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Spacey, Fincher build a winning 'House of Cards' for Netflix

Baltimore-made drama gambles with a new distribution model -- but for the viewer, the series is a sure payoff

By David Zurawik

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Kevin Spacey calls “House of Cards” “the new television series that isn’t on television.”

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And therein lies one of the biggest media stories of the year: Whether spending \$100 million to hire an Oscar-winning star and one of the most gifted feature film directors in Hollywood can lead to a TV series compelling enough to change the way viewers have been watching television most or all of their lives.

In one of the biggest media gambles of the decade, Spacey, David Fincher, Netflix and a production company you probably never heard of named Media Rights Capital are betting that the 13 episodes of a political drama they created in and around Baltimore last year can alter the basic TV business model that’s essentially been in place since the 1950s.

Predicting lifestyle and entertainment industry change in these tumultuous times is a fool’s game. But after seeing the first two episodes in this Shakespearean saga of Washington betrayal and revenge, it is safe to say that if it were on television, “House of Cards” would be the best series the medium has to offer.

The two episodes directed by Fincher, the only ones Netflix made available for screening, can stand shoulder to shoulder with the first two hours of “Mad Men” or “Homeland.” In fact, visually, “House of Cards” is far superior to both. And I say that after watching on a standard computer screen.

Starting Friday, Netflix subscribers will be able to go online and stream all 13 episodes of Season One. The thinking is that the quality of the production and the ability to watch a full season without being at the mercy of a network or cable channel that parcels the series out one episode a week will be enough to get viewers to join Netflix and change the way they have essentially consumed TV since the late 1940s.

“House of Cards” will not be on TV in the U.S., the U.K. or Scandinavia, where Netflix bought first-run rights usurping cable channels like HBO, Showtime and AMC that have come to own the quality TV game since the 1990s, when the broadcast networks surrendered the territory in favor of cost-effective reality TV.

Modi Wiczuk, CEO of Media Rights Capital, says the last thing his production company expected to do was change the way TV is bought, sold and consumed.

“All we did was set out to make the best TV show we could with the best people we could,” says Wiczuk, who characterizes MRC as a production company centered on relationships with star film directors like Fincher. “Our initial assumption was that it would go to any one of the usual suspects of the pay cable services.”

But, Wiczuk says, that plan changed once MRC talked to Netflix about buying secondary rights, after an anticipated premiere on a cable channel like HBO, Showtime or AMC.

Netflix had its own agenda and wanted to start owning original content just like HBO, Showtime and AMC.

“So, they read the script and said, ‘We absolutely love this, we want to go into original content ourselves and we want to make this our anchor show,’” Wiczuk says.

“They gave our artists two things: The broadest canvas possible with a 26-episode commitment, and absolutely no interference whatsoever,” Wiczuk says. “That’s a very unusual dynamic for television.”

The commitment from Netflix to 26 episodes without a pilot being made is more than unusual. It’s unprecedented. But without it, they probably wouldn’t have had a chance at a production with artists like Spacey, Fincher and screenwriter Beau Willimon (“Ides of March”).

It was a happy development for Baltimore and Maryland once the producers decided to film here for reasons of geography, state incentives and the history of successful productions like “The Wire” and “Game Change.” Much of the \$100 million is being spent on crews, local actors, building supplies, housing and food as Baltimore stands in for Washington.

Because of the length of commitment, the production could put down roots, building 150,000 square feet of soundstages in Harford County.

Comparable to a Hollywood studio backlot in size, the soundstages house congressional offices, West Wing offices, Capitol Hill and Georgetown apartments and town houses.

The producers also built a soundstage at The Baltimore Sun to film scenes involving a young reporter who plays a key role in the series.

And the production filmed at such area sites as the Baltimore Museum of Art, the War Memorial Building, the Peabody Conservatory and the Engineer’s Club – all of which appear as Washington locations on screen in the first two hours. Production on Season Two is tentatively scheduled to start April 15 in Baltimore.

In the end, money spent doesn’t matter unless viewers can see it on the screen. In this case, they

can — and then some.

Based on a 1990 BBC mini-series starring Ian Richardson, this “House of Cards” tells the story of Francis Underwood (Spacey), a South Carolina congressman of 22 years who has ascended to House Majority Whip and now expects to be named secretary of state based on a deal he made to help a new president get elected. Except as the new president takes office, he decides to renege on his promise, having his chief of staff tell Underwood the administration needs him to stay in Congress.

What follows is the revenge Underwood surgically extracts on the administration with the help of his accomplished and cold-blooded wife (Robin Wright) and a young reporter (Kate Mara) who seems willing to do anything to advance her career.

The script, the acting and the visuals of the first two hours are feature-film quality. The series opens with an overture-like scene that plays out at night, on the street in front of Underwood’s townhouse, where an animal has been injured by a hit-and-run driver. It gives the audience an unsettling glimpse into the steely psyche and political philosophy of the lead character as he deals with the bloody situation that landed at his doorstep.

Viewers also get their first taste of direct address, with Underwood speaking to the camera, much the way Shakespeare’s Richard III spoke to theatergoers. The words written by Willimon are inspired, but it is Spacey who ultimately makes the strategy on breaking the fourth wall such a success, seducing viewers with his charm, political savvy and easygoing candor — all the while enlisting them as co-conspirators in his dark designs for retribution before they know what happened.

Fincher wraps the first two hours in a rich, dark, atmospheric cloak that seems to draw as much from Alan Pakula’s “All the President’s Men” (1976) as it does his own “The Social Network” (2010) and “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” (2011). Fincher drenches his Washington in daytime monuments, ornate domes and lavish offices set against darkness, night and the shadows in which plots are hatched and conspirators meet.

Two of those co-conspirators are played superbly by Mara, the younger sister of Rooney Mara (who starred in “Dragon Tattoo”) and Wright. In the British version, Wright’s character was much more Lady Macbeth, just as Richardson’s was much more Richard III. With Willimon’s winning script, Wright delivers in Claire Underwood the portrait of a perfectly postmodern Washington woman who lives for social and professional power.

Mara’s Zoe Barnes character is the gateway into this production for younger viewers. She is not as complicated as Francis or Claire Underwood, but she is only about half their age, so how could she be? What’s fascinating about her is watching the way she reacts to the devil’s dance the congressman invites her to do with him — and the youthful moves she brings to their alliance.

A word of warning: Netflix allowed me to see only the first two hours, the two that Fincher directed. Fincher, who like Spacey and Willimon, is also an executive producer, brought in five other directors to do the other 11 hours. They are: Joel Schumacher (“A Time to Kill”), James Foley (“Glengarry Glen Ross”), Charles McDougall (“The Office”), Carl Franklin (“Devil in a Blue Dress”) and Allen Coulter (“The Sopranos”).

The best TV dramas, from “The Wire” to “The Sopranos,” have a variety of directors, but those series also had TV auteurs as executive producers, in David Simon and David Chase, ensuring

continuity from episode to episode. TV is a producer's medium, whereas film has been called a director's medium. Without seeing the other episodes, there is no way of knowing if Fincher, a creature of film not TV, maintained such continuity.

In the end, all I can promise is this: Viewers who give themselves up to Spacey's Underwood, Willimon's words and Fincher's direction in the first hour are in for a delicious and wicked ride unlike anything else television currently offers.

There's guilt in this pleasure. And just as Underwood ends the opening scene with the injured animal by washing his hands, some viewers might find themselves reaching for the hand sanitizer at the end of the first hour. Becoming a co-conspirator of Underwood's happens that quickly in this skilled production.

And then, they'll want to instantly order up the second episode from Netflix.

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'House of Cards'

The first season of 'House of Cards' — 13 episodes — will be available to stream starting Feb. 1 through Netflix.

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