

The West Wing Weekly
4.24: Season 4 Retrospective
Guests: Aaron Sorkin and Emily Procter

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: Live from Town Hall in New York, it's *The West Wing Weekly* [applause and cheering]. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway [applause and cheering].

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina [applause and cheering] We're excited to be here. [applause and cheering] Shalom chaverim, welcome friends and rabbis [laughter] and friends who are rabbis. We're at a national historic landmark.

HRISHI: That's right, Bob Dylan played here.

JOSH: Right and now we're doing a podcast [laughter]. Hmm. I realized before we walked out I've been working a distinctive look for this tour. If you're listening at home: a slightly baggy suit, spectacles, cheap fedora, and I just realized, now in the 6th and final leg of our tour, essentially I'm engaging in flashback Jules Ziegler cosplay. [laughter, applause]

HRISHI: In honor of that, Josh will do the rest of the episode in Yiddish. [laughter and applause]

JOSH: I have a feeling most of you would be fine with that. [laughter]

HRISHI: It's true, we did receive a gift of kugel tonight. [laughter]

JOSH: In preparation, I've been doing kugel exercises for months. [laughter] I really tightened them up. [laughter] It's going to get worse from here.

HRISHI: [groan] Tonight is a very special episode of *The West Wing* [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Of *Blossom* [laughter]

HRISHI: As I believe all of you know, tonight we're not going to be discussing a specific episode, in fact, instead we are going to be looking back at all of season 4 and really of all of the Aaron Sorkin years on *The West Wing*.

[cheers and applause]

JOSH: Many people feel that those were among the best years of *The West Wing*. [laughter]

HRISHI: And to do so, we have a very special guest joining us, he's in fact the reason for all of this. He is an Emmy winner, an Oscar winner, other things I'm sure he's won too [laughter]. Please welcome Aaron Sorkin.

[Loud extended cheering and applause]

JOSH: If you're listening to the podcast, the audience just stood, much as they stood when Hishi and I came out. [laughter]

AARON: Thank you all very much. I just have to say, because you mentioned Jules Ziegler, that when I got done writing the teaser of that episode, which is entirely in Yiddish, it's a flashback to Christmas Eve in the 1940's. It's entirely in Yiddish, it's about six or seven pages, I went to Tommy [Thomas Schlamme] and the casting directors and said, "Listen I'm going to need three actors in their early to mid 20's, who are fluent in Yiddish [laughter] and one of them has to look like he could possibly have been Richard Schiff's father." [laughter] And Tommy said, "Trust me,

any actor in their early to mid 20's, who is fluent in Yiddish, is going to look like they could be Richard Schiff's father." [hearty laughter/applause].

HRISHI: That's great. Was there any push back from anyone along the lines about the idea of having a teaser entirely in Yiddish?

AARON: No. Because by that time in the show--it's one of the nice benefits of being a hit, which we were by then in season 4--you just don't get much push back at all. Early on in the life of the series there was push back on everything because they didn't know what in the world this was, people had political opinions and that kind of thing, but by season 4 we were fine.

HRISHI: I want to actually ask you something about the beginning of this show, even before the beginning of this show. A lot of people know that Sidney Poitier was a possibility as President Bartlet but when I was researching things for our conversation today, I found out a couple of other contenders that I hadn't know about: Jason Robards who played Ben Bradley in *All the President's Men*, Hal Holbrook who'd go on to play Albie Duncan, John Cullum who is a Tony Award winning theatre actor who I mainly know from *Northern Exposure*...

JOSH: *Shenandoah*. Hrishi, it's a musical. [laughter]

HRISHI: It's like, he's from Shenandoah? [laughter] So all of these men were born between 1922 and 1930 and [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] like Brad Whitford [laughter]

HRISHI: So youngest, when the show would go on, the youngest would have been 70 years old. In the end obviously you got Martin Sheen and when the pilot was made, I believe he was 58. That's a fairly significant age difference between these people who you had maybe thought of initially, or considered. I was wondering if that age difference ended up changing significantly how you conceived of that character?

AARON: As a matter of fact, right this second is the first time I've [laughter] thought about it...what happened was, you're right, and I want to be very clear. Martin, yes, was not our first choice, but he was our last choice and he was our *best* choice [murmurs of recognition and laughter turning into applause]. We explored Sidney Poitier, absolutely couldn't afford him [laughter]. We were going to fly Jason Robards out for a meeting, but then he got very sick and so Jason was out. Hal Holbrook came in and read...

JOSH: [deadpan] as Mark Twain

AARON: [laughter]...as *Mark Twain Tonight!* [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] so that eliminated...

AARON: No, but I did ask him a lot of stories. If you don't know Hal Holbrook, for the last 50 years or something, has had a touring one man show called *Mark Twain Tonight!* and he plays Mark Twain and he's wonderful, and John Cullum, Tony Award winner from *Shenandoah*, Tony Award winner from *On the Twentieth Century* too [applause]

JOSH: ...and he finally got a round of applause for it...

AARON: ...came in and read. But you know, why didn't we think about the age of these actors? Probably because we never thought there was going to be an episode 2 [laughter] It just never occurred to us.

HRISHI: It's funny, because in the 2020 elections, the age of the potential candidates is a big factor. I mean it really, even in 2016, the idea of how old a president or a potential president

might be is something you have to consider for a number of reasons, and so a 58 year old president versus a 70 year old president, does...it changes what you have done with the character, I think. I feel like it must have opened up some possibilities

AARON: It would have opened up some possibilities but probably those same possibilities existed with Bartlet who had MS in terms of, I'm sorry to be exploiting a horrible disease, but things you could do with that.

HRISHI: Right [awkward laughter]

JOSH: Cue uncomfortable laughter [more laughing]

AARON: Yeah. I, you know what, the MS happened. It's Stockard Channing's fault. [laughter] Stockard came on and did one episode; I think it was maybe the 6th episode; it was [crosstalk] *The State Dinner*. Right.

HRISHI: [crosstalk at the same time] *The State Dinner* [laughter].

JOSH: I knew that, you just got there quicker than I did [applause and laughter].

AARON: And she called me, and she asked if we could have lunch, because she said she wanted to do more, could she come back and do more episodes.

JOSH: That's ballsy. I've never even thought about doing that [laughter]. I've done one episode of a LOT of things. It never occurred to me to tell them I wanted to do more...[laughter]

AARON: What are you talking about? That is exactly how you got on the show

[laughter]

JOSH: Oh. I'll do it with you...

AARON: Oh, oh, ok

JOSH: I mean with anyone else...

AARON: For when we get to up it, that is exactly how you...[laughter]

JOSH: Oh, I'm completely shameless with you...

AARON: Ok...

JOSH: Everyone else it's different. Let me also just add...can you believe for how long and how far I've ridden your coattails? [laughter and applause]. It's 2018!

AARON: It's been the other way round, believe me. What happened there...

[Audience says "awwww"]

JOSH: Sweet, and not true [laughter]

AARON: It is true. I went to high school with two of Josh's cousins

JOSH: One of whom, are you here? [laughter]

VOICE IN CROWD: Third Row!!

JOSH: Third row, center!

AARON: Is it Stu or Joel? I can't see

VOICE IN CROWD: Joel

AARON: Hey Joel! How are you doin'?

[laughter and applause]

JOSH: This is your life Aaron Sorkin!

AARON: This is amazing.

JOSH: I just wanted to point it out, the way my wife will always let me know that I'm on speakerphone, so in case you were going to say anything not nice about Joel. He's here.

AARON: Oh, ok. I had no intention of not saying anything nice about Joel.

JOSH: It was a cheap joke

AARON: Both Joel, and his brother, Stuart Malina. Very, very talented guys. Joel an incredibly talented singer and actor. Stuart a phenomenally talented musician who today, I have lost track. He is principal conductor of [crosstalk] Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra

JOSH: [crosstalk] Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra, HSO, a Tony winner for orchestrating [crosstalk] *Movin' Out*

AARON: [crosstalk] for orchestrating the Billy Joel musical

JOSH: It's a musical of Billy Joel songs with choreography by Twyla Tharp. She...do you like dance? Never mind.

AARON: Anyway, I had been hearing about their cousin Josh for a long, long time and it wasn't until we were all out of college, that I had a bunch of people over to my apartment in New York to play poker and Josh was one of them. This was the first time I met him, and we were just in the middle of casting my first play, which was *A Few Good Men* [applause and cheers]. Thanks a lot, I really didn't mean for an easy round, and we were pretty much cast up but we did need understudies, people who could play like 3 different marines in the thing. I'd never seen Josh act before but he had studied [crosstalk] acting at Yale...

JOSH: [crosstalk] ...this was helpful to me...

AARON: ...and he seemed like a lively guy, a smart guy and I said, "Listen, come and read for a, you're going to be reading for MP number 2 but it will be covering these other parts," and he came in; he got the part and then he took over for the actor he was understudying and then on the national tour he played a bigger role, all the while playing pranks on everyone. Did anyone happen to see Josh get owned on *Kimmel* the other night? [cheers and applause] That cheer went up all over America for people who have worked with Josh. Anyway, then *Sports Night* [cheers and applause]. So, we were talking about...

HRISHI: Stockard Channing [laughter]

AARON: Stockard Channing, who wanted to be on the show and we were having lunch at the Warner Brothers commissary and in the first episode that she did, she only had half a dozen lines, we didn't know much about her, I mean it was Stockard so she kinda hit it out of the park but, we didn't know much about her, so as Stockard was talking to me I kind of tuned out and just started thinking who she could be on the show, and I thought wouldn't it be interesting if, you know, we don't see too many First Ladies who are professionals at something.

JOSH: Melania? [laughter] She worked, that's all I'm saying.

AARON: And Hillary was a lawyer but had stopped practicing some time earlier, and I thought wouldn't be interesting if Stockard was a doctor, an MD, and how would we introduce her, you know you don't want the character to come on and say "as you know, I'm a doctor." And wouldn't it be cool, and then suddenly I had another idea which was, I would love to see Bartlet do what we've all done which is have to watch television during the day cause you're home sick, like what would Bartlet be like watching these daytime shows that [laughter] he had no idea that *Sally Jessy Raphael* was a thing, you know. And so it came to me, Bartlet's sick with something that seems benign: a cold, the flu; only Abbey, who's away, realizes it could be something a lot worse. Abbey is the only one, or one of a very small group of people, who knows. She comes rushing back and that's how, in this episode, we're going to find out that the president has MS. So I did that, and the day after the episode aired, it happens to be one of those TCA--Television Critics Association--press conferences, where the cast and I speak to all the TV critics in a room like this. And the MS episode had aired the night before and, all the critics raised their hand and one of them said, "Now Aaron, what are you going to do now that Bartlet has MS?" It was a disease that I really didn't know anything about. Honestly, I had gone to the researchers and said "give me something that's serious but I don't want him to have to be in a wheelchair" okay, and they came back to me with multiple sclerosis and that's when, as soon as that press conference was done, I went back to the writer's room and said "guys, what have I done exactly?" [laughter]

JOSH: This also gave them the idea for MSNBC.

[uneasy laughter]

AARON: That's right.

JOSH: That's my understanding. [more uneasy, awkward laughter] Yeah, that's what I do on this podcast [laughter] you should know by now.

HRISHI: Let's go to the beginning of season 4

AARON: Yeah

HRISHI: Actually, a little bit before the beginning of season 4

JOSH: The end of season 3?

[laughter]

HRISHI: After that, after that but before season 4.

JOSH: The hiatus.

HRISHI: Yeah, the hiatus period before you started writing season 4. How had things changed for you at that point? As you mentioned, the show was a hit, you'd won 3 consecutive Emmys for Outstanding Drama [applause] So, how had things changed? Did your expectations of the show or your sense of where you wanted it to go; were things different for you in that moment before the fourth season started?

AARON: Well, first of all, there was never a moment with the show where I felt relaxed, where I felt like we were at a cruising altitude, and it's like that. After every episode, no matter what season it was, I felt like there, isn't going to be a next episode. I've just used all the words I know [laughter] in every order I think [crosstalk]

[laughter]

JOSH: [crosstalk] all the best words.

AARON: I have all the best words.

JOSH: What is a hiatus to you? Was it a vacation at all, I mean you step right into it? [crosstalk]

AARON: [crosstalk] Yeah it's about two weeks and you're scared. You try to listen to your friends who are saying "Hey, why don't you just take these two weeks, just not think about the show" and I just can't force myself to do that. So you're thinking about the show and you say to yourself "This year, I'm going to get ahead of it, I'm going to do it like every other show, where there are scripts in the bank, there are episodes in the bank" and I think I could stay ahead...it would usually be about episode 3 where we caught up and then episode 4 here's the teaser [strained], here's the first act, that kind of thing. I don't need to tell you, same thing with *Sports Night*. Now this, going into season 4, there was a little bit of trouble on the horizon, business-wise, and here's why: at the outset, when we were doing the pilot, it was a very expensive pilot to do, *The West Wing* was a an expensive show to do, and we asked Allison, Brad, John Spencer, Rob Lowe and Richard Schiff. We asked them roll back their quote. For those of you who don't know, your quote is what you got paid on the last show you did. Whatever Josh is getting paid for *Scandal*...

JOSH: Would you like me to tell you? [laughter] Just kidding.

AARON: That's his quote, ok? So on the next one, his agent might say, "Listen, forget about Josh's quote, he's a bigger star than that, we're starting from scratch with a new number" or the producers might say "Listen, this is kind of a labor of love, so forget about Josh's quote, it's going to be lower." Anyway, we asked those 5 actors to roll back their quote, and 4 of them said sure and, I'm not coming down on Rob. His reason for not rolling back his quote, was that he felt essentially he already had, that he was a movie star getting paid movie star money and he was coming to television, and there was a price difference there, and I'm not part of this argument by the way, I'm not management; it's Warner Brothers that's having this negotiation. Anyway Rob said no, Warner Brothers said find another Sam Seaborn, this is before we did the pilot [laughter], find another Sam Seaborn. That's when Josh came to pitch me that you could play Jeremy on *Sports Night* and Sam Seaborn on *The West Wing* at the same time. [laughter and cheers] After all you said, I'm writing both at the same time, why can't you play both at the same time?

JOSH: I think I also cited Cynthia Nixon who had been in...

AARON: Cynthia Nixon had been in *The Real Thing* and *Hurlyburly* at the same time on Broadway. That was quite a feat by the way. She was also going to Barnard while she was doing that...

JOSH: Gubernatorial candidate - Cynthia Nixon

[cheering and applause]

AARON: She's a freshman at Barnard, and *Hurlyburly*; which is a long three-act David Rabe play is playing on Broadway. *The Real Thing*, which is a sort of a normal length Tom Stoppard play is playing on Broadway. Both directed by Mike Nichols, and the character that Cynthia was playing was only in the first and third acts of *Hurlyburly*, and the second act of *The Real Thing*. So she's just bopping back and forth between two theatres, presumably while doing her art history homework [laughter]. Anyway, we're getting way off track.

HRISHI: Welcome to the podcast [hearty laughter].

AARON: Two years later, we're after season 2 now, and now, this is now the normal time on a hit show when actors renegotiate their contract, ok? We kept the fee down so the show could

get on the air. It's a hit now and we want to get paid, that's normal. So those 4 actors, who had rolled back their quotes, and there was another reason too, and this is Brad Whitford and I really liked what he said. He said, "I don't want to be doing a scene with Allison Janney knowing I'm getting paid more money than she is," [hearty cheering and applause]

JOSH: And he never would again [hearty laughter]. Boy did he get his wish! [laughter]

AARON: That problem would take care of itself [more hearty laughter] but; Josh is right [more hearty laughter]. At the time the four of them said we want a favored nation deals, the four of us will get the same, and so they got raises and so at the end of season 3 now going into season 4, Rob said "Hey, these 4 guys got raises, I want a raise" and Warner Brothers said "You've had your raise for 3 years now"; and they got into that, I think got some bad advice from his management, I kept on massaging it, I absolutely did not want Rob Lowe to leave the show, but there was a bad moon rising. Something was...[laughter]

JOSH: I've never been described as that before...it's not a completely off...

AARON: We would replace Rob in the middle of the show with Josh. Now I'll tell you, my first instinct would have been; don't misunderstand...

JOSH: I'm excited...

AARON: My first instinct would have been to replace Rob with Emily Procter. [cheering and applause]

JOSH: What are you clapping for?! [Aaron laughter] It's over.

AARON: Only I had made a terrible mistake the year before. Emily came on to the show to play Ainsley Hayes at the beginning of season 2 [cheering and applause]. It was in the first third of season 2, and Emily was episode to episode, as opposed to the series regulars, the actors that were in the opening titles, we own them for 22 episodes. With Emily, if I knew that there was a chance that there was a story for Ainsley in my head in this episode, I would go to casting, casting would call her agent and say "Is Emily free on these dates?" and they would tell me if I could have Emily or not. I was given the opportunity toward the end of season 2 to lock Emily down, to make her series a regular [boos and groans].

JOSH: You're getting booed! [audience laughter] I never thought I'd see the day!

AARON: I deserve to be. I assure you, *not* locking Emily down, *not* making her a series regular, was the single largest mistake I made in my stewardship of *The West Wing*. [applause]

HRISHI: Oh man!

AARON: And here is my explanation. I was...

HRISHI: Actually, I told you no one was going to cut you off, but I just thought, if you're going to give this explanation it might be nice, [clapping and cheers of realization] if you could do it in person to someone. [cheers and applause] Emily are you here? Emily, is Emily Procter here?

[cheering, whistling, applause]

EMILY: He is only saying that because I'm here.

HRISHI: There's this one Ainsley line that I love that I thought would be appropriate to play right now.

[West Wing Episode 2.04 excerpt]

AINSLEY: ...and I have something to say on my own behalf, if you'll permit me a moment to say it, and I understand if you won't, but I would really appreciate it if you did.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And so I thought she might want to say something on her own behalf. Please continue.

AARON: OK

EMILY: Oh my gosh, I had no idea, is it too late?

[laughter]

AARON: It was simply, I was frightened that I wasn't have enough story and that you were going to regret being locked into this show where you didn't have enough to do. [laughter] Now, by the way it's...don't feel bad for Emily, she got [crosstalk]

EMILY: [crosstalk] They met my quote.

[laughter]

AARON: To no one's surprise she got grabbed by *CSI: Miami*

JOSH: I'm just realizing, I might have starred on that for so many years. I don't know if that's the way it would have worked [crosstalk] she would have had my job.

AARON: [crosstalk] Yes, it's definitely the way it works. But, you know, Emily came on first show, hit it out of the park and I loved it every time Emily was on the show, I loved writing Ainsley. You just lit up the screen every time you were on it [applause]. You were they single greatest way to deliver an opposition point of view. You always convinced me of things I never really believed.

EMILY: Well, you gave me the words, and then I had to convince myself [laughter] and that took a lot of doing, so it was really hard.

AARON: Well, you crushed it as we say. [cheering and applause]

EMILY: Thank you. Well, it was very funny because I did not want to leave and it was a sad time for me but I did get this other job and when I went to do the pilot, it was a *big* scene and we were in Miami and there were helicopters and boats and there was a line in the show where as the Coast Guard was towing in a boat someone said "Well we don't know if they're alive or dead because no one's been on the boat" so I snuck over to the director and I said "I don't mean to bother you but, if you're towing the boat in, someone has been on the boat" [laughter] and he turns around and he goes "Oh love, just pretend we don't know that" and then Marg Helgenberger turns around and goes "The girl from *The West Wing* is not gonna make it." [laughter and applause]

JOSH: [crosstalk] That's cool

HRISHI: [crosstalk] So you're saying the working environments weren't similar? [laughter]

EMILY: Well we toured the studio for the first time which was really just kind a warehouse by the airport, and I did actually really love that, but I walked by and we'd see one room and we'd see another room and I said "Now where do we table read?" and they actually just laughed at me [laughter] and I was like, "All right." But it was the most amazing time of my life, I feel like I could say after having done *The West Wing* that I had felt like a real actor and felt like I really had

something to say which was beautiful which I think everybody wants to feel that way. But especially an actor.

AARON: Wow, that's a really nice thing to hear. And...for what it's worth, people started naming their babies Ainsley, it became a name. Yeah.

JOSH: Was it even a name before then?

AARON: You know what? I didn't think it was; I thought I had made it up. But um, I'm pretty sure one of the *Fox and Friends* is named Ainsley.

EMILY: Oh really?

AARON: Yeah Ainsley Earhardt, isn't that one of them?

JOSH: [crosstalk] I think they're all named Ainsley?

[laughter]

EMILY: [crosstalk] Do you want *Fox and Friends*?

AARON: No, I don't watch the show.

EMILY: I'm so confused.

AARON: No, you know if you watch Colbert enough, he's gonna make fun of them and so...

EMILY: This is true.

AARON: Yeah, I'm sorry. Did I answer a question?

JOSH: Have we asked one yet?

AARON: I suddenly went into Emily Procter world... [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] It's fantastic

AARON: ...which is, which is easy. I love the bite that you just played. I loved her first episode that she did "In This White House." I loved you in "17 People." "17 People" was one of those episodes, we'd be over budget for the season, by the time we were sort of at the end of the year being a million dollars over budget for the year is acceptable. We'd be a million dollars over the budget at the end of our third day of shooting in the season.

EMILY: There was always a coffee cart.

AARON: Yes, we would...

JOSH: Is that where all the money went?

EMILY: Yes...

AARON: Well, on Friday nights Tommy and I would get everybody with, there was sometimes during the first year of *The West Wing*, second year of *Sports Night*, when the two shows on the air at the same time. It was late on a Friday night.

JOSH: Shabbos. [laughter] Answer to them.

AARON: Yep. No. I will, *Sports Night* shot at Disney, *The West Wing* shot at Warner Brothers. Those two studios are maybe a mile apart and there was this one Friday night, or really a Saturday morning. It was around 3 a.m. That Tommy and I were shuttling back and forth between the two sets and just said, "You know in all of Hollywood right now there are only two shows that are shooting at 3 a.m. on a Saturday morning. It's ours. We are the worst producers ever! We can't seem to manage this" but "17 People" was the result of you know, we would be getting over budget and either Warner Brothers or NBC would come to me and say "Listen the next episode you write"--it's called a bottle show--"We want you to write an episode with no locations, no new sets, no guest cast, no extras"...no film [laughter], just it is gonna be a stripped-down show and you would think that that would be like a nightmare, oh my God, how am I going to do this? I always loved it. I always loved having those parameters

JOSH: ``Cause then it's theater?

AARON: Because then you get to write a play [applause] exactly right. You're gonna get, let me do what I'm most comfortable doing, writing a play so we had this very serious thing going on in the Oval Office where Bartlet is revealing to Toby that, that he has MS and right across in the Roosevelt room they're working on jokes for the Correspondents' Dinner while Ainsley and Sam are debating the Equal Rights Amendment, and I had found a good reason to debate something that was like 15 years old. I found a reason to do that. But all through this thing, Ainsley is really hungry. And she's got this big speech.

[West Wing Episode 2.04 excerpt]

AINSLEY: The same article 14 that protects you, protects me, and I went to law school just to make sure, and with that I'm going back down to the mess, because I thought, I may have seen there, a peach.

[end excerpt]

[applause and cheering]

EMILY: Do you know what I remember about that? So it was a very long walk and talk and I'm 5'2" so that was often a challenge for me. And as we're going down, there's a stopwatch on it because it was either supposed to be 19 or 23 seconds. I can't remember which it was and at one point I said it's and it had been written it is and you stuck your head in you're like "it's, um, it is."

[laughter]

JOSH: I think I've told this story before, but I'm gonna tell it again. I once had a line and there was clearly a typo in the sides and in the script where it said "the the" and so I said, "I'm just gonna say it once" and someone said "Let us just call up to Aaron" so they called up to Aaron and they said "Yeah, you can cut one of the "the"-s" and then I was about to shoot and I said "Did he say which one?" [laughter] "We're gonna call up again." [applause]

AARON: Oh God [laughing].

EMILY: This is your life.

JOSH: You're saying it was not like that on CSI?

HSRISHI: Emily, were you a fan of *The West Wing* before you were on the show?

EMILY: I was and it was one of those things where I think I had so much to lose that I went in the first time to read and I thought the only reason I'm reading is because they need to hear it

out loud. They're bored. They have run out of people to sort of test the dialogue out on and you were there, you were sitting there [crosstalk]

AARON: [crosstalk] Sure

EMILY: wearing jeans and a black sweater in John Levey's office. He was behind his desk.

AARON: John Levey our casting director

EMILY: He's the casting director.

JOSH: Let's bring him out!

Emily: Really?! [laughter] it could happen. Tommy and John were on the sofa and you were in a chair and I was so unbelievably nervous, but I had no idea that you were *you*, and you read with me

AARON: [at the same time] read with you, yeah.

EMILY: And do you remember, I leaned over and I whispered to you "Thank you so much. You're really good." [laughter and applause] And then they called me back.

AARON: That made me feel great by the way.

EMILY: Well it's true. I was like, wow, this guy can really read.

JOSH: One of the, I think very, endearing things about you is that you do like to read with actors, when they are auditioning and is both surprising and also really nice. Why do you do it?

AARON: I do it for two reasons. One is the alternative is that it's going to be the assistant casting director who isn't going to be giving the actor much. The actor comes in incredibly well prepared. They've worked on it. They're doing it at a certain level and they're not getting much back from the assistant casting director and the other reason is to pace them along, to show them. "Listen. It's got to go this fast. Uh, this is where we're doing it." And I'm able, I don't know, I'm able to get a really good sense of the actor by doing that.

HRISHI: So Emily after you left the show, were you still able to enjoy the show as a fan?

EMILY: Oh my gosh. What a good question. I probably shouldn't say this any...[crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] and Aaron, same question for you. [laughter and applause]

EMILY: I mean, I would never, had such a wonderful time the time I spent on *CSI: Miami*, I mean, I would never want it to come across like I didn't because I did and I loved the people that I worked with but, I got married a second time because my first husband left, so I was very sad to go and I watched it a little bit, but it was very hard.

JOSH: By the way, of the four people up here, one of us has seen all of *The West Wing*. [laughter] Guess what folks? I'm *The West Wing* expert. These are uncharted waters we're entering.

AARON: Well, speaking of uncharted waters, Rob did announce that he would be leaving. He said it was going to be episode 17 or something would be his last episode and I wasn't being spiteful at all and I was actually doing everything I could right up until his last episode to get him to change his mind and I even wrote his last episode in a way that he could come back if he *did* change his mind, but once he had announced publicly that episode 17 would be his last episode, I decided everybody's going to see it coming if they know that it's going to be 17. So I

designed it to be 14 or 15 or something. And I knew I'd need a new character. That's when I got an email from Josh saying...

JOSH: Truly shameless. It was "I, I read *Variety* today don't know whether it's true or not, Just pitching here, but how about a less well-known, less good-looking actor who would work for a lot less money." That's all I really had to say.

AARON: For me that that was an easy call, but I think we started you off on a four-episode contract...

JOSH: ...four or six maybe...

AARON: four or six. It was a trial period where if it worked out you'd become a series regular and I remember coming to your trailer with, back then it was half inch VHS tape, and you had a little TV with a VCR in your trailer and I shoved the tape in and I showed you the main title sequence with your name in it. [audience says "awwww"]

JOSH: And that, I know exactly where that tape, is in a box in my garage if I ever get a VCR again, and I watched it over and over and over. It was very, very sweet of you.

AARON: But what's amazing is that you would think that during those four or six episodes that Josh would be on his very best behavior. [laughter] Right?

JOSH: I wasn't?!

AARON: We're shooting a scene on the Air Force One set, which we kept in a warehouse, I can't remember where. We're shooting a scene in the press cabin of Air Force One and in this scene C.J. has to pick up the phone on the wall and call ahead. She picks up the phone, puts it next to her ear and goes "What the hell?" and there's Vaseline all over the side of her head. He just couldn't help himself. Could not help himself.

JOSH: I have a problem!

AARON: Right...by this point Allison had won three Emmy Awards for the show [laughter]. Okay, all she had to do was say "I don't like that guy" and you're gone. [laughter]

JOSH: I didn't think about that. Do you realize at this point, between us we have seven Emmys and an Oscar? [laughter]

EMILY: Can I sneak in with something about the plane, which is a total aside? So I think all the planes that are a standard set for anyone are all stored in one place in the Valley.

AARON: I think you're right. [single audience member cheer]

EMILY: And when I say they're stored in the Valley...

JOSH: Is that for planes or for the valley?

HRISHI: I think it's for storage.

JOSH: Or just for storage, yeah.

EMILY: I think it might be for someone who knows what it means when you shoot a lot in the Valley. So, um, the adult film industry would also store their plane sets [laughter] with everyone else's and so occasionally you would tuck your own sides back there to shoot something and you'd pull the wrong sides out and that was...

JOSH: They have “sides”?!

EMILY: They have sides [laughter]

HRISHI: Yes, and we see all of them. [audience groans]

JOSH: He’s good.

[ad break]

HRISHI: Before Josh sent you that message, had you already had inklings of who might come on once Rob left?

AARON: You know, it wasn't what actor was going to come on. It's who is this character going to be, and mostly, how am I going to introduce them?

HRISHI: Right.

AARON: You know, I really don't get a chance to think that far ahead. It's kind of like walking in the dark with a flashlight. You can only see as far ahead of you as that beam will go so I had this idea for a story. It was that California 57th

JOSH: [quickly] 47th

AARON: 47th [laughter]

JOSH: That was ballpark, plus or minus 10. [laughter]

AARON: I had this idea for the story that got Will Bailey on the show and I have the idea for the note.

HRISHI: He's one of us.

AARON: You know, the thing about television, television has a slightly different relationship with the audience than movies or plays do, it's a more intimate relationship, it's coming into your home, frequently by yourself when you're watching it. Often, it's coming into your bedroom. You're watching it while you're making dinner and a big part of the appeal is you just want to hang out with these people for an hour a week. They're your friends. You just want to hang out with them whether you're hanging out at Central Perk, you're hanging out in the west wing of the White House, and I felt that that note from Sam to Toby saying “He's one of us”, was the permission for the audience to “He's one of us. You can like him. He's going to be hanging out with us.” [Applause]

HRISHI: So even so you knew that this character even if it didn't work out with Josh you were thinking of a character who would be part of the team long-term.

AARON: Yeah. That's right.

HRISHI: Yeah, and so I was wondering. You so much of your language is described as music and we use musical metaphors to talk about it how uh Richard Schiff's Toby is the sad oboe of the ensemble. I'm wondering what was the was the instrument that you had in your head that this character, Will Bailey would bring that was going to be [laughter]

AARON: The important thing wasn't so much, different instruments in the orchestra. Listen, you ask any writer. When a writer finds an actor that can play, they handcuff them and they never want to let them out of their sight. Watch Emily's first scene in her first episode “In this White House”, when she just owns Rob, right? [cheers] With this long probably, unpunctuated speech-

-I'm assuming--and once she's done that. I'm thinking "I want her on the team. I want to get her the ball as often as possible. I want her to be in everything that I write," and you would think that everything that I'm saying now would have led me to the decision...

EMILY: In your defense. We had to reshoot that scene so that I could do it better and we shot it on a Sunday, which happened to be the night after my birthday party.

AARON: You'll forgive me for not remembering that it was the night after your birthday party. But you didn't blow it the first time or anything and again, we only need a good one time, right?

EMILY: I'm teasing you.

AARON: Ok. Anyway, Josh and Emily, you know are two of those actors and you don't want them to run far away. You don't like it when they work with other writers. And you want to cast them in anything and so you'll create a role that they can play.

JOSH: And the role you created for me was a gift and "Arctic Radar" a gift among gifts. And since you haven't seen later seasons, just as he wrote me right into the hearts of the viewers it would not be long before I got written right back out.

AARON: Okay,

JOSH: So, you know just as of my appreciation, I just want to throw that out there.

AARON: I didn't know that actually and the reason why if you're wondering and the reason why Josh has seen more episodes of *The West Wing* than I have is the end of season four, Tommy and I for several months--really ever since Christmas had been talking about--should this be our last season? What do you think? Neither of us were going to leave the other one there alone; we were going to go at the same time.

JOSH: And why were you starting to think that it might be time?

AARON: I was starting to think that it might be time because I didn't want to overstay my welcome. I didn't want especially the cast and the crew obviously I'm thinking about the audience too but the cast and the crew, to be thinking "You know, boy, we're never going to tell them this because it wouldn't be polite but it would really be better if a fresh pair of legs came in here."

JOSH: Where on earth did you get the idea that anybody was thinking that!?!

AARON: Well, you know you worry about it a little bit. And anyway when Tommy and I made the decision and we were in the middle of shooting the last episode of the season we made the decision. We went right over to Stage 23, which is where *The West Wing* set was on the Warner Brothers lot to tell the cast because a press release was going out we want anybody to read it before we told them the press release went out and Larry David called me of all people and Larry David isn't a pal of mine we've met each other but we don't hang out or anything. And Larry David left *Seinfeld* before *Seinfeld* was over and he said "Listen, you can't ever watch *The West Wing* again, because either it's going to be great and you're going to be miserable or it's going to be less than great and you're going to be miserable.[laughter] But either way you're going to be miserable". And I thought Larry David he's kind of professionally miserable. [laughter] Of course I'm going to watch the show. I'm gonna watch. A couple of days before the season 5 premiere aired, John Wells sent over episode 5.01 season 5 episode 1--again on half inch tape. I put it in my VCR and I don't think 20 seconds went by before I dove for the TV to slam it off. I don't know whether it was great or less than great. I just know that it was like watching somebody make out with my girlfriend. It was so difficult to watch.

JOSH: You don't like that? [laughter]

HRISHI: There's some sides we could show you [laughter]

JOSH: Difference strokes for different folks [laughter]

AARON: So I have never seen seasons five, six or seven. I don't know what happened and I'm sorry to hear that.

JOSH: Guess who else got as far as you did?

AARON: Oh really?

JOSH: I realize I started this podcast thinking I was...I didn't start this podcast...I *joined* this podcast that he started thinking that I was getting recruited by an enormous *West Wing* fan. No, I was getting recruited by an enormous *Aaron Sorkin* fan. [applause]

AARON: That's really nice.

HRISHI: I had a similar experience. I got as far as the teaser on season 5 episode 1 and then I turned it off.

JOSH: But now it's your job to watch it, Hrishi. [laughter] It's your job.

HRISHI: I did watch it now. For an episode earlier that's on this tour, and it was my first time seeing it.

AARON: Really? With "Twenty Five", the last episode, the season four finale, you know, how pool there's something called a "leave" where it's....a really good pool player doesn't just want to get the three ball in the corner pocket they want to set up the next four shots after that. So they want to give themselves a good leave, it's called. I wanted to give the season five writers a good leave. I didn't want to have them have to start off with a blank piece of paper. And what do we do? I thought it'd be easier if they had to finish something and I don't know how they finished it but I [laughter] among my regrets and remember number one regret-

EMILY: Only because I'm here, only 'cause I'm here

AARON: No not only because you ask anybody who's ever stood still long enough to listen to me, what in the world was I thinking *not* making you a series regular on the show.

EMILY: You were thinking I was going to solve some crime. [laughter]

AARON: Maybe you're right. Maybe I was thinking there's a terrible problem in Miami, with crime...

EMILY: Like you do.

AARON: ...that can only be solved with some data bank that the camera can actually go into. [laughter] Also, by the way, if I had known that the show you were going to do instead of *The West Wing* was going to take you to Miami. It was horrible. The consequences were terrible. It really, really was what I wish I had done. I wish I had written to season 5 episode 1 which I'd finished the story that I started. There was a little bit of talk of Tommy and I, instead of leaving at the end of season 4, we would leave after the 100th episode which was about a third of the way through season five. [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] You missed the cake

AARON: Yeah, missed cake, but there was a really good party that I was invited to I remember that was a really fun party.

JOSH: Yeah it was.

AARON: Okay, we're getting into the weeds a little bit.

JOSH: No, no, this is where we thought we were gonna open we're interested in how you started to approach this end of season 5. It's interesting to me that you [crosstalk]

AARON: [crosstalk] End of season 4.

JOSH: All right, four, five - 57,47 it's not about numbers. Feelings. End of season four you started to write this great storyline, you--I think in my estimation famously draw deeply from your own life; *Sports Night* in its waning days sort of deliciously started to be about a network that didn't know what the hell it had, the value, "If you can't make money with *Sports Night* you should get out of the money making business," to paraphrase and so. We get towards the end of season 4, the story of a benevolent leader handing over power...

HRISHI: Actually writing a document that removes himself from power...

AARON: Yeah, That's right. What I became very interested in was a seed that had been planted in season 1. Okay, Zoey goes out with the gang. she's playing a fast and loose with her Secret Service detail gets into some trouble, in a Georgetown bar and her father gives her a real talking to, purposely wants to scare the hell out of her by saying "The nightmare scenario isn't me getting shot; it's you getting kidnapped, ok?. Once they take you and say we're going to slit her through unless you let these prisoners out of Israel or unless you point these missiles where we want these missiles to go. Then he is no, how can you expect this man to say we don't negotiate with terrorists? He is incapacitated." Okay, and that's what the 25th Amendment is for and I was very interested in the 25th Amendment and so Bartlet [pause] [laughter] after Bartlet...[laughter]

JOSH: Oh, that's what it is. [laughter] They're currently interested in the 25th Amendment

AARON: I see.

JOSH: Yeah, there's this [bleep] is still relevant.

AARON: It is, look at that. [applause/laughter] Yeah, I'll be the first to sign up to volunteer. Anyway Bartlet in this episode [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] President Bartlet

[laughter/applause]

JOSH: Never mind.

AARON: Quickly realizes with sort of the last piece of sanity that he has, his daughter's been abducted, I mean anyone here who is a parent, I'm a parent, would be able to just think about what that must feel like. He quickly realizes with the last sort of shard of sanity that he has, "I am incapacitated. I can't be calling the shots here." And I had several episodes earlier. I'd set this up I'd gotten the vice president out of there so it could be somebody from the opposition party that has to come in. Meanwhile, here's a moment we blew in that episode of "Twenty Five." Toby is the father of newborn twins, right and right at the beginning, there's a scene in C.J.'s office and everybody's talking and it's said "Guys, guys, guys, there's no vice president."

JOSH: Yeah, Will's on to it.

AARON: Will is ahead of everybody else.

JOSH: Smartest in the room. [laughter]

AARON: So there's a scene now in the maternity ward. Toby is talking to his twin babies.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Beautiful scene.

AARON: Yeah, Richard...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Killed it...

AARON: ...did a phenomenal job, really, really, [applause] really phenomenal job. Richard's talking to the two twin babies, who are on the bed, in the background is a television set that would be in the hospital room, which of course is, has 24-hour coverage of what's going on with Zoey Bartlet and her father President Bartlet, and they're running old....

[laughter]

JOSH: We have a thing about not saying Bartlet and giving him, you know, the respect, [crosstalk]

AARON: [crosstalk] Oh, the full...

JOSH: President Bartlet, yeah he likes to correct me

HRISHI: It's not we. *We* don't have a thing, *The West Wing* has a thing. We're just honoring it.

AARON: I like that, yes, nobody. You know, you're right.

JOSH: And of course now, stupidly, we add "President" to everything.

AARON: Okay.

HRISHI: "President" Everything.

JOSH: President. Thank you.

[laughter]

AARON: They're showing home movies of a younger Governor Bartlet.

JOSH: President Governor Bartlet, [laughter/applause] please.

AARON: And a little three-year-old Zoey. Okay, and what was supposed to happen. I mean it did happen. We just didn't land it--it didn't land--is one of Toby's babies is just drooling a little bit. So he takes a little handkerchief to wipe up the drool and he looks up at the TV and he sees Bartlet wiping a little bit of ice cream from Zoey's mouth and he makes the connection of, "If it was me, and they had abducted one of these I would drop a nuclear bomb on France if they told me to. I have got to get back to the White House and get this guy out of the Oval Office," and I don't think we landed the connection.

JOSH: Do remember who played the young Bartlet?

AARON: Emilio Estevez!

JOSH: Correct. [applause]

AARON: Yeah,

HRISHI: I think I felt like the connection was, was made the fatherhood connection was enough even without the handkerchief.

AARON: I'd love another run at it.

[applause]

JOSH: But we're gonna get to that conversation, too. We're not done until we have that talk!

HRISHI: Let me ask you about the stuff with Toby and his children in these last couple episodes of season 4 while you were working on *The West Wing* you had a child.

AARON: Yeah.

HRISHI: And there's this scene that happens between Toby and Leo.

[West Wing Episode 4.23 excerpt]

TOBY: ...I think I was nervous I wasn't gonna love my kids the way other fathers love theirs

LEO: Why?

TOBY: I don't know. I mean, for nine months you're hearing how this is going to change your life and, you've never loved anything like this, and, my God, the love...and nothing's going to be important anymore. Just never really felt to me like I was someone who had the capacity for those feelings. Plus, you know, I...I like what's important to me, I want it to stay important, I want to be able to do it well...

[end excerpt]

[applause]

HRISHI: How autobiographical was this?

AARON: It was a rare moment of being right on the money autobiographical. I rarely write autobiographically, but well, Toby just said it, when my daughter, who incredibly I'm taking her to visit colleges now [cheers/applause] and she was, yeah every friend of mine who was a new father, was saying it's going to be the greatest thing in life is going to change everything all those things that were important to aren't going to be important to you anymore capacity for love that kind of thing. And as Toby said, I secretly was feeling like "well look I'll fake the rest of my life because I don't want to be a jerk, but that just doesn't sound like me" [laughter] and as Toby said I like I like living and dying with each episode with each movie, with each play. I like it be 15 seconds after my daughter was born I realized it was most ridiculous thing ever in the world. You don't stop loving the other things. This is different. It's amazing. It just should be against the law that they go away to college one day.

HRISHI: Well, you may have answered my next question then, but and I don't mean to put too fine a point on it, but I was wondering if the thing that you would loved was writing and working on *The West Wing*, I'm going to try and connect some dots, but if that's true that having a child can change what's important to you. Do you think that that an all played into how you felt about possibly leaving the show that you could even have that as a consideration did your priorities change and was it at all in part because of what happened to your life off-screen?

AARON: I don't think it was because of what happened in my life off screen. Listen, the part that I left out about leaving the show is they would never say so, but I think Warner Brothers and NBC wanted me to leave the show, to be honest with you. Here's why: it's that they're not bad guys, from wanting that but here's why. Basically the economics of commercial television,

network television, are this: we for *The West Wing* we got from NBC a license fee of 2 million dollars per episode. That's not an investment. It's a license fee for two million dollars they get to air the episode twice. Okay, however an episode of *The West Wing* costs about three and half million dollars to make so our deficit financier was our studio, Warner Brothers, they would lose a million and half dollars for each episode. Why in the world would they do such a thing? Because what they're betting, we had a four-year deal with NBC, they're betting that this show is going to be such a hit that it's going to run longer than four years and that they're going to get to renegotiate the contract at the end of four years and they will have the upper hand which is what happened. After four years, they renegotiated a deal so that the license fee...first of all they had to make Warner Brothers whole they had to pay back 88 times a million and half dollars then they had to pay six million dollars an episode, for the show that's still only costing three and half million dollars to make so the owners of the show...

JOSH: 132 [laughter] it took me a while, but go ahead...

AARON: So at that point, for those first four years all those budget overages, which were due largely to my taking 10 days to write a script instead of eight. Tommy particularly was able to successfully convince Warner Brothers the better the show is the more money you're going to make...the better the show is the more money you're going to make...don't worry about the money that you're spending... the better the show is the more money you're gonna make. Once the new deal had been negotiated, Warner Brothers knew exactly how much money they were going to make right? So literally every dollar that was spent was a dollar out of their profit margin and the way that they put it is: You don't have the guy who designs the car build every car. It's a lot less expensive to bring in people who can just replicate that car I was the guy who designed the car. And again, I didn't want to overstay my welcome. It felt like I was starting to hear somebody at NBC and Warner Brothers kind of start to do the dishes and put the empty beer bottles away. And I thought this was the time to go.

HRISHI: That's a dumb reason.

[laughter]

EMILY: Yes.

[laughter/applause]

HRISHI: It does feel like, it feels similar to the expression "If you can't make money in *The West Wing* business you should get out of [crosstalk] the business of making money."

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yeah it is not a question whether they're gonna make money. It was how much [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] How much

AARON: It was. It was maximizing the amount.

HRISHI: Yeah. I do want to go back a little bit to the timing of your scripts because I feel like even we talked a little bit about, writing yourself out of power through President Bartlet writing himself out of power. There's even a scene in "Commencement" where he is writing his speech all the way up until he has to give it in fact as he's going out to give it he's still torturing Will with the idea that maybe there still some more changes to be made.

AARON: He is torturing Will. [laughter] That was, that was again, I don't know what happened after season 4 but that was a beautiful pairing you and Bartlet, you and President Bartlet.

JOSH: I enjoyed shooting it.

AARON: That was a beautiful pairing. Yes, everybody. I always loved writing episodes about writing or scenes about writing and generally whenever I had writer's block--for me that is my default position. I am in a constant state of writers walking for some reason every once in awhile. Just something happens. It goes away pretty quick and then I'm back to the writer's block. But if I'm having intense writer's block, usually so will either Sam, Toby or Will and so it just becomes an episode about I can't write anything.

EMILY: Is that your version of filler?

AARON: Yes. Yes.

HRISHI: I have a season 4 question about writing about writing, actually.

AARON: Okay

HRISHI: In "Arctic Radar" one of the great scenes is between Will and Toby.

[West Wing Episode 4.10 excerpt]

TOBY: ...Call and response isn't going to work in front of a joint session. You're alliteration happy: "Guardians of gridlock, protectors of privilege", I needed an avalanche of Advil. And when you use pop culture references, your speech has a shelf life of 12 minutes. You don't mind constructive criticism, do you?

WILL: No, sir.

TOBY: Anyway, thanks for coming in. I told Sam, I can do this by myself.

WILL: Well, maybe he thought that your speeches were obscurantist policy tracks lost in a cul-de-sac of their own internal self-righteousness and groaning from the weight of statistics. I'm just speculating. I can't say for sure.

[end excerpt]

[laughter and applause]

HRISHI: So, as you said, sometimes you're writing about writing is autobiographical. I was wondering, any of those criticisms that they're launching at each other, any of those aimed at yourself?

AARON: All...almost all of them. But in that particular case the real goal was again. It would be a several episode process of introducing Will to the audience, getting him to be one of the gang. I knew it was going to be important that I put him in a room with sort of the toughest guy in the jail yard, right, Toby? And he was going to have to stand toe to toe with him he's going to have to take a Toby Ziegler punch to the face and then respectfully punch him back and that's how he would be one of the gang.

HRISHI: Well speaking of the punch in the face, we have a message here, from Richard...

JOSH: From the puncher.

HRISHI: ...Actually about both the two scenes that we've two episodes we've just been talking about "Arctic Radar" and also "Twenty Five."

[Audio message from Richard Schiff]

Hello, this is Richard Schiff. I am contemplating season 4 and Aaron Sorkin's writing which still sticks to my bones and runs in my blood. Two things come to mind that made me feel honored and grateful that season: 1. "Arctic Circle" the episode where Toby meets Will when I read that episode. I immediately recognized that Aaron and trusted in me his personal nightmare: the inability to masterfully put words to paper that his or her ability to create to compose has been lost and despite his stress and anxiety and the impossibility of acknowledging talent greater than his own, the utter relief he feels that help has arrived. That led to one of my favorite scenes with Josh Malina in the cafeteria. It revealed for me the absolute sensation of feeling utterly and completely alone for Toby. His futility has now seeped into his work, which has been his salvation from the personal frustrations with Andy, the house and the coming twins. And 2. "Twenty Five", where all chaos breaks out where the West Wing is in turmoil and terror. Toby has become a father. Again, I was gifted with another of the most personal aspect of Aaron's writing: Will he be a good father? The scene with Leo is again, one of my absolute favorites, not only for the personal and private revelations, but more because acting that scene with John Spencer was to me an all-time highlight the quiet of it the oddity and the necessity of it. John when we were finished looked at me and said, "I don't know where the camera was", meaning we were so deep into the moments that we hadn't even noticed where cameras were placed and who was being filmed. That's acting. To be given the gift of the deeply personal from a writer is a special thing. To be given those gifts from one of our greatest writers is a thing for which I will always be grateful. I'm not sure I'll ever be challenged by a writer of that caliber again. Aaron, I loved working with you. You're a very special writer as everyone knows. I miss working with you, and I hope you enjoy the celebration of your work tonight.

[end audio message]

[applause and cheering]

AARON: He's, he's something else. He really is, you know with believe it or not, at callbacks when we were casting, The pilot it was between Richard and Eugene Levy ["wows" and laughter]. Laugh all you want. Eugene Levy's, really good [applause] He is. Now, Richard got it and he deserved to get it and it was between Allison Janney and...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Eugene Levy [laughter] He's *really* good.

AARON: and an actress named CCH Pounder who [applause]. Okay and what I remember, at the beginning of season one was that I was having so much trouble by getting a story going. I was having so much trouble getting Richard in the house and into the show, getting Toby and C.J. into the show and Tommy would come to me and he said he'd say, you know "Allison Janney and Richard Schiff they're really good. I mean if you can just get it over the plate." I'm trying and I know was having such a hard time, and so at the beginning they were not breaking out but by the end of the year, they were the first and second Emmy Awards that the show won so we all found our groove. But what I really wanted to say--I'm a little choked up from what Richard just said--but um, it is, um, to find a group of actors like this and by the way behind on the other side of the camera about 80 people for whom the show was just as important as it was for me or for you. People who no matter how early you got to work they were there already, no matter how late you left work they were still there, those, those people I'm indebted to. And thinking about John Spencer [applause]. John came from a hard scrabble background, working class New Jersey. He ran away from home, when he was 15 years old. He enrolled in the high school for The Performing Arts so the professional children's school, one of those, and after playing Patty Duke's boyfriend on The Patty Duke Show. He mostly played tough guys even if there were good guys, they were, you know, there was there was gravel in their voice and a map of the world, was on their face. He was always the happiest guy on set, he was always bucking everybody up. And it's a big loss. [applause]

JOSH: He's incredible

AARON: And he always said, that the show was a love story between him and President Bartlet, that that's what it was about.

HRISHI: I wanted to play another message from someone one of the 80 people not on screen. This is from Lauren Hissrich. Who, will you introduce who that is?

AARON: Yeah. Sure! Lauren Hissrich was a writer's assistant on the show for two years. That's a, a job. You're always overqualified for it. It's like people who, you know, get Harvard MBAs and then work in a mailroom someplace. It's a miserable job. You've got to correct my typos and hand out the scripts and get people coffee and that kind of thing and after two years of doing that. I said, you know, you've earned a shot at being on the writing staff and I put her on the writing staff and she thrived, she was terrific. I loved working with her.

HRISHI: Lauren Hissrich now is a showrunner for Marvel shows on Netflix.

AARON: Get out of here! Really?

HRISHI: Yep. She's creating a *The Witcher 3* Series for Netflix, which is a big franchise, gonna be a big franchise for them, but so here's the message that she had for you.

[Audio message from Lauren Hissrich]

Oh, man, when I found out Aaron was leaving I cried. He was the only boss I'd ever had. Before him I'd never considered a career in writing much less than in television. But in my early days as an assistant, my job was to proofread his scripts and I would pore over them like I was in Sunday school and they were the Bible. I learned everything about characters and dialogue and how to plant seeds in the teaser for a story the audience never knew was coming in Act 4. But, when he told us he was leaving, I wasn't thinking about me or my career. I was thinking about the show. What could it be without him, how these characters continue to live and thrive. What stories could be told in his absence? And would anyone care? Would I? But I was young and a little shy and I didn't say any of this to him. I just cried. I'm older now. A lot older, less shy, but I still don't really have the words to thank him for the experience, for the education, and for giving me a career that I didn't even know that I wanted. I mean that's it right? He inspired something at me that didn't exist before him.

[end audio message]

[extended applause]

AARON: These guys are all nuts. Lauren, and Richard, and Emily, and Josh. 150 other people allowed me to have for four years the best job in show business.

[applause]

AARON: It really was a great place to go to work. It really was! You had the time of your life there. The stakes were incredibly high, the work was hard, but you know, I always...I like bands more than solo acts. I like team sports more than individual sports. And it's one of the reasons why I really like doing this. In success you have somebody to high-five along the way, and failure is a little bit easier when, when I can blame it on you. [laughter] Failure is a little bit easier when there's somebody in the foxhole with you and ever since *The West Wing* I've been looking to duplicate that experience.

[applause]

HRISHI: Well, I also want to, it's not only the people who worked on the show who were so affected by what you wrote. I mean clearly all these people can attest to it as well. [loud cheers and extended applause]

AARON: Um, uh, I really can't thank you all enough for coming tonight. I'm overwhelmed by the just the size of the crowd.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you!

AARON: Thank you!

JOSH: There are people here with banners; it's like a sporting event.

AARON: No, I know I, I'll never forget this night as long as I live I promise you.

HRISHI: We wanted to share one, one message from someone who didn't work on the show who you had a profound impact on

JOSH: And by the way people tell me and give me things and tell me stories constantly asking me to pass them on. I never do. [laughter] I don't get a lot of time with you and I like to focus it on trying to get that next job. [laughter] Okay, so this is from Ryan, Ryan Dooley.

[Josh reads out Ryan Dooley's message]

Aaron Sorkin's writing actually saved my life. Approximately 15 years ago, I suffered a stroke due to a blood clotting disorder, which created a clot that went to my brain. At the time, I was attending a federal service academy with the intention of serving in the Navy. The stroke was a devastating blow, and I was medically discharged from the Naval Reserve, discharged from the academy and spent two years recovering. My stroke only affected speech and cognition. I suffered from extreme aphasia, which is a loss of speech and word recognition, and suffered from memory loss. I was truly broken; honestly thought my life was over. My father knew I enjoyed politics and loaned me his box sets of seasons 1 and 2 of The West Wing. I began watching them repeatedly as the dialogue was too fast for me to absorb. I slowly began to catch more and more of the speech. My doctors and speech therapists couldn't believe how quickly I was rebounding and when I explained how The West Wing forced me to focus and hear all the sounds and comprehend quickly, they fully embraced it as part of my rehab assignment. I was absolutely astounded a year later when one of my speech therapists mentioned that they made that referral to another adult stroke survivor. [applause] I'm sure, I'm sure Aaron Sorkin receives a million thank yous in the day, but if you ever have a moment, please genuinely pass along my most sincere and deepest thank you. I firmly believe without his writing on The West Wing that I would not have recovered from that stroke and definitely wouldn't have gone on to have the full and happy life I enjoy today.

[end message]

[extended applause]

AARON: Is there a return email address?

JOSH: I will. Are you going to write back to him?

AARON: Yeah.

[collective "awwws" from Josh, Hrishi, Emily and the audience]

JOSH: of course, of course, I will give you his... Also. I wanted to talk maybe about my next job. That isn't, that that's unbelievable, right? I mean...

AARON: I know, I...I need to read that again. I...I need to write to him.

JOSH: I will send it to you.

AARON: I can't get over that.

JOSH: Thanks Ryan, for letting us share that.

AARON: Yes, yes. Thanks Ryan.

HRISJI: We're trying to figure out, to strategize here. We have so much left to talk about but time is running short. [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] it feels like we just started.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We can just stay.

JOSH: Well, you're gonna have to crowdfund for the extra hour for the theater.

[laughter]

HRISHI: I had a quick question, as Ryan mentioned, the politics in here, there is a moment in season 4 that I wanted to go to

[West Wing Episode 4.10 excerpt]

SAM: You're the one who wrote Tillman's speech.

WILL: No, I'm not.

SAM: His speech to the Stanford Club. Yes, you are.

WILL: I don't even, I don't know what you're...

SAM: That's fine. But you and I both know different, right? So let's have some respect for that.

WILL: You've ghosted for senators, movie stars, I think the King of Belgium one time, do you say anything?

SAM: No

WILL: Why?

SAM: Speechwriters don't do that.

WILL: Yeah.

[end excerpt]

AARON: So maybe speechwriters don't say anything, *but* has anyone approached you to write political speeches for them?

AARON: Yeah sure. But you [crosstalk] don't say anything, yeah.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Name names. Can you tell us at least if you've actually done it?

AARON: I have, sections of speeches. What will happen is because you need to put a lot of separation between the last thing I would want a candidate who I support--the last thing I would want is for the public to know that a Hollywood screenwriter is writing their stuff--it wouldn't be good for them. So there are several degrees of separation. I'll get a call from someone at William Morris or CIA and they'll say...

JOSH: CIA? [crosstalk] I'm not going to let...[sings] Freudian slip!

EMILY: [crosstalk] I know! I was like; I think that's a Freudian slip!

[laughter]

JOSH: He will he will occasionally get a call from someone at CIA.

AARON: CAA! [laughter] It'll be a week or so before a debate and, they'll say we're looking for a really good pivot when McCain says this, we want to come back with...

JOSH: Got it.

HRISHI: Hypothetically.

AARON: Um, yeah, so there's that, but you don't uh, you know...[cheers and laughter]

JOSH: I just want to set the scene: Dulé Hill [cheering]

AARON: Yay, Dulé Hill and I can tell some Dule stories, but I just want to make sure that we're not overstaying our welcome with them. Leave them wanting more, them I'm talking about. [audience says "Nooooooo!"]

JOSH: It's a couple little things.

AARON: Okay

JOSH: Dulé got married [cheering/applause] so a lot of the main cast, the ones that are closer to him, were in Guatemala for the wedding; that's why they couldn't be here tonight. We asked them to maybe send some little clips. We got Richard's. This is Allison's, clearly they had a really good time in Guatemala [audience laughs], cause not only did they not figure out how to use voice memo, this drunken ramble came with some very odd handheld video. It looks...

AARON: Is this going to be Allison?

JOSH: Allison's in the room, Melissa Fitz is in the room.

AARON: You mentioned drunk, I'm just assuming...

JOSH: Yeah, there you go. That's right. I didn't say it. And there's a lot of like almost sliding off of couches. It looks a little bit like the first blocking rehearsal for a bus and truck tour of *Hair*. There's a lot of writhing and we got this from Allison.

[Audio message from Allison Janney and Melissa Fitzgerald]

ALLISON: Aaron Sorkin, it's Allison Janney here. I'm in Guatemala, and I'm here at Dulé's wedding with Richard Schiff and Melissa Fitzgerald and we're thinking about you and thinking about how grateful I am that...

MELISSA FITZGERALD: [in background] Hi!

[audience laughter]

ALLISON: ...I met you and you changed my life in a way that I will ever be grateful for, to play the role of C.J. Cregg, to play a woman that I admire a woman I wish that I was, a woman that other women come up to me and say they changed their careers to become C.J.. I can never thank you enough for that. You are the reason I want to be an actress to say the words that you

write to hear the rhythm of your music is everything to me. I adore you and I worship you and I'm so grateful that I got to meet you and to sing your words and I hope that I get to again and I adore you. [audience laughter] I love you and onto Melissa Fitzgerald.

MELISSA: *We love you, and we're all grateful. And have a wonderful night. We wish we were there.*

[end of message]

JOSH: Topsy Oscar winner Allison Janney

[applause and cheering]

AARON: That's wonderful

JOSH: and Melissa Fitz

AARON: Let me say to anyone out here who may be having a tough time sort of getting in the door of what you want to do, that Allison Janney, when she was starting out as an actress, she had a meeting with an agent who looked at her and said listen, the only roles of you ever going to be able to play are aliens or lesbians. Academy Award winner Allison Janney, seven time Emmy Award winner Allison Janney.

[applause]

HRISHI: We have one more, one last clip to play. This one comes from Bradley Whitford.

[cheers/applause]

AARON: I don't know what this is going to be, but I'm scared.

JOSH: It's nothing bad.

[Audio message from Bradley Whitford]

Hey Aaron, I miss you. I love you. Would you ever consider bringing some characters back and doing a show about Democratic consultants focusing on the firm of Cregg, Ziegler, Lyman and Bailey because I think we can make that happen.

[end of message]

[audience cheering]

JOSH: So, I didn't want to leave you out of the room, or let you out of the room, until you, we got a real answer, if there's any hope.

AARON: Let me tell you something.

JOSH: Yeah.

[laughter]

AARON: Bob Greenblatt, who's the head of NBC called me, I don't know nine months ago or something, maybe a year ago and said listen, I want you to do *The West Wing* again in in some form, you can do it for nine episodes, 13 episodes. You can do with a different cast, the same cast, just...and it was incredible, really, because it didn't seem to be a commercial pitch that he was making. He really, he was just so bummed out by the world that I felt like

[laughter/applause] that he just wanted to be on the show. The last thing I would do, is, incredibly, the show has a legacy; I'm looking at it. [applause] and the last thing I would want to do is, is harm that so, if I can come up with an idea that doesn't feel like *A Very Brady Christmas* [laughter]. Okay, if I can come up with an idea that works, yeah, I would absolutely do it [cheering/applause]. That sounded like a good pitch [crosstalk].

EMILY: [crosstalk] Crime in the White House? There's a lot of material.

AARON: Crime in the White House, you...[laughter] Yeah, sure, I want to see you with a microscope like scraping things.

EMILY: I don't want to scrape the White House right now [laughter/cheering].

HRISHI: Aaron, if you ever need ideas, you know, um, you have my email address...

AARON: You got it, and I always need ideas.

JOSH: All right, we got a maybe folks.

[cheering/applause]

HRISHI: It's a strange time for the podcast. We started this ten years after the series ended and even longer since you left the show, but it feels like we're in this strange existential moment where we are now leaving the years that you wrote the show. I don't really know what is gonna happen to our discussions. Like I said, I haven't seen what's to come [laughter]. So I really, I don't know what to expect. Josh says, it's okay. But I can't tell you, for me, I think, and for other people here in the room what a dream come true it's been just be able to have these kinds of conversations with you. As I said when, when you came out, I can't believe that I get to do this.

AARON: Hrishi, I, um, this will stop being weird in a second. The idea that there is such a thing as this podcast and that the level of conversation is like this, you know, we all do press tours when we have something coming out. So you'll do *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* and that kind of thing and the conversation isn't like this. So to get to have this I just want to let you both know how really grateful I am for this. [applause] I want you all to know. I want you all to know I don't take this for granted at all. I won't be able to get to sleep tonight. I really thank you very much. [applause]

[extended cheering and applause]

HRISHI: Thank you all so much for coming and staying. I know we went long but I could have gone for another two hours [cheering].

JOSH: We're also brainstorming special episodes we could still do with Aaron Sorkin [cheers] we'll be pitching you those

HRISHI: And that's gonna wrap it up for this episode. The West Wing Weekly is a podcast that's part of a family of shows called Radiotopia made possible by PRX.

JOSH: Radiotopia is a cavalcade of awesome podcasts; you can check them out at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: We want to thank Margaret Miller and Zach McNees who help us make the show. [cheering and applause]. Zach is here. You might be able to catch him and we especially want to thank our guests: Emily Procter, Aaron Sorkin. Thank you so much.

JOSH: Now we need your help.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

WHOLE AUDIENCE: What's next?

[Outro music]