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# A Drama's Streaming Premiere

By **BRIAN STELTER**

EARLY in the new [Netflix](#) series “House of Cards” the narrator and card player Representative Francis Underwood, played by [Kevin Spacey](#), looks straight into the camera and tells viewers: “Power is a lot like real estate. It’s all about location, location, location. The closer you are to the source, the higher your property value.”

Underwood is speaking at a presidential inauguration, just outside the Capitol in Washington. As viewers observe the swearing-in he asks in a delicious Southern drawl, “Centuries from now, when people watch this footage, who will they see smiling just at the edge of the frame?” Then Underwood comes into frame again. He’s just a few rows away from the president. He gives the camera a casual wave.

Underwood, having been spurned in his bid to become secretary of state, is on a quest for power that’s just as suspenseful as anything on television. But his story will unspool not on TV but on Netflix, the streaming video service that is investing hundreds of millions of dollars in original programming. Its plan for showing “House of Cards,” an adaptation of a 1990 BBC mini-series set in Parliament, will itself be a departure from the usual broadcast approach. On Feb. 1 all 13 episodes will be available at once, an acknowledgment that many of its subscribers like to watch shows in marathon sessions.

Another 13 episodes are already in production. Odds are, then, that viewers are going to spend quite a while inside Underwood’s head as he tricks, coerces and sometimes intimidates his opponents. “He makes you complicit in an odd way,” said [David Fincher](#), the acclaimed filmmaker who directed the first episode of the new series.

This is accomplished by having Mr. Spacey break the fourth wall, or address the audience directly. The original “House of Cards” did it too.

“I loved the idea of being intimately part of the thought process of this lead character, because he could take you aside and explain to you what he was doing and why he was doing it and where it was headed,” Mr. Fincher said.

He and the other producers won’t reveal exactly where their modern-day “Macbeth” ends up, though a shot at the presidency isn’t a bad guess. The characters introduced in the first two episodes include Representative Peter Russo, a pawn for Underwood, played by Corey Stoll (Hemingway in “Midnight in Paris”); Linda Vasquez, the president’s chief of staff, played by Sakina Jaffrey; and Underwood’s conniving wife, Claire, played by Robin Wright. “In politics there’s

ambition, desire, lust, betrayal — all the same kinds of things we exhibit and experience in our own everyday lives,” said Beau Willimon, the show runner. Mr. Fincher, Mr. Willimon and many of the other players — all basically television novices — were brought together by Media Rights Capital, an independent studio that had optioned the rights to “House of Cards” thanks to an intern who recommended it to Mordecai Wiczyk, the studio’s co-founder.

Mr. Fincher was finishing “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” when he was introduced to the BBC mini-series by an agent. “David said, ‘I’d love to executive-produce this, and I’d like to bring Eric Roth with me,’ ” Mr. Wiczyk recalled. “Generally speaking, when you get that phone call, you just say yes. Which I did.”

Mr. Roth had written the screenplay for “Benjamin Button.” Next, Mr. Fincher said, they had to “find a writer who would do the due diligence to transplant parliamentary politics to Washington.” Enter Mr. Willimon, who had written the play “Farragut North” and turned it into the film “The Ides of March.” After watching the BBC mini-series, he said, “I saw tons of great opportunities to make it our own, to make it contemporary, to broaden its scope and deepen its story.” It’s a “reinvention,” he added, not a mere remake.

By the time Mr. Willimon completed the pilot in early 2011, Mr. Spacey’s agent had started asking about the project. (Artistic director of the Old Vic theater in London, “Kevin is an Anglophile,” Mr. Wiczyk said.) The actor was part of the package Media Rights Capital brought to HBO, Showtime, AMC and other possible television buyers.

But before the studio met with any of them it put out a feeler to Netflix, thinking that fast-growing service might bid for the rights to repeat the show after a television premiere. The Netflix chief content officer, Ted Sarandos, a fan of the original, did what Netflix executives tend to do: He looked at the data. He found that Mr. Spacey and Mr. Fincher’s films were pretty popular among subscribers to Netflix’s streaming service. So were the films and TV shows in the category Netflix called “political thrillers.” And if that wasn’t enough evidence that a “House of Cards” reboot would fare well, there was this: The DVDs of the original mini-series were popular among subscribers to the company’s DVD-by-mail service.

Mr. Sarandos also sized up the project qualitatively. “It looked incredibly promising,” he said, “kind of the perfect storm of material and talent.”

He wanted exclusive rights to the show — a jaw-dropper at the time, since Netflix wasn’t in the exclusives business yet. His \$100 million commitment to license 26 episodes, two seasons, sight unseen clinched the deal.

Since the deal was struck in March 2011 Netflix has taken a couple of tentative steps into original programming, picking up overseas shows that had never been seen in the United States before. But “House of Cards” is the first show that can be called made for Netflix. It’s also the first to be

considered, by those that do such considering, as prestigious as the programs on HBO and other top-tier cable channels. Netflix plans to have premieres of several other original shows this year, including a new season of the canceled Fox comedy “Arrested Development”; “Hemlock Grove,” a horror series produced by Eli Roth; a comedy, “Orange Is the New Black,” from the “Weeds” creator Jenji Kohan; and another called “Derek” from Ricky Gervais.

For “House of Cards” what was almost as important as the two-season commitment was Netflix’s promise of zero interference. “We’re placing our faith in you,” Mr. Sarandos told Mr. Fincher and the other producers.

Mr. Willimon said that he and his writing staff wrote drafts of all 13 episodes of the first season before filming commenced on a soundstage outside Baltimore last April — in contrast to most television shows that have a much more compressed timetable. What is compressed, in this case, is the release of the first season.

“We approached this creatively as a 13-hour movie,” said Mr. Willimon, who eschewed cliffhangers at the ends of some episodes because, well, he could. “Knowing we had two full seasons in advance, I didn’t feel the pressure to sell the end of each episode with superficial cliffhangers or shock tactics in order to keep coming back, in order to jack up the ratings week to week,” he said. “I hope our version of a cliffhanger is compelling, sophisticated characters and complex storytelling.”

Since the series is set in Washington, some viewers will surely wonder if the characters are stand-ins for a real political animals. “Yeah, people will be tempted to think that it’s a real-life portrayal of life in D.C.,” Mr. Sarandos said. “It’s not at all. It’s a piece of fiction that is incredible. It’s not an attempt to portray the nastiness of Washington. It’s an attempt to portray the nastiness of mankind.”