

## Netflix woos Japan with new original series about a reporter

By Yuri Kageyama

Netflix is producing and shooting an original series set in Japan about a journalist who challenges authority, hoping to woo this nation that's hooked on watching good old TV.

Good timing. The series' heroine is based on a muckraking real-life reporter, Isoko Mochizuki, who has doggedly questioned a politician who has just become prime minister, Yoshihide Suga.

Suga took office this week after his boss, Shinzo Abe, resigned over health problems.

The Netflix series called "The Journalist" is based on the story of Mochizuki, a reporter for the Tokyo Shimbun, who kept asking questions of Suga at his news conferences as chief government spokesman, despite being cut off, ignored or ridiculed. That's a sight common in the US and some other nations but rare in hierarchical, orderly Japan.

The series will be directed by Michihito Fujii, who was behind a 2019 award-winning movie that Netflix has adapted for the series. For the Netflix series, Ryoko Yonekura, an actress known for portraying tough women, plays the reporter who like Mochizuki goes after cover-ups and scandals. It's slated for global streaming next year, Netflix announced this week.

The series was decided on long before it became clear earlier this month that Suga was destined to become prime minister.

"People were before looking for the lowest common denominator, a

story that has travel ability," Greg Peters, Netflix's chief operating officer and chief product officer COO, told The Associated Press.

"What we see is that the stories that connect with people around the world are stories that are authentic, that are anchored in the local culture, a local time that really speak a place," he said.

After five years in Japan, the video streaming service has 5 million subscribers, up from 3 million last year as the coronavirus pandemic has people looking for entertainment while they stay home. That's still a fraction of the 193 million global paid members Netflix has, 73 million of them in the US and Canada.

### Target

Netflix's image in Japan suffered over the death earlier this year of Hana Kimura, who was in the reality show "Terrace House." The female professional wrestler was found dead in an apparent suicide after becoming a target of social-media harassment.

"Terrace House" aired in Japan as a Fuji TV show in 2012, made with production company East Entertainment. Netflix, based in Los Gatos, California, said the series was licensed, although it's billed as "a Netflix original series."

Netflix acquired global streaming rights for the show from 2015. The episodes where Kimura appeared have been removed, but other episodes still air on Netflix.

"Our hearts go out to Miss Kimura's family at this terrible time.

Given this tragedy, all production and the launch of any new episodes have been postponed indefinitely," Netflix said in a statement.

In Japan, Amazon Prime Video is No. 1 in streaming services, and the smaller Hulu Japan, U-Next and Yahoo! Japan's Gyaoo are also rivals. Netflix's fee starts at 800 yen (\$7.50) and goes to 1,800 yen (\$17) in Japan.

Amazon does not give a breakdown by nation for its 150 million global Amazon Prime users, but its subscribers are estimated to be about three times Netflix's. Netflix officials say some Amazon users may use its online retail services without watching streaming content.

Netflix's director of content acquisition, Kaata Sakamoto, has been with Netflix since its Japan launch five years ago. He said hardly anyone expressed interest in making content for Netflix at first.

One hit among its original Japanese content has been its "The Naked Director," based on the life of a pornography filmmaker. It premiered last year and a second season is being shot.

The chance to pursue topics shunned by mainstream TV coupled with access to global audiences makes Netflix potentially appealing for content creators, according to Motohiro Tokuriku, an expert on net trends who works at Japanese online content platform Note.

"I used to have the theory that Japanese are too used to viewing TV for free, and won't ever sign up for paid streaming services, but that's definitely changing," Tokuriku said. (AP)

### Variety



This image released by Lionsgate shows Janelle Monáe, (left), and London Boyce in a scene from 'Antebellum.' (AP)

### Film

Monáe's performance powerful

## Horrors of slavery in 'Antebellum'

By Lindsey Bahr

The new film "Antebellum" begins with a famous William Faulkner quote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

This is a very literal introduction to a film about the evils of de facto and de jure oppression of Black people in America that's crafted as a high-concept nightmare. Essentially, a modern-day woman finds herself trapped and enslaved on a plantation and must find a way to escape and reclaim her identity. Perhaps the overused quote was a warning about the journey we were about to go on. Because while the concept is certainly intriguing, the execution falls woefully short of its potential. In other words, this is no "Get Out," although it would like to be.

Written and directed by Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz (in their feature debut) the film begins on the plantation. The camera floats over familiar images of Southern hypocrisy as a little white girl in a sunny yellow dress skips over to her mother on the steps of their grand estate while enslaved Black people work around them and Confederate soldiers march through the grounds. Janelle Monáe is introduced as one of these enslaved people, Eden. And it's not long before the brutality starts - branding, lynching, assault (verbal, sexual and physical).

We're in this "past" for over 30 minutes before the film essentially stops and reboots itself in a modern setting where Monáe is now Veronica Henley, a famous and wealthy writer and public intellectual who is going on a work trip. She has a picture-perfect life: A loving husband and a beautiful daughter, a magazine-worthy apartment, professional success and confidence. She's the kind of notable author who gets asked to speak on television and at conferences about racism and empowerment. In an alternate reality, this could be the beginning of a rom-com.

But things are a little off here and the audience, along with Veronica, begin to see the cracks in this so-called progressive society where she is subjected to dehumanizing microaggressions and bigger slights over the course of a day. There's the concierge at the hotel who takes a call instead of helping her. There's the host at the restaurant who seats her and her friends by the kitchen when other tables are open. And there's the

woman (Jena Malone) whose compliments of Veronica ooze with degrading condescension.

Malone is in the "past" too, perusing the slaves for purchase. And the film comes to reveal (as the trailer does in just a few minutes) that the plantation is neither the past nor a dream, but a very real place where Black people are kidnapped and taken so that white supremacists can "play" at living in the antebellum South, kind of like Westworld but without the pretense of robots.

The machinations of the plot are not subtle and the film seems more interested in showcasing torture rather than illuminating the racism that lives on today.

### Rebuke

Monáe said in an interview with Entertainment Weekly that most films about racism are white savior films - even some that she's been part of. It is a failing of cinema and storytelling when an experience is only shown through a certain lens that helps absolve and even make the oppressors feel good. "Antebellum" is supposed to be a rebuke to that. But it just doesn't come close to delivering on all its big ideas, despite Monáe's powerful performance. The movie is strongest in the modern setting and full of clichés on the plantation.

And this is fine. Part of leveling the playing field is allowing for failure from all areas. Besides, a big swing and a miss is always more interesting than a safe approach.

In the end, "Antebellum" will inspire conversation, just probably not the one the filmmakers anticipated.

Monáe says she "felt so much rage and anger" when she stepped onto a former slave plantation for the first time to film the psychological thriller "Antebellum."

In the movie, set for release Friday, the pop star and actress plays a successful modern-day author that finds herself trapped in alternate time periods, including the terrifying reality of a runaway slave. Remembering the moment she arrived on that plantation set, she becomes visibly emotional.

"My ancestors were stolen. They didn't steal slaves or servants. They stole doctors. They stole lawyers. They stole musicians. They stole mothers, fathers. Humans that mattered," she said.

"Antebellum," a Lionsgate release, is rated R by the

Motion Picture Association of America for "disturbing violent content, language, and sexual references." Running time: 105 minutes. Two stars out of four.

Much of the horror of "Antebellum" is in its unflinching depiction of the violence inflicted on slaves. Monáe hopes the film acts as a catalyst for discussions about systemic racism in a politically divided nation. She says it's essential to "confront the pain" of the past in order to understand the present state of Black Americans - and address police brutality and social injustice.

"You cannot talk about the present and everything we're dealing with the police without knowing the past and understanding that in the South during the Civil War that the first police institution was the same slave patrol meant to control, meant to monitor free slaves, meant to kill, meant to discriminate against free slaves," Monáe said.

The movie grew out of a literal nightmare that Bush had after his father died. He awoke remembering "this woman, Eden, that was screaming desperately for help that felt like cross-dimensional in a sense."

"I was really emotional from the experience. And I took out my notepad and took all of the notes from the nightmare," Bush said.

Bush and Renz say they used 1970s horror films as inspiration. They hope to unsettle audiences when depicting terrors of the pre-abolition South. The Oscar-winning 1939 film "Gone With the Wind" became a touchstone. Bush describes it as both a "horror film" and "a piece of really effective propaganda."

"We went so far as to obtain the lenses from 'Gone with the Wind' to shoot our movie so that we could take that same weaponry that was intended to misinform, to correct the record," Bush said.

In addition to Monáe, the cast also includes Jack Huston, Eric Lange, Kiersey Clemons, Gabourey Sidibe and Jena Malone.

Like many films this year, the pandemic has led to multiple delays in releasing "Antebellum." Bush notes the significance of the settled final date: "We didn't do it deliberately. But it just so happens that the date of September 18th is the anniversary of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850," he said.

Bush said he realizes that audiences will be uncomfortable watching the film, but he believes that unsettling times calls for unsettling art. (AP)

**NASHVILLE, Tenn:** A federal judge has sentenced an Austin, Texas, man to 30 months in prison after he pleaded guilty to stalking and sending threatening letters and emails to pop star Taylor Swift's former record label.

According to records filed in federal court, Eric Swarbrick was given the sentence during a hearing Wednesday in Nashville. The terms of the sentence, which also includes three years of supervised release, were agreed on by prosecutors in a plea agreement that Swarbrick entered in 2019.

The complaint said Swarbrick sent over 40 letters and emails to Big Machine Label Group in 2018, asking the CEO to introduce him to Swift. Over time the letters became more violent and threatening. On three occasions Swarbrick drove to Nashville to personally deliver them. (AP)

**LOS ANGELES:** Cardi B has filed for divorce from Migos' rapper Offset, claiming her marriage was "irretrievably broken."

The Grammy-winning rapper filed the divorce documents Tuesday in Atlanta, according to a Fulton County Courthouse filing. She said there are "no prospects for a reconciliation" for marriage with Offset.

Cardi B, using her birth name Belcalis Marlenis Almanzar, is seeking primary physical and legal custody of their 2-year-old daughter, Kulture. She also wants Offset, whose real name is Kiari Kendrell Cephus, to pay child support and her legal expenses.

The hip-hop stars have had a rocky marriage since they secretly wed in 2017. The couple broke up the following year, but eventually decided to work things out.

An email seeking comment was sent to her representatives.

A hearing in the case is scheduled for Nov. 4. (AP)

**TRENTON, NJ:** New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said Wednesday that YouTube stars who rented out the "Jersey Shore" house Monday should "be taken to task" after an estimated 1,000 people showed up, many flouting COVID-19 social distancing rules.

Murphy, a Democrat, called the gathering at the Seaside Heights house that hosted the MTV show

one of the "most extreme and egregious" examples of "knucklehead" behavior since the outbreak began in March.

The Canadian YouTubers, known as the Nelk Boys, have nearly 6 million subscribers and rented out the house Monday to mark the offering of new merchandise for sale.

In comments posted on Twitter, one of the group's members,



Offset



Cardi B

Kyle Forgeard, said they didn't intend for a large group to gather and the group was being unfairly criticized. He said they had hired off-duty police and provided other security to make sure there wasn't a big gathering.

"Now that we've learned we're COVID's going on everyone's bored people are going ... to show up," he said.

He also disputed reports suggesting the group aimed to attract so many people.

"We didn't want to get in trouble," he said.

Police have said they arrested eight people during the gathering Monday.

Murphy estimated the crowd numbered about 1,000 people and said it took seven or eight police

departments to break up.

New Jersey's coronavirus restrictions cap the number of people at an outdoor gathering at 500, and call for social distancing and masks.

Murphy said all the people who showed up should get tested and pointed to recent trends showing increasing COVID-19 positive test results among young people. (AP)