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MARTIN SHEEN INTERVIEW
PORTIONS USED IN: *THE THREAD SEASON ONE*

Martin Sheen, Actor
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Interviewed by David Bender
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Martin Sheen
Actor

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Martin Sheen

Actor

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DAVID BENDER:
Martin, thank you for doing this. Tell me that philosophy of your life.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Well, I've often said that acting is what I do for a living, but activism is what I do to stay alive.

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DAVID BENDER:
You've been an actor since a very early age. At what point did that become true for you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I don't have any conscious memory of ever not being an actor. I didn't know that that's what you called it when I was a child, till I started going to the movies around age five or six. And gradually it dawned on me that I was like those people up on the screen. And it was a mighty possession. It possessed me and it gave me a possession of myself.

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I knew that I was going to do that thing that I couldn't identify, but I knew it in the depths of my being. And that I knew that if I didn't do it, I would never be happy, and I would never be free. So, it was a foregone conclusion in a way. And I never wavered from that my whole life. I loved doing it, being creative, being an actor my whole life.

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And as I say, it was instinctual and it was necessary for my survival.

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DAVID BENDER:
Did it run in your family? Was there any heritage? Nothing. This was you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
No. The only relative that I learned later was an actor was my uncle Bobby Phelan in Ireland. My mother's brother who was very active in the IRA during the Rising, and from 1916, he spent a couple of years in prison. And he was known as an amateur actor. So when the family began to see me doing plays in high school,-

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-they thought it was an Irish thing from Bobby, my uncle Bobby, whom incidentally I never met, but he was my, my mother's youngest brother.

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DAVID BENDER:
But how interesting that he was an actor and an activist.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Oh, he was very active, yeah. He was quite extraordinary. A lot of stories about him.

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DAVID BENDER:
Was the activist tradition part of your family growing up? Or was that too something that you did do on your own?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I wouldn't have called myself an activist when I was a child or a teenager, but I was schooled and nourished by these two immigrants. My father was Spanish- My real name is Ramon. Martin Sheen is a stage name that I never changed officially, I'm still Ramon. If I get stopped for a traffic violation or if I'm arrested at a protest, the only ID that is acceptable is with Ramon.

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It's on my driver's license, passport, all my official papers. Sheen is making up and if this gig doesn't work out, I'll go back to Ramon. But my father and mother both struggled. In fact, my mother was sent to stay with a cousin at the end of the fight with the Brits.

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But at the start of the Civil War in 1921—and that was in a lot of ways worse than the fight with England because they were fighting among themselves—and so her family was very well involved in the Rising and in the revolution. And they sort of landed on the anti treaty side. So when the Civil War started, they didn't know who was gonna win.

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And they sent her to live with a cousin in Ohio to wait out and just see what happens. So, that was two years, from 1921 to '23, when they finally- when de

Valera made the Peace Treaty and established a republic. That took quite a while. But so, she stayed with a cousin in Ohio, and meanwhile, she met my dad, whom she called the handsome Spaniard.

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My dad was from a little village in Galicia, Parderrubias, in Santa Revolta, near Tui, which is near Vigo. This handsome *gallego*. And they met in citizenship school, which they had in those days. And he couldn't speak English. He spoke Italian and Spanish and Portuguese. So she taught him English. Her native language was Gaelic, she spoke Gaelic as well.

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And she was a secretary. She knew how to type and do shorthand, which was a great skill in those days. And so they met, and they were married in 1927 in what I later came to realize was called the Immigrant Church. It was St. Joseph's in Dayton, Ohio. It's still there, yeah. And, yeah. And so they started raising a family, and they had 12 pregnancies,-

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-but 10 survived. Nine boys and one girl. I was the seventh son, but my brother, Alfonso, was the seventh pregnancy to survive. But the one male had died, so he moved up to the seventh to survive. But I was the seventh one. So we always lied about who was the seventh son. Ah, it's yourself. Yeah. And so- But it was a natural progression to-

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We were Democrats, of course. Roosevelt, Truman Democrats, and eventually, of course, Kennedy Democrats. But there was just this- It was taken for granted. You were union, if you could be. I founded a union, or I started a

union when I was a boy at the local country club, private club. And I'd been there since 1949. And so 1954-

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DAVID BENDER:
You were a caddy?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I was a caddy, yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:
And you started at caddy's union?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I started a caddy union in 1954. Yeah. It lasted about 72 hours, and I got fired. It was the first time I heard the phrase, “You're on private property, hit the road.” And I said, “Wow, that's interesting. I've been here all this time.” Eventually they called me back because I was one of the better caddies, and they needed me. People were asking for me. But the lessons I learned, in that situation were lifelong, that you've got to choose sides.

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You cannot not choose sides, and be honest with yourself. Nevermind what anyone else thinks about you, it's how you think about yourself. So, yeah, I was an activist without calling myself an activist. I was living in times that I was very aware of. And I had an opinion about them, and I showed it with the way I lived and the way I acted. At least I tried to, didn't always succeed.

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But, yeah, those were very formative years. And I caddied from 1949 until I left home in 1958. WelI, we caddied from the early spring till the late fall. So the last experience I had was in the fall of 1958, and in January of 1959, I was in New York pursuing a career as an actor.

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DAVID BENDER:
So the caddy thing didn't work out.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
It didn't work out. But I still know how to do it.

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DAVID BENDER:
I love the fact that Martin Sheen has never been arrested, because it's always-

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MARTIN SHEEN:

That's true, yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:
Ramón has been arrested many number of times-

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Oh, yeah. Yes.

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DAVID BENDER:
-For his activism. How many? Have you lost count?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I was keeping… It's silly. But it was- There were so many issues that were so vital, through particularly the '80s and the '90s, that I felt compelled. My chief focus was nuclearism, anti-nuclearism, because I felt that our country and the entire Western civilization had fallen to the idolatry of nuclearism. It was like a religion.

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We believed- Our countries believed that that was a source of protection. Well, we were taught our only protection was trusting each other and trusting in God. And we had a responsibility to protect the planet and that

these weapons were like, a form of great evil. And it was like, no one could use them.

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They even invented the phrase, mutually assured destruction, with the Soviet Union in the United States. And everybody else agreed that all the nuclear powered nations- So if you used one, it was like a guy going into a bank, puts a gun to his head and says, “Gimme all your money, or I'll shoot.” It's suicide. And none of that has changed. And we're still arming and re-arming and thinking that that's the way to protect ourselves, and it's horrible.

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And the amount of dough that it costs to implement those weapons and keep them in a ready state. And the enormous risk of accident is now more than ever terrible with the current war between- with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the horrors that they've unleashed and the threats of a nuclear bomb.

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DAVID BENDER:
Martin, I'm doing some math in my head, and I'm thinking about two things. One is, you may—you were very young—but you may have a memory. Do you remember the bomb being dropped? The nuclear bomb when the US dropped it?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

No. That would've been in ‘45. No. I knew the war had ended. I remember the parades, and I could see from our backyard, there was a- Warren Avenue was an avenue to the downtown and so forth, so we could see parades going by at a distance.

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And I remember the toilet paper flying out of, the apartments around us and the houses, and people banging on anything they could find, pots and pans, and hollering and whooping and all. So I knew the war had ended, but no, I was not aware of the bomb.

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DAVID BENDER:
So you were about five years old, is that right?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I was born in 1940, yes. I was five when… Yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:
So let me ask you. You're becoming aware of things at that young age, you knew that there had been a war going on. Right at that same time, President Roosevelt died. Do you have any memory of the reaction when President Roosevelt died?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I had no memory of Roosevelt at all. Truman, yes. Very much so. Because he took over, the rest of Franklin Roosevelt's term and then won his own four years. But no, I became very aware what was going on in Korea primarily, ‘cause my, one of my older brothers was a Marine and did more than a year in combat in Korea, and how it affected him and, and us.

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Of all the nine men in my family, all my brothers, two were marines, one army, and the rest were Navy. So we had a very kind of front seat when anything that involved the military would happen, ‘cause the brothers were always in en route to one place or another. And, so yeah, I remember the tension.

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DAVID BENDER:
How did you feel about war in that context? I've always thought of you as someone- as a man of deep faith and a man of peace, but a man of justice in fighting for a just cause. Did you feel that your brothers were involved in that with Korea? Or did you have an opinion? How did you feel about that war?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
As far as any war- When I was growing up- As long as we were involved, we felt it was just- All of the society, the whole culture supported any effort

where our lads were sent to fight, whether it was Korea or Vietnam or anywhere else, in the Suez, or in any other situation.

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So, I only came to a better understanding of how horrible it was and how unjust it was for all the obvious reasons in my later teens. It was just part of a cultural evolution. And the movies, I saw all the soldiers. I wanted to be a soldier and march into any kind of situation, whether Europe or in Asia.

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DAVID BENDER:
So by the late fifties, you began to look at this and question things. And this is after a period of the whole anti-communism fervor and McCarthyism. Do you have memories of McCarthyism?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Yes. McCarthyism was a very clear problem, and we knew it at the time. Because the Rosenbergs were front and center at that time, and not many people were aware of what was going on. But I remember when they were executed and I think it was 1954, and I could not believe that this was a righteous, conscientious thing to do.

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And, that's where I began to question, one, the death penalty, but also just the injustice of what was clear to us at the time was they were scapegoats. They

were offered up vis-a-vis the Red Scare and the McCarthy era, and what was going on.

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DAVID BENDER:
Red baiting.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
The red baiting, yes, of course. So, that was- In fact, the Rosenbergs were, in a very clear way, an awakening to me personally. That there's something not right going on here. This cannot be right. That was a political, spiritual, physical awakening to what my responsibility was.

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DAVID BENDER:
And so this is still- You're still young, you're still in your earlier teens at this point, around this time. There's the reckoning for Joe McCarthy, the Army-McCarthy hearings. Do you remember watching them?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I don't remember watching them on television. We didn't have a TV till much later. But we would see him in the movies, in the news reels. They would have a lot of footage of world events and national events as well. And McCarthy,

sure. I saw him on the news reel a lot, and they heard about the Hollywood Ten that were accused of,-

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I guess, it's being unpatriotic to begin with. But they did a year in prison. All those guys, they were my heroes.

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DAVID BENDER:
Dalton Trumbo.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Dalton Trumbo, yes. Years later, I got a chance to meet him and told him how I felt, and told him- I was meeting him about the possibility of playing in *Johnny Got His Gun*, the movie that- he wrote it, but he was gonna direct it. And, yeah, it was a great meeting. I just wanted to meet him.

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DAVID BENDER:
You're a boy and you were watching up on the screen and you knew you wanted to be this. Do you remember what you watched? Do you remember what films, when you were small, that touched you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Oh, I can't remember a lot of the films I saw as a child, but I do remember preteen and teenager, right through James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart and all the tough guys. Warner Brothers. Yeah. They were my heroes. Spencer Tracy, in particular. I love Spencer Tracy. Cagney was- He was chief. He was my chief idol.

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And then one night, somebody told me that I had to see this guy in a film that was playing in the local theater, and it was only gonna play another night, I think it was. And it was a school night, which I never went to the movies on, but I went this one time, and it was 1955, and it was *East of Eden*. And that was the life changer.

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I couldn't leave the theater in those days. They would run two features and they'd run them twice in the evening, along with newsreels and cartoons. And I sat through the other movie and cartoons, the news reels, everything, to see it again. I couldn't leave the theater. And I knew something had happened. Now, 'cause I was still, at the time, I was doing plays in high school, and I knew I was an actor. I was- Was only a matter of time before I would pursue it.

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I was on my way to New York. That was a foregone conclusion. But I was stunned and I was just stopped in my tracks that something happened that I'd never seen before. And it was James Dean. And it was like, wow. Then I discovered he was already gone. So the disappointment, I can never- I'll never work with this guy. What was he like? And that was the first film.

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And now that was *East of Eden* and now was… *Rebel Without a Cause* came later on that year. And then the following year was *Giant*. They released *Giant*. So, that had a profound effect. And what happened, clearly to me, although I couldn't articulate it, was that he transcended the acting into behavior. He wasn't acting. It was like when he walked out of a scene, you wondered, "Where'd he go?" You kind of looked off as if you could see outside the frame to see where he was, what he was doing, because he wasn't acting. It was behavior. And that made all the difference.

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DAVID BENDER:
And you were a teenager. So there's something about that moment too, because he was a very young man.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
He was 24 when he was killed. Yeah. But, yeah, I was 15. He was from the next state. He was from Indiana, but he- Yeah, that was a profound change. Nobody had that kind of an effect on me in the business. I mean, it was literally life changing for me and a lot of other actors. And still for decades, he still continues to have that effect as people rediscover him.

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DAVID BENDER:

Well, the other person a lot of people describe in those terms from that time was Marlon Brando, who you would come to know much later in a very different context. Yeah, kind of a difficult context. I think it's- Is that an understatement?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Marlon Brando was, of course, a hero of James Dean. Long before I worked with Marlon, I adored him, I mean, his work. And then when I got a chance to work with him, it was gratifying 'cause he was extremely disarming. He was very funny, and he was very caring and sweet. And I just adored him.

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I worked with him on *Apocalypse Now*, and he was only on the film for four or five weeks, but he lived nearby and so I saw a lot of him. When we weren't working, he'd come down and join us for dinner nights, a lot of nights. And the kids didn't know who he was, and they got to know him as this guy, this wonderful storyteller, this sweet man who would come down and share supper with us and tell stories.

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DAVID BENDER:
In August 28th, '63, there was a March on Washington. He was one of the group from Hollywood who came out. Did you have a sense from him or from many of the others who were there- And a lot of interesting people—

Charlton Heston was there—a lot of surprising people. Did you talk about any of that, and do you remember that march? Do you remember that?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I remember the March on Washington very well. In 1963, we were still living in New York at that time. And so there were a lot of people coming down to Washington from New York. I didn't go personally, but I was sure aware of it. And I knew Marlon was a part of it, but the one in our business that helped organize it, gosh, we just lost him a few weeks ago.

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Harry Belafonte was probably the closest, non-family member to Reverend King and helped organize many of the campaigns, including the March on Washington. And Harry helped recruit Hollywood basically, including Marlon and Charlton Heston, as you mentioned. And so many people he was responsible for bringing into the movement.

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DAVID BENDER:
Did you come to know Dr. King at all?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

I did not know Dr. King. I saw him once, and it was a very auspicious meeting. I think I fell victim to that old phrase, you shouldn't meet your heroes, so I didn't meet him. But in 1965, I was on Broadway in a show, and-

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Selma happened in March of 1965, and I talked to my colleagues in this play. We were in a long running play on Broadway at the time, it was called *The Subject Was Roses*. And I talked to my fellow actors, Jack Albertson and Irene Dailey at the time. It was a small cast, but we thought, we've gotta do something. So we went to the manager and said, "We'd like to do a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Reverend King, and to the widow of Reverend James Reeb,"-

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-a young minister who went down from, I believe, from Michigan and he was killed in Selma. And the manager said, "Well, all right, you can do the benefit, but our theater's only 600 seats. You won't make a nickel and enough to make it worthwhile." He said, "Why don't you go and-" Oh, Jack Albertson said, "Let's go talk to Sammy Davis." He was around the corner in *Golden Boy*, a big hit musical. So it was a Saturday matinee,-

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-and we went over to see him between shows. And we told him what we wanted to do. We wanted to answer Selma. And Sammy said, "The only thing I don't like about that idea is that I didn't think of it." He said, "Let's organize it." And it became known as *Broadway Answers Selma*. And it was a few weeks later, we had this enormous… On a dark night—dark night means that everybody's off on Monday night—

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—and Barbara Streisand was doing some *Funny Girl*. She came. Maurice Chevalier was doing a one man show. He came. Alan Arkin was in *Enter Laughing*. He came. And it was just enormous. We had- Gosh, everybody on Broadway at the time was part of the show. And Jack and I were doing a scene from *The Subject was Roses*. And we gathered that afternoon for a rehearsal and Sammy said, "You know what? The show is so long, would you guys mind if we kind of… if we don't use your scene?"

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I said, "I'm fine with that." And he said, "But I could use you backstage," meaning me, "to help the older people find chairs, 'cause it's gonna be dark back there. Would you please help us out?" I said, "I will. Of course." So I showed up and I'm helping some of the older folks, who shall remain nameless, 'cause I have a different feeling about old folks at this age. And the show was going just beautifully.

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And Sammy was out on stage at this one point, and he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." And he pointed and there was- Reverend King was in a box. It was like if he fell forward, he would've fallen on the stage. That's how close he was. And we were all looking, we didn't know he was there. And it was like- and the audience went crazy, and they stood up and they shouted and screamed and applauded. It went on and on. Reverend King got up and and he took a little bow and he sat down, and they weren't having it.

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They'd screaming and he got up again and he said, “Oh, please sit down. No…” And then he sat down again, they ain't having it. They're screaming, Hey, he got up a third time. It was- And he just played it with them to sit down and- Okay, so they did, but we knew he was in the house, and we didn't know he was coming. Nobody knew. Maybe that was part of security, I never knew, but there he was. So it came intermission and the first act had gotten- So you couldn't get anyone off stage.

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Everybody wanted to sing, play, dance, whatever it was—Reverend King's in the House! And this is for Selma. And so, the second act started, and I'll never forget this. I had to get a seat for Maurice Chevalier who came in. He was an elderly gentleman at the time. And I said, “Over here, sir.” He said- And I got him a seat there, so he was gonna go on next. And Sammy was out, singing at the start of the second act.

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And he was on stage singing, and I stood in the light because I had to cue Mr. Chevalier to go out. And the light from the stage was shining on me, I felt this light and I looked over, kind of like that. And I looked again, and Reverend King was standing about 10 feet away and he was by himself. I couldn't see any guards or anybody with him. And my heart started pounding. And I thought-

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The first thought I had was, I didn't realize how small he was. And I wanted to shrink because I was looking over the top of his head and I thought, “No, he's 10 feet tall.” And I said, “Oh my God, there he is.” And my heart was saying,

"Get the blessing. Get the blessing." And the other part of me was saying, "No, don't bother him. He's bothered all the time, for God's sakes. Leave him alone." And the heart kept saying, "Get the blessing. Get the blessing. Just get the bless-" "No, no, leave him alone for God's sake. He's had a…"

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And I knew what was happening. Instinctively, he'd come back to say goodbye to Sammy. He didn't wanna bother anyone. He was late, he was tired, and he wanted to leave. And that's exactly what was going on. And it seemed like a full two or three minutes passed. It was probably no more than 30 seconds. Sammy came off and just walked right over to him and escorted him out the backstage door, and I never met him. So, let that be a lesson to you.

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DAVID BENDER:
It's a great lesson, because he did not- He may have been shorter than you thought, but he didn't disappoint. He was not a person who was ill tempered or anything.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Oh, no. No. He was a…

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DAVID BENDER:

That moment you're describing, which I thought I'd studied the history of actors and artists coming together, I'd never heard that there was a *Broadway Answers Selma.*

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Broadway Answers Selma was in the- Selma was in March of '65, so we… maybe April? 'Cause it only took us a few weeks to organize it. Everybody wanted to get involved. And so, it was very well supported. And you could look it up. I guess it's called *Broadway Answers Selma*, and Sammy Davis was one of the big organizers. There's a picture of him with Reverend King, and it may be Harry as well, I'm not sure.

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DAVID BENDER:
Did anyone film or record this, that you know of?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I don't know if it was recorded. No, I'm almost certain it wasn't. You weren't allowed to film stage shows at that time. But there were a lot of still photographs backstage and around the planning of the event.

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DAVID BENDER:

There you were using your artistry. You persuaded Jack Albertson, an actor, to use your craft to help draw attention to something, and to help raise some money and raise awareness. And is that the first group activity? You remember that you're 25 at this point, that you were doing something like that.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I was very aware in the early '60s in New York, of the Civil Rights movement. I mean, it was- By '65, it was international news, so I was aware of it. And I had grown up in a culture of racism. There were very few- I went to an all-boys Catholic high school and there were just a few lads. One of 'em was my closest friend who-

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John Crane, who's dead now, God rest him, but he was our best man. And I knew what racism was. And even in the Catholic school setting, I mean, it was cultural. People didn't think of themselves as being racist, but they were insensitive. One kid in my class- I remember this kid, he was a sweetheart. Johnny Hazelrigg was his name. He was a big kid, and he was handsome.

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And he was gonna go to the prom with a white girl. And I didn't give a damn about proms. I never went to one, I had no interest in it. But he did. And it caused a great concern among my colleagues. And I remember giving a walk to Jesus with the class about this crap, and…

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DAVID BENDER:
Did you get any of it? I mean… Was there any of that directed to you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
In New York, I had difficulty with my name because there was a lot of prejudice against Hispanics. But it was the Puerto Rican community, they were the blame for everything. So, they were the new immigrants. They were Americans, but people thought of them as being from somewhere else, from Mars, who knows where. But Puerto Ricans were responsible for all the problems. That was a racist attitude in New York at the time. And so, I was considered with my name, Puerto Rican.

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So if I'd be on the phone, or in any other context without seeing my mug, I was considered a Puerto Rican. So I said- I thought, "Oh God, I got enough trouble trying to get a job." I was an actor. So that's why I chose Sheen. The first time I used the name, I remember I was doing a one act play at the Living Theater. I was working in the theater as a janitor and an understudy.

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And they had these Monday night programs when the theater was dark. And we would do these plays. And my first play that I actually got paid for was William Butler Yeats' one act play called- I think it was called *Purgatory*, I'm not sure. And it was a father son thing. And I got this part and I did this performance-

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It was very well received and they kept it on for the next four Monday nights. And so they paid me under Sheen, a cheque, $5 a performance. And I was worth every penny, of course. But I couldn't cash the check because I didn't have any ID under Sheen. All I had was that. So I wrote a letter to the Social Security Office in Washington, and I put my Social Security card in the letter—which you should never do—

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—and I told them that this is my real name, but I'm now working under this name, so I need another card. So they did, they sent me back a card. So I have two cards, one with Ramon, but the same number as the one with Sheen. So I can work on either name. So, as I often said, if the acting gig didn't work out, I could go back to caddying or the car washer and the other things I did for a living when I wasn't acting.

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DAVID BENDER:
And the whole world wants to know, how did you come up with Martin Sheen?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I created the Sheen character… I was fascinated with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. In the 1950s, there was no one on television more popular, and he was really the first televangelist. All these other guys could have learned something

from this guy. He was the best public speaker imaginable. I didn't understand that theology or the politics of what he was saying, but I loved the way he said it.

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He was a very handsome man, and he had fire in his eyes, and he had a great speaking voice, and he had a great sense of humor. He was very disarming. And every Tuesday night, I think around 7:00 or 7:30, he gave a half hour lecture, national television, and the whole nation would be watching. Well, I didn't think of him as a preacher as much as an actor. I thought, "Wow, look at that guy."

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So, to as much to honor his presence, I just started using Sheen. The Martin came from Robert Dale Martin, who was the casting director at CBS in New York. When I first came there in 1958, I met him, and he was very, very encouraging to me. And, in fact, we stayed friends. In 1983, I did a mini series on John Kennedy. And I asked if they could find Robert Dale Martin 'cause he was also an actor. And a playwright, as a matter of fact.

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DAVID BENDER:
Is this *Missiles of October*?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

No, it was the *Kennedy* series. It was a mini series, I think two or three part in 1983. Just called *Kennedy*. And I played John Kennedy. And so I asked, "If you would look up this fellow, please," 'cause I hadn't seen him in years. They found him. He played- I believe he played Wayne Morris.

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DAVID BENDER:
Now we understand homage to Fulton Sheen. I only remember from *Gentleman's Agreement,* that terms like sheeny were used as derogatory terms about the Irish.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Yeah, for sure.

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DAVID BENDER:
And it wasn't a way of taking ownership of that back. I have to ask you then. So it's 1960, you are a Catholic, and there is an Irish American Catholic—whose name we just mentioned because you would go on to play him 23 years later—who gets elected president. What did that feel like? Tell me about that.

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MARTIN SHEEN:

John F. Kennedy was the most disarming, most welcome public figure in the life of the nation, of us individually, for Catholics and non-Catholics, for people of faith and people of no faith. I mean, he was extraordinary. And he just arrived. And the first thing that I remember in listening to him was that speech pattern.

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And it was like, it was so disarming and it was so charming and nobody's talked like that in public life. We were taught to get that Midwestern sound, and hit all the right notes, particularly the base. And here, this guy was just rewriting all the rules. And it was such an honest portrayal. He was just totally in and of the moment and the place, and we adored him. And I remember I wasn't old enough to vote then, because you had to be 21.

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I was only 20 in 1960. So I couldn't vote for him, but I sure cheered for him. And when he won, I thought, oh my God, something magnificent has just happened. And it was real. He really did make a profound change in all of our lives. And he was probably more conservative than I would've wished, but the fact that he was there and that he was so young and so handsome-

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I remember when we lived in Staten Island for a couple of years. And one day I came down to South Ferry to get the ferry across to the island, and they closed down everything. The ferry wasn't running, and a huge crowd of people and cops on horseback all over the place. And I said, “What's going on?” They said, “Oh, the president's coming here. He's gonna dedicate this

monument, that big eagle that sits in the middle of the park down there, for the sailors and all the people that had died in the at sea."

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I pushed through the crowd, and I swear to you, I got to the head of the crowd just in time to see the limousine come by and John Kennedy leaned forward in the car as if he was adjusting his coat, jacket, or something. But there he was. And the first thing that struck me was how tan he was. I said, this is- It was a winner. I said, "How does he get a tan?" It was just amazing. But yeah, that's the only time I saw him, in that one brief moment.

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But he lived in our hearts in a very, very special way. And he still does in large part because of what he made possible. He just turned the whole thing upside down. There was thing that he had- that there were- He had such a respect for the President, Eisenhower, who was at the other party, and Truman was not fond of him because they had had a feud.

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His father, John Kennedy's father, and Harry Truman had had a feud earlier. And Truman was not fond of him. And he thought that John Kennedy was too young to run. But what a lot of people don't realize is how often John Kennedy would call Truman on issues that he had dealt with when he was in the Oval Office. And Eisenhower. And they never really talked about it. Those, calls I know are- There were at least notes available for them.

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But he had that sense of history and that he always knew that there was something- there was always something more in a crisis than what you were

facing. There were always angles, people, incidents, history. There was always something. And that came into place so strongly during the Cuban Missile Crisis with his dependence on his brother, on Bobby.

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Because when that crisis ended, remember what the last thing John Kennedy said about the thing, “Thank God for Bobby.” ‘Cause Bobby had made that end run and said, “Let's ignore last message and say we accept this and that.” I'm talking about the Cuban Missile Crisis, how it ended. The ExComm committee so called, that committee that was set up out of the- with the military, with people in the civilian world, in the diplomatic world, and in the cabinet posts as well,-

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-this committee was made up of all these people who would advise the President on what to do. They came up with the quarantine rather than attacking. And so- And that proved to be very, very important. And then so, they kept communicating with Khrushchev and the Russian government, and the Soviets were demanding this and demanding that. And there was a very severe demand. And it was like, the door is shut, you take this or leave it.

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And this one very scary message coming back from the Kremlin. And they didn't quite know- This could mean war if the door is shut now. And Bobby said, “Let's ignore that. Let's take the second last message where they said, if you take the missile out of Turkey, if you do this, and you do- they promised not to invade Cuba. We'll make a deal and remove the missiles.” And so they

sent that message back pretending they hadn't gotten the dark one about how the war is gonna-

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-the world's gonna end if you don't accept these conditions. And Khrushchev jumped on it and it ended the crisis. And it was like, my God. It was like, where did that come from? Yeah, it was just like a- It was a miracle.

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DAVID BENDER:
Again, art and life coincide. You said you played President Kennedy, you played Robert Kennedy in *Missiles of October*?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I played Robert Kennedy, yes, in *Missiles of October,* which was about that specific 13 days in October 1962.

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DAVID BENDER:
So much of your choice of work—and I have to say, I think it must include *Apocalypse Now*—you've chosen things, including the way that things that speak to your values, speak to your heart. And when we're talking about social justice, you've picked a lot of things that reflect your values. Is that a conscious thing? Is that…

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I would say, yeah. When I had a choice to infuse some of my talent into a work that spoke to social justice, to civil rights, or to women's rights, or to gay rights, or dealing with- illuminating an unpopular reality, yeah, I always chose that, but I didn't always have a choice if I wanted to make a living in this business.

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There are very few things that I actually did that were from the heart and the pocketbook that spoke to how I felt about an issue. You mentioned *The Way*. Yeah, that was a family affair that was written for me by my son Emilio, and frankly, it is the most satisfying thing I've ever done in my professional life. And to this day, if I could get another film like *The Way*, I would gladly do it, but we don't always get these choices.

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Very often, we're given material that we- that doesn't really speak to our hearts or anyone else's, that it's just entertainment or fluff or nonsense, and so that we do it in order to not have to go back to the car wash or the golf course to caddy-

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DAVID BENDER:
You still got the other social security card so you could, but Martin, let's be clear. There is a part for which you will always be associated, and that is when you were our president. And there's something that's an interesting

phenomenon that I noticed is that during the pandemic, when people were at home and had to watch nothing but television ‘cause they couldn't go out, a whole new generation of people watched *The West Wing.* I'm sure you've heard this, and if you haven't, let me tell you, it's true.

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Because I was hearing it from 20 year olds that they discovered this show that had been on before they were born, in some cases. So, let me ask you. You say you were keeping the lights on and paying the bills, but then one day Aaron Sorkin comes to you, and as I understand it, it wasn't supposed to include you most of the time. It was to be about the people in the West Wing, but not the president. So, can you talk a little bit about that moment in time when this all happened?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Yeah. Well, *The West Wing* came at me like a West wind. I wasn't prepared for it. I had a relationship with Aaron Sorkin, the brilliant writer from a film a few years earlier, *The American President*. So, I was aware of his talent and his presence, certainly. And then in the- I guess it was the spring or summer of-

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It was the spring of 1999. They came with an offer to play the president in *The West Wing*. But there was only one scene in the pilot, and they asked me, would I be comfortable playing the president in just a few episodes, maybe four, tops five, in a season of 22 episodes. So that would be like, one quarter of the time. “Would you do that?” And I said, “Of course I'd do that.”

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And they said, “The only thing that we would demand from you is that you couldn't play another president anywhere else while we're on the air.” I said, “What are the chances?” So I signed on, and then the pilot was made. And I had a feeling that once the network saw that set, which was designed on the real set from the then-Clinton administration, they're gonna wanna know who plays- who works in that office.

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And I was right. As soon as the pilot was shown to the executives at NBC, they said, “Can we get him back for more?” And so I said, “Yeah, of course.” I came back and signed on just like all the other folks in the show did. And so, yeah, we were- I had a seven year run in the Oval Office and it was one of the best times of my life.

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DAVID BENDER:
It was a seven year run, so it was almost two full terms as president.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Yeah. Right. I had- When *The West Wing* began, I was in my second year as president. And so, if the- Now mind you, we never knew if it would get picked up from year to year. In fact, I didn't think it would because I thought, how are we going to sell cars and insurance and… prescription drugs on a network television at primetime-

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-with a political show with a very, very liberal Catholic president and a very liberal administration who believes in working across the aisle and works from a moral frame of reference. And so, I take- I was probably more surprised that we kept getting picked up and we kept getting more liberal and we kept getting more moral in our decisions, talking about the president.

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And so, that was the most gratifying part, was that we went from the Clinton administration into the first Bush- second Bush administration of Bush Jr., and we became like a parallel universe, if you will. 'Cause there was this rather conservative republican, very brash young president, and here was the old liberal democrat Bartlett on the other side.

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So every Wednesday night, we got the equivalent of either a fireside chat or a address from the Oval Office from Mr. Bartlett. So yeah, it was the most gratifying thing to have done that for all that time with all those wonderful people.

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DAVID BENDER:
The fact is that—and you laid it out right—during that time, that second year, we had Bush v. Gore. We saw the country- As the century turned, we saw the country turn, and a lot of people felt like fairness had gone. I ask this, it's hard to know when you're in the center of anything, but did you have that sense of the- what I call the echo chamber of television, of having an effect and then it

being reflected back to you from how people were responding to you playing that part?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Yes. I think all of us on *The West Wing* for those seven seasons had a sense that we were doing something that was much more than a job in our career, and much more than even a story about a president. That we were contributing ideas and possibilities, and we were- we became- and we were very aware of it at the time, and it gradually even became more and more clear to us of what an inspiration we were, particularly to young people and especially young women.

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And… the women in the show, the regulars particularly- Allison Jenney was a great source of inspiration to a lot of women. And we were getting letters from kids in college and high school who- and particularly the young women, who were changing their choices for career, and they were going into public life or law or social justice.

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They were becoming involved and they were being fulfilled and inspired by a lot of the energy that we were sharing on *The West Wing*. So that was the most gratifying part. Even today, like you said, during the pandemic, I still get letters from people who had never seen it before. They were born after we were on the air. And so they wouldn't have seen it as small children.

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And they became aware of it when they were locked down during the pandemic, and it became a whole new world for them. And some of them- in fact, a great many of them saw it twice. They ran- Because you remember, the dialogue is very much like I'm talking right now. It was very fast. It was hard to hear. “What'd he say? What'd he say?” And you couldn't rerun it in those days. So, yeah, they would see it again and realize- You know what's very interesting as well, is we had many advisors from real administrations, some of them going all the way back to Eisenhower.

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And there were stories that were ingrained in our show that came from real life. And one- just one example is, during the Depression, a young Black child in Brooklyn wrote a letter to President Roosevelt and said, “My father has lost his job. Could you please help my dad? And here's his name and here's our address, and please see if you can help my dad get a job.” That was the gist of the letter.

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Well, it got lost in, what we used to call in those days, the dead letter box. Well, it came to light during the Carter administration—this is a true story! One of his agents found this letter floating around somewhere and gave it to Jimmy Carter. And he asked to meet the fellow who is now a guy who was already in his sixties. And he said, “Yeah,” and they brought him to the White House, and he met Jimmy Carter.

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And he said, “Sorry, we got your letter so long. How's your dad?” He says, “Oh, he's passed now.” But that was one of our episodes where Charlie, Dulé Hill

playing Charlie, gets ahold of this letter somebody gives him that was addressed to Roosevelt, and we brought the guy in.

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DAVID BENDER:
There's an episode that I've waited a long time to ask you about, *Two Cathedrals*.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
One of the most talked about episodes of the entire series was the one called *Two Cathedrals*, which took place in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC., where the president's secretary had been killed in a car accident and he attended the funeral. The president, that is Bartlett, was feeling really-

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He'd been hit from every side, and he felt vulnerable. And there were so many chance things that turned against him, personally, politically, in every conceivable way, particularly the loss of one of the ships that had been sunk in a terrible storm. And he's just really at rock bottom. It's the most, I would say the, the most vulnerable he was in the whole series.

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And it was climaxed in that scene in *Two Cathedrals*. And he asked the Secret Service to clear the church. He was going to have it out with God, it's the only way I can describe it, but he was gonna do it in Latin. I asked Aaron once, "Why did you choose Latin?" And he said, "Because that seemed to be the

language of God for a Catholic." And as I grew up, as an altar boy, and so I knew the church Latin for the mass. And so I got that, "Okay."

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So I went to my local pastor, who's deceased now, but he was a very renowned- Monsignor John Sheridan at Our Lady of Malibu- it's our parish out by the beach. And I just had to make sure that I was saying the Latin right, and he taught me all the correct pronunciations. And so I learned the part and then went to Washington and we had to film this scene. And I also had a dear friend, who's also deceased, Father Bud Kieser, whom I worked with a lot on his series, *Insight*.

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It was a very popular anthology series that showed every Sunday morning. It was on with- There'd be the Protestant hour, the Jewish Hour, and then *Insight*. And so you had your choice. It was morality plays. And he told me one time that he would have these conversations with God. He would lock down the church, and he would go at it with God, and he would as if he was talking to a therapist or someone that had done him wrong.

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And this is true. I can reveal this now because he told me in confidence, but he's long since deceased and I don't think he would mind. And he said, yeah, he would tell God exactly how he felt, and, "How could you treat me like this?" On the other hand, it was like Tevye, "How could you do this to me? On the other hand…" And that was sort of what Bud Kaiser would do. And so it was not unfamiliar to me, but it was an outrageous scene 'cause I'm there in the middle of the National Cathedral, alone,-

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-yelling at God, and decided to have a cigarette to really get his goat. And I did it, and… I stamped on the cigarette, which was the worst thing to do inside a church. And I remember after we finished the scene, Aaron was very pleased and very moved by it, 'cause you never know if something's gonna work or not until you actually do it and you see it.

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And he said, "Yeah." He said, "I think it works, and let's go with that." Okay. So now we were waiting for the coverage. That was the initial reaction was on the- what we call the master, the whole shot, where you see- one camera would see the whole church, me walking along, and another one a bit closer, and now we were gonna do one a bit closer. And so I had to wait a while while they set up for that. And the guys that worked- Well, I shouldn't say worked. The guys that kind of-

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They were the… acolytes who had opened the cathedral for us, and they played in the service of the funeral. They were vested, and they were sitting there—three or four of these guys—and they were not happy with me. And I said, "Guys, what's wrong? You don't look happy." Said, "Well, we- This is not our choice, that we were told that we had to accommodate you people, and so there you have it."

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And I said, "But why are you so upset?" He said, "Well, we've never seen such behavior in our church before, and it seems outrageous, and we don't wanna say blasphemous, but we're not comfortable with it." And I just- I felt so badly

for them, and I thought, "Why, it is their home, and here I am, this stranger, coming in and doing all this stuff." But it wasn't really me, it was this character. Nevertheless, I just sort of- I looked up—and I'll never forget it—and in the stained glass window at the highest point where I was standing was Job.

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And I said to them, "Excuse me, gentlemen, it's Job up there." And they look and they said, "Yeah, that's Job." And I said, "What do you think about that? Didn't he have it out with God every now and then? 'How could you do this to me? On the other hand…' It's Job, and Tevye, and now it's Bartlett." So, it seemed to work. And they were less offended and more understanding,

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DAVID BENDER:
And you know from the response, that it did resonate with so many people, because it was about loss, it was about how- It questions faith. And as I said, you're- I know you to be a man of deep faith, but I've always thought of you as Catholic with a small C, and in the Dorothy Day tradition of your faith. Can you explain what that is?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
One of my heroes was Phil Berrigan, Dan Berrigan's brother. Dan was also one of my heroes. But the brothers together had a very profound effect on all of us from the '60s. And these were two Catholic priests that opposed the

Vietnam War and burned draft cards, and they went to prison, federal penitentiary, for a couple of years. So they made the ultimate sacrifice, and they were a great inspiration to all of us, that you- that if what you believe is not costly, then you're left to question its value.

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And so that was really… What I tried was to live as much as I could and to be true to myself. You can't always do it, because I didn't have that much courage. But when it was possible for me to do something and not make a fuss about it- Because whenever I protested or spoke out against some injustice, I never expected that it was going to influence anyone.

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I never believed that I was gonna change anyone's mind. I only did it because I could not not do it and be myself. Or at least the image I had of myself. So, it was a deeply personal commitment, and I've always believed that if something is not personal, it's impersonal. If it's impersonal, then who cares? So, if I was to care about something, it had to cost me something. And so, that was at the center of who-

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I have this phrase I use sometimes about just generally living, wherever you find yourself: You've gotta find a place- a way to unite the will of the spirit with the work of the flesh. You gotta put 'em together, and so that you're not unbalanced. You're not too much in one and not enough in the other. But if you can do that, then your spirit has an opportunity to breathe on its own.

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It's not forced. It's not religion per se. It's a transcendence of religion because it's spirituality. I think sometimes I'm a practicing Catholic—I'll get it right, I hope someday—but I love the faith. I have a lot of problems with the church. It's male dominated. It's made a horrible bunch of mistakes over the centuries. But the faith, in its itself, is very, very nourishing, and very important. It's where I go to kind of claim the chamber in my heart.

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That's the best way I know to describe it. I know myself in this faith. I believe in the basic tenets of Catholicism, and they make absolute perfect sense to me, that, as I say, if what you believe is not costly, then you're left to question its value. And that's what I face every day of my life. But I- It has led me to a enviable, joyful place inside myself that I don't anticipate ever changing anyone's mind or journey, particularly my family.

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There's no Catholics in my family. I mean, my immediate- my son- They admire what I do to a certain extent, but they don't have any inclination to go there, with the possible exception of Ramon who will join me at Mass every now and then, and Emilio, of course. But- And I've stopped trying to convert them. Do you know what I'm saying? I stop trying to convert anyone that doesn't believe what I believe.

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And it's because- What I think of it is it's a gift, it's a grace, if you will. It's the best description of grace, is what you believe in action. Because only when you step out into that no man's land, and you're willing to take whatever's coming at you, it's only then that you need the grace. If you're staying at home

and you're just peeping out the window, that's a limited amount of grace. You've gotta go out and expose what you believe, what you think, how you feel, and demonstrate it.

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And that's when the grace arrived. So, it's a sacred kind of activity. And I think this way- I think this is for people who have no religious belief or not connected to any religious group. People of all faiths, of no faith, but just humanity. And I found that we're all so concerned about hiding our brokenness,-

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-and I think the faith, grace, is exposing it because it's human. And that's the only way God gets in, is through our brokenness. It's only when we are willing to expose ourselves to the absolute beauty of our brokenness, that it can be blessed. So it's the beautiful, broken, part of ourselves, and that's where- that's the most important part. So I can't separate that from my family life,-

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-my political—if you will—life, my public life, my artistic life, in the movies or whatever I do artistically. It's- When I found the way to unite the will of the spirit to the work of the flesh, then I went everywhere as the same guy and experienced this sense of joy that I never had before, before I was Catholic. Well, I reconverted in '81.

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So the last half of my life has been by far the most difficult because I was so involved in so many issues, but it's equally the happiest because I know myself in that sphere, and I don't anticipate changing anyone's life but mine.

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DAVID BENDER:
You said that you didn't think that it had an impact, you didn't do it for an impact. But whenever any man strikes out against oppression, he sets forth-

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MARTIN SHEEN:
-A tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of… daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and injustice. Bobby Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, in South Africa in 1966 at the University of…

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DAVID BENDER:
Cape Town, I believe.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
He was at the Cape Town University. Yeah, 1966.

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DAVID BENDER:
57 years ago, yesterday, he said that.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
My, oh my. Okay.

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DAVID BENDER:
So, to my point and to yours, that when you do this, when you strike out against oppression, these things you've done since your- since 1981, you've stood up for the things that you believed in, they've been what you needed to do for yourself. Is it fair to say that you are aware that the things that you've done, the actions you've taken, have created these ripples of hope. Tell me what you've seen from the actions you've taken.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
From my own involvement in all of the issues, whether it was nuclearism, war—particularly the Gulf War, I was very involved in protesting against the first Gulf War, as well as the second one in Iraq, and much earlier across the Vietnam War. But whether I was protesting homelessness or injustice or racism or whatever it was, whatever issue I was involved in, I never anticipated, as I said earlier, changing anybody.

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The only one that changed was me. And I think that that's as it should be. The idea of being associated with a movement or a cause, and be counted on to promulgate that publicly and to engage in that and to influence others, is not

my concern. I think that the best way to describe it for me is when I went to a demonstration, I never looked over my shoulder. I didn't know if anybody was following me. And frankly, I didn't care. I was there for me.

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To get me there was the greatest work because I'm such a coward. I'm such a sissy, I would look- and I mean that in the old fashioned sense, I was just timid and frightened. And I would look for the cameras, or the women and the children. I'm serious! Because that was the safest place to be in a demonstration. They were the least likely to be victimized, and so-

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DAVID BENDER:
And yet you've been arrested a multitude of times, so apparently you haven't been very good at finding safe haven.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Well…

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DAVID BENDER:
Martin, I have to ask you, because you mentioned women before, and one of the people we've talked to—I know you know well—is Dolores Huerta. Talk to me for a moment, because I know you have marched with her, walked with

her, you walked with Cesar, can you talk about Dolores, and the farm workers at large and that movement, 'cause I know you've been a part of that.

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Yes, I've been involved with the farm workers for some time, but not back in- when they formed. When they started in the '60s, I was still in New York. I didn't get involved until the '80s. So I came very late, but I came during a critical period. I came during the period, Cesar was fasting in what was called the Fast for Life at Delano, the Farm Workers Headquarters.

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And that was the first time I met him. And in fact, he got me to quit smoking. I was a very heavy smoker and he got me to stop. I was so moved by him. His presence was… it was defining 'cause he had been in such conflict and for so long that it became like a mantle. It was expected of him.

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If he wasn't organizing or protesting or being arrested, then he wasn't in Cesar. But he had a life and a family, and he had a great sense of humor, and he was very disarming and very practical. I adored him. And Dolores, of course, was his partner in the founding of the union. And people don't realize how difficult it was for her because she was a Latina, and this is a very…

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The Latino culture is very heavily favored with the male dominance and these matters, particularly a union, or something as important as that. So Dolores' place in United Farmworkers is paramount. It's equal to Cesar. He couldn't

have done it without her, and she couldn't have done it without him. So they were- they were a magic couple at the time in the place, and there would've been no union if they hadn't lifted each other up to that status.

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DAVID BENDER:
Miracle is, she continues at 93 to this day.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Mm-hmm.

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DAVID BENDER:
With that energy and that purpose and that determination, what is it you see in her now, these many years later, that keeps her going?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Dolores Huerta is… one of those phenomenal committed people who lives in… a complete total awareness of the time and place that she lives. She sees all that's going on everywhere and nothing gets by her, and she is involved in so many important issues.

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I'm on the board of the Dolores Huerta foundation—I just talked to her recently—and so… She's very intimidating because it's like- She would never say it, mind you, she's very practical. She's a mother and a wife, and she's raised all these children for all these years and they're all extraordinary, but she never makes you feel like, "What have you done for justice lately?" No, there's none of that. It's like, "Hey, I thought about this," or, this and that. "Did anyone call you about this or that? Or didn't?"

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And it's like an invitation. It's not… ever a criticism if you're not on the line or you're not involved. It's an invitation. That's what she is. And it's like, wow, you're gonna step out into that place again. It's- Again, if what you believe is not costly, you're left to question its value. And so, whenever I'm associated with anything to do with Dolores, I know it's gonna cost me and it's valuable.

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DAVID BENDER:
All of these causes, you've put yourself on the line and there have been repercussions. You've been arrested and you've been jailed and you've had to do community service. Can you talk about that?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I was protesting the death of the Jesuits in El Salvador in all of the American military involvement in Central and South America, and I'd gone there with Witness for Peace and other nonviolent peace organizations and saw

firsthand what was going on, particularly in Nicaragua and El Salvador. And so, I came back and began to voice concern-

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-and urge people to become aware of what was going on down there, particularly during the Reagan years, 'cause it was very, very bad…

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DAVID BENDER:
We talked to Mike Farrell about that, who went down there as well and saw that firsthand.

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Yeah. It changed Mike's life, really. Yeah. And I was involved in a number of organizations. In fact, Mike Farrell and I were together in an organization called the Wednesday Morning Coalition, and we would meet downtown at the La Placita and march to the courthouse and shut it down. And so I had, like- There were- I accumulated 13 arrests and I had to appear in court, but these things take a long time, so they put 13 of them together,-

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-and I appeared before a very distinguished female judge, a federal judge who was hearing these cases. And she said, "Ramon," 'cause I'm arrested under Ramon, "It doesn't appear to make any difference if I put you in jail for all these arrests and all your behavior on the line." I said, "Not likely." She says,

"You're probably gonna do it again, aren't you?" I said, "I hope so." She said, "Very well, would you do community service?" "I will," I said.

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She sent me to St. Joseph's Center, and I became the dishwasher at the Bread and Roses Café just down the street. It's a homeless kitchen. And so, I spent 10 years there as a volunteer, and yeah. It was the longest job I had until I got *The West Wing.* No, it was longer than *The West Wing*, actually. But, yeah, I only left it because of *The West Wing.* Yeah. But yeah.

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DAVID BENDER:
So you began as a dishwasher, continued as a dishwasher. It's been- And did you unionize everyone there?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Oh, no, no. They didn't need unionization. No. That would've been a step down for the volunteers. They were the Jesuit volunteers, and then all the people here and all the nuns that founded St. Joseph's Center. Sister Rose was the founder of the Bread and Roses Café. Rose Harrington. Yeah

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DAVID BENDER:
The work of the St. Joseph Center is something- Because you were there, people—again, celebrity has a way of putting a little light on things the way

they did on that stage when you were there and Dr. King was there, a light comes on you—and people became aware of the St. Joseph Center and Bread and Roses because you were there. Is that a fair statement?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
I wouldn't say I drew a whole lot of attention. I mean, they were in the neighborhood, they were doing this work for years before I arrived. I think they'd been at it almost 25, 26, maybe 27 years, already now. So, no, they were well involved in the community, and there were a great many volunteers. They had all these different services. The Bread and Roses Café, the feeding of the homeless, was just one.

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They had Meals on Wheels, they had education, they had a drop-in center around the corner down here, just a few blocks from here, where the people, the street folks could wash their clothes, make phone calls and rest for a while. So yeah, they were very involved in the whole being a package of social justice and service to the poor.

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DAVID BENDER:
And it inspired you even as you were cleaning those plates, yes?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Yeah. I was not a very good dishwasher. In fact, I spilled so much water on the floor, they put up a sign one day, I came in and it said, “Lake Sheen.”

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DAVID BENDER:
There's something I have to ask you that's really personal in a larger sense. You've brought so much joy through your art to the world, and so much thought and passion. What brings you joy in art? And I'll give you one particular area. What music gives you joy? What music do you listen to?

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MARTIN SHEEN:
Oh gosh. I love music. Great fan of the music of my era, which started as folk music when I really became aware- Rock and roll, of course, when I was a teenager. Elvis was an enormous influence and Little Richard and all of the rock and roll stars of the ‘50s. I knew him and loved them all.

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But later on in life, I became aware- Well, Bob Dylan in the ‘60s had a profound effect and still does in large measure. I mean, he was a turning point, like James Dean in the cinema, Bob Dylan was that in the music world for all of us, and deservedly so. I adored him. But lately, the last 20 years or so of my life, I would say classical music, I've fallen in love with classical music and I'm even learning something about it.

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So I just love to listen to it. But now I listen to this public radio station, here in Los Angeles, KUSC. And I'm fascinated with the DJs, I guess is the only way- I call 'em the announcers. They know so much about- Many of them are musicians themselves, that I learned later, but they love what they're doing and the music is a reflection of that. But they get behind these stories, and I had no idea.

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I love Mozart and Beethoven above all, but I had no idea who they were or why they wrote what they did, and why what they wrote was so important, and how they all influenced and nourished each other. So classical music is one of my great joys to listen to. To read a book and listen to classical music today is heaven.

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DAVID BENDER:
Well, that brings us to, really, the end and the purpose of why we sat down. It's the power of narrative and of storytelling, and how important storytelling is, whether it's telling about- why music mattered to these people you listen to, or why something has mattered to a writer, an actor. What is the importance to you and what have you seen? You are, as it turns out, an amazing storyteller without a script. What is the power of storytelling to you?

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MARTIN SHEEN:

Well, storytelling is part of what I do for a living. It's usually someone else's story that I embody, but if it's personal, then it takes on another meaning, a different energy and a reality. So I think what I've always tried to do as an actor is to find reality, even in a lousy script—which sometimes is the worst thing to do because you give it credibility it doesn't deserve, but you can't help it.

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You cannot not do your best even in a terrible film or play or whatever it is you're doing. But one of the great influences I've had in my adult life, as a storyteller, I think the best storyteller on the public stage was the Master of Ceremonies for Prairie Home Companion Garrison Keillor. And I adored him and I listened to him for years, particularly the Lake Wobegon, but he was a natural storyteller, and a writer as well, and a very disarming man.

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And I ended up getting to know him a little bit, and I did the show- I did about a half a dozen of the shows, when he was still on the air, and it was one of the best experiences and the most satisfying of my life because it was back to my first love, which was radio. I grew up listening to radio in our house. We had this enormous console. And when I was a boy, I used to look behind it when everyone had gone to bed and see where the people were. Maybe they were sleeping. But that magic of-

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Because the radio forced your imagination to awaken to these stories. And I loved them. And that was the- That was really the first—before even before films—it was radio that I was drawn to with storytelling and that I would

immerse myself. Because I would cry when somebody got hurt or was killed or some injustice was imposed, and I would get furious when someone got away with something that they didn't deserve, some villain.

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So I was very involved and, and so- and I've come back full circle to the radio. I love the radio. Even today, I don't like talk radio per se, because that is divisive I think. I'd rather listen to a sports announcer ‘cause there's no arguing about who won and who lost. So I really love storytelling and- But I'm sorry that Garrison Keeler is no longer on the air because he was America's best storyteller ‘cause he was also a writer and he understood the medium in ways that nobody got before or since, I don't think. So I miss him.

END TC: 01:25:07:00