

Hip-hop star Nicki Minaj to perform in Saudi Arabia

DUBAI, UAE, July 4, (AP) — Saudi Arabia said Wednesday that hip-hop star Nicki Minaj will perform in the ultraconservative kingdom as it sheds decades of restrictions on entertainment.

The female rapper is known for her outlandish, provocative style and hits like “Anaconda”, where she raps about her “big fat” backside. Her lyrics are often laced with profanities and her skin-bearing music videos often include twerking. Christian groups criticized her 2012 Grammy Awards performance, which included dancing priests and an exorcism.

Saudi organizers announced she would be the headline act at the Jeddah World Fest on July 18. The concert, which is in line with Saudi laws is alcohol and drug-free, is open to people 16 and older and will take place at the King Abdullah Sports Stadium in the Red Sea city.

Reactions on social media ranged from shock and joy to criticism and disappointment. In a profanity-laced video posted on Twitter and viewed more than 37,000 times, a Saudi woman wearing a loose headscarf accuses the Saudi government of hypocrisy for inviting Minaj to perform but requiring women who attend the concert to wear the modest full-length robe known as the abaya. Most Saudi women also veil their hair and faces.

“She’s going to go and shake her ... and all her songs are indecent and about sex and shaking ... and then you tell me to wear the abaya,” the Saudi woman says. “What the hell?”

Saudi organizers said the concert will be broadcast globally and covered by MTV. Other performers include British artist Liam Payne and American DJ Steve Aoki. The Kingdom is also promising quick elec-

tronic visas for international visitors who want to attend.

Over the past several months, the Kingdom has seen performances by Mariah Carey, Enrique Iglesias, the Black Eyed Peas, rapper Sean Paul, and DJs David Guetta and Tiesto. That’s despite the widespread international backlash since October over the killing of Saudi critic and writer Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents close to the crown prince in the Kingdom’s consulate in Turkey.

Such concerts are a stark change from when Saudi morality police would raid establishments that played loud music.

Gender segregation between single men and women is still enforced in many restaurants, coffee shops, public schools and universities, but other rules have loosened with women now allowed to drive and attend events in sports stadiums.



One of the few Malaysian female rappers, Bunga says she at first didn’t consider a career in music.

“My initial dream was to be a politician or a lawyer,” the 19-year-old rapper told The Associated Press before her first performance in Singapore for the Malay arts festival “Pesta Raya” last weekend.

Her success has her changing her tune.

Bunga, whose real name is **Noor Ayu Fatini Mohd Bakhari**, is one of the only known rappers who wears a hijab and baju kurung, a traditional Malay dress, at her performances. Selfies on her Instagram account show her wearing various shades of hijab, but she didn’t start that way.

From Perak, the fourth-largest state in Malaysia, she became popular after a video of her performing in baju kurung in a local rap competition went viral in November. “When I reached the venue, I was wearing regular clothes,” Bunga said. But even though she was the only female at the event, she did not stand out. “At the very last minute, I bought myself a baju kurung at the venue itself.”

Her popularity soared earlier this year when she was invited to rap at a cypher show “16 Baris” that takes place in a barbershop. The show features up-and-coming talents from around Southeast Asia.

Bunga raps about her own personal life, her experiences of being bullied, facing love, and working at a gadget shop. She also gives advice to girls through her rap. She steers clear of obscenity and racism. “(Being a female rapper) doesn’t mean I have to act like boys or talk about gangsters,” Bunga said.

But rapping in traditional garments comes with its own challenges. “We can’t jump around so much wearing baju kurung,” said Bunga. Another challenge is facing criticism. Bunga said she has been criticized for “bringing down the image of women” by rapping in a hijab.

Bunga said she is not deterred and she is “living proof” that women can make it in a male-dominated rap. “I’ve realized that there are more hijabis who want to rap. I think that’s a good thing because you shouldn’t worry about what others say.”

Now based in Kuala Lumpur, Bunga is dreaming big. “I want to make a lot of songs. I want to go on tours. I want to release albums. I want to go worldwide.”

Music

Variety



This image released by Sony Pictures shows Jake Gyllenhaal (left), and Tom Holland in a scene from ‘Spider-Man: Far From Home’. (AP)

Film

Summer box office meltdown

Movie business is running scared

By Rebecca Rubin

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Heading into the new year, box office analysts were bullish that 2019 would beat, or at least match, the record-breaking success of last season. Followups to “Avengers”, “Secret Life of Pets” and “Godzilla” combined with reboots of storied franchises such as “Men in Black” and “Shaft” would elevate ticket sales to new heights, theater owners and studio executives predicted. Alas, it was not to be.

Sure, everyone showed up to “Avengers: Endgame” to bid goodbye to Iron Man, but many of those other sequels sputtered out. They were derivative, shoddily constructed, and poorly reviewed. Midway through summer, things are looking decidedly bleak. Ticket sales are pacing 7% behind last year’s popcorn season, according to ComScore, putting the year as a whole nearly 10% below the same frame in 2018.

“When you put all your eggs in the sequel basket this is what happens,” said Jeff Bock, an analyst with Exhibitor Relations. “Most of these movies feel like they came off of an assembly line. They’re not diving any deeper into the story. They’re not upping the ante. They’re not moving the needle as far as moviegoers are concerned.”

Much of the blame has been pinned on franchise fatigue, the age-old diagnosis that stems from audiences growing tired of movies with endless Roman numerals tacked on the end. But that’s not entirely the case.

People will still show up for franchise fare. “Toy Story 4” has cracked the \$500 million mark, “John Wick 3” is the highest-grossing entry in the action series, and “Spider-Man: Far From Home” is poised to dominate the July 4th box office.

Moreover, sequels, reboots and spinoffs soared at the box office last summer as revenues for “Avengers: Infinity War”, “Incredibles 2” and “Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom” set the stage for a new benchmark in North America. People don’t hate se-

quels. They avoid bad movies.

“I think everyone is trying to figure out what is the new normal for the summer box office,” said Paul Dergarabedian, a senior media analyst at ComScore. “Maybe right now you need a really strong marketing hook or a tagline. If it feels like, ‘I’ve seen it before’ — that’s not good.”

This summer “Godzilla: King of the Monsters”, “Dark Phoenix” and “Men in Black: International” all suffered series lows in large part because they weren’t very good. Being part of a well-known franchise wasn’t enough to save these turkeys, particularly when there are buzzy television shows such as “Game of Thrones”, “Big Little Lies” and “Stranger Things” beckoning viewers to stay home. Indeed, analysts suggest that ever-growing options for entertainment have made audiences more discerning when it comes to shelling out for a movie ticket.

Competition

“There’s so much content available at everyone’s fingertips,” said Kyle Davies, Paramount’s president of domestic distribution. “There is healthy competition for everyone’s entertainment dollars, but people love the theatrical experience. You just have to give a compelling reason to go. It’s causing everyone to raise their game.”

The indie market has also slid steeply, with some indie players reporting that ticket sales in the specialty space are down more than 30% through the first six months of the year. Movies like the Mindy Kaling comedy “Late Night” or “Wild Rose” may have been hits at film festivals, but they failed to convert that buzz into butts in seats when they opened to the general public. That could turn around with the debut this week of “Midsommar”, a twisty horror pic that should do for the image of Swedish villages what the “Wicker Man” did for the reputation of Scottish islands.

“What the studios have been trying to do is go

against conventional wisdom and release smaller films in May against big blockbusters,” said Dergarabedian. “This summer it’s like we reverted back and we’re in the ‘90s again where counter-programming in the summer is just getting run over.”

Analysts predict the summer could still have a few hits in store. Following “Spider-Man: Far From Home”, Jon Favreau’s stunning photorealistic remake of “The Lion King” looks to have audiences young and old humming to “The Circle of Life”. In August, Universal is teaming up Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham in the “Fast & Furious” spin-off “Hobbs & Shaw”, with a big potential pay-off.

Even if this summer falls short, industry prognosticators are confident that the year is peppered with enough potential breakouts to salvage the box office. There are signs that studios are relying less on the summer season to account for the bulk of ticket sales. That was the case in 2018, where a number of sleeper hits came from traditionally slow months at the box office. A number of highly anticipated titles are due in fall and winter, including “It: Chapter 2”, “The Joker” with Joaquin Phoenix and “Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker”.

“Movie-going isn’t seasonal anymore, you have to look at the whole year,” said Jeff Goldstein, Warner Bros president of domestic distribution. “It’s no longer about just summer or Christmastime.”

Eric Handler, an analyst with MKM Partners, thinks that 2019 will have a robust third and fourth quarters, one that will leave ticket sales roughly flat with the previous year. However, he thinks that 2020 will be a soft year and notes that many franchises are entering a transitional phase. Star Wars is wrapping up the Skywalker clan saga with “The Rise of Skywalker”, the Avengers have ushered out some of their most popular characters, and there are only so many times dinosaurs can escape from Jurassic Park. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Chloe x Halle member Halle Bailey is ready to become part of Disney’s world.

The R&B singer has been tapped to play Ariel in Disney’s next live-action adaptation of “The Little Mermaid”. Although director Rob Marshall has spent the last couple of months meeting with talent, insiders say Bailey has been a clear front-runner from the beginning.

“After an extensive search, it was abundantly clear that Halle possesses that rare combination of spirit, heart, youth, innocence and substance — plus a glorious singing voice — all intrinsic qualities necessary to play this iconic role,” Marshall said in a statement.

Bailey is joining a cast that includes Jacob Tremblay and Awkwafina, while Melissa McCarthy is in talks to play Ursula.

“The Little Mermaid” will incorporate original songs from the 1989 animated hit as well as new tunes from original composer Alan Menken and “Hamilton” creator Lin-Manuel Miranda. Miranda is also producing the film along with Marshall, Marc Platt and John DeLuca.

David Magee wrote the script with Jane Goldman writing a previous draft. Jessica Virtue and Allison Erlikhman are overseeing for the studio. (RTRS)



TEHRAN, Iran: British soul singer Joss Stone says she was deported from Iran after arriving in the Islamic Republic as part of a worldwide concert tour, even though she didn’t plan to perform there.

Posting on Instagram, Stone appears in a video wearing a white headscarf saying: “Well, we got to Iran, we got detained and then we got deported.” She said she knew solo performances by women were illegal, but she still wanted to see Iran.

She wrote that Iranian authorities placed her on a “black list” because they believed she might try to perform a public show. She described the authorities that met her on arrival at Iran’s Kish Island as professional throughout their interaction.

“These people are genuinely nice kind people that felt bad that they couldn’t override the system,” she wrote in a caption.

Under Iranian law, women cannot perform solo concerts, though

women do play in ensemble bands and orchestras. It’s unclear what Stone planned to otherwise do in Iran, though her Instagram post described her desire to show “the positives of our globe.” (AP)



LOS ANGELES: Actor Arte Johnson, who won an Emmy for comedy



Bailey



Stone

sketch work on the television show “Laugh-In”, has died early Wednesday in Los Angeles. He was 90.

Johnson died of heart failure following a three-year battle with bladder and prostate cancer, family representative Harlan Boll said. No services have been planned, but his ashes will be spread in a private ceremony.

Johnson became known for his catchphrase “Verry interesting” on “Rowan & Martin’s Laugh-In”. The Michigan native won an Emmy in 1969 and was nominated two more times through his work on the hit show.

One of his characters was Wolfgang, a cigarette-smoking German soldier who thought World War II

was still going on. Johnson’s other television appearances include “Bewitched”, “The Partridge Family”, “Lost in Space”, “Murder, She Wrote” and “The Donna Reed Show”.

He also nabbed roles in films as Dracula’s sidekick in “Love at First Bite” and “The President’s Analyst” as a federal agent. (AP)

Features

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