

The West Wing Weekly
2.00: "Special Interim Session"
Guest: Aaron Sorkin

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina. In our last episode we wrapped season 1 of *The West Wing*. Our plan had been to take a week off, then bring you the premier of season 2 in a special 2-part episode, but then just a few days ago we finally had the chance to sit down and talk to the man himself: Aaron Sorkin.

HRISHI: So we'll be discussing In The Shadow of Two Gunmen Parts 1 & 2 next week. But first we're very excited to present our conversation with Aaron, talking about this interstitial moment that we're at right now: the end of season 1 and the beginning of season 2.

JOSH: Aaron Sorkin, of course, is the creator of the show we all love, *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: He also wrote the films *A Few Good Men*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, *The American President*, and *The Social Network*, for which he won an Oscar. In addition to *The West Wing*, he was the creator of the TV shows *Sports Night*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, and *The Newsroom*.

JOSH: We only had about an hour with him so we had the mikes rolling before he arrived and we just jumped right in. So here we go.

HRISHI: I have to do, you know, a little synopsis. And for the first several episodes I was reading the NBC synopses of the show and they were worded so strangely...

JOSH: They are odd.

AARON: It would drive me crazy and...

JOSH: I can only imagine

AARON: Any promotional material, that was really the only real estate that NBC had control of.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: And that's why our promos every week, no matter what the episode coming up was about, the world was always coming to an end on *The West Wing* on Wednesday night.

JOSH: They would try to spice it up?

AARON: Oh yeah, you know, deep voice and, you know, a hero will fall.

JOSH: They must have been so delighted when you actually decided to shoot somebody. 'Now you're talking!'

HRISHI: But me trying to read those each week on mike, Josh gives me so much [expletive deleted] because I cannot get them out. They're not musically written at all and I can't do it in one take 'cause they're so awkward.

AARON: I know. And I'm sorry.

JOSH: Would you ever even attempt to try to get involved in the marketing? You're plate was

full enough. Or you would actually?

AARON: I did. And, again, they, you know, networks nowadays and as well as back then, they have so little control creatively over the content – unless it's a live event, a sporting event, or the news – they're not really making it; they're the bank. So this is the one area that they just won't let you mess with and I would, you know, I will offer to write the synopses myself. Tommy would always offer to, you know, cut a promo in our editing room. They weren't interested.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: A little bit proprietary about that.

AARON: There was, in fact, I don't know if you remember, but on *Sports Night* they were having – ABC, this is ABC now – was having a lot of trouble figuring out, before its premiere, how to promote the show. They just couldn't cut a promo for the show. And so Tommy and I said 'you know what, I'm gonna write something, Tommy's gonna shoot it.' We got you guys to do it. I don't know if you remember these [cross talk] at all?

JOSH: [cross talk] I have a vague memory of them.

AARON: There's one where you're [cross talk] sitting around playing poker...

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh, yeah. Yep, I do remember that.

AARON: It was all original content. It wasn't clips or anything. And ABC let us do that but then they sent a runner once we were done with it to come pick up the film and take it to the processing place and we found out at 6am the next morning that the runner, making sure that it was the right thing, opened the can to look at it, obviously spoiling the negative.

HRISHI: Oh, no!

AARON: You guys had one thing to do! Develop the film.

JOSH: That's actually very funny. My first job in the entire industry was as a PA on the Chevy Chase movie *Fletch Lives*, the sequel. And I got coffee and I made copies and then at the end of the day they would give me all of the...

AARON: They'd give you *Fletch Lives*?

JOSH: Yes. And then I would have to drive to Newark Airport, I would park illegally; the parking tickets which I got daily were apparently my responsibility! Yeah, I was in the red on this job 'cause I had to pay all these parking tickets! And I would send the film to be processed in LA. And I always thought the same thing. The most valuable thing, at the end of the day, the give to some 21-year-old schmuck who can barely find his way to Newark Airport.

AARON: Coming back from Washington in our first trip after 9/11, when they're running everything through x-ray machines, we had to beg and plead 'please don't run this through the..'. It's *The West Wing*.

JOSH: We're going to put that [cross talk] on TV.

AARON: [cross talk] We can't let you look. And you can't put it through an x-ray machine. They put it through an x-ray machine, but we were able to bring in the people who restored *Gone With The Wind* to restore that footage that we shot in DC.

HRISHI: No...

JOSH: That's a crazy story! Really?

HRISHI: Wow. Do you know - it wasn't my first job, but the first job in the industry I applied for – was – I got this advice from Matt Shakman, who's a director and he said that if I was going to apply for a job what I should do is instead of, like, sending a letter, I should FedEx a letter. So that way it usually gets delivered right to the person. It doesn't get lost in a mailbox and it looks a little bit different than a regular envelope. So I used that advice to apply for a job with Snuffy Walden.

AARON: Oh, no kidding?

HRISHI: Yeah. In 2002, when I first moved to LA I was, like, well I'm gonna try it. And I got a phone call so it worked kind of. And they were, like, we don't have any openings right now but we're gonna keep your [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] Nice FedEx!

AARON: You know, I think that's a really good idea. Do you know that Snuffy can't read music?

HRISHI: Really?

AARON: Yeah. He composes, Snuffy Walden is a great composer. He scores a lot of television shows. Scored *Sports Night*. Scored *The West Wing*. Wrote *The West Wing* main title theme. Wrote the 30 something main title theme, a lot of really memorable title themes. And he composes entirely on his guitar, doesn't read music. He just has a staff that then takes the music and...

HRISHI: Orchestrates it?

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: Wow. Because there's some pretty complex orchestration. I figured even if you didn't read music, you know, there's like a computer involved and he's writing with a mouse or something like that. But that's amazing.

AARON: I don't think there's a computer involved. Though honestly think it's him and his guitar. And with *The West Wing* theme I think for the first 6/8 episodes or so, if you listen to the main title theme for the first, let's just to be on the safe side say the first season of *The West Wing* and then listen to the main theme any time after that. You'll hear that Warner Brothers, the studio behind it, essentially the bank behind it, gave us money to go from electronic instruments to the LA Phil playing the main title theme.

JOSH: That happens during the first season. Hrishi remarked on it.

AARON: So at some point they said 'we like this show, we think it's going to be around'.

JOSH: 'Way to go kid, we got you a tuba'.

HRISHI: Even in season 2 it actually steps up. It gets even bigger.

JOSH: Ah. So it does even....

HRISHI: Yeah. There were a few electronic parts from the first few episodes which got replaced with real instruments. But then for the second season it steps up to this even bigger...

AARON: Here's why I don't know as much about that as you do. 'Cause that was pretty impressive! It would be because during playback – and playback is my last chance, Tommy's last chance, everyone's last chance to see the episode before air – and all we're really tinkering with at that point is sound. Can that phone ring be a bit louder? Can those footsteps be a bit softer? Can that door slam back? That kind of thing. And we can play a little bit with score. That's, like, twice as many violins as we need right there. That kind of thing. And I would always start singing during the, the main titles would roll and I just couldn't help, but I would start singing these harmonies through it, when I should have been listening probably.

JOSH: Many people – and we have highlighted some of them – have written lyrics to the theme.

AARON: Really?

JOSH: It's a fan favourite thing to do.

HRISHI: Yeah. [cross talk] Singing the name of the cast.

AARON: [cross talk] Wow, I would love to see some of those lyrics.

JOSH: [cross talk] We'll send you some links.

AARON: I would love to.

JOSH: They're pretty creative.

AARON: Great.

HRISHI: So season 2 the music changes because the bank decides to give you a little bit more money. We're, in our show, right now finished season 1 and we're about to start talking about season 2.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: And we'd love to focus on that. That sort of moment, both what you experiences doing season 1, and also what changed from the end of season 1 to the beginning of season 2?

AARON: Sure. It's a great thing to talk about. A couple of things. First of all the show wasn't really a hit until season 2. It was doing fine. It was...It was I think in the top 20 probably. Not right away, but somewhere in season 1 it was in the top 20. What happened was, back then there were summer reruns. The network got two bites of the apple. There really aren't summer reruns anymore because things that they fill in – reality shows, and they even launch new shows in the summer – take that spot. But people who had been hearing about the show had – it had been gathering buzz – were able to catch up to it over the summer. We also had a big cliffhanger at the end of the first season, which was going to pay off at the premiere of the second season. And as a result suddenly our season premiere in season 2, we were number one that week and seldom fell out of the top five. And I'm mentioning this, only because when you have that, it's a little easier to do the show. You have a little more room, you get a little more money to do the show, you're forgiven for going over budget, you're forgiven for being behind schedule. So that's one of the things that happened. Another thing I can tell you is that the season 2 premiere was one of the very few instances – it might, in fact, be the only instance – of my knowing what I was going to do ahead of time. That I had gone to Tommy sometime in March; we would usually wrap the show at the end of April, we'd be the last show of all the shows to wrap. We'd wrap at the end of April with our last show airing sometime, 3rd week of

May. But I went to Tommy in March and I said that I had this idea. It was what anyone else would consider a vague idea, but for me – Josh can attest to this – it's like the most specific thing that I'd ever come up with, which was at the end of the first season there would be a shooting. There'd be an attack, we wouldn't be quite sure who got shot in the chaos, but that the premiere of the second season, which I envisioned as a two-hour episode, we would see how all these people came together on the campaign and the idea really sprang from the fact that the pilot takes place one year into Bartlet's first term as President and going along I really felt like gee, it seems like there were a lot of good stories that took place before the pilot happened and I'd like to find a way to tell those stories. So that's what we did with the second season premiere and it's something I would go back to from time to time, in Bartlet for America, and a couple of other times that I would decide just to tell a story that took place before the series started.

HRISHI: So how long before you started shooting did you start working on the script for In The Shadow...?

AARON: For In The Shadow Of Two Gunmen I would say almost immediately, because what would happen is I would always be looking forward to hiatus, to the end of the season. Not because, believe me, I've sprinted to work every morning, I really did have, I think, the best job in show business for four years. And I loved everybody that I was working with, no-one more than Josh. But, you know, the grind of having to write next week's episode after episode 10 would start to get to you. So I would always think, OK, after I'm done writing episode 22, I'm gonna, you know, just sit in a chair for 2 months and not do [cross talk] anything.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Just stare at a wall.

AARON: Right. And after 2 days I would just, kind of miss the show. And miss doing it and especially with this when I had, like for the first time, an idea in advance, I really wanted to start writing it. So I started by just OK, I'll just take a yellow legal pad and make some notes. You know, first of all find out what happens when a President gets shot at - we had secret service advisers and all kinds of things - and notes would turn into index cards, which would quickly just start turning into dialogue, and I just started writing the show.

JOSH: Is it true that as of the shooting of What Kind of Day Has It Been? you hadn't decided who had been shot?

AARON: I can't recall when I knew that it was going to be Brad; Brad Whitford as Josh Lyman. But what I do recall is going to Brad at some point during hiatus and saying 'Listen, first of all I don't want you to be scared, it's you that got shot. [cross talk] You're not...'

JOSH: [cross talk] 'You're going to heal'

AARON: 'You're going to live, you're not gonna be in a wheelchair for the rest of the series. Everything's going to be fine.' And I said 'now, do you wanna know why I chose you?' And he said 'because you wanted your friend to get an Emmy nomination'. I said 'alright'. [Laughing]

JOSH: That's pretty funny. Are you capable of down time? Of not writing?

AARON: You know, listen, I've been, in a friendly way, been accused of being a workaholic and I just can't believe that's true given how lazy I am. Here's the problem; what I can't do is, if the next script is due, I can't relax and say 'start that on Monday, it's okay', 'cause all I'm thinking is

'I don't have any ideas' so it is hard for me.

JOSH: One of the things we've noted, Hrishi and I, and anyone who's paying attention, is that you created this incredible season of television while you were creating an incredible second season of *Sports Night*. I wanna visualise what was a day like for you? I can't understand how [cross talk] you did both.

AARON: [cross talk] Tommy and I both look back at that, at the second season of *Sports Night* and the first season of *The West Wing* and we don't really understand how we did it. That was 44 episodes of television being written and produced. Here was basically the schedule: Friday afternoon through Sunday night I wrote *Sports Night*, *Sports Night* being a half hour it's a teaser and two acts. Now television, in terms of ad breaks, it's much different now; you would be an expert on this.

JOSH: Would I?

AARON: We with an hour show it's basically 6 acts now, right?

JOSH: Yes, I believe so. Correct.

AARON: That's, you know, coming up with 5 mini climaxes, it can't be easy, so I don't envy Shonda [cross talk] or...

JOSH: [cross talk] Is that why you went to HBO?

AARON: No, I went to HBO 'cause they asked.

JOSH: There are no commercial breaks, that must be nice?

AARON: Yes, it is and there are other things that are nice about HBO which we can talk about, but no commercial breaks is nice. I'll tell you one other things that's nice, and then I'll get back to answering the question. End titles are nice and here's why. Not just to, so you can credit the people who deserve credit for doing it but on *Sports Night*, on *The West Wing*, on our shows, on network shows, we would come to the final moment of a show and then smash cut to a Nokia commercial. Okay. There's no opportunity for that moment to resonate or linger. When you have end titles, whether you're having music or silence, that last moment, that's what that's for. It's for it to work the way you wanted it to work.

So, back to the schedule. If I had a teaser written for *Sports Night* by Friday night, that was good. And it was nice, I had company. 'Cause you'll remember, my office at *Sports Night* (we shot it at Disney, stage 6, at Disney) was on the fourth floor, 4 floors above the stage and I could just pop down to the stage and, kind of, hang out, you know, with the cast and crew for a few minutes and maybe somebody would say something funny or do something funny, or just being on the set, being with the cast might give me an idea for a teaser. But if I had a teaser by Friday night that was good. All day Saturday, Saturday night, was spent writing the first act. All day Sunday, Sunday night, was spent writing the second act. I'd brought the writing staff in Sunday night to read it, give me any notes that they have, make any changes. Then it goes into the hands of PAs who make 200 copies of the script - I'm pretty sure we email the script now, that we save some trees - but back then we didn't do that. They, you know, would load it into their Honda Civics that they had bought for \$1200 when they came here to LA. They would spend all night driving to everyone's house distributing the script, so that on Monday morning

you had your script.

JOSH: Well my memory is Sunday night it would land, and then 25 minutes later I'd get a call from you saying 'what, you hated it?' [laughing]

AARON: That's probably right...[laughing] That's probably right because, and I'll tell you why. Yes, of course, it's insecurity. But I would write these scripts, whether it was *Sports Night* or *The West Wing*, or anything else that I've done, I'd write them for the cast and for the crew. It's impossible for me to imagine in my head, now with *Sports Night*, will go down in history as a critical darling that was ratings challenged. Although I think if it were on a network today, it would be among the network's highest rated shows. But for me, I mean, I think it was like 6 million people watching it on a Tuesday night, I think. That was a huge audience! I mean, where I cut my teeth if you got 99 people into a church basement, in midtown Manhattan Friday night, that meant you were sold out. So 6 million people was an incredibly satisfying audience. I'm not indifferent to the network's need to sell ad time, I understand how that business works. But I can't picture 6 million people. I can picture, because Josh and I did a play together on Broadway, I can picture what 1100 people looks like. I have been to baseball games so I can picture what 50,000 people looks like. And I've watched college football on tv so I can picture what 100,000 people looks like. I've seen pictures of Woodstock so I can kind of picture what half a million people looks like. I cannot at all picture what 6 million people looks like. And I can't see their faces. So I would be writing a *Sports Night* episode or a *West Wing* episode in the hope that it would do justice to the talent that was sitting around the table, both the cast and the other creative talent that was sitting around the table. You want Josh Malina and Felicity Huffman and Peter Krause and Bradley Whitford and Richard Schiff and Allison Janney and Dulé Hill and everyone else, you want actors of that calibre to be really excited about performing this material. And you know when you've missed and you know when you've gotten all of it. So that's why, Josh, you'd get the call 25 minutes later.

JOSH: And I would always read it and go 'I get to say this?!'

HRISHI: That's really nice.

JOSH: There was nothing to worry about! Well you talked us through Friday afternoon into Sunday night is when you wrote *Sports Night*. The second show? I don't understand! I don't understand!

AARON: Ok, so, then Monday morning comes...

JOSH: [cross talk] You have some time to account for!

AARON: [cross talk] *Sports Night* table read Monday morning and it would be after the table read, generally, that Tommy or whoever was directing that episode, would start blocking the episode, which gives me some time. I don't have to really look at *Sports Night* again until Tuesday afternoon, when I would be basically shown the entire show. I would follow the cast around all over that *Sports Night* set.

JOSH: We'd run through it?

AARON: Yeah, they would perform it as a 22 minute, 30 second play and I would watch it, give some notes to the director, and Wednesday we'd start shooting. For the first season of *Sports Night*, to accommodate ABC and their wishes, they wanted the show shot in front of a live

audience. Tommy and I were doing everything we could to disguise the fact that it was a 4-camera show, that it was a multi camera show. ABC, it's understandable, this is before all of the half-hour shows that we know and love now.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: They saw half-hour shows as comfort food, that it needs to look and sound familiar to the audience, so that wanted that laugh track. They wanted the familiar 4-camera look and we were creatively pushing [cross talk] back on them...

HRISHI: [cross talk] I had no idea that was multi-camera!

AARON: It is multi-camera. And I'm glad [cross talk] you had no idea.

HRISHI: [cross talk] I had no idea. And I've seen it so many times, I always thought it was single camera.

AARON: We would, for the first season, we shot it in front of an audience and as soon as you shoot in front of an audience, you have to use a laugh track. You no longer have a choice, because if we're using the second take on this and the third take on that, that laughs are going to be all over the place. You've gotta smooth out the sound of that.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: And not only that, but our *Sports Night* set wasn't a typical proscenium, multi-camera set.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: Like, say, *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Let me be very clear, I'm a huge *Everybody Loves Raymond* fan. Phil Rosenthal took the oldest premise that there is in half-hour comedy – the family with the in-laws across the street – and it was all execution. Just executed it exceptionally well so that it was super funny. But you can imagine an audience sitting there and watching that show. Our set was, you know, a mile wide and incredible deep and there were places in the set that the audience simply couldn't see. So what we would do is we would shoot the show Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. Wednesday through Friday. Spent 3 days shooting the show, but on Thursday night we kind of did this weird performance in front of an audience where half the scenes we would have the cast just sit in director's chairs and just read them to the audience 'cause they wouldn't have been able to see them anywhere but on the monitor. And unlike in typical multi-camera shows, we were going in and getting coverage; it would be more than the master and the over and the over. You'd wanna push in on Josh at the end of *The Hungry* [cross talk] and *the Hunted*.

JOSH: [cross talk] I was younger then. These days you wanna pull back!

AARON: So I wouldn't have to revisit *Sports Night* until Tuesday, which gave me most of Monday and Tuesday. I had nine working days to write a *West Wing* episode. 9 working days. And what you hope, and this just happens every once in a while with the tumble of the calendar, winning the lottery was getting 2 weekends inside those 9 days. Because that then meant that you then had 13 days to write the show instead of 11 days to write the show.

JOSH: They're also making a *West Wing* during those days.

AARON: You're also making a *West Wing*. With both shows you're doing 3 things at once: you're writing a show, you're making a show; and you're editing a show. So you're doing those 3 things at once, which became 6 things that one year. And I just told people, look, if I'm missing, just check the route between Disney and Warner Bros, I'm gonna be there somewhere. There's nowhere else I'm gonna be.

JOSH: Sleeping along the side of the road.

AARON: At *The West Wing* there was a great group of consultants, of professionals who had worked in Washington, many of whom had worked in the White House. Dee Dee Myers, Bill Clinton's first Press Secretary; Lawrence O'Donnell who is on MSNBC now, but he was Senator Moynahan's Chief of Staff.

JOSH: Pat Caddell.

AARON: Pat Caddell who I disagree with a lot of what he has to say, especially nowadays but his thinking was fantastic. They would come at me with things like, it could be anything from 'do you know that there's something interesting about the census?'

JOSH: Really? Could there possibly be?

AARON: I thought it was just something with a clipboard, asking 10 questions and they would tell me that and I'd usually say 'alright, write me a memo and tell me what you think and tell me what the really smart person in the room who disagrees with you is gonna say. And I'd see if I could rub those 2 sticks together. Sometimes it would be someone saying 'did you know that the President's motorcade, no matter where it is, if the President's out campaigning, if they're in the middle of America, the President's motorcade leaves the moment the President gets in the car. The secret service doesn't want the motorcade just sitting there, not moving. And that oftentimes a staffer will, you know, run into a store to get a postcard come out and find....[laughing]

JOSH: Where's my ride?! [laughing]

AARON: And I just thought I just want that shot if nothing else. And, you know, that became the Season 3...

HRISHI: 20 Hours in America

AARON: 20 Hours in America. So you put enough ideas like that together. We also had, not for the first season of *The West Wing* but starting with the second season of *The West Wing* a great co-executive producer in the room named Kevin Falls. The reason why we didn't have him until the second season of *The West Wing* was that he was performing this job on *Sports Night*. And he was fantastic at kind of wrangling these ideas and being able to present them to me in a way that sounded like it could be an episode of television. I don't think I ever – I'm going to take that back. I was about to say I don't think there was ever a *West Wing* episode where I started writing it knowing how it was going to end, but that's not true. There are *West Wing* episodes where I started writing it only knowing how it was going to end, not knowing what was going to be in the middle. There's certainly never been a *West Wing* episode, or for that matter, I've never written anything where I've known everything about it when I started writing it. For me starting is the hardest thing and I feel so much better once I've done it, once I have the opening, in the case of television a teaser, whether it's *Sports Night* or *The West Wing*. I wanna write that

just because being on page 2 is so much better than being on page nothing. And I tended to write pretty long teasers most of the time so it'd be 7, 8, 9 pages in, that ok [cross talk]...

JOSH: [cross talk] We're good.

AARON: ...at least there's a day's shooting now. The cast won't be sitting around [cross talk] doing nothing.

JOSH: [cross talk] 'I bought myself a day.' Also it's interesting that you say, so you would say 'Ok present me with a position, now give me a great articulation of the opposing view'. And I think you do a great job in the show of arguing both sides; sometimes you have one character argue both sides.

AARON: Yes.

JOSH: And I think it's an incredibly great quality to the show. Was your thinking on any particular issue ever changed through the presentation of arguments? Did you generally end up where you started on most issues? Or your own?

AARON: I was able, on a number of arguments, to understand the argument of someone who disagreed with me. And I wanna be really clear about this: I am not particularly politically sophisticated. I think that if....

JOSH: My God, then what am I?

AARON: I think you know this story, Josh, but I'm Jewish but never had any religious training at all. But in 7th Grade I began every Saturday I was going to someone's Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah and I really liked them. I thought I was a fool. So I opened the local phone book and called a local Rabbi and said, 'Rabbi, I'm turning 13 in 6 weeks, I'd like you to teach me the Torah.' And he laughed, as you can imagine, saying 'kid, I can't teach you the Torah in 6 weeks'. And I said 'no, I've got a really good ear, if you could just say it into a tape recorder, I can learn it.' He said, 'that's hardly the point of learning the Torah.' But it's instructive because hanging out, as a kid, with smart people, as a not-so-young kid playing poker with Josh, and people like Josh. No-body quite has Josh's IQ but, you know, people in the neighbourhood. I began to learn and really enjoy just the phonetic sound of what two intelligent, competing arguments sound like, and really just fell in love with the idea of 'but have you looked at it this way?' 'Have you thought about it this way?' and it's what I enjoy dramatizing. In drama there has to be a point of friction and, in my case, that point of friction is generally ideas.

HRISHI: After hearing that schedule for that first season, I had seen something where you said that generally you were always shooting your first draft.

AARON: Yeah. There was really never a time for rewrites. And the rewriting that would be done would be generally necessitated by production. First of all, my drafts were almost always long, too long, and you would much rather make the cuts on the page than in the editing room. It's gonna be brutal doing it there and it might not be possible to make a clean cut. And there is no wiggle room on television; you have to hand in a cut that it precisely 42 minutes and 30 seconds. If you're 15 seconds shorts, 15 seconds long, I would call Jeff Zucker and say 'can we be 15 seconds short or 15 seconds long?' and he'd have to check. [cross talk] Ok.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

AARON: So sometimes I would do a little rewrite if it was necessitated by production. I would certainly rewrite something if an actor came and said 'can you help me with this?' 'I don't understand this, but what about that?' kind of thing. But as much as I would have loved to have rewritten everything - I really haven't written anything that I wouldn't love to get back and write again - there just wasn't time to do it. You have to point a camera at your first draft. For me it's a very tough reality about television. If in movies, in theatre, if I'm not writing well, which is not a rare condition for me, I can stop and put it down. I can call the studio and say 'I know you were expecting the first draft in June, it'll probably be more like August', that kind of thing. You can't do that in television. You have hard air dates to meet. So, in television you have to write, even when you're not writing well, and then you have to put it on the table for the cast. You've gotta give them this thing that you know isn't as good as they are, and then you have to point a camera at it, and show it to everybody else.

AARON: So that must have felt like another kind of luxury, a new kind of luxury, here at the end of Season 1, because now you have a couple of months to write *In The Shadow of Two Gunmen*. So did you have a lot of rewriting for that one?

AARON: I'm trying to think. I know that it did feel like a luxury but I'm pretty sure that, that luxurious feeling came mostly from the excitement of knowing what I was doing. I don't mean knowing what I was doing in the sense of being an expert, I mean knowing what I was going to write. And feeling like what was in my head, at least, was good. That's not the final step. You've got to then successfully transfer what's in your head to the piece of paper. That's not always easy. But it was a bit of a luxury. Whatever good feeling I was feeling was also tempered by the fact that *Sports Night* had not been picked up for a third season, and I felt bad about that. I felt bad for, you know, my friends who...

JOSH: What a guy!

AARON: Well you feel like, listen, when you take on that responsibility of about a hundred people, their jobs depend on your work. When you say ok to that, you know, you're saying ok to all of it.

JOSH: It's worth pointing out that I had never had 2 years of solid work before *Sports Night* and I wouldn't have it again until *West Wing* so it's quite alright!

AARON: Ok.

JOSH: Do you remember any babies you had to give up in the editing room? Anything precious that had to be cut because the show came in long in the first season?

AARON: The answer is there were a lot of times that that happened. Off the top of my head, right now, I can't think of any, except to say that - and I hated this - the ax always fell on Dulé. It always did. Owing nothing at all to Dulé's performance, which was always great. It just always happened to be that the smoothest lift would be a Charlie story.

JOSH: Sorry Charlie.

AARON: And it got [cross talk] so that, and Dulé couldn't have been more gracious about it, but it got so that I couldn't look him in the eye any more.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Poor guy.

AARON: And I thought 'I'm gonna write a script that is entirely Charlie'. Ok. It's gonna be a 42-minute monologue! Where Charlie just gets to talk, no matter what gets cut, it's still gonna be Dulé.

JOSH: That's funny.

HRISHI: Did things get easier at all, by the time you were done, to do those 2 shows concurrently? By the end of the season [cross talk] ...

JOSH: [cross talk] Aaron is shaking his head, 'no'.

AARON: It never got easier. It never got easier and there was never a time, either in the 45 *Sports Night* episodes that I wrote, or the 87 *West Wing* episodes that I wrote, there was never a time when I didn't finish a script and think 'there's no chance I can write another one. I've used all the words I know, in every order that I can think of. I can't think of any more stories. That was it. You know, I left everything on the field with that script.' And I'd spend days going around saying 'I'm really in trouble'. I would go to the set and say to the actors, 'guys, we're in trouble because I've got nothing for the next episode.' They'd say 'you always say that and, hey, I've got my own problems here, I've got a page-and -a-half monologue to do right now'. But it always got done.

JOSH: You're an accomplished playwright, an Oscar-winning screen writer, what is the allure of television? It sounds horrible. [Laughing]

AARON: Except for the horrible part, I love it! Ok.[Laughing]

JOSH: Ok.

AARON: The horrible part being what I just said, is that you have to write even when you're not writing well. Here's the allure of television: working with the same group of people every week, you develop as a team and as a family; and the immediacy of it. When I'm writing a screen play, if everything goes perfectly, a joke that I write today, I'll hear the laugh 2 years from now. With television, there's going to be an episode on 6 weeks from now and I don't even know what it is yet, I haven't thought of it. So I really do like the immediacy. What I miss with television is that I like audiences. You know, I like a whole big group of strangers in a dark theatre having a shared experience. That doesn't happen in television, so I would, kind of, drive around, do a little calculation of 'ok, one out of every 6 houses that I'm looking at, where there's a blue light coming from the window, they're watching *The West Wing* right now'. And that somehow would [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] That's sweet. And also you've taken us such place with these characters, deeper and deeper, and you would have had to write 11 movies with the same characters to give us a season like this.

AARON: Yeah, yeah. A cool thing about television is that it's almost all middle, right? There's the pilot episode which is always a bit of an awkward thing. First of all, you don't really know how to do it yet. It's a brand new piece of machinery for everybody: for the actors; for the designers; for the writer; for the director. You don't really have it down yet. And there are things that you have to accomplish in a pilot episode that aren't, strictly speaking, part of storytelling, and you have to do that anyway. A series finale is also a bit of an awkward thing, just because expectations are so high and you can really only think of, in all of history, two or three series

finales that have, sort of, unanimously been hailed as great. M*A*S*H. When you're setting the bar at M*A*S*H! Holy cow! I liked the *Seinfeld* finale just fine, but, you know, Larry David doesn't and a lot of people don't. So expectations are huge for the finale, pilots are slightly awkward, but everything else gets to be middle, which is really nice.

HRISHI: You know, now we're here, going into Season 2, there's a thing that I'd read where a few people asked you what your favorite episode from *The West Wing* is, and you said that it would be difficult to choose between any of these things that you've created, but if you could pick something to show someone, you gave three. It was Noël, Two Cathedrals, and Seventeen People. And all of those are in Season 2.

AARON: Yeah, sorry Josh. Because Josh didn't come onto the show until Season 4, and there are episodes that I absolutely love from Season 4.

HRISHI: Right! [Laughing]

JOSH: How dare you, sir! [Laughing]

AARON: And I think that I was answering that question in a, sort of, time capsule way; that if I could give someone 3 episodes of *The West Wing*, that would give them an idea of what *The West Wing* was, I named those three. I could probably just as easily name another three. And back, just for a second, to Shadow of Two Gunmen, which we were talking about before. The other idea behind In The Shadow of Two Gunmen was, knowing as we did more people were coming to the show every week, and this was even before DVR or TiVo, so there was really no way for them, if you came to the show in the middle of Season 1, there really wasn't a way for you to watch the Pilot, until it got to reruns. Knowing that it was picking up steam and that we were, kind of, getting latecomers to it, I wanted to, with the opening of Season 2, kind of re-pilot the show and that this was a way to reintroduce all the characters in an organic way.

JOSH: My question is: did Tommy's directing (Tommy Schamme) and his visual style come to influence the way you would write?

AARON: God bless you for asking that question! Okay. First of all, the one word answer is: absolutely, it did. But, you know, people have, kind of, put the walk and talk label on the show. First of all, we weren't the first ones to do that by any means, the steady cam had been invented well before *The West Wing* and people had walking and talking on *E.R.* and that kind of thing. I'm not sure why it came to us. But I am only responsible for the talking part of the walk and talk. It was Tommy who, I'll never forget, we were maybe 3 days away from the first day of shooting on a pilot and construction was well under way on (our original stage was stage 17 at Warner Brothers, we would end up moving to Stage 23) and so construction was well under way on our *West Wing* set which was massive and he called me in my office and said, 'come to the stage, I wanna show you something'. And he was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning, showing me the route that John Spencer, that Leo, was going to take when he walked in the Northwest Executive Entrance of the White House, through the various offices, kind of casually walking through the Oval Office so we didn't make a big deal out of it, but, look, we just showed you the Oval Office, and this whole thing. And it was really at that point, well you know what, truly it had to have been a year earlier. It had to have been with *Sports Night* that basically what Tommy would do – because we did a lot of walking and talking on [cross talk] *Sports Night*.

JOSH: [cross talk] We did.

AARON: He would see an 8-page scene of 2 people talking to each other in a room, which is where I'm most comfortable, is 2 people talking to each other, in a room. The movie *Steve Jobs* opened last October. If you go now, you can still be among the first to see it! If you do, you'll see that I am most comfortable with just 2 people talking in a room. But it would be Tommy who would say, 'hey, would it be ok if Jeremy and Casey, if I had them, like, go in the middle of the scene go get a cup of coffee over here, a donut over there, and end up back in the thing, you know, just to add some visual interest of the world going by the camera as this was happening.' And I'd say 'sure' and that's how the style was built. And then I began writing that way, just basically saving Tommy a question of 'can I do this', and I would just start writing it that way.

HRISHI: By the time you got to the end of season 1, did your sense of what you could do with the show change? Like, your expectations based on the Pilot of 'this is what the show is' vs when you get to episode 22, did you have a different sense of what your canvas was?

AARON: First, I made sure that if an episode ever turned out to be important, ok, I wanted that to be an accident. I wanted it to have just turned out that way, rather than sitting down and saying 'I'm going to write an important one now.' That is such a recipe for disaster. You just have to stick with intention and obstacle; who these people are, what they want and what's stopping them from getting it and what their tactics are going to be to overcome an obstacle. And so if it turns out to be *In Excelsis*, great. So I didn't wanna look back and say 'wow, I've managed to start a dialogue with America and they're enjoying a show about politics so let me, you know, take full advantage of this.' Because I knew that we were walking a very tightrope, that this was a real high wire act, and that this show could become easy to not like very quickly. And I was always aware of that. That said, I can't remember ever not taking a chance. I can't remember ever saying 'it's too risky, we're not gonna do that.' You know, we were talking before about presenting two competing arguments. I do have to tell you that there are things about which I don't believe there is a reasonable competing argument. Tolerance, for instance. This was, remember, it was 15 years ago. The idea of gay marriage 15 years ago was nowhere near the table. We were talking about gays in the military 15 years ago and I would say 'tell me what the really smart person in the room who disagrees with you is gonna say, but I promise you my guy's gonna win this one!'

JOSH: Yeah, we should have you listen, we did a great interview with Patrick Murphy, the Under Secretary of the Army.

AARON: Really?

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Who repealed it while he was in Congress.

JOSH: And talked about how important the episode was to him.

AARON: No! No kidding!

HRISHI: He's a huge *West Wing* fan.

AARON: Oh, that's really something! That's really something. Yeah, it was great to meet some of the real people, know that they were watching the show. Alan Greenspan, back when he was

the Fed Chair, you couldn't call him on Wednesday nights between 9 and 10. It was just a rule people understood. After In Excelsis, got a really great call from an army colonel who oversees Arlington National Cemetery, who felt like we had done that justice.

JOSH: All those biggies, by the way, as we've noted along the way, without sacrificing anything tonally, have a lot of really funny stuff in them. Take The Sabbath Day has a lot of really laugh out loud [cross talk] funny moments.

AARON: [cross talk] Yes. Listen, I've always felt like... And the same thing with *Sports Night*, because there were many *Sports Night* episodes that were about something serious, that had [cross talk] something serious and traumatic at the centre.

JOSH: [cross talk] Sure

AARON: And I just thought 'you better be funny if you're gonna do this'. You have an obligation. And I've always felt like if you can tell a serious story funny, you're doing yourself a big favour.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for talking to us!

JOSH: [cross talk] awesome!

AARON: It was absolutely my pleasure. I hope you will have me back several more times [cross talk] to talk about specific episodes.

JOSH: [cross talk] You beat me to the question!

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yes.

AARON: Because there aren't a lot of things I love doing more than talking about those days back on *The West Wing* set. This unbelievable cast. And just very, very quickly, what we didn't get to talk about – hopefully we'll do it next time – is that, and I absolutely include Josh Malina in this, it's only incredible happenstance when you get a cast that happens like this. And when you do, it's like being handed the keys to a Ferrari. That's what we had on *The West Wing*. Just a Ferrari of a cast, a murderers row. Every single actor on that show could carry their own show and they were in this ensemble and it just worked. Thank you very much, I really appreciate it.

JOSH: Thank you.

HRISHI: Yeah, on behalf of me and really all the listeners of our show, and everybody who I know who we're making this show for, this is a vast understatement, but thank you.

AARON: Well, I really appreciate it.

JOSH: Thanks, Aaron.

AARON: Thanks, Josh.

JOSH: Oh, that was so much fun!

AARON: It really was!

JOSH: Will you really come back and do it again?

AARON: Uha.

JOSH: I'm going to hold you to that.

AARON: I'll come back and do every episode.

JOSH: That's awesome.

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for joining us, and we hope you'll join us next time. We'll be doing a special double episode for the Season 2 premiere and we'll be joined by Thomas Schlamme, Bradley Whitford, and more.

JOSH: In other news, The West Wing Weekly is now a proud member of the podcast network Radiotopia from PRX. It doesn't really change anything for our listeners, but it means we are officially part of the same family as some of the best podcasts in the world, like 99% Invisible, Criminal, The Memory Palace, and Hrishi's terrific other show, Song Exploder. You should check out all the shows, now including ours, at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Very, very exciting. If you'd like to discuss this episode with us, or with other West Wing Weekly listeners, you can leave a comment on our website, thewestwingweekly.com, or on our facebook page, [Facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://www.facebook.com/thewestwingweekly). You can also tweet at us. We're @WestWingWeekly on Twitter, I'm @HrishiHirway, Josh is @JoshMalina.

JOSH: You can also buy the official West Wing Weekly lapel pin at thewestwingweekly.com/pin.

HRISHI: I no longer have a West Wing Weekly pin because I gave mine to Aaron. We had run out of them and the only one I had left was the one on my jacket. But that's actually even better for me, that he has mine now.

JOSH: I had one, but I wasn't willing to give it to him.

HRISHI: Well, I'm going to order a new one and you all should too at thewestwingweekly.com/pin.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

AARON: What's next?

[Outro Music]