

Director hopes the force is with 'The Acolyte'

Leslye Headland's show attempts two feats at once: To please old-school 'Star Wars' fans and to tell an entirely new story.

By BROOKS BARNES

Leslye Headland has been telling "Star Wars" stories onscreen since she was a teenager. Ostracized at school for being different, she retreated inward, making stop-motion films starring her action figures.

So when she found success as an adult in Hollywood — Headland helped create "Russian Doll," the 2019 Netflix comedy starring Natasha Lyonne — and got the chance to create an actual "Star Wars" show, it was the realization of a lifelong dream.

And a chance for humiliating failure. On a galactic scale.

"I essentially cold-called Lucasfilm and, after a lot of conversations, found myself pitching a show — utterly elated, my ultimate career goal, the culmination of my fandom," Headland said. "At the same time, I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared. There is so much pressure. It's extreme. I had never done anything this big before."

Headland's show, "The Acolyte," will debut on Disney+ on July 4. Costing roughly \$180 million for eight episodes and taking four years to make, it attempts two feats at once: pleasing old-school "Star Wars" fans — who can seem unquenchable — while telling an entirely new story, one that requires no prior knowledge of "Star Wars" and that showcases women and people of color.

For the faithful, "The Acolyte" serves up wads of Jedi lore, franchise fundamental that the other live-action "Star Wars" TV shows have depicted sparingly or not at all. The opening scene in "The Acolyte" takes place in an eastern covey with colorful aliens, a callback to the Mos Eisley cantina from the first "Star Wars" movie, in 1977.

Other shout-outs to core fans — we see you, we weren't forgotten about you — are sprinkled into the dialogue: "May the force be with you" and "I have a bad feeling about this" makes an early appearance.

In the same time, "The Acolyte" embraces what some people call "New Star Wars," an era defined by diversity and expansion beyond the Skywalker saga, which started with Disney's purchase of the franchise in 2012.

Amanda Stenberg stars as a dreadlocked warrior who has a complicated relationship with a Jedi master played by Lee Jung-lee from "Squid Game." In his first English-speaking role, Jodie Turner-Smith ("Queen & Slim") plays the lesbian leader of a royal court of witches, while Filipino-Gamadian actor Manny Jacinto, the Good Fairy, appears as a shadowy trader. In one of her most action-oriented roles since "The Matrix," Carrie-Anne Moss plays a steady Jedi named Milla Jovovich.

"The Acolyte" also breaks new ground behind the camera: While women have directed episodes of shows like "The Mandalorian" and "Star Wars: The Clone Wars," Headland, 43, is the first to create a "Star Wars" series.

"It was like working on a razor's edge," she said during a Zoom interview, pushing her oversized glasses higher on her nose. "You're thinking, 'This is what people want from 'Star Wars.' This is what people don't want. It can mess with your head.'"

"During the creative process," she continued, "I had to give myself the forgiveness, as an artist, to fall off the razor — as long as I got back up. That was my promise to myself."



Leslye Headland, a lifelong "Star Wars" fan and the first woman to create a TV series for the franchise, is shown in New York on May 9.

From the second that any new "Star Wars" project comes into public view — Disney announced "The Acolyte" in 2020 — fans claw for information and pick apart what they find. It's part of what makes "Star Wars" so powerful: People care. But the attention also creates problems. Rumors can solidify into facts. Some "Star Wars" obsessives, for instance, have worried that Headland's show "breaks canon," or tinkers with already-established storylines in the franchise — the ultimate "Star Wars" crime. It does not.

In fact, Headland chose to place "The Acolyte" at the very beginning of the "Star Wars" timeline so canonical issues would be minimal. The show is a mystery-thriller — someone is killing Jedi — set at a time when the Jedi are at their peak, the pre-"Phantom Menace" era that has been explored in "Star Wars" novels but never onscreen. The only character in "The Acolyte" that previously existed anywhere in the franchise is a Jedi Master from novels named Vernestra Rwoh. (Headland cast her wife, Rebecca Henderson, in the role, giving her a lightsaber that can transform into a whip.)

"Leslye wanted this show to be accessible — no homework needed before watching," said Jocelyn Bioh, the Ghanaian-American writer. Headland added Bioh to the writing team for "The Acolyte" specifically because Bioh was not a "Star Wars" devotee.

"She asked me what I knew about 'Star Wars,' and my answer was, 'Harrison Ford runs around space with a giant dog,'" Bioh recalled, laughing. "And Leslye said, 'You're hired.'"

"She wanted to potentially invite in new fans — people like me," Bioh said.

The first "Acolyte" trailer, released in March, racked up 51.3 million views in its first 24 hours, a record for any live-action "Star Wars" series, including "The Mandalorian," according to Lucasfilm. Sneak-peek "Acolyte" footage, released in theaters in early May, highlighted the show's unique martial arts sequences; fan sites instantly deemed the fighting style Force Fu.

But a loud, primordial part of the "Star Wars" fandom has pushed back in predictable fashion.

"Why are there so many women,

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LESLEYE HEADLAND | Director of "The Acolyte"

girls and minority characters increasingly dominating the ranks of Jedi?" reads a comment on "The Acolyte" trailer, with others expressing a similar worldview.

It is a version of the same misogyny and racism that greeted Rey, the female Jedi (played by Daisy Ridley) who made her debut in "The Force Awakens" in 2015, and that drove Kelly Marie Tran off social media when she appeared in "The Last Jedi" (2017). Kathleen Kennedy, who runs Lucasfilm, has also experienced it, with "South Park" harshly attacking her in an episode last year. The cartoon depicted Kennedy giving the same feedback to "Star Wars" creators over and over: "Put a chick in it! Make her lame and gay!"

Some trolls have nicknamed Headland's series "The Wokelety."

In a brief telephone interview, Kennedy's support for "The Acolyte" was steadfast. "My belief is that storytelling does need to be representative of all people," she said. "That's an easy decision for me."

"Operating within these giant franchises now, with social media and the level of expectation — it's terrifying," Kennedy continued. "I think Leslye has struggled a little with that. I think a lot of the women who step into 'Star Wars' struggle with this a bit more. Because of the fan base being so male dominated, they sometimes get attacked in ways that can be quite personal."

Headland has tried to limit her exposure to the online conversation, both good and bad, instead relying on friends for "weather reports." "As a fan myself, I know how frustrating some 'Star Wars' storytelling in the past has been," Headland said, declining to cite specific examples. "I've felt it myself."

She followed up with a text

message: "I stand by my empathy for 'Star Wars' fans," she wrote. "But I want to be clear. Anyone who engages in bigotry, racism or hate speech — I don't consider a fan."

"Star Wars" projects aren't known for personal or idiosyncratic filmmaking. The production and marketing budgets are simply too high; the storytelling must appeal to the widest possible audience to make the numbers work.

Rian Johnson, who directed "The Last Jedi," told The New York Times in 2017 that he didn't even try to put his own stamp on the franchise. "It would be bad news," he wrote into this saying, "How do I make this mine?" he said.

Kennedy, however, pushed Headland to do just that with "The Acolyte."

"You've written a great 'Star Wars' show," Kennedy told her in 2019 in response to early scripts. "Now go write a Leslye Headland show."

Kennedy had read one of Headland's plays, "Cult of Love," which explores a complicated relationship between siblings. "It's about her personal experience," Kennedy said. "And it was just so well done and incredibly emotional. I remember reading that and saying, 'Leslye, her reading that you should put up into as you write this story for us.'"

Explaining exactly how Headland took Kennedy's advice would spoil a major plot point in "Acolyte." Let's just say that Headland heightened a clash between characters.

"I have a very strained relationship with my youngest sister, and I feel like one of the reasons it is strained is that we both see each other as the bad guy," Headland said. "And if I was going to tell a story about bad guys, it seemed to me that the place to start should be

a familial relationship where one person is adamantly convinced of her correctness and the other person is also adamantly convinced of her correctness."

"We don't speak," Headland added. "I think this will be a surprise to her." She wouldn't say anything more on the topic, except to emphasize that she has a good relationship with her other sister, who helped make a visual presentation that Headland used to pitch "The Acolyte" to Lucasfilm. (Headland described her concept in the meeting as "Frozen meets Kill Bill.") Kennedy bought it on the spot.

Stenberg, the show's star, said "Leslye really is driven by emotion and heart and relationships. So even though our show is within the 'Star Wars' universe and set in outer space, in a galaxy far, far away, it's really a family drama."

Headland had directed indie films ("Bachelorette," "Sleeping With Other People") and served as showrunner for "Russian Doll," the hit Netflix comedy about a New Yorker (Natasha Lyonne) caught in a reincarnation loop. But she had never managed — big-budget production.

What she lacked in experience, she made up for with "Star Wars" geekdom. Headland became a "Star Wars" superfan as a teenager. It was an apocalyptic period of her life, or at least it felt that way.

"I had no friends," she recalled. "I ate my lunch in the bathroom."

She found solace among the misfits in George Lucas' space opera, discovering books like Timothy Zahn's "Heir to the Empire" (1991) and collecting action figures. When Lucas released the "special editions" of his first three "Star Wars" movies, Headland lined up at her local theater on opening night. A few years ago, she had Ralph McQuarrie's concept art for Princess Leia tattooed on her right hand.

"Star Wars" has been a part of my personality since I can remember," Headland said. "So working on this show has been a dream. I had to take my shot."

She paused for a moment. "If it doesn't succeed, it's because of me," she said. "That's really scary to think about."

"No, no — I'm not going to go there," she said, climbing back on that razor's edge.

PUZZLE ANSWERS » FIND THE SUDOKU ON D4, OTHER PUZZLES ON D6

Los Angeles Times Crossword

HEART SHAKY HMO MEET
ELMER EYE TEEN STAR
RIPPED DEANS ELAN NO
DOOL YELLS CALL TAJAY
STEEPER HOOBOY WRITS
TED TONIC MICH
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Theme Crossword

BONA ASCOT STRAW TOTE
EDEN NORIA COACH OPAL
GOTTER CHANEL MANON
ABHOR SHALT AROSE GYM
TOR CORE SCAUP ABOU
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BARRE BOON BAGUET
ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL
EDITED SAGE UMBER
ABEL BASSETT TAMBOUR
TOR OUPHE COMET RATIO
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Sudoku

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Jumble

JARGON
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CHANGE

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1. Go back in
history
2. Vaporizing

POOR