

The West Wing Weekly  
3.20: The Black Vera Wang  
Guest: Mark Harmon

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today, we're talking about "The Black Vera Wang." It's Episode 20 from Season Three.

JOSH: It was directed by Christopher Misiano, it was written by Aaron Sorkin, and it aired first on May 8, 2002.

HRISHI: Coming up later in this episode, we're going to be joined by a special guest, Mark Harmon. Here is a synopsis from TV Guide: "While C.J.—code name Flamingo—gets used to being tailed by Special Agent Donovan, the President must deal with a terrorist threat on a military installation. Meanwhile, the networks are threatening to cut coverage of the upcoming conventions, Sam receives a copy of a TV commercial attacking the President, and Josh, back from the Helsinki Summit, gives Donna a box of cured moose meat—and that's not a euphemism. It turns out to be even more unappetizing than it appears." The euphemism line was from me, the rest of it was from the—

JOSH: I thought so. I hoped so.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*GINGER: You ate a moose?*

*SAM: No, I don't like eating things where the cartoon character can talk. And, you know, hatch a plan.*

*GINGER: Yeah.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: That's a great line.

HRISHI: I really like my wife Lindsey's policy when it comes to eating animals. Her rule is: she doesn't eat anything with eyelashes.

JOSH: Oh, nice. I've heard face before. Eyelashes is a good distinction.

HRISHI: Yeah, anything that can blink coquettishly.

JOSH: So no seal meat for her, for instance.

HRISHI: Exactly, right.

JOSH: Although it may only be cartoon seals that have eyelashes, I'm not sure.

HRISHI: No, I think they have Maybelline lashes, really, in real life.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: Let me ask you something.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*BARTLET: Which Plantagenet do I most remind you of?*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: That's an interesting question.

HRISHI: Do you have a favorite Plantagenet?

JOSH: I really don't, although I'll tell you, if we're going to jump right into that; it was interesting to me that—I'm no Shakespeare expert, nor am I a history expert, nor am I an acting expert, nor am I an expert in any field—it was interesting to me that this Catholic fundraiser was watching this epic combination of all the Henry plays by Shakespeare, culminating with Henry VIII, who famously broke the papacy, ushering in the Reformation. It's just it was interesting to me that that's what they'd be looking to do [cross talk] for their big fundraiser.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right. Yeah.

JOSH: Although I think I have read, I believe, there is recent scholarship that suggests that Shakespeare himself might have been a sort of a Crypto-Catholic, that he was more religious than I think Shakespeare scholars had originally thought, and that there are indications—although I'm not entirely sure what they are—in his writing that he held sympathy and possibly deep religious belief in Catholicism, which is interesting.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So maybe that's what they were responding to.

HRISHI: Okay, now you ask me who my favorite Plantagenet was.

JOSH: I should have realized—clearly there was a funny line to be had that I wasn't getting—so it's funny Hrish, thanks for asking me. I was wondering—what is the question again? I want to get it.

HRISHI (laughing): Do you have a favorite Plantagenet?

JOSH (laughing): Oh, yeah, to be a good straight man. Do you have a favorite Plantagenet?

HRISHI: Yeah! Actually, I do. My favorite is Richard of York.

JOSH: Why is that?

HRISHI: I really liked him!

JOSH: He was great in Bewitched.

HRISHI: Exactly. I was most disappointed when they replaced Richard of York with Richard of Sargent.

JOSH: Oh that's good. See? I [expletive] up your punch line [cross talk] with my inferior punch line.

HRISHI: [cross talk] You did! You really did.

JOSH: I just wanted to race you to the end and prove something.

HRISHI: Exactly. Exactly.

JOSH: Do you think there is—I'm just trying to hatch right now a million dollar idea. Do you think Plantagenet Hollywood would be a successful chain of restaurants, for like—it's a little niche, but.

HRISHI: Mmmhmm, that's terrible.

JOSH: Anybody left out there? We are going to talk about the episode. Can we talk about—can we start with the title? I know I've already shared this with you. When I hear the title, "The Black Vera Wang," I hear it as, like, an African-American designer version of Vera Wang, you know what I'm saying?

HRISHI: Right. You're thinking of Miles Morales, the black Spider-Man.

JOSH: There you go, exactly. It turns out: it's a black dress designed by Vera Wang.

HRISHI: Yeah. I wrote to Lyn Paolo, costume designer for The West Wing, among many other shows—

JOSH: Yes, including Scandal.

HRISHI: Including Scandal—Emmy-winning costume designer. Because I thought the specificity of the designer—it struck me as something, well, worth investigating, anyway. I wasn't sure if Aaron is really like the kind of person who pays attention to this stuff. That he would know, "oh,

yeah, we know C.J.'s a clothes horse..." I was just wondering where that came from. So I asked Lyn if she had anything to do with it. And here's what she wrote back: "The discussion was that we should have a gown that was very on-point for the time. And Vera Wang was very hot at the time. I then contacted Vera, and we bought the gown. So it was a collaboration on all sides." And what I love about this is that a piece of costume design, like a detail of costume design, managed to inform the plot and the text and even the title.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*HOGAN: Auntie, stop looking at the Vera Wangs.*

*C.J.: Why?*

*HOGAN: 'Cause they cost a month's salary.*

*C.J.: But I'm the cool aunt. This is what I do.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: Good catch for Vera Wang. Not that she doesn't deserve it, but it's kind of awesome to be in the title of a West Wing episode.

HRISHI: That's true, yeah. That's got to be some good product placement. And they bought the dress, according to Lyn, so.

JOSH: Well, I hope you followed up with "What did it cost?"

HRISHI: I didn't.

JOSH: Is it too late? I'm curious. I want to know and I want it translated to 2017 dollars.

HRISHI: I think it might be too late, Hill.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: Let's go to the actual beginning of the episode.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: It picks up, really, where we left off in terms of the story with the last episode, and I like how in the end of Season Three, we're really, like, building up some momentum. This happens—you know, we get those one-off episodes, sort of here and there in the middle—but as we get to the end of any season of The West Wing, things start to build a head of steam. So we finished up the Russian subplot with Chigorin—not to be confused with the Russian subplot from The Hunt for Red October—it's a different Russian sub plot.

JOSH: Completely different.

HRISHI: And where they're going to go to Helsinki for the Summit, and here we start with them returning from that Summit.

JOSH: Yeah, so this is where—we're into a run that will take us through the end of this season, of really well-plotted episodes that are serialized. Like you say, there's no stand-alones coming out between now and the end, and I'm curious when we talk to Aaron on stage in San Francisco, to ask him. Because I never get the sense—I feel like he'll always say he never plans anything ahead of time, because I've now watched through to the end of the season, it seems to be very precisely plotted, and very well laid-out, and the whole thing is paced very well. And I just don't know how he could do that on the fly. It seems like he and his writers have really plotted the thing beautifully. And I'm always, I feel like, in this arc of I guess four episodes?

HRISHI: Three, including this one

JOSH: Right, so three including this. In these next three, certain aspects of the show are more like traditional TV. They're not executed like traditional TV—they're executed with *West Wing* precision and talent and quality—but I like sometimes when there's a little bit of a thriller sense to it, political thriller, stuff that other TV shows... It's familiar territory for other TV shows and I like, and I think I've said it before, the *West Wing* has earned its ability to occasionally—and it usually is toward the end of a season—get us really pulled into the kind of juicy plots that many other shows attempt and then *The West Wing* pulls off beautifully.

HRISHI: Right. I don't know that I feel the same way, but—

JOSH: Aaah, interesting.

HRISHI: I, you know, I've mentioned to you that my favorite aspects of *The West Wing* are the ones that are very quiet, that are just about these domestic, or even, really, internal to *The West Wing*, stories.

JOSH: Well, I'm not saying necessarily that I prefer one to the other. I also love those that I know are your favorites, but I feel like the fact that that's generally where the show lives—

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Earns it the ability to jump into the deep end of more plot-driven, action-y, elements. I think the *West Wing* does them very well. If it were the go-to, if it were the bread and butter of the show, it would change the very nature of what is *The West Wing*. But I feel like I really enjoy these episodes, and I don't—it doesn't feel like a cop-out to me or "Oh, sweeps are coming," or whatever it is, or the end of the season and they need a—'cause it's always pulled off brilliantly. When Roslyn happens?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I felt the same way then. Like, oh, this is super exciting, and I, you do feel a little bit of a let down, like now we're going to do the end-of-the-season thing.

HRISHI: Well, it's funny, actually - it ties into this episode in some ways. I do feel like there must be some pressure for them to build up to some kind of climactic cliffhanger or something that lets the network know they're playing ball. It reminds me of the conversation that Toby has with the news directors here, where -

JOSH: Ah, very good.

HRISHI: Where you have to give them a little something.

JOSH: We need a floor fight?

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. A weapon needs to be brandished at some point so that we can get the 21 episodes of talk-talk-talk. And I understand that and I absolutely grant them all the leeway they need to do that, but for me, in a perfect world, you don't need to. I guess it feels a little bit like pandering.

JOSH: That's funny. See, I dig it. Well, maybe I'm the lowest common denominator. I think we may be onto something here. They may be pandering, but it's to me.

HRISHI: I mean, I want to just—I don't actually think that it's pandering because, as you said, the quality is so high. And the ideas are so lofty and the dialogue is incredible—all these things that we know about the West Wing. But it just feels one percent in that direction of "The season finale needs to have these certain flavors." And I feel like "okay, yeah, they're playing ball."

JOSH: Okay, well, here's where I'll push back a little bit. I think probably working at the White House is a lot like that. There's a quotidian nature to the daily routine of it all, and every now and then there are crises that are super-high stakes and I feel like that's the show we're given. That's the depiction we're given of the White House, and the staff, and what they deal with. And I like that the bulk of it—it's 90 percent/10 percent—and most of the time it's no less riveting but it's more day-to-day workings of an administration. And then every now and then—maybe the timing of it is a little predictable—but every now and then things are on the verge of flying out of control.

HRISHI: I think you're right, and I think that is a more accurate way of showing things. Not that The West Wing is really all about accuracy, but I don't expect anybody to agree with me on this—nor am I trying to, like, really convince anyone. This is just my heart speaking, you know. Yeah, that's fine. I do love so much of this episode and there's so much great plot here, but yeah, I'd rather hear about a bill getting passed than stuff in the sit room.

JOSH: Well, hang in. We'll get there.

HRISHI: Okay, so, in the beginning of this episode, Sam and the rest of the crew—they're

returning from Helsinki—and he gets word from Ginger that he has a package with no return address. And my first thought was: after anthrax, after 9/11, can someone deliver just a random package to inside the West Wing with no return address?

JOSH: Yeah, I would have run into my office and slammed the door so quickly that Ginger's head would have spun off its neck. I thought you were working toward something else, though. Because to me, the end of the cold open doesn't quite work because often, there's a moment of great drama, like a line of major impact is shared, and then (mimics credit music), "bwaaaah daa dah," and it goes into the credits. Whoa, goosebumps. But in this one, it's C.J. saying to Sam, "who sent it?" And then he's like:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SAM: That's the thing.*

*C.J.: What?*

*SAM: I don't know.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: We've already had the moment—we know he doesn't know. Ginger came up to him and said "there's no return address." It's not like a big reveal, it's only C.J. Who's finding out. We know he doesn't know! I don't know, it doesn't work as a button right before the credits to me.

HRISHI: I hear that. Then, when we come back, Donna and Josh are catching up after the trip, and I was thinking that Amy being a part of Josh's life—Amy being played by Mary Louise Parker, as his girlfriend now—they're officially BF/GF, and therefore this gives some cover to Josh and Donna, to flirt so hard.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*DONNA: My man.*

*JOSH: Yes.*

*DONNA: You came back to me.*

*JOSH: Just like I promised.*

*DONNA: I missed you.*

*JOSH: When did you find you missed me the most?*

*DONNA: The nights.*

JOSH: *Of course.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: I mean, they've gone so far past even the terrible, unprofessional levels that they were at before.

JOSH: This is just literally "my man, my man, you've come back." I had to look away from the screen. People, guys—you're in public!

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Yeah, you're right. That being said, I'm amazed that she doesn't bust him for re-gifting her. He's like, "I brought you this incredible thing," and then it becomes clear that it was just something that was given to him, and he's just pushing it off on her. And then he gets kind of tweaked when she gave it to another intern. He didn't buy anything in the first place!

HRISHI: I know. There's actually a lot of hypocrisy around this box of moose meat.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: My first objection, in addition to the re-gifting by Josh, he goes into a nice version of a Bartlet-esque, tech-spec talk, or he tries to.

JOSH: About the box?

HRISHI: Yeah. About the box, but it's so lame.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*JOSH: It's sauna-smoked moose meat, nicely packaged in a burnt pine box.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: And he lists "nicely packaged" as if it's a feature, which really it's not.

JOSH: Indeed, you're right.

HRISHI: You can't say "nicely," as if it's a technical specification to this thing. You're just trying to uplift this kind of crappy gift you're giving her.

JOSH: The funny thing is to me—were it kosher, or slaughtered properly—I'd be delighted to have some exotic moose meat! I don't understand why everybody's so... It sounds great! I like exotic meats. Sorry, I'm not going to get the shipment from PETA like you did. What's so bad about moose meat?

HRISHI: Eyelashes.

JOSH: Aaaaah. But that might just be Bullwinkle. Everyone's so turned off by it, and I was like "it sounds good to me."

HRISHI: Adventure eating is kind of a vein that runs throughout this whole episode. In addition to the moose, Toby at one point while talking to the network execs says, "The Secretary should eat a jellyfish?" There are basically two little shots taken by Aaron at Fear Factor..

JOSH: Hahaha, that's funny. Oh, there's a little Survivor reference in there, too.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*TOBY: You want us to vote a member of the Rules Committee out of the convention every night, or something? The Secretary should eat a jellyfish?*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: Aaron, not a big fan of reality TV.

HRISHI: I would guess not. And it really becomes clear here when he makes fun of both Survivor, and later Donna says:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*DONNA: If I'm going to eat a moose, there's going to have to be some kind of prize at the end of it.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: Yeah, that's funny. There are times when I've discussed my penchant for reality TV with Aaron, and I can see his esteem for me slipping away in his eyes. He can't even really formulate a response—it's just clear it's one of the things he does not understand.

HRISHI: I forgot about Fear Factor.

JOSH: Classic show.

HRISHI: I forgot that that was a show until watching this.

JOSH: I enjoyed it. Joe Rogan!

HRISHI: I never watched it.

JOSH: Literally never?

HRISHI: I never watched it.

JOSH: Oh, Hrishi...

HRISHI: I saw ads for it, and I was like, "No, this is not for me."

[Excerpt from advertisement for Fear Factor]

*Announcer: For \$50,000 prize money, would you be buried up to your neck in rats?*

*(Woman screams)*

*Announcer: Fear Factor, premieres in February.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: I definitely subscribe to the Aaron Sorkin school of mockery and disgust.

JOSH: Is there no reality TV you embrace?

*HRISHI: Oh, The Great British Bake-Off!*

JOSH: Ohhhh, fantastic.

[Great British Bake-Off theme plays]

HRISHI: That's my favorite.

JOSH: Yeah, you turned me onto that.

[Theme ends.]

HRISHI: I like a good house hunting show.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Or a makeover show.

JOSH: I don't watch those often.

HRISHI: Or, I mean, a home makeover show.

JOSH: Hm. You might like My Fair Lady. It's a musical that's kind of a home makeover show.

HRISHI: I do like My Fair Lady.

JOSH: Do you actually? [cross talk] Oh, okay! Wait a minute, alright I'm starting to put it together now.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah!

HRISHI: I do like My Fair Lady.

JOSH: Trying to think if there are...

HRISHI: There are some good songs in My Fair Lady, too.

JOSH: Indeed. I wonder if there are any good house hunting musicals.

HRISHI: Hahaha.

JOSH: I'll have to think about that. RENT?

HRISHI: Come on!

JOSH: Well, kind of.

HRISHI: Ugh, jeez.

HRISHI: The reason why I like Great British Bake-off so much is because it's produced with a different kind of sensibility than pretty much all American reality TV is produced. You know, so often, when you're watching those shows, they're 22 minutes long and you're getting about eight minutes of show because every time they go to or come back from a commercial, they have to recap the last three minutes.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: They're like, "Coming up next, here's a bunch of reactions and dramatic music." Then "Before we took a break, here's what happened!" And the same thing-

JOSH: Yes, the vibe among the contestants and those running the show also is in stark contrast to American cooking shows, in particular. I've been watching British Bake-Off with my daughter—late of The West Wing Weekly—and we keep turning to each other and saying "they're so nice to each other!"

HRISHI: I know. I know, I love it.

JOSH: Yeah. I feel like nice friendships are forged on The Great British Bake-Off.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well, now I feel we're probably upsetting Logan, so let's get back to the show.

HRISHI: Okay. So I was saying there's a fair amount of hypocrisy on Josh's part throughout the whole thing about this box of moose meat. Because he gets it, and then he gives it to Donna, and then he gets mad at Donna for giving it to an intern.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: When the moose meat ends up on eBay, and he gets notified, the woman who tells him

asks him who he gave the box of moose meat to, and he stands in front of Donna. He's like, "You know what, never mind, I'll take care of it." And then Donna tries to do the same thing with the intern.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*JOSH: Who's the intern?*

*DONNA: Well, how about if I'd rather not say?*

*JOSH: Donna.*

*DONNA: Come on, I'll take care of it.*

*JOSH: Fire the intern.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: Yeah, that's right. Although she busts him up for that, I think, explicitly. At which point, rather than really copping to it he just says "I already said okay."

HRISHI: Right, right.

JOSH: He doesn't want to dwell on the fact that she's right.

HRISHI: Yeah. That intern, however, what a prick that guy is.

JOSH: I thought that actor was good, actually. Can you insta-look up his name?

HRISHI: David Burtka.

JOSH: David Burtka. I know who David Burtka is. David Burtka is married to Neil Patrick Harris.

HRISHI: Aaaah.

JOSH: So there you go. The intern in this episode of The West Wing married Neil Patrick Harris.

HRISHI: Very cool. How do you know that? Do you know them?

JOSH: I read a lot of People magazine and US Weekly, and that is how I know. I do not know them.

HRISHI: Of course you do.

JOSH: Yes, so, David Burtka as intern Bruce, I like him very much. One of my favorite moments is the moment we're introduced to him, Donna walks by, and he just has a huge- he clearly likes her. There's something cute about his immediate, "Oh, hey, Donna," and he walks over and he

kind of just has this smile for the rest of the scene. He never cops really to anything. He seems like a young, sort of clueless guy who'd do what he did, and who, even when called out for it, still doesn't get what he did wrong, or care much.

HRISHI: Yes. No, he is a beautifully accurate picture of entitlement.

JOSH: Yes, exactly. And I kept wanting Donna to say "I can't believe I went to bat for this guy—so not worth it."

HRISHI: It actually reminded me a little bit of the guy who Jeremy Goodwin had to fire in Sports Night. He's JJ's nephew I think, Corbin.

JOSH: Corbin, okay.

HRISHI: You were saying that you thought that actor was terrific.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: David Burtka.

JOSH: Yeah, I thought that he did a very good job.

HRISHI: Okay, so on the topic of guest stars, I guess—

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Does he count as a guest star? Whatever—non-series regulars in this episode. As I was watching I was looking at the credits, kind of only half-paying attention, and then I thought, "Wait, what? Evan Rachel Wood is in this episode? I don't remember her being in The West Wing at all."

JOSH: A fifteen-year-old Evan Rachel Wood.

HRISHI: And I was like "Who does she play?" I could not reconcile my sense of Evan Rachel Wood. When I think of Evan Rachel Wood, I think of Westworld.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: And then, of course, I was trying to, like, "Who could it possibly be?" And then I was like, "Oh my God, that's C.J.'s niece Hogan."

JOSH: Hogan Cregg, yes. And watching her scene, I think there's something special there.

HRISHI: But even watching the scene, even as I was looking at her face, I was like "Is this Evan Rachel Wood?" I almost didn't believe the credits.

JOSH: Ah, that's funny! See, I got the essence of Evan Rachel Wood and a bit of star quality

there.

HRISHI: The star quality I get, for sure. But I was—I have seen this episode so many times—

JOSH: Oh, that's funny.

HRISHI: And I never connected the dots.

JOSH: Yes. Very talented actor.

HRISHI: Let's go to that scene, since we're talking about Evan Rachel Wood.

JOSH: Sure, at Barney's.

HRISHI: Yes. Oh, you know, I once dated a girl who lived by that Barney's. That's the Barney's-

JOSH: On Wiltshire Boulevard.

HRISHI: On Wiltshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, and I once dated a girl who lived near there. I had never been inside any kind of Barney's, but then one day we were taking a walk and we went inside. And I was so excited to recognize the place from "The Black Vera Wang."

JOSH: That's funny.

HRISHI: "I know where we are!"

JOSH: Just seeing that staircase makes me feel like I have less money.

HRISHI: But in the scene, with Evan Rachel Wood, I was so creeped out by Simon Donovan putting his hands on her. And I remembered now the first time I'd ever seen this episode, and how when that moment occurred, when C.J. goes off and they have this weird, creepy dynamic, I remember being a little sick to my stomach and worried that it was going to turn out that Simon Donovan was a villain.

JOSH: That's funny, I definitely had the same sort of cringey moment. "Why are you putting your hands on the 15-year-old to show her around, is that necessary? And didn't you also mention earlier how your hands always have to be free?"

HRISHI: I know! There's so much concern about the protocol.

JOSH: There are some red flags, yeah. "I don't know, but when I'm around a cute 15-year-old." Yeah, no. And then later it's almost returned. She's like "Am I supposed to touch you?" I don't know. There's a little bit of a weird vibe in that scene.

HRISHI: Yeah, no, she says:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

HOGAN: *I'm sorry, am I not allowed to touch you?*

SIMON: *No, it's okay.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: And I said, “No, no, no! It's not okay!”

JOSH: No, it really isn't! Forget about the agent thing—just the age difference.

HRISHI: No one—and they don't know each other!

JOSH: Right. Also, we're strangers. Correct.

HRISHI: Like, it would maybe be a touching thing, or like a sweet sign of closeness, if Simon Donovan were, you know, C.J.'s husband, or something, and they've known each other for ages, and... whatever. But it was not the case, they had just met, and here he is, like, moving a 15-year-old around. Ugh. It was—

JOSH: I know. To me, I was relieved when he started ogling the age-appropriate person.

HRISHI: Exactly! No, absolutely.

JOSH: Like, “Oh! Thank God, he's just looking at a woman who's changing behind a door.”

HRISHI: Exactly!

JOSH: At least things are less creepy now. I'm like, “Wait a minute.”

HRISHI: No, I absolutely felt the same way. It felt like some relief that he would start being creepy towards C.J. instead.

JOSH: Oh, dear.

HRISHI: You know, I think part of the reason why I was so excited about recognizing the Barney's when I went in there was also, there was some part of me thought, that figured that was in Washington, DC.

JOSH: Aww.

HRISHI: I, especially at the time, so naïve to the ways of Hollywood. Although this time, now, older, wiser, less naïve to the ways of Hollywood—

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: As I watched this episode, there was actually a moment where—and I don't normally feel this way—but there was a moment where I felt like “this was a TV set.” At one point, when

the President is walking into the Oval Office- He's outside, he's walking on, what is it, the parapet or whatever?

JOSH: Oh, wow! Yes. Yeah?

HRISHI: And he walks into the Oval Office, and I was like "Oof, this looks like a set."

JOSH: I completely—I can't believe it's the same thing. See, I was wondering—maybe it's not the exact same thing. To me, it's the outside—

HRISHI: Yes, the outside! That's what I'm talking about.

JOSH: I'm forgetting what the word is, but there are these enor—they're kind of amazing to look at—enormous super blown-up photographs that are then put on fabric... I can't remember. You would think after 30 years I would know what they are called. I can't remember the word.

HRISHI: But I know what you mean.

JOSH: And I always feel like I've just been there so many times that it looks super fake to me, but I guess you're reacting to the same thing. There's something—

HRISHI: It's like, here's this fake, flat background, and then some bushes in the foreground. But these things do not all match up, and, you know, something about it, it just—my suspension of disbelief, in that moment, dissipated.

JOSH: Interesting, because I picked up on the same thing—I often do. I've never mentioned it before, and on this one I even wrote it down, and I finally decided to attribute it to my having been on too many Oval Office sets, and having spent four years on this one—because something about it bothers me even through the windows.

HRISHI: Right. Maybe it's because there was no dialogue or anything else going on to distract from it, I'm just sitting there, taking it in. And I'm looking, and I was like, "oh..." But I do like this episode

JOSH: Oh, no, I do too—it's a terrific episode. Even if the outside looks like the inside.

HRISHI: There are some really funny lines in this episode. One of my favorites is when Sam is trying to convince everyone to let him speak to his friend, Kevin Kahn.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SAM: He's a friend of mine.*

*BRUNO: I don't care if he did your bris.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: Oh, that's a great line.

HRISHI: That's a great line.

JOSH: That's a fantastic line. Patrick Breen plays Kevin Kahn. Patrick Breen is a very talented theater and film actor, he's also a writer. He was in—I guess he still is, probably—a member of the Naked Angels Theater Company. I've just known of him for a long time, and I've met him a time or two, back when I lived in New York, in theater days. And he's one of those people whose work I particularly enjoy, and I'm particularly aware of, because I feel like he gets a lot of roles that I pursue. I think we're in that same kind of zone, and a lot of times when I don't get something, you know, I like to find out who did, and I'm like "Oh, Patrick Breen." Yeah, he's great.

HRISHI: I most recently enjoyed him in another political show, Brain Dead.

JOSH: Oh, and he was in Madam Secretary, as well.

HRISHI: Oh, I haven't watched Madam Secretary.

JOSH: It's funny how Hollywood—and he's played quite a variety of roles, and has a great range—but sometimes when you do something, people think of you for that same sort of arena.

HRISHI: Yeah, in Brain Dead he plays, like, a brilliant, but maybe slightly socially inept, really intense policy genius. And he's—part of the way, they figure stuff out, as he's poring through pages of legislation.

JOSH: And is Brain Dead the one with the incredibly weird sci-fi premise?

HRISHI: Yes, it's created by the folks who made The Good Wife.

JOSH: It sounded fantastic to me, and somehow I missed it. I should go back and watch it.

HRISHI: Yeah, I really enjoyed it. Another part that really made me laugh—well, I should say it made me laugh somewhat because of our podcast. When President Bartlet is describing the War of the Roses to Leo, it sounded like the intro to the first episode of Josh and Hrish's "Hrishi Ruins a Musical" podcast.

JOSH: Trying to sell them on this multi-hour affair.

HRISHI: Yeah. He says:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*LEO: How long is it?*

*BARTLET: I don't know, four or five hours, maybe? You'll be fine.*

*LEO: They do all the Henrys?*

*BARTLET: They take all the Henrys, they do a thing, they call it War of the Roses. I'm told by those that saw it in London it's spectacular. Catholic Charities brought out a Broadway theater, we're going to go, we're going to make some money.*

*LEO: Everything was fine except the part where we go.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: That's good. We can play that at the beginning of each episode of our new podcast.

HRISHI: Mmm-hmm.

JOSH: My favorite single line of this episode is:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*TOBY: Do not eat the fruit.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: Yes! That's so good!

JOSH: It's a really funny line, and very well-delivered by Richard Schiff.

HRISHI: I had it noted along with the other lines about adventure eating—the moose, the jellyfish, but no fruit.

JOSH: No fruit. You're no longer welcome to eat the fruit.

HRISHI: "Do not eat the fruit." It's so well-delivered.

JOSH: On the dramatic side, one of my favorite lines was Leo saying to the President:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*LEO: Mr. President, I want you to start getting yourself into a mental place where you can order an unidentified plane shot down.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I really liked the idea of—it was just a great sort of sobering line—and I like the idea of prepping, like understanding the psychology, and understanding his friend, and what it would take to get him to a point where he can make that kind of call.

HRISHI: Right, because it has to be a split-second decision.

JOSH: Yes. I'm going to get you started now, because you gotta to be ready at a moment's notice to make that call.

HRISHI: Yeah. C.J. has a line that I also really like when she's talking about the junior prom, and she asks Carol, "why did I do that, why did I keep correcting him?" You know, the older brother thing. And before Carol can even respond, she says:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*C.J.: Never mind. It was obviously some kind of left brain hip check; I'll take care of it.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: And the "I'll take care of it,"—it almost seems like—it's a line that we've heard in The West Wing, where someone has to go speak to somebody else, and like, set them straight, or whatever. But here, it's C.J. talking about her own brain. She's like, "I'm going to go in there and sort it all out."

JOSH: Yeah, that is very funny. I also like, earlier in that conversation, Carol insta-reads C.J. and knows exactly why—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's a great delivery by Melissa Fitz explaining it.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*CAROL: You were uncomfortable with the image he had in his head of someone who is old enough to be the aunt of someone going to the prom, and you didn't want to be charged for the extra year.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: It's a great line, and I like the way Melissa delivered it. She knows the woman for whom she works very, very well.

HRISHI: Mhm.

JOSH: And they're friends.

HRISHI: And they're friends in real life, which makes it even better. Now that I know, that, I like that scene even more.

JOSH: They're dear friends. I like the scene early on also between Special Agent Simon

Donovan and C.J. where we're getting this sort of sparring, but lightly comical, flirty sparring, and then it ends with "I'll see you at home!" They're like an old married couple already.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I thought that was a cute little run.

HRISHI: Back to Patrick Breen for a second.

JOSH: Oh, please.

HRISHI: And Kevin Kahn—I feel so bad for Sam throughout this whole episode, again because I know what's coming now when I watch it. I just have this little bit of dread in the pit of my stomach the whole time because he is just marching headlong into this trap the whole time. But then also it's countered a little bit by the fact that literally everybody told him not to do it.

JOSH: Well, that's what I was going to say. I really don't feel bad for him because he's warned, and warned, and warned, and warned, and then this guy plays him. It's like, dude!

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Even if you couldn't see that coming from a mile away, or maybe be a little suspicious about the timing of this lunch meat, everyone told you not to—I don't know that they had lunch meat, I wasn't looking that closely. Everyone said, "terrible idea, don't meet with this guy."

HRISHI: Yeah. It recalls the line "If you're dumb, surround yourself with smart people, and if you're smart, surround yourself with smart people who disagree with you." And Sam is clearly—I know that's from Sports Night, not from West Wing, but still—Sam is clearly a smart guy, and he's surrounded by smart people who disagree with him. Maybe he ought to listen.

JOSH: Right. I do like also when Bruno comes in, when Bruno finds out, I think, from C.J. about the leak, and he comes in to confront Sam, and Sam kind of nobly is like:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SAM: I agree this is bad, and I take full responsibility.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: As if he feels like it might end there.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: By making this grand gesture. "No, this is on me," and Bruno's like, "Okay, this is so much worse than you realize, just saying that's not going to do it."

HRISHI: Sam doing the dumb thing despite everybody telling him not to reminded me of Josh at the beginning of the season with the release about tobacco, going after Congress, when he said “I’m going to do this,” and Joey, and Sam, and everybody’s like, “That’s a really dumb idea. You shouldn’t do it.” And he’s like, “I’m going to do it.”

JOSH: Yeah, that’s right. Very similar. These guys are a bit headstrong.

HRISHI: Yeah. Although, in Josh’s defense, before everybody told him not to in Season Three, at the end of Season Two, Leo did tell him that he should—you remember, Leo’s like “Light ‘em up.”

JOSH: Ah... That’s a good point.

HRISHI: That kind of gets dropped between the seasons, and then Josh feels so bad for having messed up. I’m like “Ah, Leo’s also to blame.”

JOSH: That is true. Patrick Breen is great, I think, also.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It’s fun to watch.

HRISHI: I hate him so much! He’s so hateable.

JOSH: Yeah, well, he just does such a turn. It’s just the initial meeting with Sam, where even Sam thinks this guy must be pissed about the whole open mic moment, and he just completely sheds it off, we laughed, and then later:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SAM: You said you laughed!*

*KEVIN: You think I laughed?*

*SAM: You said “You think I laughed?”*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: When he’s so ready, you know, he does what he does. He’s got to know eventually he’s going to have a face-to-face with Sam, and I like this dramatic meetup in the rain. Sam, actually, also lightly assaults him.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He gives him a real push in the chest.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And Patrick Breen is having none of it. He's so ready to have this confrontation and I like how he just lays it out.

HRISHI: And Sam tries to get the last word in:

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SAM: Is it going to happen again?*

*KEVIN: I think it will.*

*SAM: Yeah?*

*KEVIN: Yeah.*

*SAM: I think it will too.*

[End excerpt.]

HRISHI: Mmm, you lost this one, Sam.

JOSH: Yeah. Sometimes you've got to take the loss.

HRISHI: Yeah. And Kevin Kahn walks away knowing he is just—I mean, he destroyed Sam in this one, there's no question.

JOSH: Something that I couldn't quite figure out: when Sam calls Kevin Kahn back to set up the meeting, Sam suggests a place and Kevin says, "No, let's go to this other place. I'll see you there at one," and hangs up. Now, is that part of—was there somebody there observing them during the meeting? Was that the setup?

HRISHI: No, I don't think that someone was there watching him. It's that he leaked that they had a lunch to the press.

JOSH: I just noticed, it's a little moment that's stuck in my head. Why did Kevin have a specific place he needed them to meet? Or maybe I'm just trying to make something out of something that was just a throwaway.

HRISHI: Mmm. I think that it's not that someone was there observing him. What Bruno says is "He leaked it to the press. He's got you in favor of the pledge, and you gave him the tape." So to be like, "oh, you're in favor of the pledge" is, one, just a misrepresentation of what actually happened in the meeting.

JOSH: That he could have done without having dinner—or lunch—altogether. He could have

just made it up, because it's kind of a falsehood anyway.

HRISHI: That's true too, but I guess there's just enough truth to this that he can sort of manipulate it how he wants. You know, if he's got the tape that Sam gave him, and he says "Oh, and he said this." Now if Sam tries to deny it, they'll be like, "Well, you did have lunch with the guy, right?" So, I think it's less that someone was there, and more that he just used the info as a way to seed the tape into the news cycle.

JOSH: Right. Another little thing that's interesting, but that goes kind of nowhere is that little meeting that Donna—there's that meeting, maybe Donna and Margaret are having, and saying-

HRISHI: Yes, with the secretaries about the salaries.

JOSH: Right. "This information has been leaked, as it is every year." Does that ever get readdressed?

HRISHI: It does not.

JOSH: It's interesting, I find—

HRISHI: It's kind of nice, though.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. That's one of the nice things, is where not everything leads to something that gets paid off, where it's just—this is the life of, there's all sorts of things going on every day. But it was funny, I kept thinking, "When is this gonna—when are we going to revisit this, and who does make more than whom?" and all that.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's also a moment in that scene I really love. At one point, while the camera is moving, while Margaret is speaking, after Donna's had a line, she takes a drink from a bottle of water. I don't know what it is about it, but it did not feel like acting, or anything. Whatever the thing was I was talking about with the set earlier? It was the opposite of that. It just felt so unconsidered.

JOSH: Huh, I've got to go back and look at that moment.

HRISHI: Yeah, it felt so unconsidered it could only have been, like, a really beautifully deliberate acting choice? I don't know why I love that so much, but there's something about the way she drinks. It's not like this little sip. She takes, like, a big swig. It puts her in a place—it just reinforces that she's kind of like a leader among this group of people she's addressing. She's sort of sitting casually, and she can take a swig from this plastic bottle of water.

JOSH: No, I'm actually intrigued, and I will go back and look at it because I always find, in the other direction, a lot of people like to do actor eating where they, for lack of a better phrase, make a meal out of it when they shouldn't. And there's a whole thing where it's almost like an acting crutch, like "I'm eating, and I'm-" and it's like a presentation. It's not so easy to eat

naturally on film and drink, so I'll be curious to look at that.

HRISHI: Brad Pitt does a lot of eating on screen.

JOSH: Well, it is funny, there are all sorts of acting crutches. When I was an undergraduate theater studies major, every scene it would be like, "I think this guy would be smoking!" because it's just somehow easier—

HRISHI: Something to do with your hands.

JOSH: Yeah, something to do, exactly, that makes you feel kind of grounded, cool. I think acting can also be that.

HRISHI: That's the part that I find most baffling about being on camera in any form, whether you're acting, something scripted or not. What do you do with your hands?

JOSH: It is difficult.

HRISHI: Yeah. And I start to think about it, and then I think about, "What does anyone do with their hands at any time in life?" Like, forget about acting, just, like, what do you do with your hands?

JOSH: Well, that's the thing: in real life, you don't think about it. As soon as you get in front of a camera, you start thinking about, "What do I do with my hands? Where do they go?" Yeah, eating and drinking is interesting, 'cause i mean, her decision to drink, then, also means—if she's built like me—every five takes she has to stop and go pee. That's maybe too much information. How about this? There's a brief mention, I think in the Toby with the network heads scene—oh, two things! One, Toby is an errant horndog: he flirts with everybody.

HRISHI: Oh, that's right! He has that very long look with that woman at the beginning of the, uh-

JOSH: Yes, she says something—I think it interchanges, you know, "We come directly to you if we need more floor passes?" And he just stares her down, and with a little smile is like, "Absolutely." Like, you dog! You're in a meeting, calm down! You just met her! What is it?!

HRISHI: Well, I don't think they've just met.

JOSH: I think they've met before, I agree with you. But I mean, once you make eye contact with any woman, he's going for it.

HRISHI: I think that it was mutual, though.

JOSH: I agree, it did feel like something was there.

HRISHI: There's some, yeah...

JOSH: Oh, Toby. But then later, I think, in another, or later in the scene with them, there's talk of Bryan v. McKinley and the Cross of Gold speech.

HRISHI: Uh-huh. Yeah, that's with Sam and Kevin Kahn.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*KEVIN: When was the last time we saw a genuine dialogue?*

*SAM: McKinley v. Bryan.*

*KEVIN: So what if instead the Cross of Gold speech-*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: There's a quick, brief mention of McKinley v. Bryan, and the Cross of Gold speech, both of which sounded—I mean, I know McKinley v. Bryan—the Cross of Gold speech was something I'd heard of, but didn't really remember much of, but it's pretty fascinating. It's considered one of the great convention speeches of all time. It's the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, 1896. William Jennings Bryan—to whom I think my wife might be distantly related—apparently locked up the nomination with his impassioned speech for bimetallism, as opposed to the gold standard.

HRISHI: Uh-huh.

JOSH: And it's just a whole- And this is where we get into just an absolute sphere about which I know very little, and when I read about it I still walk away understanding very little about it: you know, how a financial system works. And apparently, Hamilton had also espoused a dual silver-and-gold standard, and tinkering with it so that it reflected how gold being worth 15 times more than silver... Anyway, I guess the famous line is “you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” And this roused the delegates into voting for William Jennings Bryan. He then lost to McKinley, and of course we did go on the gold standard, but I thought it was interesting.

HRISHI: Yeah. Your wife is related to William Jennings Bryan?

JOSH: I may have made that up. I'll have to get back to you on that.

HRISHI: I'm just wondering if she might have inherited the wind.

JOSH: Very nice. I knew you were working toward something.

HRISHI: Something.

JOSH: Som'in!

HRISHI: I telegraph real badly. Let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we'll talk to

Mark Harmon.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: And now, we're joined by Mark Harmon. Mark Harmon, of course, plays Special Agent Simon Donovan. We're going to talk to him about the entire experience of his time on The West Wing, which means that there are going to be some spoilers. As you know, we usually try and avoid spoilers on the show, but in the interest of having a complete conversation we wanted to make sure we talked about everything. So if you haven't seen all of Season Three, you might want to wait and come back later after you've finished the season to hear this interview.

MARK: It's going to really seem like an Allison Janney fan letter, 'cause I worked pretty exclusively with her, but what a gift. You know, it was fun.

JOSH: Huh. You guys were very, very good together. I re-watched, actually, your last episode, and it actually brought tears to my eyes. It's very moving.

MARK: It's really good writing, and obviously you know all that, but I can tell these stories. Aaron asked me to lunch, like, the first day I got there, to eat a sandwich with him, which really meant you kind of just sit there and talked because he didn't talk much. But then you get the words back, and they sound like you, and go, "Oh, I get it."

JOSH: Yeah. He's pretty good that way; he's like a sponge. What was your first interaction with him ever? How did the job come about? We've heard tell that there was talk of your joining the cast earlier for a different arc and a different character. Is that true?

MARK: As I remember it, Josh, yeah. They had come to me maybe a year before about playing a writer who was, you know, kind of masquerading as a sports writer, but he wasn't, and I was excited by the idea of it, and then the next thing I heard was Aaron had decided to cross that character off the show, or whatever.

JOSH: Altogether.

MARK: But anyway, the bottom line is that a year later they came back with this Simon Donovan thing and it wasn't really sketched out. I mean, he just said, "You're a Secret Service assignment to C.J., and it's real, it's a real threat, and we don't really know where this is going yet. And there's one scene," and that's what I saw, and based on that is what I came to work on.

HRISHI: Right. The very first appearance is just the last few minutes of the episode "Enemies, Foreign and Domestic".

[West Wing Episode 3.19 excerpt]

*SIMON: This guy isn't small time, Ms. Cregg. You're being hunted. By the way, I can't guarantee anything except to say that if you're dead, chances are I am too.*

[End excerpt.]

MARK: Yeah, that's the first appearance, but the scene I had was the very first in the next episode, the big walk-and-talk through six rooms and 300 extras. Yeah, that was the first scene I shot there.

JOSH: That's a rough first assignment.

MARK: Well, you know all about that, don't you?

JOSH: Indeed, indeed I do.

MARK: And you're working with Allison, and she never makes a mistake, so.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*C.J.: There's no way you're letting me walk out the door, so what is it we're doing?*

*SIMON: I'm sorry?*

*C.J.: What's your plan for me?*

*SIMON: I don't have a plan.*

*C.J.: You're going to let me drive myself home?*

*SIMON: No. I've got your spark plug. Is that what you meant?*

*C.J.: You've got my spark plug?*

[End excerpt.]

MARK: Yeah, it was a fast train to get on, and it took me a while, and then, the thing is, once you get on, you don't ever want to leave, you know.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

MARK: But I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed her, and really enjoyed sitting down early with Aaron over a sandwich, and listening—really, doing all the talking—and then he starts getting pages and the character starts sounding like you; he's just got that ear. Just great people to work with, and really, a different pace to the entire production of what that show was, at least for me.

HRISHI: Did you already know the show? Were you a fan? Had you been watching it before you started?

MARK: I knew the show, and I certainly admired some of the actors that I kind of had a chance to meet when I was there, but I didn't work with any of them. I really pretty much just worked

with Allison.

HRISHI: So your first day on set, you had to do this crazy, complicated walk-and-talk. Did you get a chance to feel like you'd get to settle in?

MARK: No, I didn't. I felt thankful that we eventually seemed to get it well enough for people to say "print and move on." But I just remember a lot of mistakes, and me making them, and everybody just being incredibly patient. And I remember, you know, specifically working with Allison, who is, as you know, crazy brave and just completely in the moment and listening every time and doing different things every time that you might only see once. You know, I mean, I was doing most of the talking, but the difference was you were really moving through three or four different rooms with a hundred extras and, you know, three and a half pages of dialogue. And I'd done that on St. Elsewhere, I'd done that on Chicago Hope, but not to that degree, and not as specific as that is, and that material is. And that's another thing: when you got there, you learned quickly that if your character coughed, that was scripted, and you learn to appreciate the word like that, and that was part of it, too. But yeah, I loved getting on the train, and I loved once you got on, hopefully staying for awhile. Which I didn't know at the beginning.

JOSH: So you didn't know where it was going to end, or—

MARK: No.

JOSH: How or how many episodes, or anything like that?

MARK: No idea, no.

JOSH: Interesting. One of the things I was about to say that I love about your performance is, first of all, you're very convincing as a Secret Service agent. I mean, you've got the thousand yard stare, you've got the looking around while you're still talking to a person. Was there any—did you get any training, or is that just all on your own?

MARK: They actually—I asked, and they hooked me up with a Secret Service agent who had run Nancy Reagan's detail at the White House. And he was great; he's still a friend. In fact, at the end, when my character left, he was the first guy to call me and say "You've always got to look for a second gun! What were you thinking?"

JOSH: I was wondering about that!

MARK: It was scripted, pal. I, you know-

JOSH: "That one's not on me!"

MARK: But he was pretty insistent that I had messed up, yeah.

JOSH: That's funny. My feeling is there's also a fair amount of blame on the Korean grocer who might have given you a heads-up.

MARK: Oh, interesting!

JOSH: You know, the guy didn't even—he didn't even flash his eyes in the direction of the second assailant.

MARK: Yeah, that's exactly right. And we shot that in New York, which was fun—that was a whole different thing. But Allison had told me early on—early, early on, on maybe the third day—she had come up to me one day and said “They're going to kill you.” I said, “What?” She said, “No, they're going to kill you,” and I said, “What makes you think that?” And she said “We're getting along too well. they're going to kill you.”

HRISHI: (laughs)

JOSH: C.J. can't have nice things.

MARK: She's fun, though, isn't she? I mean, you worked with her a lot.

JOSH: Oh, she's wonderful to work with. But, so, what I love about—you're playing a, by profession, buttoned-up character, who's got a primary focus that always has to be at the forefront.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*SIMON: I'm required to call you "ma'am" or "Ms. Cregg." There are rules and regulations.*

*C.J.: Okay.*

[End excerpt.]

JOSH: But you guys have a subtle chemistry from the get-go and flirtation that plays very nicely. That must be difficult.

MARK: Ahh, it's just fun, you know? I mean, Aaron wrote all that, and I'm trying to think back as to where that started to change, and it probably started to change in that scene we did in the shooting range.

HRISHI: Which is one of my favorite scenes of the entire series.

JOSH: It's great.

MARK: Well, it's such a well-written scene, and a well-directed scene—Tommy directed that episode, and Allison, you know, just as a fan, when you're an actor and you're working opposite someone, and you watch what people do, and you just go, “Wow, is that a brave choice,” or “Wow, well look at that!” And then you see the finished product, and it all works, just all really works. But, I think that was the first time that you got to see just a little bit of who each of them were, a little bit away from the job. Just kind of enjoying each other, even for a small, small

moment.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*C.J.: I thought you'd use those little outlines of people.*

*SIMON: We have those too.*

*C.J.: I'm thinking if someone's coming for you, they probably don't have a bullseye on them.*

*SIMON: They do if I'm guarding you.*

[End excerpt.]

MARK: And then there were other beats like that, too, as it went on, but I mean, this whole thing kind of went over and out inside three episodes, right?

HRISHI: Yeah, three. I mean, four if you include that last scene.

MARK: Yeah, about three episodes. But maybe Allison knew; I didn't know. I mean, no one told me this is for three episodes, no one said, you know, you're going to be there and leave then, or you're going to stay for awhile, you know. But I enjoyed my time there, and I enjoyed working with that company, and with those people, and certainly with that writer/creator. And it remains one of those things that you choose to do, or have an opportunity to do, that you're only thankful for.

HRISHI: How long was the experience for you in terms of production schedule? Was this a month, a couple of months of your life, or longer?

MARK: My memory is a month, a month and a half, maybe? Maybe not even that.

HRISHI: So pretty brief.

MARK: Yeah, pretty brief.

HRISHI: You've done so many shows. NCIS, you're now starting your fifteenth season, I think?

MARK: That's what they say.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That is remarkable.

HRISHI: Your list of credits is so long, but do people still approach you about The West Wing?

MARK: I do hear it. It's a character people remember. And people who are fans of that show, as you know, they come out of everywhere, and so you do hear about that. You do hear—people

remember the name of that character. That's a treat, because it means you brought someone along, which is nice. But, like I say, I give so much credit to working with Allison and also having those words to say, and that doesn't happen every day. So that's also the other part of it, which is, I think we're all better when we're working with better people, and saying better words.

JOSH: And it wasn't long after working on this, I imagine, that you started your incredible run on NCIS. Is that correct?

MARK: Well, I've heard stories about that. I've heard stories about people trying to cast roles, and different roles, and not thinking people were right for certain roles, and they see you do another role, and because you did that role, then therefore they think there's a connection between who on NCIS Gibbs ended up being. But whether any of that's true or not, I'm not sure. I just know that I did do West Wing, and then there was some time when I was doing other stuff, and then this opportunity came along, and I don't know that anybody thought when those presents happened that of those sixteen shows debuting that this was going to be the one that, you know, ended up being the number one show in the world.

JOSH: It's unreal. What is that experience—I'm just going to fantasize here for a minute, live vicariously through you—what is the experience of playing the same character for 300+ episodes?

MARK: You know what, Josh, it's like anything. If you're challenged and if they're changing it, and if the writing room is excited, it's a show like any show, maybe. In certainly any show that's gone along as long as this one has. The writing room has to be invigorated, you know. The writers have to like each other, and they have to be excited about what they are putting out there, and if they are, then that infuses in the character. And I've never felt bored here. There's a lot of people here who do the work every day that I'm part of, but sometimes it looks a lot easier than it is.

JOSH: Yeah, I'll bet.

HRISHI: Was there anything in the time when you were working on The West Wing that felt like a new challenge for you as an actor?

MARK: You know, I was doing a scene with Allison one day where I had all the dialogue and I was following her through three or four different rooms, it seemed to me. And my job was just to keep talking about the detail and all the stuff that was going to change in her life because I was there now, and how she had to take this seriously, which she didn't at the beginning.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*C.J.: You can't come in the briefing room.*

*SIMON: A crowded room where anyone can get credentialed, and you're up at the podium? No, I'm pretty sure I'll be there.*

[End excerpt.]

MARK: We were doing this for quite a while, and in one of the takes, only one of the takes, she bent over her desk to sign something. It's just a piece of business she was doing, and I, of course, was supposed to be right behind her, talking the whole time, wherever she went. And in this instance, she bent over but I had gotten too close to her when she bent over, so her butt was right in my crotch, and right in the middle of the take, right in the middle of the take. Allison just connected that and turned back and just gave me a look. And then just kept right on going. And that, to me—even though it's a funny story—but that to me felt like arrival time. That felt like, "Okay, now I'm in, now we're here, and now this is working."

JOSH: That's great.

HRISHI: Was there one part that was—a memory like that—that was really tough for you, like one part of the experience that maybe wasn't so rosy, or just was particularly difficult?

MARK: You know, I talked a little bit earlier about the shooting range scene that we did, and at the end of that scene it's about many things. But, you know, she shoots the Magnum handgun and goes down, and my character shoots, and shoots well 'cause that's what he does, and the bet at the end of it is, well, I win, and you have to say something nice to me.

[West Wing Episode 3.20 excerpt]

*C.J.: I like that you're tall.*

*SIMON: You do?*

*C.J.: It makes me feel more feminine.*

[End excerpt.]

MARK: And she does almost like a 1920s flapper thing. Do you know what I'm talking about?

HRISHI: Yeah, with her hand, and her hair.

MARK: Yeah, she puts her hand up to her face—

JOSH: Exactly.

MARK: And fawns over it, right? And I remember when we were shooting that, that came out of nowhere. She just did that—that's what she did, alright? And as an actor, you look at your acting partner in a situation like that and you go, "Wow, that's a choice," right? And I remember Tommy just going "Great, we're moving on," and we went through that and then you see the finished product of it, and you just marvel at how good that is, and what choices those are, and how those actors have an opportunity every day to get in there and swing that hard. And I, listen, I recognized early on that being there was special, and I kind of thought it would be just because I

was a fan of the show to start with, but everybody there got it. Everybody. The crew got it. And it was nice to be on board that train for a little while, and certainly nice to be toeing a mark opposite her.

HRISHI: That's so great.

JOSH: Have you seen her since? You ever run into her?

MARK: Yeah, I actually do, because we both do CBS shows, you know? So I don't do a lot of the up-front stuff anymore, but I did see her a lot. And I don't know her on any kind of personal level at all, but I'm a fan, and I always say hi to her, and she's always friendly. And, you know, I like her a lot.

JOSH: Yeah, you guys were terrific together. There's something very special there that you can't manufacture. There's good chemistry there.

MARK: Well, you know, sometimes it happens, and sometimes you act it, right?

JOSH: That's right. Sometimes, you've got to fake it.

MARK: Yeah, well, and sometimes faking it works, you know? But then sometimes, it's just more easy than it reasonably should be, you know? And I really enjoyed working with her, and whatever I thought it was in the beginning, it turned out to be something much deeper than that, and longer than that, and more special than that. And I thought it was going to be special to start, so that's going somewhere, and that's a credit to the words and to Aaron. You know, he's a rare bird.

HRISHI: What about the scene where you guys kiss for the first time, when you're on the sidewalk?

MARK: Uh-huh. That was in New York, four o'clock in the morning, yep.

HRISHI: Oh, it was?

JOSH: That's romantic.

MARK: Yeah, it was a long day.

HRISHI: We had joked in the past that there are so few moments of romance on *The West Wing* that a scene like that, where two people actually kiss, it's basically the same as a full-blown sex scene in other series.

JOSH: That's right.

MARK: Yeah. It's true. And you were certainly there longer than me, you know. But, you look at that, you see it, and you didn't see it with any huge advance. You got it the week before, or

whatever it is. And as I remember, there were read-throughs, correct?

JOSH: Yeah. Sure.

MARK: And those read-throughs were high-level. I mean, people came with performance-level read-throughs.

JOSH: It was high pressure.

MARK: And people who dared sit at that table and didn't? Learned quickly they were in trouble.

JOSH: That's right.

MARK: Sitting at the table with that cast, and in my case Lily Tomlin was there, and there were a bunch of guest stars there too that were a bit daunting. It was a performance-level read-through. But when you go to do it, when you fly to New York, and you're out on the street, and there's all that being taken into it, it just made it all pretty special and all pretty memorable at the same time, because it was very different. You had very tight schedules, you didn't have as many takes as you did when you were in the studio, obviously, and you had to get it quickly. And my memory of it is we didn't do a lot of takes there. We shot outside, we were right in the middle of the city, and there pretty early in the morning doing all that.

HRISHI: I wonder if, you know, the chemistry that you guys found naturally, and that came to you two easily, if that automatically meant that something like a moment like that kiss—you know, if you also get a sense that because you guys are able to act opposite each other well—that you'd have this physical chemistry onscreen, that that would translate too, or if these are two separate phenomena?

MARK: You know, my memory is that we never talked about it; we just played the scene. You know Allison, personally, because you worked with her, but when you see her, when she shows up to work in the morning, she's the one with the skinny jeans and the crop top and the curly hair, you know, and then she transforms into this character. And there's a big difference between who she is, and who she comes to work as, and who she shows up to play, and that's one of the great gifts of her as an actress, period, is that she's a chameleon in her performances in whatever she's doing. She's got a daunting range. I mean, she can do anything.

JOSH: Truly, yeah. It's interesting to hear that you were just getting pages the way we always were, whenever we did the show, at the last minute. Because it seems that the last three or four episodes are written playing longball in a way that he doesn't usually; it seems really well-conceived, and as if he had it all mapped out, but I guess you were still just doing the show the way we always did the show.

MARK: I remember having a table read for that last one. I don't know that I remember a table read before that. Maybe there was one, maybe there wasn't, but I remember being at one table read with the whole cast and some other guest stars.

JOSH: Yeah, that's usually how it happened, one at a time. But there was no two episodes ahead, or this is what's going to happen in the next one.

MARK: No, no, no.

JOSH: So you got none of that.

MARK: No. And there was no knowledge of any kind of arc going in, to where the character was going, other than a verbal commitment that there was a threat on her, and it's real, and this is serious.

JOSH: Well, you're very generous. Thank you for your time, and for the memories.

MARK: Oh, are you kidding? Come on. I loved meeting you even though we haven't a chance to shake hands.

JOSH: I know, I'd like to do that sometime. This really is one of the, I would say, one of the most well-loved subplots to the show and I think it's because of what Hrishika was saying, which is that it was a nice little departure from the world where *The West Wing* usually lives, and we really got a personal romance. I mean, it ended as it did, but it really stands out to fans of the show, so it was something special.

MARK: I appreciate you saying so. I appreciate you thinking of that.

JOSH: Alright. That's all we've got for this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. We hope you enjoyed it. We hope you plan to come on back and enjoy the next episode. In the meantime, if you have a statement, a question, or just a drawing to share with us, go to [thewestwingweekly.com](http://thewestwingweekly.com) and leave it there.

HRISHIKA: You can also find us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

JOSH: We want to thank Zach McNeese and Margaret Miller for their contributions to this episode.

HRISHIKA: And thanks to the Knight Foundation, without whom, we would not have *Radiotopia*.

JOSH: Oh, *Radiotopia*.

HRISHIKA: A collection of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts. We're a part of it, as are a bunch of other great podcasts, and you can find out about all of them at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

JOSH: Of course, between now and our next episode, you can listen to any number of episodes of Hrishika's other fabulous podcast, *Song Exploder*, But am I wrong, or was *Song Exploder* up for an award yesterday?

HRISHIKA: Yeah, *Song Exploder* won best music podcast.

JOSH: You don't even ment—you don't even say anything? Is it the kind of thing where you have greater success than a friend, and so you feel like you can't talk about your victories, because it will make them feel bad?

HRISHI: No, it's just—I don't think it's the kind of thing that's necessarily going to make someone listen to it if they weren't already planning to.

JOSH: Why not? That's what awards are all about, is plugging and promoting. And just because I'm on a non-award winning, not even ever nominated, never going to happen, podcast—

HRISHI: Oh, we were nominated!

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Yeah! We were nominated for a different category—I forget which category.

JOSH: What are you talking about? You don't tell me anything! I'm an award nominee? I would have made a huge thing out of this. I would have traveled to—where was it?

HRISHI: It was in Anaheim.

JOSH: By God, I would have driven there.

HRISHI: That's right, we were nominated for Best Podcast in the category of TV and film.

JOSH: Alright, well, if you want the potential winners to be there, you have to let them know they've been nominated.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah. You should start your own awards ceremony—the Josh Malina Awards, and just give them to whatever you want.

JOSH: I'll think about that. Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

MARK: What's next?

[Outro music]