

The West Wing Weekly
1.01: Pilot

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly, an episode-by-episode look at the award-winning show created by Aaron Sorkin. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And my name is Joshua Malina.

[ad insert]

JOSH: And now we should go onto our, I think our *West Wing* qualifications and then we should get to it.

HRISHI: Yeah, ok. Well my main qualification is just that I got you to do this podcast with me. Other than that, I just love the show, and I've memorized probably every line of dialogue in the first four seasons.

JOSH: See this is the...going to be, I think, an interesting dynamic which is that I was on the show and I think I've seen probably every episode of it because I was a big fan of the show before I got on it. But I saw all the episodes essentially I think when they aired and never again. So now, I'm doing a re-watch for the purposes of the podcast and I'm enjoying it all over again and it's all sort of new to me, and I...is that...what, what do we want from our listeners? We would like them to re-watch with us. We're going to assume that any episode we're discussing has been seen by the listener because there will be some spoilers; although that's not our main aim, to ruin anything for anyone. But we're gonna assume people watched it and maybe before listening to an episode they may even re-watch it.

HRISHI: Yeah, or if they've never watched the show before, now you can, you can watch the whole series on Netflix. They could start now and...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: ...we'll be sort of like a listening guide.

JOSH: Oh, there you go.

HRISHI: To go along with the episodes. It's like having a little book club for watching *The West Wing*.

JOSH: Yes, a book club where only two of its members can actually speak.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Which for me, is the best kind of book club.

HRISHI: Also one that doesn't require reading books and only watching TV.

JOSH: Also true. I do like a good TV-watching book club.

HRISHI: So today we're going to talk about the pilot. When was the first time that you watched this episode?

JOSH: Before seeing it, I read the script. Aaron Sorkin and I go way back, we are dear friends - have been for twenty-five or thirty years, and he sent me the script and just on the page, I was knocked out, I don't know if I had the prescience to say "this will be a huge hit" because quality and audience don't always go hand-in-hand, but I definitely knew this was the real deal when I read it; I thought it was fantastic. And I did, immediately, and ultimately unsuccessfully, make a bid to be in it even though I was at the time already on Aaron Sorkin's *Sports Night*.

HRISHI: Right, which you were acting in, he was writing both series at the same time.

JOSH: That is true. Our second season took place as the first season of *West Wing* was unfolding and er, but before they actually, I guess fully cast the show I had a significant conversation with Tommy Schlamme, director of both *Sports Night* and ultimately *The West Wing* and Aaron who wrote both, and I was making the case that I could play the Sam Seaborn role and continue shooting as Jeremy Goodwin in *Sports Night*, and I remember using as precedent the fact that Cynthia Nixon in 1984 had been in two Broadway shows. I believe she was in *The Real Thing* by Tom Stoppard and I think *Hurlyburly*, where she was in like the first act of *The Real Thing* and then she would run across the street or down a couple blocks to be in the second act of *Hurlyburly*. And I said if she could do that live and make that work eight times a week, I can film my little bits for each, and I feel like they took me seriously for [laughing] about three minutes, and they said "yeah, that's...you're not gonna be in *The West Wing*". Then they got Rob Lowe and I was I like "Oh yeah, I get it."

HRISHI: I don't know what the *West Wing* overlap is, but for people who might not know, Cynthia Nixon is Miranda from *Sex and the City*.

JOSH: That is true. You would know that because you are such a Miranda. I'm a Charlotte.

HRISHI: I wish I understood that reference.

JOSH: I wish I did too.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: I just know that people say that; I wasn't really...don't be offended nor complimented when you later look up what that means cause I don't know.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Ok, so this is the pilot episode of *The West Wing*. It originally aired on September 21st, 1999.

JOSH: I also had to remind myself that the show premiered during the Clinton...the waning Clinton second term. I think of the show as such a wish-fulfillment reaction to the Bush years, which I think a lot of people took it that way, and I looked at the date and like "oh wait a minute", yeah it was actually, it was late Clinton when the first...when the show first came out.

HRISHI: I wonder maybe it wouldn't have been as big of a hit if the Bush years...

JOSH: If we hadn't gotten the Bush years, you mean?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Although I guess it must have done well enough, ratings-wise, in its first couple of seasons. I think, in fact I know, it won Best Drama its first four seasons.

HRISHI: Right. Aaron Sorkin was nominated for Best Writing for the pilot. The pilot is pretty amazing.

JOSH: That is one of the things-- I remembered it being great, but re-watching it reminded me just how well it functions as a pilot. I read tons of pilots as an actor and there's so many things a really good pilot has to accomplish, has to introduce, especially in a show like *The West Wing*, a broad, a big cast, big cosmography all in the first episode and still have a compelling A-plot and B-plot and sort of, Aaron sort of just checks every box in what makes a really good pilot. Everybody has their little moment, you get a little taste, a little flavor of what each character is gonna be like, how they interact together; by the end of the first episode you wanna see more and you sort of like all these characters and feel like you have a vested interest already. Ok, storylines.

HRISHI: Six storylines. The very first thing that we see is Sam, in the bar right? Getting picked up.

JOSH: Yeah. I wanted to point this out. First line ever in the history of *The West Wing*.

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

WAITER: Two Absolut Martinis up; another Dewars rocks.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: "Two Absolut Martinis up; another Dewars rocks." So two flagrant brand endorsements in the very first...I hope they have...I'm gonna guess that there was no product placement deal, but that's amazing. Two brands mentioned in the first line of dialogue ever. Sam's at a bar and he's getting sort of grilled by a journalist who wants to know if it's really true that Josh Lyman's gonna be fired for something that he said on like one of the Sunday morning political shows. Aaron's also good at a thing where he's usually a step or two ahead of the audience, which is a rare thing in network TV. I think

most of the time they sort of wanna hit you over the head and they want the audience to be two steps ahead of the show, but this one already...the pace of the show, and the pace of the dialogue, as is true of kind of everything Aaron writes, but also the content leaves you wondering "wait, wait, what exactly is going on? What's this journalist referring to?" And it sort of hooks you immediately into things that will just pay off later.

HRISHI: Yeah, that idea of in medias res, where you're dropped right into the action and then you have to catch up, that's more common now; I think audiences are more sophisticated but in 1999 that was a...that seemed very rare.

JOSH: Yeah, that was pretty fresh. Yeah, and then the pilot never slows down after that initial drop-in, it just keeps moving like a train. That first scene also sees Lisa Edelstein having appeared as Bobbi Bernstein sportscaster on *Sports Night*, so you also see this is the beginning of the mighty 'Sorkin Players' and Aaron's habitual, God bless him, repeated use of actors that he likes working with.

HRISHI: Then there's POTUS in a bike accident. That plot is sort of weaved through without actually seeing POTUS for a long time.

JOSH: I'm gonna call you on that now, just because it was something I was gonna discuss later, but as you are invoking the President of the United States by his code name POTUS, it was funny to go back and watch the pilot and it's actually a plot point, there are all these cute little references to 'POTUS' and we clearly as viewers are supposed to be thinking "who is this POTUS? What is POTUS? That's such a crazy word," and I think, I guess probably because of *The West Wing* and its ultimate success everybody knows what POTUS means now. So there's this big reveal, I'm jumping ahead but with Sam and Laurie, where finally she's like "That's your boss - POTUS?" and there's a big zoom-in on Rob Lowe as Sam Seaborn and a swell of music and he goes "Yeah, the President of the United States". But now it just doesn't work because of the success of the show. Everybody knows who POTUS is.

HRISHI: Alright, I'm just gonna keep recapping just the plotlines here. We've got Cubans on rafts, there's like a refugee...impending potential refugee crisis of Cuban immigrants trying to come across the water. Then, introduced in the first sort of moments but we don't really come to it a little bit later, is Josh Lyman versus the Christian right.

JOSH: Mm-hm. He has misspoken in anger and snark on one of the Sunday morning political shows is that right?

HRISHI: Yep. And then Sam gets entangled, not just with Laurie the prostitute but also with Mallory McGarry.

JOSH: Yes, Leo's daughter.

HRISHI: So he meets Laurie and then we get into this pager plot.

JOSH: Quaint. Quaint technology. Maybe, I dunno, maybe it's a D.C. thing, it probably is, I think D.C. counter-intuitively tends to be technologically a little bit behind the times.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah, as a...you know I wasn't kind of aware of that until there was a hubbub about President Obama not having...you know not being able to have an iPhone or use one because he had to use a Blackberry because of security reasons.

JOSH: Right, yeah. So maybe they're still using pagers there, but that caught my attention on the re-watch. Pagers. Pagers! Are they all drug dealers?

HRISHI: Did you have a cell phone in 1999?

JOSH: Uhh...no I don't think so.

HRISHI: I didn't either.

JOSH: Yeah. Well you were in elementary school.

HRISHI: I was in school.

JOSH: Yeah. I was already old.

HRISHI: But then it also sets up this...the larger plot line here of it turns out as we discover through the pagers that Laurie is actually a prostitute.

JOSH: Yes. Not that she was expecting any payment from Sam because he's very handsome. So we've got a little bit of a fantasy element already right there. I'm in a bar, a beautiful woman is eyeing me, I take her home, and though she turns out to be a law school student and high-priced escort, she's not looking to charge me. I'm so cute, she's just interested in me. So, yeah, a little fantasy fulfillment.

HRISHI: If anybody finds out this could be very damaging for the president ultimately. So he's got to cover it up.

JOSH: Right. And this is an interesting distinction between the faux D.C. of *The West Wing* and the faux D.C. of *Scandal*. On *Scandal*, he would have her killed by the end of the episode.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He might feel bad about it, but you know he'd hire someone to drill her in the forehead until she's dead. It's a lighter touch perhaps in some ways on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: What did you think of Sam and Laurie?

JOSH: Of that storyline?

HRISHI: This whole plot, yeah the whole storyline?

JOSH: Charming.

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: Yeah, I liked it.

HRISHI: Does she not know who Sam is?

JOSH: Mmm...hard to say. She...it's certainly unclear. Maybe she has an endgame in mind and she knows who he is. Then she really ought to have figured out POTUS.

HRISHI: Anyway, so we find out that POTUS has been in a bike accident, and they just kind of lay that in there originally for some...some humor.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: CJ gets to joke about it, but the part that I think is interesting and what it really sets up besides the sort of like humor of it and as this way to introduce CJ and her relationship with the press is that the president actually has a low favorability. He's not a popular president, he doesn't...he's not starting from like a position of great power even though he is the president, he's got...they make a few remarks about how the president is polling pretty badly...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: ...and his favorability is low, and so an incident like this underscores the problems that they're having with him, connecting the president and the administration to the public.

JOSH: Yes. I think it's a classic bit of misdirection by Aaron, creating a sort of a negative comic image of the president who...that is ultimately gonna be turned on its head when we finally get to meet him. We've got Leo referring to him as a klutz and an oaf, much to the dismay of Mrs. Landingham who doesn't like that kind of language in the Oval, and I think, yeah, Aaron's sort of teeing up what we expect to be sort of a Mr. Bean of a president. Then when Martin finally appears, which we'll get to later, he's...he seems to be anything but a bumbler.

HRISHI: You've got the leader of the free world, but he's sort of setting him up before we've even met him as an underdog.

JOSH: Mm-hm, oh that's...

HRISHI: Like how do you make an...how do you make the president an underdog? Because of course it's a good move to be able to have somebody you wanna root for because they've got all these odds against them. So he's setting it up that these guys have something to overcome, cause otherwise it would be easy I think to dismiss "Whatever, these guys are in the White House, they've already got it made, what do they have to deal with?"

JOSH: That's true, but on the re-watch to me it felt like a setup for a competent group of handlers who have to deal with their kind of ineffective president. Like I didn't...you know, when I re-watched it I thought like "Oh they're making...this is a...we've got a president who rides his bike into a tree, and can his staff actually prop him up and make

him look like somebody with a bit more gravitas?” So I think, you know, before we actually see the president I’m actually kind of rooting for the staff or this guy they have to deal with and then it’s a great surprise when the man himself strolls in.

HRISHI: Yeah. Yeah and actually that was the original idea, was that Martin Sheen was gonna be in the show very little, he was gonna have this sort of...just like in this episode he comes...he sweeps in just sort of at the end. He was gonna be kind of a peripheral figure and that really the show was about the staff and, and while the president is around it’s not really about him. But then of course the character ended up being so great and Martin Sheen was so great, predictably, that it completely changed after, you know, an episode.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: How about Josh versus the Christian right?

JOSH: Yes. Here’s what I was struck by. So, just again this sub-plot, maybe it’s the B-plot, it’s significant. Josh has misspoken in an interview in which he and Mary Marsh are the panelists and he said something, which we are clearly meant to believe is absolutely outrageous and unacceptable and possibly going to cost him his job. I think Toby refers to his performance on the show as “calamitous”, but re-watching it myself now in 2016, I just kept thinking “I don’t really get why what Josh Lyman said was all that bad.” He says:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

JOSH: Lady, the god you pray to is too busy being indicted for tax fraud.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Snarky certainly, not a nice thing to say, but I assume what he was saying on face value was true and he was pointing something...I dunno to me that would have been another just sort of not worth necessarily the bat of an eye if I were watching a similar show today. So I dunno, were things just more polite back then? Or is it just in the world of *The West Wing* that this is gonna throw everyone into high dudgeon?

HRISHI: I actually think that high dudgeon is the reaction I would expect if this were to happen today.

JOSH: Oh you do?

HRISHI: Yeah, because as caustic as language can get and as vitriolic as people can be on either side I feel like there’s still this respect and carefulness that every candidate on either side always has when it comes to Christianity, or maybe religion in general, and the thing is, it works. I mean one of the most effective moments that Hillary Clinton had in a debate was talking about religion, where she said:

[2016 Presidential Debate excerpt]

HILLARY CLINTON: I get a scripture lesson every morning from a minister that I have a really close personal relationship with, and you know it just gets me grounded. He gets up really early, sends it to me so, you know, there it is in my inbox at 5am.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So I think a real life Josh or a modern day Josh still gets in trouble for making an attack on someone's Christian beliefs.

JOSH: But I didn't take...I don't take this as a 'god slam' so much as a 'character of the person who supposedly serves god' slam if that's a distinction that makes any sense.

HRISHI: Hmm. Yeah.

JOSH: He's really talking about a person.

HRISHI: You think that when he says "The god you pray to" he's talking about like a...

JOSH: Somebody in the admin- in the organization I assume has been indicted for tax fraud. Am I wrong? Is it...maybe I'm way off on this.

HRISHI: It's all just a scam, you know they're using the cloak of Christianity for personal gain and...

JOSH: Right. Well that's not a slam on Christianity, that's a slam on scam artists.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But, regardless, in the world of *The West Wing*, Josh is on the very verge of perhaps losing his job. In fact we learn, I think, ultimately that the president is in fact planning to fire Josh, but is holding off on...on Leo's importuning him to do so.

HRISHI: Right. So Josh...

JOSH: Yes Hrishi?

HRISHI: Not you Josh, other Josh...

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Josh Lyman.

JOSH: Oh. By the way, again, not to make this about myself, but let's talk about me for a second. My name is Josh. My sister's name is Toby. The name Lyman, though not a true anagram for Malina, contains many of the same letters.

HRISHI: That's pretty close.

JOSH: Aaron, just stealing my details, refusing to cast me in his show, and then going on to great success and riches. That's all I'm saying; that's all I'll say on the subject.

HRISHI: All right. All right.

JOSH: Toby and Josh.

HRISHI: Actually, you wanna talk about names a little bit? One thing I thought, Toby he clearly stole that from...that's the name of your sister, and that's why he named Toby, Toby.

JOSH: I believe so.

HRISHI: But Ziegler might be a homage to the Ziegler of the Nixon administration.

JOSH: Is that Ron Ziegler?

HRISHI: Ron Ziegler, who was the...

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: ...who was the press secretary for President Nixon. There's a little bit of that, that happens throughout the show. That, you know, there's some fun that gets had with how characters are named.

JOSH: Ed and Larry. As long as we're on names, and we're on characters introduced in the pilot, Ed and Larry who are staffers of some sort. They make their first appearance in a quick little...

HRISHI: Oh right.

JOSH: ...I think during the credit sequence, they have a brief conversation with Sam.

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

JOSH: I don't think their names are yet invoked but, Peter James Smith and William Duffy, not sure I can tell you now which of them played Ed and which Larry, and think that is something with which Aaron has fun throughout the series. No, I think Duffy was Larry and Peter James Smith was Ed, but I'm not willing to look it up. We might have to have them in as guests. Ed and Larry make their first appearance, which is worthy of noting.

HRISHI: All right. Let's hit pause for a second to thank our sponsors.

[ad break]

HRISHI: Another thing that's different about this episode is that there's no West Wing theme.

JOSH: Ohh.

HRISHI: There are no, like the credit sequence that you're talking about is, you know, the credits play over...

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: ...the opening scenes.

JOSH: Leo, working his way I think, through the offices.

HRISHI: Doing his first walk and talk.

JOSH: Yeah exactly, and it is a good one.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It is a good long walk and talk.

HRISHI: So there's no...there's no traditional *West Wing* theme, it's instead that kind of like light frothy effervescent [sings] ba ra da da pum, ba ba ba baa....

[music plays in background]

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: That does end up sticking around as the closing credits music for every single episode.

JOSH: Ah, Snuffy Waldon...

HRISHI: Snuffy Waldon.

JOSH: ...who we should give credit to here.

HRISHI: W.G. Snuffy Waldon. I don't know...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ...what the W.G. stands for, do you?

JOSH: I do not know, but I'll look into it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Even as we speak.

HRISHI: So they sort of bookend the show with that music and then it ends up staying in the closing credits forever, which is always a funny, like, kind of really light way of ending sometimes episodes that are really heavy, but...

JOSH: That's true. I like the music for a TV show to tell me how to feel.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I like when *Downton Abbey* tells me "Ahh, the Dowager Princess is gonna say something funny now." "Dowager Princess"? That's not what I meant.

HRISHI: That's not a person.

JOSH: There's...I'm thinking of my *Downton Abbey* fan fiction, I write a lot of it and the "Dowager Princess" is a character. W.G. Snuffy Waldon - William Garrett Waldon.

HRISHI: All right. But everybody just calls him Snuffy.

JOSH: That's true.

HRISHI: Ok. So it's interesting that you think that Josh versus the Christian right is the B-story, I think that's actually the A-story; that's the real meat of the episode, and the rest of the stuff's sort of branches on the tree.

JOSH: All right, I'm gonna grant you that point, I suppose you're right...

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: ...because that ultimately is...that is the meat of the episode.

HRISHI: I mean that's one of the things that's so great. Normally in an episode of TV there might be an A-plot and a B-plot and maybe a C-plot, but here we've got six different things being interwoven. It's pretty awesome.

JOSH: Yeah, that is true. We haven't even discussed, really, Mandy yet.

HRISHI: Right. Oh let's talk about Mandy. So Mandy comes to town.

JOSH: She comes to town, speaking into a mobile flip phone the size of a pineapple and driving her car recklessly through the streets of D.C., ultimately getting pulled over, remaining on the phone. She gets pulled over for driving through a red light even though she's also flagrantly on the phone while she does so. That doesn't seem to concern the cop as much.

HRISHI: I think that wasn't a law yet, I think in the early days of cell phones they didn't have...

JOSH: ...you could just have it up to your...

HRISHI: Yeah...you could just be talk...

JOSH: Really?

HRISHI: ...they didn't realize that it was like dangerous until people, you know were doing that and then doing things like driving the way she's driving.

JOSH: Interesting. She's not overly concerned about being pulled over.

HRISHI: Yeah, she's not concerned about anything, I mean in terms of introducing a character, like the character of Sam is introduced...he's very handsome.

JOSH: Let's just say that...let's just get that out.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: We both think Rob Lowe is handsome. He's a handsome man.

HRISHI: Yeah. I know not a lot of people are gonna agree with us on that, but I don't care what other people say - I think Rob Lowe is handsome.

JOSH: Let me ask you this. Have you met him?

HRISHI: No.

JOSH: In person, he is like another species. He has an aura about him that leads you to instantly say, "Oh yeah, oh I get it. I get why this guy's a star."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He's just, he's got charisma, he's handsome, thin thin thin, just very nice too. But, yeah, every time I run into him like "Oh yeah, right, well, there's that."

HRISHI: He must get so tired of being typecast as like a handsome guy though.

JOSH: He's done some...he's gotten off the beaten path, you see him in the...

HRISHI: That's true, he did the *Behind the Candelabra*

JOSH: ...the Liberace thing, exactly.

HRISHI: Yeah, that's true. Ok. All right.

JOSH: So he's got range. Which is one of the great unfair things. Very, very handsome people like Rob Lowe can stick in fake teeth and spackle their hair and do whatever else they might to be ugly. I can't play...I can save them money on makeup by doing the role in Liberace, I can't play a Sam Seaborn who's handsome like that.

HRISHI: Pshaw.

JOSH: So there you go.

HRISHI: But so, you know, Josh is kind of introduced with...as like this kind of brash guy, you know, he's maybe like a bit of a loose cannon he's gonna say what he thinks, he's gonna get...he's easy to rile up and he's a little cocky.

JOSH: Right, but who cares...he's...we find...he's alone in his office watching that, that tape over and over and over of his gaffe, of his misstep, of his faux pas, so he cares and probably not for selfish purposes as, so much as the shame he has perhaps brought on the administration and the trouble he's created with Caldwell and his people.

HRISHI: And then the other person who gets this really kind of major introduction, ok like "Ok, we get what you're all about." is Mandy. Cause Mandy is introduced in this really like dramatic way, that she is speeding, she is talking on the phone and she is like this extreme type-A personality, and maybe not that nice.

JOSH: Mm-hm. Although we know that she and Josh had a thing at some point.

HRISHI: Right. The political part of her appearance that I think is interesting goes along with this idea that the president is not in a really strong place in the polls because there's this idea that he actually is gonna maybe get challenged from within his own party for the nomination for the second term.

JOSH: And do we know where in the first term we are, chronolo...time-wise?

HRISHI: I think we are now a year into the first term.

JOSH: Oh, so already, already there's rumblings of who might challenge him?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But in any event, Mandy is in town because she's coming to work for Senator Lloyd Russell, who is considering a run at the presidency, or to try to get the nomination for the second term.

HRISHI: Yeah, he's a Democrat from within his own party which is, you know, it's certainly not unprecedented but it just underscores the fact that the staff...

JOSH: Bartlet's got trouble.

HRISHI: ...yeah, and the staff have a lot of fighting to do from all sides. People who would wanna criminalize Sam's activity and go at the president from like a morals and image way through Sam. We've got his own blundering because of being an oaf and making himself look bad by running into a tree. He's got to deal with this immigration crisis with the Cubans coming in on rafts, and then he's gotta fight against the Christian right.

JOSH: He's got a Communications Director who's not great on a treadmill. Press secretary. CJ's the press secretary. This is where I can't even...I don't even know who's who. Now CJ is the press secretary, Allison Janney who's fantastic, but also, she doesn't have too much to do in the pilot, she makes a great impression. She has a very funny moment where she's sort of chatting up the guy next to her at the gym, on the treadmill, and she takes a hell of a pratfall, but CJ is not sure how to talk to the press about the fact that Bartlet has ridden his bicycle into a tree, and I think Leo at one point suggests the wording:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

LEO: "The president, while riding a bicycle on his vacation in Jackson Hole, came to a sudden arboreal stop". What do you want from me?

CJ: A little love Leo.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So, and Toby's...we haven't really discussed his first appearance.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: We get some primo Sorkin technobabble.

HRISHI: There are two things that Aaron Sorkin does a lot, which is to give the sort of tech specs of both objects and people.

JOSH: Hah.

HRISHI: We get people reciting their résumé, or other people's résumés. Or reciting, you know, the technical details of a device or a thing.

JOSH: That is a very good observation, that is true.

HRISHI: We've got Toby, and he says:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

TOBY: We're flying in a Lockheed Eagle series L-1011. It came off the line 20 months ago and carries a Sim-5 Transponder tracking system. Are you telling me I can still flummox this thing with something I bought at Radioshack?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Fantastic line, and also I love that somewhere on the Internet there's somebody saying "What a ridiculous line of dialogue. The Eagle Series L-1011 doesn't have a Sim-5..." [laughing] Like somebody's actually objecting to the inaccuracy of this list of tech specs.

HRISHI: That's great.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: For résumé recaps it's actually a little light on...in this episode we have Sam saying, when he's talking to Mallory McGarry's class he says:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

SAM: I graduated law school eight years ago and started working at Dewey-Ballantine.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I'm putting two and two together though as we discuss this and I'm realizing that Shonda Rimes, an admitted fan of Aaron Sorkin and *The West Wing*, may have sort of absorbed this aspect of Aaron's writing. Because I, as David Rosen in *Scandal* have a tendency to announce that I am the Attorney General of the United States. I've said it between six and nine hundred times on a show that has so far had about seventy episodes. So there is a similar thing going on in *Scandal*, which I hadn't really quite noted before.

HRISHI: So yeah, so Mandy comes in. She's the only character that I'm not that stoked on. You know the impression that she makes even in the...in this episode, for me, when I first watched it and re-watching it subsequently I'm just like "Yeah, she's...I don't really like her" and that's interesting because I feel like the likeability factor is really high on everybody else.

JOSH: Hm. Yeah, she doesn't treat that policeman very nicely.

HRISHI: Right. No. She's dismissive to the policeman.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: I'm not a fan.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: And then there's this Sam and Mallory sub-plot, which is...

JOSH: Comic relief.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He is pressured into giving a tour to Leo's daughter's fourth-grade class, assuming that although Leo is clearly in his sixties, or early seventies, that she's actually in fourth grade. Such things are biologically impo...are biologically possible these days, so I guess we'll forgive him that, but it's a pretty bad...first of all, do you guys ever hang out? Do you ever talk about your personal lives? But yeah, I'm not gonna look too

closely at that, perhaps logic flaw because I think it's really funny. I like the scene in the Roosevelt Room, yeah.

HRISHI: He's frazzled, he's fed that piece of information, I was...I remember being like "That's such a silly part of the plot. How did that actually even get pulled off?" and I realized that in the re-watch he's flustered, he had a night out with a lady and then he's finding stuff out...

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: But he gets fed that piece of information by somebody else, it's you know his assistant is like "Leo's daughter's class, fourth-grade class, is coming".

JOSH: Who is...his assistant's played by...Suzy Nakamura...

HRISHI: Suzy Nakamura.

JOSH: ...I wanna say.

HRISHI: Yes, exactly.

JOSH: Who would...

HRISHI: Cathy.

JOSH: ...just to swing this back around to me, would eventually appear with me in the five episode, failed sitcom *Imagine That*. She, I think, is now is on...co-starring in the Dr. Ken show, so it's all going very well for her.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: But she has... she plays Sam Seaborn's assistant, his Donna if you will.

HRISHI: Right. But...and so we also meet Donna, Janel Moloney.

JOSH: Just to throw in quickly, 'cause these personal cul-de-sacs really...must be avoided in the future.

HRISHI: Cul-de-sac?

JOSH: Already we've seen her in the Sorkin universe as Monica the wardrobe assistant on an episode of *Sports Night* in which she speaks up for herself with Casey, played by Peter Krause, when she feels she's being mistreated. And it's all about a tie:

[*Sports Night* Episode 1.11 excerpt]

MONICA: Do you know what color this is?

CASEY: *Well it's grey, uh...*

MONICA: *It's called Gunmetal. You're not expected to know what shirt goes with what suit, or how a color in a necktie can pick up your eyes.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Later in this episode, in the pilot episode of *The West Wing* she's suggesting a tie for Josh.

HRISHI: Yeah, and again because...because of how it would play on TV.

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

DONNA: *You shouldn't have worn that tie on television; it bleeds.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh Aaron Sorkin, you crafty bastard.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Layers. Layers upon layers. Thank God we're here to peel them away. We have to touch on the big scene with Mary Marsh and Caldwell. That's a major...that's a set piece.

HRISHI: Toby is trying to save Josh's job. He's trying to get him to capitulate.

JOSH: And make nice with the folks of the religious right.

HRISHI: Right, and they wanna give them an apology, be very gracious so they can smooth this over so everybody can keep their job and everybody can save face.

JOSH: They're gonna get their hearing with the president, Josh is told in no uncertain terms that he's to show up at this meeting. He agrees to do so.

HRISHI: And eat crow.

JOSH: And eat crow. Exactly.

HRISHI: This is such a good Toby moment, where he comes in...he plays nice, everything is going fine, Josh delivers this very sincere...

JOSH: Mea culpa.

HRISHI: ...yeah, mea culpa, and then Mary Marsh who is not, you know, particularly impressed wants to...she says, "What do we get? Let's deal, let's make a deal." you know, "What are you gonna give us for...in exchange for this faux pas, what's the

political benefit that we get?" and she offers them alternatives. And Toby realizes that suddenly, that there's...it's not just about saving face and being nice and smoothing things out, that they wanna do a little political quid pro quo, for Josh's misspeak. And that's when, like, you just see Richard Schiff, he has some great moments in this. As he goes like from being like conciliatory to being so pissed off at that, and like outraged at the idea.

JOSH: The slow burn. Is it a slow burn, technically?

HRISHI: I guess it goes pretty fast, especially once they start invoking the Commandments.

JOSH: Ah yes.

HRISHI: And it's so good the way he goes from amendments to Commandments and then...

JOSH: Leading to one of the all-time great entrances, in a television show.

HRISHI: Right. Yeah, could you ask for a better first line?

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

BARTLET: "I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt worship no other God before me."

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Martin Sheen makes his entrance and there's this one look that Richard Schiff gives that is so great when the president where he says:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

VAN DYKE: May I ask you a question, sir?

BARTLET: Of course.

VAN DYKE: If our children can buy pornography on any street corner for five dollars, isn't that too high a price to pay for free speech?

BARTLET: No.

VAN DYKE: Really?

BARTLET: On the other hand, I do think that five dollars is too high a price to pay for pornography.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He says that, and there is a cut to Toby.

JOSH: Richard Schiff.

HRISHI: Yeah, and he's not saying anything, but he just has this little turn where his eyes turn down and he doesn't even smile but there is a...there is a move there...

JOSH: It's in his eyes?

HRISHI: Yeah, and he's like "He's on our side, I've got the backup that I need." There's just like this confirmation. "This is my guy." He loves the joke. I love that moment, it's one of my favorite things in the whole thing.

JOSH: This is ultimately where you really fall hard for this hearty band that we've been introduced to. Where you sort of see how they...the checks and balances if you will among them and how they sort of balance each other out and get each other's backs. And this is where you really, I think, this is where you just go down hard, you know like "I love...I love these guys, these crazy guys."

HRISHI: Even though it's a show about politics on the surface, you know, and then sort of even more it's a workplace drama or whatever. I think that the show is really about friendship, and standing up for people. It's, like, about that like kind of loyalty and having your friends' backs.

JOSH: Yeah, this would be a paradigm I think that would be well applied to any Aaron Sorkin television show.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I mean I think that is these are the worlds he creates and that's what he's interested in exploring first and foremost ultimately in whatever the setting is I think that is, that's the really, that's the good stuff that he likes to get into.

HRISHI: Yeah. In that scene the Mary Marsh comment about their New York sense of humor.

JOSH: Which of course made me immediately think of Ted Cruz.

HRISHI: Right, with his comment about Donald Trump saying:

[2016 GOP debate excerpt]

TED CRUZ: I think most people know exactly what New York values are.

MONICA BARTIROMO: I am from New York. I don't.

TED CRUZ: What...what...you're from New York? So you might not.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: "We all know what New York values are."

[2016 GOP debate excerpt]

CRUZ: But everyone understands that the values in New York City are socially liberal or pro- abortion or pro-gay-marriage, focus around money and the media.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ha. Yeah. This is another *West Wing* "still relevant today" moment.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: A prescient moment. On the way out Bartlet just rips...[laughing] he goes in hard, like almost a little bit too much because there's some sort of comment about "Get your fat ass out of here". Dude, you'd already won, did you have to kick him while he was down?

HRISHI: The one thing I didn't like about this is the sort of deus ex machina kind of quality of how they get out of it. You know, because I feel like there's...they're setting up for this really great showdown of ideas between the..what the Bible says and what the Constitution says. And are you gonna play ball and are you gonna capitulate and give them some, like, political win for the Christian right?

JOSH: Right, and then ultimately it's resolved over something that's a sort of a convenience, this package.

HRISHI: Yeah, this death threat kind of doll that...

JOSH: That Bartlet's daughter has received.

HRISHI: Granddaughter.

JOSH: Oh yeah, right.

HRISHI: It's a character who we only learn about in this moment through exposition. Here's this other storyline that's been happening, this is the reason, but it's also the reason why he rode his bike into the tree, so it kind of wraps up that plotline and because he was so upset about it.

JOSH: Yeah, he was...this was on his mind.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, well this is one of the great difficulties of a...of a pilot, which is that you don't have the previous episode to lay down all the little paths that you're gonna pay off on, so I know what you're saying here, that here it sort of unravels, it's introduced and resolved very quickly in that sense maybe...

HRISHI: Yeah, I feel a little bit like...

JOSH: ...a little less satisfying.

HRISHI: Yeah, I really want them to...I want them to figure it out in the room, I wanna be in the room where it happens.

JOSH: There you go.

HRISHI: And I wanna see that play out, but the reason why it plays out is this very personal thing to the president and it's so beyond the possibility of debate I guess, you know like, yeah, you don't send a little girl a Raggedy Ann doll with a knife through its throat. Like that's just so...

JOSH: Beyond the pale.

HRISHI: ...beyond the pale, that of course everybody is gonna condemn it and then they get what they want. They...he gets to kick their fat asses out.

JOSH: Yeah. You wanted more of a fair fight.

HRISHI: Well I did, a little bit.

JOSH: Which I think...and I think we'll get more of that later on in the series, but you're right in this instance. One of the things I love about the end of this episode is that a minor sub-plot, the Cuban refugees on their rafts in huge numbers trying to make their way to Miami. They've only been mentioned, so it's an entirely off-camera plot of which we're aware it's been used for us to sort of get a sense of the various staffers and how they react to it, and there's a great little time where they're all just discussing what they might do. Nonetheless, Bartlet has a speech at the very end of the episode:

[West Wing Episode 1.01 excerpt]

BARTLET: Naval Intelligence reports approximately 1200 Cubans left Havana this morning. Approximately 700 turned back due to severe weather, some 350 are missing and presumed dead, 137 have been taken into custody in Miami and are seeking asylum. [pause] With the clothes on their back, they came through a storm. And the ones that didn't die want a better life, and they want it here. Talk about impressive. My point is this: break's over.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And the writing's so good, and the performance is on point and the music buoys it up so much that I found myself...I...almost tearing up, actually caring deeply about a minor plot that's only been mentioned to me earlier in the show and not really particularly dramatized. And I thought "Wow that's a neat little trick" That's a...you know well done to everybody involved that they got me to suddenly at the very end, care in a palpable way about this off-camera plot.

HRISHI: Yeah. Closing trivia? A little trivia. Leo, you know gets into a fight with the New York Times crossword editors over the clue of 'Gaddafi' in the crossword.

JOSH: Ah the spelling in the crossword puzzle, yes.

HRISHI: And he's like "They spelled it wrong" and he calls to try and correct it. The interesting thing is whatever version of the spelling that's in the New York Times that Leo's objecting to, and whatever he's trying to put in there, they're apparently all wrong.

JOSH: Both incorrect?

HRISHI: Yeah in 2011 there was a shot that came out of Gaddafi's passport that showed, something you know, is there a Q? Is it Q-A? Does it start with a G? Does it have D's is there an H? All these things you know.

JOSH: So...I can't stand the suspense, how does he spell it on his passport?

HRISHI: G-A-T-H-A-F-I.

JOSH: Gathafi?

HRISHI: Uh-huh. Gathafi.

JOSH: Wow, that's interesting.

HRISHI: Everybody's wrong in this.

JOSH: Apparently.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Hello Gaffe Department. Gaffe...G-H-A-F-F...nevermind.

HRISHI: It was actually met with mixed reviews I was really surprised to find that out, when I went back and discovered it.

JOSH: Oh, is that true?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I don't remember that.

HRISHI: I pulled two reviews; Entertainment Weekly gave it an 'A' which is as to be expected now it's...it has its place in the pantheon of great TV shows of all time. New York Times trashed it.

JOSH: Is that true? Look at you and your research. On what grounds?

HRISHI: They called *The West Wing* 'middle-brow'.

JOSH: Ahhh...

HRISHI: It said "of the season's most hyped and anticipated series, *The West Wing* is by far its biggest disappointment" and it ends, the review ends "judged against its own potential, *The West Wing* is an insulting mess."

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: The writer?

HRISHI: It was written by Karen James.

JOSH: Karen James.

HRISHI: There is a part where she says, you know, that there's like moments that reveal the potential of what the show could become, but that's why sort of at the end like "judged against its own potential".

JOSH: She's hedging her bets there.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Just in case it becomes a big seven season success.

HRISHI: And wins a lot of Emmys, and...yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, right. Four years in a row and all that. That's funny, that's very interesting. And so there you go.

HRISHI: So, we hope you like this first episode, and hope you'll join us for all of the following episodes. We're hoping to do one for every single episode that ever aired.

JOSH: Do you know how many that is Hrishi?

HRISHI: It's 153 episodes, so there's a lot to get to. In the meantime, follow Josh on Twitter @joshmalina, and follow me @hrishihirway.

JOSH: Sounds good. So how do we know each other?

HRISHI: Ok, so when I graduated college a long time ago I wanted to start working in film maybe, and I wanted to know what I should do...I lived on the east coast and I was thinking about moving to L.A. but I didn't know anybody in L.A. One person who I knew who went to my college and was in L.A. was this actor Josh Malina. I knew that he went to Yale, he was on one of my favorite shows *Sports Night*, and I found your website and there was an email address for you and I was like "I'm gonna ask this guy, I'm just gonna

send him an email” and I was like “I’m just looking for some advice. I’m trying to figure out whether I should move to New York or L.A. and do you have any advice for me?” Not thinking I’d hear anything back, but then I did, and you wrote back and you said...I was talking about you know, wanting to come out and be a composer and you said “I don’t really know that many composers, I play poker with one or two, but from everything that I’ve experienced, if you wanna do stuff in film and TV, L.A. is the place where you have to be.”

JOSH: There you go. This makes me sound good.

HRISHI: You were very nice....

JOSH: Though at the same time I want to caution listeners that they should not write to me because I had a slot for one nice response to somebody who wanted advice. I’ll never do it again. And I’m delighted with how it worked out, we’re dear friends now, we’ve worked together, we’ve produced some stuff together.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And now we’re doing this.

HRISHI: And that’s it for our first episode. Thanks so much for listening and we hope you’ll join us for episode 2 Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc. In the meantime you can watch Josh on Thursdays on ABC’s Scandal.

JOSH: And of course you can catch Hrishi on his podcast Song Exploder.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok. What’s next?

[Outro Music]