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'VEEP' goes deep in Season 2, and there's more Julia Louis-Dreyfus to love

HBO sitcom shot in Md. savvily explores modern anxieties

By [David Zurawik](#), The Baltimore Sun

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"Deep" and "sitcom" are not words often used in the same sentence.

But a visit to the "VEEP" soundstage in Columbia gave a glimpse of the larger cultural power of this savvy satire from HBO, returning for its second season Sunday night. I also came away dazzled by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who last year won an Emmy as best comedic actress for her portrayal of Vice President Selina Meyer.

"VEEP" drills as far down into the state of the national psyche as any TV comedy has in the past 30 years. This is the one series currently on prime-time TV that speaks to what all the lost jobs and lost homes have done to our collective psyche since the Great Recession of 2008. It helps us laugh for 30 minutes a week not only at the craven and dysfunctional politicians who seem to betray our trust in Washington every single day, but also at the frightened citizens many of us have become — workers and managers wondering when another round of layoffs might arrive.

The scene I saw filmed in Columbia is part of what will air as the penultimate of 10 episodes during the next three months. It involves furloughing workers during a government shutdown.

The real Washington is in sequestration today, which is a kind of politicized D.C.-Lite version of a full shutdown. The White House is still operating, but tours for the public are suspended because of the expense. The idea is the same: There's gridlock in Washington because the politicians are too busy serving their own interests rather than doing the work they were sent there to do.

"As you can see, we are in shutdown, so I can only have a skeleton staff," Selina tells her team as preamble to rolling out the chopping block.

They are all gathered in her office: Amy (Anna Chlumsky), her chief of staff; Mike (Matt Walsh), her burned-out press spokesman; Dan (Reid Scott), her pretty-boy strategist; Gary (Tony Hale), her neurotic right-hand man; and Sue (Sufe Bradshaw) the vice president's tightly wrapped executive assistant.

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And they are all scheming like crazy to hang onto their jobs — except for Mike, who's straight-up groveling.

In the name of avoiding spoilers, I won't reveal who gets laid off. But one staffer does a happy dance when he finds out one victim is a rival instead of him.

Selina glares at the happy dancer and hisses the victim's name prefaced by the word "poor" into his beaming face. Instantly, his smile turns to a super-sized sad-face frown as he echoes her words in a funereal voice, saying, "Yes, poor ____."

But even Selina doesn't really feel the "poor" part. She'd let them all go in a second to keep her No. 2 spot in the administration.

On one level, the hypocrisy can make you want to gag — but not before you first smile at the turn-on-a-dime phony reaction and obvious relief on the part of those who dodged the latest bullet.

"There isn't a single character in the show who is thinking first about the impact of what he or she is doing on the country or voters," says Frank Rich, the New York magazine columnist who is one of the sitcom's executive producers.

"It's all about how you can be self-aggrandizing or enhance your own position of power," he adds.

And yet, for all their pathetic pettiness and craven self-interest, these are not characters designed to be simply loathed, says series creator and executive producer Armando Iannucci.

"There's vulnerability and fragility to them that makes you connect with them, particularly Selina," the Scottish-born creator of "In the Loop" says.

"When we started with this role, there was the potential for Selina to become a kind of goofy, incompetent idiot," he continues. "That's very much what we wanted to stay away from. And Julia brings a kind of steel and a resolve. She's happy to be testy and yet you still feel for her because she fleshes Selina out. She gives her three dimensions. You can see why Selina does the things she does."

As much as intelligence and talent, it's hard work that won Louis-Dreyfus that best comedy actress Emmy last year.

"If we're up at 3 o'clock in the morning in Baltimore trying to get something done, she'll still be there suggesting this way of doing it or coming up with a funny idea for us to try," Iannucci says. "Julia's not just grown into the character, but she's grown the character in a very intelligent way. Plus, she can fall over and bump into things, which is always a bonus."

Louis-Dreyfus, who is in practically every scene of the sitcom, did take after take of the layoff sequence — never leaving the set and joining in the improvisational banter among Iannucci and writer-producers like Simon Blackwell. Iannucci's style of creation is one of the most creative and on-your-feet-demanding I have ever seen. And Louis-Dreyfus is totally engaged in it.

The producers and writers felt they were missing a comedic beat as Selina calls her staff together for the cutdown. They want an added joke to milk an extra laugh out of the tension.

"What about this?" Dreyfus asks between the fifth and six takes. "What about if I say, 'We need to get this over quickly, like a good Brazilian wax?' 'Quick, like a good Brazilian wax.' "

Iannucci says he likes it, and Louis-Dreyfus starts quietly saying it over and over, changing a word here, a word there, but most of all playing with the way she sounds each word for emphasis, de-emphasis, loudness, softness and enunciation. Over and over and over — until she likes what she has, and the director calls for yet another take.

The scene plays funnier with her Brazilian wax addition — there is no doubt about it. But it's only the first of five more takes that will be recorded.

"Selina is a diva, and Julia is not remotely a diva," Rich says. "I don't know what people think actors on TV series do, but it's brutal. In any series, people work extremely long hours — often longer than 12-hour days. So that requires an incredible amount of work, and yet her job also requires that she maintain a lightness of spirit because she has to be funny."

The best news about Season 2 is there is even more Louis-Dreyfus: 10 episodes instead of the first season's eight. And in the first four episodes, which HBO made available for screening, she seems even more aggressively funny than last year.

Part of that involves Iannucci giving her a strong foil with the addition of Gary Cole as Kent Davison, a hard-bitten senior strategist to the president. He's the attack dog she has to get past to fight her way into the inner circle of POTUS.

In Sunday night's season opener, which is set on the night of midterm elections, Iannucci wastes little time having her and Davison go head to head. Selina's delivery of her insults makes them almost poetic in their profanity and vitriol.

The last 90 seconds of the episode, which feature an exhausted Selina doing an endless string of morning show interviews, is a comic tour de force. This clip alone, which runs as the final credits roll, could rightfully win Louis-Dreyfus another Emmy.

In addition to more Louis-Dreyfus, Rich also believes Season 2 offers more "universality," thanks in part to the way November's election seem to have changed almost nothing in Washington.

"In spite of the supposed resolution that an election provides with clear winners and losers, Washington is still dysfunctional. It still can't get anything done, even though a lot of the people have spoken," Rich says.

"So I think that helps fuel the universality of 'VEEP,' because 'VEEP' is saying a plague on all their houses. ... We've supposedly had the catharsis of an election in November, but there really wasn't a catharsis. So we're back to a world like 'VEEP,' where you have a lot of people in political life looking out for themselves and not the people's business."

That's surely part of the pleasure of viewing "VEEP." But as I watched the layoff scene being filmed last month, I couldn't help thinking how consistent its themes were with a scene I had watched being filmed the year before in the vice president's make-believe office in Columbia. It was scheduled as the penultimate episode of Season 1, and it featured Selina calling in her staff so she could fire someone for a gaffe that caused her office great embarrassment.

The dots connected themselves. I smiled at the various responses of scheming, begging and anger by endangered staffers as the scene played out before the cameras. But later I found myself thinking about some of the friends and co-workers in the past decade who had seen their careers ended for real in moments just like the one I saw staged for laughs.

Such real-life moments weren't limited to journalism. Since 2008, there has been a steady

drumbeat of downsizing and layoffs from Wall Street to the world of nonprofits, like the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#), which laid off almost 10 percent of its staff last week.

Millions of American workers have experienced a national trauma the past five years, but unlike 9/11, which was followed by a spate of shows ranging from "24" to "Homeland" that helped us process our feelings as a nation, prime-time TV has mainly been silent about life after a near-meltdown of the economy.

By all means, watch "VEEP" first for the acting, writing and laughs when it returns Sunday night. But leave yourself open to the deeper feelings a sitcom of this caliber can tap and possibly help heal as well.

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On TV: "VEEP" returns for its second season at 10 p.m. April 14 on HBO.



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