

## People &amp; Places



This image released by Sony Pictures shows characters (from left), Gene, voiced by T.J. Miller, Jailbreak, voiced by Anna Faris and Hi-5, voiced by James Corden in Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Animation's 'The Emoji Movie.' (AP)

## Film

## Studios line up their heavies

## Fest slates offer look into 'awards season'

LOS ANGELES, July 29, (RTRS): As it does every July, just after the Comic-Con dust has settled and the year's third quarter begins barreling toward a close, the fall festival landscape is coming into focus, providing an Oscar season snapshot before we dive headlong into the fray.

Announcements emanating from Venice, Telluride, Colo., Toronto, New York, and London have signaled the starting gun as studios jockey to best position their prestige product — with an eye toward leveraging the awards circuit, of course.

Kicking things off will be the Venice Film Festival on Aug 30 and the world premiere of Alexander Payne's "Downsizing," news of which was broken by Variety. That early drop ought to help rip the band-aid off the film's bizarre logline — a man agrees to have himself physically shrunk in order to live out the rest of his days in one of many government-subsidized mini-resorts — and set Paramount's central player up for a run at the gold. Recent Venice openers like "Gravity," "Birdman," and "La La Land" have gone on to be dominant fixtures in the Oscar race.

Also set for Venice, per the festival's reveal this morning, are Darren Aronofsky's "Mother!" (another Paramount hopeful, starring Jennifer Lawrence and Javier Bardem in a darker twist on "Rosemary's Baby"); Guillermo del Toro's "The Shape of Water" (a Fox Searchlight player featuring a silent performance by Sally Hawkins); Martin McDonagh's "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" (also Searchlight, and possibly a golden ticket for actress Frances McDormand); Stephen Frears' "Victoria & Abdul" (from Focus Features, with Judi Dench as the late-19th century monarch); George Clooney's "Suburbicon" (Paramount once again, from a darkly comedic script by Joel and Ethan Coen); and Andrew Haigh's "45 Years" follow-up "Lean on Pete" (A24, from a novel by Willy Vlautin).

## Reveal

Toronto, meanwhile, announced a chunk of its slate earlier this week, and in doing so, lit up a number of expected Telluride debuts as well. Recently-adopted language in Toronto's annual reveal noting films as World, North American, International, and Canadian premieres takes all the fun out of Telluride's secretive process, and given both the arbitrary nature of it and recent discord regarding Telluride's penchant for sneaking Venice and Toronto premieres ahead of their bows elsewhere, you can only assume that is the point.

Nevertheless, it's clear from Toronto's announcement that films like Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris' "Battle of the Sexes" (Fox Searchlight), Angelina Jolie's "First They Killed My Father" (Netflix), Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird" (A24), Joe Wright's "Darkest Hour" (Focus), and Scott Cooper's "Hostiles" (leveraging for a distributor out of the festival), among others, will begin their journeys in Colorado before heading up north. More on them at a later date, but keep in mind that Telluride has played host to seven of the last eight best picture winners, five of them world premieres. That's an impressive track record for a four-day mountaintop retreat that can only schedule a mere 40 titles or so.

With Toronto featuring four times as many titles (even scaled back by 20% this year), world premieres abound, as ever: Andy Serkis' "Breathe," which will also open the London Film Festival, could bring actor Andrew Garfield right back to the circuit a year after "Hacksaw Ridge"; David Gordon Green's "Stronger," with an emotional Jake Gyllenhaal performance, will no doubt draw its share of tears; Harvey Weinstein has lined up Alfonso Gomez-Rejon's "The Current War," with Benedict Cumberbatch and Michael Shannon (though no word yet on Garth Davis' "Mary Magdalene," currently slated for Weinstein's Thanksgiving release sweet spot); and after already dropping Kathryn Bigelow's "Detroit," Annapurna will be looking to stir a conversation around October release Angela Robinson's "Professor Marston & the Wonder Women."

Finally, in a significant coup, Amazon Studios has lined up all three major slots at this year's New York Film Festival with its own titles: As originally reported by Variety, Richard Linklater's "Last Flag Flying," adapted from Darryl Ponicsan's sequel to his own 1970 novel "The Last Detail" (which itself spawned an Oscar-nominated classic), will open the fest on Sept 28.



Indian Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar (left), and Bhumi Pednekar (right), pose for pictures during the press conference of their upcoming Hindi film 'Toilet Ek Prem Katha', directed by Shree Narayan Singh, in Mumbai. (AFP)



## Variety

**NEW YORK:** John Morris, a celebrated US-born editor who commissioned and published some of the most iconic photographs of the 20th century, died in Paris on Friday, Magnum Photos said. He was 100.

In an extraordinary career that spanned some of the most turbulent events of the last century, Morris worked for publications that included Life, Magnum, The Washington Post, The New York Times and National Geographic.

He edited and oversaw the publication of Robert Capa's historic images of the 1944 D-Day Allied landings in Normandy while photo editor commissioning photographs from the front throughout World War II for Life magazine in London.

After a post-war stint at Ladies' Home Journal in New York, he became executive editor at Magnum, dispatching the agency's photographers across the globe to cover some of the most important stories of the time. (AFP)

**NEW ORLEANS:** D.L. Menard, the Cajun musician whose song "The Back Door" became an anthem for his culture and carried him to 38 countries on State Department tours, has died at the age of 85.

Menard died Thursday at the home where he lived with his granddaughter Nelda Menard in Scott, Louisiana, a funeral home said.

Including covers by other artists, the Cajun French song has sold more than 1 million copies over the decades, according to Floyd Solieau, whose Swallow Record Co. released "La Porte en Arriere" as a single in July 1962.

Menard became a goodwill ambassador for Cajun music and culture, the heritage of people who settled in the bayou country of south Louisiana after being expelled from Acadia in French Canada 250 years ago. (AP)

**LOS ANGELES:** Martin A. "Marty" Sklar, a right-hand man of Walt Disney and central figure in the development and expansion of his company's theme parks around the world, has died.

Disneyland spokeswoman Suzi Brown confirmed Sklar's death for The Associated Press. He died Thursday at his Hollywood Hills home at age 83, a company statement says. No details were released on his cause of death.

"Here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy," Sklar said in 2005, reading from a plaque at the front of the park.

"That says so much about what Walt

## Film

## Pretty good storyline in 'Emoji'

## 'Great time to be actor of color'

NEW YORK, July 29, (Agencies): Jessica Williams says it's a great time to be an actress of color, and applauds Netflix for leading the way in promoting diversity.

Williams, who cut her teeth as a correspondent on "The Daily Show," takes on her first starring role in the streaming network's original film, "The Incredibly Jessica James."

The actress feels Netflix helped shape stories about people of color, citing original programming like "Master of None" and "Orange Is the New Black" that are able to "showcase people of color in an amazing way."

While inclusion continues to improve, especially on Netflix, Williams says the struggle for racial equality is far from over.

"I think it's a difficult time in some ways to be a person of color, and I think the same for actors of color, but I also think it's a great time. Because I think now ... there's so much more room, I think, for us to be seen, and there's room for us to create our own stories," Williams said.

Williams feels great pride that she's part of movement toward greater diversity on screen, calling it something that makes her heart warm and sing. She said she remains mindful of the actresses who paved the way.

"It's like so many black actresses that came before me and my generation. They came before and they did not necessarily have this opportunity that I feel like I have now, and so I'm really grateful for that, and I really do think it's a really great time to be an actress that is black, in a way," she said.

But that doesn't make shifting gears from a comedy news show to a feature film an easy choice. Williams certainly felt some trepidation with the move.

"I was really nervous because this movie does have comedy in it. It also has a lot of heart, and some sweet moments. So I was worried whether I would be able to portray that or not. But I had a lot of fun doing it, and I found out that I could," she said.

Written and directed by Jim Strouse — who previously directed Williams in his 2015 film, "People Places Things" — the story was written with Williams in mind. Her desire was to correctly depict the "life of a modern, young black woman," and took it a

step further by also taking on the role as an executive producer.

"Just in case I had things to say creatively," Williams said.

Strouse called Williams a comedy ninja and the right actress to portray the ever-changing nature of romantic relationships.

## Relationship

"I remember when a relationship goes astray or whatever, you break up, you don't talk and in like maybe months down the road you have coffee," he said. "Now it's like, you ghost and maybe a couple months down the road you start liking each other's photos again. It's a weird time." He called the dynamic interesting, then with a knowing smile said, "I don't know if it's healthy."

As for her previous gig, Williams has the distinction of being the youngest correspondent hired for "The Daily Show." Now she's hoping to join the list of the show's alumni who have moved on to bigger and better things.

"To be mentioned among people like Samantha Bee or Hassan Minaj and Steve Carrell and Steve Colbert is insane," she said. "It's, it's very surreal and I think — I packed up everything to move and be on the 'Daily Show' and I was nervous because I was 22. I was, umm, I had a lot of big shoes to fill working with Jon Stewart. I felt like in the beginning I had a lot to prove, and it's really an honor to be among those people."

If you're going to build an animated film around a concept that's dumb, flat, goofy, and obvious, and maybe a tad corrupt in its cartoon-toy-box opportunism, then you could probably do worse than the idea behind "The Emoji Movie." On the one hand, it has the feeling of scraping — as in, we've had Trolls, Smurfs, and LEGO, now here come the funny-faced "expressive" ideograms on your smartphone. What's next: "Automated Siri Voice When You're Put On Hold: The Movie"?

Yet let's come out and admit that the notion of a digitally animated feature that brings emojis to life does have its hokey-irresistible side. It goes right back to the feeling you had the first time you ever used an emoji — not ironically, but because you saw that it was tapping your inner child in a way that was kind of

cool, especially when you realized that yes, you do have your favorites (personally, I lean on Sun With Face, Cowboy Hat Face, and Spaghetti). Any cynicism I might have had about "The Emoji Movie" was knocked away months ago by the film's very funny trailer, which featured Steven Wright as the morosely indifferent, slightly constipated voice of Mel Meh. That trailer suggested that a seemingly obvious movie might be throwing you curveballs.

The bad news is that "The Emoji Movie" really is meh. There have been worse ideas, but in this case

The main character, it turns out, is the son of Mel Meh — a junior grouch-face named Gene (voiced by T.J. Miller), who is getting ready to make his debut in the bustling workplace of emojis. They all live in Textopolis, a city that's embedded in the phone belonging to Alex (Jake T. Austin), a high-school freshman who keeps texting Addie (Tati Gabrielle), the girl he's got a crush on. Each day, every emoji — Crying Face, Heart Eyes, Slice of Pizza — takes his or her place in a vast wall of cubes, which resembles a giant version of the tic-tac-toe board on "Hollywood Squares." When one of them gets chosen for a text, his or her image is scanned, and all they have to do is sit there and be there adorable symbolic selves.

But Gene can't do that. On his first day, he messes up, looking not so much like a Meh as like a Picasso who's been in a bar fight. He gets branded a malfunction, and Smiler (Maya Rudolph), the corporate boss with a heart as cold as her grin is big, wants to see him literally deleted. Gene's problem is that he isn't a Meh. He's got every face — every feeling — inside him. He's like a Divergent who exceeds in every possible way, which in the one-emotion-per-icon world of Textopolis marks him as an unclassifiable nonconformist freak.

That sounds like a pretty good storyline, but the trouble with "The Emoji Movie" begins with Gene. He's supposed to be a pinwheel of faces and emotions (you could almost imagine him as a digital version of the Genie in "Aladdin"), but as conceived by director Tony Leondis, and voiced by the comedian T.J. Miller (in an oddly unvaried performance), he's the opposite of Meh — he should have been called Blandly Enthusiastic.

intended here," Sklar told the AP. (AP)

**NEW YORK:** The widow of late Linkin

Park singer Chester Bennington says she's feeling the love from the rocker's fans but she's also feeling the loss. Talinda Bennington said in a statement

late Thursday she wants "to let my community and the fans worldwide know that we feel your love. We feel your loss as well."

Chester Bennington hanged himself from a bedroom door in his home near Los Angeles last week. His death was ruled a suicide.

"One week ago, I lost my soulmate and my children lost their hero — their Daddy. We had a fairytale life and now it has turned into some sick Shakespearean tragedy. How do I move on? How do I pick up my shattered soul?" Talinda Bennington wrote. "The only answer I know is to raise our babies with every ounce of love I have left." (AP)

**LOS ANGELES:** Leonard Landy, best known for his work as one of the Little Rascals on "Our Gang," died Wednesday. He was 84.

Often recognized for his freckled face and big ears, Landy appeared in 21 "Our Gang" comedy shorts, debuting in "Feed 'Em and Weep" in 1938 and culminating with "Fightin' Fools" in 1941.

"Our Gang," a series of comedy short films about a group of poor neighborhood children and their adventures, began in 1922 as a series of silent shorts and they were known with sound in 1929. Landy was created with sound in 1929. Landy was known for watching the action with an occasional one liner. (RTRS)



Prince Albert II of Monaco (right), and Princess Charlene pose during the Rose Ball at the Monte-Carlo Sporting Club in Monaco during the 69th annual Red Cross Gala, on July 28, in Monaco. Created in 1948, the gala is an annual summer charity event held in Monaco by its princely family. (AFP)