

The West Wing Weekly
6.08: "In the Room"
Guests: Penn and Teller

[Intro Music]

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

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about 'In the Room'. It's episode 8, from season 6.

JOSH: it was written by Lawrence O'Donnell Jr. It was directed by Alex Graves and it first aired on December 8th 2004.

HRISHI: In this episode, at Zoey's birthday party, the magicians Penn and Teller perform a trick that looks like they burned the American flag, in the White House. The president, C.J., and a lot of people who aren't Josh Lyman, get ready for the China summit. Josh instead has to deal with Will and the Vice President's presidential campaign dreams. But while on board Air Force One, the president's MS symptoms get worse than ever before. His crisis not just of his health but of publicity and international diplomacy.

JOSH: Man, that sounds good.

HRISHI: I think it was pretty good.

JOSH: I do too. I really, really like this episode.

HRISHI: And coming up later in our episode we're going to be joined by two special guests: Penn and Teller.

JOSH: Very exciting.

HRISHI: And they start this episode, in the teaser, they're performing for Zoe's birthday and they do this flag burning trick.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

PENN: We take some tinder and a very eccentric magic wand and we can do this

[Sound of flames]

PENN: But it's ok. Even though the flag is gone, the Bill of Rights remains.

[Applause]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which was already part of their routine.

JOSH: Yes. It's a bit of stunt casting that doesn't feel stunty to me. It doesn't feel like a gimmick. It really works I think organically with this episode. It provides not just sort of a cool moment but a significant sub-plot of this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, they're both famous enough and trickstery enough that I buy both that they would both be invited to this party and that they would dare to do this trick inside the White House. Like, where more delicious of a place to perform it.

JOSH: Yes absolutely. If you know Penn and Teller and their approach, it seems absolutely credible that they would do this on that stage in that place.

HRISHI: Did you meet Penn and Teller that day when they were filming this?

JOSH: I did not. This feels like another missed opportunity, along with the James Taylor concert.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I can only imagine that it was because I had young children at the time and so I didn't come in when I wasn't called ever. [Hrishi laughs] But I regret it. I keep watching now all these great moments and thinking why didn't I come in? I could have seen Penn and Teller perform live from six feet away off camera. I would have enjoyed that very much.

HRISHI: Have you ever seen them perform live?

JOSH: I have seen them live. I'm a fan of magic.

HRISHI: And occasionally a dabbler in it?

JOSH: I guess so, I mean, the truth is I never took it too seriously. I was in to it as a kid and I might go to Lou Tannen's, this great old magic store in Manhattan and buy tricks every now and again when I could get my hands on some money. So, I was in to it but I was not an accomplished magician but I've always enjoyed it.

It's kind of brilliant to use this trick of theirs for *The West Wing*. I guess I must have seen them perform this first on *The West Wing*. I'm not sure I was aware of this being in the repertoire but I've seen it since, you know, I've seen them perform it. I love it because I'm always frustrated when the controversy around flag burning comes up, because it always seems so incredibly obvious to me that the great strength of this country is that we have the right to burn the flag. So even as you can say, it's like that old, I think it's a Voltaire quote, 'I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' I can understand people's being put off by the idea of burning the flag but I can't imagine the next logical step becomes 'Let's propose an amendment to the constitution to ban flag burning.' It seems so silly, it's like, don't you kind of get the point? So, I like the fact that that in this fantastic, delicious, visual way they make that point so beautifully. It's sort of the best encapsulation of that concept that I've seen.

HRISHI: In some ways, this episode is a return to season 1, episode 16, the episode "20 hours in LA" and the Vice President later in this episode comes out really vociferously in favor of an amendment to ban flurn. Flurn blagging.

[Both laugh]

JOSH: Yeah, let me just say I'm not a fan of flurn blagging [laughs]

HRISHI: Yeah, [laughs] that amendment...

JOSH: But I will defend you right to flurn blag to the death.

HRISHI: Oh ok! Alright! Well, the Vice President says, he's always been associated with this strong position against flag burning and Josh kind of makes fun of him for it but Josh, you know, he talked to Joey Lucas in that episode and the Vice President never did. Or maybe he just talked to Al Kiefer. You remember Al Kiefer is the one who says, "You gotta come out strongly in favor of a flag burning ban amendment", but Joey said:

[West Wing Episode 1.16 excerpt]

JOEY: Kiefer asked the wrong questions. His poll said 80% of the people, when asked if they favored a flag burning amendment, said yes. Which is roughly the same percentage of people who say they'd favor sending litter bugs to prison. He never asked them how much do they care. 37%, or less than half of those who said they'd favor the amendment, rated the issue very or fairly important. 12%, or less than a third of that group, said that the issue would swing their vote. The only place this war is being fought is in Washington.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But you know, the Vice President wasn't watching season 1 yet.

JOSH: Apparently not.

HRISHI: He missed it.

JOSH: And in this episode Will, I choose to believe that his bringing Josh to make the argument with Russell, despite his protestation, or his denial, is in fact a set up.

HRISHI: I think the whole thing is really well played by Will.

JOSH: Right?!

HRISHI: I think it's great. He tries to announce to Josh that he tried to talk the Vice President out of it and you know, Josh bristles, makes fun of everything about it. But really, Will is trying to enlist him and bring in some muscle to bolster his argument.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

WILL: So how would you suggest the Vice President handle a flag burning in the White House? What would you tell him to do?

JOSH: I would tell him to shut up! I would tell him to show a little loyalty to the president and his family. But then I'd have to explain to him what loyalty is, wouldn't I?

WILL: Do you have time to do that now?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He's like 'look I tried to do it but I couldn't on my own, maybe you could help?' I think he's telling the truth. I think he really couldn't talk the guy out of it.

JOSH: I choose not to believe that.

HRISHI: [laughs] You think he didn't try very hard? He's just saying it to Josh?

JOSH: Yeah maybe it's just because I'm being defensive on Will's part and the idea that he's so pathetic and so ineffective that he's like, 'I couldn't do it but I bet Josh can convince him'. I

believe what Will denies which is that this is just a set up. That he believes that Russell is probably convincible, persuadable, impressionable enough to listen to a decent argument. And he wants Josh to be the one to see that happen.

HRISHI: Right. So, he's ceding the opportunity.

JOSH: That's my take.

HRISHI: I like it. I'm fine with that reading. Either way, Will is quite wily in the episode. He does bring Josh in, he does everything he can to make it happen, you know. He sets up the Vice President with the idea that Josh should be the one running it. He gets Josh there to make the argument. Everything is really as well choreographed as it can be, except for the final coup de grace because Josh just bluntly tells him, 'I don't want him to be the president'.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And that's kind of checkmate.

JOSH: Yeah. That's the end of the road.

HRISHI: But Josh does a great job making the argument that needs to be made to the Vice President. The Vice President, he's really using the flag burning as a way to try and ramp things up. He's scared of Governor Baker's popularity; Governor Baker who's played by Ed O'Neill. And there's some pressure that he's feeling because of that and he's feeling like he needs to say something so that he can maybe drive Baker to the right and make a move but then Josh comes in and he tells him:

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Baker is at 32, you're at 19. Hoynes and everyone else are in single digits. You're not going to catch up to Baker with flag burning. Baker's just a governor. He's got to jump at every issue to get coverage outside of Pennsylvania. You're Vice President of the United States. You can't go chasing every little controversy that comes along. You can't let Baker dictate your agenda. You pick your spots carefully. Every speech you give will be treated as breaking news on CNN.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Then Russell reveals that yeah, he's been considered for Campaign Manager and now he sees why.

JOSH: Right. Josh has proven himself.

HRISHI: And I like Will's pitch to him as well. He knows that's not a perfect candidate.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

WILL: Bob Russell might be the next President of the United States. You get in now, you can make him the candidate you want him to be. After that, we make him the president we need him to be.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. I think that's a little bit of rehabilitation for Will's character and those who denigrate him. He's become yes, less of a Sorkin idealist, and I guess more of a Wellsian

pragmatist, but there's value there. He thinks they can get their guy elected. He thinks there's more to him than most people give him credit for. And he's saying here, 'we will wield a lot of influence with the President of the United States and we can have a hand in making him the leader we need him to be.'

HRISHI: He feels more connected to a Sorkin episode in this episode than he has in a long time.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true.

HRISHI: I think he's got some really great dialogue courtesy of Lawrence O'Donnell.

JOSH: Yeah, this is a well written script.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think so too. This part especially, the Vice President and Josh/Will dance is my favorite part and the Vinick part of it as well. Like this stuff, the actual presidential campaign stuff sort of congealing is a thing that I get really excited about.

JOSH: Yeah, and there is some, it has a little bit of the excitement of things finally...some momentum building in the election.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's exciting.

HRISHI: You know, one thing that I don't love about the dialogue in this episode though.

JOSH: Yes?

HRISHI: You remember in season 5, they would say the title of the episode during the episode?

JOSH: Yeah, that's right yeah, we used to note that yes.

HRISHI: Yeah. Do you know how many times the words 'in the room' are said in this episode?

JOSH: How many times?

HRISHI: Ten times!

JOSH: Truly?

HRISHI: Yes! Mash up please, Zach!

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

ANNABETH: They wanna know who was in the room

C.J.: They really wanna know if the president was in the room

KATE: Mr. President, what you say in the room is entirely up to you

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm gonna hammer them on Tibet in the room

LEO: You don't wanna put them alone in the room

TOBY: You're insisting on being alone in the room with the Chinese leaders

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Yeah, you wanna be in the room too?

TOBY: I do not.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: To get some real work done, right there in the room

ANNABETH: Well I'm not taking any questions

Cross of voices: Was the president in the room?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow, that sucked.

HRISHI: It kinda did!

[both laugh]

JOSH: Wow, a full 10 times.

HRISHI: Yeah. That leads me to another thing that I was thinking while watching this – there's a lot of Hamilton in this episode.

JOSH: Yeah, I thought so too. Even just the phrase...

HRISHI: 'In the room'?

JOSH: Well clearly in the room

[Hamilton: An American Musical song "The Room Where It Happens" excerpt]

BURR: [sung] No one else was in the room where it happened, the room where it happened, the room where it happened. No one else was in the room where it happened, the room where it happened

[end excerpt]

JOSH: But I was wondering whether I was reaching when Leo is describing Arnold Vinick's ability

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

LEO: 'Ever see Arnie Vinick campaign up close? He'll go in to those high school gymnasiums in Iowa and New Hampshire and blow them all away.'

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I just thought, I don't know if that's a direct link to Lin and Lin's mind and Hamilton but it popped for me

[Hamilton: An American Musical song "Dear Theodosia" excerpt]

HAMILTON AND BURR: [sung] Someday, someday, yeah, you'll blow us all away

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I don't know if it's a direct link but there is a direct order from your commander.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: This plane is going to China. That's a direct order from your Commander in Chief.

[end excerpt]

[Hamilton: An American Musical song "Cabinet Battle #1" excerpt]

WASHINGTON: [sung] Figure it out Alexander. That's an order from your Commander.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: There's three credible Hamilton lines in this one.

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: But I did feel a little bit hammered.

JOSH: By the phrase?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: It's a lot. I don't know how I didn't notice it.

HRISHI: I also found the lead-up to the China stuff a little bit dull. Like, there's this argument about Tibet but it kind of doesn't really go anywhere.

JOSH: Yeah, not my favorite part of the episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it just sort of feels like they're just padding things with China stuff to set up some more important things like, you know, like the fact that Josh isn't going.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: You know, there are all these preparations happening and he's not a part of it. That's the real thing that we're getting. The issue of Tibet is really just stuffing.

JOSH: It's a red herring.

HRISHI: Mmhmm. Were you saying that because of communism?

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: Ok, got it.

[both laugh]

JOSH: It's so much funnier with an explanation.

HRISHI: It is. All jokes.

JOSH: Yeah. I like Josh's sensitivity to Donna's, and I think even Charlie's, trying to avoid even mentioning the China trip.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Let's get two things straight. First, I'm fine not going on the China trip. Picking a UN ambassador...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: It's actually grating on him.

HRISHI: I do feel bad for Josh. Again, I mean, this got taken away from him. He's had a lot of bad breaks and really not all of them have been his fault. How about this though? Two flag episodes back-to-back.

JOSH: Yeah that's weird.

HRISHI: Right?!

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I mean, I was fine when there were two blag furning episodes back-to-back [Josh laughs] but this is just a lot.

JOSH: This is too much, I agree.

HRISHI: Yeah. Straight off of the Taiwanese flag incident, we've got this American flag incident.

JOSH: I wrote 'Annabeth is not that good with the press.' [Both laugh] That made me laugh. The way that she's been giving Toby lessons for like three episodes and then all of a sudden, she's surrounded by them and she is like, 'I said I'm not going to answer any questions' and she's losing her cool, she's defensive and not what I expected from her.

HRISHI: Ok. Well, you know, you don't have Pat Riley suiting up and going out and trying to dunk, do you?

JOSH: Well that's true.

HRISHI: And maybe also, I thought she looked very poised while doing it. Or no [cross talk] but you're saying she didn't even have that much

JOSH: [cross talk] That's true.

HRISHI: She's losing her cool.

JOSH: She looked cute. Put together. Maybe when compared to Toby for sure.

HRISHI: Yeah, her facial hair was decidedly not fussy.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Hey, you know, we get the first appearance of Alan Alda in this episode.

JOSH: Ah! I wrote 'Alan Alda is immediately great'.

HRISHI: He is! Did you know that he was in consideration for the role of the president?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: How about that?

JOSH: He would have been terrific.

HRISHI: He would've been great. It would've been a very different kind of President Bartlet but he's great and they do such a great job setting him up. Just like they did with Martin Sheen where you just feel 'this guy could be president'.

JOSH: I agree. He's charismatic, he's funny, he's sharp, he's got an edge but he's wise - I mean, it's just everything all at once. And I think that if you told me he's going to be shining his shoes and I would have said, 'Nuh that doesn't sound great.' But I love it. I love the sue...shoe shining scene'

HRISHI: No, sue shining.

JOSH: Sue Shining was good.

HRISHI: The blag furning was great.

JOSH: Right. I just love that scene. There's something I... he's just another one of those actors, you know it's just hard to put your finger on why he's so immediately compelling but he is and I immediately get the electability of the guy too.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's something so both idiosyncratic and also completely natural about him that you just, he immediately seems like someone who is just inhabiting the role. It doesn't feel like he's acting, because you're like 'who would come up with that way of being?!'

JOSH: Yeah. He's the guy. He's great. He just also yesterday received the Screen Actors Guild Lifetime Achievement Award.

HRISHI: Well deserved.

JOSH: Which was, yeah I have to say, the montage reminded me just what a remarkable career the guy has had and he said in his speech, which I thought was quite lovely;

[Acceptance speech excerpt]

ALAN ALDA: It may never have been more urgent to see the world through another person's eyes and when a culture is divided so sharply, actors can help at least a little, just by doing what we do.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So, I thought he also had keen insight into what's happening today.

HRISHI: Did he announce that he was going to be running for president?

JOSH: Uh no, but I thought it would have been a good opportunity to do so. There were literally hundreds of people watching.

HRISHI: Because hundreds isn't actually that much.

JOSH: Right. It's funnier when you realize that.

HRISHI: Yeah. Other telecasts have sometimes up to the millions. this one, you're saying, had fewer.

JOSH: That's what I'm getting at. That's the comic gem I was trying to polish, yes.

HRISHI: It's a good one. Good joke.

JOSH: Thanks.

HRISHI: So, we're introduced to Alan Alda's character, Arnold Vinick, as someone who the President wants to bring in as the UN Ambassador, even though he's a Republican. But this is kind of the President's style, we know this about the Bartlett administration. They don't mind reaching across the aisle; they had Ainsley Hayes, they had Joe Quincy, they had Albie Duncan, who was kind of Vinick-like. He's an elder statesman who knew foreign policy really well and that seems to be Vinick's deal. They want him to be UN ambassador because him and the president, despite disagreeing on other things, always see eye-to-eye on foreign policy.

JOSH: I think also, in a second example of somebody getting busted by Josh but not quite admitting the truth, Leo sort of suggests that if Vinick is the US Ambassador to the UN maybe they'll stop investigating them. [both laugh] I think that is probably actually part of the political calculus there.

HRISHI: Yeah. I like the admiration that Leo has for him as a campaigner but also that the two most politically savvy people in the whole crew, Josh and Leo, neither of them predicted that Vinick might actually run. Like they, on the surface, they look at it and they're like, 'yeah he's too moderate and too centrist to really win over enough of the Republican base to get the nomination. But then Leo has so much respect for them that as soon as they start to think about it, they're like;

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

JOSH: A Republican who wins California wipes us out in the electoral college.

LEO: Right.

JOSH: He's not getting the nomination.

LEO: If he does, we've got no one in who can beat him.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, that line is pretty huge. You know, because when they send Josh in the room to talk to Vinick and he tells him that he's going to run and Josh is so taken aback, I thought isn't it Josh's job to read these kind of tea leaves specifically, and to know what people are going to do you know, a few moves ahead. And so at first I thought, does this go against what we know about Josh and that strength of his and then it turned out, no it doesn't actually, there's just a lot of reasons why he would never have expected that he would go for a presidential run.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And I found this quote from Lawrence O'Donnell, he said it was quote, 'my greatest pleasure on The West Wing to write Vinick, especially since once I said that it would never be a Republican political show.' And he said that his mind was changed after going to the GOP Convention in 2004 and he saw Christie Whitman and Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had a mix of stances on issues in terms of both, y'know, some conservative stances, some centrist, and even some liberal stances.

JOSH: That makes sense.

HRISHI: Alan Alda has some experience already playing a president.

JOSH: In?

HRISHI: Canadian Bacon.

JOSH: Canadian Bacon. What is that?

HRISHI: A Michael Moore movie.

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Comedy, not a documentary.

JOSH: Right. I have not seen that, have you?

HRISHI: It's a John Candy movie, yeah, I saw it.

JOSH: Oh, I was going to say, ok, there's a scene in the montage at the SAG awards, the Alan Alda montage, where John Candy like knocks him to the ground and I wasn't sure what movie that was from.

HRISHI: That was Canadian Bacon. Yeah. Also, we haven't talked about this, Leo's back in the White House!

JOSH: Yes, he is. Just to do, to do, some file shredding.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah.

JOSH: Some shrile feeding.

HRISHI: To destroy some evidence of something. It feels nice to have him back, there's a comfort there.

JOSH: Mmhm, and I was glad he and Margaret got a hot embrace.

HRISHI: Hot? Jeez!

JOSH: Sexually charged.

HRISHI: [laughs] Josh!

JOSH: Or maybe I mis-, that's how I took it. [both laugh] No, I like that they had their little hug and it was sweet.

HRISHI: Mmhm, so, Leo comes back and also Millie comes back, the Surgeon General.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Two old friends from home, actual old friends from home, not the code 'an old friend from home' which is the code that we were...

JOSH: Yes, that many people brought to our attention when I was feeling that there was deja vu what with the Secretary of Agriculture being in the Roosevelt Room.

HRISHI: Right, and that was me really dropping the ball on the...

JOSH: Very unlike you.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's unlike me to remember something, even just a germ of it, and it's unlike you not to have.

HRISHI: I think I just was...

JOSH: Stunned?

HRISHI: I don't think I let your deja vu comment sink in strongly enough for me to actually stop and search the rolodex [cross talk] for an old friend of home because of course I know an old friend from home.

JOSH: [cross talk] Fair enough.

JOSH: Of course, you do.

HRISHI: So, we get some actual old friends here, from home. Mille because he knows what she got on her Organic Chemistry tests and she's invited on the China trip, supposedly to brief the president on public health affairs in China. But it turns out she's actually a backup plan because he knows that his MS is getting worse. We know this too because, in our last flag related episode, the president was having some trouble. He couldn't, you know the reason why he accepted the Taiwanese independence flag, is because he didn't see it.

JOSH: Right, he admits that to Abigail at the close of that episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Here's is an interesting thing, I think. I found that subplot very compelling.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: And sort of beautifully played by Martin, there's a lot just in his eyes, you know, starting to feel a little bit trapped in this body which is failing him.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I think it's a beautiful performance. The one thing I didn't quite understand is that we are let in to what's going on sooner than those around the president, we see that he is having trouble holding the pen in the Oval Office and he eventually just puts his right hand in to his pocket and then, it sort of made a kind of tension point to the episode about when others might discover what's going on and there's a weird shot on Air Force One of, I had to look at it a couple of times, because C.J.'s sort of eyeing, I guess what turns out is, she's sort of eyeing his uneaten meal, it's kind of weird sort of rack focus moment where she looks down, I guess she's taking in the fact he hasn't eaten and she's wondering. So, he is hiding from his Chief of Staff, he's hiding from C.J. the failure of his body, he's brought the Surgeon General on to confide in her and to get some medical advice.

HRISHI: And I think also just some sort of, really, nursing.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

MILLIE: Well, I guess I'm going to have to feed you then, aren't I?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which I thought was touching as well. But then that whole tension is dispelled and dispersed in the next scene where you just see Millie, the Surgeon General, sitting down with Toby and C.J. and telling them. I thought there wasn't kind of a payoff discovery, there was kind of a tension built. We know this thing.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Oh now Millie knows this thing, well I wonder when and how the rest of the staff are going to find out and they just find out. And then I thought, baked into the episode itself, was maybe a better denouement to that aspect of the story, I think maybe when he finally couldn't move his body at all. When she comes in later and she is talking to him and he says I thought you were going to let me rest and then she wants him to get up and do something, C.J. does, and he says I can't move. And just that moment is slightly robbed of the impact it might have had if she didn't know anything was going wrong prior to that.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So I'm not quite sure why we had the air let out in that previous scene, I'm not sure what value there was in that.

HRISHI: Yeah. That's interesting. That said, there's still plenty of moments of surprise and tension about the MS, the initial escalation of going from just not being able to hold his pen to suddenly when he tells her he can't move his hands, and then he has this back and forth about taking a nap, and finally lies down and then he cannot move at all. And that sudden ramp up of symptoms is really scary.

JOSH: Yeah, so we finally see him being essentially carried out and put on a table. I mean, it's just like this horribly vulnerable moment and yet he also still has that presidential prerogative that he's going to use and he says, 'this plane is going to China'. I mean, it's a great moment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But it's uncomfortable. Our elder statesmen on the show, Leo and Bartlet, have not been doing well, physically.

HRISHI: Yeah. The show hasn't been a show about age before last season and now, it really is.

JOSH: Increasingly so.

HRISHI: Yeah, and therefore mortality and that's just a dark cloud hanging over everything.

JOSH: Yeah, and it very nicely parallels the fact that the Bartlet administration is getting on in years. He's talking about 'this is my final China summit, I can't just bring things up, or I can't just chalk things up to progress, I need to actually get something done'. He's thinking about legacy because his time is running out. Certainly, in the White House and maybe in this world all together.

HRISHI: Yeah. They even mention-

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

TOBY: FDR

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Do I really have to remind those kids that Roosevelt fought WWII from a wheelchair?

TOBY: Yeah but.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: But he died in office. Ok, I'll skip the Roosevelt bit.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But throughout the escalation of MS symptoms, the president's mood is almost chipper. He's cracking jokes. I loved this moment when C.J., like the contrast between him being chipper and then everyone else just sort of taking in the gravity of it. There's a shot of C.J. when they bring out the wheelchair and just like the pain and hardness that just like enters her expression is great.

JOSH: Yeah, you're absolutely correct. There's... He's not one for self-pity.

HRISHI: Yeah, even to the extent like this feels a little bit gratuitous even. The end of the episode, he says, 'No, I'm going to wheel myself'. He had just, moments before, said he's got his left arm back but that's it. But then he's like, 'no I'm going to wheel myself down.' How's he going to do it? He's only got one hand.

JOSH: He's going to go in a circle, that's what they should have done. [both laugh] They should have ended with his just circling. If I directed it, that's what we would have gone out on.

HRISHI: Great! Missed opportunity. Because if you wheel yourself, and you only use one hand.

JOSH: Right, picture it people.

HRISHI: The other wheel doesn't turn, it actually just goes in a circle.

JOSH: Thank you. Thanks for that one.

HRISHI: It is, that shot is brutal when you like see the IV in his hand.

JOSH: Oh yeah, there's an IV drip behind him hanging. It's a very vulnerable, and I, it's a great I think final moment and image as C.J. kind of, with dignity, says 'the President of the United States says he's going to wheel himself in' in this reduced situation. It's pretty powerful.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's pretty fantastic. The last episode that I think Lawrence O'Donnell wrote was 'Full Disclosure' in Season 5 and I really liked that episode as well.

JOSH: Full disclosure, I don't really remember what happened in that episode.

HRISHI: [laughs] Fair enough.

JOSH: See, what I'm doing is I'm taking the title of the episode.

HRISHI: Oh ok.

JOSH: And then just using it as the phrase itself might be used.

HRISHI: Oh ok, alright, I got it. Ok, let me try it: full disclosure: 'In the Room' is a good episode.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah, I think that works.

HRISHI: Does that work? There were two colons in there. What are we doing?

JOSH: [laughs] I don't know. But it's for the entire episode now so we've committed to it.

HRISHI: [laughs] Well.

JOSH: You see, what we're doing is just beating a dead horse [Hrishi laughs] hoping that a series of things that aren't particularly funny, if we just keep going back to them, will somehow, through pure repetition, be funny.

HRISHI: Mmm mmm ok.

JOSH: I already mentioned the weird shot of C.J.'s gaze, I believe, at the president's uneaten food. There is also a moment that goes on at least two beats longer than it really should at the end of the Charlie/Josh scene where they just stare at each other.

HRISHI: Yes!

JOSH: And it's weird. It's kind of like 'neither of us has dialogue any more so all we can do is stare at each other. I hope they'll cut soon.' Right? Did you notice that?

HRISHI: Yes!

JOSH: It's really weird. I had to go back and watch it over and over, it was so delightfully awkward.

HRISHI: It is so awkward. I don't know that I would use delightfully in front of awkward, it was just awkward for me.

[West Wing Episode 6.08 excerpt]

CHARLIE: C.J.'s afraid it's going to drown out coverage of the China trip. She needs you to...

JOSH: Put out the fire? She actually say put out the fire? Tell me she said put out the fire?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Josh makes a joke that isn't funny, and then he repeats it, and then we just hang out.

JOSH: Kind of like this episode of the podcast. [laughs]

HRISHI: Hey!

JOSH: Uh no, delightful for me only because Brad Whitford had to experience it. In terms of an actual viewer of the show, really odd, really weird.

HRISHI: Yup.

JOSH: Why don't they cut out of this sooner?

HRISHI: Really, why did he say it in the first place?

JOSH: Well, also that.

HRISHI: So, 'in the room', said many times in this episode, I'm going to end with this, I did like how versatile the phrase was. The number of rooms that one could find oneself in that are important enough to merit use of the phrase 'in the room'. I've forgotten where this sentence started.

[both laugh]

JOSH: Keep going, just keep going.

HRISHI: Is good.

JOSH: I agree.

HRISHI: But there's the China summit.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: There is the East Room where Zoey's birthday party was happening. And there's also the Room of Requirement where Vinick is gonna be.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: And they need him to say yes and they don't want to put the president in the room.

JOSH: Unless they know they're going to get a yes.

HRISHI: Get a yes. And then Josh is the one who is in the room. Actually, *The West Wing*, it turns out, is shot often times in rooms.

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: So, it works.

JOSH: That I remember.

HRISHI: Yeah. Come back next week for more insightful insights.

JOSH: Yeah, maybe on the website we can put footnotes to all the attempted jokes in this episode.

HRISHI: [laughs] We could also on the website just list rooms.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: We're going to take a quick break and when we come back, we'll be joined by our guests, Penn and Teller.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: We're joined now by Penn and Teller.

JOSH: They are famous, accomplished magicians and together the longest running headlining act in Las Vegas history. How about that?

HRISHI: Pretty amazing. And they've been performing together since 1975.

JOSH: Welcome to the show.

PENN: Hello, hello, how are you?

HRISHI: Shall we just, let's start at the beginning?

JOSH: How did this happen? How did this come about? It's one of the rare, I think, very successful meldings of bringing something pre-existing and recognisable famous people on to and into a fictional universe and have it work so well.

PENN: Well you know, I like that. You see, I've been very good friends with L-O-D, who you know as Lawrence O'Donnell. I've always called him L-O-D.

JOSH: He prefers G-O-D.

PENN: [laughs] Yeah exactly.

JOSH: [laughs] That's Lawrence.

PENN: L-O-D saw us win a free speech award, some First Amendment Award, for our burning the flag bit. He came, I think, to have lunch with me but came early and saw the presentation and saw that bit and loved that bit and that was before I think he was even working on *The West Wing*. And then he came to me when he got the *West Wing* gig, he came to visit me out in Vegas, and he saw the bit again and said, "We just gotta do that as a

West Wing episode.' And I said, 'great'. And then he asked me for the script to the flag burning and I sent it to him and he said, 'ok we'll do this'. And then he talked to the grownups to find dates and schedule and so on. And then he sent me the script and not only had he taken our trick but he also took my summation of the trick that was part of my monologue and gave it to other people in the script. And imagine my surprise when they didn't burden the writing credit with my name. [Josh and Hrishu laugh] That would have taken up so much more time. [Josh and Hrishu laugh] You're watching the show, you don't need that extra credit, just have it say Lawrence O'Donnell Jr. and be done with it, that's my thinking. [Josh and Hrishu laugh]

JOSH: Nice! Where does your friendship with L-O-D stand these days? [Hrishu laughs]

PENN: Could not be better. Could not be better. We are very good buddies and I was thrilled, thrilled, thrilled to be on *The West Wing* and the line that people talk about all the time is true:

[*West Wing* Episode 6.08 excerpt]

JOSH: Did you go to law school?

PENN: No. Clown school.

[end excerpt]

PENN: But I was trained differently because when I was with Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth, we were not allowed to say clown college, we had to say Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Clown College every single time. Just like you're forced to say *The West Wing*.

JOSH: This is true. Are there no alternative clown colleges?

PENN: There are none that I know of. I think the University of Miami has a circus arts program and I think one college in Virginia does but the only real no-kidding clown college was Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Clown College.

JOSH: But there are still elephants?

PENN: Uh yeah but not working.

JOSH: True.

PENN: I don't know that there are many elephants working in the US. It's possible that Cole Brothers are one of the, what fashionably call, mud shows that still have elephants but I don't think so. I think we've expanded our range of compassion so we no longer do that as Americans.

JOSH: Hear, hear.

HRISHU: I have to say, my favorite line of yours in this episode is one that you say twice. It's 'what's the difference'.

[*West Wing* Episode 6.08 excerpt]

PENN: He doesn't talk.

JOSH: *He doesn't talk like Harpo Marx or really doesn't talk?*

PENN: *What's the difference? You tell me Charlie; did we burn a flag or do we just vanish a flag in a patriotic flash of fireworks?*

CHARLIE: *Don't know.*

PENN: *What's the difference?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love that. That feels both wonderful as a device for the plot but also it feels like the business that you traffic in, right? I mean, what is the difference between what you see and what really is?

PENN: Yeah. Once again it is one of the lines from our show. And that's really important that there is no difference. I should point out, we don't do the flag burning in our show anymore, and one of the reasons is we always put in new stuff in the show and we got about nine hours of material and if we did every single thing we knew how to do we'd be Bruce Springsteen. [Josh laughs] We have to keep it down to a reasonable length. But the other reason is, that was meant to be a patriotic bit that was non-intuitively patriotic,

HRISHI: Mmhm.

PENN: That it was deeply patriotic but you discovered that. But toward the end of doing that, it became very strange because patriotism had become so, to my mind, altered, that when we pulled the flag out, people applauded. And it really troubled us because I think that's only a good bit in our show if the patriotism is in some way skewed. If it's a celebration of transgression as opposed to flag waving. The reaction to the show began changing somewhat and so Teller and I both wanted it out. And we would still have occasionally people who didn't understand it and get mad at us and that was kind of ok but what we didn't like was people who didn't understand it and loved us.

JOSH: I think in its way that's still as relevant as ever. Even if you choose not to perform it, we have a man in office now who I think as recently as the run up to the election was suggesting that desecration of the flag, burning the flag, would warrant loss of citizenship or a year in prison.

PENN: Yeah, he did. And I've had my run ins with Trump. There was a while when the New York Times listed me on his hate list higher than Hillary Clinton, which really!

JOSH: That's an achievement, yes.

HRISHI: Yeah, congratulations.

PENN: Well it's even more amazing that the President of the United States of America would have a hate on for a magician, of all people. It's kind of like when Lincoln said four scores and seven years ago there's this carney magician, I'm not really fond of. [Josh and Hrishu laugh] When John F. Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you but rather go to Vegas because this magician sucks.' That was pretty surprising. But yeah, when he started talking like that, we briefly considered putting the bit back in and then it seemed oddly opportunistic. It seemed like we'd be simply cashing in. Now obviously, when he said that, the second he said that, our Twitter feed got filled with people sending the clip of us on *The West Wing* of us doing that and it seemed to accomplish that better because it said, 'this

is something they think about', not, 'this is something they put in to go oh this is in the news, maybe we can make a buck'.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: One of the things we'll link to also because some people are familiar with the trick just from *The West Wing*, there's at least one video I've seen online, on YouTube, that shows the more fully realized and extended trick in which you in fact reveal how it's done by performing it a second time with the Chinese bill of rights which of course does not exist and thus is transparent.

PENN: Right, what I find interesting and of course *West Wing* did not have to deal with this because we did not do the transparent version, when we did in on CW as part of our show 'Fool Us', they censored out the Chinese bill of rights line, thinking that in some way that was racially unpleasant, [Hrishi laughs] whereas maybe people who came from China to the United States were well aware of the lack of a bill of rights was possibly [Hrishi laughs] part of their reason for immigrating.

JOSH: Indeed.

PENN: We were upset by that. Of course on *West Wing*, we didn't deal with that because we didn't do the second half.

HRISHI: Could you tell us about the original origin of the trick? How did you first come up with it?

PENN: in 2000, which is now many years ago and ancient history, Teller and I did a series of TV shows that were awful, where we went to Egypt, China, and India. And we did not go there as tourists, we went there to see magic that was done for the people in those countries. So not magic done for tourists.

JOSH: Street magic.

PENN: Yeah. When we were outside of New Delhi, we were in a place called Shadipur which is the place that the untouchables live and, although there are not supposed to be caste systems in India, like there's not supposed to be racism in the U.S., it still exists. And we were in the worst places in these countries. So, Teller and I spend not a long time, but two months, in places in the world we'd never been, seeing things that were nightmarish, and it seemed to the two of us, with our limited understanding and very libertarian points of view, that what these countries were lacking was freedom.

Now it turned out that's one way to read the history. One of the reasons it's gotten so much better over the past 20 years. Most of these places, we have to remember there are some places that are doing badly but they are very small areas – one of them being the United States by the way. And we wanted to write a really patriotic bit but when Tony Orlando, who's a friend of ours, does 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon' in his show in Vegas and has all the veterans stand up and Wayne Newton has all the veterans stand up, when they wave a flag on stage, I can't say Teller and I are morally opposed to it. We are definitely aesthetically opposed to it. It seems like not what art is supposed to do. So, we wanted to do something deeply and honestly patriotic but it had to fit in within our taste. And a friend of ours, in passing, there are, you know when you're composing magic, there's a list of things you can do. You know you can vanish, you can animate, you can produce, you can transform and one of the things you can do is destroy and restore. And a friend of ours just said in passing, who's a magician, I've always thought doing a burned and restored flag would be a great thing. So, it really was his idea. His name was Jamie [indecipherable] he

never performed it so we started banging around with it and it turns out, this is very uninteresting for *The West Wing*, but the magic in it is fairly hard. It is actually, in terms of jock magic, the final vanish is very difficult.

HRISHI: What does that mean, jock magic?

PENN: I mean just how you do the actual tricks. Not the art of it, not the jokes, nothing, how do you get the [expletive deleted] up your sleeve. That's the question. And the question on the flag bit was how do you get the [expletive deleted] flag up Teller's sleeve. You've got cloth that's too heavy and you can't make it disappear. So, there's actually a huge amount of R&D in just the trick. Now anybody seeing that does not say, 'wow, intellectually that was a little interesting but man, the magic on that was great.' [Hrishi laughs] No-one says that but you still have to do it.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: How long did it take to get it down?

PENN: Well we work on stuff a long time. We probably worked on it for 18 months I would say before putting it in. And then it got confused, and this is also not a part of the *West Wing* story, but we had to take it out right after 9/11. We put it in in 2000 and then in 9/11 we pulled the flag out, it would appear and the audience would do this jingoistic reaction, and then the bit, you couldn't understand it from there. So, it was out for a while. And then we did it for a bit and it we were really in the pocket around 2003 to 2010 or so. It really was a bit that we felt our audience was understanding and really digging and really enjoying and it went through there. And then we just wrote a lot of other stuff and then once, I think everyone has said this sentence, once Trump took office all bets were off.

HRISHI: Well I think that's really fascinating. I mean, we love to find out the backstory of how things come in to existence.

JOSH: There's also a fantastic podcast episode of *This American Life* that takes a look at the development of a trick, and one that you don't particularly like and it's kind of fascinating I thought...

PENN: I hope I didn't give the impression that I didn't particularly like it, the truth is I hate it!

JOSH: Yeah! [Josh and Hrishi laugh] I was underselling it. I just wanted to leave something for the listeners, but yeah, it's a pretty fascinating look at I think the dynamic that you two have and also just at what it takes and the amount of work that goes into preparing one of your tricks. I found it fascinating.

PENN: I used to judge what I did on an awful lot of VO, when I'm also doing TV, I judged the producer or director based on how disparate their number of takes are. If someone does three takes every time or if someone does 23 takes every time, I just assume they suck. [Hrishi laughs] If someone does 1 take, 50 takes, 20 takes, 2 takes, 7 takes, and you can't figure out what number of takes you're going to do, I consider that to be someone who's really trying to find exactly the right thing. And Teller and I used to think really hard about how long we would work on a trick, and now our show has things that we worked on for 15 years, kind of all the time, and it has things we've worked on for 2 weeks, because it depends on what the trick needs.

HRISHI: What was your experience like on the set, I mean in terms of looking for the right number of takes? How did Alex Graves rate for you as a director when you were making it?

PENN: It was just great. I mean, once we got to the set, it was wonderful. And for all my joking about L-O-D, because he knows me so well, and because he was taking stuff that I'd said probably 800 times on stage, there was no problem in knowing the material. Everything was just, I think there was nothing in the script that he hadn't heard me say, so there was no, whether you want to call the work the pedestrian work of memorization or whether you want to call it the artistic work of character, I had neither to do. [Penn and Josh laugh]

Walking on to the set of a show that is established and tight and good is an absolute pleasure, because you're the only one who is going to have problems. [laughs] You walk in and everyone goes, 'well, we know what we're doing, what can we do to help you know what you're doing?' [laughs] So, it was a wonderful set to work on and there were also, because everybody was aware that this was stuff that we did, and also that we were doing magic, that everyone was aware that they just were kind of trying to put something that we did in to ones and zeros, and there wasn't really too much to figure out. And I think we added in a little bit of juggling and stuff like that.

JOSH: I wanted to mention that! That's maybe, you're probably going to say that's an easy bit for you, but a nifty piece of the episode where you're juggling from behind Teller two inedible objects and an apple and he's getting a bite each time. That's fantastic.

PENN: We just threw that in to give it a little pop but that's something, that feeding the apple to Teller thing is something that goes back, well even at that time, went back 20 years.

JOSH: Fantastic. Anything else you want to tell us about the experience?

PENN: I mean, really all of this is just my friendship to L-O-D. We would not have been as open to taking a hunk of our show and moving it into a fictional world. Because L-O-D was writing it, we knew that even stepping on to a fictional set, that the integrity of Penn and Teller, called Penn and Teller, would remain intact. So, there was no due diligence to have to do because we trusted L-O-D and, by extension, *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: How did you and Lawrence first become friends?

PENN: There was a show, it was a local television show out of Connecticut that was kind of a precursor to *Politically Incorrect*. It was not Bill Maher, it was a different host. And the early guests were L-O-D, and me, and a couple of other people. And I got tell you, I walked into a room with L-O-D and we just had this immediate affection for one another and became very close, fast friends. And Jesus, that was '86.

HRISHI: Wow.

PENN: So, it's been a long time.

HRISHI: And do the two of you ever argue about politics, with your libertarian viewpoints and his democratic ones?

PENN: Yeah, although you have to remember, I think everybody knows this, but his political beliefs are oversimplified on *West Wing*...

HRISHI: Right.

PENN: On MSNBC, they have to be, so I wouldn't say that when we get together, we agree on things. But the conversation is much more complex than the cartoon version you might do in your head if you just watch TV.

HRISHI: Right. Completely understandable. But you don't argue to the point where it threatens your clearly long standing friendship.

PENN: No, no, our relationship is sexual, not political. [Josh laughs]

HRISHI: Thanks so much both of you for joining us, we really appreciate your time. And that does it for this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

JOSH: Thanks for joining us. Hope you'll join us again. Thank you to Margaret Miller, Zach McNees and Nick Song for their indispensable expertise in putting together this episode.

HRISHI: Thanks to Radiotopia for being our network. Radiotopia is a collective of independent podcasts, curated by the fine folks at PRX, and you can find out about all of our shows at radiotopia.fm

JOSH: You can follow us on Twitter at @westwingweekly, you can follow our Instagram account, you can follow Watson, Hrishi's dog [Hrishi laughs] on Instagram, you can check out our Facebook page 'The West Wing Weekly', you can leave messages at thewestwingweekly.com and you can give us a 5 star rating on iTunes. Or lower.

HRISHI: OK

JOSH: OK

PENN: What's next?

[Outro Music]