



Actress Kerry Washington plays damage-control specialist Olivia Pope in a new prime-time series based on D.C.'s real-life PR guru Judy Smith.

Ms. Fix-It

BY LAUREN PAIGE KENNEDY

When scandal taints the powerful, few of us can ignore the headlines—or the sordid details. Some of us even gleefully peck at the carcasses of our fallen idols, laughing at late-night jokes, gossiping over water coolers, posting viral videos. Scandal is fun, right?

Still, how many career-ruining humiliations have you *not* heard about in this town? How many potentially incendiary indiscretions have happened right under our collective noses—maybe down the hall or across the street in some historic building—but somehow managed to avoid even a whiff of scandal? Who exactly snuffs out the stuff of tabloid fodder before the bloodhounds set in?

This is where a PR “fixer” comes in. And if you’re actress Kerry Washington, 35, famed for her work in films such as “The Last King of Scotland,” “For Colored Girls,” “Ray” and the upcoming (and hotly anticipated) Quentin Tarantino flick “Django Unchained”—the opportunity to play a lead role in a new TV series based on a real-life political insider whose job it is to clean up others’ messy affairs was too just tempting to pass up.

The true insider is D.C.-based PR guru Judy Smith. Smith has worked closely (if quietly) with President George H.W. Bush, plus a revolving roster of the scandal-tinged, including Monica Lewinsky, Clarence Thomas, Michael Vick and former D.C. Mayor Marion Barry. The new ABC series—which debuts in early April and is the brainchild of “Grey’s Anatomy” creator Shonda Rhimes—is called “Scandal,” with the aptly named Ms. Washington tackling Smith’s fictional alter ego, Olivia Pope.

Washington lived in D.C. as a student at George Washington University in the late 1990s, has long advocated for the National Endowment for the Arts, and even served as an official ambassador for President Obama’s first election campaign. Here, she talks “Scandal,” her public love affair with D.C., and her passion for exploring the world’s destinations through her work.

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Washington Flyer: The character of Olivia Pope is a big, juicy role, isn’t it?

Kerry Washington: I’ve been really lucky in my career, since I’ve played some big, juicy women. Olivia Pope is unique in so many ways for me. I’ve never done television in this way before. I’ve done a couple episodes here and there at the beginning of my career, but I’ve never been the lead on a TV show. And it’s been really exciting—but the television machine is a different animal!

WF: Is the pressure on, now that you’re anchoring your own show?

KW: Olivia is the leader of her own life, and so that leadership quality is one I’ve been trying to explore and embrace to play the character. You use the word “anchor.” But that’s putting the focus on the wrong place, in terms of my artistic process.

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WF: What it’s like to work with Judy Smith?

KW: Judy is a producer on the show, so she’s really involved, but I’m careful to say that Olivia is *inspired* by Judy and is not based on Judy. Judy never had a complicated relationship with Bush One in the way Olivia has with the president on the show!

Most of the elements that come out of Judy’s experience are based on the office, and the way the office works, the kinds of clients [she] deals with in Washington. And Washington is such a fun place to base the show. Many of the most powerful people in many fields either live in Washington or come to D.C. regularly. If the show were based in L.A., it would be all about crises in the entertainment world. In Washington, you can have clients who are entertainment-based, military-based, business-based, politically based, or union-based—so many different powerful circles that find a home in the capital.

There have been times where I’ve called Judy and said, “Where are you right now? I can barely hear you!” And she’ll say: “I’m not at liberty to tell you.” It is exciting that the series is inspired by someone who really does this work, plus the fantastic imaginations of the writers.

WF: What does a “fixer” do?

KW: I say on the show, “We’re lawyers, but we’re not a law firm.” We do practice law, but we’re not limited to the practices of what a law firm does, because we’re not dealing just with the courts, but the court of public opinion. We’re helping someone fix the worst moment of his or her life. We’re there to prevent crisis, and to put out fires before they burn down the house.

WF: Did Shonda Rhimes write the script with you in mind?

KW: No. It’s funny, because when people on my team first read the script, they asked, “Does she know Kerry?” It’s so crazy because they know how much of my life is based in D.C., and they know how involved I am, and that I was in the Obama administration. But they were struck by how easily they could see me in this role. I didn’t want to read the script, partly because TV scared me.

Shonda is so talented, but I wasn’t looking to do a network TV show. I thought: I’m not gonna read this! What if I really like it? Do I have to give up my film career? I have four films coming out this year! What does it mean for the rest of my career if I fall in love with this project? But they were insistent, and I read it—and I was just blown away.

WF: Do you consider yourself a political junkie?

KW: I’m not a junkie, but I am someone who likes to participate in the process. I watch “Meet the Press” every week, and I’m excited that George Stephanopoulos is coming back [to his Sunday morning show]! I watch them all: Candy Crowley, Christiane Amanpour. I care about this world, and I’m interested. Because of my parents, I have a deep understanding that what happens in Washington is not separate from what happens in the rest of the country.

We’re lucky enough to live in a representative democracy, but our leaders can only be our representatives if we let our voices be heard and we participate in the process. I like to take part in the process; it’s part of being a responsible American. I didn’t imagine that I would be part of the Obama administration, but I was so humbled and grateful for the opportunity. I was an official surrogate for the campaign, and I traveled to 13 different states during the primaries.

WF: Tell us about your years spent at George Washington University.

KW: I did go to GW, and I’m currently on its board of trustees. I lived in Washington in the late ’90s, and I went to GW’s inaugural ball for the second Clinton term. It was an exciting time to be in D.C., and for that to be my first election I could vote in. And I started doing advocacy on behalf of NEA in college. It was an exciting place for me to be, in terms of understanding the connection between art and politics. So to be in Washington at a time when they were talking about ending the NEA, to be part of the protests and to keep it alive and well, that

was a phenomenal experience. And to be in a city with such cultural and arts resources! To be studying Shakespeare in class, and then to be able to go to the Folger Shakespeare Library. Or, to write an anthropological paper, and then go to the Smithsonian for references.

WF: Can you name a few favorite local haunts?

KW: I’m a big fan of **Sprinkles Cupcakes** [3015 M St., NW]. I love the GW campus and its auditorium. The concerts I saw there, and the visiting arts programs that come through—I’m a big fan. I fell in love with Ethiopian food in Adams Morgan. And José Andrés’ restaurant **Zaytinya** [701 9th St., NW]. I love that place. I also enjoy the **Red Bloom Wellness Spa** [7215 Arlington Rd., #202, Bethesda, Md.]. It’s a spa owned by the makeup artist I use when I’m in Washington.

WF: As an actress you travel a lot, and shoot on amazing locations ...

KW: I shot in Prague, which is such a beautiful city. And I’m about to do a second film in New Orleans. The first time, I shot before the flood [for 2004’s “Ray,” co-starring Jamie Foxx], so I’m looking forward to going back. It’s for Tarantino’s “Django Unchained.” I’m reunited with Jamie, and it’ll be an intense process with a director I’m excited to work with.

WF: Any destinations you dream of visiting?

KW: Bali. And I’ve always wanted to go to the Galapagos Islands. I’ve also heard that St. Petersburg, Russia, is really beautiful. There are so many places in the world I’d like to see. But work does take me around. I’m really lucky. ☺



“Scandal,” set in D.C., debuts in early April on ABC.