

The West Wing Weekly
6.09: "Impact Winter"
Guest: Ben Murray

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello, you're listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today, we're talking about Season 6 Episode 9. It's called "Impact Winter".

JOSH: This episode was written by Debora Cahn. This episode was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter. This episode first aired on December 15th, 2004.

HRISHI: Two episodes ago, in episode 6:07, the title was "A Change is Gonna Come," and I think in this episode the changes arrive.

JOSH: Aaaahhh.

HRISHI: The President goes to China, but he is severely impaired by his MS. Charlie pushes C.J. to consider her next step after she steps out of the White House, and Josh considers his next step after it turns out Donna has already considered what her next step will be.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Later in this episode we're going to be joined by Ben Murray who made his debut on *The West Wing* in the last episode. He plays Curtis, the president's new personal assistant to replace Charlie.

JOSH: A man who has held Martin Sheen in his arms. I mean, I've done that off camera, but he did it on television.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Little do our listeners know that Martin Sheen insists on being carried everywhere.

JOSH: That's right. I was amazed all these years later when Martin showed up for his interview with us that Ben was carrying him. That was the first time we met him.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Yeah, Yep. What did you think of this episode?

JOSH: I liked it. The physical stuff and the deterioration of President Bartlet is painful to watch but compelling.

HRISHI: Yeah, I'm impressed by how much happens in this episode.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: In terms of those changes, there is a lot of kinetic energy in this episode, you know. I feel like we're used to seeds being planted and then paying off over the course of a few episodes, especially in the last couple of seasons, but things really move here. Let's start at the beginning. I mean, at the beginning it doesn't feel like anything is going to happen. It's a slow day, and Josh and Donna are kind of whiling it away, but then C.J. calls and lets them know what we already knew from the previous episode, which is that the president has had an incident because of his MS, and he can't move his legs, and his arms have only just come back. Annabeth is, in fact, talking about how there's not that much to talk about in the briefing room, but then suddenly all hell

breaks loose. Josh scribbles 'Get Leo' on a pad to tell Donna; this is right before the titles come in. And something about the way that he, like, writes it and then taps on the pad, that when the titles did come in, all I could do was sing the theme with the lyrics "Get Leo" the whole time.

[*The West Wing* theme music plays]

JOSH: [Laughing]

HRISHI: Or just variations on 'Get Leo', 'Go get Leo', 'Go get Leo now'.

JOSH: [Laughs] I like that.

HRISHI: It works pretty well, and I think everyone should try it when they watch this episode. So Vice President Russell after we come back, the Vice President comes back talking about...

[*West Wing* Episode 6.09 excerpt]

VICE PRESIDENT RUSSELL: I was playing tennis when I heard... I couldn't believe my ears.

JOSH: We were just discussing...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it feels really weird when he says it to the staffers, and then he goes and does the briefing, and he says it there, and you're like, oh, he was just practicing that garbage line?

JOSH: That's exactly what I wrote down, I liked that, I liked that, I did sort of bump on it that first time. I was like, wow, that was clunky; and then I was like, oh, that was a test run; and he felt it went over well enough that he was going to give it another whirl in front of the press. I thought that was great. This was another one of those moments where I wish they hadn't hung a light on it because then subsequently, although I kind of like that too, but subsequent to the moment Josh actually gives Will a little grief about it.

[*West Wing* Episode 6.09 excerpt]

JOSH: Free advice for the campaign trail: stop with the ceaseless mentions of the tennis game. It doesn't make him look young and vigorous. It makes him look like a dilettante who can't settle down with a thick book.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: First I was disappointed, I was like, oh, I had already noticed. I felt smart as the audience like yeah, I had kind of picked up on the fact that he seems to be trying to try to draw a distinction between the president's state and his own more youthful, physically fit state, and I was disappointed that Josh brought it up. But then there's the little couplet.

[*West Wing* Episode 6.09 excerpt]

DONNA: You really think all the talk about tennis make him look flaky?

JOSH: No, I think it makes him look young and vigorous.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [Laughs] Yeah, exactly.

JOSH: That had value, so that saved that moment for me, but at first I was like, why shine a light on it?

HRISHI: I love that about this episode. There are a few moments like that where you're like, why are you doing that? Oh... but then it pays off.

JOSH: Yeah, so I was like, Ok, you got me.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: It was very good, very clever. She's a good writer, that Debora Cahn.

HRISHI: She is. My favorite stuff about this episode has to do with the presidential campaign. I think this is gonna end up being my refrain for all of season 6. All the stuff in the Bartlet administration, all the stuff in the White House. I'm like, yeah, ok, yep. But then anything that has to do with campaigning or like, positioning for the primaries, all that stuff, I love; I cannot get enough of it, and this episode there's a lot of it, and it's so great, and the showdown between Josh and Will is fantastic " That moment of him saying, "Hey you know what, watch yourself, you and the candidate and stop with the mentions of his tennis game." But there's a part where, you know Josh says, "Watch yourself, you and your candidate." And I really like you in this episode a lot, Josh.

JOSH: Thank you.

HRISHI: You have just utter, dripping contempt on your face. Your line is just...

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

WILL: You done?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But the way you deliver it is just, just like, so much... 'go [bleep] yourself, man.'

JOSH: This does come easily to me, this take.

[Both laugh]

HRISHI: It's great – I mean, because at this point you know, we know Will sets things up to try and bring Josh in, you know, and be like, you run the campaign [Crosstalk]. Like he was going to cede that position of power to Josh [Crosstalk], and he said no, so now it's, you know, there's a little bit of a declaration of war. Even though, even in that moment it's not like Josh has declared for somebody else, he's said he that doesn't want to see Russell be the President [crosstalk] it's a great, great dynamic. And then yeah, that turn, it was like, out of Will's earshot, Josh saying 'it's a good move, Will was right.'

JOSH: [Crosstalk] That's right. [Crosstalk] Indeed. [Crosstalk] That's right. Right, he is grudgingly admiring it. He's not going to acknowledge that to Will certainly.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah. I'm enjoying these too actually. These are now, we're definitely in a bank of episodes, possibly between here and the end, that I think I've never seen.

HRISHI: Really?

JOSH: Yeah, I think... this job is always fantastic, and I was thrilled to have it, even then, but at a certain point, I think I lost any interest in watching this show. I kinda did my thing, I felt like, eh, I don't have that much to do here. I mean, I love it. I love when I'm at work, I love the people, but I wasn't running home to watch it on Wednesday nights.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So I'm feeling a new appreciation for this storyline we're getting into. I feel like I've never really, you know, I know everything that happened, and I read the scripts, and... but I don't think I ever really experienced what it was we were making. I really think there are just now tons of episodes I've not seen a frame of.

HRISHI: Yeah. We've talked about this a lot, about how things synchronize with the real world; our discussions line up, and to be talking about this stuff in the run up, and people declaring their candidacy.

JOSH: It's wild.

HRISHI: It's so great to be doing this right now while this is happening in 2019. It just makes our discussions crackle for me in a way that, I don't know, even if we would have done this... it's not like the show would be different, but I just love what the outside world is bringing into this watch.

JOSH: Yeah, it's incredibly weird. I mean if we had decided somehow to schedule this podcast so that things would coincide with the real world, we never could have accomplished...

HRISHI: [Laughs] It's true.

JOSH: The remarkable – I mean, time and time again is this preternatural synchronicity between our re-watch and events happening in the real world. It's bizarre and delightful.

HRISHI: So, back to the China stuff for a second.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: At this point in the episode, they are not yet in China. They're just trying to figure things out, and I really like this one moment between the president and Toby as they are trying to, like—he's trying to set up what their dynamic should be for the negotiations, and Toby's trying to, in the interest of time and what they can do, he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

TOBY: Maybe we let of the Tibet conversation, cut straight to—

PRESIDENT BARTLET: No.

TOBY: If they're not going to budge on Tibet anyway...

PRESIDENT BARTLET: We talk about Tibet so they can be implacable. We talk about Taiwan so that they can hold the line against the capitalist imperialist foe. We do it all so that when we get to North Korea, and they agree to do our dirty work, they won't have lost face at every step along the way. Cancel the banquet, cancel whatever the hell you like, but we do not skip one step, not one moment of my negotiation with President Lian.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I loved that. I love that there are a lot of times when the president seems like he is the guy who is the least informed in some ways, and he is like counting on the advisors to give him the best information that they gather, and then he makes his decision. But here it's just like, he knows what the dynamics are with the players, and he knows how to play that game to their advantage.

JOSH: Yeah, right, he's an experienced statesman by this point.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it is fun to hear his take.

HRISHI: I guess I have been feeling like maybe the president, he's seemed less powerful or less knowledgeable or something. He's been kind of diminished I think recently. I don't know, it just feels like it's been a little while since we've seen him just like kick ass in a way that, even just this one line, just him schooling Toby reminds me of that other...

JOSH: Yeah no, I think it's very well done

HRISHI: There's no Uncle Fluffy here in the president.

JOSH: I think President Bartlet's sharpness and his mental acuity in this episode, you know, highlights the physical degradation that he's going through. So that he's this brain in a chair that they're wheeling around to where he needs to be, and it just, that's a really weird thing to say.

HRISHI: [Laughs] It brings up images of Krang from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

JOSH: Very good. Yeah, but the contrast is stark, and I think that's done intentionally, and it's effective.

HRISHI: Yeah, there are really smart things that are done in this episode in terms of how they lay out the plot points. And one, just to jump way to the end, you know, the just heartbreaking moment later when the president falls.

JOSH: He has his tumble, oof... that is tough to watch.

HRISHI: Yeah, and he has this incredible moment with the First Lady when he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I can't do the job Abbey, do you understand? I can't do it. I cannot do the job. Look at me. Look at me!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Gah, that part is just brutal, but it was so smart to have that story be – at that moment before you go to Josh in the final moments of the episode talking to Congressman Santos about running for president. Like, there is another version of this where they don't think about that, or they don't have that set up, but I think there's something for us, for the audience. Like, you need the president to kind of own up to this idea of like, hey it's ok for us to acknowledge that my age, and how long I've had this job, and that things are changing so that you don't somehow feel you don't bring some kind of like bitterness to the idea of replacing him with Santos; like, it's a way for us to buy into the idea of a new contender for the presidency because they've already given us the president saying 'I can't do it anymore.'

JOSH: Yeah, I think that's true. That said, it's still painful, it's still an emotional mixed bag.

HRISHI: Definitely.

JOSH: I do agree there's almost, although they're not in the scene together, there's almost a passing of the baton.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: As the president admits he's not up to it, he just physically can't do it. There's also flashes there to me of the young Martin Sheen, and, you know, smashes a mirror in *Apocalypse Now*.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: There's like that fury and that mad spark in his eyes as he self-flagellates, he hits his own legs. Which, you know, I guess you have no feeling at that point. It's a very intense moment, and what a performance from Martin.

HRISHI: I totally thought the same thing. I felt like this is acting from a 1970s school of cinema that you don't see on TV really ever. Especially not like network TV in the early 2000s. It just felt like wow... he brought some other world onto the screen in that moment, and it's so incredible.

JOSH: It's electric, yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Yeah, he brought it.

HRISHI: So, as I mentioned, Curtis actually did appear in the last episode, but we really— I think he really makes his presence felt here when the president says, "Hey, let's make a break for it." And he actually picks him up, and you get a— really appreciate how enormous this guy is, and how strong he is, and he just like picks up the president and carries him off of the plane, down the stairs.

JOSH: Down the stairs!

HRISHI: Yeah, it is pretty incredible and bringing new meaning to the term, 'body man'.

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: Okay, here's a part of the episode that I didn't like so much.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Walter Sprout.

JOSH: Aaahhh.

HRISHI: There's a character that gets introduced, he comes in and tells the White House:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

WALTER: There's an object coming toward the earth, an asteroid. Our calculations could be wrong, but ah... if they're not they indicate that an object, following that trajectory, would strike the earth in approximately 48 hours... 46.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I just feel like, we've been here before.

JOSH: Oh, I agree. Am I wrong, when we spoke to Jacob Keaton for "The Warfare of Genghis Khan," did he not complain that *The West Wing* treats NASA in a certain way?

[The West Wing Weekly Episode 5.13 excerpt]

JACOB: Well, the portrayal of the NASA people, first of all, is just about the lowest stereotype I think you could pick up for NASA people. We don't all wear name tags, we don't automatically look like nerds, and that's certainly not the way we would approach a meeting at The White House.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: So there you go, that's what I thought, I thought of that interview as soon as this scene began. That said, I'm a huge Patrick Fischler fan. I think he's a great actor. I love him, I don't know if you've seen him, he's done— if you look at his IMDb page, he's done like a million things.

HRISHI: Oh, he's always such a scary dude I feel like.

JOSH: Have you seen *Happy* on SciFi?

HRISHI: I haven't.

JOSH: It's incredibly great, I mean, if you're looking for recommendations out there, people, it's violent and crazy and out there and addled and marvellously original, but be prepared for that you're stepping into. Great show, I loved it, and Patrick Fischler plays an extremely odd character named Smoothie on it, and he's pretty fantastic, as is the whole show.

HRISHI: I remember him mostly from *Lost*.

JOSH: Yeah, sure.

HRISHI: But he introduces this subplot, which, to me, reminded me of Season 2, "The Fall's Gonna Kill You." Do you remember that one where there's a piece of a satellite that's hurtling towards Earth?

JOSH: It's pretty similar.

HRISHI: Yeah, and Donna says:

[West Wing Episode 2.20 excerpt]

DONNA: A Chinese satellite called Zodiac has fallen out of its orbit and will be falling to Earth at an unspecified time and place. This giant thing is falling to Earth. They're watching it on radar. Isn't there something we do?

JOSH: Like what?

DONNA: Like sound the alarm, I don't know.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And it's just— I understand it's different, one is an asteroid, and it's more dangerous-- it's a bigger thing, and in "The Fall's Gonna Kill You" it's a part of the satellite; it happens all the time. Donna just doesn't know how frequently this thing happens. But in both cases, you know, there is a sense of this thing is hurtling towards the Earth, and hey, look, everything's fine by the end.

JOSH: Yeah, especially in terms of it being a revisit to familiar terrain. You've got to take it to another place I think. It's gotta go somewhere else. I kept on wondering, first of all, it almost felt to me, first of all, as a sort of just clunky metaphor for the end or what's facing President Bartlet in that, you know, I kept wanting it to be more of a real plot rather than something that was I think, just a sort of sinister B or C plot that somehow heightens everything else that's going on. And then it just kind of fizzles out as these things I guess generally do. So, I kind of wanted either some bigger payoff in terms of learning how a government would deal with a situation like this. It turns out they deal with it mainly by treating it as if it's highly unlikely and that the people talking about it are just odd weirdos that you kind of have to...

HRISHI: Humor?

JOSH: Humor, yes, thank you.

HRISHI: Yeah, the idea of like a paranoid nerd coming in and, you know, warning of dangers, and you just have to sit through it is just... We also had Bob Engler played by Sam Lloyd. You know, this feels a little bit like Bob Engler redux, and we already had Bob Engler twice. Anyway, but so, it has that kind of a "Crackpots" vibe, this is like 'big block of— [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Big block of asteroid. There you go.

HRISHI: Big block of space.

JOSH: Really big block, yeah.

HRISHI: Yeah, they talk about the size of this thing.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

WALTER: It's 400 meters.

NASA ADMINISTRATOR: That's considerably smaller.

WALTER: Twice the size of the Astrodome. Gives new meaning to the phrase 'duck and cover.'

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought, "no, it doesn't."

JOSH: Meh, it's not a great joke.

HRISHI: It's not even a— like, it's in the clothing of a joke without actually being a joke. Like, there's nothing.

JOSH: Right, it looks like one.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: The one thing I did like about that storyline is, I liked that there's a certain point where President Bartlet is talking to Curtis about all the potential cataclysms that could come of it, and

he's so relishing it, and Curtis just looks stricken, which is funny. I liked the look on Ben's face, and I also just like this is like, that President Bartlet's enjoying it.

HRISHI: [Laughter] Yeah. Ok, back to the stuff I love. I found this whole thing about C.J. and Kate trying to give the president a way to let them know that he's tired or needs the bathroom really funny.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: It's sort of like 'the signal'. It's the other signal. It's like the much less cool signal.

JOSH: [laughter] Yeah right, exactly. Or um, my own personal— I've told this story, how's Grampy?

[Both laughing]

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

JOSH: I would have loved if President Bartlet had turned to the...

HRISHI: President Lian.

JOSH: President of, yeah and said, "so how's Grampy?"

[Both laughing]

HRISHI: C.J. swoops in...

JOSH: Translates it.

HRISHI: She says:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

C.J.: If you need to take a break at any time...

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I'm fine.

C.J.: Just— I don't know, tug on your earlobe or something. We'll make something up.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I desperately hope you're not serious.

C.J.: It's a three hour meeting; I'm gonna want to take a break.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Then you should tug on your earlobe, and this one'll make something up.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's great. But then later, the president is like... he is tugging on his earlobe, and he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: The plan was flawed.

C.J.: It was.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: Ideally, the recipient of the secret sign stays in the room.

C.J.: Yes.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I almost pulled my ear off!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The whole thing reminded me of the classic *Seinfeld* moment when they are trying to devise a way to help each other to get out of a terrible conversation at a party. In the episode "The Stranded", there's a great subplot about trying to come up with a signal.

[Seinfeld Episode 3.10 excerpt]

JERRY: Now listen, let's keep an eye on each other tonight in case one of us gets in a bad conversation. We should have a signal that you're in trouble so the other one can get us out of it. How about this: chicken wing? No, no, no... I got a better one! Head patting.

ELAINE: What have you been doing? I've been smacking myself senseless. People think I'm a mental patient.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [Laughing]

HRISHI: Basically the same scenario.

JOSH: Exactly the same scenario.

HRISHI: "I've been smacking myself senseless," Elaine says. It's the president's "I almost pulled my ear off."

JOSH: Probably where they got it from.

HRISHI: Yeah, I think so. There is a great thread in this episode between Leo and Josh trying to figure out what's going to happen, and I love the way that the two of them sort of debate Hoynes and Russell on the relative strengths and weaknesses of each candidate, and sort of what they're faced with, and then how they compare to Vinick, and that kind of analysis is exciting, and it feels really real. I just love hearing the two of them pick that apart.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

LEO: Sitting VP is gonna raise a lot more money, and he's in a position to offer a lot more favors.

JOSH: Hoynes is a guy without a job.

LEO: That said, Hoynes has much more experience in the job Russell holds. He was elected Senator of a huge and complicated and usually Republican state, and Russell got elected representative of a district the size of my thumb.

JOSH: Hoynes is smarter than Russell. He'll kick his ass in the debates.

LEO: And he's got more foreign policy experience. It could happen.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, I like that too.

HRISHI: And then the part where it gets, like, exciting and *West Wing*-y especially is when Leo says, you know, "The people who pick a candidate in the back room, that's us. That's us right now." And, this... it's so great.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

LEO: You pick your dream candidate yet?

JOSH: I don't know how all of this works.

LEO: You pick the smartest, most capable, most honorable individual you can think of, and you have a conversation.

JOSH: I can't pick up and leave the White House to go run a campaign for some dark horse I pulled out of a cornfield.

LEO: I did.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yup.

HRISHI: So good. I also appreciate Leo saying there are no stupid ideas and then walking it back because it's true, there are stupid ideas.

JOSH: There are many stupid ideas.

HRISHI: Another moment similar to your dripping contempt with Josh was a great little micro-performance moment on Gary Cole's face when Leo decides he's going to intervene in the cabinet meeting. The Vice President, when he goes, and he makes the announcement about the president's MS, he says that he's going to go speak to the Cabinet. Will has sort of set this up, not as an ambush, but like, not as a forewarning. He's just like, "I'm going to go meet with the Cabinet," and then, by saying that, it's going to look very weird.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

WILL: It's been announced. You don't think it'll be more awkward if it doesn't happen?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He's kind of forced the hand of the administration. Now, the Vice President gets to meet the Cabinet and do this very presidential thing.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: But so, their way to diffuse that is to put Leo in the cabinet meeting as well. And this exchange when Leo tells Russell that that's going to happen is really great. You know, he says "Mind if I join you?" and Russell just gives him this look, he says:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

LEO: Mind if I join you?

RUSSELL: Sure... That'd be great.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: There's a moment where the whole thing passes across Gary Cole's face, and it's beautiful.

JOSH: It's great. It's a good moment.

HRISHI: So the thing that I think that has been built up to the most that finally pays off here is Donna quitting.

JOSH: Mmhmm, yeah. This has been a multi-episode attempt to try to get his attention and have him to sit down and have a conversation with her. I wonder why actually-- I mean of course, there's payoff, there's an emotional payoff, but why has he-- he's been so dismissive for so long.

HRISHI: He's been much worse than usual. I think in some ways to motivate this change, but it might also be his own self-absorption, you know, like, he's had his own problems to deal with and his own fate. Between things that he screwed up in Season 5 and then now having to work for C.J., and everybody being like, what are you doing? What are you doing next, but he has been especially dismissive to Donna of late.

JOSH: Yes, even for him. Josh is usually pretty wrapped up in Josh, and he has a tendency to take Donna for granted.

HRISHI: What did you think when Donna finally tells him. Like, I actually think that despite all that, and the fact that we know that there's something brewing that he's ignoring, when she just lets it out, when she's like "I quit"? I actually cheered.

JOSH: Oh yeah, I was happy for her. It was definitely a 'you go!' kind of moment. And at the same time, I felt that, you know, although I was taking a little joy in it, she clearly isn't. Even though she's asserting herself, she also looks kind of stricken. That had to happen, and it had to happen the way it does.

HRISHI: Yes. There are two personal things that I thought of while watching this episode. In this one, there is someone who is close to me who was, at one time, in a relationship with a guy and cared for him very much and they had a plan that they were going to move in together. But it was important for her that before they moved in together that they would be engaged. And it was made clear with plenty of time for it to not feel like an ultimatum, I guess, though it was, I suppose. And the dude in this scenario was just like a really laid-back kind of guy, and it got all the way up to the point where it was time to move in. They were packing up stuff, and this person who was close to me was like 'this is not happening' and ended the relationship, and I was so proud of her for making that painful move. There was no joy in it, and I think it takes, yeah, it so much courage to make that decision on your own behalf, even though it's not something that you feel good about.

JOSH: That's a very apt story you shared because there is also a blurring as there is with all things Josh and Donna of the personal and the professional, and this feels like both a professional move. And I also like the moment when Josh tells Leo that Donna's leaving.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

JOSH: Donna quit.

LEO: Donna Moss?

JOSH: She's gone.

LEO: You piss her off?

JOSH: I don't know. She has a new job.

LEO: Good for her. See, I tried to tell you this, people move on.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: It feels a little bit like he's talking about a relationship break up, and then, Leo's response is good for her, that's great. People move on. That's how it's supposed to work.

HRISHI: Leo was so harsh, I think, actually because he says 'Donna Moss?' Like, who? come on... That felt like, just an extra...

JOSH: I actually liked that, it like that in a normal world, in a normal White House, the former Chief of Staff might have to take a beat for a second I mean. Rather than in this superhero, Avengers--

HRISHI: Right!

JOSH: Clique of--

HRISHI: We're all a family--

JOSH: People that are like a family to us. Yeah, I liked that part. [Laughs]

HRISHI: [Laughing] Right? Yeah, I loved that part. It really cracked me up, but it just felt like, especially painful to Josh in that moment.

JOSH: Right, well, that's what I liked, as he's hoping to get a little more out of it, and Leo's like, that's great. Good news. Good for her.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah, and he says, "like I said, people move on."

JOSH: Right, and I guess that's where the two plots I guess brush up against each other. Where Josh is having trouble with the concept of moving on. His response is, "Have you found your guy for president?" "I'd like Bartlet to have a third term." Josh has to realize that it's time for him to move on too. He has to figure out what his next chapter is.

HRISHI: The other thing from my own life that came up while watching this episode is that part when Russell says, "I was playing tennis, I couldn't believe my ears," and you hear him say it again. There was, I remember, a Christmas Party that I spent with the family of someone who I was seeing, and it was like a big extended family thing. But there was one guy who was there, and somebody arrived from out of town or something like that, whatever. And he was like "You're already here? Where'd you park the plane?" And then they came in, and I was still standing in the foyer four minutes later. I hear him say to someone else, "Where'd you park the plane?" Like the first was just a practice run.

JOSH: That's funny.

HRISHI: So then, I'll tell you where they parked the plane. On the tarmac... and the plane was Air Force One. And that's what you call, a segue.

JOSH: Nicely done.

HRISHI: Where'd you park the Segway?

JOSH: [Groans] You beat me to it.

HRISHI: Sorry, I should have let you say that one.

JOSH: That's a classic duck and cover.

HRISHI: [Laughing] For some reason, by the way, when Donna did quit, and I gave a little cheer, in my head I went, "Donna Martin graduates, Donna Martin graduates."

JOSH: Wow.

HRISHI: Do you remember that? It's from *Beverly Hills 90210*.

JOSH: Oooohhh, so you had a theme song to... with Leo in your head, and you had 'Donna Martin graduates' ...you're fixating.

HRISHI: And *Seinfeld*.

JOSH: By the way, Brad and Janel singing in the opening scene.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

[Singing 'Monday Monday' by The Mamas & The Papas]

JOSH: Monday, Monday...

DONNA: Nana... na na na...

JOSH: So good to me...

DONNA: Nana... na...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ooof. That was kinda fun.

HRISHI: [Laughs] I thought it was kinda cute. By the way, so after the President has his fall, and there's that incredible performance from Martin Sheen, he says, you know, "I'm not in the room, I can't do the job."

JOSH: Shades of Hamilton.

HRISHI: Right? But then he is able to talk his way into the room. And he managed to negotiate -- away from everybody else -- he manages to negotiate a way into multilateral talks that includes North Korea and China and Japan. And he's done this really deft bit of statesmanship, and he does it using the tactics that he had given his staff. You know, bring up the old president, and you can get some leverage because that's a sticking point for the new president. And he does it, and he manages to pull the whole thing off, and it's amazing. But I love how the toll from it is so high physically, like you know, they say:

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

ABBEY: *The president's made his choice Millie. He'll come out when he wants to come out.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And he's going to suffer the consequences. And then it turns out the consequences are pretty serious, and he has another attack after boarding Air Force One.

JOSH: The way they all kind of shuffle into that room on their own and the door closes behind them is very scary.

HRISHI: It is scary, but it gives so much energy to Josh's trip to Texas. It puts this pressure on the show to be like, 'Who is the successor?' We know it can't be Hoynes. We know that we don't believe in Russell. We don't feel about Russell the way anybody feels about President Bartlet, and so who's it going to be? And so, it's a great way to line those things up where you really are like, oh gosh, what is going to happen with this guy?

JOSH: Yeah, and beyond the single episode, it also feels to me as, indeed I think it was a show looking to reinvent itself and possibly to continue in a new way. You can almost feel the behind the scenes what's going on with *The West Wing* itself potentially coming to an end and looking for a way to extend and find new creative life.

HRISHI: Yeah. I'm sorry to bring yet another external cultural reference, but...

JOSH: Please do.

HRISHI: There's something akin to the new *Star Wars* movies in comparison to the old *Star Wars* movies. In *The Force Awakens*, which I enjoyed very much, there are a lot of storylines that are basically the same as in the first *Star Wars* movies. And so you kind of feel like, Ok, they're reinventing, and there are new things, but they are playing from a playbook that they know works, and they are tying it to the legacy in this way, and there's a little bit of that here. Like where Leo is Josh, and Santos is Bartlet. But I actually like it better here because we never actually got to see that stuff. We heard about it, we did see a little bit in flashback, right? But it was before the time of the show, and so now we're getting to see what that's really like in the present tense, and it's really cool.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: It's a smart way to reinvent yourself is by still taking some of the things that you know work, story beats that you know work and felt good, but you get to realize them for the first time

JOSH: Yeah, you're right.

HRISHI: All in all, a pretty good episode folks.

JOSH: Yeah, and suggest further good stuff coming.

HRISHI: Yeah, I'm excited. Let's take a quick break right now, when we come back we'll be joined by Ben Murray, Defense Attorney. But formerly he played Curtis Carruthers, the president's body man, and that will be coming up after this.

[Ad Break]

JOSH: Joining us now is Ben Murray who chatted with Hrishika and me from his office in Nebraska.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us, Ben.

BEN: Thanks for having me.

HRISHI: I was wondering if we could start at the very beginning. How did you first end up on *The West Wing*?

BEN: I had just come off a show. I think it was actually my first TV audition. It was a show called *American Dreams*. I ended up kinda being on it off and on for the three seasons it was on.

JOSH: It was a good show.

BEN: Yeah, it was great, I loved it, and it was a great experience. I had done a bunch of commercials before that, and my wife and I got married in June, and I was supposed to come back two weeks later for the start of season three. At the season finale of season two, I ran into a cave, and upon my return to Hollywood was informed that I wasn't in fact coming back out of the cave. So I was in a deep depression after my marriage, and it was not much longer after that I got a call. And they wouldn't tell me what it was at first. And then they said it was *The West Wing*, and I had to wear a suit. So I had to borrow a suit. They sent me the sides. It was the actual scene where I carried Martin off the plane was the audition scene.

HRISHI: Wow.

BEN: Yeah, that was the one. You probably don't know what it's like to be 6' 5" and 300 lbs, but wearing a suit without suspenders is a bit of a chore. So I borrowed a suit from a guy who's actually bigger than me. I went in for the audition, and I had to bend down and act like I was gonna pick somebody up, and I had my borrowed suit pants precariously perched on my love handles, and when I went to stand back up, man, I just lost them.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [Laughing]

BEN: So my pants fell off, and I caught them about mid-thigh, and I was just... It was just humiliating. But I just finished the audition. Well, I thought it was funny, so I kinda enjoyed it, but like, nobody even laughed. It was just like, stone-faced. It was just crickets in the room. And so I had a walk-on pass, so I couldn't even drive on the lot. So when I got off the lot, I called my agent, and I was like, "Yeah, that's not gonna happen. It literally could not have gone any worse." And he was like, "I don't know what you're talking about. They already called that was awesome they loved it."

HRISHI: Wow.

BEN: I don't even think I had a call back. I think I just got it. At that point, I still don't think I had a TV, so I mean I knew what the show was, but I didn't know how big it was. I didn't know how big a deal it was. It was crazy. I remember my agents were going crazy because they were trying to get everybody on it. And that's probably part of the reason I got it because I wasn't really overwhelmed by the whole thing.

JOSH: It does help to not seem overly hungry in the room when you're auditioning.

BEN: Right, I mean, it's— go in and play a big dummy. I'm the Marlon Brando of big dummy. I can hit that meatball out of the park every day of the week. I don't have a lot of range as an actor. I'm a one trick pony, and that one trick is what you see right here.

JOSH: Did you realize soon, once you started working on the show, did you realize it was a big deal? Were people psyched, the people around you?

BEN: Yeah, they really were, and I noticed immediately after the first one aired, the number of auditions I got really shot through the roof, and I shot two shows while I was shooting *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: So, in the audition you had to do the scene where you carried Martin Sheen. What was it like when you actually had to film that scene with Martin Sheen?

BEN: I knew going in that that was it. Even though that was the audition, I was actually in the episode before that so I had gotten to know him, and so we had already kinda talked about it. I had shown him on set the first day. He kind of just pulled me aside. He ended up being an amazing person, and I ended up spending Christmas with his entire family that year, which was odd too. I showed up on set, and he said, "What work have you done on this character?" And obviously I hadn't done any, and I was like, "Oh, you know, I've been working on stuff." He said, "Would you care if I told you what the backstory was? I don't want to step on your toes." I was like, "No man, I've got some ideas, but I want to hear you out." And he has this long story about how, first of all, he thought the character should be played by an African-American, but he was able to move past that. And then he said that he thought they brought me in to be the new Charlie because I had played football at Notre Dame, and he had this whole backstory. And so yeah, I just went with it. But the episode before, we did the scene where we carried him down the hallway of the plane on a stretcher, and that was actually physically harder because I like literally did not fit between the hallway of the plane. I was, like, too wide, and the other guy that they had on the other side, he was a pretty small guy because they had to shoot over his shoulder. He was doing none of the carrying, so that was harder. The day we did the shot where I picked him out of the chair, the actual carrying was not a problem. It was when I was picking him up over and over again because it was tough to reach down into the chair.

[West Wing Episode 6.09 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: You keep this up your arms are going to fall off. I hope somebody brings the damn chair.

CURTIS: I hope so too, Sir.

[end excerpt]

BEN: So, he kept a little bottle of that Evian spray water in his pocket of his coat, and between every shot, he would soak my face with this water. I'm like, "Man I'm at 100% sweat already. I'm really, I'm good. I'm really ok, you don't need to spray that." And every time he was like, "Oh this is gonna look great on camera." And he would call the makeup people in and tell them to dry me off in between. So it was this process of in between these people were coming and drying me off.

JOSH AND HRISHI: [Laughing]

BEN: They had like three different shirts for me because I was sweating through everything, and then before we would go, he would spray my face the whole time. I mean he really was-- he could not have been nicer to me. And we shot really late, we shot it up by Magic Mountain in Valencia. I think we were there probably almost, it seemed... I guess looking back it seemed like it was midnight, but I don't remember. He asked what I was doing, and I was just going to go home. He actually said, "Well, let's go stay at a hotel." And he rented a room for me at like a Hilton Garden Inn, which at this point I hadn't been anywhere but a studio apartment in either Chicago or North Hollywood in the ten years prior to this. So it was, you know, it was the first time I'd had cable in years, and I was able to just lay in this hotel with air conditioning and order a pizza and watch movies all night long, and it was just awesome. And he paid for the whole thing. Yeah, he was great.

JOSH: So, Martin Sheen I think had a little crush on you.

BEN: I think he, [cross talk] he treated me like a little street urchin he was taking under his wing. At one point, he was feeding me from his plate!

JOSH: [cross talk] He clearly liked you.

HRISHI: This gets better and better.

BEN: It was so embarrassing. So we're there, and then during one of these episodes, he asked what I was doing for Christmas, and I said I wasn't doing anything as my wife had flown to visit her parents in Texas, and he invited me to the Sheen/Estevéz family Christmas at Charlie's house.

JOSH: Did you have to sign a non-disclosure form?

BEN: It was— so, Charlie was married to Denise at the time.

HRISHI: Denise Richards?

BEN: Yeah, and they had just purchased a house from Kirstie Alley. The biggest house I've ever seen, and it was like a comedy sketch. Like, I pull up in my [expletive] Kia Rio, and they're like, "You guys can park around back." And I'm like, "I'm really not here to work. I was actually invited to this thing."

JOSH AND HRISHI: [Laughing]

BEN: So I got to talk my way into it, and then it's like, everybody's famous, and they're like, "Who's this guy?" And I have to say, "Your dad actually invited me to this thing." My wife wasn't around to cover me, and she told me to bring something nice, so I went to this bakery and bought like \$50 worth of these really fancy Christmas cookies. And so I nervously ate half of them on the drive to the house. And then, full sweat, I walk in and hand them this, and they couldn't have been nicer and said thank you and everything. Then about halfway through the party, I realize there's not another carb in this house. I'm the only person who's eaten a carb in ten years, and so I brought the worst gift possible. And at the end of the night, Martin pulls out all these pieces of paper, and he puts them in a hat, and he said, "We have to do the-- this is what we do every year. This is our Christmas tradition." So you have to reach in a pull out a piece of paper, and so I'm the first one to go, and there's no explanation for what this is, so I reach in and pull out a piece of paper, and it says 'four calling birds.' And I'm like, oh God Almighty... we're going to have to sing "The 12 Days of Christmas". And I'm four! So there's only three people who have it worse than me.

JOSH: [Laughing]

BEN: We sing the whole thing. It takes twenty minutes start to finish. I have to belt out 'four calling birds' because, you know, it's Martin Sheen. What are you going to do?

JOSH: It's a sweet tradition.

BEN: Yeah, I know, I was obviously never invited back so. But yeah, it was the greatest experience being on the show. He was so nice to me. Everybody was. Then I was gone. I left probably less than a year later. I left LA.

JOSH: Left LA altogether?

BEN: Yeah, I did *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* after this. I did a couple of episodes of that. And then I was on a show, I did a couple of episodes of a show called *Heroes*, which was just miserable.

JOSH: How come?

BEN: I wasn't enjoying myself. We had just had our daughter, and she was allergic to the frigging air in California. We were doing like eight nebulizers a day, and I went... I was supposed to sign up for a couple more episodes, and I went home. I just said to my wife, I was like, "Can I just be done with this?" She said, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Can I just leave?" And she said, "Yeah, you can leave! God, that's all I've ever wanted to do!" And then she said, "I should have told you this a long time ago."

JOSH: Escape from LA. Well done.

BEN: So that would have been the following November, I think, we left.

HRISHI: If you think you'd had better experiences like you'd had on *American Dreams* and *West Wing*, do you think you would have still felt like leaving at that time?

BEN: I just-- I don't think it was for me. I think that it might just be for some people because I kind of fell into it, you know? It wasn't, like-- I think it needs to be your dream to get through stuff like that. I think had it been my dream my entire life to be an actor and to be on television, I think that would have carried me through some of that stuff. And the stuff I was doing wasn't stuff I would really like, want my... Like *West Wing* is one thing, and even *American Dreams* was great, but a lot of the commercials, I was a fat guy with my shirt off talking about 'don't drink the water in Mexico' and making a fat face like this. I'm like, do I really want my kid to see that? Is that the legacy I want to leave? I don't know.

JOSH: Fair enough. So now the big question is, what have you done with your life since?

BEN: I went to law school. I'm a criminal lawyer. I currently have a death penalty case, which is the only one going in Nebraska now and the first one since the legislature overturned the death penalty. And then the fine voters of Nebraska decided that wasn't good enough, and they want the death penalty again, so here I am fighting for somebody's life. I guess the majority of the stuff I do is criminal defense. It's what I did all day today. I was in court today.

JOSH: Congratulations on raising the stakes of your life and the substance of your work.

BEN: It certainly makes me more interested. I don't sleep as well at night. But yeah, I mean, it's great, but it is very stressful. I do feel much more fulfilled now than I did when I was dancing around with my shirt off.

HRISHI: I'd like to think that, just like Martin Sheen invented a backstory for Curtis, we can also create an epilogue story for Curtis too, and in that he also becomes a defense attorney. I think you've really modeled something for Curtis too.

BEN: Yeah that's probably right. But the way I was playing Curtis, I think he only had a future in maybe throwing trash cans from the back of a truck. I'm not really one of those actors. I kind of just say what they put on the page. I don't really put a lot of thought into it.

JOSH: You and me both, my friend.

HRISHI: I think Curtis has some hidden depth. That's how I read the character.

BEN: So, I hadn't actually seen the episode. So I went back this last week and looked at-- I don't remember which one it was, but it's where there's an asteroid flying towards the earth, and the look on my face was actually me thinking-- and I remember it exactly, "What in the hell am I doing here? That's Martin Sheen telling me about an asteroid." I mean, there was no acting at all. It was just me thinking I'm from Deshler, Nebraska. What in the hell am I doing here with all these people who know what they're doing? And I'm just this moron here. None of that was acting. There was no depth in that. It was as honest as it comes.

HRISH: Ben, thanks so much for talking to us. This has been fantastic.

BEN: God yeah, thanks for having me on.

JOSH: You're my kind of actor, Ben. We're from the same mold.

BEN: Yeah, exactly. I don't miss it much, but *West Wing* was an amazing experience. I really loved it. Everyone that I met was nice.

HRISHI: Does it ever come up these days for you?

BEN: It's only ever come up in a case. I defended a kid I actually went to high school with. It came up in jury selection because one of the jurors just knew it, and so that's the only time it's ever come up in a case. So I think we just booted everyone who'd ever seen the show. It's a lot more stressful than acting ever was but probably not as much glory. The other upside to being on *The West Wing* was it was the first time I found out I was balding. When I was carrying him off the plane, they were gonna shoot from above and behind me. So I'm sitting in the makeup chair, and they have what was like a pepper shaker, they sprayed some stuff, and they were shaking. I said, "What are you doing?" Lady goes, "Oh, I'm covering your bald spot." I said, "What are you talking about? She goes, "We have to cover your bald spot." I said, "I don't have a bald spot." She was like, "Oh yeah you do," and she holds up the mirror. And if you look at that shot, everything from in front is me, but from the back, when you see the trucks and stuff, it's some skinny stunt man with like a dollar store wig on.

JOSH: Oh, no kidding.

BEN: It's the worst thing you've ever seen.

HRISHI: Huh...

JOSH: Wow.

BEN: So yeah, they shot that I think at the Burbank airport or something. It was a fun time.

JOSH: Awesome, thank you for taking the time to do this, and good luck with your case in June.

BEN: Thank you very much.

HRISHI: And that does it for this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. Thanks so much to Ben Murray for joining us. Thanks so much to you for listening to this episode.

JOSH: With the help of course, as always, of Nick Song, Zach McNees, and Margaret Miller.

HRISHI: And *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of fantastic, independent podcasts. You can learn about all of our shows at Radiotopia.FM.

JOSH: In the meantime, you can follow us on all manner of social media, and you can leave anything you'd like to say about the show on our website thewestwingweekly.com. It's not too late to give us a review on iTunes. I've noticed we're getting very close to 7,000 five-star reviews. I would like to hit 7,000, and if we do, nothing special will happen.

HRISHI: [Laughs] Speaking of unimportant milestones... We're also close to 100,000 followers on Twitter. That would be exciting.

JOSH: That would be fun.

HRISHI: If 3.1 thousand of you would join us on Twitter, that would be great.

JOSH: I've just passed a milestone.

HRISHI: That sounds painful.

JOSH: It was a little painful, but worth it, ultimately.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BEN: What's next?

[Outro Music]