

# 'Better Call Saul' stars Jonathan Banks and Giancarlo Esposito break bad a second time



With "Better Call Saul," actors Jonathan Banks, left, and Giancarlo Esposito get a second chance to make a bad impression after breaking big on "Breaking Bad." (Jennifer S. Altman/For The Times)

By **Randee Dawn**

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**W**alter White may have been "Breaking Bad's" antihero protagonist, but at least half of that iconic series was indelibly stamped by two of its supporting characters: Giancarlo Esposito's meticulous meth-king businessman Gus Fring and Jonathan Banks' cop-turned-hitman Mike Ehrmantraut, both of whom (spoiler alert!) died in the series. But "Better Call Saul," which takes place before those events, has worked a TV miracle by giving Gus and Mike a second chance to make a bad impression — in the best possible way. The Envelope joined the actors at AMC's New York offices amid a thunderous rainstorm that provided the perfect soundtrack for their chat.

**Gus is back for "Saul's" third season, and Mike has been there since the show began. But why come back?**

**Esposito:** I was finished. I felt like the investigation was done; why would I want to go back and mess with

that. I came back because of the joy I got from creating and the parameters with which I was given to create. I came back for the work. I came back for the people, for the writing, for Jonathan, for Bob [Odenkirk].

**Banks:** I just love Mike, and I thought, "I'm not done with Mike. Let's do more Mike!" Very quickly you saw this was a different show — same characters, but this is a whole different drift.

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— Giancarlo Esposito

**So what was it like to work together again? How did you find the Gus/Mike rhythm?**

**Banks:** Giancarlo said to me today, "You make me smile," and I said, "You make me smile." This person, my friend, who is the antithesis of an evil guy, is such a joy to be around.

**Esposito:** We had a rhythm from the first time we met — even within the characters, we're very similar, very close to each other. So it fits. My expectations are high; as a human being and an actor, I want people to be attentive. I'm doing a film now with a bunch of young kids and, God bless them, but there's nothing but chatter between shots.

**Banks:** Oh, God.

**Esposito:** Nothing but talk about [crap]. It drives me crazy. When I drop in, I want to drop in and I want to play. I don't want to drop out.

**Banks:** A lot of things can take place in the silence. We're content to be where we are with these characters. There are a lot of distractions and you've got to have that sensitivity when someone needs to be a little more silent. I don't need that buzz all the time.

**Vince Gilligan, who created both "Breaking Bad" and "Saul," said that with Walter White he wanted to take a Mr. Chips character and turn him into Scarface. Do you see "Saul" being a chance to watch the rot creep into Gus and Mike, or is it already there?**

**Banks:** Mike grew up on a block that was not a good block — a hardcore, hardscrabble environment. There was a lot of danger from the very beginning. But his weakness is his compassion for other people. You can elaborate from that.

**Esposito:** There was always danger around Gus, but he used his skill and intellect to manipulate his way out of that and create a world of his own. This guy could be selling toothpaste — he's a good businessman. It doesn't have to be meth, but it is. His most excellent skill is how he blends in with people and allows them to

believe he's your next-door neighbor, a normal guy. You could say he's going bad, but he's doing a lot of good in the process — even if it is self-serving.

### **So are they villains?**

**Esposito:** [Laughs] Within every villain, there's a saint. I refuse to look at Gus as just a villain — he's more than that. That would be the stereotype.

**Banks:** We think of villains as twirling a mustache or tying girls on railroad tracks. Mike knows that things are bad, and if anything, it spirals him deeper and deeper. The only reason Mike is here is because of his granddaughter. Without her he would have eaten his gun a long time ago.

### **How did the original series change your lives and careers?**

**Banks:** I've run hot before — it'll be 50 years this July since I got my first paycheck in summer stock. But this is the most noticeable thing in this 50-year career for me. That changes your life a lot. For me, it's pleasant.

**Esposito:** I always say "Breaking Bad" was my third rise to stardom: I'd done Spike Lee movies, the stage ... but this got to a fever pitch. People recognize me now. I'm a little jealous, because Gus is more famous than I am — people don't even know my name. That helps my ego and my spirit a great deal because it's a great equalizer.

**Banks:** I had a woman walk up to me once and go, "Hey, my husband knows who you are!" [Laughs] And her next line was, "He knows all the bit players!" [Mutual laughter.] Isn't that great? Is that not great?

**Esposito:** Fantastic.

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