

The West Wing Weekly
2.22: "Two Cathedrals" (Part II)
Guests: Aaron Sorkin and Kirsten Nelson

[Intro Music]

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

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about "Two Cathedrals." It's the second part of our discussion of this incredible episode, the season two finale of The West Wing. We're joined once again by the creator of The West Wing, Aaron Sorkin. Aaron, thanks so much for coming back to The West Wing Weekly.

AARON: It's my pleasure.

JOSH: It was written by Aaron Sorkin, it was directed by Thomas "Tommy" Schlamme, and it first aired on May 16th, 2001.

AARON: Mm-hm.

JOSH: When's the last time you watched it?

AARON: May 16th, 2001.

JOSH: Not really.

AARON: Yeah.

JOSH: Not really!

AARON: Yeah. I loved watching the episode when it aired. I loved sitting there and sort of pretending I was part of the audience that was seeing it for the first time, pretending I was seeing it for the first time. And there's hardly any episode that I've gone back and watched a second time.

JOSH: That's wild.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: Is there a reason for that?

AARON: Well, I think I mentioned this the last time I did the podcast. There isn't anything I've ever written that I wouldn't like to have back again so that I could write again, and I don't feel that way while I'm watching the show, you know, when it airs, but I do feel that way from the second viewing on, and I just don't want to feel that way about it, you know? I just, I really like remembering the first date, and letting that be the whole relationship.

HRISHI: Lawrence O'Donnell told us a story on our last episode where he had gotten the script for the pilot of *The West Wing*--

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: --and that was I think 1998.

AARON: Right.

HRISHI: And then it took a while for it to get made, as we've discussed, and then when it finally

came out, the final version of the shooting script, I guess, was exactly the same. And he was astonished by that - not a word had changed.

AARON: I don't know if that speaks well or poorly of me, I really don't. The pilot notwithstanding, because the pilot you have much more time to work on than anything else.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: Everything else, with maybe smaller than a handful of exceptions, there simply wasn't time to do anything but my first draft, so first drafts became shooting scripts. Sometimes a scene or two would get cut for time because it'd just run way too long, but other than that, we just had to point a camera at the first draft.

JOSH: Is that the case with this episode?

AARON: Yeah.

JOSH: Because there's so many balls in the air and so many setup-payoff, setup-payoff and long ball over multiple episodes and--

AARON: Right. Well, in fairness, the thinking about this episode started much, much earlier. It started with, just an unfortunate cigarette that Kathryn Joosten smoked. Both Kathryn Joosten and I, I think in February of that year, were at a fundraiser at a hotel. And she and I both have the bad habit of every once in a while having a cigarette. And we, without knowing it, sort of snuck out of this fundraiser at the same time to have a cigarette for a minute. So we were out, I think by valet parking or something, and she mentioned to me that next week she was going in to test for a pilot. As soon as she told me that, as soon as she told me that she was going in to test, I really stopped listening to everything else she was saying after that and just began thinking - how would I write Mrs. Landingham off the show? And when faced with something like that, I like to kind of embrace the problem rather than just sweeping it away, saying, well, Mrs. Landingham has decided to retire and go back to New Hampshire, and there'd be an episode with a nice party for her, and maybe a clip show where we showed some Mrs. Landingham stuff. I decided there's a better idea here, which is that I wanted to - I decided in that moment, that by the end of the season I wanted to push Bartlet to the place where he would renounce his faith in God. This very devout Catholic. And here's one thing that could help. There would be others along the way. If Mrs. Landingham died - more than that, was killed; did not die of natural causes, died in, I came up with it was car accident, a drunk driving car accident. That's what I did with Mrs. Landingham. And then, you're right, I had to then set up a number of things for that season finale to work, and really push Bartlet to the edge. Because I knew what was going to happen in "Two Cathedrals," I was able to tell Kathryn before she read the script for "18th and Potomac," which is the one where she's killed, 'don't worry, this doesn't mean you're off the show. You're gonna be back.' And she was, in "Two Cathedrals."

JOSH: Most people would say car crash, but, it turns out Mrs. Landingham's death is smoking-related.

AARON: Yeah.

[Laughter]

AARON: Cigarettes do kill [cross talk].

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

AARON: They really do.

JOSH: There's a lesson there, kids.

AARON: Mm-hm. Going back to-- I'm sure you've covered "18th and Potomac." Everyone prior to the table read had been told that Mrs. Landingham was gonna die in this episode, except Dulé, who we couldn't get ahold of, and who hadn't read the script prior to the table read, and who has the line:

[West Wing Episode 2.21 excerpt]

CHARLIE: No. She's dead.

[end excerpt]

AARON: As it happened, that line was the first line on the next page, so this thing-- Dulé turned the page at the table read, and he looked at it, and he couldn't believe it, and it was almost like, well, if I don't say it, it doesn't happen [cross talk] and I can just sit here, and the poor kid-- and we honestly, we weren't pranking him, it wasn't anything, it was just one of those, between me and Tommy, I thought you told him, I thought you told him, kinds of things, and so that poor guy, you know, lived through Mrs. Landingham's [cross talk] death.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, God!

HRISHI: [cross talk] Oh, man.

JOSH: And actually, his delivery of the line in the episode is very well-- I like-- He doesn't put a lot into it. It's not overly-- there is a layer of shock in it and it's just very simply put.

AARON: I couldn't agree with you more, and Dulé is a great actor, and I gave him one note before he did it, which is, you're more used to death than these other people.

HRISHI: Whoa. Wow.

JOSH: Good note.

AARON: Are just more used to it than these other people.

HRISHI: Right. I was wondering, while we're talking about Mrs. Landingham, if there were things about Kathryn Joosten that, from the beginning of when you first started working with her, up until "Two Cathedrals," were there things about her outside of the show that ended up informing how you wrote that character?

AARON: Kathryn in real life is bawdy. She's very, very smart, very, very funny. Like I said, bawdy, and she had rhythms in her funniness that I tried to send the ball in that direction if I could.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well, since you're on that, I thought, brilliant job in both the writing and the acting of young Mrs. Landingham [cross talk], Kirsten Nelson, because the comic rhythm and the vibe of the woman--

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: *Look. If you think we're wrong, if you think Mr. Hopkins should honestly get paid more than Mrs. Chadwick, then I respect that. But if you think we're right and you won't speak up because you can't be bothered, then God, Jed, I don't even wanna know you.*

[end excerpt]

AARON: She [cross talk] was fantastic [cross talk]. She, just by way of trivia, she was the first runner up to Felicity Huffman for the role of Dana Whittaker [cross talk] [cross talk] in *Sports Night*.

JOSH: [cross talk] Whooh!

JOSH: [cross talk] What a job.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Whoa!

JOSH: [cross talk] Didn't know that.

AARON: Yeah.

JOSH: Interesting. What do you get for first runner up?

AARON: Nothing, man [cross talk], it's brutal. [Laughter] It's brutal, but, yeah, she's-- the actress has certainly landed on her feet and works all the time and [cross talk] it was great that she was available for this. She obviously came into the audition having watched every Mrs. Landingham episode and did the voice without it being like an SNL impression. You really saw Mrs. Landingham as a young woman.

JOSH: [cross talk] Lifetime of regret?

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: We actually spoke with Kirsten Nelson, and so let's go to that interview before we come back and talk more with Aaron.

KIRSTEN: Hi, I'm Kirsten Nelson, and I played the young Mrs. Landingham.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us.

KIRSTEN: Absolutely, thanks for having me.

HRISHI: I was wondering if you could tell us about your memory of filming this episode, and before that, even, how you got the role.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, I don't have to reach back too far. This one is just one of those fond memories that you just kind of never lose details about how it all happened because it's really cool. Kathy Joosten and I did-- ah, we were doing a sitcom for CBS, and I think it was in either '98 or '99. And so we were working together as pilgrims. It was like a pilgrim show for CBS called *Thanks*.

JOSH: I remember that!

KIRSTEN: [Laughter] You and like a handful of other people.

JOSH: I was, I think, the key demo for that show. I'm sorry.

KIRSTEN: Fantastic. So you buy mutton...

JOSH: That's right!

KIRSTEN: ...and buckles.

JOSH: And I use a blunderbuss.

KIRSTEN: [Laughter]

HRISHI: Were you guys pilgrim detectives? Would you solve crimes?

JOSH: [Laughter]

KIRSTEN: You'd think that that was a high rate, especially after the fifty percent mortality rate after that first year. Yeah, we were literally pilgrims. It was 1621 and we'd all survived. We were the survivors after that first horrible winter. And Kathy was, because--

JOSH: It sounds funny!

KIRSTEN: It was pretty funny. It's-- you know, there were turkeys.

JOSH: I remember fondly, actually.

KIRSTEN: She was just, because everybody needs already, even in the New World, the neighborhood mensch.

JOSH: That's right.

KIRSTEN: And there she was. So we had already-- [in Chicago accent] we had already started up this kind of relationship.

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

KIRSTEN: So it was a Chicago thing that we had bonded over, that we were both from Chicago and we could just kind of slide right into these accents automatically again. But then she left our little dying show to go do this, you know, [imitating Kathryn Joosten] I'm gonna do this show. I don't know what's gonna happen, but it's about, uh, you know, politics.

HRISHI: [Laughter] That's uncanny.

KIRSTEN: She, bless her, she go-- she went to *West Wing*. And then about a year or two later, I actually ran into her and we were outside, I think it was The Improv over on Melrose, though, so it was like the *Comedy Lab*. I was coming out, she was going in, we were seeing a show. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh, Kathy, hi! How are you?' [imitating Kathryn Joosten] 'I'm good. Listen, they're lookin' to have someone play the younger me.'

JOSH: Ha!

KIRSTEN: And I was like, 'Oh! Ok, that sounds really cool.' [imitating Kathryn Joosten] 'Say, I'm gonna put a word in, but you should tell your agents.' [normal voice] So, I think that was like a Saturday or a Sunday, and Monday came and I called my agents and they were like, 'Oh, we didn't think that part was anything. No, we're not submitting you.' It's a one-line thing that says, Looking for an actress to play the young Mrs. Landingham. Which was, I know, purposeful, because they didn't want to let anyone know--

JOSH: Oh, sure.

KIRSTEN: --what they were already going to be doing with her, because they had planned on

killing her! But I said, 'No, no, no, guys, seriously! I ran into Kathy, and she said to just give it a shot, see what happens.' And they were like, 'Fine.' 'She was gonna put in a good word. Please, please, please.' And, indeed, I got the appointment. And then they sent over a CD, so I had to listen to how she says her lines. And they said, you know, before we go in and read with Tommy and Aaron-- I think John Wells might have been there, as well-- you need to hear how she speaks, what is her cadence? And I was like, "Well, ok, I guess, you know, it's Chicago, I think I got that down."

JOSH: Ha.

KIRSTEN: So that's the, you know, and then, kind of the rest was history. It was a nice history. But, yeah, I got the part, and then we flew to-- we shot our stuff in DC. So all of that sequence in the flashback, because they were doing the funeral at National Cathedral, they just moved the entire production for that finale out to DC. And Aaron was there, and I think that first night in the hotel just kind of meeting everybody, and meeting quickly with hair, makeup, costume. What are we putting her in, what are we doing with her hair? It's gotta look period. Then the next day we had a great, great long day, but I think we were in Delaware. Maybe we were in Delaware.

HRISHI: Yeah, Delaware is where the private school was.

KIRSTEN: Where the private school was? [imitating Kathryn Joosten] The states are so close together out there, you can go anywhere.

HRISHI: So, did you ever at any point consult with Kathryn Joosten about your take on how she spoke?

KIRSTEN: No! Come to think of it, that's a good question. I never did. We had laughed about it, I think when we were doing Thanks, about, you know, the pilgrim thing, that we could both slide into that Chicago regionalism so easily. And it was just a cadence.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: Why do you call your father sir?

YOUNG BARTLET: Is this gonna be a whole afternoon of questions?

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: Well, actually, you've been talking for quite some time.

YOUNG BARTLET: I'm sorry. Am I boring you, Dolores?

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: Mrs. Landingham, please.

YOUNG BARTLET: My father's the headmaster.

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: Yeah, but before he was your headmaster, he was your father, right?

[end excerpt]

KIRSTEN: I was already a huge fan of the show, so I had watched from the beginning. And I watched all the way through to the end, even after I did my episode. So I had seen her, and I knew how she performed and how that very direct delivery - I'm not gonna give you the time of day, this is just my attitude, and this is, I'm gonna say what-for and move on. And I was very keen and very aware that I wanted to do her well and kind of give her a good send-off, especially because we were all so tight-lipped about what was going to be happening to her.

JOSH: Did they make that explicit to you? Was there any signing of forms or urging, [cross talk] just urging not to...

KIRSTEN: [cross talk] Yeah, the urging. Thank God that was before, like, social media, right?

JOSH: Right.

KIRSTEN: It was just really strongly urged. I didn't have to sign an NDA or anything like that. They were pretty cool. But they said, 'Please don't give this away, this is gonna be our big reveal.' I didn't even tell my husband at the time. I was like, 'You know what, they're just having her-- you know, they're just gonna do a little flashback, like they already did how they met the other characters, you know, and their pasts, and they wanted to give a little nod to Mrs. Landingham, to Dolores.' So when we all watched the week before mine aired, when you find out that she was killed in car crash, I remember my husband freaking out. He was like, 'What!? What!? You're what!?' 'I'm like, I know, I know, I know, I know!' Then my mom's calling on the phone, 'They killed her, what are you doing?' Like, yeah, I know, it's sad, isn't it. So they didn't have me sign anything but they just, I think because she was just, it was done so well, and having read that script, you just really wanted to keep that secret about what was gonna happen and let everyone really enjoy it as it was unfolding. 'Cause it was so-- I still get chills when I think about, you know, what was written on that page. So, it was a good episode.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, you do that rare thing of absolutely embodying her as a younger woman, making it your own, and yet also there's no sense that you're doing an impression. It's a very, very fine line that I've seen other people err [cross talk] in their attempts to do. So, huge hat tip to you. It really is - it's remarkable.

KIRSTEN: [cross talk] [Laughter]

KIRSTEN: Thank you.

HRISHI: And it's not really, not just - it isn't just the voice. There's something in the physicality of your performance that evokes Kathryn Joosten's version of Mrs. Landingham, too. Was that something that you were thinking of consciously? Not just the voice but also the way you carried yourself?

KIRSTEN: Yeah, I mean, because, having worked with her and having then watched the show, I knew how she moved. I knew when she chose to do eye contact and when she wouldn't.

HRISHI: Hm.

KIRSTEN: She, you know, it's almost like when you pick up on other little quirks of - well, I knew that Martin Sheen didn't put his jacket on normally. He'd flip it over his head, and, you know, with the arms in the sleeves.

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

KIRSTEN: Like that, I could see how Kathryn moved very straight-backed and everything was very tight. And when she moved it was very conscious. I'm gonna look at you now, and I'm gonna talk to you directly. And I guess because I was a fan of the show and I watched her, she made it really easy. And then hard at the same time because I wanted to make sure that I did that justice and that it didn't come off as a caricature. That I just really wanted to just be her younger self.

HRISHI: It doesn't come off as caricature, but did you have experience in the past of doing impressions or impersonating others?

KIRSTEN: Impersonating others, probably no, unless we count improv or stand-up. But nothing to, you know, write home to your mom about.

HRISHI: But that counts, though. I think that that's interesting [cross talk] that you have an improv and stand-up background.

KIRSTEN: [cross talk] Does it count?

JOSH: [cross talk] Sure.

KIRSTEN: The improv comes very naturally, yeah. I did it in college, and then in Chicago after graduation, and then a little out here in Los Angeles, early on in the career. So we would do, you know, improv shows, and then that comes naturally, the comedy side. Which was, you know, had to be tampered down, obviously, for the dramatic, but I do have that background in improv and multi-cam sitcom. And then reading books aloud to children, where you're forced to just come up with new voices [cross talk] every page if you're gonna keep 'em interested. So, that was part of the storytelling.

HRISHI: [cross talk] [Laughter]

HRISHI: Did you have any kind of relationship with Kathryn Joosten after this episode and after you guys both had left *The West Wing*?

KIRSTEN: After we both left, no. I know that she went on to do, you know, she was over at *Desperate Housewives*, and it was the same thing. We would run into each other every now and then. But it's not like we got together for barbecues, even though I just held her in such respect. But we never crossed paths on, like, a coffee basis again, until I heard about her passing. And then just kind of, you know, had a moment of silence for that old broad. She was pretty awesome.

JOSH: Did you ever get a sense from her what her reaction was to being written off the show?

KIRSTEN: [Laughter] Yeah, I do.

JOSH: I'd like to hear it.

KIRSTEN: She was funny. It was-- I think it was the same time that I ran into her, or shortly thereafter. It might have been right after I got the part, because we did contact each other and I was like, 'I got it! Oh my God, great!' That she-- [imitating Kathryn Joosten] a bit of advice. [normal voice] I'm like, 'Ok.' I think how the story-- if I remember it correctly, that she had an opportunity to go do a pilot--

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

KIRSTEN: --right at that time. And she's like [imitating Kathryn Joosten] 'Wow, this is gonna be great. I got this opportunity to go do a pilot. I better go tell the EPs.'

JOSH: Mm.

KIRSTEN: So she says, [imitating Kathryn Joosten] 'Kirsten, if you're a guest star on a show,

and you get a pilot, make sure that they have the finale written before you walk into that room.'

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: Yeah, that seems to be the big takeaway.

KIRSTEN: Yeah, that is the big takeaway. So she said, 'I tell them, and Aaron was so, you know, Oh that's fantastic, what a great opportunity, but aha! I've got my finale.'

JOSH: [Laughter]

KIRSTEN: And then the pilot didn't go, and then she was still dead. So [cross talk] it was, that was the big takeaway from - She loved, I know that she loved Mrs. Landingham, like everybody did. But she had an opportunity and it's just the way of the world, I guess, in our business, how it goes.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Aww.

HRISHI: But then you would go on, though you didn't have any scenes with him, in this episode, you would go on to do a lot with Dulé Hill.

KIRSTEN: [Laughter] Yeah, I did, I did. Mr. Tapper. Yeah, that was the funny thing about this *West Wing* episode, is that I didn't really meet any of the regular cast, because all of our stuff was in flashbacks and out in Delaware, and Lawrence O'Donnell was-- And then the kid that played the young president--

JOSH: Jason Widener.

KIRSTEN: --Jason, yeah. That's the only people I had contact-- No! No, I did meet John Spencer. He actually saw me in the hotel, like, in the lobby. Oh, that night! And he made a point to come up to me and say, 'Wow, I heard you were just fantastic tonight.' And I just was beaming. I'm like, 'You're John Spencer! This is wonderful, thank you so much.' But yes. Dulé. Now, this is only between me and Dulé and this is a personal thing that I put up that I can never work with him again because I never plan on being pregnant again. I was about four months pregnant when I was doing *West Wing*. Maybe like four and a half months pregnant?

JOSH: Huh.

KIRSTEN: So, as the young Mrs. Landingham we were trying to cover up, you know, my little baby bump, because she was not supposed to be pregnant. But Kirsten Nelson was. And then the next time I decided to work, or I got the opportunity to work with Dulé again, I was about eight months pregnant, and that was *Psych*, that we went on to do for USA Network, *Psych*, and I was like, 'I'm not pregnant ever again. You know, the shop is closed. I guess Dulé, it's been great, we are never working together again.'

JOSH: Did you name your child Dolores?

KIRSTEN: Du-lores, in honor of Dulé.

[Laughter]

JOSH: Both of them. Very good.

KIRSTEN: Yeah. Yeah, it's a nice blending, a blending of the two.

[Laughter]

KIRSTEN: Actually, it was a boy, so no. But no. He couldn't hold that fine name.

JOSH: Oh well.

KIRSTEN: I know. There's only one Dulé.

JOSH: How many days did it take to shoot your stuff for this episode?

KIRSTEN: We did it all in one day.

JOSH: All in one, wow!

KIRSTEN: All in one. They only had that-- they could only be in Delaware for that one day, so we were there from sunup to sundown, and it was about a two-hour drive. So I think we were all picked up around three-thirty in the morning.

JOSH: Long, long day.

KIRSTEN: It was a long day.

JOSH: And did you enjoy working with Tommy on this episode?

KIRSTEN: Yes. Tommy was-- he was just so cool. I know that there was a lot-- people were feeling the pressure for this episode, just because I think it was the finale, and Tommy was back directing and taking this under his wing. Actually, I think there was one of those-- I think it was the scene where we're spraying down-- What's he doing? Is he spraying down boats?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yes.

KIRSTEN: Spraying down boats--

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: I got a project for you.

YOUNG BARTLET: Really?

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: You can show the courage and the intellect and the leadership skills everyone talks about.

YOUNG BARTLET: I'm a little busy right now hosing down the boats.

YOUNG MRS. LANDINGHAM: You know the women who work at this school are paid less money than the men?

[end excerpt]

KIRSTEN: So it's on this beautiful outdoor slope, the weather was gorgeous, you know, here we are and I remember Aaron lounging along that slope. He might have even brought a blanket with him. He's like, 'Oh, I'm just, I'm lounging on location.' But before the first take, he kind of came up to me, put his arm around me and was like, 'Yeah, by the way, the success of this episode rests on your shoulders, good luck.'

JOSH: [Laughter] That sounds like Aaron.

KIRSTEN: And he walked away and I'm like, 'Oh my God! I'm just a guest star. What do you mean? Don't do this.' And I think Tommy probably came up to me like, 'Don't listen. Screw it.'

Like, Don't listen to a thing he said. Here we go. Everybody!' So that was really great working with him, and I was really glad that I had the opportunity to work with him and for them both because I actually tested for them when I was at studio for [cross talk] *Sports Night*. Yeah.

HRISHI: [cross talk] *Sports Night*.

JOSH: Aaron said, Aaron said.

KIRSTEN: Did he say it? Oh my Gosh.

JOSH: Indeed he did.

KIRSTEN: Look at that-- [cross talk] I'm a-blushin'.

HRISHI: [cross talk] He said you were the runner up.

JOSH: He said it very well could have been you. You and I would be dear friends now.

KIRSTEN: See? We would be best buddies. BFFs. Jeez.

JOSH: [Laughter]

KIRSTEN: Yeah. Like that up-and-comer, Felicity Huffman. She just has something about her.

JOSH: When's the last time you watched the episode?

KIRSTEN: It's been a while. I thought about, like, oh, maybe I should watch it again tonight. But it's almost like I could say Jed Bartlet's speech heading down the center of the aisle of the church, right before he stomps out his lit cigarette.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

KIRSTEN: It's those moments that I just remember from that whole thing. It's just really great.

JOSH: Yeah, it's one of the all-time great TV episodes, I think. In no small part thanks to you!

KIRSTEN: Oooohhhhhhh noo!

HRISHI: Yeah. Truly, according to Aaron, entirely because of you.

KIRSTEN: [Laughter] My ears again.

JOSH: That's right.

KIRSTEN: They're burning. There they go.

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: Thank you so much for joining us.

HRISHI: Thanks, Kirsten.

KIRSTEN: Thank you, you guys. Thank you much, thank you much.

HRISHI: Let's take a quick break, and when we come back, we'll talk more with Aaron Sorkin.

[Ad break]

AARON: The young actor who was playing young Bartlet, whose name I've forgotten now, but I'll bet you it'll be Googled by the time [cross talk] we're done. What Tommy taught him to do was--

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes. We have that technology.

HRISHI: Jason Widener. I should know that.

AARON: Jason Widener. Jason Widener I thought was terrific, too. And Martin Sheen has some kind of problem with his shoulder that requires him to put on a jacket a very particular way. Audiences may have noticed. It's a kind of over-his-head thing, which, after years and years of, you know, putting on a jacket a thousand times, he does in a half a second. He just does this thing, and Tommy told Jason Widener, I need you to learn how to put on a jacket that way. You're gonna put on your jacket that way. And we even used it for some screen wipes, right? [cross talk] He would-- The kid would put it on and we'd-- yeah.

JOSH: [cross talk] Yeah. Beautifully done. Loved that.

AARON: So, I really liked the way it worked. We shot at a beautiful private school in Delaware, which has come up in other movies. Bartlet went to the same school as all the kids in the *Dead Poets Society*. [Laughter] And I think the kids in *School Ties* and *Scent of a Woman*, they all went there. They all went to the same prep school.

HRISHI: When you were writing this episode, you know, at this point you'd written three season finales. Really, a series finale, as well--

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: But even with those in mind, did you feel like you had set the goalposts further for yourself?

AARON: Listen, any time that happens, any time you inadvertently raise the bar, it's not an advantage, but it's something that you're proud of. You're certainly happy that happened. *The West Wing*, like *Sport Night*, we got dangerous around the holidays, we got dangerous at season finales. For me, you know, I wanted every show to be as good as our best show. That's what everyone wanted. But I don't know, there's something about the season finale. Maybe because your ability to think about it a little more, like I know here's where I wanna be by the end of the season so I have to start setting these things up. Maybe because you know you don't have to resolve it the following week, that you'll have a summer to think about the one after that. One way or another they become very special episodes of the show.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: In our re-watch, this is my, thus far, favorite episode of the show. It takes my breath away, the audacity of the show. I wrote down, even, all the-- because each time I've watched it, there are so many places where, if it didn't-- if you guys didn't execute perfectly, it would have gone bad. I wrote down so many things that, on paper-- this also maybe shows the limits of my creativity, but there are so many things that, if I had read on paper, I'd have said, Oooh, I don't know. A storm coming, and then its arrival. The ghost of Mrs. Landingham. Multiple flashbacks. Having a character talk to God in a monologue for two and a half minutes.

AARON: Mm-hm.

JOSH: Then we're gonna throw in a Dire Straits song in the end. I think I would have said, 'Ooh, oh guys, this is very risky.'

AARON: Yeah, you're right, and there was probably that thinking going on, but I'm really glad that you brought up execution, which is everything on the show. That you're right, on paper, this

could have looked like a tire fire. But Tommy's execution, [cross talk] the execution of the cast, the execution of all the designers and their crews, made it work. I think the last time we talked about the times when I've gone backwards, when I've started with music and moved backwards, this is one of those times. Because I didn't-- I mean, I knew a lot about the show. Didn't quite know how it was gonna end. Was riding around in my car, heard the Dire Straits and then started to see everything that goes on during the Dire Straits song. And it's how we got the storm--

JOSH: [cross talk] Whoof!

HRISHI: Right!

AARON: --because I wanted to include-- I wanted it to be a seamless transition from our sound effects to Dire Straits' sound effects. And then that storm ended up working for us in a really good way. We got the bounces on that show. That was not the ghost of Mrs. Landingham, who was--

JOSH: [Laughter] That was a bad way to--

AARON: Yeah, I know. I just, I wanna make that very clear.

HRISHI: Right, right.

JOSH: Oh, the offended creator.

HRISHI: Right, 'cause you have the shot of--

AARON: --Bartlet talking to no one, yeah. Which, by the way, I [cross talk, unintelligible]

JOSH: [cross talk] I didn't meant to imply that I thought, in fact, she was an apparition. I understand this is a mental--

AARON: I know that you know that, but I am now-- but there are people out there who do believe that I brought up the ghost of Mrs. Landingham.

JOSH: I can't promise you this is not gonna wind up on a t-shirt.

[Laughter]

AARON: It was Tommy's idea. It was not scripted, it was Tommy's idea to have one or two shots of Bartlet talking to no one.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I have MS and I didn't tell anybody.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Yeah. So you're having a little bit of a day.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You gonna make jokes?

MRS. LANDINGHAM: God doesn't make cars crash and you know it. Stop using me as an excuse.

[end excerpt]

AARON: To make that clear that this wasn't the ghost of Mrs. Landingham. It was obviously-- it was Martin thinking about Mrs. Landingham and that revving him up.

JOSH: Yes. And Shakespearean, as much of this episode feels. I mean, I couldn't help thinking

about-- it's almost an inverse Lear. Lear rants and raves in a storm and it reflects his inner madness and what's going on in the kingdom. Bartlet kind of goes the other way and finds clarity in the storm.

AARON: Well, those are very heady comparisons, but when you're dealing with stuff as big as, you know, the White House and being the leader of the free world, and mixing it with stuff as personal and human as a friend dying, you get to walk the same ground as the great playwrights and do your best with it. And you get to use some Latin.

[Laughter]

JOSH: Which, actually another thing that I loved about the use of the Latin is, I felt like it was a perfect explication, if that's a word, of something that you often say about dialogue, and the sound, you know, that you hear it as music, and that it has to be, you know, said a certain way, and that sometimes the sound is the meaning. We didn't need the translation [cross talk] of the Latin in that scene and I'm glad that we didn't have it.

AARON: [cross talk] Right.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Haec credam a deo pio? A deo iusto, a deo scito? Cruciatu in crucem. Tuus in terra servus, nuntius fui. Officium perfeci.

[end excerpt]

AARON: Yeah. And it-- somewhere, probably online, the translation is available to you, but you're absolutely right. You didn't need to understand the literal meaning of what he was saying, just that he was continuing to get all up in God's face and now we're gonna do it in your language, ok? I don't need you pandering to me by understanding English. I can speak Latin, I'll do it right here.

HRISHI: Ok, so if I can interject outside of the intention of the author, if you'll allow me--

AARON: Sure.

HRISHI: I do think that you have these little puzzles in there. A lot of times in the show you're ahead of the audience but eventually all is revealed within the episode itself, but here I feel like there are a couple of ciphers that you've put in that, once you actually decode them or you can get into them as a reader, there's all this depth that gets revealed, too. And I think the Latin is one of them. I think that once I had looked up what the Latin meant, however long ago, it was like a kind of key to some of the rest of the episode.

JOSH: If it had actually pointed to a treasure, it would have been a great promotional thing.

[Laughter]

JOSH: Too late, but...

HRISHI: Here's the-- a Latin translation [cross talk]. It's probably wrong but--

AARON: [cross talk] Ok.

HRISHI: He says, I give thanks to you, O Lord. Am I to believe these things are from a righteous God, a just God, a wise God? To hell with your punishments. I was your servant here on earth

and I spread your word and I did your work. To hell with your punishments, and to hell with you.

AARON: Yes. That's a pretty good translation, except for the very beginning, I give thanks to you, O Lord. Yes, that is a literal translation [cross talk], except he's saying it sarcastically. What he's saying is [cross talk] thanks a lot.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: [cross talk] It is so hard to detect sarcasm in Latin.

[Laughter]

AARON: Yes. And the way we do these translations, by the way, and then I've got an interesting Josh Malina translation story to tell, but the way I do the translations is I would give it to, say, I'd give the English to a Latin professor at UCLA, have them translate it into Latin, give that to a Latin professor at USC and have them translate it back into English for me, so that I can listen for things like that that might be mistaken. But the Josh Malina translation story is this.

JOSH: I'm scared.

AARON: No, it was really interesting. There was an episode of *Sports Night* in season two that had a Passover seder, that ended with a Passover seder, because the staff had to work on Passover.

JOSH: "April Is the Cruellest Month."

AARON: Correct. So Jeremy, Josh's character, is organizing a Passover seder for the people who have to work there. And the script ends with-- and it's because I never do this, but because it was now really late on a Sunday, the writers' assistants were waiting for me to be done so that they could do their thing and distribute the script. The very last thing that happens in the episode is that Jeremy begins a prayer.

[Sports Night Episode 2.19 excerpt]

JEREMY: Baruch atah Adoshem, Elokaynu Melech haolam, borei pr'ri hagafen. Baruch atah Adoshem, Elokaynu Melech haolam, asher bachar banu mikol am v'rom'manu mikol lashon v'kid'shanu b'mitzvotav.

[end excerpt]

AARON: Ordinarily, I would find that prayer, write that prayer out and then write, "fade to black". But, because I didn't want to keep the writers' assistants waiting and because I knew that Josh speaks Hebrew--

JOSH: [with uncertainty] Mmm.

[Laughter]

AARON: --he was surely going to know what this prayer was [cross talk].

JOSH: [cross talk] Yes, kiddush for the seder.

AARON: --at the very least. I just wrote, Jeremy begins the prayer as we fade to black. The episode airs on a Tuesday night, as they all did, and on Wednesday, we got a letter, a call, someone wanted to know why Jeremy said the wrong prayer. And I went to Josh like, delighted that he might have made a mistake that we wouldn't let him forget, and said, "Hey this person

says that you said the wrong prayer". It turns out, here's the story. The Jews--
[Laughter]

JOSH: Those people.

AARON: I am one. [Laughter] But the Jews have a kind of dummy prayer.

JOSH: It's really only certain words. It is words that are the name of God.

AARON: Ok.

JOSH: But it's like protecting God's name if you're not saying it in an actual prayer. In fact, I wasn't actually at a seder.

AARON: And that's the-- the point is, Josh would not say the real prayer--

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: --because he wasn't praying. He was acting on a television show.

JOSH: That said, in my mind, because I know it's a choice that I didn't run by anyone, that Jeremy could have made this decision that he's gonna have his real seder later at home, so I felt I was protecting... [Laughter].

AARON: Yeah, listen, you can make the argument that, well, if--

JOSH: And it was really two words: Adoshem and Elokaynu are the ways you refer to God and the Lord when you're not actually saying the prayer. And I've had many Jews come up to me and say that they appreciated that.

AARON: What circumstance, other than that, would you have to use those words?

JOSH: For instance, if you said to me, What is the prayer over bread, I'd say Baruch Atah Hashem, Elokaynu Melech haolam, Hamotzi lechem min haaretz.

AARON: That's you [cross talk] telling me what the prayer is, you are not praying.

JOSH: [cross talk] That's because I'm just telling you [unintelligible]. I'm sure someone else will write in and say if you're teaching someone it's ok to say the right thing. I know that's so-- it's typical, it's pilpul, I guess, which is Jewish, you know, making a 45-minute conversation out of something that should take [cross talk] 15 seconds to communicate. But, yeah.

AARON: [cross talk] [Laughter]

AARON: Well, I-- anyway, [cross talk] I thought that was fantastic.

HRISHI: [cross talk] That's great. Yeah. That's a great Sandy Koufax moment.

AARON: Yes.

JOSH: By the way, one of the great experiences in my professional life was filming that episode and that particular scene because, as luck would have it, my parents and one of my sisters were on the set when I was filming it, so I was with these people with whom I'd probably shared-- how old was I? Sixty-four seders, so for them to see me filming that scene was-- [cross talk] it was very special to me.

AARON: [cross talk] That is something.

AARON: Well, speaking of people watching scenes being filmed, when we shot the scene where, in the National Cathedral, where Bartlet's walking down the aisle and cursing at God--
HRISHI: Right.

AARON: We were-- First of all, we shot it at the National Cathedral, Washington. Magnificent place. And we were rehearsing. And I looked behind me and saw in the back of the room that a number of clergy had gathered. And I thought, you know, I should tell them what's about to happen. It seems like the least I can-- the least rude I can be is to at least tell them what's gonna happen. And so I walked up to the priest who was closest to me and said, Excuse me, 'Father, I just want to let you know that Martin Sheen, in this scene we're gonna do, he's gonna curse at God. And the priest said, 'I know, it's gonna be great.'

ALL: [Laughter]

JOSH: That's why I'm here. Oh, that's awesome.

AARON: And by the way, then I looked at all of them, it looked like that's why they were all there. They're like [cross talk] Waiting my whole life for this.

JOSH: [cross talk] Don't wanna miss this.

JOSH: Was the cigarette difficult to clear? Was that another conversation?

AARON: It was a conversation. They were very reasonable. Now, that, the cigarette, by the way, you know, after going through this whole thing about how there was no ghost of Mrs. Landingham, there is a moment of--

JOSH: Otherworldliness? [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Spiritual connection?

AARON: Yeah, with the cigarette. But it's one of those, 'Or was it?' kinds of things. Was it just a-- Listen, clearly we - [laughter] I was gonna try to get out of it, I can't.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: Clearly we, the filmmakers, Tommy and I, were saying-- and it's not Tommy's fault, he just shot what was in the script, that, as Bartlet's motorcade drove past the National Cathedral and the custodian swept up, or picked up the cigarette butt, Bartlet felt something.

HRISHI: I loved it.

AARON: I'm good with it. [cross talk] I'm ok with it.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

JOSH: I loved it. To me, every moment in this episode works and clicks and I love it all. He also-- I like the way he lights that thing so he can grind it into the floor.

AARON: Yeah. [Laughter]

JOSH: It's not just him smoking a cigarette [cross talk], he takes one puff.

AARON: Yeah, it was a big 'Go to hell' to his father--

JOSH: Mm-hm.

AARON: --who, you know, you started talking about Lawrence O'Donnell. We had a very tough time casting that part, we just couldn't find the person that we wanted. It was a really important role, not just for that episode, but we're saying that this, you know, like Mozart's father, this father occupies an enormous place in Bartlet's mind, not a very good place. It's still with him

today, that kind of thing. You can't just cast anybody. You know, Lawrence likes to say, you know, they cast me 'cause they just ran out of actors in Hollywood, [cross talk] but that's not why.

JOSH: [cross talk] He did make that case.

AARON: It was Tommy's idea. It was an idea I thought worked out great. I thought he did incredibly well as a father who doesn't like his son because the son's mother is Catholic and the son has decided to be, too.

HRISHI: Hm.

AARON: You know.

HRISHI: Well this is one of the reasons why I felt like understanding what was being said in Latin opens up the episode a little bit. Because you-- at least I was able to then-- maybe it was clearer for other people-- understand the resonance between that speech in the cathedral to God reflecting on his experience with his own father. When he says, I spread your word and did your work, there's even a direct connection to the cigarette in church at school, where his father says:

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

DR. BARTLET: People shouldn't be smoking in the chapel, I think is my point, Jed. Do you understand what I'm saying?

YOUNG BARTLET: Yes, sir.

[end excerpt]

AARON: Yes. The whole speech, the whole episode, the whole thing with Bartlet and his father for the life of the episode was about-- and I don't think this is a problem peculiar to Bartlet, but it was about having to separate God and your father, your actual father.

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: And Bartlet's difficulty doing that. So that speech in the church was to both of them and thus, the cigarette--

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: --at the end.

HRISHI: "Brothers in Arms," I think, is the other puzzle piece, I think in this, where you can appreciate the episode knowing nothing about the song, listening to it as just serving almost like score--

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: --in the episode. But I think when you listen to the actual lyrics and if you know anything about the song-- even just the fact that the song starts with a storm--

AARON: Right.

HRISHI: --with the rain sound effects. I was wondering, was that a song that you just loved for

the music of it, or were you also thinking about the context of what the song was about?

AARON: It was a song that I used to, you know, when I first heard it, which would have been in the late 80s, I think, is when that album came out-- that I used to just love the music of it. If you had asked me about the song then, or before I wrote "Two Cathedrals," what I would have remembers are Mark Knopfler's, you know, lead guitar licks that he's doing in there.

[Instrumental guitar]

AARON: Driving around in my car, trying to work on the episode was really the first time I listened to the words and thought, This is too good to be true. This is gonna really work well. And on the one hand, I felt like, am I handing off the end of the second season of *The West Wing* to Dire Straits and then saying you guys take it away. And then I thought, or rationalized, no, that this was all gonna be ok. And there's also-- what I remember after the episode came out was a bit of confusion about the ending. That there was a feeling of, wait, was this supposed to be a cliffhanger about whether or not Bartlet's gonna run again? Because if it is, they just gave it away. He just stuck his hands in his pockets.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: And I thought, Well, that was on purpose.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: We instructed him to do that in the script.

HRISHI: Well, there are a couple things about that Dire Straits song, and that choice, that I really love. So, that song is about the Falklands War, and the lyrics are sung from the point of view of a soldier who's dying--

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: --on the battlefield. And so it's really-- doesn't feel like you're just handing it off because that is so different. But there are these amazing things that come out because of that. One is-- this is a little thing, but there's a lyric--

[Dire Straits song "Brothers in Arms" excerpt]

Now the sun's gone to hell and The moon's riding high

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The sun's gone to hell, I thought the thinking about--

JOSH: S-O-N.

HRISHI: Yeah, S-O-N, and him telling God to go to hell when that line comes on in the episode, has a whole other meaning.

AARON: Right. That's so great to hear, because what you're experiencing there is what happens to us when we're in high school and we break up with our girlfriend [cross talk] and we're listening to the radio--

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ha, right.

HRISHI: Yeah.

AARON: -- and every song is about you and her, and every word it seems--

JOSH: For me it was always just "Walk Away Renee."

AARON: [Laughter]

JOSH: Why does this song come on every time?

ALL: [Laughter]

JOSH: She is walking away.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: So when the show can do that, when "Brothers in Arms" can do that to you, it's working on that level and that just means we got you. I don't mean we got you like a prank, I mean the connection between the people telling the story and the people hearing the story, or this person hearing the story has been made.

HRISHI: Yeah. The other thing is, too, the title of the song, "Brothers in Arms"--

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: --I wanted to go back to a thing that you said earlier when you were talking about this very personal thing that's happened, when you lose a friend. And my first thought when you said that was, But he didn't just lose a friend, he lost his sister, he lost his big sister. And the title, "Brothers in Arms," you know, this idea of, these are people who are not related to you, but, in this common cause, you are brothers, reinforced so much of the show in general, but specifically things that are mentioned in this episode about family. You know, he's rejecting his father, but at the same time, affirming the family that he's kind of created around him.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: What was Josh Lyman, a warning shot? That was my son.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then there's the part, for me this is the part that really gets me choked up, when watching the episode, even though it's not a text-based thing. When he's in the rain, and Charlie brings him his coat, and he doesn't put it on. And then, before they leave, Charlie takes off his coat--

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: Which, in the moment is nice, but you really get struck by it immediately afterwards as you see everybody else putting on their coat and walking out in their coats.

AARON: Yes. Just gonna disagree with you. It is a text-based thing, though, both those stage directions.

HRISHI: Oh, I just meant that they weren't words [cross talk], sorry.

AARON: [cross talk] Dialogue, it wasn't dialogue, oh, ok.

JOSH: And she wasn't a ghost.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: One of the things I was most pleased about after the episode came out-- 'cause Bartlet standing in the rain, Charlie brings him his coat, Bartlet doesn't want it, and Charlie follows Bartlet back in and takes off his coat.

HRISHI: Right

AARON: Bartlet isn't wearing one, I'm not wearing one. And I was so happy that people noticed that. You always wonder, is this thing that's really important to you, is anybody even gonna notice it? And people, at least some people, did, and I really liked that. I thought that Tommy did some of his most beautiful shooting in that whole "Brothers in Arms" sequence. You know, I said I hadn't watched the episode since it aired? I must have watched that sequence more recently, because I really clearly remember the motorcycles in the-- the police motorcycles in the motorcade. You know, Tommy found a spot right where they can just rise up there, and it did it perfectly with the music. Everybody did a really good job on that. You know, when it's the last episode of the season-- any other episode, as Josh can tell you, what I'm doing mostly is writing the next episode. When it's the last episode of the season, there's nothing for me to do, except bother people. And so like, what I like to do is, I'll start out by, Let me be the guy who brings everyone coffee now. Everyone's been doing it for me all year. And that just quickly changes into worrying about stuff, and Tommy has got to wish that as soon as I turn in the script, I would leave the country.

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

AARON: Because, suddenly, like I'm worrying about everything and he's saying, you know, We're doing this the exact same way we've done every other episode you and I have done together. There've been like a hundred, ok, so it's all gonna be ok.

ALL: [Laughter]

JOSH: So, did you watch Martin in the cathedral?

AARON: Oh, yeah.

JOSH: Were you able to watch that? So, I'm curious: how many takes, how did that go, did he have to ramp into things, was he there on take one?

AARON: He was there on take one. Latin and all.

JOSH: Mm.

AARON: And, by the way, Martin is extremely devout. This was all a big, big deal to him. I don't recall-- I mean, it's the usual number of takes. Tommy does a lot. There were, for Martin's speech, a number of set-ups. There's the high angle from the back, the high angle from the front, there are close-ups, tracking. Certainly, none of us were sitting there saying, Oh, when is

he gonna get this? He had it and it was just a matter of tuning it and--

JOSH: There's a little moment in there that I feel like ties into the whole "Brothers in Arms" philosophy--

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: They say we haven't had a storm this bad since you took out that tender ship of mine in the North Atlantic last year. Sixty-eight crew. You know what a tender ship does? Fixes the other ships.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I mean, that's in his list of things that God has done that he's got a quarrel with, but I also thought, that's what Mrs. Landingham was.

AARON: Yes.

HRISHI: She was a tender ship.

AARON: You're right about that, and that's another really good girlfriend-broke-up-with-me-in-high-school take on it. And I don't mean to-- I'm not saying you're reading too much into that. It's kind of like a neural net that, the more you know about it, the more it's gonna mean to you.

JOSH: Look, when the material is rich, you start making all these connections.

AARON: Well that's really great to hear.

HRISHI: I thought that was a really nice moment, too, because, again in the flashback scenes, there's also this connection being created between Bartlet and sort of the more-- the people in the humbler stations around him.

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: When Mrs. Landingham is trying to get him to speak for the cooks and the clerks at the school--

AARON: Right.

HRISHI: --the people without prestige. And so I thought this sort of-- it was nice that this person who's still a servant of God as well, has this connection with him in that moment. Especially after the whole dialogue with himself with Mrs. Landingham there.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Give me numbers.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: I don't know numbers. You give 'em to me.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: How 'bout a child born in this minute has one-in-five chance of being born into poverty.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: How many Americans don't have health insurance?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Forty-four million.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The part where he really goes from renouncing his faith in God to realizing that this is a

test, and he has to come back from it, and he thinks about all the people outside of himself that need him, I thought that having the shot of the janitor brought that home in a really palpable way.

AARON: Again, that's great to hear. You hear about people who take up golf, and they spend the afternoon just hacking away at the course, and then, for some reason, they hit the ball beautifully. And it [pop], it makes the right sound, and it sails, and having hit that shot, they keep coming back and back, just to kind of chase that experience to get it one more time. That's a lot like what writing is like for me.

HRISHI: Hm. There are a couple lines that I wanted to ask you about. They're just little-- I just was wondering about the mechanics of them. I don't have any kind of big thought about it. But I love-- there are a couple little bits of repetition. Leo says to the President:

[Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

LEO: It was a beautiful service, I thought. I thought it was a beautiful service.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I loved that moment of Leo kind of floundering a little bit at what to say. What do you say to someone in this-- in that moment? But he doesn't repeat the line, there's this-- he just-- he inverts it a little bit. It's just a beautiful piece of writing.

AARON: For people who ordinarily are hyper-communicative, to have them, as you said, floundering for a moment, is always effective on the show.

JOSH: I liked that young Bartlet, when Mrs. Landingham presses him on the equity in pay issue, says, 'Show me numbers. Economist-to-be. [cross talk] Show me numbers.'

AARON: [cross talk] [Laughter] Yeah.

AARON: Which Bartlet then says to the ghost of Mrs. Landingham.

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: No, no! She's not-- Aaron!

AARON: Yeah, she's the ghost of Mrs. Landingham, who will haunt him now for the rest of the series, ok? [cross talk] Only Bartlet can see her, and he'll be like, 'Guys can't you see her?' She's-- she's right there! Can no one see--

JOSH: [cross talk] I also-- I wrote that this--

JOSH: This is-- I'm just-- Halloween is coming here, it's gonna be a huge costume.

AARON: [Laughter]

HRISHI: Well, she's the one--

JOSH: I know what I'm going as.

HRISHI: She's the one that's opening the door to the--

JOSH: There you go!

AARON: To the other side?

HRISHI: Exactly.

AARON: Uh-huh.

JOSH: I liked this couplet of dialogue, too, because it will lead me into a completely irrelevant story about myself.

AARON: Great. [Laughter]

JOSH: C.J. preps Bartlet to take a specific question, rather than answering the question that everybody wants to pose to him, and--

AARON: Right, she knows where the softball question is--

JOSH: Right, exactly. And so she reminds him and she says:

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

C.J.: Mr. President, I'm going in there right now. This is the last time I'm gonna see you before you step up. Please, where's--

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Front row, first seat on the right.

C.J.: Whose right?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: My right.

C.J.: Thank you, sir.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And that reminded me, because I had a very similar experience. When I was seventeen, I had a hernia operation. And one of the final things pre-op [cross talk] is that a nurse came in.

AARON: [cross talk] Oh, God! [Laughter]

JOSH: At first there was a shaving incident, which was very embarrassing because there was a cute girl sharing pre-op with me. But we'll-- I'll skip that. And then she-- just before sending me into the operating room, the nurse says, 'Now, it's on your right side, yes?' And I said, 'Yes.' And then, as they were wheeling me, just before I banged the doors into the room, I yelled, 'My right! My right!'

AARON: [Laughter]

JOSH: I don't know how they keep track of it.

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: The New York Times used to-- they don't anymore, but they used to periodically print retractions and corrections from around the world. And one of them was, it was a correction. It said, Where it says 'Insert ZIP Code', it should read, 'Pull rip cord.'

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: I just imagined somebody jumping out of a plane, going, nine-double-oh-two-four!

ALL: [Laughter]

AARON: Oh [Expletive deleted]!

ALL: [Laughter continues]

AARON: My right.

ALL: [Laughter continues]

JOSH: Let me ask you this: I think one of the questions posed by watching this and re-watching this episode, and the power and how well the young Bartlet and young Mrs. Landingham characters played brings me back to a question on many people's minds. People want to know about a potential re-boot or re-visit, and we have opined that perhaps, à la Muppet Babies, would you ever consider origin stories or revisiting-- I'm gonna put you on the spot-- revisiting the show by seeing some of our heroes when they were younger?

HRISHI: Let me give you a visual aid here.

AARON: Oh boy.

JOSH: Oh, right, I forgot. Hrishi's already cast it.

AARON: [Laughter]

JOSH: I should have mentioned that.

AARON: Well, that's a fantastic casting job. I won't say out loud, but--

JOSH: No, he's posted it.

AARON: Ok. [cross talk] Then that's--

HRISHI: [cross talk] We've talked about it on the show.

JOSH: [cross talk] We've shared it.

AARON: That's a fantastic casting job.

JOSH: And lots of other people have their ideas.

AARON: First, I will say that this podcast has done an enormous amount to fuel the, kind of a *West Wing* renaissance. Between this podcast and Netflix, there's a whole generation of people who think that the show is on the air right now.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

AARON: That they're not watching something that was on ten years ago. Weekly, there's a conversation either with Bob Greenblatt, who's the president of NBC, or with Peter Roth, who's the head of Warner Brothers Television, and an ongoing conversation with the cast members

about doing something again, whether it was a limited eight-part series or a two-hour special or reviving [cross talk] the series wholesale. I'm gonna correct one thing that you said. What people love is the cast. They wanna spend time with this cast every week. What nobody wants is *A Very Brady Reunion* show.

JOSH: [cross talk] Come on, Aaron! Come on!

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

AARON: They always let us down. We get disappointed by that. But if I can come up with an idea that works-- Basically, it's the same as it's always been. If I can think of an idea, I would do it in a second. But I am mindful of the--

JOSH: Legacy?

AARON: I don't wanna use that word, but this show holds a fond place in many people's memories, and that means a lot to me and I just wanna respect that.

JOSH: So you're saying maybe!

ALL: [Laughter]

JOSH: When I was a kid, that's all I ever shot for. If I could just get my parents to say maybe. Just don't say no!

AARON: Yeah.

JOSH: So, maybe! Ok. I'll take it.

HRISHI: Let's talk about a couple other little moments in the show. We get the organization NOAA in the show, but it's the National [cross talk] Oceanographic--

AARON: Oceanographic and Atmospheric--

HRISHI: Administration. And normally you say it, No-uh, like they say NASA.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: But in the show, the whole name is told, and then Bartlet says:

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: According to the N-O-A-A, this storm... [audio fades]

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I was wondering if you had to do that because saying NOAA, for a TV audience that might not know what that is, would be too confusing 'cause it sounds like a name?

AARON: Yeah. "According to NOAA" is what they would say, but you're absolutely right. I would have made that decision because the audience would have stopped for a second and thought, Who's Noah?

HRISHI: Who's Noah? [Laughter]

AARON: Is Noah someone I'm s'posed to know?

HRISHI: Yeah. I also was thinking about the timeline, right, this cigarette break that you guys shared. For me, I felt like the speech in the cathedral had been presaged all the way back in

“The War at Home,” when Abbey confronts Bartlet and says:

[West Wing Episode 2.14 excerpt]

ABBEY: We had a deal. And that deal was how you justified keeping it a secret from the world. It's how you justified it to God.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And that kind of set up the showdown. Were you thinking about this idea of his faith versus lying about the MS all the way back then with the idea of paying it off in this way?

AARON: Boy, it sounds like I was smarter than I was, but I-- That episode, “The War at Home”-- Do you remember the airdate? By any chance do you have it there?

HRISHI: So, it aired February 14th.

AARON: If it aired February 14th, then I probably wrote it on the 13th.

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

AARON: No, if it aired February 14th, that means I probably wrote it right before the Christmas break, and it's possible that I had already had that cigarette with Kathryn.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: I loved that payoff of that. Like, of course as soon as the MS gets re-introduced and we realize that it's gonna be pitted against this idea of is he gonna run for re-election or not [cross talk], that it just becomes part of the tapestry of the season for, I mean, that's episode fourteen [cross talk], and yeah--

AARON: [cross talk] Mm-hm.

AARON: [cross talk] “17 People,” and yeah.

HRISHI: That's episode fourteen of season two, and so for the next nine episodes, it's always there.

JOSH: I love that the cold open ends with Leo saying:

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

LEO: There's gonna be a press conference tonight. I'd watch.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And the episode ends with Leo saying:

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

LEO: Watch this.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I loved that. Just the-- there's so many little nuances--

HRISHI: Mm-hm.

JOSH: --that pay off.

HRISHI: There's another thing about the president's familial connection to Mrs. Landingham, too.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

CHARLIE: Is there anything else you need, sir?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I need pallbearers.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: These are things that we've learned already in the course of the episode, but it's really driven home by that line, that Mrs. Landingham doesn't have any other family. She's lost her sons, she's lost her husband, and so, in addition to his responsibilities running the country, he also has to put together this funeral for his sister.

AARON: Right. I'd say a very broad theme in all of the television that I've written is that it's all right to be alone in a big city if you can find family at work. And you just described some of the literal moments of that.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's also a great-- we talked about this earlier, Josh, about how Dessaline in Haiti, kind of has this off-screen proxy effect for Bartlet a little bit.

JOSH: Leader in a tough situation.

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: Mm-hm.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: He's been president of his country for two days. He's spent 'em both at gunpoint.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He kind of says it, he tosses it off to Charlie, and he kind of then goes on from there, but it's a little insight into what he's thinking about, you know, the parallel between the gun at his head.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: There's something in the last few episodes that Josh and I have been discussing about how the machine is starting come apart at the seams.

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: That the staff, this tight-knit group is starting to snipe at each other a little bit, and there's an example of that in this episode, another example of that, when Sam raises his voice.

[West Wing Episode 2.22 excerpt]

SAM: I wanna bring it up again.

C.J.: Why?

SAM: 'Cause I got shouted down the first three times and I work here, just like you do. Can I help you?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's something so shocking whenever Sam raises his voice. Like, I think we're a little bit used to it with Richard and with Josh, but you get this, like, visceral shock a little bit.

JOSH: I think it has something to do with the idea of someone who looks like Rob Lowe having to exert himself for any reason.

HRISHI: [Laughter]

AARON: I think you're making an interesting point. I know you're kidding around, but the fact that Sam is a mild-mannered guy, but you're right. Those moments when he gets angry, when he raises his voice, as you said, become meaningful.

HRISHI: Yeah. And they really jar you. Right after the scene in the cathedral, we come back to the staff having the meeting talking about--

AARON: Lemme just go back for one second and say that the sniping among the staff had to happen in order for "Brothers in Arms" to be meaningful.

JOSH: Hm.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: Hm.

AARON: Go ahead. [cross talk] They come back after the funeral--

JOSH: [cross talk] Well said.

HRISHI: Yeah. And you really feel the, I think, the sort of underlying thesis of *The West Wing*, that there are these lofty levels to it, ideas of what it means to be a leader and what's happening sort of at the top of the food chain. And then, sort of the gears that fit together to make all of that possible. But that these guys are operating at a different level that's really-- you know, while he's confronting his faith and having, kind of, these existential questions, they have to come back and be making the decisions and making sure that things actually run and at the very mundane way.

AARON: I agree, and I remember feeling that writing it, feeling it, watching it, that Bartlet gets to have this kind of out-of-body moment, and the staff has to deal with the reality of what's going on, just as, I'm sure, you know, somebody, like, when JFK was shot and Johnson was taking over, somebody around there had to be unemotional, right, and say, This is how it works. In fact, Will Bailey had that moment in "Twenty Five," in my last episode, so those kinds of moments are nice.

JOSH: I have a question. This is my first re-watch episode by episode, since I originally watched the show, so sometimes I don't know whether things are gonna be revisited because I can't remember the next three episodes or--

AARON: Mm-hm.

JOSH: There's this undercurrent that keeps occurring to me about, sort of some unspoken things-- Mrs. Landingham died in a car crash in her new car on her way back to the White House at the President's request, and, I mean, I'm left with the feeling that he was going to tell her his medical situation.

AARON: Yeah. He says, does he not, before he sends her off:

[West Wing Episode 2.21 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Do me a favor, would you? Come back here after you pick it up. I'd like to talk to you about something.

MRS. LANDINGHAM: Yes, sir.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah.

AARON: Absolutely.

JOSH: So does he live-- is that a guilt that he lives with moving forward, that she died trying to make her way back to him, or--

AARON: Well, if it is, it's something I never dramatized. But he's already blamed God, thinking that God [cross talk] is doing it as retribution for the fact that he was lying in the first place, so--

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: Yeah, that's true. Good point.

HRISHI: I was wondering, for you, we talked about the storm sound effects in "Brother in Arms" and how that led you to start the rain in [cross talk] this episode.

AARON: [cross talk] Mm-hm.

HRISHI: But rain has been, kind of, something that's continually been in your writing, and I was just wondering if you could talk about the significance of when you've decided to employ that.

AARON: Well, first of all, I think the first time I employed it on TV, Josh was in the scene.

HRISHI: Yeah, in *Sports Night*.

AARON: In *Sports Night*.

[Sports Night Episode 2.16 excerpt]

JEREMY: I like you. And I hurt your feelings. I wanted to come back here and insist that you take my umbrella.

JENNY: I think you wanted to come back here just to be with me. But give me the damn umbrella.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You do like rain.

AARON: Yeah, I do.

JOSH: It's a lot of fun to act in, too, I have to say. Just watching them-- the creation of it, the physical--

AARON: I like the way it looks, I like that it's an obstacle that you have to [cross talk] fight against. So sometimes I'm just using it for aesthetic reasons. Obviously, it was more than just aesthetics in "Two Cathedrals."

JOSH: [cross talk] Contend with.

HRISHI: Again, there's a line in "Brothers in Arms" that refers to a baptism, although I think it's baptisms of fire--

AARON: Baptisms of fire.

HRISHI: But I was wondering if that was-- if there's supposed to be a sense of--

AARON: There is, as a matter of fact. When Bartlet steps outside, that rain is meant to be-- the rain and the wind-- is meant to be a sort of born-again kind of thing.

HRISHI: Right, 'cause that's really where he decides-- he comes back to his faith.

AARON: Yes. Yeah.

JOSH: How 'bout the title? We've got the Washington National Cathedral. We have his prep school cathedral. We have our Holy Father and his father. I even thought, and maybe this is just "Walk Away Renee" again--

ALL: [Laughter]

JOSH: Blurred vision is one of the symptoms of the MS that he's having. He's seeing two cathedrals.

AARON: Very interesting. I honestly just meant it literally as the National Cathedral and the cathedral at his prep school, two places where someone had littered on the floor.

HRISHI: That's so funny. You know, I had thought of two cathedrals as National Cathedral and the White House.

JOSH: Mm.

AARON: That's interesting, and I have heard other-- See, this is why I always am reluctant to answer these questions, because--

JOSH: Right.

AARON: It's "Don't walk away, Renee". If it's living in your head as this other thing, I don't want to spoil that. It's perfectly valid. We dramatized this also on *Sports Night*, with "Eli's Coming," that Dan, Josh Charles' character, always misunderstood what "Eli's Coming" was about.

HRISHI: Right. Well, I think you actually made the case for both things being able to coexist earlier in this conversation. That, you know, the things that I'm pulling out of "Brothers in Arms" [cross talk] from its context in the episode, even if the weren't literally intended by you, it's not wrong to interpret it that way.

AARON: [cross talk] Mm-hm.

AARON: It is absolutely not wrong to interpret it that way. What happened was, we, the show, we got you wound up, and the rest is you.

JOSH: It's funny, just last night I was hanging out with a friend, my friend Jay, and not apropos of this episode or talking about *The West Wing*-- He's a big music fan and he was talking about a Bread song, a song by Bread, "Everything I Own," by David Gates that everybody always thinks is about a broken romantic relationship, but in fact he wrote about his father's passing. And the songwriter doesn't want to tell you what it's about, or rob you of having it be whatever [cross talk] it means to you.

AARON: [cross talk] That's right.

AARON: That's right. Like, I still don't know what the song "American Pie" is about. I was told it was about Buddy Holly dying, and it might be. But then I've been given nine other theories of, no, it's not-- it doesn't have anything to do with Buddy Holly, it's about this, and I always feel bad after that, because then when I'm told the truth I feel like I never get to feel that way again--

JOSH: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: You mean, robbed of--

AARON: Yeah, and I don't wanna do that to *West Wing* fans.

HRISHI: Well, see, I think, for me, I have no problem with it. I'm always interested in the intention, but I don't think that learning the intention erases the other interpretations. That's also part of the reason why, certainly, we have so many episodes where it's just the two of us and we talk about what we think we're getting from the episode, but the reason why it's so important, I think, for us to have you on the show is to be able to have both, you know? I definitely don't want to only have it exist in interpretation. I think intent is so illuminating.

Ok. This is a thing where, in an early episode with Emily Procter--

AARON: Mm-hm.

HRISHI: Donna comes down to her office. You know, she asks if we look alike.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: There's a part where she goes on a date with someone. The date gets cut off early and she comes home. It's a bust. The date's a bust.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: Right? And so many people-- I was astonished by how many of our listeners are convinced that the reason why the date went badly was because the guy that Donna went on a date with thought she was Ainsley.

JOSH: Oh, right!

HRISHI: And I was like, that's ridiculous! There's nothing in the text to--

JOSH: People were furious at us--

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: That we were like-- so, well?

AARON: No, that's not what happened, and--

JOSH and HRISHI: [Laughter]

HRISHI: Thank you.

JOSH: We can include that, then? [cross talk] Thank goodness, because people really took us to task, like, I don't think--

AARON: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: They're like, there's no other way to read it! I was like, what are you talking about?

AARON: Yeah, no, that's not what happened.

HRISHI: Ok.

AARON: By the same token, and I guess we can end here, I love coming on the show, but even more, I love that this show exists. Obviously, it feeds my ego that this show exists, but it's incredible to have this kind of conversation take place about the show, and it's really amazing and I want to thank you both.

JOSH: Thank you, Aaron.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it does just trigger a far greater conversation on our message boards and on Facebook. I mean, it's unbelievable what-- we just get to the surface of things in terms of what other [cross talk] people take the baton and run with it.

AARON: [cross talk] Well, I'm really glad--

AARON: Really, really glad to hear that and-- you can't ask me too often--

JOSH and HRISHI: Ohh.

AARON: Honestly, I'll do every episode. Thank you both very much.

JOSH: Thank you, Aaron.

HRISHI: Thank you. Thanks for joining us again.

AARON: You bet.

JOSH: So that's it for this episode. That was another fantastic Sorkin interview.

HRISHI: That's also it for this season.

JOSH: [Gasps] That's right!

HRISHI: Next week we'll be taking a week off to try and rest and recover and start to prepare for season three. In the meantime, please get your friends and your family to start watching *The West Wing* and listening to our podcast if they aren't already.

JOSH: That's right. And if you don't own the official West Wing Weekly lapel pin, you can find it at westwingweekly.com/pin.

HRISHI: The thing about the pin is, it allows you to identify your fellow West Wing Weekly listeners in public places. I was just on essentially a nerd convention on a ship, and there were a few--

JOSH: Were you the captain?

HRISHI: [Laughter]

JOSH: I'm just assuming.

HRISHI: Only metaphorically. And there were some West Wing Weekly listeners on board, which was amazing, and I saw some West Wing Weekly pins. It was really, really cool, and it's just a nice little shibboleth that you can use to identify fellow fans, and you can give them the signal when you do. It's become much cooler than I think we even anticipated. So, please check that out. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/pin and get yours if you haven't already.

JOSH: It helps us make the show, and we appreciate your support.

HRISHI: That's true. In the meantime, 'til we get to season three, you can talk to us about this episode or any of the other episodes at thewestwingweekly.com, or on our Facebook page, facebook.com/thewestwingweekly.

JOSH: I hear we have an Instagram account.

HRISHI: That's true. It's instagram.com/thewestwingweekly.

JOSH: The West Wing Weekly is a proud member of Radiotopia, which is a curated selection of the very finest podcasts available.

HRISHI: It's made possible by the Knight Foundation and by listeners like you. If you'd like to tweet at us, Josh is @joshmalina, I'm @hrishihirway, and our show is @westwingweekly.

JOSH: If you wanna throw us a five-star review, go do it on iTunes. Seriously, do it.

HRISHI: Aaron Sorkin is not on Twitter. This show is produced by Joshua Malina and me, Hrishikesh Hirway, with help from Margaret Miller and Zach McNees. We couldn't do it without them.

JOSH: If you're looking for something to do between episode drops, you can listen to Hrishi's other fabulous podcast, Song Exploder, and you can see me on *Scandal* on ABC, Thursday nights at nine, eight central.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

AARON and KIRSTEN: What's next?

[instrumental from "Brothers in Arms"]

[Outro Music]