

The West Wing Weekly
3.12: The Two Bartlets
Guest: Blanche Sindelar

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to the West Wing Weekly. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And mine is Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about Season 3, Episode 12 "The Two Bartlets".

JOSH: It's an episode whose teleplay was written by Aaron Sorkin – ampersand – Kevin Falls. This episode was directed by Alex Graves and it first aired on January 30th 2002.

HRISHI: Here's what's going on in this episode. Should the President make a statement in support of affirmative action? Toby says yes, but the President hedges, and CJ reveals she's against affirmative action for personal reasons. There's a protest against U.S. Navy military testing in Vieques, Puerto Rico, that's led by a friend of Josh's. Sam gets a mini block of cheese with Bob Engler, UFO conspiracy theorist, and Josh and Amy's love story intensifies with, but almost gets derailed by, a spontaneous romantic trip to Tahiti, which was probably recommended by Josh's friend Agent Casper / Coulson.

[Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D excerpt]

Phil Coulson: It's a magical place.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ha.

HRISHI: Bradley Whitford was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Emmy and the series won an Emmy for Best Drama based, in part, on this episode.

JOSH: It's a great episode, I think.

HRISHI: I think so too. We're now past the State of the Union and really, on to the re-election. Let's start with the cold open, it's one of my favourite cold opens of the entire series, I think.

JOSH: Sounds good. What happened in it, I don't remember.

HRISHI: It starts with Josh getting woken up by the intercom at 5:14 in the morning, and he kind of groggily goes from the bed to do his morning ritual. He turns on two TVs, he tries to make coffee, it turns out he's got an empty thing of coffee grounds in the fridge.

JOSH: Right. He's a Folgers guy.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Disappointing.

HRISHI: And he's also a trash coffee guy.

JOSH: Yes he is! [cross talk] That is a very telling moment...

HRISHI: [cross talk] I love it.

JOSH: “No, no you’re not going to do it...” [cross talk] It’s a little bit like a horror movie.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: Yes, it’s a great little brief insight into his home and personal life. We even get to peek into his refrigerator. He drinks Shasta.

HRISHI: [laughing] And he still wears the big PJs that CJ got him.

JOSH: Oh. Wait, what?

HRISHI: In Season 2, when he gets shot and he’s recovering, the staff gives him a gift of pajamas.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Do you remember this? When they’re sitting out on the stoop...

[West Wing Episode 2.03 – The Midterms excerpt]

CJ: Hey, you’re wearing my pajamas.

JOSH: Yes, I am.

CJ: Take your coat off, let me see... Those are too big.

JOSH: Yes, they are. All this time I’ve been working with you, did you also think I was playing power forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ha! Cute. A little continuity.

HRISHI: CJ’s PJs.

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: Yeah, so he’s wearing those... Amy says - you didn’t remember... when Amy’s like...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: Those pajamas are too big for you.

JOSH: What makes you say that?

AMY: Well, you got the bottoms on –

JOSH: I know they’re too big for me! What are you doing here?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I remember *that*, from this episode. I just don’t remember anything prior.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: My brain is like one of those... have we had this discussion before, I can't even remember that. There was a toy when I was a kid, and you kind of... with the stylus... you sort of wrote onto this sort of filmy piece, and you could draw whatever you want, and then you pull it up, and it erases itself.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's my brain.

HRISHI: [laughing] You can only do one sheet at a time.

JOSH: That is correct.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Take a sheet.

HRISHI: Let's do this episode then, while it's still fresh in your magnetic toy brain.

JOSH: Let's!

HRISHI: Amy Gardner, I think, has maybe seen *Good Will Hunting* too often, [cross talk] 'cause she just keeps saying...

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes!

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: So, how do you like them apples? ... How do you like them apples?

JOSH: No...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right, I kept thinking that too. Had Aaron just viewed it? Although it's used to good effect, it is funny.

HRISHI: It is funny. Okay, so let's talk about Josh and Amy in general in this episode. What did you think of their storyline? There's a lot of information.

JOSH: I wanted to ask you first - so these six nights that they've spent together...

HRISHI: Mm hm...

JOSH: They're sleeping together.

HRISHI: Sure.

JOSH: So she's cheating on Tandy?

HRISHI: I mean, if they have an exclusive arrangement, then maybe...

JOSH: Well, what sense do you get? I mean, the fact that he asked her to marry him gave me the sense that I think he perceives the relationship in a very different way from how Amy does.

HRISHI: I think the fact that Amy said no summarily shows that she thinks about it... yeah! In a... like, she was pretty surprised to be asked the question too. I think, you know we've only heard them spoken that they're dating. Not like, he's her boyfriend.

JOSH: Right. I guess I was working backwards, he proposed to her – I suppose that could just be a way of getting very serious very quickly, or I more strongly suspect that he thought something else was going on [cross talk] from what actually was.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: I think it's both.

JOSH: You can see there's an intimacy between the two of them, they certainly have chemistry.

HRISHI: But I also like the pugilism that exists between the two of them. Even in this little exchange where, at the end of the cold open where Josh says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: You call me from your cellphone, that's where the real conversation always takes place.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which is a great little insight into how their relationship mostly gets conducted. They've spent six nights together but clearly they've had a lot more interaction than that, mostly on the phone, which is a great piece of information, but then it also leads to this beautiful thing where Josh has, like, built up his, sort of cocky attitude, when she says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: You know, for the most insecure guy I've ever met, you're pretty sure of yourself.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He's kind of riding that wave, he gets the phone call and he starts listing the times they've spent the night together. It's so good.

JOSH: Well, yeah. This is another one I know I've pointed it out before, though for the life of me I can't remember exactly where... In fact, I think I can! Come on, filmic-sheet brain, come on! I think it's when Bartlet's going to give a speech... talking about the weather, or something... remember? And finally, there's like a build up during the cold open. And then Bartlet says something, and we totally know it's coming, the first line of his speech is inappropriate for some reason to the weather?

HRISHI: Yes! [cross talk] Because it's raining. Exactly, very good.

JOSH: [Cross talk] Yeah, ok! What episode is that?

HRISHI: As I look out upon this magnificent vista [cross talk] but they've moved the speech indoors.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes, exactly!

JOSH: God, that was exhausting massaging that out of my brain. I believe that when we discussed that episode I said it was an example of absolutely knowing the joke that's coming.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's utterly telegraphed, and yet the execution is so flawless that it made me laugh out loud, and the same thing happened here. I knew Josh was going to be talking to someone else and divulging this intimate information with a certainty, but it's done so well that it literally made me laugh out loud.

HRISHI: Yeah. Margaret's...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: Anybody else in the office?

MARGARET: Hey, Josh.

JOSH: Hey, Margaret.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, it's very good.

HRISHI: Her expression, her little pause, it's perfect. I love that little cold open, it's a little play unto itself.

JOSH: I agree, and I love... I think that's why this is an episode that I particularly take to, I love when we get the mix of personal and professional, and get a little bit of a peek into the private lives.

HRISHI: Mm hm. Ok, so it's 5:14 in the morning when Amy shows up, and she is like, fully dressed, ready to go. She's like, on her way to start her day, and that's pretty intense.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: When she says originally, she's like...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: Josh, you and I have spent four nights with each other, I didn't break up with him for you. I'm not pathetic stalking woman who, you know, does things.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought, except for show up at your house unannounced [cross talk] at 5:14 in the morning.

JOSH: [cross talk] This early in the morning.

HRISHI: I mean, I don't think she is actually pathetic stalking woman, let me make that clear.

JOSH: Look at you, covering your ass.

HRISHI: Yeah! Josh calls himself a power dater, that's how he knows about Tandy.

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: He's a power dater! That's what power daters do. You know how I know?

AMY: 'Cause you're a power dater?

JOSH: That's right!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: What's he talking about?

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: We have no evidence that he's ever dated before.

HRISHI: Yeah exactly, when does he ever power date? I think you need to date someone in order to consider it power dating.

JOSH: Right. He's a power flirter perhaps.

HRISHI: Maybe, and even then he seems to fall over himself.

JOSH: There's one moment in the cold open that I liked, I thought it was indicative of something we see from Alex Graves a lot, just generally when he directs, but also in this episode. I think he is incredibly creative visually, but in a way that doesn't call attention to itself, so, as we're following Josh throughout his apartment and I can't remember whether she knocks or rings the doorbell... but he then quickly puts the garbage filters into his coffee pot and he goes to answer the door, and the camera goes with him and then sort of settles on a piece of furniture... kind of a coat-hat rack that Josh has by the doorway, and it's in the mirror of this piece of furniture that we see Amy first revealed. He just has ways, I think, that are very interesting visually, but add to the scene and the feel, there's something intimate about the way that they meet at the door but we see it in reflection, and that in another director's hands might feel showy but in Alex's, do not.

HRISHI: Right, or could have been done in a much simpler way, where it's like, okay, here's the door and now the door opens, and [cross talk] here she is.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, right, here, here, one, two.

JOSH: Absolutely. And there's a lot throughout this episode, whether it's just Bartlet kind of standing up into his scene, there are ways he has of kind of, keeping momentum going visually that I find arresting, in a good way.

HRISHI: Yeah. Speaking of the visual richness of the show, later on in this episode we're going to be joined by Blanche Sindelar, who was the properties master on the show. She's going to talk to us about Gail's fish bowl and a bunch of the other props that they made. This isn't a prop so I feel ok talking a little bit of [expletive deleted] about it, because it's not Blanche's department to have done this, but in this episode, Amy's giving a speech at one point for the Women's Leadership Coalition and I have to say, the sign she's standing in front of is so terribly designed, it has such terrible design and terrible typography--as a sometime graphic designer myself, I was offended by it.

JOSH: What was your Yale major?

HRISHI: It was art, but with a specialty in graphic design and photography.

JOSH: I just wanted to call attention to that so [cross talk] you know of what you speak.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh ok.

JOSH: It's not pleasant to the eye?

HRISHI: It isn't, I mean, we've seen the Women's Leadership Coalition logo before in her office and so we know what it is, and that's not great. It's Women's Leadership Coalition stacked and the W L and C, the first letter in each line is bold, while the rest of it is, sort of, normal weight, it's not good typography in general. But then the sign itself, the banner is like green, it's a green sign and has red type on it and that's in one font that's different from the font that is used in the logo of the Women's Leadership Coalition, but the part that bothers me the most, that's like nails on a chalkboard for me, is the apostrophe in Women's Leadership Coalition. They don't use smart quotes, it's actually like the prime symbol [cross talk] that's used for feet, so it's a straight... yes.

JOSH: [cross talk] Ah... just a straight vertical flip. Oh, that's bad!

JOSH: So do you think, are you faulting the art department, or do we think they're trying to tell us that the funds of this particular organization really go where the money is most needed and they have little left for nice visuals.

HRISHI: You know, I don't know if it's a money thing. I went to, as we talked about, I went to the White House Correspondents' Dinner earlier this year.

JOSH: Way to work in that you went to the White House Correspondents' Dinner.

HRISHI: [laughing] I bring it up because at that dinner, not a small event, thousands of people there, there's a giant banner that hung above the stage that said "White House Correspondents' Dinner" and the apostrophe on Correspondents' was the wrong apostrophe there too.

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: Yeah. With all those copy editors involved in the press, you'd think that somebody would've caught that.

JOSH: Yeah, that's rough.

HRISHI: So I think it was true to life but disappointing nonetheless. Please, people, use smart quotes, if you want a guide, there's a website actually, it's called SmartQuotesForSmartPeople.com and I will also here admit that I am very pained by our own website, WestWingWeekly.com, and by our lovely first sponsor Squarespace, because our site defaults to dumb quotes, you don't get the proper quotations and apostrophes by default. There are a lot of instances on our website where it's wrong too.

JOSH: There's one other piece of weirdness, I had asked people to set off their positive comments with a series of asterisks and that made the website go crazy and so people's comments, people who did so, I think their comments somehow switched to italics... so someone else opined that perhaps I was trolling our entire listenership. It was unintentional trolling.

HRISHI: Yes! I can tell you, Josh doesn't know how to format things on the website. [laughing] But yeah, this is just another reason, the quotation marks thing is just another reason for me to stay off our own website.

JOSH: Quotation Marx, the least popular Marx brother.

HRISHI: [laughing] Highly quoted though.

JOSH: True enough.

HRISHI: More highly quoted at least than Harpo.

JOSH: That's true. But speaking of that same scene with the sign, it was another, I thought, instance of great visual directing on Alex's part. Just that first shot, we see Amy giving the speech on a CSPAN screen, that takes us to Josh entering the room, that takes us to Amy live, and it's all done in one, it's just very elegantly executed.

HRISHI: Here's a question about Amy, who's Henry?

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: Is there someone who can take care of Henry?

AMY: What do you have against Henry?

JOSH: Nothing, I love Henry.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, the dog.

HRISHI: So you assume it was a dog?

JOSH: Was that not made explicit?

HRISHI: No, in some interpretation of this, somebody's wondering whether or not Amy's leaving behind her child.

JOSH: Or it could be Harrison Ford from *Regarding Henry*, who needed a babysitter.

HRISHI: Who's regarding Henry when you go to Tahiti? So then Josh proposes going to Tahiti, and I think this is prompted by him being fed up by the position that he's being put in by the White House when he has to convince his friend to stop protesting because they don't like the optics of it.

JOSH: You mean Billy Molina?

HRISHI: Billy Molina! Very big Hollywood actor.

JOSH: If only.

HRISHI: I wish we could have got to hear some of that phone call, the Josh/Molina phone call.

JOSH: Right. Boom.

HRISHI: So he's upset about that, and I think... he's like 'I'm going to get out of here, take a vacation' that he rarely takes, and certainly not a spontaneous one. He goes and he, I think, excited by the revelation that Amy's now free and clear, he goes and makes this romantic gesture, let's go to Tahiti. But then, of course, that gets derailed, he self-sabotages it, really in a way that is entirely predicted within the episode. Anyway, I want to skip ahead to the part where they actually get to his apartment, he's recreated Tahiti in his apartment and it's actually sweet and he actually is overcoming his self-sabotaging instincts, he's learned from Sam and he's learned from Leo. And he's talking about the drinks that he's made them?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And he says he's made one of them with...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: Bacardi Four-Fifty-One.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: There's no such thing.

HRISHI: Yeah, I don't think there is any such thing and not only that, it would be impossible with the rules of math. Because I think, Bacardi One-Fifty-One is called that because it's one hundred and fifty-one proof.

JOSH: Right, which is 75.5%...

HRISHI: Alcohol?

JOSH: See? I can do halves now, [cross talk] It's all back! I've got my math powers back. Yes, so that would be over 200% alcohol.

HRISHI: [cross talk] There you go! Yeah, exactly.

HRISHI: Maybe that's true, maybe Bacardi's really trying – they're giving 110%.

JOSH: [laughing] That's funny, Bacardi 451. I guess I missed it, because I thought there was trouble elsewhere in Tahiti.

[*Trouble In Tahiti* excerpt]

DINAH: [sung] Trouble in Tahiti, indeed!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: *Trouble in Tahiti* being a reference you probably won't get, as it was a musical. But I like that, one – he associates Tahiti with reggae, and he also associates reggae with the work of UB40, which I guess it could be tangentially linked, but perhaps not the most authentic reggae.

HRISHI: I was wondering, maybe Bacardi 451 is the version that appears in Ray Bradbury novels?

JOSH: Very nice. *Trouble in Tahiti* itself is a light opera by Leonard Bernstein that takes on the heartbreak of suburban living. It's kind of brilliant.

HRISHI: Oh yeah? Do they ban books in it?

JOSH: They do not. But you know if you do burn something that's 451 proof it goes up very quickly.

HRISHI: Right. But I do like at the end of this episode that Josh is trying to overcome his own self-sabotage. You know, he gets the message from Leo where he says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

LEO: My wife lives in my house, I live in a hotel. And this is why.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Sam says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

SAM: Next thing that happens, you find a reason to be mad at her.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: They both give him really great advice, he doesn't listen to either of them, screws it up, but then, you know, before we get to the end of the episode, I think in a demonstration of how he's grown, and maybe also how much Amy means to him, he manages to not just leave it at the angry phone call that could be where they break up.

JOSH: Mm hm.

HRISHI: And I like that Sam, without having been there for any of the conversations, that he invokes Amy's line, he says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

SAM: Guys like you?

JOSH: Yeah?

SAM: I'm one of them.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. I am also a baby-man.

HRISHI: Right. There's a lot of identification with dating styles by proxy here. Josh saying, "He's a power dater, I know because I'm one", and then Sam saying "guys like you – I'm one". So I guess therefore, by transitive property, Sam is a power dater, which seems to indicate that he never goes on dates.

JOSH: Right, exactly. I'm your kind of power dater. What do you make of Leo's choice of Josh for the Vieques task at hand?

HRISHI: One thing that I liked is when Josh is making his arguments about Puerto Rico, I was like "Oh yeah, he knows all about the arguments for statehood because he did the stamp thing."

[West Wing Episode 2.09 – Galileo excerpt]

LEO: What are you smiling at?

JOSH: Nothing, I just... Toby got the stamp assignment.

TOBY: Leo, I might need some help.

LEO: Take Josh.

TOBY: Thanks, congratulations, you're choosing the next stamp.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He got the stamp job!

JOSH: That's right, he's been there before.

HRISHI: I mean, I think he's trying to leverage Josh's friendship with Billy Molina. It's not particularly fair, I guess, to Josh, but when they need the result that they need... in the past, he's like "They don't like it, I don't care," has been his attitude for stuff, so it felt like it was consistent with that.

JOSH: Yeah, but it's interesting to me that Leo makes the decision, even though what he's choosing is the friend of the lead protester, who absolutely agrees with the protesters.

HRISHI: Mm hm.

JOSH: I mean he's really putting him in a position.

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

JOSH: Leo, if I wasn't working here, I'd probably be with 'em down there.

LEO: Yeah, but you're working here.

JOSH: This is a crappy thing to do with friendship. These things aren't supposed to be personal.

LEO: We're at DEFCON 4, I'm sorry, we're arranging the call.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: I liked the bottom-line nature of it.

HRISHI: That reminded me of when Sam has to break the news to his friend that they're not going to support his re-election bid anymore. You know, he fights for his friend, saying "Look, I'm the one who got him to run in the first place, and now you're asking me to screw him over." And Sam has to do it, and he does it. But he does it despite his own personal objections, and I think Leo's got the same attitude here as he does there. He's definitely consistent with this stuff.

JOSH: Yeah, that is true. I guess I felt overall, the sort of overarching theme of this episode is the professional, and the personal... so that you have CJ's relationship with her dad, and that comes into the professional world with the discussion of affirmative action and how she feels about it. You have Amy and Josh's personal relationship and we see how their professional relationship sometimes gets in the way. There's the Vieques situation, and then there's Josh and his friend who have a personal relationship.

HRISHI: I think you can draw that out in the Sam/Bob Engler stuff too.

JOSH: Yeah, absolutely. There's Bob and his dad.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And there's Bob and Sam at work.

HRISHI: Yeah. Well, let's talk about the affirmative action part of the episode, because I think that's really the major part of this episode.

JOSH: Although interestingly, there's no big meal made of the issue itself.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: Which is not necessarily to the detriment of the episode, but I just found it interesting where I kept thinking “Aaron’s going to dig in deep, or...” but we never get any two characters... it’s a discussion between Bartlet and Toby about whether to take it head-on, and then there’s a little mini-discussion about the merits between Toby and CJ. But other than that, there’s no big meal made of it.

HRISHI: Right, I read a thing in the Wall Street Journal by West Wing consultant Peggy Noonan, who said that one of her contributions was this idea of CJ’s dad having suffered under affirmative action. I’m quoting from the Wall Street Journal article here and we’ll link to it on the website. She says, “In my version, CJ’s father had suffered, he was an idealist who believed everyone has an equal shot at success in America. A public-school teacher who wanted to help kids and was gifted in his work with them. Now he saw a less-qualified and implicitly less loving person elevated at his expense, and only because he was the wrong colour. It left him shattered, the flag on which he’d stood had been pulled from under him and he never fully regained his balance.” It’s an interesting article in general because it’s Peggy Noonan talking about, the sort of, the leftist politics of Aaron and of The West Wing and how she feels as a contributor about it. It’s worth reading, even if you disagree with her politics.

JOSH: Well, absolutely, we will link to it.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think the most interesting part of the mini discussion that does happen, it’s really just a passing, kind of, moment but Toby quotes from George Washington when he talks about the National University.

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

TOBY: In a general juvenile period of life, when friendships are formed and habits established that will stick by one, the youth from different parts of the United States would be assembled together and would by degree, discover that there was not just cause for those jealousies and prejudices which one part of the Union invited against one another.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Toby’s quoting Washington there in defense of affirmative action and what I like about it, and again, there’s no meal made of it, like you said, but I really like the subtle point here, which is the idea that affirmative action not only benefits minorities who get accepted into universities, but everyone else as well, because it offers, like, breadth and depth of experience that they get to have instead of some kind of homogeneous atmosphere instead.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: It’s a subtle point that could have been made more explicitly.

JOSH: Right, that’s why I also wanted, maybe one more pushback from Toby when CJ kind of made her complaint about the unfairness in her Dad’s life, just a little pushback, and maybe an acknowledgement that there is an inherent unfairness in affirmative action, but it’s trying to address systemically an enormous...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ... grotesque injustice of an entire country whose economy and economic prosperity was built on the back of slaves and yes, in trying to address it in some fashion with affirmative action, there’s now going to be some unfairness on the other side. Yeah!

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And that's ok.

HRISHI: I think there's also something... I was thinking about how you've reacted to episodes like *Celestial Navigation*, and just kind of in general, about taking our characters' perspective on something as gospel. Where CJ says "He was held back while a less-qualified black woman was promoted instead every time." And it's sort of like, are we just supposed to accept as fact that this woman is definitely less qualified? I mean, CJ is talking about her dad, it's clearly framed within the context of - this is a very personal matter for her, but there's no kind of objective data that we're given to show "Oh, yes, he was the more qualified candidate, you know, for all these reasons," and I think it's a lot trickier to say that as a statement, you know? I would have had Toby maybe push back there.

JOSH: Oh, I see what you're saying, that's also a very good point, but I guess the difference between a scene like that and my take-away from *Celestial Navigation* is that I didn't feel, I guess, altogether, that I was being told...

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: ...by Aaron and Alex to take her face-value and to identify with her argument. In fact, I didn't...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: ... which is really why I wanted Toby to push back. I liked at least that it was, well, here's two people that disagree.

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: And I can come down on either side, and that seems to be ok with the people who are showing me this.

HRISHI: Right, exactly. And CJ's perspective is completely understandable, and I like the way that they relate it to, you know, her father's health that this kind of policy decision... It's not just that her dad is on her mind because she's talking to him, she feels like this sharp mind is being dulled for reasons that she's now relating to his, like, professional fulfillment. I think that was really smartly done. And yeah, CJ doesn't come across as unreasonable or anything like that, and Toby doesn't come across as insensitive to the whole thing.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that actually one of my favorite things about this episode is that the interpersonal dynamics seem to be somehow more complex and layered and grown-up than sometimes they do on this show...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Another scene, that scene when Josh calls Amy to tell her about the trip and it's not going to happen. It was very... There's a lot going on.

[*West Wing* Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: And Leo's making you stay for the meeting?

JOSH: Yeah... No, he's not. I want to stay.

AMY: Ok.

JOSH: For one thing, it involves a friend of mine, and he did something he didn't want to do and... look, I just want to make sure his back is covered.

AMY: *Don't get angry at me.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The show isn't generally black and white, but there's a lot of great subtlety to what the two people were feeling and the kind of dance they were doing around each other. I think the writing and performing in this episode is really exceptional.

HRISHI: Yeah. I also appreciated the, sort of, the complexity and subtlety, the kind of muted nature of some of these? It wasn't, like, knockout brawls that they were having and that heightened it. But let's talk about the last scene for a second between Toby and the President.

JOSH: Right, another great example of what we're discussing.

HRISHI: That was crazy! I mean there's this fantastic build-up narratively to that moment where Toby is trying to push the President to do it, he's getting Sam in on it, he's presenting him with, like, language, the President does a rewrite on it and Toby's like "What is this? You're not saying anything at all." But he's still, like, deferential, he talks to CJ about the Uncle Fluffy duality...

JOSH: I love that every few episodes I recognize and re-appreciate another reference from Lin's rap that I hadn't necessarily gotten...

[*What's Next?* song excerpt]

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA: [*rapped*] ...the text, you ain't getting Uncle Fluffy motherf---ers, what's next?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Oh! [laughing]

JOSH: I was like "Oh! Uncle Fluffy."

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: Yeah, ok.

HRISHI: Oh, by the way, according to Alex Graves, apparently Richard Schiff had a really hard time saying Uncle Fluffy without giggling.

JOSH: He's a giggler.

HRISHI: That's so funny to think...

JOSH: Toby Giggler.

HRISHI: [laughing] So Toby's building up to this moment at the end where he then comes out with this bombshell, he says...

[*West Wing* Episode 3.12 excerpt]

TOBY: *Your father used to hit you, sir.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I was like... WHAT is happening?!

JOSH: Yeah, there's something disarming both in the writing and in Richard's performance where he is, of everyone, the least afraid of confronting President Bartlet and saying things that, as Bartlet points out in this scene, may be way across a certain line but he also has a way of doing it with such respect that it ends up being disarming and as you say, then the little thing kind of bloop out and it's a gigantic bombshell that he's just dropped.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean the President has said in the past "I need you," you know, he tells Toby that he needs him, he needs him to keep pushing him. But this is crazy. But again, like you said, the writing is so exquisite in the way, because it's like... my gut kind of churns when he says it, but he also still says sir. He says "Your father used to hit you, sir."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's so complicated, because he's like... he is pushing so hard, but doing it in a kind of... he's not yelling. It's not like in 17 People where he's like, jumping up and down on the President as he says--and I couldn't even believe the President was even engaging with him to the extent that he was.

JOSH: Yeah. Although you can see, I think in classic Bartlet fashion, if you anger him, you've probably said something that he's going to mull over a little bit later. You've struck a chord.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And usually his first reaction is not his ultimate response. And he even has a moment about...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

BARTLET: I don't know what the hell goes on in a Brooklyn shrink's office, but get it the hell out of my house!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was almost waiting for him to throw out "New York sense of humor," it was almost like a little ugly side of Bartlet. He is pissed, he's rubbed the wrong way in the extreme by Toby's psychological read on him.

HRISHI: Yeah, which is... reasonable.

JOSH: Yeah. I mean, it's super forward...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...it's pretty audacious of Toby to go there. But I also wrote down, Aaron has a deep understanding of the psychologies of the characters he's created.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: They are complex.

HRISHI: Yeah, but I'm just trying to imagine a scenario, a relationship that I could ever have with someone where I could even broach the topic like that, in a confrontational way. Because Toby's just taking a guess.

JOSH: Right, right.

HRISHI: It's like "Hey... hey work friend, you were beaten by your dad, right?"

JOSH: "And you had this reaction to it, didn't you?" It's a little much.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I love also the scene, the composition of the shot at the very end, where we see essentially Bartlet alone in the Oval with Washington over his shoulder.

HRISHI: Yeah, and he sits in that chair on the right and he leans forward on the desk, and we've seen him do that same move. He did a similar thing in *Two Cathedrals*, when he was confronting another ghost, not his father but he was talking to Mrs. Landingham. After he talks to Mrs. Landingham and he's like, formulating his idea to be re-elected. You can tell that Toby has really, like, struck a nerve, but not in a way where the President is dismissing him outright, because to me it's like he goes to this posture of internal reflection, the way that he did at the end of *Two Cathedrals*.

JOSH: While we're on the subtlety of this episode, I thought it extended even to what could really could have been the comic subplot, or maybe it is the comic subplot, about Sam Lloyd as...

HRISHI: Robert Engler.

JOSH: Yeah. It's a great subtle performance of what could be just "I'm the kooky guy"...

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: "I'm going to play it kooky." Instead he goes the other way, as good actors tend to do, and makes him actually pretty grounded.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And regardless of what he's saying...

HRISHI: And heartbreaking!

JOSH: Yes, absolutely, because we're getting now, this character that we know is kind of slightly off, we're getting a little insight into why, or why he has the obsessions he does.

HRISHI: I love the way that Sam puts it, that he inherited the family business. But the way he delivers the line about...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

ENGLER: Sam. Patronize me, laugh at my work, but please don't minimize the lifetime my father spent in this pursuit. The man had three PhDs.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It is heartbreaking, and he kind of cuts with his words. It's funny that Sam keeps getting these kinds of requests, you know, it's very similar to the request he has in *Somebody's Going To Emergency*, where he has to deal with Donna's friend's grandfather...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: ...because her father is dying, and here, Bob Engler's father has passed away. The idea of characters and their fathers, and the legacy of their fathers, and what is up to them to carry and vindicate keeps coming back.

JOSH: This is a rich vein for Aaron and it might be interesting to discuss with him at some point, or maybe he prefers to write it rather than discuss it.

HRISHI: We talked about Sam being sensitive the other day, and I felt like it came through here too, he's very sensitive. He picks up on the comment about Bob Engler's dad and asks him. Bob Engler doesn't say "Oh, my dad passed away three months ago."

JOSH: He beats him to it.

HRISHI: Yeah, he figures it out, he can see where this is coming from, and what some of the motivation is, and then, very kindly, basically plays into the conspiracy theory by not confirming anything and saying "Look, I can't tell you anything."

JOSH: Right, which Toby, although he's not in the room in that scene, later echoes. He walks into another scene and mentions Bob and Toby gives him...

HRISHI: [laughing] Yeah.

JOSH: It's one of those things that's funny, it works even though like... how does Toby even... Toby even used the same language, but, it's very funny.

HRISHI: Yeah, although in that scene, I'd just finished writing "Sam is very sensitive", but then he walks into the room and he's like "Hey everybody!" and seems to apparently ignore and completely miss that CJ has, like, tears in her eyes.

JOSH: Yeah, he does not make the read.

HRISHI: I was like "Well, maybe not." I was wondering if you cast dweomer on a certain moment in the episode, where Sam says...

[West Wing Episode 3.12 excerpt]

SAM: This is like Dungeons & Dragons camp all over again.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, that's right he does! I didn't think of that. It's been awhile since we've dweomed.

HRISHI: I know. I have to reveal some really exciting news...

JOSH: Yes?

HRISHI: ... which is that I have recently started, for the first time since I was fourteen years old, I'm now part of a Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: Playing D&D, with some other awesome people, and it's so, SO much fun.

JOSH: Relapses are totally to be expected, and they're part of the healing process.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's pretty great.

JOSH: Wow. Wow. I'm rocked back on my heels by this news. I've never even really seen anybody playing Dungeons & Dragons other in the movies, and occasionally I would walk past that particular table in the cafeteria in high school. [laughter]

HRISHI: It's really interesting to play it as an adult, but it's also interesting now because it's coloring... I've been thinking about it because we've been playing it, and now it's coloring everything. Anyway, so when Sam's like, it's like Dungeons & Dragons camp all over again, I was thinking about the statistics of somebody like Toby, in the scene at the end with the President...I was like, hmm, his Wisdom and Intelligence scores are very high, but his Charisma? Very low.

JOSH: Oy vey! Let me ask you something, is this an ongoing... so a campaign is something – is it like a round if it lasts for days and days and weeks and...

HRISHI: Yeah, it's ongoing. So, I don't know the answers because I am just a player. The person who is actually running the campaign is a game designer named Keith Baker, who's amazing, and he actually knows what's happening, so I don't know.

JOSH: He knows the endgame.

HRISHI: If there even is one, yeah, exactly. So it's pretty awesome.

JOSH: Happy for you.

HRISHI: My friend Chelsea Kane is playing and she used the Secretary Name Generator to determine her character's last name.

JOSH: And? What'd she come up with?

HRISHI: I think it's Fairingfield.

JOSH: Nice, very nice. First name?

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: Thought there might be more there.

HRISHI: Yeah, first name is Pants.

JOSH: Pants Fairingfield.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Sure, alright.

HRISHI: Wow, I thought you were going to be all about the D&D camp line.

JOSH: Eh, flew by me. Sorry.

HRISHI: That's ok. I was particularly attuned to it. I'm built to notice that. I was thinking: Oh look! Sam went to D&D camp. One, I never even knew that D&D camp was a thing and my youth was wasted, and two, I felt like even more like I identify with Sam if we can just ignore all the sexist comments.

JOSH: What about the quote: The impression was left that the White House got demystified and the impression was left that anyone could do it. Huge Trump ai-yi-yi moment.

HRISHI: Oh my God, yep. The scene at the end between Toby and the President where he's saying why the President needs to emerge as the lethal Bartlet and not Uncle Fluffy. But the problem is, we get a few glimpses of the idea that Rob Ritchie is like, a dream candidate because he's not that bright, and CJ's like "Wouldn't that be a gift?"

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: But the President and Toby both know that this guy is dangerous, and Toby identifies him as, he's got the ingredients to really appeal to the electorate and, yeah, when he drops the line...

[*West Wing – Episode 3.12* excerpt]

TOBY: *Yeah, but a funny thing happened when the White House got demystified, the impression was left that anybody could do it.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I just wrote – Trump: ay-yi-yi!

JOSH: As did I. When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers. I guess that's the situation of CJ's desire to go up against Ritchie.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Also turns out I believe that quote, Toby says it either in Italian or Latin, but it's a quote from an Oscar Wilde play, *The Ideal Husband*, so I'm not sure where the Italian part comes from.

HRISHI: Huh!

JOSH: Or so my limited research suggests.

HRISHI: Oh! You know what we missed last week? We were talking about *The Lion in Winter*.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Along these lines of Toby quoting things, he quotes *The Lion in Winter*, and we were like "Oh he misquoted *The Lion in Winter*, the line is actually this," and we got it wrong.

JOSH: Oh, we did?

HRISHI: Which is classic.

JOSH: And when you say we, you mean you...

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly, yeah, I got it wrong, a movie that I love, I munched it.

JOSH: That probably won't be pointed out on the boards more than once.

HRISHI: Right, but the other thing that we missed is that Jeremy says it in *Sports Night*.

JOSH: Oh, that I saw, somebody already pointed out and showed me that clip, and yeah, turns out I don't even remember episodes I was in, nor dialogue I myself spoke. But I did go back and watch the clip, because somebody sent me the link.

HRISHI: In the clip, does Jeremy say "A writer once said...?"

JOSH: I believe so, yeah.

HRISHI: So *The Lion In Winter* isn't referenced. But that's nice to know that *The Lion In Winter* has been such a deep part of Aaron's...

JOSH: Psyche?

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly, in his go-to list of references, because I do love that movie so much. Here's one thing about the Uncle Fluffy part of Bartlet...I found an interview with Aaron in the *New Yorker*, actually Peggy Noonan makes reference to it in her *Wall Street Journal* piece. Ok, so, the Uncle Fluffy stuff? This is really about Al Gore.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Aaron said in the *New Yorker*, this is a quote: "It was frustrating watching Gore try so hard not to appear smart in the debates. Why not just say, here's my [expletive deleted] resume, what do you got? We're a completely fictional non-political show, but one of our motors is doing our version of the old *Mad* magazine 'Scenes We'd Like to See,' and so to a extent we're going to re-run the last election and try a few different plays than the Gore campaign did."

JOSH: Interesting, fascinating.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That did not occur to me.

HRISHI: Because, yeah, Al Gore's a very smart guy, and it's true, it was really painful watching him...

JOSH: Be on guard, lest he appear too smart.

HRISHI: Yeah, bend himself out of shape to be...

JOSH: Folksy?

HRISHI: Exactly. That led me to think about the idea of this episode having the two Bartlets, but there are also two Lymans, I feel like...

JOSH: Lyman is the plural. [laughter]

HRISHI: Exactly, the two Lyman. There is Josh, who is the pragmatic political operative, the company man, who will do what Leo says, and like, toes the line and swallows whatever the bitter pill is. But then there's also the guy who can melt steel with his arguments, you know? The guy who quit working for Hoynes because Hoynes wasn't the real thing. Like Toby says, lethal, and Leo's... asking him to trade in that version of Josh Lyman for his sort of Uncle Fluffy, the guy who's just there to do the job and make sure everything goes smoothly.

JOSH: One other, I think, rich and layered scene, there's a beautiful performance by Allison on the phone, early on in the episode, [cross talk] with her dad.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, it's so good.

JOSH: There's, I mean, first of all, I always say phone scenes are my favorite, because there's nobody else in the scene, but it does actually make them difficult. Because well, in the best of all worlds, I mean, when you're doing a phone scene in which you actually hear the other half of the conversation, usually the actor involved in any filming situation where people take the art itself seriously, you actually have the other actor on the line speaking to you. She's doing a phone call which is entirely her.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's emotionally fraught and she's giving an incredible performance, where we are, obviously at least in my experience of watching it and listening to her, you can feel her love for him, you can feel her frustration at... with him and at this situation.

[West Wing – Episode 3.12 excerpt]

CJ: Because I don't live in Iowa, I'm not allowed to vote there... Ah, see, there's always a catch... Well, he's unchallenged in the Iowa caucus, so I like our chances.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: There's just so much going on in what is one actor talking to herself, it's a pretty astonishing performance.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's just one little bit where I felt like she just reached out and like, grabbed my heart, where I just felt like I related to the emotion behind it so much, where she just says...

[West Wing – Episode 3.12 excerpt]

CJ: Oh my God. Dad, 'cause this is how it is.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That little "Oh my God, Dad." Love my Dad, as all of you have now heard, he's a very lovable guy.

JOSH: As we all do now, Hrishi.

HRISHI: Yeah, [laughs] exactly. And it still feels a little bit new, the idea of being an adult and being frustrated with your parent in that way. Of like having to be like, no, I have to get you to understand. It still feels like an unfamiliar dynamic despite how many years I've been an adult.

JOSH: I'm 51 and haven't had that yet, but I assume it's more of a reflection on me than on my dad. He can't actually be superhuman, so I think it's... [laughter]

HRISHI: By the way, it was very sweet on Fathers' Day, you posted a picture of your dad, and you said 'Happy Fathers' Day to my best friend' and I teared up a little bit.

JOSH: Ah!

HRISHI: I thought it was very sweet.

JOSH: Ah. That's true.

HRISHI: There's this thing I liked, this little recurring motif that comes through this episode. At the beginning, we see Josh turn on those two different TVs with the news and then later when Amy comes over, she turns on the TV, and she says...

[West Wing – Episode 3.12 excerpt]

AMY: You can turn on the news, you know.

JOSH: I don't wanna turn on the news.

AMY: Just to see how they're covering Iowa.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: As Donna has delivered it earlier, you know, it's a foregone conclusion: the President is running uncontested in the Iowa caucus, and Donna comes in and says...

[West Wing – Episode 3.12 excerpt]

DONNA: I don't know if you care, but you officially won the Iowa Democratic caucus.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So they already know the result, Amy comes in and says "You wanna put it on just to see how they're covering Iowa," and then he turns it off, and then at the very end, when Toby leaves, he walks out of the Oval Office, he turns off the TV.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: And I feel like there's a little subtle thing being put forward there, which is, the TV I think kind of represents the interpretation of your actions, or really how other people see you, and there's a power in turning the TV off. You know, like, there's no point in watching the Iowa coverage except to see how people are talking about you. And this is what Toby's trying to get through to the President, that this should not matter – be yourself, because if you start thinking about the TV, you start thinking about the interpretation, you're going to make yourself into something less effective than what you could really be, so turn it off.

JOSH: Phew! Home run, over the left field fence, again!

HRISHI: [laughs] Excellent. Let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we're going to speak to Blanche Sindelar, properties master.

[ad break]

BLANCHE: My name is Blanche Sindelar, and I was the property master on *The West Wing* for all seven seasons.

JOSH: Thanks for joining us!

BLANCHE: Well, thank you for inviting me.

JOSH: This is exciting, we've been enjoying your work for three and a half seasons of the show so far on the podcast, and it's exciting to have you on. Can you tell us your *West Wing* origin story?

BLANCHE: Yes, I can. I was working on a movie in Puerto Rico, with Lou Wells, and he handed me a videotape one day and said "I would like you to work on this TV series," and I said "Oh, I don't know, Lou, TV series are really hard," because I had done the first two seasons of *Profiler*, and it was really hard. And I said I wanna really get back to making movies, and he goes "Well, watch this," so I watched it, it wasn't finished, it was, you know, the sound and the music hadn't been finished, and I watched it and I went "Well, this is going to be a hit."

HRISHI: [laughing] Even in its unfinished state, you could tell?

BLANCHE: Oh yeah, so I said, "Sure, I'll do the first thirteen episodes," that's all they had at that point in time, and by then, you know, it was a big hit and so I just said "Well, we'll see how long this lasts."

JOSH: You're saying they had shot the pilot already?

BLANCHE: Yeah.

JOSH: Oh! So you came on Episode Two.

BLANCHE: No... well, yeah, I guess so, yeah. I did everything but the pilot, yeah.

HRISHI: Well, can you tell us your origin story at large? How did you get to be...

BLANCHE: A prop man?

HRISHI: Yeah.

BLANCHE: Well, I was... [laughing] That's another story. I was living in North Carolina, I had just finished grad school in Georgia, and I was working as a talent agent's assistant, and I got a phone call, they were auditioning people for a ninja movie in Western North Carolina, and one day my boss said "I can't keep you on payroll anymore, I don't have any more money," so I was out of a job, so I called them up and said "Is there anything in the movie business?" so they called me up a couple of weeks later and said "Can you be a set decorator?" and I said "Oh yeah, sure!" but I didn't have any idea what a set decorator did.

JOSH: I'll figure it out on my feet.

BLANCHE: But I have a master's degree in theatre, and you can do anything if you have a degree in theatre. So I did a few movies for them, and then I got a call about six months later to work on a movie, a horror movie, and I don't really like horror movies but it was with a director by the name of Sam Raimi. So my first job as a prop master was with Sam Raimi on *Evil Dead 2*.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Wow!

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, fantastic.

HRISHI: My favourite Sam Raimi movie. I love that movie.

BLANCHE: So, I've been very blessed in my opportunities.

HRISHI: *Evil Dead 2*, that's when he gets the chainsaw arm?

BLANCHE: Yes.

HRISHI: Ahhh. [cross talk] So good.

JOSH: [cross talk] Spoiler alert!

HRISHI: The chainsaw arm is so...

BLANCHE: You've never seen it, Josh? It's very campy.

JOSH: Uh, no, actually I have seen it. I love those movies.

HRISHI: Was that one of your creations, the chainsaw arm?

BLANCHE: No, some of those props were made in L.A. and shipped to North Carolina, and my assistant had to change some of the stuff. But we did make the room laugh, my assistant and I, we made the room laugh, remember all those?

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

BLANCHE: We spent a day rigging all these things.

HRISHI: Will you explain for our listeners what a property master does?

BLANCHE: A property master, basically, is in charge of everything that actors touch, that's one way to look at it, and so that involves everything from angel food cakes to Uzis. So, it can be the food that's on the plate, or the gun in a person's hand, and everything in between.

HRISHI: And besides the, sort of, paper description of that, what's your process like for a West Wing episode, where does it start for you, does it start when you receive the script?

BLANCHE: Yeah, when you receive the script, or in the concept meeting – in this case we sometimes didn't have scripts! In the concept meeting, you would find out what the concept was for the show, and then when you got the script, you read the script and break it down in terms of the obvious props that are listed in the script, and the things we call 'reading between the lines', so that if someone is at a dinner, you know, what are they eating, what are they doing, or if they're in their office, and the paperwork – what is the paperwork that they are dealing with, and how does it relate to the scene, that kind of thing. So there's a lot of reading in between the lines, and then character props, for instance, Toby Ziegler, he liked to always have that little red ball around, that was not something that was scripted, it was something he came up with, but it was like, "Let's always make sure that that little red ball is there for Toby to use." So, you initially break it down into the obvious things and then you fill it in with the things that you know from the characters, and from the scenes, and then you meet the director and find out what their ideas are, and then go from there.

HRISHI: So you really have to know the characters well enough to be able to interpret them yourselves.

BLANCHE: Or come up with some possible things for them, yeah.

HRISHI: Two weeks ago, we discussed Bartlet for America, and there's a central prop in that, the napkin.

BLANCHE: The napkin.

HRISHI: Was that something that would have come up in the concept meeting?

BLANCHE: Well, it was in the script, so yeah, it was in the script and discussed in the concept meeting, and we made a couple of samples for Tommy, as the director, to look at and he chose which one he liked.

HRISHI: What did the options look like? We know the one that ended up on screen, what was the –

BLANCHE: Different styles of writing, probably different kinds of pens, which was more readable, which was less readable, you know, that kind of thing.

JOSH: So, whose handwriting is it?

BLANCHE: Do you really want to know whose handwriting it is?

JOSH: Yes, I really do.

BLANCHE: It's not mine, it's - I think it was one of the stand-ins, I think, wrote it for us.
[laughs]

JOSH: Oh, really? [laughs]

BLANCHE: I think we were like, passing it around, and it was like "Who's got the best kind of handwriting?" and Tommy picked one, and I think it was Christy's.

JOSH: That's awesome. Do you know where that napkin resides now? It's such a proto-piece of West Wing.

BLANCHE: Tommy has one of them, Aaron has one.

JOSH: Ohhh. Wait a minute.

HRISHI: Oh, because you had to make multiples for shooting...

BLANCHE: Yeah.

HRISHI: ...in case someone accidentally uses it to wipe their face.

BLANCHE: Who has the one that sat on John Spencer's--was it John Spencer's desk?
Yeah.

HRISHI: Mm hm.

BLANCHE: It was either Tommy or Aaron.

HRISHI: You know, it's a handwritten napkin, how closely could you replicate it from one napkin to another?

BLANCHE: Oh, it's not hard to do, it was a very simple script, so it's like "Bartlet for America." It was a very block style, it wasn't anything too fancy, it wasn't very difficult.

HRISHI: We loved the fact that Leo licked it before he put it, sticks it to the easel? Do you remember that?

BLANCHE: Yeah...

HRISHI: And I thought, who in the prop department has to handle it after that?

JOSH: With tongs.

BLANCHE: Yeah, well, I'm sure it was dry by then.

JOSH: Yeah, so you probably had to have a bunch of them, I forgot it was lick-and-stick, there were probably a whole big pile of Bartlet for America napkins ready.

BLANCHE: Yeah, we had a few, we had a few.

JOSH: Wait a minute! Does anybody sell Bartlet for America party napkins?

BLANCHE: Nobody sells any of these things that they could be selling, like the pens, I've gotten calls... [inaudible]

JOSH: Oh yeah!

BLANCHE: Do you have the pen that he signed...? No, I don't have that, I gave all that stuff to Warner Brothers.

JOSH: Bah, Warner Brothers!

BLANCHE: Even when it was over, we didn't know it was going to continue to be such a, you know, a hit.

JOSH: Right, so did you steal anything? [cross talk] Did you keep anything? Come on, you must have something special.

BLANCHE: [cross talk] I have, I have a few things that I won't say that I have. You know, I have the bumper sticker, probably a coffee cup. [cross talk] A couple of little mementos.

JOSH: [cross talk] Nice.

JOSH: And you have the original Gail, who still lives, I understand.

BLANCHE: Yeah, no. She's this big now! No.

JOSH: That's right! She lives in your bathtub, she's forty-eight pounds.

BLANCHE: I don't know where Gail wound up.

JOSH: How many Gails were there?

BLANCHE: I think there were only three Gails. [cross talk] We did really well with Gails.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's pretty impressive for a seven season run.

BLANCHE: Yeah, we had pretty good luck with Gail.

HRISHI: So, tell us about Gail's fishbowl, because this is a rare exception where, this technically isn't a prop, right? Except for the first episode where Danny hands the fishbowl to CJ, that's when they touch it, but otherwise, it doesn't necessarily fall under the purview of something that an actor holds.

BLANCHE: Right, but for some reason, animals are sort of considered under the prop department category. There's a few things in this business like directors' chairs, and animals, and stuff like that, and some special effects things that fall in the jurisdiction of the property department. And animals is one of those, and I guess maybe because it swims around, and it's kind of an actor?

HRISHI: Right!

BLANCHE: It should be taken care of? Yeah, we took care of it, we had it in the prop room, it got fed every day. And then during the Christmas breaks it would come home with me, and during the summer it came home with me...

JOSH: Aw!

BLANCHE: Until my assistant Mark started on the show, and he insisted that he was going to take care of Gail.

JOSH: Did you feel a connection to Gail? Did you like Gail?

BLANCHE: I felt a little bit of connection, and I felt a little sad when Mark took over, but he was obsessed with Gail, so [cross talk] it was like, you can take care of Gail.

JOSH: [cross talk] [laughs] That's actually pretty cute!

JOSH: How about the master stroke of changing out what would be in Gail's fishbowl, so it would be thematically tied to episodes at times?

BLANCHE: That was kind of my idea, Tommy didn't want me to do it. When it first came up, it was like you know, so Tommy, we have this fishbowl, what are we going to do with the fishbowl, we have to put something in the fishbowl. And he goes "Well... I don't know, I don't wanna..." You know. I said, shall we put something in that relates to every episode, and he goes "Well, I don't wanna break the fourth wall," he thought it was breaking the fourth wall. I said "But we're not going to see it that much." We don't really see it that much, right?

JOSH: I think it's perfectly subtle, it's like a little Easter egg and you could always absolutely explain that CJ did it.

BLANCHE: Right!

JOSH: If you have a problem with the fourth wall, the explanation is CJ put stuff in. Now, why she put stuff in that's thematically tied to what's happening in the White House is another question.

BLANCHE: Right, so I just thought it would be fun to see if we could thematically tie it to the... and it was amazing that, you know, we could do it a lot, a lot of times we could do it.

HRISHI: Did you ever have that moment where you put something in the fishbowl, and a director said "No, we can't do that"?

BLANCHE: No, I don't think so. And towards the end, we just kind of got a little bored with everything and kept putting the White House in. [laughing]

HRISHI: Well, before that, I wonder, so we're on Season 3 now, is there a fishbowl iteration that was your particular favorite?

BLANCHE: The first one of the second season, after Bartlet got shot, I made this fishbowl with a bullet hole through it, and I had the White House, and I had red gravel.

JOSH: [cross talk] Holy moly!

BLANCHE: [cross talk] I don't think it ever showed up on camera,

BLANCHE: ...but because he had gotten shot, I had someone drill a bullet hole through the...

HRISHI: That's amazing! We definitely have not seen [cross talk] the bullet hole fishbowl.

JOSH: [cross talk] No, that's definitely a go back and check it out revelation for me.

BLANCHE: And there's actually a fishbowl in the Smithsonian.

HRISHI: Right! We exchanged some Tweets with the Smithsonian Twitter account as they talked to us about their Gail fishbowl.

BLANCHE: Yeah. So that was probably one of my favourites. Then there was the Mars ones were fun. We actually changed the size of the fishbowl, we made it into a round fishbowl, and we put the orange, or kind of, you know, reddish clay, and we found a little Rover, and I went to the JPL, when you could go to JPL without a...

HRISHI: Security clearance.

BLANCHE: I went there and found a little Rover and put it in there.

HRISHI: Was that for Galileo?

BLANCHE: I think so.

HRISHI: That's great. I remember the Rover, I had forgotten about the clay colored rocks. Well, how about some other favorite props, outside of Gail's fishbowl? Josh had commented on this address book, or notebook that Sam Seaborn had, that it was just full... it was Sam's notebook, right?

JOSH: Yeah, it's like his daily planner, it's got Post-Its, and tons of notes, and it looks like he's had it for a long time, and I was just marveling at the amount of work that must have gone into the creation of a prop like that.

BLANCHE: Yes it did, I actually had one of my assistants who was a day player, she worked on that a lot. Shannon did a lot of work on that, I just kept giving her "Here, take this number and this number and this number and this address." She kept working and filling it up. It was one person's job for a couple of days.

JOSH: Yeah, it's fantastic, and it's just a quick little hit on screen but it adds a layer to Sam's personality to know that this is how he keeps his information, it's wonderful. A few episodes back too, there was a guy who I was noticing, the briefcase he carried suggested that he'd had it a really long time and this was not a guy who could buy a high-end new briefcase. I'm always just impressed at the aging and the character that you imbue into these props.

BLANCHE: That's the fun part of it.

HRISHI: Is there a prop that you can remember from The West Wing that was particularly difficult to get right?

BLANCHE: No, but one of them - the bill signing one was kind of tricky, I actually got good help from the White House on that one, because we had to recreate the bill signing, and then, the whole box it came in, and when it was passed from one person to the next person, I don't know if you've seen that episode? I called the White House and they gave us specific information, and then I had a graphics house here in town help me make that whole thing, to make it right.

HRISHI: That's when the bill comes and the President has to pull out the stamp and sign it, to veto it, right?

BLANCHE: Yeah, there was a veto one, and then there was the signing one, there were two of them, I can't remember now. There was one where you signed it and one there was veto it, the big veto stamp.

HRISHI: Let me ask you about another favorite of mine, Paul Revere's knife?

JOSH: He gave him the knife!

BLANCHE: Yeah! That, where did we... I think we got that on eBay.

HRISHI: Really?!

BLANCHE: I might have got that on eBay somewhere.

HRISHI: From the official Paul Revere smith... [laughing]

BLANCHE: No... it was either eBay or it was History for Hire.

HRISHI: You just looked for an old knife?

BLANCHE: No, I did a little bit of research to find out about Paul Revere. I can't remember now, the details and stuff, but we try to do as much research as we can to find out about... I think what knife-making was like in those days and things like that.

HRISHI: Right, yeah, there's a level of detail that is required... I mean, sometimes, something like, again in a recent episode, Charlie buys the President a map of the Holy Land...

BLANCHE: Oh yeah.

HRISHI: ...that doesn't have Israel on it, it's such a... it's a big part of the plot, you know, it comes up multiple times, and we actually see the map unrolled in the episode. So that's a pretty specific prop that the episode requires, is that something that you guys created, or did you again have to find...

BLANCHE: No, we created that. We used large pieces of parchment and we had it all... we had graphics people work on that for us.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: It must be hard sometimes to reconcile the amount of research and care you'd like to put into these props, and the short amount of lead time you often get on any TV series, but especially on an Aaron Sorkin TV show. Were there ever any last minute things that just gave you a huge headache or were incredibly difficult to whip up in time?

BLANCHE: Well, there was this huge Bible we had to come up with, he actually gave me the heads-up on that and said "I'm going to write this big huge Bible in," you know, and so History for Hire again came through on that one. They had a really big huge Bible and then they did a cover for it.

HRISHI: What's History for Hire?

BLANCHE: It's a prop house.

HRISHI: Oh, ok.

BLANCHE: They specialize in history... I mean, props for - period props? Anything from the 1980s back to... they do Civil War, they'll do whatever period -

JOSH: They have Brad Whitford in a back room right now.

[laughter]

JOSH: For hire.

HRISHI: You can call them up and say "I need this, do you have something that we can rent?" and they'll tell you what they've got.

BLANCHE: Yeah, I'm renting a lot of musical equipment from them right now, for the movie I'm working on.

JOSH: Oh yeah, talk us about what you're working on right now.

BLANCHE: Right now I'm working on *Valley Girl: The Musical* – it's a remake of the actual movie that was done in 1983 that starred Nicolas Cage, who was not Nicolas Cage back then, and so it's a remake, and it's a musical.

JOSH: I love musicals.

HRISHI: As do I, and the adaptation –

JOSH: We'll see it together.

[laughter]

HRISHI: So, this adaptation, is it a period piece?

BLANCHE: Yes, it's set in 1983, is about our approximate year.

HRISHI: It definitely freaks me out to have something referred to as a period piece when it occurred in my lifetime.

BLANCHE: Is the 1980s real -

HRISHI: I'm not ready for that. We haven't gotten to it yet, but we're about to come up to Hartsfield's Landing, where we have the moose meat, in that chest? Do you remember that?

BLANCHE: No, but I remember the fish, that Josh got one time, some fish from Alaska he had gotten. That, I had to go downtown and get a broker to get for me... Alaskan shad shipped in.

HRISHI: Wow.

BLANCHE: The moose meat...

HRISHI: You don't actually see the moose meat, it's in this old chest from... it's from Sweden, I think, or something like that...

BLANCHE: That, again, I might have got from History for Hire.

JOSH: Let me ask you this, Blanche, do you watch the show?

BLANCHE: Well, when you told me this was coming up, yeah, I started watching it again, actually, I was watching it because I was finding it as a nice diversion from what's happening today in our White House -

HRISHI: Is something happening... happening today?

BLANCHE: With our current administration... So yeah, I was watching it, and I'm going "Wow, we did a lot of work," I can't even remember, like, there was a big campaign thing, and I'm like "Did we shoot that here? Was I working on that?" It was huge!

JOSH: When you're watching the show, are you just prop-prop-prop-prop-prop-prop-prop or do you take in the performances, are you just looking at what you did, and what worked, as some people tend to do?

BLANCHE: No, I can pretty much, you know, suspend my disbelief. I mean, it's so well done, it's so well acted, and the writing is so good. It's just, you know, even after having worked on it, and just looking back at it, it's really captivating.

JOSH: Well, that's why we wanted to have you on, because sure, people will mention the writing and the performances, and sometimes less-sung aspects of the show are still such an integral part of what make that world, and your work is always so grounded and it's interesting to hear you talk about, because I can see how much thought goes into each little piece and how it reflects and adds to the characters.

HRISHI: Do you feel like, that you receive that love and the fandom for your work on the West Wing? The show is so beloved, you know, people are obsessed with Gail's fishbowl. Do you feel like that attention has come your way, do you feel the affection from the fans?

BLANCHE: Well, I do get, you know, people say "Oh my God, you worked on The West Wing, you know that's my mother's favorite show!"

[laughter]

BLANCHE: And, they're like "Yeah! That's really cool," you know, they don't usually talk about the props, but they just talk about the show overall had a such large impact on people. But I do get a "Oh my God, you worked on The West Wing, that's great." You know, I do get that. I don't get people bowing down to me like I do when I mention I worked on *Evil Dead 2*.

[laughter]

JOSH: Well, there you go, that's the –

BLANCHE: "Oh my God, you worked on *Evil Dead 2*!"

[laughter]

BLANCHE: Maybe one day.

HRISHI: I think so, I think –

JOSH: [cross talk] Well, if we have anything to do with it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] After this episode comes out.

JOSH: Well, props to you, Blanche.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ohhh, Josh! Come on! Ohhhh....

BLANCHE: [cross talk] Well, thank you.... That was a good one.

JOSH: [cross talk] Sorry, I really wanted to say that.

JOSH: Oh dear.

HRISHI: And that's it for our episode.

JOSH: Thanks for listening to this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: There's no new episode next week, we're gonna take the week off, but we'll be back on July 12th. I hope that all of you guys wear your *Ok Ok What's Next?* red white and blue shirts on the Fourth of July, if you do, take pictures and send them our way.

JOSH: If you want to post a question or a comment that Hrishi won't read, but I probably will, you can do so at thewestwingweekly.com, or on our Facebook page, or on our Instagram page... You can support *The West Wing Weekly* by clicking Donate on our website and

throwing us a few dollars, or you can buy a *West Wing Weekly* lapel pin and join Bartlet's Army.

HRISHI: And we'd like to take a second to thank Zach McNees, Margaret Miller and Izzy Malina, who help us make this show.

JOSH: Mm hm.

HRISHI: And the Knight Foundation. The Knight Foundation make Radiotopia possible, and *The West Wing Weekly* is part of Radiotopia from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary podcasts.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BLANCHE: What's next?

[Outro Music]