

The West Wing Weekly
0.17: Casting the Pilot
Guest: John Levey

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to a special bonus episode of *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina. And this episode first aired now.

HRISHI: Today, we're talking to casting director John Levey. He's responsible for casting the pilot episode of *The West Wing* and the first two seasons.

JOSH: That's right. We've wanted this interview for a while, but it seems fitting now as we're reaching the end of the series and the podcast that we go back and take a look at the original assembly of this amazing cast.

HRISHI: It's true. I'm getting a little nostalgic as we reach the end, and yeah, I think going back to the beginning feels right.

JOSH: That's right. Fortune step in, and an unsuccessful audition for *SEAL Team* put me in the same room with John Levey.

HRISHI: Were you auditioning for a show called *SEAL Team* or were you actually trying to become a member of the Seal Team?

JOSH: No, there's a new show that takes place behind the scenes of a circus and I was going to be the seal trainer.

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: I was very excited about it, but it's not I [crosstalk] - someone else is going to get that job.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's too bad.

JOSH: Yeah, it seemed like a good job for me.

HRISHI: This might be the time to announce my new role on a show where we work in a factory putting stickers on things and really just kind of approving things with a little bit of wax and a stamp. It's also called Seal Team.

JOSH: [laughter] Fantastic. Love it.

[laughter]

JOSH: I have an audition next week for a cloning television show. It's all these – it's an ex-husband of Heidi Klum that's been...

[Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: Cloned and there are nine of them and it's a baseball thing called Seal Team. I'm pretty excited about it.

[laughter]

HRISHI: That's great. I'm also going to be working on this natural disaster movie, and there is just a wildlife explosion in population and all of a sudden this coastal city is overrun with wildlife. It's called Seals Team.

[laughter]

JOSH: Nice. Very nice.

[laughter]

HRISHI: All right, I'm done. I think for everyone's sake we ought to be. Let us now turn to our conversation with John Levey. Thank you so much for joining us.

JOHN: Oh I've been intrigued and wanting to connect and get a chance to do this for a long time. It was a good happenstance that I saw Josh professionally, and we talked about it.

JOSH: It's a little unfair I didn't get the job, but you got the podcast.

[John laughs]

JOSH: And I am correct, did you bag – did you go two for two Emmy-wise in your work on *The West Wing*?

JOHN: I do have two of those dangerous, pointy statues.

[laughter]

JOSH: Two of your four.

JOHN: I do have four; I have two for *ER* and two for *The West Wing*.

JOSH: So was it your connection to John Wells that brought you to *The West Wing* originally?

JOHN: Yeah, absolutely. I was, you know, had been working with John, well really, for a very long time. He was the head writer under John Sacret Young on *China Beach* in the 80s, so I had worked with him. And then when I moved over when the merger between Warner Brothers and Lorimar happened, I moved over to what we jokingly referred to as Warner-mar, and Well's deal moved over there as well. And then, of course, *ER* happened, so I was John's person. And, it was actually interesting because, at the beginning, Aaron and Tommy were so tight, and it was John's deal that got *West Wing* on the development radar but it was very much the first time John wasn't 100% in charge. And, I think Tommy and Aaron probably saw me as a little bit of an outsider or "John's guy" at first, and that was dynamic...not in a negative way but, you know, they're both incredibly strong personalities and strong leaders and they had both just come off of *Sports Night*, so their connection was incredibly tight; their way of working and all of that.

JOSH: And did they arrive with definite ideas about casting *The West Wing*?

JOHN: I think Aaron certainly had Brad in mind for something, and we weren't clear until really close to production which part Brad was going to play. Some of that had to do with Rob who came in once for the pilot and then when we wanted to sort of mix & match with Rob, his management took the position "We showed you what we could do. Make a deal and let's go forward, or don't make a deal but he's not coming back in to read again." And so, Brad was kind of sitting there between Sam and Josh [chuckle] waiting for a deal to either make or not make with Rob for Sam.

JOSH: Hmm. So, was there a time where it was clear that those two guys would play those two roles but unclear who would play what?

JOHN: No, I think it was always clear that, if Rob was in, he was Sam. And, if Rob was out, Brad was Sam.

HRISHI: I remember Brad saying that when he go the script for the pilot originally, he was looking at Sam and looking at the lines, and eventually he said to Aaron, he was like "I really think I'm Josh."

JOHN: Yeah, well he was certainly right about that. You know, when we first started doing the pilot, the President wasn't really a regular. It was really the West Wing. It was about not the Oval Office. And then, when Martin emerged, I think everybody thought it would be wasteful to have him just be there and not use him strongly and so, I think that was the big shift that happened during that process.

HRISHI: I was wondering if we could go back a little bit, before actually the process of the pilot. Could you describe what the relationship was that you had with John? You said that Aaron and Tommy sort of saw you as his guy, and I was wondering what the relationship between a casting director and an executive producer or show creator is really like.

JOHN: Well, I think mine with John is quite unique because it's been going on now for a very long time, so you get shorthand, and you get all this experience where you know somebody – the kinds of actors that they respond to and the kinds of actors they don't respond to, and specific actors who have maybe annoyed them at one moment in time. But, my relationship with John has always been very open and just really terrific. He's a wonderful, nurturing leader and, you know, any long relationship like that has just so much built in; easy communication and I think that's been the hallmark of our relationship. He's done incredibly well, and, as a result, I have too. And, with no false modesty, I think I've helped. [laughter]

JOSH: Of course.

JOHN: Our taste really synched up at a certain point.

HRISHI: So, when *The West Wing* came to John as a project, were there immediate casting needs that you knew how you were going to address from the get-go?

JOHN: Yeah, there's some casting directors that are encyclopedic; they watch everything and they know everybody. They know the third replacement in Aaron's *All the Presidents Men* on Broadway or all of that kind of stuff. I'm not that way. I'm sort of a guy from the 60s, so I jokingly

say I'm a vibist. I know what you are when I'm sitting in a room with you. I get you, and I get a sense of where to put you. So, I think that's my strongest skill, and, when I started this, I just started the process. I started just started talking to agents and managers, and started reading the script and reading the script and trying to get to know Aaron particularly. I already knew Tommy because he had directed the live episode of *ER*, and I knew him to be meticulous as hell, and really, really gifted, and really organized. And then, of course, I had to adjust right away because Aaron reads with everybody. It was unique because I was, you know, when you're reading with actors, you're watching with one eye and reading the script with the other kind of. But when you're just watching, you're totally plugged into the actors and to their performance.

HRISHI: So, did it feel like a luxury for you to have Aaron there reading with the potential cast?

JOHN: Well, at first I didn't get how he could be watching with as much care as I was used to a creator watching with, but he obviously can and does. I know, when I'm reading with actors, you're really in the scene with them so you can feel their work in a different way than if you're just watching it.

JOSH: Yeah, I was wondering what you make of Aaron's desire to read that way? I can't tell whether it's something he just enjoys [chuckles] or kind of gets a kick out of jumping into the material, you know, harking back to his days as an actor or whether there's an extra element of something he can sense in an audition.

JOHN: I never really talked about it with him. But, you know, my sense of Aaron is that he really is a one man band, and now I think that he's directing as well, he's probably more and more a one man band. I don't mean that in a negative way. I mean I think he's really fully in control, and the more he can take control, the more he's alive in the moment of whatever he's working on, and I think then the better his judgment is. But, at first, it was weird – genuinely weird. His scenes, for the most part, play very fast, and he reads faster than that.

[laughter]

HRISHI: Yeah, I guess he knows that speed that he's looking for actors to speak it, and so if he can outpace them then they know they have to catch up from the beginning.

JOHN: He creates a self-cleaning oven, right.

[laughter]

JOHN: I think one of the ways in which it was easy to cast *The West Wing* was if you couldn't keep up with the pace you were gone. You know, there are many, many, many really talented people who just don't have that facility for language and pace.

HRISHI: I was wondering if we could maybe look at the folks that you had to cast for that pilot, and you could tell us some memories you have about meeting each of them or some of the reasons why you thought they would be appropriate?

JOHN: Very early on, John Spencer read for Leo, and I remember very distinctly that everybody in the room, Tommy and Aaron particularly, were kind of just blown away...he was camera ready for that part after the first sentence. You could just smell how perfect he was for it. Wells had worked with him on a show that shot in New York maybe 3 years before that called *Trinity*.

HRISHI: And you worked on that show as well, didn't you?

JOHN: I did indeed.

HRISHI: So were you responsible for bringing in – how did John Spencer sort of come into the John Wells fold?

JOHN: Well it started during that show, *Trinity*, in New York, and I think the New York casting people brought him in, but I was aware of him also. He had done a jazz play at the Taper out here, and John is just – still miss him – an enormously talented and a real kind of theater junkie; a real actors' actor. I think he lived and breathed his work in a way that's not typical of television.

JOSH: Did John walk out of the room with the role essentially, or was there a big network discussion?

JOHN: Well, I mean we read other people but I think everybody really knew.

HRISHI: How about the casting of Moira Kelly as Mandy?

JOHN: [chuckle] That I think was our idea. In those days, and I think still, the Gersh office has an enormously ripe pool of television actors that are gifted and really ready for work. Moira was someone I liked very much going in to the process, and unfortunately that was the one part that didn't work. It was just impossible to integrate a character that wasn't in the West Wing into the West Wing.

HRISHI: Gersh is the talent agency?

JOHN: That's correct. You know, the big ones have sort of the name, name, names, but for the other parts, Gersh probably has 2 or 3 people on every pilot that happens.

HRISHI: And how does it work when you have a show like this that you're putting together? Are you responsible for sending out some kind of memo to all of the big agencies saying –

JOHN: Sure, there's a thing called the breakdown services and that goes out on a daily basis to agents and managers who subscribe to it. And we describe the roles that are available and then get, in those days, hard pictures and resumes delivered to our offices by messenger; and we open all those goddamn envelopes –

[laughter]

John: And separate them into the piles, in those days, and start talking to the major agents and to the agents and managers you have relationships with. And then, you're talking it over with the producers and the director, and with the executives at both the network and the studio, and you just start putting one foot in front of the other. I always say that doing pilots is a little bit like making a mobile at the beach, you know when you hang one shell from that piece of driftwood you have to balance it at the other end with a shell that starts to create the ensemble. And, it is that knee bone connected to the thighbone thing. It's really why casting pilots is exciting because, when one piece falls in, you know when you get John Spencer, you get all that gravitas, you get all that realness, you get all that sort of unmade bed-ness. And then, Rob is a completely made bed right. [chuckles] He shirt is tucked in and his tie is tied well and it's always

in place, and he's a real leading man in that way. And then you start putting all those other pieces – actually in those days, Kevin Scott was my second-chair partner and he watched a lot of videotape on people we didn't really necessarily know, and he's who brought Allison to my attention. I don't remember exactly who's on her demo in those days, but she had scenes with major people from several different projects, and it was just completely clear that she could hold her own opposite heavyweight talent. And, she was so damn funny, and so smart, and obviously when you start to get to know Aaron and Tommy, you know that smart, funny, and fast are requirements. Allison had all three.

HRISHI: Was there anybody else who you were unfamiliar with who really blew you away in their audition process?

JOHN: Not for the leads per se, but, for that under-cast, Janel was somebody I did know and she had done *Sports Night* I think, but then she just won that part. And I think Aaron had suggested a number of the other people who were the assistants and then we got to the press room and some of those reporters that ended up doing 10, 15, 20 episodes over the life of the theater, and they were co-stars but they were sort of – I always used to say about the cast in *ER* that the nurses and the EMTs, that that was the trampoline that the leads got to jump on.

JOSH: Hmmm.

JOHN: Because you never had fall off; once you cast all of those small parts with really wonderful people, they could hold their own in scenes with the people 1 through 7 or whatever.

HRISHI: How about the role of Mrs. Landingham? She had been in an episode of *ER*. Was that how she was on your radar?

JOHN: I guess that must have proceeded it, so I don't remember specifically, but I do remember meeting her in a class and hearing her story – that she had started acting well in to her adult life. I think her husband had passed away, and she had moved to California and started acting.

JOSH: She and Martin had a very special chemistry together, as did all sorts of different combinations of the whole cast worked so well together, and you talked earlier a little bit about mixing and matching, and did you do a lot of reading with multiple actors in the audition process?

JOHN: No, we didn't. We just got lucky and skilled. Aaron, and Tommy, and John also when he would always step in towards the end, you know those are three of the brightest, most intuitive guys that work in television - obviously, otherwise why would all three have had such continued and astonishing success? I mean, they're really good at what they do, and I always think, and maybe Josh you agree or don't agree, but I think two talented actors can create chemistry of whatever appropriate chemistry by being present in the moment, and working off each other, and not having a predisposition about where the scene has to go.

JOSH: Absolutely, yeah I do agree with you, and I do agree that it's a skill. I think it's probably just my deep love of the show I felt like impute to it almost something magical that, even beyond the skill of the great actors, there's something very special about this group of people that you put together. I can only imagine what the initial table read must have been like. It must have been immediately apparent.

JOHN: You know, everybody told us that politics doesn't work on television, so it was kind of like a free swing. [laughter] And, in those days, because technology hadn't really happened yet, we weren't recording these auditions the way we do now, and so we were able to be kind of unencumbered by so much supervision. It was the last of the sort of auteur days. Now, the networks and studios have so much more access to you process that it's a little hard to be as free as we were in those days, and sometimes that works out spectacularly and, obviously, lots of times it doesn't.

JOSH: Now, we'll take a quick break for some ads if you live in the United States and for some break music if you live outside the United States, and then we'll be back with more of our conversation with John Levey.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: And now, back to the show. I'm wondering how you got the kind of insights that you have about acting and actors. Were you an actor yourself?

JOHN: I was a bad actor, [laughter] but yes, I was an actor in college. I kept gravitating towards directing, and, when I came out here to California in the early 70s, I was directing in the theater and I got very lucky and did a production of a Israeli playwright Joshua Sobol called *The Night of the 20th*, and it happened that one of the actors that was in the show, his partner was the Director of Audience Development at the Mark Taper Forum, a wonderful guy called Bob Schlosser, and he thought the production was pretty great, and he brought Gordon Davidson to see it, and then I got the NEA Directors Fellowship at the Taper in 1980. And that was the first time I'd ever heard of a casting director because there were casting directors on staff, and I did a lot of new play development readings of new plays. So, I worked with writers, I worked with dramaturgs, I worked with casting directors, I worked with actors, and so, somehow I got trilingual, and I also had a background in psychology in college and so all of those things combined so that I could speak everybody's language. And that, I think, was my asset.

HRISHI: Hmmm. Moving past the pilot, I was wondering if there were examples that you could give us of anyone that you might have cast after the pilot you felt like you were responsible for a real coup, you know, someone you brought in for a particular part you felt particularly proud of making that connection.

JOHN: Well, I didn't know it then but I certainly know it now and that would probably be Elisabeth Moss. She read opposite quite a number of young women for the President's daughter in that wonderful, famous scene about chili where Martin shared the family recipe for chili.

[West Wing Episode 1.05 excerpt]

ZOEY: *Taste this. Doesn't it need cumin?*

CHARLIE: *It needs oregano.*

ZOEY: *Well, let's get to work.*

[excerpt ends]

JOHN: I can tell you a funny story. The spice cumin is featured in that recipe, and one young woman clearly had never been in the kitchen she called it “see-men” the first time she said it –

[laughter]

JOHN: And “come-in” the second time she said it.

[laughter]

JOHN: And, as she was walking out the door, Aaron said “Not in my chili”.

[laughter]

JOHN: But Elisabeth read and there was just something -as I said, we didn’t know it then but you look at the work she’s done since then –

JOSH: Astonishing.

JOHN: My goodness gracious, it’s really extraordinary. And, it seems to me, she’s going to continue as her generation gets older to find new stuff and exciting stuff. She’s really an extraordinary talent.

JOSH: Also, I want to make sure we don’t skip talking about Richard Schiff and how he got the role of Toby.

JOHN: Oh god, yeah. You know who read – who tested opposite Richard?

JOSH: We’ve heard Eugene Levy!

JOHN: Yeah, Eugene Levy. He probably gave the single funniest audition that didn’t get the job in my long career. I mean he made the executives in that room at NBC laugh out loud eight or ten times in that short little moment. But, there was something so innately grumpy about Richard that was perfect for what Aaron had in mind for the future. Richard just was – I mean again, talk about embodying the role. Between him and Spencer, we got so lucky. It was such a great group.

JOSH: That’s interesting. I bet Eugene Levy probably walked out thinking that he had nailed and he bagged that role -

JOHN: Oh absolutely.

JOSH: So it’s one of those situations where it’s just two very different alternative interpretations, both great, and then just having to choose one.

JOHN: Yeah, and, because we had funny in some of the other places in the extreme, it wasn’t really what we needed out of Toby. What we needed out of Toby was cynicism and worry. That was his corner of the market.

JOSH: And all things he would find a way to make humorous at different times throughout the show ultimately.

[West Wing Episode 1.04 excerpt]

TOBY: *There's literally no one in the world that I don't hate right now.*

[laughter]

[excerpt ends]

HRISHI: I remember when Richard first came on our podcast and we'd asked him about his memories of the audition process that he had been coming in for his reading:

[West Wing Weekly 1.10 excerpt]

RICHARD: *As I'm walking out, I saw Allison Janney in the pool of actors waiting to audition. I said to myself if they're serious about her, then these guys really know what they're doing. And I got a little excited about it.*

[excerpt ends]

JOHN: Well, that's again a great tribute to Kevin Scott who brought her to my attention. I didn't know her from Adam. Although, years later when I got an award from the casting society, Allison very kindly agreed to present it to me, and she made up the most fantastic story about being barefoot in a rainstorm in New York and walking by a pay phone and it started to ring and she answered it, and it was me talking to her about this part in *The West Wing*.

[laughter]

JOHN: You know an absolute fabrication.

JOSH: God bless her.

HRISHI: Maybe I can ask you about some of the heavy hitters that come in for recurring roles early on - someone like Tim Matheson who played Vice President Hoynes?

JOHN: Well, I did a pilot, my very first pilot at Warner Brothers, that Tim was the executive producer of, so I had known Tim for a very long time. *[laughter]* He's a great guy, and I always used like to tease him and say he was born to be the Vice President.

HRISHI: That's great. How about Anna Deavere Smith as Nancy McNally?

JOHN: That was a direct result of everybody's excitement at her one-woman shows, and I think that may have been Aaron's idea.

HRISHI: We know he liked to pull actors that he had seen in theatrical productions into *The West Wing*.

JOHN: Yeah, absolutely. His love of the theater is extraordinary, and it's one of the things that makes him fun to work with because he knows people that other people in television have never heard of – sometimes including the casting director.

[laughter]

JOSH: But your background in theater must have made you simpatico with Aaron from the get-go, I would think?

JOHN: You know, I'm not sure Aaron would know me if we ran into each other tomorrow.
[chuckles]

JOSH: Huh.

[laughter]

JOHN: Aaron is so in his own world that, when you're with him, he's with you, but I think then, when you're gone, you may be like a puff of smoke that's gone too. Aaron's process is certainly the most unique of anybody I've ever worked for, and, in some ways, it's a difficult process. You know, you'd get a scene between a congressman and Josh, and it would be two and a half pages long, and it didn't have a page number on it, and you'd ask if it was in Act 1 or Act 4 and if it was one of four scenes, or if it was one scene because those are the kinds of things that are important to a casting person because you've got to know what pond you're fishing in –

JOSH: Hmm.

JOHN: And Aaron would often say, "I don't know" and that would be on day three of prep.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Did you ever have a major disagreement about a casting choice that you can remember?

JOHN: No, because it's not a democracy, and I'm aware that it's fine for me to be passionate about what I do, but I get to say 'no' and 'maybe' and Aaron, and Tommy, and John get to say 'yes'.

JOSH: If you're willing to touch back on Moira Kelly as one of maybe the only aspects of the original cast that, for lack of a better description, didn't work out, how did that play out? Did she feel, at the time that she left the show, that character-wise it just wasn't a situation that was working out for her either?

JOHN: Yeah, I don't think she was happy. I don't imagine she could have been happy because, as the show evolves, *The West Wing* took on this magical quality, and, anytime we left the West Wing, anytime we left that physical space, the energy left. Then it became just really about 'Will Josh and Mandy sleep together or not?' and that just wasn't compelling compared to all the rest of what was happening. I don't think it had anything to do with her. It just wasn't a fit.

JOSH: Mhmm. So it was a fairly amicable parting of the ways? I mean it must be painful [crosstalk] at any point to leave.

JOHN: [crosstalk] Oh, I'm sure she felt like [expletive deleted], and I'm sure, as the success mounted, seven years of escalating money is a very good thing for actor –

JOSH: Indeed.

JOHN: In their life. I'm sure there was disappointment and maybe a little feeling of having been misled or something along those lines.

JOSH: Mhmm.

JOHN: If you were the first drummer in the Beatles, [chuckles] I imagine you were pissed off once in a while.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: I'd love to go back to the conversation we were having about chemistry and actors working off each other, because I think one of my favorite pairings in the show that really is a pairing is William Duffy and Peter James Smith as Ed and Larry. I was wondering if you –

[laughter]

HRISHI: If you thought of the two together when you were casting them? That seems like an instance where you really had to construct the mobile with both of them in mind.

JOHN: Absolutely not. I think they found that in dailies after it happened.

HRISHI: Hmm.

JOHN: Then they were smart enough to go 'this is comic gold - in the right dosage, we can mine this and have a lot of fun', but we absolutely didn't think of it at all. Peter was somebody we knew. Duffy was definitely – I think my memory is that that was an Aaron person.

JOSH: Yeah, that's right, from the tour of *A Few Good Men*.

JOHN: Right.

HRISHI: How about John Amos coming in as Admiral Fitzwallace?

JOHN: God, that's a great – well you know obviously one knows John Amos from *Roots* among other things, and he just seemed, I don't know, he was larger than life in the way that *The West Wing* is. You know, it's a weird combination of sizeable performance and persona, and absolute real style of acting, and there's some people, as we were talking about language earlier, there are some people who can do both that sort of helium-infused performance and that totally reality based performance at the same time. John Amos is one of those guys.

HRISHI: When you're talking about these costars roles for a character that maybe just shows up for just one episode or a few scenes in an episode, is there an example of someone who had that kind of role that you felt was a real knockout?

JOHN: Well because he's a good friend of mine, I always loved Charles Noland as Reporter Steve I think he was.

HRISHI: Mhmm.

JOHN: He has just one of those faces that was made for radio, [chuckles] and yet he just seemed of that world. His wife used to be my associate, and I got to know Chuck over the years

and he's a friend and I always thought he did a terrific job in the newsroom every time he got to ask C.J. a question.

[West Wing Episode 4.15 excerpt]

REPORTER STEVE: C.J., there's a 1948 U.N. Convention on Genocide, and the U.S. is a signatory. Simply put, it says that if it's determined that genocide is taking place, the United States is compelled to intervene.

C.J.: The problem is the Convention distinguishes between acts of genocide and genocide.

[excerpt ends]

JOHN: Yeah, he was a real presence.

HRISHI: Were there times where a part would be described where Aaron didn't necessarily have an actor in mind but you knew right away 'I knew who this role should go to'?

JOHN: You know, again, that's a rare thing for me. I am totally process addicted. I don't want to fall in love and know who it's going to be because she might not be available. [laughter] And then I'll be disappointed no matter who it ends up being.

HRISHI: So is that a trained emotional response you've learned over the years?

JOHN: Yeah, probably from my personal life.

[laughter]

JOHN: You know, for those kind of parts, you send out these breakdowns, and pictures and resumes come across your desk and you kind of go 'Yeah, that's a great idea!' but then you always show five because you're never quite sure exactly what Aaron hears/sees. And ultimately, that's what going to be the deciding factor. It isn't going to be what I think. It's who's going to grab Aaron's attention.

HRISHI: Do you still, after having done this job as casting director for so many years, is it still fun for you to do?

JOHN: Absolutely. I wouldn't do it anymore if it wasn't. I'm of a certain age that, if I wasn't having fun, I certainly wouldn't go to the party. When I get to see good material come to life, I love it. Otherwise, at this point, I wouldn't do it. Fortunately, my house is paid off.

JOSH: Ha ha! Well done.

JOHN: My children are both grown and taking care of themselves, and I absolutely do it for the love of the work.

HRISHI: Can I ask you why you decided to leave *The West Wing*?

JOHN: Well, ultimately, *ER* was still going. *ER* was my baby in a very important way, and Aaron's process started to not feel as though it respected anybody else's right to a process.

JOSH & HRISHI: Huh.

JOHN: There were other things coming up through John Wells' productions that interested me, and Tony was absolutely chomping at the bit to do *The West Wing*, and he's a dear friend of mine – Tony Sepulveda. I knew he would have a fresh take on it. He had a wonderful comedy background as a casting director that I didn't have, and I knew he would be energized by getting to work on something that prestigious and that important, and that he would serve Aaron, and Tommy, and John well, and that I would probably sleep better. [chuckles]

HRISHI: So it is as you said, when it stopped being fun, you stopped going to the party.

JOSH: Yeah, even back then - good for you.

JOHN: Yeah, I mean I had John's blessing. I went over to his offices and said I'm not feeling this in the same way I was in these first few years, and I think I'd like to move on. He was supportive of that.

JOSH: So that wasn't the case from the get-go? It was a deteriorating situation.

JOHN: No, it just wasn't ever going to change. You know, I have the greatest admiration for Aaron and his talent, but, as I said earlier and I mean it in the best way, he's a one-man band.

JOSH: Mhmm.

JOHN: At a certain point, it diminishes your right to a role.

JOSH: Hmm.

JOHN: I'm a, as I said earlier, I'm a 60s guy. I'm a collaborator. I'm a cooperator. I'm interested in community, and I'm fine to be in service of for a while, but eventually that just doesn't feel like a world I want to live in.

JOSH: Mhmm. Look, that is a take I have heard from actors who have worked in the Sorkin universe as well, so it's not the first time I've heard that reaction.

HRISHI: I was wondering if, during the time you were on the show and/or after you left the show, you watched the show?

JOHN: Yeah, I watched it religiously. Fortunately, John Wells hired me to be exclusive to him, and while I wasn't doing seasons 5, 6, and 7, I was the Head of Casting at JWP, so I was, in a certain way, tangentially involved with Laura's years as the casting director. Not exactly supervising her, but being involved in the process.

HRISHI: So you watched it all the way through the finale?

JOHN: I have seen every episode, yes. It's a perfect television show. It's smart. It's funny. It's educational. It served a real, gigantic purpose. I have a nephew who's just over 30 who got married just over a year and a half ago to a woman who works in women's health issues in the government, and she blames *The West Wing*.

JOSH & HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: It's incredible, isn't it?

JOHN: It is! There's a whole generation of idealistic 30 year olds who care about America in a way that they got from Aaron who cares about America.

HRISHI: John, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

JOHN: Oh, it's my pleasure. I'm happy to do it finally, and I look forward, Josh, to seeing you in my office some time soon.

JOSH: Oh, I'll be back. I'll be back. You will.

HRISHI: And that does it for this special bonus episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

JOSH: It was, if I say so myself, pretty great. [laughter]

HRISHI: Our thanks to John Levey for joining us. Our thanks to Prodigal Son, Nick Song, who's returned.

JOSH: That's right! He's back.

HRISHI: Prodigal Song.

JOSH: Very nice. Like a dog returning to it's own vomit –

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: Nick Song is back.

HRISHI: We - [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Too much?

HRISHI: Yeah, it was too much.

JOSH: Maybe.

HRISHI: We really needed his help, and he came back and helped us out by recording John Levey's interview for this episode. Thanks Nick!

JOSH: That's right. Thanks as always to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller who never left us in the first place.

HRISHI: That's true. Thanks to Radiotopia from PRX; a fantastic collective of fiercely independent creative podcasts.

JOSH: How can we find out more about them?

HRISHI: I'm glad you asked. You can just go to the website Radiotopia.fm, and you'll find information about all the shows that are part of the collective.

JOSH: I shall. In the meantime, you can leave a message for us on our Squarespace powered message board, thewestwingweekly.com. You can follow us on all manner of social media.

HRISHI: That would be nice.

JOSH: Wouldn't it.

HRISHI: Especially as soon that will be the only way to hear our nonsense.

JOSH: That is true.

HRISHI: Well, not hear. Read.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Well not write, read.

JOSH: Wrong. Yeah, right. Correct.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

JOHN: What's next?

[Outro Music]