

The West Wing Weekly
5.09: "Abu El Banat"
Guest: Joe Fab

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today, we're talking about episode nine from season five. It's called,

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: Abu el banat

[end excerpt]

JOSH: This episode was written by Debora Cahn. It was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, and it first aired on the third day of the twelfth month in the year 2003, of the common era.

HRISHI: This is Lesli Linka Glatter's second episode in quick succession. She directed episode seven, I think, as well.

JOSH: So not back to back.

HRISHI: Not back to back, but close to it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Here's what's happening in this episode, briefly: It's the Christmas tree lighting at the White House. The Bartlet daughters are supposed to be coming to the White House for dinner, a rare chance for us to see them all together, potentially. The DEA is prosecuting a doctor in Oregon for assisting a patient with their death, which is legal in Oregon. This opens the door to a debate that Toby doesn't want to have, so he tries to foist it off onto the VP via Will Bailey. Doug, who is Liz's husband, the son-in-law, he wants to run for Congress and he won't take no for an answer. Not from Josh and not really from anyone. 12 NGO workers in Sudan are arrested for proselytizing, and the administration wades in to defend all of them on what seems to be false charges, but then it turns out that 2 of the 12 workers really were evangelists undercover who were proselytizing.

JOSH: There it is.

HRISHI: It must be tough to step into a Christmas episode, especially in the non-Sorkin era. That must feel daunting.

JOSH: As a writer?

HRISHI: Yeah, for Debora Cahn, especially after the run of, traditional run of Emmys for Christmas episodes.

JOSH: Right, yeah, that's a high level assignment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: How did you think she acquitted herself?

HRISHI: I thought this episode was a little bit like not-great Christmas turkey, like a little undercooked and a little overstuffed.

JOSH: Interesting, I wondered. I enjoyed this episode. I didn't find it— I don't think it's going to crack a lot of top-10 lists. But I liked the, maybe I should attribute it to Debora, I was going to say Wells-ian inclination to go a little more personal. I liked that we got a rare, and I felt, earned closer look at the Bartlet family and its inner workings.

HRISHI: I will say that was my favorite part of the whole episode by far. My favorite part that ran throughout the entire episode was the ever-changing roster of who's actually seated at the dinner table?

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: That part felt like a nice play you know, like a set where you could just imagine people coming and going, and constantly you get a rotating set of partners. We never actually get everyone at that table.

JOSH: Yeah, that's funny that you had mentioned it, that you likened it to theater, because when we did finally get to the family dinner, such as it is, we don't really ever see the full family assembled. People coming in and out, leaving and have other errands and the president gets called out. I liked it very much, I thought it was sort of nicely modulated family tension. I thought Debora Cahn's writing was excellent there, and I thought to myself I'd love to see her write a play about a family.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's also possibly because I just saw my dear friend and Sorkin actor Josh Charles in *Straight White Men*, which is a family play by young Jean Lee, the first Asian-American woman to have a Broadway play produced, and it is a family drama set around Christmastime. And I loved it. Josh is terrific in it, it's a great play, and if you get a chance, go see it. I think, I know it's just about to open, in fact I think it opens tomorrow. I saw it in previews. And there's just a little similar texture to the Bartlet family, and we get a little glimpse of it, and I wanted more, which I think is generally indicative of good writing and performing and directing, if it leaves you wanting a little bit more.

HRISHI: I was thinking that you would be especially well-primed for this episode too, for the friction of this episode, having just been on a week-long trip with your entire nuclear family.

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: I thought, this is gonna...

JOSH: Yeah, a highlight of which included going to see *Straight White Men* with my entire family.

HRISHI: Oh, that's great.

JOSH: It was interesting to be with my family watching the dynamics of another fictional family.

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: It was very thought-provoking and interesting.

HRISHI: Another fictional family?

JOSH: Did I say another fictional family?

HRISHI: You said, yeah, which leads me to wonder [cross talk] Who are those people that I've met at your house?

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, I see.

JOSH: I think you didn't really just hear the punctuation. If you go back and listen to my delivery, it was to be with my family in New York watching another, *fictional* family.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Sure, sure. We believe you.

JOSH: [laughing] I'm a real boy.

HRISHI: I had some trouble with the family stuff, only insofar as Gus, the grandkid.

JOSH: Yes. His performance?

HRISHI: I'm just like barely interested in children, really, in general. And then—

JOSH: Wow. Might get some comments on that.

HRISHI: [laughs] And if there's a kid who does something interesting, sure, then it'll be interesting, but we just get entirely too much time with Gus. He's neither cute nor interesting nor precocious nor smart.

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

GUS: I have a quarter with New Hampshire on it.

BARTLET: You sure do.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Not a well-developed character, certainly. I like, though, I guess, seeing the kid around as a touchstone for other characters. I liked how President Bartlet ran out to the limo, swept him up, wanted to grab him, get his mitts on his grandson immediately, held him up high, and then he's called away. And there's a great little moment when Leo is going to apprise President Bartlet of the situation in Sudan, and it is a hostage situation, or it's being described thusly, and John Spencer just does a quick little take to the kid, as in, I'm about to say something—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I wonder if he'll understand what I'm talking about, it's a little inappropriate—

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And it's just great acting, where you just take in the situation, you don't just barrel ahead with your dialogue. You realize oh, I'm a man who is aware that I'm about to say this in front of a kid. I just liked it. It's instantaneous, it's a quick moment, but it had value.

HRISHI: I think it did have value. I think it had value in the same way that an excellently utilized prop would, but then you don't give the prop a few lines and a lot of screen time.

JOSH: Haha! Wow, you really don't like the kid. Well how about, let's just jump all the way straight ahead into the final scene, and did you not, you didn't treasure that?

HRISHI: [snorts] Yeah, I really didn't.

JOSH: That's funny, because I thought it was sweet. I actually, I dug it. It's a little sentimental, but I think the best West Wing Christmas episodes are, and I liked that little moment and I thought it was cute. One that, I think it's President Bartlet, earlier is scoffing at the idea of doing a run-through of flicking the switch.

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: He had a Fisher Price gizmo hooked to the side of his crib with more cranks and levers than a DC-10, but we're gonna practice with the switch.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like that he knew he'd be fine taking the kid out to flick the switch on and off and the kid had missed the moment, and I don't know, I thought it was cute.

HRISHI: But so, the rehearsal was actually not for the switch but because of the crowd. The crowd was—

JOSH: That the crowd was going to freak the kid out.

HRISHI: Yeah. But that did leave me to wonder, I mean, the president always has people around him. Even if he doesn't have his staff around him, he still is supposed to have the Secret Service around him. So where were they?

JOSH: Oh, at the last moment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well, I don't know, maybe on the West Wing grounds itself, if you've got enough snipers around, that if anybody jumps the fence, they'll be dead within a couple steps?

HRISHI: Yeah. We'll see.

JOSH: Anyway, I liked it. I thought it was a sweet moment, and I liked that final, I guess, crane shot that Lesli has sort of traveling up the tree and *ding!* ending with the light, that star on top being lit.

HRISHI: We know from past episodes that you really get a lot out of lights turning on and off.

JOSH: Well, that's true.

HRISHI: [laughs] Fireworks, street lights...

JOSH: Maybe that's what it was. It's funny, 'cause I was home and I did actually break out champagne and I toasted that moment—

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: at the end of the episode.

HRISHI: What about Toby not really understanding what a Christmas tree was?

JOSH: Yeah, what was that all about?

HRISHI: [laughing] At the beginning, he also had some surprising reaction to C.J.'s Christmas tree. What was that all about?

JOSH: And to C.J.'s featured prominent derriere shot at the beginning of that scene. I feel like the recurring light motif of this season five is the framing of women's bodies. You know, it wasn't egregious, but it kind of was the top of the scene, right?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: We started at the end.

HRISHI: That is a fact. I thought that there was another part relating to Gus that was a little confusing to me. So one of the scenes that I also enjoyed was the scene between the president and Liz.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: Because we haven't really had a chance to see what their relationship is like so far. She was chilly towards him in the moments when we first met her, during Zoey's kidnapping, because we knew she sided with her mom and blamed the president for the kidnapping in general, but we haven't had like moments of dialogue between them. This is the most we've ever gotten, and I liked that we find out that she is actually, maybe the more politically savvy member of her family.

JOSH: Yes, clearly so.

HRISHI: Yeah. But the ending of that scene, when he asks her why is she helping Doug, everyone else who's politically savvy realizes why he's not a great choice, and she says, well, he's my husband, and he asked me to. And I thought, there's something honorable in that, but the part that I don't get is when she says:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

LIZ: I don't want my son to be a part of my entourage. A photo op is not his idea— I don't want it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's fine, OK, she doesn't want it, so sure. But the first part of that, when she says that, you know, she has this objection to her son being a part of a political entourage, but then she doesn't have the conviction to tell her husband that she doesn't want that for her son? I get a little bit lost in there.

JOSH: Yeah, I take that as a strength, perhaps, rather than a weakness of the scene, but I think you're right. It's a little bit, her feelings aren't black and white. It's a little bit more complicated, I think, it spoke to maybe a feeling that she as a candidate couldn't control something that she as a mom maybe will be better able to do, even if her husband is running. But I think you're right, it is sort of...

HRISHI: Murky.

JOSH: Ambiguous - it's murky.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's true. And also, I enjoyed an excellent Annabeth Gish in that scene. I thought she was quite good. And I thought also the palpable hit, emotionally, of that scene is her referencing that she paid a price as a kid.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: In the Bartlet household or in the Bartlet family and there's also, I guess subsequent to that, there's a brief discussion between Abbey and President Bartlet about their not quite being Currier and Ives—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And some of the sacrifices they made to be the political family that they are.

HRISHI: That really was my favorite part, I think maybe in the whole episode, that exchange:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

LIZ: You cannot do it all.

BARTLET: Your mother did.

LIZ: No, Daddy, she didn't.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oof.

HRISHI: A little bit of a bombshell.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And a great one, and a realistic and wonderful one, and I think it deepens our sense of who these characters are, what the family dynamic is, really succinctly.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true, which can be done both with and without dialogue. I also like the scene when we finally see all three Bartlet siblings together—

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And they're just watching and listening to the carolers, and they let the moment breathe a bit as they eventually all touch one another and laugh and share a laugh, and I liked that it was not a scripted moment dialogue-wise.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I thought it was very effective. It was fun just to see the three women together.

HRISHI: Yeah. My favorite moment is towards the end of that, as they're circling, as the camera circles around to the back and you see, Liz pulls on Zoey's hair, did you see that?

JOSH: Oh, I didn't pick up on that, specifically, not consciously.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought I saw it and then I had to go back and look. It's tough because it's a little bit dark, it's not lit really, but you can make out, her hand goes up and she just gives a little, like, playful tug to the back of Zoey's hair, and I thought that was just a great detail.

JOSH: That's adorable, I love it. That speaks to sisterhood, I will definitely go back and take a look at that. It's funny, when you, now that you mention circling, I'm also remembering a moment, that was one, I guess, a single take?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: As the camera moves around them. When President Bartlet and Abbey are walking out to meet Doug and Liz's limo or car—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There is some circling going on, but it has some cuts, and sometimes you pay the price in a big sort of mob scene that has choreography that's difficult to replicate exactly. And there's some circling going on of Lesli Linka Glatter's camera, and within it you can see the photographer in jump cuts being in different places that he couldn't possibly be. And it's suggestive of a continuous moment, but if you go and take a look, the photographer who's covering it, he has a couple lines of dialogue, is in one spot, and then as the camera moves to the left, he's now further right, even though he was moving left—

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: There's some stuff that doesn't quite work out. And then also, a very, very clear shot of that photographer very aggressively chewing gum, which I thought was an odd choice.

[laughter]

JOSH: Either on the actor's part or the whole production. Like, dude, you're working at the White House, take your gum out.

HRISHI: Yeah, save it until after the job is done.

JOSH: Yeah, put it behind your ear, like any civilized person.

HRISHI: Let's talk about some of the other parts of the episode, maybe some of the stuff that doesn't work as well, or at least it didn't work as well for me.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Let's start with the subplot about the doctor in Oregon.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: So the DEA is prosecuting this doctor. They start by going to talk to the attorney general, to sort of set the matter straight. This is not something they're going to interfere with. This state has determined that it is legal there, and therefore it is not the federal government's place to interfere. And I had two feelings about this whole subplot.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: One is that I wish they actually dove into the issue a little bit more, but I do like what it actually is ultimately leading to, which is a much more personal connection to it, this revelation that a high percentage of patients who are requesting doctor-assisted suicide are people with MS.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: I thought that was a really smart and sneaky way to get that very heavy question into this episode. But overall I felt like, this is the undercooked part, like I didn't think that they talked about the real debate about it very well, and I wish I could've seen the struggle a little bit more about— like, I feel like it mostly happens off camera and out of the story, oh, he has thought about this. You know, these references to the syringe in the drawer. But again, it's also murky for me because I do love where it ultimately lands, which is, like it's the reconciliation of the president and the First Lady.

JOSH: I agree with your analysis. I wrote down that they, I was disappointed that they failed to dig in on what could be a very interesting topic. For most of the episode, it feels as if the topic itself is framed in a way to allow us to observe this sort of political maneuvering, and is the attorney general using this as sort of a launching pad for his own campaign and for personal— rather than digging into the ethics or any of the finer points of the issue itself. And then I was surprised, in a nice way, when it took a personal turn with the president.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I thought, that was unexpected for me, and very effective. But I agree, it could have been more of an episode, for better or worse, but I think it would've had value. You wouldn't describe this episode necessarily as “the one about doctor-assisted suicide”

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: But it could've dug in and made that a significant and fascinating component of the episode in a way that it didn't quite land.

HRISHI: Right, I think this could've been the A story.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And instead, I don't know what the A story really is in this episode.

JOSH: Yeah, that's very well put, I was just wondering that as you posited what it could've been, I was thinking, well, what was it? And so I think there is a little, it does feel to me like a lower-stakes episode. Although I really enjoyed it, it felt like an assemblage of B and C stories with nothing really fighting its way forward to demand the mantle of A story.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think this is tough because the Christmas episodes are so strong, and the A story of them is so clear. I mean, you can say, “In Excelsis Deo,” that's the one about the Korean war vet. “Noel,” that's the one about Josh's PTSD. “Bartlet for America,” this is the one about Leo's struggles with alcoholism, and “Holy Night” is the one about Toby's dad. They're clear stories that drive the holiday narrative forward and, like, sort of the spirit of Christmas, they're isn't really much of a spirit of Christmas in this one despite that fact that there's a lot of surface stuff about Christmas trees.

JOSH: I think you're right. They didn't even take the three-point shot that they normally do on the West Wing Christmas episode. Hey, look, you're actually diminishing my enjoyment of an episode!

[laughter]

JOSH: Look at the role reversal. No, when I consider it now, I think you're absolutely correct. I ended up enjoying it more on the level of, and I've spoken of this in the past, maybe not in a while, those just sort of smaller episodes where, here's a day—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: in the administration. But improved by the more personal look we get into the Bartlet family. I did enjoy that aspect of it. But I think you're right, it was overall I guess a less ambitious Christmas episode than we've become used to.

HRISHI: Mmhmm. One part that I found objectionable in the doctor-assisted suicide part of it was, well we have Dylan Baker in this episode playing the attorney general.

JOSH: Whom I love.

HRISHI: And he's in *The Americans* with another West Wing alum, your former roommate, Noah Emmerich. He was very creepy in *Happiness*.

JOSH: Oh, yeah.

HRISHI: He's really good at being creepy. He was very creepy in *The Good Wife*, too.

JOSH: Haha! He's just a fabulous actor. I've known about him since 1984, freshman in college. I saw him at Yale Rep, he played the role of Valere in the Yale Rep's production of *Tartuffe*, in which the eponymous role was played by Austin Pendleton, whom we know as Barry Haskell from *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah. And was Dylan Baker at the Yale Drama School then?

JOSH: I believe so, yes.

HRISHI: Why were you at Yale in 1984, to go see a play?

JOSH: I had, it must have been my freshman year. I graduated from high school in '84.

HRISHI: Oh, OK. Then I guess so.

JOSH: It must have been a production, it must have been in the fall of '84, and it was a terrific production. It's funny, I have a, I'm a big fan of Molière. I also saw Dylan Baker in an incredibly great role that I still sometimes quote with Noah Emmerich, because we went to see it together. He did a production of a play called *La Bette* in 1991, and he played the prince, and he was just hilarious. And *La Bette* is sort of, I think it's actually a play in rhyming verse, sort of in the mode of Molière. It's very, very very funny.

HRISHI: While we're telling Dylan Baker stories from college, the first time I really was aware of Dylan Baker was when he was in a photograph by my photography teacher at Yale, Greg Crewdson.

JOSH: What?

HRISHI: Yeah, he was, Greg Crewdson does these very elaborate staged photos, and he was working on a series called "Twilight" then that had sort of a *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* vibe, and they're really incredible productions. And Dylan Baker is in one of the photographs, and I was like, who's this? And people at the time were like, that's the guy from *Happiness*.

JOSH: That's wild. He's even good in photographs.

HRISHI: Yep. I'll put a link to that image up.

JOSH: I look forward to seeing it. He's a terrific actor. He's the kind that, I look up to him.

HRISHI: Wow. Well, in this episode, his only episode of *The West Wing*, he plays the Attorney General. Now I turn to a part where I'm criticizing it a little bit. I don't really understand where someone, it seems like it's not his first time having a kind of difficult, thorny, contentious relationship with the administration over how he sees policies. And I think that's fine, I don't think that's an issue. I think that it's entirely believable that the president might have appointed someone to his cabinet with whom he clashes. But—

JOSH: Team of rivals?

HRISHI: Yeah, I could see it. They do seem to be pretty far apart and it does seem like he's, they have a history here. I wish we'd had some kind of history. It feels a little bit like, we've talked about this in the past too, the opposite of *deus ex machina*. What's the opposite of *deus ex machina*?

JOSH: Hmm.

HRISHI: It's a [expletive deleted] *ex machina*.

JOSH: [Expletive deleted] *ex machina*, yeah, I think so, that's it.

HRISHI: Where suddenly, this person is created who appears on screen to be a foil and cause a problem. You know, we get mention of Berryhill in this episode. You know, Berryhill and Hutchison, these are people who have been long-running characters as Secretaries of State and Defense and we know what the relationship is kind of. It's been built in since the first season. It seems like a strong move to be like, oh, and here's the attorney general and here's this really contentious relationship.

JOSH: That's interesting. I didn't bump on it as I watched it, but I'm allowing you to—

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: further ruin my enjoyment of this episode *post facto*.

HRISHI: And in the end their final resolution, the president says, fine, we will have the debate, I'm taking the gloves off, we're gonna have this debate, which seems like a very bad political move. Not just about whether you want to have the debate or not in front of the State of the Union, all the stuff that Toby doesn't want to have, that's one thing. But the idea of, it suddenly becomes a huge process story, one thing we know they don't want to have. If it's the president arguing with his own attorney general, and he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: You pull this crap one more time, you're fired.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Why isn't he fired now? If they're agreeing to have the fight, if the president says, I'm going to have this debate, why not fire the guy? That way, you'll still have the debate, and also get rid of a guy who clearly is ideologically at odds with you and gives you a lot of trouble historically.

JOSH: Well, I took that scene, which I liked very much, actually, as the president calling the attorney general's bluff. And I think President Bartlet leaves the room as thinking, maybe that fight is not going to happen.

HRISHI: Ah.

JOSH: I think he walks away thinking he may have just won it in the room. Perhaps not, perhaps that's not credible, but I think that's the maneuver. You know?

HRISHI: Sure.

JOSH: Merry Christmas, tell your wife hi.

HRISHI: Yeah, that might be the case, that he has out-flanked him. But we don't know. Much like the resolution of the actual issue here, we don't get it. We don't know what's going to happen. We didn't get the debate about where everybody really stands and like, get to chew on that. And then it's sort of just left hanging.

JOSH: That's true. Well, I liked it. I liked the directness of it. It's funny, it also came off the heels of yet another example of something that does bug me. It's now, I think, in its third iteration, becoming a pet peeve of mine, which is the season five tendency in my eyes to spend two or three scenes on a mini arc that really requires just one. For instance, the sending of Josh to go speak to Doug about his run...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He's supposed to throw water on it and end it. I didn't find it entirely credible that Josh Lyman would have that conversation with this guy and walk out of the room in that sort of standard kind of sitcom-y plot where like, hmm, he didn't really get what I was saying.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: You know, I just didn't quite buy it. The writing was good, the acting was good, the directing was good. I just, the actual existence of that scene, I couldn't quite go in for. I don't think he would walk out of the room and say, I think you're not really hearing what I'm saying. the way we've learned who Josh Lyman is as a character, and I get it's familial here and the fact that he's a Bartlet in-law [cross talk] muddies the waters. But I didn't quite buy that it would take the extra scene or two it did for him to come back and just lay it out. And also, as we find out in the ultimate scene between Josh and Doug, Doug's got a response. He's doing it anyway, and he feels fully ready, and he's confident, so I just think they would have gotten to the conversation in that scene in the prior one. And so I actually enjoyed the fact that when President Bartlet had to leave his Christmas table to come down and talk to the AG in the Oval that he walks in saying:

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: Two more doctors? You couldn't wait a year to start campaigning?

ATTORNEY GENERAL: Mr. President—

BARTLET: You don't run for governor from my Cabinet.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I liked the directness of it. It's the kind of thing that could have played out similarly over the course of two or three scenes, but here it's just like, let's have the conversation. So I liked, I appreciate the directness of the Bartlet approach.

HRISHI: I buy that. I buy that. As far as the Josh thing with Doug, I felt like they kind of set it up without really setting it up by having this great moment between C.J. and Debbie, when C.J. asks Debbie to keep communicating this message to Liz:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

C.J.: I've got a meeting. Could you tell her?

DEBBIE: You can't say no to her, can you?

C.J.: Not really.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then I at least lifted that quality and put it on Josh in that moment where he doesn't actually get the message across to Doug. I thought, oh, OK, and Josh suffers from the same thing: he can't say no to Doug. And you know, we have some background that's like, oh, they're buddies. But it could've been nice to connect those two dots a little bit more. But I'm actually, I was OK with it because of that previous scene. And also, another moment that I really thought was great in how terrible it was, the first interaction between Josh and Doug is so painful and awkward. The little small talk, they kind of tease Josh about, oh, he's your friend, and Josh says, he's a nice guy. And then they see each other:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

JOSH: Good to see ya.

DOUG: Good to see ya. I swiped your paper.

JOSH: It's government property. I'm gonna have to call the feds.

DOUG: Then I'd better dash. See ya.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's just so...

JOSH: It is, he actually does a little physical, fake dash. Yeah.

[laughter]

HRISHI: It was great.

JOSH: It was kind of cringe-y great.

HRISHI: Yeah, it was really wonderfully, accurately, horribly done. As soon as Dylan Baker showed up on the screen, I was like, Dylan Baker, is he going to be in *The West Wing*? I didn't know, so I looked it up and no, this is his only episode. So I felt like oh, OK, this potentially rich topic —

JOSH: Mmm.

HRISHI: And dynamic is not going to be further explored. So that was a bummer. He even had sort of an arc like Oliver Platt, you know where we could have a few episodes to kind of tease out the dynamic and the history and where it came from.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I would have given them more leeway to have that kind of [cross talk] I felt a little bit, too, like it reminded me of *Abbey*. I felt like *Abbey* in “Manchester Part II,” where she says:

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah, I'm with you on that.

[West Wing Episode 4.02 excerpt]

ABBEY: You go from I've got a lot to say, to I can't say it right now because I've got so much to say, to I've got to read about agriculture and... [fades out]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: She's trying to engage with him about running again, and that's what it feels like. They talk about, oh, the debate will open up this whole can of worms because of this and this, but then we never do get the debate, and then it just kind of peters out.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: Goes to sleep.

JOSH: You're not wrong.

HRISHI: Okay, let's talk about this other part of the episode, the NGO workers in Sudan. Spies for Christ, as Leo calls them.

JOSH: Great phrase.

HRISHI: What did you think?

JOSH: They didn't dig in too deep on this one either.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It was another, this one is maybe a C story struggling to be a B story.

HRISHI: Mmm.

JOSH: And I think what I found most intriguing was that they never seemed to really question the idea of making proselytizing a capital crime. It was more a question of whether they had proselytized or not. And once it had turned out that two of them in fact had 18 Bibles ready to go and, obviously they were on a mission and they were proselytizing, it was, we owe them an apology. In other words, the whole issue was framed not around whether American travelers to the Sudan should be potentially... am I wrong? Am I making that up or did they refer to it as a capital crime?

HRISHI: It is a capital crime.

JOSH: Yeah, not whether they should potentially be on trial for a capital crime for having done missionary work. But the fact that, at least early on in the episode, we're under the impression that, hey, these guys were just there to do good work, they were just there to help and to do the work of this organization. Once they sort of find out, oh, two of them were actual missionaries, [expletive deleted], we're going to be out millions now. Now we have to bargain for them. And President Bartlet, I think, posits that he in fact should call and make an apology.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's never any discussion about, maybe I should make a call and talk to them about how they treat—

HRISHI: Missionaries?

JOSH: religious missionaries, yeah. For some reason I found that more interesting than anything else about that storyline.

HRISHI: Hmm. I think this story must be inspired by two women who, in 2001, were arrested for proselytizing, not in Sudan, but in Afghanistan. Dana Curry and Heather Mercer were arrested in August of 2001. They were eventually broken out of prison by U.S. troops after military action post-9/11 in Kabul. I'll post a link on the website. There's an article, you can read more about it, but it seems like that must have been the inspiration for this.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: Their escape had this much more dramatic turn where the invading forces rescued them, and not this sort of off-screen...

JOSH: Bargaining.

HRISHI: Bargaining with a checkbook. This is now, aside: I'm sorry for people who enjoyed this episode, they are going to be tired of me criticizing it, but these are my thoughts on this episode, and I can't help—

JOSH: This is your sworn duty, Hrishi.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I respect it.

HRISHI: There's this running tension in this episode between the tree rehearsal and the president having to meet with Nancy. There's a great, funny line about, there's some debate about a bath:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

BARTLET: Aren't we expecting Liz and Gus?

DEBBIE: Oh, they're running late. There's a disagreement about a bath.

BARTLET: Nancy McNally is waiting, and she's already had her bath.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs] I wrote down that line. There are some great, hat tip to Debora Cahn, some great lines of dialogue in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought that was really funny. But at a certain point, it's like, he's the president. Nancy can come to the Oval Office.

JOSH: Yep, that's true.

HRISHI: Like, this meeting does not need to be held up because he's got to make his way over to find her.

JOSH: Mm, good point. But then they'd have to pay Anna Deavere Smith for an episode and show her walking through the hallway.

HRISHI: Yeah. [laughs] But that seemed like kind of a silly plot hole.

JOSH: You're right. I gave them a pass on all sorts of things.

HRISHI: Well, that's what I did last episode, so you know, we're making up for it.

JOSH: Sure. I like the reference to past family disputes and spats, including the cauliflower incident.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah, which I definitely listened, I heard that with capital C, capital I.

JOSH: Yeah, no, I was already printing a t-shirt.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I was like, can we sell that? Eh, it's not enough of a thing. And it also makes me wonder whether that was somehow brewing in my subconscious, because in numerous interviews and panel discussions and moderated panels for *Scandal*, we would often be asked to describe, what's the season four finale in one word? Or, describe what it's like to work on *Scandal* in one word. I don't know why this idiotic question would often be posed to us. And then we'd go down the line, each of us [cross talk] and I would always—

HRISHI: [cross talk] Literally "in one word," that's how it would be phrased?

JOSH: Yes, and so we'd hear what Kerry said and Tony said and Guillermo said, and the entire cast would go through, and I would always say "cauliflower."

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Thinking, you know...

HRISHI: Yeah, that's as good of a word as any.

JOSH: Right, and far more intriguing an answer than anything that had preceded it, so.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I may have stolen that from this, who knows.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I don't know. Either that or I'd be a total ass[bleeped]. Like, in one word, how can you describe the new episode on Thursday, and I would say, "episode."

HRISHI: Yeah. [laughs] It's a question that merits that kind of response.

JOSH: I think so too.

HRISHI: Right. OK, maybe my final nitpick, though don't hold me to that.

JOSH: Bring it.

HRISHI: It's just that it felt like, similar to my other frustrations with this episode, kind of a truncated non-ending, we just never get anywhere with so much of this stuff. The whole exchange between Josh and Donna about her present.

JOSH: Mmm. I kind of liked it. [cross talk] Go ahead, pick that nit.

HRISHI: [cross talk] What did he get her?

JOSH: We don't know.

HRISHI: And we never find out! And the next episode is after Christmas, we are never going to find out.

JOSH: Uh, I can live with that disappointment. No, I thought it was kind of cute the way it was built, I mean first of all, again, this is a romantic couple talking about, and he's taunting her:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

JOSH: I saw it Thanksgiving. I got it.

DONNA: No you didn't, what is it?

JOSH: I'm not telling you.

DONNA: I want to know.

JOSH: Really? It's a gift certificate. Tower Records. 'Cause you're a fan of the music, you get to go on a spree.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You can just see Donna's face fall, and then it's just kind of letting out a little more line and saying, of course that's not what I got you, I got you something else. And he won't tell her. I thought it was kind of cute—

HRISHI: No, it's socks.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Though as someone who has given you socks, [cross talk] I felt—

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes, I felt it was an unfair shot at socks as a gift.

HRISHI: [laughs] Socks could be very thoughtful.

JOSH: Mmhhh. I've received some beautiful pairs, including yours, and I often give socks.

HRISHI: Like the moment where Josh gives Donna the book. It is really nice, and I felt like this was—

JOSH: Oh, I know why you didn't like the scene.

HRISHI: Teasing and no—

JOSH: No, there was a little itch that never got scratched for you. You like, at the end of a scene, to be able to go, "He gave him the socks!"

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Just something, you were just stuck with—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He gave her the "dot dot dot" does not work for you.

HRISHI: What did he give her?! I don't know! But it doesn't even feel like a satisfying non-resolution, you know. Like, the way that you argued for the debate between the President and the Attorney General. Like, this was actually a series of moves and countermoves, and we're not going to have it.

JOSH: To me, I disagree. I think it's, though it's glacial, it's a moving forward of their personal relationship. She actually bothered, thinking she needed to, to indicate what he should purchase for her for Christmas. She discovers that, in fact, he's had something for weeks. She's delighted, he lets her down because she thinks it's something that actually has no, suggests no understanding of her character, he just got her a gift certificate. And then she's tauntingly pleased as she walks away knowing that she's got something of a personal nature coming.

HRISHI: Mmm, OK.

JOSH: It inches their relationship forward.

HRISHI: Does it?

JOSH: Yes!

HRISHI: OK. I think they're already there, but I guess—

JOSH: Oh, well, that's true too, it certainly, in one sense, we usually [indistinct] them altogether, just trying to find the good. It's another iteration of what we know already in terms of what's between them. It's not a revelation to the, that's what it is. It's not a revelation to the viewer that perhaps there's something actually between them. It's another reinforcement that Donna knows he really digs me, I think.

HRISHI: Mmhmm. I guess Josh's final lines are directed to me as much as they are to Donna. He says:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

JOSH: I'm not telling you. Live with the pain.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Alright, fair enough.

[laughter]

JOSH: Come on, Hrishu.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: There always are I think, these days, Trump-ai-yi-yi moments, but there was a significant one where Dylan Baker as the attorney general says:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

ATTORNEY GENERAL: The White House interfering with a federal prosecution? You really want to walk that road?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That was a major Trump-ai-yi-yi moment for me.

HRISHI: [laughs] I also thought a nice bit woven into this was the continuation of C.J.'s relationship with her dad. I think Toby, while I was watching Toby asks her, how's your dad, in the exact moment that I was thinking, she's arguing with Toby about the right to die, and Toby says:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

TOBY: We're not stopping anyone from squirreling away 50 Second in a nightstand and washing it down with a bottle of vodka.

C.J.: In order to down the 50 Second, you have to have control of both the muscles in the hand and the muscles of the esophagus. This is an opportunity, and we're dodging it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She makes a very—

JOSH: And her performance, too, you can feel the emotional heft of that moment.

HRISHI: Exactly. She's got some fire behind it, and she's also making a point that, clearly he has not considered. And as soon as she did that, I was like, of course she—

JOSH: I was getting there at the same time.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, it was good timing, it was very well-written. That is a good scene. That said, immediately after that, I thought, wow, that was kind of dirty pool.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It wasn't a, hey, I'm a friend really checking in on you. It was, OK, we're not just arguing about something here, it's this is personal for you. I thought it was a knock down.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And kind of a shot at her.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Toby not at his best in this episode. He's also not very pleasant to Will. Not that this is new, but boy, he is pretty awful to him.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought—

JOSH: Including, I think I had opined in an earlier episode that Will no longer had an office in the West Wing. I realize in this episode, I'm incorrect, this is where he gets booted, finally.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought that he was out as well. I had assumed, maybe, I thought that we had seen, or there was even that there was a discussion in the episode about—

JOSH: I thought so too.

HRISHI: not having that—

JOSH: There was some discussion of that on the board, so they'll figure it out and let us know.

HRISHI: At some point, yeah, to me it felt clear that Will wasn't working next to Toby already. But then yeah, it turns out, I guess he still was, and then he really ungraciously gives him the boot here.

JOSH: Maybe either no one ran it past Lauren Hissrich, who would have told them. In an earlier episode, we've already established, Will's in the other room. We're now going to go the extra step that Toby, in the interim, brought Will back to his office so he can kick him out again.

[laughter]

JOSH: It was all just a setup. No no, you can keep your office here. Please, come back.

HRISHI: This really starts to mess with, I think the commonly held or disseminated narrative around Will Bailey. At least the way, what had understood, which is, and we've talked about this before, that Will was a traitor or a bad guy for what he did by defecting. You know, I can't believe Will left the Bartlet administration and went to work for Russell. Here, I still feel like Will did what he, I don't blame him for what he did, and I feel like he's trying to do his job well, and there are other parts of running the government that are important besides just working as senior staff for the president. And really, Toby's being a baby.

JOSH: That's how I take it as well. I like Will's explicit statement:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

WILL: I'm not your man in the VP's office, Toby.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I'm not on this team anymore. Not that I'm working against you, but I'm doing something else now.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I do think a lot of wingnuts judge Will for it. I certainly never did as I was acting it, and as I re-watch, I find myself totally understanding Will and his decisions. [cross talk] I get it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah. So I think that, for me, in summary with this episode, I think the episode, for me, had a likeability issue. What I love about *The West Wing* is how much I am in love with all of these characters. You know, I just want to spend time with them, I want to hang out with them. But no one, even the people who sort of fare the best in this episode, none of them feel like characters that I really support or feel strongly about, that I'm like, oh, what a great person. This idea of oh, these are some really wonderful people with strong ideals. I don't know, likability is not something that is important to every TV show. Clearly, some shows are built on the idea of an antihero or whatever, but—

JOSH: It's funny, I was just tweeting about this recently. I don't know if you read, but having observed a conversation among a few TV reviewers in my feed, I tweeted, "I've never quite understood the criticism of a television show based on the unlikeability of its characters." That said, there's a difference between spending four seasons with characters that I think we are meant to like and, indeed, we have fallen in love with, and then taking some harsh left turns with some of them. So if that's how you experience it, I totally get that. But yeah, I don't usually have that problem, although I do for sure like all of the main characters in *The West Wing*, so I'm not dying to— I guess I like them enough that when I see a more unpleasant side of them, it doesn't feel abrupt or painful, or maybe it feels a little painful, but it doesn't put me off of them, it gives me greater insight into them. So to see how the Bartlets don't have the perfect family that I thought maybe they had, just to me emphasizes their humanity rather than diminishes it. And when I see Toby being an ass[expletive deleted], it doesn't put me off of him suddenly, I just go, OK, that's Toby not at his best. And why isn't he? OK, this is what's playing here. It hasn't happened to an extent where I feel like we're not watching the same characters yet.

HRISHI: No, I think you're right. It doesn't feel like it's out of character. And it's not like it's the first time that Toby has acted like an ass [expletive deleted], but usually that is tempered by some greater ideal that he's pursuing, and maybe not doing it in a diplomatic way, but there's some heart underneath the old goat exterior. And we neither get to sort of the lofty political ambition nor do we get to some actual softer side of him. And it's not limited to Toby, again, it's not even so much that I think everybody comes off as a jerk in this one, far from it. It's just that none of the characters, I don't watch this and think, what a great set of people who I want to hang out with a lot.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And I think that is part of the appeal that the show has been built on before. Like if you were to have an episode of *Parks and Recreation*, which takes the likability factor like, sky high. If you were to have an episode where everybody was kind of just moving the pieces around the board without doing anything to sort of charm you, it wouldn't be as much fun to watch.

JOSH: I guess. I wouldn't fault a single episode. If you feel like season five is playing out as a bait and switch, I could understand that. It's interesting to hear the way you articulated it. I do now tie it back, at least, to that moment between Toby and C.J., and I do feel like maybe there should've been a little bit more there. Because what felt like just an outright dick move to ask her how her dad was doing in the middle of this discussion about assisted suicide or death with dignity, and to have no more to say, and to in fact have upset her to the point where she leaves the room, and make no move to get up and address it. Even if we didn't have to see that scene, is a little bit of a short-change of Toby's character or the relationship those two have, which is a very special relationship. And I feel like maybe there could've been a little bit more to the moment. Because I watched it and thought, ooh, God, that is a serious low blow. And I would've thought it would have to be addressed. You know, that came out of the passion of the moment, or I overstepped, or something. It was interesting to end the scene there. I'm curious to see, the next time we see Toby and C.J. together, whether there's any residual bad feelings. I suspect it will not be addressed again, but it felt to me like, maybe we were owed a little bit more there.

HRISHI: Yeah. OK, let me ask you this. What did you think about the story of the title: "Abu el Banat"?

JOSH: Well, the first thing that clicked with me is one of my dad's best friends, on a trip to Israel with my dad, was dubbed by, I think they had a Palestinian driver or guide who called him "Abu Banot," father of daughters. Because this friend of my dad's had, at the time, three daughters. He would ultimately have a son. It was just funny to me, it was so right on the nose of what I knew from real life. And I guess I kind of liked it. It is related to us by President Bartlet, right.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it's interesting, he's got that sort of thing of, ugh, having daughters. But we've seen his love for them so much, and we see so clearly his sense that his daughters have all — not his sense, he explicitly states that his daughters all date morons, that he holds them in such higher esteem than the men they love. But it is sort of this, oh, girls are so complicated.

HRISHI: Yeah, I mean, obviously, he thinks that it should be Elizabeth who runs for Congress, not her doofy husband. Like, he's not hampered by gender in terms of what he thinks that women can achieve. But that sort of, ay—

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I'm a little tired of it! I'm a little tired of it, and I've actually, it rubbed me a little bit the wrong way to be like, all these Bedouin men were like, hahaha, it is so tough having daughters. To use that example specifically, because he doesn't talk about, that's why we keep them in veils and don't let them learn to read.

JOSH: [loud intake of breath]

HRISHI: But, you know, to be like, oh, how about this charming story from like a deeply patriarchal society that, or civilization that oppresses women, hahaha.

JOSH: It was made light of, for sure.

HRISHI: Yeah. But whatever, let's glaze over that part because it gives me this funny story to talk about. Woe is me and my daughters.

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah, OK. Now you've thoroughly ruined the episode for me.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Right down to the title.

HRISHI: It's... yeah.

JOSH: Did the running time bother you?

HRISHI: [laughs] I was feeling so heartened. I feel bad, I feel like I've sort of let people down a little bit. You know, I was really enjoying season five, and I saw some comments from people saying, oh, it's nice to see Hrishi gets it that season five is actually good. And it's not like this one episode means I've written off the season or anything like that, but I feel bad that I've basically spent the last—

JOSH: I don't think you should feel bad. I think you will be happy to find that there's a contingent of viewers who feel like season five isn't quite up to snuff. And they'll be happy that you found an episode that you could quibble with to this extent.

[laughter]

JOSH: Which is our job, ultimately.

HRISHI: I think, in closing, I felt a little bit let down by this episode. I thought there were a lot of great ingredients for a potentially rich episode. Maybe if there had been one fewer plot element, we could've developed—

JOSH: A deeper dive into the other.

HRISHI: Yeah, it would have been more satisfying to me. So I hardly give this episode an F by any means or anything like that, I just, I felt like it set some things up and then didn't see them through in a way that I would've liked, and instead I had to have a lot more Gus than I needed.

JOSH: Fair enough. And there's a Christmas tree in Gail's bowl. Let's finish on that point.

HRISHI: Very cute.

JOSH: [laughs] And if they could have somehow gotten a smaller goldfish to flick it on and off, that would have been—

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: awesome. But I guess, too much to ask, the technology.

HRISHI: Maybe they tried and the bigger goldfish was like, this little goldfish is boring.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah, I'm with you. It might've been that.

HRISHI: OK, let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we'll speak to Joe Fab, a documentary director whose work touches on this episode in two interesting and very different ways.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: Joining us now to tell us a little bit more about the Christmas tree lighting in real life is Joe Fab. Joe Fab's a producer, a writer, and a director and documentary consultant who worked on producing the televised Christmas tree lightings for many years in the White House. What was your title at the time when you were producing the Christmas tree lighting shows?

JOE: In the George H.W. Bush years, I was a stage manager, but then I became producer and writer.

HRISHI: And how did you end up getting that job?

JOE: Well, I volunteered early on during the George Herbert Walker Bush years, and just because I liked it. I live in Virginia just near D.C., I'm a political junkie. But I mostly avoided political stuff because I wasn't comfortable with most politicians, to be honest. However, this was a nonpartisan event, strictly nonpartisan, so I volunteered initially to be a stage manager, and then I had theater and live event experience, a lot of it, and so I was asked then to start writing the show and start producing it.

HRISHI: So what did you think when you saw this episode, "Abu El Banat," and how prominently the Christmas tree lighting fits into it? What was your take on this part of the episode?

JOE: Well, first of all, I was really delighted. You know, there had been four previous Christmas episodes and while one referenced it a little bit, it never really came up in any big way. And now here we were with an episode where it's a major portion of the show, so immediately I started paying attention to what's correct, what's not correct, how did they make it work in the context of *The West Wing*? One of the things that struck me that I liked a lot is that it sounded like an important event, but not something that, today if you look at this event on TV, it's kind of an extravaganza. It's kind of big and flashy. But in the days when I was doing it, it was really an extension of its history that goes all the way back to 1923 and it felt almost like a small town event. So I was really pleased that nothing in the episode portrayed it otherwise.

JOSH: So you do not approve of the variety show that it's become?

JOE: Well, since you're pressing me on the point...

JOSH: [laughs]

JOE: Not really.

HRISHI: Were there any glaring errors that you saw in this episode?

JOE: Well, probably the biggest one is that the tree was not on the White House grounds. In this episode, the tree's on the South Lawn of the White House. And while it was there back in, I think 1941 to 1953, it was on the South Lawn. In recent times it's been on the Ellipse, so outside of the White House grounds. The president and Gus could not have just walked outside and gone over to the tree and lit it up. That and the fact that, it's a small thing, but there's not a switch like what Gus throws in the show. There's actually a switch and a button. So, you throw the switch so that you make the thing live, the contraption that lights it live, and then you push the button when you want to light the tree.

JOSH: The switch is a lie.

JOE: Yes.

HRISHI: It's kind of like the seal and the stamp when he has to veto something.

JOE: Yes!

[West Wing Episode 3.03 excerpt]

DOUG: I like the bold gesture. I think you gotta get out the stamp.

JOSH: You sign it. You don't do it with a stamp.

DOUG: I thought it was a stamp.

BARTLET: Actually, you stamp it, then sign it.

[end excerpt]

JOE: Right, I always thought of this as kind of the failsafe on a nuclear switch.

[laughter]

JOE: You know, any two things that happen. But there was a time, you might be interested to know, when George Herbert Walker Bush was lighting the tree, when he pushed the button and nothing happened. Embarrassing for everybody. By the way, I was not producing the show then.

JOSH: There was a similar nuclear incident, but we can get into that another time.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOE: That's funny, Josh.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs] Thank you.

JOE: Sure.

HRISHI: Do you feel like, between the three different administrations that you worked on, that the Christmas tree lighting, more or less, stayed the same? Or did it change? Did it reflect the personality of the president or the administration in any way?

JOE: It really stayed the same. And really, the White House mostly just stayed out of things. We put the show together, and we'd let them know what was happening, but they did not try to influence what we were doing.

HRISHI: Would you say that, for the most part, from year to year, they kind of went off smoothly and consistently? Were there things that happened in particular years that made some Christmases stand out in your memory?

JOE: Well, yeah, there's one that always comes to mind. I won't name the performer involved but, as you may know, presidents are very very tightly scheduled. They're almost always exactly on time. So my experience had been that every year, the president would show up about three minutes to five and we'd get going. One year, however, President Clinton was late. But we had to start at five o' clock. So we started the show, and one of the artists was on stage singing, and forgot the lyrics to the song, *really* forgot the lyrics, like completely went up, was making up words.

JOSH: What song?

JOE: You know, I don't remember.

JOSH: Fair enough. Neither did she.

[laughter]

JOE: But anyway, she was making up words. And while she was doing this, the president had arrived and was standing next to me, and he was trying to peek around the corner of the edge of the stage to see her. And I remember saying, Mr. President, the audience is right out there and if you could see out there then they could see you. And you're the president and all, so, not real good, so he co-operated with that. But when she was really in the weeds on this thing, he started slapping me on the back. I remember him saying, "What do you think she's gonna do?"

[laughter]

JOE: I was like, well, she's a pro, Mr. President, I'm sure she's gonna stop and she's gonna tell the audience, I made a mistake, let's start up again. I don't know how she's gonna know the words suddenly, but she didn't. She kept going, it was horrible. So I remember that one.

HRISHI: [laughing] You're too courteous to—

JOSH: Yeah, for the love of God, name the [cross talk] person, so I can look it up.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Name the artist. But I know what incident you're talking about, you're talking about the Patti LaBelle "Where Are My Background Singers?" year, right?

[Patti LaBelle performance excerpt]

PATTI: [sung] I'm gonna [indistinct] all I can, because I don't have the right words and I have no background singers. Oh, I don't. Whoo!

[end excerpt]

JOE: An artist whom I won't name.

[laughter]

HRISHI: OK.

JOE: That's terrible. You found that video, didn't you?

HRISHI: Yeah, I've watched that many times in the past.

JOSH: As have I. Yeah, I forgot.

HRISHI: I'll put a link up to that video. It's really funny. It's really, really funny.

JOE: OK, well, it's out then.

HRISHI: It is. Well, now this is a hard transition to what else I wanted to add.

JOSH: Wait, before you get to that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Did you ever throw a menorah in there?

JOE: Well, actually, you know, there is a menorah that gets lit. I didn't do that event, but also on the Ellipse, every year. I don't remember when that started, but there is one.

JOSH: OK.

HRISHI: Are there other years that stood out for you?

JOE: Of course, there was the 9/11 year. This event was outside, and I mean really outside on the Ellipse, and C.J.'s right in this episode. She says they were expecting about 6,000 people. So we'd have a really big audience, and if you know that real estate, although the president is behind bulletproof glass, there's no cover on the president's box. And the president would walk out onto the stage exposed, but President Bush was showing that he was not going to cower by what had happened, so he came. And I was standing backstage, and I turned to the Secret Service agent, and I said, you never told us what happens if something does happen, someone does try to get to the president. And the agent pointed to this little kind of corner of the walls and said, I would get down on the floor right there and stay as close to the floor as I could because we'll pick the president up bodily and carry him out of here, and we'll knock over anybody in our way. And you know those guys you see in the movies who are big, hulky guys, and they're usually wearing those ribbed black turtleneck sweaters and they're obviously heavily armed? Guys like that were on the roofs of everything around us. So it was an interesting event. But nothing happened, it all went off great.

HRISHI: Well, luckily, in this episode at least, it all also went off pretty much without a hitch, except for switching out Zoey for Gus.

JOE: Yeah.

HRISHI: You also have another interesting overlap with this episode because you're actually working on a documentary about assisted suicide?

JOE: Well, Hrish, I have to stop you. Even though that language is used in the film, we don't say that anymore.

HRISHI: Oh!

JOE: That was kind of the language that was used at the time, but today we refer to this as medical aid in dying, which I was happy to hear at one point when Toby is talking to the president, he says, aid in dying:

[West Wing Episode 5.09 excerpt]

TOBY: One in five patients requesting aid in dying has MS.

[end excerpt]

JOE: We use that language because suicide suggests that the person wants to die. In fact, wherever medical aid in dying is legal, it is only available to people who have a six month or less terminal prognosis. These are people who do not have a choice about living. They're going to die.

HRISHI: Right.

JOE: So the choice they make is whether they will do it as I halfway heard C.J. say in the episode, whether they will die in agony or whether they will exercise some control about what the very end of their life is like.

HRISHI: Hmm. That is an important distinction.

JOE: Sorry to correct you—

JOSH: No, that's interesting.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I'm grateful for the correction because yeah, that is a very important distinction. Do you have the title for the documentary that you're working on?

JOE: Yes. It's called *When My Time Comes*.

JOSH: And can you tell us about the current state of legislation regarding the issue?

JOE: Sure. At the time that episode was made, I think if I have the dates right, medical aid in dying was legal in Oregon, as you hear in the show. It was also, by then, legal in the state of Washington. Since then, it's been spread to, or laws have been passed in, let me get my list in my mind, in Vermont, Colorado, Washington DC, Hawaii most recently. It's also legal in Montana, not because of a law that was passed, but interestingly because a man there claimed that there was nothing in Montana law that prevented him from having medical aid in dying. That case went all the way to the Montana Supreme Court, and they agreed with this man. So Montana has the right to medical aid in dying by judicial decision rather than by a law being passed. There's been something now of a real movement across the country. 70 percent of people in America approve of medical aid in dying being available to those who want it, and interestingly, even among those who, the Catholic Church is one of the main obstacles to laws being passed. It's a huge funder of the opposition, but the rank and file Catholics, 70 percent of those also are in favor of medical aid in dying.

JOSH: That's interesting.

JOE: It's a real movement, and personally, I want to have it. And I understand that not everyone does, but the point of view of our film is that if you're someone who believes that only God should decide when and how you're going to die, we support that 100 percent. For those who want every bit of medical science working on their behalf, keeping them alive as long as possible, we support them 100 percent. But for people like me, who would like to have medical aid in dying as an option, should I choose to use it, I'd like to be supported 100 percent too. That's where I'm coming from.

HRISHI: And when do you think we can see your film?

JOE: Don't I wish I knew? It's an independent documentary, and even though I've done films that were fully funded before we started, this one is being funded as we go. So I'd say we're about, maybe halfway through shooting, and so we'll probably shoot until the end of this year and then go into post. So, let's express the hope that, say, by next summer, perhaps.

HRISHI: Well then, I would say, for people who want to stay up to date with what you've got going on with the film and otherwise, they should follow you on Twitter. You're @JoeFab.

JOE: That's correct. I'm also on Facebook, and our film has a Facebook page. When My Time Comes Movie, so you can search for that.

HRISHI: We'll link to all of that. Joe, thank you so much for talking to us about both of these issues that normally would never be linked in one person's life.

JOSH: Interesting confluence of subjects in one person.

JOE: I'm so happy to be with you. Thank you very much for this chance.

JOSH: Thanks for your time.

[outro music]

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening, I apologize again to people if you feel like I've ruined your enjoyment of this episode. Josh, I apologize to you directly.

JOSH: You know, this is a podcast about *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I think you need not apologize.

HRISHI: All right. Well—

JOSH: Too late.

HRISHI: Exactly, if you think this episode of the podcast, like the episode of the show for me, suffers from a likability issue—

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: I would understand. I, like Doug, have a pretty good sense of the things that people might be saying about me behind my back.

JOSH: A big thank you, as always, to Margaret Miller and Zach McNees for their work on the podcast, and a reminder that *The West Wing Weekly* is part of Radiotopia, a collection of fine, fine podcasts about which you can find more information—

[laughter]

JOSH: at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: You made it.

JOSH: Yeah. Sometimes you just gotta jump in and assume you're gonna tunnel out to the other side.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

JOE: What's next?

[outro music]