

The West Wing Weekly
5.04: "Han"
Guest: Paula Yoo

[Frédéric Chopin – Prelude in E-minor (Op.28, No.4) excerpt]

HRISHI: Here we go.

JOSH: Hi guys. Wipe away those tears and listen to *The West Wing Weekly*. There's hope, there's always hope. [laughter] I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: For those of you wondering, I was playing left hand, [Hrishi laughs] and Hrishi was playing right hand.

HRISHI: Today, we're talking about "Han." It's episode 4 of season 5 of *The West Wing*.

JOSH: This episode was written by Peter Noah. Peter Noah would later go on to many things, including being a consulting producer on, I believe, 40 episodes of *Scandal*. He's a great writer, and story credit for this episode goes to Peter Noah and Mark Goffman. That's Peter Noah & Mark Goffman and, A-N-D, Paula Yoo. The direction is by the always-magnificent Christopher Misiano. The episode first aired on October 22nd, 2003.

HRISHI: In this episode, a North Korean pianist comes to the White House for a performance, but things get complicated when he tells the president he wants to defect. C.J.'s for it, but everyone else is pretty much against it, and the president has to weigh both arguments. Meanwhile, Will is having a hard time writing an inspiring speech about the nomination and confirmation of vice president-to-be Bob Russell. Josh is battling one congressman who plans to be a holdout vote against the nomination. Toby wants to get away from speechwriting, but every time he thinks he's out, they keep pulling him back in. [Josh laughs] We're gonna start our discussion of this episode by speaking with Paula Yoo. Paula worked as a staff writer on *The West Wing* for season 4. She has story credit on this episode, even though it came out in season 5 and coming up, she'll tell us how that happened. Since her time on *The West Wing*, Paula has gone on to write and produce for shows like *Supergirl* and *Mozart in the Jungle*, and many others. She's also the author of several books for children and young adults. You can find a link to Paula's website, paulayoo.com, on our website, where we've also posted a video of Paula playing *The West Wing* theme on violin in four-part harmony with herself. That's pretty awesome. Tell us how you first started working on *The West Wing*.

PAULA: I was hired as a staff writer on *The West Wing* for the fourth season. What happened was, up til then, I was a journalist for about 10 years and then I eventually left to work on my fiction full-time. I was teaching, and a friend of mine recommended, she said, "well, you write fiction and you were journalist and you're a TV junkie. I don't know why you're not writing for TV, because that's basically fiction writing on a deadline." So I said, "huh!" So I applied to the Warner Bros. workshop. I had never written a script before, I actually hand-wrote it out. I just knew that the dialogue was in the middle of the page. That's all I knew [laughter] about it. I knew every 15 minutes, something exciting happened before the commercial break. So I kind of just guessed. I wrote an *Angel* spec, and I sent it in, cause I really like *Angel*. I sent it to the Warner Bros. workshop, and then they called a few months later to say I had gotten into the program. So, because of the Warner Bros. workshop, that's how I got my agents, who then got me on *The West Wing*. So it was kind of like a pretty quick trajectory.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOSH: Did you have to meet with Aaron in order to get that job, or...?

PAULA: Yeah, you know you meet with the executives, and then the network and all that, and then I finally met Aaron at his office on the Warner Bros. lot. I was like, oh my gosh, this is happening so fast. I was a little intimidated because it's Aaron Sorkin, but he was actually really nice, made me feel very comfortable. I don't really remember what we talked about. We just laughed a lot, because he's funny. So that's my Cinderella story, I guess. I was only on season four, so I just wrote with Aaron. But I remember John Wells started working with us a little bit. He wanted all of us to write our own episode of *The West Wing*. I thought that was cool. So that's actually how I came up with the story "Han." It was actually just my spec episode script because John wanted to see what kind of ideas we could do. So we had like a mini workshop. We got to get his notes and everything, and then I rewrote the script. Eventually I moved on to a show called *Tru Calling* on Fox; I was a writer there. Then I found out in the fifth season, John Wells really liked my script "Han" and he wanted to use it. I was so thrilled. That's how I got the story credit, because the entire Korean pianist storyline was part of that, as well as the other story lines.

HRISHI: But you didn't have an expectation when you wrote it that that would ever actually go on air.

PAULA: No, I had no idea. I just thought of it as a great learning experience and an opportunity because writing for Aaron was a little bit different than your traditional TV show. Because of him, and I guess David E. Kelly and just a lot of those kind of auteurs, they're the kind of more of the art. They almost treat their TV shows like a novel because they're the author.

HRISHI: Right.

PAULA: So we kind of helped with our research and writing of certain scenes and things like that, but it was not your traditional way of writing TV.

HRISHI: So that's the external motivation for how "Han" got started. But what about internally, where did the story come from?

PAULA: Well, the story came from a lot of places. First of all, I'm Korean-American, I was born in the States but I did live in Korea. I lived in Seoul, from 1977 to 82, and I went to Seoul Foreign School, which is an American school. I should also stop and say, I'm the worst Korean ever because I don't speak Korean, even though I lived there. So it was really interesting going to live in Korea, because I was third grade to the seventh grade. It was really interesting because I viewed myself as an American, and then I went to Korea and everyone looked like me, but I couldn't quite communicate with them. I remember I left for America, my family left in 1982. In 1983, they had the first kind of reunion of North Korean families and South Korean families, and they actually did it on TV. KBS was the Korean TV station there. So they would have all these Koreans hold up these pieces of paper with the names and descriptions of what their relatives looked like. They were separated during the war. It was almost like a reality show, ahead of its time. They'd say, "Oh, someone saw the broadcast, they're going to meet you."

JOSH: Right.

PAULA: I was thinking about that. That's what inspired the original script, was not about the nuclear arms talk. It was actually about the reunion of all these families. The piano part was because I'm also a classical violinist. I have played since I was a kid. I actually played professionally when I'm not writing for TV. I play in a bunch of orchestras. I kind

of specialized too in rock music. I've gone on tour with No Doubt and played with the band Fun and done some recordings.

JOSH: That's cool.

PAULA: So music is a big part of my life. I still play; I still do little violin videos on YouTube. Actually made a little recording of *The West Wing* for Aaron just as a little thank you.

[Paula Yoo on violin: *Theme from The West Wing* excerpt]

PAULA: All of this kind of fell into how I wrote "Han." My first thought was, what if a North Korean musician wanted to defect on the night of his recital at the White House [crosstalk] and...

JOSH: [crosstalk] And was the resolution in your story similar to that in the final episode?

PAULA: Yeah. I was very moved. They actually kept the integrity of what I wrote. What they did keep was the fact that the president was not going to grant him defection because it's basically like *Star Trek*, like the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. [Laughter] That's kind of where I was going with it, so yes, *Star Trek* influenced my conclusion as well. And what I loved with what John Wells and everyone did with the final version that aired, was how President Bartlet was telling the young pianist...

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Freedom means choice. You must decide which is the most responsible course.

[end excerpt]

PAULA: ...and I didn't even realize, then I realized, "Oh, you know what. I actually gave the young man a choice." But to hear Bartlet say those lines was just so moving. I was like that's why it's John Wells, that's why it's Aaron Sorkin; you guys are good at your job. [Laughter]

JOSH: I'm curious, in your version, because in the version that we see, the issue of the greater good revolves around these peace talks [crosstalk] and not threatening them. So if that wasn't an element of your script...?

PAULA: [crosstalk] Yeah.

PAULA: No, it actually wasn't. Originally, I did have something similar to that. But when I got my notes, John Wells talked a lot about being very emotional, what's at the heart of your story? So that's kind of what influenced the family stuff because I thought, if I make it really about negotiations, he defects and hundreds of families can never see each other again. So it made it more personal that people could really identify with it. But I'm glad they changed it to what they did because, I watched it again last night and it was weird. It was like it could have been written today because of what's happening, like what's going to happen next week?

HRISHI: Yeah.

PAULA: It's so prescient. It just kind of boggles my mind. My parents, they saw killed soldiers, they saw rotting bodies. They walked to 2-300 miles by foot. My mom had bare feet. She had to carry a huge thing of rice on her head. At night, they would camp by the river and hide out and everything. Her feet were really bloody. I really hope people understand how personal and human what's happening right now. We should just forget about all the noise, about the politicians, and all the grandstanding. At the end of the day, there are families that are being affected by this.

JOSH: Very well said. We tend to frame it all in terms of American politics, the U.S politics, without an eye towards the personal, really at all.

HRISHI: You said that assimilation was so important to your family that Korean wasn't really spoken. It wasn't important that you learn it so much. Can you tell us when you first were introduced to this concept and this word *han*, and what it meant to you?

PAULA: I actually don't remember when I first heard the word *han*. I think maybe I had read an article. I remember it kind of stayed with me because it kind of explained my parents' moods. And it kind of explained a little bit about how sometimes I would just get all sad, because a lot of times things are subconsciously passed down. They talk a lot about how the concept of *han*, it's kind of like a culture-bound psychological condition that gets passed down. So I think that's kind of how it folded into the script itself. But it was kind of like therapy for me, because I started thinking "ah, I think that's kind of what my parents went through." When I was a journalist, I got my Master's at Columbia University Journalism School. My thesis was actually on suicide and depression in the Asian-American community because at the time, in the early 90s, suicide rates for young Asian-American women, between the ages of 13 to 24, had skyrocketed. I myself went through not clinical depression, but there were a lot of times where I felt a lot of pressure and just really identified with those extreme feelings. And so that was kind of a way of me exploring as a journalist what that meant. At the time I didn't know about *han*, but later when I was working on *The West Wing* story, kind of added new light to my Master's thesis. I was like, "oh, I think I want to go back and work on that again."

HRISHI: Was this episode when it aired, even though you weren't on *The West Wing* any more, was it something that your parents watched? Was it something you could share with them?

PAULA: Yeah, actually I was very grateful. They were really excited to see it. I sent them a video [laughs], the Dark Ages, I sent them a videocassette. So they were very proud. My dad was very proud of me with my writing and stuff. My parents realized when I was very young that I was a good writer. They still encouraged that, so I was never afraid to show them my writing. In fact, I wrote a young adult novel that was published by HarperCollins in 2008 called *Good Enough*. It actually pokes fun at the Asian-American overachiever stereotype and the model minority myth. That was basically based on my life as a high school geek and violinist, and had a lot of confrontations with my parents. I think I got closer to my parents, not through talking to them, but showing them a book.

HRISHI: Even though you learned about the word first from an article, did you ever talk about the concept of *han* with your parents? Did you ever get their sense of that word and its meaning?

PAULA: Yes, actually I remember sending emails to my dad. I remember copying and pasting a Wikipedia article and I was telling my dad, "What is this?" So my dad, he has the Korean keyboard. So he had sent back the Korean symbols, the letters, for *han*, and he explained a little bit and he said yes, this article is correct. He was my fact checker. I think he kind of confirmed that it was all correct. But yeah, it's ironic; I kind of bonded and learned about Korea and Korean culture this way.

HRISHI: I had read this definition: *han* is sorrow and the hope to overcome it, and it is injustice and the obsession to avenge it. And I was remembering where I had read that, because when you mentioned suicide, I actually read about that on Anthony Bourdain's website.

PAULA: Oh, this has been a horrible week.

HRISHI: It has, yeah.

PAULA: [crosstalk] This and Kate Spade. It's so sad.

JOSH: [crosstalk] It has been.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah. But you would say that that sounds right to you, that the sadness caused by injustice is part of it.

PAULA: Mm-hmm, exactly.

HRISHI: Josh and I talked about this when we were discussing the episode. And I felt like outside of the pianist himself, C.J. really came to embody a sense of *han* in the story as well.

PAULA: I mean, that's something she's gonna carry with her for the rest of her life. I mean, this was a kid, in my script he was 18, but he still, Tony Lee, who did such a wonderful job portraying him. [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] He was so good.

PAULA: [crosstalk] Oh, you know he was on *Lost* later.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

PAULA: I'm like, hey, that's the *Han* pianist. [laughter] I actually really liked how each character had their own viewpoint.

HRISHI: Mm-hmm.

PAULA: It's interesting because I, of course, side with C.J. and what she felt. And it was interesting because Leo McGarry's kind of caught in the middle. And the way it ended too, it's very dark, and I think that the president himself has a little bit of *han* at the end too because, when he talks about [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Oh for sure.

PAULA: Yeah, when he talks about what *han* is, when he learns about it, and just kind of leaning back with his arms behind his head, it's a very ironic pose because he's not at rest. He's giving the appearance of being at peace, but inside he's suffering from the *han*, and that to me was a very great physical representation of what it is.

HRISHI: Awesome. If people want to follow you on Twitter, you're @PaulaYoo.

PAULA: Yes, and my cat is @OreoTheCatYoo. [laughter]

JOSH: Wait, you have three cats but only one deserves a social media account?

PAULA: He's the oldest.

HRISHI: Ah, privileges of the first-born.

PAULA: Yeah.

JOSH: Yes, I understand. [Laughter]

HRISHI: Paula, thank you so much for joining us.

PAULA: Thank you for this opportunity. Take care.

[Brief Intro Music]

HRISHI: Okay, Josh. Let's keep going. First off, I want to say I like this episode.

JOSH: I really like this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. This is some good *West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah. I dug this one. I thought the episode being named *Han*, that's a complicated concept to try and [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] *Han*-cept

HRISHI: [laughter] to put in a TV show, but I thought they did a good job. I thought that it was a good embodiment of *han*, certainly for *The West Wing*.

JOSH: I agree, and before we got the actual definition of it, I was feeling it. Now I think this episode emotionally, had achieved what the overarching theme and tone is supposed to be. I was feeling that sort of melancholia. It's a beautiful piece of work, the music, so that's a very effective piece to have woven through the episode and to have the pianist performing. But I also thought the emotional heft over all of the episode worked in this vein.

HRISHI: Yeah. One thing that I thought was really beautifully done, was the way that this episode fit in with the overall story of C.J. that we've been witnessing, the way she sat by herself when the fireworks were going on in the last episode. She's got this distance and the sense of emotional...

JOSH: Malaise?

HRISHI: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly, yeah. She has the sense of malaise about the work that they're doing and maybe her role in it. And for me, I think, the pianist, Jai Yung Ahn, is the one who tells us about *han*, but really I think C.J. is the one who embodies it in this episode, or she's the one who is feeling at the most.

JOSH: Yeah. I think it is good continuity that she's chafing it appears to me, against the limits of her job and I think that's probably a very realistic situation to depict in the show. I think Toby's in a similar, you know, he's explicitly stating he wants to start crafting message, or formulating message, rather than simply expressing it as a speechwriter, and I think it makes a lot of sense. What we don't have in terms of realism I think in this *West Wing* is the amount of turnover you would normally see, of course, because it's a television show. We have beloved characters and we don't want to lose them every season or two. But I think realistically, certainly to the extreme in the Trump administration, the turnover of staff members, but I think even in a more typical administration, people start to leave. They want to go on to the next thing their career, or they're just exhausted and drained. And I like that we're starting to see with Toby and certainly with C.J., that they're either wanting more agency within the parameters of their jobs, or are feeling a certain exhaustion or disappointment with what it all means to work on a presidential staff.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I can really understand C.J.'s exhaustion because it's not just the volume of work or even the intensity of work. I think she is the moral compass, and she has been the moral compass in the past. But now that compass is out of alignment with where so many of the policies are pointing.

JOSH: Yes, and she's also, I think, whereas in the past she would have either more subtly expressed herself, or would have been more cautious about to whom she expresses her opinions, we now have C.J. essentially walk into the Oval Office and tell the president she believes that what he's doing is wrong.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Morally.

HRISHI: Yeah, and I think it's a great next step from what we saw in *The Women of Qumar*, when you know, she lost her temper with Dr. McNally. She comes back from that, and she still is stating her case and letting her opinion be known, even when Leo tells her explicitly to butt out. But she does it in a much more professional way, and I think in an effective way as well. There are two spots that I wanted to point out: 1. There's this moment where Leo tells her to butt out when they're talking to the Undersecretary of State Barrow, new character...

JOSH: ...played by Ron Canada.

HRISHI: Who's fantastic. He says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

BARROW: Don't let him back in the building. Well, the good news is, his handlers don't let him out of their sight. Today, it's like they're working for us.

C.J.: Our very own totalitarian helpmates.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That sort of postscript is just, it's just a dig, you know, that she's letting them know...

JOSH: She can't help herself.

HRISHI: Yeah. And then in the Oval Office, President Bartlet says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: These negotiations are the real thing. I can't allow this defection. I know you disagree, but that's my decision.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then there's the slightest pause before she adds:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

C.J.: It's not that I disagree, sir. I'm disappointed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And you can see it hit the president, I think the way that she really intended it to.

JOSH: Mm-hmm. I also like that, although she's now got the gumption to explicitly state her case to the president's face, he has to pull it out of her a little bit. The scene is well written, I think, where he's getting a sense that she's not quite saying what she's perhaps come there to say.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And he pulls it out of her.

HRISHI: Right, it feels a little bit like Bartlet the chess player again, where she says something, and he says that's not your real argument. And she says something else, and he says that's not your real argument either. You know, he sees the board and he sees it so well that he knows that these things are feints, and the real move is yet to come. And so he's just trying to get her to come out with it.

JOSH: Mm-hmm, and giving her permission to do so.

HRISHI: Yeah. What did you think about this idea in this exchange? Because what her real argument is, she says this young man's asking for freedom. It's what this country

was built on and really, I think her version of it is he wants to defect, we should let him. But the president's interpretation of that idea, this young man is asking for freedom, he interprets it a different way.

JOSH: Yeah. Well, a little bit of that was murky, and murkiness is not necessarily a bad thing, even as it played out ultimately in the scene where the president has his interesting sort of awkward communication with Ahn, essentially putting it in his hands. And I guess giving him sort of a test, which I think the president ultimately decides he has failed. He didn't know what freedom was I guess, Bartlet says, in that scene in the Oval. But it's a little tough for me to pin down exactly what went on there.

HRISHI: Yeah, I feel the same way. There are parts where I felt like, "oh, ok, I understand what he means." And then he would say something and I was like, "oh, no, I don't understand what he means."

JOSH: Yeah. And I thought, as a native English speaker, if I'm confused [laughter], maybe he really didn't entirely understand. It's like I guess, well, let's just get to it now - a discussion of Ahn's ultimate decision.

HRISHI: Yeah. Ok, so he says to him, "I'm sorry to say I cannot let you defect," and he's asking if he understands me, and then he says, "I, if I try to stay, you'll arrest me?" He says "No." He says "You'll give me back to them?" He says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: No. Freedom means choice. You must decide which is the most responsible course.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought that that meant, that the president was saying, you can stay if you want, if you want to defect. But, the thing that you're putting at risk are these negotiations, these nuclear treaties, and everything else that we've got going on with the North Koreans, and so it's up to you. And so then Ahn at the end says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

AHN: I wish to thank the president, the American people, for this opportunity. I wish it be started many exchange, improve relation between our country.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought ok, great. Yeah, so he did the noble thing, sacrificed his self-interest for that of his country. But then the president said:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: He didn't realize what it was.

C.J.: What what was, sir?

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Freedom.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: What do you make of that?

JOSH: It's problematic. Well, I felt ultimately that we were supposed to take away what you just described, the sense that this young man made a greater macro decision to protect the possibility of productive talks between the two nations. But with President Bartlet not having said anything explicit about that we can't, I can't grant you asylum because we have these sensitive talks or some sort of allusion to it, it feels to me like

what he was saying was, I cannot grant you asylum, and then with his answers to the next two questions, wink wink, but if you ask for it, I'll have to. That's how I feel like it actually played out in the moment, like what he was saying is, I can't tell you yes, and also that there has to be risk taken on your part.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: In other words, I'm not going to tell you now if you ask me for this, this is what I'm going to do. We've also been told earlier that essentially, it would be a capital crime in North Korea [cross talk].

HRISHI: [cross talk] in North Korea.

JOSH: Right, for this young man to ask for asylum. So if he's not granted it, it's the highest stakes decision the guy can make.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: And in that sense, it played out to me as a very unfair situation to put him in.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: To assume that this young man is going to put it all together and understand that the President of the United States is saying, I can't risk this but if you publicly ask for it, I might have to, now you make the decision. It seems a bit much, and then extremely unjust or unfair to him to later essentially admit or to frame the decision as he blew it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He didn't realize that freedom requires a risk that he was unwilling to take.

HRISHI: Right. I'm not entirely sure what his disappointment was in the end where he says he didn't understand. Was it because of the choice that he made, or is it because of what he said in that moment? I don't know.

JOSH: Well, I think he says the most diplomatic and politic thing you could.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: He speaks beautifully.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It's almost, I think, really the criticism and confusion is on Bartlet's part.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Not the pianist's.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Bartlet's message is mixed. It's almost as if, as President of the United States, he felt he had to deny this guy. But as a human being, he was hoping he'd put President Bartlet in a spot where he had to...[cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: respond in a different way. But really then, the fault and the blame, if there is, lies with the president.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think that kind of reminds me of *Take This Sabbath Day*, in that way as well, where he as a person, absolutely didn't want to see this person executed. He's against capital crime. But then, in his sense of what his duties were as a president, he felt like he couldn't set this precedent of giving him clemency. And Leo's solution was let's avoid it all together, keep him out of the country until this whole thing was done.

Similarly, he's like oh, we could cancel the concert and somehow avoid the thing. But it was murky for sure. I still am not confident in my understanding of what all happened.

JOSH: I'm sure we'll get a lot of weigh-ins from listeners, and that will be interesting. That also ties into two pieces of potentially very dark political play in this episode. One is Josh Lyman's decision that, having failed to sway Thiele...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...that what he'll do is leaked a false story...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...that Thiele is just pissed off because he himself wanted the Vice Presidency. But that is very, very nasty, bare-knuckle politics.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It doesn't happen because unbeknownst to Josh, Ryan Pierce has done something with a phone call to change Thiele's mind. But that's a nasty, nasty bit of business, as would be I think and I guess as actually happens in this episode, Leo's decision not to let Ahn know that were he to request asylum, he could not be refused.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: In other words, to play off the ignorance...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: ...of this young North Korean, and simply not bring it up. And that's also...

HRISHI: Dark calculation.

JOSH: Yes, that's some dark political calculus. And I think there almost might have been a better, again I'm not sure murky is such a bad thing, you know.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: With most TV you walk away, and you know exactly what happened, and you know exactly what it meant, and that's not necessarily to the benefit of viewers. So I don't want to fault the murk necessarily. But I feel like it might have been interesting in that scene at the piano, which I also think is beautifully acted. Tony Lee in a largely silent, and alternatively when he speaks in Korean, performance, incredible physicality, and amazing, compelling, lugubrious face. [laughter] I really, really like the actor in his performance. I like that scene at the piano, and I like the way Christopher shot it, especially that last sort of sinking shot on Bartlet.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But it might have been interesting in that scene if Bartlet had left him with a little nugget of information, suggesting that were he to do this publicly, the president would be put in a position where he had to make a decision counter to the one he intuitively feels as the correct one. I feel like that might have been the little nugget he should have been trying to leave with him.

HRISHI: The happy ending that I was hoping for, was that there would be some kind of middle ground the way there was with the Chinese defectors, the pilgrims in *Shibboleth*, the way that they let them walk out of the INS detention center, and China still gets to save face, and the California governor meets them with the Red Cross. But of course then that wouldn't be true to the feeling of *han*.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right. And also I love the little one-two extra sucker punch at the end where we have the president telling C.J. that the talks are halted over the most absurd of tiny points. So it's not even as if this guy hasn't defected, but we have great reason to believe that the talks will be productive.

HRISHI: Yeah. You know the president tries to translate *han* in the episode and he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: There is no literal English translation. It's a state of mind. Of soul, really. A sadness. A sadness so deep no tears will come. And yet still, there's hope.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think there's also some aspect to that sadness that comes from a sense of being wronged, of an injustice that's been done. And so I think in some ways it's even more apt in this episode because it's a sadness that comes from factors outside of your control, and that's true for Ahn here. You know, that he's sort of...

JOSH: ...caught up in a situation not of his own making.

HRISHI: He's caught between these forces, and I feel like it's true for C.J. as well. There's this sense of sort of riding in this current, and wanting to fight against it and not being able to.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a good description also, I think, and I'm glad they don't explicitly point it out for politics, American politics, specifically.

HRISHI: Oh, the sadness and with a little bit of hope.

JOSH: Yeah, that you don't give up entirely because progress is maybe infinitesimal, but progress can be pointed to. But that there are great injustices and situations that make significant progress difficult, and can lead one to a feeling of despair.

HRISHI: Yeah. The one thing I wanted to talk about in this episode is how there are these reversals. People who I think we're supposed to identify as antagonists or bad people or something, that's too simplistic. And as the episode points out, it's too simplistic to see them that way. But there are three examples of character turns that I really liked and the first one maybe we would start with is: Thiele, the congressman that you mentioned. Thiele is going to be the one person who's going to vote against the confirmation of Russell, and he's a Democrat. So it's even more outrageous and insulting that he would embarrass the president, and everyone thinks that oh, he's just doing it to be self-serving so that he can get on the talk shows. So you're sort of set up for this guy to be a villain, or vain, whatever. But then his argument against the nomination is... [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] It's difficult to refute what he has to say.

HRISHI: Yeah. He says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

THIELE: My petty animus is that Russell's not good enough, which is exactly what you've been saying to each other around here ever since his name was announced. [Laughs] You think I don't know how you got rolled on Berryhill? Or forced to settle for this party hack? You've put someone second-rate next in line to a president with a serious health problem. You want to talk about embarrassment? Be embarrassed about that.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah, he really puts it to Josh in a way that leaves Josh speechless, and rightfully so. And I loved that turn, that this guy is, you end up feeling like yeah, he's right.

JOSH: Absolutely. He makes the very salient point as well that they're choosing somebody second-rate to be the second in line behind a president with a serious health condition.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I mean that is a very good point. All this left me not only feeling critical of Josh's approach, which is just an absolute, he takes a mallet...[crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] sledgehammer

JOSH: ...to this guy. Yes, sledgehammer, better. But also questioning again Bartlet's decision not to fight the fight for Berryhill.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: We're reminded in this episode that he was enjoying maybe artificially pumped up, but pumped up approval numbers.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And he didn't want to spend that political capital in the fight for Berryhill.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He kind of rolled over, so I feel like we've seen a Bartlet for a while that's not firing on all cylinders. I think it was a questionable decision not to put up the fight for Berryhill, that I imagine he probably would have won ultimately.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: This Thiele storyline kind of reminds me about one of my favorite stories about Ron Paul.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: Ron Paul is someone who I disagree with on many issues. But there are things that I liked about him too when he was a congressman. But it reminds me of the time when he was the sole "no" vote in opposition to awarding Mother Teresa a Congressional Medal of Honor.

JOSH: Oh, interesting.

HRISHI: And like this Thiele storyline, you hear that and you're like, "Geez! What a jerk. He's gonna vote against [cross talk] Mother Teresa?"

JOSH: [cross talk] I'm fascinated because I'm not a big Mother Teresa fan.

HRISHI: Oh, really?

JOSH: Yeah. I've probably read too much about her, like the Christopher Hitchens article... [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: ...and suggestions that rather than ameliorating suffering, she tended to glorify it.

HRISHI: Well, his objections were not even along those lines at all. Here's a statement that he read. I'm going to read part of his statement in opposition. He said, "I rise today

in opposition of H.R. 1650. At the same time, I rise in total support of, and with complete respect for, the work of Mother Teresa, the Missionaries of Charity organization, and each of Mother Teresa's Nobel Peace Prize-winning humanitarian efforts." He says, "I oppose the Gold Medal for Mother Teresa Act because appropriating \$30,000 of taxpayer money is neither constitutional, nor in the spirit of Mother Teresa, who dedicated her entire life to voluntary, charitable work, particularly humanitarian." And then he says that, "In fact, as a matter of demonstrating my personal regard and enthusiasm" for her work, he invited each of his colleagues "to match a private, personal contribution of \$100 which, if accepted by the 435 Members of the House [of Representatives], would more than satisfy the \$30,000 cost necessary to mint and award a gold medal, to the well-deserving Mother Teresa." He later says, "For the record, not a single Representative who solicited my support for spending taxpayer's money, was willing to contribute their own money to demonstrate the courage of their so-called convictions in generosity. It is, of course, very easy to be generous with other people's money."

JOSH: Interesting. Well, that's a Paulian approach to the subject that I might have anticipated.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I'll have to include a link to what I'm talking about as well, because I'll probably be roundly [expletive deleted] upon... [cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right

JOSH: ...by people for casually dissing Mother Teresa, but I think...[cross talk]

HRISHI: [cross talk] You'll provide some backing...

JOSH: [cross talk] I will.

HRISHI: ...arguments. But, so, Ron Paul would oppose everyone else in Congress so often, you know, in 434 to 1 votes, so often that his nickname was Dr. No.

JOSH: Ha, that's interesting. Also, I like the way that Peter Noah and the other writers chose to frame or to build up our anticipation of this Thiele meeting, which is that this guy's just looking for some time on the Sunday morning news shows. It's going to be 434 to 1, and he's gonna be, or... [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Doing victory laps.

JOSH: ...534 including both houses. Yeah, he's gonna be doing a victory lap, or just he's gonna stand in the spotlight for a while, and have people listen to what he has to say as the sole "no" vote. Then we realize he's got actually substantive arguments.

HRISHI: Yeah, victory lap is not the right term when you have been [laughs] voted against by literally everyone else in a bicameral disagreement with you, but you know what I meant.

JOSH: I did. Can we go back to the cold open?

HRISHI: Oh sure.

JOSH: The cold open I just think is excellent. It was a very good scene, with multiple layers and tones. It's awkward, and it's suspenseful, and it's actually funny, this first meeting with Ahn and with his North Korean handlers. The one little misstep to me is, I don't love the line of dialogue, "This isn't a signature. It's a message." I think that reveal could have been made with a less clunky line. There's a little mint chocolate clunk to the end. [Hrishi laughs] But it's still a very, very effective cold open. It has what I would like

to now refer to as a fantastic bombswell, which is that last moment bombshell that leads into the swell of the opening measures of our title theme. Our having discussed it last episode, this is the recommendation of HRH Kate or @amazonqueenkate on Twitter. I think bombswell is good.

HRISHI: It's really good.

JOSH: And this cold open has a pretty good bombswell.

HRISHI: It's true. I'm just thinking about the music coming in, the swell part of the bombswell, and then I also want to just jump to the very, very end. I really loved the way that the Chopin Prelude was worked in to the very closing of the episode, just a couple of bars and then a chord of resolution.

[Frédéric Chopin – Prelude in E-minor (Op.28, No.4) excerpt segueing into *The West Wing* closing theme's final notes]

HRISHI: It's really beautifully done.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a beautiful piece of music, too.

HRISHI: It is one of my favorites.

JOSH: Can you tell us exactly what it's called?

HRISHI: This is Chopin's Prelude in E Minor Op. 28, No. 4. It's just one of the all-time great sad pieces of music for solo piano.

JOSH: Yet with a hint of hope. [laughter] No?

HRISHI: Yeah. There's not a lot of hope in that one.

JOSH: No. I read somewhere that Chopin himself requested this to be played at his funeral.

HRISHI: Wow, that is arrogant. [laughter]

JOSH: It's intensive. It led me into a fantasia of what I would like played at my funeral and to that end, I'm writing a song called *Open up the Coffin One Last Time and Please Make Sure That I'm Dead*. [Hrishi laughs] I'm hoping they'll play that.

HRISHI: They'll play it on a stereo that's placed on the lid of your coffin that's so heavy, no one can actually lift up the coffin.

JOSH: Wow, wow, that would be ironic and horrible. And then people would be like, "I don't remember hearing faint scratching in that song before." [Hrishi laughs] This has taken a dark turn.

HRISHI: Don't record faint scratching in one of the tracks.

JOSH: Right. What did I want to say? Ah, there was a missed opportunity for the dad joke of all dad jokes when Charlie and President Bartlet are discussing... There's not a lot of Charlie in this episode, this may be his sole scene. It feels like they're just kind of tossing him, like we've got to pay Dulé a lot, let's make him come to work at least one day, and they have a little scene and they discuss the work of Chopin.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You like Chopin, Charlie?

CHARLIE: If I say I've never heard any, am I going to get the life history of the guy and a shopping list?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Oh, Chopin Liszt!

JOSH: Yes, there used to be a little pad called the Chopin Liszt that you would take to the grocery store if you were a music lover. Chopin Liszt, I wish they had made that explicit joke. I would have thrown on my “no bad joke like a dad joke” socks and re-watched the episode. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: Let me go to the second of the reveals that turns here. You talked about how well they wrote Thiele’s argument that’s hard to refute. I love how Peter Noah did not write a scene where Ryan Pierce reveals to Josh what he did. Ryan Pierce is the other person who I spent a couple episodes now rolling my eyes at. It’s not even so much that I plauded the fact that he was able to get Thiele to change his vote and surprise it, it’s that he didn’t take credit for it. That is what I really liked about him by the end of this episode.

JOSH: Right. You get a subtle bump up in estimation for Ryan.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: He lets Josh take the credit for something that Josh knows he hasn’t done.

HRISHI: Right. That was great. And I suddenly thought ok, there’s more to this guy than I had previously suspected.

JOSH: Yeah. That said, don’t you get, with Ryan on the phone call, that he’s somehow just using his position. I guess we don’t really know, the answer is we just don’t know what Ryan has said, which I think is also kind of a tasty morsel that rather than spoon feeding us or feeling that we had to have our hands held through the process. We just know that he’s done something. He has said something.

HRISHI: Yeah.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

RYAN: It’s not really my personality. I’m more of a “get more bees with honey” type.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: He’s used some form of, I guess diplomacy, to get the job done.

HRISHI: Right. He has, in direct opposition to what Josh says, that you’ve just got to hammer these guys in order to get the work done. He does, yes, something diplomatic. And whether it’s using his family connections, or the fact that Thiele used to work for his uncle, whatever, he does something else and it works. And, I thought that was great. But yes, I love that we don’t know what it is, and I love that it’s never revealed to us how he gets it done, and it’s never revealed to Josh.

JOSH: Also, have we been led to believe that Ryan Pierce is a direct descendant of Franklin Pierce?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Because somebody, and I’ll have to credit him I guess on the website, because I don’t have it in front of me right now, but somebody on Twitter pointed out that Franklin Pierce and his wife, Jane, had, I believe, three children, all of whom died before having children themselves.

HRISHI: Oh, that is great, so that’s some great West Wing historical fiction.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: That's great. Because then that means there's no possible descendant that they could be... Like Lauren Hissrich told us that there's a level of rights clearance that you have to do when you're naming a character, to make sure that there is no one alive who might be able to say, "Oh, this person is supposed to be me, or in some way be a version of me," because then they can sue you, that means they're in the clear.

JOSH: Maybe they went out of their way to find...

HRISHI: I think it's brilliant.

JOSH: Now, I'm curious, yeah. And it's worth taking a little look and reading the incredibly tragic circumstances of Franklin Pierce and his wife. They lost a child at three days, a child at age four, these are both through sickness, and then a child at age 11 in a railway accident.

HRISHI: Oh geez.

JOSH: Yeah, very, very sad and tragic but I think, I suppose you're right, perhaps this was done intentionally.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think it must have been. It's a way to have a direct line to a president that you know that has been fictionalized.

JOSH: I've just a weird, little couple points that connect in a strange way. One, there's an odd moment early on, now I can't remember what C.J. and Leo are discussing, but it's in the cold open. Oh, yeah, they're discussing North Korea, and Leo's got a little casual...

HRISHI: Racism?

JOSH: Yeah, which I think is fitting, it feels right in his mouth. It's not like I bumped on it like, "dick!" It's kind of like, oh ok. I mean, this is how people sometimes share and expose their own casual prejudices. I don't think he would say this in front of anyone else but he feels very comfortable talking about North Korea in rather derogative terms to C.J.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

C.J.: So what's...?

Leo: He's North Korean. God knows how he managed to even learn. Their music's all hymns to the barley harvest, not that they ever have one.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So it's very stereotypical broad brushing from Leo. And then C.J. goes on to mispronounce the word raffishly:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

C.J.: ...makes them sound rāffishly charming...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: She says rāffishly," and I always wonder how that happens. I often mispronounce words, but if I'm not sure of one or, you think on a set somebody would say, "Hey, I think it's rāffishly." How does that happen? I did a similar thing on the set of *Stargate SG-1*. Did I tell this story? When somebody had the word p-r-i-m-e-r and was pronouncing it p̄rimer.

HRISHI: We've talked about p̄rimer versus p̄rimer on this show.

JOSH: So I think I must have mentioned that, on this episode of *Stargate SG-1*, another actor was saying the word p̄rimer. And I tried to sort of, I wasn't a dick about it, but I

somehow brought up “oh, I thought it was pronounced prīmer.” I tried to do it like, maybe I'm not sure, and it turned into just a really bad situation, people's getting insulted and it turned into a whole... I'm sure everybody on the show is like, “What that dick that Malina guy is.” [Hrishi laughs] But really this all leads me to the fact that Ron Canada was also in that episode [Hrishi laughs] of *SG-1*. He's not the one who was saying prīmer instead of primer, [crosstalk] but he was in it. It's the “Bad Guys” episode of *Stargate SG-1*.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right.

HRISHI: Hm. I thought that maybe C.J. was pronouncing it correctly, and she was talking about qualities embodied by Ralph [pronounced Rāfe] Fiennes.

JOSH: Oh, see I thought you were going to go the extra step and mention the character Ralph [pronounced Rāfe] Rackstraw from *HMS Pinafore*. That would have too much [crosstalk] to hope for from you. But I was hoping you might be going there.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Wow.

HRISHI: Well, I don't know anything about that character, but I will say that Ralph Fiennes is quite raffish.

JOSH: He is indeed.

HRISHI: No, he's not.

JOSH: No? He's not?

HRISHI: He's quite refined.

JOSH: Oh I guess, raffish, but isn't it in an appealing way? Now I gotta look up raffish. I love looking up words, by the way, especially words that I think I understand. Ok.

HRISHI: I thought raffish means like not refined.

JOSH: This is, I don't know dictionary.com or something, unconventional and slightly disreputable, especially in an attractive manner. I could see Ralph Fiennes being raffish in certain roles.

HRISHI: He's quite fine though. He's quite Fiennes.

JOSH: I see where we're going. [laughter]

HRISHI: I'm just saying he's not so crude. He's less crude. He's more...Ralph-Fienned [refined].

JOSH: Oy vey! Never try to have a serious conversation [crosstalk] with an errant punster.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Sorry!

JOSH: I had to look up another word during this episode. I had to look up the word parlous...

HRISHI: Hm, yeah.

JOSH: ...which it turns out is simply a derivative of the word perilous, but I thought it would've meant voluble or talkative, but I was wrong. So I learned a new word.

HRISHI: And who is he actually talking to when he says that, he says, “it was like I was talking to John C. Calhoun.”

JOSH: I don't know. I think he's just saying the guy was speaking in kind of a southern dialect, John C. Calhoun having been a senator and noted racist vice-president from South Carolina, correct?

HRISHI: Yeah, I guess.

JOSH: So wasn't it just as a reference to someone using the word parlous?

HRISHI: Oh, he was saying somebody said the word parlous. I did not get that.

JOSH: That's how I took it. Yeah, parlous, like who uses that word? It was like talking to John C. Calhoun [crosstalk] or some sort of, who's the big rooster, the animated rooster?

HRISHI: [crosstalk] I see.

HRISHI: [laughter] Foghorn Leghorn.

JOSH: Yeah, I think he's like, I was just talking to Foghorn Leghorn.

[Warner Bros. Looney Tunes Show excerpt]

FOGHORN LEGHORN: Well boll, I say, boll my weevil, I'll do it.

[end excerpt] [laughter]

JOSH: Oh dear. We, like Franklin Pierce's train car, have gone badly off the rails.

HRISHI: Oh geez!! You can't say...

JOSH: What? Too soon?

HRISHI: JOSH!!

JOSH: Too soon?!

HRISHI: Oh Josh, you are so Ralph Fiennes-ish.

JOSH: [laughs] Oh dear.

HRISHI: That is crude in an attractive way, I suppose.

JOSH: Yeah, what's the word for crude in an unappealing and unattractive way because that's what I am.

HRISHI: [laughter] Josh Malin-ish.

JOSH: Josh-ish.

HRISHI: Ok. Back to Barrow for one second to...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Sure. Why not?

HRISHI: [crosstalk]...Ron Canada

JOSH: [sings to the tune of *O Canada*] Ron Canada. Do you think there's anybody who names their kid, say Orville Canada, would be O. Canada. How could you not name your kid...? Anyway [laughter] Go on, what was your point?

HRISHI: Parlous? I like this character Barrow a lot. I love this exchange between him and C.J. when they're talking about the DMZ and he says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

BARROW: It's not that bleak. The DMZ is beautiful. It's like a nature preserve. Endangered black-faced spoonbills, Amur leopards...

C.J.: What's your point?

Barrow: That I know more about this than you do.

LEO: The legal issues...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: Pretty good.

JOSH: Good writing. There's a lot of very, very good, clever, without calling attention to its own cleverness, dialogue. I think Peter Noah is a superb writer and this, to me, I can't imagine ever having to rank *West Wing* episodes because I just don't have it in me. But this is a very, very good episode.

HRISHI: Yeah. I feel like to do that, I don't know, it would just be an exercise in bitterness if you were to rank all of the episodes and I just don't get that kind of rancor sense from you.

JOSH: [laughter] You're el fuego. You cannot be stopped. There's now a certain cadence to your voice where I should know...[crosstalk}

HRISHI: [crosstalk] you know it's coming...

JOSH: ...a joke is coming. Yes.

HRISHI: Yeah, Lindsay can always tell just from my face. She sees the wind up in my eyes.

JOSH: And does she, as if a grenade has been thrown in the room, does she just hit the floor and cover her head?

HRISHI: She just tunes out. She sees this like something I do with my face. I don't even know what it is because otherwise I'd try and stop myself.

JOSH: Yeah, Melissa will usually give me a cautionary, "no."

HRISHI: [laughs] Before it happens?

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Pre-emptively.

JOSH: Yeah, I appreciate that.

HRISHI: Okay, let me just point out one thing that I really liked but it also led to something that I didn't like. I really liked the exchange with the staff when they were talking about the recession in the Oval Office.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

C.J.: Sir, something happened today at the briefing. I got questions about the economy, and I felt like I was tap-dancing.

LEO: Saw it. I thought you were fine.

JOSH: Deft, extremely deft.

C.J.: As much as I appreciate your attempt to compliment me out of my point, I'm starting to feel a little self-conscious about our lack of vocabulary to describe the economy.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Didn't she get the bagel memo?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So good.

JOSH: Fantastic. Great writing.

HRISHI: It's so good.

JOSH: Yeah.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

C.J.: Sir, I'm worried that, at some point, avoidance starts to look like maybe we just haven't noticed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's great writing. A great bit of dialogue and also it's a really sharp observation of how things actually work in the briefing room. If you don't talk about it, if you don't have a talking point ready, it seems like you're not ready or maybe you aren't aware of it. Anyway, I loved all of that. But then, my good feelings about it were squashed a little bit when it gets called back by Josh when talking about him and Amy so explicitly.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

JOSH: It's like what C.J. said today about the economy. By refusing to put language to it, we're trying to pretend it doesn't exist. But it's something, even if we don't know what to call it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I don't like, oh man, it felt like with this thing that was sort of up there in the rafters got pulled down.

JOSH: Yeah, I can see that. Yeah, there were certain connections in the episode that were best left to the viewers to make.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I also didn't know whether I necessarily wanted Josh to have the moment with Donna where he says, what you said about economics wasn't so crazy. In fact, the president referenced it.

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: We saw Josh make that realization as he sat on the couch, and it was a beautifully done. It's a great scene, and Brad has kind of a moment where everyone's kind of sitting back up and he's still back there just having that little realization, that I felt we didn't necessarily need to hear it.

HRISHI: Yeah, actually there were two moments like this where I thought, and this isn't a criticism of the writing or anything like that, it was more just a disappointment in the characters a little bit, where I felt like more could have been given, more credit could have been given. Josh says this thing to Donna and I feel like he could have, I don't know, instead of tossing it as an aside and throwing in a cheese joke, it could have been evidence for him of how smart Donna is; that despite her trying to do it in this weird way where she's showing off in front of her aunt and uncle, that she had a suggestion for how economic policy should be applied in a way that was more apt than the experts in the room.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And it felt like it should give her some credit, and maybe like lift her status a little bit. And in the same way, when there is the Chopin Liszt conversation, the president is like, will you find out what the price of milk is? And of course Charlie knows what it is because he's someone who actually has to shop for himself. And I wanted there to be a moment where the president says, you are a smart guy and you have something substantive to contribute besides just carrying my bags and telling me about my

appointments. You should sit in on this meeting and just provide us one other perspective, you have a point of view that we sorely are needing. And rather than saying that, he just says, will you make sure everyone else knows what the price of milk is tomorrow?

JOSH: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think maybe you were hoping for too much.

HRISHI: I'm sure, but I don't think it's unrealistic. [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I feel what you're saying. I think it was more realistic the way it happened.

HRISHI: Absolutely.

JOSH: Ok, good go tell everyone else. And I did feel in there, in the look like, I got a little bit of what you're talking about. While he doesn't make it explicit to Charlie, I also thought it was a great moment where they realized nobody in the room...[crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

JOSH: ...had any idea what a gallon of milk cost.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: But yeah, I thought there was an element of that there. I also thought there was a nice little piece of character building or a little new angle was on Ryan, how quickly he read that there is something up between Amy and Josh.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Just his perception, his powers of observation are on point, and I thought Josh...

HRISHI: [laughs] Really?! I thought it was pretty unsubtle.

JOSH: It was so obvious? Oh, ok.

HRISHI: Well, I mean because she walks by and Josh basically had cartoon eyes coming out of his skull as he watched her walk away.

JOSH: Oh, ok maybe I missed that. Ok, never mind.

HRISHI: But I like that you're finding more ways to give him credit. That's sweet.

JOSH: Maybe I just really like Jesse Bradford, and I do.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Let me go to the third turn that I really like.

JOSH: I love that you started to make a point 42 minutes ago, and I'm sure it's all my fault, that I keep interjecting enough stuff that you're now on to the third point of the original thing you were trying to discuss, from the beginning of the podcast, but go ahead. Part three.

HRISHI: It's great, actually, it's great. It's similar to, you know, in *The West Wing*, they have the different stories and they don't tell the entire story all at once. They go from thing to thing and then they come back to it. [crosstalk] Then, you know...

JOSH: [crosstalk] True

HRISHI: ...that's how it becomes a running theme. Anyway, the third turn is Bob Russell himself. Again, like with Thiele, there's this build-up of just what a boring guy this choice is, and what a terrible choice. You get this eloquent speech about his mediocrity:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

TOBY: In a triumph of the middling, a nod to mediocrity, and with gorge rising, it gives me great nausea to announce Robert Russell – Bingo Bob himself – as your new Vice President.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then his reaction to it makes him come off like the hero, really the victor. You feel so bad for him in that moment when he sees the teleprompter, and then recognizes it and then despite that, his reaction is not to demand that Will gets fired or just come in and even yell at those guys, or anything.

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

TOBY: Mr. Vice President, please accept...

VICE PRESIDENT RUSSELL: I'd like a copy.

TOBY: There are no copies. We've shredded...

WILL: Wiped hard drives...we're considering putting out our own eyes.

VICE PRESIDENT RUSSELL: Find one. Send it to my office. I thought it was hilarious.

TOBY: Hilarious, sir?

VICE PRESIDENT RUSSELL: I know my public profile, my political persona. I'm just glad to see there's such a keen awareness of the scale of the job you've all got ahead of you. I'm part of the team now, which makes all this pretty much your problem. Good luck with it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It speaks to a quality of character that I think the president sees a little bit, you know, when he says, oh, the people of Colorado voted for this guy four times. And when Russell himself is not singing his own praises exactly, but he says, I get along with people, I don't ruffle feathers. This guy is sharp.

JOSH: Yeah. It makes me really, really like the guy.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's greater depth to him. There's a self-awareness and there's a confidence, as somebody who can actually get a big kick out of two other people ripping him apart. That's a very appealing quality to be self-deprecating or not even, he wasn't making jokes about himself but recognizing someone else wrote some very trenchantly nasty stuff about him. He goes, "I got to get a copy of it, that was hilarious."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. It's disarming, and I think points to hidden depths in this person we've been led to believe is quite shallow.

HRISHI: You know, that's actually kind of a Malina-ish move as well to say...

JOSH: I was gonna say, I was about to say, it's one of the things I love about me. [Hrishi laughs] But I decided, you know what, better to let Hrishi point it out.

HRISHI: Oh, you're gonna write [laughter] somebody read this statement I wrote about myself at my funeral. [Josh laughs] All the ways I'm great. [laughter]

JOSH: While we're on it, there's another moment. There's a moment in the show where I thought I was quite good [laughter]. There are two pieces of physical acting in this

episode that I really liked. One of which is me, and it's a small thing. [crosstalk] This is not...

HRISHI: [crosstalk] What is it?

JOSH: ...a giant pat on the back. I enter early on to, I guess, discuss my first draft of the comments I've put together for President Bartlet. And you can see as I enter, as Will enters the Oval Office, that he's still not entirely comfortable being alone with the president, that there's still almost some residual trauma from their very first encounter...[crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah

JOSH: ...in season four, and you just have to go back to look at it. But I can see, I hope it's not that I'm doing something, but rather just some sort of, you know, kind of living in the character that even as he enters the room, he's not at the level of confidence and calm that the other characters are when they go into the Oval. And then there's just a piece that I could watch endlessly on a loop, maybe somebody can GIF it for me, which is John Spencer eating a cracker as Leo, in prototypically Leo fashion, [Hrishi laughs] that I can't even articulate why I love it so much.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: There's something about his physicality, he's eating a cracker or something crunchy from his lunch. And you know, you could say, why don't they start the scene after he ate that thing? But it's a fantastic moment. It is so Leo alone, eating a crunchy thing.

HRISHI: [Laughing] Everyone knows that quintessential Leo crunchy thing.

JOSH: Yes, I reference it all the time in my real life.

HRISHI: [Laughs] It's funny that now we find out that the president plays piano. Before, he said he played trombone. You remember he told the story of... [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I forgot. Yeah.

HRISHI: ...he played trombone, and threw the slide into the end zone, which is more than he could say (for the quarterback)...

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Right, but now he says he played piano. He said:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I could read ok, and get the fingering down, but I should have been sent to rhythm prison.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Of course that rhythm prison is run by The Police.

[Musical excerpt: The Police – Roxanne (opening bars)]

JOSH: [Laughs] Nice, you did come prepared.

HRISHI: [Laughs] But *The Police* drummer, Stewart Copeland, is amazing.

JOSH: Ok, hat tip. We haven't discussed Toby maybe at all. We definitely learned that when Will's having trouble writing, Toby is less expansive and generous in his support...

HRISHI: Than the other way round...

JOSH: ...when the shoe's on the other foot as in "Arctic Radar."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I love it, I think it's great writing again. Toby basically just says:

[West Wing Episode 5.04 excerpt]

TOBY: Well, hitch it up and start typing. Come on, clackety-clack.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It's almost Will's words are kind of a mirror, and he doesn't say there's no blood going to it, but he says something about my confidence is down around my ankles or something like that. So it is almost what could have been like an "Arctic Radar"-like episode of Toby now pumping Will up, but you're not gonna get that from Toby.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: That well is dry.

HRISHI: But then when they switch the message to the way they do feel, passionately, the passion comes out in the writing.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right. And, you know, this is a mini bump. There's no real reason for Will to be writing down...

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Right, obviously he's got to, in order for us to believe that it could possibly have made it's way to the teleprompter. And so it's still worth it, it's worth the buy you have to make. Dude, why are you typing it into the main body of the actual speech? [Laughter] I remember filming that though. It was actually, it was good fun.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah, there's something about playing a scene where characters are clicking and [crosstalk] coming up with something creative...

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Clacking

JOSH: Clicking and clacking if you will, that was just good fun.

HRISHI: Yeah, I do love a good typing scene, [laughter] all those action shots.

JOSH: Well, for *The West Wing* that's...

HRISHI: Sorry, clack-tion shots...[laughter]

JOSH: ...and reclack-tion shots. That's an action scene for *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Do you think it's clear to everyone that we, when we talked about Chopin Liszt, that it's the name of the two composers, Chopin and Liszt?

HRISHI: [laughter] No! It was not clear.

JOSH: Oh, ok. [laughter]

HRISHI: That's great, Chopin Liszt. That's great.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: I mean, it's not great. It's awful, but...

JOSH: It's kind of great.

HRISHI: It's great how awful it is. You know who's having a great run of episodes?

JOSH: Who's that?

HRISHI: Bagel.

JOSH: Oh, bagel is, yeah. Bagel call-backs.

HRISHI: The real MVP.

JOSH: That bagel is everything.

HRISHI: [laughter] It is an everything bagel.

JOSH: Do you think any anyone's still listening?

HRISHI: [laughter] If they are, let's say goodbye.

JOSH: Let's.

HRISHI: Well, that does it for another episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thank you for sticking with us, eating the entire way through this everything bagel.

JOSH: We remain, as ever, a proud member of Radiotopia. Radiotopia is a collection of the finest podcasts in the land, and you can find out more about the other podcasts at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Thanks to my co-host and co-producer, Joshua Malina, and our editors, Margaret Miller and Zach McNees.

JOSH: And thanks to my co-host, Hrishu and do by all means listen to Hrishu's other podcast, *Song Exploder*.

HRISHI: And please do watch Josh's episode of *Stargate SG-1 – Bad Guys*. We'll put up a link to *Prelude in E Minor* if you'd like to listen to one of my favourite pieces for solo piano. It will not be the one where I'm playing it. Thanks so much to Paula Yoo for joining us.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

PAULA: What's next?

[Outro Music]