

coverstory
BY JAY BOBBIN



Holland Taylor, Nana Mensah and Sandra Oh (from left) star in "The Chair," which begins streaming Friday on Netflix.

A college department head is up to her ears in problems in Netflix's **'The Chair'**

Professor Ji-Yoon Kim may represent a first at her university but she might be the last person who'd want to take on this mess.

As played by Sandra Oh ("Killing Eve," "Grey's Anatomy") in the Netflix half-hour comedy "The Chair," which begins streaming Friday, Aug. 20, she's the first woman chair of the English department at Pembroke University as well as one of the few staff members of color at the prestigious Massachusetts institution.

Though its stately buildings and finely manicured campus suggest wealth, the university is in fact hemorrhaging money and Dean Larson (David Morse, "Outsiders") instructs his department heads to find the dead wood among the faculty and push them toward the door. Translation: Pick out the old-timers with high salaries and low enrollments and make them want to retire.

Which puts two profs squarely in Ji-Yoon's crosshairs – Elliot Rentz (Bob Balaban) and Joan Hambling (Holland Taylor, "Two and a Half Men") – both of whom are painfully aware of the budget cuts and the fact that their advanced age makes them a target.

For Taylor, the script by Amanda Peet (an actress who steps behind the camera as creator, executive producer and showrunner here) and the opportunity to play a character her own age were big drawing cards.

"(This is a woman) who has no f...s left to give," the 78-year-old Taylor explains. "She's

sort of, as Amanda Peet ... said to me when we began, 'This character is unedited at this point in her life.' And that really appealed to me because I would say that I was brought up with a lot of manners and a lot of awareness of others and I definitely have an editor that controls how I behave very, very well. And I can sort of see that loosening as I get older."

There are other issues making Ji-Yoon's life interesting. Bill Dobson (Jay Duplass, "Transparent"), a popular instructor, suffers a series of embarrassing episodes as he struggles with his wife's tragic death during childbirth; Yasmin McKay (Nana Mensah, "New Amsterdam"), a younger professor, agitates for change and advancement in the department; and young daughter Ju Ju (Everly Carganilla, "Yes Day") acts out, much to the dismay of her single mom.

Meanwhile, Joan deals with the prospect that her longtime friend might also turn out to be her executioner, professionally speaking.

"This is a mentor/mentee relationship," Taylor notes, "and when the mentee has excelled and climbed the mountain and done very well, it's very exciting for the older person who has been her friend and advising her. And even though Joan is being pushed aside by (Ji-Yoon's) generation, Joan would not see (Ji-Yoon) as a personal threat at all until she does feel that she's been let down by her, which is very crushing. So it's a very, very human story."

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