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WHAT'S CHARACTER GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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WHAT'S CHARACTER GOT TO DO WITH IT?

MS. BOONE: Everybody ready? Could -- are there any more seats that anybody can squish in to the middle, because we have a lot of people who'd love to seat -- sit? I think you're supposed to be up there.

MR. SORKIN: Okay.

MS. BOONE: We're really --

(Applause)

MS. BOONE: -- how many people are pass holders in the audience tonight?

And how many people are members of the Aspen Community and from abroad that don't have a pass? Welcome to the Aspen Ideas Festival. This is going to be really quick. This is David Brooks, this is Aaron Sorkin, and they're going to talk to you about character.

(Applause)

MR. BROOKS: Kitty, that was the kindest introduction I've ever received. Thank you.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Well, it's a pleasure to get you at Hollywood and into the real America. Welcome to Aspen, Colorado.

MR. SORKIN: It's great to be here. I do want to say thank you to the Aspen Institute; to Walter Isaacson, who's sitting here; to all of you, for coming. And especially it's a big deal for me to share a stage with David Brooks. I --

(Applause)

MR. SORKIN: I just want to mention I just got into town a couple of hours ago and this is my first time in Aspen. It's beautiful here, but there's not enough

oxygen to support life. So I don't know what's going to happen now.

MR. BROOKS: We're going to do the rest on a stairmaster machine.

MR. SORKIN: Yeah, okay.

MR. BROOKS: So we're going to talk about character and hopefully mostly how Aaron develops character. So I'm just going to do -- the first question is just walk me through, pick a character, do you write like a short story about them? Do you write prose about them before you do dialog? Do they come from real people? How does a character actually come about in your mind?

MR. SORKIN: I don't do those things that you just mentioned. Other people do. And it's important to note that there is no one way to do it. Everybody does it differently.

For me, rather than kind of tell the audience who a character is, I like to show the audience what a character wants. And it all boils down to intention and obstacle, somebody wants something, something standing in their way of getting it. They want the girl, they want the money, they want to get to Philadelphia, it doesn't matter but they have to want it bad. If they can meet it, that's even better. Something formidable is standing in their way and the tactics that that character uses to overcome the obstacle is going to define who the character is. It's like having a Christmas tree and then hanging on them that is all.

MR. BROOKS: So pick -- I mean, just pick a character. We're probably familiar with most of your characters and describe the desire. The desire comes before all the other demographic qualities or --

MR. SORKIN: By desire you mean intention?

MR. BROOKS: The intention, yeah.

MR. SORKIN: Absolutely. It's -- when you say

demographic qualities, I think that what you're thinking of is characteristics.

MR. BROOKS: He's good.

MR. SORKIN: And that's a little bit more like Mr. Potato Head.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Where you have the thing and I'll give it big arms and little ears and then you got a hat, no moustache or moustache, that kind of thing. And that is -- absolutely comes last if it comes at all. The -- what a character wants and how they go about getting it, how they go about overcoming the obstacle is what's going to define that character.

MR. BROOKS: I'll just point out, Toy Story did okay with Mr. Potato Head.

MR. SORKIN: They did. They did. But if you look at the characters in Toy Story beginning with Woody on down, they had one big desire which was to be there for Andy. Andy was the name of the kid, right?

MR. BROOKS: Yeah.

MR. SORKIN: To fulfill their essence as a toy, which is to make a kid happy. And you know, a ton of obstacles were thrown at them and their characters were defined by how they overcame them.

MR. BROOKS: Do you think -- I mean, just as you look around the world, do you think that kind of intensity of intention is normal in people you meet or is it something that you write dramatic stories about?

MR. SORKIN: That's a great question. Let me answer it this way, and let me know if I didn't answer your question when I'm done. The properties of people and the properties of character have almost nothing to do with each other. They really don't. I know it seems like they do, because we look alike, characters and people. But

people don't speak in dialog, they're lives don't unfold in a series of scenes that form a narrative arc. The rules of drama are really very much separate from what we know from, like I said, the properties of life.

MR. BROOKS: Is that true of Shakespeare?

MR. SORKIN: It's, I would think, especially true of Shakespeare. You know, people don't rhyme.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: They did in Lower Manhattan (inaudible).

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: I like -- listen, I tend to write very romantically and idealistically. So the characters that I write are going to be, kind of, quixotic. And they're going to fail a lot and fall a lot. But, you know, there's a romance in trying for honorable things.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. Now, so you mentioned that -- are -- do you consider -- do you have a moral purpose, are you trying to improve the world or see the world?

MR. SORKIN: I'm really glad you asked.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: I really am, because --

MR. BROOKS: One out of seven the --

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: I think because of the way I write and some of the subjects that I write about, whether something has taking place at the White House or something has taking place in a newsroom, that it would be easy to look at that and feel like I'm trying to give you a lecture on here's how things should be done if everybody just lived the way I wanted them to live, live the way

these characters are showing as an example, and we'd all be better off. That isn't on my mind at all when I'm writing.

I have no agenda. I certainly don't have a political agenda. You see, I do. Here's the only political agenda I've ever had. When I was in -- eleven years old, I had a crush on a girl in my sixth grade class named Jenny Lavin (phonetic). And she was volunteering after school at the local McGovern campaign headquarters.

And so it thought it would be a good idea if I did too.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: And one Sunday they put us all in a bunch of buses and vans and took us over to White Plains which is the county seat in Westchester where I grew up, because the Nixon campaign motorcade was driving through. And we were going to hold up signs that said McGovern for President.

And that's what I was doing when a 143 year old woman came up from behind me, grabbed the sign out of my hand, whacked me over the head with it, threw it on the ground and stomped on it.

My only political agenda has been the slim hope that that woman is still alive and that I'm driving her out of her mind.

MR. BROOKS: Have you stalked Jenny Lavin on Facebook?

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Believe it or not I'm not on Facebook.

MR. BROOKS: Really?

MR. SORKIN: Yeah. I was for the -- for a brief period while I was writing the movie, while I was writing

the Social Network.

MR. BROOKS: Why not?

MR. SORKIN: And then -- why not? I don't have a good reason not to be, I just don't have a good reason to be -- I don't know why not. I --

MR. BROOKS: You'll drive Jenny Lavin crazy.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Listen, you're right. I wouldn't mind knowing what Jenny Lavin was up to.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: No, no, I didn't --

MR. BROOKS: Walter, you got a phone?

MR. SORKIN: Honest to God, I'm not looking to hit on Jenny Lavin.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: We all have our Jenny Lavins.

MR. SORKIN: Yeah.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: She's a big producer in Hollywood. She's got (inaudible) on her next project.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: So talk to us -- you know, you're famous for dialog.

MR. SORKIN: Uh-huh.

MR. BROOKS: At what point does the dialog come in?

MR. SORKIN: Well, it's the last thing. I -- it -- what I'm asked for is how long does it take you to write a movie. The answer is actually a couple of years. But most of that doesn't look like what a passer-by would say was writing. It looks a lot like me lying on my couch or watching ESPN.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: But what I'm doing is -- again, I worship at the altar of intention and obstacle. And I'm trying -- I'm just loading up on what those things are, what is the intention and obstacle. And that's the driveshaft of the car.

Once you've built that, then you can start to do the fun things that you like to do. For me, that's dialog. I really enjoy dialog because my parents took me to see plays starting from when I was very little. Like I said, I grew up first in Manhattan and then in a suburb of New York called Scarsdale.

And my parents took me to see plays starting from when I was very little. And oftentimes they took me to see plays that I was way too young to possibly understand, like "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" when I was nine.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: And I did not understand what was happening on stage. But I loved the sound of dialog. It sounded like music to me. And I wanted to imitate that sound. So now, story for me, plot is a real weakness.

I consider plot to be kind of a necessary intrusion on what I really want to do, which is write dialog. But I can't write dialog unless there's a plot. So I will kind of get myself as loaded up as I can on, you know, who wants what and what's standing in their way; just two people in a room who disagree. They can disagree on the correct time of day, but they have to disagree. And once I have that, go ahead and write.

For instance, with "*The Social Network*," I had like the first third in my head. And I frequently, in fact, always, start without -- before I know how it's going to end really. I wish I knew how it's going to end, but I just can't wait that long. I have to get started and I hope it comes to me along the way.

So I had about the first third, and I definitely had the first scene, which it's a very simple scene, it takes place in a bar in a college campus, and two students, one of whom is Mark Zuckerberg, are -- who have dated a couple of times, they're breaking up. And that's the scene.

And when I finally sat down to write it, it occurred to me for the first time. And it had been about a year leading up to that, of thinking and going and visiting the Final Clubs at Harvard and talking to the -- I spent a lot time with the Winklevoss twins and that kind of thing.

When I finally sat down to write that first scene, it occurred to me that these two characters were much -- were at least a little bit younger than -- they were younger than any characters I had ever written before. And that -- suddenly I had to make them sound young and like they're young today in the 21st century. And I think I maybe wrote six lines before I said this has just gone awful, they're going to have to talk the same way everybody talks and everything that ever I do. And they did.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: The characters I write don't really distinguish themselves by the way they talk.

MR. BROOKS: So when you write -- that scene is famous, he gives that Boston University speech, which is (inaudible).

MR. SORKIN: Which I do apologize. I spent the last four years apologizing to anyone who went to BU. My

sister went to BU. It's a fine school. It was the right line to write in that school.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: I didn't know your sister went to BU. Wow. Should have chosen BC.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Now -- but -- so when you write a great line, you know, "You want me on the wall, you need me on the wall," do you know write there, this is a really good line.

MR. SORKIN: I know when I write a line that I like, you know, when it -- musically it feels right. And again, you know, what the words sound like are as important to me as what they mean. So you know, I know if I've, you know, kind of got it going on, if I'm in a groove. I don't know, you know that you know, we're going to be saying you can't handle the truth however many years later.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Now, when you -- do you think this is -- you know, you've been doing this now for, I don't know, a couple of decades, do you think it's changed the way you see the world when you're in conversation with people? Are you at work? Are you more observant than you hadn't if you'd been doing something else?

MR. SORKIN: Yeah, definitely. Definitely, I am less -- I am more -- more observant is a nice way of saying it. I'm less in the actual moment than I am trying to use whatever this moment is to help myself at work. And again, it's because of that, that year -- that year-and-a-half, you know, spent on the couch watching ESPN, I -- first of all, I'm always terrified that I have written every word I know, you know, and in every order that you can put it.

I am haunted seriously by the fact that, you

know, like everybody I've, you know, I've a dictionary at home, we all own a dictionary, and I'm haunted by the fact that in that dictionary on my shelf is the best play ever written if I can just pick the right words and put them in the right order. It's already there and I just need to crack the code.

And so basically I'm -- it's hard to get me 100 percent present in the moment. I'm usually thinking about this thing that I'm having trouble writing or if I'm in the middle of doing serious television, that's the worst because you always have a term paper due. So the answer is when I'm having a conversation with somebody, I'm hoping they're going to help me out somehow.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Frequently, if I'm really stuck, I'll go out into a -- like a public place, a diner, a bus stop, any place where you might overhear a conversation and hope that I can land in the middle of a conversation that will get me thinking how in the world did this -- what in the world was the beginning of this conversation and I'll try to write that.

And so I was in a diner once and just overheard somebody, I mean, they were really frustrated saying, "I mean, honestly, how many people can you think of named Gordon?" And I thought, let me get out of here, so I'm going to write the rest of this scene, and I'm going to write the beginning of this scene.

I was in Jackson, Mississippi and passed by a park bench and two men were sitting there. And one of them said, "Who that they're going to get the jump on, Jesus?"

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: And again I thought, that's what I'm talking about. I am going to -- he wrote the best line of the scene, now I'm just going to write the rest of it.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah -- now, do you think you're more empathetic? I mean you're sort of mining. But are - - like -- to understand intention and obstacle, you've got to actually get into the minds of people.

MR. SORKIN: I'm not sure if this is what you mean by empathetic or not, but I've written two anti-heroes in -- I mean in the midst of all the romanticism and idealism, I've written two anti-heroes. One was Mark Zuckerberg and the other one, let me make this sound as little like a plug as I can, is in Steve Jobs, which opens October 9th, based on the book by Walter Isaacson.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Is Walter your anti-hero?

MR. SORKIN: Walter is my absolute hero. And in those cases, when you're writing an anti-hero, you can't - - you have to have empathy, you can't judge the character. Those characters I write, anti-heroes or even outright antagonists like Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men*, you really want to write them like they're making their case to God why they should be allowed into heaven.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. My favorite movie, Present Company excepted of course, is a movie called *The Searchers*, a John Ford movie --

MR. SORKIN: Yeah.

MR. BROOKS: -- where John Wayne is a bigot throughout that movie, and it's an incredibly complicated but very moving role because he's trapped by circumstance, he is a primitive man trapped in a semi-civilized civil society.

MR. SORKIN: Sure. Listen you can, in drama, get people to empathize with bigots. We saw it with *All in the Family*, right, we loved Archie Bunker, we loved him and the reason why was that Norman Lear and that team and Carroll O'Connor did a great job making us feel, sort of, the life of this guy who, you know was, you know, had a father who was hard on him and he's just making ends meet

and he is living in Queens, to understand that life. And he also showed us a very nice father and it's a tough needle to thread, but you can do it. In *12 Angry Men*, by the very end of *12 Angry Men* you kind of want to give Lee J. Cobb a pat, you know.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. Now, I have a weird question, I was at a conference one -- a cocktail party, a very bad cocktail party, where I happened to run into a fascinating guy who is a novelist. And we got to chatting and I write the non-fiction newspaper, he writes novels and he said to me, I don't know why he thought this with me -- he said, "Do you drink while writing?"

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Maybe that's why some of my columns are very sensitive, but I said no, do you drink while writing your novels, he said no. And then he said to me, do you drink after writing and I said, often.

And I said do you drink after writing and he said, yes often and I said to him, why do you drink after writing. He said because the writing process to me is so emotional that I needed to calm down. And I said, to me the writing process is so disciplined, I needed to loosen up.

MR. SORKIN: That's really interesting.

MR. BROOKS: So, which are you? I am -- feel like I am that Boston University girl right now.

MR. SORKIN: Yes. I don't drink, so I can't be helpful there. But as far as the rest of the question goes, yes, I am emotional when I write them, actually very physical when I write too, I am -- especially when it's going well.

I start acting out the parts, I stop typing and I start walking around, I can find myself two streets away from my office or my house because the things are going really well I am like kind of rush back and type it, it's a little enervating. If I have written well, if I am

writing badly it is the worst feeling in the world after, so I am a parent too, so after something bad happening to my daughter, this is the worst feeling in the world.

But you do it for those tiny moments of -- you put the bat on the ball, are you really connected with it. I once broke my nose while I was writing, I was writing an early episode of *The Newsroom* and kind of got up in the middle of the night because I realized there is a great gag, it's sort of as sold as comedy itself, but it will work right here. And I just went from my bedroom to -- I keep a little office at home -- just to write a note to myself to do this and then those notes turned in, became a little longer, then I started writing dialog, I just -- the hell with it -- opened the script and started writing.

And what it was, was a moment where Jeff Daniels having just experienced the last straw was going to -- lunging at a staffer or doing one of these with somebody holding him back.

And I was, at the moment that I was kind of doing that I had moved from the office into the bathroom and lunged into the mirror with nobody to stop me from doing it. If it had been a Scorsese movie, he would have said, let's go again, this time with a little less blood.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: My nose was plainly broken, I mean -- my face was smashed here, so I called a friend of mine, it was about midnight and she came over and said, "Oh my God, we got to get you to the emergency room." I said, no, no, will you read these pages? Just tell me if this is funny.

MR. BROOKS: I think I've read that when Proust was dying, he was rewriting a death scene in remembrance -
-

MR. SORKIN: I don't know anything about Proust's dying and what was happening then, okay, New York Times.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: When Lady Gaga was dying.

MR. SORKIN: Uh-huh.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Okay. We are going to open it up in about 10 minutes, but I have got (inaudible) myself a little more. Let's go back to politics. Do you think liberals and conservatives enjoyed *West Wing* equally?

MR. SORKIN: I mean I have statistics that suggest they do not, but I'm glad we have gone back to politics and I am glad in addition to Walter Ekaterina, Huffington is sitting here in the first row. Again, I do not have a political agenda nor am I particularly politically sophisticated. What I have are great tutors on *The West Wing*, on *The Newsroom*, I hired people who had experience in Washington, experience working in the Whitehouse who were able to combine that with -- they kind of got a kick out of the stories that they were able to tell.

So, just someone who is able to say, listen on Halloween the Whitehouse press Corps is allowed to bring their kids to the White House to trick or treat. Someone would say -- I got to tell you something. The presidential motorcade moves as soon as the president gets into their car. And oftentimes, especially on the campaign trail if an incumbent is campaigning, a junior staffer will run into a store to get a postcard, to get a t-shirt or something, come out and find that they are in the middle of nowhere with the motorcades gone and they have been left behind in Oklahoma. And so it's just something like that, that's both of those were *West Wing*. And they would teach me if only phonetically, sort of, the sound of two intelligent people disagreeing.

MR. BROOKS: But there is -- I mean, in a lot of your movies, especially the politicals, other work, there is an idealistic version of how it should be.

MR. BROOKS: Yes, and again that's not me saying, come on you dummies, why can't you be as clever as I am, that's just me being romantic and idealistic and trying to be as good as like Frank Capra was at --

MR. BROOKS: Are you compared to Capra a lot, I mean, aside from Proust, are you?

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: I mean, Capra has this idealism too.

MR. SORKIN: I would never compare myself to Capra.

MR. BROOKS: Let me say, did he inspire you like of the film makers who you grew up with?

MR. SORKIN: No, as a matter of fact. But I like his moves, I really do, I like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, but they don't light me up, Donkey Hodie lights me up.

MR. BROOKS: The novel?

MR. SORKIN: Yes.

MR. BROOKS: So, you are castigating me for Proust and you are getting Cervantes.

MR. SORKIN: That's exactly right.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: I will tell you why, because Donkey Hodie was turned into a Broadway musical.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: And so now I can understand it.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. Well, do Proust. Now, would you say like what's the best moment, is the best moment in

your career, is it the moment when you write it, is it moment when it's on the screen or on the stage or when the actors read it? At what point is the craft fulfilled?

MR. SORKIN: There are a lot of good moments along the way. Again they are going to be way, you are going to have way, way more bad days than good days and you know you remind your self that a baseball player, professional baseball player who only fails two out of three times is going to the Hall of Fame, you keep telling yourself that.

The good moments, you have written a scene well and you have -- if there are any pool players in here, you know what I mean by giving yourself a leave, which is to say, you have written a scene well, and you have left off at a place where you can go to bed knowing what you're doing when you get up tomorrow morning, that you are not going to get up tomorrow morning climbing the walls because you don't have an idea, that you know just what you are going to do, you have given your self a leave, that's a great moment.

Somebody else reading it, somebody with fresh eyes coming to it, I will tell you, when Walter read the Steve Job screenplay and liked it, that was a really big deal to me, sitting at a table, read. And I remember my first movie table read where it was *A Few Good Men* was my first movie, and Nicholson makes that character Colonel Jessup, makes his entrance on page 23 of that screenplay. And we are having a table read, and there is about 80 people on a sound stage and Nicholson, I had his first line and there was just kind of an audible gasp in the room because it wasn't somebody doing a Nicholson impersonation, it was Nicholson. And there had been a number of actors that I felt that way about.

But the biggest big deal moment is when somehow you know that you've written something and it's not just about writing it because remember there is a big difference between what you and I do, you write things that are meant to be read and I write things that are meant to be performed. So it would be like a composer just writing notes and handing up the sheet music to the

audience, it wouldn't have nearly the same emotional impact.

Once everybody comes together, the actors, the director, designers, technicians and the audience which is a major collaborator and what we are going to do tonight. If it lands and you can tell if it does, that's a really big deal. It feels fantastic.

Unfortunately the feeling is fleeting and you have to do it again. You cannot dine off yesterday's really good feeling, it really doesn't last that long.

MR. BROOKS: Now, I have asked this question of a lot of people who have done really first class work and I say, do you feel complete, do you feel whatever ambition drove you, is it satisfied and can you rest?

MR. SORKIN: I don't know a single writer who would answer yes to that question, not a single one. My hero and my mentor coming up, is a writer named William Goldman who, he has two Academy Awards for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*, he wrote *The Princess Bride*, he wrote *Magic*, on and on. He is a fantastic novelist, a fantastic screenwriter, he is also a fantastic writer of nonfiction. And I would recommend to anybody, not only in the movie business, I would recommend to anybody a book that he wrote called *The Adventures in the Screen Trade* which is, it's a wonderful, wonderful read, also a book of his called -- by the way I don't make any money when he sells books -- a book that is called, *Hype and Glory*, which was about, there was one year in which he was a judge at the Cannes Film Festival and the Miss America Pageant in the same year.

And he uses that thread to -- actually to write about his marriage falling apart and it is a fantastic book. Anyway Bill Goldman found me early and took me under his wing and he is still very much sort of a godfather figure for me. And when I saw that he was unsatisfied and restless and hadn't -- didn't feel like he had yet accomplished what he had always wanted to accomplish, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, right, *The Princess Bride*, I thought there's no hope for me, this is

what drugs are for.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. One final line of questions and then we will throw it open. And I should say right now my visibility is limited, so somebody could -- well, somehow we will have to fix that. You talked -- I am going to get back to the moral issues.

MR. SORKIN: Yes.

MR. BROOKS: You talk about intentionality, a lot of -- it's striking, a lot of your work takes place in the workplace.

MR. SORKIN: Yes.

MR. BROOKS: But do you have different ambitions, are all ambitions just dramatically interesting or there are certain characters who have had ambitions that you thought were amazingly noble that -- of the sort of famous characters you have done?

MR. SORKIN: Yes, I try to -- first of all, to address the first thing that you said, yes, I love writing things that take place in workplaces as they are sort of a common -- a theme in the stuff that I've written which is, it's okay to be alone in a big city if you can find family at work.

So, I like workplaces, I like people who are really good at their job, no matter what that job is and I kind of like watching them do it.

To answer the second part of your question, we just have to distinguish between the fiction and the nonfiction that I have written because *The Social Network* wasn't really about, I don't know, we can have a discussion about the nobility of what Zuckerberg's intention was, it just wasn't really about that. On the other hand Charlie Wilson and *Charlie Wilson's War* his intentions were extremely noble, his tactics were loony and it worked. But when I am writing fiction, I am really mostly interested in honorable intentions, I'm really mostly interested in the difference between not good and

bad, but good and great.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. Now, let's go -- this is much talked about, I am sure you have talked about this a thousand times, you know Zuckerberg case, he has a long term girlfriend, in the movie he doesn't have a girlfriend, he is driven by unrequited love or romantic longing.

MR. SORKIN: Let me figure out a way of answering this without re-litigating all this because I do not, the opening of that movie, here is -- okay --

MR. BROOKS: It's not an accusation. It's a more philosophical question.

MR. SORKIN: Yes, I understand. But first let me tell you how I got there, which is this. What I had was Mark Zuckerberg's actual blog post from that night which you hear in voiceover, we do the first scene with Rooney Mara. The credits roll while he walks from that bar called The Thursday Scholar back to his dorm room and then we hear in voiceover, he starts blogging and we hear in voiceover his blogging which we start to mix with this party at a final club, this world that he wanted to be in, that voiceover, that blog post was almost verbatim his blog post.

Stuff that I changed or cut would not affect your takeaway at all and in that blog post which begins, I changed the name of the girl, it begins, "This girl is a bitch," he tells us about the thing that -- well, I wanted to write the hour that came before that blog post.

Whether he had a girlfriend at the moment or not, I can tell you that he had a very bad day with this girl and I decided that it was a motivation for me.

MR. BROOKS: Let us now right here we will start here, we will start.

SPEAKER: William Goldman also said, "Nobody knows anything," famously.

MR. SORKIN: Yeah.

SPEAKER: So, when you started on *West Wing* which is a tremendous success, would you talk about the difference between that and *Newsroom* in dealing with executives?

MR. SORKIN: Well, the differences are enormous and *The West Wing* is a good, nobody-knows-anything example, because at the time you couldn't do a show about Washington, you couldn't do a show about politics, they tried a couple times, it's just -- television wasn't going to come near it because the broadcast television, the idea is to alienate as few people as possible, that's why if you look at the early days of broadcast television sort of the *Father Knows Best* era into *I Dream of Jeannie* and those kinds of shows, the big hit shows, nobody lived anywhere, they all lived in Springfield. The husband had a job, though we didn't know what it was, he was a businessman, sometimes he was in advertising, they didn't have religion, they didn't have a salary because they had to seem just like you, okay.

Television has a much different relationship with its audience than movies or plays do, it's a much more intimate relationship because television comes into your home and it's something that you do frequently while you're flipping through a magazine, talking on the phone, putting the kids to bed, making dinner, that kind of thing.

So, *The West Wing* wasn't supposed to be a hit or even get on the air, it was a fluke that it got on the air and here is how, it didn't not test well, they let us make the pilot, the pilot didn't test well, it didn't test horrendously but it didn't test through the roof.

Then Warner Brothers our studio in order to convince NBC to put it on their schedule, to order 13 episodes of the show, they came up with a new testing sample that no one had tried before. They tried, it tested extremely well with four groups, households earning more than \$75,000 a year, households where there was someone who had four years of college, households where

they subscribe to *New York Times*, okay, and the fourth and this was a huge deal, remember *The West Wing* went on the air in 1999, households where they had home Internet access.

And the reason why that fourth one was big, now everybody has home Internet access, but not in 1999. The reason why that fourth one was such a big deal was because it was right in the middle of the dotcom boom and Warner Brothers was able through -- and NBC were able to show these people where they could advertise.

And if you were to go back and look at not on DVD but the actual broadcast episodes of *The West Wing*, you would see that well more than half of our spots were for dotcoms, it was dotcoms and BMW was why that show was on the air and the *New York Times*.

MR. BROOKS: That's a demographic of like 16 people.

MR. SORKIN: It's a demographic of like 16 people which they were able to sell like it was the number one show on television because there was nowhere else to go for these advertisers.

MR. BROOKS: Are you conscious of those commercial considerations when you are writing or is that faraway?

MR. SORKIN: It's not even faraway, it's nowhere on my mind, I am actually always I am seeing for the first time when it's on the air who the buyers are and I remember with *Studio 60* which was a show that wasn't successful, there was watching it one Monday night and there was a 62nd spot for a super-duper lubricant for -- I just thought who the hell was watching this show, what is our demographic.

MR. BROOKS: I am on shows with a lot of hospice ads.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Yes, but I want to finish *The Newsroom* on HBO, it is an entirely different business model. HBO does not care how many people are watching, *Game of Thrones* or *The Newsroom* or *Girls* or anything like that, they don't care. They care how much the *New York Times* is writing about it or how much public acclaim it gets because that's what gets people to buy subscriptions to HBO.

You would be surprised actually at how few people are watching some of the most talked about shows on television.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: And so -- I am sure that they didn't get in a room and say, gee, how can we make things great for writers. The unintended consequence of this was that it is great for writers or artists of all kinds because you no longer need to attract a giant audience to stay on the air, you just need to be good. And I will take those odds, I will fail or succeed with that metric.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. Other questions, right here.

SPEAKER: Yes, you were so successful, had such a unique voice in a medium that didn't necessarily lend itself to that. When you write now, do you find yourself consciously playing into that voice or even consciously trying to avoid that voice?

MR. SORKIN: When it comes to the voice, I think you are talking about dialog again probably. If I am consciously doing anything I'm doing something wrong probably. There needs to come a time again when you have got it, when you are loaded up, when you know what the scene is about, when you know what has to happen in the scene and what the problem is. There does need to come a time when you just have to let it fly.

You are lucky to get to that point and though I will admit to this, I will become conscious of -- listen, I'll be conscious of if I just wrote badly, not like a parody of that we will see from time to time, maybe

genuinely badly, I will know it all, I will stop, I will be upset with myself, but if I am writing the way I write, I am okay with that.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. There is more over here, right over there.

SPEAKER: Okay. You mentioned earlier that you build plot from giving your characters obstacles, they struggle and then it ends by them ultimately reaching their goal. Was there an experience in your life that influenced you to write this way or did you adopt this writing process from your favorite writers and authors?

MR. SORKIN: Let me be clear, they don't have to succeed in their goal, they can fail, but they have to have tried as hard as they can possibly try, the intention has to be clear, the obstacle has to be formidable, they can fail, you won't have a happy ending, but that's okay.

Where I got that was two places; one, yes, trying to emulate my favorite writers, but the other is Aristotle. In the *Poetics* by Aristotle which is barely even a book, it's more like a pamphlet, it's like 64 pages long, right there are the instructions for, this is what drama is, this is what a play is. It also applies to movies and television Aristotle couldn't envision such a thing, but he tells you exactly what is required of a protagonist, a hero, a tragic hero, an antagonist, he tells you exactly what is required of a play.

And except when it comes to bad dialog, when you are in trouble, when you are writing, it will almost always be because you have broken one of those rules of Aristotle's. And you have got to become a diagnostician, you got to figure out what you did wrong, what rule did I break here. So, it's that, but are you a writer?

SPEAKER: I wanted to write a book, but I know that I have a lot of things going on, so.

MR. SORKIN: Okay. Because my suggestion which was going to be read people that you like and try to figure out why you like them. And when you see something

or read something that you don't like, try to figure out why you don't like that, be a diagnostician.

MR. BROOKS: Can I just ask something on the craft, do you have a schedule sort of like ESPN?

MR. SORKIN: I am like -- like I am Stephen King wake up to the -- go to hell.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Wow, it's gotten ugly. Do you have a microphone.

SPEAKER: I have a question.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. I hear them. Right there, straight down the middle.

SPEAKER: So, you talk about the writers that you like and the writers that you sort of envision. How much of yourself do you think is sort of or maybe perhaps your super-ego has been injected into some of the characters that you have created.

MR. SORKIN: I would say probably first of all more of my father has been injected into the characters than me, it's I think that I get mistaken for my characters and my characters get mistaken for me from time to time that if this character said something that I'm using them simply as a delivery system for what I want to say, which I don't do.

But you know, I told you about jumping up and down and dancing around my office, playing all the characters. So there would be as much of me in CJ Cregg on *The West Wing* as there would be in Sam Seaborn.

MR. BROOKS: I saw a hand right over here. We are going to go over there.

MR. SORKIN: Okay.

SPEAKER: This question is actually for David.

MR. BROOKS: Ask.

SPEAKER: What if anything have --

MR. BROOKS: I do have a schedule.

SPEAKER: You do. Not my question.

MR. BROOKS: To hell with those who don't.

SPEAKER: No, not my question. So, my question is, what if anything have you learned about character from the characters that Aaron Sorkin has written.

MR. BROOKS: That's a good question.

MR. SORKIN: It's great question.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Nothing I didn't already know.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: I am actually -- it had never occurred to me the power of the ambition and drive in all of your characters. And that, I would wonder where that would come from. I mean we know in -- for all of us, so lot of people in this room were recently successful.

MR. SORKIN: Uh-huh.

MR. BROOKS: And there is some lack there that you are grown up with and you are striving to find that completion, which you say in screen writing, and it's certainly true in journalism, is never actually fulfilled. And so I do think the characters are so dynamic because of that -- that void they are trying to fill forever. Does that ring, ring true.

MR. SORKIN: It does. I would say especially so in *Steve Jobs* which opens October 9.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. And people after that will feel fulfilled won't they after --

MR. SORKIN: After they've seen it twice.

(Laughter)

MR. BROOKS: I wish I had a better answer but that is a very excellent question which I would have to think more about. A really good answer is going to come to me in two hours.

There was a question over here. Never mind. Okay, we've got a whole wing over here.

Well, we've got a gentlemen that will come to --

SPEAKER: I don't think you answered the question. Who do you identify personally with, is it Jack Nicholson or Tom Cruise, is it Farnsworth or Sarnoff is it in Farnsworth's play, is it Steve Jobs or who is it that you personally want to be if you had your choice?

MR. SORKIN: There is an extent to which I identify with all of them like I said because I wrote them and I wrote them -- I will use the phrase again -- as if they were making their case to God why they should be allowed into heaven. So I feel very sort of close to all of them.

But you know, you mentioned Farnsworth and Sarnoff and probably not a lot of people here are familiar who that is. I had a play on Broadway called the *Farnsworth Invention*, which was the true story of kind of epic battle that took place between a young man named Philo Farnsworth who invented television at a very young age and David Sarnoff, who also at a young age was the president of RCA and the founder of NBC and sort of along with William Paley, the founder of the idea of a broadcast network, really the inventor of mass communication.

But this plays a dual between Philo Farnsworth and David Sarnoff and Scott Rudin, who is the producer of the *Social Network* as well as Steve Jobs --

MR. BROOKS: October 9.

SPEAKERS: October 9.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Said that the reason, he knew I was the guy to write the *Social Network* was that he came to an early preview of the *Farnsworth Invention*. And in the *Farnsworth Invention*, Sarnoff is the antagonist. He is -- he stole television from Philo Farnsworth and Scott Rudin said that because it was so clear that my sympathies were with Sarnoff during this that I was just trying to convince the audience that Sarnoff wasn't such a bad guy that I was the person to write *The Social Network*.

SPEAKER: This is for Aaron Sorkin. So I am a big fan of your work in general but as a Silicon Valley tech guy, I have got a question for you, you seem to have love-hate relationship with technology and some of your work Farnsworth, Jobs, Zuckerberg very, you seem drawn to it and then a lot of your characters on the other side in other works or sort of anti-technology or are a-technology and you've made some comments yourself.

MR. SORKIN: Uh-huh.

SPEAKER: For Aaron Sorkin, technology; frenemy, would you say?

MR. SORKIN: Okay, let's have this out once and for all.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: I am not a Luddite. I get as much out of technology as anybody. As you pointed out, I do not think there are five members of the writer's guild who have spent more screen time romanticizing the binary system than I have.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: Okay. But I -- mostly by -- my problem is with technology it is not with the apparatus. I am slightly concerned about -- social media is where my problem is. So it's that -- and I've said so personally, in forums like this and I've dramatized it a little bit mostly on *The Newsroom* and people who work in digital media are really responded positively to that, they dig it.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: They did not like, I think it fell to them like I was saying new media is silly and old media isn't.

MR. BROOKS: We've time for one or two more, I think. Right there.

SPEAKER: All the characters you talked about --

MR. BROOKS: Ma'am there is a microphone come looming behind you.

SPEAKER: Most of the characters you've talked about with the exception CJ Cregg have been males. And when it comes to talking about intentionality and obstacles and this being the driving force, do you think this is different when it comes to males and female characters and if you think about female characters in your -- I think of Mackenzie McHale is probably the most memorable one that I remember. But how do you think about those characters and do you think about genders influencing what they want in how you write those?

MR. SORKIN: Unless the scene has to do with gender, somehow for instance a romantic scene between a man and a woman, I am not thinking about gender at all. I am not thinking this is how a woman would do this, this is how a woman would talk, I just think that that's a generalization, that's impossible.

So I am again, I am just concerned with intention and obstacle, what does this person want, what are they going to do to overcome the obstacle and honestly it's -- with a few exceptions, it's mostly the casting of an actress in the part that is defining the gender of the character.

MR. BROOKS: Okay last one there, there was a gentleman there just in the same neighborhood.

SPEAKER: So kind of picking up on your casting reference, you create these characters, you act, you live these characters -- I mean literally you -- their dialog, you've got total control at that point in the creative process.

MR. SORKIN: Yeah.

SPEAKER: But then comes casting.

MR. SORKIN: Uh-huh.

SPEAKER: And then comes acting. And so how do you handle letting go or do you let go or what is the dynamic in the casting process in it?

MR. SORKIN: I don't let go.

(Laughter)

MR. SORKIN: But like I said, I signed up for this. I don't know if I would be a good novelist or not. I suspect not because I don't, my powers of description just aren't terrific. But I eagerly went toward a method of story telling that is collaborative. Because I just think that fantastic things can happen in that kind of environment.

So I am ready for the fact that things are going to change a little bit. For a year, I have been playing Steve Jobs and now it's Michael Fassbender and that kind of thing. Also that the director -- in this case Danny Boyle has a vision in his head, which is very much informed by what I put on the piece of paper. But he is not there to -- just to carry out my instructions, just to point a camera where I've told him to. So I get excited about that kind of collaboration, I really do.

MR. BROOKS: Okay, I am struck by the deep American-ness of this hour. It's a country of energy and ambition and I mean even Walter has in his -- biography of Franklin has, this discussion how ambivalent we are about ambition and there is the ambition of him, there is the ambition of Lincoln but then I think through your characters whether a Zuckerberg, Billy Beane, Jobs, Charlie Wilson, there are people with outlandish ambitions out of proportion to what might be expected of them in their role?

MR. SORKIN: Yeah. Again I just find that very romantic.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah.

MR. SORKIN: And it all goes back to Donkey
Hodie. This is guy who felt like he was living in a world
that was just a little -- had gone over the edge of
incivility and crudeness and he was a scrawny old man who
was experiencing dementia and he decided that you can be a
knight if you just behave like one.

MR. BROOKS: And so what strikes me even in the
way you've talked about your own craft is the idealism
inherent in that and also those moments of transcendence
when you are actually lost in your craft --

MR. SORKIN: Yes.

MR. BROOKS: -- with the actual perfection of
the craft in those rare fleeting moments, sort of
justifies the ambition and completes it?

MR. SORKIN: Yeah, the moments are rare and the
moments are fleeting but the moments are worth it.

MR. BROOKS: Okay. Aaron Sorkin everybody.

MR. SORKIN: Thanks.

(Applause)

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