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Netflix's new French TV series 'Marseille' represents a big bet on local content

By CHRIS O'BRIEN
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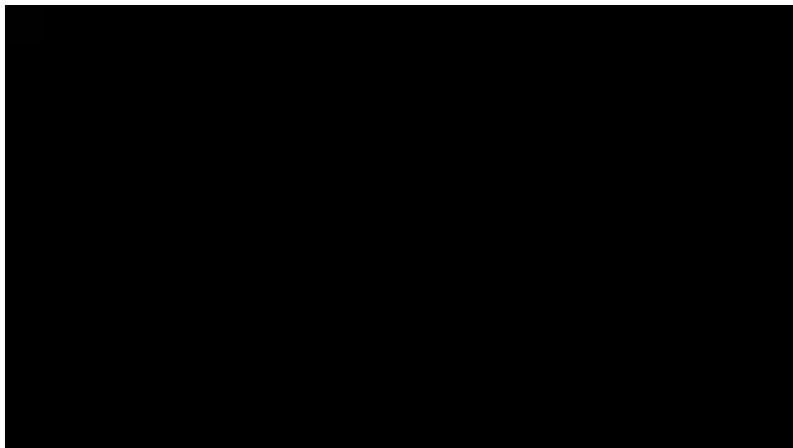


Stephane Caillard, Gerard Depardieu, Benoit Magimel and Nadia Fares pose during a photocall for the premiere of the French TV show "Marseille." (Bertrand Langlois/AFP/Getty Images)



In staging a lavish premiere screening of Netflix's first French-language series, executives arrived Wednesday in the country's second-largest city with a long list of things for this show to accomplish.

Of course, they would like the show, "Marseille," to be its latest buzzworthy hit. They also hope that spending millions of dollars on a French show will demonstrate to critics in this film-mad country that they came in peace, not to conquer and eviscerate its creative industry.



But more importantly, Netflix needs to demonstrate that its massive bet on creating original content for local markets is on track to be a winner. As more streaming services offer more content, Netflix believes its global scale and investment in new programming will keep it on top of an industry that seems to be evolving faster by the minute.

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"No one has ever built a global production operation in this way," said Netflix Chief Executive Reed Hastings. "We have to figure out how to do that. The Internet is the first global distribution channel. We can be sure we'll get some wrong. But we hope to get enough right so we can keep investing in more local content."

At the moment, Netflix has 30 original shows or films in various stages of production in countries around the world. Hastings and content chief Ted Sarandos, the man who runs the production business, believe they are already

creating as much original programming as any of the largest traditional broadcasters in the world.

With Netflix having expanded to 190 countries late last year, the two men expect that slate of original programming to grow by many magnitudes so they can offer local programming to local viewers. It's a staggering pace of expansion for a company that was primarily in the business of delivering DVDs by mail a few years ago, and introduced its first series, "House of Cards," in 2013.

The company's annual budget for such content is on track to grow from \$5 billion last year to \$6 billion in 2016. That has made investors nervous at times, wondering if and when this big gamble will pay off.

The gala premiere of "Marseille" on Wednesday and the release of the first season of eight episodes at midnight seem to encapsulate all the excitement and risks that flow from Netflix's ambitious content plans.

The new show arrives about 20 months after Netflix's launch in this country stoked national anxieties about whether it would undercut the carefully calibrated economic system that produces much of the TV and film.

"There were some comments that this would be Armageddon for French media," Hastings said. "And that turned out not to be true."

But amid the sometimes heated rhetoric in 2014, Netflix also announced that it had agreed to produce "Marseille," a move that was part of emerging content, but also seen here as a kind of olive branch.

As Hastings and Sarandos discussed the show Wednesday, they sat in a restaurant on the seventh floor of the Sofitel Hotel that offered a jaw-dropping view of Marseille's Old Port. A cascade of white buildings climbed the surrounding hills leading out to the water, and the sun overhead seemed to bathe them in a bronze glow.

However, rather than being associated with art or architectural wonders, Marseille

is more often synonymous in France as a foothold for the Mafia, corrupt politicians, drugs and gangs. Not so good for tourist brochures. But as it turns out, perfect fodder for an edgy series from a company that likes to take risks.

"Marseille" tells the story of a coke-snorting mayor, played by Gérard Depardieu, who may or may not be corrupt. The mayor is near the end of his career and is preparing to step down and hand power over to his chosen successor when things go sideways. There is violence, sex, manipulation and beautiful, luminescent panoramas of Marseille mixed with gritty slums.

"We're very happy with it," Sarandos said. "The reviews are quite positive. This is an example of very good storytelling."

Alas, that is only partly true. In France, the previews of the first two episodes have been widely savaged by reviewers, a sign of just how tricky it can be to target local tastes. "One wonders how Netflix ... did not anticipate its French ship going straight into the wall," wrote one reviewer for *Télérama.fr*. *Le Monde*, one of France's largest newspapers, likened it to an "industrial accident."

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However, executives and producers said reviewers in Britain and Germany had offered praise for the series. And they noted that reviews of Netflix shows, such as the recent "Fuller House," tend to not have much effect on viewing.

"All the Europeans love it," said "Marseille" producer Pascal Breton, as he paused on the red carpet before the screening. "Everyone except the Parisians. It's funny, no?"

The screening was held inside the Palais du Pharo, set also on the waterfront and built by Napoleon III for his wife in the 19th century. On this night, it was illuminated by bright red lights matching Netflix's signature color.

As cast members ran the gauntlet of press, French journalists appeared perplexed that someone had filmed something outside of Paris. Again and again, they asked, "Why Marseille?"

Meanwhile, Marseille's real mayor darted from journalist to journalist, basking in the attention his city was receiving, though the series itself promises to not necessarily paint a flattering portrait of its namesake.

Sarandos said he hopes the show will drive tourists to Marseille and raise its international profile. And Hastings said he hopes the reach of its platform will persuade France's creative industry that it is more opportunity than threat.

As the crowd gathered in the theater for the screening, Hastings stood at the front with a microphone. Behind him was a massive poster for "Marseille" beamed onto the screen.

"Tonight, all eight episodes will be available around the world," he said. "People in 190 countries will be able to binge watch the first season. It shows what's possible because the Internet is the first global medium the world has ever known. And it shows the kind of reach a show made right here can have."

O'Brien is a special correspondent.

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