

September 20, 2013

Characters on 'Veep' Become Shorthand for Washington Types

By ASHLEY PARKER

WASHINGTON — When a friend invited Teal Pennebaker to a party in the nation's capital, Ms. Pennebaker had just one question: "I asked her, 'Will there be a lot of Jonahs there?'" she said.

Ms. Pennebaker, 31, a Washington-based policy writer, was referring to Jonah Ryan, the White House liaison to the vice president's office on HBO's "Veep" and one of the show's deliciously obnoxious characters — memorable as much for basking in his proximity to power as for his attempts to use what little status he has to get sex.

"It's a dead-on, very apt way to describe a certain type of D.C. guy," Ms. Pennebaker said. "It's such a great descriptor. 'Oh, he's such a Jonah,' or, 'That party will be all Jonahs. Let's not go.'"

(For those curious, the answer came back no; the party was a Jonah-free zone.)

If Aaron Sorkin's "West Wing" represented an idealized Democratic presidency (powerful people doing good things) and inspired a swath of young viewers to enter public service, the latest generation of political television offers a more dystopian vision of the nation's capital. The distinctly dark "House of Cards," on Netflix, serves up powerful people doing bad things, while "Scandal," on ABC, provides powerful people doing bad things in what they believe are in the service of good things.

But "Veep," which is in the running for four Emmy Awards this Sunday, including one for best comedy, manages to repurpose politics as lowbrow farce, and offers perhaps the most realistic glimpse at the banal tasks, humdrum days and outsize egos that make up the daily lives of the city's political staff members: largely powerless people doing ... things.

As such, the characters in the show — which revolves around fictional Vice President Selina Meyer (played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and her often-hapless, always-cursing staff — have quickly become an in-the-know byword for certain D.C. archetypes, in the same way that "Sex and the City" captured a whole generation of women as Carries or Mirandas.

"These things work their way into our vocabulary, particularly in self-referential communities that like seeing themselves portrayed in the media," said Ron Klain, a former chief of staff to Vice Presidents Joseph R. Biden and Al Gore. "I think in all professions, people like shorthand ways of referring to things and using popular culture references to refer to things. And I think Washington

in particular loves to see itself portrayed on television or loves to see itself portrayed in the movies.”

For Bill Burton, a former deputy press secretary for President Obama, “Veep” allusions have become a convenient way to capture a certain type of Washington social-climbing behavior.

“A situation will occur and I’ll say: ‘Do you watch ‘Veep’? That’s totally what Jonah would do,’ ” Mr. Burton said. “The Jonah is the most spot-on depiction of Washington ever constructed. I know 100 guys like that.”

Though Jonah (or, in the words of Mr. Klain, “being an obnoxious, pompous jerk”) may be the prototype that has most pervaded the Washington lexicon, almost every character on the show can serve as a convenient nickname for a certain overly eager, overly scheming and overly self-promoting Washington staff member.

There is Dan Egan, the handsome, ambitious, quick-witted and even quicker-talking deputy director of communications. There is Sue Wilson, the brusque and efficient keeper of the gate. There is Gary Walsh, the vice president’s body man, always at the ready with his trusty bag (itself nicknamed the Leviathan) to anticipate his boss’s latest whim.

“I’ve heard people refer to junior staffers who have to do personal stuff for the principal as, ‘Oh, he has Gary’s job,’ or ‘He’s doing Gary work,’ ” Mr. Klain said.

There is also Mike McLintock, who has been Vice President Meyer’s director of communications since her time in the Senate, but now seems largely a lumbering, dead-tree relic in a hyper-speed Twitter world.

“Like Mike, he came with the building,” said Tracy Sefl, a Democratic strategist, recounting a “Veep”-inspired insult she has heard levied against a certain type of long-serving but checked-out staff member. She added, “This is decidedly not a compliment.”

So real are the “Veep” comparisons that a Washington lawyer sent a video of Barbara Morgan, Anthony Weiner’s spokeswoman during the recent New York mayoral campaign, in which she manages to blow off several reporters all while smiling broadly and furiously tapping away on her iPhone. Referring to Ms. Morgan, who is perhaps most famous for her recent expletive-laced tirade about a former Weiner staff member, he wrote: “Like a ‘Veep’ character, especially when you consider her recent words.” (In this case, Ms. Morgan might be “a total Amy,” a reference to the show’s Amy Brookheimer, who, as the vice president’s chief of staff, constantly finds herself defending her boss’s image.)

The most ubiquitous Washington type, however, is embodied by Dan Egan.

Jay Carson, a former Democratic political operative and currently a producer of “House of Cards,”

said: "I know 55 Dans. Dan is definitely the most realistic."

"Dan is so universal in Washington — the sort of charming, kind of conniving, good-looking, hard-charging operative," said Mr. Carson, who, it should be noted, is in many ways a bit of a Dan himself. "There are myriad people who resemble Dan."

Or, as Matt House, a spokesman for Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, put it: "You encounter a lot more Dans than Jonahs."

But Reid Scott, the actor who plays Dan, said in a phone interview that "as many Dans as there are in the real D.C., there are a million more Jonahs trying to be Dan."

Several of the actors on the show said they have been surprised and pleased to hear anecdotally that their on-screen characters have managed to so accurately capture a subset of Washington's striving population.

Mr. Scott recalled attending a Wizards' basketball game in Washington with a few fellow "Veep" actors, as well as the chief of staff and communications director for an Illinois congressman. "They were just saying how every office had their Dan," Mr. Scott said. "They were like: 'Oh, my God, I know 30 of you, this is so crazy. It's so accurate that there's this guy who thinks he's so charming and so dashing, but he's actually just a snake in the grass.'"

And speaking to Katie Couric on her daytime talk show earlier this year, Ms. Louis-Dreyfus, nominated for an Emmy as best actress in a comedy, said that when she once visited Mr. Biden at his office, in a surreal twist, "People in his staff introduced themselves to me as characters on the show."

"Like this one woman says, 'Hi, I'm Allison, I'm the Dan Egan of the office,'" Ms. Louis-Dreyfus said. "Another woman, she goes, 'Hi, I'm the Sue of the office.' I mean, really, it was bizarre."

In perhaps the ultimate sign of cultural saturation, "Veep" allusions are no longer reserved for Washington. Timothy Simons, who plays Jonah, said he's begun hearing about Jonahs in a variety of professions.

"I've heard people talk about Jonahs in their workplace that isn't political," Mr. Simons said in a phone interview. "I've heard people say, 'Oh there's this guy I work with who's a total Jonah,' but it's like a day trader."

Mr. Scott agreed that "Veep" shorthand has "started to leak out of the D.C. sphere."

"I have friends who are agents and managers," he said, "and they've started to refer to their climbing office boys and girls as Jonahs."

