretty funny though.

JOSH: OK, it makes a certain amount of sense. But to me as the reader, that's the whole story is the height discrepancy between a bride and a groom. That's all I'm interested in.

HRISHI: [Laughs]

JOSH: So sure, keep their eyebrows on the same level but at least mention their heights in the piece.

HRISHI: [laughs] That was West Wing Weekly on padding the episode. I had a note about clothes.

JOSH: Ah, yes.

HRISHI: Charlie wears his suit to go to Georgetown in the dorm. I thought that was interesting. You wouldn't take your tie off, at least? He's so clearly out of place in a dorm room at night, you know, full of college kids being dressed for work and I wondered why he wouldn't want to, you know, take the jacket and tie off before he goes out there. But it also made me think that it maybe was a really interesting wardrobe and directorial decision to make him stand out.

JOSH: Yeah, I think so.

HRISHI: To show that he's like entering into this foreign soil basically.

JOSH: Yeah I think you're right. I think it's a sartorial choice that enhances our understanding of his character. There's a certain formality to him and maybe yeah a slight feeling of being out of place.

HRISHI: Yeah, we've got Zoey has wet hair and like Gina has a sweatshirt and he's like basically a Secret Service agent and she's dressed like a college kid.

JOSH: And we know Charlie, his life situation, has affected his life path and he missed a college experience that he might have enjoyed and benefitted from and been more comfortable in and I think you're right. I think that's a nice subtle touch.

HRISHI: Another the other thing I noted, is that TOBY dresses like a used car salesman. [KM laughs] I remember there was so much hay made out of the fact that President Obama wore a tan suit...

JOSH:...right...

HRISHI: ...Do you remember that ? To a press briefing and it was a very big deal. And then I was thinking that it was interesting that Toby can wear a brown suit with like a big striped tie. It really informs his character in a way that's how he's gonna dress. He doesn't wear the traditional just navy suit, white shirt kind of ensemble.

JOSH: Yeah, no. Well, I think you're right, I think he owns sort of aggressively doesn't care how he looks

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: Or how he presents himself. He has a great little line in there too, when Josh says something about this is why you are largely perceived as being a pain in the ass, he says...

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

JOSH: This, this right here is why you have a reputation as a pain in the ass.

TOBY: I cultivated that reputation

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like that

HRISHI: He was really - he was on fire in the episode. Even the part when they're going to go back into the meeting and Josh politely says,

[West Wing Episode 1.17 excerpt]

JOSH: After you.

TOBY: After you.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He's like, I'm not going to even give you that. I'm not even going to give you the satisfaction of—

JOSH: I'm not giving anything up.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I'll be the last into the room, thanks.

HRISHI: There's a great piece of writing and a little turn of phrase in an exchange before they go into the meeting. It's like a great little piece of writing dexterity where Toby doesn't want to go to the meeting and Josh says,

[audio clip from the episode]

JOSH: You have to go to the meeting, I told them you would be at the meeting, if you're not there they're gonna start right out insulted

TOBY: If I go to this meeting there's a decent chance they're going to end up insulted. So.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, very clever

HRISHI: It made me sad again that the New York Times did not use my line when we were asked what our dynamic was and I said we're kind of like good cop/bad cop, only Josh is funny, famous cop and I'm not funny, not famous cop.

JOSH: I'm glad they didn't

HRISHI: I couldn't believe it, that was, that was gold.

JOSH: Oh, Hrishi, inaccurate

HRISHI: When I was thinking about TOBY's wardrobe, it also made me think of Sports Night. Because recently we had dropped in some clips from Sports Night, you know for episode 15 and I had been watching again recently but I always really liked on that show how they dressed your character. How they dressed Jeremy. Like I feel like there was an unspoken uniform for your character which is he would often be wearing a shirt and tie, but often the shirts weren't dress shirts. You know not like traditional dress shirts, a lot of time they were plaid patterned you know like checked shirts and then like a tie on it. He's not yet like getting paid enough to afford to dress nicely, he doesn't get the wardrobe that Dan and Casey get assigned to them and yet he has to look professional. And always with his sleeves rolled up. There's like a real uniform, and I always like that.

JOSH: That, that is true. That's said I got a little tired of the knit ties.

HRISHI: Oh really?

JOSH: Yeah, a lot of knit ties.

HRISHI: Now I completely picture the knit tie part as well. Like I- I-when I think of Jeremy Goodwin, I think of a khaki and black checked shirt, black knit tie, sleeves rolled up, and jeans.

JOSH: That was my uniform.

HRISHI: It's pretty good. Did they ever talk to you about why that particular wardrobe for your character?

JOSH: No

HRISHI: Or was it just like here, wear this?

JOSH: Yeah, it was just here wear this. I would have liked a little variety to be honest Hrishi

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Oh yeah. It was just they were just done with me. Like alright, we got him done. [laughs]

HRISHI: [laughs] I liked it, I always liked that. I mean, I know this was Reesman's husband but I liked the references to Steve. Like we're not on the back of Steve's boat now Becky.

JOSH: Oh Yeah, they play a great little game. You know, like all the little power play matchups and watching they and I like that we're not given as much information. They throw out little bits and we're meant to fill in sort of the rest on their prior relationship and what she means to her and what they've done and what they could do for her and I like-I liked how the first lady once she decided that fine, I'm gonna get Reesman's amendment taken out, she gets it done and she gets it done pretty quickly. She knows how to play, she's not necessarily such an amateur.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: And that wraps it up for this episode. But before we go, Hrish, we have to discuss your very exciting visit to the DNC, to the Democratic National Convention.

HRISHI: It was really exciting.

JOSH: I was sorry I couldn't go.

HRISHI: Yeah I was sorry that you couldn't join us.

JOSH: So talk to me, highlights, was it super exciting?

HRISHI: You know I was not expecting to be moved. I was expecting to go in and be an observer and find out some interesting things. I think that maybe I'm a little bit cynical in my heart and that's part of the reason why I love The West Wing so much is because it-it soothes that cynical part of my take on politics in America. But this was pretty close to a West Wing kind of experience. There was a lot of great oratory and people really talking about big ideas and there's a lot of idealism and I really loved it.

JOSH: We were invited by former governor of Pennsylvania, Edwin Dalright.

HRISHI: Yeah, it really came to us through our friend, Melissa Fitzgerald.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Which was an amazing, incredible opportunity that she offered to us.

JOSH: And let the record reflect, we would have, or at least one of us would have attended the RNC had we been invited but that didn't happen.

HRISHI: Oh for sure. If there are any Republican elected officials or the staff of Republican officials who want to invite us to things, we're totally down.

JOSH: We will show up. So what did you do at the DNC, because I know you actually ran a couple little events right?

HRISHI: Well I hosted a West Wing Weekly trivia game and that was super fun and I was glad to get you in on it by phone and we had Allison Janney and Dule Hill and Bradley Whitford all call in.

JOSH: I was one of Richard Schiff's ineffective lifelines.

HRISHI: And then the other thing that I did while I was there is I talked to a few people about The West Wing so I put together a little mini-supercut about some of the thoughts I got from people there at the convention.

[cut to interviews from the DNC Convention]

AMY: I'm Amy Dacey, I'm the CEO of the Democratic National Committee.

HRISHI: Is there a significant episode or moment from The West Wing for you and your career?

AMY: Okay, first of all, let me say, I'm a huge fan of the West Wing but probably one of the significant moments was when I had to take a little hiatus from The West wing and that's because I was John Kerry's traveling political director in 2004 and I was on the road with him the entire year. We unfortunately lost that election and the episodes right after were all about Iowa and New Hampshire and campaigning so I took a little break but I'm ready to go back. It's funny when you're coming back from living in a moment and there's a show that kinda has some parallels, it was interesting.

CHRIS: Hi my name is U.S. Senator Chris Coons, from Delaware. TOBY Ziegler whose real name is Richard Schiff who I just ran into in line coming in. I literally ran into Richard standing in line to get into the '08 Democratic Convention when I was not yet a Senator, I was like a local elect and I was like oh, it's so great to see you TOBY Ziegler. He's like "I have a real name" uh-I mean, I mean Mr. Schiff. It's so nice to meet you, I just love everything you do and I'm so impressed with your show and he's like yeah, it's great. One of the things I loved about The West Wing was it gave you a window into what life must be like working in an incredibly exciting, demanding, busy environment and it put values in sharp contrasts and it also managed to be encouraging and inspiring about the power of public service. Um, it made you think, um it made you laugh and it made you optimistic about the capabilities of the folks who are taking some enormous challenges working in the west wing.

HRISHI: When it first came on, it was several years before you were elected, did it figure at all into your being wanted to be an elected official.

CHRIS: It did make me more be optimistic about the prospects of serving. I started with 10 years in county government, so frankly that was more Parks and Recreation than it was West Wing. It did inspire me to take the leap to run for the US Senate. Um and I have had moments in meetings, in conversations, in events, with folks from the White House or fro the Senate where I would have a flashback to a West Wing episode. The West Wing is a show that has encouraged me and inspired me in a lot of different ways and has challenged me and has helped reinforce I think in a whole generation their confidence that public service can be a noble cause.

ZEKE: My name is Zeke Miller, I'm a political correspondent for Times Magazine and I love the West Wing but it just gets journalists totally wrong. Number one, we can go with the obvious Danny Concannon. Don't date the Press Secretary, don't hit on the Press Secretary, if you do that you leave the beat. It's like everyone, you don't do it. It's like rule number one. First commandment. Don't do it.

HRISHI: Isn't that inspired by a real story?

ZEKE: Yes, doesn't mean we're proud of it. [laughs] I'll be honest, we're not proud of it

HRISHI: A lot of people who are in elected office look at The West Wing and cite characters or moments from this show as inspirational for them. You don't look at Danny Concannon and you don't say that it is inspirational for me?

ZEKE: Oh no you look at Danny Concannon and you're like I'm gonna pull that person's White House press credential. That's how we look at him, we have to. I'm a member of the correspondents association. For us that's like cardinal rule number one, don't do what he does. And there's an element of that flirty, casual banter that happens between all people like that's just the nature of reporting in general but never, there's a line, there's a line everyone knows the line and he crosses that line probably like episode 7.

HRISHI: And do you spend much time in the White House briefing room?

ZEKE: Um, I did two years at the White House briefing room and I will be back there full time after the election's over.

HRISHI: Thank you so much.

ZEKE: Thank you

[end of interviews]

JOSH: Good stuff Hrish, those were awesome. I liked Zeke Miller's high judgement and outrage at Danny Concannon

HRISHI: [laughs] I thought you would. Amy Dacey, the CEO of the DNC is at @AmyKDacey on Twitter, Senator Chris Coons of Delaware is @ChrisCoons, and Zeke Miller of Time @ZekeJOSHiller. If you want to talk to me or Josh on Twitter. You can tweet at us. I'm @HrishiHirway and Josh is @JOSHMalina and we both tweet from the show from @WestWingWeekly

JOSH: And we also have a Facebook page, back to you Hrish

HRISHI: Our Facebook page is facebook.com/TheWestWingWeekly. You can leave a comment for us or discuss the episode with fellow West Wing Weekly listeners. And you can also leave a comment for us on our website, TheWestWingWeekly.com.

JOSH: [sighs] That one I knew. I'm sorry you have to do all the heavy lifting and traveling.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: What's next?

[outro music]