

The West Wing Weekly  
2.10: Noël  
Guests: Bradley Whitford and Ellen Totleben

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about season two episode ten of *The West Wing*. It's called "Noël".

JOSH: It first aired on December 20th in the year 2000. It was directed by friend of the podcast, Tommy Schlamme. It was written by Aaron Sorkin, teleplay by Aaron, and story by Peter Parnell.

HRISHI: Here's the synopsis from *TV Guide*. "It's the Christmas season at the White House, but Josh is anything but merry. For one thing, the holiday music that Toby insists fill the halls sounds to Josh as though it belongs in a shopping mall. Beyond that, he's being rude to everyone, even raising his voice to the president--something that just isn't done--so Leo orders therapy. Meanwhile, CJ takes interest when an elderly woman on a tour of the White House loses her composure at the sight of a painting, and the President decides that he wants to sign all of his Christmas cards--well, maybe just 100,000 of them--personally."

JOSH: Coming up later, we're going to discuss the episode in depth, and later still we'll talk to Bradley Whitford who won an Emmy...what? *How?* ...for his performance for this episode. But first, we're going to start off with a conversation with Ellen Totleben.

ELLEN: My name is Ellen Totleben, and I'm the set decorator. I decorated the pilot, and then all seven seasons.

HRISHI: You won an Emmy for the pilot.

ELLEN: Yes, I did. Mmm hmm.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about "Noël", and you were nominated for another Emmy for this episode. Does this episode stand out for you? Do you remember it well?

ELLEN: Yes, yes because all of the Christmas episodes were always very moving. But this one was the one where Josh has the PTSD, you know, so it was pretty intense that way.

HRISHI: And was your job that week, or for that episode, also particularly intense? Because when we were watching it, I even made a note when I was looking at it, it just...the immense amount of labor that had to go into that episode.

ELLEN: Yeah, I mean, to do the Christmas episodes are tough anyway because, ya know, Tommy's always real strict about authenticity, and so, when the White House does the, ya know,

decorates for Christmas each year there's a specific theme. And the day after Thanksgiving they swarm the entire White House with hundreds of people coming and doing this really exotic decorating, and it's all done in one day. Only I didn't have, ya know, a hundred people. I had, like twelve people, but yeah, and it's, as you know, there's just so much, ya know, real estate in that set, so yeah hundreds and hundreds of feet of garland and twinkle lights and, ya know, florals and Tommy always wanted the flowers to be, ya know real and fresh, so everything you see is real, and it was pretty intense. We had to do it in one day, so that was always crazy.

JOSH: And is that a reflection of Aaron's last minute writing style? [laughs]

ELLEN: [laughs] No comment.

JOSH: Ha! It's a safe space here.

ELLEN: No, ok. It's more because of how we have to shoot it, ya know? And shooting one on top of the other, we had to dress it right after we finished an episode that didn't have any Christmas decorations. We had, ya know, 24 hours, basically, to go from nothing to that.

JOSH: And can you generally explain for the listenership what you do?

ELLEN: It's basically everything you see that isn't an actor or in the actor's hand is me. So, it's everything from the flooring to the lamps to the paper on the desk and everything in all the drawers and I first, ya know, have to service the time period and the writing, the character, the location, and then, ya know, from there it's pretty defined and then Tommy trusts me to then take it to the finished level. And the production designer, Ken Hardy, of course oversees all of that and as far as architecture, sets, that kind of thing, but it's basically everything you see is...is *moi*.

HRISHI: And had you worked with that team before? Had you worked with either Tommy or the production design team before this series?

ELLEN: When we did the pilot, John Hutman was the designer, and I had worked with him before way back on *Heathers* and some real early film stuff, but I hadn't done TV. And, so he asked me to do the pilot and said, "Well, ya know, just do the pilot and then, ya know, you don't have to do the TV," and I'm like, "Ok." So I did the pilot and then John didn't want to continue on to do the series, so the art director, who was Ken Hardy, who's done a lot of film work, they offered it to him. So, it was great because he had never production designed before so it was kind of fun for me because he was--how do you say this--molded him to be, make it, make it work for me. Ya know what I mean? [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah.

ELLEN: I didn't have to fight with any eccentric production designers, which they tend to be a little kooky. Of course they probably say that about decorators, too. So, from the very first season all the way through, Ken and I did the whole season and we continued to work together on, I'd say half of what I've done since with him. And I actually do still have about half of my

team that is still with me. They tease me 'cuz I say I can't get rid of them because they're the only ones who speak Ellen-ese...

HRISHI/JOSH: [laugh]

ELLEN: [laugh] Which is, you know, the point-and-grunt kind of decorating that you end up doing. We dressed this whole episode, ya know, for Christmas, and we thought, 'Ok, we're gonna get a break because we don't have to undress or redress anything--it's all, ya know, Christmas.' And then we finish the episode and there was of course a scene here and a scene there that they kind of didn't quite get, so we had to undress the [cross talk] whole thing...

JOSH: [cross talk] Ai-ya-ya.

ELLEN: ...And, so Tommy said, "Ya know, I'll just pick a few spots and let's walk through. We don't have to put everything back up and you know, we'll just figure out." So of course we get in there and he's like, "Ok, I want to see...ok, well wait...let me...ok..." and then he's backing up, backing up, and then the arms go above the head and then, as soon...

JOSH: [laughs]

ELLEN:...as soon as the arms go above the head, ya know you're...

JOSH: It's trouble.

ELLEN:...you're done. So we ended up having to bring back twenty foot Christmas trees, and redress, ya know, the whole deal in, of course, six hours, so it was pretty...we became very familiar with garland. It was pretty crazy.

HRISHI: On this episode there's one detail that I really appreciated, and I was wondering if there was a conversation that you guys had about this, trying to do this explicitly. In the scenes where Josh and Dr. Stanley Keyworth are talking and they're doing his therapy session, the whole rest of the episode the Christmas decorations are really prominent, and it really like changes the whole feeling of the set. But in that room they're a lot more sparse, there's like a wreath here or there, but they're all hidden in shadows. And I was wondering if that was something that you guys specifically tried to do to keep, ya know, so that it was still decorated for Christmas but intentionally muted from the rest of the episode.

ELLEN: Yeah, definitely. One of the things that I'm responsible for is for decorating the room but not hitting people over the head with it necessarily, or in cases where they shouldn't actually notice. And, so in this case, the decorations were too distracting. But to keep a little bit of it in there, so that you don't get disjointed and think that the flashback and...ya know, to keep the flashbacks separate from the present. Because, you know...as you noticed how they shot it, where they crossed over often, and it could have been difficult to know when he was there or when he was flashing back or even flashing back to 5 days earlier. So...

HRISHI: Right.

ELLEN: ...that was one of the ways to make sure you knew that he was in the present but very subtly. So yeah, you're not supposed to notice that we did that, but yeah that was the intention: to keep it separate, ya know?

HRISHI: When thinking about your Emmy nomination for this episode, when you got that were you like, "Yeah, that makes sense." Because this one was a *crazy* amount of work, like this was an extraordinary episode in your own view, in terms of what went into it with the planning and the execution. Or, for you, are there other episodes where you feel like, "Is this one getting noticed because of all the obvious labor" but there are other more subtle things that are happening in other episodes that might have been your choice to single out?

ELLEN: Well, it's interesting because when you submit an episode you basically have to have a percentage of new sets in order to be eligible. So that this one was interesting because they allowed the sets to be counted as new because they were completely...uh...

JOSH: Redressed.

ELLEN:..Redone. So, that's kind of funny, but from my perspective, and from my peer group, it isn't impressive because it looks fabulous, but for that kind of a set it's just all about flowers and garland. Labor-wise they don't really care what it takes. From an artistic point of view, the ones to me that make much more sense to submit are the ones that are really detailed or unusual from a creative point of view. This particular one is a phone-in.

JOSH: And am I correct that you guys hopped right onto *Studio 60* [cross talk] after *The West Wing* ?

ELLEN: [cross talk] Yes. Mmm hmm. Yeah, [cross talk] that was--

JOSH: So you wanted more - you were ready for more of the crazy?

ELLEN: I'll tell you, Aaron Sorkin was just an absolute thrill and pleasure and beyond to decorate for his words, ya know? And Tommy Schlamme, of course, I would just work with anytime all the time. He's amazing.

JOSH: I was just gonna say, even though we're not up to it yet, I had a brief interaction with Ken through Twitter because I talked about, I don't know if you had any involvement in the infamous incident of Marine One (the helicopter) saying, "The 'Untied' States of America" on the side.

ELLEN: Oh, my gosh. Well, thankfully, when I say, "Everything you see... *except* signage" which gives me the out because I had nothing to do with that. That was not all my department.

JOSH: [laugh] All right, kick that one down the line. [cross talk] We'll get to it eventually.

ELLEN: [cross talk] Yes. [laugh] Oh, Yes. And then there's just the endless fishbowl stories. And there's so many fun stories that went on, especially after seven years.

JOSH: What department's in charge of Gail's fishbowl?

ELLEN: Well, it's a combination of props and set dec because it's technically set dec because nobody touches it, but then the one episode where she's given the goldfish as the present, so it was then put into her hands, so then it became a prop. But we had a different fish bowl for every episode and the game was to find whatever decoration in the bowl fit, ya know, a story in the episode. So, ya know, like the Christmas episode we put a little Christmas tree, and then, ya know, so every episode had a different thing in the fishbowl, and it was always fun to see, ya know, who noticed it.

JOSH: Yeah, we love tracking it. Any idea who originated that concept?

ELLEN: Well, it was me! [laugh]

JOSH: Right. [laugh]

HRISHI: That's awesome.

JOSH: That is fantastic. I'm glad to know that!

ELLEN: I had to put something in there. But then as it went on Blanch Sindelar, who's the prop person would, ya know, do some different ones and, ya know...And they saved every one of them. They used a new bowl every time because of the crossover and if they had to reshoot it and yadda yadda...So in the prop room all around the ceiling, there's a shelf all the way around the room, and all the fish bowls were [cross talk] up there.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's awesome.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Wow.

JOSH: There should be a fish tank somewhere at the Smithsonian with all of Gail's [cross talk] pieces in there.

ELLEN: [cross talk] [laughs]

JOSH: How many Gail's do you think there were? [laugh]

ELLEN: I don't know. How many...Do you know what? There were only two!

JOSH: Get out of here!

ELLEN: Yes, because I remember asking somebody about that and said that it was like the longest living goldfish. “No animals were hurt in the filming of this TV show” kind of a thing. So it was...

JOSH: Wow, *that's* a bombshell.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I won a lot of goldfish as a kid at festivals and fairs and they never made it home.

ELLEN: Yeah, so it was the running joke. And there's a lot of those little things that we would put. Like, ya know, we were really into, Tommy especially, layers and layers and...ya know we had such a great time every episode changing, like what we saw on the back of Josh's board, and we'd write post-its to him, giving him a hard time, and ya know, on their desk and little stuff like that. So, that was always to keep it fresh, ya know... [laugh]

HRISHI: Hmm. Oh! You know, we had gotten a question from a few different listeners who noticed that in season 1, Josh's office had what looked like a gun range target pinned to his bulletin board? And then, of course, after season 2 started, and he had been in a shooting, when we come back to that office that target is not there anymore.

ELLEN: Ya know, I think I recall that that was intentional, to kind of remove it, because we didn't want to confuse anybody. But I think we brought it back after season 2.

HRISHI: Thanks so much!

JOSH: That's fantastic. I'm glad we got to shine the light on your amazing contributions to just the world we think of as *The West Wing*. Like, as you said, your aim is never to stand out. You don't, but you did so much to create the world that we all have in our heads when we think of the show. And so it's nice to get a few minutes to unpack it all with you.

ELLEN: Yeah, it's great. It was a great experience and certainly a high point in my career, and I love talking about it. I'm very passionate about it. I first took it on and like, yeah, how many sets can you do in a White House, ya know? [laugh] And then it was like, well, quite a few.

JOSH: Actually, very, very many.

ELLEN: Yeah, so...

HRISHI: Well, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us.

ELLEN: My pleasure. Thank you. What's next?

[*West Wing* theme music]

HRISHI: So, here's something interesting. As you mentioned, the original air date is December 20th, 2000.

JOSH: Mmm Hmm.

HRISHI: But it was supposed to air on December 13th, 2000.

JOSH: What happened?

HRISHI: Al Gore conceded to George W. Bush that day instead, and the programming was preempted.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Yeah. So, here are, sixteen years later, in the wake of one contentious election, and talking about this episode feels very timely.

JOSH: Indeed it does. And, it should be mentioned that we were originally supposed to record this episode on November 9th with special guest Brad Whitford. And then as the events, ya know, I don't why he cancelled, but as the events of November 8th played out...

HRISHI: Things went awry [mispronounced "ah-ree"].

JOSH: [laugh]...Things went awry ["ah-ree"], albeit [mispronounced "all-bite"]...

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH:...for some people, they went ok. And I got an email from Brad that just said, "We gotta reschedule this thing." And we did manage to.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's also worth mentioning that we are recording this episode from our alma mater: Yale University.

HRISHI: It's true.

JOSH: We met with the Yale College Democrats tonight, and had a little Q&A with them, and that was a lot of fun.

HRISHI: And I gave a little presentation about *Song Exploder* to the Timothy Dwight Residential College.

JOSH: Yeah, you did. Tomorrow I'm going to meet with both undergraduate theatre studies students and graduate students, and tell them to pursue anything else.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: I suspect they won't listen to me, but I'll give it a shot.

HRISHI: But someday they could be working on a podcast about a show that they were once on.

JOSH: That is true. [laugh]

HRISHI: Here's another thing about the election. This episode was originally filmed while the election itself was happening, and apparently in between takes of "Noël", they would stop and go to the TV to check the results as they [cross talk] were coming in.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, *on* election night year 2000.

HRISHI: Yeah, part of this episode was being filmed. And then when it came out, it got postponed because of the contentious protracted recount finally coming to a close, or at least Gore finally making a concession speech that night.

[Al Gore concession speech excerpt]

*AL GORE: Good evening. Just moments ago, I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd President of the United States.*

[End of excerpt]

JOSH: A concession speech, I believe, written with the help of Eli Attie.

HRISHI: That's right. All things come back.

JOSH: That concession, having been made, would then clear Eli's schedule to join the staff of The West Wing.

HRISHI: Yeah. In Canada, because they did not have that issue, this episode aired as scheduled on the 13th.

JOSH: Is that true?

HRISHI: Yeah, so Canada got it a week early.

JOSH: Nice research. I wonder...well, it being the year 2000, I guess spoilers were relatively safe.

HRISHI: Yeah. No one was pre-tweeting.

JOSH: They would have had to canoe down to the United States and deliver their spoilers, which would take more than seven days.

HRISHI: [laugh]



JOSH: So everything was fine.

HRISHI: What did you think of this episode? You know, this episode has won a lot of awards.

JOSH: It was an excellent episode. I have to say, I'm sure it'll lift...but the events of November 8th and the days following thus far have left me *not* in the mood to watch *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's, you know, I still love this episode, but I waited until I *had* to watch it because we were going to record [cross talk] today.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: I didn't *race* to it.

HRISHI: I'm curious to see if our podcast listenership goes dramatically up or down because of the election.

JOSH: Yeah, I'm curious too actually. I have to say, a lot of people, I feel, have reached out through social media and said, "Thank you guys, particularly for doing this now," which I very much appreciate hearing. But I'm curious to hear also how other people feel. Are you escaping into the world of *The West Wing* ? Or are you feeling a little bit like we are?

HRISHI: Yeah. We also got some tweets from people saying, "Tried to watch. Couldn't do it."

JOSH: "Too soon."

HRISHI: Yeah. Maybe they'll [cross talk] come back around.

JOSH: [cross talk] But we soldier on.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Even though perhaps we be suffering from PTSD, we soldier on.

HRISHI: [laugh] Very nice.

JOSH: [laugh] Like Josh Lyman. So let's dive in.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's a pretty great episode. It's dramatic. It feels different from other *West Wing* episodes in many ways.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: I like the time shifting back and forth, the present-day therapy session slash interview going on, and there are very clever visual ways that it kind of sends us off back into the time the events being discussed were actually happening.

HRISHI: Yeah, there's one moment in particular. It's around the eighteen-minute mark. Josh is describing why the pilot got a purple heart.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*JOSH: His plane was shot at over Bosnia. It caught fire. He ejected.*

*(Sounds of screams and gunfire)*

*JOSH: And there were some injuries.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And there were lots of nice, sort of...moments of intercutting from one time to another, but this one was my favorite. When he's talking about the purple heart, and Leo asks him why did he get the purple heart? And he starts to tell him, and the camera starts to move to the left behind Leo. And as it passes Leo, it comes out the other side, and it's the other scene, but Josh's dialogue is continued seamlessly.

JOSH: Seamless, yeah, very clever.

HRISHI: Yeah. Super cool.

JOSH: Tommy Schlamme.

HRISHI: Brad's performance? Are you going to say something nice about Bradley Whitford?

JOSH: (Patronizingly) Brad's a terrific actor.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: No, I think Brad's performance *is* terrific. And I love Adam Arkin in the role [cross talk] as Stanley.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, he's so great!

JOSH: And the two of them have a very good dynamic. It's kind of a very interesting cat-and-mouse game going on, but they also...the grudging respect he earns from Josh, and you can see that he cares but he doesn't coddle him *too* much. I mean, it's interesting the dynamics and the kind of game and what he teases out of Josh over the course of the episode.

HRISHI: And it starts right away. They've got this contentious dynamic immediately. As soon as Stanley's describing what ATVA is, Josh is so over it, like he cannot contain his boredom or his exasperation. He's like a bored teenager. He's got his mouth open and he's like rolling his eyes as he's describing. He can't even keep himself from interrupting him and saying, "Yeah, I know it all", ya know?

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: But I like when Brad's like--

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*JOSH: Do you think you're talking to the paperboy?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI:...And then right before the cold open ends, Stanley says –

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*STANLEY: You're not talking to the paperboy either, Josh.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Instead of going to *The West Wing* opening theme I wanted it to go to "Paper Boi" by Paper Boi from the TV show *Atlanta*.

[*Atlanta* "Paper Boi" excerpt]

*PAPERBOI: (Sung) Paper Boi, Paper Boi. Always 'bout that paper boy. If you ain't on your grind and you flexin', you's a hater, boy. Paper Boi, Paper Boi, Always getting' paper, boy...*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: I, being older than you, had a different reference. First, I wrote down, "Great cold open. Paper boy."

HRISHI: [laugh] All about that paper boy.

JOSH: That's where I meant to go with it. No, and then that made me think of classic arcade video game, 'Paper Boy'.

['Paper Boy' video game theme music]

HRISHI: The one where you threw the papers on the...

JOSH: Yeah, you had to bike around and [cross talk] throw things...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. Was that an arcade game? I only knew it as the Nintendo game.

JOSH: Have you ever been to an arcade?

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: Ok. I didn't know how old [laugh] I didn't know if they were completely gone, extinct now, it was an arcade game.

[both laugh]

HRISHI: I had my thirteenth birthday at Aladdin's Castle.

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: Yeah. This story about the pilot, the subplot, you know that was inspired by a real life thing?

JOSH: I thought it was inspired by last week's *TV Guide* synopsis.

HRISHI: [laugh] Right. So now I can say that was *TV Guide* just getting 2.09 and 2.10 mixed up.

JOSH: Yeah, weird.

HRISHI: Totally weird.

JOSH: I did no research. I suspected, perhaps, so can you tell me the real story?

HRISHI: Yeah. There was a pilot named Craig Button, and he was, really, it was a very similar circumstances. He was flying a plane, and it was ruled a suicide because it had no other explanation. He seemed of sound mind, but he crashed the plane and...

JOSH: And there was no malfunction?

HRISHI: Right. By the way, Craig Button's birthday is on Thanksgiving this year. The real Craig Button. His birthday is November 24th. Also my father's birthday.

JOSH: Is that right?

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: I was touched by the parallel story of someone else suffering through some sort of mental trauma. You know, the fact that we were given just a little bit of insight into what this pilot

had gone through in getting some little pieces of his history somehow made it seem more vital to get the story of Josh, which we could.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: You know, to delve into Josh's PTSD or his trauma or his mental anguish because he's still there.

HRISHI: Right. Before it's too late.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: [cross talk] In a grim kind of way of looking at it.

JOSH: And also, one thing that people have been hollering at us for, but we, I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but I didn't acknowledge it yet because it would've been spoiler-ish – is that this episode gives us a little insight into how harsh Josh was to Donna in the episode...a couple episodes ago [cross talk] I think?

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, I didn't buy that.

JOSH: No? You don't buy it at all?

HRISHI: I don't buy that at all.

JOSH: You don't think there's any chance...well, I mean 'cuz if...did that one moment, when he completely harshes on her and her date that she's about to go on, *did* feel like how he's treating, kind of, everybody in this episode.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: And so I thought, 'Maybe. Maybe it was Aaron laying some breadcrumbs out for us.'

HRISHI: I guess I believe the version where Aaron always says like, "I had to write something this week. And so I came up with *this* ." And I know there was this idea that, like we get in the pre-opening, this idea that maybe there *should* be some psychological aftermath. You know, that it shouldn't just be completely wrapped up. We had episode 3 to get to speed through Josh's recovery, but still there should maybe be some lingering effects, but I believe that they probably would've come to him that week or maybe the week before. The idea of two weeks earlier, three weeks earlier...

JOSH: Knowing the way Aaron works, you make a good point. That said, I don't mind interpreting it [cross talk] the way we just discussed...

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laugh] Sure. Retroactively.

JOSH:...And that various other people did.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I feel there's a need out there among the viewership and the listenership to our podcast to believe that there's a reason why Josh was that harsh [cross talk] to Donna.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. Yeah.

JOSH: So, I think that's at least... I'm gonna give you a nod to...that's a reasonable theory.

HRISHI: Yeah. But, Adam Arkin is so good as a foil to Josh in this. He just stonewalls him on anything. Josh can't get anything past him. He can't get jokes past him or snark or lies...nothing. It's pretty amazing.

JOSH: Yeah, you have a sense that this guy... this isn't his first time dealing somebody who's going through what Josh is. And he's willing to let it take as long as it takes.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That Josh kind of has to get there.

HRISHI: Yeah, he basically matches every single kind of pugilistic instinct that Josh has.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*JOSH: I'm sorry if this question sounds rude, but how long will we be here today?*

*STANLEY: Well, I'm sorry if this answer sounds rude, but as long as I want.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love that. That they had found, in this ATVA guy, the most formidable opponent for Josh. I liked when Josh says...

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*JOSH: This is incredibly prosecutorial.*

*STANLEY: I don't care.*

*JOSH: I think if you want to know...*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I felt like, yeah, and they're treating...that's because, Josh is basically a hostile witness. And he's treating him like that. It felt reminiscent of courtroom/ *A Few Good Men* kind of stuff.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: Donna has that line, when she's setting Josh up, to call him a yutz. When she's got the file on the pilot, but she says that, "I anticipate your every need."

JOSH: [chuckles] Yes.

HRISHI: It was a little too much. I was like, "Woo!" And he bought it. He was like –

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: He was like, "Yeah, ok, but still." Like, it didn't phase him. He didn't even hesitate at her far-too-sexy kind of delivery. But it was a good set-up.

JOSH: I wrote down, "Josh bumps lightly into someone in the hallway." You notice that little moment?

HRISHI: No?

JOSH: Well, there's a very, very small moment with an extra, or a background actor, and it's just a little nod to how deftly he usually moves down the hallways and weaves his way around, and it's just another little clue that something's off with Josh Lyman. I liked the smallness of that gesture.

HRISHI: Did he have to like, put his hands on them to move them aside?

JOSH: No. My memory's it's just a little, "Oh. Eh," bumps on the elbow kind of thing.

HRISHI: That's great. You know Donna's getting super excited about Yo-Yo Man, and she says,

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt)

*DONNA: You can take your Pablo Casals. You can keep your Rastropovich. I say Yo-Yo Ma rules.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Two cellists who have also played at the White House, but while I was digging around for this episode, I found something out that was pretty neat. So, Pablo Casals, he played for JFK at the White House. And Pablo Casals also discovered a cellist, young cellist, aged seven and brought him to perform in front of JFK later. An aged seven Yo-Yo Ma.

JOSH: Is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah.

[*'The American Pageant of the Arts', Leonard Bernstein introducing Yo-Yo Ma excerpt]*

*LEONARD BERNSTEIN: A seven-year old Chinese cellist playing old French music for his new American compatriots. Welcome, Yo Yo Ma and Yeou-Cheng Ma.*

*(Applause)*

*(Cello Music)*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's very cool.

HRISHI: Isn't that cool?

JOSH: That's fantastic.

HRISHI: It wasn't at the White House, but he played, and Leonard Bernstein emceed the event. It's really cool. I have the link for it on YouTube, so we'll put it up [cross talk] on the website.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, great. Yeah, I want to take a look at that.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah, you can see 7 year old [cross talk] Yo Yo Ma performing-

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, I really want to see that.

HRISHI: With his sister on piano.

JOSH: Well. I used to play the game *Celebrity*, with the same people, with great frequency.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: And, people used to put the name "Mstislav Rostropovich" in the hat so many times that eventually we just made a signal, so that you just made a gesture, and your team would guess, "Oh! Rostropovich!"

HRISHI: And everyone should go watch the *Sports Night* episode, "Celebrities" to see...there's a little nod to that in that.

JOSH: There is? I don't even remember that.

HRISHI: It's not Rostropovich in it, but they have a signal for...

[ *Sports Night* Episode 2.15 excerpt]

*DANA: [laugh]*

*DAN: This is an Israeli violinist.*



CASEY: *Yehudi Menuhin!*

DAN: *Yes!*

CHRIS: *Time! We got one!*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Is that right? I can't believe I don't remember that. That's [cross talk] funny.

HRISHI: Well, so, part of the reason you don't remember that is because Jeremy doesn't get to play.

JOSH: [laugh] That's true. He sits in the room whispering all the answers [cross talk] that I know.

HRISHI: Right, right.

JOSH: But that's funny because, of course, Aaron was one of the people who used to play in that Celebrity game, so I guess, he put it in that episode.

HRISHI: By the way, Yo-Yo Ma also performed in *The West Wing* Season 1, Episode 7.

JOSH: Just not the actual Yo-Yo Ma.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: But for the State Dinner, the President says,

[*West Wing* Episode 1.07 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Yo-Yo Ma's going to play - some Bach concertos, I believe.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: So, this is his second appearance in-

JOSH: I'm Bach.

BOTH: [laugh]

HRISHI: What?

JOSH: Look, I'm off my game.

HRISHI: Was that Arnold Schwarzenegger as a dead composer?

JOSH: Yeah, I'm trying to put the reference... I'm not sure...yeah. I wonder whether they imagined, whether Aaron even imagined as he wrote an off-camera Yo-Yo Ma in the first season that he would have ever guessed that Yo-Yo Ma, himself, would be delighted to be part [cross talk] of the show on camera the next season.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right. Yeah, yeah we found out from Aaron that Yo-Yo Ma was actually a huge fan of the show, and got really excited when he first got on set.

JOSH: Didn't somebody tell us a story, maybe it was Aaron, about his playing the piece over and over and over, even when he didn't really need to?

HRISHI: Yeah. There are two great stories. One that Richard Schiff told us about watching Dulé do this sort of like softshoe tap routine...

[ 'ATX Television Festival' - Richard Schiff interview excerpt]

*RICHARD: Yo-Yo Ma's sitting there playing around with his cello, and Dulé walked up to him and said, "Can you play that thing you were playing earlier?" And Yo-Yo Ma goes, "Sure." And he starts playing, and Dulé starts to try to tap along a little bit to this classical piece, which doesn't have a you know, bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu-bu, [audience laugh] and he's trying to find it. And Yo-Yo is like, "This is cool." [audience laugh] And he starts playing, and before you know it, you know... Dulé is shuffling along to Yo-Yo Ma, and it [cross talk] was one of the most beautiful moments I've ever seen anywhere.*

*BRADLEY WHITFORD: [cross talk] It was unbelievable.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then the other story that I really loved was, I think it was Tommy was talking to Yo-Yo Ma about playing the piece –

[ 'ATX Television Festival' - Tommy Schlamme interview excerpt]

*TOMMY: I will also say one other thing about Yo-Yo Ma, which was normally what you do is he records it once for you in the environment you're playing, and then you play that back, so that...it's an editorial reason. And I had said to him, "You know, we're going to shoot a lot. You're going to have to do it often. So I think the best thing would be to playback." And he went, "You're worried, right?" And I went, "What are you talking about?" "You're worried that I won't play it in the same rhythm every time. Don't worry about that." [audience laugh] And he did! We could edit any one of the takes and it would never change the metronome of it.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's remarkable.

HRISHI: Yeah. Bernard Thatch from The White House Visitors Office?

JOSH: As played by Paxton Whitehead.

HRISHI: That guy was like...It was sort of like what we were talking about with Ainsley. Where, here's this new take on writing from Aaron. A new voice...literally a new voice, but also figuratively. That's just a totally different kind of approach to that cadence.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*BERNARD: Claudia Jean.*

*CJ: How are you doing, Bernard?*

*BERNARD: I'm not at all well.*

*CJ: That's not unusual, is it?*

*BERNARD: No.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think you said that a lot of people, when they speak Aaron's words, there can be a sameness to how they deliver it. And then people who are really good, like the people in our main cast, know how to deliver it. But every now and then, it feels like a completely new take on it. And I thought this was one.

JOSH: I completely agree with you. I'm a big fan of Paxton Whitehead's. He's a terrific actor. I saw him in the original Broadway production of Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*.

HRISHI: Oh, I love *Noises Off*.

JOSH: Oh, I love that. I think that that performance...that's the loudest that I've ever laughed in public.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: I was paralyzed with laughter, and Paxton Whitehead was particularly funny.

HRISHI: I've never seen the play, but I remember watching the movie, the John Ritter movie version of it, which has a huge insane cast, and I was watching it when I was home sick when I was like in seventh grade or something, just randomly picked that one up to watch, and I was sick, and I was on the couch. I was home alone, and I laughed so hard, despite being sick and feeling awful, and I just loved it so much.

JOSH: It's incredible. If you ever have opportunity, see the play. Because seeing that physical humor live, the precision timing...it's pretty special.

HRISHI: Yeah, I'd love that. So Bernard Thatch, in this episode, he's talking about Gustav Kaiou.

JOSH: Throwing a little bit of shade at him. [*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*BERNARD: Kaiou was a contemporary of Courbet, who was considerably more gifted. This is a painting of the cliffs at Etretat, cleverly titled, "The Cliffs of Etretat". It is a minor work.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I was like, this is rough. There's no way that's a real painter, right? If they're talking so harshly about him. And indeed, it is not. But the cliffs at Etretat is a subject that's been painted, famously by Claude Monet, in a painting called, "The Cliffs at Etretat" and also Gustav Courbet, who's not Gustav Kaiou, also called "The Cliffs at Etretat" and Eugene Delacroix. [cross talk] It's a place that's been painted...

JOSH: [cross talk] Interesting.

HRISHI:...a bunch of times, but it's made me realize that with *The West Wing* it feels like they will praise things from real life, but when it comes time to like talk down about stuff they will fictionalize it.

JOSH: That's just good manners.

HRISHI: It's respectful.

JOSH: *The West Wing* was not raised in a barn.

HRISHI: [laugh] And it would be cheeky if he was...I mean, even though they've established that he's a snob, it would be a little bit rough if he was suddenly like, "Claude Monet...Psh! Stupid."

JOSH: [laugh] True.

HRISHI: I think about his line, this is what one little snippet of *The West Wing* that runs through my head, every now and then:

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*BERNARD: CJ, your necklace is a monument to bourgeoisie taste. CJ: Thank you.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: It is of course a freakish, little thing. Or something.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*BERNARD*: You're a freakishly tall woman.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, you know what? I think this is another closed caption disaster.

HRISHI: [laugh] Oh, no! They took "freakishly tall" and made "freakish little"?

JOSH: I think it was like, "You're a freaky, little woman." And I remember thinking, 'She's not little.'

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: Wow. I can't remember now the exact...I think when that subplot is finally resolved, and the woman...they give her back [cross talk] her painting...

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: He has a funny, little, quick little aside there about the French.

[*The West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*CJ*: We've contacted the French--

*BERNARD*: Who probably surrendered.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laugh] Right. He says the first time around, before, you know, in the first go around, when he's talking about Kaiou, he says,

[*The West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*BERNARD*: The French government offered it as gift to The White House. I suppose as retribution for Euro Disney. So here it hangs...like a gym sock on a shower rod.

[end excerpt]

JOSH & HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: It's good writing.

HRISHI: It's so good, but I noticed that it isn't just his delivery that's like this new take on Aaron's writing. Aaron is writing this character differently. He's definitely writing him with this supercilious manner...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI:...in the language. It's [cross talk] not just in the performance.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's true.

HRISHI: Which is great. There are a lot of...I feel like French surrender jokes are kind of a hallmark of *West Wing* episodes.

JOSH: Do we have a lot of them?

HRISHI: I feel like there are. Maybe we haven't encountered them yet. But I feel like that's a go-to.

JOSH: My favorite, although it's not from *The West Wing*...

HRISHI: Mmm hmmm.

JOSH:...is the eBay item listing that says, "French World War II rifle – never shot, dropped once."

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: It's good, right?

HRISHI: What's that from?

JOSH: I don't know. I want to say I made it up, but I know that I did not.

HRISHI: No. When Bernard is doing that... you know, first he gives CJ the "your necklace is a monument to bourgeoisie taste", and she's like, "Thank you," and it's like she doesn't really get it. But then when he finally says, "The President, possessing even less taste in fine art than you have in jewelry," she gives him this look of like, "All right, buddy!" [laugh]

JOSH: [laugh] Yes.

HRISHI: Ok, back to Josh for a second.

JOSH: Ok, onto Josh.

HRISHI: When he gets revved up, when they're in that scene in the Oval, it is so good. Like, you could give him the Emmy just for that one scene. I mean, he does a lot of good work in this episode, but that moment when he loses it. That is like, again, the marriage of the performance and the writing. The way he repeats, "Listen to me."

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: He's a good guy. You should talk to him.*

*JOSH: You need to listen to me. You have to listen to me. I can't help you, unless you listen to me! You can't send Christmas cards to everyone. You can't do it! Forget the SPR let's get the IMF loans like we said we were going to! Listen to what I have to say about Dideon and please listen to me!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He keeps saying it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And it feels...real, like it feels like just somebody who is *losing* their temper.

JOSH: Yeah, I also like the performances of those around him. [cross talk] Everybody.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes!

JOSH: Those who are trying to kinda...talk him off the ledge a little bit – Leo and Sam, and also, sort of the dawning realization on President Bartlet's face that –

HRISHI: Something's wrong.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Although he's not, you know I like that he's also expecting Josh to walk it back.

HRISHI: Yeah, [cross talk] to get it together.

JOSH: [cross talk] He kind of looks at him, like, "You remember what *my* position is, right?"

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: "You realize you're talking to the president."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So he's not, you know, overly concerned. He's kind of just waiting for Josh to step it on back.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But [cross talk] it doesn't happen.

HRISHI: [cross talk] There are a lot of great looks in the triangle surrounding Brad in that moment. The President glances at Leo in the middle as he's starting to like, get really revved up, and the president's like asking him, and he kind of just like flicks his eyes over to Leo, just like, "You catching this?"

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And I love, as Leo's kind of like escalating, like, "Hey, hey." You know, they try to get him to stop. Sam's attempt to pacify him is by going quieter. He just does this really quiet, "Josh." But none of them work, but it's really nice how Leo's kind of ramping up, and Sam take's this entirely different take. And then, after Josh has really blown his top, Leo looks over at Sam, and they cut to Sam and Sam is...he's just looking away completely. Almost like he's, just like in disbelief, and almost like he's a little bit ashamed for his friend.

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

HRISHI: Although, one thing I noticed is that I really like that moment, but then they cut to the wider shot. And in the wide shot, Sam's looking at Leo. And then they cut back to Sam [cross talk] and he's looking away again.

JOSH: [cross talk] Whoops.

HRISHI: Which is just [cross talk] a little....

JOSH: [cross talk] Jump cut. Whoops.

HRISHI: I'm going to stick with the canonical version, which is that Sam wasn't looking, and I really like that. There's a neat effect, I think, in this episode that whenever they do the flashback of Josh in the apartment, that, like when he breaks the glass, it's like this crazy over-the-top, unrealistic sound effect of the glass breaking.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

(*Sound of glass breaking*)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I really like that as a decision to, sort of, like indicate that this is a lie.



JOSH: Yeah, I was thinking that this is the first time we're seeing something that didn't happen.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's a new technique of information delivery to us as an audience.

HRISHI: That's right. This our first moment with an unreliable narrator.

JOSH: Right, there you go.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah, and so I love that that sound is unnatural, and like it's way too loud and doesn't fit the space, and it happens a couple times. When he finally starts to kind of come clean about the thing, and they're really getting into the heart of his PTSD, he's talking to Stanley. And that section is, again, like just incredibly composed, because they are cutting between him telling the story, him at the concert, and him in the apartment. There are three different locations and three different times happening, and it's all being scored by Yo-Yo Ma [cross talk] playing the Bach.

JOSH: [cross talk] Mmm Hmm.

HRISHI: And eventually, the way they cut the music, is with the glass breaking again. The glass breaks and underneath that the music cuts out.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

(*Cello music playing*)

STANLEY: *Ok.*

JOSH: *I sat down on [cross talk] the couch...*

STANLEY: *[cross talk] Can you honestly tell me [cross talk] that when that pilot committed suicide...*

JOSH: *[cross talk] I, I, I pushed the magazine aside...[cross talk] as a coaster...*

STANLEY: *[cross talk] Can you honestly tell me...*

(*Sound of glass breaking. Cello music stops.*)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Suddenly it has [cross talk] that shot.

JOSH: [cross talk] Do we know who edited this episode? We probably should give a shout-out. It is very deftly edited.

HRISHI: It was edited by Bill Johnson.

JOSH: Huzzah, Bill Johnson.

HRISHI: Yeah. Stanley gets a little bit harsh too, at the end, when he's like pushing Josh further. I wonder if because he just knows this is the kind of dynamic that Josh responds well too, or what. But he's like...

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*(Cello music playing)*

STANLEY: *And then what happened?*

JOSH: *I don't know.*

*(Gunshot sound)*

STANLEY: *What are you, in the 4th grade?*

JOSH: *I don't know how it started!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's really harsh.

JOSH: I think you're onto something though. I think, in a way, he is responding to Josh the way Josh sometimes treats other people...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH:...and to kind of get under skin a little bit and to sort of just provide a little friction to get him where he needs to go.

HRISHI: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that was why I felt like, "Oh, they've made me wonder if, in another universe, Adam Arkin could've played Josh Lyman.

JOSH: I think he would've been very good.

HRISHI: Yeah. So, the end of this episode has again, I mean, we're just on such an amazing streak of episodes right now, but this is again, like, I feel like I keep being like ridiculously superlative every episode that we record. But this is, again, one of my favorite all-time, top-five all-time scenes from the series – this exchange between...the moment when Leo tells Josh the story about the guy who falls in the hole.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*LEO: The priest writes out a prayer. Throws it down in the hole and moves on. Then a friend walks by. "Hey, Joe, it's me. Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here!" The friend says, "Yeah, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: This is pretty classic.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also like that, without depicting it too much, it's clear that it's really Leo's hand behind this whole ATVA interview. I mean, we learn that, I guess, explicitly. But I even get the sense that the reason that Stanley pushes Josh so hard is that Leo has said to him, you know, "Don't leave that room until you've gotten somewhere with him."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I think it's really important to him. I think the outburst in the Oval was really bad, and Leo is concerned for him on both the professional level, because he's on the verge of really not being able to function...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And also what that means for his friend, personally. And I think Leo's, you know, at a DEFCON 5 here, and he knows that something's really gotta give. And then he's *there*, and he tells that story. He gives one of his classic John Spencer beaming smiles when he first goes into this story that he knows might provide some solace for his friend. It's a great scene.

HRISHI: Yeah, it is up there, for me, with the Paul Revere knife. Because it has this just...

JOSH: He told him this story. He fell down the hole!

HRISHI: [laugh] It is that...like...I don't know. It just...it really gets me. That extension of your work family as being your real family. These are the people that you spend so much time with. I was thinking about that, and it started to make me realize that, outside of my wife, you know you're the person that I spend most of my time with?

JOSH: Ha! I'm in the hole with you.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But here's the bad part, Hrish. I *don't* know the way out.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: But I'm willing to just hang down here.

HRISHI: That's cool.

JOSH: It's something.

HRISHI: Yeah. Luckily, our hole has snacks. I've got a flentl for this episode.

JOSH: There was *quite* a flentl.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: Why'd that make you laugh?

HRISHI: It's just funny. "Quite the flentl", It's just...I guess I was thinking it's funny to me to modify flentl. Like "unique", flentls just *are* . [both laugh] But this was [cross talk] quite the flentl.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's right.

HRISHI: Tell me, why did you think it was quite the flentl? JOSH: I just wrote down, "quite the flentl."

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: I except you to unpack everything. I just write down a phrase or a couple words. I don't know, who remembers? There's music, here's a siren [cross talk], there's music, it's a multi-layered flentl.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Exactly! [laugh] Well, there you go! That's right, it is. There's this crazy camera action that happens as Donna and Josh walk out of the White House, and they see the carolers singing, "Carol of the Bells". And, like the camera goes to this handheld kind of thing, and it's on this askew angle, and it's kind of moving around, and it's disorienting in a way that's just really essentially repeats this idea that for Josh, music is what triggers his PTSD.

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

HRISHI: What should be this beautiful holiday moment is instead this, like disorienting, vertigo-inducing, PTSD-inspiring event. And so then as he's sort of taking it in, and you wonder if it's triggering something for him or not, they introduce these sirens underneath, some actual police sirens underneath the carolers.

[*West Wing* Episode 2.10 excerpt]

*CAROLERS: Ding! Dong! Ding! Dong! Dong!*

*(Sound of sirens)*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I also thought you could have gone out on that last scene with Leo. I like that they extended it to show, one, that it's not so neatly wrapped up, where he's just cured and fine, and then also, the way they depicted it reminds us that Donna's down in the hole with him, too.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah.

JOSH: That she's there for him.

HRISHI: Yeah. She might not know the way out, but she's there to help him.

JOSH: And I was slightly covetous of this final scene because they seem to really be leaving...exiting the gate in front of the White House.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Right? That seems to be shot on location.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I never got to do that.

HRISHI: [laugh] You've been to the White House.

JOSH: Yeah, but nobody filmed it.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: No, I liked that it was filmed on location. You could tell that it was real.

HRISHI: But this flentl is another example of music carrying over. You know, we've defined flentls as being things that are sounds from the world of the show. Score [cross talk] does not count.

JOSH: [cross talk] I think it's flenta.

HRISHI: Ah, flenta?

JOSH: The plural.

HRISHI: [laugh] Ok. Not flenti?

JOSH: Or flentodes, in Greek.

HRISHI: [laugh] Right! But, in any case, to qualify as a flentl it cannot be just score. That doesn't count.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It has [cross talk] to be from the world.

JOSH: [cross talk] You need...the sirens.

HRISHI: Yeah, but...actually, the last, 'tong' of the song...

JOSH: That's true, was practical. Because...

HRISHI: Exactly, because we saw the singers. And so that happened with the Thanksgiving children singing. And yeah, and it happens again here. The music is kind of doing this double-duty, both as score and flentl fodder.

JOSH: [sigh] Flodder.

HRISHI: [laugh] Oh! So, you know Tommy Schlamme, by the way, mentioned in episode 2.02, Part Two of "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen", that the "Noël" flentl, in his opinion, is the best flentl of the entire series.

JOSH: Wow. The flentl, if you will, to end all flentls.

HRISHI: Mmm. I won't. [laugh]

JOSH: Nor should you.

HRISHI: We're going to take a quick break, pay some bills, and then we'll talk to Bradley Whitford.

[Ad Break]

JOSH: Dude, welcome back! You're our first returning guest. Isn't that right?

BRAD: Is that true?

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: Yes!

BRAD: What an honor. Especially considering Hrishi's hostility toward my relationship with Donna.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: Yeah, what's that all about?

BRAD: I feel embarrassed, defensive, I want to make sure I don't attack you, I want to understand...I don't know...

HRISHI: Was there a specific comment I made that-

BRAD: (Incredulously) "I'm more interested in Sam and Ainsley"?

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Really?

HRISHI: Did I say that?

BRAD: Yeah, you did!

HRISHI: [laugh] Oh, you know, I think there's just [cross talk] a lot of...

JOSH: [cross talk] I'm enjoying this.

BRAD: Yeah, you think he's a crass, sexist, entitled, privileged man treating his assistant in a condescending way. But let's let Hrishu speak for himself.

HRISHI: I think you're talking about the exchange when Josh kind of let's loose with the "lack of self-worth"?

BRAD: I thought that was harsh. I did. And, I think part of the reason I was upset about your response to it is I was uncomfortable with it too [laugh].

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: I think I got defensive too because I always just felt like, *obviously* from day one, playing this guy, this guy was an *idiot*, in terms of handling his emotions and his ability to see what was really going on. He was *clearly* in love with her and was disguising it with his brusque dismissiveness.

JOSH: That's why I assume you're in love with me. [laugh]

BRAD: It's absolutely true. It's absolutely true.

JOSH: We actually briefly discussed, in light of "Noël", and Josh Lyman's PTSD and dealing with that trauma, whether, maybe that's why he went off so hard on Donna. We ultimately decided that Aaron has never planned anything that far ahead.

BRAD: Yeah, maybe that's it. Maybe that's why he put it in there. Yeah, and then there's also the question of how aware is Aaron that he is writing a relationship, that...is he setting up Josh in a

certain way? Or is he being unconsciously dismissive and sexist? I don't know. It's an interesting question.

HRISHI: That doesn't preclude me from being invested in the relationship and enjoying seeing that dynamic.

BRAD: No, it was really funny because I heard that, and I always felt like Josh was this emotionally constipated guy who couldn't see how in love he was with her. And ran away from it. And, I don't know, just being casually cruel. I didn't like that Josh was casually cruel to her.

HRISHI: I think that that's true. I think that that's really insightful. And I think we get a little bit of that insight in "Noël", too. The idea of where Josh is sort of the rawest and why he might kind of want to protect himself, consciously or unconsciously, from getting too close to somebody.

BRAD: I have a very weird time watching anything I am in. And I don't respect that about myself. Because I think it's vanity that I should be able to get over in order to be a better actor. I always get mad at directors who say, you know, "We can have the cinematographer, we can have the costumer, but we don't want to let the actors come and see dailies, because they're emotional children, and they'll freak out." But, I guess I'm an emotional child because I truly cannot stand to watch. And I watched the pilot, I watched the last episode ("Shadow of Two Gunmen") that we talked about. And then I just watched, "Noël", and I thought, "People loved this episode. I remember we won prizes for it." And, I watched it. And, I didn't have fun.

JOSH: [laugh]

HRISHI: Really

BRAD: And as I was watching this I remember thinking to myself, "This is a very raw, emotional episode. You don't want to cheapen the current scene on the emotional release." And I thought that the most Josh should release, emotionally, is kind of, I remember thinking, it's kind of where Walter Cronkite was when Kennedy was shot. Where it's just...I didn't think it would be realistic for Josh to consider himself realistically functional if he was absolutely melting down listening to Yo-Yo Ma, which is obviously the moment.

HRISHI: Right.

BRAD: Watching it, I realized, "Oh, you [expletive deleted] idiot, just let it go."

JOSH: [laugh] No, I think it's the inner struggle that's most interesting to watch.

BRAD: I knew that this was getting into very emotionally dilated terrain, and obviously I'm hyper-critical. [laugh] And not just of me. I think I'm too critical watching acting. I am very critical of myself.

JOSH: If it helps, Hrishi and I thought you were terrific in this episode.



BRAD: That doesn't help.

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: No, I'm kidding. I was upset because I want to be able to just sit and watch and forty percent of the episodes I haven't seen.

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

BRAD: And I just want to get to the place where I can enjoy it, and then John Spencer walks in, and I just think about people dying...[laugh] I don't know. I'm having a hard time.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I understand. I have a similar reaction. I just avoid watching what I'm in now.

BRAD: Yeah, yeah. Do you?

JOSH: Mmm hmm. I know you avoid also watching what I'm in.

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Yeah. If I really want to get to a full, horrified, sorrowful release, I just watch your work.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: I understand. There is a similar...back to what you're talking about though, there's a similar dynamic, I feel like, in the Oval too. The scene with Martin.

BRAD: I remember thinking...I remember being frustrated. I don't think...Look, maybe this was the right place for the actor to be. I didn't feel like, "Oh, gee. Nailed that." I felt like, "I don't know if this is right." I mean, it's an interesting thing that I say to young actors all the time, which is...

JOSH: Can I have your number?

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Right. [laugh] I'd like to help you in your work.

ALL THREE: [laugh]

BRAD: Boy, you see right through me. No, but it is to take whatever fear you're having about the acting process, and turbocharge it into the scene. So if you're nervous about not

getting a take, channel it into the nervousness in the scene. Because often it can take you where you need to go, and you're not sitting there, thinking, "I'm failing."

HRISHI: Did you get any kind of reassurance from Tommy? What's your guys' dynamic in the course of making this episode? Do you ask him a lot of questions, and did he give you a lot to go on? Or when you say that you felt like you weren't getting it right, I was wondering if he was a, ya know, if he was a lifeline at all.

BRAD: Tommy was incredibly helpful to me in this. I remember this being, you know, one of the great creative experiences in my life. It just wasn't a great watching experience many years later. You know what was interesting is the whole idea of PTSD, it almost seems naïve, the way it's presented in the episode. But it really was kind of just being talked about, back when we did this. It was funny how sort of naïve it seemed to me that Arkin's character, as if it was an insight that I had PTSD. [laugh]

JOSH: Hmm.

BRAD: Do you know what I mean? Did that strike you?

HRISHI: I definitely agree that PTSD is something that we are much more aware of and have better fluency with now [cross talk] than we did sixteen years ago, yeah.

BRAD: [cross talk] Yeah, that's all I'm saying.

JOSH: How about those scenes with Adam Arkin? You guys are very, very good together, and it's a very interesting dynamic. I assume this all shot in a day.

BRAD: It was a day or two.

JOSH: Did you guys rehearse a lot? Or did you just work it out on camera?

BRAD: My feeling is that we just worked it out on camera. I mean one incredible virtue, as you know, on *The West Wing* was we really were able to rehearse in a protected way that I don't see on a lot of sets. Did you feel that on the show?

JOSH: Absolutely. It's just not built into the timetable of your average TV production.

BRAD: Right. I mean it's very funny to me whenever I'm doing something now. You walk on the set, and the director goes, "So you're standing here. You're standing there. The camera's here." And it always flashes through my mind, "You're so lucky Richard Schiff's not here."

JOSH: [laugh]

BRAD: And he was right. Ya know, we got to rehearse and work with a director. And this was a Tommy episode, and when it's a Tommy episode and it's a Christmas episode, you have as much time as you want.

JOSH & HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: And I know that that process was not rushed. I keep thinking of a very funny thing Chris Misiano said. He said, "Here's a directing tip." He said, "Come in, you're the director, stand where you want the camera to be. And just tell the actors to block it they way they want to block it, and their vanity will play right to you."

JOSH: [laugh]

BRAD: Where the camera is. And it's really true. It's a great way to block.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: And brilliant slash horrifying.

BRAD: Yes. Brilliant and horrifying. But yeah, listen, I felt like Adam was somebody I know. Actually, I don't think I've seen him since then, but I had known him a couple of times, and there's something wonderfully warm and easy about him. I didn't want the material to sound...chipper. You know, I didn't want it to be...not what Aaron's writing is, but the parody of what Aaron's writing is.

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

BRAD: I remember consciously not wanting to, in those scenes with him, be as conscious of the rhythm as you are in a fun scene with Donna.

JOSH: Hmm.

BRAD: If that makes sense.

JOSH: It does make sense.

BRAD: We're shooting out at a college...and a room full of background people, and Yo-Yo Ma comes out, and first of all that is the most beautiful piece of music, which I actually had a relationship with...

JOSH: Hmm.

BRAD:...from before. It was something that my mother, who was a musician, was a harpist. She had, when I was a kid, played for me...that. It was one of those things that just made you weep. It's just beautiful. So, Yo-Yo Ma comes out and plays this, and then hands...he says, "Does anybody want to hold this?" And basically passes around his cello.

JOSH: Uh! I thought you meant his [expletive deleted].

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Which is, you know a four or five million-dollar thing, and I remember talking to him, and he's like, "Yeah, people need to not be precious about this. People need to... you know, it's part of my thing. I don't want people to think this is, you know...it's a mysterious thing that they can't..." And just starts handing it around.

JOSH: That sounds like someone who wants to collect the insurance.

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: [laugh] That's right. And then he started improvising, and Dulé started tap dancing with him, and that was just, I remember just driving home from that thinking, "Oh my god! I am the luckiest person in the world."

JOSH: That's a good day at work.

HRISHI: I read that the day that you guys were shooting this episode, well one of the days you were shooting this episode was Election Day. Like, you guys were taking breaks in between shooting to catch up on what the results were on the Gore/Bush election.

BRAD: It was a crazy night, going late, and I had done some campaigning for Gore, knew him a little bit. That was hard to watch.

JOSH: You are effective on the campaign trail.

BRAD: I am so effective. Yeah, yeah this year I was in Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Ohio.

JOSH: If I ever run for anything I know who I'm *not* asking for help.

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Yeah, I know. It's upsetting.

JOSH: Now let's talk about the Emmys.

["2001 Emmy Awards" excerpt]

*(Sound of applause)*

*PRESENTER: And the Emmy goes to...Bradley Whitford, The West Wing. (Applause)*

*BRAD: I work on The West Wing so I have a really fast speech to say. I must dedicate this award to my beloved late father, George Whitford, and to my beloved very present mother, Genevieve Whitford. Thank you for my family. Aaron Sorkin, how does an actor thank a writer for the role of a lifetime? I have no idea. You gotta write that speech for me.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That must have been exciting. That was your first Emmy...win.

BRAD: Yeah. Yeah, I think it was the first time I was nominated.

JOSH: You weren't nominated the first year?

BRAD: No, I was not.

JOSH: Oh, ok. So let's talk nomination first. Do you wake up early and wait to hear? Or does somebody call you?

BRAD: I remember...Look, I don't think there's any way to feel really good about an awards show. [laugh]

JOSH: Come on, it must have been a thrill.

BRAD: Yes. It was an absolute thrill. But what you're thrilled about is...I was thrilled for my mom.

JOSH: Yeah, I completely understand.

BRAD: I remember, boy this is funny. What's hard about it, I was just thinking, is that people are having the most incredible, creative experiences of their lives, and then you have a human dog show...

JOSH & HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD:...and the big lady, you know, in the muumuu comes out at the end and goes, "The Schnauzer is better than the Chihuahua."

HRISHI: Even more surreal must've been that you're nominated against your fellow castmates. Right? You were up against John Spencer...

BRAD: Listen, I have to tell you, I felt like Aaron had a very clear idea of when he was writing someone an award-winning performance. And I think he was very conscious and generous about it. And, you know, if you look at the tape, the moment I'm announced, I turn around and said to John, "You're next."

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Hmm.

BRAD: Because I knew he was. And I knew that Aaron wanted that for him. Aaron *wanted* it for Richard. Aaron *wanted* it for me. Being an actor is such an elusive...air quotes around "career"...that it's nice to get a stamp of legitimacy on a career that feels like a bunch of sand going through your fingers. Am I in a dark place?

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: [laugh] We're enjoying it though. For a hundred dollars, can you tell us who won Outstanding Guest Actor in a Comedy Series that year?

BRAD: Outstanding guest actor in a comedy series.

JOSH: That would be Derek Jacobi as Jackson Hedley on *Frasier*. I would have paid you.

HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: Wow.

HRISHI: Well, let's go through, just for a second, the awards that this episode did garner.

BRAD: One thing I do want to say about the Emmy that is....God, I'm gonna admit something that has to do with you, Josh. We never thought we were going to win the Emmy. *Ever*. We never went into that night thinking that we were going to win for Best Show. Because *The Sopranos* was the greatest piece of television ever made, according to *The New York Times*, who, I'm so glad you pointed out gave us a [expletive deleted] review.

JOSH: Right.

BRAD: We were this kind of mainstream thing, and *The Sopranos* were *definitely* gonna win the first year. And then, when we did, well then they *have* to win the second year. And then when we did, oh my god, we *owe* them on the third year. And on the *fourth* year, when they won...and this is a line that I tell people *I* said, but Josh actually said it. Apparently, James Gandolfini said to somebody in the press, "I don't know why we come to this thing anymore." And I think somebody asked Josh for a response, and Josh said, "Oh! I thought he played Tony Soprano. I didn't realize he played Big Pussy."

HRISHI: [laugh] Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho!

JOSH: [laugh] I did say that.

BRAD: Do you remember that?

JOSH: I do, actually. [laugh]

BRAD: And...

JOSH: May he rest in peace.

BRAD:...I tell people that I said that.

JOSH: That's ok.

BRAD: Only to young actresses.

JOSH: After you get their number.

BRAD: After I get their number. But honestly, we never thought we were gonna win. And the weird thing now...I don't know how anybody wins an Emmy now. Those years, if you look at those years, if you were a supporting actor on *The Sopranos* or *West Wing* you were gonna get nominated. Now there's five million shows. It's very...tricky. And, I remember the first year thinking, 'You don't know if it's going to one of the shows that gets nominated.' I remember thinking, 'Oh, my god! I'm so glad I'm on a show, you know, that is getting this kind of attention and support.' And then you realize, 'And I'm one of the few people who was not nominated.' [laugh]

JOSH: [laugh]

BRAD: And I see actors struggle with that all the time. And very often you realize there's certain kinds of episodes that are gonna win an Emmy. And you probably shouldn't take it too personally.

HRISHI: I have a follow-up question, something that came up that I wanted to ask you about. When we were talking to Emily Procter we mentioned a moment where you kind of did this burpy thing and Josh made the comment that you're a very burpy actor, and Emily said that she thought that there was like an in-joke that you have with another friend about, like how many kind of burped lines you could get into it?

BRAD: I will do things to amuse myself, to distract me. One of the things I did on *West Wing*, and I ended up doing it on Broadway plays, is I will keep a piece of gum in my mouth through the whole scene.

HRISHI: Hmm.

BRAD: It's just a little secret. I just like to have a little secret. I wanted to see how many times it would take for me to touch the top, just casually reach up, like a kid, and touch the top of Leo's door.

JOSH: Yes. We've seen that. [cross talk] We've noticed.

BRAD: [cross talk] You've seen that? Yeah. Ok. And I wanted to see when somebody would notice that. And Tommy came up to me and said, "Can I talk to you?" And I said, "Yeah", and he says, "What are you doing?"

JOSH: [laugh] Trying to make a TV show here.

BRAD: But, the burping thing, yes. Tim Busfield. I did *Revenge of the Nerds II: Nerds in Paradise*...

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Full titles always appreciated.

BRAD: The full title, yeah. And Tim Busfield was in it, and Tim ended up going into *A Few Good Men*, so basically if I hadn't done *Revenge of the Nerds II*, which I was a big snob about, I would not have gotten *West Wing* or met Aaron. Which is spooky. Tim and I...I have not seen that movie, but we had a little contest to put in little burps.

JOSH: So it goes back to *that* .

HRISHI: [laugh] There it is.

BRAD: It goes all the way back to that. And there's two ways you can do this: You can get...And I got, I definitely during *West Wing* you'll see some subtle, [cross talk] very subtle burping going on.

JOSH: [cross talk] [laugh] Doing it over the phone. I love it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [laugh] I love it!

BRAD: There are some movies where I've done incredibly elaborate burping work, where the really ornate version is a burp that you register as a smell.

JOSH & HRISHI: [laugh]

BRAD: And I would do that...I don't know what that is, but you know this, Josh, from swimming around in Broadway plays, whatever makes you want to be an actor makes you want to mess around.

JOSH: That is true.

BRAD: If you look at the show carefully you'll see some burps, you know, the better the writing the fewer...and the more subtle, the more artful...the burps and the distractions will be. But it's very interesting to me. I don't know what that impulse is.

JOSH: Well, thank you. Thanks for coming on again.

BRAD: Anytime. You're my favorite podcast.

JOSH: There we go. And you do you have a second favorite?

BRAD: No. I've never listened to one before.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: (sad trombone) Why'd I ask? Thank you, Brad.



HRISHI: Thanks so much.

BRAD: Thanks for caring.

JOSH: Yeah! Look at us. We did it.

HRISHI: We did.

JOSH: Is this the first one we shot on location, or we recorded on location in another state. Oh, here's another thing people are pointing out: say the name of the city we're in.

HRISHI: New Haven, Connecticut.

JOSH: And I think I say NEW Haven?

HRISHI: That's right.

JOSH: I say it incorrectly. I gotta train myself to say New HAVEN.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm. Well, you know, I think...I've certainly heard people, other than you, say NEW Haven.

JOSH: It doesn't make me right though, Hrishi, does it?

HRISHI: Eh. I'm not claiming any rightness by saying New HAVEN. But that's how I say it.

JOSH: But, what kind of haven is it? It's a *new* haven. Maybe *I'm* right.

HRISHI: That's what I'm saying. I don't think that it's very clear cut.

JOSH: Huh. But I guess my point is that you say it...incorrectly.

HRISHI: [laugh] I mean the words are "new" and "haven". So, who's to say what's right in terms of which one you emphasize.

JOSH: Well, one is qualifying the other.

HRISHI: Right. So that seems like a matter of subjectivity. I'm on your side here.

JOSH: Well, on Christmas did you get a new SWEATER? No. You got a NEW sweater.

HRISHI: [laugh] No one says NEW sweater.

JOSH: Well, I'm gonna start saying it. In fact, I hope this Chanukah I get a NEW sweater.

HRISHI: [laugh] What are you gonna wear to the party? I'm gonna wear my NEW sweater.

JOSH: What are you gonna kill that thing with? A fly SWATTER? No. I'm gonna kill it with a FLY swatter. 'Cuz you know what? It swats FLIES.

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: It doesn't SWAT flies.

HRISHI: [laugh] If you do it correctly, it does.

JOSH: Well, fair enough. On that note, thank you for listening to this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: My name is still Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I continue to be Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: You can follow us on Twitter. Josh is @joshmalina. I'm @hrishihirway Hrishi starts with an "H". And the show is @westwingweekly.

JOSH: Wh-est Wing Weekly. It's pronounced Wh-est Wing, but it's spelled without an "H".

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: What else? You can write to us on our Facebook page.

HRISHI: facebook.com/thewestwingweekly

JOSH: Or on our website.

HRISHI: thewestwingweekly.com

JOSH: What else have we got?

HRISHI: *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of the Radiotopia Podcast Network from PRX. Made possible by The Knight Foundation and MailChimp, celebrating creativity, chaos, and teamwork. Check out all the shows at radiotopia.fm. This episode was produced by Josh, me, Zach McNees, and Margaret Miller.

JOSH: Be sure to check out Hrishi's other fantastic podcast, *Song Exploder*. And if you want to check out Hrishi in one of his other incarnations, you are a true renaissance man, Hrishi, You can check out his work in the band Moors, which is Hrishi and Lakeith Stanfield.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: And I'm a big fan of everything you've put out thus far, but you have a *new* track out.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm.

JOSH: And people can here that where?

HRISHI: [wearemoors.com](http://wearemoors.com). Or on Spotify or iTunes. But our band is Moors. M-O-O-R-S.

JOSH: Definitely do yourself a favor and check them out. And if you have a free 41 seconds, give us a rating on iTunes. Unless you don't like us. And if you *don't* like us, why are you still listening to this podcast?

HRISHI: [laugh]

JOSH: Be gone!

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BRAD: What the [expletive deleted] is next?

[Outro Music]