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This 'exciting time' at FX includes major hits like 'Fargo' and a lot of Emmys attention



Cuba Gooding Jr., left, and Courtney B. Vance star in "American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson," one of the FX shows up for Emmy consideration. (Byron Cohen / FX)

By: Greg Braxton

The winners for the 68th Primetime Emmy Awards won't be revealed until Sunday. But a football superstar turned murder defendant, a collection of quirky criminals, and married KGB agents posing as a suburban American couple have already positioned FX for victory laps.

Much of the attention during the ceremony will as usual focus on HBO, its 94 nominations — the most of any network for the 16th consecutive year — and its juggernaut "Game of Thrones," the leading nominee. But the premium network is sharing center stage this time around with basic cable outlet FX, which is armed with 56 nominations — marking a new record for basic cable — and the buzziest shows of the year.

Win or lose, the deluge of nominations demonstrates how FX, the first basic cable outlet to win a top Emmy award — for “The Shield” in 2002 — has evolved into a formidable challenger to HBO and AMC, which have long dominated the awards landscape, particularly in the prestige drama arena, with “The Sopranos,” “Game of Thrones,” “Mad Men,” “Breaking Bad” and others. At last Sunday’s Creative Arts Awards —the kickoff for the Emmys — FX, which is owned by Fox Entertainment Group, scored 12 Emmys, surpassing its previous high of eight total wins.

“We’re an overnight success that’s been 14 years in the making,” quipped John Landgraf, the head of FX Networks who has been the key architect of FX’s growth. “This is a really exciting time at the network, and I’m so pleased. It’s a tribute to the extraordinary team of executives that have been here over a decade, who are responsible for the breadth of programming we have.”

Much of the FX glow is fueled by “American Crime Story: The People v. O.J. Simpson,” the star-studded miniseries from producer Ryan Murphy (“Glee,” “American Horror Story”) that was both a critical darling and the water-cooler show of the season. The show earned 22 nods, including outstanding limited series, and virtually the whole cast, including John Travolta, Cuba Gooding Jr, Courtney B. Vance and Sarah Paulson, are nominated.

Also up for major honors is the second installment of “ Fargo,” which won in 2014 for outstanding miniseries and this season featured several story lines involving warring criminal outfits and lawmen, and “The Americans,” which follows a pair of Russian spies and combines a tense espionage story arc with a family drama. The attention on “The Americans” is particularly gratifying for network honchos: Praised by critics but largely snubbed by Emmy voters since its premiere in 2013, the series is up for best drama, lead actress (Keri Russell) and lead actor (Matthew Rhys). (It has already won two consecutive Emmys for guest actress in a drama for Margo Martindale.)

Joe Weisberg, creator of “The Americans” and the show’s executive producer Joel Fields, said the emergence of the show as an Emmy contender is thrilling, noting that FX has always been supportive,

even when the show wasn't performing as well as the executives hoped.

“From the beginning in Season 1, when we were worried about the fate of the show, they told us, ‘Stop worrying about the ratings, you’re going to be fine, just focus on the show,’” said Weisberg.

Added Fields: “We feel safe taking creative risks, and John and his team will offer up a wise, honest perspective. Their only goal is to make the show better. They found the ultimate creative manipulation — to make us want to be the best we can.”

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— Joel Fields, executive producer of "The Americans"

“Sometimes mainstream acceptance takes a little while,” said Murphy, who has developed several of FX’s signature shows, including “Nip/Tuck” and the “American Horror Story” and “American Crime Story” franchises.

Murphy said he noticed a change in the way FX was viewed by the industry when Jessica Lange won her first Emmy as lead actress in a drama for “American Horror Story” in 2013. When Kathy Bates won for supporting actress the following year for “American Horror Story: Coven,” it became even more obvious.

“I saw that the industry was taking notice,” Murphy said. “I could feel my world shifting a little bit. Now I get so many calls from actors and directors wanting to be on these shows.”

The hoopla surrounding FX extends beyond its awards momentum. Executives are celebrating the critical raves and huge audience response to its two new comedies, “Atlanta” and “Better Things,” which debuted earlier this month. This week marked the sixth season return of its huge hit “American Horror Story,” the anthology series that has become FX’s most popular show. (The launch was trumpeted by several mysterious, horrific images on large billboards as well as similarly spooky trailers.)

On the horizon are other high-profile projects, including a third season of “*Fargo*” with Ewan McGregor, “*Taboo*” with Tom Hardy from producer Ridley Scott, and two major Murphy projects: “*Feud*,” about the rivalry between legendary actresses Joan Crawford and Bette Davis that will star Lange and fellow Oscar winner Susan Sarandon, and a new chapter of “*American Crime Story*” that will focus on the 2005 Katrina storm/flood disaster. The network has changed directions from its path in the early 2000s when it was primarily known for its dramas centered on white male antiheroes such as “*The Shield*,” “*Nip/Tuck*” and “*Rescue Me*.” When Landgraf arrived in 2004, he focused on expanding the network’s brand to be more inclusive, pushing the edges in exploring genres such as horror (“*American Horror Story*”) and self-reflective comedy (“*Louie*”).

“We just kept pushing it, experimenting and aiming on getting better and more original, and we knew we couldn’t be strong in just one genre,” he said. “We wanted to be viewed as quality for the masses.” There were significant hallmarks. The network programmed a legal thriller, “*Damages*,” about two female rivals — Glenn Close and Rose Byrne. “*American Horror Story*” resurrected the anthology series formula of different stories that has been followed by others, including “*American Crime*” and HBO’s “*True Detective*.” “*Fargo*” took the name of the Oscar-winning film and injected it with a whole new twist and energy that built on its darkly comic tone. Oscar winners and A-listers such as Lange, Bates, Billy Bob Thornton, Angela Bassett, Martin Freeman and Forest Whitaker gravitated toward FX projects.

Media experts said FX has moved far beyond the network that scored the first major Emmy for a basic cable network in 2002 when Michael Chiklis of “*The Shield*” scored an upset victory in the lead actor in a drama category.

“They’re no longer the scrappy upstart,” said Scott Steinberg, author of “*Millennial Marketing*.” “What FX has done very well is having the ability to read the tea leaves in regards to pop culture and geek culture. They are doubling down and willing to take more of a chance. They’re also designing their programs to appeal to Gen-Xers and millennials.”

Murphy praised Landgraf as a visionary executive who has learned “how to do commercial fare that is loved by critics and TV academy voting members. He’s gambled, and that’s a real difficult thing to do. He’s taken big swings and it’s paid off.”

Landgraf is not making any predictions about what will happen at the Emmys. “I’m thrilled, and I try not to quibble,” he said. “I don’t control any of this.”