Amazon Studios asks the public to review shows before they're made into series. Sound crazy? Not to its executives, who consider the studio "the most customer-centric in the world."

BY **DEANNA BARNERT**

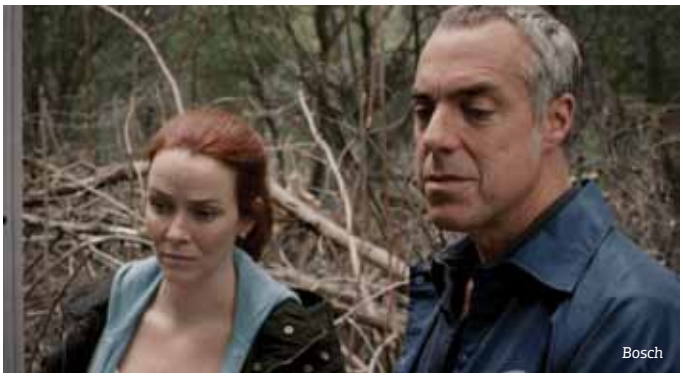
Opinion, Please!

ILLUSTRATION BY **TODD REUBLIN**

"Fifty years ago," Joe Lewis says of a time far, far away, "there'd be three heads of networks and their teams of a few people making their best guess on what the audience wanted to see. Forty years later, you had tens, if not hundreds, of TV channels and more executives trying to guess about niche audiences.

"We've transcended that entirely. When it comes to decision-making, instead of trying to guess what a million people want to watch, we just ask the audience."

A startling, yet perfectly plausible concept: ask people what they want to watch, then give it to them. Not so startling is that it has come from Amazon, the company that figured out how to sell almost everything to almost everybody via the internet. As the streaming service prepares a second season of original programming, executives at Amazon Studios are savoring their unique way of doing business.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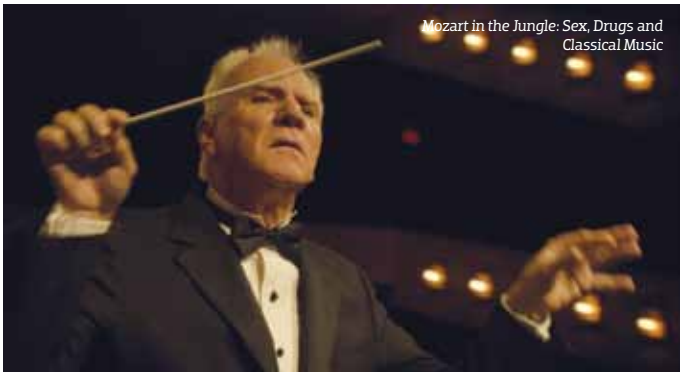
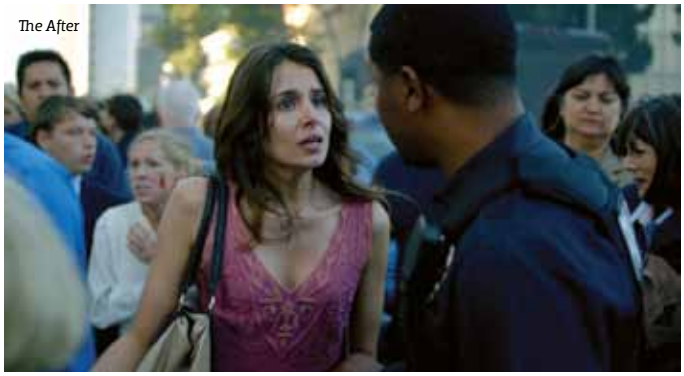

Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs and Classical Music


The After

AMAZON STUDIOS

"Amazon Studios is the most customer-centric network studio in the world," says Lewis, head of comedy TV development.

That's because Amazon customers in the United States and the United Kingdom get to participate in the actual development process. They can submit their own scripts for consideration and track studio development via Amazon's online development slate; Amazon may even reach out to a select few to garner feedback on concepts or ideas.

The studio's pilot season is a one-month period during which customers get to watch and review the pilots under consideration. Those reviews will ultimately help define the new season.

"We can say, without a doubt, that customers and users already love any show we pick up," Lewis says confidently.

Anyone with an Amazon account can chime in via Amazon's familiar product review system, but to see the fruits of their labor — the actual TV series — customers need to upgrade to an Amazon Prime account, which, for $99 a year, offers access to Prime Instant Video's movies and television shows. (It also offers free two-day shipping for Amazon purchases and other benefits.)

Currently, Amazon Studios has thirty theatrical motion pictures on its development slate (though nothing has been greenlighted yet), and execs admit they're still figuring out how to best solicit feedback for movies.

On the TV side, however, customers are fully engaged.

The studio is revving up for a second season of *Alpha House* and a slew of premieres, including *The After* (from *X-Files*'s Chris Carter), *Bosch* (from best-selling novelist Michael Connelly and *Treme* co-creator Eric Overmyer), *Transparent* (from Jill Soloway, producer of *Six Feet Under*) and *Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs and Classical Music* (from Roman Coppola, Jason Schwartzman and Alex Timbers). Three new kids' originals are also set to launch this summer, with two more to follow.

Meanwhile, the studio's third wave of pilots is already picking up steam, with orders for a Marc Forster–Ben Watkins drama, *Hand of God*, and a Whit Stillman dramedy, *The Cosmopolitans*.

"A lot of people agree that television is in a renaissance," says Roman Coppola (*Moonrise Kingdom*, *The Darjeeling Limited*), who adapted *Mozart in the Jungle* from Blair Tindall's memoir. "There's incredible, exciting work happening."

"No more dreaming about *one day*," says Morgan Wandell, Amazon Studios head of drama series development. "We can take real shots with amazing talent and have the potential to deliver it to millions of people via streaming video. I find I'm still pinching myself, because we've been living through this migration for so long."

While Amazon Studios is all about giving customers a voice, development starts with the executives leading the charge, each of whom strayed from traditional cable and network television careers to explore this grand new world of streaming.

Roy Price, director of the studio, for example, spent almost six years developing animated Disney TV series like *Kim Possible* before branching out. Lewis, who originally hails from Comedy Central's *Tosh.0*, left 20th Century Fox four years ago, "because I had this vision of the future and how television was going to be delivered." Wandell did time as a production executive at Berlanti Television and ABC Studios, developing hits like *Ugly Betty* before breaking into alternative media; and Tara Sorensen, head of kids' programming, previously developed and produced Emmy-winning series at National Geographic Kids Entertainment and Sony.

This experienced crew believes the key to creating great television is finding and betting on talent.

"A lot of shows that have done well recently have one thing in common: They have a super talented creator with a vision for doing something new and interesting with an ongoing, serial story," Price points out. "That's the fundamental thing we're always looking for."

Specifically, he says, Amazon is interested in working with creators who delve into worlds that haven't been seen on TV, take risks and refuse to settle or pander. With so many outlets tackling scripted programing these days, Amazon sees the real battle in acquiring talent, not viewers.

"Sometimes people say, 'Just let me know which way you want me to go and I'll do it,'" Lewis notes. "There's no better way to end a pitch here. I tell my team all the time, 'The best script we could have is one we don't have to give any notes on.' It can happen. As developers, we can help curate the brand and the talent we're working with, but we're not here to make notes."

Coppola, who's new to TV development but certainly not the business, felt that approach from the beginning of his partnership with Amazon. "They appreciated what we'd done and were ready to be our patron and support us," he says.

Amazon creators also don't have to grapple with traditional TV conflicts like pleasing advertisers or writing to commercial breaks. Issues like sched-

uling the right lead-in or interrupting serial story arcs for baseball season aren't pertinent, either.

"The platform is different," Lewis says. "Therefore the product is, too. We're not a cable, broadcast or movie platform. If you want to call it anything, it's serialized TV. If we're right, you will get to see a beginning, middle and end of every show on Amazon. It's TV meets movies, in this new form."

As Amazon is changing the way television does business, the very concept of competition is changing as well.

"Here's what it boils down to," Wandell says. "You've got to be somebody's favorite show. It's slightly different than broadcast, because we're not trying to be all things to all people. We want to passionately engage Amazon customers who want distinct, interesting television."

Amazon Studios' open submission process accepts proposals for comedy and children's programming from "anyone in the world," Lewis says. "We just lower the drawbridge and every script gets read."

A team of in-house readers and executives culls the submissions, selecting the front-runners. The best of the submissions slowly make it up the ladder to the division heads. If an online submission makes the cut, Amazon pairs the newbie writer with a veteran showrunner for the pilot. The project is then added to the development slate and put to the same standards as any other contender in the slate.

This season's *Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street*, for example, came from David Anaxagoras, a preschool teacher who has an MFA in screenwriting, but was ready to throw in the creative towel. His kids' program — about three tweens whose ostensibly ordinary suburb is a source of eccentric characters and strange events — wasn't Amazon's first online submission to make it to pilot, but was the first to get picked up.

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Gortimer Gibbon's Life on Normal Street

"In many ways, his life right now resembles Gortimer's: Did that frog really exist? Did I really just sell my script to Amazon?" Sorensen quips. "At the end of the pilot shoot, we asked David if he was happy with everything. How could he not be? We got an Oscar-winning director [Luke Matheny] and [actress] Fionnula Flanagan! David started to cry, because he was so moved by seeing his work come to life. This would never happen [elsewhere] — this guy was discovered from nowhere."

And while it's breaking the mold in its development process, Amazon is trying to do the same with kids' content.

"We wanted to take an innovative approach to curriculum," Sorensen says. "We looked at combining left- and right-brain [thinking] into one show. We would never do a math show, but we might do a music show that touches on math."

Sorensen says Amazon is building an "über-curriculum for lifelong learners" with the help of educational psychologist and children's TV expert Dr. Alice Wilder (*Blue's Clues*). As in primetime, several proven, Emmy-nominated creators are in the mix, but with a panel of experts to keep the curriculum on track, the kids' division is open to working with anyone with a creative vision.

The three kids' series set to launch this summer are: *Tumbleaf*, a stop-motion series that explores science through play; *Creative Galaxy*, a show about solving problems through art; and *Annedroids*, a live-action series that follows the adventures of a home-schooled genius scientist who tinkers in her junkyard.

In the children's division and in primetime, customer engagement comes into play as soon as shows land on Amazon's development slate. Throughout the process, Amazon keeps its eye on users' activity and responses via daily reports on metrics such as which scripts are garnering the most attention or generating conversations. Official pilot season, however, is the heart of testing.

For Amazon's second wave of pilots, customers were given a month to view, rate and provide feedback online on five primetime pilots and five kids' pilots. Millions of Amazon users reportedly weighed in on the first wave, and word is that number doubled in the second.

Though this is a totally new process, Price calls it "risk-friendly."

"You always want to be right on that line of edgy, safe, loud and provocative," Lewis says. "We can push things farther and then put it in front of the audience and say, 'Did we go too far?'"

Wandell enjoys Amazon's customer-review process for another reason.

"As someone who's spent a lot of nights in a testing facility in North Hollywood with fifty slightly grumpy people who are aspiring to have careers in this business, it's interesting to see what real viewers and customers think about the shows," he says. "That's an incredibly unique proposition, for creators to hear directly from the audience how they're responding to the worlds they've presented."

The creators can read the reviews, just like anyone else, if they so choose.

"When it first came out, I was excited and I tracked it — 'Oh, we have five stars!'" Coppola says. "It seemed there was a lot of interest in the show and a couple of people said, 'Wow, a show about this world [of classical music] is long overdue.' That made me happy."

But Coppola hasn't checked back in since the beginning.

"I'm curious, but tentative," he admits. "The chatter online can sometimes be less than kind. And when you're making work, you have to go with your instinct, be observant and put your radar out for comments. But to crowd-source and be too involved with those comments can be disruptive."

That's where the execs and techies step in to analyze the data, which is about more than just comments and rating scores. Case in point, *The Rebels* pilot did not get a pickup, in spite of a healthy customer rating of 4.3 out of a possible 5.

"We see a lot more granular detail about how people watch things," Lewis explains. "We not only look at how many people start an episode, but how many finish it. Then, who are those people? Are they twelve-year-old girls or thirty-something men and women? Do people tweet about it? Do they rewatch it? Most of the time, we find our thoughts have aligned with the viewers."

Amazon TV executives admit that they're still figuring out their system for series production and release.

With its first original series, *Alpha House* and *Betas*, Amazon initially made three episodes available to any and all viewers, followed by weekly episodic releases for Prime members only.

"Before us, it had been done two ways: all at once, or one at a time," Lewis says, referring to the Netflix-style of releasing entire seasons at once and the traditional network format. "There are a million derivations. We're open to any form, and I don't know if we've come up with the perfect one yet."

Price agrees that certain elements are "inherently experimental — for now. It's a completely on-demand world, and that creates a new dynamic. You want to operate in a way that takes that into account. At this early stage, you can overdo it with rigid plans that don't work with reality."

Of course, there are some areas with less room for experimentation, even at Amazon Studios.

"There are aspects of narrative storytelling that haven't changed since Aristotle's *Poetics*," Price maintains. "Hopefully, we'll find a hybrid of practices that take advantage of the old and the new.

"The plan is to make Prime Instant Video more and more awesome," he adds. "We are working on that every day. We'll figure out the sweet spot."