

Bob Odenkirk returns as a deliciously 'Bad' lawyer in new AMC prequel 'Better Call Saul'



By FRAZIER MOORE AP Television
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In this image released by AMC, Bob Odenkirk portrays Saul Goodman in a scene from "Better Call Saul." Odenkirk reprises his role from "Breaking Bad," in "Better Call Saul," a much-anticipated, well-worth-waiting-for prequel airing two episodes Sunday and Monday at 10 p.m. EST. (AP Photo/AMC, Ursula Coyote)

NEW YORK — The first we see of the man we loved as Saul Goodman, he is behind the counter in a shopping mall Cinnabon in Omaha, Nebraska.

We don't know why. And we don't know when, other than, presumably, it's several years before he came to be the irrepressible Albuquerque attorney for drug lord Walter White on the AMC drama "Breaking Bad," then, thanks to the virtuosic work of Bob Odenkirk, who played him, broke out as a character so irresistible the world refused to let him go when "Breaking Bad" ended its five seasons in 2013.

Now the man we knew as Saul (with Odenkirk reprising the role) is back, better than ever, in "Better Call Saul," a much-anticipated, well-worth-waiting-for prequel airing two episodes at 10 p.m. EST Sunday and Monday.

That "huh?" scene in the Cinnabon instantly signals that "Saul" retains the twisted storytelling style of its forebear. No surprise, since it was co-created by "BB" mastermind Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould, a "BB" writer who conceived the Saul Goodman character.

"There are so many glimpses of this character in so many different guises — different ages and awarenesses," says Odenkirk, who, speaking for himself as the actor portraying him across the hop-scotch "Better Call Saul" narrative, acknowledges, "It's a puzzle. And, in a great way, it can be hard to keep track of. We had to do that work. But when you watch it, you don't have to."

In short, as every "Breaking Bad" fan understands blissfully, the viewer of "Better Call Saul" need only submit and enjoy.

Soon enough, Sunday's premiere settles (sort of) back home in Albuquerque, quickly certifying "Saul" as its own special thing: That is, the man we knew doing hefty business as Saul Goodman is, on this show, a struggling criminal lawyer born Jimmy McGill.

"This guy seemed so happy during 'Breaking Bad!'" says Peter Gould by phone from Los Angeles, where he and his writing team are already plotting season 2. As discussions of a spinoff got more and more serious, "We asked ourselves, 'How did this guy get to be Saul Goodman in the first place?' The more we talked about it, the more excited I got about a certain period in his life — about six years before Walter White walked into Saul's office.

"What problem does becoming Saul Goodman solve for Jimmy McGill?" That was what the writers asked themselves, says Gould. "That was the genesis of starting the new series where we did."

The premiere reunites the viewer with Mike Ehrmantraut (the fearsome "Breaking Bad" fixer played by Jonathan Banks) and introduces new characters, including Jimmy's mysteriously indisposed brother Chuck McGill (played by Michael McKean).

But Odenkirk (who arrived on "Breaking Bad" in its second season as welcome comic relief, then grew Saul into a full-bodied scene stealer, even in the company of leading men Bryan Cranston and Aaron Paul) returns now as the star in his own right. He is constantly on-screen and, as he brings new shadings to an old, familiar character, you can't take your eyes off him. He's too wound up, beguiling, calculating and desperate to let you.

Odenkirk, on a visit to New York on Thursday, repeatedly deflects the credit for his performance on "Saul" to the writing and the producers.

"I can't believe they trusted me with it," he says. "Getting that first script I was like, 'Really? You're gonna trust me to bring this guy to life on THIS level? Thank you! But you're nuts!'"

Maybe not. With "Breaking Bad," his first dramatic role, Odenkirk revealed true acting chops, and since then turned in impressive performances in the 2013 film "Nebraska" and last year's FX series "Fargo."

But at 52, he can look back at a lengthy career largely focused as a comedy writer and performer whose credits include "Saturday Night Live," "The Ben Stiller Show," "The Larry Sanders Show" and, paired with David Cross, HBO's legendary "Mr. Show" sketch-comedy series.

Asked how he identifies himself as a show-biz professional these days, he pauses thoughtfully, then says, "I spent so many years with writer at the top of the list, it's hard to say I'm an actor now. But I like acting. It's a wonderful challenge. If I got to act the rest of my life and do roles as good as this one, I would take that option."

In the meantime, he dismisses talk of imminent stardom. When a reporter praises him for the three "Saul" episodes shared for preview, he responds earnestly, "I have to keep my head down still.

"We have 10 episodes this season, and more after that, so it's a long road," he declares. "I need to prove myself over all of it to an audience. So there's more challenge to come."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Frazier Moore is a national television columnist for The Associated Press. He can be reached at fmoore@ap.org and <http://www.twitter.com/tvfrazier>. Past stories are available [at http://bigstory.ap.org/content/frazier-moore](http://bigstory.ap.org/content/frazier-moore)
