

TV



## **BATWOMAN BEYOND**

AS **BATWOMAN**'S NEW LEADING LADY, JAVICIA LESLIE BRINGS A FRESH ATTITUDE TO GOTHAM

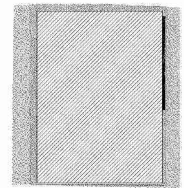
By Chancellor Agard

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**BATWOMAN CAN'T STOP MAKING** history. In season 1, the Greg Berlanti-produced Arrowverse drama starred Ruby Rose as the titular heroine, a.k.a. Kate Kane, who was the first openly LGBTQ superhero to headline a TV show. Now, the second season takes things a step further with new lead Javicia Leslie (*God Friended Me*), the first Black woman to portray

the Crimson Knight on screen. It's a landmark moment of representation in the genre. "We just keep adding adjectives to how people describe Batwoman," showrunner Caroline Dries says with a laugh.

But don't let that chuckle deceive you: Both she and Leslie are very aware of the huge responsibility that comes with such a groundbreaking move. "If anyone puts on the suit, the first thing they're going to feel is 'When someone sees this suit, it represents something to them. It represents a hero,'" says Leslie, 33, who made her debut as new Batwoman, Ryan Wilder, in the Jan. 17 season 2 premiere of the CW series. "This is something that I wanted my entire life.... It feels like an honor to be a part of this history."



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commit—was born. “While Bruce and Kate were interested in fighting [Gotham City’s corrupt] system and social injustice, Ryan actually has experienced being stuck in that system firsthand,” says Dries, “and I think that’s what her superpower is.”

In the season premiere, a homeless and jobless Ryan stumbles upon the Batsuit after Kate disappears (no, she’s not dead). At first Ryan views the suit as a way of reclaiming her power after years of feeling powerless. As the season progresses, she eventually joins Kate’s allies Luke (Camrus Johnson) and Mary (Nicole Kang) on the Bat-team full time. Her full transformation into **Batwoman**—with a new suit all her own—becomes her way of standing up for the people Gotham often overlooks. “I completely related to Ryan when it came to defining who Batwoman is to her, and who she is to Batwoman,” says Leslie, who infuses Ryan with a natural goofiness and lightness. “As actors, we do like to separate ourselves so that we can play different roles and you can see differences in our characters. But it really felt like I needed to bring a little bit of who I am to this.”

Given Ryan’s background, this season *Batwoman* is delving even deeper into social issues that resonate with the character on a personal level, including child trafficking and police brutality. And her wrongful conviction, for example, informs how she handles the False Face Society, a gang flooding the streets with a deadly



↑ “We were looking for sophisticated elegance,” says EP Caroline Dries of casting Shivaani Ghai as villain Safiyah

← *Batwoman* (Javicia Leslie) vs. hitman Victor Zsasz (Alex Morf)

↓ “Ryan having her version of the *Batwoman* suit changed a lot for me, because then I really felt like this is *our* *Batwoman*,” says Leslie, who began the season in the original costume worn by Ruby Rose (left)

new drug. “Batwoman has this particular vendetta against [them], because drugs permeating the city and nobody taking any responsibility for it strikes at her core,” says Dries, noting that the group’s leader, DC villain Black Mask, is one of the season’s big bads.

While the False Face Society brings the gritty street-level action, the season’s Ra’s al Ghul-like villain Safiyah (Shivaani Ghai) delivers the heightened comic-book drama fans expect from a Bat-themed show. The dangerous protector of a mysterious island, Safiyah has a complicated history with Kate’s maniacal twin sister Alice (Rachel Skarsten), who shuddered whenever that adversary was mentioned last season. “She’s not what we expected from season 1,” teases Ghai, adding that their reunion reveals how Alice became a supervillain. “[Safiyah] does come across as someone who is quite charming and kind. She has a definite soft spot for Alice. You will learn as we go on that there’s definitely a much deeper relationship here.”

With Safiyah, Black Mask, and Alice, it seems as though Ryan will have her hands full in season 2, but Leslie is more than confident that Batwoman has everything she needs to succeed. “No matter where she is, she shows up as herself—and [doesn’t hide] what she believes in,” says the actress. “I think that’s part of what makes her the Batwoman we all need.” ●

*Batwoman*’s bold new direction is the result of Rose exiting the show, in part due to a back injury, two days after the season 1 finale aired last May. Dries decided to create an entirely new queer character instead of recasting Kate, in part because there wasn’t a story-related reason for Kate’s appearance to change. More important, though, she saw an opportunity to bring something new to the Batman mythology: Kate and her missing Dark Knight cousin Bruce Wayne come from wealthy backgrounds, but what would someone from a less privileged upbringing do with the Bat symbol? Thus, Ryan Wilder—a street-smart martial arts expert and orphan who recently served time for a drug crime she didn’t



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