

Amazon's TV deal with Jordan Peele among the highest-profile to date for streaming service

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When it comes to enticing A-list production talent to the world of streaming television, Amazon Studios is showing that two can play this game.

Amazon said Tuesday that it has signed a first-look deal with Jordan Peele and his production company Monkeypaw Productions, giving the writer-director of last year's horror hit "Get Out" a home to execute his idiosyncratic creative vision for the small screen.

The deal is seen as a major win for Amazon as well as a riposte to its chief rival, Netflix, which has been on a creative buying spree that includes recent deals with mega-producers Ryan Murphy and Shonda Rhimes.

Amazon has already secured production deals with "The Walking Dead's" Robert Kirkman as well as "Gilmore Girls" creator Amy Sherman-Palladino and her husband, Daniel Palladino. Now with Peele, the Seattle-based e-commerce giant is enlarging its stable of brand-name producers in the hopes of creating what its TV lineup has so far lacked: a long-running series with mass appeal, along the line of HBO's "Game of Thrones."

The agreement with Peele is also the first major TV deal announced under Amazon Studio's new head, Jennifer Salke, who joined the

company in February following her tenure as president of NBC Entertainment. Her hiring has been widely viewed as a reset for the studio following the departure last year of Roy Price after he was accused of sexual harassment.

The Peele deal will be the first of several production agreements that Salke is expected to secure as part of her strategy to build up Amazon Studios, according to a person with knowledge of the situation. Salke was unavailable for comment.

Also Tuesday, Amazon Studios announced that Barry Jenkins, director of the Oscar-winning film "Moonlight," will direct 11 episodes of the limited series "The Underground Railroad." The series, adapted from Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, will debut on Amazon Prime Video.

Since joining Amazon, Salke has brought on board Vernon Sanders, another NBC veteran, as co-head of television. Sanders is working alongside co-head Albert Cheng to lead the creative and production units of Amazon's TV operation.

"Amazon is indicating that it intends to compete vigorously with Netflix, HBO, and others for partnerships with the most compelling content creators working today," said Susan Bidel, a senior analyst at the market research company Forrester, where she covers the media industry.

"In Amazon, Jordan Peele gets a partner with deep pockets, a keen understanding of a highly competitive market and, as with every other business they enter, a commitment to winning."

While Netflix is still outspending the competition, with an expected \$7 billion to \$8 billion in content outlay this year, Amazon Studios is also ramping up its ambitions. The studio is embarking on a multiseason TV

adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," which is expected to be its largest undertaking to date.

Amazon Studios is also in the process of moving into a new home at the historic Culver Studios in Culver City, where it will lease production and administrative facilities.

Prior to Tuesday's announcement, Amazon had already begun working with Peele's Monkeypaw Productions on "The Hunt," a recently greenlighted drama series about Nazi hunters, as well as an upcoming documentary series about Lorena Bobbitt.

"I couldn't be more excited about this new relationship with Amazon," Peele said in a statement. "They've been a fantastic partner to Monkeypaw over the last year because they're committed to the same kind of fun and culturally relevant television we are."

A former cast member of Fox's "MADtv" sketch comedy show, Peele won the Academy Award for original screenplay this year for "Get Out," which was released by Universal, with which Peele still has a movie deal.

Streaming services such as Amazon and Netflix are investing more heavily in original content as well as talent at a time when the legacy Hollywood studios are moving to launch competing services featuring movies and TV shows from their own catalogs.

"Top-tier Hollywood talent are incentivized to sign with streaming platforms that offer more creative freedom, larger production budgets and more upfront cash," said Ashwin Navin, chief executive and co-founder of Samba TV, a television data and analytics company.

Streaming services usually pay talent more money upfront since there is a smaller residuals pool from DVD and syndication.

Navin estimates that Netflix will outspend Amazon on original content by approximately \$2 billion this year. "But it's clear that Amazon is making moves to bolster their in-house talent."

Since its inception in 2010, Amazon Studios has launched more than 20 original drama and comedy series. Most of them have been quirky, indie-flavored projects that have earned critical plaudits but not mass viewership.

Amazon has been successful in persuading major movie talent to work on TV projects, including directors Woody Allen and Nicolas Winding Refn, as well as actress Julia Roberts, who will star in the upcoming drama series "Homecoming."

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