

The West Wing Weekly
4.17: "Red Haven's on Fire"
Guest: Senator Tammy Duckworth and Lauren Schmidt Hissrich

[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 Red Haven's on Fire. It's episode 17 of Season Four.

JOSH: The teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin. The story by Mark Goffman and Debora Cahn. This episode was directed by Alex Graves and it first aired on the 26th day of the second month of the year 2003.

HRISHI: Josh doesn't like to say February for everyone who's wondering why.

JOSH: It's not that I don't like to say it! I don't think I'm great at it and I'd rather just publicly...

HRISHI: ...Play to your strengths!

JOSH: Exactly. I try to do things I'm better at, publicly.

HRISHI: Today, we're joined by a special guest, Lauren Schmidt Hissrich. You may remember Lauren's name from our last episode. She had the story by co-credit on "The California 47th", the Part One with "Red Haven's on Fire" being the Part Two. I had asked Lauren when we should speak to her, whether it should be for Part One, for Part Two, and we agreed that Part Two would make more sense because then we could talk about everything that happens in the arc. Thank you so much for joining us!

LAUREN: Thanks for having me, guys! I'm so excited!

JOSH: Hooray.

LAUREN: Hooray!

JOSH: It's good to see you. It's been a long time.

LAUREN: It has been a long time, Josh.

HRISHI: Before we get into how you started on *The West Wing*, I just want to give people a little glimpse into the long list of credits that you've had since then. Most recently, Lauren was a writer on Netflix's *Daredevil* and *The Defenders*, the Marvel series, and was a co-executive producer on both of them. And coming up, she's working on an adaptation of *The Witcher* series, the books and the resulting video game adaptation, turning that into a Netflix series too.

LAUREN: Yes. I just turned in the pilot of that last Friday, so we are on our way.

JOSH: Congratulations!

LAUREN: Thank you!

JOSH: It's really exciting. That's awesome! So, how does that work? What's the next step for that? Now you sit back and wait for...

LAUREN: Notes. Lots and lots of notes. You know, it's a really big project for Netflix and it's a very worldwide project for them. It's actually being done internationally, not just sorta for Netflix originals here, local originals. So, there's a big production team on board. They come at it from all different perspectives. There are people that actually worked on the novels. There's people that worked on the books, or on the video games; and obviously, there's Netflix and everyone has a lot of thoughts what the series should be like. So, I'm sure I'll be getting notes really soon. But, it's been a really great process so far, and honestly, starting my career with *The West Wing* and now being in sort of this genre fantasy world, it's been a big, big journey for me.

HRISHI: Well, as someone whose two favorite genres are the political drama of *The West Wing* and comic book superhero stuff, thank you for hitting all of the quadrants for me.

LAUREN: Hrishi, you're my audience. You just are.

HRISHI: Thank you.

LAUREN: You are it.

HRISHI: Well, let's go back to the beginning.

JOSH: Speaking of superheroes, let's get an origin story.

HRISHI: Yes, excellent!

LAUREN: Oh, nice! I started on *The West Wing* as an intern [cross talk] during the first season-

JOSH: [cross talk] named Lauren-

LAUREN: -named Lauren!

JOSH: Is that your real name or did Aaron give you the name?

LAUREN: Yes, my real name is Gertrude but I'm not supposed to tell anyone that! So, I started between my junior and senior years of college and I ended up coming out here to visit family that summer. And, I was here for... It was my first time in Los Angeles ever! And, I was here for about six weeks and I got bored pretty quickly and my aunt's best friend said "Hey, do you want to come answer phones at my office?" And I was like "Sure, why not!" and that office actually

was *The West Wing*. So, I worked for the line producer that first year, just basically answering phones and getting coffees and getting lunch and-

HRISHI: That was your summer job?

LAUREN: That was my summer job. I got paid no money and it fully changed my life. I mean, it truly did because one, I was a 20 year old from Ohio and I was like "Where am I?" The Warner Brothers lot and there's George Clooney walking by for *E.R.* It really was not what my normal life was. But more than that, actually, I got to read Aaron's first few scripts. I was there... Obviously, the pilot had already been done... but I was there when episodes two, three, and four were written and it was incredible and it opened my eyes to this whole new world of writing that I'd never even considered. So, I had to go back and finish my senior year of college but when I graduated, I packed up my car and drove back out and started as a PA on the show officially in the second season and then I never left. I was there for all seven seasons.

HRISHI: How did you go from being a PA to getting into the writers' room?

LAUREN: You know, *The West Wing* had a really great opportunity that a lot of shows don't have, which is I went from PA to writers' assistant but Aaron had created a researching position because the show was so research intensive and Aaron wasn't one to be on Google in the middle of the day. And so, really, a lot of things came my direction and the incredible thing about being a researcher is that it really shapes your story mind because so often, when a writer comes to you and asks for something, they don't quite know what they're asking for. They're not saying "What type of currency do they use in Armenia?" or whatever. What they're saying is "I need to get to the end of this story. Can you tell me a few different ways to get there?" you know, through sort of government channels or through diplomatic channels. If we're doing an international story. So, a lot of it was just about me figuring out facts for Aaron or for the other writers but as a sort of burgeoning writer myself, learning how to tell stories and sort of what I would need to build a plot. I mean, it's the best education I could ever ask for and probably, by the way, remains one of my favorite jobs. I got to talk to really interesting people. *The West Wing* was so popular, you could cold-call almost anyone, anywhere and get someone on the phone to talk to you. It was such a great position and for me was a real stepping stone to being a writer! And then, I became a staff writer in Season Six on the show.

JOSH: So, when you were doing that original research... It's interesting. You were researching with an eye towards material that would provide good stories. Would you then explicitly pitch a story or would you say "This is what I've come up with" and leave it to Aaron to sort of divine what direction he might go with?

LAUREN: Oh, Aaron divined all directions! Researching under Aaron was a very specific task. It was very sort of goal-oriented and he always knew the goal. I'm sure you guys have discussed this before. It's even reading some of these scripts, "Red Haven's on Fire", for instance, was published and shot as a 'white script'. It only had one draft. It never had any revisions.

HRISHI: Because if you have revisions, they change. It goes from white, then there's pink and green and blue or something like that?

LAUREN: Yep. White, blue, pink, yellow-

JOSH: Salmon-

LAUREN: -Salmon, buff, tan, lavender... They actually do go up that high. It's crazy. But this show was shot... This is the words that came out of Aaron's brain and were typed onto paper and no changes were ever made to it before it was shot, which is pretty crazy. But, it's one of the things, with talking about Aaron being goal-oriented, there are things that are planted on page two of the script that come back on page 57 and he always very much knew where he wanted to go with stories or even if he didn't, he would figure it out and make it feel like he did the whole time. So, no, Josh, to answer your question, I didn't really pitch stories those early seasons, definitely not to Aaron 'cause he just had it all in his brain.

HRISHI: In that case, how did you end up with the story credit on "California 47th"? I didn't realize that it wasn't until Season Six that you were a staff writer. I thought by Season Four, you being credited with the 'Story by' that you were already a full-fledged staff writer.

LAUREN: So, one of the things that Aaron did really well- I'm sure you've heard about this from other writers- his system of writing with the writers' room was the use of memos. Have you guys talked about the memos yet?

HRISHI: Yes. We've seen some courtesy Eli Attie.

LAUREN: Yes. Eli was a master memo maker. So, really, we would pitch within the room to Kevin Falls during those years- we would pitch within the room and come up with the best ideas. Generally speaking, Aaron had a concept of what he wanted the show to be about. Is it about Red Mass, is it about California 47th and Sam's campaign, and we would come up with individual character storylines. I tended to be the Donna person. By that point, I think I was about 23 years old and I related to Donna a lot. And, all good writers should write out of their comfort zones but for me, Donna sorta being in this world that she didn't always understand but always wanted to do her best, I could not feel more akin to a character. So really, at that point, we would come up with stories and then it kind of was like whoever's story ended up kind of taking center stage in that episode would get 'Story by' credit and factored into that too, we tried to break it up pretty evenly. So if you look across those seasons, seasons two, three, four, you'll see that credit is broken up between writers pretty evenly because it really was a group job. We were all in the room together all the time.

HRISHI: So even though you were an assistant in the writers' room at first, you still had the privilege of being able to pitch. There wasn't a thing where 'You're just the writers' assistant. You can't be a part of this conversation.'

LAUREN: No, not at all! It was a really egalitarian place and I didn't get credited until I was a researcher and I was actually in the room full-time at that point. But no, Kevin Falls had a great way of running the room which is the same way that I still run rooms which is the best idea wins. It always does.

JOSH: That's good to hear. Aaron being a writer who's arguably obsessed with workplaces, it's good to hear that the kind of workplaces he creates on TV are reflective of the environment he fostered in real life.

LAUREN: For sure! No one that was in the writers' room any of the four years that Aaron was there would ever tell you "He was the boss", "He was the king." He understood the show and had a vision and a passion for the show that it didn't matter how hard the rest of us worked. It was his. So, we were the best support staff that he could have and really, I mean, talk about aligning to *The West Wing*. That really was the job of everyone in the show as well. You have a president that you believe in and you have all these staffers who of course have egos and of course want to do things their own way but really it's all in service to this greater thing. It very much mimics the writers' room that we were in.

HRISHI: Even though the writers' credit on the 'Story by' was broken up somewhat evenly, was there something about "California 47th" and "Red Haven's on Fire", this two-parter, that you felt like you contributed to materially more so than others or is there something about these episodes that feel particularly yours?

LAUREN: Interesting! Going back to the Donna of it all, and I have a couple of thoughts. One of the things that I love in "California 47th" is the Donna/Josh story and Donna going and meeting with the Communist Party leader...

[West Wing Episode 4.16 excerpt]

DONNA: Richard Sutter. I was just wondering what your opinion of [cross talk] Richard Sutter-

IVAN: [cross talk] Well, he's the enemy. That's what he is. I mean, simply put, he is the enemy. This is an Assemblyman who led the charge for-

DONNA: Excellent.

IVAN: Um, I'm sorry?

DONNA: He was. And, I think what you have to say is valuable...

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: ... because it's something that so resonated with me in the way that you're kind of, even when you're joining a writers' room, you're kind of just thrown in out of your depth, and you sort of swim or sink. And that, to me, was kind of a perfect story 'cause all she did was what she was told to do and the fact that Josh continues ragging on her for these two episodes is hilarious. But, more than that actually, just in second reading, when I was reading them and watching them a couple of days ago, I really love the interaction between women in these two stories. There's a couple of times, one where Elsie is protecting the Laurens from Will...

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

ELSIE: And the tax plan's out two days early and you weren't here for the nine months before, so you're cramming it. And you're taking it all out on four defenseless interns who, by the way, think Sputnik's crashed down on their heads too!

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: I think it's really reflective, sort of, for what's going on in culture now but sort of showing how women take care of each other in an office setting. And it happened then and it still happens now. And there are these great moments. There's that one. There's another one where Josh is yelling at someone and Donna basically just says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

DONNA: Don't yell at her!

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: -and the scene [cross talk] moves on. You don't need that line and yet it's sort of the perfect example of, I think, what it's like to be a woman in a workplace. And there's stuff like that that I feel, not that I wrote any of those lines, but I definitely feel like even then, I... There were only a few women in the writers' room at the time and I feel like we all were really sort of paying attention to what it would've been like to be a woman in the White House as well.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: While we're on the topic of women supporting each other, I want to switch gears for a second and play a conversation that I had with Illinois Senator Tammy Duckworth. All season, we've been talking about Andy Wyatt and her pregnancy and some of the controversy that's gone along with it and we start this episode with Toby and Charlie in jail because of their fight with the folks who had something to say to Andy.

[West Wing Episode 4.16 excerpt]

MAN: Miss Wyatt, those kids you got in there deserve a father.

ANDY: I'm sorry, are you talking to me?

MAN: Yes, I was. That's all.

AND: They've got a father, and it's Congresswoman Wyatt, not Miss.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Well, earlier this year, Senator Tammy Duckworth announced that she's going to be giving birth, making her the first U.S. Senator to do so while in office. She also gave birth to a daughter in 2014 when she was a Congresswoman and she was one of only ten

Congresswomen ever to do so. So, she talked to me about changing some of the rules around maternity in the House and Senate and how she's really able to pursue it and partly through the support of the other women who've come before her and serve alongside her.

[Hrishi's interview with Senator Duckworth]

HRISHI: Hi, Senator Duckworth. Thank you so much for speaking to me.

SENATOR: Of course! It's a pleasure to be on.

HRISHI: I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what some of the particular challenges are for someone who's serving in office while pregnant.

SENATOR: Well, I think, like any other pregnant woman, you've got all the physical challenges that come with being pregnant and trying to keep a schedule. Our schedules can be pretty hectic here and a lot of times, you have some very very long days so you certainly have to monitor and maintain your health. But, that happens with anybody who's a working mom. In terms of policies and the like, I am running into some more issues in the Senate than in the House and I think partially because in the House we were very fortunate that Nancy Pelosi was Speaker at one point [cross talk] 'cause she changed some of the rules. So, for example, in the House, she was the one who allowed children to be allowed to be taken onto the floor of the House of Representatives and then, to their credit, Speaker Boehner and Speaker Ryan followed in that new tradition and so, even though I was breastfeeding my daughter, I could still go onto the floor to vote because you have to be there in person to vote and I was able to bring my child with me when I was doing that. Unfortunately, children are not allowed on the floor of the Senate, so it's going to be interesting when I give birth what I can do to vote.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Hmm.

HRISHI: That's interesting to me that after Speaker Pelosi had made that change that it had to be renewed by the Speakers that followed. It's not a permanent change?

SENATOR: Well, they have the option of changing it at any time that they want and they did not. They just kept the policy in place.

Hrishi: I see. And how hard do you think it'll be to make those kind of changes to the Senate's rules?

SENATOR: Well, I'm going through that process right now and I'm very fortunate that the two women leaders on the Democratic side- one is the ranking member Amy Klobuchar. Senator Klobuchar is the ranking member on the Rules Committee so she's the top Democrat on that and she's very supportive and I've sat down and chatted with her and then Patty Murray is the most senior woman in our caucus and she has indicated her support in helping to try to change the rules right now so we're going through the process. But, this is the Senate. It's very tradition-bound. It is very slow and I've told them "Well, you know what, the due date is the due date. It's comin'." And so, we're going to have to work on this because once I have the baby and I'm

holding her in my lap and I have to vote, I'd like to see someone try to stop me from going onto the floor to vote with my baby.

HRISHI: Right.

SENATOR: We do have more of a time crunch even though things do move slow in the Senate.

HRISHI: When you were pregnant with your first child, did you experience any kind of negativity around that? Either from colleagues or from constituents or even just random private citizens that decide they want to have an opinion and weigh in.

SENATOR: Well, I will say it was much less of a big deal in the House than it was in the Senate. And, in the House, I was the tenth Congressman to give birth while in office so a lot of my colleagues had been there before me and it didn't really make that much news- me announcing the pregnancy or even having my baby. It was more of local news kind of a thing. This went national! This went crazy! I really thought it was going to be in the House and overnight, it was on every news show. Everybody was talking about it. I couldn't believe it... what a big deal it was in the Senate, but it was all positive and I received- it came the day after the government shut down. I had announced it after we reopened government and I think the vibe was people were just looking for some good news and I got such wonderful support from both the men and the women on both sides of the aisle. Cory Gardner came up to me and said "You know, Cory's a unisex name". He was the first to do it but he was not the only one. It was funny. It was only Republican men who offered me their names. I thought it was pretty funny, but it was very positive. Now, the only negativity I've experienced was after having my daughter in the House and when I ran for the Senate, my opponent tried to attack me for missing votes- I only showed up to a certain number of votes and I missed all these votes and I had to point out that yes, I was on maternity leave. As a 46 year old new mom on maternity leave, that's why I missed votes. But, they tried to present that as me not doing my job and not providing the full context of why I missed those votes for those three months.

HRISHI: Does it feel to you like the things that make motherhood tough in the House, or particularly in the Senate, that they're the result of how the procedure of changing rules works, the slow-moving nature you were talking about, or do you think that it's a cultural thing? The fact that it's still- 22% of the Senate is women and that's a record high.

SENATOR: I think it's a little bit of a combination of the two because until you get the women into office pushing the envelope, it just doesn't come up. But now that it's come up, now I'm fighting against a 200 year tradition in the Senate and changing rules- not an easy thing to do in the Senate and forcing it to happen. And, I could keep quiet and figure out workarounds but I'm not going to let that happen. I think that I have a duty to represent working families all across this country and it's not just women but men as well who deserve paid family leave. I am going to push this and I am going to fight for this. Something as simple as I'm not allowed to take maternity leave, technically, because if I take maternity leave and I use the term leave as an official maternity leave, then for that 12 week period I will not be allowed to vote or sponsor legislation to do the actual work of my job that my constituents elected me to do. I'm going to push that and say "No, this is ridiculous. I should be able to take maternity leave and I chose to have my daughter... I'm going to have my baby here in Washington D.C. instead of at home in

Illinois so that I can be here for those votes.” We have a lot of tough votes coming up in the next three, four months and I need to be here for them. So, we have to change our policy so that if someone’s on maternity leave, you should still be allowed to come in to vote. You shouldn’t have to manipulate the system. I have colleagues who have been ill who have missed votes or come in just for one or two votes. That’s working around the existing system but not changing the rules and we just need to do that and allowing- I’m going to push to change rules so that I should be able to bring my child onto the floor when I’m voting. There should be a lactation room so that me or a female staffer or any woman that is breastfeeding can express breast milk while they’re doing their jobs in the Capitol.

HRISHI: These kinds of institutional roadblocks, do they feel like they’re products of some kind of veiled misogyny or is it just that nobody’s given birth in this Senate before and so this is the first time anyone’s had to tackle it?

SENATOR: I think it’s ignorance and I do think it’s out of line. Because, how many female staffers have given birth in the Senate who have to work in those chambers and have not been able to bring their child?

HRISHI: Right. It’s not just the elected members.

SENATOR: Right. We went through something for the women of the Senate. There was a big fight a couple years ago to have female bathrooms.

[West Wing Episode 2.13 excerpt]

SAM: Where'd you get the bathrobe?

C.J.: The gym.

SAM: There are bathrobes at the gym?

C.J.: In the women's locker room.

SAM: But not the men's.

C.J.: Yeah.

SAM: Now that's outrageous. There's a thousand men working here and 50 women.

C.J.: Yeah, and it's the bathrobes that's outrageous.

[end excerpt]

SENATOR: The female senators did not have a bathroom- I think it had one stall in there- that was sufficient for the number of female senators there were and Barbara Mikulski, the first

woman elected to the Senate, led the charge along with some of the other female senators to push- and apparently, it was a big fight and caused a ruckus- for them to insist on a bathroom that had, I think, three stalls or four stalls in it now. But, they had all the female senators and at the time, there was like 15 of them using one stall. It was something ridiculous like that. And, in order to make the female senators' bathroom bigger, they had to take a little room from the male senators' bathroom, which of course, made people even more upset. So, it became this gender battle that- thank goodness Barbara Mikulski was one tough lady because she made it happen and we actually have this bathroom now that we can all get in and out of when we're there for votes and stuff and not have a line for the female senators' bathroom like you're at a ballpark. And, so, this was kinda the same thing. Until we got enough female senators, and enough female senators with seniority, we couldn't fight for those things. And, I sorta feel like here I am, I'm having this child, and I'm gonna fight for this because it's not just about making my life easier so that I can bring my child, but it's about this nation and this institution that we work in.

HRISHI: Well, I hope that your fight to change the rules goes smoothly and easily and I hope the same for your pregnancy.

SENATOR: Thank you so much! And, there are many people in on the fight with me, so by no means am I alone on this.

HRISHI: And you've got a lot of people rooting for you. Thank you so much for joining me.

SENATOR: Thank you.

[end of interview]

[intro music]

HRISHI: My thanks to Senator Duckworth's staff for helping me set that up. I'm really honored that I got to speak with her. If you don't know Senator Duckworth's story, she's an Iraq War veteran and a Purple Heart recipient. She flew Black Hawk helicopters for the Army and she lost both legs in combat. She's a pretty amazing woman. You can follow her on Twitter: @SenDuckworth. Okay, so let's get into the episode! Actually, back to the thing that you were saying about this moment between Donna and Josh and when she stands up for Maddy Tatum, I thought that was an interesting contrast- the relationship that Donna has with Josh in that moment versus Elsie's relationship with Will because Elsie sticks up for the interns but she doesn't do it in front of the interns.

LAUREN: Right.

JOSH: Right. [chuckles]

HRISHI: And, I thought that- I'm not sure exactly whose power that is a reflection of, whether it's Elsie being sensitive to the idea that Will is still new in the White House and she doesn't want to undercut him in front of people who are working for him. I mean, Josh is high-powered and he knows it and everybody knows it as well and so Donna can shut him up without fear that it might- she doesn't have to worry that it's going to make him look weak by doing so.

LAUREN: Right! And, I think in addition to that, that it won't come back on her in any way. I think what's great is by Season Four, you have this relationship between Josh and Donna that she knows she can say something like that- kind of put him in his place, and it won't 1) make him look bad, and 2) make it tougher on her which I think is a really interesting thing, which is the Elsie/Will relationship that we have, at least as viewers, is very new. Now, Elsie and Will obviously have a backstory but, as viewers, I would say that we're not sure if Elsie actually sort of talked to Will in that way in front of the interns: 1) What would the interns think of Will? Would they still respect him? But, 2) Would he still respect her? And, would she be able to effectively do her job as well?

JOSH: Yeah. Okay, so, the Laurens-

LAUREN: Yes.

JOSH: -as a group, is there any coincidence to the fact that there are interns named Lauren and you are an intern named Lauren on the show?

LAUREN: No, not a coincidence, funny enough! Aaron's long-time assistant, who's now a producer on his projects, is also named Lauren. And, the year that this was written, we both sat at desks directly outside of Aaron's office. So, he would bellow out from his office "Lauren!" and we would both come running. And, it was about half and half who he needed, but never at the time did he manage to eke out either of our last names. So, we would both just come. And there was a point where he would laugh that he was surrounded by this support system of women named Lauren, which is absolutely what happened in "California 47th". The funny thing, when we actually did the read-through for "California 47th", only one of the three Laurens was able to- the cast Laurens- was able to make it to the read-through, so myself and Aaron's assistant Lauren played the other two Laurens. But, there had been some kind of snafu where I thought I was playing Lauren Chin, and in fact Lauren Chin was actually at the read-through, so I started reading her lines and she was like "No, that's my- I'm that Lauren!" and it was- yeah.

HRISHI: You needed jerseys to tell your roles apart.

JOSH: So, Aaron essentially is investing Will with some of his less flattering qualities and then taking the piss out of himself. Aaron's kind of admitting, I guess.

LAUREN: Yep!

JOSH: Yeah.

LAUREN: It was interesting because as I was reading the story, I was getting like "[expletive deleted], Will! Stop treating them like this!" I was getting very angry and I forgot how the story ended, which of course is Aaron taking a piss at himself, of course saying "I'm the first one to have a smartass remark and to sort of talk down to someone because I think they are not as intelligent as I am or not as savvy as I am" only to come back down and realize- or come back around and realize that he's been in the wrong. And yes, that was my life that year.

JOSH: One of the worst infractions to me is in “Red Haven” early on when Will refers to one of the Laurens by number and then subsequently refers to her by her full name. He actually does know their names at a certain point and is continuing to call them by number! That’s bad. That’s really bad.

HRISHI: It’s funny. I noted that as-

JOSH: I was like “Dude.”

HRISHI: I noted that too and I thought it was actually a good thing. I thought well, something is getting in there. At some point he’s- some information is coming through because he remembered Lauren Shelby and actually addressed it to the right one.

JOSH: See, I took it as he’s continuing to talk down to them even though he’s-

HRISHI: He could do better.

JOSH: - He’s kinda continuing to dehumanize them even though he knows their names. He’s still using the number and then it slips out that he knows name. I also did write down two- I don’t remember at the time taking such a dark view of the character I was playing and maybe that’s because you kind of have to not if that’s not an element- if you believe that he’s not aware of it as he’s doing it. You gotta kinda push it away but rewatching these 15 years later, I just wrote down “What a dick!” It really is pretty bad. I mean, he gets the opportunity for a big buyback at the end although I notice he doesn’t say the words ‘I’m sorry’.

LAUREN: I’m sorry. No apology necessary.

JOSH: No, he’ll let them read between the lines.

HRISHI: I actually had a thought about- I’m sorry- when Lauren Romano has the comment about the tax plan...

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

ROMANO: The doctor got into medical school.

WILL: Hmm?

ROMANO: I’m sorry, I said the doctor got into medical school.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She apologizes for her comment but Will never says “I’m sorry.” It made me think of the *Inside Amy Schumer* sketch- I’m sorry, it’s so funny! It’s this Women in Innovation panel and it’s all these brilliant women who’ve done amazing things and a man who’s moderating it and all the women are continuously just apologizing.

[Inside Amy Schumer episode 3:04 excerpt]

SASHA: I invented a solar-paneled water filtration system that- (clears throat loudly) Sorry. Um, that's portable and lightweight- (clears throat) Um...

MODERATOR: Do you need some water?

SASHA: Yeah, sorry, thanks, that would be great. But if you can't, no worries.

MODERATOR: Don't worry about it. You know what, why don't we just come back to you?

SASHA: Sorry.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's great. We'll link to it. It's on Hulu.

JOSH: And of course, the comment about the doctor is exactly also what they should be considering. What are the arguments against the position they are trying to stake out?

LAUREN: Right.

JOSH: It's a bad moment for Will. It really is.

HRISHI: Yeah.

LAUREN: Just being a dick. Will is just being a dick.

JOSH: He really- Yeah. There's no defense for it.

HRISHI: Let's go to the beginning of the episode. I thought that the opening shot itself was pretty clever because it's a TV, and at first, you're just getting exposition courtesy of the news reporter, which we all love, and there's also a nice little MSNBC tie-in-

LAUREN: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: -with the bug and that reporter is speaking from the Pentagon Briefing Room, so he's in D.C., in the Pentagon, talking about what's happening in Kundu, talking about Batanga and the hostage situation. And then, without cutting from that shot, we're also in a third-level location. We're in Orange County because it turns out the TV is on in the jail where Toby and Charlie are. I thought that was a really smart way to manage to get information about three different places in one shot.

LAUREN: All through this episode. I was just talking to my husband about this, who was on *The West Wing* as well. and one of the things that we were talking about was the sort of mastery of transitions that happens in Aaron's scripts and as a writer, you learn very early not to use telephones and not to use TVs, that they're such easy- It's like an easy way out of a scene or

how to get, how to connect people. No one wants to see phone calls, both sides, and I swear to you, one, they are real life. This is what I love about this episode. So many people are on the phone, as you actually would be if you were trying to run a campaign and run a country from two or three different places.

JOSH: Right.

LAUREN: But, two, the way that they're used to transition from scene to scene visually, and we'll start a phone call in D.C. with Will and we will transition into Toby in Orange County. And, it's just brilliantly done and it feels like such a nice way to tell a story without too many cuts.

HRISHI: So, those are rules that writers are supposed to follow but Aaron is not following them, and yet he's making it work despite not following them?

LAUREN: Yeah, absolutely!

JOSH: Well, this is a big jump ahead in the episode, but it feels appropriate to bring it up now. His flouting of conventions is something that I noticed at the end in the Sit Room. I feel like one of the elemental rules about writing for film and for TV is to show things rather than tell. Show me the action, don't talk about it. And, there's an entire hostage crisis playing out and it's riveting in the Sit Room and all they're doing is they're on phones... like she said, should avoid that... But if we've got a speakerphone and we've got what could be this incredible action scene just being described and a pause and radio chatter and then confirmation that there's been a success and then more information that there's been a disastrous retaliation and it's incredibly riveting. That's what I wrote down, the same thing. This is what you're not supposed to do on TV. And, you write for superheroes now. It would be tough doing Marvel-type material where you didn't see anything happen.

LAUREN: Right!

JOSH: But, for *The West Wing*, it works. These incredibly high-stake situations, there's something about even just waiting, the pause to wait to hear what happened, that is very compelling.

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

(thunderous applause)

LEO: I gotta tell you something, that was the longest radio silence since Mexico.

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: You know, that particular scene too, to me, it's all about powerlessness and that's sort of the beauty of just listening to something on the phone that you have no control over, that you have done the best that you've can as Bartlet has done the best that he can, and listen to the advice of his advisers, and then kind of just has to sit back and watch it happen and I'm totally riveted as well. Also, the other thing that we try not to do as writers, most writers will tell you, is

elaborate props work, which I'm sure, Josh, from an acting perspective, it's the same thing. It's like 'Let me just act, not fool with props'. There is something in that Sit Room scene, though, where something happens and they all turn down to their classified folders and they're using their pencils and I would give anything to know what's on those folders and it's such a great use of, again, what we're allowing characters to see and not see and what we're allowing the audience to see and not see.

JOSH: Let me just jump in to say I love props. I'm not that kind of actor. If you want to give me anything to play with and to do something with, any kind of crutch, any physical inanimate object, I'm happy to have it, so let me put that out there.

LAUREN: I love it! Like pushing a piece of glass out of window, so, you know...

JOSH: Sure. Oh, there you go! That's funny. Rewatching it, I remember- normally, the number of takes you can do in any particular set-up is limited, really just by time and sometimes, something's more elaborate and you only get a few goes at it. I remember the prop guy, I guess, maybe it was Steve, came over and said "We've got two of these." And I was like, "Wait a minute. Are you kidding me?" He goes "No, you've got two tries at it" and I guess that was made clear to me. I remember feeling incredibly nervous about it. I was like "Ugh, I've gotta do the piece in physical comedy, but I can only do it twice!"

LAUREN: Yeah, don't screw that!

JOSH: And, I can't rehearse it. And, you have to touch it to rehearse it. I was like "This is terrible! This isn't fair!" But, I was happy with the way it came out.

HRISHI: Lauren, I have to say- actually, one moment from a Marvel show where you don't see something that I really love- I think it's the first real big set piece in Season One of *Daredevil* where there's the big fight scene in the hallway [cross talk] and it's all shot as one take or made to look like it's one take and then at the very end, he goes into a room to rescue the kid that he's there for and the camera doesn't go with him into the room.

LAUREN: [Cross talk] Oh yeah, the hallway scene.

LAUREN: Yeah,

HRISHI: It always stays in the hallway the whole time. And, you don't see that moment until he emerges again. I thought that was a really cool bit of restraint.

LAUREN: Yeah, that was actually one take. They did that as a 'oner'. And, it is- You know, I actually think, oddly, relating *Daredevil* to *The West Wing* in a way is viewers get fatigued of things really fast. And certainly, having done several seasons of Marvel shows, very quickly, you realize that the fights are cool, but if you have a fight every episode, then by the time you get to the season finale in Episode 13 and it needs to be the biggest, baddest fight you've seen yet, you've seen everything you can do and it's not that exciting. And, I think that's where restraint really helps. That particular scene is just about what's happening in all of those side rooms that you can't see and then to see that he emerges with a child that has been down in that end room

since the very beginning is crazy! I think that it's something that Aaron does really well in his scripts as well, which is sort of knowing you have these Sit Room scenes, for instance, that we're in the Sit Room, I don't know, once every three episodes, twice every three episodes for a big scene, and it's like "How do you make those look different?" because, by the way, anyone who ever shot on that set will tell you that it's dark and people fell asleep a lot. A lot.

HRISHI: Actors, even?

LAUREN: Oh yeah!

JOSH: I think I've shared before, maybe I've been saving it, John Amos fell asleep during a super high-stake Sit Room scene. But rather than judging him, I was impressed. I'm always so nervous whenever- on edge and I'm like "That's a relaxed actor! He's asleep."

LAUREN: He's asleep! He's just chill. Yeah, people would fall asleep in there all the time, so it's sort of like how do you make that different, and I love those scenes where you either see just everything up on the screen and basically, you as a viewer are watching characters watch something on a screen. That's the entire scene. But it works, it works.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's a great little moment in an earlier Sit Room scene earlier in this episode that kind of flies by but I think it's significant where Bartlet misunderstands the term 'wet team'.

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Why the CIA wet team? We're not near water.

FITZWALLACE: No, sir, it's called... They call it a wet team because it's bloody,

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like it because, one, it's a little exposition to tell the audience what the phrase means if they don't know it but also, you realize the guy who's gonna make the call doesn't know everything. This isn't- he's not so of this world. I mean, he's been in it for a few years now, but it's also "OK Wow, this seems- it appears to be a basic thing that he ought to know that he doesn't know and now they're going to give him the rest of the information then he's going to make a decision".

LAUREN: Right.

HRISHI: I love that you get to see him confront the idea of the violence.

LAUREN: Yeah.

HRISHI: The mother of one of the Marines says...

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

MRS. ROWE: I say this is what it looks like from where you are. The comfortable chairs and the bodyguards.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And, you know, Leo has served and so he's able to sort of deflect that criticism but this is a moment where that really is brought into sharp relief because, yeah, he doesn't know the term and the term is there because it's bloody and then you have to see him process it and then give the order.

LAUREN: One of my favorite things in that scene, actually in that same moment, is that- and it's just something I've tried to remember as a writer, is that someone refers to the wet team and the question- Bartlet doesn't immediately say "What's a wet team?" The conversation actually continues on for three or four more lines before he inserts "Wait, wet team? But, they're not near water." And, it's such a great example of- he is basically just listening to a conversation about what's about to happen. And then, it's as though the conversation catches up with him and he realizes "Wait, wait, wait, wait, I don't understand that. Let's go back. I'm not going to pretend like I know what it means. Let's go back." It's a very real human moment, I think.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I was also struck by- and I think there's a connection to what you're saying- the scenes during which Bartlet is speaking and conferring with the families of the hostages. He walks into a room again where all he can really do is listen and he knows he's going to be asked questions and his response, over and over again, is "I can't tell you that." That's another aspect of his- that can't be an easy task, to go into a room to try to provide some sort of solace or encouragement without saying anything of substance but that's his job at that moment.

LAUREN: Yeah. It's a great- it's a really great scene.

HRISHI: Powerlessness is such a great theme to him, to someone who's a president

LAUREN: Yeah. That scene in the Mural Room that you're talking about with the families, there's something that really strikes me too, which is that he also never really apologizes for not being able to say anything. There's a sense that he knows that he can't say anything and he- I'm sure that he's sorry for the fact that they are in the dark. But, all he can really do is sort of be there and be, in some ways, the most presidential he can be, and in some ways, just trying to be a normal guy sitting around people whose family's lives are at stake. It's funny- It's one of the scenes that you read on the page and it's just like "This. I can't tell you this. I can't tell you this. I can't tell you." And then, you watch the episode and it's an incredibly moving scene.

JOSH: I thought the same thing too, that on paper 'Eh, it didn't look like much of a scene', but then the way it's staged, the way it's acted by Martin- I thought also all the guest stars who were playing these family members, that's not an easy thing to play in silence in a room. It's all done very, very well and well-directed by Alex.

LAUREN: That Alex Graves!

JOSH: He's good. We gotta get him.

LAUREN: He's good.

HRISHI: Let's go back to the jail and the opening scene before the main titles. So, recently, we had a live event that we did with Dulé Hill, and James Roday came in as a surprise guest, or was supposed to be a surprise but I ruined it. So, we got to have a little bit of a crossover with *Psych* for a moment, but I thought that this moment in the episode also was a little bit of a preview of Dulé's work in *Psych*. Charlie, here, kind of grumpy and sassy- If you take Charlie and you make him grumpy and sassy, he kind of becomes Gus [cross talk] from *Psych*.

LAUREN: [Cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: That's funny. I love- there's also just a little, little nuance of language that I think is hilarious where Toby, early on, he's on the phone, again, and he says...

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

TOBY: If I was someone who felt comfortable hugging other people, I'd do one to Sam because he absolutely impaled himself.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's like a little kid speaks. I can't even articulate why it's so quintessentially Toby Ziegler to say 'I'd do him one'.

HRISHI: I think that I love- he's so unfamiliar with hugs [cross talk] and hugging that he doesn't even know the language around [cross talk] hugging

JOSH: [Cross talk] It's a performance piece.

LAUREN: [Cross talk] Around hugging, yeah.

JOSH: Right. Oh, you give a hug. Huh. Truly funny.

HRISHI: I also love the line that Charlie has.

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Excuse me, but at this point, we're in jail voluntarily- Can we go?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah. Right. "Can we go?"

LAUREN: 'Why are we all standing here?' I love these moments because so often in the first three seasons, you basically know Charlie vis-à-vis Bartlet so to have him, and then vis-à-vis Zoey, which is a different type of relationship, but to have him sort of on his own and sort of getting to know Charlie as a human being and not just the assistant to the President, I think, is amazing. And these, I think, are the most fun moments.

JOSH: Right, there are aspects of his personality he has to tamp down in wordplays. It's fun to see Charlie unleashed.

LAUREN: Yeah, it's good.

HRISHI: If we had an action scene of Charlie actually punching the guy, that would've been a whole other feeling, too- Charlie unleashed.

JOSH: Indeed.

LAUREN: We don't see that happen, do we?

HRISHI: No.

LAUREN: We just hear about it.

HRISHI: No.

JOSH: It's too bad because I really want to see what Toby was doing while Charlie was handling it.

LAUREN: Yeah, seriously.

HRISHI: But, I like that even in that moment, we stick to the plan of keeping action offscreen.

JOSH: Yeah.

LAUREN: Yeah.

HRISHI: It's only related afterwards. When we get to Donna and Josh for the first time, Donna first mentions Max while she's giving a rundown to Josh and we don't know who that is. And, Josh says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

DONNA: Okay, speaking of the First Lady, you have a meeting with Max in the morning.

JOSH: Yeah, Max is taken care of.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The script is so far ahead of the audience and we won't find out for so long- it was only until I watched the episode for the second time that I really caught that line and understood it. The first time, it just kind of sailed past me. I mean, it's not even the first time I've seen the episode, but even on rewatching, it didn't catch my ear. But then, when I watched it again for the show this week, I was like 'Oh, he already knows that he has this'- he's basically hamstrung Max but we aren't going to find that out for awhile.

LAUREN: Yeah, he screwed him over already! This scene, actually, the first scene of Act One between Josh and Donna, to me, is one of those things that I'm still trying to learn as a writer which is that you have a scene that kind of just feels like dialogue. It's just a chat between two people. And, almost everything in this scene, while feeling like casual back and forth Josh and Donna chemistry, ends up coming back later in the episode. Specifically, they bring up the proofreading-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

DONNA: Alright, the HHS chapter of the submission is ready for you to proofread. You want me to do it?

JOSH: I guess I'm really supposed to do it myself.

DONNA: Yes, but you don't do it yourself, so you want me to do it?

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: -Which of course ends up biting him in the ass later in the episode, and not even proofreading that particular thing- a totally different thing, but it's planted kind of perfectly in a scene that feels otherwise a little fluffy. And, it's just sort of proof that even in these scripts when you get scenes that just feel like 'Oh, this is just a character building moment', they usually have something to do with plot and it's why it's such a fun read now.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But, is that the kind of thing- do moments like that sometimes get reverse engineered where Aaron sees where he's going and goes 'Oh, I gotta- If I go back and lay this in' or is it all done with foresight and knowledge ahead of time?

LAUREN: I mean, I'm trying to remember. I can tell you for me, when I write, they're almost all reverse-engineered, which is you get to something and you're like 'Oh [expletive deleted], I need something to be laid in earlier. I can add in a little piece of dialogue there and it feels like I planned it.' Every once in a while, by sheer luck, you will plant something and realize you can use it later. I don't know whether Aaron is just the luckiest person in the world or whether he just has a brain of genius. I mean, it feels like, especially on script, which is I pointed out this is a full white script because-

HRISHI: Right.

LAUREN: -there were no revisions done to this. And, a lot of these episodes were written and shot the next day or three days later. There wasn't a whole lot of time between writing and shooting, so there wasn't a lot of time to go back and reverse-engineer stuff.

HRISHI: You had mentioned, at one point, a couple of lines that you had said "I didn't write either of those lines." Are there lines- going back over the script, are there lines that you read that you remember being something you contributed, specifically? Like, 'Oh, that one was mine.'

LAUREN: Oh, probably not. I mean, I'm sure that I could go through- especially lines like- I'm looking at a line right now which is just the newscaster on TV. If I was writing anything, it was probably the newscaster on TV because a lot of the things- fun fact- that I got to do as a researcher was I got to write all of the graphics on all televisions at all times. So, any weather report that you see, any ticker- what's funny is by year seven of doing it, I would get bored and I would go back and use tickers that I'd written for Season Two in Season Seven so you probably could find- You're like 'Wow, they've really- there's been a power plant in Arkansas that's blown up four times in the life of the show!'

JOSH: 'The Dow Jones is back to exactly what it was five years ago.'

LAUREN: Exactly! But, a lot of times, anything that I did get to write was purely factual stuff. If something of mine made it into the script, it's simply because I was listing out researched facts that Aaron then took and put into a script.

HRISHI: That's great. That's exactly the kind of answer I was looking for. I mean, honestly that's better than 'one sentence and a done' response. The fact that you got to write all the chiron is so good.

JOSH: Were you ever able to do a shout out to a friend or use someone's name or anything like that?

LAUREN. Yes. There are a lot of shout outs to people. There's a lot of- because also, one of the other things I did on the show as a researcher was I was in charge of all clearances so I got to clear all of the names and suggest back-up names. So, almost all of my friends exist in *The West Wing*. A lot of them have run for Congress. Later in election episodes, all of my family's names are on whiteboards. I used that to the best of my ability!

JOSH: As well you should have. I certainly would have.

LAUREN: Yeah!

JOSH: And, can you talk to- actually, for people who don't know what it means to clear names and brands and things like that, how that works?

LAUREN: Oh, yes! So, it's kinda funny. For every- you know, you kinda start out on a basic level of any name, any first and last name combination in a script, and it's not always- a lot of the

times, they are the names that are said on screen. Sometimes, even if it's just written in a script and not said, we still have to clear it because, for instance, *The West Wing* became script books so those scripts were actually published.

JOSH: Right.

LAUREN: So, the way clearances works is that you have to make sure that no one believes that you are defaming them or maligning them in any way. What's interesting is that there can't just be one of a person, so if you had-

HRISHI: Hrishikesh Hirway-

LAUREN: Exactly! There's just one of you and I put your name in a script, then you could actually come back and say "I'm the only person with that name, so obviously, she's talking about me." The other thing, though, is that you don't want too many people with that name because then you open yourself up to lots of lawsuits. You're kind of looking for a name that clears that there's maybe six or seven people in the United States with that name.

JOSH: Interesting.

LAUREN: And then, it becomes even more complicated if you say, Hrishi, that you do podcasts and it's like "Okay, so now I've said this name and this person is a doctor so now I not only have to make sure that there are no doctors called that but I also have to make sure there's no men in New Hampshire called that." And, it gets very complicated and most complicated when it comes to big things like corporate names, mostly because you are more likely to be sued by a corporation than a person.

JOSH: Oh, the corporations are people.

LAUREN: Yeah!

HRISHI: What about something like The Ronettes? Will calls the interns The Ronettes, the girl group that sang "Be My Baby."

LAUREN: Public domain. So then, you have a whole sort of level of things that you can name. You could say The Ronettes, you could reference a movie title or the name of a sports team, as long as you're not saying anything bad about them, basically. It is different- the rules are different- when they apply to props because I could say to you "Hey guys, can I have an Altoid?" but if you show a box of Altoids, then suddenly you're doing product placement, which lands you in a totally different territory.

HRISHI: Oh, but the name- saying the product name does not count as product placement.

LAUREN: It does not.

HRISHI: Because the very first line of *The West Wing*, we had said "Oh, some product placement. We hear the bartender say-

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

BARTENDER: Two Absolut Martinis up; another Dewar's rocks.

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: Right.

HRISHI: We called it product placement in our podcast, but apparently not.

LAUREN: If you [cross talk] take a bottle, right. By the way, I love that I'm gesturing as though anyone is going to be able to see me do this.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Because we don't see the labels-

JOSH: But we can see you.

LAUREN: If you take a bottle of Absolut and put it on the bar and turn it so the label is perfectly facing the camera, then it becomes product placement.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Yeah, we talked about that a little bit last episode... Greeking, sometimes they'll Greek out a name-

LAUREN: Yep.

JOSH: -so you can kinda make out- because you're familiar with the logo, but it doesn't quite look right.

LAUREN: Because I was the researcher on the show, I was actually named in several different lawsuits which is fun.

JOSH: Ah!

HRISHI: Huh.

LAUREN: Which never make it to me at all. It's all a Warner Brothers thing. But, the best one was... I was sued by the government of Turkey for-

JOSH: For the Butterball hotline?

HRISHI: Exactly, exactly!

LAUREN: I'm trying to remember what it was. At some point, I'll look back and see what the episode was but I said something- apparently I had done research that said something about

the country of Turkey that the government of Turkey took umbrage to and I was named in a lawsuit, so...

JOSH: Wow. But never deposed, never got to the point of depositions or anything like that?

LAUREN: Nope. Never.

JOSH: 'Cause there's some massive team of legal people at Warner Brothers taking care of this stuff.

LAUREN: Taking care of all of that so that I, a 23 year old researcher, don't have to show up in court against the government of Turkey. So yeah, that was fun.

JOSH: What say we take a quick break and come back later?

[Ad break]

HRISHI: When you're working on these two-parters, did you know you'd be working on these two-part episodes together? Specifically, I'm asking because Amy Gardner's in this episode and has a huge set of moments throughout, but Mary-Louise Parker is not in "California 47th." Amy Gardner is not in that episode at all.

LAUREN: Right.

HRISHI: She just sort of shows up in Orange County here when they sit down to talk about the money that Sam has on hand. And I thought, "When did she get there?!"

LAUREN: Same thought here. I think it depends. In terms of the Kundu story in this episode, I believe that it was always going to be a bigger story 'cause really, for the first time, we were tackling the subject of genocide. And basically, sort of relooking at the Rwandan genocide and sort of thinking "What would have happened if the US had actually gotten involved?" So, that is an enormous story and really couldn't be- justice couldn't be done to it over one episode and obviously, it's something that's playing through this season a little bit. But really, the most episodes, I think one of two things would happen. Several episodes like "Inauguration", Part One and Part Two, were actually written as a two-parter. This was probably more like we have a story that we can't quite fit in 5 beats that I think it was like "Oh, hey, let's stretch this over two episodes." It's weird. I felt the same way about Mary-Louise Parker and I wondered "Oh, was it a scheduling thing? Could she not actually- was her schedule not allowing her to be part of one episode or something?" 'Cause it does... Story-wise, it feels really odd that she just pops up in there and then pops up with a big story.

HRISHI: Right. I was also thinking maybe it was a budgeting issue... One less guest star.

LAUREN: That's also possible.

JOSH: In this episode, I noticed Amy Gardner not great at pouring water out of a glass.

LAUREN: No! Really not good at it!

JOSH: I was like 'I get the whole stuff- everything happening by mistake- but at the point where you're just trying to pour water on the fire, why can't you do that?' So maybe, Mary-Louise is one of those actors who doesn't love props. "How do you use this?"

LAUREN: 'Ah! It's glass! I don't understand!'

HRISHI: After that scene with the fire, when Amy's speaking to the First Lady, there's something about that scene, something about the set-up of them being in a garden, and at this like fancy building, and then Doctor Bartlet saying-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

ABBEY: Save me, would you?

AMY: You want me to?

ABBEY: Please.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then, Amy doing her whole thing- everything about that reminded me of a Jane Austen moment.

LAUREN: It's true. There's something about- First of all, the idea of "Save me" and Amy makes this choice to sort of intellectually ram the other woman into the ground when Abbey comes back and says 'I meant walk me away'... It's so smart and it's so funny and I love- Again, I just love in these two episodes the scenes between women. But yeah, the garden setting is hilarious-

HRISHI: Yeah.

LAUREN: -that it's out there 'cause it's so beautiful and so...

HRISHI: She reminded me of Lizzy Bennet in that moment.

LAUREN: Yeah.

JOSH: Hah! Very good, yeah. I also- We also get a moment of near Yiddish from Abbey Bartlet who says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

ABBEY: Alana Moiron is about to zatz me on fair pay.

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: Zatz me! Zatz!

JOSH: Not zetz, which is Yiddish for 'little smack', zatz. It felt about right coming from Abbey.

LAUREN: I love near Yiddish. It's near Yiddish. It's Yiddish adjacent.

JOSH: That's right.

LAUREN: I was laughing about the beginning of that scene when they're at the sort of dinner honoring the Bartlet women, which is kind of an interesting concept for a dinner, I guess. But, I was laughing about the line [cross talk] which I just thought "Wow! I don't think a First Lady could say that now!" It just is one of those things that, in the 15 years that has passed, I was trying to imagine what gets sort of nice titterish laughter in the scene, I think now would not.

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

ABBEY: "The DNC honors the Bartlet women." Well, I assume you're talking about my daughters and my mother-in-law, 'cause if the DNC's honoring my husband's skanky ex-girlfriends..."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [Cross talk] I know!

HRISHI: That's funny, I was thinking First Ladies couldn't say it then!

JOSH: The current First Lady wouldn't need to say it.

LAUREN: This is true.

JOSH: Doesn't need to be made explicit.

LAUREN: Hrishi, you think that it was weird to say then?

HRISHI: I would think that it would be easier to get away with a line like that in 2018 then it would be in years past. It would be that we'd be too prudish to let a First Lady say "skanky ex-girlfriends" in a speech.

LAUREN: I went the opposite way with it, which is now, I think that if any First Lady, our current First Lady notwithstanding, if any First Lady got up and referred to other women in that way at a dinner honoring other women, that she would be- no, she would be vilified.

HRISHI: Yeah. Then again, it was dialogue written by a man.

LAUREN: Excellent point. As I had to remind myself several times in the script.

HRISHI: In that scene with Alana Waterman, the Jane Austen scene, there's a thing I wanted to mention too, which is Mary-Louise Parker does this little thing- Alana comes over and she starts talking, the first scene when they cut back to the First Lady, Mary-Louise Parker's kind of looking away a little bit. It's just a little moment but it feels like you can see her kind of gathering the response and then she's like coiling up her craftiness and then sort of jumps into the conversation like she's figured it out and then she's like-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

AMY: I thought it was terrific, if that counts for anything.

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: It's one of my favorite things about the character of Amy Gardner. When she first appears, she always has this kind of awkwardness and this sort of pause... 'Can I do this? Can I be here?' and then she's on fire. And I think it's a Mary-Louise choice, which I think is amazing every time.

HRISHI: Amy Gardner's on fire.

JOSH: Yeah, she's so good and distinctively her.

LAUREN: Yeah, totally. I love it.

HRISHI: She says to Alana-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

AMY: Ironically, I have a hunch the First Lady could've been brought on board fair pay if she'd been lobbied more- what's the word- more, you know, professionally.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the fact that she even highlights the word 'professionally', I thought was a nice touch because that is the word when Josh speaks to the First Lady earlier in the episode, he says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

JOSH: If you want your agenda taken seriously, put a professional face on it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And so...

LAUREN: Oh!

HRISHI: ...the connection that the First Lady will then hire Amy makes sense because that very word was inserted first from Josh and then Amy highlights it here too.

LAUREN: I didn't even notice that, so that is, that's right. Good catch!

JOSH: [Cross talk] A good catch.

HRISHI: Another note about facial expressions: I thought that in addition to the stuff that Elsie says to Will throughout this episode, I thought Danica McKellar did excellent nonverbal work in all of her reactions to things that Will said or things that the interns said. I really felt the sort of awkward and really... shame sometimes that you feel for someone that you're on their side but you have to just witness them being a dick or just saying things that you know they're gonna regret or that you regret in that moment. I thought she did a lot of great work on that front.

JOSH: Yeah, there's also subtle indication after Will has discovered that she's kinda talked about him when he wasn't around at the start of the next scene where they're all together. She walks by and Will just kind of says 'Good morning' to her and you can see that she's clocking already that he's got something on his mind, something not quite right. It's nice acting from Danica.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

LAUREN: Her character here is so fun and I love the sort of mediation that happens on her behalf and there's something- just bringing up the correct facial expressions- is there's one particularly that she gives Will throughout the whole scene where she's basically telling him he's being a dick without saying it and it is that look that I think a lot of women know and a lot of men know because women give them the look which is 'Are you listening to yourself? Do you hear what you're saying?' and it's great. It's so effective and it's effective in life too, by the way. It's a pretty good one in life.

JOSH: Will's a little slow on the uptake, though.

LAUREN: He is. He is. He does not get it yet.

HRISHI: I also like the facial expression from Bradley Whitford when Donna is reading the fax to him and he gets interrupted by Maddy Tatum and then they cut back to him and he is just stricken with panic as he says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

JOSH: Read me the rest of the fax.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And, before he even gets the words out, I thought that was a great piece of work from Bradley Whitford.

LAUREN: I was reading through the script and, Josh, I was telling Hrishu that I have all of my original scripts from the show.

JOSH: Really?!

LAUREN: Every single one starting with the pilot. So, they have all of my notes in them and [cross talk] They take up two enormous waterproof bins in my garage and every time I look at them, I'm like 'I don't need these. Why am I keeping them?' But it was- it has been fun to go back through. But there's actually a couplet that was cut from the show which I actually think is such a great cut because it leads exactly to that moment- his strickenness, basically, which is that when Josh and Abbey are talking- when Abbey first comes to see Josh and he's saying 'You need a professional.' He gives her this advice, he walks her to the door, and then Abbey turns around in the original draft and says "You're not frightened I'm going to take you up on our advice?" and he says "Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty scared of that" which kinda sets up what the story is going to be.

JOSH: [Cross talk] That's fantastic.

JOSH: Right, it telegraphs it a little bit.

LAUREN: It telegraphs it totally! But without that line, what I love is that Josh is so in his ego for this entire episode- he's gotten what he wanted, he got to be a smartass to the First Lady and say 'Here's what you need' but then never thinks that it's gonna come back and bite him.

HRISHU: Right.

LAUREN: It was such a great lift in post-production.

JOSH: There's a special hubris to Josh Lyman where you always know the other shoe is going to drop probably before the episode's even over.

LAUREN: Yep!

JOSH: Just always getting karma-ed immediately.

HRISHU: Then it leads to one of my favorite Donna moments maybe ever where she says-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

DONNA: Well, a whole new chapter begins.

[end excerpt]

HRISHU: It's so good and it's so layered and Janel's performance of that one line is great. I was wondering, if you have the script there, is there any kind of stage direction or anything around that line to indicate- I mean, just, I love that performance.

LAUREN: Yes, I will look.

HRISHI: I was thinking just when things were looking up for Donna with her “Don’t yell at her” comment, she was really seizing something and then-

LAUREN: No, there is no stage direction whatsoever! She’s finishing the fax, she says “Weather here is 74 degrees and partly cloudy” and then it says pause... “Well, a whole new chapter begins” and Josh responds “Yeah.” I would show you guys, although it wouldn’t do any good for our listeners. There’s very little stage direction. It’s amazing. Most of these scenes are- every once in a while, you’ll get ‘hangs up a phone’, ‘picks up a phone’,... It was really, I have to say, for me, having just finished a pilot that- when you write a pilot, so much of the pilot is set up, so much is establishing the world and building the world so it takes a little more stage direction, but to finish that, turn it in, and then read this, which is just like- The entire episode opens up with a television mounted on a wall bracket, reporters are reading. That’s it! That’s all you need to know! There’s no feeling involved there, there’s nothing that says what color the television is... It’s really sort of simple and allows Alex or the director to really- and actors to make choices- everyone to actually do their jobs and do their jobs well and sort of shine, which is really great.

JOSH: Do you recall- So, would there have been substantial tone meetings about scene to scene or really was ‘Here’s the thing. You go do it.’?

LAUREN: No, there were definitely tone meetings! Epicly long tone meetings. But, this season was actually a little special because this is the season, maybe it was Season Three, I don’t remember, when Alex and Chris first came on board, when Alex Graves and Chris Misiano first came on board as co-EPs. They, being resident directors, and they each directed for or five episodes themselves, so out of the 22, they were directing the bulk of them. So, they were so- having two resident directors was actually really helpful because at any given time, a director is obviously in prep, shooting, or in post. And so, to have that other person on the ground, to work with new directors, I think that tonally, you wouldn’t have to tone scripts for as long as you would with a new guest director every episode because it really was- first, being in Season Four of a show, so much is already set up and so much is already just functioning.

JOSH: Sure.

LAUREN: But also, I think Alex and Chris just really had their eye to sort of what an episode needed to be and what we could do in the time constraints, which was always our battle on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: This moment for Donna feels like she has her own mini version of powerlessness. In the “Inauguration” two-parter, things were going well again between her and Josh. It felt like there was some momentum between the two of them, what Josh determined to be a vomitous moment of her sitting on his lap in the crowded cab as they drove back, but still it felt like ‘Okay-

JOSH: This really was “Wild Thing” to which I objected.

HRISHI: Wild Thing, that’s right! But then, it’s like you can’t go too many steps forward with anything, so suddenly another obstacle has to be thrown in their path and it’s not one that either

Donna or Josh chooses. It's just Amy's back and Donna knows immediately that spells some halting of that momentum.

LAUREN: This is, to me, it really is indicative of how if you have two actors who understand what the scope of the relationship is and their backstory is, all it takes is a single line in an episode to remind the viewer that 'Yeah, this is still happening. This is still turning underneath the surface and it always will be.' I really like the line and I really like that it's not- what's great about it is that it is not in any way sorta sad or mopey from Donna. There's nothing about it that says 'My chance is over.' It just is like 'We're starting something new now and we'll see what happens' and it's a really lovely moment.

HRISHI: Oh, that's interesting. I thought that she was a little mopey there!

LAUREN: Really?! Oh, I didn't read it as mopey at all! I read it as 'Well, let's see what happens!' Also, I think she does not- this is my sorta personal take on it- but I always think that Donna doesn't see Josh with anyone else so if he's going to be with someone else, he's probably going to screw that up. [cross talk] So, I don't think she's that worried.

HRISHI: [cross talk] So, it's not a defeat.

HRISHI: It's just a postponement or something like that.

LAUREN: Exactly. That's how I've always read all of those lines which is like [cross talk] 'Great, we'll see what happens with that one! Good luck!'

HRISHI: [Cross talk] Great!

HRISHI: That's interesting. I like that. Do you know that song, Josh, "Sand in My Shoes"? That C.J. sings?

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

C.J.: (singing) Sand in my shoes... (still singing) Sand from Havana...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was going to Google to see 'Is Allison just making something up or is that a song?' No, I was not familiar with it.

HRISHI: I had always wondered that before starting this podcast when I used to just watch the show and not do anything about those questions like that. But now, since it's my job to find out the answer, it turns out "Sand in my Shoes" is a real song. It was written by Victor Schertzinger and Frank Loesser for the film *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* in 1941 and it was sung by Connee Boswell and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson.

JOSH: Rare moment of Toby being inured to C.J.'s charms. He doesn't really seem to get much out of her little shimmy and singing for him.

HRISHI: I know! I really like Allison Janney's interpretation of that melody. As you'll hear in this little clip from the original, Connee Boswell does not make Havana nearly as sultry as Allison Janney does.

LAUREN: As Allison Janney does in a ballgown.

HRISHI: The Havana... It's sung much straighter in the original 1941 version.

[*"Sand in my Shoes" excerpt*]

BOSWELL: Sand in my shoes, sand from Havana, Calling me to...

[*end excerpt*]

HRISHI: Ok, that's my career for the episode. At the end of the episode, let's go to the- I guess the denouement between Will and the interns. He apologize- He doesn't apologize-

LAUREN: He doesn't.

JOSH: Not really, no. Not so much. Not in so many words.

HRISHI. Exactly. Not in those words at all, but he owns up to the fact that he was a jerk and then it turns out that after all- I love this bit- that after all of that drama and headache and rushing to get the job done, it turns out all those speeches aren't needed anyway because the military action's is gonna what everyone's going to be talking about.

[*West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt*]

WILL: We rescued the hostages, but suicide bombers killed 17 US soldiers in Ghana. This'll be what we're talking about tomorrow, so I'm gonna put the tax plan aside and work on this.

[*end excerpt*]

HRISHI: Their reaction to the news reminded me of the end of "Inauguration: Part Two" when the President finally tells the staff about what they're gonna do about the doctrine. Before he can even really finish speaking to them, they're already moving. They turn to each other and start figuring out strategies for how they're gonna- what they have to do to enact the plan. Similarly, here, Will- he tells them what's going on and he expects them to go to say good night but then they immediately, like a little microcosmic version of the senior staff, just go to the next task to try and help him knowing what his work's gonna have to be.

LAUREN: I mean, I love sort of the themes that play series-long through *The West Wing*. The concept of "back to work" is so real and love how it's always done on the show in terms of 'One problem is maybe kinda solved or not solved, but we still have to move on to the next one' and that the work is never done which is, of course, the whole concept of the government anyway. But, I also like the kind of teamwork and comradery it shows because it's so true. I can tell you

from being on TV shows, I can tell you from being on *The West Wing*, that there are times where there is too much work and too few people to do anything, and yet you just have to keep going and it's not like at the end of the day, we put out a script and go home. You put out a script and then you move on to the next thing.

HRISHI: The last words that Aaron ever writes for Sam Seaborn are-

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

SAM: We should get back to work.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: -and I thought that was a really beautiful thing. It felt like the playwright in him too, that it's like a song fading out rather than ending, rather than having a final note. The idea is that it keeps on playing out into infinity and that's Sam walking out of that bar. He's not done- it's the last we're gonna see of him in Aaron's tenure, but he's just going back to work.

LAUREN: Right. He's not dying. He's not disappearing off of the planet. It's a really smart way to do it and a good way to- obviously, it's a huge goodbye for a character that has been on the show for four years-

HRISHI: Right.

LAUREN: -that is still sort of honoring the character in a nice way.

HRISHI: And, as you said, the theme of really the entire series: "Back to work." No matter what, it's always-

JOSH: -What's next.

HRISHI: Exactly. It's his version of 'what's next.' It's also a really nice symmetry with the first time that we see Sam which is that line I was referring to, the martini and the Dewar's. The first time we ever see Sam is also at a bar with a drink.

LAUREN: Yeah, you're right. And a call girl.

JOSH: Yeah, I like the call girl callback in this episode where he starts to chastise Toby.

[West Wing Episode 4.17 excerpt]

TOBY: You're really going to be teaching the seminar on call girl caution, really?

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: Yeah, that's good.

HRISHI: It's like we get a little, without doing a clip show, we get a little set of flashbacks.

JOSH: Highlight reel of Sam's.

HRISHI: From Sam's past.

LAUREN: Yeah.

JOSHI: They share a sweet hug, Toby and Sam.

HRISHI: Yeah, he does him one.

JOSH: That's right. He does him a hug.

LAUREN: He does him a hug. That was an unexpectedly sweet moment for me. Again, reading on the page versus seeing it on the screen- on the page, it actually is a little, I don't want to say silly, but they do this "Really? Yeah. Really? Yeah. Really?" And it actually, again, it worked on screen, It ended up being this sort of lovely moment.

JOSH: Okay, that's it for this episode of "The West Wing Weekly."

HRISHI: Thank you so much to our guest Lauren Hissrich. You were awesome. Thank you.

LAUREN: Thank you guys! Thanks for having me!

JOSH: Say hi to your hubby for me. We didn't really get into that! You met him on the job.

LAUREN: I did! Super, super fun fact is that he was my aunt's best friend that actually got me the job in the first place [cross talk] though being a total stranger to me at the time.

JOSH: [Cross talk] Wow!

JOSH: Interesting!

HRISHI: We'll have to get the 'meet-cute' story on another episode.

JOSH: Yeah.

LAUREN: Yes!

JOSH: That does sound cute.

LAUREN: It's adorable.

HRISHI: If you'd like to follow Lauren on Twitter, she's @lhissrich which is spelled H-I-S-S-R-I-C-H and Josh and I are both on Twitter. I'm @hrishihirway. Josh is @joshmalina. And, The West

Wing Weekly is @westwingweekly. We're also on Facebook and on Instagram and you can always leave a comment for us on our webpage, thewestwingweekly.com.

JOSH: "The West Wing Weekly" is a proud member of Radiotopia, a cutting-edge selection of the finest podcasts. You can check them all out at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller, our terrific editors. We're taking next week off, but we'll be back the week after that to talk about "Privateers."

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

LAUREN: What's next?

[Outro music]