

The West Wing Weekly
5.06: "Disaster Relief"
Guests: Alexa Junge 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: Today we're talking about episode 6 of season 5 of *The West Wing*. It's called "Disaster Relief."

JOSH: The teleplay is by Alexa Junge. Story by Alexa and Lauren Schmidt, now Lauren Schmidt Hissrich.

HRISHI: And today we're joined by two special guests.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Alexa Junge and Lauren Schmidt Hissrich.

JOSH: Yes. This episode was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter and it first aired on November 5th in the year 2003.

HRISHI: Thank you so much for joining us both of you.

LAUREN: Thanks for having us.

HRISHI: This is the time when I usually do a synopsis of the episode but, for the synopsis, I'm going to turn to Leo, because he sums it up pretty well.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

LEO: *I've got a cap gains tax cut tacked onto an appropriations bill, two Bronze Age civilizations threatening to blow each other up over some goats, and a major ally that's going to be in the lobby leafing through dog-eared copies of Congressional Quarterly while the president is singing Kumbaya.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ha.

HRISHI: The president is singing *Kumbaya* because he's in Oklahoma tending to people who have been struck by a tornado. At least 17 people have died already. Let's start away from the episode actually. Alexa, can you tell us how you got the job as a writer on *The West Wing*?

JOSH: Origin story!

ALEXA: I think that initially that John reached out to me actually, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to put me on *West Wing* or *ER*, and so I think that's the initial way that it happened. But actually, Aaron had reached out to me at the earliest stages of the show when it first happened, and I didn't end up going, on but then when John reached out to me later, I went to Aaron and said "are you cool if I do this?" and he was lovely, and so I was really happy, I mean, it was already an extraordinary show, you know, and knew what it was and was just, you know, inspiring in every direction and offered really great new challenges for me personally. And, Lauren, you had been there already, I think, when I joined?

LAUREN: Yes, I was like the ripe old age of 24 or something at that point but I had been there the whole time.

JOSH: And Alexa, were you hoping *West Wing* or *ER*? Did you win the coin flip or lose it?

ALEXA: Ahhh! That's a dirty question.

JOSH: I'm a tough investigative journalist, Alexa.

ALEXA: I appreciate that. I was extremely happy to be on the *West Wing*.

[laughter]

JOSH: Good answer.

HRISHI: How did the experience of being in the writers' room, if you remember around the time when this script was being written, how did it compare to your many years on *Friends*?

ALEXA: Well, it was very different and when people ask me about how I run shows, I always talk about the fact that I learned some really amazing ways to do it on *Friends* but then when I was with John and seeing how he managed, you know, *West Wing* and his other shows, I was able to kind of take the best of both possible worlds. But we were in the room a lot less at *West Wing* and which I think was a lovely treat for me after 18 hours a day in the *Friends* room. And I love the way that Lauren and I got to collaborate and work, and sort of it was there was a lot of sort of fraternity kind of walking around everybody's offices and, you know, sharing information and being able to talk to people about what you were working on or something that wasn't working.

HRISHI: Could you shed some light on how you two ended up working together on the story for this episode? Did you get paired up randomly? Does everybody look around and when they say "OK, everybody pick a partner for lab"?

LAUREN: Pick a buddy?

HRISHI: Yeah.

LAUREN: No, John did something really, really smart: when he took over the show, he brought in a bunch of new writers but he also had, I think, three or four of us had been there from the beginning. So what he did he paired off basically a person who had the history of the show with a person who was new to the show. In my case, I was a really inexperienced writer and Alexa was wildly experienced and talented and it was sort of a great meshing because John was able to say to me "does this feel like the show that you know? Does this feel like how the characters speak? Does this feel like, you know, a *West Wing* story?" And Alexa was able to bring in all of her experience and actually craft the episode really well in a way that I was still learning. So it was very- it was wise.

JOSH: The buddy system.

LAUREN: It really was.

ALEXA: It was!

JOSH: Were you responsible for each other's whereabouts? [laughs]

LAUREN: Totally. Always.

ALEXA: And clothing choices [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I remember that from camp.

[laughter]

ALEXA: Yes.

LAUREN: That's right.

HRISHI: So, I'm also curious, in terms of keeping the continuity of the show, not just the feeling of it but also the plot. There are lots of through-lines so far in season 5 that are carried through in "Disaster Relief." Was there a process? Do you start off by breaking the entire season, or a chunk of the season, so you know that "ok, this is going to be the 6th episode and so we need to make sure that you know these pieces move across the board while also telling the story that's distinct to this one"?

LAUREN: Yeah, I mean, has anyone, have any of the writers talked to you about Hawaii yet?

HRISHI: No.

[ALEXA laughs]

JOSH: No.

LAUREN: Ok.

JOSH: Color me intrigued.

LAUREN: So, I actually met Alexa in Hawaii. One of the things that John did every year for *ER* then started doing for the *West Wing* is that we kicked off the writers' room in Hawaii for a week. And [crosstalk]

ALEXA: [crosstalk] Very sad. Very, very sad.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Rough.

LAUREN: [crosstalk] Super tough. Basically it was kind of like camp, in that an enormous house was rented for us. I believe there were, like, 13 writers that year, and we bunked up in bedrooms and we would have writers' meetings from 9am to 5pm. You know, and everyone would get up in the morning and go to the beach and after, you know, after 5, we would all have dinner together and have some drinks. And it really was as much of a bonding activity as it was, sort of, work. But what John pitched, because of course, we're, you know, Alexa and several of the other writers were new to the show, and I was new to John, and he basically pitched it as us getting out of the writers' room and getting out of our, sort of, understanding of television and story and basically just clear everything out of your mind and think big. And it really, I have to say, it works. We sat around for a week and really came up with the major, sort of, plotlines of the entire season. So that by the time we were in the Warner Brothers lot in Burbank, on day 1, we actually already had some thoughts about what we wanted the 22 episodes to be.

HRISHI: Wow.

ALEXA: And another thing that John did, and does, I think, and I now do on every show that I'm on is, he screened the entire previous season and we took very, you know, we took copious notes and we talked in detail about what we felt was working, where was the show at its best, what was confusing, what did we want more of in this season. I was just impressed that he was willing to let everybody, no matter what their title, or whatever the hierarchy was, to just be very frank about their feelings and I think that has an indelible imprint on the way the season begins as well.

JOSH: That's impressive. Do you remember- I guess the biggest transition would be going from Sorkin to post-Sorkin. Do you remember how he articulated, or how the discussion went, in terms of "well this is a, here's a new direction we might push towards"?

ALEXA: I mean I don't think that there were conversations like specifically to address that. It was more, just, sort of, taking the episodes on their own terms. I know I felt this sort of responsibility to, you know, I wanted to sort of bring some, like, sexy banter and some things that I felt like maybe I could offer up. Although hearing the episode last night I was you know I just couldn't believe some of those jokes that just don't feel like jokes. And I apologize to all of you...

[ALEXA laughs]

JOSH: Which? No, I'm curious! I've no idea what you're referring to. What didn't pass the test for you?

ALEXA: I could just hear myself being cute a bunch, and sort of, like, smarter versions of Friends jokes. Not that I'm crapping on that but just I don't know...

JOSH: See, I liked the moments of levity in this episode because you want them; things are not going too well for anybody in this episode, and one of the things I was curious about, painting with a broad brush, but one of the things that Hrishi and I are noticing watching season 5 is that this whole world of our heroes is in a darker place, which I like. Things are off kilter, people are unhappy either in their jobs or whether they are being heard or whether enough agency. Toby wants to be a big message guy, C.J. isn't happy with some of the ethical decisions of the administration, Will, by this point, has gone and taken another job. And that feels to me like the major sort of direction shift that Aaron probably never would have explored because he wants, it seems to me, most of the time, for the audience to just be experiencing the happy place that these people are in, enjoying each other, and you guys sort of set people more at odds with each other.

LAUREN: And I think that was kind of a natural, you know, we've all heard the criticism that in the post-Aaron Sorkin world, that members of the senior staff of the *West Wing* weren't treating each other with as much respect, that there was more infighting, but truthfully I think that's part of how we approached the season, which is "what happens when dad gets sick, basically, when dad steps down?" When the moral and ethical leader of your world is absent and the kids start fighting? That's what happens, you know, and it feels like a very realistic thing for us. And I think, obviously, as you move through the seasons, we tone it back a little bit but it, I kind of like the darkness of this, too. I was surprised, it was the first time I've watched it since it aired, and I was surprised at a little bit of the darkness, but it felt real.

JOSH: Yeah, and we get a scene in this episode with C.J. and President Bartlet where she is saying to him:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

C.J.: *The world is too dangerous now, unpredictable. I need you back, I need you to lead.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And it is kind of there's almost a parental feel to what she's asking of him, like, get back in the game.

LAUREN: Right, get it together dad.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I also have to say that I really like the jokes in this episode. And my process of preparing for today, I watched the episode and then, Alexa, I watched one of your beloved *Friends* episodes, "The One Where Everyone Finds Out," which I think is one of your classics, and then I rewatched this episode, and [laughs] I don't know if it was because of doing it in that order, but there's a scene in Leo's office where there are a few jokes, and hearing them back and forth, I started to imagine them, you know, being said by *Friends* characters, and I could hear it, and I think it's great. There's this exchange where Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

LEO: *Anything new on Carrick?*

JOSH: *He's a Republican.*

[pause]

LEO: *Newer?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And later in that scene C.J. says

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

C.J.: *Photo ops aren't cynical. They give people hope.*

JOSH: *Hope? What is that?*

[end excerpt]

ALEXA: Yeah, no, I did really try to make an effort to make sure it was flying along. I remember, you know, when you work in half hour comedy, you really make sure to try to service every character, to make sure they all... like we had a little board in the *Friends* room of who had how many jokes and so I made a little board for myself, when I was working, to make sure I was, you know, spreading them around, so nobody would feel like they didn't get to be funny if possible.

HRISHI: There's a cadence, right, of "Set up, set up, joke," or something like that that you have to adhere to?

ALEXA: It shouldn't feel quite like that but yes, exactly. I don't think I did this, please God, I hope I didn't, but a traditional sitcom joke would be a son saying to his father "can I take the keys to the car?" and the father says "there is no way in hell that I would ever give you the keys to the car" and then the son goes "here's a \$100" and the dad goes "Ok." That's like a classic structure, you know, so hopefully you didn't hear too much of that going on.

HRISHI: Not at all.

JOSH: My question is who among the *Friends* cast would you be most likely to hear from if you didn't spread the jokes around in an equitable fashion?

ALEXA: Oh! Ah you know what? Depended on the week and the episode!

JOSH: Ok. Fair enough.

HRISHI: Ok, so in this episode, we had these two competing dynamics, not competing, but somewhere kind of inside/outside, there's often the structure in *The West Wing* where there's some sort of internal palace intrigue that's happening, but then there's also a story about the world

at large that might involve the military or something like that. What we rarely, I mean really never get, is the president actually going somewhere and being in another location. Maybe he might be on Air Force One, but really we very seldom see the president somewhere. And so this felt like a big departure having him actually on the ground in Oklahoma. Was that something that you had to, I don't know if justify is the right word, but was that something that you had to justify or work your way up to: we're going to put Martin Sheen, you know, on location somewhere outside of the set?

ALEXA: Lauren, tell me if I'm wrong, but I remember that that was part of the conception of the episode, is that it was gonna be that change that you're noting and that he was, Bartlet really was going to get out there and be with people in a way that we might not have seen him previously. Is that how you remember it Lauren?

LAUREN: It is. You know, I think that, again, and Hrishi you asked something earlier that I realize I went off on tangent and didn't answer. You were asking about sort of the how we laid out episodes and how we sort of laid pieces into episodes that would come back to play later. This is another big John Wells thing and it's how I now run my own show. Just like Alexa, I got a lot from John, in terms of how he approaches a series in a very kind of mathematical way, which is that our writers' room was surrounded with white boards. There were white boards everywhere, and he would write, 5.01, 5.02, 5.03, all the way up to 5.22. And each one of them would have an underline on them and we would, from the very beginning of the season, start putting events in various episodes: where wanted the season to begin, where we wanted the season to end. And this story was one that John actually felt really strongly about, and wanted it to play toward the beginning of the episode because, again, carrying over from season 4, we're telling a lot of stories about the destabilisation of a presidency, and sort of how President Bartlet is finding himself again as a family man and as a leader. And the idea of him connecting to families that aren't his, I think was also part of this conceit.

HRISHI: And luckily, by his example, all presidents since this show aired have always had great connections to families that aren't theirs.

JOSH: Ha! Well said.

LAUREN: Yes, yeah, yeah.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I was thinking about this episode, and just remembering sweeter times when a [expletive deleted] up like Josh's would potentially get you fired from your White House staff position. That that was even a threat like: "oh we lost someone to the other party," and now people are calling for him to be fired. You know it hangs over this episode as the looming nightmare for Josh, but it also seems quaint.

JOSH: That's true. That said, I want to thank you personally for giving us a cowed, humiliated, fearful Brad Whitford culminating in his drunkenly yelling at a building.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

JOSH: Hey! You want a piece of me? I'm right here. I'm standing right here. Come on. Come on!

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thoroughly enjoyed that plotline.

ALEXA: [laughs] I think he did too. I hope he did.

JOSH: Yeah. He seemed to relish it, yes.

HRISHI: I love how the comments to Josh in the beginning of the episode are sort of the mirror image to what he was dealing with in the previous episode, where everyone was kind of giving him these words of, you know, “nice profile.” I’m talking about the *Washington Post* piece that had been written about him. We don’t even see their faces, necessarily, as they pass him in the hallway, but they’ve all read this thing and he’s trying to brush it off and, now, in reverse, we have people sort of trying to give him some weak words of encouragement and it’s really nice how those two things are mirrored, and that’s the kind of thing I was wondering about in terms of the continuity between the episodes: if you were actively engaged with the script of the previous episode so you could say hey, you know, we want to take this motif and then turn it on its head in the following episode.

ALEXA: Yeah, it was very intricate. I mean we all just ate that up. I know I did, I mean I was just thrilled to be able to plot like that and you know it’s like opening presents when you can pay stuff off that has been set up, so... I just remember running to Lauren’s office and you know we would sort of put our heads together and then we would say “oh, let’s go check with so-and-so who’s doing the next episode, and see if we can connect the tissue there as well.”

LAUREN: I think, too, part of it is that we were more involved on sort of a script basis, episode to episode, as well. So one of the things that John does is he tables every episode, so as soon as you write a script, you turn it into all of the writers, we all brought hard copies at the time. You would read them the night before, you would note them up and we would go around the table. And page 1: any thoughts on page 1? You know, you would start with macro thoughts, then literally do a page-to-page read. So you were so intricately involved in every episode and it also allowed, by the time we were reading episode 5.05, by the time we were reading “Han,” Alexa and I had started writing 5.06, so there were also things that we knew that we could put in or we could ask them to backfill. But it was really sort of, you know, as Alexa said, it was kind of this new fraternal feeling in the writers’ rooms there, it was really collaborative, you know?

HRISHI: Yeah, I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you, Lauren, having been there for all of the Aaron years and, you know, where all of this stuff has to be fed to one person and then really internalized and then he comes up with this final teleplay versus here where you have such a collaborative process, where the information is decentralized. That’s the part I think is so interesting. The system of it is so different that in some ways it’s not up to one person to have to keep it all in their head and at the same time you have to spread these ideas around many people and yet still have it feel like it comes from one cohesive voice of the show.

LAUREN: Yeah, it’s interesting because this is one of John Wells’ philosophies, which is that it’s ok to watch an episode and say “hey! that episode feels like an Alexa Junge episode,” or “that episode feels like a Debora Cahn episode;” that it’s ok to let some of your personal voice slip in and that viewers are savvy enough, and interested enough, to start seeing what individual writers bring to stories. It also makes the scripts better because you’re able to sort of imbue yourself into the script in a way that makes it more interesting.

JOSH: Yeah, and I think by this point the characters are established well enough that we can see someplace new that another voice might take them without going “wait! this is not the same.” You know, I watch it and it’s still *The West Wing* and it’s still Toby and it’s still Josh but I think you’re right, I think you can subtly tell that there’s a freshness to some of the writing.

LAUREN: Which is, I mean, as we all know, I think season 5 was jarring to so many viewers because of that. But I do think that by the time you get to latter seasons, I think people got used to it and enjoyed that freshness to an extent. God willing, by the way.

JOSH: Yeah, no, I’m enjoying that.

ALEXA: And I just want to say one thing, which is when you talked about all of it being in the head of one person? The same is actually true for season 5 and that head is Lauren’s. I could say to Lauren, “have you guys ever done this, at any point?” and she was like an encyclopedia, so I think Lauren, you were the clearing house for all facts and all questions and all consistencies and...

JOSH: A living show bible?

ALEXA: She was! [crosstalk] She should go right in the Smithsonian!

LAUREN: [crosstalk] Thank you

JOSH: Was either of you around on set when they were shooting or were you already back at work on the next thing?

ALEXA: I certainly remember shooting, in Long Beach, the Oklahoma piece. Yeah that was one of the lovely things about the way, you know, John lets you produce your episodes so you're there every step of the way and getting to see how he runs all those meetings, and that was really, really valuable too. But I don't remember if they forced you to keep working on everyone else's scripts and help everyone else, Lauren, but I kind of remember us... weren't we both in Long Beach together?

LAUREN: Yeah, what John does, the way that he runs writers' room, because John is always running a million things and he's a very busy man, is that on *The West Wing*, we met three times a week, three hours those days. And that was it. You know, it was like 3-6, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, or something. And the way that he ran things is you were required to be in the writers' room. It didn't matter if you were writing, if you were, you know, shooting, it didn't matter: you had to be in the writers' room so that you had the full participation of the writers. But that being said, that left you a lot of time to be working on your episode or to be on set. So Alexa and I, I can send you guys pictures later because I actually found them of us in the Oklahoma which was, yeah, down in Long Beach.

JOSH: I thought the, also, the production design and the production value of those scenes was pretty impressive--the storm damage, the tornado aftermath was very well done.

LAUREN: Alexa and Josh, do you remember that we actually got Ellen Totleben, one of the things that she did is that she put out a call, and it was on the call sheet I think, or maybe an email, who knows? asking for if people had furniture and clothing and stuff they didn't need to bring in.

JOSH: I don't remember that. Well, how about that?

LAUREN: Yup, so, like, you can see someone's old chest of drawers there, you know?

ALEXA: And I noticed looking at it too, last night, that it was, I wouldn't say it was the earliest days of CGI, but like the I remember Lesli talking to us about how, you know, in the background we would see more destruction, smoke, and so I sort of noticed it last night and it holds up really well but it's yeah definitely, but I just remember being like, wow, what can they? wow, they can do a lot of stuff!

[laughter]

JOSH: I think they also, I think a lot of Brad's performance [Alexa and Lauren laugh] was done with CGI. A lot of it was done in post.

[ad break]

HRISHI: To me it felt like there were some echoes in this episode to a few Sam Seaborn moments only this time sort of Josh was living them, instead, in a slightly different incarnation. Sam, when he was first faced with potential consequences of his dalliance with Laurie the call girl, he didn't go to C.J. first, and she scolded him for it. This is early on in Season 1, she tells him:

[West Wing Episode 1.03 excerpt]

C.J. I'm your first phone call. I'm your first line of defence. You have to let me protect you and you have to...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But, here, she tells Donna, she's like:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

C.J.: If he'd come to me, I'd tell him myself. Except men are funny that way--he'd never come to me.

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: Yeah, absolutely. I'm positive that was a call back, because that's something that we play a lot with C.J. too, which is like "hello, I'm here, if they'd just come to me," and no, absolutely.

HRISHI: I love the difference in the reaction: how strident she is with Sam, you know, way back in episode 3 of season 1 and here's she's like "eh, he's not going to do it. I've learned".

JOSH: I actually really like that moment and I thought when I watched it that that's an observation that maybe Aaron wouldn't have had C.J. make, that having a woman write for her, there was value there.

HRISHI: And then later, you know, in season 3, Sam gets played by Kevin Kahn with the fake election tape, you know the ad campaign tape that they have for the Ritchie campaign, and you know, he takes one in the teeth as Donna put it and everyone was checking in on him and telling him to get up off the dirt, and kind of giving him some words of encouragement in a similar way. Everyone except for Toby, who said he didn't want Sam patronized, and I think Toby is a little more actively protective of Josh here behind the scenes, because he doesn't want him to lose his job, and he doesn't want to have him especially lose his job to Angela Blake. But to his face, in terms of Josh's feelings, he doesn't patronize him at all.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

TOBY: Do I look like your mommy?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

LAUREN: But don't you think there's a really nice progression in this episode? One of the things that I noticed on the re-watch is that it goes from "do I look like your mommy?" to "let me walk you out," which is still actually to keep him out of Leo's office, to that final moment of "do you want to grab lunch?" and there's an actual, I love the progression of "totally don't give a crap" to, like, "I'm going to pretend to give a crap" to "I actually do," which feels very "Toby" as well.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's true, yeah.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah, I agree.

HRISHI: For Toby, you have to measure the arc in a much smaller distance.

JOSH: That's right. Baby steps.

HRISHI: Yeah that is true. It's really cool and I do love how when Toby is trying to reassure him, even in his, sort of, detached way, he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

TOBY: *She's not going to give up a corner office with a view of the park.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then when she does show up, he just looks stricken when she comes into Leo's office and I thought that was a great bit of acting from Richard.

LAUREN: Yeah.

HRISHI: I think the question of scale is interesting in this one too, because you have the palace intrigue and you have actual devastation, and that brings me a little bit to the question of the title: the title here is working on multiple levels. Who comes up with the title? Because I saw the title, "Disaster Relief," and the first reading of it is FEMA's response in Oklahoma and the president going in there, but Donna, herself, is also, like, Josh's one person disaster relief team.

ALEXA: I don't remember. I don't think I named it. Do you remember, Lauren?

LAUREN: I definitely didn't name it because I'm horrible at titles, so if it wasn't you [crosstalk] Alexa, it must have been someone else in the room.

ALEXA: [crosstalk] No it must have been... yeah. Although I do remember I'm obsessive about naming names for characters. I take it really seriously and, like, spend hours and I just remember being completely overwhelmed with how many names I had to come up with for the episode, and I guess the FEMA director was someone I knew, and then I have a friend, Janine, who I always put in to as many scripts as I can so she's been on *The West Wing* and *Friends*, and other shows, *Big Love*, other shows that I've worked on. But I probably ran into you, Lauren, a million times and said "do you like this? do you like this? do you like that?" but...

JOSH: I was hoping you were going to say the original title was "The One Where Disaster Relief."

[everyone laughs]

ALEXA: I wish! That's a good one.

LAUREN: Ahhh, that's funny. There's a Congressman, I think, in this episode who is Congressman Singer, which I have to assume is [crosstalk] Josh Singer, one of the writers.

ALEXA: [crosstalk] Yeah, Josh, it was. It was Josh, yeah.

LAUREN: We rarely name things after each other but until you get to like whiteboards and stuff but no that's funny.

ALEXA: I think it was a form of hazing actually because Josh, he's very entertaining, and new at the time, but he was sort of everybody's whipping boy, so I think there was a little bit of like "let's hang him out there and embarrass him," you know? Let's purposely name a character after him that he can't really say no to.

LAUREN: [crosstalk] Right

JOSH: [crosstalk] By the way, speak...

LAUREN: This is by the way, Oscar winner, Josh Singer.

JOSH: Yes, I was going to say...

ALEXA: Exactly, exactly.

JOSH: For... what's the name of the movie?

HRISHI: *Spotlight*.

JOSH: *Spotlight*, thank you. Speaking of the white boards, I know I did this on *The West Wing* and I try to do it on every job I have, which is occasionally try to sneak into the writers' room when they're not around so I can erase things and add little pitches. So I can remember writing things like "Will gets a sports car," or "two pretty women fight over Will Bailey," and it never happened, but I would always throw my little pitches in... unsuccessfully.

HRISHI: So your friend Janine gets the honor of being the happiest that...

ALEXA: [crosstalk] The boat.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Toby has ever been: the fifteen minutes when he was thinking of the name Janine.

ALEXA: Yes.

HRISHI: Does she know that she has this honor? Do you tell her every time? "Hey by the way..."

ALEXA: Yes, she does know. She got mad at me once because she was, like, Peter Horton's ex-wife on *Once and Again*, so... she wasn't mad *per se* but anyway, yes, she does know. I try to keep her posted.

JOSH: I also just like that little quick hit-- as I watch it I thought "now he's not going to say what he would've named his boat." I like that we come back to it later, and that it was just a little we just get a little tease, a little play over Richard's face what this name means to him without getting too far into it. I thought that was a great little touch. I loved that.

ALEXA: I love those kind of set-ups, to me are really fun, like the promulgate or the propulgate.

JOSH: [laughing] propulgate.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

Leo: Although I'm pretty sure there's no such word as "propulgate?" Maybe he meant propagate or promulgate?

Will: You put the Vice President in a room and...

[end excerpt]

ALEXA: That's something that I probably couldn't have done on *Friends*, in a way, actually because you, sort of, would have probably had to have played it earlier, but because the show is filmic, it's almost more, I hate the word delicious, but it's almost more delicious to let it go longer [crosstalk] kind of and bring it back...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right. I agree.

HRISHI: It's funny, I love that moment, but it was spoiled for me a little bit: the closed captioning kinda gave away the payoff later because, in the closed captioning, when the Vice President says

“propulgate,” they wrote it in quotes, they displayed the word “propulgate” in quotes and so I didn’t even have a moment to let it slide by and maybe consider that it was a real word for a second or something like that, even for just the briefest moment when you might go “hmm, ‘propulgate?’” I didn’t get to have that moment because they gave it away by putting it in quotes.

JOSH: I’ll admit something embarrassing which is watching this episode, you know sometimes when you hear a word enough times, you start to wonder whether it is a word, and I kept during Terry O’Quinn’s little subplot I kept thinking, “Is Albania a real place?” “Albania: is this like Qumar?” I had to look it up, with apologies to Albanians and any Albanian listenership, I actually had to check and I’m like “ah ok, I thought so”.

ALEXA: You shouldn’t feel bad because I know someone that thought the Bedouin were characters in Star Wars.

[laughter]

HRISHI: That’s a good mistake. I mean, that’s a delicious mistake, I’ll say.

ALEXA: Hmm.

JOSH: There’s also one more, speaking of the closed captions, there is another example of what I like to call the “closed craptions” when they get it terrifically wrong and there’s “how did they know about this stuff? Did they tap Leo’s phone?” became, “Did they tap Leo’s food?” in the closed captions. I’m not sure what they were thinking.

HRISHI: Here’s a confusing thing about the closed captions, as well. In a scene where the President is in conversation with one of the tornado victims, the older gentleman, the closed captioning actually has a line from the president that is never heard. Something that I thought maybe that they had the script and they were working off of that, and it was something in the script that ended up getting cut, you know, eventually so that the scene started a little bit later. According to the closed captioning, he says, “I’ve never been in a tornado and I can’t imagine…” and then it goes to the old man and he describes, you know, it’s like, he describes the sound of it. Do you know, was that ever a line that you had written? “I’ve never been in a tornado and I can’t imagine…” and then this guy responds?

ALEXA: Well sometimes you write dialogue on the set to feed, you know, to set up where the beginning is gonna be, like, or at the end of a scene, or dialogue for… but I can’t imagine that I would have started a scene with those words. It’s expository. I kind of feel like maybe it was just something to help Martin, or it could even have been maybe something that Martin came up with himself. I don’t totally remember.

HRISHI: It’s so strange because it’s not in the episode at all. It’s just…

ALEXA: It was magical.

HRISHI: The closed captioning person just decided that they wanted to take a shot at writing on the show.

LAUREN: At dialogue, yeah!

JOSH: Speaking of the president’s trip to Oklahoma, I love that whole storyline because it’s very nuanced as to what the impetus is in the first place for him to go, even C.J., she almost contradicts herself within four lines.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

C.J.: We need this Presidential moment; let's not give it away to Russell. I think you should go, not because of how it looks, because of what it is.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So she even in the space of her little speech, she's saying this is kind of a photo op that we shouldn't just, you know, give for free to the Vice President, and then she's saying it's the right thing to do, that's really why you should do it. And then he goes down there and his story is, it's kind of murky. He's, he feels, it seems like he feels good finally for the first time in six months because he's actually doing something: he's touching people personally, and maybe he feels good about interacting with these families when things aren't going so well with his own family. But then, by the same token, he is ignoring stuff back at headquarters that he really should be attending to, and I like the whole world that that storyline lives in, wondering "well is he doing the right thing?" and it's understandable on a human level why he kind of just wants to stay there, but is he also escaping his greater responsibilities?

HRISHI: I also thought it was a wonderful detail that C.J. was the one to persuade him to do it, not just because it made sense for her as a character and the arc that we've seen her going through this season, but also even just this little detail that we get of her remembering the tornado sirens when she was younger, and you know her character, I think, like Allison Janney herself, is from Ohio, which, you know, is tornado country, and so the idea that she might have a direct connection to what those people on the ground might be going through or what they need: why it's important not just for these political reasons but, like you said, Josh, because it's the right thing to do, that she's able to access that part of the moral compass more quickly than other people because she's, she's got this direct connection to it.

LAUREN: As someone who is from Ohio as well, I actually remember talking to Allison about that, because that's exactly what we did. I mean, I have such strong memories of my mother dragging me out of bed. We had a bathroom that we went to. It was not in the garage but it was, you know, a bathroom that was tiny with you know nothing in it, and my mother would put us in there with like blankets and pillows and a little like AM/FM radio, and that's where we would hang out waiting for tornadoes to pass, you know?

HRISHI: Wow. We talked a little bit about character names but I had a question about character creation, specifically whose idea was Ryan Pierce?

ALEXA: Lauren, you may know this better than I.

LAUREN: I can't point any direct fingers here but I would say that one of the things that shifted in season 5 was sort of, you know, do we need too much like we're breathe new life into the writers' room, do we need to breathe new life into *The West Wing*? And there's actually several examples, Ryan Pierce is one of them, but there's several throughout the season of new interns and new assistants and people have new... none of them last past season 5. Not that they weren't good stories or good performances, but I think it was, like many things in this season, an experiment to see what would work and, as storytellers, how we could start to enter into new territory that Aaron hadn't explored, and by season 6, we were like, "ok let's return to what's working".

HRISHI: My first impression of Ryan Pierce was not a positive one, but I think, you know, intentionally, he's not supposed to come off as likeable, and I like how that tension keeps getting you know, I keep getting poked in both directions on how I'm supposed to feel about him, you know, of course he has courtside seats to the Wizards/Knicks game, like ugh, of course this guy does, but at the same time... and he's talking to Donna about what porn site he visited, you know, just like wildly annoying qualities in this guy but at the same time, he also is ordered by Donna to go have Josh's back and he does it. And he doesn't do it in a sort of perfunctory way; he really does have his back in the end. And he never cops to the idea, you know, he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

JOSH: *You didn't have to stay and eat dinner with me to keep me from looking pathetic.*

RYAN: *I was hungry.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Despite all of these other superficial qualities about that character, I found myself liking him more and more.

LAUREN: I think Jesse Bradford, too, did a really good job in this episode. He actually only has, I think I looked, he only has five or six lines for the whole episode and I think him showing up for Josh and it's more his presence than anything else.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah. He has a real presence in this episode.

LAUREN: [crosstalk] Yeah. I think it's really great.

ALEXA: You did too, Josh.

JOSH: You're very kind!

ALEXA: No, you did! And speaking of whole arcs and whole stories, I remember, I really liked when it was clear that you were really good at this and this was going to work out.

HRISHI: There's a moment of your performance, Josh, that I noted.

JOSH: Uh oh.

HRISHI: After C.J. tells Will to own his decision, you have this expression on your face, a kind of like half grimace you know, where you're kind of... yeah! You're doing it right there, actually! But I had written, I was like, I've seen Will make that face before and I've seen Jeremy Goodwin make that face, you know in reaction to events on *Sports Night*, but I don't think I've ever seen Josh make it but, look, there you just did it.

JOSH: And I just did it for free, over Skype. Speaking of new characters, Terry O'Quinn as General Nicholas Alexander.

HRISHI: Replacing Fitzwallace as the chairman of the joint chiefs.

JOSH: I'm curious actually why did we lose John Amos and Fitzwallace? Any memory?

LAUREN: I would have to say scheduling. I can't fathom... I don't know if he started a new series that year or something?

JOSH: [crosstalk] Possibly. It seems most likely.

LAUREN: [crosstalk] I can't fathom another reason.

JOSH: And spoiler alert, we do get him back for a couple more episodes in the series, but loved John Amos and I'm also a huge fan of Terry O'Quinn, I was so thrilled to see him, I mean, I knew he was coming on the show, but I didn't know it was this episode. I love him. He's one of those guys, I think, again, who can do anything. And also I don't know, does any of you watch *Patriot*?

ALEXA: Mmhmm, I have seen it.

JOSH: It is largely under the radar. It is a really, really great show on Amazon...

ALEXA: It is.

JOSH: ... of which Terry O'Quinn is one of the stars. It's kind of a putative spy thriller but it's really so much more. It's a really, really, original, interesting, funny, compelling, moving show that people should check out more. So go try *Patriot!*

LAUREN: What I love about this Terry O'Quinn moment too is there's a sense from Leo in this episode and I assume, Alexa, you wrote this, because it's sort of perfect, I think, for what was happening this season, is there's this great moment:

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

C.J.: General Alexander has only been chairman of the Joint Chiefs a week; Let's give him some time to find the paper clips but if you'd care to

[end excerpt]

LAUREN: And it's like two scenes later it's like well, never mind, we're starting, we're doing this. And that, very much, was like the experience of coming in season 5 of *The West Wing*. It was like "Great, let's find each, let's find.... oh right, we need to get this on the air." I mean, that's, you know, 22 episodes.

HRISHI: One administrative thought (the Bartlet administration that is) which is it's so sad that Fitzwallace is no longer chairman of the Joint Chiefs when you could really feel the great relationship he had with Leo, and the great relationship he had with the president and, despite the sort of potential changing of the guard there, we still have Miles Hutchinson as the Secretary of Defense, somebody who has really clashed with the president, you know, multiple times. He still gets to have his job.

LAUREN: But don't you love to hate Hutch? I mean.. [crosstalk] You love to hate him.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah, he's the worst. He's a good bad guy. Hutchinson is played by Steve Ryan, who comes back in this episode. We also get a reporter in Oklahoma, named Louis, who's played by Bryan Callen, and just like we noticed in the last episode, there was some great guest starring work there, Bryan Callen has been in a lot of things, most recently in *The Goldbergs*.

JOSH: He's a funny stand up as well.

HRISHI: I saw him do stand up one time. When it comes time to, you know, you're writing the episode, and you get to be on set, do you also have any kind of either input into the casting of characters like this, or these are the qualities that the actor playing this character should definitely have? They need to embody these characteristics.

ALEXA: At a certain point, the casting director, Laura Schiff, would obviously know people and bring people in. But we would sit around the table and say, "I know this person for this," or "somebody might be really good," or "this is an idea,"... we used to sort of brainstorm about that so I mean, I remember that becomes a sort of group effort. But it was really fun, because there were so many fun parts, and the other reporter in that episode is a dear friend of mine, who since become a really well-known director and actress, but that was one of those, she made me look good because I was able to say "I know somebody in the theater who might be helpful," and so...

JOSH: Any memories of working with Lesli Linka Glatter, who directed the show. By the way she's a huge TV director now, a multi-Emmy nominee, DJ award winner, I believe she was nominated for an Oscar for Best Short years ago, she's a very, very accomplished woman. Did you work with her at all on the show, or was that outside of your....?

ALEXA: Yeah she was lovely. At one point, I think she was an ex-dancer, but I sort of remember her like pirouetting into video village or doing some kind of amazing jump to her seat.

JOSH: Yeah, that's my memory of Lesli. I've gotten to work with her a few times and she has a great energy...

ALEXA: Right.

JOSH: And she has boundless stores of energy, which you need from somebody leading a set where you can shoot for 10, 12, 14 hours. She's pretty great to work with, and she's very, very creative. When's the last time either of you had seen this episode? Years?

LAUREN: [crosstalk] since it aired.

ALEXA: [crosstalk] Not since it aired.

JOSH: Yeah, so it's the same way for actors and writers. You kinda maybe you see it once then why go back? We've given you a reason to revisit.

ALEXA: Yeah.

JOSH: But and, Alexa, did you not enjoy watching it? Because you talked about ...

ALEXA: No, no, did I sound really negative? Oh no, I was just sort of hearing my shtick and thinking I was up to my old tricks.

JOSH: Which is how I feel watching myself.

ALEXA: I found it really lovely to watch and just reminded me of what a great challenge it was to be immersed in that kind of a writing landscape, and I did feel really, it made me really sad about where things are. You know, it was like, just to see the opening and feel those sort of patriotic feelings, and just think about where we are today was striking. But, no, I really enjoyed it. And it just made me remember how much fun I had with Lauren, too.

LAUREN: That's so sweet.

ALEXA: [crosstalk] It's true, we had fun.

JOSH: [crosstalk] That is sweet.

LAUREN: Alexa was a huge mentor to me also, because she at the time was incredibly successful, incredibly busy, obviously an incredible writer, but was also a very new mother. And I remember thinking "like, wow, she is..." I don't want to say "having it all," but "she has a son that she is crazy in love with and is everything to her, and is also having this wonderful giant career, and is really, seems like, not just a good writer but a good mother." And it has truly inspired me throughout the rest of my career in, sort of, thinking like how do I continue being present for my children and my kids, and being a good mom, while also actively pursuing something I'm so passionate about.

JOSH: Yeah, it's difficult. It's probably difficult in a lot of jobs but I can speak to the experience of working in Hollywood and working on a TV show for an actor; it's much more so for writer/producer types, the hours are incredibly demanding and trying to nurture and see to the rest of your life can be difficult.

ALEXA: It's so funny you mention that. So my son was ten months I think when I was on the show, and I remember bringing him to the set one day and, you know, praying that, it was like a rehearsal or between shots, praying that he wouldn't, you know, make any trouble and we were actually it's the line in the episode where Bartlet says "it's like I woke up and I don't remember who I am."

HRISHI: Yeah.

ALEXA: Something like that? So the original line was something like “I used to wear this one suit and I put it back on and it was too small.” Or something. It was a little better than that but not much, but anyway Henry, I remember I’m in this position where Martin is reading the line, I’m worried that Henry’s going to cry or make noise, and then Martin goes “Yeah, I’m not going to say that. I’m just gonna say this,” and then he’s like “cute baby!” So I actually when I went to work with Martin on *Grace and Frankie*, I was like, “do you remember this line from a long time ago?” and I don’t know if you guys know Martin, but he has a lot of things to remember and sometimes he doesn’t always remember things, and he said “yeah, I really didn’t like that line. I really didn’t like it.” [Josh and Hrishu laugh]

HRISHI: Not only did he remember it, [crosstalk] he remembered how much he..

ALEXA: [crosstalk] I brought up the bad one.

HRISHI: Well, thank you both so much for joining us. This has been really enlightening and really fun. One thing I wanted to mention as a closing note in terms of great lines in this episode. One thing I particularly liked about it is I think in “Disaster Relief” is that we get a record number of times of [crosstalk] Leo yelling Margaret.

JOSH: [Crosstalk] Margaret! I knew you were gonna say that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I love that too. I watched this episode and I thought, “I’ve got to start doing that.” When anything is either like a bit of a crisis or demands action be taken, I’m just going to start yelling “Margaret” off camera, you know to off camera. It’s so great. I love... I knew you were working towards that. I loved every instance of that in this episode.

ALEXA: It was purposeful but did it continue? I don’t remember if we continued it in other episodes but it definitely became like shooting birds, let’s do it again.

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

Leo: Margaret!
Margaret!
Margaret!
Margaret!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Thank you both again for coming and speaking to us. Lauren, it’s so nice to have you back and, Alexa, thank you for joining us.

ALEXA: Of course! Thank you so much.

LAUREN: Thank you for having me.

HRISHI: Thanks to all of you for joining us. If you want to follow our guests on Twitter, you can’t follow Alexa, she’s not on Twitter. But Lauren is @LHissrich, Josh is @joshmalina, I’m @hrishihirway and of course our show’s @westwingweekly. If you want to leave a comment for us about this episode, you can do soon our website thewestwingweekly.com or on our Facebook page or on our Instagram or wherever you want to find us.

JOSH: The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of Radiotopia, which is a collection of wonderful podcasts. You can find out more about them at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: And thanks so much to our editors on this show Zach McNees and

[West Wing Episode 5.06 excerpt]

Leo: Margaret!

Margaret!

Margaret!

Margaret!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: ... Miller.

JOSH: "Margaret!"

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ALEXA and LAUREN: What's next?

[Outro Music]