

The West Wing Weekly
7.10: "Running Mates"
Guests: Matthew Del Negro

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Welcome back to *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about "Running Mates." It's episode 10 from season 7.

JOSH: This episode was written by Peter Noah and it was directed by Paul McCrane. What jumps to mind when you hear the name Paul McCrane?

HRISHI: I don't know.

JOSH: Fair enough. I'm just old. For me it's *Fame*. 1980s break-out film, *Fame*. He played "Montgomery."

HRISHI: I know the song from *Fame*.

JOSH: Huh. Sure. The one that goes "FAME"!

HRISHI: Mhmm. Yup.

JOSH: He sang multiple songs in *Fame*, and I think composed one of the songs that he performed.

HRISHI: No kidding.

JOSH: A very good actor; would become famous on *ER*. He has a long list of credits. But I remember being very excited to be directed by Paul because he played "Montgomery" in *Fame*.

HRISHI: Did you talk about it?

JOSH: Probably not. I'm a little shy. Paul is a great guy. Terrific actor, terrific director, and a lot of fun. Great sense of humor. I like him very much.

HRISHI: And he directed this episode, which is about the Vice Presidential debate, and Leo's performance as a debater. It might be terrible.

JOSH: The episode or [laughs] his performance?

HRISHI: The synopsis for sure and his performance.

JOSH: It's not a great episode I think. I'm not sure I'm willing to label it with "terrible" but this was the - maybe the first time altogether, but certainly in a long time that I didn't buy the premise.

HRISHI: You know, it's interesting, I didn't love this episode the first time that I watched it but then on subsequent viewings, I liked it a lot more.

JOSH: Oh, interesting.

HRISHI: Yeah, in the end, I think I like this episode.

JOSH: Wow, okay, well here's my problem and it's right at the top of the episode. As you say, the "A" story is about Leo underperforming, to put it mildly, in debate prep and the concern that raises among his team about what's gonna happen in front of the cameras. And the problem I have is in the opening scene, he actually seems to be dealing with a like possible bout - I don't know if you have bouts of dementia - but it's so, he's so off I mean was hard for me to, it's not like, he was having trouble speaking English.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LEO: I need um, now that's a good answer. I'm gonna need um, this broke thing, it's a trap isn't it? I'm just leading with, I'm leading with my chin here. These candies, pre-canned...can we take a break?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Leo in that moment, I felt for him because he sounded like I do on this podcast before we edit everything together.

JOSH: [laughing] That is not true

HRISHI: When he says: "health care in this country is broken and the Republican Congress' attitude is... seems to be? is?, Is is stronger." The amount of second guessing that he does is what is really relatable and astonishing. And I felt very seen in that moment where he can barely get to the end of his sentence...

[crosstalk]

JOSH: I don't think there's a comparison to be made there. But beyond trying to measure his tone or figure out how best to say it, he actually at one point he says "is it broke or broken?" That's just English. Like he's wondering whether he's supposed to say "the system is broke"?

HRISHI: It's because he's cuing up the line "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

JOSH: Right, but I don't know. It was weird, I kinda felt like all of a sudden Leo's like "wait, the system is doorknob? No broken." Wait which am I supposed to say? Like I'm like who is this guy? I mean what is he going through? And John, always fantastic, just kind of broke my heart. He seems so vulnerable and so out of his element, that I found it hard to buy. That feeling of stupefaction continued for me throughout the episode as he doesn't even necessarily seem to be aware of what happened because he wants to know from Josh, what did you think and they're all lying to him. The whole thing, I just found it hard to buy.

HRISHI: Well let me give you my theory on it. I can go along with your feeling of incredulity -

JOSH: Nice, it's synonym time.

HRISHI: Really for me it's the change, the delta in his performance between this first moment and then what we get at the end of the episode. He really is unable to complete a sentence here and then in the end he is relaxed, cogent, articulate, and you know does what he needs to do. But I buy, or I am willing to buy, the explanation that he gives Annabeth at the end, where he says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LEO: The truth?

ANNABETH: Yeah.

LEO: I was really that lost.

ANNABETH: Oh come on.

LEO: Couching answers and tame time-pressured soundbites and then when Josh...(fades out)

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think that is the thing that was really tricky for him. As Santos says in this episode:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: Every time you and I argue policy, you kick my ass.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I think that what's really tripping up Leo here is the stilted performance part of it. Even just when we watch the Presidential debate episode, those sort of last-minute reminders that all the staff were giving Santos, you know make sure you don't do this, make sure you do this, make sure you keep your answers like this, remember to say this. All those kinds of rules that they have to manage I think end up feeling paralyzing for Leo and he can't access all the information that he actually has and all the skill he has naturally as a speaker.

JOSH: Yeah, I think you're right, and I believe that explanation at the end, I just think they sort of would have arrived at that nugget of truth like 15 seconds into the cold open, where in his sort of charmingly irascible way, Leo would have said "I can't do this! I can't do it like this. I know you have pre-written things and you want me to hit that and whatever but I gotta be me." I don't think it would have taken this sort of first of all weird cloud of confusion where nobody really knows what's going on, including Leo himself, and they're ripping up tapes and pretending it doesn't exist. And he wants to see it to review it. I think he would have said you know after his first stumble and inability to kind of say a written line, he would have said "I can't do it like this, you know I'm good at this" I don't know. I just kind of didn't buy that it would take 45 minute of my time and however long it took in the universe of *The West Wing* to come to this realization. I

mean, I certainly felt that it was hurtling towards a very good performance by Leo and so I kinda felt like they took us to a fake place to give us what we would have ordinarily expected which is Leo...

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: Leo is sharp, he's good on his feet, he's confident and so I wish they had given us a realer, a more credible exploration of what's going on or why this wasn't working or why they would have been trying to box him in in the first place and trying to pre-package the stuff he was going to say.

HRISHI: I think you're right about that. I was filling in the gaps with this idea that the campaign is running at such a break-neck pace that they don't even have the time or even the luxury of time to be able to analyze what's going wrong. They haven't even had a moment to practice this until the top of this episode, this is the first time they're realizing what it actually might be like. But yeah, a couple of sentences definitely could have helped to say 'This has really snuck up on us. None of us have ever seen Leo in a public setting like this. We don't know what's gonna happen.' Something like that to reinforce it, I understand your misgivings.

JOSH: Yeah, and I'm not sure why Leo wasn't able to put his finger on exactly what was tripping him up.

HRISHI: Yeah. I totally understand what you're saying. And so, the first time that I watched this, I was very distracted by this part of it. I was distracted by sort of the plot mechanics of Leo's debate performance. And then this very clear idea that Leo himself has leaked his poor performance. You know, we dance around it for so long in the episode but obviously Leo is the one who has leaked that he is a bad debater to try and lower expectations and he hasn't told his own team. And why he hasn't told his own team, I don't know. But he's keeping it from them. The whole thing to me felt, the first time I was watching it, I just kept feeling like I'd seen this before, like it was a version, like a riff on the joke at the top of "Game On" from Season 4 when Toby you know is told that the President is having a crisis of confidence and then the President gives him you know the terrible answer in the White House and then...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right.

HRISHI: ...of course he's fine and you know Toby's like 'he's ready.' That's kind of like what Leo's doing to the entire staff. Somewhere along the way, he knows he's punking them.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah, right, exactly. A clever analogy that of course did not occur to me but I do feel the same way. Why didn't he just tell them, put them out of their misery or let them know. I kind of felt like Leo was respecting the 'no spoilers' for the people that are watching the show.

HRISHI: Right. Especially if he's gonna break into Annabeth's email account and use that to be, like what if she gets a follow-up call from one of the reporters that apparently...

JOSH: Yes, that could of very easily happened.

HRISHI: So I don't know why that part had to be secret, so I got really caught up in that and it just felt strange and yeah, like you said, we were being revved up for what was obviously going to be a fine performance by Leo. I actually like that he doesn't like blow the doors off the place,

you know, that in the end his performance is: good. That was actually the most satisfying part. Alright they didn't take it to this place where he comes out and he IS President Bartlett or something like that.

JOSH: You're right about that. That in a way is probably what most surprised me. I'm like okay, they, it was measured.

HRISHI: So, like I said, the first time I watched that, I was caught up in this and I didn't really think that I liked the episode that much. On subsequent viewings though, knowing how all of this stuff plays out, it kind of slid into the background a bit and I knew what was coming and it allowed me to appreciate some of the other details in the episode and I actually really love the details in this episode. There are a lot of great little moment and little lines and little exchanges that I found charming and amusing and just nice. So it's a thumbs up with caveats from me because it doesn't really feel fair to say 'yeah, when you first watch the episode, it's a little distracting and maybe not that great, but after the third time watching it, you really, really start to appreciate the great parts of it.'

JOSH: I regret now that I didn't beat myself senseless with multiple viewings. I've never had the anodyne effect where you just get numbed to the lesser aspects of the episode so you can enjoy the details of it. I'm looking forward to walking back through it with you now.

HRISHI: Yes, let's see if by the end of this I make you like it a little bit more. Before we get to the fun stuff though, we have to talk about the very sad stuff.

JOSH: Yes. The opening from Martin.

HRISHI: Yeah, Martin Sheen who is otherwise not in this episode delivers a pre-episode address:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

MARTIN SHEEN: Good evening. On December 16th, we lost our dear friend and colleague, John Spencer. Through our shock and grief, we can think of no more fitting memorial to this wonderful man, this extraordinary actor than to share with you, beginning tonight, the last few months of his work here on The West Wing. Johnny, it seems we hardly knew you. We love you and we miss you.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That was a difficult thing to watch. It also felt like, um, I guess I don't remember having watched that or that having been made or maybe I didn't watch it and maybe I never did. I'm sure I must have known that Martin was going to record a little statement. But it was just a weird blurring of something that's so personal but making it public. And I think it was the right thing to do to kind of acknowledge what happened and the fact we're still going to see him and to frame it as a tribute, I thought was sweet and a nice touch. But there was something that made me feel uncomfortable about the sort of public-private nature of what happened and how to share it.

HRISHI: Yeah. The whole thing is so sad and so strange that, you know just the way that TV production works, to have someone die and then say 'well we have several more weeks of their

work to show you.' I read that John Wells said in a press conference that there was in fact a debate about whether or not to air the other episodes as shot or if they should reshoot them and sort of try and re-frame them to account for what happened. And the decision was made to keep everything as it was filmed because that was the best possible tribute for John Spencer and what they thought he would have wanted. He made a joke, John Wells said: "If you knew John, I think he would have been upset with me if we had changed scenes like 'What, you're cutting my scenes kid? What are you doing that for?"

JOSH: I think it was an apt decision as anyone will tell you and people have told us, John was the consummate, he was the actor's actor and he loved it and he loved this role on this series. And I think the correct tribute was to share his work.

HRISHI: This whole episode feels just painted in tragedy and irony. Because the way that the episode and his death timed out, to make this announcement and say 'oh we're gonna continue on because showing his work is the best tribute' and then to have an episode that features Leo so heavily and I think some of John Spencer's best work in the series is included in this episode. It's remarkable that that's how things worked out.

JOSH: Yeah, and knowing that he would be gone so soon after this also I think probably colored the way I watched it. There's a fragility and frailty to him at times, to Leo, and it's hard not to imagine John himself frail and that may also be part of what took me out of this episode a little bit as a viewer.

HRISHI: It is hard to stay in the episode knowing what happens because there are all these discussions of Leo's health. The parallels between Leo and John Spencer are impossible to ignore and so every time they make a joke about Leo's health, it's tough and it's hard to stay in the story whenever any one of those lines come up. And there are several of them in this episode. At the very end, you know, when Josh is congratulating Leo for his performance, Leo says

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LEO: Just never make me do this again.

JOSH: In four years, book it.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's a line that's not meant to be ironic or anything other than congratulatory, but knowing what happened, and with Martin's introduction, it just changes the meaning of so many lines like that.

JOSH: Right. Inevitably, sure.

HRISHI: Yeah. This makes us sort of face an editorial decision on the podcast a little bit about how to do something in recognition of this moment as well. And what I think, and I hope our listeners feel this is appropriate, is address this more deeply later when the series addresses what happens in the actual narrative as opposed to right now.

JOSH: Mhmm.

HRISHI: So with that, let's get in to the actual episode. I think there are a lot of funny moments in this episode.

JOSH: Share some of them won't you.

HRISHI: [laughs] Maybe I was looking for gems? Maybe I was looking for pearls? What's the word here? Maybe I panning for gold. A little bit while I was - [laughing] see this is what I'm saying – I'm just like Leo. Oh God, are we gonna have to leave all of that in?

JOSH: I'm leaking the tape.

HRISHI: Yeah, okay, the first thing that made me chuckle was how high Bradley Whitford's voice goes up when Josh destroys the video tape and then tell Leo it was the only copy:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LEO: So what was the report?

Josh: Uhhhhh.....It was good, You know, some bumps.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: And all the times that the characters are trying to be nice to Leo in the face of how terrible he's doing cracked me up in this episode. I mean the way Janeane Garofalo has portrayed Lou is already so quickly and so clearly defined that yknow when she struggles, when it's up to her, when it's her turn to try and give some kind of positive reinforcement to Leo, we just know how much it pulls against the actual fibre of her being.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LOU: Okay, that was...good. You spent perhaps a little more time laying out the other side's position rather than your own and the language was a bit dense.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: She can barely get through it. I just thought her performance was fantastic there.

JOSH: Not to knock any of the performances and also not to be a constant downer throughout, but I felt like some of those - that was one of the better moments - some of that whole 'we're lying to you and the audience knows it, we all know it, but you don't know it,' it feels like a sitcom to me, a sort of stock sitcom situation and I don't love it. I've gotta feel like Leo's smart, he's sharp, he knows he tanked, he's not gonna believe you. Like I just kinda feel like now we're on *Friends*.

HRISHI: But I think on *Friends* Leo would believe them. But what we find out is of course Leo doesn't believe them. He knows exactly what's going on. Nobody is fooling anybody, least of all Leo.

JOSH: So why aren't they having a real conversation at this point? I mean this is a very high-stakes thing going on so why are they all just [expletive deleted] with each other. We're lying to him...

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's a really good question.

JOSH:...he's bullshitting us. Like instead of going like 'well here's what I think, I think I need to...'

HRISHI: What I love too though in the end though is there's like the little soundbite from the newscast that ultimately deflates the whole things by saying like 'well actually the stakes aren't that high'

JOSH: Well that's true too, you're right, somebody says it's a Vice-Presidential debate, come on.

HRISHI: Yeah. We treated it like it's this high stakes thing and they're like 'well'. And in the end he did a great job, which is to say nobody is running into the arms of the other candidates, it's fine.

JOSH: I know, that, I was like 'now you're calling out the part I was gonna give ya on credit. Like there was a little part of me from the beginning that was thinking 'it is just a vice-presidential thing, like why is everybody freaking out?' But I was like, okay that part I can buy, that lack of credibility, and then somebody calls it out later in the episode.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Who says Vinick's kids are approaching menopause? Was that Lou?

HRISHI: Donna says that:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

DONNA: Vinick's kids are approaching menopause, we wanna get them right...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh Donna does it, I thought that was a very funny line. I wasn't expecting that.

HRISHI: Why is that so funny to you?

JOSH: I mean it's just such an extreme way of making her point but it made me laugh. It just caught me off guard.

HRISHI: Yeah, okay. Here's a line that sent me sort of drifting into other thoughts away from the show. At one point Josh says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

JOSH: I need you to pretty for 20 million TV viewers.

LEO: That's what we're counting on? Campaign's doomed.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which I thought really sounded like something Leo would say, and I liked it, but the tangential path it sent my mind down on was one where I just thought about all the actors who have to play roles that in the world of the film or the episode or whatever it is that they're doing, they play a character who is supposed to be unattractive. Like where characters act or say things in a way that is supposed to be factually somehow that they are unattractive and you know juxtaposing that with being in a career where people are supposed to look at you and you have to get a job based on your appearance and things like that.

JOSH: You're vicariously bruised by that.

HRISHI: Exactly, when I just think about all the auditions and rejections, all the judgment, all the horrible stuff that goes along with being an actor in the first place. And then it's like you get the job, by the way your job is 'Ugly Man #2.'

JOSH: Yes, it does, it takes you out of the moment because you're feeling for - I have this, this is I guess like a corollary- I don't like when little little kids are crying in scenes because I'm like 'That kid is actually crying.' That kid, they shook him around or something or they waited like 'he's upset, he's upset, let's roll, let's go!' I'm just like that kid is really upset and it takes, even though it heightens the verilitude of whatever's being done, it takes me out of it because I feel bad for the kid.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I do have a similar thing when people are called upon to you know somehow shame themselves or are shamed in the scene for something physical.

HRISHI: Yeah, I remember watching an episode of *Insecure* and you know there's a double date, like a blind date that gets set up and one guy comes in and he's like really hot and he's you know set up with one friend and then the other friend gets this other guy and she is visibly disappointed at, with his looks. And that's sorta like that's the rest of that part of the episode, and I just thought like what a heartbreaking way to have like a professional win.

JOSH: And I'm sure in total, it's so hard to get work that - I know I'd play 'Super Ugly Guy #2' in a second, happily, but yeah, I do get your point.

HRISHI: Yeah, anyway, back from my tangent, that line is all made up for for me in this episode by the fantastic dynamic between Leo and Annabeth in the whole episode. It took me a little while to figure out how she fits into this, you know what the groove she fits into in this machinery

of the show but once they paired Annabeth and Leo together, it really came together for me. I love their chemistry.

JOSH: I liked the smirk scene, I don't like when it gets playfully faux-sexual. That's not my favourite of their kind of interactions. But I did like her kind of man-handling his face and it was also, I thought Peter Noah- Leo I mean John has a sort of twinkle in his eye kind of smirk that's kind of just great. It's hard for me just not to imagine John with that smirk. I like that they built a whole scene around her advice around it. I thought it was kind of right on and it was a charming scene between the two of them.

HRISHI: I want you to break down your uncomfortableness with the flirtatious elements to their dynamic.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

ANNABETH: Hey, look at me. Gorgeous.

LEO: Oh get her away from me.

ANNABETH: Man cannot take a compliment.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh sure, you know it's like when a waiter comes over to an older person...

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH:...why are you laughing already? Your laughing is making me laugh. Why is this funny?

HRISHI: It's already funny, I'm just, I'm okay, you keep going.

JOSH:...when waiter walks over...

[both burst out laughing]

JOSH: Is it just the service industry that's funny?

[laughter continues]

JOSH: A waiter will walk over to an elderly gentleman and say 'And what will you have young man?'

HRISHI: Oh wow.

JOSH: It's like she's saying 'I'm getting hot looking at you' and this is funny because I'm not.

HRISHI: But she IS, It's already been established. You know Leo suggests...

JOSH: [crosstalk] I didn't buy it in the elevator, I don't buy it in the debate prep room.

HRISHI: I like it

JOSH: When I'm older, and I'm talking 5 to 7 years from now, and someone comes over and says 'What would you like to drink young man?' There's gonna be some fisticuffs.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I'd like to drink your blood.

HRISHI: Fair enough. I don't liken in the dynamic here to that one. If you'd like to punch out a waiter, for calling you 'young man' I'm not saying I approve, but I understand. But I don't think that's what's going on here. I think that uh...

JOSH: [crosstalk] So you think there's an actual sexual vibe between these two?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: Alright.

HRISHI: I think that Leo is clearly feeling awkward about it and teased by it and I don't know that he would necessarily say that there is, but Annabeth has put it out there previously that there is and she's just like leaning into it. Where I take exception to your metaphor or your analogy is that the waiter says to the older person 'What will you have young man' it's a joke because it's not true. But what Annabeth is saying is 'your smirk can be devastatingly sexy in the right context' and I think yes, clearly. John Spencer has so much charisma and is a handsome dude and that look and his energy absolutely could be devastatingly sexy. I wouldn't say she's being patronizing or joking.

JOSH: Alright, we'll leave it at that.

HRISHI: [laughs] He's a charmer I think.

JOSH: I certainly found John Spencer charming and find Leo charming. That I'll sign off on.

HRISHI: Alright. I don't mind being teased by women in this way. Like a woman teasing me saying that I'm handsome when I know that she's joking, it doesn't totally bother me because there's some part of my mind that gets to live a little bit in the fiction that she might not be joking.

JOSH: Huh.

HRISHI: And just that little imaginary space, that lives somewhere between the reality of everything, feels...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Well I can understand if you're actually not sure then it would be a little bit titillating and you can lean toward 'she probably means it' but if you *know* she doesn't mean it, you might as well when someone says 'hello' live in the fiction that they said 'hey you're handsome oh ooh wah wah'

HRISHI: Josh, let me tell you a little something about my...

[Both laugh]

JOSH: Is that what hello means to you? I had no idea. Okay, fair enough. "Getting to know you..." [sung]

HRISHI: Okay, speaking of being on camera, here's a part of the episode that I did not like and not because I thought that it was not done well, but because I just didn't like it. I actually, I found myself feeling a little bit resentful of the episode for having introduced the subplot in the first place, again not because it was done badly. But, there is a storyline here where there's a photo op gets set up by the Santos campaign. When the candidate arrives home, he greets his children outside of his house, the press can see, they take pictures, it's gonna be great. Except it backfires. So to speak.

JOSH: Well done.

HRISHI: This plotline bums me out. So to speak.

JOSH: But...so to speak. Yeah, I didn't love it either. Starting from when Santos gets out of the car knowing there's a photo op and still whistles at his kid like he's a dog.

HRISHI: And the kid runs over and they had to actually make a kid run to do that.

JOSH: That's right. Which I find heartbreaking.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I won't have it.

HRISHI: Just to recap. Do the recapping part of this in the middle of this sweet, charming, though staged scene, you know that mixes the genuine and the artificial. At one point, you know the kids are sick, Helen wipes their son's nose and the cameras take a picture of - oh Jesus, I don't even like saying it, you know, I don't even like talking about it.

JOSH: Do you not wanna say 'thong' is that it?

HRISHI: I just don't like talking about the whole thing. Anyway, yeah so, they take a picture you know that you can see her underwear, you can see that she has a tattoo on her lower back. They take a picture of it and then a tabloid prints it. And though this tells a story of the world that is *accurate*, I think, one that is grimy and cheap and horrible, I turn to the *West Wing* for a respite from that kind of griminess.

JOSH: You know, I'm with you. It's interesting. In fact I was watching the episode in the kitchen, at the kitchen table on my laptop with my wife puttering around the kitchen behind me and I was heckling a little bit here and there and I started to, I verbally laid it on, I think for the same reasons right then, I was saying 'oh no, this is what the story is?' And I think I felt the same way, you articulated it better, I just had a negative reaction, but I think that is what it was. You are

right that it's spot on the kind of thing that might well happen, even the insert shot of the whatever tabloid page itself - the way they had it magnified, zoomed in on the underwear is exactly what they would have done. That kind of thing does happen all the time. But I think you're right, it took us to a place I'd rather not go when I'm watching *The West Wing*. But maybe that's unfair. But I think I also was turned off by the storyline.

HRISHI: Right, I mean the reason that the *West Wing* has the reputation that it has is because it portrays things you know perhaps the way that we wish things were and not necessarily as they are. This was a storyline that felt very much like the way things are, you know it reveals a misogynistic double standard that exists and the absolute injustice of the kind of scrutiny that spouses of candidates have to undergo despite not being the one who's actually running for office. All this puritanical garbage like, hypocritical puritanical garbage that this country is seemingly obsessed with.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

BRAM: It's trash journalism, the lowest kind of tabloid stuff. This'll backfire.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think the idea of a plotline that shows the kind of specific scrutiny that a candidate's spouse gets would have been interesting. This is not the one that I wanted to see.

JOSH: Yeah, I think fair enough. Ultimately, you and I are very cultured, sophisticated gentlemen and we found it a bit vulgar. I think that's the bottom-line right there.

HRISHI: Oh jeez. So to speak.

JOSH: So to speak.

HRISHI: Okay, that said, I thought that the actual substance of this grimy plotline was handled well. I especially liked the way that Teri Polo performed this entire episode.

JOSH: I agree, I thought it was a terrific performance and I also thought it was interesting that the immediate reaction that Peter Noah gave her in the script was to be speechless.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

HELEN SANTOS: I guess this is speechless.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I thought that was kind of great, it was great writing and a terrific performance. She just, I felt horrible for her. The humiliation that she was now going to have to face. And I thought it was handled very well.

HRISHI: I especially liked how it's contrasted with the kind of outrage that she was able to have before this happened. You know when the grievances were about the extra security and the long hours and all the things, all the unfair things that go along with just running for office that a

family has to endure, she had a little mini rant with Santos talking about all of this stuff. But then when the focus shift to this instead, her reaction is not to be outraged, it is really like she withdraws and gets quiet and like resigned in a way that is really effective and so heartbreaking.

JOSH: Yeah, I agree. And then I also found it interesting, sort of along the lines of 'eh it's a vice-presidential debate, it doesn't matter anyway' line, Donna kind of had a little bit of a figurative slap on the face:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

DONNA: The option to be left alone took a hit when the Congressman signed on to run and pretty much got obliterated once he gained the nomination. It'll be a distant memory when he wins this thing. Might be time for you to start talking about the kind of First Lady you want to be. I'd like to help you with that if you'll let me.

HELEN: I can't tell you what kind of First Lady I'd like to be. Too busy deciding if I want him to win.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah. That was great. We talked about the smirk scene with Leo. I actually think the best smirk of the episode goes to Jimmy Smits when he and Helen are having this exchange where she's upset about all the additional security and she's talking about the barbeque and how her mother had to wear an ID tag:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

HELEN: My mother had to walk around tagged like she was some kind of threatening wacko.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Slightly out of focus behind her, Jimmy Smits actually has a great smirk for a second until Helen says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

HELEN: If you're considering this and opportunity to crack a mother-in-law joke, you are seriously misjudging the mood of your audience.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This is one of the details that later I really, really appreciated. How their dynamic as a couple in this moment, Santos lets the silence kind of sit for a second and when he comes back and he says "oh I had a real good one," she actually laughs. Like she knows that they're okay. And then my favorite thing is the way Jimmy Smits delivers the next line where he just says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: Too late.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: They're a very credible couple, I agree.

HRISHI: And then he says, "I'm sorry." And as we mentioned in a previous episode that we were here for all your marital advice, unasked for marital advice, I'm just gonna say this is some great marriage work done here. And all married people could learn something from this scene. And the effectiveness of him listening to her, keeping his mouth shut, making a little joke when he knows the timing is right, and *then* giving her a sincere apology.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: A sincere apology is gotta be the most valuable currency in a relationship, dontcha think?

JOSH: Yes, I do. I'm working on it. I'm working on it.

HRISHI: And then we get Leo dispensing with some marriage advice, and I love that too where he says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LEO: My best advice, don't get on a plane angry.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But then also the irony of someone who's been divorced giving marriage advice. And does that make it better or does that make it worse that he's divorced.

JOSH: I think that phone call was my favorite scene of the episode.

HRISHI: Yeah!

JOSH: There's something about it, that just the tone of it they got just right. And the writing and the performances. And I thought it was just, it was sweet, it was charming, it was a moment away from the hectic nature of the campaign. And I felt like oh these two guys really like each other.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I wanted to see that.

HRISHI: Yeah, me too.

JOSH: And they see some value in each other and they can have this just kind of personal moment. I liked it a lot.

HRISHI: Me too. I loved the evolution of their relationship that this scene allows us to see. You know from that moment where Josh had been trying to get them together in the beginning of this season where they didn't know each other yet and Josh knew that if he could just get them to sit down and just talk a little bit, they'd find common ground. And now all these weeks later, you can see the fruits of that labor in this scene.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: One other detail in that scene between Matt and Helen Santos I really like Helen's earrings in that scene. They're very nice.

JOSH: Hmm, I didn't notice.

HRISHI: She's got that beautiful dress on, very nice earrings, and then we find out in this conversation that she didn't actually even get to go.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: She got all dressed up for that and she didn't even go to the event because she had to stay home with their sick kids.

JOSH: That's right. I had that Lou - in true Toby fashion - says...

HRISHI: I know what you're gonna say!

JOSH: Go ahead.

HRISHI: It was the next thing that I was gonna bring up myself actually. She says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

LOU: And you don't sound like you could care less.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Lou, oh Lou. I almost felt like the podcast has just come full circle and we should just stop here.

HRISHI: Lou, in fact, it is Josh who could care less about your misuse of couldn't care less.

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: How about Will and Kate speaking of some-

JOSH: Eh, I don't know. I didn't enjoy my performance in this episode. Maybe I was just so tuned out that I wasn't enjoying the experience altogether. But uh yeah, I didn't find me charming at all. [Hrishi laughs] I'm glad she did.

HRISHI: I didn't actually say that I did yet Josh.

JOSH: No, no, no, I'm not suggesting that you did. I'm suggesting that *she* clearly did.

HRISHI: Oh, *she* did. Oh I'm sorry sorry sorry.

JOSH: Yeah, no I'm saying she seems rather taken with him. He's doing well. I don't get it, I don't see it. Although I did, when we finally had the meal itself and when he had his candlelight and the takeout food and they were gonna watch the debate and I like that Peter had him refer to it as a first date and she picks up on that and he says 'hey I'm an optimist.' I was like okay now we're cooking, I can see a little appeal. But for much of it I was like meh, I don't know.

HRISHI: I like that scene because it was one of those moments that I've mentioned on the podcast before, where something in the physicality of you switching salads with her I saw a little bit of Josh Malina in that Will Bailey action.

JOSH: There were some, now I forget what you call it now. There was a little...

HRISHI: [crosstalk] ...cheap thrills

JOSH: There are some very minor cheap thrills. You had to look closely for it, there's a little twirl. A little utensil handling.

HRISHI: Yup.

JOSH: A little, yeah, a little flipping of the lid of the salad. Thank you for noticing. I appreciate that.

HRISHI: I notice it because I do think that you know you really have created a character that is separate from you in Will Bailey. I mean between the writing and your performance, I never look at the show and think 'oh that's Josh being Josh,' I recognize that as Will Bailey. And the reason I know that is because every now and then there are these moments where I see something and I'm like 'that's not just Will, that's Josh right there.'

JOSH: There's the Venn diagram, there's the overlay.

HRISHI: Exactly, it's not just the face.

JOSH: That's right. What else? Oh yeah, let's not just rush past the salads. I had two problems with this salad. First of all, they looked identical to each other...

HRISHI: They did look identical!

JOSH: I was like 'those are two of the same salads...' and if it's Carciofi, where the [expletive deleted] are the artichokes?! 'Cause I didn't see an artichoke.

HRISHI: Nope.

JOSH: That looks like a very, very basic salad and it looked like 'I'll take two of your most basic salads' so this is a big date.

HRISHI: Yeah it really was a lack of detail in the salad design there.

JOSH: A little bit. It's like props, what the hell? They're exactly the same. You know it is nice to say, 'oh this looks better? Please, you take it.' But not if it's the same thing! [Laughs]

HRISHI: And neither of them is the thing that has been described.

JOSH: What they're purported to be in the first place! Exactly.

HRISHI: Which is funny because there are some details in the props in this episode, one that I will mention is in that tabloid that you talked about with the insert, there is a piece of text at the bottom of the page that says 'we'll take you "behind" the scenes with Helen, an exclusive interview with the lady in red,' which made me laugh because: one, they bothered to put the like dumb pun in the tabloid, but two, how did that tabloid get an exclusive interview with Helen Santos?

JOSH: I think they're lying. [laughter] That's very funny. I think there's a Gene Wilder movie, *The Lady in Red*, so maybe it was the actress from that. Just a little bait and switch, misdirection.

HRISHI: With the Will-Kate stuff, one thing that cracked me up was that there are two scenes in this episode that end with a lingering shot on *your* face. Like it goes the cute back and forth, it's very quick and quippy between the two characters and then both times, Kate says something and then we end with a reaction shot on Will that lasts like a little too long and is like slightly goofy and weird. No offense.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: I think it's how Will is reacting to it and it seems genuine, but it felt funny when it happened the second time.

JOSH: Yeah, maybe just the terrible mistake in editing.

HRISHI: It also felt like a repeat of - like it's become a little trope between them - because when Kate asked Will to the wedding, and she says 'Do you have a tux? Do you wanna go to the wedding with me?' Will does not actually answer, he didn't say 'yes'

JOSH: That moment was held a little bit too long. I felt the same way.

HRISHI: It was held... on your face. So I think watching this episode after that episode, I was like every time there's a little cute flirty moment between the two of them, the botton though that Poonam is 'as cute as a button'

JOSH: It needed a real button. I agree with you.

HRISHI: It's always just a 'and now Will looks surprised and happy and flummoxed and cute'

JOSH: Yeah, I don't love those moments either. I'm sure I didn't love playing them and I didn't love the end result there. And you're right, it's also like 'okay, we've done this.' Vic has one of

those in the previous episode where Debbie Fiderer is offering him different drinks and he says 'no, no, no', and she says 'do you want a valium?' and it just kind of holds on him, maybe a beat too long. Although there's all this little comic payoff in

HRISHI: ...maybe he does want a valium?

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Another moment I liked in this episode is when they're doing the second round of debate prep with Leo, and Otto, who is subbing in for Ray Sullivan, and in the first round was fantastic, vicious and really kind of went for it, basically mopped the floor with Leo, gets told by Josh 'hey, remember we're trying to build confidence so hold back a little.' And then immediately Lou says 'this is only useful if it's real, don't hold back.'

JOSH: I liked that too.

HRISHI: And poor Otto has to deal with both pieces of conflicting information and you can see he doesn't know what to do with it. And I just thought that was cute.

JOSH: Me too.

HRISHI: Okay, here's another piece of the episode that I really liked and felt tragically connected to.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: This scene: when Josh accuses the rest of the team of leaking Leo's debate performance, Lou says 'I haven't spoken to a friend in two months' and Annabeth says 'I don't think I have any friends left' and Ronna, my true soulmate in this scene says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

RONNA: All my friends are in this room.

LOU: Okay, you win most pathetic.

[end excerpt]

[Hrishi & Josh laughter]

HRISHI: That was great. Josh, Watson, all my friends are in this room. And Josh, you aren't even in this room!

JOSH: Awe.

HRISHI: I appreciated that there was a moment in this episode that sort of set things up. There's a moment of exposition in the Vinick headquarters talking about Leo's status as a possible debater. And for some reason I really liked it, I think because of where it appeared in the episode, you know about 16 minutes in Sullivan says:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SULLIVAN: McGarry is verbal and tough. It's one thing to argue behind the scenes, it's a whole other ball game doing it in debate setting.

SHEILA: Concerned about presentation, tone...

SULLIVAN: Clarity.

SHEILA: ...concision.

SULLIVAN: It's hard enough for veteran politicians let alone a neophyte like McGarry. Leo's no neophyte.

SHEILA: Being a candidate he is.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: If that exact same scene had appeared in the cold open, or even like whenever at the beginning of Act I, it would have felt clunky and you know DJ Exposition-ish. But where it fell is sort of like all these things had been established in some ways and here they were just kind of putting a finer point on it and it felt like a real conversation that could exist between these characters.

JOSH: Interesting point, yeah. I agree.

HRISHI: Is this working at all? Are you liking the episode any more or, as I talk about all these scenes, did I like...

JOSH: No.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: But I'm enjoying our chat.

HRISHI: [Laughs] You know there is this other thing running through this episode which is that Santos is kind of handling his kids from a distance for the most part, for the majority of the episode.

JOSH: Doesn't wanna get sick.

HRISHI: Yeah. And Helen kind of gives him a hard time about it but I appreciated his concern.

JOSH: As did I.

HRISHI: I was talking to Maggie Rogers, singer-songwriter Maggie Rogers, who was on *Song Exploder* a while back, I was talking to her recently and she was saying part of her job is to not get sick. And she's absolutely right. In addition to writing songs, and then travelling and performing them in concert and doing press and stuff, when you're on tour you have to take your health as seriously as any other aspect of the job.

JOSH: Absolutely. I know plenty of actors who are almost hypochondriacal in that sense and certainly singers and musical actors are very serious about their instrument and their voice. And if you're doing a show in New York, it's eight episodes a week so yeah, and I think if you're a presidential candidate. I don't think Bernie took very good care of his voice leading up to this most recent democratic contender debate

HRISHI: The rasp heard around the world.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Because all the gears suddenly grind to a halt if you have to take a day off or something like that

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: So I appreciate it.

JOSH: I was with Matt on that one too.

HRISHI: But by the end of the episode you can see that his differences having worn away, much like an immune system after too much travel. so I think you see in a couple of instances. In one, he goes to try and comfort his daughter when she says she's sick even though she does not want him

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: What's wrong Angel?

SANTOS' DAUGHTER: I want mommy!

SANTOS: Okay...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But then also I thought It came through a little bit in his reaction to his clearly very annoying brother.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: His brother shows up and wants a favor.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS' BROTHER: Listen I invited over a couple business associates for drinks and a photo. Think we can get it past your stormtroopers?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The whole thing sounds sketchy but I think the Santos has been so burdened by his own sense of guilt about what he's done or not done for his family, what inconveniences he's caused for them, that sort of stuff that when this request comes in, he just says all right.

JOSH: Yeah, he has been ground down.

HRISHI: And poor Bram is the one who has to deal with it.

JOSH: Oh yeah. we're going to talk to Matthew Del Negro later this episode. We'll get his take on his whole experiences. This is not Bram-centric particularly, a Bram-heavy episode but we'll talk to Matthew about his *West Wing* experience all around.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's not Bram-heavy, you wouldn't say it weighs a kilo-Bram.

JOSH: Nice! I was trying to work my way towards that but I couldn't remember how many brams are in an ounce. 28? Is it 28? I haven't sold drugs in so many years, I couldn't make the joke.

HRISHI: I was gonna say that maybe the FBI is listening but you know there's a chance that somebody from the FBI is listening. I thought the brief but excruciating scene of Santos trying to just go get his mail was very effective.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SECRET SERVICE AGENT: Sir, did you want to go somewhere?

SANTOS: I've just gotta get the mail.

SECRET SERVICE AGENT: Of course sir, we'll just need a few minutes to shut down the street.

SANTOS: To walk to the mailbox?

SECRET SERVICE AGENT: Anytime you go into the front yard

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, but I didn't believe that that hadn't happened before. This is his last visit home, he's never had this mail moment?

HRISHI: Maybe he hasn't been home since winning the primary.

JOSH: I don't know, maybe it's just another subplot that kind of was a little bit weak for me because I felt like yeah, they should be used to this already. Yes, you have to have a bunch of people whose job it is to keep you safe and alive and yes, it's a bummer.

HRISHI: But the part that I liked the most from that was the fact that they have to shut down the entire street. It's one thing for Helen to complain about the inconvenience and the toll that it takes on the family because that's at least a decision that a family can make together when someone decides to run. But the burden that it puts on just his neighbors who happen to live on the same street as them is something that I had not thought about yet.

Yeah, that's true and Helen has a funny line

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: Guys with dark glasses...

HELEN: Are you kidding they now live on the safest block in America.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: But I like that spotlight. I hadn't considered it. It was this little moment that did it for me

JOSH: And I like the hand signals that the Secret Service guys started to give and then you saw people in the far background start to run off, it was well done. Yeah, well done Paul McCrane.

HRISHI: Another cute exchange I thought was the phone call between Josh and Toby:

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

JOSH: I'll talk to you in 6 weeks

TOBY: Election day?

JOSH: I forget. In DC, they let felons vote? Too soon?

TOBY: Just a little bit. See ya.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Richard Schiff is so good that you know that he knows that Josh is joking. You also know that he really means it when he says that it's just a little bit and then he but he's still also smiling when he says see ya, like there's so much layered in that little tiny bit of dialogue between these two characters and friends.

JOSH: Yeah, yeah you're right. I like that.

HRISHI: I love that.

JOSH: I was glad they were still speaking.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. I mean and that too that made me feel happy that things have continued to get better for them from their confrontation at Toby's apartment and round one of that. Also on *The West Wing* you can say asshole?

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

JOSH: Alright, I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to you. Last time you were a more than usually asshole.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes, they did say asshole.

HRISHI: I don't like that either.

JOSH: [Laughs] I'm offended.

HRISHI: Speaking of puritanical garbage, [Josh laughs] I did not like that. Here's the thing, I didn't like in the most nitpicky of ways.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Josh calls Toby on the day of the vice-presidential debate. It has previously been established in the episode that the VP debate is happening on a Sunday. Toby is in court, a busy courthouse saying he's in between arraignments.

JOSH: On a Sunday. Look at you.

HRISHI: How is he doing that on a Sunday.

JOSH: Good bust. That's a good bust.

HRISHI: Thank you. Just make the VP debate on Monday,

JOSH: That's all you have to do.

HRISHI: All you have to do.

JOSH: Or, just have a little 'Open 24/7' neon sign somewhere in the background at the court.

HRISHI: There's a great moment where Santos is sort of hyping up. He's doing the opposite of lowering expectations.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

SANTOS: I have every confidence that when Leo McGarry challenges Ray Sullivan on the issues, he's going to show that the Vinick campaign so-called sensible solutions are neither sensible nor solutions.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought that Linda Richman, Coffee Talk with Linda Richman. Anybody who does not know, you must know, on SNL we have some young listeners they might not know. On *Saturday Night Live*, Mike Myers used to do this character Linda Richman and sometimes Linda Richman would talk about something get upset you get verklempt and then she'd try to recover, she would give the audience something to discuss. She's like talk amongst yourselves, she'd give you a topic, and then would say something like Dr. Pepper was neither a doctor nor pepper. Discuss. And the peanut is neither a pea nor a nut. There's some good ones Ralph Feines is spelled neither Rafe nor Fines.

JOSH: You did your research.

HRISHI: The one that immediately came to mind was the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire. Discuss. Which is actually a reference to Voltaire.

JOSH: What?

HRISHI: Uh yeah. So layers on layers in that one.

JOSH: Yeah, indeed.

HRISHI: So yeah, Santos was channeling a little Linda Richman. I think the best part of the Helen subplot grimeiness and all is the moment that it provides for Donna who by the way has shown in this episode she is so fully integrated in the top tier of this campaign.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: It gives her a moment to reach out and help Helen craft this sense of identity for what kind of First Lady she might be something that they haven't talked about before and I thought that was awesome. I love that Donna you know seized that opportunity, I mean she's been doing very well throughout the whole episode you know and she's doing a great job on the campaign, but here now she's able to carve out territory for herself that no one has staked so far and really you know it's been a missed opportunity up until this point. I mean like you said, I like that exchange between them when Helen says well I'm not running for president and she says with all due respect, we both know you're not that naive.

JOSH: Yeah, it's a bit on iron fist in a velvet glove moment which I liked.

HRISHI: Yeah, I just, I think Donna is fully a badass and she's using her experience and her instinct to their fullest power here and really helping.

JOSH: Right on. We're gonna take a quick break now for a few ads and then we're gonna hop back on the mics and talk to Matthew Del Negro.

[Ad break]

MATTHEW: Hey this is Matthew Del Negro, I played Bram Howard from Venezuela

[laughter]

MATTHEW: I heard that too, and I was like, that one, when it came out in the script I was like really?

HRISHI: What is your family background?

MATTHEW: Italian. 100% Italian. So it was fine but I remember being like Bram? Bram sounds so WASP-ish. It doesn't sound Venezuelan.

HRISHI: Everything about that line was surprising.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

BRAM: It's all about the dinero.

SANTOS: That's money right?

[end excerpt]

MATTHEW: I liked how you guys kid of roasted it. I've gotta tell you, it was very interesting to watch. I had not seen *The West Wing* in a long time. It was like wow, that's uh that was the job that brought me out to LA so there was a lot revved up in it and then also I didn't really have very much to do.

JOSH: So wait, you booked this from out of town?

MATTHEW: Yeah, I actually booked this, I was out here for pilot season and I went in for what I thought was going to be a guest spot. Jason Ensler was directing. Eli had written the episode. It was "La Palabra." Went in, I didn't feel particularly good about the audition actually. Like I kind of came out like ah that's too bad and then got it. Went to the fitting and met Phillip Hayman who was working on Lynn's team.

JOSH: I remember Phillip.

MATTHEW: And he was like during the fitting like you get a lot of information. He was like, you should really be good because I think they're kind of auditioning people to do this who you know the storyline on the campaign trail or whatever and I was just I was scared [expletive deleted] to do the show and I was so prepared and then "La Palabra" - I had all these you know walk and talks through the hallways where I was leading Smits and Whitford and all these people and I was, I never, it never dropped anything because I was just it, was just out of fear you know. And I was okay so then it ended up turning into more.

JOSH: It's so true by the way that my wife Melissa of 23 years used to work in wardrobe and they are the people to talk to but I would always do that even on *Scandal*, I'd be like Lynn at a time when I wasn't guaranteed all episodes, like "am I in the next one?" She's like "well I shouldn't tell you but here it is." They've got all the information. They know much more than anybody else.

MATTHEW: Totally. What wardrobe and hair and makeup same thing. You learn a lot in the trailer yeah.

JOSH: That is true.

MATTHEW: Yeah, and then they brought me back in the finale of the sixth season and then they invited me to the wrap party at the end and I was about to go back to New York and Alex Graves was like I'll see you next summer or I'll see you know the end of the summer or something and I was like "really? could you put that in writing?" and he's like "oh you'll be back." And then I was in New York and they called and they said you know even that it was like we're guaranteeing you three out of the first five and I came out and I did those and then just kind of kept going and kept going and I got a kick out of listening to you guys with the tell-a-Bram, [Josh and Hrishi laugh] because I used to say is there a script where it doesn't say "Bram hovers"? [Josh and Hrishi laugh] Like that's what it would always be whatever and then 'Bram hovers' and I watched last night now it's like embarrassed that I was even coming on to do this with you guys because I'm watching I'm like I'm just kind of lurking around and then drop a couple of things here and there it's very, very funny.

JOSH: Well did you agree with our assessment that occasionally Bram is called upon to ask a question the answer to which he probably knows just so that the audience members can hear the explanation.

[West Wing Episode 7.10 excerpt]

BRAM: Who's Al Smith anyway?

SANTOS: First Catholic to run for president in 1928.

BRAM: Why's the dinner such a big deal?

[end excerpt]

MATTHEW: Totally, I mean yeah, a lot of it was you know we actually Karis Campbell and Ramon De Ocampo and myself and Evan Arnold in the beginning you know he was Ned...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Before he got fired.

MATTHEW: ...And then he got fired. We used to joke and say that we were gonna have a spin-off called *Aides*. [Josh laughs] I was like we're kind of on this show right you know is always like tryin to, you know shimmy into the back of a frame that kind of thing.

JOSH: That description resonates with me as well. There are a lot of those like "what am I doing here?"

HRISHI: Did you feel like you were given enough to start to get a sense of Bram's character and you know your way into expressing the role?

MATTHEW: Yeah, I think I was. I mean there were some episodes where I was given a little bit more and one of the things I did and Eli was kind, you know Eli wrote that first episode and then

I just kind of became friends with him, still friends with him to this day and he always said he's like you know you nailed that I know these guys that did this and you got it and really it was like the kind of role where you stay out of the way.

[West Wing Episode 6.18 excerpt]

BRAM: You met Backus in San Francisco at the Giants game. Daughter's an honor student at Loyola. Congratulate him on his wife's thyroid operation.

HELEN: So it was successful?

BRAM: Don't mention the thyroid operation.

[end excerpt]

MATTHEW: You get it done. You don't bring a lot of attention to yourself. You don't slow anybody down and you are serving in that case, I was serving Santos you know it's like I'm just his guy and Jimmy was such a great guy that was easy to do. So it was like as the actor and as the character it was very much the same relationship, you know and he was that you know I don't know I'm sure listeners know him and you guys have probably talked about him or his character on this show but my first memory of Jimmy Smits was my first day of shooting. We shot at the ranch you know across the street from Warner Brothers and they got us a van back to where the trailers were and he was he was like in the back of the trailer which first of all that's not generally where you know the guy who's higher on the call sheet is sitting so he sat there and then we pull up to his trailer and people are starting to go "Jimmy here you go" and like people are starting to move out of the way so he can get out of the van and he's like "no, no I'm good" and he literally like he climbed over the backseat of the trailer and like shimmied out of the back of the van to get to his trailer and it's just like wow that guy is that was my experience of him. He was just this kind of a really big heart and a warm person but not in a BS way. When he was working he was working it wasn't like you were you know he wasn't doing it to try to be liked he just really was a good guy.

JOSH: Yeah. I think that comes across in his portrayal at Santos too that warmth.

MATTHEW: Totally yeah.

HRISHI: What was the episode that you watched last night?

MATTHEW: I watched "Running Mates" last night and as it started I was like did they ask me to do this show an episode that I'm not in I couldn't remember I remember the debate and I was like I thought this is one that I was like written out and then as it went I started to remember I was like okay you know it's it's funny like I remember where we filmed somewhere near Pasadena that all the stuff when we go back to Jimmy's house and like Altadena or somewhere over there and I was kind of separated from my aides crew in this episode I was on my own. But the one thing, also I remember on that first episode was working with Brad Whitford and I had known him from having seen the show a little bit and I did not realize how funny he was just as a guy. I mean he would just killed the entire set and then boom they call action and he would go.

JOSH: Exactly. From one second to the next he goes right into it.

MATTHEW: I felt like he was so loose as Josh so loose it was just effortless it was great to watch that.

JOSH: I was gonna say that *West Wing* and *Sopranos* is a pretty heavy-duty one-two punch early in a career

MATTHEW: Yeah I mean that's what's funny when I got to *West Wing*, I was there for a little while and somebody it might have even been Dillon Massen and came up to me and say 'what was it like on the set of *Sopranos*?' I'm like 'oh you knew I was on the *Sopranos*?' You forget but that job I always say *Sopranos* is the job that keeps on giving because you get jobs way down the line and people ask you about that and *West Wing*'s the same way and *Scandal*'s kind of the same way actually where they were these you know they had something to them and a common thread -I just told this to someone someone was asking me the other day all three of those shows did cast table reads. I don't know if that's coincidence that they were, but do you do it I don't know I don't feel like most shows do cast table reads.

JOSH: No, I agree with you I think they're standouts. I think it speaks to an approach to the material, to ensemble work, and to the people in charge you know originally Aaron and then Shonda, I can't speak to *Sopranos*, you beat me there I got two out of three but yeah I think it speaks to an approach and a kind of a respect for the work that you don't always get given the time crunch of TV production.

HRISHI: Did you two have much interaction on the *West Wing*?

MATTHEW: I don't think we had any.

JOSH: Not on-camera. We met each other.

HRISHI: That's what I was wondering.

JOSH: But that's also one of the nice things about table reads which obviously isn't necessarily reflected on what's ultimately on screen but you get to meet the people that you don't get to work with. You at least get to sort of touch base and say hello and introduce yourselves and kind of get on that same page.

MATTHEW: Yeah, I mean on that show it was just interesting because kind of what we had heard everybody that was on the Santos campaign was that you know the die-hard fans were like 'oh this is BS that they're doing all that' like they wanted you guys back and that we were like the scrubs coming in so it was like you guys would be over there and we were like this you know rogue unit that was on the campaign trail so it was almost like it was two different shows you know.

JOSH: How about was there talk or buzz or a feeling that you guys might become more featured if the show continued beyond where it finally did I mean there must have been some hope brewing there.

MATTHEW: There was definitely there was talk of it and then I don't you know you hear things I don't know what's what but first of all John Spencer may he rest in peace what a great great dude. I had heard different reasons of why they pulled it I don't know if they're true it is

kind of shocking, it is really a good show even at the end it's kind of shocking that it didn't continue on.

JOSH: But I mean I don't even really know and hopefully we'll get into and talk to some people who really do but my sense was just that it was a numbers thing and how much it cost to make and the question of whether the network was willing to continue with it and I think ultimately they weren't but I do think John Wells and company were good to go and planning to continue.

MATTHEW: Yeah.

HRISHI: One of the reasons I was asking about how much interaction you two had on the *West Wing* was what that was like then when you were both on *Scandal*. Did you have any kind of feeling of reunion?

JOSH: Oh yeah we were really happy to see each other.

MATTHEW: Yeah, yeah. When I saw Josh on *Scandal* that was kind of like hey!

JOSH: Yeah I was very psyched to see you too.

MATTHEW: It's here it's like seeing someone from from high school you know on vacation.

JOSH: I'm excited to find out, figure out what we're gonna do next.

MATTHEW: Yeah it's gonna be very interesting.

JOSH: What are you working on now?

MATTHEW: I'm working on *City on a Hill* on Showtime. It's the Kevin Bacon, Boston cop drama and Matt Damon, Ben Affleck thing and their company Tom Fontana is running it. It got a second season. Sadly, I did a Netflix comedy that I loved like one of the best - did you see it *Huge in France*?

JOSH: Yes I did! Of course. I wanted to watch you. I really dug it. That's no more?

MATTHEW: No dude. I mean talk about we were like "what!?" I've never gotten that kind of feedback from like you know people in my town that are cutting the rope for *The Office* and they're like when are you doing season two? I got to play an actor so it was it was fun I mean I just got to send up everything about what we do.

JOSH: Exactly, very funny in it.

MATTHEW: Those guys, Andy Mogel and Jarrad Paul, their tone is just right up my alley you know. So that was sad not to go, but *City on a Hill* is pretty cool so that's what I'm doing right now. I'm waiting, we're in between.

JOSH: Oh right on. I haven't watched it yet so I guess you have to do a Boston accent?

MATTHEW: I gotta do a [expletive deleted] Boston accent yeah

JOSH: There it is.

MATTHEW: Can you swear on a *West Wing Weekly* or you got to be all [expletive deleted] proper?

JOSH: Yeah, we'll bleep ya out. Awesome!

HRISHI: That's pretty good, that's pretty good.

JOSH: Hey, Hrishi knows.

MATTHEW: I went to school in- but so it's like I'm finally putting that Boston College education you know to use after all these years.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah I had little Proustian palpitations there I felt like I was gonna get beat up. [Josh laughs]

JOSH: I'm gonna make sure we talk about his podcast.

HRISHI: Oh yeah tell us about your podcast!

MATTHEW: Oh yeah, so the podcast is - well we talked about getting to the White House and then the you know the show is over it's called *Ten Thousand No's*. So it's all about overcoming rejections, overcoming adversity, and I talked to not just our industry I do have a lot of writers, directors, actors, producers as well but I have entrepreneurs, cancer survivors, pro football players - you know professional athletes - world champion iron men, that kind of thing and just get into their origin story and kind of get into sometimes the nitty-gritty of what they do. It's been one of the best things I've told Josh this it's one of the best things that I decided to do. I think people thought I was crazy when I started it but it has been so good for my soul. I feel like I took all the [expletive deleted] that bogged me down and turned it into my platform and I literally just yesterday got off the phone with a publisher. I had met with them and they want to do a book *Ten Thousand No's* book which is like my journey as an actor and then quotes from guests.

JOSH: Hey good for you.

MATTHEW: Yeah like it's led to so many things that I didn't anticipate and it just feels right. Because it was it actually was born out of when we were doing *Scandal*. There was one season I was supposed to do a lot and it kind of just went away and I was sitting around going crazy and I finally just said like I'm not I don't want to wait for anything I wanna create something and just started doing it and then it's, I mean it's introduced me to so many amazing people it's been really cool. So thanks for asking.

HRISHI: That's awesome.

JOSH: That's fantastic! That's how I feel about this. Except that everything that you did, Hrishi did and brought me along for the ride.

HRISHI: We're gonna put a link up to your podcast on this episode. Specifically, we're gonna link to the episode that you did with Eli Attie.

MATTHEW: I did one with Schiff too if you want to put those...

HRISHI: Oh even better. Okay, we'll put up links to your episodes with both Eli Attie and Richard Schiff.

MATTHEW: Yeah and Malina's been ducking me for like two years so.

JOSH: The only reason I was dragging my feet is that I was hoping to overcome adversity before I get on. [All laugh] But I guess you could just call me in the midst of it.

MATTHEW: I'll call you in like five years and we can see if we can get something going.

JOSH: Check in once a decade I'll let you know when I'm ready.

MATTHEW: Yeah.

JOSH: Well thank you for doing this this was awesome.

MATTHEW: Yeah man.

HRISHI: And that's it for this episode thanks so much for listening. Thanks to Margaret Miller and Zach McNees for helping us make this episode. Thanks to all of you for listening and thanks to Matthew del Negro for joining us. You can find Matthew del Negro on Twitter @MatthewdelNegro. You can find us at @WestWingWeekly or at thewestwingweekly.com or on Facebook, Instagram, all those places. Let us know what you thought of this episode.

JOSH: Thanks as ever to PRX and Radiotopia. Radiotopia is a snazzy selection of sophisticated and cultured podcasts. You can find out more about the other podcasts at Radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: That was definitely the closest I've ever heard you to playing a light FM DJ.

JOSH: Yeah, I was trying to ramp it to something like that and then I almost fell asleep during the pause. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: You did too good of a job.

JOSH: That's right I was lulled.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

MATTHEW: What's next?

[Outro Music]