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TV

'West Wing' reunion special is nostalgic and more poignant than ever

HBO Max aired "A West Wing Special to Benefit When We All Vote," featuring cast members reenacting a classic episode.

Oct. 15, 2020, 2:12 PM EDT / Source: TODAY

By Randee Dawn

"The West Wing" came back!

All right, for one show only, and with a very specific purpose, but "A West Wing Special to Benefit When We All Vote" has finally aired on HBO Max, and yes – it gave us *all* the feels and then some.



— Bradley Whitford. HBO Max

Here's what we'd vote for as some of the biggest highlights of the evening:

Bradley Whitford's intro

From the moment Bradley Whitford (Josh Lyman) gave his introduction to the one-hour staged re-enactment of "Wing's" season three episode "Hartsfield's Landing," we were hooked.

Whitford joshed lightly about the importance of actors lending their star power to something like the presidential election ("we feel at a time like this the risk of feeling obnoxious is too small a reason to stay quiet if we can even get one new voter to vote"), and gave us a heads up that "This Is Us" star Sterling K. Brown would be stepping into the late John Spencer's shoes as White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry.

Hello, Mr. President!

Once Whitford had his say, the show began in earnest and it was thrilling to see Martin Sheen (as President Josiah Bartlet) talking and playing chess once again.

— Martin Sheen (President Bartlet) HBO Max

"Hartsfield's Landing" takes place across a long night as the first votes are being cast in the New Hampshire primary, while issues crop up between China and another election in Taiwan, so chess serves as a metaphor to all the action that's going on around him.

"See the whole board," Bartlet tells Sam Seaborn (played by Rob Lowe).

Words that snap, crackle and pop

Meanwhile, the dialogue takes us back to the days when show creator Aaron Sorkin was writing some of the wisest, wittiest and most verbally savvy dialogue on TV. Trivia abounds, and it's enough to make us wish for a press secretary devoted to tossing off informative tidbits to the corps (like the fact that the same songwriters who crafted "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" are the ones who also wrote "Shine On Harvest Moon").

— Whitford and Allison Janney (C.J. Cregg) HBO Max

The old gang is back

But none of those lines would work without our favorites being able to deliver their lines so

expertly, and it's thrilling to see Dulé Hill (Charlie Young), Allison Janney (C.J. Cregg), Janel Moloney (Donna Moss) and Richard Schiff (Toby Ziegler) rattle them off like pros. Everyone snaps into their parts as if they just stepped out of them yesterday, rather than 14 years ago. (The show originally ran from 1996 to 2006.)

— Sterling K. Brown (Leo McGarry) and Whitford. HBO Max

The show also found places for characters and actors who weren't in the original "Hartsfield's Landing" script, including Emily Procter (Ainsley Hayes), who was enlisted to read stage directions. Elisabeth Moss (Zoey Bartlet) and Marlee Matlin (Joey Lucas) also popped up during interstitial segments to joke around about behind the scenes secrets (Matlin insisted that Whitford kept a stuffed animal in his on-set desk drawer).

Between the Lines

The tone of the episode had to straddle story tensions with rapid-fire zingers, all set against the backdrop of our current real-life political situation. "Wing" was always an "unattainable TV fantasy," as guest Samuel L. Jackson notes during an interstitial segment between scenes.

And those in-between moments are some of the most fun on the show. Each segment is fun and informative in a specific way: Janney and Lowe explain to go to Vote.org for questions about registration or mail-in ballots and there's a TikTok reference that's hilarious. Moss and Hill appear to speak to young voters on why it's so important they join in.

— Rob Lowe (Sam Seaborn) and Janney. HBO Max

Then there are guests like President Bill Clinton, Lin-Manuel Miranda and former first lady

Michelle Obama, who stop by to talk about the upcoming election and why voting is critical. Miranda's cue-card reading of lines he clearly didn't write ("I was never in the cast of 'The West Wing' and that failure is a pain from which I'll never recover") is hilarious; of course eventually he gets serious and talks about how this year's election results may not be known right away.

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"The West Wing" makes us believe it.

Take an advance look at 'West Wing' reunion



Randee Dawn





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