

Venice Film Festival forges ahead with reduced lineup

By Lindsey Bahr

The show will go on for the Venice Film Festival in September, but with a few modifications due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizers said Tuesday that they are pushing forward with plans for its 77th installment, which will include a slightly reduced number of films in the main competition as well as some outdoor and virtual screenings. If the schedule stays intact, it will be the first major film festival since COVID-19 essentially shut down the industry in mid-March.

Festival director Alberto Barbera said in a statement that he is "extremely pleased that the Biennale Cinema can be held with a minimum reduction of films and sections" and that "a significant number of directors and actors will accompany films to the Lido."

There will still be 50 to 55 films in the official selection, which will be announced on July 28, and screenings will take place in the traditional venues as well as two outdoor arenas (at the Giardini della Biennale and a skating rink on the Lido) with adopted safety measures established by authorities. The festival will take its Virtual Reality section online and this year forego its Sconfini section, which hosts smaller films and genre fare, to accommodate more socially distanced screenings of the major films in competition. Actress Cate Blanchett is presiding over the main competition jury.

Travel to Italy, an early epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, is allowed from European countries. The European Union last week said it

would reopen its border to 14 nations, but most Americans have been refused entry due to soaring coronavirus infections in the US. Press from countries with travel restrictions will be able to view press conferences virtually, Barbera said.

"Without forgetting the countless victims of these past few months to whom due tribute shall be paid, the first international festival following the forced interruption dictated by the pandemic becomes the meaningful celebration of the re-opening we all looked forward to, and a message of concrete optimism for the entire world of cinema which has suffered greatly from this crisis," Barbera said.

The Toronto International Film Festival, which is typically held on the heels of Venice in September, has already announced plans for a smaller 2020 version, with fewer films and virtual red carpets. Both festivals serve as major launching grounds for awards hopefuls, although no one knows exactly how it will work now that runway to the Oscars has been extended by two months.

The Venice Film Festival runs from Sept 2-12.

Also:

NEW YORK: The national labor union representing stage actors and managers has given the go-ahead for two Massachusetts theaters to resume theatrical performances, offering potential road maps for the national return to live performances.

Actors' Equity Association on Monday approved a one-man show by

Barrington Stage Company and an outdoor production of the musical "...spell" at Berkshire Theatre Group. Both companies will turn Pittsfield, in western Massachusetts, into a laboratory for how union shows can return to work following the coronavirus pandemic. The shows are scheduled to start in August.

The green light comes as theaters across the country grapple with trying to again create live entertainment. Producers and union members are discussing best practices for audience and workers.

Barrington Stage Company is producing "Harry Clarke", a one-man show that will employ a performer and a stage manager. It will be held indoors, but seating has been cut from over 500 to 163. The backstage area will be isolated and regularly cleaned.

Nearby, "...spell" will be presented to 96 audience members in an open-air tent adjacent to The Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield and employ a cast of about 10 and two stage managers.

At both performances, patrons will be asked to wear masks and performers and stage managers will be tested for the virus regularly. While some shows have been mounted across the country since the outbreak, none have the stamp of approval from Actors' Equity Association.

"Taking a safety plan from the page to the real world will require everyone to work together, from the employer to every employee, especially our members," said Mary McColl, Executive Director of Actors' Equity Association. "Every production is different and will be evaluated on a case by case basis focusing on the safety of our members." (AP)

Variety



This image released by Netflix shows (clockwise from top), Matthias Schoenaerts, Charlize Theron and Luca Marinelli in a scene from 'The Old Guard'. (AP)

Film

Comic movie gets an overhaul

'Old Guard' wonderfully unconventional

By Jake Coyle

For all the painful absences of this summer, it has been a season blessedly bereft of superheroes.

No, they're not all bad. And there is much of the normal rhythms of the movies' main-event months to be nostalgic for. But one thing I haven't missed is the unending business of franchises — their perpetual erection, expansion and, occasionally, hopeless collapse.

For better or worse, world building is on us this summer. And that has, in many ways, been a good opportunity for further examining the kinds of stories that get told and who tells them.

Netflix's "The Old Guard", on the surface, seems like it gives us what the summer has been missing. It's a starry, big-budget adaptation of a graphic novel about a band of immortal warriors led by Charlize Theron.

And to a large degree, it supplies much of the absent superhero stuff. Visceral action sequences. Torrents of bullets. A blatant set-up of future installments.

But "The Old Guard", while in many ways typical, is wonderfully unconventional in all kinds of less obvious ways. Its characters, even the long-living ones, are recognizably human. Emotions like melancholy and doubt — both of which are normally checked at the door by Marvel — have been allowed in. The world all around is — gasp! — realistic.

Much of this is owed to Gina Prince-Bythewood, the filmmaker of "Love & Basketball" and "Beyond the Lights" who here brings her naturalistic and soulful touch to the kind of genre movie she hasn't previously tried.

This would, just in film-making terms, be an exciting leap in scale for a not-well-known-enough directing talent. But it's also history-making. Prince-Bythewood is the first Black woman to direct a comic book film. And, while

the material isn't special by any means, Prince-Bythewood subtly bends the sensibility of the superhero film in fresh and newly flexible directions.

Theron plays Andromache the Scythian (Andy, thank goodness, for short), a seasoned warrior of 6,000 years. Virtual immortality has come to her and a few others as a mysterious and uncertain gift, or possibly, a curse. With her are Booker (Matthias Schoenaerts), a veteran going back to the Napoleonic Wars, and Joe (Marwan Kenzari) and Nicky (Luca Marinelli), a pair who fought on opposite sides of the Crusades before following in love.

Pivotal

The concept, from the comic by Greg Rucka (who also wrote the script), is promising. Like a militant band of Zeligs, the group has stealthily swayed pivotal moments of history and battle through the centuries, but Andy is doubting their usefulness. "The world isn't getting any better," she says, wearily glancing at a TV news broadcast from Syria. "It's getting worse."

When we first meet them, we don't know that they're anything but run-of-the-mill mercenaries. They dress in black and carry big guns. They're hired for a job by former CIA agent Copley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) to save schoolchildren abducted in South Sudan, an apparent reference to the Boko Haram kidnappings in Nigeria.

But when they go to the underground location, they're gunned down. Lying on the floor, their eyes flicker to life like rebooted laptops. When they rise and mete out their revenge, the real trap — a watching camera placed by Copley — is revealed. Their secret is out, and soon a multinational pharmaceutical company is after their blood.

A story line that encompassed more of the group's secret sway through history would have been nice, but "The Old Guard" instead deals

with this threat to the warriors' survival. The actors, particularly Theron, convincingly capture the dynamics of a group whose relationships go back eons. They might be largely immune to death, but they're still haunted by it, and visibly uneasy about their place in the world. "The Old Guard" is about the heavy weight of duty.

The film also ropes in a potential new member. KiKi Layne, the breakout star of "If Beale Street Could Talk", plays a US Marine in Afghanistan who, after having her throat slit, finds herself miraculously healed. Her fellow soldiers eye her suspiciously, but she'll soon find a home with the immortal four.

Partly because Layne stands out so much as a performer, I wonder if "The Old Guard" should have begun the story with her, immersing us in the confusion that follows her discovery. My other quibble would be that the upside of being immortal warriors means you can use much more interesting and elegant weapons than guns. Maybe centuries of warfare would have soured Andy and the others on gun violence.

It's one of many missed opportunities for "The Old Guard", which doesn't have nearly as much fun with its undead characters as, say, Jim Jarmusch's very tasteful vampires in "Only Lovers Left Alive". "The Old Guard" could have surveyed a history of violence just as Jarmusch's characters soak up humanity's works of art. Instead, it feels more locked in the present.

But maybe "The Old Guard" means to save something for the sequels it baits at the end. Fair enough. This summer, I'll let it pass.

"The Old Guard", a Netflix release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for sequences of graphic violence, and language. Running time: 125 minutes. Three stars out of four. (AP)

Features

ARABIC TIMES

FRIDAY-SATURDAY, JULY 10-11, 2020

NEW YORK: Disney+'s streaming of "Hamilton" was surely the biggest event on television screens over the holiday weekend.

Just how big, however, remains a mystery.

Disney knows, but it's not telling. Data is coming in to the Nielsen company, too, but won't be released until Disney gives the go-ahead. "Hamilton" is the poster boy for how the science of measurement is not keeping up with how entertainment content is being consumed.

Disney+, which announced in May that it had signed up 54.5 million paid subscribers worldwide, will not release information on how many people subscribed in time to get "Hamilton" or how many watched until its next quarterly earnings report, a spokeswoman said.

Nielsen offers plenty of information on who watched television shows the past week. For example, Fox News Channel drew 5.7 million viewers on Friday night when it showed President Donald Trump speaking at Mount Rushmore.

Television viewership is widely known because advertising is the business' cornerstone. Advertisers need to know exactly how many eyeballs they're getting for the money. It's different for streaming services, which are primarily supported by subscriptions. The industry's giant, Netflix, set a trend by keeping details about how many people watch their programs largely a secret.

Nielsen said it is repeating what it did in the early days of cable television by letting networks and their corporate owners dictate how much information about how many people are watching is released. Nascent networks figured it was a buzzkill if people learned that the audiences for heavily-promoted shows were small.

The same is true for the streaming services. They're also nervous about how viewing patterns will be depicted — a new streamed show will often get a big audience when it is first released, but quickly drop off.

Nielsen has pushed during the pandemic to release more information, including a weekly listing of the top streamed shows based on minutes viewed.

With the market becoming crowded with more streaming services, the pressure is rising among creators and marketers for more dependable information on how

popular the shows really are, **Brian Fuhrer**, Nielsen's senior vice-president for product leadership, said Wednesday. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Authorities say former "Glee" star **Naya Rivera** is missing and being searched for at a Southern California lake.

The Ventura County Sheriff's



Rivera



Salling

Department late Wednesday confirmed that Rivera, 33, is the person being searched for in the waters of Lake Piru, which is approximately 56 miles (90 kilometers) northwest of downtown Los Angeles.

KNBC reported late Wednesday that Rivera rented a pontoon boat at the Lake Piru reservoir Wednesday and that her young son was found on the boat wearing a life vest. Rivera's

identification was found on the boat. Sheriff's officials launched a boat and helicopter search Wednesday afternoon, but that had been suspended by nighttime. The search will continue early Thursday.

Rivera played Santana, a cheerleader in the musical-comedy "Glee" that aired on Fox from 2009 until 2015. Rivera appeared in 113 episodes of the series and

dated co-star **Mark Salling**, who killed himself in 2018. Rivera is an American actress and singer. She began her career as a child actress and model, appearing in national television commercials before landing the role of Hillary Winston on the short-lived CBS sitcom The Royal Family at the age of 4, for which she received a nomination for a Young Artist Award. (AP)