

French TV Series ‘Versailles’ Courts Global Appeal

Producers of show hope it will help France become a major exporter of TV programs



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‘Versailles,’ about a young king—Louis XIV—turning into an absolute monarch, had a budget of roughly \$32 million for 10 episodes. *PHOTO: TIBO ET ANOUCHKA/CAPA DRAMA/CANAL+*

By

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April 13, 2015 5:03 p.m. ET

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PARIS—When television and cable executives from around the world gather in Cannes this week, French producer Fabrice Larue will be holding his breath.

Mr. Larue and his co-producers are pushing hard to sell “Versailles,” a raunchy series about Louis XIV that they hope will help France become a major exporter of TV shows in a global bazaar largely [dominated by U.S. studios](#).

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/french-tv-series-versailles-courts-global-appeal-1428959019>

The show—a modern retelling of the intrigues and scandals at the court of one of the longest-reigning monarchs in European history—is the biggest evidence yet of the push by French producers to compete with blockbuster American TV shows, like “Game of Thrones,” that have [invaded channels](#) around the globe.

As opposed to the U.S., where studios can often recover costs for big productions faster by selling a series to national channels that reach 100 million pay-television homes, producers in Europe can’t amortize costs of a similar size over as large an audience in any one country, making it harder to finance big projects.

To overcome this hurdle, the French team behind “Versailles” decided to take a gamble: They are betting that “Versailles”—filmed in English—will become a global success.

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“We have to make €10 million in sales internationally to get to break-even,” Mr. Larue, chief executive of production company Newen, said ahead of the MIPTV fair in the French Riviera, where the first episode of “Versailles” will be screened to potential content buyers.

With a budget of nearly €30 million, or about \$32 million, for 10 hourlong episodes, “Versailles” is the most expensive TV series ever made in France, according French producers. Newen’s Capa Drama unit teamed up with [Vivendi SA’s Canal Plus](#) and production houses Zodiak Media and Incendo of Canada to raise a budget that comes close to big U.S. shows. U.S. companies often spend approximately \$3 million or more for an hour-long episode, with big productions such as “Games of Thrones” costing two to three times that sum.

Producers in France are trying to surf a recent wave of success of French-made shows. “Les Revenants,” or “The Returned,” a series about zombies co-created by Haut et Court and Canal Plus, was sold in 90 countries, including the U.K.’s Channel 4 and the Sundance Channel in the U.S. The French series won an International Emmy Award for best drama series in 2013. “Borgia,” a historical series set in Renaissance Rome that was co-produced by Lagardère SCA’s Atlantique Productions, Canal Plus and others, sold in more than 50 markets, including [Netflix Inc.](#) in the U.S.

“We’re at the cusp of a new trend, a TV renaissance...there is a lot of great stuff coming out of Europe,” said Bruce Tuchman, who runs [AMC Networks Inc.’s](#) AMC and Sundance channels internationally. Sundance aired the original French-language series “The Returned” with English subtitles. Mr. Tuchman declined to say whether AMC is interested in buying “Versailles.”

Sales of French TV programs to international markets rose 8% to €137.1 million in 2013, a record for France, according to a study by the association of French TV program exporters TV France International and CNC, a government body that regulates audiovisual industries. Sales of fictional programs rose 14%, according to the study.

It took nearly five years for “Versailles” to get to this point. Now producers will see whether their investments will bear fruit.

To recover all their costs, producers need to sell the show in at least 30 countries, Mr. Larue said. They will start to make money when the show is sold in more countries than that, depending on the size of the country, he added.

Channels in Germany, Canada and Australia have already purchased the series, Mr. Larue said. Selling it in the U.S., where producers import relatively little foreign-made TV content, would help recover a big chunk of the money, he said.

For Mr. Larue, there is more at stake than losing money.

“I see myself as an ambassador of France,” he said as he watched Canadian director Daniel Roby film a scene of the show in a small château southwest of Paris.

The bulk of TV program exports are to other European countries. Few shows make it across the Atlantic. In 2013, the U.S. bought €8.1 million of French-made TV programs, an 18% decline from 2012 but a jump from €5.9 million in 2004, the study data showed.

The producers of “Versailles” are trying to change that. They hired Simon Mirren and David Wolstencroft—the British screenwriters behind popular series such as “Without a Trace” and “The Escape Artist,” respectively—English-speaking actors and adapted makeup and costumes to fit in with international standards.

“Versailles,” named after the famous French palace that took half a decade to build during Louis XIV’s 72-year rule, tells the story of a young king turning into an absolute monarch as he uses the château, its women and parties as bait to trap potentially powerful rivals.

“It’s like the ‘House of Cards’ of its time,” said Rodolphe Belmer, a top Canal Plus executive, who together with Claude Chelli, head of Capa Drama, came up with the idea for the show when they were walking through the French palace’s gardens five years ago.

The show’s producers have had to overcome hurdles from tax issues to numerous delays due to a lack of financing to complex French rules on limiting the maximum working hours for actors.

With the filming of “Versailles” completed, Mr. Larue’s battle isn’t yet won.

To boost exports abroad, France would have to produce more series of the scale of “Versailles” and make sure it can deliver follow-on series to keep channels interested, executives say.

“ ‘Versailles’ remains an exception for now,” said Mathieu Béjot, executive director of TV France International. “We need more volumes to sell abroad.”

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