

# The Cult of Sarah

*Why the inimitable  
Sarah Paulson is the  
future of TV.*

**BY JASON LYNCH**

Photographed in  
Rarities at Lotte  
New York Palace  
by Sasha Maslov.

**S**he won an Emmy, SAG Award and Golden Globe for her bravura performance as Marcia Clark in last year's FX miniseries, *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, but it took Sarah Paulson almost another year to confirm what the TV industry really thinks about her acting chops. Earlier this year, her longtime collaborator and *O.J.* executive producer Ryan Murphy offered the actress the lead in *Ratched*, an origin story he is executive producing that focuses on Nurse Ratched, the iconic, sadistic nurse from the 1975 film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Murphy shopped the project around to networks, offering a package for the first time that included his frequent muse Paulson attached as star and producer. "That was very exciting and also very scary, because I thought, oh God, what if they take this out, and people are like, 'No thanks, we're good. We don't need a Sarah Paulson show,'" says Paulson. "Thankfully, it all worked out very well."

In the wake of last year's most acclaimed TV performance, everyone—TV networks and movie studios alike—wants to be in business with Paulson. *Ratched* sparked a high-stakes bidding war, with Netflix ultimately fending off suitors like Hulu and Apple (which is developing an original TV series strategy) for the project last month, giving the drama a hefty two-season commitment. And that is only one of three high-profile TV series that Paulson will film over the next year. In 2018, she'll begin production on *Katrina*, the third installment in Murphy's *American Crime Story* anthology series for FX, and continue on the other Murphy FX anthology hit that started her meteoric rise, *American Horror Story*.

This year's AHS installment, *Cult*, debuted last month to an audience of 6.9 million viewers, and ranks as the year's No. 3 most-watched scripted cable series in total viewers and the 18-49 and 18-34 demos, behind only *The Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones*. She'll be back for Season 8 next year, while also appearing in a trio of major movies: *Ocean's Eight* (an all-female spinoff to the *Ocean's Eleven* trilogy due out next June, co-starring Sandra Bullock and Anne Hathaway), *The Post* (a Steven Spielberg-directed drama due out in December, about the Washington Post's decision to publish the Pentagon Papers in 1971) and *Glass* (M. Night Shyamalan's sequel to both *Split* and 2000's *Unbreakable*). It's a slate of meaty TV and film projects that any actor would envy. "Feeling a little bit of the incredible excitement and joy she's experienced—having her artistry and talent recognized—has been really wonderful," says FX Networks CEO John Landgraf of Paulson, who has become one of his network's MVPs. "It's been fun watching her dreams come true."



When Paulson first crossed paths with Murphy in 2004, guest-starring on a Season 2 episode of his plastic surgery drama *Nip/Tuck* as a woman who claimed to have stigmata, “I didn’t know that was going to lead to my world spinning on the Ryan Murphy axis,” she says. Neither did the prolific creator. He later cast the actress in a 2008 FX pilot that didn’t get picked up, but then lost touch with her, until Jessica Lange intervened on her behalf while filming *American Horror Story*’s first season in 2011. Lange, who starred in *The Glass Menagerie* on Broadway with Paulson in 2005, had been spending time with her former co-star after she moved to Los Angeles during filming.

“L.A. is really not her town, so she was glad I was there,” recalls Paulson, who tagged along with Lange to an event honoring one of Murphy’s employees. “It was the first time I had seen Ryan in many years. Jessica threw her arm around me, looked at Ryan and said, ‘Can’t you find something for Sarah to do on the show? It would be so great. I just like having her around.’” Murphy, who was writing an episode featuring psychic Billie Dean Howard, obliged and gave Paulson the part. After her three-episode arc, Murphy took her out to dinner and offered her a long-term deal to continue with the show. “I was like, ‘Based on what?’” says Paulson. “I didn’t know why he was motivated to do that, but he did. Then I played Lana Winters, and the rest is history.”

Her turn in *Asylum* the following year as Winters, a lesbian journalist institutionalized in 1964 for being gay, is what first caused Landgraf to take notice of Paulson’s star power. “She was the most important character in the piece. It took her from a young woman to an older woman, and she was unbelievable,” he says. “We always knew she was great, but her ability to carry things and put them on her shoulder became evident. And she’s knocked it out of the park over and over again. She’s become a major star.”

Murphy kept presenting Paulson with new challenges each year, as *American Horror Story* rebooted annually with a new premise and characters. The actress played a



STYLING: CANNON/JUDY CASEY; HAIR: MATTHEW MONZON USING ORIBE/TMG-LA; MAKEUP: TYRON MACHHAUSEN/THE WALL GROUP

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blind witch in *Coven*, conjoined twins in *Freak Show* and a drug addict in *Hotel*. “There is something so incredibly potent about knowing that every year, you have no idea what you’re going to get to do,” Paulson says.

That’s the case again with her *Cult* character, Ally, who hits uncomfortably close to home. She has become unmoored by the results of November’s presidential election, which triggers several of her phobias—many of them shared by Paulson in real life, including tryphobia, the fear of hole clusters in things like sponges and coral reefs. “I can’t even talk about it, it makes me so upset. I have a terrible fear of bees and honeycombs, natural sponges, all that stuff I don’t like,” she says. “I can’t even look at the marketing campaign for the show”—which features an oozing brain shaped like a honeycomb—“My throat starts closing up.”

In the uncertainty of each new TV season, buyers hail Paulson’s

*American Horror Story* as an essential fall constant, reliably delivering the audiences they crave most. “The Horror Story model is very smart, because you have staying power,” says Nick Hartofilis, evp of national investment, Zenith. “It’s a genre that people love. You can change the story, and people are genuinely interested to start again and see what it’s going to be this time. It’s a huge thing to have that as a resource to be able to tap into.” Maureen Bosetti, chief investment officer, Initiative, agrees: “There’s certain shows we absolutely want to be in for their stability and audience. *American Horror Story* has carved out a highly engaged audience. It adds a lot of value to our overall buy.”

Of all the acting curveballs Murphy has thrown Paulson’s way, no role has had a higher degree of difficulty than that of Marcia Clark in *The People v. O.J. Simpson*. “If you were going to take a face plant, you were going to take a big face plant in front of a lot of people, the biggest one being Marcia Clark,” says Paulson of playing Simpson’s lead prosecutor. “I felt an enormous weight to get it right for her. But at the same time, it was the most exhilarating thing I ever did.” Langraf concurs, noting that Paulson’s masterpiece *People v. O.J.* episode, “Marcia, Marcia, Marcia,” which delved into her ill-advised courtroom makeover, “is one of my favorite episodes of television that we’ve ever made.”

The *People v. O.J.* averaged 12.6 million viewers each week for FX and won nine Emmys, including Paulson’s first victory after five previous nominations. “It was incredible,” Murphy told *Adweek* earlier this year of the show’s and Paulson’s Emmy wins. “I had been very close to Sarah for years and years, and that I could give her that moment and help her have that recognition was amazing.”

Her awards shows sweep is “the most extraordinary thing I don’t remember happening,” says Paulson, looking back a year later. “As a young actress, you dream of being validated or recognized in that way. That being said, I don’t remember having enough joy about the whole thing. I feel that the experience has been a bit outside me.”

The Emmy memories may be fleeting, but that role’s impact on her career has been indelible. “A lot of people watch *Horror Story*, but it’s more of a niche show. I’d been on *Horror Story* for five or six years, and Steven Spielberg wasn’t calling then, because I don’t think Steven Spielberg watches *American Horror Story*,” says Paulson. But the director saw the entire season of *People v. O.J.*, and offered her *The Post*, with no audition required (as was also the case with her film roles in *Ocean’s Eight* and *Glass*).



### RYAN’S HOPE

Paulson has become showrunner Ryan Murphy’s muse, appearing in (top to bottom) *American Horror Story: Cult*, *The People v. O.J.* and *Nip/Tuck*, to name just a few.

She filmed *Cult* in L.A. while simultaneously flying out to New York for *The Post*, in which she portrays Tony Bradlee, second wife of Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee, played by Tom Hanks. Paulson is now in rehearsals for *Glass*, where she has “a great part. I’m not just in a big Hollywood movie with nothing to do.”

Next spring, Paulson will return to FX to start *Katrina: American Crime Story*, which is based on the book *Five Days at Memorial* and is expected to air in 2019. She will play Anna Pou, a doctor at New Orleans’ Memorial Medical Center, who was later charged with euthanizing patients during the disaster. “It’s a great character and a very compelling story of a very harrowing situation for a lot of people,” she says.

She’ll also shoot another season of *American Horror Story* next year for FX. And while “I love working at that network more than I can say,” Paulson will transition from making hit season after hit season for FX to hopefully doing the same for Netflix with *Ratched*, as she steps into the character that won Louise Fletcher an Oscar. Six months ago, Murphy sent her the *Ratched* script and urged her to think long and hard about whether she’d be up for playing the same character for multiple seasons. “I thought about it for about five minutes,” Paulson says, laughing. “The character was so interesting, and of course Louise Fletcher is extraordinary in that movie. I thought, what an interesting thing to explore how that human being became the human being in the movie.” Signing on as a producer too was “the next logical step for me, that my voice be allowed at the table in a more official way,” she says.

Paulson is trying not to think about how she’ll actually juggle all of the film and TV projects she has committed to. “This is a new world for me, but the best way for me to get through it is put my head down and focus on the task just in front of me,” she says. “I can’t look to the left or right, or I’ll be too paralyzed to do anything.”

Her overloaded calendar means a role in the next installment of Murphy’s other anthology series *Feud*, which will focus on Prince Charles and Princess Diana, is





“probably” off the table. She’s also absent from Versace—the Season 2 installment of *American Crime Story*, which will air early next year—but makes it clear she’s not interested in any TV shows that Murphy isn’t involved with. “There are great creators out there, absolutely, but I have found a home in the sense that I work for a person who sees me completely, knows my strengths and weaknesses, knows how to push me and keeps throwing me the ball,” she says. “Why would you leave something that works? This idea of jumping off one thing just to be available in case something great comes by, that’s

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like leaving your wonderful mate because you think maybe someone more interesting is out there.”

Besides, Paulson knows from experience that seemingly can’t-miss TV projects can still end up crashing and burning. In 2006, she starred in *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, Aaron Sorkin’s ravenously anticipated *West Wing* follow-up for NBC that was “as surefire a thing as anything,” but ended up “a big bomb,” she recalls. “I didn’t work for awhile after that. You go from having Aaron Sorkin’s dialogue and this caliber of actors and production, to hitting the audition circuit again trying to get a pilot at pilot season.”

Another opportunity that could come her way from her higher post-Emmys profile is an advertising campaign, which Paulson says she is open to for the first time. “I would absolutely do it, certainly for products I actually use. I’m a Neutrogena makeup wipes gal, and every time I use them I go, ‘Do I need to call someone and tell them? Because this is something I use every day. I’m always taking off all kinds of things you can’t even imagine on *American Horror Story!*’” she says. “I wouldn’t want to become the face of something that would then get in the way of my being able to play a part that didn’t jive with the company. But if there was a wonderful coming together of a company and myself, that’s something I would not shy away from at all.”

Beyond working with brands, the actress is also eager to shoehorn a play into her insane schedule. “I haven’t been onstage in about five years,” she says, “and that’s too long for me.” And as she’s getting a taste of producing for the first time on *Ratched*, Paulson is “desperate” to try her hand at directing. Murphy is “totally game” to have her helm one of his shows, and even offered her a chance to direct an episode of *Feud: Bette and Joan*, but she wasn’t able to carve out space in her schedule.

But she knows that before long, that too is another career dream that she’ll be able to realize, thanks to the embarrassment of acting riches that have come her way in the past few years. “That’s really exciting,” she says, and another reason to thank Ryan Murphy—and Marcia Clark, too.”