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Small-screen courtrooms a hit with lawyers

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For many, TV shows are an escape from reality. For attorneys, that's no different – even when they're watching lawyers on TV.

"Better Call Saul" is the latest in a long line of TV shows about the legal profession. A prequel to AMC's "Breaking Bad," the show stars Bob Odenkirk as a crooked-at-times attorney named Jimmy McGill.

"He's a likable guy and you like his character," said Patrick Fitzsimmons, senior associate at Hodgson Russ LLP in Buffalo. "It's a great show. I think it's the one show compared to the others where it's not about a big firm."

Also a fan is Michael Benz, an associate at HoganWillig who recently returned to his native Buffalo after working in the Philadelphia public defender's office and in his own practice as a criminal defense attorney.

"(Odenkirk's character is) the classic defense attorney who will do anything to make a buck or help his client," Benz said, adding that he often binge-watches shows with his wife, Carla, an attorney in the federal public defender's office in Buffalo.

They recently finished watching "Goliath," an Amazon Prime legal drama starring Billy Bob Thornton, and are working their way through "Animal Kingdom," a TNT show starring Ellen Barkin.

"Even the shows (we like) that aren't necessarily taking you into a courtroom are usually about crime and criminal justice in some aspect," Benz said. "My wife and I watch a lot of high-excitement, mindless action-type shows. I think because our jobs are so stressful and you're thinking about a lot of things that can cause anxiety, (TV) can just take your mind off it."

Fitzsimmons said he likes "Better Call Saul" because of the mix of attorneys.

"The characters are likable," he said. "You empathize with them in the personal and professional situations they find themselves in and you're biting your nails, hoping they make the right call."

As will be revealed before the conclusion of "Better Call Saul," Odenkirk's character eventually changes his name from Jimmy McGill to Saul Goodman. Later on in this fictional universe created by showrunners Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould, Goodman will go on to aid Walter White, Bryan Cranston's character in "Breaking Bad," as he builds his criminal empire.

"Better Call Saul" is in its fourth season, but when viewers meet Jimmy in the pilot, he's a "solo guy, working hard to redefine himself (and) scrape together a living," said Fitzsimmons.

The show also features Rhea Seehorn as Jimmy's love interest, a young lawyer starting out at the fictional firm Hamlin Hamlin & McGill.



BEN LEUNER/AMC

"Better Call Saul" puts a new spin on legal drama as the slippery Jimmy McGill (played by Bob Odenkirk) builds his practice.

Michael McKean of "Saturday Night Live" and "Spinal Tap" plays Jimmy's older brother, with whom he has a contentious relationship and is one of the firm's namesakes. Patrick Fabian plays Howard Hamlin, the buttoned-up son of the longtime partner of McKean's character and who now runs the firm.

"I think they portray a good amount of the spectrum," Fitzsimmons said. "It's interesting to see that ... They really cast the different types of lawyers. I don't know of any other legal show that really kind of captures those distinctions."

As Jimmy devises one scheme after another that flirts with fringes of the law, Fitzsimmons said you can't help but cheer for him.

"You like him and you want Jimmy to make it," he said. "It's interesting how they write the storylines."

Although they may be entertaining for viewers, Benz said lawyer-themed shows are exaggerated or unrealistic at times.

▶ KEY EVIDENCE

Law and laughs make for memorable TV

“Law & Order” (1990-2010)

20 seasons, 456 episodes

The NBC program that became a TV mainstay and spawned six spin-offs along with foreign adaptations featured Detective Lennie Briscoe (Jerry Orbach) and Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy (Sam Waterston) in a procedural drama that showcased the investigation and prosecution of crimes.



GETTY IMAGES

The cast of NBC's "Night Court"

“Night Court” (1984-92)

9 seasons, 193 episodes

John Larroquette starred as egotistical prosecutor Dan Fielding and the late Harry Anderson was Judge Harry T. Stone in the NBC sitcom about nightly shenanigans in a New York City municipal court.

“L.A. Law” (1986-94)

8 seasons, 172 episodes

A drama about a fictitious Los Angeles firm called McKenzie Brackman Chaney and Kuzak, the NBC show took on both lighter and more serious storylines and launched the careers of Bryan Cranston, William H. Macy and David Schwimmer, among others.

“The Practice” (1997-2004)

8 seasons, 168 episodes

Originally a writer on “L.A. Law,” David E. Kelley created the ABC drama that starred Dylan McDermott as Bobby Donnell, an attorney who started his own firm to help the innocent only to learn the financial aspect of keeping it afloat wasn’t easy. A spin-off, “Boston Legal,” ran until 2008.

“Suits” (2011-present)

8 seasons, 118 episodes

The USA Network show combined a catch-me-if-you-can attitude with humor and the drama behind the scenes of a large law firm in New York City. Gabriel Macht stars as hotshot attorney Harvey Specter but recent years saw the exit of co-stars Patrick J. Adams and Meghan Markle (who married Prince Harry in May).

“Ally McBeal” (1997-2002)

5 seasons, 112 episodes

The title character played by Calista Flockhart navigated the legal world and her romantic life in this Fox comedy-drama that became one of TV’s highest-rated programs. The New York Times called it “refreshing and offbeat” for its feminist look at the legal profession.

— *PATRICK CONNELLY*

"In general, if you are that kind of criminal defense attorney (who is scrounging for clients), you are not successful at that," he said. "There's no busting into the back room and saying, 'That's it, John, he's done talking. We're out of here!' ... I think real practice as a lawyer is a lot more boring than they would have you believe on TV. The non-criminal defense parts of the law where you're sitting at a desk and doing paperwork certainly don't look like the exciting courtroom drama."

Benz said criminal defense is an exception to the norm because lawyers get out of the office more and spend time in the courtroom.

Shows such as "Law & Order" do sprinkle in enough of what's real to keep his interest, Benz said.

"They do reference real case law and they talk about real principles of law," he said. "There are objections for real things and hearsay."

For Benz, watching that show with his father while growing up in the 1990s sparked his interest in becoming an attorney.

"I wanted to be the prosecutor," he said. "It just seemed like the job I wanted to do."

After law school, he gravitated to the defense side.

"I like the role of helping the underdog," he said. "I didn't really want to put people in jail, I just wanted to help them stay out of jail."

Fitzsimmons said he's now watching "Billions," a Showtime drama with a legal component starring Paul Giamatti and Damian Lewis.

As for the Benzes, they're watching "Ray Donovan" on Showtime in which Liev Schreiber plays an attorney-turned-"fixer" who helps clients in tight situations.

"There's always parts of those shows that have something from a legal angle," Benz said.

"Better Call Saul" airs at 9 p.m. on Monday nights on AMC and previous seasons are streaming on Netflix. The current season wraps up Oct. 8.

Patrick Connelly

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