

People & Places

Television

DeGeneres show extended

Iraq Ramadan show 'revives' an industry

BAGHDAD, May 22. (RTRS): On a studio set in Baghdad, a director watches the star of his TV series hold a knife against the neck of a fellow actor, in a dramatic revival of fortunes for Iraq's entertainment industry.

Filmed in Iraq where the entertainment industry has been battered by conflict, "The Hotel" unfolds in a run-down hostel owned by a novelist who records the lives of his guests as they struggle against violence or become caught up in romance.

Made on a small budget, the series of daily shows has been airing during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when families and friends across the Middle East often gather around televisions after breaking the day's fast with an evening meal.

The series tackles sensitive issues of prostitution, drug use and human trafficking, topics that drew censure from some lawmakers and members of the public in the religiously conservative country.

As a result, some racier scenes have been cut.

Dream

But Ali Jaafar al-Saadi, one of the show's producers, makes no apology for the subject matter. "Art in my opinion never solves issues, but it sheds light on certain problems in society," he told Reuters.

Those behind the production see it as part of a slow recovery of Iraq's film and entertainment industry, which crumbled after the 2003 US-led invasion and in the years of conflict since then.

Hassan Husni, a former actor who directed the show, said working on the series fulfilled a dream. "People were eagerly awaiting the return of Iraqi drama. This opens the door," he said.

Husni left Iraq in 1996 when international sanctions against Saddam Hussein's government crushed the economy and made it difficult to earn money acting.

"I kept waiting for stability to return to the country," he said. Meanwhile, he gained experience abroad in Lebanon, Syria and Saudi Arabia, before coming home five months ago.

Saadi said the revival of television production and other cultural activities showed a semblance of calm was returning to Iraq. "Art can only exist in a place with security, a place that is relatively stable," he said.

The team has still faced hurdles, often having to work with old equipment or teaching crew members new skills.

Many Iraqi actors, cinematographers and directors who also fled have remained abroad. But Saadi said he was "very optimistic" that the entertainment industry would thrive again.

Many Iraqis were happy to see a local production on their TV screens, after years of watching shows imported from Egypt or other Arab states. But some were shocked by scenes that included one depicting a massage or those showing characters gathering in a nightclub, drinking alcohol or taking drugs.

Members of parliament's culture committee said the show "contradicts the values and norms of Iraqi society", which led to some nightclub scenes being edited out of future episodes.

His comments about the show's themes were echoed by veteran actor and star of the show, Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas.

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Ellen DeGeneres is sticking with her daytime talk show.

DeGeneres announced Tuesday that she has signed a new deal to continue hosting "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" through 2022. There had been rumors for some time that DeGeneres was planning to leave the show when her current contract was up in 2020, something she leaned into when making the announcement to her studio audience in a video released Tuesday.

"the beginning I said this show was going to be like a relationship," DeGeneres said. "We've been through the good, the bad, the 'Fifty Shades of Grey' phase. It's been a lot of fun and 16 years is a pretty good run. Sometimes in a relationship, you need to take a break. But I don't. You're stuck with me. I just signed for three more years."

According to sources, DeGeneres now has a large ownership stake in the show, having been granted more points with every contract.

DeGeneres, Mary Connelly, Ed Glavin, Andy Lassner, Kevin A. Leman II and Derek Westervelt serve as executive producers. Originating from Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" is produced by A Very Good Production and WAD Productions, Inc in association with Telepictures, and is distributed by Warner Bros Domestic Television Distribution. The show has already been licensed by the NBC Owned Television Stations (10 stations) and Hearst Television (22 stations) through the 2021-2022 season.

Connection

"Ellen is, quite simply, a force of nature," said Peter Roth, president and chief content officer for Warner Bros Television Group. "Her energy, intelligence, kindness and creativity know no bounds. Whether it's her instant connection to her guests on her flagship talk show, her warm and funny hosting on 'Game of Games', or the infectious enthusiasm she shares in producing everything from 'Little Big Shots' to the animated antics of 'Green Eggs and Ham', it's an honor to work alongside her. We're thrilled to continue this fun and friendly journey with her."

DeGeneres also currently hosts the NBC series "Ellen's Game of Games", which features the comedian and daytime host playing supersized versions of the games she has popularized through her talk show. NBC also announced that she will host three holiday specials titled "Ellen's Greatest Night of Giveaways" later this year.

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The BBC will air a spoof talk-show fronted by an animated Vladimir Putin. The UK pubcaster has ordered two pilot episodes of "Tonight with Vladimir Putin", a semi-scripted talk show hosted by a CGI representation of the Russian leader.

The first guest will be Alistair Campbell, a former high-ranking political spin doctor in the UK. Other interviewees are plucked from the world of British TV and popular culture. Visual effects specialist Framestore has used performance capture technology to enable the 3D animated Putin character to walk around the set and interact with guests.

The producers said that the animated Putin will be seen trying to get to grips with feminism and diversity. "Everybody's favourite bear-wrestling global strongman Vladimir Putin has finally achieved his ultimate goal - a chat-show on the BBC," the BBC said as it announced the show.



Sheryl Crow performs on stage during the 44th Annual Gracie Awards at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel on May 21 in Beverly Hills, Calif. (AP)

Music

Morrissey offers 12 covers, with very mixed results

Staples, Harper unite for great music

By Mark Kennedy

Mavis Staples, "We Get By" (Anti-Records)

Time has certainly not dampened the urgency in Mavis Staples' voice. Now 80, the Grammy-winning legend and social activist has one clear enemy on her new album: the status quo. She sings the word "change" some 20 times.

The terrific "We Get By" opens with the song "Change" and ends 10 tracks later with "One More Change to Make". Along the way, she urges action: "Can't stay the same", "Something's got to give" and "Grab hold of the days".

All the songs on this, her 12th studio album, were written by Ben Harper and their union is both fruitful and moving. Harper has given Staples some tunes that show off her vulnerable side and others that make you move, with some funk and folk and soul and blues, the guitars often shimmering. He joins her in singing the dynamic, soulful "We Get By".

The Staples-Harper collaboration dates back to when he wrote the terrific song "Love and Trust" for her 2016 album, "Livin' On a High Note". She thanks him for all his new work in the liner notes: "I love you, Baby Bruh". He has three Grammys, but Harper might put that career achievement first.

Harper has written and produced an unrushed and quietly brooding album for Staples, one that puts her expressive voice at the center and the instruments turned down. Two songs - "Never Needed Anyone" and "Heavy On My Mind" - sound like the band was another room down the hall.

In between calls for change, Staples sings about love. On "Chance on Me", she is needy: "I don't need a symphony/I just need one violin." On the tender, bluesy "Hard to Leave", she's longing: "Softly reaching over/For your touch upon my sleeve."

Then there's the standout "Stronger", an irresistible rocking track where

Staples' voice stretches and soars and the guitar keeps up with her. "Don't need a house on the hill/Don't need my face on a dollar bill," she sings.

Now that's an idea. Staples may not need her face on our money, but perhaps it's the least we can do to thank her. Hey, George Washington has had a long run. Who's down with Staples on the \$1? Change can be good.

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Morrissey, "California Son" (Etienne/BMG)

Morrissey delivers a dozen covers on his new album, "California Sun", which reimagines works by such masters as Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Carly Simon as well as more obscure musicians.

It's a bold move by the former Smiths singer, a sonic face-off against some of music's giants. It deserves to be taken song by song and scored like a boxing bout over 12 rounds.

Who's ready to rumble?

The album kicks off with Morrissey's take on Jobriath's '70s gem "Morning Starship" and the so-called Pope of Mope nicely keeps its trippy vibe but modernizes the sound. Good opening choice and credit to Morrissey for introducing Jobriath to a new generation, 1-0 to Morrissey.

But Mitchell's twangy, rich "Don't Interrupt the Sorrow" is next and Morrissey can't lay a glove on the original, 1-1. He does better with Dylan's "Only a Pawn in Their Game", with the Englishman giving the folk tune a slight Celtic feel but failing to match Dylan's sarcastic bite, 1-2.

Morrissey then painfully fails to connect on his cover of Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Suffer the Little Children", turning the original's spiky mania into a lounge song, 1-3. He does better with Phil Ochs' "Days of Decisions", his voice glorious, 2-3.

He also surprisingly gets a point with Roy Orbison's "It's Over", matching the American icon's tenderness and

even upping the heartbreak, 3-3. But Morrissey is no match when it comes to The Fifth Dimension's "Wedding Bell Blues" - the original is lush and heartfelt; Morrissey's is camp, 3-4.

He seems to have completely misunderstood Burt Bacharach's "Loneliness Remembers What Happiness Forgets" - when Dionne Warwick sang it, it was a soaring ballad, when Morrissey does, it's a small pop ditty, 3-5. He also doesn't do enough to bloody Gary Puckett's "Lady Willpower", 3-6.

Morrissey is in trouble now. He's been knocked down. But he might pull it off if he finishes strong. Unfortunately, the next one is Simon's "When You Close Your Eyes". Simon sings in service of the song; Morrissey is posing in front of it, 3-7. And his cover of Tim Hardin's "Lenny's Tune" lacks the original's haunting sadness, 3-8.

The folly of the project is truly laid bare when Morrissey tackles Melanie's "Some Say (I Got Devil)". The original is eerie and complex, an irresistible feminist anthem. While Morrissey croons hard, this was never the song for him.

Final score: 3-9, an easy decision.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Motown Records and veteran rapper T.I. will be honored at ASCAP's 32nd annual Rhythm & Soul Music Awards, the company has announced. The awards take place on Thursday, June 20 in Los Angeles.

Motown, which was founded by Berry Gordy and is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, will receive the ASCAP Rhythm & Soul Heritage Award, which honors ASCAP members who have had a major impact on the legacy of rhythm & soul music. Previous recipients include Smokey Robinson, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis, Chaka Khan, Peabo Bryson, Earth, Wind & Fire, Rick James and Bill Withers. (Agencies)



Actress Tilda Swinton (right), and her daughter Honor Swinton Byrne pose for photographers upon arrival at the premiere of the film 'Parasite' at the 72nd international film festival, Cannes, southern France on May 21. (AP)



Levitt



Griffin

Variety

LOS ANGELES: Simran Sethi, the Los Angeles-based director of Netflix international originals, responsible for India content, has resigned and will quit after a transition period.

Netflix did not comment. Sources familiar with the matter told Variety that Netflix prefers an executive based in India to oversee local original content that has now grown to 11 series and 22 films. Sethi, who grew up in the US, chose to remain there for personal reasons, the source said.

Sethi's replacement could hail from within India or from outside, but the role will be based in Mumbai as it requires dealing with local content creators on a daily basis.

Sethi is the second high-profile executive to choose to stay in Los Angeles rather than move to Mumbai, after Swati Shetty. A former Disney executive who went on to produce Sundance audience award winner "Umrika", Shetty joined Netflix in August 2016 and relocated to Los Angeles from Mumbai. When her role required her to move back to Mumbai, Shetty quit, and after a cooling off period, joined Brian Grazer and Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment as VP, international content, a Los Angeles-based position.

Sethi joined Netflix in August 2017 after stints at Freeform, NBC, Adam Sandler's Happy Madison and Sony Pictures Television. While Netflix global hit "Sacred Games" was already commissioned when Sethi joined, shows commissioned or acquired under her watch include "Richie Mehta's" acclaimed "Delhi Crime", "Deepa Mehta's" "Leila", due June 14, and "Bard of Blood", from Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment. (RTRS)

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LOS ANGELES: "Kathy Griffin: A Hell of a Story", a documentary comedy from the star comedian, has sold to Brainstorm Media for a special theatrical release this summer. Variety has learned.

The movie will play in US theaters on

July 31, for a one-night special event. Fathom Events is a partner on the deal, and Griffin will join audiences for a live Q&A following the film.

"A Hell of a Story", which is directed by

Troy Miller, premiered at SXSW in March to strong reviews. The film takes place at the end of Griffin's recent "Laugh Your Head Off" tour, where she discusses the fallout from a controversial 2017 photograph where



Musician Elton John and producer David Furnish (left), arrive for the UK Film Premiere of Rocketman at the Odeon Luxe in London on May 20. (AP)

she posed with a fake severed head that looks like it belonged to Donald Trump.

As a result of the picture, which Griffin meant as a joke, she was blacklisted by Hollywood. She stopped getting job offers in movies and TV. And even worse, she underwent lengthy federal investigation by the US Department of Justice and the Secret Service on suspicion of conspiracy to assassinate the president. (RTRS)

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LOS ANGELES: Amazon Studios has acquired global rights to Joseph Gordon-Levitt's terrorist drama "7500".

The deal, announced Monday at the Cannes Film Festival, excludes Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Universum will distribute the film in Germany.

In "7500", Gordon-Levitt plays the co-pilot of a plane that has been hijacked by terrorists. The title references the code 7500, which a pilot uses in the event of a hijacking. The code is designed to silently alert air traffic controllers of the situation without tipping off the hijacker. German director Patrick Vollrath wrote the screenplay with Senad Halilbasic.

Gordon-Levitt came on board and Vollrath began shooting starting in the fall of 2017 in Cologne and Vienna. "7500" is Vollrath's full-length feature debut following his 2015 Academy Award-nominated short, "Everything Will Be Okay". (RTRS)