

HER EYES



HAVE IT

MAURA TIERNEY, LIKE EVERYONE ON SHOWTIME'S *THE AFFAIR*, DID NOT KNOW HOW THE STORY WOULD END.

Everything that happened over its five mercurial seasons reverberated from an illicit love affair between two married individuals. Tierney's character, Helen Solloway, was not one of the unfaithful. She was one of the betrayed, inexplicable as that seemed.

"She wasn't a shrew. She wasn't a trope," Tierney says. In fact, Helen was presented as an appealing, level-headed and devoted spouse to author Noah Solloway (Dominic West). The first time we glimpse them, they are squeezing in a contented bout of lovemaking in their Brooklyn brownstone before their kids wake up.

"The story appealed to me because the characters were basically happily married," Tierney says. But then Noah chooses his ardor for waitress Alison Lockhart (Ruth Wilson) over his wife and four children. "I was intrigued by the boldness of that," says Tierney, who assumed the two lovers would dominate center stage to the end. Not so.

Tierney's captivating, nuanced performance — of a wife shuffled to the sidelines and trying to make sense of it — held the story and its characters together in the long run. Creator-executive producer Sarah Treem acknowledges this was not her original vision. However, she says, "Since the series was always about how we feel on the inside versus how we are perceived from the outside, Helen became the character who most fully embraced that paradox and thus became the heart of the show."

"It was a good ride," Tierney reflects, sipping coffee (pre-quarantine) in a West Village restaurant close to her home. It's been two months since the series concluded, and she looks refreshed — her hair is shorter and she's wearing a comfortably baggy sweater over jeans. She does, however, feel nostalgic for the cast and crew; this is the first time in five years that they won't return to production. "I miss everybody," she says.

IF THE PERFORMERS ON *THE AFFAIR* COULD NEVER PREDICT WHAT WAS COMING, NEITHER COULD THE VIEWERS. Every season delivered audacious and tumultuous plot innovations. New relationships bubbled up. The MeToo movement elbowed in. Climate change came into play. So did PTSD, terminal illness, prison, literary success, a child's death and dementia. There was even an involuntary manslaughter: Helen accidentally hit Alison's brother-in-law after he stepped (or was pushed) out of the darkness and onto the highway as her car hurtled past. "When they told me that Helen killed Scotty," Tierney says, "that was a surprise. Which I loved. No one is going to see that coming."

Sometimes the plot machinations tested viewers' patience. But the characters were absorbing and the performances stirring. It was critical that Helen be likable, Treem explains, to prevent the audience from using her as an excuse for her husband's affair.

"Maura always plays such down-to-earth, warm, honest characters — she was a perfect choice," says Treem, who was also impressed by Tierney's ability to express complex and contradictory emotions without saying a word. "Maura can play more impulses on her face in ten seconds than I've seen other actors do in a whole movie. She can tell a whole three-act play with just her eyes."

What also beguiled viewers was the show's novel structure: each episode was initially cleaved in two. The first half presented the story from one main character's point of view, and the second showed the same events from the perspective of another. In the first season, this device was employed to show Noah's and Alison's contrasting takes on their unfolding relationship. In subsequent seasons, it broadened to other actors and story developments, suggesting there is no absolute truth to any one person's slant.

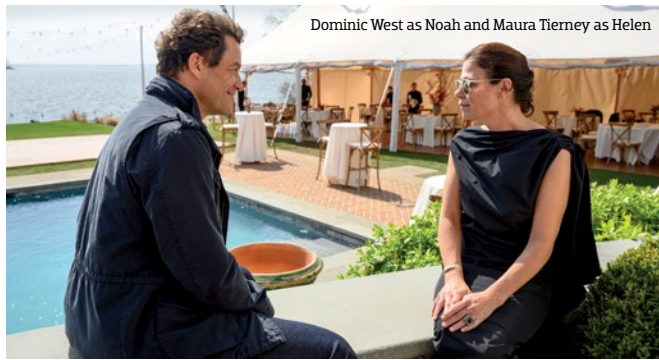
"Maura gave such a compelling, heartbreaking performance in the first season," Treem says, "it became clear she needed her own perspective."

So, for the first episode of season two, Helen and Noah showed up for a divorce mediation session. In Helen's point of view, she was wearing the same sexy outfit she'd worn on a date the night before, having had no time to change. She viewed the mediator as taking Noah's side, even sitting next to Noah. In Noah's version, Helen was appropriately attired in a pantsuit, and the mediator, who sat between them, was not unduly sympathetic to him. "Almost all of us looked better in the other person's POV," Tierney notes.

She most enjoyed her role in season two. As the writers expanded Helen's presence, she became a bigger target for other characters' takes on the turmoil in their world.

"So it wasn't just one Helen, it was two Helens. And then three Helens. And then it was four and five," says Tierney, who enjoyed the shape-shifting these new perspectives required of her. She especially reveled in the POV of Helen's daughter, Whitney (Julia Goldani Telles), who saw her mom at one point as completely undone by Noah's defection. "A needy, drunken, over-sharing, bad mother," Tierney says, gleefully. "It was the complete opposite of Helen's perfectness in other areas of her life. She has an inappropriate relationship with her husband's best friend. She's drinking a lot, eating pot. We see her devolve in a way that's interesting and is really fun to play."

Maura Tierney could tell a whole three-act play with just her eyes. So says Sarah Treem, creator of *The Affair*, the Showtime series that ended its five-season run with Tierney, as the resilient Helen, at its heart. BY ANN FARMER



VIEWERS HAVE BEEN REVELING IN TIERNEY'S PERFORMANCES SINCE WELL BEFORE *THE AFFAIR*.

Perhaps her most prominent early credit is the 1995–99 NBC sitcom *NewsRadio*, which became a cult favorite.

"I don't know if it was really a hit," she hedges. "But it had a committed following." In the fast-paced show, known for its left-of-center jokes, Tierney displayed her comic chops as Lisa Miller, a reporter who's a crackerjack at math. Her colleagues tried to stump her, but no matter how Byzantine the equation, Lisa could rattle out the correct answer. "I'm positive I messed up," she insists. "But that's the cool thing about TV. You get to do it over again."

When *NewsRadio* ended, Tierney accepted the role of nurse Abby Lockhart on the NBC medical drama *ER*, where she stayed for ten years (the show would run another five). She evolved from medical student to OB/GYN nurse to *ER* nurse to *ER* doctor. Her character had a recurring drinking problem: "I fell off the wagon. I got back on the wagon. I fell off the wagon again. I got back on."

Along the way, Emmy-winning actress Sally Field came aboard to play her mother, a woman with bipolar disorder. "She had a profound effect on me," Tierney says, describing Field as a thoroughly committed actress and a force to emulate. "All of a sudden, the characters fell into place because of the power of her performance." Field inspired her, she says, to take more risks and do a better job of owning her career.

Tierney, who will star with Jeff Daniels in the upcoming Showtime series *Rust* (a drama set in the Pennsylvania rust belt), says she also benefited from acting alongside Gene Hackman in the satirical feature *Welcome to Mooseport*. "I've never worked with another actor who listened so intently. You could only respond by being hyper-alert back," says Tierney, who was equally impressed by how he made acting look so effortless. "I thought, 'Wow, I'm going to keep trying to do that.'"

THE WAY TIERNEY EMBODIED HELEN, WITH HUMOR AND RESILIENCE, PROVED AUSPICIOUS, BECAUSE THE SERIES UNEXPECTEDLY SHED TWO MAIN CHARACTERS BEFORE IT ENDED. Ruth Wilson bowed out after season four, citing issues with the nature and amount of nudity asked of her. Joshua Jackson, who played Alison's cuckold husband Cole, likewise didn't return for the final season.

"It's always kind of awkward," Tierney says, sympathizing with Wilson's concerns. Tierney recalls that her sex scenes on *ER* were pretty vanilla, with Abby seen either engaged in foreplay or after the supposed coital moment. "Just rolling over and exhaling," she says. Sex scenes on *The Affair* were more graphic.

After Wilson's departure, the series brought in an intimacy coordinator for the final season. By then, however, Tierney had established a familiarity with the cast and crew; she worked out many issues in the privacy of her trailer, with costume designer Caroline Duncan providing a discerning eye. "Should I lie like this?" she'd ask Duncan, trying out poses. "No. Don't," Tierney recalls her saying at times. She laughs at the memory, noting, "So I felt protected."

West also had a way of putting her at ease. "Dominic is so charming and

has a great sense of humor." She says West, like much of the cast, would sometimes look askance at his character's bad choices. "He'd say, 'Why is my character being such an asshole?'" But no matter how much they laughed or goofed around in rehearsal, West became acutely present whenever the cameras rolled. "Once they said, 'Action,'" Tierney says, "I knew Dom was going to be there for me."

Treem also recalls West saying that when working opposite Tierney, "You're not acting, you're reacting." Treem adds: "I thought that was so beautiful."

Tierney did object to some scenes. After her divorce, Helen partnered romantically with Vik, a physician played by Omar Metwally. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, Vik asked Helen to keep the severity of his condition a secret from his parents. Helen didn't follow his wishes, and that appalled Tierney. "I would never betray a partner like that," she told Treem, who responded, "Well, you're not Helen. You're a nicer person than Helen."

Treem did incorporate some of Tierney's ideas. She recalls asking Tierney if she thought Helen should go on an initial date with Vik. "Maura said something about how a date is really just an interview for sex," Treem says. "That line went straight into the script. I think Helen became a much funnier, irreverent character as Maura continued to play her, because she herself has such a dry, inspired sense of humor."

Tierney similarly didn't want Helen caught up in a tired storyline about losing the male gaze. "Men lose the female gaze, too," Tierney recalls telling Treem. "They just don't talk about it all the time. Let's move on."

Treem responded with something like, "Great. I hear you." So Tierney was taken aback when a subsequent script had Helen experiencing menopause like it's a tragedy. "I was like, 'Are you fucking kidding me?'" Tierney recalls. Then she explained to the younger women writers that Helen could actually be quite relieved about not giving birth, at her age, to yet another child. "And I think I was heard."

It's not like Helen ever lost her sex appeal. After Vik, the writers paired her with a new romantic partner, a movie star named Sasha Mann (Claes Bang) who, in a twist on a twist, was portraying Noah in a film adaptation of Noah's bestseller about his betrayal of Helen. "That was fun," she says. "But he was so freaking tall." Bang measures six-four-and-a-half; Tierney is a petite five-foot-three. "He was this much taller," she says, reaching her hand up as high as it can go.

BEFORE PRODUCTION BEGAN EACH SEASON, TREEM WOULD GIVE TIERNEY THE BROAD STROKES OF WHAT LAY AHEAD. But nothing prepared her for the penultimate episode, when Helen and Noah fled a wildfire in California. Besides an encounter with a rattlesnake, Tierney had to climb down a steep canyon wall, clinging to small notches in the rock face.

"All of a sudden Helen is free soloing," says Tierney, who was fitted with a harness. But she still had to complete the descent. When Noah started issuing directives about where to place her feet, Helen barked, "Quit mansplaining."

"That was very funny," Tierney says.

Treem had originally envisioned closing out the series by reuniting Noah and Alison, but Wilson's unexpected departure required the writers to concoct an alternative. Once again, Tierney found herself invited into the writers' room. They asked what she thought of the possibility of Helen and Noah hooking up again.

"What are we saying about marriage...," Treem asked her, "if they get back together?" Tierney recalls responding, "Whether they get together or not, I thought Helen was always a sucker for Noah."

"I think they got there in some way," says Tierney, who also recalls Treem inquiring if they'd ever given Helen a middle name. Then others on staff asked her the same question. "I was like, 'Wait a minute, is this for my tombstone?'" Tierney says. "I was like, how dare you? I said, 'Sarah, if I'm dead, tell me how I die.'"

She never did learn. "But it was all fun," she says. "I like the way it ended." ©

All seasons of *The Affair* are available to stream on Showtime.

