HOUSE OF HORRORS

WITH HIS COMPANY MONKEYPAW PRODS. — BASED IN A HOME HIGH IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS — JORDAN PEELE WANTS TO REINVENT STORYTELLING, ONE SCARY TALE AT A TIME

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ATOP THE COFFEE TABLE INSIDE THE house where Jordan Peele’s Monkeypaw Prods. lives sit some very on-brand peri-
odicals — titles like Heavy Metal, Fango-
ria and Rod Serling’s Twilight Zone Mag-
azine. The Twilight Zone issue is a gem. It
not only boasts a photo-realistic illus-
tration of a human baby with a cat head
but also a David Lynch retrospective cov-
ering his career “From ‘Dune’ to ‘Blue Vel-
et’” and a special report that takes read-
ers “Inside the New Horror.” The magazine
is dated 1988. Its owner was 9 years old
when it was published.

Thirty years later, it’s a pretty good
emblem for what he’s up to.
The Monkeypaw house is an unortho-
dox place for a production company . First
of all, it’s, yes, a house — balanced pre-
cariously on a Hollywood hillside, tucked
into a residential neighborhood. Peele sits
on the balcony of the upper floor, under
the Hollywood Sign, a view that recent
New York transplants in his company
still gawk at. It’s from that perch that he’s
running a mini empire, having leveraged
the surprise success of feature directorial
debut “Get Out” into a power position as a
producer. Fueled by the box office returns
of that film, along with an Oscar for orig-
inal screenplay, he’s become one of the
entertainment business’s most sought-af-
ter creators.

“Get Out” is the beginning of a move-
ment of representation in genre of social
relevance in fun movies — of elegant, artis-
tic movies that also can have great
box office potential,” Peele says. “It’s the
same in television. I think people recog-
nize that if you’re going to make some-
things in this subgenre, we’re the experts.”
The guy from “Key & Peele” is now a
top-tier filmmaker able to get almost
any TV show he wants made — and he’s
crafting a company in the mold of Ste-
ven Spielberg’s Amblin and J.J. Abrams’
Bad Robot to power his ambitions. He’s
about to begin production on “Us,” his
next feature as director and writer, and
has five current or forthcoming series at
six networks or platforms, a brand-new
first-look deal at Amazon Studios, an ani-
mated feature and a Spike Lee joint with
his name on it.

Little is known about “Us” other than
that Universal plans to release it next year
and it will be a socially minded thriller
with a relatively modest budget (though
not so modest as the $5 million spent on
“Get Out”). That intersection — of smart
genre entertainment and social conscious-
ness — is where Peele is building his com-
pany and his future as a producer, film-
maker and creator. Listen to him talk
about any of his projects long enough, and
you’ll begin to see where their DNA shows
a shared ancestry with “Get Out.”

“Genre is important to me because
that’s what I love to watch,” Peele says.
“Every now and then, a drama will really
get me, but for my money I look to cinema,
I look to television as an escape. And that
means an escape from reality. I think one
of the things that we try and do is provide
an escape for our audience — but to not let that allow us to shut our eyes to what’s really going on in the world.”

PEELE IS ONE OF ONLY FOUR AFRICAN-AMERICANS ever nominated for a best director Oscar. He also has proved that he knows how to make money at the box office. There is little doubt that if he wanted to, he could make big-budget spectacle pictures — or leave genre behind for the naturalistic small-bore storytelling favored by the Oscar voters who might someday give him a directing award. But by staying on the course he charted with “Get Out,” Peele can do what few in the business ever have a chance at — something new.

“Get Out” hit theaters after epidemic police violence against African-Americans became a fixture of national news and as President Donald Trump’s race-baiting began to increase in volume and shamelessness. When any of his projects come to television next year, they will do so in the wake of the Muslim travel ban, the dissolution of thousands of families at the U.S.-Mexico border, sexual abuse allegations against some of the media’s highest-ranking men and God knows what else.

“There has been a lack of imagination in Hollywood, which sets us up to bring in really new, creative ways of storytelling,” Peele says. “The imagination, especially when we talk about representation, has been dull. For years and years and
years, there's this preconceived notion that diversity presents a struggle for projects. Well, the truth is, we haven't invested in diversity. We haven't invested in artists. So there's a lack of courage, and I think, when you take leaps and you bring courage and confidence to projects, it works.

That Peele's projects are inclusive makes him a sound investment at a time when media companies are, more than ever, being taken to task for inadequate representations of women, people of color, LGBTQ individuals and people with disabilities. But Peele isn't making shows about a Jewish boy killing Nazis, a woman cutting her abuser's dick off and black people fighting monsters in the segregated South just so his corporate partners can score diversity points. He's doing it because it's fun.

“I think when you entertain first, you can get at something socially profound or intellectual much easier,” he says. “I think people prefer a story to a lecture or a history lesson. At least I do.”

What made “Get Out” so transformative was that it turned country-club racism into artisanal popcorn fare. “I think what Spielberg did with ‘Jaws’ is quintessential,” Peele says. “It’s totally terrifying, but it still feels like an escape.”

Peele's most recent project is “BlacKkKlansman,” the based-on-a-true-story feature, released Aug. 10, about an African-American police detective in the 1970s who goes undercover as a KKK member.

Peele served as matchmaker between production company QC Entertainment, which had the screenplay, and director Lee. For his trouble, he netted credits for himself and Monkeypaw. The film won the Grand Prix at Cannes and is Lee's best-reviewed work since 2006's “Inside Man.”

Peele remembers calling Lee, with whom he had never spoken, to talk about “BlacKkKlansman.” Lee told him that he was on his way to see “Get Out” for a second time, in a theater in a predominantly black neighborhood. He had seen it a few days earlier with a mostly white audience.

“I thought, ‘This is dope. This is the best way this can start,’” Peele says. He takes little credit for “BlacKkKlansman” beyond connecting Lee to the material.

Instead, television is where Peele has been spending the bulk of his “Get Out” creative capital, the medium where he made his career as a sketch comic — first on “Mad TV,” then on “Key & Peele.” The former is best remembered as having been less than the sum of its parts. The latter was a two-header built around Peele and fellow “Mad TV” alum Keegan-Michael Key that broke ground coming from the perspective of biracial comedians.

“Key & Peele” ended in 2015, having in five seasons won a Peabody Award and two Primetime Emmys, and spawned a comedy bit (Luther the anger translator) that President Obama would co-opt for the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Since then, television has grown so creatively dominant that feature filmmakers follow their Oscar wins with series deals. Peele followed his with nearly half a dozen.

“I would love to take the Pepsi Challenge with any other production company in Hollywood,” says Monkeypaw president Win Rosenfeld. “We sold five shows in about eight months — to series. No pilots.”

The list of projects for which Peele and Monkeypaw have secured greenlights since “Get Out” premiered last year may indeed be longer than any other producer's over the same period. It includes “Lovecraft Country” at HBO with Abrams and Misha Green; “The Hunt” with David Weil and documentary series “Lorena” from Joshua Rofé at Amazon Studios; “Weird City” with Charlie Sanders at YouTube; and a relaunch of “The Twilight Zone” with Simon Kinberg for CBS All Access. TBS also renewed the Tracy Morgan comedy “The Last OG.”

On the film side, in addition to “Us,” Monkeypaw is producing “Wendell and Wild,” a Henry Selick-directed animated feature that will reunite Key and Peele as voice actors.

Peele also set a first-look television deal with Amazon Studios in June. The agreement was finalized after Amazon picked up “The Hunt,” about a group of Nazi hunters in 1970s New York, and “Lorena,” about domestic-abuse victim-turned-vigilante Lorena Bobbitt.

Peele became a top priority for Amazon Studios head Jennifer Salke after she took over the e-commerce giant's entertainment division this year. Her meet-
In Peele’s office at Monkeypaw

are his Oscar, one of his Emmys and the chairs that Catherine Keener and Daniel Kaluuya’s characters sit in as the latter descends into “the sunken place” — the psychological prison that black victims are forced into by white predators in “Get Out.”

Down the hall is Rosenfeld’s office. The two men have known each other since high school. A veteran nonfiction television and digital-media producer, Rosenfeld moved from New York to Los Angeles last year to oversee Monkeypaw as Peele began to run the awards-season gauntlet. The company had no staff to speak of. Rosenfeld planned to fill his free time with consulting work.

“Then ‘Get Out’ did what it did,” he says. Monkeypaw now has more than 20 employees. The structure is purposely non-hierarchical. Peele, Rosenfeld and creative director Ian Cooper are the leadership. Everyone else is, title notwithstanding, on an effectively even playing field.

“We spent very little time, but some time, considering a normal structure,” says Rosenfeld. “Then we said, ‘Fuck that. Let’s get cool people we like here.’”

One of those people is Cooper, a mixed-media sculptor, who also knew Peele when they were teenagers. “We’ve been since adolescence really interested in things that scare us and exploring that in a way that is earned and grounded,” Cooper says.

Rosenfeld describes Peele’s brand — the Monkeypaw brand — thus: “Our films and our TV shows are the underdog turning into a badass. That’s the root of it. We’ll start with a normal person who’s dealing with the actual evils of the real world. Then when the monster comes in, it’s really potent, because killing the monster is cathartic for that character.”

Such monsters abound in “Lovecraft Country,” a story of African-Americans in the 1950s Jim Crow South encountering creatures from H.P. Lovecraft’s horror novels. Peele brought the project to Abrams just before “Get Out” became an awards darling.

“This was before he became Jordan Peele the phenomenon,” Abrams says. “He was just Jordan Peele the insanely talented comedian and storyteller. What I loved about it, and what when I saw ‘Get Out’ I was blown away by, was that he was doing what Rod Serling did, which is take stories of race and class and politics and fundamental human stride and tell them through genre.”

Serling is another touchstone for Peele. Of all his television projects, he says, he was most reluctant to take on “The Twilight Zone.”

“I was terrified,” Peele says. “Why would I ever jump into the most established, pristine shoes in all of the genre? I could rip ‘Twilight Zone’ off and call it something different and not be compared to Rod Serling. So I stepped away from it. And then several months later I got another call.”

That call came from Kinberg, who for years had been attached to a reboot kick- ing around at CBS Television Studios. Peele agreed to meet, and the two fed each other’s enthusiasm for reviving a show that routinely tops lists of the greatest in TV history — and whose one-hour anthology format is largely out of fashion in the serialization era, save Netflix’s “Black Mirror,” which has become the contemporary standard-bearer for “Twilight Zone”-style storytelling.

“The realization, for me, was that it was an opportunity to attempt to continue with Serling’s mission,” Peele says. “If we approach it without ego and sort of bow to Serling, that will hopefully suffice for our fellow ‘Twilight Zone’ fans but also bring back a show that I think is needed right now. Because it’s a show that has always helped us look at ourselves, hold a mirror up to society.”

Peele has resisted — but not ruled out — stepping into Serling’s on-camera presenter role for the revival. The new series will have someone in that job, speaking directly into camera, teeing up each episode. But Peele worries that his face is too associated with comedy, that his presence would undermine the serious work he’s putting in to do right by Serling’s legacy.

Serling used entertainment to get at real-world horrors, and created something beloved in the process. Peele tries to accomplish the same in everything he does. He’s doing a lot. And he wants more.

“We can make projects that take courage to produce,” he says. “When we can give companies a bit of the courage to do something new, something special, something bold and novel can really come from it.”