

The West Wing Weekly  
Episode 1.21: Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics  
Guest: Bill O'Brien

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: In our last episode, we talked a bit about the work of Bill O'Brien, the actor who plays Joey Lucas's interpreter, Kenny Thurman, and we're really happy that he's going to be our guest later on in this episode. We're going to talk to him about Kenny, Joey Lucas, and sign language in *The West Wing* . But first, we're talking about Season 1, Episode 21: "*Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics*."

JOSH: The story is by Pat Caddell, the teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin, and it was directed by Don Scardino, another actor/director with whom I'm very familiar. He directed the Broadway production of *A Few Good Men* , in which I appeared—my first real job as a professional actor. He directed a lot and I guess executive produced a lot of *30 Rock* s. I think he was the original Jesus in *Godspell* —that's a musical, Hrishi.

HRISHI: Like *Our Town* .

JOSH: Uhhhhh...no. It's unlike *Our Town* in that it actually is a musical.

HRISHI: My favorite musical? *Waiting for Godot* , probably.

JOSH: Which is brilliant, because you're waiting for the musical numbers.

HRISHI: Exactly. They turned on the lights, but I knew there was music coming so I did not move.

JOSH: That's good. [both laugh]

HRISHI: Thank you.

JOSH: [laughs] Back to Don Scardino. The first Broadway production of *Godspell* (which of course is a musical by Stephen Schwartz, based on the stories of Matthew, I wanna say) featured Don Scardino as Jesus. He would later direct the off-Broadway revival in 1988 at The Lamb's Theater. And then he directed *A Few Good Men* on Broadway. He's been very good to me, an excellent director, and he and Aaron have a long history.

HRISHI: What makes a good director for you? What kind of things do you get from him that makes you feel like "this guy is a good director for me"?

JOSH: That's a very good question. I think it's a little bit different between a theatre director and a TV director or a film director. Film director, the number one thing I'm looking for is anyone who gets me home early. [laughs] No, but I would guess, taking away the technical aspects, about which I know precious little, it's really just about how he or she communicates with the actors. I mean, that's what I'm looking for as an actor, and somebody who sort of has a strong idea of what he's looking for—he or she, I should say—but also arrives on set or on stage open to the possibility that the actors are going to have a viewpoint as well, and to change things. So I guess actually that's what you really expect out of a theatre director. And in television a lot of the time people show up and they really know what they want; "I want you to stand there and move there, and the tone of the scene is this." And I think the really good film directors are confident enough to pivot and change the blocking and listen to what the actors have to say on set, even though there's a horrific time crunch involved in filmed entertainment. I think Aaron likes to work with directors the way he does with actors, over and over, who get what he's looking for and what he's trying to do.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And of course also I feel like we haven't talked about Tommy Schlamme probably as much as we should have.

HRISHI: That was why the ATX reunion was such a huge revelation, when Aaron Sorkin revealed that it was actually Tommy Schlamme who created the whole Walk-and-Talk, that it wasn't part of the script.

[ATX West Wing reunion excerpt]

*AARON: I will never forget Tommy coming into my office as excited as a kid on Christmas morning saying, "Come with me, I want to show you something." And he took me over to our set and he took me by the hand through the choreography. That wasn't me. I wrote the opening; Tommy found that, Tommy and I together.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I hope we get to talk to Tommy Schlamme on the podcast sometime soon.

JOSH: That's really why I bring it up, because what happens in TV is—not to take away from the episodic directors, who are very important and involved and creative—but once a show's style and feel and lighting and tone and pace are established (and that happens largely in the pilot with that original pilot director, and on a show like *The West Wing* I would say even more so than usual) Tommy with Aaron really created their own original vision. And then so subsequent directors for the rest of the series are tasked with, in addition to bringing their own thoughts and ideas to the table, but maintaining what was established in the pilot and early on in the show. So what I'm saying is really, Tommy has a long reach throughout the entire series, and we really should have him on to acknowledge and to help us understand, you know, his input. But I think

probably we've undervalued it by not discussing it as much as we should. So, got to get him on soon.

HRISHI: Yeah. Here's a synopsis of the episode.

JOSH: A Hrishi synopsis. A "Hrynopsis." Sorry. That's Synopsis with an "H."

HRISHI: Right. The staff find a way to stack the FEC with reformers. The first step is shuffling U.S. ambassadors and firing one. Laurie graduates from law school, and when Sam goes to congratulate her, he gets set up by Laurie's friend and presumably Steve Onorato. As a new poll is conducted to check in on the president's approval ratings, CJ feels like she's having trouble asserting authority with the president and the other senior staff. This episode is one of two that was submitted for Allison Janney's Emmy win.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: The other one was your favorite, "woot canal."

JOSH: "Woot canal." Exactly. Well look, she's great in both episodes. She's always great, and I could see how dramatic Janney and comedic Janney, like, why not balance them out. Probably fine choices. I mean I would have a hard time... there are certain ones where you go, oh yeah: In Ex-chell-sis Deo, or In Ex-cell-sis Deo, or...[both laugh] I can't think of a third way to pronounce it. But I can see where you'd pick that one for Richard *for sure*. And then you can find... any other episode could be a second. But short of that, I dunno. I just think that everyone's so great that it's just "Eh, just pick any two." And in the end I think also with a hit show like *The West Wing*, probably most of the people voting have just seen it all and it's just, you know, it's not like, "Oooh, I really would have liked to nominate Allison Janney but she was a little off in the two she picked."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: In the end, you're getting nominated for playing CJ Cregg and playing it brilliantly.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: But it is interesting; it is interesting to note.

HRISHI: This is a fantastic episode for CJ. She's really in control despite her own self-doubt, she's driving a lot of the action in this episode.

JOSH: Yeah, I mean it's a great one for her as a character.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Separate from, I'm just trying to think, is this the best Allison Janney episode? Don't know, but it's a great CJ episode. She gets some power back.

HRISHI: Yeah, we start off with her trying to keep things from going off the rails, when everybody is nitpicking the polling questions.

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*TOBY: The question is asymmetrical.*

*CJ: That may be so, but the question originated two decades ago and is proven to be a consistent predictor of the voters' potential behavior, so it stays the way it is.*

*JOSH: I have a problem with fourteen.*

*CJ: What's your problem?*

*JOSH: [Reading] "When making policy decisions, do you think that President Bartlet puts the needs of the average people first?" "Average people" is a pejorative phrase and it occurs about six times in the polling model.*

*CJ: It may come as a shock to you, but 80% of the people in this country would use the word "average" to describe themselves. They do not find the term deprecating; indeed, being considered an average American is something they find to be positive and comforting.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And she's shooting everybody down and she's really asserting her knowledge and her expertise, and it's great. I like her mild, or maybe not so mild, exasperation with everybody. As she's just trying to like, not veer off course.

JOSH: She's also the one—in what I think is a slightly-predictable-but-it-works-anyway element of the story—she's the one who says that President Bartlet's poll numbers are going to go up. And she even takes Leo to task for not sharing that information with the president. Although he'll have none of it and just kind of misses her summarily. But she at least attempts to say, "Hey, you know, I'm being undervalued here."

HRISHI: What do you think? There's also a part where she's talking to the president, where she says...

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*CJ: I didn't say that, sir.*

*BARTLET: Sorry?*

*CJ: I didn't say we'd hold steady at 42, Mr. President. I said we'd gain five points.*

*BARTLET: Yeah?*

*CJ: Yes, sir.*

*BARTLET: Well, okay. Anybody want to offer CJ the odds?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Do you think that she is reading too much into it, that she's making more of a big deal out of it than it needs to be, because she's feeling insecure?

JOSH: I would say that in a vacuum, if this was the only interaction to judge by, that it would be making a mountain out of a molehill. But I think given the (so far) series-long way that she's been treated at times, I don't blame her. I think her opinion is being sort of shunted aside and undervalued. I think there may be an element of, that Leo didn't want to share, didn't want to build up the president's hopes by saying, "You know, actually CJ thinks you're going to be five points." I think it's his version of poo-poo.

HRISHI: Right, yes.

JOSH: And instead of saying it spitting, he's saying, "I'm just not going to say it." So I think it's possible that CJ is taking it slightly maybe the wrong way and that it's not personal to her but rather Leo just didn't want to say, "Hey, somebody thinks these are going to go up." Because Leo doesn't think they're going to. He thinks they're going to hold steady at best, and most everybody else thinks they're going to hold steady or go down.

HRISHI: But then the part that's confusing is why he doesn't then just say that to CJ. When she says, "Why didn't you include my opinion," he could have just said, "Well, I didn't want to jinx it for him. You know, I think that's a valid opinion, but I don't want to get his hopes up." Could have just said that instead of just saying, "Eh, don't read too much into it."

JOSH: That's a very good point. He could have done her a favor and just told her why he didn't say it. I love getting my hopes up.

HRISHI: You and I are different on this account. I feel like you—

JOSH: It's funny.

HRISHI: —even with the podcast, we've had moments where you're like, "Can't wait to do this." And I'm—even though I did not know about poo-poo yet, I'm just screaming "poo-poo" internally.

JOSH: Well it's funny. Maybe I might be slightly superstitious about saying great things are going to happen. But I am, and have always been since I was young—I remember going, I would do this back and forth. As I started to pursue acting, every time I would audition for something I would get my hopes incredibly, I would just be dreaming, literally go to sleep thinking about being on Broadway and the show that I'd just tried out for. My parents were

always saying, “Don’t get your hopes up, Josh. Don’t get your hopes up.” I remember even saying back then, “I know I’m not going to get it, so let me at least enjoy the ‘hopes up’ phase!” [both laugh] And then it was like, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I deal very well with the eventual disappointment. I understand 99 out of 100 times I don’t get the job, but I don’t want to throw myself off a building at that point, I go on to the next thing. So, I don’t see the harm in me getting my hopes up. Let me at least enjoy that.”

HRISHI: Right. No, you have a good “What’s Next” policy.

JOSH: There you go. And we get our big, meaty, “Okay. What’s next?” at the end of this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, it’s a good one. In the previous episode, we didn’t comment on it, but there’s a little Josh and Joey “Ok/Ok.” I liked that.

JOSH: I did note it.

[West Wing Episode 1.20 excerpt]

*JOEY: Okay.*

*JOSH: Okay.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I noticed in the cold open, Mandy is reduced to the sole utterance of, “Okay, here we go,” as the polling, you know, like you can start the polling. That’s all she gets in the cold open.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Meager. Meager rations for Mandy.

HRISHI: But you know, the painful part for me in this episode is definitely not Mandy. It’s this Laurie and Sam subplot, which I just want to be over.

JOSH: I thought of you. I felt for you as I watched it. I thought, ‘Hrishi is not happy about the return to this.’ Well here, I’ll tell you what, I didn’t particularly, I didn’t love that aspect of this episode myself, or the return to that subplot. But here’s what I found really odd...we’ve talked in the past about not quite being able to pin down what their relationship is. And it just blew up again into 1. Oh they’re still in touch? and 2. What *is* their relationship? Because when Sam is talked out of going to her actual graduation, he calls her, and Laurie is in the library studying for the bar, and she answers the phone like—

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*LAURIE: Hello?*

SAM: Are you in the library?

LAURIE: It's you.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She's *really* psyched to hear from him, certainly seems to be romantic, and I was just sitting there thinking, "Wait a minute, what's going on?" But by the end of the episode I still didn't really know.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's one part of that mystery that I do like, that actually lent some depth to the whole thing that I found a little bit heartbreaking: the fact that it's Sam who gives Laurie the briefcase. If a briefcase is the traditional gift for a law school graduate, and he's the one to give it to her, that means that she doesn't have anybody else in her life to give it to her.

JOSH: Very good point. And that's one of the things I was trying to parse in my mind, too. She seemed really crestfallen that he wasn't going to be at the graduation. And I was thinking maybe she doesn't have a lot of people showing up.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: For her law school graduation.

HRISHI: Right, and so then I was inventing some backstory for her, and all of it was tragic.

JOSH: How dare you.

HRISHI: [laughs] But that was the part that I liked the most, the implication that Sam is the only one in her life to have this kind of, I don't know, tenderness? She's got Sam and she's got her friend.

JOSH: That's "friend" in quotes, right?

HRISHI: Yeah, it's not, yeah. She's got Sam and she's got Janeane, who is a backstabber.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: Opportunistic.

JOSH: As long as we're on this actual subplot, why oh why did Sam decide to meet Laurie on a sidewalk and give her a gift?

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: That was not—I mean, dude. Credulous simplicity.

HRISHI: Right?

JOSH: I mean, it was a grotesque error in judgment, I think, to meet her at all. And compounded by the fact that he assured Toby that he would not. Then on top of it, it's like, "Okay, I am going to meet you outside." I mean now, Janeane may have found a different way to set them up, but they really made it easy on whichever publication it was that took that picture.

HRISHI: Yeah, but at this point now we're past credulous simplicity and we're into incredulous simplicity.

JOSH: There you go. This is true.

HRISHI: I like the turnaround that happens with Toby, in regards to Laurie. How Sam is getting testy at him for just calling her "this girl." But then there's a look that Sam gives Toby when they're in the Oval Office. As they're talking and Toby's kind of defending Sam and the president says:

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

BARTLET: You should also call the girl. What's her name?

SAM AND TOBY: Laurie.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the fact that Toby says her name, just that little detail, you see Sam quickly turn his head and look at him. And even though you don't see Sam's face in that moment, it's a great little thing that he notes.

JOSH: Yeah, I loved that moment as well.

HRISHI: What did you think about Leo and Barry Haskel?

JOSH: Ah. Well first, it should be noted, the guest cast in this episode is overwhelmingly fantastic. And instead of doing them all at once I guess we can do them as we discuss them, but starting with Austin Pendleton, who is just a terrific actor and theatre director. Nominated for a Tony award for directing Elizabeth Taylor in Lillian Hellmann's *The Little Foxes*. Actually you know he, when I was at our alma mater, Yale University, I was a Theatre Studies major and at least once Austin Pendleton took over a scene studies class when my teacher couldn't make it. I have a slightly sweaty, shameful memory of his critiquing a scene. I think I did a scene from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and I must not have been very good, because my memory is that I was excited that Austin Pendleton was teaching our class, but then that maybe I didn't feel like I was very good. [both laugh] But he was a terrific teacher, I mean, he was kind. It's not like he, you know, tore me apart or anything, but I remember thinking, "Aw, I would have liked to have brought my A-game for Austin Pendleton."

HRISHI: Right.



JOSH: In any event, terrific actor. And I like the Barry Haskel setup: Let's impress him, let's get stars in his eyes, I like Rodney the dress Marine, and his moves. The whole thing sort of just kind of amused me. And I like that rather than writing it the way I think most people would, which is just that they bring Barry Haskel in and dazzle him, and unbeknownst to him, they've put on this whole show in order to dazzle him—rather than do that, Aaron ups the stakes and writes himself a greater challenge, which is to have Barry Haskel say—

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*BARRY: When I got the call from your office, my wife and her friends said this is what was going to happen.*

*LEO: What's that.*

*BARRY: That you were gonna use the trappings of the White House, that there was going to be a sort of umm...intimidation?*

*LEO: No one's intimidating you, Barry. You're with us.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He actually is aware of it, and they still get him.

HRISHI: Right, yeah.

JOSH: Which I thought was just kind of great, that Aaron threw in that extra layer of self-awareness. But he's still gonna fall for it.

HRISHI: When they bring Barry Haskel into the Oval Office and he meets this room full of Cabinet members as part of the song and dance, he meets the Attorney General, this guy Dan Larson. But way back in our first appearance of Charlie, it was noted that the Attorney General is black. And this guy is not.

JOSH: You are absolutely correct.

[West Wing Episode 1.3 excerpt]

*JOSH: I really like him, Leo. I want to hire him.*

*LEO: What's the problem?*

*JOSH: He's black.*

*LEO: So's the Attorney General and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That was noteworthy to me because you know, it was part of this conversation about race and diversity, you know, the meta-conversation about diversity in the cast of *The West Wing*. And when they brought Barry Haskel into the room my first thought was, 'Whoa. That is a room full of white men.'

JOSH: It's a very astute point given that they're there largely as props, just to show that these heavyweights have been brought into the Oval, in order to impress Barry Haskel. Why not have—you know, there's no argument for—we've previously mentioned an African American Attorney General—

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And it's not like when it came down to it, the guy who read for it, he doesn't really have anything to do, other than kind of—

HRISHI: He just has to shake his hand and say his name.

JOSH: Right, so I wonder why, actually. Why on earth they didn't cast an African American actor.

HRISHI: Or make him a different Cabinet position.

JOSH: Yeah, right, also of course they could have done that. Although, that is odd. I mean that being said, I think there is also—although I couldn't tell you why they did it—I do think Aaron has a sort of casual disregard for the bible of the show. Most shows have what literally is called the bible, in which the aggregated history and facts of a show are kept in something called the bible. So you know, if there was going to be the Attorney General on screen, they would have in the bible, "Okay, well, what previous mentions do we have of the Attorney General? Oh yeah, here in this episode we mentioned that he's African American, we need to..." So you know, I see a similar thing, and we're finally getting to the scene between Charlie and Ken Cochran.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Clearly a re-working of that scene between Ken Howard, who was playing the Supreme Court Justice—

HRISHI: Yeah, Peyton Harrison.

JOSH: His scene with Charlie and the fact that Charlie had caddied at his club, they're sort of reworking it as Ken Cochran the ambassador and the restricted club, at which Charlie was a waiter, right? I mean, instead of saying, "Well, we've kind of done this scene before, people might..." Aaron just kind of does his thing.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know, I'm just remembering a thing that I thought of ages ago when you were talking, when we were talking about ret-conning. You know that term: retconning? Retcon?

JOSH: Spell it for me, and then I'll admit that I don't know what it is.

HRISHI: R-E-T-C-O-N. It's not a real word, it stands for "retroactive continuity." It's a comic book thing, mostly.

JOSH: Oh. I figured it was either that or Star Trek. Every time you say something like that, I feel it's going to be some political thing that I really should be familiar with.

HRISHI: No, no, no. But you read comics, so you should—

JOSH: I do, actually, I love graphic novels and I should, but I do not, know what retconning is.

HRISHI: Retconning is when you—yeah, it's retroactive continuity.

JOSH: I suspect I understand where this is going. Which is I guess it kind of ties into what Aaron—Aaron does not do retcon, right?

HRISHI: In that he's like, we're like, "Okay well I guess that's what the story is now," even though previously on *The West Wing* —

JOSH: But he doesn't explain, for instance, that the Attorney General—

HRISHI: Has changed?

JOSH: [laughing] Had a process done.

HRISHI: [laughs] Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: He no longer appears to be African American.

HRISHI: As the series goes on, we're going to get some serious retconning.

JOSH: That's also now my new favorite word.

HRISHI: Isn't it great?

JOSH: I love it. I love that there's a word for everything.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Ah, I love English. Well I guess, or German. German really has a word for everything. But, retcon. I'm going to use that *a lot* .

HRISHI: Awesome. Here's a little moment that I liked. When CJ and the president are talking early in the episode, and they're walking into the Oval, she gives Charlie a high five? Not a high five. She gives him a low five.

JOSH: Who does?

HRISHI: CJ.

JOSH: Wow, I did not notice that.

HRISHI: It happens quickly, as they're walking through the, you know, whatever, the Mrs. Landingham/Charlie zone, they say hi to him. And first the president says hi and then she says hi and as she walks by, it's pretty low, she gives him five. It's pretty great.

JOSH: And then I don't know if you noticed, right after that, there's a nanosecond subliminal shot of Sam doing his dance from "The Jackal". [both laugh]

HRISHI: Let's talk about what's surely gotta be one of your favorite things in this episode, which is Donna asking Josh why he hasn't taken his assistant to Maui, because that's a thing that bosses do for their assistants.

JOSH: I'm going to turn to my note page for that, and I wrote "uck." U-C-K. [both laugh] U-C-K, underlined three times, with an exclamation point.

HRISHI: I wrote that, bosses take their assistants to Maui? Only when they are schtupping.

JOSH: Well, there you go. Yeah, here's a...I've gotten a mixture of support and denigration for my stance on Josh and Donna. Some people just love them to bits, others agree with me, that it's a little bit...some people are saying, and I think I might have to agree, because I don't know that I felt this way when I originally watched, but somehow rewatching it, with an eye—a discerning eye—on that relationship, it's a little bit icky to me.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: I mean, it's like, get a room! Either, I know, whatever, it'll happen or it won't, but enough already! You're at work. Stop it.

HRISHI: How do you feel about workplace romances in general, not necessarily televised?

JOSH: What do I think actually as a real human being?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Ummm, I don't even really know. I guess, if you keep it to yourselves...in other words, if it doesn't affect work, if you're not walking around flirting the whole day instead of doing your jobs, I've got no problem with it. If I worked on that White House staff, I think it would really bother me. I wish someone in one of these Walk-and-Talks, as they flirt and do their thing, that everyone they pass is rolling their eyes.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Like, uggggghhhhhhhhhh.

HRISHI: We get another great Margaret-ism in this episode. I mean, we're just, she's on a roll. This is now three episodes in a row, where she has this little moment of quirky Margaret-ness.

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*MARGARET: Leo?*

*LEO: Yeah.*

*MARGARET: CJ's here.*

*LEO: Okay...*

*MARGARET: Wanna hear a joke? LEO: Uh, okay.*

*MARGARET: You know why they only eat one egg for breakfast in France?*

*LEO: Why?*

*MARGARET: Because in France, one egg is un oeuf . [pause] Okay, CJ's here.*

*LEO: Okay...*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, and I like how NiCole Robinson plays these moments, she plays them pretty straight and dry.

HRISHI: So dry.

JOSH: She's got a great delivery. I like what she's doing and I like that — and I think this would be, were we to ask him, I think that Aaron would confirm that this is another situation where Aaron probably picked up on what she was doing in the little moments that he was giving her and he liked it and started writing for the character more.

HRISHI: Yeah, it seems like both writer and actor are really enjoying it. Those little bits must be so much fun. Here's a great thing: when Joey and Josh are talking about Theodore Roosevelt, and he gives her the Roosevelt quote, and she says:

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*KENNY: What kind of boarding house?*

*JOSH: Polyglot, it means having knowledge of or speaking—*

*KENNY: I know what polyglot means.*

JOSH: Then why did you ask me?

JOEY: He asked!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: When they're signing that, "polyglot" is finger-spelled, which I believe means that there is no actual word, right? Isn't that how it works in ASL? If there's no actual word for the word, then you finger-spell it. And I loved that of all the words to not have a word for, it's polyglot.

JOSH: That is funny, although we learn in this conversation that Kenny doesn't know what the word means, so if there is an ASL word for it, he doesn't know that word. So he has to spell it.

HRISHI: Right, but Joey finger-spells it, too.

JOSH: Oh, she finger-spells it? Well there you go then, well then, you have a very good point.

HRISHI: Or she was just accommodating Kenny, because he didn't know it, like you said.

JOSH: I also enjoyed that for the first time Kenny actually gets in the way of their conversation; at one point she kind of bats him aside. Which I thought was funny. We were lauding Bill O'Brien last podcast for his elegance and his ability to move between them, and I thought it was funny that there was kind of a comic moment where she just kind of pushes him aside because she's trying to get to Josh.

HRISHI: Since we're talking about language a little bit, Josh, wanted to talk about the word "podcast" for a second.

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: Like you just said, "in the last podcast." But I think that there is some difference of opinion on how that gets used. Like I would say, "in the last episode of this podcast," right? Is the word podcast referring to the show in general, or is it referring to a single episode? It's used both ways, but my preference is to use the word podcast to talk about the entire entity.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's better. I think one might say "in the last *West Wing* ," but that is certainly an odd way to phrase things, saying "the last *West Wing* " as opposed to "the last episode of *West Wing* ."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I think you're absolutely right. I think, and here I will point out, I never understand when people don't like to be corrected.

HRISHI: Oh, yeah.

JOSH: I think you just pointed out a good thing that I will modify when I next refer to an episode of our podcast. I understand not wanting to be corrected in front of people and stuff but sometimes I don't understand an aversion to somebody setting you right. Like if I'm mispronouncing something, I want someone to say hang on, I think you're mispronouncing that word.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I'm really just patting myself on the back for being not defensive and open, really, to all your [expletive deleted] criticism. [both laugh]

HRISHI: Well, I really appreciate it in you. And I think it is a valuable quality. I mean, if you didn't...how could we ever go to school or something like that if you didn't want to get better at stuff?

JOSH: That's a good point.

HRISHI: Being corrected is a lesson. I don't know. I guess it depends on who's doing the correcting and how they're doing it.

JOSH: But here's another thing and it's interesting that you point out an imprecise use of language, because one of the things I wrote down about this episode is that Aaron glories in language, and *The West Wing* is a celebration of language, and this particular episode includes a comic dissection of the language of the polling questions early on. Now this is something we discussed in our—

HRISHI: FiveThirtyEight.

JOSH: —in the *episode* of the FiveThirtyEight podcast that we did, that crossover episode we did with FiveThirtyEight. We talked about polling, we talked about that specific scene early in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, Nate Silver addressed in our conversation this very topic, which is a real question that comes up in polls. Here's Nate:

[FiveThirtyEight Episode "Politics Podcast: Good Use Of Polling Or Bad Use Of Polling — In 'The West Wing'" excerpt]

*NATE: No, because you know, right direction versus wrong track, that is asymmetrical! And that question—it is! And often people say, "You know, 'wrong track' doesn't sound so bad. 'Wrong direction' sounds much more firm," right? And so often their responses to the question tend to be maybe more negative than people's mood is, but as the characters are saying, if you've been asking the same question for a long time, then a flawed measure that you know how to correct for might be better than a new measure that you're in the dark for what it means in context.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And it's interesting, and it's interesting in its relation to polling, but it's also to me of interest just in the sense that Aaron in this show exalts language and the importance of language and the attempt to employ it in a precise manner.

HRISHI: Right, and on top of that, there is the actual debate that's going on between Joey and Josh, the reason why he's quoting Theodore Roosevelt, which is English as the official national language. And she eloquently puts that:

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*KENNY: Aside from it being bigoted and unconstitutional, it's ludicrous to think that laws need to be created to help protect the language of Shakespeare.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's great. And you know the whole thing races by as a little comic/romantic minor subplot, but there's some meat on those bones.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's something to the way Josh says to the president...

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*JOEY: [blows raspberry]*

*JOSH: She did it again.*

*BARLET: Yeah.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I don't know exactly what it is, but it's something like... joyfully complaining about your girlfriend to her dad?

JOSH: Yeah, yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: Something like that you know, like how you're getting teased?

JOSH: Yeah, right. Where he's really saying, "This is what I love about her."

HRISHI: Right, yeah. There are a couple moments in the episode where Martin Sheen delivers his line a little fast, he's a little bit ahead of the beat in his response. And I love it. I think it's funnier because of it. Like when Toby asks him, when the president gives him all the Wikipedia entry of the Federated States of Micronesia, and Toby asks, "Why would a person have that



information at their disposal?” And before he can even really get out the last word, the president says, “Parties.”

JOSH: “Parties.”

HRISHI: And then it happens again between the two of them after Toby’s offered the ambassadorship, the president says:

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*BARTLET: Full diplomatic immunity?*

*TOBY: Yes, sir. Though there really aren’t a whole lot of laws in Micronesia, so—*

*BARTLET: Sure.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Again, like kind of just a little bit too fast, and it’s just funnier that way.

JOSH: Yeah. Well it’s funny that you point out, I thought you were going to go somewhere else with this. That is, I sometimes notice with Aaron’s work and with other writers like Shonda Rhimes, who are very dialogue-heavy and call on the actor to speak very quickly, that on occasion an actor can’t really handle it and the words are spilling out ahead of what could possibly be their thought process. I sometimes pick up on it, when the words are getting ahead of the actor and it’s such a fine line. You know, my feeling is that I’ve always maintained that it’s very easy to act Aaron’s writing. Basically if you say the words in the right order you look like a pretty good actor; you just kind of get out of the way of them. But sometimes on a *West Wing* or a *Scandal*, the words are just ahead of the actor and it really doesn’t work when that happens. But that’s not, of course, what you were accusing Martin Sheen of.

HRISHI: No, no. It was—I always wonder if that’s an acting decision or if that’s a direction thing, but it worked for me really well.

JOSH: Yeah. It’s an interesting question. I will say that Don Scardino has incredible comic timing, both as a person and an actor, and a director, so I’m not surprised that you’d find little moments like that where the timing really enhances the laugh in an episode that he directed.

HRISHI: Yeah. So speaking of other guest actors in this episode, we get Senator Max Lobell, played by David Huddleston.

JOSH: May he rest in peace. He passed on very recently.

HRISHI: I know him best as the Big Lebowski.

JOSH: The Big Lebowski. And I, being even older than you, know him as Olson Johnson in *Blazing Saddles* .

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And he's one of those guys—well this is another thing, and I'll eventually—well, I was going to wait until they've all been mentioned, but we'll talk later about Lawrence Pressman as Ken Cochran. In addition to language, *The West Wing* celebrates character acting.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And character actors. And people like John Spencer and I would say Martin Sheen, and Richard Schiff and David Huddleston and Lawrence Pressman and Austin Pendleton, these are the stars of a television series, and if you lined them up, you wouldn't prior to this necessarily say, "These are the guys who are going to be the stars of television." They are character actors. And Aaron writes incredible dialogue for character actors. And I love that about the show, and the class of actor that he gets for what on occasion, or often I should say, are very small appearances, is astounding. You get these great, great actors and great faces. It's one of the things I just love about this show.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's not like they're trying to cram everything in with famous people coming in for guest roles all the time. There's not this pressure to get names.

JOSH: Right, in other words, you're exactly right. They avoid stunt casting and they just employ great actors.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And each of these guys has a resume as long as your arm, I mean, the kind of guys where you go, "Oh I know I've seen that guy 100 times," and you look and he's done way more than a hundred things, but you can't necessarily name ten things that they've done, but you've seen them all over the place. That's my kind of actor.

HRISHI: I love the exchange between Senator Lobell and the president. And that you know that here's a moment where that kind of political deal-making isn't actually happening.

JOSH: Yeah, and when they call out in sort of that stereotypical way how they each view the other.

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*BARTLET: 'Cause I'm a lily-livered, bleeding-heart, liberal, egghead communist.*

*LOBELL: Yes, sir. And I'm a gun-toting, redneck son of a bitch.*

*BARTLET: Yes, you are.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's a great little moment here.

HRISHI: Yeah. They talk about briefcases... briefcases. *Briefcase* .

JOSH: Briefcases. Briefcases! That was my nickname in high school. [both laugh] I never knew why.

HRISHI: Okay, let me try that again. When they're talking about the *briefcase* , we get some great tech specs.

JOSH: Tech specs! That was my nickname in high school. [both laugh] I never found out why.

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*BARTLET: What kind of briefcase did you get her, Sam?*

*SAM: Coach Beekman in British tan with brass hardware.*

*BARTLET: That's nice.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So we get Lawrence Pressman as Ambassador Ken Cochran, the ambassador to Bulgaria, the president summons him back to fire him. He's been having an affair with the prime minister's daughter. Lawrence Pressman, a face we remember from many, many things including Hart of Dixie , the original American Pie , The Man in the Glass Booth , Star Trek: Deep Space 9 ( that's for you, Hrishu).

HRISHI: I've never seen it!

JOSH: Don't retcon your life. You've seen every episode.

HRISHI: [laughs] Well done.

JOSH: And, perhaps most importantly, the father of David Pressman, a dear friend of mine and a terrific actor. We co-starred together in a very, very short-lived sitcom called *Imagine That* , and it was not successful. Imagine that! But he's a terrific actor, as is his father, and it's a pretty great scene.

HRISHI: I love the scene when he and Charlie are in the room together and Charlie's face. Just before he's even said anything, especially since I know what's coming, has just got this barely contained glee, even before he's said anything to him.

JOSH: Yeah, it's great. I also like Lawrence Pressman's performance because he's got a lot going on. There's shock, there's shame, there's anger, and just in this one brief scene it all plays from one moment to the next. It's a nice piece of acting, in a very short period, which is what we get a lot from these guest stars on the show.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And also I like that Bartlet's in his groove mode, he's enjoying it, he's just got a big old grin on his face, he's delighted when it turns out that he's correct, that there is history between these two. He's enjoying firing Cochran, he's just going from room to room kind of bouncing around and doing his thing. And it's fun to see him in that mode.

HRISHI: It seems like a silly thing to mention 21 episodes deep into talking about a TV show, but how blown away I am by acting sometimes, how much I forget about it. I guess maybe I've said this already about Martin Sheen, that I just forget that he is acting a lot of the time. When he stops, he says...

[West Wing Episode 1.21 excerpt]

*BARTLET: Wait a second. You two have a past?!*

*CHARLIE: Sir—*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And he's like, his surprise registered is so real to me.

JOSH: Yeah, that's a great moment of delight.

HRISHI: I like the way he says the word "past" in that exchange. It's funny. I don't know, maybe it's that kind of old New England, kind of Kennedy-esque way of speaking? It jumped out at me.

JOSH: Did you notice that in that, I guess it's the final scene when they're in the Oval waiting for the polling numbers, right, the polling results, you can hear the clock? They actually get a sound that the grandfather clock is ticking, to help build the suspense and the weight.

HRISHI: Did you like after they get the polling results, and there's a shot of every single member of the cast giving their version of the happy smiles?

JOSH: Uhhh, that didn't bother me. I did write, "Music?"

HRISHI: That didn't bother you?! When they go around and it's like, "Actually we went up nine points," and then they cut from every—one-shots of every single character, and it reminded me of what we were talking about before—

JOSH: "I serve at the pleasure."

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: I somehow didn't pick up on it, and I think it was because I was furiously scribbling, "Music?" [both laugh] Because I wasn't sure I loved the music at the end there. Which I guess is just I should probably stop saying it. I guess that's just how I often react to the music.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I sometimes feel a little robbed of my...And again, it's not like the music is bad, it's just sometimes there are moments that I feel don't need the full-on...

HRISHI: You don't need the bow.

JOSH: I'm already feeling it.

HRISHI: Right. It's a bow that's tying everything together, and you don't need it.

JOSH: Yeah, a little bit of the bow, exactly. The musical bow.

HRISHI: Unrelated to the episode, but related to that...there's a piece of advice that I heard Rick Moody give one time to writers that I really like, and has been kind of a thing that I think about in all creative endeavors I think. He said that when he finishes a book and he's like, feels really satisfied about how he's ended it, and he's like "Yes, THE END," he goes back and he deletes the last sentence that he writes. And that becomes the ending.

JOSH: That's intriguing.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think about that a lot. It has really helped curb an instinct in me I think to want to try and tie things up in a bow and feel like, "Okay, and now everything is done, neat package." You don't have to put too fine of a point on it. Oftentimes it's better when you leave a little bit of air, so delete that last sentence.

JOSH: Well that's a very good articulation of I think what I feel often as a viewer. Not necessarily this show, but all sorts of things, I think you're right.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That's a good practice. Although I think I'm in my head enough that once I started adopting that as a writer, I would just add an extra line at the end. [both laugh] I would just be like, "And then I ate ice cream," and then I'd go back and delete the ridiculous last line. I'm saying I've found a loophole, that's all. That's all.

HRISHI: And now we're going to take a quick break.

[ad break]

HRISHI: We're joined now by Bill O'Brien, who is currently the Senior Advisor for Innovation to the Chairman at the National Endowment for the Arts. But we know him best as Kenny, Joey Lucas's interpreter on *The West Wing*. Thanks so much for joining us!

BILL: Thanks for having me, it's great to be here.

JOSH: Welcome to the show.

HRISHI: Let's start here: How did you get the role of Kenny Thurman?

BILL: It was a really interesting time because I had basically been transitioning away from being an actor into being a producer and a managing director at that point.

HRISHI: In theatre?

BILL: In theatre, yeah, I was the managing director and producing director for Deaf West Theatre. I had been knocking around on stage for years, mostly in theatre, lots of bus-and-trucks, performed in 48 states, and had been kind of trying to knock through the doors in L.A. for a couple years. But then the Deaf West thing came up, and so I'm about a year into, "Nope, not auditioning anymore," and then I get this call from a guy who wasn't my manager but he knew me, and his name was Sid Craig, and he had been called by Warner Brothers basically. They knew he was affiliated, he was on the board of Deaf West, so he called and said, "You gotta get over there right now." They'd already done I think two rounds where most of the people who knew how to sign had kind of been through an early stage rehearsal, and so basically it's one of those things where, you know, as they say, I went straight to producer. So I walked in the room, and it was really intimidating because there was Marlee Matlin—who I knew and she knew me, but we didn't really know each other very well—Aaron Sorkin, Tommy Schlamme, and then heads of various departments of Warner Brothers. And I think we read through the scene that ended up being our first scene, the big switcharoo on who's talking. Josh is hungover and can't figure out, I'm yelling at him, he's yelling back at me, I'm saying, "No, that was her."

JOSH: Right, in "Take the Sabbath Day."

BILL: Yes, where he was terrifically hung over, wakes up with Joey Lucas coming in and yelling at him through my voice. And it was like a Marx brothers thing. Everybody was breaking up and Marlee gave me a huge hug afterwards. So as auditions go, it was one of the most fun I've ever had.

JOSH: And do you remember were they looking at both women and men? We like that they cast a man to be, in a sense, the voice for this female character.

BILL: Yeah, I think that was intentional, I mean we never discussed it, but I can tell you that the other two people that were at that last stage, the only choices to be made at that point were male.

HRISHI: Interesting. You said you knew Marlee from before that. Had you guys ever worked together?

BILL: No, but she was a big fan of Deaf West, came to all of our openings, knew me as the managing director basically, and the guy who jumped up on stage every so often.

HRISHI: And how did you learn sign language? Where did that come from in your life?

BILL: Kind of an odd story, my first job out of college—I grew up in Iowa, went to University of Northern Iowa, and then I won an American College Theatre Festival acting competition that brought me out to Washington, D.C., the Irene Ryan Awards at the Kennedy Center. And in the audience one of the judges actually was a guy who ran a theatre tour out of Rochester, New York, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and he basically offered me a job to write music and be one of the six actors (three hearing and three deaf) to do a 10-month tour across the country and Europe. I ended up putting that on hold for a year and did a year of Shakespeare instead, but then I did that the following year, and it was really just kind of being dropped in the deep end of the pool. I was the only person who didn't sign fluently, and the other two hearing actors were really interpreters who sort of acted occasionally, so I was kind of the professional actor that was brought in. And the tables were kind of turned really, it really gave me a sense of what it was like maybe to be a deaf person in a hearing world; I was a hearing person in a deaf world, riding around in a van and certainly the first few months it felt like there was a conspiracy theory of information that was being passed around the van and I was excluded and you know, you can get really paranoid. Every time someone glances your way, you're like, "Are you talking about me?" So that was kind of where I learned sign and I was a fluent signer by the end, but I was especially intrigued by all the tools that a deaf actor could bring to the stage or to the camera or whatever. They have more to work with, really, just in terms of they're used to using their entire body and their face to get across the entire thing that they're trying to communicate. And it was an interesting thing to start peering into the kind of German clock that goes into how you bring all of that together in a way that's going to communicate effectively for both hearing and deaf audiences at the same time. And that's why both Deaf West and then *The West Wing* were really great little sandboxes, or big sandboxes, to continue to kind of unpack and experiment with that.

JOSH: It seems like a particularly complicated dance to perform for camera where you're doing, even upping the difficulty level on *The West Wing* by incorporating you and integrating you into Walk-and-Talks. Were those as difficult to stage as I imagine them to be?

BILL: Yeah, oh, more. It was a fantastic challenge. But one of the things that made it so difficult specifically for this show was that...it became apparent to me from the first table read. Not until I saw, or rather heard, it out loud, not so much when I read it, but when we went to the table read, it really struck me right away how Aaron's voice had such very specific musicality to it. And it was almost like Shakespeare in terms of how I'd first go back and scan how it needs to sound, because if you interrupted the rhythm it was just going to fall flat. And I think that was the core challenge and the person I really have to give a lot of credit to in helping me navigate all of that

would be Jack Jason, who you've probably seen as Marlee's interpreter whenever she does a talk show or whatever. He's also her producing partner. And Jack and I would—as soon as we got the script, we'd go video tape and come up with the sign translation and map it out in a way that we knew that it was going to flow in the way that it needed to flow, and that also involved a lot of work on Marlee's end, because she couldn't just always naturally sign it the way she would've because that may not be in the rhythm of the sound of it.

JOSH: Wow.

BILL: It's always a bit of a dance, and that's something that Deaf West, we were particularly good at that part of that magic at Deaf West in terms of, especially when we got into musicals, the more time you spend on translation and the more you have that stuff worked out, you know, the more equipped you are. But of course with Aaron, he's constantly rewriting. So whenever I'd come to a table read and we were going to start filming in one or two days and he'd say, "Okay that was great, just keep pages 9 through 14 and throw the rest out," I'd be like, "Ohhhh my god."

JOSH: Oh, that aspect of it never even occurred to me, wow, that must have been crushingly difficult for you.

BILL: I think the sensation was really like trying to surf Jaws with one surfing lesson. And part of it had to do with...I could never for a millisecond get ahead of Joey, or it would just completely fall apart, definitely for every deaf person watching, but I think quite a few hearing people might catch it as well. It can't be Kenny dictating what's being said, he can't be ahead of Joey.

JOSH: Right.

BILL: And then so it was always like really trying to surf that fine line of allowing it to sound right and allowing the poetry and the musicality of Aaron's voice to have landed right, and then the third layer on top of that, which is everything really, was being true to what Marlee was doing in the moment. You know, so I was just trying to be kind of like an antenna at that point, but still twisting all kinds of knobs and levers while I'm trying to be natural.

HRISHI: Can you talk about the character of Kenny Thurman? What was your view into that character?

BILL: That's an interesting thing. I knew a number of interpreters, and how fully dedicated they were to removing themselves completely. That's not something I'm very good at in real life.

HRISHI: I've noticed, or I really appreciate, how you deliver the lines. Like, you're not matching Joey Lucas's emotion necessarily in the way that she was, you know, what she was saying. There was still kind of an even keel to Kenny. Is that part of that job of removing yourself, or is that something you felt like was an indication of what Kenny's like?



BILL: Sign language typically looks bigger than the translation would be when you use your full gesture and your facial expression. Now Marlee's not extreme in that way at all, but certainly I think on television it's amplified a little bit. It's just natural for her in her authentic way to be signing and communicating. For hearing people who are not used to deaf culture to think that they are being more expressive than they actually are, in terms of "wow, she's really angry." Sometimes, no, that's not it at all.

HRISHI: Right.

BILL: So I think in all honesty what I was trying to do whenever I was interpreting for her I was trying to channel as best I could, you know, both the sound of what I'm saying and how that's going to communicate to the audience, but also above all making sure that I was being as absolutely true to her as I could be. So I think some of that might just be in that the interpreter in real life would have maybe sounded a little less expressive, and if anything I think that if you ever saw a smidge of Kenny leaking in, it would have been usually like in those moments right before and right after—

JOSH: Mmhmm.

BILL: —where, you know, this is actually a person in the room for a second, reacting to a chair, or to Josh. There was a few slight moments where I think there would be a little bit of a glance exchanged between Joey and the interpreter, you know, on like that thing he just said or whatever. But for the most part I tried to keep that very, very minimal.

JOSH: Well, you found yourself a conduit to conversation both about heady policy, and you found yourself in the middle of a burgeoning romance.

BILL: Yeah. [laughs] And that certainly was funny, I mean, I would like to, I was hoping I would get a chance to say to your audience at some point that I'm still not sleeping with Al Kiefer. [all laugh] But yeah, I mean so much of that was easy to pull off because of the writing, you know, like most things. All I had to do was like, what I would actually do, and the comedy would just be there, or the nuance. So, that stuff was definitely fun. I mean I think, first and foremost I think that if there's like backstory, that I would think about and occasionally talk a little bit about with Marlee. But we didn't have to do that very much. I think the assumption was that these two are both very, very good at what they're doing.

JOSH: Right.

BILL: Extremely competent. One of the things that I just, if I take myself, Bill O'Brien, you know, deaf theatre guy out of it, I think the thing that I liked the most about how Joey Lucas was incorporated into the show, and I think this is really rare, I can't really think of another instance where, here comes this deaf person dropped in the middle of this story arc, and there is really almost zero attention paid to the fact that she is deaf.

JOSH: That's right.

BILL: And it sort of, I think, in some ways, instantly gave you a sense of how evolved these people were that were around her. It didn't give them pause for a second. Toby, or any of them, didn't go, "What's this?" They just immediately were like "Oh, she's got a lot to say." I love the idea also that was established pretty quickly and I think this episode helped a little bit with that, and this stuff kind of operates in the background. That's another thing that's so good about this show, it seemed like you could just sense that everybody started to really quickly understand what her competence level was, and that she's somebody they should listen to, and Al Kiefer might be just somebody that should go away now.

JOSH: And did you do many takes?

BILL: No, not really. I would *absolutely* lose my lunch if I thought we had to do another take because of me.

JOSH: That's always the pressure, especially on those walk and talks, you know, one blown moment, you have to come back to the beginning.

BILL: Well, the other thing is the end of the episode when we're all around the Oval Office and it seemed like there was a number of those scenes that involved *everybody* .

HRISHI: [laughs] Right.

BILL: So, you know, it's like I am not just wasting Marlee's time, I'm wasting Martin Sheen's time, and John Spencer, and, you know. I think the only, the one time that I will say that I do recall having a really tough time was at the fundraising thing, where there's a mansion in L.A., and because there was so many stars there—Jay Leno and David Hasselhoff, etc.—

JOSH: That's right.

BILL: —they filmed them first, so that they could get their bits in and get gone, and one of the last ones to come through was David Hasselhoff. And Aaron gave him a tremendously complicated bunch of stuff to say, to sort of surprise the audience, that you wouldn't think David Hasselhoff would have these political opinions, I guess.

HRISHI: Right.

BILL: What ended up happening is, there was many many takes on that, and by the time it finally got to Marlee and I, we'd been there for...God, I don't know, 14 hours or something? And it was like 3 in the morning, and I was just like, "Oh my god." And I think we did have to do, we didn't do a lot of takes, but it was the time where I felt like I was at my least best. Otherwise I think it was, you know—Marlee and I probably, because of the translation stuff and all of that, were more rehearsed than most people were, because we had to be. So usually we didn't have to do many takes.

HRISHI: Did you have to educate directors? I mean, you were doing so much research before

you got to the set it sounds like; did you ever have an issue where the directors didn't understand what it was that you had to do?

BILL: Not really. And I could kind of alleviate myself from having to play that role because there was Jack Jason always on set, and I think he was officially kind of a consultant in that way, so if there was a question or if there was something that needed to be adjusted, Jack would spot it before I'd have to say anything. And then, you know, I'd just see him over there talking to the director and then I'd see the solution and I didn't have to do much about trying to create it. The interpreters that I've watched at Deaf West that I tried to emulate, the other one is Jack Jason, absolutely. I mean, he does this, and he's been at Marlee's side since *Children of a Lesser God* doing this. And, you know, with Marlee, there's probably no other person on the planet that I could think of that has been in these high-profile kinds of situations, and trying to help navigate really in a hot spotlight, and he's always done that with a lot of panache. So he was definitely a model for this, no question.

JOSH: Well you know it's an interesting thing how, I wonder, was there ever any discussion of his playing Kenny? I mean, we had a significant conversation about you because it really requires an actor, it's not somebody who's simply interpreting for her, but an actor playing a character in this scene.

BILL: Yeah. I think, and I do recall there being...Jack mentioned something to me, and he could answer better than I could, but you know the first thing I'd say is I do think that Jack could have done this, no question. He's not necessarily a trained actor, but he's been in show biz, he's been on the couch, you know?

JOSH: Right.

BILL: And I think he could definitely pull it off. My sense, and I forget if it was, I think it was him that said that it was considered briefly, but people would recognize him.

JOSH: That's an interesting point, too.

BILL: You know, he's been on *The Tonight Show* with Marlee, he's been on *Good Morning America* with Marlee, and it would pull people out of the *West Wing* world if you saw Jack with her.

HRISHI: Right, yeah, that makes sense. Was this your first TV credit?

BILL: There was a couple of other shows that I did do, I don't think before then. You'd think I'd know this, wouldn't you? *Gideon's Crossing*, *Providence*, and then after I moved to the NEA I had a friend who wrote a role for me on *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. But yeah, and to be honest with you, the number of auditions I've done for television I could count on less than one hand.

HRISHI: Could you tell us about what you're up to now? I really wanted to make sure we talk about the military healing program.

BILL: There is something about *The West Wing* that I love so much that is true in my actual real world job. [laughs] Basically, I've been running this innovation office for the NEA since about 2009, mostly focused on things at the intersections of art and science, all of which are really fascinating, creativity-in-the-brain kinds of things. And STEM to STEAM, integrating arts and humanities in STEM learning. But the one that really I think is for me the most resonant is a partnership that we've had since 2012 with the Department of Defense. It involves creative arts therapies being integrated into patient-centered care. And when I say patient-centered care, they're *really* really doing it. There's a place called the National Intrepid Center of Excellence. They basically just said, "We want to invest heavily in confronting the most wicked issues that are confronting active duty folks right now." And so, when you think the signature wounds, or the invisible wounds of war, that are associated with traumatic brain injury, concussive events, and tracked with psychological health issues, we are very intrigued because we were looking at how the arts impacts not just your experience when you go to the things that we traditionally fund—you know, the theatre and ballet and opera, etc., all of which obviously, you know, I'm hugely supportive of—but how do we look outside of those lines and think about what the resonance for art is in healing, in education, in human development. And these guys at the NICoE were basically going all in on advancing ways of integrating both traditional and non-traditional approaches to confront this very specific problem. The arts arenas are where we unpack those things. So, we have Republican-chaired Senate and House committee members who are basically applauding this program and saying, "Here's some funds to expand it out and we've promised by the end of February to have 12 of these up and running in different parts of the country." So we're pretty busy right now, but awesome stuff.

JOSH: Wow, it's heartening to hear that the Department of Defense would be so forward-thinking and open to this kind of creative approach to healing. And that Congress might actually support it, it's nice to hear.

BILL: Yeah, you know, I think when I was talking to my bosses, they were really surprised at how receptive the military was, and I think over time I've learned that maybe that was naïve of us and of me to think that way, because if you look at medical innovations across American history, the military was right there driving things forward, because they had to for very specific reasons. And I think because this issue that they're dealing with has to do with psychological complexity, there's a willingness and an eagerness to take this tool and use it to its utmost. They want to understand these afflictions better and they want to build resilience in the people who have raised their hand and have gone and served for us. And I think at the end of the day, this is going to be really compelling if all of the technologies and all of the research that's being advanced up there winds up being the military coming out and saying, "This is your brain on art."

HRISHI: It sounds like a very *West Wing* kind of program. It sounds amazing.

BILL: Totally. *Totally*. You know, I was watching *The West Wing* the other night and I was like, I don't think at the time I was filming that that I ever thought that people actually could feel that way if they were working the real government. You know, and the administration at that time wasn't something I was enormously connected to. But I really do think, I mean, there is a lot of people that I've met who are working for the government who actually really do jump out of bed in the morning. Definitely everybody on the team that I'm working with across the military and NEA on this initiative. The key thing on this I realized is something that I learned at Deaf West, which is the notion that the success of your production is 95% dependent upon your casting. Definitely, obviously Aaron had an awful lot to do with it, but what a cast, you know? And if we can continue to build out with the same kind of people who feel the same way, it's going to work, no matter how badly I might be trying to screw it up at the top. [laughs]

JOSH: Well, you were a very key part of that cast, and I'm glad that we got to have our moment with you. Keep up the incredible work that you're involved in now.

BILL: Yeah, I wish I would have had a little more time to work with you, Josh. You came in sort of towards the end and Marlee was constantly pregnant [all laugh] during those years.

JOSH: Yeah, a little bit like ships in the night though.

BILL: Yeah, yeah.

HRISHI: Thank you so much for taking time to talk to us.

BILL: Thanks so much for the call, guys. It was a thrill to be a part of this.

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for joining us, and we hope you'll join us next time. This episode was produced by Josh and me, and it was edited and mixed by Zach McNees.

JOSH: Go buy a pin. [both laugh]

HRISHI: And you can leave a comment for us about this episode on our website: [thewestwingweekly.com](http://thewestwingweekly.com), or on our Facebook page: [facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://facebook.com/thewestwingweekly).

JOSH: In the meantime, you can also follow us on Twitter and, really, why aren't you? We've asked you twenty times now? Just do it! Follow us on Twitter. I'm @JoshMalina, he's @HrishiHirway, that starts with an "h." There's another "h" somewhere in the middle. Come on!

HRISHI: It's true.

JOSH: Follow us on Twitter. We also both tweet, although really it's largely Hrishi [both laugh] from—

HRISHI: @WestWingWeekly.

JOSH: Ok

HRISHI: Ok

BILL: What's next?

[Closing theme music]

JOSH: And then I ate ice cream.