

**GREY'S  
ANATOMY  
ACTOR  
KIM RAVER  
ON THE  
HIT SHOW'S  
COVID-19  
STORY LINE,  
FILMING IN  
PPE, AND  
HONORING  
HEALTHCARE  
WORKERS**

By Mara Sassoon

# TRUE LIFE DRAMA

Kim Raver ('91) has appeared in many award-winning television shows. She currently plays cardiothoracic surgeon Teddy Altman on the hit ABC show *Grey's Anatomy*.

David Livingston/Getty Images



# **KIM RAVER** stood on the *Grey's Anatomy* set for the first time since the medical drama halted production in March 2020. She was clad in full PPE—not just a mask and scrubs, but a heavy personal respirator hood.

The weight of the hood, the way it muffled the sounds around her, helped her immerse herself in her character's experience. It also compounded the emotional weight of the scenes she was about to start filming for the show's 17th season.

As her character on the Shonda Rhimes ABC medical drama, cardiothoracic surgeon Teddy Altman, she was about to embark on a story line in which the show's Seattle hospital was being ravaged by the virus.

By the time *Grey's Anatomy* began filming in September 2020—six months after production on its previous season abruptly shut down—the worldwide death toll from COVID-19 had climbed to almost 1 million. The show's writers felt it was their duty to incorporate the global pandemic into the new season's plot. As showrunner Krista Vernoff ('93) told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "To be the biggest medical show and ignore the biggest medical story of the century felt irresponsible."

Raver ('91) was struck by the experience of filming scenes that echoed what she had watched play out in the months the show was on break. The first episode of the new season found the *Grey's* doctors dealing with PPE shortages and navigating a hospital overcrowded with COVID patients.

"It's so strange to be telling a story that we're universally going through in the moment," she says. "I'll be doing a scene, and then after I take off whatever costume I'm wearing, there's this feeling of, 'Oh my gosh, we're still in it.' There's no separation. Usually, we're telling a medical story that people can understand emotionally, but that they aren't actually *going through*."

Raver says the cast and crew were united by a desire to use the show as a platform to honor the arduous efforts of healthcare workers during the pandemic.

"I just feel really grateful to be able to tell these stories, especially when I see what our frontline workers are actually having to go through," she says. "We're in a time where there's enormous loss and grief, and you feel like you have a purpose in telling them."

## STORIES WITHIN STORIES

*Grey's Anatomy* was one of the first major network shows to announce it was pausing filming due to the spread of COVID-19, cutting its 16th season short by four episodes in March 2020.

"There was this shock of shutting down," says Raver. "Before, it felt like nothing could shut us down—we just kept going no matter what."

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Raver in full PPE on *Grey's Anatomy*. She says the medical drama's cast and crew have viewed the show as a platform to showcase and honor the work of healthcare professionals during the pandemic.

But as the astonishment wore off, the show's cast and crew jumped into action to help real-life healthcare workers. The props department donated the gowns and gloves they had on hand for filming when PPE shortages were a major problem in hospitals around the country. On National Doctors' Day—March 30—Raver and other cast members appeared in a social media video to thank the medical professionals fighting the virus on the front lines.

The rallying effort reminded Raver of another striking moment in her career when her craft and the harsh reality of life merged. In 2001, she was filming the NBC drama *Third Watch*, about New York City firefighters, paramedics, and police officers, when the September 11 attacks occurred. Many of the first responders the show consulted with went to assist at Ground Zero. And, just as *Grey's Anatomy* donated PPE to hospitals, the show quickly organized to send equipment, including microphones, lights, and a working fire truck it used in scenes, to the emergency services in the days following the attack.

"We just wanted to help in any way we could," says Raver, who played paramedic Kim Zambrano on the show.

*Third Watch* opened its third season on October 15, 2001, with a two-hour special documentary featuring real-life first responders sharing their experiences in the aftermath of September 11. The season also went on to address the horrific events of that day and its impact.

In one episode, Raver's character runs to the fire station after she sees what has happened to the World Trade Center on TV, ready to help. In another, set weeks after the attack, the show's characters are still searching for the missing at Ground Zero. "There was a sense of community" in filming that season of *Third Watch*, with a story line that addressed a tragic event that affected the entire nation, says Raver. "It was that same feeling, addressing the pandemic on *Grey's*."





Raver (pictured with costar Bobby Cannavale) played paramedic Kim Zambrano on *Third Watch*, about New York City firefighters, paramedics, and police officers. The show's 2001–2002 season addressed the September 11 attacks and the tragic day's aftermath.

Many of *Grey's Anatomy's* COVID-19 plotlines borrowed from real life: one character's mother dies after contracting the virus at an assisted living facility, while Raver's character tends to a colleague who suffers worsening COVID-19 symptoms and needs to be placed on a ventilator. Raver says she felt the pressure to accurately portray the physical and emotional toll the virus takes on healthcare workers, but Vernoff says she was well equipped to take on the challenge. "Kim is a total pro. She can take any direction you throw at her. She has real and easy emotional depth."

The show's writers also sought to honor the efforts of medical professionals by ensuring they did the proper research before starting to draft the season's episodes. "During our prewriting research time, we watched a lot of video diaries of doctors and read innumerable articles about what they are going through," Zoanne Clack, a doctor, writer, and executive producer on the show, told *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Also important to Raver and the rest of the *Grey's* cast and crew: not adding to the healthcare crisis by turning

filming into a spreader event. The show has taken special measures to keep cast and crew safe during filming, says Raver, including constant testing, social distancing, and wearing masks in between scenes and during rehearsals. "I have to say, to this day, they're doing an incredible job at keeping all the safety protocols. There's also been a real coming together of our cast and crew to make sure that we're all safe in our daily lives so that we can keep everyone in our company on the show safe."

#### LEARNING THE CRAFT

Raver's experiences grappling with dark, difficult subjects are a long way from her first foray into showbiz. Before she was playing a paramedic on *Third Watch* or a heart surgeon on *Grey's Anatomy*, the New York City born and raised Raver appeared on *Sesame Street* as a young child. "I'd walk onto the sound stages and it was magical," she recalls. "There were all these Muppets everywhere."

But while she has fond memories of being on the *Sesame Street* set, Raver says it was her time at the First All Children's Theater that really sparked her desire to act. When she was 13, she joined the after-school theater program, where she counted actor Ben Stiller among her peers. The performers were all children, ages 6 through 17, and all of the productions were written especially for the theater company. The famed late writer and theater director Eliza-beth Swados even penned one of the performances.

"I just loved it. There was something about performing and telling stories. I knew then I wanted to be an actor," says Raver. "It became a big part of my life because eventually I had to choose: do I want to be a regular teenager and hang out with my friends from school, or do I want to be a part of this company? It was a big time commitment. We weren't allowed to be even a minute late. I was at this theater every single day, right after school until the evening, and then I was doing homework. It definitely formed my self-discipline."

At BU, Raver says she met like-minded classmates—and still keeps in touch with many of them. "When I think about my experience at BU and the community that I had there—and that I carried on with me since graduating—I realize it's an important thing to have as an artist and as an individual. It's such a tricky business, and you need that kind of support," says Raver. "I tell young actors just getting out of school that your community when you get out—the people you went to school with—is so important."

When she was starting out in New York City just after graduating from BU, Raver gathered with fellow alumni and other creatives she met through her network to rent

performance spaces and put on productions, "just to stay in working shape while we were auditioning." Finally, she landed her breakout role in the 1995 Broadway production of *Holiday* with Laura Linney and Tony Goldwyn. When she started rehearsing for the show, she couldn't help but reflect on her performance in *Twelfth Night* at the Huntington Theatre while at BU. "I remember thinking what incredible prep for *Holiday* I got from that experience, from being up onstage during the rehearsal time—practicing stage combat and doing vocal warmups—all the way to the performance. I owe a lot to my BU training."

#### FINDING BALANCE

While Raver has played a wide range of roles over her career, from Audrey Raines, a Department of Defense senior policy analyst, in the action-packed Fox series *24*, to Nico

"And I think Kim has brought so much to recent seasons."

And Raver was game to come back. "I just loved the story that she wanted to tell. It made a lot of sense," says Raver. "There was just so much more to tell about Teddy. It's incredible to have a show that keeps evolving, and it's pretty amazing that after all these years, there are new and exciting story lines."

Even if some of them don't always show her character in the best light. When production on *Grey's Anatomy* halted in March 2020, season 16 inadvertently ended with a scandalous cliff-hanger. Raver's character leaves an accidental, and incriminating, voicemail for her now-fiancé Hunt on their wedding day, which indicates she's cheating on him. The show's devoted fans wasted no time taking to social media to express their disappointment with Altman—a quick glimpse at the comments on ABC's

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Reilly, the seductive editor-in-chief of a luxury magazine, in NBC's *Lipstick Jungle*, Altman might be her favorite part yet, she says. "I love and respect Teddy and the journey she's been on. She's an amazing, multifaceted character."

In fact, in 2012, Raver's respect for the character was part of her decision to step away from the role. Her series option was up, and she felt it was time to give Altman a break. The character left the show to accept a job with the United States Army Medical Command, but Raver noted that she wasn't opposed to returning to the show one day.

In the meantime, Raver explored other roles, including a recurring spot on the NBC sci-fi series *Revolution*. Then in 2017, Vernoff reached out to Raver to propose a new story line that would bring Altman back: a baby. In season 14, Altman returns, rekindling a friendship with a former colleague, Owen Hunt, which blossoms into something more—and, eventually, parenthood.

"A lot can be mined by returning to characters who were here before and are already beloved by the audience," Vernoff says of the decision to bring the character back.

YouTube clip of Hunt listening to the voicemail, which has more than one million views, shows the full range of their discontent. "This scene crushed my soul and gave me anxiety," wrote one fan. "That was cruel and heartbreaking," said another. But the fans weren't the only ones who were disappointed in the character's actions.

"I'm upset with Teddy," Raver told *Entertainment Weekly*. "There's a universal thing of when you have what you want, the healthy people make it blossom, and the people that need work kind of blow it up. And I think we've all been there... the beautiful thing of the show is that [characters] have their shining moments and then they have their very ugly human moments."

Raver especially feels the importance of showing those very human moments in playing Altman this year, connecting with viewers during such a difficult time.

"*Grey's* has this really amazing gift of blending comedy and drama. As an actor, that's the place you want to be, to be able to tell those stories with that balance. I'm just so grateful to be on this show." ●

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