

NETFLIX

A Conversation with the Creative Minds Behind HOLLYWOOD

Executive Producers Ryan Murphy, Ian Brennan, and Janet Mock break down representation, revisionist history, and why a story set eight decades in the past is more timely than ever.

How did the idea for **HOLLYWOOD** get started?

RYAN MURPHY: I'd been playing around with the idea doing something about buried history for a while, and I knew that I wanted to do something hopeful and optimistic — a celebration of 1940s Hollywood. After working together on *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, Darren Criss and I were having dinner and we started talking about a very famous gas station in Hollywood where sex workers mingled with celebrities. These young sex workers lived in an environment of shame, and they weren't allowed in the game because they were seen as tainted goods. I merged both of those ideas, and we began a lovingly constructed look at how I wished Hollywood would have operated back then; a world where women and gay people and people of color could flourish. I think the world would be very different than it is today if that had happened.

JANET MOCK: Ryan pitched the show to me over dinner as a show about these outsiders in Hollywood who are going to try to make it no matter what. It intrigued me. He told me it was set during the Golden Age of Hollywood in the studio system, and I *love* that time period, especially the movies from that time period. But oftentimes, as a woman of color, I rarely, if ever, saw myself represented during that time. I remember telling him that, and he was like, "Trust me, the series is going to be taking a turn, and that's one of the reasons why we need you as a leader in the room." Every time when I'm pitched a project, I'm always like, "How can I see myself in this? Where am I in this story?" And I think there are so many different touch points for me in *Hollywood*.

IAN BRENNAN: When we started writing the show, all of the same lead characters were there from the beginning. But about three episodes in, we hit a wall and had to acknowledge, "Well, Camille can't get the lead role, because that's not what would have happened. Once the studio finds out Archie's black, the movie's going to be taken away from him." Once we hit that wall, we realized that just telling the accurate historical version of this story felt dirty and exploitative. And Ryan smelled that. Our experience writing this show was a lot like Archie and

Raymond's experience making *Meg*. Ryan basically said, "Don't we have an opportunity to tell a different story? To rewrite history?" And once that question was posed, the show opened up.

This show is set in the 1940s, but it tackles some extremely timely themes. Talk me through writing a modern narrative through a period lens.

BRENNAN: Even back then, way before the #MeToo Movement, we were dealing with the same issues in entertainment — and everywhere, really. Now there's finally an awareness about abusive power dynamics. But what if these conversations had what happened in 1947 instead of 1997 or 2007 or 2017? We wanted to explore that.

MOCK: We tried to shine light on the deep tragedies that did happen, but ultimately we wanted to tell a story of triumph. Ryan's compass as a showrunner is to create a safe environment for all of us to be very vocal. I felt empowered to say, "I don't like something that we've broken. I don't think this script is strong. I think we should go back again." Ryan has a lot to do, but I think at the end of the day, that dynamic is big a part of our working relationship; he trusts us to imbue the scripts with what they need to make them even deeper, to challenge him to think even more.

BRENNAN: Working on this show was the most collaborative experience I've had backwards and forwards — with Janet, with our directors and writers, and with our actors. Everybody felt empowered to speak their minds, and so everybody has their fingerprints all over this show.

MURPHY: I love working with Ian and I love working with Janet because they're very passionate about their points of view. Ultimately that's what you want if you're a creator. You want somebody to say to you, "No, this is right. I know this because I've lived this." Everything that we wrote felt like it could happen today, so it did not feel like we were writing a period piece. But it did feel like we were righting several wrongs, and that was very moving to do.

Many of the leading characters are fictional, but you've also included some real-life historical figures — Rock Hudson, Henry Willson, Anna May Wong, Hattie McDaniel, Eleanor Roosevelt, to name a few. Why did you choose those people?

MURPHY: I was very interested in Anna May Wong and Hattie McDaniel and Rock Hudson because they were all people who should have been able to be themselves and be celebrated, but were not. They were victims of the Hollywood system and they were under-appreciated. All three of those people had tragic endings. I was interested in this idea of giving them happy endings. What would that look like? How would you do it?

MOCK: One of the first questions Ryan asked me was, "What would happy endings look like for Rock Hudson, for Anna May Wong, for Hattie McDaniel?" It was important to us that we tell an aspirational story, and that we show a different kind of portrait of what the winners and

dreamers look like. Because today, we're still grappling with an industry where there are far too few people of color on screen, far too few LGBTQ people and women in power. We wanted to show what Hollywood could be today if, back in the 1940s, a movie like *Meg* had been made and rewarded. It would have reverberated and pushed culture forward in the same way that *Black Panther* and *Moonlight* have. But still, even now, we deal with two steps forward, five steps back.

MURPHY: I have a very strong connection to this time period because my grandmother was a big movie buff, and I was raised with her telling me all about Rock Hudson. We lived in Indiana, but from a very young age she would tell me that Rock Hudson was gay and I remember thinking, "Oh, there's somebody else like me." I grew up as a gay guy in Indiana and I didn't have any role models, and I didn't see anybody like me succeed, so I felt very alone. Janet, like me, grew up and rarely saw young black women succeed. I firmly believe in this idea that if you can see it, you can be it. And if you don't see it, you can't. It's very, very hard.

You've assembled an incredible cast of fresh faces and legends, from Jeremy Pope to Patti LuPone. How did you approach casting this show?

MURPHY: Casting a television show is like casting a dinner party. It's like, "Well, who do I want to sit next to for the next six months of my life?" I like to give actors a lot of say and then throw challenges their way. I just called them all up and said, "Hey, I have this part for you, and I'm not going to take no for an answer, and you're going to do it." It was a very fun group of people and we all really believed passionately in what we were making. We believed in the message of the piece. We had a lot of fun dinner parties. It was a very fun and very emotional experience. There was a lot of crying during the making of this show because of how painful so much of this story was and continues to be.

Jim Parsons is absolutely terrifying as Henry Willson — we're not used to seeing him as a villain. How did you approach writing and casting that character?

MURPHY: Henry Willson was a real-life villain, and that role was very heavily researched. Wilson was a true sexual predator and an alcoholic who would take these young men who were vulnerable and from bad homes, who came to Hollywood trying to make it, and then sexually abuse them. It's a very tricky thing when you're writing a monstrous character like Henry Willson, because you may not like what they do, but I want you to understand why they're doing what they're doing. Nobody just becomes a monster. Monsters are made.

BRENNAN: Writing a delicious villain is my greatest joy and the thing I do the best. And once Jim signed on, it was such an odd but absolutely perfect casting choice. When I first saw the dailies, I was stunned. He's the only person I could ever picture in that role now.

MURPHY: When I presented Jim with the role, it wasn't an instant yes. He worried about it. It was scary. But he had just come off a very long run playing a beloved sitcom character, and he

was like, "Okay, I want to be scared. I've been playing this beloved character. I want to do something scary." Once he committed to it, he *committed* to it. He put in the false teeth and the contacts and the prosthetics every day, which were very painful. He wore that wig, he changed the way he walked. He choreographed the entire drag dance scene himself, and got a huge round of applause from the crew. I was filming *The Prom* with Meryl Streep when I got the footage of that scene, and I could not believe how good it was. I showed it to Meryl and she was like, "Oh my God, this is so brilliant." If Meryl thinks you're brilliant, that's the best you can do..

Why do you think a story about hope and reformation is so important right now, at this specific point in our history?

MURPHY: Well, I think that in our show, we have Eleanor Roosevelt come into town and she says it best. She says, "I used to believe that the government could change the world, but I don't know that I believe that anymore." She believes that we need leadership in other places, one of those places being Hollywood, to show a world that is more compassionate, more empathetic. We learn life lessons from what we see on the screen. We learn how to act, how to fall in love, how to forge friendships, make enemies. It gets into our permeable membranes. Hollywood has always been a great, great teacher for me, and I think this show offers a world we need to be reminded of — a place where the good guys win and a new day is dawning. At its core, that's what this show is about: happy endings.