

The West Wing Weekly
4.13: "The Long Goodbye"

Guests: Jon Robin Baitz and Robert Egge from The Alzheimer's Association

[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 "The Long Goodbye." It's episode 13 of season 4.

JOSH: It was written by Jon Robin Baitz, it was directed by Alex Graves, and it first aired on January 15, 2003.

HRISHI: This episode deals with C.J. going home to Dayton for her 20th high school reunion, and also dealing with her father who is in the early onset of Alzheimer's.

JOSH: No Aaron Sorkin to be found on the writing credits.

HRISHI: This episode is an anomaly because it was guest written by playwright Jon Robin Baitz, and coming up we're going to discuss the long goodbye with Jon Robin Baitz, aka Robbie Baitz.

JOSH: Very exciting!

HRISHI: This episode is a strange one because Aaron hasn't written it. It's also one where we've gotten a lot of notes from people in advance of our watching because West Wing fans who have a loved one with Alzheimer's or some form of dementia have really been affected by its portrayal in this episode.

JOSH: I find this to be a very moving episode. I like the little detour we get into C.J.'s life.

HRISHI: Before we speak to Robbie Baitz, I thought it would be important get a little context on Alzheimer's. It's not something that I knew a lot about, and it's obviously a huge part of this episode. So, to give us some more context and some more information, here's Robert Egge of The Alzheimer's' Association.

ROBERT EGGE: I'm Robert Egge, chief public policy officer of The Alzheimer's Association

HRISHI: So going into this episode, my understanding of Alzheimer's is really just anecdotal. Things that I know from family members of friends and watching things like this episode of *The West Wing*. In your opinion, do you feel like the show generally portrayed the disease accurately in "The Long Goodbye?"

ROBERT: Well you know my sense from watching this episode was that it was an accurate way to portray the disease. The thing is, as you would image, like many other diseases, but maybe particularly true with Alzheimer's, it could present in so many different ways with more than five billion Americans with this disease, it really does look very different in different circumstances. My sense was they were talking to people who knew this disease very well and that seemed to come through in the episode in the way they interpreted how it was for this man. For instance, one example, it's very common in the disease progression for people of course to want to hide what's going on and try to keep it at bay and postpone the development of this disease. So that's one example of where I thought they had really channeled authentically what people struggle with with this disease.

HRISHI: And i'm sure that trying to hide the disease doesn't help anyone.

ROBERT: No, it' doesn't. I think that's generally right. One of our big themes at the Alzheimer's association is we need to talk about this. We need to talk about it at a national level. We need to talk about it in a beltway context. But we need to talk about it as families. And, we understand how tough that can be but it is necessary for all the reasons that were surfaced in this episode. People have to talk about it as a family to figure out how they're going to get through a disease that can be so demanding and difficult to navigate.

HRISHI: Now how long have you been working on Alzheimer's?

ROBERT: Well you know I first became involved with working in this area around the time that this episode aired actually. A little bit after that. In the early 2000s I was involved in a long term care commission in Washington and one thing that we kept coming into was that you can't talk about long term care and the burden on our country in that context, even then, without dealing with dementia because so many cases of why people are in nursing homes or in other long term care settings was because of this disease. So that's where I first started working with this. And then I went specifically into Alzheimer's with a blue ribbon task force a few years later when we decided we couldn't tackle Alzheimer's in the context of long term care and do it justice, we have to talk about things like the research picture. And so a number of people from congress came back to us, that also includes Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and others, who were experiencing Alzheimer's from many different vantage points, to deal with this. And that's where I started work with Alzheimer's specifically and I've never stopped, and I'm glad for that of course.

HRISHI: And did it seem noteworthy that *The West Wing* had an episode focussing on Alzheimer's?

ROBERT: If you're going to go back, this was one of those episodes that was one of the first times someone spent as much time as this episode did going into Alzheimer's, and we were at a point then that this was a conversation that was hidden in a sense. In many different contexts, it was hidden, in terms of families trying to not talk about, it certainly wasn't a topic in Washington very much at all. If you go back ten years earlier, about before the air date, that when former President Reagan discussed his diagnosis with the nation in a letter that caught so many people in a powerful way, but having said that, in policy terms terms, you weren't talking about Alzheimer's much at all during this period.

HRISHI: I've read that Alzheimer's is one of the most costly diseases. I imagine that lends an urgency to have that conversation with congress because beyond the humanitarian and the medical reasons behind trying to learn more about Alzheimer's, there's this added pressure on the burden on the economy.

ROBERT: That's true, but it took a while, i think, for people to understand this, and one reason is, and this can get pretty wonky in a hurry but I know that's what *The West Wing* does, but a lot of the ways we would present statistics wouldn't surface the cost of Alzheimer's until it was looked at in a deeper way. So for instance, today, just like during this episode, in discussion there, there aren't those kinds of medications unfortunately, that people are able to use that are often the story behind the cost of say, in cancer and oncology where you're paying for expensive biologics. That's not what's driving the cost in Alzheimer's and dementia more generally. What it really is driving is long term care costs that are paid by medicaid in a medicare context or most of the cost is the fact that Alzheimer's complicates everything else whether it's your diabetes or your cancer, or just leading to going into the hospital and back out. So it's when we look at it from that lens—when independent researches did—that we realized this is a major cost driver for the entire country and that now has the attention of both parties of congress

HRISHI: Has the narrative around Alzheimer's changed in the intervening years? If someone were to tell a similar story now in 2018 would it feel materially different? Because, from the way the episode depicts it, and from what I do know about Alzheimer's, the outlook feel so bleak. Has that changed?

ROBERT: Well so you know, in many ways. I'll start with the bleak side of it...

HIRSHI: Sure

ROBERT: In many ways we still don't have what we so much need as a country and that's represented even, as you might imagine, we're serving all the time opinions of Americans across the board about the disease and one thing we see consistently, especially when you get to people who are middle age and older, this is often the most feared disease of Americans. And you can see why in this episode, it came through, there was a really interesting moment in the episode where they discuss the fact that nobody wants to be a burden.

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

DR. VOIGHT: Because you hate being a burden, you're probably aware that it's harder on the people around you than it will be on you.

[end excerpt]

ROBERT: And that's one of the larger sources of fear is you don't want your loved ones to be thinking of you as that burden they have to worry about. Nobody wants to be that, of course. and that's often what's driving the fear. A lot of issues, but that's one example that drives the fear of this disease and on that front it's still the conversation that happens in millions of families today. People are afraid of that and discussing how to navigate through. So that is very similar

today to what it was in 2003. On the other hand, from a broader sense, we're dealing with this disease in a much more forthright way than we may have been doing at that time and even if you look at it from a policy lens there's a lot of reason to be optimistic as you look to the future. This disease was very much an afterthought, I think you could safely say, in terms of biomedical research in our country. In what congress could do in terms of funding for the cures we need, in just the last several years, research funding has nearly tripled for Alzheimer's research. That's a really big story. It's congress intentionally saying we have got to do something about this disease and responding. That was not happening in 2003. That just wasn't on the minds of congress at that point.

HRISHI: And have you seen any fruits from that increased research? Does it feel like that investment has already brought in some returns?

ROBERT: Well you know I think we have now, the lag that is required between when the research funding goes in from congress before it gets to labs and trials are complete, it drives the development of new treatment, that takes a while. So the increases of recent years hasn't had time to go through that process yet. We're so eager for it as you can imagine. But even now we see, first of all the—you talked about it feeling bleak—well it sure felt bleak from a researchers perspective a few years ago. They knew that had all these great leads that they couldn't pursue for lack of funding. Right now it feels like a renaissance in the scientific community. People are very optimistic about what they're pursuing. There's other aspects too, that we see, even though we don't have the treatments yet. One interesting area of development in the context of this episode is we're getting much better at diagnosis, and that's true in a practical sense of what we saw in the exchange with the neurologist, his friend, in that episode, but it's also true a step back from that, in terms of new technology. So now we're able, what we couldn't do then, we can now look inside the living brain and see—beta amyloid is one of those, it's a term for what's deposited in the brain during this disease—and we can start to rule out some of these that look like Alzheimer's that actually can be treated and so these are encouraging things while we're waiting for the real big breakthroughs, of course, that will change the future of this disease.

HRISHI: What's your hope from our listener? What would you like West Wing Weekly listeners to do?

ROBERT: Well I think that, one hope is that, there are bound to be listeners who are dealing with this right now. It's just inevitable because of the numbers of people involved—or maybe know others or their self...

HRISHI: No, we definitely have heard from some of our listeners who have told us about their experience watching the episode either during or after a loved one had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and how much it affected them just to even see it discussed as you said, you know, it wasn't really it wasn't really portrayed on T.V.

ROBERT: I'm sure

HRISHI: So absolutely, I know it's touched...

ROBERT: Yeah cause so every family can relate to that and two things I urge them to consider. One is our 800 number, 24x7 around the clock 800-272-3900, so people should feel free to place call that number and start a conversation around this. Our website too—alz.org—has a lot of good information. So, my one hope on just a very personal level is people know there is support and good advice and resources for those who need that. More generally I hope that we have this conversation in policy terms. You know, it's interesting to me that in this episode there is this subtext of policy in the background, all the things that are going on with the bombings at the embassy that seem timely today but it also seemed accurate representation at the time that they weren't trying to the turn this into a policy discussion and as I mentioned, that really wasn't going on at the time about Alzheimer's. Now it is, very much, something that members of congress and administration, they're talking about and working on, and one hope I have is that your listeners are encouraging that conversation. They're getting involved too to tell their members of congress, the administration, that we've gotta keep working on this, we've gotta keep moving towards the breakthroughs that millions of Americans are counting on.

HIRSHI: Robert, thank you so much for joining us, and telling us about your organization and shedding light on Alzheimer's. We'll put the number on the website. Again it's 800-272-3900 and the website alz.org.

ROBERT: Thank you so much for the invitation.

HRISHI: Alright without further ado, let's talk to Jon Robin Baitz about his experience making this episode and hear some of his thoughts on it. He's a playwright and television screenwriter whose work includes *The Substance of Fire*...

JOSH: Both the play and movie co starring my costar Tony Goldman.

HRISHI: *And The End of The Day* which starred Lord John Marbury himself, Roger Reese.

JOSH: Substance of fire, original cast, I believe, Playwright's Horizons, featured Patrick Breen, whom we know from playing Kevin Kahn in classic *West Wing* episode "The Black Vera Wang."

HRISHI: So he has a lot of familiarity with *West Wing* players, and it turns out, with Aaron himself. Let's jump right into our conversation with Robbie Baitz

HRISHI: Thank you so much for joining us

ROBBIE: It's a pleasure, happy to.

HRISHI: Let's start at the beginning. From your experience, how did this whole episode begin?

ROBBIE: It began with a random phone call from Aaron, who I knew and adored. We sort of came up together as playwrights and I have a memory of—we both had plays on at the same time, mine was *Substance of Fire*, and his was *A Few Good Men*, and I was off Broadway and he was on Broadway and we were both in previews at the same time, and I passed him on the street while going to my previews. I kept sort of remarking why do look so put together? One day they started previews and he was wearing a suit and like, walked up to him and said how

can you be wearing a suit to previews of your play, and he said, well, Mr. George Abbott wears a suit, to this day, George Abbott, great, late theater impresario. And I just, I walked away, you know, schleppy and bedraggled, loving Aaron even more. Anyway, cut to some years later, I get a phone call, and it was the fourth season of *West Wing*, and they were behind, and I'd never written television before, and he asked me if I would write a one-act play, as it were, using one character, for something called a 'bottle episode', which I of course had no idea was a thing. And he explained it, and they needed to shoot a couple episodes at the same time as it turned out. So, I'm not stupid, I chose Allison Janney to be the person to write for, C.J., whom I knew from New York theater. He sent me a giant Fedex box of, they were still cassettes I think, in those days, so I sat there and I watched all these episodes, and you know, I loved the show and I knew it, and I handed in a draft like ten days later. And Aaron called and said: "come on out, it's terrific." And there were no notes, per se, that were technical notes about the frame of it, having to dovetail with prior plot, but the draft I handed in was the draft we shot. It was longer, perhaps—I had to cut a bit, because I didn't know what TV looked like, and I kind of came, and sort of, spent an hour or two with Aaron in his office, and I sort of met everybody. Josh, I think you were there. I came by and sort of wandered through the set, I remember thinking I should have probably written for you too cause I liked you.

JOSH: [laughs] I remember being sad that I was not in this episode, I was very disappointed. Having unsuccessfully auditioned for the *Substance of Fire* in one of many instances when—I can't even remember whether it was Patrick Breen or John Tenney who got my role—but that would happen multiple times in my career with either of them.

ROBBIE: Sorry. I know it was very close, I remember that.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah, I'll bet. Oh you're a good man, you're nice to say.

ROBBIE: Became a poker impresario I believe, as well.

JOSH: That's right, you could have gotten in on the wave.

ROBBIE: Too bad, i'm always one step behind.

HRISHI: Let's go back for one second to the actual draft that you wrote. Had you been watching *The West Wing* up to this point? Had you been a fan, or were you aware of the show?

ROBBIE: No, I was a fan, I loved it, and—but I was intermittent—in and out of it. There was something about sitting down, and watching sort of a dozen of them curated by Aaron and I remember I sort of sat there, occasionally crying, you know, in my little office in New York. There was one episode that I remember, I don't know why it had such an effect on me, but it was people who were threatening the president's daughter were arrested in a cabin, or something?

HRISHI: In a diner?

ROBBIE: In a diner, that's right. And I was just so impressed that a show that was so much about smart talk was also exciting at the same time in its own way. I had a soft spot for Rob

Lowe just because I had known him for a long time, and he was always very charming. He then subsequently came in my TV show *Brothers and Sisters*.

JOSH: I loved, *loved*, that series

ROBBIE: Oh thank you. I only made the first season, I decided that the world needed me as a playwright much more than a show-runner.

JOSH: You created the series, no?

ROBBIE: I did, I had no idea what I was doing in fact, and I was, my incompetence proved to be an impediment, and so much smarter people like Greg Berlanti had to take over, and he did a great job. I learned a lot, I certainly was more combative as a TV person than I am now, you know, it was a lot of tilting at windmills. But looking back at that show I'm proud of a lot of it. Yeah.

JOSH: I wonder whether there's some overlay or some parallel to your work in TV and Aaron's cause I know he also came in as a playwright and the parameters within which he had to work sometimes, I know he bristled against them.

ROBBIE: I think there was the day I moved into my office on the Disney lot there was a magnum of champagne on my desk and he was of course in Burbank also, a couple miles away, and there was a card with it which said: "I'm going to be looking out my window to watch your head fly off your shoulders and explode. Love, Aaron."

HRISHI AND JOSH: [laughs]

ROBBIE: And of course he was right, it did explode, multiple times. I think he made it less intimidating for me to start doing television. He certainly made it possible, and in fact he gave me the wrong idea because there were no notes, there was no rewriting essentially, the wonderful Alex Graves, whom I adore, directed it, and it made me think, well television's where it's at. And then it took me a long time to actually do it again.

HRISHI: So while you were watching these tapes, of the set of episodes Aaron had selected for you, what were the elements that jumped out to you from C.J.'s character that you wanted to draw from as you were watching?

ROBBIE: Haplessness, a tremendous intellect, hampered by a kind of subtle social ineptitude, masked by being very articulate, with a profound sense of humor,

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

C.J.: He has a new job now, he gets married after my mom died, twice, now to a lovely lady in the English department. Her job is baking and hating me.

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: You know the joke is always my favourite perfume, and she was so deeply in on the cosmic joke of it all, but also very much a kind of confused delight and knowing Allison and knowing that she was been blessed with a combination of perfect comic timing and very smart eyes, I wanted to spend those minutes with her.

HRISHI: And how about as you were writing it, did you start to imagine any of the other roles? Were you pre-casting in your mind for who might play...?

ROBBIE: Yes I wrote her father specifically for the great Donald Moffat.

JOSH: Wonderful actor.

HRISHI: He's so perfectly cast. I was wondering that because while watching it, I just thought, who else could have played this role so well?

ROBBIE: I had essentially grown up in the theatre, and actually watching films, with him and he was never less than thrilling to me, and what a great match to play her father.

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

TAL: My father kept perfect time—marked it, measured it with this—the hellos and goodbyes. It keeps faltering; nobody can do anything.

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: I think he understood when I gave him the script that it was for him, and said yes right away. How much I love him. He sort of ratified my love of actors in a deep way.

JOSH: Donald Moffat, nominated for two Tonys in one season. 1967, *The Wild Duck*, and *Right You Are If You Think You Are*. I'm not even sure how he did that.

ROBBIE: I don't know. He's remarkable, and then was brilliant in the movie *The Thing*.

JOSH: Watching him in this episode of yours makes me want to see his King Lear. That would be something.

ROBBIE: I wonder if he ever did it. I don't know.

JOSH: I think not, but I would have liked to see it.

ROBBIE: He had fallen out of an apple tree either right before the show—maybe it was right after—but he was injured right around the time of the show and broke his leg and it was a bad break and he had lying on the kind of wintery Connecticut ground for some hours. I think it was right before and he'd just recovered from that.

HRISHI: I was just thinking that the technical part of casting this role, you know, you can't just imagine who would be right for it in terms of their voice or their performance style. You also have to cast someone who would be tall enough to be believably C.J.'s dad

ROBBIE: I didn't even think about that, but he must have just sort of been stuck in my head. He had done a play called *Painting Churches* by Tina Howe a couple of years before in which he was so transcendent and lucid and I remember him as being tall but yeah, you couldn't have Richard Dreyfuss play her father.

JOSH: [Laughs]

HIRSHI: Right. And how about the casting of Matthew Modine. Is that something you were involved in, that decision?

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

C.J.: You were a baseball-playing punk rocker.

MARCO: And you were the smartest, funniest, saddest girl in Dayton.

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: Yes, I wrote that for Matthew as well. We did become friends a little bit and I just admired him. I think we just sort of became New York friends, and it was another one of those things where he just was that guy and I sent it to him—maybe the agency or whatever did—and he was on board immediately. I think he wanted to come back but I was not responsible for whether that happened or not.

JOSH: That's not on you

ROBBIE: No

HRISHI: While you were writing this, did you feel like you had to comport your voice to fit the way that Aaron wrote

ROBBIE: No, because it's not — I felt, like, a *carte blanche*. It was a discrete thing. I subsequently wrote an episode that wasn't shot for reasons that had nothing to do with the writing but had to with what Aaron wanted to do with the character I wrote for an episode called "Hoynes for America."

JOSH: We want it. Can we have it?

ROBBIE: Yeah, I'll find it for you!

HRISHI: That would be amazing

ROBBIE: His son came out of the closet, he was gonna run, and his backers didn't want his son running—remember this was 2001 or 2—his son was a football star at Texas A&M in this episode and Hoynes' backers were uneasy with the son sort of coming out, and Hoynes told them to go [expletive deleted] themselves. And he also, at the same time, was making a deal to sell his diaries to be published and they were very very explicit and very critical and very explosive. And I wrote a part for him and Joel Grey, as his publisher. And everyone was set to do it, and maybe it was John Wells—no, it was Tommy Schlamme—said, “yeah Aaron wants to do something else with that character,” and that was the end of that.

JOSH: If you let us share it with people, people would love to read that. I'm dying to see that.

ROBBIE: Oh I'll send it to you

HRISHI: Would that be ok, for us to make it publicly available?

ROBBIE: I don't see why not, unless Aaron objects or something. I can't imagine

JOSH: No that's great

HRISHI: Exciting!

HRISHI: So you come to the set to shoot the episode. You have no notes. Most of it wasn't shot on the set though. Where did you actually do the filming?

ROBBIE: It took place in Dayton and we shot in Chicago. We found a beautiful house. Not downtown, of course. But in one of the near suburbs, that was just perfect for it. So we were there for a week or so and I was there every step of the way, making little changes. I think there was a very long monologue that I had to cut down, just couldn't fit it in. It was Verna Bloom's justification for walking out.

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

MOLLY: I didn't get to spend time with your father. We never had an affair. I'm sorry, but I don't want to diaper...

C.J.: Shut up! Shut up.

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: And that was that. But it was a beautiful experience that the crew was into the script a lot. I remember a lot of care being taken over the design of the place and, just the setting and the mise-en-scène of it, and the kind of meticulous careful rendering of this man's life in this house. It was very impressive. It was a beautiful week actually. It was *very* cold.

JOSH: One of the things that I noticed is that the house—it's like a cliché to say—but it is like another character in the piece.

HRISHI: Especially the way they made it so cluttered

JOSH: It looked lived-in by that character. There are great, even little silent moments where, you know, she picks up that bottle, there's a bill or something

HRISHI: Stuck to it

JOSH: Stuck to the bottom, you just get a sense of the way this guy's living in an alternately, sort of able to take care of himself and not.

ROBBIE: And that's Alex Graves, really, his sensitivity to the texture of it was kind of obsessive. It's sad we have not worked together since. It was a great experience working with him.

JOSH: And as great as he is with a camera, I think he would be a very good theater director.

ROBBIE: Totally, yeah.

HRISHI: One of my favorite moments from the episode is one where I really marveled at the editing, and I wondered how much of this was something that was born out of editing, or written into the script. When, after Marco and C.J. get to the reunion, and they decide they're not gonna go yet, there are shots of them in the hotel room. The light from the passing car illuminates different elements from the hotel room, you see them sort of out of focus in the background, and it's intercut with other scenes happening elsewhere. I just, I love that whole sequence.

ROBBIE: There was some of that in the script, but Alex found a kind of necessary, almost symphonic sort of musicality to it they way he edited it together. I think a lot of that is his.

HRISHI: That was really beautiful. I was also really impressed by this little bit of continuity for C.J.'s character. It just happens really quickly, but it's the kind of thing that in other episodes of *The West Wing*, ones that Aaron himself has written, there are these little breaks, but there's a little moment where Tal says to C.J.

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

TAL: "You mean, more than a nice lady from Catholic family Services?"

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I think C.J. only mentions that she's Catholic once way back in season one, but the fact that that was continued through, I thought that was a really nice detail.

ROBBIE: Well, I was paying attention...

HRISHI: You were.

ROBBIE: No, I was paying attention.

HRISHI: Because you know, we have somebody like Leo at different times talk about—he's from Boston, he's from Chicago, he has Irish relatives, he has Scottish relatives—not that all those things couldn't go together, but just the fact that you came in and, you know, just had this little call back to something about her past that we knew about from three seasons ago was impressive.

ROBBIE: I took the whole thing incredibly seriously, I have to say. I didn't want to let anybody down, I knew—now I know more about what it means to be behind in a season and how unending the torture that can be, is on the cast, and on the production, and on the crews. At the time I just thought, this this so cool, being asked to do this, and of course it was.

HRISHI: Can you tell us more about the research you might have had to do to make this episode focused around C.J.'s father's Alzheimer's.

ROBBIE: I'm not sure where it came from, to tell you the truth. I always have had a fear of losing my faculties, and that there's a metaphor in all that. To slowly, if you're smart, and if you cherish your brain, say you read a lot, you use your mind, there can be almost nothing worse. I'd had periods of, kind of, real self doubt around that time. I was sort of blue. And sometimes when you're very blue, you start to actually forget the continuity that it takes just to get through the day. Time actually warps. And so I used that, and I don't remember but I read that phrase, "the long goodbye" to refer to Alzheimer's, I think I was toying with writing a play about it. So I didn't have to do a lot of research. I'd seen a little bit of dementia, a little bit, now more, but that early phase that Donald Moffat's character is in, that her father is in, reminded me of the vacuity that can come with depression. I used that.

JOSH: In a way you did write a play. You know, this episode functions as one. In an episode that in many ways that it's about time, we're getting this anomalous stop in the time of this series, and we get to step away in a way we don't normally do and I wish could happen more. We don't see these people for great lengths of time away from the workplace so it's special to see that. And maybe it's my age, but as I watch this, and having seen it before, as I rewatched it, I find myself like a pendulum, identifying with C.J. as a child, you know, worrying about relatives, and then worrying about myself. And, also understanding the second wife's—as harsh a thing as she seems to have done—understanding her point of view.

ROBBIE: Yeah, I don't know how I got all that. I mean...

JOSH: In 45 minutes.

ROBBIE: Well it's probably—the script's probably going to maybe be about 70 minutes. I don't even necessarily think this is an episode of *The West Wing*, in a weird way. It is sort of a one-act play. It's almost fan fiction, in fact.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: That's amazing.

JOSH: That's what I love about it. That it is anomalous, that it is its own thing, but to me not jarringly so. To me, in a way that just gives greater depth of understanding to one of the characters we've been on the journey with as we go back to it. It's a fine needle you threaded there.

HRISHI: You mentioned that you didn't get notes but I was wondering one, when you were conceiving this direction, making it about Alzheimer's, was that something that you had an initial conversation about with Aaron before you started writing or before you handed in the actual draft?

ROBBIE: No, I just wrote it and sent it in, and heard right away that they were excited about it. But I wrote it really quickly. It took me about three days. Aaron had said on the phone, "write a play," and I was in the middle of a long torturous play that I think became a play called *Ten Unknowns* and I did at Lincoln Centre with Juliana Margulies and Donald Sutherland, but that play was torture to write, and I'd been working on it for years so the prospect of writing something really quickly and then having to have it produced really quickly, you know, that's one of the reasons playwrights go into television, I think.

HRISHI: How long was the timeframe between when you finished writing and when this actually aired?

ROBBIE: About two months. We shot it in December. I took the train from Chicago to New York as I had a, Mike Nichols had produced an evening of one act plays as a benefit, and I had a play in that, and we wrapped shooting and I went straight to the train station and took this overnight train to New York. So this period of November to December/January was kind of larger than life and amazing, actually.

JOSH: Was any extra rehearsal time baked into the schedule for the actors?

ROBBIE: Very much so actually, and they loved it. I remember a lot of the day went to rehearsal actually, or as much as you could spare when you were trying to make the day. A few extra days were built in though.

HRISHI: Can you tell us about the musical choices in this episode? Something like the "Goldberg Variations" that C.J.'s father plays on the piano.

ROBBIE: Well, the "Goldberg Variations" are very special, obviously. They represent a kind of bright lucidity and a demand for specificity. They can't be screwed up. They require a kind of concentration, and it seems to me that the mathematics of the piece work to stabilize Donald Moffat's character. There's other music in the piece too, if you remind me.

HRISHI: At one point Miles Davis is playing, I think, "Kind of Blue."

ROBBIE: That's right. Which again, struck me as, mood-wise, perfect. I wanted to highlight the difference between this episode of *The West Wing*, and the normal pacing of episodes which are replete and filled with dialogue and walk-and-talks, and snap, and verve, and this just seemed as a contrast. Part of the episode is about the incredible gulf between a private life, a

family life, and a work life, and those music choices go to that, in some way. Those are not the pieces of *The West Wing*, in some way, if you know what I mean.

HRISHI: Right.

ROBBIE: And if you think about those characters, think about the people in our own lives, there's always something hovering in the background. There's always someone, a parent is aging or ill, a sibling is having a hard time, and the shadows of that sort of play on our faces behind the eyes a lot. And music does so much in film, obviously, and I wanted to reflect, really, the otherness of where C.J. came from.

HRISHI: Yeah there's a beautiful explanation of that from Talmidge later when she offers to fly back and he says:

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

TAL: You can't keep flying back and forth.

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: Which is very true, and I was doing that at the time, well this is what it is. God, I'm sorry, I'm triggered and jarred now. [sighs] I'd blocked this out but it's true. So my dad had cancer at the time and it had, unbeknownst to any of us, spread to his brain. And the fog was forming, and I was flying back and forth from LA to New York, to help take care of him, and the entire episode is imbued with that. And for some reason I blocked that out. Now, for obvious reasons.

HRISHI: Right. It was affecting his cognitive ability.

ROBBIE: Completely, yeah. He forgot how to drive, which is a terrible thing for a man to go through.

JOSH: And you wrote into this episode.

ROBBIE: Yeah. I think I must have done this consciously at the time, but I don't think I've ever discussed it *at all*. And I'm just, kind of, remembering all of the aspects of that, of flying into LA and I went to see them, we didn't quite know it was in his brain. I did, and doctors were dismissing it, because that kind of cancer, which is colorectal cancer, very rarely goes to the brain. And he crashed his car at the old farmer's market on third street, getting out of a parking spot. And, he was a great driver, he never had a ticket, never had an accident his whole life, and same thing had happened a month prior, and finally the doctors listened to me. So of course all of that was being kind of pulled into this episode. What C.J. is going through was a version of what I was going through: trying to find reason, trying to find a logic to it all. Of course, my mother didn't abandon him, but it was very hard for everybody to cope with.

HRISHI: Are there qualities that your father and either Donald Moffat or the character that he's playing here have in common?

ROBBIE: Yeah. They were both—in the case of my dad, my dad was fairly, a genial intellectual of a sort, hit perfect pitch. He played the piano almost all day. He had retired from his sort of corporate life and was trying to make up for years and years of having traveled independent of my mother for work, so they were spending a lot of time together, enjoying each other. And I remember there's a thing about Donald Moffat talks about his neighbor...

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

TAL: Old Mr., um... Moyers, from two doors down, after his Beth died, all he wanted to do was to be taken to the Astro dinette for tuna melts, which is what they'd done together every Thursday. And now... [turns music up louder] it's me taking him

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: My parents lives had become quite small at that point because of the illness, so I would call them up and they had gone to Hamburg or Hamlet and has tuna melts and it was such a pleasure. I relentlessly threw things in there that I was experiencing.

HRISHI: Did your father ever play Bach on the piano?

ROBBIE: Yeah, he did. No Glenn Gould, but he was very good and music had become most of his life at that point. This is very odd, actually, to put all these pieces together so randomly, so many years later. I find it slightly unsettling.

JOSH: It's fascinating, it sort of suggests that maybe as you're writing something, even though it's deeply personal you have to compartmentalize during the process.

ROBBIE: Yeah, I mean, I wrote a whole play *Other Desert Cities* about the act of taking from the lives of people around you, and what that does to them because so much of what you do as a writer is untrue. You know, nobody can [expletive deleted] you up like a writer, sort of presuming to know your life and that's what *Other Desert Cities* is about but that's another story.

HRISHI: As an aside, I have a t-shirt from a band that I like very much called Languis. They have an album called "Other Desert Cities."

ROBBIE: Really? Well you know it is that sign up on the 10 and it always represented, sort of, what's out there.

HRISHI: Right.

ROBBIE: What is this "other" desert cities?

HRISHI: The east coast version—there's one in Maine when you get back onto the 95 coming out from further east towards the ocean, you finally get to the 95 and it says "all points north and south."

ROBBIE: See? Luckily I'm not a theme playwright, because otherwise I would have been like, "oh yeah, I'm going to write a play called "other points north and south."

HRISHI: [laughs] Okay, let's take a quick break, and we come back, we'll continue our conversation with Jon Robbie Baitz.

[AD BREAK]

HRISHI: So after you'd wrapped in Chicago, did you get to see cut before it aired?

ROBBIE: Oh, yeah.

HRISHI: You were involved in editing?

ROBBIE: Well I didn't ask to be, but Alex, I think he just, like me, took the whole thing very seriously and so he showed me a couple of cuts. Mostly he was anxious about having had to trim for time, and there were whole sections left on the floor, and it didn't bother me at all. It wasn't precious cargo. The cumulative effect was what I was after, that remained melancholy and wistful and filled with the kind of yearning the script had. I don't know what to make of the romance in it. I don't know where my head was at with that.

HRISHI: For fans I think it was really nice to finally see C.J. get some.

ROBBIE: Yeah. Right?

HRISHI: Because throughout the whole series

JOSH: Truly.

HRISHI: She's always thwarted.

ROBBIE: I believe that Aaron had, it turns out, when he saw the episode was amazed that that happened because—

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Because he likes to keep his characters very frustrated.

JOSH: He doesn't really let his characters have some.

ROBBIE: I don't know, but he was shocked.

HRISHI: I always thought it was like boxers. They can't have that, sort of, satisfaction because they need to stay hungry for the job.

ROBBIE: Yeah and you make terrible decisions when you don't have sex.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [Laughs]

JOSH: She looks a lot happier at the reunion right after.

ROBBIE: Well I thought she deserved a kind of, if you're gonna go into the past, and it is a high school reunion, lust has to be, lust was so much part of high school

HRISHI: Sure

ROBBIE: In fact all of high school was all lust-based, except for math, which was lust-free.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [Laughs]

HRISHI: Did you pay attention to reaction when the episode finally aired?

ROBBIE: I don't remember the reaction. I remember someone saying to me that's the best non-episode of *The West Wing* I've ever seen. I don't even know what that meant. I was proud of it, but I have a deep skepticism of reactions. There's something very punishing within me that insists on marching with my eyes straight ahead.

JOSH: You must be the only writer of the Aaron era to have written an episode solely on your own. You know, it's a one off, so I know it stands out in that sense. One of the things I feel watching it is, as it was getting towards the end, I'm sad because I know we're not going back to this place and to these people. And there's kind of the additional sucker punch of wondering how much C.J. is gonna see these people again. She says to him at one point.

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

C.J.: I'll see you next week.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: We know that she's not going to, and it's kind of doubly gutting to know this is just an arena we won't see again, and not so sure C.J. will.

ROBBIE: I would have liked to have done more of these sort of strange trips where I, sort of, take responsibility for their other internal lives.

JOSH: Personal, yeah.

ROBBIE: Yeah, like I loved the president's secretary so much, Mrs Landingham. I would have liked to have followed her home, of a night.

ROBBIE: In an episode just before this we get a taste of Toby Ziegler, Richard Schiff, and his dad played by Jerry Adler, and that would have been another place that absolutely could have merited an entire episode.

ROBBIE: I'm sure. Of course, Richard was miffed.

JOSH: I'll bet.

ROBBIE: In his Richard way, but I put him in a movie the next year called *People I Know*.

JOSH: There you go

ROBBIE: And he got to play with Al Pacino for a couple hours and I think felt much better.

HRISHI AND JOSH: [laughs]

ROBBIE: I'm easily guilted by actors, Josh.

JOSH: Good to know. Thanks for doing this!

ROBBIE: Oh no, it's a pleasure. To all of the real *The West Wing* fans who might have been dismayed by the episode, I offer my humble apology. I was following orders.

JOSH: I think it is a terrific episode of *The West Wing*, and I think it's special in the sense that it is both different and of a piece, which is the exact line you had to tread.

ROBBIE: Yeah!

HRISHI: To me it feels like listening to your favorite band covering a song by another artist that you really like.

ROBBIE: That's so interesting.

HRISHI: You know the players and you know their styles but they're doing some material that isn't necessarily what they normally write, but you get to enjoy it in a different way.

ROBBIE: Yeah like maybe Johnny Cash covering Wilco.

HRISHI: Exactly.

ROBBIE: [laughs]

HRISHI: Oh, so in *The West Wing*, President Bartlet has a catchphrase of sorts. He says "What's next?" And, in the episode Matthew Modine, Marco, says at one point:

[West Wing Episode 4.13 excerpt]

MARCO: *Life is all... "what's next?"*

[end excerpt]

ROBBIE: I had no idea.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: I was wondering about that. That's incredible.

ROBBIE: I had no idea. Maybe, again, you know, these things are just, you just sponge things up and absorb them. As I recall, that character had had a very sort of difficult past, so that's what you'd say when you worry. What's next?

HRISHI: Thank you so much.

JOSH: Awesome, thank you.

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode.

JOSH: Yeah, that was interesting. It was interesting to hear Robbie have this epiphany about this episode all these years later, as we talked to him.

HRISHI: Yeah, it really was.

JOSH: That was remarkable.

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Robert Egge from the Alzheimer's Association for speaking to us. You can learn more at alz.org. You can follow them on Twitter at [@alzassociation](https://twitter.com/alzassociation). Robert himself is [@robertegge](https://twitter.com/robertegge). And again, if you need to talk to someone they have a 24x7 helpline, their number is 800-272-3900. Our thanks to Robbie Baitz, and our thanks to you. If you want to find out more about Jon Robin Baitz's work, you can connect with him on Facebook at facebook.com/jonrobinbaitz.

JOSH: Or, as he referred to it when we discussed it, "the facebook."

HRISHI: He's still stuck in a pre-Justin Timberlake era of Facebook.

JOSH: I now feel like he's part of my extended Jewish family referring to it as "the facebook."

HRISHI: And if you want to connect with us, you can leave a comment about this episode on thewestwingweekly.com, or on Facebook page, Instagram page, or you can tweet at us [@westwingweekly](https://twitter.com/westwingweekly).

JOSH: As always, we thank Zach McNeas and Margaret Miller for their contributions to the show, and we thank Radiotopia for allowing us to be part of them. If you'd like to check out other cutting-edge podcasts that are part of the family, go to radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ROBBIE: [sighs] What's next.

[Outro Music]