

THE BALTIMORE BANNER

# From BSA to HBO: Baltimore's Rachel Hilson seizes the spotlight

Wesley Case

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Actress Rachel Hilson is a Baltimore native and alumnus of Baltimore School for the Arts. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

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## The Baltimore School for the Arts alumna's career is taking off, with a Will Ferrell-led comedy on the way

When the new HBO Max series "Duster" opens, the camera slowly zooms in on Rachel Hilson. Her character, Nina Hayes, is making the case that she's ready for a daunting challenge.

"I appreciate your time and understand that this is an unusual situation. But growing up as I did in Baltimore, looking like I do, being who I am, there weren't many handouts, sir," Hilson says. "If an opportunity came your way, it was because you fought for it."

What could be seen as on the nose was merely a coincidence — series creators J.J. Abrams and LaToya Morgan wrote Nina, a fictionalized version of the FBI's first Black female agent, as a Baltimore native before casting Hilson, who grew up in Original Northwood.

"J.J. and I were like, 'Oh my God, that's a good sign.' Kismet!" Morgan said.

The scene is a fitting introduction to an actress whose career is making the type of coveted leap many of her peers dream of — from cameos and minor roles to leading a high-octane thriller opposite "Lost" star Josh Holloway. After playing high schoolers years after she graduated from the Baltimore School for the Arts, Hilson is relishing the chance to play a strong, complex woman for a wide audience.

"I'm finally able to step into this power and confidence that maybe my appearance wasn't letting me do for a while," said Hilson, 29, last week.

We're inside the BSA, where Hilson studied theater. The now Brooklyn, New York, resident is back home to take her dad to an Orioles game, a late Father's Day outing. For our nearly hourlong talk, she forgoes a plastic chair and opts for a bright red exercise ball instead.

As a kid, Hilson's passion was ballet, but she quickly learned she didn't have the feet for it. The regimented environment wasn't for her, either.

"With dance in general, because it's technical, there's a right way and a wrong way," she said, "and I think that can be really hard and stifling."

Her mother encouraged her to try different activities like sports, piano and cello. It was a "really diverse childhood," Hilson said, which also included regular trips to city farmers markets, where her family became close friends with the owners of Neopol Savory Smokery. She had their smoked mussels on her mind during the train ride down.

But it was at the BSA where Hilson's love of acting took hold. Stage movement came naturally, given her dancer background, but other elements took more practice and

effort.

“I had a lot of stage fright when it came to singing and speaking. And so I think it helped me find my voice, honestly,” she said of the Mount Vernon neighborhood school.



Hilson eats mussels at Belvedere Square in Baltimore. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

Her musical theater teacher Becky Mossing said Hilson’s “quiet determination” always stood out. She was never showy about her accomplishments, Mossing said, like when Hilson landed the small role of Nisa Dalmar on the CBS legal drama “The Good Wife.”

“She didn’t compare herself to anyone else in her ensemble. Simply, she was there to work,” Mossing said. “She was kind and thoughtful and her peers loved her, but she never made a big deal of the projects that she was doing.”

Still, it didn’t take long for the cutthroat realities of Hollywood to take shape. Getting “The Good Wife” felt easy, but what followed was not.

“I was like, ‘Oh, I’ve got this — piece of cake. Sign me up,’” said Hilson, who attended New York University’s liberal arts school Gallatin after BSA. “After that, 99% of the auditions I auditioned for I didn’t get.”

Despite her confidence being “shaken constantly” back then, Hilson’s perspective has grown with time.

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“You’re catching me at a particularly interesting time because I feel like I’m having my end-of-20s revelations right now. I’ve been recognizing certain patterns,” she said. “You’re always going to be disappointed if you’re getting your validation from successful auditions or booking jobs or reviews.”

Her big break, as it so happened, was just around the corner. From 2019 to 2022, Hilson appeared on 13 episodes as a teenaged Beth Pearson on “This is Us,” the critically acclaimed, flashback-heavy NBC family drama that became appointment viewing for millions.

“It opened doors. I feel like that it was the first time I was really able to showcase more of what I knew that I could do,” said Hilson, who followed “This is Us” with a starring role on the Hulu teen series “Love, Victor.”



From 2019 to 2022, Hilson appeared on 13 episodes as a teenaged Beth Pearson on “This is Us.” (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

[“Duster,”](#) which premiered in May, is a whole other beast in every sense of the word. The slickly shot, deliciously retro series — named after getaway driver Jim Ellis’ (played by Holloway) vehicle of choice, a cherry red 1970 Plymouth Duster — lives up to the adrenaline ride of its namesake.

Hilson’s Nina, loosely based on the FBI’s first Black female agent Sylvia Mathis, enlists a reluctant Jim to help take down a crime syndicate in the 1970s Southwest. The eight-episode series’ season finale airs tonight.

The role of Nina required the 5-foot-2-inch Hilson to push herself in new ways, from deeply researching the histories of the FBI and Black Panthers to learning how to speak Russian and shoot a gun. Hilson knew she was in good hands with Abrams and Morgan, given that they created fully fleshed-out heroines on their previous shows like “Alias” and “The Walking Dead,” respectively.

“I was really excited by the opportunity to just get to do a lot of things ... emotionally, but then also I get to be a badass,” Hilson said with a smile. “So that was really fun, because the dancer in me still loves a little bit of choreography.”

Morgan said she knew Hilson, whom she described as a “supernova,” had to play Nina from the moment she first read the series’ opening scene.

“She’s such a gifted actress. Obviously, she’s been on so many wonderful things but this was an opportunity for her to be the lead and really carry the show,” Morgan said. “She shouldered that responsibility with so much grace and so much heart.”

“Duster” has received [positive reviews](#), and both Hilson and Morgan are hopeful there will be a second season.



After playing high schoolers years after she graduated from the Baltimore School for the Arts, Hilson is relishing the chance to play a strong, complex woman for a wide audience. (Jessica Gallagher/The Baltimore Banner)

In the meantime, Hilson continues to broaden her talents — she just finished shooting the movie “Judgment Day,” a Will Ferrell-led comedy directed by Nicholas Stoller (“Forgetting Sarah Marshall,” “Neighbors”). She’ll also be back in town in September as a co-chair for the annual Baltimore Homecoming gathering of accomplished city natives.

On the cusp of 30, Hilson is feeling rather reflective. She’s been reading more about astrology and admits Scorpio traits — passionate, persistent, keeping things close to the vest — fit her, “for better or for worse.”

But as an actress who’s already experienced years of career ebbs and flows, Hilson is “excited to just be less attached to certain outcomes.” She feels grounded, more at peace than ever with taking things as they come.

What’s life been like since “Duster”? Hilson doesn’t hesitate.

“About the same,” she said. “And I’m very OK with that.”

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Wesley Case is an arts and culture reporter for The Baltimore Banner. Previously, he authored The Scan, The Banner’s weekday morning newsletter, and covered Baltimore’s arts and nightlife as a

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