

'Mad Men' Director's New Series 'Romanoffs' to Tell Story of Heirs to Russia's Throne

Matthew Weiner's latest project will dramatize the lives of descendants of the Russian royal family.

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'Romanoffs' will focus on the lives of several descendants of Russia's ill-fated imperial family.

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"Mad Men" stars Jon Hamm, Elisabeth Moss and John Slattery are set to feature in a TV dramatization of the lives of the descendants of Russia's Romanov dynasty as showrunner Matthew Weiner returns with his long-awaited new project.

Titled simply "Romanoffs," (the double "ff" reflects the way it was spelled until recently) the serial is being financed by Amazon Studios, which has budgeted in excess of \$50 million for the ambitious project after a winning a bidding war. Its partner is The Weinstein Co., an

independent movie company with significant foreign distribution reach.

Ever since AMC's award-winning "Mad Men" went off the air two years ago, the nature of Weiner's next project has been the subject of excited speculation in the industry. Kept tightly under wraps until recently, the series will be an eight-part anthology, with shooting taking place around the world.

"I didn't want to talk about the show because I wanted to get the room opened," Weiner said in a released statement. The "room" is the industry name given to the writers' room that is set up for a TV project. Weiner currently has as many as a dozen screenwriters working on the show.

"Each of the eight episodes will tell a standalone story with no recurring plot elements or actors," said Weiner.

The director explained that the only common thread is that each episode will tell the story of people in contemporary times who believe they are descendants of the imperial family that ruled Russia from 1613 until the Bolsheviks seized power.

"I love this idea that these characters believe themselves to be descendants of this autocratic family," said Weiner.

Russia's last tsar Nicholas II abdicated the throne during the revolutionary upheavals of 1917. In 1918, Nicholas was executed by revolutionaries, alongside his wife, children and his entourage, who had accompanied the family into exile in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg. Many relatives escaped to the West.

Various groups of descendants abroad claim to be true successors to the throne. Among the better known descendants are the UK's Prince Philip, King Constantine II of Greece and Russian Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna. Are they likely to "star" in "Romanoffs"?

Weiner is playing his cards close to his chest for now, but hinted that the series might feature Grand Duchess Anastasia, who many insist escaped the firing squad, despite forensic evidence indicating otherwise.

Weiner said that Anastasia's whereabouts had "long served as a mystery, with lore suggesting she'd survived the tragedy and taken on a new identity."

The showrunner says that the series will be contemporary, featuring "a different cast, a different story and a different location." The current game plan calls for four episodes to be shot in the U.S. and the other four in soon-to-be-determined European countries.

Unlike "Mad Men," "Romanoffs" will go directly to streaming, which represents a revolutionary marketing approach for a big-budget show – and a huge gamble. The project also represents the first time this team of writers, including Weiner, will be writing for streaming.

For now, the specifics of the casting process remain vague, but "Mad Men" veterans Jon Hamm, Elisabeth Moss and John Slattery are expected to be involved in separate episodes, adding box office power to the project.

Hollywood has always had a fascination with the Russian royals, with efforts by various would-be Romanovs over the years to draw attention to themselves adding color to the myth.

Perhaps the best known bogus “Romanoff” (yes, he spelled it this way) was a restaurateur whose establishment, the now-defunct Romanoff’s, was Hollywood’s most famous dining spot during the movie colony’s heyday. The restaurant catered to the likes of Frank Sinatra and Ronald Reagan, before he was elected president. Eventually, however, this “Romanoff” was exposed as a Lithuanian-born commoner.

A concrete date for the streaming of “Romanoffs” is yet to be announced, but the show is expected to be released in late 2017 or early 2018.

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