

The West Wing Weekly  
2.02: In the Shadow of Two Gunmen, Part II  
Guests: Michael O'Neill and Bradley Whitford

[Intro music]

JOSH: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. This is Part 2 of our two-part episode discussing the two-part episode "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen." Coming up later, we'll be joined by Bradley Whitford, who played Deputy Chief of Staff Joshua Lyman. But first, we're going to start the episode off with an interview with Michael O'Neill.

JOSH: Of course, on *The West Wing*, Michael plays one of our favorite recurring characters, Special Agent Ron Butterfield, the head of President Bartlet's Secret Service protection detail. Hey Michael.

MICHAEL: Hey Josh, Hrishi. How are you guys?

JOSH: Oh man, it's good to talk to you.

HRISHI: Yeah, thanks so much for joining us.

JOSH: We've been enjoying you all season. We've thus far discussed only the first season of *The West Wing*. I guess I'm curious, to start, to know... how did you get involved in the show?

MICHAEL: I went in to audition for the head of the president's detail of the Secret Service. Chris Misiano was directing that episode, and Aaron wasn't either inclined or able to make that particular audition and I screwed it up the first time. You know, you didn't fool around with Aaron's language. It was really beautifully drawn but it was very, very specific, and I stumbled over it. Chris had said something to me, and he was so kind. He said, "I think I gave you the wrong note. Let's try it again." So we did, and then I got it, but there'd been a long argument with my agent because I'd seen the show and it was a one-off, a one-time guest star. And I thought, this writing is brilliant. I don't want to do this show for one time!

JOSH: Ha! Find me something recurring.

MICHAEL: Yeah. And they said, "Hey, buddy. You just had twins. You need a job."

JOSH: Ron Butterfield, in fact, came back many, many times, and he's a real fan favorite too. And I think it's because even though you're a stone-cold pro, you brought a real humanity to him as well. You have a nice relationship with the people you're protecting.

MICHAEL: Thank you for saying that, Josh. An extraordinary thing happened to me as I got engaged with the role. The Secret Service became incredibly generous to me in beginning to fill

in a lot of information and protocol and procedure. Nothing that would endanger the current president, obviously, but they were very, very helpful to me. And then there was this *pièce de résistance* with a man named Jerry Parr. An old high school football coach of mine had a cousin named Jerry Parr. And Jerry Parr was the man who pushed Reagan into the automobile when Hinckley shot him. He said, "Call him," and he gave me his number, and I called him and explained who I was and what I was doing. He couldn't have been more generous, more informative, more honest, because it's "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen, Part I and II" that we're talking about. Josh, he gave me every bit of behavior in the back seat of that car with Martin when I realized that he's been hit. Everything. It's all straight out of his experience with President Reagan when that occurred. And I was able to put him together with Aaron at the end of [Season] 1 before the second season began.

JOSH: But that's pretty intense.

MICHAEL: It really was. So I felt tremendous obligation to bring as much humanity and dignity to the guys who did that work as I possibly could, because they'd been so kind to me, you know? And also there's a little-known realization about the Secret Service, in that their entire *raison-d'être* is to cover and extract, which basically means they're there to take the bullet and trust that one of their compadres will get the shooter. I mean, who does that? So yeah, I felt a pretty strong obligation to them.

HRISHI: Can you tell us about some of the specific things that Jerry Parr told you about? Things that might have ended up in that scene in the limo with the president?

MICHAEL: In the very beginning, there's the panic that occurs, just the adrenaline dump that occurs. You've gotten POTUS into the car, and you're returning him to what Mr. Parr called the corral, which is the White House, the safest place on the planet for the president of the United States. And of course, President Bartlet—Martin—was going, "No, no, you're hurt! We're going to go back, we're going to take you..." and it's like, "No, no, we don't discuss that." Which was straight from Mr. Parr. This supersedes any discussion. This is protocol. And the physical behavior that occurred was, as soon as you realize that there's blood, you start with critical injury first. I started with Martin's scalp, and you start from back to front, and then back again, to try to find a wound. Then you go up sides and down front. And that "down front" was when I hit the blood. But it's all exactly what occurred with him and President Reagan in the car. President Reagan had a paper handkerchief from the luncheon in his pocket, and he dabbed his lip, and when he pulled it away, Parr saw blood. But it was blood bubbled. It was oxygenated blood, which meant lung shot. As soon as I saw the blood on Martin, I knew that he was hit and that he was beginning to bleed from the mouth, we had an internal problem, call "GW, blue, blue." So that behavior was all specifically from Jerry Parr, even up to GW, which meant George Washington [University Hospital], which was totally out of protocol for the Secret Service when President Reagan was hit. Only two vehicles, the car that the president was in and the Bronco, were able to escape the crowd and move away. He made an executive decision, Jerry Parr did, to move President Reagan to George Washington because they dealt with gunshot wounds

more than any other hospital in the area. So that was not protocol, that was just “we’ve got to save this man’s life.”

JOSH: That’s the split-second decision.

MICHAEL: A split second. And he said something, Josh. He said—and this is a thing that I thought a lot about at the hospital when we were filming—they did not know if the attempt was over. They didn’t have secure communication then, the way we do now. They didn’t know if it was ongoing, if when they rounded the next turn... they only had two cars! And he said to the guy in the back, “Bronco,” which was the car that was trailing, “we have a problem.” And that’s when they knew the president was hit, and they redirected to George Washington. Well, of course that’s what we did, and that’s what we enacted in the scene. When we got there, there were only four agents, which is what President Reagan had. Big cardinal points. They got him in the hospital. Even as I speak of it now, I lose my breath.

JOSH: Sure.

MICHAEL: Just an extraordinary thing. But if he had taken me by my hand and walked me through a 3-dimensional model of the entire thing, I couldn’t have been better prepared for what occurred in that car on that day.

HRISHI: That’s so cool.

JOSH: I read somewhere that Jorja Fox actually got injured in the shooting. Do you recall that?

MICHAEL: I remember it really well. There was a lot going on. It was three o’clock in the morning. There was a huge crowd scene. There were a lot of motor vehicles. There was a tremendous number of moving parts. On one of the takes, when they moved the president’s car out, a car that wasn’t supposed to be pursued. When they yelled, “Go,” this car went as well. And Jorja, who had pushed Zoey into the car and went down on the ground to duck and cover the shots... that trailing car literally skimmed her foot. It was one of those moments. There’s the difference in the sword fight that happens when you’re in rehearsal—

JOSH: That’s right.

MICHAEL: The sword fight that happens—right, Josh—on stage?

JOSH: The adrenaline’s pumping, everyone’s.

MICHAEL: I remember just saying, “Ok, let’s all just be mindful here, and everyone look after yourselves.” It didn’t really hurt her, but as much as anything, it was the shock of the fact and that this unexpected thing had gone by with pace and just brushed her. But it was enough that they immediately went to full alert on Jorja, very protective of protocol with her about whether or not she was injured. She continued but—

JOSH: Close call.

MICHAEL: It was a moment. Yeah, it was a moment.

HRISHI: One of my favorite scenes from part two of “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen” is when Toby comes to talk to Ron about the canopy and Secret Service procedure.

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*RON: It wasn't your fault.*

*TOBY: Ron...*

*RON: It wasn't your fault. It wasn't Gina's fault, it wasn't Charlie's fault, it wasn't anybody's fault, Toby. It was an act of madmen. You think a tent was gonna stop 'em? We got the president in the car. We got Zoey in the car. And at 150 yards and five stories up, the shooters were down 9.2 seconds after the first shot was fired. I would never let you not let me protect the president.*

[end excerpt]

MICHAEL: You know, that wasn't Jerry Parr, that was Aaron Sorkin. It's funny. I got saved by best intentions there because I like Richard so much. Whenever I watch the show, I always think he's the conscience. So I found Butterfield was trying to take care of him a little bit there, and Tommy said, “Mm no. Don't take care of him. Do your job.”

JOSH: Hmm.

MICHAEL: “Your job is to take care of the president.” And it was a great note. Because from that point on, I could see that he was in distress and he thought he had responsibility for it, and I [said], “No, no, no. I would never let you not let me protect the president.”

JOSH: It's such a great quotation.

MICHAEL: Isn't it?

JOSH: Yeah.

MICHAEL: It's funny because people come up and say the line to me! And I just say, “It was an act of madmen.”

[laughter]

HRISHI: That's awesome.

MICHAEL: The thing that Aaron wrote, that “the shooters were down 9.2 seconds after the shots were fired,” you realize how quickly things happen in that world. That, I thought, was just

wonderful writing and information. I felt really fortunate to get to be the guy that said it. I did think one of the things that was interesting about it—even though I said, “The Secret Service doesn’t comment on procedure”—Aaron allowed Butterfield to give him more information about what had happened procedurally after the first shots were fired. He did take care of him. He got him off the hook because Richard, or Toby, was so afraid that he’d been responsible without a tent there for the president being fired upon.

JOSH: He put him at ease.

MICHAEL: Yeah, he at least let him go on in his life without carrying that with him.

HRISHI: I think that’s what I love about Butterfield. He isn’t just this superstar Secret Service agent. There’s something very paternal about him and compassionate. And you played him with this quiet dignity, so there’s nothing cocky or arrogant or “cowboy cop” about him.

MICHAEL: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: Instead there’s something really caring about him, but he still gets to have those cowboy moments of taking care of the president and looking after him even though his hand’s been shot.

MICHAEL: [laughs] That’s really delicious, to try to get to play both ends and to fill it in. This guy had a family. He had kids at home. For me, there was a life going on there. Maybe it’s because my own kids were so small at that time. They always sort of influence everything. But I really thought that it was important, as much as one can, to show the humanity of those guys because that’s what they showed me. That’s how I got to know them, as they began to help me, or talk with me, or take me into the Oval Office. And this was before 9/11 so obviously there was a lot that they could do that they probably wouldn’t or couldn’t do now. There was just tremendous largesse about them as both professionals and just people. And you realize that every day when they strap it on, they’re a human shield. One of the things I like—this was a little thing that happened—but he allows the humanity to come out for Butterfield when they were about to tell Dulé what had happened. And they’re in the president’s hospital room.

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*CHARLIE: They tried to kill the president ‘cause Zoey and I are together?*

*ABBEY: No.*

*RON: Charlie, the president wasn’t the target, according to the statement. The president wasn’t the target.*

*CHARLIE: Oh. Ok.*

[end excerpt]

MICHAEL: But no one would say, “You were the target.” They just couldn’t bring themselves to say it. The whole family was there. Mrs. Bartlet was there, Zoey was there. [inaudible] camera back to Butterfield. And he goes, “The president wasn’t the target.” And you just see it land on this—

JOSH: Psychologically what that’s going to do to him.

MICHAEL: Yeah. It’s sort of humanity by proximity, watching someone go through that. Lovely moments.

JOSH: Fantastic. Thank you, Michael.

HRISHI: Thank you so much.

MICHAEL: You bet. Thank you, Hrish. What’s next?

HRISHI: We’re going to take a quick break, pay some bills, and then we’ll jump into our conversation with Bradley Whitford.

[ad]

JOSH: It’s a very special afternoon here at The West Wing Weekly. Our guest today has somehow been nominated for five Emmy awards, with two wins. You’ve seen him recently as Hubert Humphrey in *All the Way*, as Mark/Marcy and Magnus Hirschfeld in *Transparent*, and you likely remember him most vividly from his turn as Roger in *Revenge of the Nerds II: Nerds in Paradise*. We’ve been watching, enjoying, and discussing his work as Josh Lyman all season here on the podcast. At long last, it’s inexplicable fan favorite Bradley Whitford.

BRAD: [laughs] First of all, it’s great to be here. I do feel like I need to address, because I know that sometimes we go at each other in public, and it may be unsettling for people—

HRISHI: It’s unsettling for me.

BRAD: I know, I know. And my girlfriend gets upset sometimes when there’s back and forth. And I just want to say publicly that... are you still acting?

JOSH: [laughs] Wow, that took longer than anticipated.

BRAD: No, no, no, I actually love Josh, and I’ve loved him for a very long time.

JOSH: That’s what I always say. People will ask like, “Do you guys really like each other?” And I always say, “Brad loves me.”

[laughter]

BRAD: I hate to say this publicly, but I do love Josh Malina. But I do want to say that this started, and we'll get into it, on *A Few Good Men*, one of the more traumatizing—

JOSH: The play.

BRAD: The play of *A Few Good Men*. One of the most traumatizing things a human being can do is go into a Broadway play, because everybody else has been doing it. They're a well-oiled machine. I was going in playing Ross, but it was my first time on a Broadway stage, and you get, like, one put-in with the board cast that afternoon—

JOSH: Which is a fairly brief rehearsal. It's a run-through—

BRAD: Very, very brief rehearsal. You've been working alone with the stage managers, playing all these parts. Anyway, I go on stage, it's my Broadway debut, I'm thrilled to be in this play, and I'm facing the audience and I throw open my briefcase, and it is just plastered with the most horrific, explicit pornography. And Josh was playing a soldier on the side and I think we made eye contact.

JOSH: Undoubtedly.

BRAD: Yes.

HRISHI: You guys didn't know each other before that? Is that how you met?

BRAD: Is that how we met?

JOSH: Wow, I guess... we must have met a little bit prior to that but not long before. We met on that show.

BRAD: We met on that show. And the only problem with Josh, when you get into these back-and-forths, which we've talked about enough publicly, is Josh's utter lack of understanding about the idea of proportional response.

JOSH: Ah, good reference.

BRAD: Yeah, that was for the *West Wing* people. I always say if you use, like, a hand buzzer on Josh as a joke, he'll, like, pick up your third grade daughter from school. What people need to understand is, if you have the sides—the script in your hand—and you walk by Josh, he will slap them out of your hands. If you have an iPhone, it will be switched to Mandarin in a second. And one of the most perverse things you would do, is, I was reading books on the set. And often, several times—

JOSH: You would read big, thick nonfiction books, is my memory.

BRAD: Big, thick nonfiction books, political books, and often you would tear out the last three or four pages.

JOSH: Yeah.

[laughter]

BRAD: Which is just so twisted and sick!

JOSH: I have to say, that was a reflection that my Brad hate trumps my book love because—

BRAD: Yes! You would desecrate a book!

JOSH: As a book lover, I would actually do that. By the way, I don't want to raise the bar too high. Richard cried thrice.

BRAD: I have to say, I am a little worried. I was gonna say, looking at the show, after so long—and I have not seen, honestly, all of the episodes and I have not gone back until now—I found it very emotional, and I am a little worried that I'm going to, like, do a Schiff all over this mic.

JOSH: Please, Schiff away.

BRAD: Yeah, it's a verb. But—

JOSH: Yeah, take a giant Schiff.

BRAD: Take a giant Schiff.

JOSH: Don't hold it back.

[laughter]

BRAD: One of the greatest things that Josh ever did—our show, I think it's safe to say, would eat directors. It was a brutally difficult show.

JOSH: That was true.

BRAD: And I think that directors felt tremendous pressure. Being an episodic director is, I think, one of the most difficult things in Hollywood because you have to be an authority figure when you're an outsider. It's a very odd thing to have to do, and it would destroy directors. I remember one of them crying behind a flat the second day of shooting, first year. But this was later on, when you got on and the show—

JOSH: Started its slow descent...

BRAD: Its slow descent. And there was some guy—we were working 'til two in the morning, three in the morning on a Friday. And the director emotionally is just happy that they've got these 16-hour days, [and] they've gotten through it. You can sense that they're just gonna sleep,

they'll come back Monday. And you went to transport and you got the keys. Do you remember this?

JOSH: Sure.

BRAD: [laughs] Yes, ok. Got the keys, opened the guy's trunk, put a bunch of computers and things off the set, and then when we wrapped at 3 AM, called security and—

JOSH: Well, post-9/11, they used to check you on the way in and the way out.

BRAD: Right, and that's an opportunity to make a vulnerable stranger miserable for you. What is that? You're a sweet guy!

JOSH: [laughs] Boredom...

BRAD: Well, it is boredom. What are you gonna do, think about your work? I actually love this about Josh because I actually agree. I think talking about acting is like dancing about architecture. When directors start talking, I always joke I go through three silent beats: "[expletive deleted] you. I suck. Ok what?" You have an amazing thing on a set. I believe anytime any directors ever said anything to you, you'd mutter, "I don't care."

[laughter]

JOSH: Sometimes I just think it.

BRAD: [laughs] I really respect that.

JOSH: Look, in a 28-year career, I have yet to ask a question.

BRAD: [laughs]

JOSH: Directors may not love me, but the crew does. Crew people delight in me.

BRAD: [laughs] Right.

JOSH: So we're here to talk about the Season 2 double opener, "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen, Parts I and II," but even prior to that, we want to talk about your *West Wing* journey. I think a lot of people are thinking, "How on Earth did he get this role?"

BRAD: I was playing the [expletive deleted] in *Revenge of the Nerds 2: Nerds in Paradise*, which I think you referenced before. I dug deep emotionally. But I met, actually, Tim Busfield. We went to a playwrights' festival in Louisville. Tim ended up replacing in *A Few Good Men*. When Tim was leaving, Clark Gregg was leaving, and I went into Clark Gregg's part and understudied Busfield. That's where I really met Aaron, and I think that Tim had suggested that I might be right for it, and then Aaron amazingly—no disrespect to us, but generally the replacements in Broadway shows go to fading television actors—

JOSH: I'm planning that for my late career—

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH: Which is three years from now.

BRAD: [laughs] Aaron was incredibly supportive of me being the lead in the play, which was a big vote of confidence. Later on, I was doing a play, *Three Days of Rain*, in New York. It was 18 years ago, when my daughter was born. Aaron came, and he had been doing a lot of movies, and Aaron said, "I have this thing I want you to read." It was *Sports Night*, and it was an amazing script, and the idea of Aaron doing a TV show was really exciting to me, but I thought, "There's no way he's gonna have anything to do with this. He's gonna do one of those things where he writes the pilot and then goes away. He's not gonna be an involved showrunner." And I had been offered a show called *The Secret Lives of Men*, which had an on-air commitment of 13 shows. My daughter was born, and it was a painful conversation with Aaron. I was really honored, but I couldn't do it. And then, of course, *Secret Lives of Men* didn't—the soufflé did not rise. I don't know if you've ever experienced that—

JOSH: [laughs] Dude—

BRAD: *Sports Night* became this really interesting, celebrated show, and I thought I had made the mistake of a lifetime. Thank God I didn't do that show because if that had happened, I wouldn't have gotten *West Wing*.

JOSH: You'd have my career.

BRAD: Right, which would just be humiliating.

JOSH: [laughs] It is.

BRAD: And then Aaron had told me that he was writing a part in this political show that he thought I was right for, which was exciting to me. I read the script and I was gobsmacked. I just thought, "Oh my God, this is a beautiful, amazing script. I love this character. I have this character's politics. I have this character's personality, sort of—I hope not completely." And I was obsessed with getting it. Aaron did not have power or swing back then.

JOSH: So you had to read.

BRAD: Right. I remember working on this. I was living in Hollywood and I would go up in the canyon. Auditioning is treacherous and I don't respect the process. I despise it.

JOSH: It's not geared toward getting the best out of the actor.

BRAD: I think auditioning is a particular kind of skill. I had actually gotten to the point, because I hated auditioning so much, where I consciously said to myself, "You know what, just go into it. I know I'm not gonna get it. I'm just going to pretend this is an opportunity to act." So I would

hyper-prepare. And for this, Aaron was bringing me in. He didn't have any power, but for him I wanted to do well. I remember walking up in the mountains, and I've never done this—like, I had it memorized for a week, and I would go up and walk in those firebreak paths up there. And because sometimes you walk into a room and frogs fall out of your mouth, I remember practicing it for, like, two days as if I was acting badly, trying to do it well. I was trying to get around every kind of mind game of it. I remember the audition—and I stand behind none of my work, I really am hypercritical, I believe—but I felt, “Oh good, it really went well.” Aaron called me, used a sports metaphor: “You made me look great. You hit it out of the park. This looks great.” And then I get the word that they're not sure. Warner Brothers wasn't sure. “They're worried you're not funny enough. They're worried you're not sexy enough. They're worried you're not good-looking.” It was like a bucket of devastating stuff, and Tommy was not convinced.

JOSH: So maybe I'm wrong—did you not know Tommy prior to this? Or did you—

BRAD: I did not know Tommy. I was really upset because Aaron said to me, “Look, I really want this to happen. I really think it should happen.” At one point, John Levey said to my agent—

JOSH: Casting director.

BRAD: Yes. “What do you not understand about the sentence: ‘Brad is not going to be in this?’”

JOSH: It got to that point.

BRAD: Yes. Yeah. It was weird because in retrospect, I think it wasn't about me. I think it was kind of a proxy battle between Aaron and Tommy.

JOSH: Interesting.

BRAD: I think it was weird for Tommy that Aaron... I don't know.

JOSH: Well, I mean, you were his guy. I think that happens a lot where—

BRAD: Yeah.

JOSH: The person's like, “Well, I know you got this guy from before, and he's your guy, but I'm —”

BRAD: Right, and there are good reasons to be suspicious of that. Maybe you like him, but let's look at everybody. Aaron kind of pushed, and my agent who's now my manager—I've been with her forever, largely because of her behavior on this experience, because we were told, “No,” and she, partially through talking to Aaron, kept it alive. They brought me in to read with Moira Kelly, and I remember being really upset afterwards because my understanding of it was that it was to just have her read, and I felt like it was her audition. I remember feeling like this is about her...

JOSH: So she hadn't been cast yet. They were looking at both of you. It was a chemistry thing maybe?

BRAD: Yeah, it was what they call a chemistry test.

JOSH: The only chemistry test I've ever passed was in high school.

[laughter]

JOSH: Every other one, the leading lady has said, "We don't have chemistry. I don't like him."

BRAD: It just makes me realize how much I hate... if there is such a thing as real chemistry... People always use that word "chemistry." Chemistry is just moments that work. And the whole idea of a chemistry audition is idiotic because you're in this artificial thing and people are staring at you. What are you gonna do, try and fake it? It's not gonna be honest. It's not gonna work. Anyway, I thought I did well, and that phone call comes right away: "You got blown off the screen. She overpowered you." And I was like, "Oh come on!" I was really, really upset. And I was mad at Tommy because Aaron is this incredibly talented writer who's basically said, "I want you for this part." I was really upset. I felt like Tommy was standing in the way. We ended up becoming incredibly close—I love Tommy. So I'm, like, climbing out of my skin—I was really upset about this—and I was in Santa Monica. I pulled into a gas station, and I had a car phone, which was exciting. It was Dina Chalk, my agent. She said, "You got it. Call Aaron." And Aaron said, "I'm so excited. You got it." He said, "You're gonna play Sam."

HRISHI: Which was not what you had read for.

BRAD: No, never. I think a lot of people don't know this story.

JOSH: I didn't know this story. This is the first you've heard of Sam?

BRAD: This is the first I've heard of it. And I had this, it felt like, really strong connection to Josh. I was in no position to do this, but I said, "Aaron, I am so grateful. I'm only gonna play this card once in my career, but I'm not Sam. I'm Josh." I said, "You know, you had told me early on that you wanted me for this." I don't think I'm embellishing when he had said, "I kind of wrote this with you in mind." I said, "Don't let this process mess you up." I think what had happened was—I think there was contractual stuff with Rob, and they were probably trying to kind of stiff-arm Rob. I know they were looking at, I think, Rob Morrow to play Josh, who's a great actor.

JOSH: In other words, somehow leverage Rob into taking the role because it had been offered to you? Or what—

BRAD: I think that they were playing contractual hardball with Rob—

JOSH: And you were caught in the middle?

BRAD: I don't know how these things work, but I think that they may have said, "No, we're not going to give you that, and here's our 'No, we're gonna cast...'" I remember I hung up the phone. [Aaron] said, "You know what? Yeah, just give me a second." And then I got the call, and I don't know what happened, but—

JOSH: But it happened.

BRAD: But it happened.

HRISHI: It happened the way it was supposed to.

BRAD: Well—

JOSH: Well, that's the funny thing when you hear these stories. I've never heard that story before, and I believe it and I hear it, but there's something about the original cast. Everyone is so indelibly their character. I can't imagine it having worked another way. It seems easy in hindsight to go, "Of course you were Josh!"

BRAD: But Aaron said to me in the moment, "Brad, it doesn't matter. I'm gonna write to you."

HRISHI: Right, so Sam would have been a different character.

BRAD: Sam would have been—

JOSH: Sam would have been Josh. Josh would have been something else...

BRAD: By the way, one of the extraordinary things about Aaron, which we can get into more, is an unsung ability—in addition to all of his storytelling instincts—to write for people. I had known, as you know, Richard forever. He picked up on that. He has an amazing intuition, and his ability to, in the best sense of the word, exploit a performer... I think part of it, and something I really do appreciate in Aaron is that he truly loves actors.

JOSH: Yeah, that's for sure. I always say, he's incredibly spongelike. His intellect is spongelike, as is his creative force, so he picks up on everything about you. Verbal tics, things you say, and you'll find them at any discussion, suddenly popping up—

BRAD: I don't think he does it consciously, actually.

JOSH: Nor do I, really.

BRAD: Richard and I have a very long, familial, complicated relationship, and boy, did he pick up on that.

HRISHI: Right, because you guys knew each other from when you were in college. Is that right?

BRAD: Yeah, I took care of his dog, Lyle.

JOSH: Why is it just perfect that Richard had a dog named Lyle?

[laughter]

BRAD: He had a dog named Lyle. Richard was my roommate Paul Schiff's brother, and he was this amazing creature to me. I came from Wisconsin. I came into New York. And I met Richard, who was this kind of dyspeptic... he wasn't interested in acting. He wanted to be a director. My joke about Richard is, he's doing a one-man show. The only problem is he hates the cast.

[laughter]

BRAD: I knew Richard really well by the time I got out here. I graduated in '81, so in the late '90s, Richard had established himself and had done movies and was a really interesting actor. I knew that whole thing about him, like, not showing up—

JOSH: His hesitancy—

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember at some point saying to Tommy, "Look, this may be a very bizarre audition coming up, but this guy's really, really, really good."

HRISHI: I was thinking about the beginning of this episode, of "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen," thinking about what you guys were saying about Aaron's spongelike quality, because I remember when I was watching, I was thinking, "I wonder how they decided that it would be Toby who goes and finds Josh, that Josh has been shot." When Josh slumps over, it's Toby who catches him, and it's this really tender moment. I feel like it could have been written for any of the senior staff, and I wonder why it ended up that it was Toby who did it. Feels like that might have played into it.

BRAD: Yeah, or that could have been one of those examples of what—I can tell you for sure that if Aaron was here, he'd go, "Ah, I was writing as quickly as I could." It could've been that there was this connection. I'll tell you about some of the later stuff, which I watched, was very directly personal, which he had asked me if it was ok to talk about.

JOSH: In these couple of episodes in particular, the show is turning into all sorts of things we haven't seen before. All of a sudden it's a thriller. It's a political thriller. We get superhero origin stories. We're getting this team that we love. I love, in the second part, that we're seeing origin stories. "Oh, this is how they met!" or "This is what she was doing. She was in entertainment PR, C.J." And then we're getting an assassination attempt, but that's going to be all brought down into a look at gun control, because C.J. is gonna step up in front of the press briefing and say what she says.

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*C.J.: There were 36 homicides last night. 480 sexual assaults, 3,411 robberies, 3,685 aggravated assaults, all at gunpoint. And if anyone thinks those crimes could have been*

*prevented if the victims themselves had been carrying guns, I'd only remind you that the president of the United States was shot last night while surrounded by the best-trained armed guards in the history of the world.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And there are so many threads going, so many balls in the air in these two episodes, it's unbelievable.

BRAD: It's extraordinary. There was no idea that this show was going to be a hit out of the gate. I think there was a lot of resistance to picking it up. Nobody thought *S opranos* was going to be a hit. Nobody thought *Breaking Bad* was going to be a hit. Nobody thought this was going to be a hit. If anybody thought any of those shows was going to be a hit, they would have destroyed it with stunt casting, with over-interference. But one of the things was, the show was starting to pick up, and I believe the network and Tommy—I don't know if Tommy was pushing it—"let's do a cliffhanger," which Aaron is resistant to.

JOSH: I'm sure.

BRAD: Aaron is resistant to all notes. If you tell him he has to do it some way, that'll make him resistant, which is something I totally understand because I feel that way too, and so do my children. And my dog.

JOSH: But that's one of the things I marveled at, in that it's such a classic TV trope, the season-ending cliffhanger, but boy does it work here! I mean, he just does it so much better than it's usually executed.

BRAD: Right, I think he was kind of pushed into it. And I think at this time, Tommy and the writers were encouraging the idea that this could really work.

JOSH: Both episodes aired on October 4, 2000.

BRAD: Yes.

JOSH: This was a double premiere.

BRAD: At Aaron's house, I remember. Were you invited?

JOSH: I might have been at that, actually. Is that a serious question?

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH: I might have been.

BRAD: I think you were. He had TVs, like, outside.

JOSH: Actually, I do remember it. I thought we were kidding, but I think I was there.

BRAD: Yeah, I remember that. It was exciting.

HRISHI: So, when you guys left off on Season 1, there was this cliffhanger ending. But we learned from Tommy Schlamme that nobody actually knew who had gotten shot.

JOSH: Right. We certainly, as viewers, didn't know. I was exchanging emails with Tommy, and he said, "Make sure you tell people, as of the staging and shooting of that final sequence in the finale, we didn't know who had been shot."

HRISHI: It ends with—

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*MAN: [over radio] Who's been hit? Who's been hit?*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. So when did you find out? It's actually perhaps the most dramatic flentl in *West Wing* history.

HRISHI: Exactly.

BRAD: Flentl?

JOSH: You're obviously not a regular listener to the podcast. So when did you find out that you were the one who had been shot?

BRAD: You know, it was interesting because I was thinking about that, and there was part of me that thought I had a memory of Aaron, when we were shooting in Washington, saying, "It might be you."

JOSH: The assassination sequence was shot in DC? It was on location?

BRAD: Yeah, and then he called me over the summer and said, "It's you." I was like, "Do I survive?"

[laughter]

JOSH: Yeah, that would have been my immediate question.

BRAD: "What kind of phone call is this?" And he was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, you totally survive. You totally survive." The night it actually aired, I was at work and I had not told my mom. Anybody who was interested in the show was like, "Jesus, who got shot? Who got shot?" And it was the time delay—I think it was like six o'clock, and so I timed it to call her. I said, "The

premiere's really good. I want you to see the teaser." And she's like, "Who got shot?" and I'm like, "You'll see, you'll see." And then she sees it's me, and she goes, "Oh, my God!" and she hung up.

[laughter]

BRAD: That's a memory. By the time they poured the blood on my shirt, it was pretty clear that I was the one who was shot.

[laughter]

BRAD: Yeah, I remember those extremely long nights. Tommy is what you call a very thorough shooter. And I gotta say, watching—it is extraordinary, his direction of this, and his construction of it. I mean, it's overwhelming to watch this for me 'cause I haven't seen it in a long time and I just get this, "I can't believe we got to do that." Whenever Tommy directed, the production values went way up—

JOSH: "We're making a movie this week."

BRAD: "We're making a movie this week." And part of Tommy's virtue—listen, if Tommy had a director who made their day, that made Tommy skeptical. Meaning, like, in 12 hours you got it done, you're not pushing hard enough. And I will guarantee that on this, I think the network probably put more money in—I was watching it going, "Yeah, wow, there's, like, helicopters—"

JOSH: It looks fantastic.

BRAD: Yeah, it looks like a movie.

HRISHI: Yeah. One thing I noticed early on was in that first scene between Butterfield and the president—

BRAD: How good is he? Jesus, he was great.

HRISHI: Yeah. Did you notice that all the Secret Service agents are referred to by their first name? It's never, like, Agent Somebody, it's—

JOSH: See, what I noticed is that all the Secret Service agents have last names that are also first names.

HRISHI: You know somebody named Butterfield as their first name?

BRAD: Oh, my God, you guys. Stop it. Stop...

[laughter]

HRISHI: I'm just kidding.

JOSH: Butterfield...

BRAD: Did you think about this?

JOSH: But wait a minute. Didn't you say first names?

HRISHI: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. They're all referred to by their first names.

JOSH: Oh, right.

HRISHI: Ron, Gina, and then in the car, he's like, "Where's Gina? She's not in the car." He's like, "She's with Mike and..." Someone else.

JOSH: So is that accurate, you're saying?

HRISHI: It's just interesting that they're all—

JOSH: Very casual.

HRISHI: Yeah.

BRAD: Yeah.

HRISHI: With Secret Service agents, I would expect that—

BRAD: You know, Aaron famously said, "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." And honestly, if you're around writing a lot, it is incredible to see that kind of intricate, successful storytelling structure, knowing that it's not the way a mortal does it, which is draft after draft after draft after draft.

HRISHI: Another big part of these two episodes is the relationship that comes out between Sam and Josh. They were colleagues in the first season and certainly seemed like friends, but here it becomes really explicit that the two characters have this shared past and have a lot of affection for each other.

BRAD: Right, yeah. Boy, it's hard to watch Rob age, isn't it?

JOSH: Ugh... not a happy story.

BRAD: [laughs] It's rough.

JOSH: He used to be cute!

BRAD: He used to be so good looking, so full of life. That's the fascinating thing, too, about doing a television show is, "Oh, I have a sister who died in a fire, I didn't know that. Oh, I had

this relationship with them. Oh, this was my family situation.” That’s one of the sort of peculiar joys—

JOSH: Retcon.

HRISHI: Exactly, yeah, so we’ve now retconned this relationship between the two of you, but—

JOSH: I just learned this phrase. Teach it to Brad on air, won’t you?

BRAD: Retcon?

HRISHI: It stands for retroactive continuity.

BRAD: Ok.

HRISHI: And so it’s like rewriting the past backstory of a character, or whatever the story might be to go along with [cross talk] whatever is happening now—

BRAD: [cross talk] With what’s going on now, yeah.

HRISHI: And this is a little bit different because we’re in a flashback. It’s not like they’re changing some backstory to make it happen. But we’re adding these details that we didn’t know about that would’ve changed, maybe, how we read certain scenes in the first season.

BRAD: Well, yeah, I mean, as an actor if you had known that—

JOSH: When I first joined the show, I was working with Danica McKellar, and then I found out she was my half-sister—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And I thought, so I shouldn’t have been slightly hitting on her in those earlier episodes...

[laughter]

JOSH: Because that’s inappropriate.

BRAD: No, I thought it was—I just thought it was an interesting family.

HRISHI: Did it change the way that you and Rob worked together? Knowing now that your characters have this dynamic...

BRAD: Rob made me laugh. We would kind of torture each other. Rob was very Republican back then. Not that everybody in Hollywood needs to be a Democrat, but I was outraged by that, and I remember I used to put “Impeach Bush” bumper stickers on his car so he could—

JOSH: [laughs] Would you get into issues substantively with him? I remember fighting about Israel with Richard once.

BRAD: Yeah, that was part of the joy of the show—

JOSH: That's what I think. That's what I always felt.

BRAD: I mean, look, creatively this is beyond your wildest expectations—that it's about politics, which was something I was always fascinated with, which became very urgent as we were doing this. You've got Lawrence O'Donnell hanging out on the set, and you've got real politicians—it was a fascinating part of it. And you were talking with Aaron about it all the time, too.

JOSH: Look, I think it's one of the joys of watching the show, is that it encourages exploration and discussion and conversation. And we do the podcast and we don't get, usually, too deeply into our own political views, but we do touch on things, and then our message board on our website goes crazy, and people are interacting. It's one of the nice things about the show—not just working on it, but just being a fan of it.

BRAD: Read-throughs were amazing events, I felt. You know, you treated Aaron like a playwright and it was extraordinary. I remember—I think we read these together. That's my memory. I may be wrong, but I think they came in as a unit 'cause he'd been working all summer and—I'm sure they were, 'cause Tommy was directing, so Tommy needed to know. I just remember the read-throughs as these—just as an actor, it's just extraordinary to—

JOSH: They were exciting.

BRAD: They were really exciting.

HRISHI: And you weren't resentful about the fact that you had a day that was twice as long because you have a script that's twice as long.

BRAD: Yeah, well, they always sort of pushed the union rules on that. Like, you know, "There's a read-through at lunch..."

JOSH: And read-throughs—I mean, you don't get paid for them, and I think what they are is, you're invited to the read-through. You'll be fired if you don't accept this invitation...

[laughter]

JOSH: But this is entirely voluntary.

BRAD: And I've said over and over, but Aaron was just putting out—especially in Season 2, this was the beginning of this sort of string of plays, which culminated in the "Two Cathedrals" read-through.

JOSH: The table-reads were big. There were a lot of people in the room. Roosevelt Room—is that where we would have them?

BRAD: Yeah, and in the hallway. They'd do them in the big foyer there.

JOSH: Ah.

BRAD: Yeah, and they were big things for Aaron.

JOSH: Well, one of the really endearing things about Aaron is, he really cares what you think.

BRAD: Yes, he has a very honest—and that's part of why his shows are so good, I think, because his writing process is infused with this deep, profound desire to be loved.

HRISHI: In this episode we really get the origin story, the superhero origin story, of the team coming together.

JOSH: Which feels right to me because you love this team, right? By the end of the pilot you've already bought into the dynamic between them and among them all, so it actually kind of works for me, this origin story idea. Like, alright, now we're going to find out how they came to be superheroes, their maybe humble beginnings, and...

BRAD: Yeah, I remember saying to Aaron, "What are you going to write after this? I mean, how are you going to...? You need an arena, you're going from the White House. You can't do a show about, like, a canning factory or something."

HRISHI: I would watch that show, though.

BRAD: Yeah, I would too.

JOSH: *Canning 65* by Aaron Sorkin.

BRAD: I used to joke about how the show became kind of like liberal porn, like you know he's playing with expectation in a very interesting way. There's a predictability about our essential goodness that makes it like liberal porn, like "Ooh, here comes the really well-informed guy and he's going to solve it."

JOSH: I will say, one specific thing about this episode: if you watch the cold open of "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen, Part II," and you haven't watched the first episode, the cold open plays like a horrendous overreaction of the police to a diner putting out his cigarette in an egg.

[laughter]

BRAD: It does seem a little extreme.

JOSH: He does it, he walks out, and then there's a helicopter and five patrol cars. Let me ask you about this, too!

BRAD: Yes, Josh.

JOSH: Very few people have mentioned that, during the entire assassination attempt, also one of the main characters was taken hostage or kidnapped and never appears in the show again, and that's Mandy. Can we talk about the Mandyville of it all? You got to Season 2 and Moira Kelly is not on the show anymore.

BRAD: Yeah, you know, Moira, I think it's got to be painful for her. She was very sweet—

JOSH: And good. We've commented on her during the first season—

BRAD: She was lovely. I knew that she wasn't happy...

JOSH: A lot of listeners and we, too, wonder what exactly happened. Did you know that she was not going to come back for the second season?

BRAD: No, in fact, I felt kind of guilty about it because here we were all having this amazing experience, and I knew that she was not happy. I think she was in a situation where she didn't feel she could be comfortable, which I understand. And listen, I'll be very honest—I have had the most phenomenal creative experiences of my life with Aaron and Tommy. I have seen very wonderful people feel overwhelmed by a certain kind of input and enthusiasm, and I think that there was this kind of sense of, "Oh, we're all having this wonderful time," and she wasn't—

JOSH: She wasn't having the time of her life, or it wasn't the way—

BRAD: Yeah, and I really honestly don't know. You know, I knew that initially that was supposed to be my romantic interest. And very quickly there was a turn away...

JOSH: We've talked about that, too, and it's worth noting Janel Moloney now in the opening credits. It was exciting to see her in the Season 2—

BRAD: Right, yeah, that was—

JOSH: She's made it into the montage.

BRAD: That was exciting. During the pilot—which I saw recently and it was very interesting to see—I do remember she was a day player. She was playing my assistant, and if you look at the pilot, there's assistant shifting around, and I do remember very clearly—she's an absolutely translucent performer. I remember our first smart-ass exchange, and going around to the monitor and going to Aaron, "Oh my God, I love her."

JOSH: She speaks very glowingly about you in general and specifically about your taking care of her. For instance, she said in one walk and talk, you asked for another take when she really needed it.

BRAD: Oh, yeah.

JOSH: And as a guest, she wouldn't have the gall to ask for it.

BRAD: Well, I'll tell you something actually. As the show went on, I really do ache for especially guest actors coming in. It's a horrible, horrible position. I mean, they should win Nobel Peace Prizes. But I remember noticing early on, these walk and talks would scare the [expletive deleted] out of directors and out of guest actors.

JOSH: Sure.

BRAD: The logistics of these walk and talks—these directors would come in and try and micromanage it. And as soon as we had the power, we'd go, "Stop, stop, stop. We'll get it. I'm telling you, it'll seem like we'll never get it and we'll get it in four, but if you start telling me to put the file down there, you will suck the zen out of me and we'll be here all night." And guest actors doing a walk and talk, if they're at the end of a walk and talk, I used to call it F.O.G., fear of greatness, where they'd be great in a take and then just, "Gahhhh!" You know, like, right—

JOSH: "Back to one."

BRAD: "Back to one." But I learned a little trick when I was doing a walk and talk with a guest actor. They would be intimidated, and so I would screw up the first take.

JOSH: Oh, that's very generous.

BRAD: I'd take like five steps, and not take much time, not so you had to cut, but just go back. And it's actually a good thing to do when you're auditioning people, is to instruct the reader to screw up, because people have this baked-in idea they have to be perfect.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: It's occurred to me to do that, but I've never done it. [laughs] In the Josh and Donna origin story, in your first meeting—

BRAD: It's a big walk and talk.

JOSH: Yes, and I was going to be very disappointed if you come upon her, she's in your office, and we pretty quickly find out that she isn't your assistant. She's decided she's your assistant. And I was just thinking, "Come on! Come on, why? This has got to turn into a walk and talk," and indeed you did one.

BRAD: Yeah. Obviously that relationship was an incredible joy. I mean, the fun we got to do to each other, the fun of playing Josh's inability to see what's really going on, was a real joy throughout the whole thing.

JOSH: And another, I think, example of Aaron seeing that something's working, or seeing the seed of something and absolutely letting it blossom and writing to it.

HRISHI: I felt like even Donna's story of how she came to be your assistant felt to me like there was some parallel to Janel's journey on the show. You know, here's a character who shows up, who's kind of in a role that isn't necessarily integral, but says "I'm gonna make myself invaluable..."

BRAD: Yeah, that's true.

HRISHI: And then Josh recognizes, "Oh, there's something here." And then, of course, it becomes this long-term thing.

BRAD: And, again, I think Aaron doesn't think that way, but I think his process, as crazy—I mean, when I ended up writing, I thought I was gonna die. And you realize, I didn't approach what he was doing in terms of the complexity of this kind of DNA, of the personal stuff going on and the issues going on—you know, the issue complexity, the verbal complexity. It's unbelievable he did that.

JOSH: And try doing it episode after episode...

BRAD: Episode after episode. I cannot imagine, I can't imagine. One thing I love about Josh is —

HRISHI: The character or the—

BRAD: No, no. No. And not his work.

JOSH: The real one.

BRAD: No, on the set. I steal this all the time and people love it. At the end of a take I will go, "And... career," instead of "And... scene."

[laughter]

BRAD: But I always appreciated that. And you used to always mention that, when you and Allison worked together, between you, you had four Emmys, which I also loved—

JOSH: [laughs] I had to keep revising it because she keeps winning.

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, my God! By the way, as I was watching it, not that this is an insight, but I was watching it last night, like Jesus, she's good. You know—

HRISHI: She's so funny. The pratfall into the pool is so funny.

JOSH: Back in last season you had a great pratfall.

BRAD: Yes, I did have a pratfall. And one thing I love about Aaron is, one of my favorite moments in the show, I think it's later, my dad sends me some shoes, and I just fall. Like I'm walking in to talk to a senator, and I just slip and fall. Truly one of my favorite moments ever is the coffee. The coffee's cold, and it just comes out.

HRISHI: So good.

JOSH: That's a very funny scene altogether.

HRISHI: Everybody gets a little bit of retconning here. Sam has a quick aside when he's at Gage Whitney. He says, "When I was a congressional aide, we used to say this thing." And just with that one sentence fragment, you find out he had some experience in the past before he became this private sector lawyer. He also was a congressional aide.

BRAD: Right, right.

HRISHI: This is some real retconning. C.J., we find out, is a Hollywood publicist, but in "20 Hours in LA," she didn't know what a development deal was.

JOSH: Ooh, very good. Good point.

HRISHI: So this is real retconning, where it's, like, according to what we've already seen, she definitely shouldn't also have a career working for—

JOSH: Should have known.

BRAD: God, Aaron is so full of [expletive deleted].

JOSH: Turns out.

BRAD: We busted him.

JOSH: [laughs] And guest cast! Allen Garfield and Grace Zabriskie in two small—even the little small roles are played by these great actors.

BRAD: Oh, God, the actors. Dave McCracken—

JOSH: Dave McCracken.

BRAD: May he rest in peace—saw him come through. Also, it's very intense for me to see John. Which, you know, we'll talk about at—

JOSH: We will, yeah.

BRAD: At another time. You know, one thing I just, and this is where I may sort of Schiff on the mic—

JOSH: Do it.

BRAD: Aaron had called me. My father who I loved and was a sweet guy, and I always thought I was kind of fulfilling an opportunity that was never allowed to him in a creative way, to be an actor, and was a lovely, funny, funny, funny man—

HRISHI: What did he do?

BRAD: He came out of the Depression and started working at an insurance company and worked his way through an insurance company, but he was an amazing musician. And I always remember him—I'm Schiffing—

JOSH: You did it, you cried, you're crying!

BRAD: No, I'm not! You know, standing, taking a picture to play... I always got the sense that he had to live this rational life. And he was an amazing, amazing musician, but he always got off on it, and I got the job. He was kind of losing it, and right before he died, I got to go back and show him the pilot. And he was a little fuzzy, and I remember thinking, "Oh, my God, I'm gonna show Dad this show that he's gonna be so proud of." And he couldn't quite, you know... "They're talking too fast." And then he died before the show went on after we made the pilot, so it was always a very powerful—I know it would have meant for him, even though he was not the kind of guy... he thought I'd certainly... I didn't feel any pressure to make anything. But Aaron called me very sweetly and said, "I want to talk about your dad. Are you ok with that?" in the sweetest way, in the airport. And I realized that... I always say this cast really came—it's a great group—but part of the chemistry in it is that Martin—there's a lot of admiration, there's a lot of ribbing, there's a lot of affection, but there's a real kind of parental thing going on, and it was amazing to have Aaron write that scene where I feel this very paternal affection for Martin.

[ West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt ]

*JOSH: They're calling my flight.*

*BARTLET: You want me to go with you?*

*JOSH: Go with me?*

*BARTLET: Maybe you want some company on the plane. I can get a ticket and go with you.*

*JOSH: Governor, California. You have to go to the ballroom and give a victory speech in primetime, and go to California.*

*BARTLET: I guess you're right.*

*JOSH: You guess I'm right? Listen to me, Governor, if you don't lose this election, it isn't going to be because you didn't try hard enough. But it was nice of you to ask. Thank you, I appreciate it.*

[end excerpt]

BRAD: So it was... I don't know. It was meaningful to me the way—

JOSH: That's a beautiful scene.

BRAD: The way that... yeah. And it's great the way Aaron writes it because it's like, "What are you doing here?" "You shouldn't be there." He keeps the obstacles 'til the very last minute.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's incredible too because the groundwork for that was laid way back, like episodes ago. In "Six Meetings Before Lunch," in episode 18 of the first season, you mention in the conversation with Jeff Breckenridge, he worked at a law firm with Josh's dad. And he asks after him, and it's revealed, you say, "Oh, he died the night of the Illinois primary."

BRAD: God, yeah, that's weird. That's weird that Aaron would—

HRISHI: And it gets paid off so many episodes later.

JOSH: Long ball.

HRISHI: Yeah, it's a really long ball.

BRAD: Yeah. I may be hallucinating this, but there's so many connections. I remember him saying to me once, in kind of an unguarded moment, "Write backwards." Meaning, know where you're going. Which I thought was an insight into his sort of unreal output, but I know he wasn't—you know, just his choice of MS was very last minute and, you know, "give me a disease."

JOSH: Right, right.

HRISHI: But then here's something that maybe because he was drawing upon your own—

BRAD: Yeah, and he was very sweet about it. It is surreal because when you're doing these shows, you're living together, and there is a very familial thing going on. Certainly with Richard, which at times became tricky because I think we love each other and have known each other and have a familial relationship. And it was very intense when John passed away because John Wells then wanted to make sure we were comfortable with—you know, I was a pallbearer at a funeral and now I'm a pallbearer on TV, and it got very Pirandello and weird. But I think Aaron was grateful and always sensitive about picking up on what's actually going on.

HRISHI: I love in that scene when the governor is actually offering to go with you, he's like, "Oh, let me go with you." He does this like Columbo-style patting of his pockets... Like, I don't know exactly what he's looking for...

BRAD: Yeah, like, you don't have to buy a ticket...

JOSH: Well, I like that. There's so much going on there, and Bartlet's looking for a way out. I mean, he's doing a beautiful thing, and he's being there for Josh, but he also maybe doesn't want to go back to this room full of people—

HRISHI: Right, exactly.

JOSH: And Josh, even in his grief, is still doing his job well. So, like, no, they're expecting you and you have to be there, and it's all these threads all at once.

HRISHI: Yeah. I also love the entry into that scene, when you're sitting at the airport, and in the background you see a Secret Service agent come in. Like, one walks across the screen and you see one in the background and then one in the foreground, and only then does Martin Sheen walk into the screen. It's great.

BRAD: Yeah, that's amazing shot creation. It's interesting the way that scene is staged. I very clearly remember that night.

HRISHI: In LAX.

BRAD: LAX.

HRISHI: Yeah, despite the fact that they have Chicago posters hung up, it's, for anybody who's been in LAX, clearly LAX.

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, it was LAX.

HRISHI: There's another moment between the two of you, which is at the end when you're in the hospital, when he puts his hand on your head and is, like, patting your hair. The very end, the very last shot.

BRAD: Right, exposing my hairline, God.

JOSH: [laughs] He might have rubbed it off.

BRAD: He might have rubbed it off. That's why I can't—

JOSH: Gentler, gentler, Martin!

BRAD: Gentler, gentler.

HRISHI: He gives Leo a kiss on the cheek in Part 1, before he goes into surgery. What did you think about—there's one moment where, when Toby's recruiting C.J., he calls EMILY's List:

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

TOBY: *That girls' group with the stupid name.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's pretty rough.

JOSH: Yeah, I had to immediately Google that. I'm like, "EMILY's List is a real thing!"

HRISHI: It's very real.

JOSH: Yeah, it's big.

BRAD: I think there's some probably casual, in retrospect, condescension about women in that.

JOSH: Which might not be entirely alien to the boys' club atmosphere of this senior staff of—in other words, you know, Aaron takes flack a lot for things that I think are credibly—

HRISHI: You want to attribute it to the character.

JOSH: Right.

BRAD: Yeah, I agree. I think he's reflecting what a bunch of guys may casually—

JOSH: I mean, there are times when C.J.'s opinion or thoughts are given less impact, and it's perhaps because she's the lone female voice in the room.

HRISHI: But you think it's story-driven, not coming out of—

JOSH: Yeah, I don't always see those—I mean, those are worth commenting on, but I don't always see those and say, "Aaron's got a problem with women."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: I'm not saying it's an invalid thing to explore, but it's also a little bit of a boys' club, these guys, and that is sometimes an element of—

BRAD: And certainly there was. C.J.'s probably the most beloved, strong, respected, one of the most wonderful female characters ever on TV, so—

HRISHI: Absolutely.

BRAD: I'm always loath to jump to that interpretation.

HRISHI: I wanted to get a comment about that "girls' group with the stupid name" from Amy Dacey, who before becoming the CEO of the DNC, was the CEO of EMILY's List. And EMILY's List is—to me, that's a badass organization. It was founded by Ann Richards and Barbara Boxer and a bunch of badass ladies. Amy, you were the executive director of EMILY's List.

AMY: I was, yes.

HRISHI: So what do you think when you hear Toby tell C.J. that EMILY's List is a "girls' group with a stupid name"?

AMY: [laughs] Well, of course, you have to laugh when you hear it represented like that. But to be honest with you, it was such a sense of pride to hear it said on a TV screen and to know you were a part of that organization. I remember the stories about the peak in interest in EMILY's List, how it helped the organization to have such a well-respected show like *The West Wing* mention your name, right? Like, you've come a long way, you know?

HRISHI: That was a sign. You made it. You got name-checked.

AMY: Yeah, you got name-checked. It was awesome. And of course we've seen that clip in a lot of videos and promotional stuff that we use when we talk about EMILY's List.

HRISHI: Ah, so you got to turn it around and use it for your own benefit.

AMY: Sure, sure. But you know, a show that so closely follows the political system and made real time references... To think you were one of the organizations that was picked to be mentioned was a big deal for us, you know? Like, that group that supports women. And that's what we want out there, and it definitely—whatever can drive more people to cut that extra check to support our candidates or support our organization, you've gotta love it, you know.

HRISHI: [laughs] So for anybody who is annoyed, like I was, when you hear that, what should they do? Where should they send their check?

AMY: They should send their check—go to [emilyslist.com](http://emilyslist.com), and immediately cut a check to the organization and know it's going to the right purpose. We're certainly not a silly little organization. You know, we've got millions and millions of members and have elected hundreds and hundreds of women, and there's a big, big group of women that I know EMILY's list is trying to help elect this cycle, including the first woman president. So that's a big step. And then a lot of women to the Senate and House and down-ballot. So if you want to say, "Hey, listen Toby, we're out here and we're working hard," then that's exactly where to send the money.

HRISHI: Awesome. Thank you so much.

AMY: Alright, sure. What's next?

BRAD: You know, I gotta say, I think that Toby's kind of trying to provoke her there. I don't think it's an unconscious labeling. I think he's trying to provoke her. I mean, EMILY's List is an amazing org, and I've given money to EMILY's List.

HRISHI: How about Charlie in this episode? Poor Charlie has to deal with not only finding out that people were shooting at his friends, it turns out that people wanted to kill him.

JOSH: Mmhmm.

HRISHI: And because people wanted to kill him, he's fine, but friends of his got shot. When they have that scene in the episode, just watching him take in all that information—

BRAD: Well, we cut a scene where I'm actually in the hospital and I grab him by the throat and I go, "This was meant for you."

[laughter]

HRISHI: I can't believe you didn't use that one. The one thing that I love in that Charlie scene, though—and this is something that we note often—is how beautiful the word "ok" is employed. You know, when Mrs. Landingham in "In Excelsis Deo" reveals that her sons were killed, and he takes in that news, and he responds with "ok." Here, again, they tell him all this, that the president wasn't the target, that [Charlie] was, and he just has to take it all in, and he says:

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*CHARLIE: Oh, ok. Ok, well, ok.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I love the way that that word is used. I mean, it's part of our sign off—

JOSH: We sign off with it. Also, I will say, Josh Lyman's immediate post-op muttered "What's next?" in Bartlet's ear, that killed me.

HRISHI: Yeah. We should talk about Ron Butterfield's speech to Toby. You know, throughout the whole thing we've been hearing a little bit about the tent—

JOSH: Right, the tent.

HRISHI: Yeah, for the president. And that they're gonna refer it to the Secret Service, and then we finally find out that this whole time, Toby has been carrying around this guilt, feeling like it was his fault. This whole thing was his fault because he was the one who wrote the memo saying, "We aren't gonna use this, we're gonna do the open air entry and exit."

BRAD: Right, right.

HRISHI: And then Michael O'Neill gives this beautiful—

BRAD: Michael O'Neill is really extraordinary, and the longer I act, I marvel. When you're doing a show, and it happens so often on *West Wing*, these people come in and are just absolute ringers. You look at these actors, and they have the familiarity, and there's something about actors who have a history with them.

JOSH: We've talked about that often, about people who carry that history into their small amounts of screen time—

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JOSH: And leave a lingering impression.

BRAD: Yeah. And Michael O'Neill is really the best example of that. I mean, you saw it right away.

HRISHI: Yeah. And you guys talk about the music of Aaron's writing a lot, and that really felt almost like a sung delivery. He really nails the rhythm and the cadence of those words and makes it beautiful. Like the "I would never let you not let me protect the president."

BRAD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it's interesting with Aaron, because you were just talking about the ok's, there are wonderful moments that are written in that I think Aaron is conscious of, when he was writing or when he was collaborating so fully. With Aaron, you could tell whose face it needed to end on. It was always a creative choice with Aaron when the stopping talked. And then it's interesting because at other times—

JOSH: "Talking stopped." Interpreting for Mr. Whitford, you said, "When the stopping talked." I think you meant "when the talking stopped." Carry on.

BRAD: I meant what I know.

JOSH: Ok.

[laughter]

BRAD: But it's interesting because very often with Aaron—I don't mean to use the word Shakespeare, but you're speaking everything you think. You know, everything you think is coming out of your mouth. I don't know, maybe we're overanalyzing, but it is interesting, those moments where he chooses to really say it. And it's one of those unapologetic, uncynical things. I love that about this show, too. It's what I love about the Beatles, about Bruce Springsteen... I mean, cynical's easy, and we're all cynical, but I love the risk of aspirational storytelling.

HRISHI: I think the thing that's so cool to me is that there is that large gesture, that aspirational gesture, but then all the little moves still line up.

BRAD: Yeah.

HRISHI: The tiny little stitches. There's one part in that exchange between C.J. and Toby when she's telling him to avert his eyes.

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*C.J.: Avert your eyes.*

*TOBY: What?*

*C.J.: I'm climbing out of the pool, my clothes will be clingy, avert your eyes!*

*TOBY: [laughs] C.J., I really didn't come here...*

*C.J.: Avert your eyes!*

*TOBY: Ok.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And the whole time, it's just on Richard Schiff that whole time, as he's taking in every time she's yelling, then he finally turns around. I would almost expect there to be more cross-cutting between her yelling and him, but it just stays on him the entire time.

BRAD: Right, right.

HRISHI: It's a great decision. With your scene with Donna, when you're finding about her, and it seems like Josh has ESP when it comes to Donna.

JOSH: Oh, he reads her in that scene.

HRISHI: Yeah, his intuition is bordering on telepathy.

[West Wing Episode 2.02 excerpt]

*JOSH: Your boyfriend was older than you?*

*DONNA: I think that question's of a personal nature.*

*JOSH: Donna, you were just at my desk reading my calendar, answering my phone and hoping I wouldn't notice that I never hired you. Your boyfriend was older?*

*DONNA: Yes.*

*JOSH: Law student?*

*DONNA: Medical student.*

*JOSH: And the idea was, you'd drop out and pay the bills 'til he's done with his residency.*

*DONNA: Yes.*

*JOSH: And did you?*

DONNA: Yes.

JOSH: Then why did Dr. Free Ride break up with you?

DONNA: What makes you think he broke up with me?

[end excerpt]

BRAD: You know, Josh certainly had—in a way that I blame Josh, not Aaron, for—a kind of casual, you know... The man is in charge. And really, what's great about the relationship, and why I defend Aaron on this question, is we really had an Edith/Archie thing going on. I think I know everything, and I don't know anything. She is the smartest. She is the one in the relationship with the coup de grace insight. It's a very interesting relationship as it develops because I'm seemingly cocky and she's constantly undercutting me and kind of seeing through me. Boy, what a great relationship. I remember wondering early on, "Oh, Jesus, is this going to become... Are we going to be a couple?" And very wisely, Tommy was adamant, like, "No. No, no, no, no. No."

HRISHI: You basically are already in love and spend all your time and you act like a couple, so to actually make you guys a couple would actually lessen the story, not increase it.

BRAD: And as Josh's wife Melissa knows, there's nothing more boring than consummation.

JOSH: [laughs] Wow. And I let you mispronounce coup de grace. I let that go.

BRAD: Coup de grace?

JOSH: Mmhmm. We pronounce the "c" because of the final "e."

HRISHI: True.

JOSH: [expletive deleted] you!

[laughter]

HRISHI: I like that in the season premiere, despite having now 22 episodes to rely on, there are still new moves being found in the writing and in the direction, especially.

BRAD: And by the way, Tommy does not get enough credit. I look back at the way he ran that show, and that's a very tough job, dealing with a bunch of very needy, complex actors. You know, shooting, it's like you're having a wedding every day. It's overwhelming. Aaron needed Tommy. Tommy needed Aaron. Dealing with how to work with a creative force like Aaron is a very specific skill, having to combine that with the logistical mayhem of shooting. And Tommy, I felt, was always asking very big questions. He wanted directors who came in—I'm telling you, any show you do now, everybody's in a constant state of production fear, and "just deliver us our episode," and Tommy wanted much more of that out of directors, which is how you found Alex

Graves, who's a brilliant director, Chris Misiano, who's a brilliant director. They eventually became producers, but I think brought the best out of directors on that. That's Tommy pushing it, and Tommy saying to himself, "What's next?"

JOSH: Awesome interview.

HRISHI: Yeah, thanks so much.

JOSH: Just fantastic.

BRAD: Anytime. I'll come back. I would love to—

JOSH: You'll come back, right?

BRAD: I'll come back. I'll come back.

HRISHI: Do you have anything that we need to talk about?

JOSH: Oh, yeah, actually, let's talk about what you have coming up.

BRAD: I just finished a movie called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* ...

JOSH: Of which you are one.

BRAD: Of which I am one—

JOSH: Who are the other two?

BRAD: Peter Dinklage, Walton Goggins. Richard Gere's the doctor—

JOSH: That is a good cast, except for Brad.

BRAD: Except for me. Jordan Peele has a horror movie about race that I'm very excited about.

JOSH: What's the name of this film?

BRAD: I think it's called *Get Out*, but it's a fascinating thing. I did a documentary series on climate change called *Years of Living Dangerously*, where I went to Washington—and we can talk about this next time, but it's fascinating, the reaction I get in Washington. This whole thing was me going to Republican congressmen to talk about climate change.

JOSH: That would be worth discussing.

HRISHI: Interesting.

BRAD: Yeah, yeah. Because that's been an interesting part of my life, advocacy stuff that's come through the weird—you know, because I pretended to be in the White House, they kind of

take you seriously, which is weird. I had a movie called *Other People* that's coming out, like, right away. Molly Shannon should get nominated for an Oscar.

JOSH: That's exciting. You're annoyingly busy. I'm happy for you.

HRISHI: Thanks so much for joining us.

BRAD: My pleasure.

HRISHI: And that's it for our episode.

JOSH: Season 2, game on.

HRISHI: We'd love to discuss this episode of our podcast with you on our Facebook page, [facebook.com/thewestwingweekly](https://facebook.com/thewestwingweekly), or on our website, [thewestwingweekly.com](https://thewestwingweekly.com). If you listen to the podcast on iTunes and you like the show, we'd love it if you'd leave us a rating or a review, and if you don't like the show, we'd love it if you didn't leave us a rating or a review. Thanks.

JOSH: If you just can't get enough of us and you want to follow us on Twitter, you can do that too. I'm @JoshMalina, my co-host Hrishikesh is @HrishiHirway, and the podcast is @WestWingWeekly.

HRISHI: This episode was produced by us, with help from the intrepid Zach McNees and the scintillating Margaret Miller.

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HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

BRAD: What's next?

[outro music]