

Will life imitate art? Steppe queen film makes Kazakhs wonder

ALMATY, July 22, (RTRS): An ageing central Asian leader grooms his daughter to succeed him, and she then overcomes suspicion from her patriarchal society to unite her people.

It could describe the future trajectory of Dariga Nazarbayeva, the 56-year-old daughter of Kazakhstan's former leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, who many people believe will eventually become president of the oil-producing nation.

In fact, it's the plot of a film about Tomyris, an ancient central Asian warrior queen, which is being prepared for release in Kazakhstan and whose producer and co-writer is Dariga Nazarbayeva's younger sister, Aliya.

The film's tagline, according to advance publicity material, is: "A queen born to make the steppe great".

The filmmakers declined to answer questions from Reuters, but according to Kazakh political analyst Dosym Satpayev, the parallels between the hero of the movie and Dariga may be more than just a coincidence.

"One cannot rule out the idea that Tomyris serves several goals: to play a political role... on the one hand, and on the other to help the (first) president's youngest daughter fulfill her movie industry ambitions," said Satpayev.

Nursultan Nazarbayev, a 79-year-old former Communist Party apparatchik, resigned as Kazakh president in March after three decades in

power. He backed Senate speaker Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to replace him, and Tokayev won a June 9 presidential election.

Pass

But some political observers believe Tokayev is a place-holder and that the succession will eventually pass to a member of the Nazarbayev family.

When her father stepped down, Dariga was appointed the new speaker of the Senate, making her the no. 2 figure in the political hierarchy of Kazakhstan, an ex-Soviet republic of 18 million people which won its independence from Moscow in 1991.

Still, the idea of a female ruler could be a hard sell in a country where many still believe a woman's role is in the home.

This is why the upcoming movie has caught the eye of some observers who think it might make Nazarbayeva's potential presidential bid more acceptable among ordinary Kazakhs.

Directed by Akan Satayev, who has previously worked on a flattering biopic of Nursultan Nazarbayev, the movie is entitled "Tomyris" and is based on the story of the ancient queen.

She was ruler of the Massageteans, a confederation of Iranian-speaking nomadic tribes who were related to Scythians and inhabited Central Asia for several centuries.

Ancient Greek historian Herodotus described their victory over

the invading Persian army in the sixth century BC, and how Tomyris dipped the head of King Cyrus the Great, killed in battle, in a vessel of blood.

Little else is known about Tomyris, but the void has been filled by fiction.

Kazakh writer Bulat Zhandarbekov published a novel of the same name in 1993 and it became an instant hit as the newly-independent nation was looking for a fresh identity.

Director Satayev declined an interview request from Reuters, but four people involved in its production confirmed that the script was loosely based on the book.

Also:

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian President **Jair Bolsonaro** says he wants a "filter" on the country's audiovisual production, possibly limiting public funding to projects his administration deems fit.

Bolsonaro said Friday that without some sort of filter, he will consider shutting down the government-run National Cinema Agency. The agency oversees regulation and financing for **Brazil's** film and audiovisual industry.

The president commented a day after signing a decree moving another agency that determines governments policy on movies from the citizenship and culture ministry to his chief of staff's office.

Film

Variety



Hawkeye/Clint Barton (Jeremy Renner) in a scene from Marvel Studios' 'Avengers: Endgame'. The global box office has a new king in 'Avengers: Endgame'. The superhero extravaganza, the week-end of July 20, has usurped 'Avatar' to become the highest grossing film of all time, with an estimated \$2.79 billion in worldwide grosses in just 13 weeks. (AP)

Film

Eichner, Rogen put their own spin on Timon and Pumbaa

'Lion King', a photo-realistic movie

By Rebecca Rubin

They may preach "Hakuna Matata", but Billy Eichner and Seth Rogen certainly felt anxious about taking on the roles of Timon and Pumbaa in the live-action remake of "The Lion King". The carefree meerkat and warthog were key ingredients in the original 1994 movie's success, stealing scenes with their antics. But the chance to join a cast that includes Beyonce and Donald Glover and the opportunity to appear in a film that's expected to be one of the biggest hits of the summer proved irresistible. "The Lion King", featuring state-of-the-art computer wizardry, hit theaters on July 19. Eichner and Rogen reunite to talk with Variety about what audiences can expect from their return to the Pride Lands.

Question: When did you first see "The Lion King"?
Seth Rogen: I was much older than I thought I was. I guess I was 12 when "The Lion King" came out, which was a little old to be really into a cartoon. I was about to enter high school, which is really weird to think about. It's a movie I watched a lot, and I know every word to every song.

Billy Eichner: I'm a couple years older than Seth, but I remember seeing it with my parents in the theater, and I vividly remember loving it.

Q: Some people call this a live-action remake of "The Lion King". But that's not entirely true. How would you describe it?
Rogen: I would call it photo-realistic.

Eichner: I don't care! It looks amazing, that's all I know!
Q: Does the photo-realism make it scarier for audiences?
Eichner: Maybe it does. That's good. I think people should be scared.

Rogen: Exactly — these kids have to grow up.
Eichner: These kids grow up with the internet. Not nearly as scary as what they see here. It's a nightmare out there; we are just reflecting reality.

Q: You have both worked in voice animation before. How was this process different?
Rogen: We were actually together. That was really different, and you can tell when you watch the movie. Our rapport is incredibly naturalistic, and we really play

off one another in a way that would have been impossible if we weren't actually there in the room together. Weirdly it's one of the most naturalistic performances I've ever given, and I play a warthog.

Eichner: It's a beautiful transformation. Seth is absolutely right: Usually because of logistics or people's schedules, you record your part separate from the other voice actors, and they just edit it together in post and make it sound like you were all in the same room. For this movie, we were always together. Even the scenes with Donald, we were all there for "Hakuna Matata". It allowed us to really lean into our improv skills. I haven't seen the final cut, but from the rough cut we're overlapping with each other so you can just sense we're in the room together. It makes all the difference in the world.

Rogen: I saw the movie! It works. You're so funny, Billy. I was going to text you but I thought I'd tell you live during this interview. I was honestly so thrilled with how funny it is.

Eichner: Well I can't wait to see it.
Rogen: You have to pay to see it.

Q: How would you rate each other as singers?
Rogen: Very high. I've got to say that when you watch the movie, I am very pleased with my performance — but Billy is a strong singer. I didn't know you were such a good singer. I thought, "Oh, Billy could sing", and then he really can sing to a real degree, which I honestly was not thrilled about when it first happened.

Eichner: I don't think when Jon gave me this role he knew about my singing background. In my back pocket I've had this skill but never been asked to use it before. But Seth has a very beautiful singing voice, and I think we should record an album of standards together after this.

Rogen: Part of the album should be Hans Zimmer giving me singing notes because that was equally entertaining as anything.

Q: What kind of notes did he give you?
Rogen: Oh, you know just "more in the tune of the song."

Q: How does it feel knowing you will share song credit with musicians such as Beyonce and Donald Glover?
Eichner: It's about time. This is the culmination for

them of so many years of hard work trying to get to our level. It's really gratifying that we've been able to give them this opportunity.

Rogen: Yeah, I feel good for them. They deserve this break. I can't imagine how thrilling it must be for them.
Q: What is it like singing such recognizable songs?
Rogen: It's fun because you grow up with them.

There was a certain exercise in my head of not being too familiar with the original version. Your first instinct is, "I'll go listen to the original version and remind myself of what it was like." The instinct that served me better was to not do that specifically and really trust that Jon would guide me to do all the things that he thought were necessary in order to make the song hit.

Eichner: The songs were probably one of the more intimidating parts to record in terms of having to walk this fine line of nodding to the original and certain elements of the original performances that people just love and would be disappointed not to hear again, but also finding ways to make it our own. Especially "Hakuna Matata" — that song is ingrained in people's heads. Once you get past the first few takes, you start to fall into your own rhythm. Eventually the anxiety wears off, but that's a big one to take on.

Q: How did you make the role your own while also honoring the things that made the first film special?
Rogen: I think I mostly had to trust that Jon cast us for a reason and just give him what I hope he wanted from that decision. Obviously the director, especially Jon, is very specific and articulate in guiding you in the direction he wants, but what I quickly found was he wanted us to really try and make it our own.

Eichner: It's not really one of those movies where you were cast and you suddenly try a new voice out. It wasn't like a Meryl Streep moment. He cast everyone for a reason because he heard our natural voices in his head and wanted some version of that.

Q: Disney is very controlling about press. What has it been like promoting this movie?
Rogen: I've been amazed we haven't gotten yelled at yet, Billy!

Eichner: I know, I know. I'm totally shocked right now. But what are they going to do to us? (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Disney's "The Lion King" certainly felt the love this weekend, generating \$269 million at the international box office.

Director **Jon Favreau's** remake of the classic Disney cartoon now holds the eighth-biggest debut of all time overseas, and that's not including the film's early opening in **China** last weekend. Combined with a stellar \$185 million start in **North America**, "The Lion King" earned \$433 million globally over the weekend and \$531 million to date. After 10 days in theaters, "The Lion King" is already the seventh-highest grossing film of the year.

"The Lion King" debuted at No. 1 in all 52 international markets, with particularly strong showings in **Russia, Brazil, Mexico, and Australia**. In **China**, "The Lion King" is just shy of the \$100 million mark with \$98 million in ticket sales. Other top markets include the **United Kingdom** (\$19.9 million), **France** (\$19.6 million), **Mexico** (\$18.7 million), **Brazil** (\$17.9 million), **Korea** (\$17.7 million), and **Australia** (\$17.1 million). It has yet to open in **Hong Kong, Japan** or **Italy**.

Sony's "Spider-Man: Far From Home" also had a solid weekend overseas, where it amassed \$37.2 million from 67 foreign territories. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Actor and comedian **Deng Chao** underlined his enduring popularity with mainstream Chinese audiences by delivering a surprise No. 1 box-office hit in "Looking Up" over the weekend. It scored \$38.6 million in its opening frame, according to data from consultancy Artisan Gateway, and displaced "The Lion King" from its perch. "Looking Up" is a family comedy about a father's close and pedagogical relationship with his son. The narrative stretches from the son's unconventional childhood to his meditative moments while in space as an astronaut.

Deng ("Shadow", "Duckweed"), "The Mermaid") stars as the father. He co-directed the film with **Yu Baimei** from a script by Yu ("The Breakup Guru").

The film had an unconventional Thursday opening, when it scored \$9.21 million. Friday was worth \$9.85 million, while Saturday and Sunday each delivered scores of close to \$15 million. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: SAG-AFTRA and streaming giant Netflix have agreed to a new three-year



Favreau



Chao

contract with expanded coverage for union performers.

Netflix has previously employed SAG-AFTRA members under the union's standard master contracts for television and film and had been signing on a production by production basis.

The union announced Saturday that the new deal recognizes performance capture as covered

work and includes coverage of dubbing, which applies to all of Netflix's foreign-language live-action and animated motion pictures dubbed into English.

The deal was approved Saturday by the union's national board by an "overwhelming" margin, although SAG-AFTRA did not specify the exact numbers. The agreement, which

expires on June 30, 2022, does not require ratification by the union's membership.

SAG-AFTRA said the new deal also includes gains in theatrical residuals, greater rights for members in the areas of options and exclusivity, improved overtime rules for stunt performers and specific protections for members regarding harassment and auditions. (RTRS)