

The West Wing Weekly
5.22: "Memorial Day"
Guest: Josh Singer

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we're talking about the season finale of season five. It's called *Memorial Day*.

JOSH: It was written by John Sacret Young and Josh Singer. It was directed by Christopher Misiano and it first aired on May 19th in the year 2004.

HRISHI: Here's a little synopsis: "Memorial Day" is the season finale, and in it, President Bartlet wrestles with what to do in response to the killing of American officials in Gaza. But even as he weighs the options, the situation keeps escalating, with Israel and Palestine attacking each other in retaliation and counter-retaliation. Meanwhile, Josh finds himself being used as a proxy for back channels with the Palestinian Prime Minister, and Charlie and Toby try to ready the President for throwing out the first pitch at an Orioles game in Camden Yards. Coming up later, we're gonna talk with one of the writers of this episode, Josh Singer. He's an Oscar winner for the film *Spotlight*, which he co-wrote. He also co-wrote *The Post*, and he wrote the new film *First Man*.

JOSH: How about that? That's a good get.

HRISHI: Yep. But first, let's talk about this episode a little bit. Josh what did you think?

JOSH: I liked this episode. I thought a good continuation of the last and a good end of the season. I like the very last moment itself. We don't have to begin at the last moment, but I like the heft of this episode and where it kind of leaves us as we look forward to the next season.

HRISHI: Yeah, let's take a second, maybe, before we even discuss the granular parts of the episode itself and just reflect on the fact that this is the end of the season. This is our season five finale, as well as the show's.

JOSH: It's major.

HRISHI: You know, this is my first time watching this season, as has been widely discussed by us, and people told me a lot of negative things about season five before I watched it, and I think some of those comments set my expectations pretty low. And I'm happy to say that the show consistently surpassed my expectations.

JOSH: I'm delighted to hear it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That *is* good news.

HRISHI: Let's review a little bit. There are a lot of casualties in season five. This is "Memorial Day" and Fitzwallace gets brought home here, but there are also characters that we've lost to death by being written out, I guess. Like, Mandyville is no longer just for Mandy. RIP to the characters Angela Blake, [cross-talk] Jack Sosa, Ryan Pierce, [cross-talk], and Marina. Angela Blake, Jack Sosa, and Ryan Pierce, and Marina, all introduced in this season and shown the door.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Ryan Pierce!

JOSH: Yeah, and shown the door off camera.

HRISHI: Yeah. Angela Blake faded away without a mention. We got to have a good satisfying end for Ryan Pierce as played by Jesse Bradford, I thought.

JOSH: Yeah, we know what he's off to, and he's been promoted up and out of the show.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I think that was satisfying. Jack Sosa, we talked to Wilson Cruz and we, you know, we found out that was just a little bit of a, you know, one-and-a-half-off, one-and-a-tenth-off, but Rina just disappeared.

JOSH: Yeah, she evaporated.

HRISHI: Her last episode was "The Supremes" and I was appreciating her as a character more and more. I'm not gonna say that I totally miss her, but in "Eppur Si Muove", she told us she had a little girl and to me it felt like an indication that there was a lot more depth to be explored with her character. Like, you know, a last name.

JOSH: Yeah, they could have made that commitment, you're right. That would have been nice.

HRISHI: But no, that's it for that character. So, no closure there. But Kate Harper is clearly coming back.

JOSH: She's here to stay. Yes, she's made quite an impression.

HRISHI: Yeah, I like her a lot.

JOSH: I'm glad you mentioned all those minor characters because they did add flavor to season five.

HRISHI: Yeah, this is our *in memoriam* reel for season five.

JOSH: That's right. Pour one out.

HRISHI: Yeah. Some other things that have been irreparably damaged, maybe, or I don't know, in season five. If not killed, then changed forever, maybe? The playful dynamic between the President and the First Lady.

JOSH: Hmm, yeah, we haven't-- They haven't bounced back by season's end.

HRISHI: No. I mean, they're certainly better than they were at the beginning, but it feels like a different relationship.

Toby and Will's friendship. I was just thinking about when Toby announces he wants to-- he tells Leo he wants Will to be the deputy. Leo says to Toby,

[West Wing Episode 4.15 excerpt]

LEO: Listen, Will did a great job, and I like him personally, too, but he had a bad meeting with that public affairs guy, and people at State are focusing a lot of displeasure on him.

TOBY: I told him to have a bad meeting with that public affairs guy.

LEO: I know and I want to use him again, but I need friends that stay right now so I want him to work under the radar. He should work out of his house and deal with us by phone.

TOBY: That's exactly what I was gonna say.

LEO: Yeah?

TOBY: Except the part about him working under the radar in his house on the phone. Leo, I want the President to appoint him Deputy.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: That feels like a long ago era.

JOSH: Distant past, yes.

HRISHI: And maybe, for me, the biggest casualty of this season was a level of likability to our characters overall.

JOSH: Mmm, yeah, I think that's true. And I think that's why some people tag this season as a low point or a downer. But I think there's also something to be said for getting to the less attractive depths of some of our characters too. I kinda like that, I guess, is what I'm saying. I've often bridled against the sort of hero worship of these characters, so I kind of like when we get to see the lesser side and the more human aspects of these guys.

HRISHI: You know, I was thinking about how in this episode, at the at the very end, when the President and Leo are in the tunnel--

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

LEO: The most important moment of your presidency and you're gonna blow it because you're human. You're a father who almost lost--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You think this is about Zoey? You're damn right it's about Zoey. And Ellie and Elizabeth and Mallory!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I was glad that they brought that storyline back, you know, it had cast a long and sort of unfun shadow. I thought it was reasonable that it cast such a long shadow, [cross-talk] but it wasn't that much fun to watch, and I thought maybe that is my takeaway from this season, in relation to what you're talking about in terms of their likability, you know. Reasonable, but not so fun.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's a fair assessment.

HRISHI: How about great things that you liked about season five? Do you have any favorite aspects of it?

JOSH: No, nothing really jumps out.

HRISHI: [laughter] For me, I will say I think Donna's storyline, her evolution in this season is-- I really enjoyed that.

JOSH: That's what I meant to say.

HRISHI: [laughter] You know, for four seasons she basically didn't really evolve, even as other characters did here and there, and I thought this was really interesting. You know, there are some ways in which she's growing apart from Josh and some ways in which she's just growing up in her job, and the way that Angela Blake introduced that dynamic and the way that C.J. kind of encouraged it, I thought all of that stuff was really neat. Yeah, so Donna's my favorite thing about the season five.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

JOSH: Yeah, she perhaps had the greatest character development over this season.

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

JOSH: Yeah, I suspect you're right.

HRISHI: One thing I also liked-- it's more of an absence of something, so it's a little bit harder to really feel, I think, but one thing that we never really discussed in this season is *deus ex machina*.

JOSH: Yeah?

HRISHI: Which is something that I felt like came up in the Sorkin era.

JOSH: It was less of a go-to device in this season, you're saying?

HRISHI: Yeah, and sometimes, you know, whether it's in the pilot and, you know, the President and the Lambs of God, or in "Stackhouse Filibuster," you know, Donna and her superhuman intuition about Stackhouse and his grandchildren. I mean, [cross-talk] there weren't those kinds of huge leaps, and I liked that. Those are little things that would sometimes mar episodes that I love in the first four seasons.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Right.

JOSH: Interesting. So would you-- you would choose that as illustrative of Aaron's years and the device that he liked to go to?

HRISHI: I think so, yeah. I mean, it certainly, it got sprinkled in. Certainly wasn't a thing that happened commonly, but it happened.

JOSH: I think what you're describing points out a tendency of Aaron's, which is less one of John's, which Aaron writes and he does it very, very well, and, I guess, perhaps at times, less so for you, but he likes to write fairy tales, and I think the show was a little bit more of a wish fulfillment [cross-talk] fairy tale under his four seasons than we've seen in this season. [cross-talk] And I guess that probably, more than anything, speaks to the two men who were running the show.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Hm.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

HRISHI: Mm-hm. I think you're right, yeah. I have another category in our yearbook superlatives here.

JOSH: Yes?

HRISHI: I'm gonna give "Most Underrated Character" to Bob Russell.

JOSH: Hmm!

HRISHI: Again, it was communicated to me that this character was gonna be just terrible, and I like Bob Russell. I think he's an interesting character. I think that Gary Cole did a great job, and I think that the writers did a great job providing the administration a foil through him. I like him. I think he's a neat dynamic, and I think I liked how he was wily and kind of underestimated at times, and proved himself to be more savvy than people gave him credit for.

JOSH: Yeah, I totally agree. I feel like, more often than not, Russell has proven himself to be in all ways better than we've come to expect. You know, again and again he sort of steps over the bar that has been set for him [cross-talk] very low. Which makes me think that, maybe, I guess, it really is Will's character that people are reacting to negatively, when they do react. I used to think it was his going to work for Russell, you know, explain the whole thing for those who don't like Will. But then and I watched this and, like, I can totally see what Will sees in him.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I don't have any problems with Will in this season, either, except for the moments where he was very underused, you know, and was Clippy, the Microsoft Office paperclip, just showing up.

JOSH: Yes. He got a little annoying as the Greek chorus or the-- yes, as the paper clip.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There were plenty of instances where he could have not been used and that would have been maybe a better call. [cross-talk] I mean, now it looks to me like they were kind of-- I guess it's the employment version of throwing me a bone by keeping me in, but as I watch it I'm like, what's he doing there? Like, literally even just physically. Like, what's he physically doing? Why is he there?

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

HRISHI: [laughter] Why is he leaning into the door jamb that way?

JOSH: Right, exactly. But at least they got rid of Ryan, so it was only one guy constantly just walking around the halls [cross-talk] leaning in.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] [Laughter]

HRISHI: I think I will have to re-watch the season to really get some definitive feelings about this, but I think that my favorite episodes of this season were "Full Disclosure," "The Supremes," and "No Exit."

JOSH: Mm-hm. I remember two of those!

HRISHI: "Full Disclosure" is the one where C.J. goes and confronts the Vice President. You know, Matheson comes back.

JOSH: Now I remember that one, too. That one I mainly remember for giving us the ability to spend an entire podcast saying, "Full disclosure! I thought the lighting was really good."

HRISHI: Yeah. Okay. And so now to maybe my least favorite thing about season five, and I don't know if this is a thing, but it was introduced in this episode, so this is also my segue into us discussing the episode more specifically-- is the dynamic and the bond between the President and Leo in trouble? Because based on this episode, I would say that it is. There's this moment, you know, as they go from the President and Leo arguing and the President saying,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm the guy in the office, Leo. I'll be the one who's judged!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then cutting to the flashback and the President saying to Leo, even as he's about to go out into the public, he says to Leo,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: It should be you, Leo. You, not me.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which is all fine, you know, that that doesn't seem so crazy, but there's a look that John Spencer gives. The performance that he gives-- Leo has this gleam in his eye that for the first time, it seems like maybe Leo agrees with him.

JOSH: I thought the same thing, too, as I watched it, and it also seemed somehow, I guess, deeply meaningful to him that Bartlet said it.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's one thing to be like, oh, that was awfully nice of you, but this is [cross-talk] -- In the context of this, and-- and in my interpretation of it, this is Leo remembering this moment. He's like, oh, yeah, even the President thinks I should have been the President. It gives him this sense of--

JOSH: [cross-talk] Yeah.

JOSH: It's almost like, *I* knew that but I didn't realize *you* knew that. *I* knew it should be me, it's nice to hear *you* say it.

HRISHI: I mean, it's, uh, this is a huge bummer for me. This feels like maybe it tears at the suspension of disbelief that Leo, who has been so staunchly the guy behind the guy, would actually be like, you know, what, maybe-- Like, to me, this seems like Leo thinking about that the President shouldn't be the President, and he should be the one in charge. Like, beyond the way that he is often the one in charge as Chief of Staff, you know. He *is* the second most powerful person in the White House already.

JOSH: Well, what happens in present day if this episode leads you to think that there's a personal interrelational fissure beyond the actual decision they're discussing?

HRISHI: I guess the tenor of their discussion about military force-- We've had this kind of conversation before where Leo says, look, you have to dig in and yeah, this is-- I know you don't feel comfortable with military action, but this is part of the job. There was something different about it here, where Leo is just upset with the President for wanting to be cautious, for wanting to take his time.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true. I also like the contrast between Leo remonstrating with-- if that's the way to put it-- Commander Harper in the Situation Room.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

LEO: What do you think you're doing?

KATE: Excuse me?

LEO: We don't push agendas here.

KATE: I don't believe I am. I'm trying to give him the relevant information.

LEO: This isn't the UN. He's not the Secretary-General. He's the President of the United States and our job is to make sure his priorities are clear.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then we see Leo throughout the episode, Leo himself, has a different relationship, he's gonna absolutely lay in and lay on and get his. So I sort of like that we see him say, hey, hold back there to Commander Harper, and then we see in his personal relationship with the

President, he's absolutely going to, you know, more than lobby him, he's really gonna try to pressure him into the decision that, I guess, Leo would make.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think you're right, though, that there isn't necessarily something so specific in the present tense that makes me feel that way. It's more the fact in the moment of them arguing at Camden Yards and the President saying, I'm the one who's gonna be judged and then cutting to the President saying it should be you Leo, that juxtaposition, and then the look in Leo's eye makes me think, oh, Leo thinks this as well. It should be you.

JOSH: Well, for sure the stakes are high. The stakes are very, very high on both the macro and micro levels, and so we get the sense that perhaps there could be a break in their relationship.

HRISHI: Yeah. I want to go back, though, to the part that you were talking about with Leo and Kate Harper in the Sit Room. That felt jarring to me, as well. It's like, what is Leo on in this episode? Like, he has never talked to somebody in the Sit Room like that, even people with whom he patently disagrees. [cross-talk] You know, they're saying, hey, we should do this. He will be like, that is the wrong call, or, you know, he'll tell the President something else, but then to sort of go over to Kate after the President leaves and kind of give her a talking-to and, like, putting her in her place.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

JOSH: Oh, he does.

HRISHI: He-- he does. Yeah, it just felt not fun to watch and I was disappointed in it. Especially as to whatever extent Kate is supposed to be the stand-in for Nancy. You know, Leo and Nancy would have their own dynamics, but [cross-talk] he certainly-- he isn't giving her that kind of respect.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Right.

JOSH: Right. Well, he's not going toe to toe with Commander Harper on the issues, he's putting her in her place.

HRISHI: Yes, yes.

JOSH: He's saying, you gotta understand how this works. The way you're acting is inappropriate.

HRISHI: Yeah. Which it isn't.

JOSH: I would think not.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. I think that her job is to do what she's doing and to lay out what she thinks.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also-- I guess he also feels that, I don't know we're giving so--, you know, Leo's got a sort of a hawkishness to him.

HRISHI: He says,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

LEO: Today's priority is not world peace.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right, what a line.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's a great line of dialogue, I thought. Like [cross-talk] he's just, he's just laying it out there. He's just saying it.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: I would say it's a bombshell if it weren't too literal of a line.

JOSH: [laughter] Yeah.

HRISHI: So I'm hoping that this is a dynamic that's introduced here in the finale, but I really hope that-- This is the biggest cliffhanger to me is, like, what's gonna happen between Leo and the President, which is not a fun cliffhanger.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Bombing Gaza could be the most dangerous move this country has made in two centuries.

LEO: Or not.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: In seventy-five years we'll know if we're right or wrong, but nobody standing here today can tell me that with any certainty.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Jumping to another part of this episode, I really like the line that Josh has when he's trying to go see Donna. He says,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

JOSH: I work for the President of the United States. I have the diplomatic rank of a three-star general. Tell me where Donna Moss is.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: And it is not-- although Josh can be prone to bragging or whatever, this is not the moment where he's doing that. He's doing whatever he can to try and get in the room, and it's just a cool detail to find that out, the deputy chief of staff--

JOSH: Is that true, you think?

HRISHI: I think that is!

JOSH: Oh, I didn't-- I just-- Seemed like something to say.

HRISHI: [laughter] I don't know, I didn't look it up, but I buy it, [cross-talk] and I like it.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Maybe.

JOSH: Oh, that's funny.

HRISHI: I'm willing-- willing to go with it.

JOSH: To me, it was very much like the way the guys go into the police station in "Celestial Navigation." It's like that, "don't you know who we are" kind of thing.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: When he says-- He's-- The nurse says, are you a relative, he says, I work for the President of the United States, I have the diplomatic rank of a three-star general, tell me where she is,

JOSH: I guess I thought it was annoying.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah. Why don't you just explain the situation then?

HRISHI: She wouldn't stop for red lights if he were hurt.

JOSH: I guess so.

HRISHI: He won't stop for inquisitive nurses.

JOSH: Apparently not.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Oh, I wrote down, not super cool of Josh to watch news coverage of the bus bombing in Donna's hospital room. Oh like, dude, put on a little Bob Ross or something maybe a little more soothing for the bomb victim behind you, [cross-talk] and maybe not CNN covering bomb-- the bus blast.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: You know a fun fact about Bob Ross? He has the diplomatic rank of a three-star general.

JOSH: [laughter] I believe that. I like at the very-- I guess, the cold open. First of all, we get Natalija Nogulich, actress of Serbian descent, playing the Israeli ambassador. She does a good job. I think she's also a-- an Atlantic Theater Company-type person. I remember being aware of her, maybe knowing her back in New York when I knew all those guys, and I like that President Bartlet is trying to kind of hammer at her and against further Israeli retaliatory action [cross-talk] and she poses him a question, basically, says,

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

AMBASSADOR GALIT: Mr. President, we received information on the whereabouts of a man responsible for the repeated killing of our citizens. We have the specific location and little time. Would you have done any differently?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And we sort of get a moment where he doesn't have much of a response, and then just seconds later, [cross-talk] Harper comes in and basically we have a President who is confronted with a similar situation and we're gonna find out what-- what is he gonna do? I just thought it was cleverly timed and well-written.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: I thought so, too. I actually thought at first-- the first time I was watching it, I heard that line, I thought, oh, is she talking about Sharif?

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: You know, there was a conversation between Fitz and Leo where Fitz says,

[West Wing Episode 3.21 excerpt]

FITZWALLACE: We measure the success of a mission by two things: was it successful, and how few civilians did we hurt? They measure success by how many. Pregnant women are delivering bombs. You're talking to me about international laws. The laws of nature don't even apply here! I've been a soldier for thirty-eight years and I've found an enemy I can kill. He can't cancel Sharif's trip, Leo. You've got to tell him, he can't cancel it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And that is, you know-- that ends up leading them to prompting the President to [cross-talk] ordering the hit, and of course, Israel got drawn into that, and so I thought maybe she was talking about that. And then this double whammy of the next, very next scene, suddenly now he has to answer the very question that she's posed to him.

JOSH: [cross-talk] That's right.

JOSH: Boom. Yeah, immediately.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought that was great. Oh, one other thing I liked that was also sort of a callback, but there wasn't really any attention drawn to it: when Josh comes back to the hospital after his spy mission, he comes back to find Donna's room's empty and there's bloody bandages on the ground and when he finally gets some answers he finds out that she's developed a pulmonary embolism and they say,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

COLONEL LEAHY: It's a blood clot--

JOSH: [simultaneously] A blood clot.

COLONEL LEAHY: --we're trying to remove it now.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He knows exactly what it is because, I don't know if you remember this, that's what killed his father

JOSH: Mmm, I didn't remember that.

HRISHI: Yeah, back in "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part II."

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Josh?

JOSH: Governor.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Your father died, Josh. I can't believe it. What happened?

JOSH: He went in for his chemotherapy and he unexpectedly developed what's called a pulmonary embolism. It's a--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: It's a blood clot.

JOSH: Yeah. Went to his heart, there was cardiac arrest.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow, heavy.

HRISHI: Yeah. So between the, you know, collapsed lung and the pulmonary embolism, I thought this-- it's a nice way of drawing Donna even closer to him.

JOSH: Mm-hm, sure.

HRISHI: It's sort of like the pilot who flew into the side of the mountain having the same birthday as Josh [cross-talk] in *Noël*. There are these markers-- I mean, she's not just in danger, her health isn't just at risk, there are these markers that bring Josh back to these other moments of trauma.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

JOSH: Is it possible that the entire series is a Josh Lyman fever dream?

HRISHI: *St. Elsewhere*-style?

JOSH: *St. Elsewhere*, yeah. Right. I guess we'll find out. I guess we'll find out in the coming season.

HRISHI: But I thought that was really nice. Again, there's no attention brought to, like, oh yeah, I know what that is because my dad had-- nothing like that. [cross-talk] It's just a little moment that, if you've been paying attention to the show, you get this--

JOSH: [cross-talk] Right.

JOSH: Hey, hey, don't you have to rub it in.

HRISHI: [laughter] I thought that was really great little subtle tidbit of writing.

JOSH: Yeah. Now that I know, I agree. [laughter]

HRISHI: Well, there's a lot more to talk about. Let's go to our interview with our guest, Josh Singer, and we can get into it and find out some more from the perspective of one of the people who created it.

JOSH: Why not?

HRISHI: Alright, let's take a quick break, and then when we come back, we'll be joined by Josh Singer.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: We're joined now by Josh Singer, who co-wrote this episode, and this is actually, I believe, your very first teleplay for *The West Wing*.

JOSH SINGER: That's correct. I helped out on "The Stormy Present," but this was my first teleplay credit.

JOSH MALINA: It's very exciting to welcome yet another Yalie, yet another a capella enthusiast, and yet another fellow Oscar winner-- oh no, wait, I haven't won an Oscar.

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] Former a capella enthusiast. Former Oscar winner, too, I guess.

HRISHI: And for anybody who doesn't know, Josh Singer won an Oscar for Best Screenplay for *Spotlight* in 2016.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, it's actually half an Oscar because I won it with Tom McCarthy, so it's actually-- it's funny because they take the little man, they cut them right in half so it's this-- it's this very interesting-- people always come in, they're like is that an Oscar? They're like, no, it-- just-- it's only half--

JOSH MALINA: And is it really chocolate in the middle?

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] With a chewy nougat center, actually.

JOSH MALINA: Nice.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah.

JOSH MALINA: Nice. Well, great film. Well deserved. [cross-talk] Your half-Oscar is well deserved. Or your full Oscar was half-deserved.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Thank you, that's very kind.

JOSH SINGER: That's-- Right. Exactly. You know, it's funny because I feel like that-- I used to say all the time, and I still say now, I really learned to write in the John Wells screenwriting school, and what's a little nice about coming to this particular program is, the reason I am a screenwriter is because of *The West Wing*. I was literally struggling trying to figure out what to do when I was in grad school, and I had come out to LA to stay with this fella, Dave Katz, who I had worked at McKinsey with. I was interviewing for law firms out here. I was between my, I guess, second and third year, or third and fourth year in grad school and--

HRISHI: Law school?

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, I did a joint law and business degree. And Dave said, you gotta watch this show. It's called *The West Wing*. And I was captivated. It immediately became my favorite, if not the only, show I watched on television. I thought the writing was amazing. This was in the, you know, the Aaron Sorkin years, and I also was like, oh my God, he's having a conversation on a weekly basis with the American people about things I care about, and wow, you can do that. You can have conversations about things you care about, you know, and try to push ideas. And oddly, it was right at the time that Gore lost to Bush, and I had gone down to Florida and tried to help out in the recount, which, you know, I was sort of an observer, but it wasn't really all that helpful, obviously.

JOSH MALINA: They could use you again, you know, [cross-talk] currently. Head to Florida.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] [laughter] Exactly!

JOSH SINGER: But anyway, so I saw the show and I thought, wow, this could be exciting. This could be the kind of thing-- it's the kind of thing I would like to do. And so if it weren't for Aaron creating this show I never would have-- I don't think I would have thought to get into this industry in this way.

HRISHI: Well, I'm sure lots of people watch *The West Wing* and think, this is great television, I would love to write like this. How did you actually make it happen?

JOSH SINGER: You know, I finished graduate school, I said to my father, I said, I think I want to write. [laughter] Now that you've you paid for four years graduate school and he was really-- he and my mom were incredibly supportive. And he said, how many years you gonna give it? And I said, I'll give it three years. And he said, that sounds about right. And I took a part-time job and moved out to LA. And the part-time job turned out to be a very-- very little-time job and I met, you know, actually the Yale connection was quite helpful because my friend Derek Simonds, who I'd been in the Whiffenpoofs with, he actually introduced me to a guy named John Stevens and to another guy named Peter Blake who were television writers. And Peter actually told me, well, what you do is write a spec script, right? Mock scripts of shows that are on the air. And my favorite show was *The West Wing*, so I started writing a *West Wing* spec. I was dating an Israeli woman at the time who had a very far-right point of view, and I was reading a lot of Thomas Friedman, so I was more of a lefty, and we started arguing about Israel-Palestine and I thought, okay, well, this is a good, you know, I literally used all the op-eds we were sending each other as the basis for a script about Israel versus Palestine because *The West Wing* hadn't covered that at the time. And the most successful connection came from this subplot, which was random. My friend Sarah Lowe had sort of introduced me to this random woman who was acting and who was dating a fella by the name of Llewellyn. Llewellyn Wells. And Llew, was, as you guys know, the line producer on *The West Wing*. And his brother, John, was an executive producer on *The West Wing*. And Llew very kindly offered to read my script when I was done. And he read my *West Wing* spec and he liked it and he had me come up to the Starbucks up in Burbank, the one not far from the Warner Bros. lot, and it was the greatest note session I ever had because he basically said to me, what do you think is wrong with your script? [laughter] It was just total Socratic method, [cross-talk] which I love, and I was like, well, I think it needs this, this, and this. He's like, yeah, that sounds right. And he sort of then brainstormed with me a little bit he's like, well, when you're done, send it back to me. And so I finished that script and I sent it back to him and about a month or two later I got the call that changed my life, which is from Chris Selleck and Andrew Stern, who were running John's company. Llew had passed him the script, and what I didn't know was, John was taking over *The West Wing* from Aaron, and so John was going to take some of the writers who were in the room, but he was also looking for new writers. And Chris and Andrew liked my script and they passed it on to John, and John liked my script, so I was a pretty lucky guy. [laughter] So thanks to Llew and John and, and Sarah Lowe, who put me in that subplot, that's how I got on *The West Wing*.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Interesting

JOSH MALINA: And your dad was psyched.

JOSH SINGER: Exactly. I think I called them and I literally-- I call home, I said mom, dad, and I said [sings *The West Wing* theme].

JOSH MALINA: [laughter]

JOSH SINGER: I literally-- I was outside, I remember, when I got the job, because, you know, I had the interview with John, then, you know, took a while-- took a month or two until things shook out and, you know, and-- and I literally was outside a Kinkos when I got the call from my agent and I literally called them and sang the theme-- 'cause they loved the show, and it was pretty exciting.

HRISHI: So you were there for the entire fifth season, and this is, as we said, this is your first teleplay, but you were-- you were part of the writers' room the whole time, right? I was.

HRISHI: I was wondering if you could give us a little bit of background, before we get into “Memorial Day” specifically, a little bit about some of the stuff leading into this episode. First of all Kate Harper.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah.

HRISHI: There's a new character who'd been introduced just a couple of episodes earlier. Can you tell us about how that character was created and came about? Like, what motivated the idea of a new recurring character, and, sort of, what her arc was gonna be?

JOSH SINGER: I think we had a bunch of foreign policy episodes and wanted to do more foreign policy episodes. It was something Peter Noah was very interested in. I was very interested in foreign policy and we wanted to have an asset, as opposed to, you know-- we had some incredible actors who had come in, Ron Canada, who played our Secretary of State [cross-talk] and was terrific.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk, sung to the tune of *O Canada*] Ron Canada...

JOSH SINGER: He's great, right, but, like, we wanted somebody who would become a regular on the show. We wanted another strong woman, and we started playing with this idea, as I recall, of a character who would be, you know, pretty much all business. In my head, she was gonna be a little Vulcan, right, a little Spockish, a little, you know, [cross-talk] nerdy in that way while being also attractive and charming.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Hmm.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

KATE: If you want to apprehend Nasan without escalating the conflict, of course the Chairman has consistently chosen violence over peace, he's-- doesn't really have the strength to take on Hamas. He's walked away from offers that would have given his people a Palestinian state and the Israelis aren't likely to ever sit down to the negotiation table with him again. He's not the answer to the greater problem. He may be the answer to this one.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: And so we started brainstorming. I'm not sure, I think I pitched the name Kate. It's my sister's name, which is not really all that big of a deal 'cause, you know, when it comes to naming characters, like a hundred names are thrown out in a room and, like, you throw out 70. You know, each writer throws out 15, but-- but Kate is my sister's name so I was always pleased that the character wound up being named Kate. And yeah, so I loved that character. It was actually really fun to write and incredibly useful, although I re-watched the episode last night and I had a tendency [laughter] when I started on the show to get a little thick in the writing, a little dense in the writing. If I have an Achilles heel as a writer it is-- it is tending to get a little dense. You know, I remember Alex Graves, when we gave him the script for “The Stormy Present,” literally, like, had a-- had a cow. It's just like some of the density of that material, and I remember also Chris Misiano, God bless him, was prepping for “Memorial Day” while he was shooting episode 21, “Gaza.” I remember him trying to read my script and saying, it's just dense! It's so dense! [cross-talk] And really, and this is, like, walking, prepping, like on set, in front of, like, Stockard's there, like Martin's there, and I'm like, I'm literally, I think went home and I cried

myself to sleep that night. [laughter] So for those of you who've just seen *First Man* and think it's a little dense--

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] [laughter] That sounds like him.

JOSH MALINA: [laughter] Well, it's-- That's-- that's the trick, isn't it, writing, I think, a really great episode of *The West Wing*, is the material is dense and how do you write a 44-minute episode that takes on issues of great complexity and yet still moves along at a clip and yet-- and doesn't just bounce along on the surface?

JOSH SINGER: You know it's-- it's funny because, you know, Carol Flint at some point said, well, I want to do an episode on mandatory minimums, and, you know, we did it but, you know, we really only scratched the surface. And so I was helping out with the research, and I went back and I did all this research into mandatory minimums, and I went back and looked at the episode there and did on mandatory minimums and I realized that what he had done is he cherry-picked the three most important facts about mandatory minimums, the three things that, like, just grab you, like, you know, about, like, that a, you know, a three-strike felony can wind up-- three times of smoking dope can wind up with ten years in jail, whatever it is. Like, the most certain grab-you-by-the-collar facts, and he had wound just those three facts into the episode and nothing else, because everything else is super-dense and not particularly interesting. And so Carol, when she's trying to write, is stuck with like, everything else, which is super-dense and not particularly interesting. And Aaron had this amazing ability, just cherry-picked, like, the three best little tidbits, you know, and so I think it's one of the reasons why his episodes sing and some of our episodes don't quite, [laughter] [cross-talk] because we get stuck in the muck, as they say. So, you know, going back and watching "Memorial Day," I felt very similar to Chris Misiano, watching some of these scenes where they're talking about foreign policy and my head starts hurting, I'm like, I can't believe I made viewers watch that, it's so dense. It's just so dense!

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Huh.

JOSH MALINA: [laughter] I really like this episode. I think it's an excellent episode, and in addition to all that, you're also giving us flashbacks and you're giving us early Leo-Bartlet relationship. There is a lot going on in this episode.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, you know, so the episode actually came about in a sort of interesting way. I wasn't supposed to write the finale, of course, because I'm, you know, new guy. This was gonna be 21, Peter's was gonna be 20, I think, and then John was gonna write the finale, right, something like that. And I'd been pushing, you know, all year, do Israel-Palestine, because I'd written my spec on it and I was super excited and I thought it was something that would be fun to cover and I knew a bunch about it and it was something I wanted to write about. And I remember in the room, like, then we got this idea, maybe we'll do, like, a couple-episode arc on Israel-Palestine. So we wound up settling on, okay, we would do this episode with Donna and Gaza, and then-- which Peter Noah wrote beautifully, although we fought a lot about, like, 'cause we wound up-- you know, I was somebody who'd started very far left on this issue and the more I got to know in talking to all my friends at AIPAC or who worked with AIPAC, the more I had drifted towards the right, and so I wound up being the guy-- and I'm still pretty far left, I mean, I'm a Thomas Friedman Israel-Palestine guy, as it were.

HRISHI: Would you explain what that means?

JOSH SINGER: Well, just in terms of, like, where-- where you come down on this issue, 'cause it's a thorny one, [cross-talk] and, you know, are you, you know, I wouldn't call myself pro-Palestinian, but I actually don't, you know, love the behavior of the Israelis for the last ten, fifteen years, and I'm not a huge fan of Netanyahu. But even being, I think, pretty moderate, I was far-right in our room. I think Peter Noah was much to my left and so we had some good back-and-forth about certain stories used in various episodes, and-- and 'cause you're making points about this stuff. But anyway, so I was writing what was, I guess, gonna be episode 21, and I wrote this outline for my episode, and I turned it in, and John sort of came to me, he's like, well, you know-- it, you know-- he's like, Bartlet needs to be this, you know, and, you know, John would generally say, like, have one great idea but, and then he's go on, but he said, like Bartlet needs to be this, and that's all I got. I gotta go. So I'm sitting there, I'm like, oh God, I'm gonna get fired. [laughter] Like, I'm done. This is not going very well.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Yeah.

JOSH MALINA: Do you remember what his-- what the critical point was?

JOSH SINGER: He was basically saying that, I think it was about Bartlet being more active. It was a typical, you know, writer's rookie mistake of, like, lots of stuff happening and yet your main character is not actually active. So Bartlet wasn't particularly active, so he's like Bartlet needs to be more, I think, active and assertive and wanting, you know, whatever. I think that's what it was. Which was actually an incredible note in some ways, you know, the most important note, but the rest of the outline, which was a mess, he basically was like, this is a mess. And I did have the baseball thing in there, 'cause I had asked Llew, I'd say, could we ever go-- I love baseball, so I said to Llew Wells, I said, would we ever shoot in the stadium? He's like, well, I don't know, we could look into it. And he basically came back to me while I was writing my outline said, yeah, we could shoot in Camden Yards. I was like, oh my God, like, that was the greatest thing I could imagine, and so I had written the baseball storyline, which was fun. So that was kind of working, and then there was this big huge Israel-Palestine thing that wasn't working at all, and then I didn't really have a B-story except Josh and Donna over in the hospital and nothing was happening there. And so John says, well, Bartlet needs to be more aggressive and has to have more of a-- more active, and then left the room. [laughter] 'Cause this was a real mess. And the other writers start to leave, and I literally-- I don't grab them, but I literally said, guys, you can't leave me! I need help, you can't leave me, really! [cross-talk] And so, I said, Lawrence, what do I do about this A-story? And so Lawrence literally walked me through how I handle the A-story. Like, you know-- and I think he probably came up with the thing where-- the speech at the top,

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] [laughter] Don't go.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: "Tyranny of terror"? "Death mongers?? What is this? Tolkien?"

TOBY: The stronger your language now, the more leeway you'll--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm not saying it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: So I think that was probably Lawrence-- you know, 'cause that's a pure, like, brilliant Lawrence, like, this is actually how these things work. Might have been Eli, but, you know, I remember sort of calling Lawrence and I was like, I'm-- what am I gonna do with this Josh and Donna-- and Peter Noah-- bless him-- Peter Noah said, well what if Josh were a spy? Right, what if Josh turned out to be a spy? Which, you know, at first sounded like a pretty goofy idea, but the more Peter talked about it and then, you know, I think a couple other people in the room sort of like, said, that's not a bad idea. And we started hashing out, like, well, what would that actually look like? And I did a little research and that is my favorite thing of the whole episode, is that whole little storyline. So we were supposed to meet, I turned in my first script, and, like, the meeting was cancelled. Or it wasn't the meeting was canceled, it was, like, I think John met with all the producers. So essentially any writer with a producer title, which meant that me and Deborah and Mark Goffman and Lauren Schmidt-- this is-- they were mostly producers, so I meant, like, everybody but, like, the four of us. And so, like, I'm sitting in my office, I'm like, oh, I'm definitely gonna get fired. This is it, I'm getting fired. And I was like, I thought the script was good. And I think I had made Deborah read it ahead of time and she'd-- she had given me some notes and said, this isn't bad, you know, and so I was like, I thought it was good, what's going on, oh my God, I'm gonna get fired. And then they came out and John had put John Sacret Young onto the episode and made it the finale. And he made it the finale because, in truth, he had to write the finale for *ER* and I think he was just slammed and he was like, okay, if I make this the finale, then I can have a group of people bang out 19, you know, I have three or four writers all come together and everybody write pieces of 19, which he did, and just slide this down, basically, 'cause this feels like a finale. It feels like something you end the season on, right, and, you know, if you gin up, you know, is Donna gonna make it? And you, you know, have this sep-- real separation between Leo and Bartlet like this, you know, and this big major thing which is gonna lead to Camp David at the beginning of the next season-- like, this feels like a season finale.

JOSH MALINA: Also, what kind of pitch did he throw? Let's not forget that [cross-talk] huge cliffhanger.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] [laughter]

JOSH SINGER: Right, exactly. Did he hit the mitt? Although you hear it hit the mitt.

JOSH MALINA: That's true.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

[baseball hits mitt]

[end excerpt]

JOSH MALINA: We call that a flentl on this show, the audio that plays as the closing titles go. [cross-talk] It's a big flentl.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] What do you call it?

HRISHI: It's just syllables that Josh kind of regurgitated when I-- I said, we-- we talked about this phenomenon that happens in the show a lot: the story continues even though the visuals are done, [cross-talk] then when you see the executive producer [cross-talk] credit, but there's still

actually some meat to the story, and that we thought that needed a term, and so Josh [cross-talk] sort of reflexively said, flentl.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Yeah.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Flentl

JOSH SINGER: That's good, that's good, that's pretty good.

JOSH MALINA: There it is, the pinnacle of my writing career.

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] It's pretty good. I don't think I've ever come up with anything that clever. Jeez, maybe I should look for another profession.

HRISHI: You mentioned the dynamic between Leo and the President here, and that, I think, is the most shocking part of this episode. I mean, with all the geopolitical stuff going on and the espionage with Josh and everything, to me, the part that was, you know, that was the most tense was this idea that suddenly, for the first time, I felt like we were seeing Leo, you know, we'd seen Leo look at the President and kind of caution against his more dovish tendencies, but these couple of moments towards the end of the episode when you start to see this-- a different kind of take from Leo on what the President was doing, that was really surprising to me, and really, very effective in terms of the tension.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

LEO: How many times have we tried negotiation?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We're not negotiating with the Chairman.

LEO: Your priority should be the security of this country.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: I gotta say, John Spencer was the loveliest, loveliest guy, you know? I know he had howled at the moon a bit in his youth, but when we got him, oh my God. I mean, I learned so much, not only from the writers of the show, but from the actors. I mean, 'cause, like, what greater thing than coming in and as-- 'cause John really believed in writers being producers and being on set, and what greater thing is there than sitting on set and watching John Spencer do take after take, right? Allison Janney do take after take, Richard Schiff, Bradley Whitford, I mean, it's a murderer's row. I'm not even talking about Martin or Stockard, I mean, and, and John--

JOSH MALINA: Or me.

JOSH SINGER: Or, or Malina, that's true. Malina, wow.

JOSH MALINA: [laughter] I mean, I know-- I know you're gonna get to me, I just thought I'd jump ahead.

JOSH SINGER: I was gonna get to you. You know, by the fifth season I'd get to you. But-- but-- but, you know, Spencer used to call it riding the horse, and every take was subtly different. It was such a major education for me and one that has served me, I think, very well on the feature side, is maybe they'll do one take which was in your head, but most of the takes are not gonna be anything close to what was in your head, and that's the beauty of it, you know? I have to say, if I hadn't had that preparation from John Spencer when I worked on *The Post*-- Meryl Streep is amazing, and what's really amazing is she does a take and it's-- not only is it not anything in your head, you as the writer are like, there's no way that take makes any sense in this moment. It does-- it's not what a character is supposed to be doing. And then you see the whole thing cut together and you're like, oh my God, that was the perfect take for this moment because she understands the story arc better than you do.

JOSH MALINA: Huh.

JOSH SINGER: And so it's truly understanding what collaboration with an actor is, right? And, and I learned that from John, watching him do take after take after take. But I have to say that the flashbacks-- So that I cannot take credit for. That was John Sacret Young's-- in some ways it was his main contribution, at least structurally, you know, and he had notes throughout and whatnot, but, you know, he basically was like, why don't we do some flashbacks? You know, they've been effective previously and just as a way to illustrate how far apart these guys are. And what's funny is, at the time, I never loved the flashbacks, and watching the movie-- the movie-- the episode last night, I really enjoyed them. I mean, I really thought they give some nice shape to that falling apart of Leo and Bartlet, which is pretty-- it's hard to watch, especially, you know, for fans of the show, you know, who think of, you know, them as mother and father or father and mother, you know. I mean it's a-- Bartlet and Leo have this, you know, marriage, and in some ways, you know, that story, it's richer, right, Because there's so much more to work with, because they've been together for so long. That's what this story is with Leo and Bartlet. Like, we've never really s-- we've seen Leo and Bartlet fight, but it's always, like, a typical, like, a fight you have and then the next thing you're fine. Right? It's just, you know, 'cause couples fight because, you know, there's friction naturally and that's, that's, that's what it is. You're both holding the rope, right? But this is a fight of colossal size, right? This is a fight that could destroy your relationship, and to see Leo and Bartlet get this far apart from each other and putting that context of that flashback so, you know, for those of us who are new to the show or haven't watched all five seasons, right, who don't understand, oh wow, these-- how close these two are, you get to see, like, and remind them, like, Leo put Jed there, right? Leo is the one who made him President in a lot of ways.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I can't do this without you.

LEO: You think I'd let you? There's a reason I've stayed sober.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: And so to have this moment where Bartlet doesn't listen to him, right, is actually-- and is-- that, that, to me, one of the toughest moments in the whole episode is when Leo is pushing him in the Oval and,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

LEO: This is a waste of time. We've tried elevating moderate--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Thank you.

LEO: You need to--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Thank you.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: Meaning, I'm done, right? And then goes off, and it's a beautiful shot by Misiano. I love it because he's on the mound, right? He goes off in front of the windows. It's like the JFK portrait, but he's got the ball behind him. Which is just-- it's a lovely shot with, with Martin with the ball behind him, and you sense he's on the mound and he's alone, right? And he's not-- and he's pushed Leo out and it's made much more powerful, you know, the decision itself is intellectual, but the fact that he's alone, right? That he's pushed away his dearest friend on this, that's what makes it emotional, right, as is the end of the episode.

HRISHI: Another emotional thing that happens in this arc is that Fitzwallace dies. And I thought it was surprising, earlier in this season, when Terry O'Quinn came in and his character replaced John Amos's character as, as the Joint Chiefs, and after Fitz gets killed, I was wondering if that had been, sort of, in the cards all the way back then, if you had known that you were switching out these characters because you wanted to reserve that card, you know, to play it here.

JOSH SINGER: You know, it's funny, because a couple things. First of all, I think Terry O'Quinn was cast-- I feel like it was in, I think, John Sacret Young-- it was John Sacret Young's episode-- might have been in "The Stormy Present" where we first meet Terry O'Quinn, but-- 'cause I remember him being cast and I remember thinking, like, I don't know, like, this guy-- it doesn't feel like he has the weight of John Amos. I don't know, is he really much of an actor? And of course then he's on *Lost*, he's, like, the greatest actor ever, and I was a huge fan.

JOSH MALINA: He's awesome.

JOSH SINGER: So it's-- what's funny is, we wanted John Amos for these flashbacks and couldn't get him. It was-- the first version of the flashbacks were just a tad stronger because they had John Amos in them, as opposed to tell Gerald McRaney, who's, who's terrific.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

GENERAL ADAMLE: Woodrow Wilson didn't know a battalion from a battery when he took office.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: And he did a heck of a job with the Treaty of Versailles.

GENERAL ADAMLE: Admiral Fitzwallace thought you might find it reassuring.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: He did, did he?

LEO: Alan, thanks for coming up.

GENERAL ADAMLE: We'll start the full security briefings next week. Sir, congratulations again, and good luck with the press conference tonight.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: We got him because we couldn't get John Amos. There was, like, a scheduling conflict.

JOSH MALINA: Uh-huh, he was either unavailable or mad.

JOSH SINGER: Right, exactly. [laughter] Something like that. So that was-- that was a pretty big bummer but, you know, and I think he might have been mad that we killed him off, but it was, how do we make this have some weight, right, for our viewers? And so Fitzwallace was sort of a natural candidate, sort of a beloved character who's-- you know, we haven't seen in a while, to do that with.

JOSH MALINA: I like, there's-- there's one line in one of the flashbacks when Bartlet half-jokingly says,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Admiral Fitzwallace. Remind me to fire that guy.

[end excerpt]

JOSH MALINA: I thought, you know, had he done so, he'd still be alive today. [cross-talk] It's like those little moments and those little decisions that have great consequence.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Right.

JOSH SINGER: That is the fun thing with flashbacks, right, is you can always play with that sort of thing.

HRISHI: Even though you you couldn't get John Amos for it, the fact that you were able to get Gerald McRaney back was nice for people who have been following *The West Wing* and, you know, it's a nice Easter egg because we know that Leo and he have a relationship [cross-talk] from, from episodes ago, that he was his commanding officer, and so it was a nice way to kind of tie back to the, the continuity of the show.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH SINGER: Oh, right, is that "An Khe?" Is that right? Is that the episode where he's his commanding officer.

HRISHI: It's from "War Crimes" back in--

JOSH SINGER: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

HRISHI: In "War Crimes," he's the one-- in season three, he tells him that Leo could have been prosecuted for-- whatever this war crimes legislation means, Leo could be prosecuted for actions that he took in-- in the war.

JOSH SINGER: Right, yeah. And, and, and again, like, another great actor. I mean, you know, you look at the-- I mean, again, so we've got this cast, it's like the murderers row, right, but then we've also got, if you look at the secondary cast, you know, Gary Cole's in there, you know, who later becomes, you know, a much bigger figure in our show, but, like, he's terrific in a-- in a pretty small role. And, and I forgot the name of the fellow who plays the House Speaker, but if you watch *Thirteen Days*, I mean, he's a wonderful actor [cross-talk] as well.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Steven Culp.

JOSH SINGER: Steven Culp, yeah. Like, so you've got these great, great actors at every turn. It's again, you know, I had no idea how good I had it.

HRISHI: Hm.

JOSH MALINA: Steven Culp is very good, I felt. In this episode, he's got the briefest of appearances, but he's sort of exhorting President Bartlet to action, and there's something in his performance where it's just-- there's a genuineness to him, whether it's sort of-- the politics fall away and you can see in his face that the import of his words-- I really like him in this.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

SPEAKER HAFFLEY: There's an obvious course of action here, and on that, we stand firmly behind the President. And Bob's right. Politics aside, Leo, he's gotta do this.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, he's very good at that sort of thing. Again, if you haven't seen *Thirteen Days*, he plays Bobby Kennedy and Bruce Greenwood plays JFK, and it's one of my more favorite political movies.

JOSH MALINA: Speaking of Kennedy, I thought President Bartlet-- this is just a little thing-- has a very Kennedy-esque moment early on when he's giving his statement to the nation and he says,

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I ask for your patience while we hunt for answers.

[end excerpt]

JOSH MALINA: I love-- Every now and then Martin just can't help embodying JFK.

JOSH SINGER: You know, it's-- it's funny because Martin recently told me about meeting Bobby Kennedy at one of his rallies, you know, when Martin was, you know, on Broadway and went to, you know, sit on stage and, you know, and just with such reverence and, you know-- look, you know, Bartlet's from New Hampshire, I mean, you know, might come by some of that Boston [cross-talk] accent naturally, so--

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Fair enough.

JOSH MALINA: [imitating JFK accent] Nahh-turally.

JOSH SINGER: Exactly. Exactly.

HRISHI: Another moment I loved in this episode is when we're in Germany in the hospital room, and Josh is talking to C.J. on the phone, you know, ostensibly trying to tell her a strategic plan for what they're gonna do.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

JOSH: You need to come out fighting. Leak a force depletion report and blueprints for the invasion.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's language that is, you know, not diplomatic at all to talk about what the US is gonna do in Palestine, but while that's happening, Colin has come into the room, [cross-talk] Donna's room, and that-- there was a great Freudian slip and also the kind of thing-- it's also the kind of slip that you can imagine someone making from the White House podium and getting in a lot of trouble.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, I mean, you know, that moment with Colin-- Brad is just so wonderful, right? I mean, like, the way he sort of gets distracted and it's hilarious. I think that was Peter Noah's-- He always loved this idea that Donna has this relationship and then Josh has to confront it and confront his feelings or, you know, where is he with Donna? I will say, I never thought that Josh and Donna should ever get together. They always felt like brother and sister to me, just for what it's worth, but I did like writing these scenes.

JOSH MALINA: Like a *Game of Thrones* brother and sister thing.

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] Well, that may be the way it goes. But, but, yeah, I was-- that was, that was not--

JOSH MALINA: I love the-- that even amidst the greater goings-on in this episode, that we get the romantic subplot sort of being inched along, even implicitly. There's a lot of great interplay among Jason and Janel and Brad.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

JOSH: Pretty long flight from Gaza to Germany.

COLIN: Not really. It's nothing compared to the flight from DC. Look, she didn't mention anything. You know, it's just, if this is gonna be an issue, then--

JOSH: No, no issue.

[end excerpt]

JOSH MALINA: I think they're all-- they're all great in this episode and I like their scenes and the jockeying. And also, if you ever had any question, you can see in Brad's countenance as Josh, just the way he's looking at [cross-talk] Donna in that bed, that he is a smitten man.

JOSH SINGER: [cross-talk] Oh, it's so good.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, it's-- it's so good. And Jason Isaacs, another fantastic actor who I didn't know much of other than, you know, a little bit of *Harry Potter* and, you know, but he was wonderful and comes on really as a presence in those-- those couple episodes, which is great.

HRISHI: Oh, we kind of wandered off of this, but I was wondering if Terry O'Quinn's character-- if you had known that you were gonna kill off Fitzwallace a while ago, and so when you introduce Terry O'Quinn, that was sort of a long ball that you were playing?

JOSH SINGER: No I think we were just, you know, I think we were just bringing in new blood, you know, you know, obviously in administrations people change, you know, people retire, you know, or they're forced out by crazy Presidents who don't want people investigating into Russia. But, so, you know, with these kinds of changes we just naturally, you know, were bringing him in. There was no long-term planning in terms of the Fitzwallace of it all. That's something I think we came up with when we were trying to figure out, okay, who do we kill off to make this bomb meaningful.

HRISHI: Right. Have real stakes.

JOSH SINGER: Correct.

HRISHI: What do you think was-- ended up being the hardest part about making the episode? Were you also on set when they were filming it?

JOSH SINGER: I mean, this is the wonderful thing about John Wells, is that he really believes in writers as producers, and so he wants his writers, you know, we do tone meetings, we did concept meetings, we would be part of the form, part of the prep process, and then on set for the entire shoot. In every episode I did on *The West Wing*, that was the case, which was, which was pretty great as, certainly for a young writer. Although it could have its moments. I was on set for "Stormy Present" and I remember I had no idea what I was doing. And so James Cromwell actually was, was very good on his lines, but was switching up like that, you know, and "Stormy Present," as you know, is very dense, and he was calling something Middle East instead of Arabian Peninsula, which nobody cared about except the newbie writer who had no idea what he was doing, and I kept trying to tell our dialogue coach that maybe she should give this to him, and she didn't want to. And then on turnaround, she said, well why don't you go talk to him? And this was a scene that was, like, Cromwell and Martin and John Goodman, right? [cross-talk] And so like three huge, heavy, major-league, you know, actors. And I go up and I start talking to Cromwell. I didn't understand that, you know, talking to actors is not like having intellectual conversation with a professor. It's, you know, [laughter].

HRISHI: [cross-talk] Right.

JOSH MALINA: It's nothing like that.

JOSH SINGER: And so he starts getting heated and I don't know why he's getting heated, but I - and I'm trying to pull out and suddenly I feel Alex Graves, you know, grabbed me by the back

of the neck, and said, we're all good here, James, just keep doing what you're doing. Like, sitting me down in my chair. [laughter] [cross-talk] One time when I thought I was gonna get fired.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] Wow.

JOSH MALINA: I'm with you, though. Hey, the script's the script.

JOSH SINGER: Well, you know.

JOSH MALINA: That's the job.

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] That's true.

JOSH MALINA: That's the gig.

HRISHI: But, so, no-- no nightmares like that on this episode?

JOSH SINGER: No. Although I will say-- sort of a nightmare that turned into a dream, which is that-- so, I wound up flying myself to Camden Yards because I wanted to be part of that, and my parents are from Philly, and my father and mom came down, bought tickets to the-- to the game. 'Cause we shot before an actual game at Camden Yards. And it was raining. And we had one day to get this shot. And it was, like, a five-hour rain delay. And what was funny was, when we were prepping, and we actually-- we shot the tunnel walk, that's all below Camden Yards, and then the walk up onto the field and on the field, and when we were prepping, it was actually-- it was fine out, and then it just started raining, just as we were about to start shooting. So we wound up waiting for, like, five hours and it was inordinately fun at first, 'cause, like, when we went out to shoot, you know, Martin went up on the mound and I had had my dad-- my dad was a catcher when he was, like, in middle school, and so I had him bring-- I had bought him a catcher's mitt, which I had him bring down, and so I got behind home plate and got to catch for Martin when he was throwing, [cross-talk] which was pretty cool, and then-- and then we wound up having this rain delay. And, like, we're all like, oh my God, are we gonna get this off? And Chris Misiano is, you know, tearing his hair out, and Martin grabs me and says, let's throw the ball around. And so in that tunnel where we shot that walk-and-talk with-- with Leo, Martin and I wound up having a catch for, like, an hour, which was just, like, I mean, it was surreal, and, like, super-- just, like, kind of great. Like, here I am, this is my first year writing for television, I'm having a baseball catch with Martin Sheen, right, while we're waiting for the rain to pass. And eventually the rain did pass. The-- the crowd was actually a little-- it was not a full house because of the rain and, and whatnot, and because a lot of people had left, so we sort of had to-- you'll note the camera is pretty close on Martin because the wide shot you see, like, there's, like, this stadium's half empty. But we waited it out and then we got the shot and then stayed and watched the game, which was pretty great. So that was a pretty great day.

JOSH MALINA: [cross-talk] That's so great.

JOSH MALINA: Was Martin feeling any pressure getting up there and throwing from the mound?

JOSH SINGER: No, he had a much better arm than Bartlet did, so--

JOSH MALINA: I thought that might be the case.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah. We had fun. That-- that-- the thing where he has to throw and hit the lamp and where-- that was actually a lot of fun, too. I will say something, and Dulé may be mad at me for this, but Dulé is a wonderful tap dancer and very athletic, but did not grow up playing baseball. Grew up playing soccer. So, if there's someone who has a motion issue, right, it's less-- it's less Martin and more Dulé [laughter]. So actually--

JOSH MALINA: I noticed that we're not seeing a lot of Dulé throwing the ball back. We're hearing it and then seeing the ball go back to Martin.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, his form is a little-- it's not what you would expect from-- from Charlie, so we had to shoot around that a little bit, so--

JOSH MALINA: [laughter] I suspected as much. I love those scenes. Those scenes are great, and I like the marrying of, sort of, the sublime and the ridiculous and discussing actual US foreign policy in a tricky situation as the President in a bulletproof vest practices pitching. It's great writing. It's a great scene.

JOSH SINGER: I mean, you know, to me that's-- it's, it all stems from Aaron, right? It's what Aaron does so well and really all of his seasons, but the first two seasons in particular, those scenes and the spy scenes, similarly, were the most fun to write.

HRISHI: I love that scene, that the hallway scene as a response to this idea of John Wells saying, oh the President needs to be more active.

JOSH SINGER: Right.

HRISHI: That you can actually add this physicality to him going through, trying to figure out what his-- what he's gonna do, and then have his pitching mirror his level of decisiveness.

JOSH SINGER: Right.

HRISHI: It was really wonderfully realized.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'd really like to bomb the whole damn place.

[baseball hits mitt]

TOBY: Gaza?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Gaza, the West Bank. [baseball hits mitt] Take out the whole Arabian Peninsula while we're at it.

[end excerpt]

JOSH SINGER: Right. You know, it's funny, so, this episode and "The Supremes" both got nominated for the WGA, which a friend of mine, this guy, Michael Borkow, said at the time, like, you should enjoy this, it's your peers. Right? And it really is, it's-- it's a nice thing, right, and I don't think I really appreciated it at the time. But John Sacret Young appreciated it, and he

bought a flask, because he and Debora and I drank bourbon, drank blends on occasion. He bought a flask for me and a flask for Debora because Deborah's episode, "The Supremes," also got nominated, and Deborah actually won. So he bought a flask for Debora that said "The Supreme" for Debora, who really was the supreme, as you all will see over the next two seasons, and bought a flask from me that said "The Big Fat One," which is Bartlet's line.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: They're just waiting for me to play my role and chuck a big fat one right down the middle.

[baseball hits mitt]

[end excerpt]

JOSH MALINA: That's great.

JOSH SINGER: Right as he manages to-- So, yeah so, you know, again, that first season of *The West Wing* for me was my first year in writing grad school and what a wonderful group of teachers I had.

JOSH MALINA: I want-- another thing I'll point out, which we often point out, is not only is the show itself evergreen and the issues that it deals with, but there's also a strange overlap with our podcast show. As episodes come out, as I was re-watching this episode, a news notification came up on my computer with the headline saying "Palestinian infiltrates from Gaza sets greenhouse on fire in Israeli community," and I clicked on the story and then it added that additional reports say that Palestinians threw explosive devices at Israel Defense Forces soldiers. Then there were reports that the army responded, that one Palestinian has been killed, 37 wounded, according to-- that's according to the-- Hamas's Health Ministry in Gaza, and it's just-- it's just a constant reminder on a lot of fronts how little progress is made, and also, just how this show-- it's ever-pertinent.

JOSH SINGER: Yeah, I mean, it's upsetting to me, like, there are so many issues that we grapple with today that we were grappling with 15 years ago, 30 years ago, 50 years ago. This is one of them. Back at this point when we wrote this show, it's possible Israel had a little more of a leg to stand on, you know, and they really were challenged to find a partner for peace, as we talked about. Arafat was, it had been all there in '93 and then it just slipped away. It's hard, because I really feel like, you know, both sides are definitely bad actors at this point, and I haven't studied the issue in a while, so I feel sort of a little off base saying it, but I do think you need to sacrifice-- both sides need to sacrifice and both sides need to be willing to sacrifice. It's the same issue with climate change. I mean, that's the other one that comes-- you know, like, there was just this huge article about how, you know, we really knew all this stuff, and I-- I've looked at this in detail, wondering if there's a story there like, you know, back in the 70's, 80's, 90's, we knew, right? We knew what was happening, and it was a lot less dire and we-- it would have been more easy to do something. We just weren't really willing to make the sacrifices necessary, and I think that that's something that, again, it was what drew me to the show. I mean, Aaron wanted to celebrate the values that made our country great, which is hard work. Like, all these guys work very, very hard and they're all very, very bright and they all try their best to proceed not as is easy but as is in accordance with American values, and really understanding what those values are, what your democratic values, which are inclusive values, you know, which, again, sadly are the opposite of, I think, what's going on right now.

JOSH MALINA: That's for sure.

HRISHI: One of the things that you have one of the leaders do-- at the end of this, Chairman Farad pulls a move on the Bartlet administration that they've actually used themselves.

[West Wing Episode 5.22 excerpt]

TOBY: Chairman Farad, he's on TV, he's thanking us for inviting him and Prime Minister Mukarat to a summit with the Israelis.

LEO: We didn't invite him! We haven't even formally invited Mukarat!

TOBY: He's publicly accepted our invitation to Camp David.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I loved how delicious that irony was because it's the same thing they did to Seth Gillette earlier in season three, you know, when they were trying to get-- figure out how to get him on the blue-ribbon commission. Because if they invited him, he would say no and and they couldn't have that, and so they just announced his acceptance.

JOSH SINGER: [laughter] You know, it's funny, I don't know if we thought about that when we did it, and I can't even remember where that twist came from. I didn't remember it and so I was like, oh no! [laughter] So it's a pretty good twist and it sets up-- what it sets up nicely is, you know, we do two episodes on Camp David and actually there were teeny little bits-- like, really, maybe, a half-page-- there were teeny little bits of that first spec script that made it into one of the two Camp David episodes.

HRISHI: That's great. I was actually wondering if, yeah, if you talked about your original spec script while you were working on these two episodes.

JOSH SINGER: I don't think any of the original spec script made it into this episode, but again, like, and literally it's probably, like, I think it's one scene from that spec that made it into one of the two and Mark Goffman, I think Lauren Schmidt Hissrich and I did a bunch of research for John on the Camp David episodes, which were a real challenge, but which were fun to work on in season six.

HRISHI: Once you figured out that this was gonna be the finale, how far ahead were you already planning in the writers' room for the next season?

JOSH SINGER: Not much. You know, John did this thing-- this is another good story. So, John did this thing every year where he would have us-- he'd have all the writers go to Hawaii for a retreat prior to the season. That's really when we would beat out the season and, you know, look, that sounds amazing, right? Like, I had joined *The West Wing*, I'm brand-new to the show, and I'm going to Hawaii and it's, it's Kauai, right? It's the cool island, right? And, like, super exciting, right? Except it was the-- it was the most stressful week of my entire life, right, 'cause like, here I am, like, and it's all these writers who have all these huge credits and here I am, like, who's never worked in the business before and I'm terrified, right? And so, like, the first three days of a week in Hawaii, you know, and we're all staying in this mission house, so, like, you

can't get away from anybody. Like, you know, I think I was rooming with Mark Goffman. Like, you know, it's terrifying, right? And so, like-- and so, the first three days I don't say a word in these rooms, right, 'cause I'm just scared to death, right? And then at some point I-- you know, we're taking a lunch break and I walk up to my boss, John Wells, and I say to John, I say, I hope it's okay I haven't said anything, I mean, I'm just, I'm, you know-- And he's like, oh, he's like, you don't want to say anything for, like, six months. I mean, he's like, worst thing you can do is say something dumb and then everybody thinks you're an idiot. [laughter]

JOSH MALINA: [laughter] Well that really takes the pressure off.

JOSH SINGER: Which was-- which, on the one hand, took the pressure off, on the other hand was, you know-- So, and of course then I, you know, had to say something the next day, but, but it actually was really kind of him, because it did take the pressure off and he was making a point like, that you're here to learn, and it really, like-- that's the wonderful thing that John did, and I'm sure still does for staff writers, you're getting paid to learn. Our first episode was about the 25th amendment, right, 'cause Glen Allen Walken becomes the President, right, because Bartlet steps down and takes himself out, right? And so, like, John had me-- my first assignment was, write me a memo on, like, well, how would that work and what would you call Glen Allen Walken and, you know, would you call him Mr. President? Would you call him Mr. Acting President? I wrote, like, a 25-page memo with, like, 17 pitches for, like, ways this would be a really cool, you know, thing to do with the 25th amendment in your episode. None of it made it into a script, right? It was all useless, right, 'cause I didn't know what I was doing, and that was the wonderful thing about John, is he was really bringing in young writers to teach them, right? And to let them have an opportunity to learn at the footsteps of all these really great writers and then hopefully be able to contribute by the end of the first year, right, or by the second year. But, so, to answer your question, I don't think we had a whole lot planned for the next season, other than when John decided we'll slot this into the finale. The lessons I learned-- I mean, it's funny, most people say they go to law school and they learn a different way of thinking. I think I went to John Wells' screenwriting school and learned a different way of thinking.

HRISHI: I didn't get to ask the second half of my two-parter of, you know, what was the hardest part about making the episode? My other part is, after re-watching it now, do you have a favorite moment from this episode, whether it's the writing or the performance or just how something was realized?

JOSH SINGER: I would say, like, I'd like to think that I've grown as a writer over the last 14 years, you know, and so what's not surprising is how many of the moments I want to strangle myself 'cause they're so dense. [laughter] Like, really, come on, could you, like, lose half the words in that, please? But then there are other bits that I'm actually like, wow, okay. And look, a lot of them work because Brad is so good, right? Like, Brad does comic moments like that better than anyone, you know, so it's less the writing and more the performance, but surprised that some of the stuff actually works. I will say, you know, it's funny, I'm working on this anthology television show about the Oval Office. I want to pick a different President each year and show democracy in crisis. I think it's a-- maybe a good way to comment on what's going on today and also a fun way to get back into the Oval Office, and as I've been writing the pilot, I suddenly got this, like, oh, I know what this is like, right? And so it's been a lot of, like--

JOSH MALINA: I've been here.

JOSH SINGER: You know, Debora Kahn used to look through my scripts and she'd see dense writing and dense writing and dense writing and then she'd get to a page where it was line, line,

line, line, line, line, line, line. You know, which is the way Aaron writes, and she's like, that's a scene. [laughter] And so, and-- and by the way, that's the most fun-- it's fun to write that stuff, right, when you can actually get that banter going, and it actually still feels like these are real characters, you know? Like, and so I've been playing with that, which has been a lot of fun.

JOSH MALINA: That sounds great. You're a terrific writer and I've been very pleased-- not surprised, but very delighted to see your your subsequent success.

JOSH SINGER: That's-- that's very kind. I've been I've been very lucky and very fortunate to work with some great people, as I was back then.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us, and and congratulations on *First Man* and everything else and everything to come.

JOSH SINGER: Thanks, guys.

JOSH MALINA: That does it for another episode, another *season of The West Wing Weekly*. We're halfway through [cross-talk] our show. That's very exciting.

HRISHI: [cross-talk] [laughter]

HRISHI: Thanks so much to all of you for sticking with us for five seasons. Very special thanks to the people who make this show possible alongside Josh and me: Nick Song, our research assistant, Margaret Miller, our editor, Zach McNees, our post-production supervisor.

JOSH: They're the best in the biz.

HRISHI: Next week we have a special episode for you, a special bonus episode while you get ready for Thanksgiving. We're gonna be talking about our other favorite political show, *Parks and Recreation*.

JOSH: Hooray! A show that you urged me to watch on this very podcast itself.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: And I love *Parks and Rec*. It had somehow just gotten by me, and now I've certainly seen every episode, and I would hazard a guess that I've seen every episode more than once. It became a real family favorite and we all watched together over and over.

HRISHI: But don't worry. It is still a *West Wing Weekly* episode. Our conversation is a deep look at all the ways in which *The West Wing* influenced *Parks and Recreation*.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Our guests are Michael Schur, who co-created the show, Adam Scott, and Rob Lowe. So look out for that next week, and then enjoy your Thanksgiving. We're gonna be off the week after that [cross-talk] as we get ready for season six, and we'll be back in December with our sixth season.

JOSH: [cross-talk] Mm-hm.

JOSH: The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick.

HRISHI: What he said.

JOSH: In the meantime, follow us on Twitter, follow us on Instagram, follow us on Facebook, reach out to us at thewestwingweekly.com.

HRISHI: You can follow our guest, Josh Singer, on Twitter @jsinger10.

JOSH: You can give us a five-star review on iTunes. [cross-talk] If you want to give us less than a five-star review, I'm not sure where you're supposed to do that, but you can-- I'm sure you can Google it. You can buy our merch at thewestwingweekly.com/merch

HRISHI: [cross-talk] That would be nice.

HRISHI: And it makes a wonderful present for all of you who are getting ready for the holidays. You've got a variety of options to give to your favorite *West Wing* fan, or just give it to yourself. In closing, thanks to you, Josh, for also sticking with me for five seasons.

JOSH: Thank you, Hrish, for coming up with the idea for this podcast and lying to me about how little work it was.

HRISHI: [laughter] Any time. And if you'd like to look for a new podcast, check out our siblings at radiotopia.fm, a project from PRX, a curated collection of excellent cutting-edge podcasts. Radiotopia.fm.

JOSH: Alright, see you on the other side.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH MALINA: Ok.

JOSH SINGER: What's next?

[Outro Music]