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Fireworks Promised on 'West Wing' Debate



By LYNN ELBER, AP Television Writer

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LOS ANGELES - The powers behind "The West Wing" are making this campaign promise: Sunday's live debate between presidential candidates Arnold Vinick and Matt Santos will be far from politics — or television — as usual.

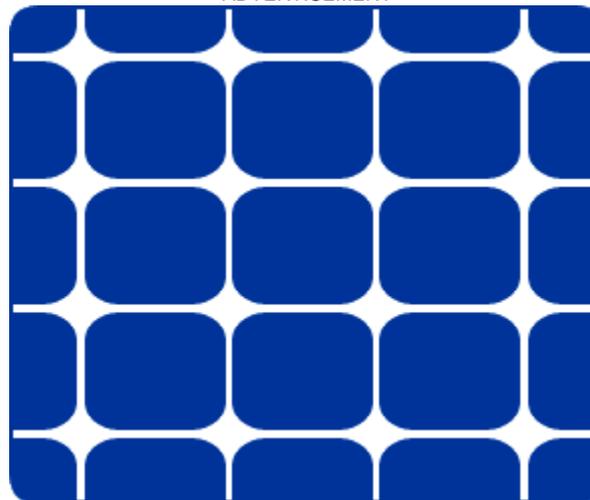
Laurence O'Donnell, who balances work as a political analyst and a "West Wing" executive producer, said the hourlong episode (8 p.m. EDT on NBC) represents "my wish-fulfillment debate."

"We are using the accepted liturgy of presidential debates. It will look the same, it will be moderated by Forrest Sawyer, a real news person, it will have all that real feel to it," O'Donnell said.

"But I think it will be more satisfying in that the candidates end up really going into the issues in a way that they normally would not," he said. "They end up each forcing the other to get more honest as the debate wears on."

In other words, Republican Vinick, played by [Alan Alda](#) , and Democrat Santos, portrayed by [Jimmy Smits](#) , will listen and respond to each other — as opposed to real-world debates that tend to excise substance or spontaneity.

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AP Photo: In this undated publicity photo released by NBC, actors Alan Alda, as Senator Arnold Vinick,...

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The fictional encounter starts with the usual rules, the kind that "are set up by the candidates and are there to protect the candidates and not promote an informed debate," said executive producer Alex Graves, who is directing O'Donnell's script.

But one of the politicians — Graves won't say who — quickly proposes tossing the book aside.

"And that's the starting point and everybody, including the moderator, underestimates what that's going to mean," Graves said. "It ends up ... with the candidates doing and saying things you would never expect to see in a debate, never."

The actors may also do something rarely seen. Although they have a script, Alda and Smits also received a crash course in debate strategy and issues that will allow them to veer off the page.

"It's loose enough that it will be exciting to the audience," Smits told The Associated Press.

Asked if that approach puts unusual pressure on the actors, he replied: "Pressure? I'm totally sweating this."

The episode, with separate live versions for Eastern and Western time zones and with just two commercial breaks, could be the highlight of a resurgent year for "The West Wing," which is drawing lavish critical praise after being dinged in recent seasons for a creative slump.

Ratings for the series need a jolt. In the first few weeks of the season, and with a move from Wednesday to Sunday, it lost more than 30 percent of its audience (while ABC's new Oval Office drama "Commander in Chief" jumped into the top 10).

Whether "The West Wing" can regroup and return for an eighth year, it's making this season count. There's the immediacy of a story line with echoes of the [CIA](#) leak case, with the TV version involving communications director Toby Ziegler and space program secrets.

That's intercut with the lively presidential campaign that could end up with the White House remaining in the hands of the Democratic Party or with a moderate Republican senator from California gaining control early next year.

The producers are claiming they have yet to decide whether Vinick or Santos prevails; maybe Sunday's show will offer clues.

"The West Wing" featured a debate before, between President Bartlet ([Martin Sheen](#)) and Republican opponent Robert Ritchie ([James Brolin](#)). But that fourth-season show switched between behind-the-scene machinations and the debate itself.

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This time, the producers decided to really stretch TV's boundaries. Scenes typically last scant moments; the debate episode will offer two 25-minute blocks of uninterrupted drama, most of it focused on the candidates.

"We're letting two great actors really go at each other and try to defeat each other for basically an hour, nonstop," O'Donnell said, with the chance to go "deeper and deeper and slug each other harder and harder."

Issues include taxes, health care and U.S. border security. (The topic of abortion was explored in the previous week's episode.)

The challenges are "more exciting than daunting," said Alda, who, like Smits, has worked on the stage. The "M-A-S-H" star also can claim live on-air experience: In the early days of TV and his career, Alda appeared on shows including "The U.S. Steel Hour."

He likes his character — Vinick "seems unusual in that the positions he takes have some connection to the values he holds," Alda notes dryly — and is rooting for him.

"It makes it fun. When an actor plays a character, you want what that character wants. Otherwise it doesn't look authentic. So I really want to defeat Jimmy — I mean Jimmy as the character," Alda said.

"No, he wants to win," is the retort from Smits when told of Alda's remark.

The actors and producers agree there's significant room for error on a live episode, especially given how infrequently it's done (an "ER" episode and the recent "Will & Grace" episode among the few examples).

Ever the strategist, O'Donnell suggests that missteps could prove as rewarding for viewers as a flawless hour.

"We could get it completely wrong. You might be able to only hear Alan Alda and not hear Jimmy because the mikes don't work (or) the camera goes out; some crazy thing happens with the equipment. Certainly, the actors can lose their way."

"There's just nothing more fun to watch than that kind of train wreck. If I wasn't involved with the show I'd be turning it on just to see: OK, how do they screw up," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — Lynn Elber is a national television columnist for The Associated Press. She can be reached at lelber(at)ap.org

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