

[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Actor Resources](#) > [Meet Actor and Teacher Kevin M...](#)

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Written by Jonah Azurin

Kevin Murray, an actor from the D.C.-Maryland-Virginia (DMV) area, has been in the entertainment industry for over forty-five years. With impressive credits for both stage and screen, it's no wonder why he booked the role of Ben Blossom in the new Showtime Limited Series, *The Good Lord Bird*. I had the pleasure of chatting with Kevin about his life, career, and how he is navigating both in this pandemic.

When did you want to be an actor?

I started acting in high school but I wasn't sure I wanted to be a [professional] actor at the time. I studied theatre at University of Maryland, College Park and started working professionally the week after I graduated. I worked regularly in live theatre but a few years later, the film and television industry started to take off in the DMV area. Film and television is what I'm really passionate about now. I don't really have time to do [live] theatre anymore because it's so time consuming and I work full-time teaching theatre at George Mason University. Film and television is so wonderful because most of the gigs are short term and reach a wider audience, thus having a big impact. [Those types of gigs] don't happen frequently enough but when [they do], it's a good feeling.

Did you always want to be a teacher?

I've been at [George] Mason for thirty years. What I discovered, and what I love almost as much as acting, is teaching and being in the classroom. I enjoy working with the students; they are really talented and it's such a fun adventure. When I'm in the classroom, it's my safe zone.

How are you navigating the pandemic as an artist and a teacher?

From an actors standpoint, we have been auditioning via video submissions since before the pandemic. It was sort of the norm in the DMV market so it wasn't a big leap for me when things started to shut down. With very few exceptions, most casting directors [in the DMV area] welcome video submissions because it's much more efficient. Actors liked submitting online because they can audition without leaving their home and record multiple takes before they pick the best one. When you're in a physical, face-to-face audition you get one shot if you're lucky. In terms of performing, I've been doing more voiceover work. I've done it a few times before but now there has been more [casting] calls for it. The [in-person] projects that I've been cast in or are being considered for don't know when they'll start producing. Safety is first and foremost paramount, so there are a lot of protocols involved when it comes to starting production. There are also union guiding rules which are not inexpensive for production companies to follow, but they have to do it.

At [George] Mason, we've been teaching all our classes online. Zoom is my new best friend. I'm very fortunate because the class I'm teaching right now is called *Acting for the Camera*, so teaching in this format (online distance learning) is actually a pretty good fit; the students are doing really well. In the spring, I teach *Audition Techniques for Stage and Camera* so there's an element of that class that is suitable for online teaching. I may be able to teach some of my classes face-to-face, but we are waiting to see what happens with COVID-19.

How did you get cast for Ben Blossom in *The Good Lord Bird*?

I have a manager that routinely submits his actors to projects but for this particular role, I self-submitted through [Arvold Casting](#). I have worked with Arvold Casting in the past and I have a long-standing professional relationship with them.

What was your favorite part about shooting *TGLB*?

Being among other professional actors who had the same goal while filming. Filming took place in Richmond, Virginia and I was there for about a week. [The cast and crew] are from all over the country; a lot of them are from New York or Los Angeles and a few of them are around the Eastern Seaboard. Everyone bonded right away. I don't know how to describe it but there's this energy of "I'm in my happy place" when I'm going to make a movie or a television show. Even though the reality of being on set consists of sitting around and waiting, you are surrounded by people who are in the same boat as you so there's new people to meet and a lot to talk about. The thing I took away from *TGLB* was how cool it was to live through the 19th century for a week, you know? The look of the place, the wardrobe, and the fact that we weren't supposed to bring our cell phones-it was a very positive experience. The people were great, cast and crew. Ethan Hawke was a prince; he was wonderfully complementary to everybody. It was really a comfortable place to be.



Behind-the-Scenes photo of Kevin Murray on the set of *Good Lord Bird*.

What was it like seeing Ethan Hawke work in action ?

I don't know how much coffee that man drinks! His energy level is incredible. You see in the show that he hits these really high emotional points with a lot of shouting and pontificating then there are these quiet moments. He was doing multiple takes of these scenes and he never lost a moment of energy or focus. He is one of the Executive Producers on *TGLB* so he was working very closely with the directors. At times they would talk about a change in dialogue or camera angle and they would collaborate on that throughout the day. It was interesting to watch. I've seen a lot of his work over the years and I think this is one of his most amazing works he's ever done. I have a lot of respect for him. He's great.

What was the most challenging part about your character and being on set?

I don't recall anything being that challenging. I was just so happy to be there. Everyone had respect for everyone. [The crew] was very attentive to all of the actors and even to the extras; you don't see that often. But challenges? Getting up at five in the morning was challenging but that's the nature of the beast. It was a good experience.

You've worked with a lot of well-known industry creatives such as Julia Roberts, Director Joel Shumacher, and Dominic West, to name a few. What's it like working with big name artists?

It varies from case to case. There are some really positive experiences. Richard Gere in the film *Runaway Bride* (1999) was delightful, a real gentleman to everyone, and a pleasure to work with. The HBO show *The Wire* (2002-2008) was shot right here in Baltimore. I had a scene with Dominic West and that was a very positive experience and a lot of fun! The *House of Cards* (2013-2018) episode I'm in was directed by Joel Shumacher, who directed *Batman Forever* (1995) and he was delightful to work with as well. There's some stardom but the secret is to show up and be professional because you're all working together. I've seen a few people get [starstruck] and ask for autographs but everyone is working and trying to avoid distraction so you have to respect the process. Whether your role is principal, supporting, or background, we're all working together.

If you weren't acting, what would you be doing?

Probably teaching, which I'm doing when I'm not acting. I've done a lot of jobs over the years but it's always in the field of theatre or film. For twenty of my thirty years at George Mason, I was running a professional theater company in residence, Theater of the First Amendment, which closed its doors in 2012. I came in as a company manager first and then became a managing director. As managing director, I wore many hats: casting director, production assistant, in charge of marketing and fundraising, and everything imaginable when it comes to running a theatre company. My guess is that I would be involved in some sort of administrative, theater-related job or I would probably be doing something educational or administrative for the arts.

What advice would you give to artists and teachers during this time?

The one piece of advice that I often give is to not look at doing work virtually as a detriment to the arts. Look at it as an opportunity to learn a new skill set and a new way of storytelling because when the pandemic subsides, the online aspect of storytelling isn't going away. It's going to become yet another component of the industry. Even now, the entertainment industry has so many different components: animation, voiceover, radio plays, children's theatre, and more. There's always different styles and elements so online performance and distance learning is going to continue in some capacity. At the same time the audience will flock back to live performances because they miss it and miss human contact so much. So I say hone your skills and get really good at [those skills]. Those are the people who will have many more tools in their tool kit. Look on the bright side!

Are there any future projects you're in that we should keep an eye on?

I work in the independent film industry as well and there's a short called *Stormchaser*. I shot it two years ago and it's making the festival circuit. It's been picked up by thirty-five festivals around the world. Gretl Claggett directed, wrote, and produced *Stormchaser*; it was just a wonderful story that I was lucky enough to be cast in. And my audition and callbacks were all virtual! But in terms of upcoming work, I never want to jinx anything so we'll wait and see.

Be sure to catch Kevin Murray in *The Good Lord Bird* streaming on Showtime. Follow Kevin Murray on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) for updates on his film *Stormchaser*.



Still shot of Kevin Murray in Showtime's *Good Lord Bird*, now streaming.

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