

The West Wing Weekly  
4.21: "Life On Mars"  
Guests: Richard Schiff, Eli Attie, The Swingles

[Intro Music (sung live by The Swingles)]

[cheering]

JOSH: Thank you to The Swingles. The Swingles.

HRISHI: Live from London [cheering] this is The West Wing Weekly. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina. [Cheering]

HRISHI: Thanks so much to The Swingles. [Applause]

JOSH: Whatever happened to The Swingle Singers? [Laughter]

HRISHI: There it is.

JOSH: That's what happened to them.

HRISHI: You may remember that line from Season 3. Debbie asks "whatever happened to The Swingle Singers?" They changed their name to just The Swingles and then you just heard them.

JOSH: Exciting to be here. We're thrilled to be in London. We've had a swell time here. It's worth noting I believe today is the 153rd anniversary of the assassination of our 16th president Abraham Lincoln. Hoping overall this'll be a better night of theatre. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Today we're talking about Season 4 Episode 21. It's called *Life On Mars*.

JOSH: I prepared for *Two Cathedrals*.

HRISHI: Come back in a couple of years.

JOSH: I also want to.... we're gonna do some London shoutouts. We've had a lot of fun. We had a special tour of Parliament. Grace and Coleen, I think they're here, thank you for giving us an incredible, incredible tour. And the best moment for me - the highlight among highlights - was that as we walked into Westminster Hall, which I believe is the oldest section of the palace, right? Grace, we were in awe and we were oohing and aahing and Grace turned to us and said "it doesn't go away". [Laughter] It was kind of a perfect moment.

HRISHI: Today we're talking about Season 4 Episode 21.

JOSH: I prepared *Two Cathedrals*. [Laughter]

HRISHI: It's called *Life On Mars*.

JOSH: We could bring The Swingles out again. That was good.

HRISHI: This is usually how it goes when we're recording at home.

JOSH: One last thing: we also saw the cracking good production of *Hamilton* in London. [cheering]. That was fantastic, so thanks to Lin and Tommy and Katie Bryant and everybody who set that up for us. If you haven't seen it, see it.

HRISHI: If you haven't heard, it's good.

JOSH: It's incredible. Shall we talk about the show?

HRISHI: Sure.

JOSH: Alright. What are we here to talk about?

HRISHI: Tell me about this episode.

JOSH: The teleplay by fan favorite Aaron Sorkin [cheering]. That's a given. Story by Paul Redford and Dee Dee Myers. The direction on this episode was by John David Coles, who also directed Arctic Radar. This episode first aired on April 30th in the year 2003.

HRISHI: In this episode you get Hoynes resigning the office of the Vice President. It's a bombshell that's revealed in the teaser. We then jump back 24 hours and see how the brand new associate counsel Joe Quincy connects the dots that lead to Hoynes' exit. Along the way, Will and the speech-writing interns try to counter an environmental attack ad. Toby eats a salad. And Donna tries to reason with a bird. [Laughter]

JOSH: I should have brought a salad with me. Oh, too late.

HRISHI: These are all delightful moments, but they end up all being swallowed alive by this sense of cataclysmic dread as the Hoynes story comes to light. This episode like the previous episode that we discussed was submitted as part of *The West Wing's* Emmy win for Outstanding Drama Series. And Matthew Perry, who's in the episode. How about a hand for Matthew Perry, but before you do that, I'm gonna ask if you're gonna give a hand to Matthew Perry it has to be a series of claps delivered like this [claps quickly four times, as in the *Friends* intro music]. [Laughter]

JOSH: You guys are good, you did your homework.

HRISHI: They knew it, yeah.

JOSH: Matthew Perry's in this episode [four claps] and he and Tim Matheson... Feel free to do that anytime he's mentioned over the course of the evening. I like it.

HRISHI: He and Tim Matheson were both nominated for best guest actor in a drama for their work in the 4th season, based in part on this episode. To talk about this episode we have two special guests coming out to join us. We have West Wing writer Eli Attie and our very own friend of the podcast Toby Ziegler, Richard Schiff. Please welcome them. [cheering]

JOSH: Jews in Union Chapel. Jews in Union Chapel. [Laughter]

RICHARD: I just wanna point out that they stood in Dublin. [Laughter]

JOSH: Thank you. [Clapping] And you should understand we had to ask for it there too. [Laughter]

RICHARD: I got my “standing o” and I can leave now. That music was really really good. Really excellent in fact.

JOSH: That’s a Richard Schiff rave, people. Just so you know.

RICHARD: What was that from?

JOSH: Oh, we’re gonna have to jar your memory, aren’t we.

ELI: It’s *Friends*. It’s the theme music to *Friends*.

HRISHI: That’s right. Thank you both for joining us. It’s amazing that you could be here with us in London. You’ve both been on the podcast, but to do it here in front of all these... it’s really incredible and we’re so happy to have you.

JOSH: Nice chance to use your English. [Laughter]

RICHARD: Which needs practice.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: Shall we jump right in?

JOSH: Do let’s.

HRISHI: OK. So this episode opens up. We have the teaser begins with Charlie waiting outside the White House. It’s 5:58 am and it’s raining and the first thing I thought was that in Aaron Sorkin’s world rain is never without significance. It’s always, usually it’s some bad omen. Occasionally it’s a fun plot device. But those always seem to involve a Josh Malina character, whether it’s Will Bailey making it rain to help his candidate’s election chances, or Jeremy Goodwin getting a chance to give an umbrella to an adult film actress with a heart of gold in *Sport’s Night*.

RICHARD: I do have to interrupt and just say for full disclosure: rain in every movie is an omen. [Laughter]

JOSH: I wasn’t gonna say it. I’m glad you did, Richard.

RICHARD: Full disclosure.

JOSH: I think Aaron’s not happy with my personal hygiene, so he’s constantly hosing me down.

HRISHI: Every now and then it's fun in Aaron's world, but usually something heavy's coming down from the heavens, so watch out, and this episode is definitely one of those. Charlie meets Claire Huddle and as they walk through the West Wing they walk past C.J. and Josh and Toby who all seem to know the contents of the letter in Claire's hand. And Claire knows what it contains too. When they finally get to the Oval Office we see it's a letter of resignation from Hoynes. And then we go to the credits. So we start with this huge bombshell and Eli, I was wondering whether you could talk a little bit about in the writers' room when you have something like this, where you structure it where you reveal what's gonna happen right away and then everything else has to- is gonna be a flashback from here. What does that do for writers when in terms of like, what are the challenges that it presents and then what's the freedom that it gives you?

ELI: Well I think the benefit of it mostly is that you're choosing one of the juiciest most exciting moments and leading with it. You're always looking for, and Aaron was always looking for a great teaser. Very often in fact he would have a hard time starting a script if he didn't feel he had an incredibly strong teaser. I think usually the impulse is simply to move up one of your best pieces to the beginning. And actually I think... it's funny because you're spoiling the plot, but I think there's almost more tension when you know what something is leading to.

RICHARD: In the case like that, but I do have a teaser story which you might remember or not. But Aaron, who's often frustrated and also often made jokes about not having any ideas, which is interesting considering how prolific he actually is. And he came to set one day and he goes "75,000 dollars to anyone who gives me an idea for a teaser, a good teaser".

ELI: By the way, an offer not made in the writers' room of the show. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha. When I first knew him he used to say "I'll give you 50 bucks to get me a pack of cigarettes". I did it over and over and over.

RICHARD: So I'm the only fool I think that took that seriously. And I went in another room and actually thought up what I thought was a great teaser. And I told it to him and the idea was that we're all in either a lock-down or working late or the heat's off for some reason, and we try to make a fire and no-one can figure out how to make a fire in the fireplace. The teaser was used eventually about 8 months later. I was married very briefly once to a writer, who said the key to writing is to listen to what everybody says and write it down and then publish it long after they forgot they ever said it. [Laughter]

JOSH: Long, long after you've offered them \$75,000 for the idea. [Cross talk] What did you do?

RICHARD: [Cross talk] Six months later, when the teaser actually showed up, I had not forgotten that I had given him... and I mentioned it to him in front of Tommy Schlamme because I did, didn't I. And Tommy goes "yes you did, I was right there" and that was the end of it. [Laughter]. I was hoping there was an epilogue to that story.

ELI: I was gonna ask what you did with the money.

RICHARD: I never got it, is my point. That was the subtext of the joke. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha. We'll send him this episode. It's not too late. He's done OK for himself.

RICHARD: Ah man, I could use it. Would also share it with everybody. Pints on me.  
[Cheering]

HRISHI: You won't be around when he gets the money. [Laughter] He means a different set of people.

JOSH: He'll buy you pints like Aaron's gonna send him 75 grand.

HRISHI: He's just hoping for another standing ovation. How about the names in this episode? Claire Huddle. Blair Spoonhour. Stu Winkle.

JOSH: Matthew Perry [four claps]. Just making sure you're on it.

HRISHI: That's gotta be the most fun thing, just coming up with names for characters that have to do whatever they have to do.

JOSH: Make up names and then have the characters make fun of them. That's what Aaron does.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: Dude, you came up with the name. Yeah, no, fair. My favorite thing is that Stu Winkle is name-checked over and over for being an incredibly strange name. Doesn't sound that strange to me. But the name of the actor who plays Stu Winkle: Sam Pancake. [Laughter]. That's a funny name.

HRISHI: It's true. Sam Pancake, by the way, was also... besides this episode he was in two other episodes of a show with Matthew Perry [four claps]. He played a waiter in a couple of episodes of *Friends*. I have a little clip you can hear of him, not with Matthew Perry, he's with David... [four claps and laughter]

JOSH: We've created a monster.

HRISHI: He's with David Schwimmer.

[Friends Episode 9.14 - The One With The Blind Dates excerpt]

*ROSS: What's - what's going on?*

*WAITER: OK, the waiters have a little pool going. We have a bet on how long it'll take before you give up and go home.*

*ROSS: What? You - you're making money off my misery?*

*WAITER: Well, if you stay till 9:20, I am.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Got a laugh even without the rest of the context of the episode.

JOSH: Well who are all those people laughing in that clip?

HRISHI: Ha ha. I was thinking we should pipe in some laugh track for our live tapings.

RICHARD: Am I crazy or Stu Winkle was just a voice in this?

HRISHI: That's right, he was just a voice in this, which is why I thought people might recognize him even though I wasn't playing a video.

RICHARD: I was loving the idea.... I was hoping that he was a voice on *Friends* as well. [Laughter] That was his career.

HRISHI: Ha ha. No, we see his actual face in that too. He's also in *Arrested Development*. Sam Pancake is in a lot of things. [Laughter]

RICHARD: That's a stack of pancakes in his career.

JOSH: I was trying to work towards something: "so you know you were a little flat". [Laughter]

HRISHI: OK, so after we go through the credits we come back from the cold open. Actually before we get to that part, Richard and Josh, what's it like during a table read when there's something like this? When there's a big bombshell reveal. I assume - is it the table read that you find out these things are happening, or do you read the scripts before the table read? I'm wondering if there's a collective moment where it's revealed to everyone that something big like this, that the Vice President's gonna resign happens, and you can sort of experience your shock collectively.

RICHARD: Well when you hear the last podcast, a recurring theme of that podcast was my almost total lack of memory [Laughter]. [Cross talk] I honestly don't..

JOSH: [Cross talk] A truly nice quality in a guest on a podcast about a show that's been off the air for ten years. [Laughter]

RICHARD: And by the way when you get to be this age I heard older people when I was younger talk about how fun it is to be older because you don't give a, you know. And it's because you don't remember anything to care about. [Laughter] But I don't remember this being that big of a shock because Hoynes, don't forget, was not necessarily in favor with this White House very much. Actually, one of the things I'm surprised about this episode and that's also very politically interesting, is that they needed him to carry on a) the legacy and b) to lead the Democratic Party after... [Cross talk] What's his name?

JOSH: [Cross talk] Bartlett. [Laughter]

RICHARD: Thank you.

JOSH: He wasn't kidding, folks.

RICHARD: After..

HRISHI: "President Whats-his-name".

RICHARD: "President Whats-his-name". You know, the little guy. I love Martin Sheen just so you know. But I thought it was fascinating that they really try to convince him to stick it out even though they really don't... I don't really think they liked him nor did we very much. But it wasn't a shock because he wasn't really an every-day kind of part and there was some acrimony and he probably got a really good movie.

JOSH: Let's not go too quickly over that.

ELI: He was probably, I mean Tim Matheson was probably only in four or five episodes a season. You guys would probably know the numbers better, but if you're interested I could tell you a little bit about behind the scenes, what went into this storyline.

JOSH: I don't know, guys. You want to hear about behind the scenes?

ELI: So it's always a tricky decision when you decide to eliminate a character on a show like this because.... In fact I think it might have been Aaron who referred to it once as burning your furniture. It keeps you warm for half an hour and then you don't have the chair anymore. So I think it was a little easier with Tim Matheson because he wasn't in as many episodes and of course he comes back in the later seasons. But this was entirely in Aaron's mind as I recall to set up the end of the season, which I don't know if I should be spoiling or not or [cross talk] avoiding.

HRISHI: [Cross talk] Don't spoil. Don't please.

ELI: So I won't spoil it, but people who know what happens in 25 it's important that Tim Matheson and that character not be in the show.

JOSH: And at this point Aaron and Tommy know they're going?

ELI: I don't think so, I think it was so close. I think this was so incredibly close to... I think that happened so incredibly close to 25 being completed. Now I think there had been some discussions and there had been moments already this season where the idea of him leaving had been broached. But to get back to the story for a moment, we can come back to that. Aaron was saying to the writers' room he wanted to find a way to get the Vice President out of that job and was there scandal, was there something we could do. And I actually told Aaron a true story about something that happened in the Clinton administration and this is the story. I don't know how many people here are familiar with Dick Morris at this point. Dick Morris was Bill Clinton's...

JOSH: Zero people, Eli. Zero. [Laughter]

ELI: You don't have to clap for the name. But he was basically Bill Clinton's David Axelrod. He was the most important strategist and really the [cross talk] most important..

JOSH: [Cross talk] Also zero, Eli.

RICHARD: Basically the British reference..

JOSH: We're in a different country.

ELI: I don't have a British reference.

HRISHI: Could you relate him to a character on the West Wing?

ELI: All the words are so similar here I get very deluded. [Laughter]

JOSH: Haha.

ELI: No, so anyway Bill Clinton had this political strategist who really was his most important advisor when he was running for re-election in 1996. And the way that guy was sort of toppled. It came out in the *National Enquirer* that Dick Morris was having an affair, a long affair with a prostitute and that he was [cross talk] letting the prostitute. He was letting the prostitute listen in on phone calls between him and the President. And what happened was, the prostitute, while she was carrying on this affair, I mean she was paid by Dick Morris at I think the Hey Adams Hotel, some hotel near the White House. She would regularly meet him there and apparently suck his toes. It was one of the things that they did, this all came out later.

JOSH: [Cross talk] You guys heard of prostitutes? [Laughter]

RICHARD: Thank you for that.

ELI: She [cross talk] You're welcome, you're welcome. [Laughter]

HRISHI: [Cross talk] I'm just glad he said toes.

JOSH: Ha ha.

ELI: So she called the *National Enquirer* while this was going on and tried to sell her story. And she said "I'm sleeping with the President's closest advisor. I listen in on phone calls with the President and there's life on Mars. You know he told me there's life on Mars." And people at the *National Enquirer* basically said "we'll call you". They thought she was crazy. And I guess somebody scribbled down her number and a few weeks later NASA held a press conference and Bill Clinton held a press conference to say that this meteorite had been found in the Antarctica and they'd been studying it and there were traces of molecules and there may be life on Mars. And suddenly everybody at the *National Enquirer* said "um, where's that number?". And that's actually how that story came out. So I just told that story to Aaron in the writers' room and it's just so bizarre and so great that that kind of became the basis for this.

HRISHI: Wow.

ELI: And I looked it up today by the way. Sorry, Richard. The press conference by NASA was held on August 7th 1996 and Dick Morris resigned on August 29th 1996.

HRISHI: Wow.



RICHARD: One thing that might be interesting to know is that Dick Morris later became enemy number 1 of the Democrats, right?

ELI: Oh, for sure, for sure. Hateful guy, [cross talk] opportunist.

RICHARD: [Cross talk] Hateful, mean, and resentful guy.

JOSH: Let's bring him up! [Laughter]

RICHARD: Dick Morris! Boo! [Laughter] But I've thought, I've read too much into Aaron leaving. If you listen to the last podcast you'll know what I'm talking about. And I thought that this was in a way, some way of writing, of telling a story of the beginning of the break up of things. In other words..

ELI: Oh, that's interesting.

RICHARD: That Bill Clinton said a phenomenal thing at the Good Friday agreement telling a story about the.... did I say this the other night? Never mind.

HRISHI: You can tell it again.

RICHARD: Just a reminder that life is short and that we're not gonna be here forever and things break up, and one of the things I liked about our story line is that after Toby gets the news of this and he goes back into the room he doesn't say "come here, I've gotta tell you what's gonna happen". He listens first and assesses the progress and then realizes that the mood is right for him to even deal with that and then says "there's something I need to tell you". But in other words the work of the nation goes on, the family goes on, because it's really about the splitting up of the family. And it's a precursor of what's gonna happen. But I might have read too much into that [laughs].

ELI: You know it's possible. Probably in Aaron's mind he was already thinking about moving on I mean the interesting thing to me was that working on the show with him the two seasons that I did with Aaron, he had a kind of an inability to plan ahead. Which turned out to be a great strength. We as a group in the writers' room would always try to interest him in "well, we can do this in episode 12, and then we do that in episode 13 and this in episode 14" and he would always wanna do all those three things in episode 12. And somebody once said about him that he wrote every script as if it was the last thing he was ever gonna write. And that, I think that's why he was so good, why he is so good, because he kind of leaves it all on the field. He's very..

JOSH: Very Hamilton.

RICHARD: Very Hamilton, [Cross talk] yeah.

ELI: [Cross talk] Yeah, he really is. He sort of would save nothing. But then toward the end of the season, he would start thinking about "OK, these last three or four or five have to be great and propulsive" and then he would get very interested in building toward something.

RICHARD: Back in the days of *17 People* certainly was an arc.

ELI: For sure.

RICHARD: But the other characteristic of wanting to do everything now and not thinking too far ahead is a good explanation for why we got five page monologues the morning of. [Laughter] Which happened quite often. Which happened quite often. Did it ever happen to you?

JOSH: I never had a five page monologue. [Laughter]. There was no question of when it was delivered. It never came.

RICHARD: Did you ever have a five page reaction that was written? [Laughter]

ELI: It's actually interesting to me because this episode, watching it again today, there's kind of one storyline really. There's just this one storyline. But everybody gets such interesting character moments along the way. Like Richard's couple big scenes where he's eating a salad. [Laughter]. And also talking with you about the ads.

RICHARD: Very important scene.

ELI: But I just found it interesting to watch how many emotional sign points there are for the characters other than Joe Quincy, when really the whole story's of him cracking this... [Laughter] I didn't. That's why I didn't say... [Laughter] the name that shall remain unsaid.

RICHARD: Actually when I first got this script I thought "wow, this is the first time in my career, probably the last, that I will be used along with an actual funny person as comic relief. [Laughter]. I think it was a little bit of comic relief.

JOSH: Toby's always funny.

ELI: I actually think so too.

HRISHI: Certainly often funny. But you know, the thing is... [Laughter]

RICHARD: For those at home, I gave him a look. [Laughter]

HRISHI: The thing about the salad eating joke, this is one of the things that I love so much in *The West Wing*, is that it is built up and built up and built up as this joke and it's funny and we're laughing throughout the thing, but in the final reveal it has this emotional underpinning. That the reason why Toby is suddenly trying the salad and doing all these things is because he's really trying to get back together with Andy. And you can laugh all that you want about the process, but the reason why is actually really sweet and heartfelt.

ELI: That's a very good point. And at the same time, I don't know how many people here know this but, at that time at least Aaron hated salads. And he hated anything that was healthy. He ate a lot of hamburgers, and I just think that was also very auto- it came from a genuine place, the criticism of salad. [Laughter].

JOSH: Ha ha.

RICHARD: The salad was really a gift from Aaron Sorkin. A writing gift.

HRISHI: I wanted to go back to one thing you said about..... The title of this episode is *Life On Mars* and there's this kind of silly thing that happens throughout this episode where people keep equating the idea that there might be fossilized water molecules with life. And they're really not the same thing. There's this sort of cavalier...

RICHARD: Where there's water there's life, no?

HRISHI: Apparently not. I mean not necessarily. [Cross talk] Because..

JOSH: [Cross talk] I'll moderate this debate. Do you want to? [Laughter]

HRISHI: There has been..

JOSH: Opening statement?

RICHARD: The honorable..

JOSH: Or was that..

RICHARD: Can we rap this like Hamilton?

JOSH: I mean had there been a..

HRISHI: OK. Hold on, can we, alright.

JOSH: ...a David Bowie song called "Water On Mars", I think they would have gone with that title for the episode. [Laughter]

ELI: Or a song called "The Distinct Possibility That There May Be Life On Mars". [Laughter and applause]. That's the working title.

RICHARD: But you can't have life without water. Am I crazy? Should I go back to school on this?

ELI: Actually it's funny. Because just thinking about this in the last few days, and I must have had this thought back in 2003. You know it was in 1996 that NASA held this press conference and we certainly never heard anything else about life on Mars. I think the report is still classified.

HRISHI: So in 2012 the Curiosity Rover found proof that water was present on Mars for thousands of years. And maybe millions of years. But they still haven't found evidence of life. There's the possibility that life could exist maybe. But you know Mars doesn't have a magnetic pull the way that the Earth does. So all the radiation still gets... There are a lot of things that might prevent it. Anyway I'm just saying that... [Laughter] [Cross talk] water molecules..

JOSH: [Cross talk] That was a bit of a buzz kill.

HRISHI: I would have preferred the title “Distinct Possibility Of” [Laughter]

HRISHI: The way that that came out through the *National Enquirer* is interesting, so that ended up becoming metabolized into Stu Winkle. The *National Enquirer* actually becomes a column in the *Washington Post*, which I thought was an interesting choice but I guess it leads a way to bring gossip into the White House. Because the *National Enquirer* isn't gonna have a reporter who's a White House correspondent whereas the *Washington Post* will and so they can actually have someone who has..

RICHARD: Not in back in those days anyway. [Laughter]

ELI: It was amazing to watch this episode today. And I watched it with a few people who are here somewhere. And just the quaintness of one consensual affair toppling someone's career. [Cross talk] I mean..

RICHARD: [Cross talk] Exactly. [Laughter]

ELI: Yeah.

RICHARD: Exactly. And I have to say that because of that, and I think it's because of that, my critical eye was a little bit more open on this episode. And I don't know because I didn't watch back in the day how I thought of it originally because I didn't see it. But watching it now, exactly right. It feels silly and obsolete because this news - a classified leak and an affair - is every single day. We get something like that or exactly that. And nothing happens. It used to end careers and now it's just fodder for a news headline that will be erased tomorrow by bombing Syria. [Applause]

JOSH: On the podcast we call these “Trump-ai-yi-yi” moments. And the other thing that caught my eye eye eye on this was that there's a sort of quaint subplot that the administration is concerned about even the appearance of having obstructed justice and interfering...

ELI: Right. [Laughter]

JOSH: Right? They're all “Oh, now I'd better talk to Leo”.

RICHARD: And what kicks off the episode once C.J. is informed of the oddities of these two different stories. She goes to get Matthew Perry... [four claps]

JOSH: You're welcome back.

RICHARD: That time I didn't expect it. It's really weird what's happening over here. And the thing she says after that little scene is “find out if there's anything illegal”, right?

ELI: Yeah.

RICHARD: And it leads to the potential of a big deal. Which leads to a resignation. And yet... the point already made, as to what's happening these days.

JOSH: Can we play Clip 1, [cross talk] which is a Gish and C.J.?

HRISHI: [Cross talk] Yes.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*RALPH: Is there any existing report which says anything at all, and if so what, and will it be made public, and if not why, and if not isn't that illegal?*

*C.J.: Um, I don't know. But I'll find out to the first bunch of questions. And as for legal and not legal that's a matter for the council's office.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that clip because I feel like there's a very subtle linguistic thing where C.J., who's normally very precise, she says "I'll find out to the first bunch of questions". There's just this sense that she's a little bit rocked back on her heels by what she's dealing with and can't quite articulate what she has to say.

HRISHI: Yeah. And as she's saying it the next thing she says is that, she says:

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*C.J.: Oh, hey, yeah. That's a matter for the council's office. I know the right guy to speak to down there. He's gonna fix you right up.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And we know from previous episodes like *Privateers* that C.J. likes to engage in a little bit of hazing. She put the olives in Will's jacket. And so she can both answer this guy's question and she sees a great opportunity to mess with Joe Quincy.

JOSH: And she beams, This is really... she smiles so wide.

HRISHI: Yeah. And then that takes us finally to a return to this Steam Pipe Trunk Distribution Venue. [cheering]. And there we find Joe and he meets Blair Spoonhour, a law student who's working at the council's office. And there's this kind of strange exchange here:

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*JOE: What are you, 14?*

*BLAIR: Thank you, no, I'm 22. I'm a law student at GW.*

*JOE: What year?*

*BLAIR: I just finished my first.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I was just curious about that scene. You know, he's commenting on her age and stuff, And I checked, and the actress playing Blair Spoonhour is 4 years older than Matthew

Perry [four claps]. Which reminded me of another, like Luke Perry playing a high school sophomore at aged 24.

JOSH: Ha ha. It's a Perry thing.

HRISHI: Yeah OK, so back to the Steam Pipe Trunk Distribution Venue. There's a lot of ladder talk down there. We get this exchange:

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*JOE: This White House doesn't like lawyers very much, do they?*

*BLAIR: Really they hold them just one rung above being a Republican.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So we have Republicans on this rung and then lawyers just one rung above. And then later in the same scene C.J. comes in.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*C.J.: That's a good idea, let me show you around.*

*JOE: As a matter of fact I should probably stay here and get started.*

*C.J.: Joe, I outrank you by like 17 rungs, so follow me would you?*

*JOE: Sure.*

*C.J.: Come on, it's gonna be fun. But if it's not you should pretend that it is anyway. You know why?*

*JOE: Because you outrank me by like 17 rungs?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I'm not sure which rung she's referring to. The lawyer rung or the Republican rung. There's some complicated ladder system in the West Wing. [Small laughter] Thank you, thanks. Thanks, everyone. [Laughter]

JOSH: They did say rung a lot. You're not *rung*.

HRISHI: OK. Moving on. [Laughter]

JOSH: That's how I work. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Thank you all for jumping in on that one. [Laughter] C.J. and Joe get into an argument about farm safety net and Joe says it's the Republican position tearing up the farm safety net as C.J. describes it that the Republican position is good because, quote "food is cheaper as a result". And C.J. argues with him. But I couldn't help but think about a moment

from Season 2 when then Governor Bartlett is campaigning in Nashua and he has, do you guys remember this moment? And he's talking about the dairy farmers and Toby tells him to tell the truth about what he's done. And he says "you know, I screwed you guys on this one because I didn't want the price of milk to be more expensive".

RICHARD: No, I think it was a flashback. And I think it was Josh that brought me to Vermont or New Hampshire. Wasn't that the moment when Josh looks at me because he was honest with these, it was a vet hall as I recall. [Laughter]

HRISHI: You're doing what I sometimes do, which is I think you're confusing yourself with Rob Lowe. [Laughter and applause]

ELI: That's what happens with Sam Seaborn's character.

RICHARD: That's never happened to me before. [Laughter] Nor will it ever happen again.

JOSH: Ha ha.

RICHARD: Am I really?

HRISHI: You are already working for Governor Bartlet, or Toby was already working for him. And Sam had to be convinced, yeah..

JOSH: You've gotta watch this show, it's great. [Laughter]

HRISHI: But I thought it was interesting that in these two different contexts this idea of having the farmers have to pay more. And one is seen as this moment for Josh Lyman as "oh, this guy is the real deal", but here it's also being argued as this majority Republican opinion. I thought that was neat.

ELI: It's funny I was looking through just old files on my computer that I had that related to this episode, and I found a memo that we wrote for Aaron. He must have asked us for that scene for the best pro and con arguments about farm subsidies and agriculture bill and we gave him two pages of all this detail which he distilled down to three lines. But the thing that I found most interesting about it was that the memo for some reason was titled "Hepburn / Tracy". So he must have asked us in the writers' room, he must have said he wanted to do a kind of Hepburn/Tracy bit between C.J. and Joe Quincy, which became our lifeless memo about agriculture subsidies. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha.

HRISHI: I mean I guess that makes sense because it ends with this classic moment from C.J..

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*JOE: Claudia-Jean, you've only known me for four minutes. Usually it takes people a better part of an hour to hate me and everything I stand for.*

*C.J.: I'm the Press Secretary, Boo-Boo. I don't have that kind of time.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: She almost sounds like she's channelling Hepburn a bit.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: That's great context for that. That's really cool.

ELI: Sometimes this works. [Laughter] It's not gonna work every time.

JOSH: It's better than the *rung* thing. [Laughter]

ELI: You know when someone makes a good point you don't have to pile on. You can let it lie.

HRISHI: I really like that that's the origin, that he was going for something like that. 'Cause I had found it a little bit weird but now I'm totally cool with it. That Joe Quincy calls her Claudia-Jean, that he's already that familiar... [Cross talk] Yeah. That intimate that he would use the non-nickname version of her name. But still.

JOSH: [Cross talk] That intimate.

ELI: Well, one of the interesting things to me about... this episode is just a good example of something that happens in virtually every episode, which is that even when there's tension, even when there's heat as there is between Toby and Will, and Toby and Charlie, it's a family. And people are trying to...

JOSH: Toby and anybody, let's be honest.... [Laughter]

RICHARD: Well, let's face the facts.

ELI: No, but at the end of the day even in welcoming a Republican with opposite views into the White House, the fact that they've set foot in that building means they're part of this family. And even as she's hazing him she's giving him a huge responsibility and also letting him go see the Vice President on his own.

RICHARD: Yeah, given that, I was just curious what everybody thinks when they come out of the office when the Vice President says that he's done with Toby and, um..

HRISHI: Will.

RICHARD: No, not Will. Toby and C.J. and..

HRISHI: Josh.

JOSH: Josh. Character Josh. And..



RICHARD: ..and Matthew Perry [four claps]. I got it right. And when they leave the office and we're all kind of shaken and Josh says "you'd better not be smiling" as he takes the lead in the walk and talk, which he was wont to do. And Joe is behind him and C.J. says "he wasn't smiling". But there was a kind of hard edge to that little comment that Josh made.

HRISHI: Yeah.

RICHARD: Which jumped out at me.

JOSH: I liked that moment, though.

RICHARD: Yeah?

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah, it felt like Josh had said in the previous episode. It feels like there's a guy from the other team standing in your locker room.

RICHARD: No doubt, yeah.

JOSH: Right and when he brought it to them it had to be acted upon but still at arm's length a little bit.

RICHARD: There was no behavior in this episode that would indicate that that would happen. The only evidence of the possibility of that was that he was a Republican.

HRISHI: Right. No, I think it exposed more about where Josh is in that scene. 'Cause he's a guy who used to work for Hoynes.

RICHARD: That's fair, yeah.

HRISHI: And so he's seeing this guy being toppled by this thing and he's, even in the confrontation with the Vice President he says.... he just cuts right to the chase. And Hoynes says "I ought to punch you" but he's, I think, running in the red from the beginning of the scene already. And then he ends up taking it out a little bit on Joe.

RICHARD: Yeah, fair enough, Yeah.

ELI: I mean it also speaks to what Richard was saying at the top of this which is that none of these characters except maybe Josh and not even Josh really have been that sympathetic to Hoynes. But he's the one who would be most likely to be sympathetic. He could have said that comment in some ways possibly that "you weren't to see that".

HRISHI: Actually, I was taking it the other way that Josh is likely to be least sympathetic. Like he's most let down by Hoynes.

ELI: That's interesting.

HRISHI: And so he's gonna have the harshest response to him. Everybody there is being a little bit ginger.... They're speaking a little gingerly about what they're there talk about and

Josh just goes right for it because he's mad at him for having put them in this position and having to see this guy who he worked for falling from grace like this, over this.

ELI: Interesting.

RICHARD: You win. [Laughter]

HRISHI: But how cute is the scene between Toby and Will?

JOSH: Very cute.

RICHARD: How can it not be? [Laughter]

HRISHI: That's true enough.

JOSH: It's a lot of cute to work with.

HRISHI: Actually, Richard, it sounded a little bit like you might have a cold in this.

RICHARD: Yeah, I noticed that, I must have been sick.

JOSH: Ha ha.

HRISHI: I'll play this part.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*TOBY: We've been sitting here for 20 minutes.*

*WILL: I came in to show you this spot and to tell you I think we should run a counter-ad. I don't have an idea for one.*

*TOBY: Well, get one. Have an idea. Don't come in here with half a thing and not be able to, you know, after you've walked me to the brink and say we've got to do this, it's important, though I've no earthly idea how. Like one of those guys that buys the big new thing but doesn't really know how to get the most out of it?*

[laughter and applause]

JOSH: That's why he got the five page monologues.

ELI: Can I say also that Richard is so good in this episode, I think, and it's a testament to his acting because he doesn't really have a storyline in the episode. I think all of our regulars are really supporting Matt Perry's storyline [four claps] and I think it...

RICHARD: I forgot that. It really is fast. [Laughter]

JOSH: You guys keep waking Richard. [Laughter]

ELI: I think it takes a lot because in those scenes, particularly in that scene, and in the scene with Charlie where he's eating the salad, the evil salad, he goes from 0 to 60 and is having a real emotional experience that's about this deeper thing. And it's probably harder to act those scenes when they're not connected to a solid through-line.

RICHARD: I don't remember them as being more difficult. It's definitely easier to be in a full arc storyline because you kind of ride it after a while. You jump on the tracks and you let the tracks take you and it's a little bit of a rollercoaster. And it's like, "oh great, you're surprised". So these you have to kind of work out beforehand because they're isolated in a way. But they're not hard, as I don't remember them as being hard, except that I was probably sick and very uncomfortable. But no, I don't remember them as really being hard and it was a recurring theme where Toby would be disappointed in Will. [Laughter] And I just love the fact that Dulé was sitting in my office and I was watching my reactions to him talking and talking and talking and talking. And the oddity of the fact that he was in my office was available to me to play, you know. And that was already, I think the first line I say is "you know when you said you won't even notice me? Well.." [Laughter]

JOSH: Yeah.

RICHARD: "I do." [Laughter] And then he gets at me with the salad. What I love about that is the layer. It's like OK, you can eat here and you can chat my ears off, and it's like that's weird. But don't get me with the salad. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha.

RICHARD: No, but those were fun. I don't know if they were hard. But then again I don't remember [Laughter].

ELI: Well, you have a great "buddy comedy" dynamic, both with Josh and with Dulé in those scenes.

RICHARD: I just have to say. I love you a lot and I really do..

JOSH: You can say nicer things about Dulé now. [Laughter]

RICHARD: I'm going to.

JOSH: Go ahead. I know where this is headed. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Ha ha.

RICHARD: He's been there before. No, but Dulé Hill is just one of the most special human beings. Just one rung ahead of Will, of.... [Laughter] What's your name again? [Applause]

JOSH: Rung. Rung. Rung. Rung.

RICHARD: No, but because I didn't get to work with him that much. You, I had to work with every day. [Laughter] But because I didn't get to work with him that much. We only had three, four scenes maybe.

ELI: Sure.

RICHARD: There was a pool table scene, something else.

ELI: Yeah.

RICHARD: And I adore that man, and more now than then. And I just wanted to say that he's incredible.... He's incredible in this scene.

ELI: He is great.

JOSH: This must be why you're about to go to his wedding and I wasn't invited. [Laughter] I went to the first one, I'll go to the third. [laughter and applause] But I wasn't invited to this one.

RICHARD: Do I have to respond to that? [Laughter]

JOSH: It's best that you don't.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: I'm impressed that in the span of three sentences at the end there you get to work in the word "thing" twice and have it mean different.... you're referring to two different things. "Don't come in here with half a thing" and then "you're like a guy with the big new thing". And that was awesome.

RICHARD: If you take those words and just kind of change one or two of the order of them, they will make absolutely zero sense.

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah.

RICHARD: Which is the brilliance of Aaron in many ways. Right?

JOSH: He's a precision writer.

ELI: For sure. For sure.

RICHARD: We'll, it's metered out and there's a specific landing point on the words that make this nonsense have deep meaning. If not deep meaning then very specific meaning.

JOSH: I noticed one of the other Sorkin-y things that he does in this episode which he often does in other episodes, will have a character say something. The other character says "I'm sorry". The first character repeats it again.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: If you cut out all the times it happens in this episode the thing would run 17 minutes. [Laughter] And yet somehow it's incredibly effective, I'm not even really sure why.

HRISHI: That's right.

ELI: I think sometimes, especially in a storyline like this, there's so much information going by so fast that it actually gives you pause for breath. He finds ways... I believe that the repetition is actually a form of exposition. He's giving you the chance to absorb...

JOSH: Catch up a little.

ELI: A complicated idea that if you only had the one instance of it it would just be too fast.

RICHARD: Especially in this episode. I mean, am I crazy?

ELI: For sure. This can be hard to follow.

RICHARD: I was watching.... the first time I watched it I was like "what? There's a NASA what? And Caseon, who's Caseon? And 100,000 what's going on? And there's a leak somewhere and how did they figure that out? And I watched the second time, as many people apparently have to do. Thank God I didn't have to start way back then because I would have had to watch it six times to understand it myself. And it takes that repetition to land exactly what the hell we're talking about.

ELI: It's kind of a more fun less obvious way of doing it than the typical network TV spelling it out in just a very obvious way.

RICHARD: Don't get me depressed, please.

JOSH: There's also, actually, when.... I don't want to say the name. Joe Quincy. [some claps]. No. [Laughter]. He figures out, I mean it's quite an intricate thing that he unravels over the course of this episode.

ELI: [Cross talk] Although..

JOSH: [Cross talk] He's sort of Sherlock Holmes-like. I don't know if you guys get that reference. But then when Hoynes.... Hoynes.... I can only say it like Jerry Lewis. Hoynes.... is presented with it, he actually reiterates "oh so you.."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: "You saw the call logs" [Cross talk] "..and you figured this and you worked it back to that guy". Although, that was also sort of rather cleverly done.

ELI: [Cross talk] Although..

ELI: Hoynes does say to..

JOSH: Hoynes.

ELI: He does say to Joe, though, that "you heard a rumor", which I don't think comes up any other time in the episode. And I only really caught it today watching it that that's probably why he was so far ahead of the curve. That he'd heard about this and..

HRISHI: Ah.

JOSH: Makes it plausible.

ELI: Makes it more plausible. And it's another thing that happens a lot in this episode which is that you can blink and miss that and it's such a big point [Cross talk] and I don't think..

RICHARD: [Cross talk] I did. Twice. [Laughter]

ELI: Yeah. I don't think.... And I was also kind of marvelling at the way in the first Toby/Will scene where you're watching I guess the ad that you're going to counter. I can't remember now if that was something we shot, or if we actually wrote the first ad [Laughter] [Cross talk] And I don't know where we can get that information possibly.

RICHARD: [Cross talk] I'm gesturing. I'm gesturing. [Laughter]

JOSH: Richard is raising his hand like an eager schoolchild for people listening at home.

RICHARD: Which I haven't done for 53 years. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha ha.

RICHARD: I was wondering that when I watched it. It's like did we, did they ever shoot it and did they just forget? It makes more sense in many ways if we have at least one image of Rex the dog and the woman with the car, because I had shot that scene with Josh Malina and I..

JOSH: Please. [Laughter]

RICHARD: Who I adore. [Laughter] Not quite as much as Dulé Hill. [Laughter] And I didn't know what we were talking about. Because I hadn't done it or seen it in so long. It's like, Rex the dog?

ELI: You know it's funny..

RICHARD: I didn't know what the issue was because you hear it in the first part of the commercial. There's some bill, or is it a bill or something?

HRISHI: Fuel Efficiency Standards.

RICHARD: You see I still don't even know. Yes. And so it took me the second time through to know what the heck we were talking about. And I'm the one doing the talking. [Laughter]

ELI: Now that I think about it a little bit more, it's highly, highly unlikely we shot the ad because as I think about it the ad that's described in pieces in that scene would have been very expensive to shoot for just a little quick pop.

RICHARD: One little shot? Of a dog in a car?

ELI: All the stuff in a car. [Cross talk] Maybe you're right. It feels to me like that would have been a lot of work for just a tiny little shot on the screen. But I was impressed watching it today that it lets you catch up to what the hell these two guys are doing or talking about. And you have no idea until the middle of the scene, it takes a while to realize they're even talking about an ad. And that's.... you don't see that a lot today.

RICHARD: [Cross talk] Which is a good thing.

ELI: It's a very good thing.

RICHARD: As long as we figure it out eventually.

ELI: Yes, exactly.

JOSH: I have a little thing. Just a little minor thing. But I like to find any kind of *Scandal* / *West Wing* crossover. You know that Shonda Rhimes is a big fan of *The West Wing* and that David Rosen, the character that I play in *Scandal*, no please [Laughter], was kind of an homage to David Rosen who's mentioned as having been offered Toby Ziegler's job first.

RICHARD: Who I met, the real person, at the Democratic Convention this last horrific election cycle. [Laughter]

JOSH: Wanna tell us about that?

RICHARD: No, he's not that interesting. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Apologies to David Rosen.

JOSH: I guess you just did.

RICHARD: No, he's a fundraiser and he introduced himself as "I'm the David Rosen from blah blah blah" and that's it.

JOSH: OK. [Laughter] That's enough. There's a little bit from Josh. It's the whole trying to get Joe Quincy to correct him and say "No, I'm a shyster not a sawbones" and then Josh is a little bit competitive because he knows that Donna thinks that Joe Quincy is cute. And is a biscuit.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*JOSH: I don't practice law. I help write the laws. I write the laws. I make the laws. I am the law.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: In my mind this is echoed years later in my dialogue, David Rosen's dialogue on *Scandal*.

[Scandal Episode 1.02 excerpt]

DAVID: *You know what I love about my job? I'm the good guy. The law is on my side. I am the law. The law is me.*

[end excerpt]

RICHARD: I.... [Applause]

JOSH: It's more the *Scandal* style that.

RICHARD: I believe that's plagiarism. [Laughter]

JOSH: Oh, you tell Shonda. [Laughter]

HRISHI: I think she just owes Aaron \$75,000.

RICHARD: Am I crazy or did Theresa May also steal a little bit from *The West Wing*? [Laughter and hisses] Oh, it happened.

JOSH: You always set these things up as if the thing is correct you're not crazy. You're still crazy but you're right about the Theresa May thing.

[Theresa May speech October 4, 2017 excerpt]

*THERESA MAY: And it's when tested the most that we reach deep within ourselves and find that our capacity to rise to the challenge before us may well be limitless.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Sometimes though, the repetition has this expository quality and sometimes it's just fun like when they say "stop it" over and over again to the bird. We meet Donna's bird. Sometimes it's fun just to have people repeat things. Sometimes it's fun when Matthew Perry repeats things [claps]. See?

RICHARD: Matthew Perry.

JOSH: But would you guys buy a shirt that says "repetition is fun"? Not a great merch idea.

HRISHI: What is the bird all about?

RICHARD: I know.

JOSH: You do? [Laughter]

HRISHI: Richard?

JOSH: Richard Schiff, you've been recognized.

RICHARD: I'm raising my hand, but I want to hear other theories first.

ELI: Well, I actually...



JOSH: I got nothing.

ELI: I can tell you, maybe this will spoil Richard's..

JOSH: Well, let's hear Richard's first.

RICHARD: It might be the same. But I hope it's not the same.

JOSH: Wait a minute.

RICHARD: I hope it's not the theory that I have. That's what I'm hoping for.

JOSH: No, that would be great. Let's hear you first.

RICHARD: Well, I just think that it's kind of silly, but it's a carrier pigeon banging on the window of the White House. Something's going on. Well, maybe I'm mixing *Game of Thrones* and *The West Wing* a little. [Laughter]

ELI: No, I think that actually...

JOSH: Like a raven.

HRISHI: ..that's where I was going too.

RICHARD: It's just "tap tap tap" and "stop it", "tap tap tap" and "stop it". Something is going on outside of this West Wing that you don't know about.

JOSH: Well, in a Sorkin project rain and pigeons always..

RICHARD: Rain and pigeons..

HRISHI: I thought it was very Edgar Allen Poe. "Tap tap tap" is their version of "never more".

RICHARD: Right.

ELI: Well.. [Laughter]

JOSH: Well, here's the truth.

HRISHI: Here's the real thing.

RICHARD: We're so wrong. [Cross talk]

ELI: I think that may be totally right. I was just gonna say that there actually was a bird on the ledge of the writers' room. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha.

ELI: This is true.

RICHARD: I can't tell you how disappointing that is.

ELI: No, that doesn't mean that it didn't present itself to Aaron as some kind of a symbol. But it was pecking at the window and he had this wonderful way of hovering in anything that was happening to the people around him or to him and just always ended up on the page. And it may well have had that symbolic intent.

RICHARD: This explains why I also over-read putts. [Laughing]

JOSH: Ha ha ha.

RICHARD: I think I read a little bit too much into this.

JOSH: So it's another victory for Occam's Razor.

HRISHI: Blanche Sindelar who is the props master on this show. She told me that they brought in a pigeon trainer, an animal handler for this. Because I was amazed by how well they were able to shoot that, how hard it was. And even as I was wondering is any of this trickery or anything like that. And she said no it's a real bird and just pigeons are very smart and they had an animal trainer come in and..

JOSH: They couldn't throw in a dog too and get Rex on the screen? [Laughter]

ELI: But it's an odd..

JOSH: That's our show.

ELI: It is an odd choice in some ways. And I think in a good way because it doesn't, it's not something that goes anywhere. It's just a sort of.... I mean it probably was intended as a symbol. It's just sort of an odd feature of these scenes and gives those actors something else really interesting to play.

RICHARD: Well, I mean it also sets up a couple of repetitive, not repetitive jokes but jokes that repeat about being crazy. Josh walks into Donna when she's going "stop it" and then Josh says "I'll scare it away" and Donna goes "No, no, no, no. Don't do that" which is really kind of adorable. And then when Matthew Perry.... [four claps] Boy, it's dying down, I have to say. [Laughter] It's 'cause *Friends* was a long time ago. And C.J. and Donna are saying "stop it" at the same time and it gives a perspective of everyone's a little crazy.

HRISHI: So then after we meet the bird and Donna tells Josh not to shoo it away because it's not bothering anybody, we go to Will's office where he's now trying to come up with the counter-attack for Rex the dog, and I think it's really sweet that Will's still working with Cassie and the Laurens who we met in the two-parter a few episodes ago. I think that seed was planted at the end of that episode, that the interns are gonna stick around and do the work. But there's a little bit of a combative relationship and we see a little bit of the resolution of it. I'm so happy that there's a part 2 to that. That that wasn't the end of that relationship and they come back to this.

ELI: It felt a little bit to me like that storyline juxtaposed against the Hoynes storyline was an echo of *17 People* actually, where jokes are being written in one room while...

RICHARD: That's right.

ELI: This much more serious drama happening.

RICHARD: Wow, that's right.

ELI: Even to the point that at the end of this episode you say to Will "you're gonna have something to tell him" and that happens at the end of *17 People* too and I can't remember now who says to somebody else "stick around".

RICHARD: I think I come back in from the Oval Office being utterly shaken from that scene with the president and with Leo. And I come back into the Roosevelt Room to continue.

ELI: For sure, yes, right.

RICHARD: Is that not what you're trying to...

ELI: Well, I think that definitely happens. But I think there's a moment where...

RICHARD: That's the end of the episode.

ELI: Where somebody else says to Sam "stick around tonight".

JOSH: Again, you're confusing yourself with Rob Lowe. [Laughter]

ELI: No no, but it might be, I can't remember whether that is you or Brad, but somebody kind of says a similar thing. But you're right you have that same moment where you have this heavy knowledge and you walk through this room where...

RICHARD: And life's too much to go on.

ELI: Yeah. It seemed similar parallels.

HRISHI: So with both the bird and with this ad, these other little things that are happening in these compartments, the rooms in the West Wing, none of them go anywhere.

ELI: Right, they don't resolve.

HRISHI: We never find anything out about the ad or what is to come of it. We never hear again from the bird.

RICHARD: That's, that's right.

ELI: Maybe not the bird storyline, but that storyline had an ending at one point that we pitched to Aaron and then it was his choice to just have everything subsumed by this bigger story. Which seems fitting. It just brushes everything else under a rug.

RICHARD: I'm just curious what you think now of, and it was mentioned earlier in another podcast, with the current *#MeToo* thing and the attitudes towards women working on your staff. There's a very specific lack of knowing their names, which is an Aaron Sorkin recurring theme, which will also happen in *Charlie Wilson's War*. I'm just wondering how you guys reacted to that?

HRISHI: We talked about it at one time.

JOSH: Yeah, well it used to be far worse. Will Bailey gives them football jerseys and called them by number. [Laughter] Yeah.

RICHARD: That happened in *The West Wing*?

JOSH: Yes. Yes. [Laughter]

ELI: Do you actually.

JOSH: What you're seeing is the vestige of earlier...

ELI: Do you know I actually.

JOSH: Far worse ability to discern one from the other.

RICHARD: Really? Maybe if somebody would play the music my memory would come back.

ELI: But I will say this.

JOSH: No, but you're right.

ELI: That has an origin actually. That was actually something that Roseanne did with her writing staff when *Roseanne* was first on the air. She had so many writers and they came and went so often. There were so many people fired and so many people hired that at one point she - this is the story I've heard - she made jerseys for her staff with just numbers on them.

JOSH: Wow.

ELI: So she could walk into the writers' room. Maybe that's apocryphal. But that was the story I heard, so that actually was a bit of an homage to that.

RICHARD: Yeah.

ELI: But I thought you were going to, Richard, also going to talk about the final - I don't want to get ahead of where you guys are headed - but the final scene with Bartlet and Leo and Hoynes. Because even the attitudes in that, those could be a little polarized.

RICHARD: Yeah, did you really..

ELI: Which is to say

RICHARD: "Didn't you know that she, didn't you get a sense that she would do something like that?" That kind of question.

ELI: Well, that. But also just the fact that they, even that they want to fight and defend him. Some people could take issue with that as out of step with 2018.

RICHARD: Well, it felt like he didn't do anything wrong except have an affair. What's wrong with that? [Laughter] Kidding.

JOSH: I'll moderate this debate.

RICHARD: Kidding.

JOSH: Opening statement.

RICHARD: Know what I mean? There was no advantage [Cross talk]

ELI: No, sure. It's just interesting. I think it's interesting [Cross talk]

RICHARD: There was no abusive behavior. It was just illicit behavior. But it's not illegal.

ELI: That's true.

RICHARD: Nor does it cross a red line in behavior. You know. Except with the wife.

JOSH: Well, one of the moving things I think about that whole storyline to me is that whatever you judge him for or do not about having the affair, his undoing is this very human impulse to impress. It's just one of the saddest things.

ELI: Yeah. Pillow talk.

JOSH: Which he admits to in that big scene and he basically says he wanted to be the guy who seemed like a good guy because he helped to arrange for the, what is it, whatever it is 10,000 computers.

RICHARD: Yeah, 100,000 computers.

JOSH: And he wanted to show he knew this inside information about water on Mars. To me there's something touching about that.

RICHARD: It's the pillow talk thing which is why people are taken advantage of by spies and nefarious interests. They create these relationships so that pillow talk will lead to information. Wow, this is a long sentence. God.

JOSH: No it's good. And one of the things that I really, well let's play the clip and then I'll say.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*HOYNES: I'm resigning the Vice Presidency.*

*BARTLET: What about it's none of your business?*

*HOYNES: I leaked classified information. It is their business. It's also a felony.*

*LEO: Are you in a position to deny it?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that last line and I love that Leo says it because I feel like Aaron occasionally leans towards hagiography and sort of making out his characters to be these just saintly, perfect, morally, ethically.... And here you have Leo basically saying "can we get away with just denying it? Never mind what you did, and that you committed a felony, and that she.... Can we just gloss this over?" Which I like. It makes the characters more complex and real.

RICHARD: And political.

JOSH: Yeah. right, and realistic.

HRISHI: Let's backtrack a little bit to how we get to this scene. When we're first in the room with Charlie and Toby and the salad [Laughter] we get some exposition from Charlie. Some pretty hardcore exposition here.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*CHARLIE: Baldwin, long a fixture in DC Manhattan society, whether for her work on charity boards or her position on the arm of some of Wall Street and Washington and Hollywood's most eligible men, as well as hosting some of the Beltway's favorite.... What the hell kind of sentence is this?*

[end excerpt]

ELI: He's channeling Richard. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha.

HRISHI: It's interesting because he's doing this thing that we've talked about before where the news serves as a way to bring in a lot of exposition really quickly. But it also gives us a little bit of insight into Stu Winkle. We don't know yet what Stu Winkle does or that much about him but immediately we're given this insight that despite the fact that this is a writer for *The Washington Post*, not necessarily a great writer. I actually asked Emily Heil who is the gossip columnist for *The Washington Post* currently what she thought about this episode and here's what she sent back. She thinks that Stu's treated really unfairly. That he's a guy with a legit job and it sounds like he's pretty good at it. Respect. That's what she said. And I think this is part of it. They're making fun of his writing to sort of delegitimize him even before we get any further. He has his legs cut out from under him.

RICHARD: It's nice to know that the gossip columnists hang out together and stick up for each other. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: C.J. also notably hangs up on him. As soon as she has what she needs from him, he's in mid-sentence and it's "click".

HRISHI: That's true. One last thing that Emily Heil wrote. She said "A lot of the mechanics of that storyline ring true to me. As a gossip/social columnist I have definitely come across tips that I then pass on to colleagues. It goes the other way too, that colleagues who cover politics and other beats pass me tips that they can't use." Which I thought was quite interesting.

ELI: Yeah, I think that the show as a whole took such a dim view of leaks and disloyalty and of press coverage that was more about salacious gossip or conflict as opposed to substance. So it just feels so consistent to me with earlier episodes where it's a little bit of a smackdown of the press, frankly.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That also speaks to some Aaron and loyalty.

ELI: For sure. It's funny because I joined the show at the beginning of the third season. And at least my sense of it not having been there before that is that the show itself was getting a lot of glowing press in those first couple of seasons. And I think in the third and fourth seasons less so. Even though it ended up, for example, winning Best Drama Emmy in Season 3 and 4, it was kind of written off for those years until it won. There were a bunch of fairly negative stories written in *The New York Times* and other places about behind-the-scenes things at the show. Some of which were unfair, and I think that yeah, I think that stuff upset him and he wanted press coverage that was a little more substantive and a little less, you know. I think this episode took on its own life and some of those scenes were fairly stripped down of a lot of the discussions that we had leading up to them, as is always the case. But I remember very specifically: when I worked for Al Gore there were [Cross talk] a number..

RICHARD: Eli Attie worked for Al Gore. In case you didn't know. And was a Toby Ziegler of sorts. [Cross talk] I mean, a very, very... You mean you weren't as good as Toby? [Laughter]

ELI: [Cross talk] Well, I was more of a Sam Seaborn maybe. [Laughter] No no, I didn't mean it that way. I meant more junior. I meant more junior.

JOSH: Oh!

ELI: That's exactly what I mean. No, I was Al Gore's speech-writer.

RICHARD: Writing, writing. I'm talking about writing. Only writing.

ELI: I aspired to be Toby Ziegler. But there were a number of tell-all books written by recently departed Clinton aides who left that White House. And I remember even having this conversation with Al Gore that it makes it much harder for a staff person to have a relationship of trust with whoever they're working for if they suspect that you're gonna go out

and sell your story or tell your story or just gossip to a reporter. And I know that was some of what we talked about in the early discussions of what became this episode. Was just the idea that both Hoynes and this Helen Baldwin woman who presumably, she's having an affair with somebody, he thinks he can trust her for that reason alone. That leaks and disloyalty kind of undermines everything you do in something like government.

HRISHI: So the moment when Joe Quincy super sleuth is able to put this all together and then reveals it to C.J. is an interesting one, because it actually happens wordlessly between the two of them. It's while Stu Winkle is rambling on on speakerphone. And he sort of presents all the evidence to C.J..

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: Shows her the calls. Shows her the clippings from the newspaper. And this is a moment that I think is really interesting. It's very dramatic, and it's played out so nicely. And while watching that scene that's when I felt this is why the teaser was the reveal of where this pays off. Because that scene is so complicated. There's so many things that are..

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: That are happening And the information that's being told. To look at that and figure out "OK, from all these things what this means". They never actually specifically say "this means the Vice President was having an affair with Helen Baldwin and she's leaking stuff to Stu Winkle which must have come from the Vice President". All this stuff is sort of coming out, it's being implied, and it's really complicated. The reason why we as an audience are able to digest all of that is because in the first 30 seconds of the episode we get the letter of resignation from the Vice President.

ELI: Well, what I thought was interesting about that was that if you get... you might get from that scene that the Vice President is having an affair with Helen Baldwin, or you might not. The story works either way. But to me it's so unusual for this show to have used insert shots. It just very very rarely told stories that way. It would usually be Richard and Brad in a room. It would be done like a play. Here you can't use those kinds of quick visual pops and the only reason I think it does is because it's so complicated and seeing those call sheets and seeing those scribbles at last gives you a chance to catch up, and I think you barely get that chance before the scene is over.

RICHARD: And it also gives them the opportunity to keep it wordless, which is..

JOSH: Yeah, it's a lovely scene and the direction by John David Coles I think is spot on.

RICHARD: I concur.

HRISHI: The nice thing about the insert shots too, and this sometimes happens in moments like this on *The West Wing*. All the names of all the other calls that aren't Helen Baldwin and John Hoynes are people who work on *The West Wing*. Blanche Sindelar, who we mentioned already, the prop master. And previous guests on our show. Lyn Paolo who's the costume designer, and Ellen Totleben who's the set decorator. They're all names on that call list if you stop..



RICHARD: You have watched this show way too many times. [laughter and applause]

HRISHI: Luckily I'm not the only one. I think that there's also this thing that's happening at minute 29. This scene is happening at minute 29 and if it had happened earlier.... And we need that much time to finish the plot and if it had happened any earlier - closer to the actual letter in the cold open, it would have felt too abrupt. It's this build up to it and I just think the pacing of getting to that is really expertly done.

RICHARD: It also changes their relationship at that moment.

HRISHI: For sure. Yeah. She goes from hazing him. He proves something to C.J. in there too. But it is still a little bit crazy that Joe Quincy is such a super detective.

ELI: Well, you know, this actually gets to something that I was thinking about this episode. Especially in rewatching it, which is that I think Matt Perry [four claps] does a great job in this.

JOSH: Come on, Eli. You're better than that.

ELI: And I'm sure that his work on the episodes he did is what led Aaron to want to work with him on *Studio 60* after this, but I wish there were more of our regulars in this episode. He's kind of a guest coming in and he really kind of swallows the episode.

RICHARD: There's only so many salads I can eat in one..

ELI: This is true. The salad of mercy.

RICHARD: The thought had crossed my mind that every actor's in thirst of a great storyline and we needed the rest, you know. To tell you the truth. But it did occur to me that he was doing a very.... this guest, this stranger, was doing a very *West Wing* kind of storyline.

ELI: Yeah, for sure, and again it's a testament to Richard and Alison and Josh and these incredible actors in the show that with the little real estate that they got they made a real impact. And also it's a testament to Aaron. But a real.... their characters kind of still progressed in this episode. But in a lot less time than normal.

RICHARD: We were pretty good. [Laughter]

ELI: No disagreement here.

HRISHI: Eli, as someone who worked for a Vice President, I wanted to ask you about the monumental.... How big of a deal [Laughter] this..

ELI: Yeah. Would that be "monumentality"? I'm not sure.

HRISHI: So many of the episodes of *The West Wing* that I love deal with these sort of more, I don't know, I don't want to say quotidian necessarily.... But things that feel like they came right from the government and they feel like the real substance of governing.

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: But this, of a Vice President resigning. It's only happened twice before in history. John C. Calhoun resigned and stood back for political reasons. Spiro Agnew's the only one who's ever resigned in disgrace like this. So only really one other precedent in history. Did you feel at all like this was.... Was there any danger about having such a big..

JOSH: The credibility of a plot-line like that?

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: I don't think so because again this speaks to what a different time it was and how long ago it is now. This was seen as a bombshell. Not only did he have an affair, but he also leaked potentially damaging, maybe even illegal classified information to her. Yeah, it's a huge thing and it's an especially huge thing because I think as we established on the show with Hoynes, the Vice President has no portfolio and some are really close important advisors to presidents and some are not and we really depicted Hoynes as someone who wasn't. And so really his job was to have a heartbeat in case the President lost his, and to sit around and wait for the opportunity to run for that job. So it's not like somebody who's served so honorably and so well who realizes they can no longer serve in the same way. It's taking himself out of a line. It's even referred to in that scene that "well, in 2 and a half years you can run". It always was about him waiting his turn and running. So I think it makes it an even harder decision. But, no, I think, especially as we're getting to the end of this season and knowing where the season is going, I think, definitely this was about some big moves and propelling us to the end of the season.

RICHARD: If I may, I think that Aaron certainly elevated the morality, if not the efficiency, and the success of this administration. The morality of this administration was a priority to accentuate. And we had been through a pretty big scandal a few years earlier in the real world. Not to mention.... Was this before 2004?

HRISHI: This is 2003.

ELI: 2003.

RICHARD: Well, we were forebodingly presenting the next scandal which was, I believe John Edwards and that. So in the real world this was happening, and I think what Aaron maybe and these writers were, correct me if I'm wrong, were saying that this White House is a step above on a moral plane. Maybe not in the realistic logistics of governance and the successes because if you look at our administration, not a great deal of massive legacy..

HRISHI: Legislation.

JOSH: Achievements

RICHARD: Achievements, thank you. You know. A Supreme Court Justice. I always get struck by when people say "oh, I wish you guys were in the real White House". I go "careful what you wish for", because take a look at our record. And part of the thing that I loved about that part of what Aaron presented and what continued after he left was the absolute difficulty of getting anything done. Especially with an oppositional Congress. And we focussed on that

makes better stories: to fail and to give it your best shot and to go around and to move onto what's next. But the Clinton White House was much more successful than we were.

ELI: You know what's funny about that. You're so right about that and I think that that was a kind of a storytelling choice, talking about the sort of thinness of the accomplishments of this White House. And I remember my first week on the staff in the 3rd season, Aaron coming to me one day and saying "could you just give me a quick..." I was coming out of the the real White House and had all this vernacular, and he said "would you just give me a quick paragraph on Bartlet's accomplishments as president" and then he left the room. And I remember thinking "I just got here. You've been writing this show for two years". But I think it was because really there weren't that many signal accomplishments. I just made up a few medium sized things. I think partly because you couldn't say on the show "well, he had the defense budget and now college is free" and things that you would sort of weirdly have to depict in some major significant way. It was very hard to think of a way to dramatize those.

RICHARD: And speaking of the unbelievable. The fact that those successes could have happened. You know what I mean?

ELI: Yeah, for sure.

RICHARD: It was a bigger stretch than other fiction.

ELI: For sure, absolutely.

HRISHI: So, at the end of this episode we kind of return to the original moment that we opened with. But things are a little bit different and it gives us a chance to see some different details. The first time when Claire Huddle walks through the hall we see C.J. and we see Toby and we see Josh sort of taking in her walk. This time she does the walk again as we've now caught up in real time, but this time they show Joe Quincy watching her as she comes in and we know now what a huge role he played. And then there's a repeat of the scene between the President and Claire Huddle in the Oval Office, but it's shot totally differently. And I thought this was an interesting thing, I don't know, but I imagine John David Cole's decision to shoot it..

RICHARD: You have to, you have to.

HRISHI: It's square on with the Resolute desk and when the scene first starts there's nobody in the frame. And then the President walks in and then Claire Huddle walks in and they have their exchange. And there are no cuts, which I guess isn't that unusual with all the walk and talks. But the camera doesn't move really. And then it starts to slowly back away. They finish the scene and then they both leave. And that was a really visually jarring thing almost, to see the camera not doing anything. Except for just backing away. It was a visual move that we never see on the show. And I thought it was a nice way to underscore that this kind of huge plot moment is also something that we've never seen on the show.

ELI: I found myself watching that and thinking, because *The West Wing* was a very difficult show to produce in the sense of really long shooting days. The writers worked incredibly hard. We all loved being there but it was a very consuming job, and I just watched it and thought we easily could have just used the same piece of footage twice and saved a few hours.

RICHARD: I know but you can't.

ELI: But that wasn't the *West Wing* way. You're right.

RICHARD: You cannot do that. Because there are always perspectives. Everyone who's seen it has changed, At first we're curious and you cut back and forth, and like what's going on? This is weird, it seems important. Did you take a cab? What is this about? But now we know and we can step back and we can see it from a bigger perspective. And that's great directing.

ELI: That's a very good point.

HRISHI: One thing that we didn't talk about yet that I really loved is that Josh and I sometimes talk about some of the choices that you as an actor make that really bring Toby to life and make him so distinct. One of the ones that I love..

RICHARD: Well, losing his hair was a big choice I thought. [Laughter]

JOSH: Ha ha. That is commitment.

HRISHI: You committed. I thought that was important. I liked the accent you put on the word "nut" here.

JOSH: Ha.

RICHARD: So did I when I watched it again.

[West Wing Episode 4.21 excerpt]

*TOBY: Did you think I was gonna have the Press Secretary on behalf of the President compare a federal judge to a pistachio nut?*

[end excerpt]

[Laughter]

HRISHI: And..

ELI: That's great.

JOSH: Pure Richard.

HRISHI: It made me think of a Christopher Guest moment from the movie *Best In Show*. I don't know if you all know that show. But there's a moment when Christopher Guest starts naming nuts and the way he says "pistachio", he calls it a pistachio nut in a similar sort of way

[Best In Show excerpt]

*HARLAN PEPPER: I used to be able to name every nut that there was. Pistachio nut. Red pistachio nut. Natural, all natural white pistachio nut.*

[end excerpt]

[Laughter]

JOSH: I think it's conceivable that when we put out the podcast we will cut this and place it earlier rather than finishing on it. [Laughter] But it was worth visiting.

HRISHI: I think if you dig hard enough there's a theme for the whole episode.

JOSH: Yeah, no you may be right.

HRISHI: In that little pistachio nut.

RICHARD: I did wonder why I expressed it that way but I was always looking for ways to accentuate a point in the meter that maybe Aaron didn't expect that would pop me out and get me interested in it. But it was also the word "nut" was very appropriate at that moment.

JOSH: Ha ha.

RICHARD: So I think maybe that's where it came from. But yeah, I noticed that too. I liked it, I have to say.

ELI: I will say that one of the things I found in my papers on this episode was some material that the staff gave to Aaron for that scene. And our pitch to him was that the inappropriate thing that Toby had written in the press guidance was comparing the court to a kangaroo court. And this is an example I think of Aaron's wonderful specificity. Because kangaroo court is a little bit of a lazy cliché, it's the first thing probably you'd think of if you were trying to insult a court. And he was and is allergic to cliché.

HRISHI: Is he allergic to nuts? [Laughter]

ELI: That's a very good question.

RICHARD: It also provided a nice moment for Joe Quincy to understand the workings of who we are as a family.

JOSH: True.

RICHARD: Because later on when C.J. has it on her desk and goes "whaddya got, I gotta change that" and he has a little smile on his face.

ELI: And by the way I thought Allison Janney was so great in this episode. [Applause]

RICHARD: When is that not the case?

ELI: It's never not the case but I think it's a... The same is true. Josh, I think you guys had really... Allison had more, but you guys had a handful of scenes and they're so alive and

they're so, the characters kind of.... It's just such a great group of actors this show. It's such a rare occurrence and so..

RICHARD: Well she had a great place to start, which is completely dismissive. And then find herself hanging off a cliff really, from a PR standpoint. And in many ways I was similarly gifted because I started out with really nonsense from his perspective and then something very profound was happening. You didn't have that luck so much. [Laughter]

ELI: Well, but you know..

JOSH: I knew something was coming.

ELI: In Will Bailey's defense..

JOSH: Thank you, Eli.

ELI: No, I think he has the same arc except the last little piece of it is off-screen. That he's working on this thing that feels to the audience like a typical *West Wing* storyline and would be a good storyline in any other episode but that it just gets swallowed by this other thing. He just doesn't realize it in the final scene.

JOSH: Despite going head to head with Toby over and over and over I think he wants to please him. And he has displeased Toby early on even to the point where Toby throws a ball at him. So I think later scenes in the Roosevelt Room are fueled by a desire to come back with something decent.

RICHARD: No doubt, but what's great actually about the scene between us, the first scene, is that I hurl a Spaldeen at you, and then I go into a tirade and your disposition pretty much is like "well, I haven't thought about it, sorry".

JOSH: Right.

RICHARD: It's so matter of fact. It's like "I'd apologize if I thought I should have thought about it but I didn't think about it and those are the facts". And it was actually a fantastic counterpoint to my explosion.

ELI: Plus it shows that Will is part of the family. In that Toby can snap at him and bark at him in that early scene probably because he's going through his own, as you point out to him, he should either marry Andy or kill himself. [Laughter] But Toby's gonna tell you this thing that just happened that you probably could wait til morning to hear. You don't necessarily need to act on it.

RICHARD: And he gets in the last dig in that scene, which is "you want me to close the blinds and turn down the lights?"

HRISHI: Before we close the... turn down the lights and close the blinds, let's wrap things up. That's it for this episode. Thank you so much to all of you for coming and joining us here at Union Chapel. *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of *Radiotopia* from PRX, a curated network of independent podcasts.

JOSH: You can check out the other podcasts at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: We'd like to thank our guests so much. Please give a big round of applause to Eli Attie and Richard Schiff. [Applause and cheering] And we'd also like to thank, of course, The Swingles for that amazing opening. [Applause and cheering] And let's bring them back out. Swingles, will you come join us again? Cheering] So one thing that I found when I was researching this episode that I love. As we discussed earlier today, *Life On Mars* is also the title of a David Bowie song. And way back in 1979, Martin Sheen was the host of *SNL* in an episode. And the musical guest in that episode was David Bowie. [Crowd goes aah] We're gonna end the show tonight with The Swingles. They're gonna do *Life on Mars*. [Crowd cheers]. And to kick it off, before Josh and I leave the stage here, we thought we'd have President Bartlet introduce them.

[Saturday Night Live Episode 5.07 excerpt]

*MARTIN SHEEN: Ladies and Gentlemen, David Bowie.*

[end excerpt]

[Swingles sing Life On Mars]

[Applause and cheering]

HRISHI: Thank you all so much. Thank you, Swingles, that was amazing.

HRISHI: OK.

JOSH: OK.

CROWD: What's next?

[Outro Music]