

SPOTLIGHT

Funny Side Up

After a series of serious movie roles, Danielle Deadwyler finally flexes her comedy chops on *The Bear* and *Rooster*

BY CANDICE FREDERICK

Over Zoom, Danielle Deadwyler, known for resonant dramatic performances — like her portrayal of the real-life mother who fought for justice for her son's murder in *Till* — shows off her sillier side by playing an imaginary bass to describe her new role as a poetry professor on the HBO college-campus comedy *Rooster*.

The often-deadpan character of Dylan Shepherd, who is navigating the obstacles of professional and personal success opposite Steve Carell's slightly out-of-touch yet well-intentioned teacher-in-residence Greg Russo, is the latest in a recent string of comedic roles for Deadwyler, who, earlier this television season, had viewers in stitches as Chantel, the multitasking friend and hairstylist of Ayo Edebiri's Sydney on the *The Bear*.

"She has a different stroke," Deadwyler says about Dylan, mid-mime. "It's a bit slower. It's a bit more bassed-out." As for her on-the-spot musical ability to convey this point, she jokes: "Yeah, I'm multilingual."

Since the 2010s, Deadwyler has taken on one challenging role after another with seeming ease: Cuffee, the queer Black outlaw in Jeymes Samuels' *The Harder They Fall*; Hailey Freeman, the prickly matriarch of farmers in a decimated future, in *40 Acres*; and Berniece Charles, a widow fiercely trying to protect her family's legacy during the Great Depression, in the Netflix adaptation of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*.

Roles like Chantel and Dylan are a bit scarcer on Deadwyler's résumé, but they came at a time when she felt she needed a shift. "I think I was tired, honestly," says the actress, recalling the antecedent for her genre switch that prompted her to take time off in the summer of 2024 to "artistically rehab" her craft, as she puts it.

"The body and mind have to essentially recalibrate," Deadwyler explains. "I had to do nothing first, and I realized that you have to be refilled in order to offer anything and figure out new ways to share."

Comedy became that new way for the actress. First, she booked *The Saviors*, the Islamophobia satire that premiered at this year's SXSW and co-stars Adam Scott. Then

came a guest acting role in season four of *The Bear*.

The "Worms" episode, written by Edebiri and Lionel Boyce — who stars as Marcus in the FX comedy — takes place in a single day when Sydney goes to Chantel's home to get her hair braided. Audiences are dropped into the interior lives of two friends who have somewhat drifted apart over time. Sydney's job as a sous chef has virtually taken over her whole life, while Chantel also balances a job that often falls outside of the typical 9-to-5, on top of keeping up with other people's drama, her sometimes boyfriend and a daughter whom she leaves with Sydney to go buy more hair. (She says she'll be back momentarily, but of course she returns hours later.) This specific retelling of the typical Black female hair-day experience is part of what thrilled Deadwyler about the role.

"I know those women. These are women of the hood. I'm a hood girl," she says.

The role not only allowed Deadwyler's comedic timing to shine, it provided an opportunity to be in the moment — a carefreeness that continued when the cameras weren't rolling while on set with Edebiri and director Janicza Bravo. "It was weird Black

girls singing Björk," Deadwyler recalls with a smile of the dynamic behind the scenes that also helped build intimacy between the audience and Chantel. "It was fun. It was cozy," she adds of the episode. "It had hints and blips of quietude, the kind of exploration that her character does. Seeing the family images, you just drop into a world and it's familiar."

When it came to joining *Rooster* as a series regular, Deadwyler says: "I wanted to play in the other part of the playground. ... I wanted to do comedy, but I was being real picky about what it was and how it felt and what I wanted to present. I awaited that opportunity, and this felt good."

The actress holds her own among comedic heavyweights in the series, which also co-stars John C. McGinley as the questionably competent college president Walter Mann.

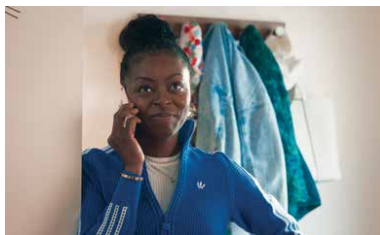
"It's funny, because it's me being able to come home most days after working and feeling OK," says Deadwyler. "Drama, drama, drama, action, action, drama, drama, Steve Carell. That's a different feeling."

There's an inherent charm Deadwyler displays in the role. Even as Dylan maneuvers weightier situations like romantic rejection, or the uncertainty of a new leadership position, or feeling bothered that a promising student decides to turn her back on poetry, the actress brings a sense of humanity while embracing her character's flaws.

"It's teaching us how to be," Deadwyler says of playing Dylan. "I think that's exactly what is endearing about it and the kind of things that are tugging at me right now. People who are deeply flawed. Black women get to be flawed in this world. How are they doing it? And do they get to continue to be?"

These are some of the questions that are driving Deadwyler as an artist right now on the heels of joining season three of *Euphoria* and the forthcoming *X-Files* reboot set to be produced by Ryan Coogler.

"Dylan progresses to leadership, [is] challenged by it, feels uncomfortable in it, is questioning it, reluctant to it," Deadwyler explains. "Everything else that I'm exploring of late is giving me the opportunity to do that same thing." **THR**



From top: Danielle Deadwyler guest stars as Chantel on *The Bear*. She also plays Dylan Shepherd, opposite Steve Carell, on *Rooster*.

ROOSTER: COURTESY OF HBO; BEAR: COURTESY OF FX; DEADWYLER: GABRIEL CATTANEO/GETTY IMAGES FOR HBO



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