

Rhea Seehorn Is Getting Away With It

The jig is up for Kim Wexler as “Better Call Saul” nears a close. Meanwhile, the actress who plays her has been quietly stealing the show.

By Austin Considine

Published July 8, 2022 Updated July 9, 2022

LOS ANGELES — Rhea Seehorn insists she is a rule follower. And not the kind who, like her character Kim Wexler on AMC’s “Better Call Saul,” follows some rules in public while bending others in secret to whatever ends she believes are just.

She never sneaks a grape from the salad bar. She stands on the foot-shaped stickers at the airport to ensure proper social distance. She becomes enraged when someone cuts in line.

“I have an issue with people thinking they’re better than anyone else,” Seehorn said over coffee and eggs at a Beverly Hills cafe, one of two times we met around the Los Angeles area last month. “It makes my blood boil in a way that I think is a bit irrational.”

This made for a fine line, I suggested, between her and her character, a lawyer who faces dire consequences for her increasingly Machiavellian machinations when “Saul” returns for its final run on Monday. Kim has that reaction toward people who flout the social contract, too. Seehorn acknowledged as much, but there was an important distinction, she said.

“The problem is, Kim’s ideals aren’t off,” she said. “But the way she’s going about them is.”

Across five and a half seasons, Kim’s long slide toward perdition has become arguably the narrative keystone of the series. It wasn’t always that way. When it began, “Saul,” a prequel to “Breaking Bad,” seemed primarily focused on the transformation of the slippery but fundamentally decent Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk) into Albuquerque’s sleaziest lawyer, Saul Goodman. Kim’s ultimate role was uncertain then, even to the writers.

“We had no idea, when we started, how important her character was going to be,” said Peter Gould, the showrunner and a co-creator. “If you watch the pilot of the show, she has probably three lines of dialogue.”

It soon became clear, however, that Seehorn’s character, who began (outwardly) as a straight arrow with a promising legal career, would be integral to Jimmy’s metamorphosis. Like Jimmy, Kim was breaking bad. Unlike Jimmy, though, Kim never appears in “Breaking Bad,” which has led many fans to assume the worst. The stakes have always been potentially higher for her than for the guy with his name in the title.

That seems like a lot to carry, given that “Saul” is one of the most critically acclaimed series on television. But if it is, Seehorn, 50, who has been acting on screens and on stages since the ’90s, handles it gracefully. Unlike the tight-lipped, inscrutable Kim, Seehorn isn’t afraid to be vulnerable, either professionally or, as it turns out, in conversation. She has no problem, for example, talking at length about a rash. She is funny, and has a blinding, unguarded smile that made me wonder if I had ever actually seen Kim Wexler’s teeth (all those tooth-brushing scenes notwithstanding).

“Kim would think I was a giant dork,” she said. “She would not hang out with me at all.”

Still, there was something Kim-like beneath the dorkiness. Several times during our conversations, she acknowledged feeling as if she were getting away with something, as if all the colleagues, critics and Emmys forecasters must be lying. She wasn’t breaking rules. But like Kim, she fought back a nagging fear, she said, that someday, somehow, she was going to be found out.

“I feel like I walk around in the world and pretend to be a normal person,” she said. “And I’m not.”



Seehorn with Bob Odenkirk in the final season. “We had no idea, when we started, how important her character was going to be,” said Peter Gould, one of the creators. Greg Lewis/AMC, via Sony Pictures Television

PERCHED ATOP the Brentwood hills with views across Los Angeles, the Getty Center seemed like a good place to ruminate on lofty questions of art, ego and fraud. We met there at Seehorn's suggestion, which made sense: She earned a degree in studio art before pursuing acting full-time. She still paints whenever she can.

Unwittingly, she had also chosen the opening week of an exhibition of a newly restored Willem de Kooning painting, "Woman-Ochre" (1955), which had been stolen from the University of Arizona Museum of Art in 1985. The thieves were most likely a middle-aged married couple, schoolteachers, who in broad daylight walked into the gallery, cut the painting from its frame with a razor and took it home, where it hung in their bedroom until they died. (It wasn't recovered until 2017, at an estate sale.)

They sounded a lot like Kim and Jimmy: Kim especially has derived an evident, at times erotic thrill from secretly breaking the law with Jimmy. Unlike this couple, though, Kim hasn't been able to stop. Her particular delusion was to think that she could commit crimes, however justifiable in her mind, without eroding some small part of her moral integrity.

"Based on what she came from and the way she views the world, she thought she could tip the scale slightly in the world and right some wrongs," Seehorn said. "And it became out of control."

Seehorn came up much differently than Kim, who was essentially homeless as a child, with a grifter mother. But there was enough dislocation in the early life of Seehorn, who was born in Norfolk, Va., that it seems no accident she has proved so adept at inhabiting the character.

Seehorn's family moved a lot because of her father's job in counterintelligence, doing stints in Japan and Arizona before settling in Virginia Beach when Rhea was in elementary school.

"She was universally liked," said Trish Goodwin, one of her best friends since childhood. "She was smart and she did her work, but she wasn't an annoying brainiac."

When Seehorn was 12, her parents split, and around that time she started going by her middle name, Rhea (pronounced: RAY; her first name is Deborah). Her mother had done musical theater in high school, but Seehorn was more drawn to the passions of her father, a Vietnam War veteran who loved drawing and painting.

It was while pursuing studio art at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va., that she discovered acting, in an elective class. She didn't change her major, but she dove right in.

"I think ignorance was bliss," she said. "Because it seemed very simple to me at the time in a way that I understand now that it's not."

During her freshman year, her father died of complications from alcoholism. Goodwin, who also went to George Mason, remembered when Seehorn got the call. "She was devastated," she said.

“She kind of saw that tether to art cut — that was how she connected with her dad,” Goodwin added. “And I think it probably gave her a lot more focus when she came back.”

Soon after college, Seehorn moved to Washington, D.C., where she threw herself into theater, then later to New York. Sometimes it paid the bills. Other times, she acted in instructional videos and did whatever other odd jobs she could find.

Christopher Walker (“We Own This City”), an actor and close friend who hustled alongside her in Washington, remembered her as “extremely hard working” — and “a loud laughter.”

“I don’t think she felt the need to be quiet or tamp down, or be a compliant sort of person,” he said. “I think there’s maybe an expectation sometimes, particularly for a woman, not to cut loose like that.”



“My last day, I left the set and I just thought, I’m going to be thinking about that ending for a very, very long time,”
Seehorn said about the end of “Better Call Saul.” Ryan Pfluger for The New York Times

In Hollywood, where Seehorn moved in 2002, producers sometimes asked her in auditions to be more feminine, more likable, more like what they expected from a pretty blonde. She ignored those notes as best she could — her heroes were Madeline Kahn, Gilda Radner, Gena Rowlands — and found plenty of regular work anyway, often in short-lived sitcoms (“I’m With Her,” “Whitney”). She was grateful but restless.

One day, after failing to land a part in the Amazon series “Sneaky Pete,” she was walking through the Sony Pictures Studio lot, and she saw the infamous meth-lab R.V. from “Breaking Bad.”

“In my head, I was like, I miss that type of storytelling where you really have to dig deep,” she said. The next day, Sharon Bialy, who was the casting director for “Sneaky Pete,” rang her up. There was a “Breaking Bad” spinoff in the works, and she thought Seehorn would be perfect.

“A lot of people pigeonholed her in the industry as a comedy actress,” Bialy said. “But I had an instinct that she was so much more than that.”

Odenkirk said he and Seehorn had connected instantly. “I think she’s rolled with the punches her whole life,” he said. Instead of letting it make her into “a cowering, delicate person,” he added, “she’s tough and she bounces back, and she’s fun.”

That toughness has found its way into “Saul.” Gould said that it was evident from the beginning what Seehorn could bring to the role. “There wasn’t even a remote second choice,” he said. But as the character grew, he added, Seehorn’s specific qualities informed Kim’s evolution — and by extension, the story’s.

“If we had not cast Rhea Seehorn in this role,” Gould said, “we would be talking about a very different show right now.”

IT’S HARD TO IMAGINE much fun awaits Kim in an arc that, as viewers know, seems bent toward tragedy. Seehorn was tight-lipped about Kim’s fate in the final stretch but not about her experience making it.

“The next six episodes, this whole season, was probably the most challenging work I’ve done in my career — but blissfully so,” she said in a follow-up phone conversation. “My last day, I left the set and I just thought, I’m going to be thinking about that ending for a very, very long time.”

Production of this final season created a lot of memories. There was the experience of sharing a house for a year in New Mexico with Odenkirk and Patrick Fabian, who plays the object of Kim’s loathing, Howard Hamlin. (Among other things, it involved delivering a litter of puppies.) There was Episode 4, which was her first time directing television.

Then there was the day last summer when Odenkirk had a heart attack on set and nearly died right in front of her and Fabian.

“Did it change our friendship? Yeah,” said Odenkirk, who had to be defibrillated three times and went 18 minutes without a regular heartbeat. “We were going to be friends for life from the experience of doing ‘Saul,’ but ... we’re going to be closer than that.”

When Seehorn and I first met, at the Getty, one of the first things she offered was a disclaimer: “I’m not very good at playing me.” She said it laughingly, in what came to seem like a reliably self-deprecating manner, a reflex pointed out by several of her friends and colleagues. I took it under advisement then but after spending some time with her, I’m not so sure.

By most measures of success — career, friendship, family — Seehorn has found it. She is engaged and seems to enjoy helping raise her fiancé’s two boys. Odenkirk, as *Variety* reported in a recent cover story on Seehorn, hopes to cast her in a coming mockumentary created by him and his “Mr. Show” partner, David Cross.

It seemed to me that such successes were the result of a person’s playing herself pretty well. Odenkirk appeared to agree.

“She doesn’t know how great she is,” he said. “She doesn’t give herself enough credit, but she *shows* what she can do, and hopefully she knows that.”