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# House of Cards: TV Review

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## The Bottom Line

Kevin Spacey shines in this heavyweight new contender in the drama category that makes Netflix a major player as a content provider.

## Premieres

Feb. 1 (Netflix)

## Director

David Fincher

## Cast

Kevin Spacey, Robin Wright, Kate Mara, Corey Stoll, Michael Kelly, Constance Zimmer, Michael Gill, Sakina Jaffrey,

**Netflix goes big with the series starring Kevin Spacey as a scheming congressional leader in a production as slick and stylish as anything on HBO or Showtime.**

If Netflix wanted to come out of the gates strong as a content provider worthy of any cable channel, it picked a stellar choice in *House of Cards*, a remake of the Brit series starring a riveting **Kevin Spacey** and directed by **David Fincher** (at least the first two episodes, which were shown to critics before Netflix releases all 13 for streaming Feb. 1).

The streaming and DVD-by-mail service got its original-content feet wet a year ago with *Lillyhammer*, starring **Steven Van Zandt** as a New York gangster who goes into witness protection in Norway, but it is really making its mark with a slate of five new series rolling out in 2013. It's a concerted, calculated slate that says, "We've arrived -- and what are you going to do about it?"

## PHOTOS: 7 Music to Movie Directors: Michael Bay, David Fincher, Spike Jonze [7]

As a threat to higher-end niche cable channels that traffic in acclaimed dramas, Netflix's likeliest competitors are FX, AMC and Starz. But there's a ton of money on the screen in *House of Cards* -- produced by Media Rights Capital and launched with a reported \$100 million investment for two 13-episode seasons -- and it looks as slick and stylish as any HBO or Showtime offering.

Co-created and written by **Beau Willimon** (*The Ides of March*), *House of Cards* is the right lead-off show because it has "player" written all over it. Luscious cinematography that shows off Washington, D.C. -- a central force in this political series -- never gets old to look at, especially the opening montage.

The series focuses on House Majority Whip Francis Underwood (Spacey), a wheeler-dealer who was essential in getting new president Garrett Walker (**Michael Gill**) elected, plus -- and more important to his plans for power -- landing Linda Vasquez (**Sakina Jaffrey**) as chief of staff, who will give Francis access and the policy changes he wants as he pushes for Secretary of State.

But there's only one problem with that: After the inauguration, the hard-nosed Linda gives Francis the bad news that he's not getting the Cabinet job. (The president isn't even present at the break-it-to-him meeting). Instead, the administration wants Francis just where he is, because he'd be more valuable there helping shepherd new legislation through in the first 100 days.

## VIDEO: Netflix's 'House of Cards' Trailer: Betrayal and Beltway Intrigue [2]

Knocked on his heels and bitterly disappointed, Francis appears spun-around crushed. But his equally conniving and power-hungry wife, Claire (**Robin Wright**), won't allow that. "My husband doesn't apologize, even to me," she tells him. Their main connection seems to be they crave power and influence more than any other couple and feed off it in an almost sexual way. The setback also has hurt Claire's efforts at restructuring her nonprofit to be more high profile. It doesn't take long for Francis to recover from the blow. And what he's got on his mind isn't all that hard to figure out: revenge.

But he's not just interested in making the new administration regret screwing him so cold-bloodedly; he wants to prove where the real power rests if such a person has the wherewithal and spiteful backbone to move all obstacles to get it done. And Francis does. He is gleefully manipulative, causing havoc and headaches in the first two episodes to establish he's not to be messed with, while sublimely coming off in person -- and to the faces of those he's sinking -- as if he's on their side. It's master-manipulation, and Spacey, using a wonderfully seductive and disdainful Southern accent, truly nails every line.

Now, the big conceit in *House of Cards* is that Spacey breaks the fourth wall and talks directly to the camera, one of the most dicey stylistic choices any series can make. But it's not unique; **Don Cheadle**, yet another fantastic and magnetic actor, pulls it off with aplomb on Showtime's *House of Lies*. That's clearly the key: You need someone absolutely convincing to make that trick work. In *House of Cards*, Spacey gives a master class in how this is done, his dialogue dripping either with disdain or the calm dismissiveness of a man who already has set damaging events in motion and knows before anyone else the fallout that's about to occur. Spacey also has a well-honed half eye-roll/half dead-eye stare that's glorious to behold as he breaks that wall and engages the viewer.

## Q&A: Media Rights Capital's Modi Wiczyk Talks 'House of Cards,' Reveals Projects With Zemeckis, Wyatt, More [3]

"You know what I like about people?" he asks, staring into the camera. "They stack so well." He's been reading newspaper coverage of the carnage he's created. When he eviscerates a candidate's nomination, Francis looks at the camera and says the man will go home and realize how he was sliced and diced him and conclude, "My God, all I ever amounted to was chitlins."

It's not all one-liners and sneering contempt, however. Spacey's character is allowed some inoffensive exposition and often tells the viewer what someone is thinking and will do. When they do it, Francis will look into the camera, his faced drained of any emotion, letting you know it's almost too easy for him. This is why you keep a guy like him on your side.

Meanwhile, Wright's performance is a unique blend of ice-queen power player and loyal, equal-partner wife who keeps Francis directed. Fincher's shots of them enduring people they don't like in Washington -- where the elected officials, lobbyists and other players see each other in church, at the symphony, at fundraisers, etc. -- solidifies a viewer's belief that the duo combine to be the same type of predator.

For Francis to pull the strings that crush the best-laid plans of the administration that screwed him, he needs a capable team and web of other players. His chief of staff Doug Stamper (**Michael Kelly**) is a peacetime consigliere with an equally blunt approach. He and Francis also needed a loyal soldier who will follow orders and find one in Congressman Peter Russo (**Corey Stoll**), whose proclivity for women, booze and drugs eventually lands him in the majority whip's doghouse and thus creates the makings of an indebted, loyal soldier.

What might be less effective -- especially for those of us in the world of journalism -- is the construct of Zoe Barnes (**Kate Mara**), who works at the fictional *Washington Herald* and is doing meaningless features and feeling wasted, though it's clear she's still quite young and green. She's painted as more of a social-media/blogger type than a seasoned journalist, though she has a voracious desire to cover politics (and has some hard-earned understanding of the players to help her). "This is the *Washington Herald*, not TMZ," an editor tells her. She replies, "Do you know how many people watch TMZ?" But senior political writer Janine Skorsky (**Constance Zimmer**) wants no part of her.

Zoe wants to shake things up in a new-media kind of way: getting a blog, going to parties, doing more unsourced stuff for online, which leads to derision from those at the paper. But a trip to the symphony and a picture of Francis glancing at her ass while she walks in -- just a captured fleeting moment -- leads Zoe to make a bold proposition to Francis: Be my source; give me anything, and I'll run with it. She wants access, and he realizes press manipulation will keep his Machiavellian plans in motion.

### **EXCLUSIVE: David Fincher Battles Over Budget on Netflix's 'House of Cards'** [8]

Now, Mara is excellent in this role, but it's a bit of a stretch to think that someone so savvy as Francis would make a link with someone so unproven. She hooks him by saying she's better than what she's being asked to do, which is precisely what's happening to (and fueling) Francis, so that's when he agrees.

Once you get over the dubious alliance, the dramatic function of being able to manipulate things through the press becomes intriguing and essential. One night when they secretly meet in the shadows at a museum, Francis makes Zoe prove her smarts by trying to figure out what he's about to give her and how it will play out. It's a wonderful scene, allowing viewers to realize Zoe really is more talented than her entry-level job. Francis then gets up, looks at painting of two rowers and mentions that it's his favorite. As he departs, Francis says: "We're in the same boat

now, Zoe. Be careful not to tip it over. I can only save one of us from drowning.”

Willimon clearly is having fun with the writing on this series, and he’s deftly able to make it shift characters and moods with ease. That means Francis isn’t always devouring people. In one scene, we find that he -- like so many others -- owes a great deal to lobbyists. And when he’s shown being threatened to make promises come true, he says to the camera: “It’s degrading, I know. But everybody gets in line when the tit’s that big.”

### **STORY: Kevin Spacey, Robin Wright: Why Netflix’s ‘House of Cards’ Is the Future of TV** [5]

In other scenes, Willimon makes sure he fleshes out the characters so they’re not one-dimensional. If they’re doing awful things, he finds subtle ways to make that reverberate. For example, Claire makes her loyal office manager fire 18 people and then walks in and fires the office manager; later, Claire is ordering from a Starbucks-like chain, and the older woman running the cash register -- clearly someone who recently was downsized and needs work -- is mystified by the process and lost. As Claire endures the screw-up while a younger barista fixes things, Fincher keeps the camera tight on Wright’s face to find the cracks in her character’s emotions.

Even better is when Willimon does the unexpected. Outside on the street, a crazy man -- half naked, dirty and with wild, stringy hair -- is grunting and roaring like an animal. Francis walks over, bends down and looks him in the eyes, which eventually calms the man. Says Francis: “Nobody can hear you. Nobody cares. Nothing will come of this.” Let the nice men take care of you, he says; part paternal offering, part command. It’s a great scene.

*House of Cards* needn’t worry about ratings, of course. That’s not how Netflix -- or HBO or Showtime -- operates. So the series is in no peril, already having been picked up for a second season. It’s a heavyweight new contender in the drama category, just as Netflix now is as a content provider.

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