

The West Wing Weekly
5.21: "Gaza"
Guests: Jason Issacs and Janel Moloney

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Hrishikesh Hriway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today, we're talking about episode 21 from season 5. It's called "Gaza."

JOSH: Said episode was directed by Christopher Misiano, written by Peter Noah, and first aired on May 12, 2004.

HRISHI: In this episode, the congressional delegation to Gaza, which includes now-retired Admiral Fitzwallace and Donna, is attacked by a roadside bomb. Two congressmen are killed, and Donna is badly hurt. The episode slips in and out of flashbacks as we learn what happened which includes a romantic dalliance between Donna and a photojournalist played by Jason Isaacs. Coming up later in this episode, we'll be joined by Jason Isaacs and Janel Moloney. A couple of things worth noting about this episode: Janel Moloney was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress, and it was based on this episode and the previous episode, "No Exit."

JOSH: Right on.

HRISHI: And we spent some time in our last episode talking about how amazing her performance was in that one.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Other Emmys for this episode - production designer Kenneth Hardy and set decorator Ellen Tottleben won an Emmy for Outstanding Art Direction. *The West Wing* also won an Emmy for Best Sound Mixing based on this episode.

JOSH: How about that?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well, it looked great. I'm sure it sounded great too, but I've only got one good ear [both laugh] so I shouldn't be the final arbiter of what sounds good.

HRISHI: It's been a while since we've seen *The West Wing* flex their production values like this.

JOSH: Yeah, this is major.

HRISHI: Yeah, we're on a location, there's a helicopter in the air, there are dogs and monkeys and carts and tons of extras.

JOSH: Did you find out where it was shot?

HRISHI: It was shot in Riverside County by the Salton Sea.

JOSH: I thought it looked pretty darn good. Pretty darn genuine.

HRISHI: The only thing that I saw that - [both laugh]

JOSH: I think I'm anticipating where you're going.

HRISHI: Did you see the first moments of the cold open when we see some extremely new Israeli flags? Like, bright bright white despite the dust, and you can actually see the creases still in one of the flags.

JOSH: It's still in the bag. [both laugh] That's pretty funny. And then the other moment that I found not super genuine were the superimposed flames on the car as it exploded. I'm sure there's real flames at some point but, and maybe I'm wrong - again, no expert - but the actual explosion itself while it was happening looked to me like somebody just added flames to it.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Maybe I'm totally wrong.

HRISHI: Those looked like real flames to me.

JOSH: Did they? Well, maybe they are. They didn't to me.

HRISHI: I'm looking at it. Yeah, those look like real flames.

JOSH: Really?

HRISHI: I mean, what's the point of flipping over the car if you're not also going to set it on fire?

JOSH: Umm...I guess keeping the people also inside it alive.

HRISHI: Right before the attack, there are a couple of people outside of the car with Fitzwallace who are arguing about Israel and Palestine in very vague terms who are part of the codel but we never actually meet them. I think those might be the congressmen who are killed.

JOSH: Ah. This is some heavy duty *West Wing*.

HRISHI: Jason Isaacs plays Colin Ayres and just seconds before the explosion, he was taking photos of Donna making coquette-ish eyes at him. Then seconds later, he's taking photos of her bleeding and upside down still strapped in her seatbelt in the car. It's a really heavy duty image. It's arresting, and the violence of it is really unusual for *The West Wing*, so I think it's a big impact.

JOSH: It's an interesting episode. There's a lot going on. It's an episode that I think attempts to achieve balance in many different areas, including about the issues themselves but also in terms of the...it's got a little bit of a romantic subplot, a little bit of a political subplot, a little bit of a thriller/action, much more action that you normally see in a *West Wing* episode. I think you see sort of a John Wells imprint on the show, and yet it's still *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: The romantic part of the episode I thought was really well done and complicated.

JOSH: Much like all of these things.

HRISHI: The show is trying to balance issues, but they're not shying away from complexity at all. There's no attempt I think to simplify anything even down to this romantic love triangle between Donna and Colin and Josh.

JOSH: I give them credit for it. This is a very ambitious episode of the show. I think it does very well on most fronts. I like episode a lot. There are some - I think before we sat down to start recording, you said that this is a lot. There's too much. There's almost too much episode for one episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But that makes it sort of enjoyable. There's a lot to chew on and ruminate over in this episode.

HRISHI: I think one of the reasons it feels so different. I think that thing about feeling the John Wells fingerprint on this. The only other moment of real violence on *The West Wing* on-screen violence - or really something close to it - was "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen." After the attack at the Newseum, we find out that the President and Josh were both shot. But those moments are broken up. We don't see someone get shot. Even the dramatic reveal of Josh holding his torso as he gets discovered, we don't see the action of it. Seeing the car blow up, we see the moment where Fitz is killed and we see Donna bleeding. That's just an incredibly new feeling to this show.

JOSH: And it's a jarring experience to watch that happen. One minute, these beloved characters are just chatting away making idle conversation, and the next minute, they're in dire consequences. There's a moment of conversation - I guess his final moment of conversation ever, which I thought echoed from something I saw in *Full Metal Jacket* - he and Donna are chatting and Fitzwallace says...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

FITZWALLACE: Yeah, travel. Learn about new cultures, make new friends.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I was kind of waiting for, there's a classic quotation from *Full Metal Jacket* where Matthew Modine's private joker says...

[Full Metal Jacket excerpt]

PVT. JOKER: See exotic Vietnam, the jewel of southeast Asia. I wanted to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture and kill them.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I feel like that was echoed in Fitz's words. It was almost like a premonition.

HRISHI: Yeah. We see Donna, and we go to the opening titles, and when we come back from the opening titles, of course the first person that we see is Josh. It has to be Josh. It couldn't be anybody else.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: And he's on a plane, but before we can really take in the context or understand what it is or even the expression on his face, we hear Toby ask, "How's Donna?" And we're immediately taken to a flashback. And the title card says "7:31 AM - BEFORE THE EXPLOSION" which I thought was an odd choice of words, but I guess it explained what it needed to. "Before the explosion" is a strange way to anchor something in time. So is something as specific as "7:31 AM" as vague as "before the explosion."

JOSH: I bumped on that too when they put that up there. We're clearly at a certain point going to surmise this anyway. I wonder why they wanted to just lead with it.

HRISHI: Yeah. But there is interesting stuff happening with time in this episode. What finally is revealed is that the moment that Josh is on the plane is at a different time than when the explosion happens which is at a different time from when this conversation is happening, after the opening credits. At 7:31 AM, before the explosion, but then the plane is after the explosion and after all of this stuff has happened. So in the first few minutes, there's actually three different times.

JOSH: There's a lot going on. It is jarring and complicated and perhaps that's why they wanted to clear things up a little bit with the chyron. Perhaps that speaks to how I experience things. It's funny, having been in the show, you would think I wouldn't be surprised by anything on the show, but of course, I guess we've established that my memory of things is fragile. At first, I thought Colin's reaction to what happened I found almost inauthentic. I thought, 'What kind of journalist is this guy? He's running there, he's clearly concerned, but he's not taking pictures. I

would think any war journalist his first reaction would be to document what's going on.' And I was under the impression as the cold open developed, that they had just met, that he had just caught this eye of this attractive girl. So I mean, once I was able to reverse engineer that they had a relationship, it was the personal that sort of explained to me why he wasn't in necessarily "career mode" and he ran there first because he knew that Donna was in the car.

HRISHI: I think it's a nice moment when you see him being torn. He wants to go rush in. He's got one feeling, but then this sense of duty creeps in, or professionalism, and he has to take these photos that are such...The photo he had taken beforehand of Donna passing by maybe was motivated more by their relationship, but then here he's documenting news. They let us see his ambivalence play out on his face.

JOSH: Yes. That's true.

HRISHI: So then when we're back in the White House, and it's 7:31 before the explosion, and Josh is complaining in that moment about the long emails he gets from Donna.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And this exchange I think is so weird and a little bit cringe-inducing for me...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

TOBY: Heard from Donna?

JOSH: I get these daily interminable emails that I have no time to read. She doesn't seem to have mastered pith.

TOBY: Le mot juste.

JOSH: Donna's style is more le mot mo'mot.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That sucked. First of all, none of this is like Toby. First of all, I can never ever imagine Toby saying "le mot juste." It's just a flowery comment that adds nothing to the conversation, and Toby is not flowery. He's an amazing writer and because of that, not despite that, I don't think he has much use for -

JOSH: Le mot juste.

HRISHI: Using a French idiom just for the sake of it. I think he's more every word needs to have value.

JOSH: I suspect you're right. Equally puzzling to me, although I'm willing to accept that it's just a broadening of Toby's character that I must accept as part of who he is, is that his wife has to hock him (as he puts it) to go visit his own kids.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

TOBY: Concision is not her problem. Every day, the same three little words: See your children. Before email, it was a lot easier for your ex-wife not to hock you from 6,000 miles away.

JOSH: Are the kids with Andy's mom?

TOBY: The very definition of an approach-avoidance situation.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: The Toby that we saw just after their birth is apparently no longer so connected to his own children. It's surprising. Poor Huck and Molly!

HRISHI: I bought that, though. I could imagine Toby simultaneously being just *in love* with his children - just crazy about them - and then having that love move into a sort of abstract place. And the day-to-day rigors of his job being at a certain point, "Now what do I do with them? What's my place?" And not knowing exactly what he needs to do. At work, he's got his office and maybe doesn't feel that same way.

JOSH: And I do ultimately buy it. I'm just disappointed in him.

HRISHI: That, okay, yeah. That is for sure disappointing. Disappointing in a different way than "le mot mot". Ugh! Also, right after, Toby smiles at Josh and it's either just...I'm choosing to interpret that smile as "did you really just say that, you moron?" But even still, I think his reaction would be more to go full on staring daggers at Josh instead. But he's in a good maybe because he does a Minnesota accent.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

C.J.: Are you from Minnesota?

TOBY: [heavy Minnesota accent] I'm from Minne-so-ta.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That sucked. [both laugh]

HRISHI: I wonder if people know yet that that is a joke.

JOSH: I don't think we leave it in. Here's what happens. We often have to record promos for new shows or the other podcasts on Radiotopia, and though we have listened and liked these shows, we don't listen to the clip when we say, "Now here's a clip." We listen to these shows on our own, and so every time we put in, "So take a listen, here's a new clip", we pause and I say, "Well *that* sucked" just to make you laugh.

[Previous recordings of The West Wing Weekly excerpt]

JOSH: Let's listen to a clip....That sucked. [Hrishi laughs]

[beep]

HRISHI: Let's play that interview.

JOSH: That sucked.

[beep]

JOSH: That sucked. [Hrishi laughs] I mean, probably. I didn't listen to it.

[beep]

HRISHI: Here's a clip.

JOSH: That sucked.

HRISHI: Josh, you never get sick of that one.

JOSH: No, it really makes me laugh.

[beep]

JOSH: That sucked.

HRISHI: You can't say that about one of our guests. Can you?

JOSH: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't leave it in.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: We don't include it in our promos, and we don't say it about what we just promoted, but it makes me laugh. And I have a little bit of OCD, so I now I feel that any time we talk about something we have to drop in, I have to come back with "that sucked."

HRISHI: In my mind, I associate that with any time we play any kind of clip. And then we come back from it, you say, "That sucked."

JOSH: Yeah. Maybe we should've kept it as our own little thing, but the secret's out. Did you bump on the phrase Leo employs: "tar baby"?

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

LEO: It's a tar baby. Sisyphus.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I didn't bump on it for its own sake so much as that he threw it right after Sisyphus. I thought how many metaphors are we going to get?

JOSH: But to me, "tar baby" has racial overtones. I was surprised to hear Leo. Although he's an old school guy, but it was odd to me. It bothered me. I went and looked up the phrase. It comes from the second of the Uncle Remus stories, published in 1880 so when Leo was a teenager. It's about a doll made of tar and turpentine made by the villainous Br'er Fox to trap Br'er Rabbit. The more Br'er Rabbit fights the tar baby, the more entangled he becomes. So it's just a term that refers to a sticky situation.

HRISHI: Right. That's the meaning that I know. But now, I'm looking it up with you.

JOSH: Yes, and I found this probably on Wikipedia because that's as deep as I go. That's where I start and end my research, but I'm not sure where I found it. I'm not saying the term's provenance rests in African folklore, but some Americans consider "tar baby" to be a pejorative term for African Americans, which is why I bumped on it when Leo said it.

HRISHI: John Kerry and John McCain and Michelle Bachmann and Mitt Romney have all been criticized for invoking it as a metaphor. It says here on Wikipedia that an article in the *New Republic* said that some people are unaware that some consider it to have second meaning as a slur. Clearly, I was just one of them. It's interesting that you bring that up. This is in a conversation that Leo has with Will. But then later, Leo seems for an old school guy to be quite sensitive about language.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

LEO: You're going to have to be our go-to...I was going to say "guy." The problem with English. "Guy" is wrong, "gal" is patronizing, and "person" sounds arch.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He's self-aware. He just didn't catch himself on "tar baby."

HRISHI: I don't know if you remember this, but a while back, I caught some flak after I had a conversation about sexual harassment with three women who were listeners of our podcast. And I said, "Thanks guys" and multiple folks tweeted at me saying, "That's not right" and I immediately got defensive. I was like, "Really? Is that offensive?" But maybe for the first time ever on the internet, they changed my mind. My opinion was changed, and now I'm on board. Now I try very hard to be conscious of that. So it's nice to see Leo struggling with it too. And I liked the button on the scene when Kate Harper says...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

KATE: I've made my peace with the colloquial.

LEO: Okay.

KATE: Just between us girls.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She has, I thought Mary as Commander "Bangs" Harper, a bunch of good stuff at the end of this episode. I like her stuff with President Bartlett as well, which we'll discuss later.

HRISHI: I like that this episode gives her an opportunity to present a perspective that might not otherwise be in the room when they're discussing the aftermath of the explosion. Josh is understandably irrational.

JOSH: Too close to it.

HRISHI: Will says...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

WILL: Regime change?

C.J.: Take out the chairman?

WILL: He is the impediment.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Get rid of Farrah, Chairman of the PLO.

HRISHI: Exactly. The Palestinian Chairman.

JOSH: Yasser Arafat died I think in 2004, so prior to this, but I assume Farad is meant to be an Arafat-type stand-in.

HRISHI: Which I think is interesting because in season three, in a couple episodes of season three, Arafat himself is directly name-checked.

JOSH: Referred to, yeah. I forgot that. You actually make a good point. Perhaps he's meant to be Arafat's successor.

HRISHI: Either the successor, or we're doing a little rewrite and he was there. To me, it sounds like they're talking about him as a known quantity, like somebody they've dealt with for a long time. Right?

JOSH: That's what it sounds like to me. You're reminding me. I forgot that we had Arafat name-checked, so I was thinking Farad is meant to be Arafat, so that's interesting.

HRISHI: I think he *is* supposed to be Arafat, and they're just retconning a little bit.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: And saying, "This is the person in the timeframe to go."

JOSH: It's either that, or Farad is now a stand-in for Abba and they decided not to name-check Abba because he was currently Prime Minister.

HRISHI: Maybe.

JOSH: Maybe, I wonder.

HRISHI: So Will is calling for a regime change, and Kate has this objective, or more objective, I don't know. She has a perspective that is different. She's trying to give this sort of measured view, and she's met with some resistance but she keeps her cool and makes her point. I thought she was great.

JOSH: By the way, I can't remember where in the chronology of episodes I had this interaction, but at some point John and I discussed Israel. He heard me talking about how I was going to do a speaking engagement, how I've for years spoken to different Jewish groups, and different iterations. He said, "Oh, what do you talk about?" I said, "My personal, my upbringing, my yeshiva years in Israel" and he said, "Oh." And we talked a little bit about Israel. Next thing I knew, I don't know if it was this episode. We'll see in future episodes that Will Bailey is fiercely pro-Israel. I don't know if he did that as, he's also to the right of me in terms of Israel, so it's not like we had deep discussions and he fashioned Will's positions from mine, but something I feel like in my personal interactions with John sparked something in Will Bailey's Zionist was born. He has some very interesting scenes in the future, without spoiling anything, he says some things with which I would take great exception.

HRISHI: I was wondering about that actually, because I was watching these scenes, and I thought, 'Well, I'm glad that they put Will on this side of the debate.' It just felt less jarring than if Will had been on the other side knowing what I do know about how you feel.

JOSH: Well, I personally as an actor would not have cared at all.

HRISHI: Right. Yes.

JOSH: I mean, at all.

HRISHI: But me as a viewer, knowing the character and the person playing the character, it would have - there would have been some cognitive dissonance if Will turned out to be anti-Israel.

JOSH: That said though, I don't think that anybody really, it's not that there's a strong anti-Israel voice on the staff.

HRISHI: That's true, no.

JOSH: But Will is notably pro-Israel and sort of vehemently so.

HRISHI: Right, I guess that's what I should clarify when I said, "Oh, Kate is giving this more objective view. Really what it is is that she's giving some voice to the -

JOSH: To balance.

HRISHI: To the Palestinian side.

JOSH: Exactly. She's just allowing for a little balance. It's interesting. And with Josh, you kind of understand. He's right in the thick of personal involvement in these issues. And Leo basically very kindly tells him to go home, which is the right thing to do. And what we don't really know is why Will seems so worked up. There's something more there clearly. From watching it, I'm like "He's got some skin in the game or something." It's interesting.

HRISHI: Their dynamic is interesting because Kate is couching her language in things like "some view this" and Will called it.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

WILL: Don't keep saying "some argue" and "there's a view." Can we restrict it to your view?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then she gives her best lines of the episode.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

KATE: Palestinians are no longer fighting to destroy the Jewish state. They're fighting for a state of their own. A revolutionary struggle against an occupying force. And revolutionaries will outlast and out-die occupiers every time.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The language is really compelling in it, and it's also spoken like someone who I believe would be in her position. Someone who's looking at revolutionaries versus occupiers. She's not just looking this at the specifics of Israel and Palestine but really the dynamics of occupied states and the people who live there.

JOSH: Yes. Prior to that, she sounds a little bit like a diplomat whereas Will says that Israel is not the problem. This is a guy who can't really add much to the conversation. He's seeing it in very monolithic black-and-white terms, and it's a situation that can only be described as grey. There's stuff to describe here, and I think the episode by and large does a good job of showing that. You're right. She's pushing for balance, and also suggesting that the situation is intractable and unsustainable.

HRISHI: The episode is a little bit like an intro to Israel and Palestine. This is what we were saying when there's too much. There's just no way to get deep into any of it and it's something that requires depth. And yet the amount that 42 minutes...the surface level you get with 42 minutes, I feel like they did a good job with that.

JOSH: I feel the same way. That ultimately is one of the takeaways for me with a lot of *West Wing* episodes is that it sparks my interest, or I could see how it would spark someone's interest to dig deeper into something that's been brought up. There's only so much that can be done in 44, 45 minutes. It's infrequent that something is part of a multi-episode arc, so you've sort of got one shot at it in an episode. I thought that even though this episode did a good job, even though there were moments when I thought this was pretty basic or this is pretty intro, I thought they did a good job of going a little bit deeper at least in the sense of broader perspectives and giving a sense of multi-narratives rather than just pitching it from Palestinians' point of view or Israel's point of view. And it's funny because it's something to which I objected in "Isaac and Ishmael" but I find it more effective here. I think it's because it's dramatized and not placed in a school room for kids.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: It's a little bit less didactic.

HRISHI: Absolutely. I think the best moment of that for me is the scene with the Israeli soldier. I found that scene so harrowing even though it is just dialogue.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

YOSSI: I lost comrades. For a soldier, this is expected, but 12 women killed. Nineteen killed in their barracks.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thought that was very moving, and it didn't play like a little moral lesson. I believe the guy in part because the guy was good, so let's give a shout out to Zach Cohen who was born in Tel Aviv and was quite good as Yossi. I thought he was genuine and believable; he gives a good performance.

HRISHI: The story that he tells about the attack on the IDF base is based on something that really happened in 2003 when three soldiers were killed in their barracks and two of them were young women. Another thing we mentioned earlier is really this whole storyline about the diplomatic convoy being attacked by a roadside bomb is very similar to something that happened in 2003, and three Americans died in that attack.

JOSH: As we record this episode, it's worth noting that three teenagers were killed in Gaza near the border in an incident that's now being disputed. Israel is saying they were planting an IED, officials in Gaza saying not at all, they were just kids. In terms of progress, "none" would probably be a good description of what there's been since this episode, and I look forward to talking more about the situation in Gaza and Israel. I've been to the Erez Crossing, the crossing that is name-checked and depicted in the cold opening. I visited there long ago.

HRISHI: Can you tell me a little bit about the things you are thinking and feeling when you watch an episode like this?

JOSH: I guess this hits home with me on a very deep level. That's why I was pleased overall. I'm not sure I've ever seen this episode. I felt like I was watching it for the first time. I believe I never have before, so I was pleased that again without feeling like it was a primer on the Middle East, it did accomplish sort of what needs to be done. It depicted suicide bombers. It also referred to the intractability of certain Israeli positions. Two years later, Israel would unilaterally withdraw from Gaza as described by Yossi.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

YOSSI: There are 7500 of Israeli settlers surrounded by 1.3 million Palestinians.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then of course, there's all the human labor and risk of protecting this absurdly small pocket of Jews trying to live where they're not welcome. In 2006, the settlers (many kicking and screaming) were forced to withdraw from Gaza, the scene with the settlers.

HRISHI: Donna says that there's talk of giving up these settlements. That was already part of the conversation in 2004, enough that Donna knows about it. But the woman says...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

ISRAELI WOMAN: God wants us in this place. We have a divine moral obligation to be here.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: This is a point, again, that Will in his slightly myopic view says...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

C.J.: I'm not saying there's equivalence.

WILL: Israelis don't talk about driving Palestinians into the sea.

KATE: Some do.

WILL: Oh, come on.

C.J.: You've never heard the phrase Greater Israel?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's what the settlers are talking about too in the scene that you're describing. There's this concept that from the Bible, Jewish Israel is entitled to all of the West Bank and all the Gaza Strip because that's what God promised us. To me, there's this sort of inane-ness - is that a word? - or inanity of tying your territorial claims in the modern day to the Bible.

HRISHI: An Israeli version of Manifest Destiny.

JOSH: Yes, this is a problem. This is not a modern-day solution for real people and real peoples. So I'm glad that the episode dealt with that. The episode showed you settlers and their philosophy. Not that that's the case with all settlers and that all settlements are the same, but this couple - I'm glad that scene was included.

HRISHI: Let's take a break from this for a second and turn our attention back to Donna's specific storyline.

JOSH: Donna's dalliance?

HRISHI: Mmhmm. I love how complicated this part is. First of all, I think maybe one of my favorite moments in this episode is when Leo tells Josh that he can go to Germany.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

LEO: If there's someplace you'd rather be, everyone would understand.

JOSH: I'm fine. [long pause] Thanks.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Leo just looks him in the eye until Josh finally says thanks and heads off to get on the plane to go see Donna. I thought that was really nice. Another moment of love that I really appreciated is when we're in the White House moments after the explosion. Things are crazy, the camerawork changes completely, we're in a shaky handheld and whip-panning from character to character around. Then Toby manages to get a call from Andy, and then he tells her he can see her on TV. She's on the news at that moment, and she waves. And this is maybe my favorite moment of the whole episode. Toby starts to wave back at her, and then he stops himself and puts his hand against his head. But just that moment.

JOSH: Such a human moment.

HRISHI: Ah, it's so great and just belies so much of what we've heard from Toby complaining about Andy and everything. I feel like we get an X-ray right into his heart in that second.

JOSH: Well put. Yeah, absolutely.

HRISHI: You don't actually get that much from Andy in this episode. She only has a few lines, but the fact that she's in there as part of the codel ends up being this great fulcrum for the rest of the episode because it allows us to contrast Toby's sense of relief with his earlier annoyance and how prickly they've been to one another earlier this season. We also get to contrast Toby's relief in that moment with Josh's panic, where he still doesn't know what's happening to Donna and Andy is only able to tell him that she's been loaded into an ambulance, and that's it. So Josh is just sort of stuck with that. Toby walks off-screen and continues his conversation with Andy.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

TOBY: Just come home, will you? Just, uh, et the hell out of there and come home.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I thought that was really great use of that character even though she didn't appear on-screen that much at all.

JOSH: I agree.

HRISHI: So with the Donna stuff, I think it's so deliciously complicated and well-written that there's this device that's being used in the episode for our flashbacks where it's Josh reading Donna's emails. We hear Janel's voice and he's learning about it. The thing that he complained about to Toby at the beginning ends up being this connection to her, but then as we find out later, one of these emails that she'd written to him was written from Colin's room after they'd slept together. So after this little correspondence, this love connection I think between the two of them is helping connect Josh to her as he travels towards her. It's also her following C.J.'s advice in the last episode and having a one-night stand.

JOSH: Post-coital correspondence. That's an interesting point. I hadn't really pondered that. There's something interesting about the vocal tone of her voice overs. It's not the vivacious Donna that I'm used to. There's something about it - and I don't mean this as a criticism as I actually like it - it's almost to me, I experienced it as almost an element of what happened to her is in the voiceovers, like it's the voice of somebody who's maybe dead or in trouble. There's something about her. It's very, I mean, she's also talking about serious stuff and what she's observing and what she's seeing. But there's something in her performance and the nature of her vocals in the voiceover that I like, that it almost feels like it's coming from somebody who's in the situation that we now know her to be in.

HRISHI: Right, I like that interpretation. Eventually, Josh makes it to Germany where Donna's hospitalized. Donna turns out has a collapsed lung. I don't know if you remember this, but Josh had a collapsed lung too when he was shot.

JOSH: I don't remember that. Maybe that's why he responds...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

JOSH: Collapsed lung. That's no biggie, right?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was like, collapsed lung sounds horrible to me. That sounds very, very dire. But I guess maybe it's because he went through it.

HRISHI: I think he's being sarcastic because he knows exactly how serious that was.

JOSH: One other scene I wanted to discuss. I think it's early in the episode. Toby and Will.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Will pops into see whether he can take a look at a draft of President Bartlet's speech that Toby's working on. First thing I noticed is that we see sort of a rapprochement in "No Exit", and I was curious to see whether or not their chemistry or relationship would've fundamentally changed.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

WILL: The Vice President would like to see an advanced copy.

TOBY: To check my spelling? Errors in syntax? Noted grammarian that he is?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It appears not to have changed. I like that. It's an accurate depiction of most people even after a therapeutic bottle episode.

HRISHI: I guess that's true.

JOSH: People often fall into old patterns of behavior, and that's what we see here. Especially in times of stress. Of course it's a time of great stress. But there's a sort of darkness, especially to Toby, I mean a cynicism. He makes a couple comments.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

TOBY: Them and every other pro-Israeli lobby have to try and not sound happy it happened while otherwise trying to avoid saying, "I told you so."

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is a deeply cynical thing to say, but that's Toby.

HRISHI: The thing that I think is really complicated about that exchange is what Josh says later.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

JOSH: We need to kill them! We need to find them, and to kill them. We kill them, then we find out who sent them, and we kill them too.

LEO: Josh?

JOSH: You kill the people who did it, you kill the people who planned it, then you kill everyone who was happy about it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: I mean, he's talking about Palestinian terrorists. But according to Toby's comments here, it's going to include some people who are actually pro-Israel.

JOSH: Right. Again, very very dark thing to say, but I'm sure there are I think on both sides, the lowest of the low who rejoice in violence or in such affairs or who are so myopic that they're looking to politicize and weaponize every such crisis. I would hope that this does not reflect the view of most people on either quote-unquote "side." Are there such people? Certainly. And it's also interesting, I thought, to see a depiction of Josh as someone with a personal connection to an act of terror. Of course, it's hard to be dispassionate or to act with reason and to balance when you're right in an event like that. But one would hope that people in positions of power would have a cooler approach.

HRISHI: I just want to go back to something you said. You said "people on either quote-unquote 'side.'" Why "side" in quotes?

JOSH: In the forum of the Middle East and Middle East affairs, I hate this concept of sides even though that's the way it's often framed. There's this idea that I'm pro-Israel *not* pro-Palestinian.

HRISHI: It's a binary.

JOSH: Right. I'm about Palestinian rights, so I don't want Israel to exist. Our issues in this arena are often presented as black and white, up or down, monolithic yes. That's a great danger, and there are certainly some people who view the Middle East through that prism. But if there's hope, and some of the characters in this episode evince no hope whatsoever - see Toby about the possibility of progress - but if there is going to be any sort of progress, there has to be sort of a mutual attempt to explore the grey area of all these issues. So I don't like to use the word

“side”, and I like to think of myself as pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian and able to wrap my mind around a more nuanced view of this area of the world than we often see.

HRISHI: I mean, if you can imagine a whole different group of people with different approaches to peace, you could say these aren't different sides. These are just different methods you want to use to achieve that, but unfortunately there are people who believe in complete eradication of the other side. There is a side, and it's a zero-sum game.

JOSH: That's true, you're right. It would also be a mistake to be so nearsighted to not accept that there are people who want to push Jews into the sea or who want to establish Greater Israel living in the biblical Promised Land. So it's important to see those people as well. I just don't want to function personally in that zone.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And this is what it goes back to in what we spoke of earlier. I know we spoke earlier about the episode being a little bit of a primer, a little bit of a 101 introduction to the Middle East, but I think that shortchanges how much is accomplished in the 45 minutes of this episode where we get an attack on Americans, where we get a view of settlers in Gaza that is not so positive, we get an Israeli soldier who's talking about the untenable situation of trying to protect a few thousand people in the midst of over a million people. We get an unbalanced Will who says it's not Israel's fault, basically Israel has nothing to do with this. Then we get a check on that with C.J. mentioning this concept of Greater Israel. There's a suggestion that there are those who think there's a Bible and God has promised us the entirety of this land.

HRISHI: Even at the end of this episode, the whole time they've been trying to urge Israel not to take action. They want to try and get everyone's temperature down for just a second so they can figure out what happened. And then Leo finds out...

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

LEO: Israeli gunships just fired missiles into an apartment house in Gaza City. They were targeting a Hamas leader. Twelve killed including four children.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. And we know such things happen, and that's balanced by an earlier mention of Hamas targeting civilians. There's also a mention of, we see a mother on TV that Donna and Colin are watching her, who has martyred herself, who has committed suicide in order to kill Israelis. Then there's mention of Palestinian Authority paying families of martyrs. At the same time, we talk about how kind of basic the episode is, but hats off really actually to how broad the outlook is while still feeling like a story is dramatically told. They touch on a lot of bases. I was worried about just discussing this episode. I can't imagine running a show and deciding to make this episode and to try and make anyone come away and say, "That was kind of fair." I think they did a very very good job.

HRISHI: One thing that was so different about this episode, and I really appreciate it, is the fact that we were there. So often in *The West Wing*, our usual M.O. is things happen in other places, and our experience of them is in the White House. There'll be a character coming in with news: This thing happened. And then they have to figure out what their response is. I'm so glad that they didn't try and take this subject on in the same way. It was like you said the dramatic realization of it was so much richer. I thought it was great.

JOSH: You make a very good point. I think it ties into a point you made earlier. The episode begins almost with a tease that it's going to be less good than it is because we fade in. I look at the transcript - "We fade in, exterior Gaza, day, Erez Checkpoint. We open on a shot of a young man kicking a soccer ball." Then moments later, we get a very basic conversation.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

KORB: They're a displaced population.

DESANTOS: Displaced? Palestinians move what, 15, 20 miles? You know I grew up in Dayton?

KORB: They're still refugees.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's their conversation in entirety. I remember doing an inner eye roll, thinking, 'Is that going to be the level of discourse on this episode?' And soon after, we're not only - forget about a deeper discourse, we're plunged into actual dramatic...we're in the scene. They're dramatizing with greater depth the situation in the Middle East.

HRISHI: I think the thing that's so impressive too is not only an episode that feels like a complete departure from *The West Wing* but also these beautifully realized moments that feels like *The West Wing* at its best. Towards to the end of the episode, when the President and Kate go to visit Fitzwallace's wife Gail - that is as moving as any other sort of domestic *West Wing* episode.

JOSH: I agree.

HRISHI: I was surprised to find out that her name was Gail, because previously in this season, in "Dogs of War", Fitz talked about his wife and he said her name was Laura.

[West Wing episode 5.2 excerpt]

FITZWALLACE: I promised Laura a month on a boat, kicking around the Caribbean for our honeymoon.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh. I blame Lauren Hissrich. Lauren Hissrich Schmidt. The keeper of the Bible in her head. Novella Nelson plays Gail Fitzwallace and I think gives a very moving performance. By

the way, we haven't even really touched on it. Fitz is dead. How about that? We've lost a beloved character.

HRISHI: That's what I'm saying. It's too much! There's too much. That is part of everything else, and we've gone this whole time without talking about it. It's crazy. There was an article in *The Tennessean* back when this episode came out where they spoke to John Amos about Fitz's demise. He said that the way he found out was just very informally. He said one of the directors came up to him and said, "Oh hey, John. How's the burrito? Oh by the way, did I tell you we're killing Fitzwallace?" It was just like that," he said. "Why's that?" "We wanted to create a cliffhanger." And John Amos's response was, "Well, I don't know about that. I'm sure my creditors and my ex-wife are going to have a cliffhanger wondering if they're going to get their next checks."

JOSH: It seems the appropriate response. It's a tough business. That sounds about right. He's almost ahead of the game that someone even said it to him. I've heard plenty of stories where the actor finds out at the table read or shows up for filming and there's been a rewrite. It's a rough business. Speaking of which, there were times actually in this episode where I thought President Bartlet was a bit cold in terms of what just happened. Although, I like this. There are elements of his interactions with Commander Harper that are lighter.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

BARTLET: The Mideast reminds me of that old joke about the optimist and the pessimist. The pessimist says, "Things are terrible. It can't get any worse." The optimist says, "Oh yes, it can."

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it almost seems inappropriate to be light in that moment.

JOSH: Yeah, or "You unfeeling lout. How could you?" Fitzwallace is dead. But I think probably actually to do the job, to be the President of the United States, you have to have some sort of rhino skin. Otherwise, you couldn't get up in the morning because of the type of stuff you have to deal with. I can't imagine having to go meet with the families of the fallen over and over and over. So I think it's probably accurate; we see clearly that he cares. But he also has to go on with the job. Close out his day.

HRISHI: That's one of the reasons I loved the scene with Gail so much. It's the only thing we really heard from the President was "I asked Fitz to go." His reaction felt too small to me considering what the relationship was that they had. I don't know. I just remember Morris Toliver who was killed early in the administration.

JOSH: His doctor?

HRISHI: Yeah, and how much the President was worked up over that. I thought, 'This is it?' He's changed. He's learned a lot about the kinds...he's gotten used to having to deal with tragedy. He's talking with Kate, and the fact that he brings her into the motorcade with him to go visit Gail, the fact that his final scenes in the episode are there at the house, I was glad. I was, 'Okay,

we're getting a moment of the President treating this very solemnly and the way it deserves.' And then the end of that scene, the President says, "The people responsible will be found and brought to justice." What broke my heart was Gail saying...

[West Wing excerpt 5.21]

GAIL: Don't promise that. I know the world.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: What a great line. She basically busts him, and she's right. It's not a promise you can necessarily keep.

HRISHI: It's interesting that coming soon off the heels of the President saying we shouldn't make promises we can't keep when talking about the unions. She had to remind him of that.

JOSH: There's also an essential couplet between Harper and Bartlett.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

KATE: It can get easy to forget there's a silent majority on both sides that just want to live their lives.

BARTLET: Unfortunately, you spend all of your energy dealing with what's drowning them out - the active and bomb blasts.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: One, I actually believe this so I was happy to hear it. I also like the way it was worded: "It can get easy to forget there's a *silent* majority" because there is a price to be paid and a risk run to be a moderate voice in this situation - to speak out for the other narrative - and of course, the greatest risk to run is to remain silent because that lets the polarization and the extremists on either side have the voice. So there are moderate and moderating voices, because I do think the average Palestinian and the average Israeli wants to live a decent life and a safe, peaceful life. Now that every episode, they're starting with "last episode" there's a moment that strikes me like could-be-in-an-airplane movie, Zucker brothers movie.

HRISHI: Uh huh.

JOSH: There's two moments. First, President Bartlet says to Commander Harper I think in the Oval, "Walk with me." Classic line, walk with me. Then they're about halfway, and he says, "Take a ride with me." I wanted to play out to his ridiculous thing. They get home, and he says, "Come inside with me. Let's get in bed. Can I make you dinner?" And she spends the rest of her life with him, where he just never says goodbye. [both laugh]

HRISHI: Let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we're going to talk about this episode some more with Jason Isaacs, who played Colin Ayres, and Janel Moloney who of course plays Donna.

[ad break]

HRISHI: Let's say hello to Jason Isaacs and Janel Moloney. Jason, I was wondering if we could start off by you telling us how you got this role.

JOSH: How'd they get you?

JASON: I was living in Venice, and I could not get a rest in the film world. I had never done television, American television, not for many many years. Somebody said, "Maybe you should do some television." I went, "Am I reduced to that?" They said, "*The West Wing*" and I nearly wet myself from excitement. It was and still is far and away my favorite television program, and I was just beyond excited to be in it. Everything about it was a shock culturally to be there for me because I'd come from the world of film. I'd been working in film for a long time. I hadn't done any telly. And I was used to the script to being a loose blueprint, a starting point for a discussion, and that's very much not the culture that I found on *The West Wing*. Is that fair, Janel?

JANEL: Yes.

JOSH: I've heard from other film actors too that there was a bit of a culture clash, a rude awakening.

JASON: It was a learning curve. *West Wing* I think more than any other American television program had inherited Aaron's genius. He wasn't writing anymore, but three dots were three dots; it wasn't a semicolon. It was very surprising. I just hadn't been in that environment, not for many many years. So the first thing I did, if I remember rightly, was suggest that he be Irish, northern Irish. And there was some [expletive] about Belfast, so he'd be interested in bombs and sectarian divisions, but it was really to give myself some license so I could change the dialogue. The other huge adjustment was that I was an addict of the show, and I was meeting Josh and Donna and Toby and C.J. and all these people. The fact that they were mortals and whether they looked nice in the lens.

JANEL: Aw...sorry we disappointed you.

JASON: No, they were delightful and charming, and somehow they were the saviors of the free world, but -

JANEL: Stupid actors. [everyone laughs]

JASON: It took me a while to adjust to that too. I don't think I really ever got over the feeling they were propping up the crumbling edifice of democracy for the rest of us.

HRISHI: I'm surprised actually to learn that you met everyone, because all of your scenes were shot in this location. I wasn't sure if that would've been the case.

JASON: I went to the set for costumes and makeup and chats and stuff, and if I remember rightly, Richard was directing the previous episode. If Richard is a quite serious bloke on a normal day, on a day where he's directing, you can tell it's up to 50. So I feel like I really did meet Toby. [everyone laughs] But we went to...Gaza was in the Salton Sea. Do you remember much about the Salton Sea, Janel? It was something.

JANEL: Yeah, I do. It had a very specific scent. [everyone laughs] The city has this kind of sulfurous kind of scent. It's an odd place, I found it kind of an odd place.

JASON: Well I remember - and I could be completely wrong, as I can get many things wrong - is that it was built as the first and largest man-made tourist formation, and they got the drainage wrong. You're being very diplomatic about its scent. It stunk from many miles away. We stayed, if I remember rightly, we stayed in a motel.

JANEL: Yeah.

JOSH: No expense spared.

JASON: We ordered Chinese food, and we all gathered around the slightly algae-covered swimming pool to eat, and we complained to the young guy at the desk about the standard of Chinese food or thin walls or something about the motel. The guy said, "See that building up on the hill there? It's a prison. The only people that stay here are cons on their first night out and the hookers with them." [everyone laughs] We all went, "Ah." And we all slept in our clothes buttoned up to the neck.

JANEL: That's a good memory. I don't remember that.

JASON: They did an amazing job creating Gaza, though. The area was full of markets and stuff.

JOSH: It looked good.

JASON: People asked whether we went there.

HRISHI: I was impressed just by the American accent that you just slipped into to tell that story.

JOSH: It was good. It was really good.

JANEL: Yeah, that was good.

JASON: Do you remember the kid who played the Israeli soldier?

JANEL: I do.

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

YOSSI: *Young Palestinians would come out from hiding - boys with rocks - and they shoot them with live bullets.*

[end excerpt]

JASON: He kept his accent there, and he'd just come from Israel very recently. He'd just left the army. At the end of the day, he went back into the American accent.

JANEL: I remember that. He was a nice kid

JOSH: He gave a good performance.

JANEL: I learned a lot just about the conflict, that I didn't really know that much about it.

JASON: I remember talking to him because I was very upset about that one scene. And I loved being in it, I loved doing lots of stuff. I loved being with Janel and Brad and just generally to have been in *The West Wing* at all is an absolute thrill. But there was something about that one scene only, that coverage of the young soldier where he described a massacre of taking potshots at teenagers and shot them down like rabbits, that I knew couldn't be true because I know a little bit about the Israeli army. Not to take any side in the conflict or make this discussion political, but that isn't true. Not that people don't get shot, but they would be prosecuted and the world media would be down on you immediately. I had some chats about it with Peter, who wrote it, and John Wells, and they said they'd look into it. Do you remember that?

JANEL: I remember you getting involved in a way that involved your perspective, your experience, people that you knew. It riled you up in a little bit of a way. I remember them being very respectful and intelligent. I don't know if they did anything.

JASON: What happened is I was told that when we get to that day, we'll look at it and if it turns out that massacre didn't happen, we'll change it. We got there and it hadn't changed, and the kid had just got out of the Israeli army. I said, "How do you feel about this? It feels to me like this couldn't happen in the way it's described. But what do I know?" He goes, "No. Of course it couldn't happen." I says, "Well how do you feel about doing it?" He says, "I called my commander in the Israeli army, and I told him what I'm being asked to do, and he said, 'You know what? They all think we're Nazis anyway. Just get yourself a career.'" And that's why he'd done it. I remember that day. John and Peter were, you're right, it was very very important to them that they presented every side equally and fairly and stridently, and I thought they went in that particular scene only, too far in believing something that was unbelievable, presenting something unbelievable. The rest of it I thought they did magnificently..

HRISHI: That is fascinating.

JOSH: An interesting thing to discuss as the President of the United States is suggesting that the rules of engagement for the caravan is that a rock thrown will be equivalent to a rifle shot

HRISHI: The thing about this stones being thrown in the episode, that was also based on something in 2003 when the American diplomatic envoy was attacked and there was an explosion. There really were Palestinian children who threw stones at Western reporters saying, "Allahu akbar." Now, these rules of engagement that Trump is suggesting, that would be grounds to shoot them.

JASON: It's one of the reasons why *The West Wing* hasn't aged a jot, because we need to be reminded that it's the most important and responsible position in the free world. We should have someone who can bear the weight of that responsibility in office.

JANEL: Yeah. Word.

JASON: Thanks, Nel.

JANEL: Did you rewatch it?

JASON: I did. I watched it yesterday, actually. I'm so glad I've been with my wife for 31 years because I should never try to pick anyone up. I was smiling like a pedophile the whole time. [everyone laughs] I think I was smiling just to be in *The West Wing*. I couldn't stop grinning. People were getting blown up, Gaza - this huge refugee camp - and I'm just grinning from ear to ear the whole time. I wanted to retake it all.

JANEL: That's okay. Me too. I was struck by the naivety that they shrouded Donna in as she walked into this experience. It was kind of lame. Donna was super smart, and would they have sent her unless she was smart? Everything was like, "Tell me, man. Tell me."

JOSH: Man of the world.

JANEL: It was kind of lame, actually.

JASON: Mostly, it was things you would know if you'd ever read novels.

JANEL: Yeah, you could do Wikipedia and then be like, "Oh yeah." And she's sitting there staring like that scene when we're sitting on the bed, and she's, "What is she saying? Oh my god, she had children?" It was like, 'No [expletive] she had children'. Have you read the paper, Donna? I didn't realize it then because I was happy to be blown up and have a big exciting episode.

JASON: And out of the office.

JANEL: Honestly, I remember being really excited to work with Jason. I was pretty excited about that. I think when you've been on a show for so long and you're doing so many episodes, people don't have the luxury all every single the time to get in there and fight for content, but looking back, I kind of cringed a little bit.

JASON: It was simplistic, I thought, that episode. They're laying things out as if someone had never heard of Israel or Palestine, and only once they'd done a primer could they actually let the story be dealt with.

JOSH: We discussed that a bit. In addition, we discussed the difference between the British pronunciation of p-r-i-m-e-r as "pry-mer" and the American pronunciation as "prim-er." I'm delighted to have had an actual Brit speak the word.

JASON: You've never heard it said out loud?

JOSH: No, the Brits say "pry-mer" and Americans say "prim-er."

JASON: Okay. Thank you for that.

JOSH: We used that very word is discussing it. In defense of the episode, it is also a bit of an introduction and as we said Middle East 101. It does, I think, a very good job of being balanced and of dramatizing it rather than setting it in what feels like a classroom.

JASON: Right. I do remember on a much more trivial note...

JANEL: Uh oh.

JASON: There was a scene - bear in mind, Janel and I were slightly friendly, she knows my then-girlfriend-now-wife. There was a scene that said, "Lights come up. Donna's typing an email. She has slept with the reporter." Something like that.

JANEL: Which they don't show, right? There was no kissing or anything.

JASON: No, no, you don't remember. The person who was directing it said, "Let's do one where Donna's typing and we jib up a little bit and we see that you're asleep in the bed behind." Okay, so we do that, and he goes, "Let's do another one where we come up behind Donna and you put your hands on her shoulder."

JANEL: Oh, I do remember! We kissed a little bit. How could I forget this?

JASON: Unbeknownst to me, she suddenly starts sucking my face and 30 seconds later, Chris goes, "Cut!" And I go, "Janel!"

JANEL: He told me to do that. I wouldn't have just done that.

JOSH: Sure he did. Sure he did.

JASON: Three things I remember about the kiss. Obviously, one, it was delightful. Two is that as soon as I said, "Janel, what the [expletive] was that?!" you said, "Freebie." [everyone laughs] And three, I remember the whole time you were kissing me, I was thinking, 'Don't kiss me! You should be kissing Josh!'

JOSH: [laughs] As a fan of the show.

JANEL: I remember Chris told me to do it, like it was a thing, but they didn't use it, right?

HRISHI: No.

JASON: They didn't use it.

JOSH: They didn't use it, but it's on Janel's reel.

JANEL: It's on my reel. Now that I'm married, I just watch it every night. [everyone laughs]

JASON: Don't we all?

JANEL: I remember just enjoying being away and doing that. It was always great fun to go away, whether it was like going to Pittsburgh in "20 Days" or whatever that one was, or going here, or when we would be in DC, it was always a lot of fun.

JOSH: How long were you guys on location? Just a couple of days?

JASON: Three or four days or something. We were in the hospital room as well.

JANEL: And that was back at, umm...

JOSH: Back at headquarters?

JANEL: Yeah.

JASON: I made the mistake, if I remember rightly (I was much younger), I made the mistake of suggesting I wear my own clothes because I had kind of linen things. And then of course I could never wear them again because they've been on television. They were my favorite shirts, then they were consigned to the dust pile.

JANEL: Why would you do that? They had a wardrobe. Lyn Paolo, she's nice. [cross talk] They can afford that.

JOSH: [cross talk] I think you get an extra \$14 a week.

JASON: Mine looked sort of lived in, sort of crumpled. They looked like someone had lived in them for quite a long time.

JOSH: There was also one little prop that you had, which was so wonderful. You guys agree to go to the bar, and Donna says, "I can't, I've got someone here, it's going to be a while." He says, "I'll wait." And you hold up a book. It's a great old paperback that looks like something Colin would be reading.

JASON: I love that.

JOSH: It's a great little prop.

JANEL: I'm just a little curious about why I had a totally different hairstyle then. It's like my hair is curly and completely different. And it's like, what, I go to Gaza and I bring Beyonce's hairdresser? It was curly, completely different hair. I don't understand what I was doing.

JASON: It gets frizzy in the desert.

JANEL: I guess that was the thought. It was really silly.

HRISHI: I liked that detail.

JASON: You were right though, by the way, we were on location and being such a huge fan of the show, I was - When they initially said you're going to be on *The West Wing*, I could see myself walking and talking and bashing through doors. Instead, I'm in this sort of stinky motel and this very sandy location which didn't exactly tick all my boxes. But I was with my favorite characters.

JANEL: There is something that the people that really want to be on *The West Wing*, they really do. They want to be cruising down the hall with Allison Janney, and then handing papers to somebody, then make a cup of coffee and walking around a corner, so I get it.

JASON: Also, for years, I had hated anyone that got between you and Josh, obviously, because that's the point of the show - this fabulously unconsummated relationship that eeks out for years and years and years. So to be one of those people, those hateable people. That's another thing that I remember is that I'd already been in I think the first of the *Harry Potters*, I'd already been in *Chamber of Secrets*, so although I was there, clearly benign and grinning like a psychotic person, but nonetheless playing a character that so many people thought that I had planted the bomb. I can't tell you how many people. There wasn't Twitter in those days, but somehow I got the feedback that lots of people knew that it had to be me because I'm a Death Eater.

HRISHI: You were playing Colin Malfoy.

JASON: Right.

JANEL: Interesting, interesting.

HRISHI: Janel, I have a couple of questions for you. Josh had made a comment about the delivery that you give while doing the voiceover of the emails that you sent to Josh [Lyman].

[West Wing episode 5.21 excerpt]

DONNA: When you get out of the hotel meeting rooms and into the streets, what hits you about Gaza isn't the overcrowding and poverty.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Josh interpreted it almost like this was the ghost of Donna speaking. [everyone laughs]
Do you remember?

JANEL: Well, you could see it. At that point, you don't know what happened to her. They did this thing where you saw the very unexpected explosion in the beginning, which I thought was super well done, then you don't know if she's dead or not, you know? They killed Mrs. Landingham. Why wouldn't Donna go? I can't imagine, I mean come on, they're not going to kill Donna, but you never know. I don't remember anything about my performance, but I think we must have done that two days before the show was supposed to be on because everything like that, everything post was down to the wire. I think I knew I lived.

HRISHI: That's what I was going to ask.

JANEL: They came to me in the beginning before they did it, and the first thing John said to me was, "Let me preface this by saying you live" and then he goes on to tell me there's going to be a few episodes and it's going to start like this and it's going to end like this, so he prepped me.

JOSH: That was kind.

JANEL: Yeah.

JASON: When I was rewatching it, I'd wondered whether you'd objected to reading out the emails because there's something about hearing an email read out, because it's an odd thing to happen. It doesn't happen, and it's a conceit. I wondered if you'd bristled against it.

JANEL: No. Some people hate voiceovers. I always find them kind of romantic, and I enjoy voiceover, so I think I had a good time doing it.

JASON: I liked it. For me, that's Josh hearing your voice in his head.

JANEL: I think that. I didn't even think to object. By then, we had done, I don't know, 70 episodes or something?

HRISHI: Over 100.

JANEL: I think the brilliance of *West Wing* is that the very very final day, the very last scene of the final, people were still like, "Was that good? Should we go again? Did I get that? Did I get the funny? Did I miss that? Uh oh. Can I get another?" Always to the end. I was always felt like the bar was super high, and nobody ever phoned it in. So if something didn't really bug me, I was just going to keep going.

JASON: I felt the same. When you go into an episode or two, you get slightly different. When you run for a long time, you just get your day over with.

JOSH: Get through it.

HRISHI: Janel, one of my other questions was about after the filming of the actual explosion and then the scene where Jason comes and Colin is shooting the photographs, you're upside down in the SUV and strapped in and covered in blood. I was wondering if you remember filming that, and if it had been a hard scene to shoot.

JANEL: No, it wasn't. It was fun. We're in show business. That's what we're doing it for. Yeah, it was fun. I spent 100 episodes walking around in high heels and a pencil skirt, so it was fun to do something a little different. They were very careful. When they shot the explosion, that's kind of a little closer than you realize it's going to be because what you see is this kind of thing happening. It happened. They did this small, fake explosion, but you get just as surprised because you don't know exactly when it's going to happen. You don't know how it's going to feel. So that's a real thing. Then they go and they flip the car up and they put this stuff all over you and they wedge you in there, then you get up and laugh and go to lunch.

HRISHI: It wasn't like, okay you have to do 16 takes and you have to be upside down the whole time?

JANEL: No, no no no no no no. They did it fast, and really if you think about it, all it was was a shot. And Chris was very efficient, so I imagine being away, he was even more careful about using the time well.

JASON: Mmhmm. I remember running more than once, and thinking, 'I'm not that fit. Can we do it again or something?'

JOSH: I don't think I believe that.

JASON: Limping up here like an old man, sort of wheezing and resting on the wall. I did like that bit, not of my acting but of the story that there's a photographer, he gets there, he takes all these photographs, '[expletive] there's the girl I'm falling for, but what am I going to do? I've got to take pictures. That's my job.' I kind of like that little bit of inner conflict in the story.

JOSH: I was going to ask Janel, during the stunt or the gag itself, were there any flames on the car itself or were those all CGI-imposed? We were discussing.

JANEL: I think it must've been CGI. I don't remember there being any flames. I don't remember - I don't remember exactly what was happening, because as you saw, I had to be totally engaged and then they did this thing. Which was great, I remember seeing it. I hadn't seen it in a long time, and not remembering exactly how it happened. Getting really surprised when I saw it, too. My kids actually saw, I have a Polaroid of me after with Chris Misiano and we've got our arms around each other and I'm covered in blood. I remember my kids seeing that. I have more than one car accident picture of me covered in blood from a show, so they were very very interested in that.

JOSH: It's a living.

JANEL: I don't remember it being very dramatic or unpleasant.

JASON: I think there were flame bars there, actually. If I remember rightly, there were a bunch of flame bars actually.

JANEL: Oh really?

JASON: In the foreground of the shot, yeah.

JANEL: Did they do that kind of CGI then? Back in the dark ages?

HRISHI: This was the debate between us. I thought that the flames looked real, Josh thought they looked fake.

JOSH: I'm talking about on the car itself.

JASON: I don't think there was money for CG flames back when. We're talking about 2004.

JOSH: Janel, do you remember John Amos having anything to say as you filmed his final scene of the series? How was he feeling that day?

JANEL: I remember he was sweet and funny, but I remember he was bummed. And like in a very cute way, not thrilled to be ending. That was a great character.

JOSH: Much loved.

JANEL: You never knew on *West Wing*. Sometimes you hang out and get to have these fantastic episodes. These characters that were more supporting, like John's character. When you got a great scene on *West Wing*, even if it was a couple great scenes in an episode, it could be very meaningful to actors, so to be killed off would be just a real bummer.

HRISHI: Jason, did they tell you right away when they asked you to do the show that it was going to be for this multi-episode arc?

JASON: No, I think I got the three episodes together. It was "Gaza", there was a follow-up, and I think I was very briefly in the first of season six in one scene. Frankly, I wanted to be in it as much as possible, but as a huge fan of Josh and Donna, I thought get me out of there as soon as possible.

HRISHI: Are there other memories you have that we haven't talked about yet from filming this episode?

JASON: The thing I was most shocked by was that Josh was a terrible or brilliant clown always looking for a gag, whether he was dropping his pants or pretending to walk down stairs or walking into a wall. I couldn't process that with Josh at all. It was incongruous to me. I remember the hospital room where we would play these very serious and earnest scenes, then pissing ourselves laughing in between all the takes. That's what I remember.

JOSH: That's great.

HRISHI: You've posted all these photos on your Instagram.

JASON: I have a lot of them. I'm sure Janel will remember. I've got one with soup pouring out of your mouth.

JOSH: Send it. Please send it!

JANEL: No, because Jason - okay, this I remember. Jason, I don't know if he still does it, but did this super horrible thing where everyone person who is in this contacts, he takes a picture of them eating, and that's what comes up when you call him. A picture of you with a sandwich in your mouth comes up instead of a nice picture.

JASON: Classy picture. Here's the thing, Janel. It's actually only you.

JANEL: Oh, you only did that to me? Oh, alright.

JASON: I do remember thinking - this is not a criticism of the people who did it - but there's a huge and rather fantastic community of Israeli actors, and there are a lot of people doing funny voices in this that didn't need to be hired. I thought that was odd for a show that has such integrity in so many other areas.

JOSH: Thankfully, due to shows like *Fouda* and others, American audiences are now being exposed to great Arab and Israeli actors.

JASON: That's true.

HRISHI: Before we let you go, I just wanted to say Jason how much I loved *Death of Stalin*. I think I've recommended it on the podcast already before, but I'm going to say it again. Especially for anyone who's a fan of *The West Wing*, *Death of Stalin* is just a must watch, and you're brilliant in it.

JASON: Well thanks. Anybody who's a fan of genocidal comedy will love it. [everyone laughs] Let me just say - second only to the thrill of being on *The West Wing* is being on *The West Wing Weekly* podcast, so thanks for having me.

JOSH: Aw, you're a good man.

HRISHI: Thank you both so much.

JOSH: Thanks for listening to the podcast.

HRISHI: It's so much fun to be able to get to speak to both of you together.

JASON: Thanks, Janel. Until next time, my darling!

JANEL: Yeah, 'til next time.

HRISHI: That sucked. [Josh laughs]

JOSH: Bless you. Alright, that does it for another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for listening, and thanks so much to our guests Janel Moloney and Jason Isaacs.

JOSH: Do you think the plural would be “Jasons Isaac”?

HRISHI: Umm...we’ll never know because he is one of a kind.

JOSH: Boom!

HRISHI: You can follow them on Twitter. Jason Isaacs is @jasonsfolly, and Janel Moloney is @nellymoloney.

JOSH: We are at our own names, the show is @westwingweekly.

HRISHI: And if you have any other comments that won’t fit in 280 characters, you can leave them for us on our Facebook page or on our website: thewestwingweekly.com.

JOSH: We would like to thank Margaret Miller, Zach McNeese, and Nick Song for their indispensable help creating this episode.

HRISHI: And we’d like to remind you that *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a curated collection of extraordinary podcasts.

JOSH: Check them out at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

JASON & JANEL: What’s next?

[outro music]