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Amazon Launches 'The Romanoffs'

The series begins this Friday

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Aaron Eckhart and Marthe Keller in "The Violet Hour" **Chris Raphael / Amazon**

HOLLYWOOD—Curiosity about his Russian heritage spurred veteran American TV showrunner Matthew Weiner to create the year's most highly anticipated video event, "The Romanoffs" anthology.

The eight-episode Amazon Prime streaming production presents the Romanov dynasty in a completely different light straight from the imagination of producer-writer-director Wiener.

The stories all take place today and revolve around people who believe themselves to be descendants of the Russian royal family that ruled Russia from 1613 until the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917.

For the creator of the highly successful "Mad Men" series, the Romanov dynasty presented a different kind of challenge. "I love all kinds of television. But I thought: Wouldn't be

interesting to sort of follow the old TV model of giving people a complete story every week, sort of like 'Playhouse 90'?" Weiner told The Moscow Times. Like the 1950's television show, every episode of "The Romanoffs" has a different cast, a different story and a different location.

"You can watch them in any order, and you really don't have to keep up," he said.

Family connection

Weiner has always been interested in the Romanovs. "It's sort of my heritage." And he has also been intrigued by how people have been searching for their families' pasts on social media, creating an industry to help people discover their roots.

Initially Weiner was attracted to the Romanovs while poking around for information about his own ancestors. (The show's spelling of the name reflects how it was written 100 years ago.)

"My family on my mother's side is Russian. My grandparents are not quite first cousins but very likely they're second cousins. They're from a town outside of Kiev and they left after the revolution and came to Ohio," he related.

Unlike his imaginary Russian characters in the series, when it comes to his own family Weiner says, "My ancestry? Well, like most people I've found out that we were not the princes.We were the servants," he laughs.

What's the attraction of the Romanovs? Weiner said that "it sounds like a joke but it seemed relevant to write about a bunch of people who think that they used to be great. And it's kind of interesting because it is the Romanovs."

Pretenders to the throne

Weiner, who is the head writer of the anthology, said that when he began his research, he "went on Wikipedia...there were 120 people who had claimed to be related to the royal family."

As an example of would-be Romanovs, he cites a famous Los Angeles restaurateur who identified himself as Prince Michael Romanoff. Later he turned out to be from a Romanian Roma family. He is not portrayed in the series.

The project took Weiner, a nine-time Emmy winner for "Mad Men" and "Sopranos," to seven countries around the globe for filming, with each episode taking place in a new location with a new cast.

The films were shot in Paris,in the Czech Republic, Romania, Mexico City, Austria, Toronto, Los Angeles and New York.

One of episodes has the veteran French actress Isabelle Huppert, playing the part of a Russian movie director. "I wrote the part for her, taking advantage of some of her unusual skills, one of which is that she speaks Russian," Weiner explained.

The weekly series kicks off on Oct. 12 on Amazon Prime, which lets the series go worldwide thanks to Amazon's international distribution platform.

True to form, Weiner has kept the story lines under wrap, only providing short teasers of a few words about each episode's story line.

The premiere show titled "The Violet Hour" takes place in Paris, an ancestral home that holds the key to a family's future. It is followed by "The Royal We," about a couple with their marriage in a rut as they find their own temptations.

In the third installment, "House of Special Purposes," a movie star and a director go head to head in a battle over what is real. In "Expectations," over the course of one day a woman in New York City is confronted with every lie she ever told. In "Bright and High Circle" a trusted friend under suspicion tests the loyalties of a tightly-knit community.

Mexico City provides the setting for "Panorama," where an idealistic reporter falls in love with a mysterious subject. Episode seven, "End of the Line," a couple faces destruction on a trip abroad to pursue their legacy. And, finally, "The One That Holds Everything" is a story that circles the globe as a man tries to escape a family curse.

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