

Plans for movie on New Zealand mosque attacks draw criticism

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, June 12. (AP) Tentative plans for a movie that recounts the response of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to a gunman's slaughter of Muslim worshippers drew criticism in New Zealand on Friday for not focusing on the victims of the attacks.

Hollywood news outlet Deadline reported that Australian actor Rose Byrne was set to play Ardern in the movie "They Are Us," which was being shopped by New York-based FilmNation Entertainment to international buyers.

The movie would be set in the days after the 2019 attacks in which 51 people were killed at two Christchurch mosques.

Deadline said the movie would follow Ardern's response to the attacks and how people rallied behind her message of compassion and unity, and her successful call to ban the deadliest types of semiautomatic weapons.

The title of the movie comes from the words Ardern spoke in a landmark address soon after the attacks. At the time, Ardern was praised around the world for her response.

But many in New Zealand are raising concerns about the movie plans.

Aya Al-Umari, whose older brother Hussein was killed in the attacks, wrote on Twitter simply "Yeah nah," a New Zealand phrase meaning "No."

Abdigani Ali, a spokesperson for the Muslim Association of Canter-

bury, said the community recognized the story of the attacks needed to be told "but we would want to ensure that it's done in an appropriate, authentic, and sensitive matter."

Tina Ngata, an author and advocate, was more blunt, tweeting that the slaughter of Muslims should not be the backdrop for a film about "white woman strength. COME ON."

Ardern's office said in a brief statement that the prime minister and her government have no involvement with the movie.

Deadline reported that New Zealander Andrew Niccol would write and direct the project and that the script was developed in consultation with several members of the mosques affected by the tragedy.

Niccol said the film wasn't so much about the attacks but more the response.

"The film addresses our common humanity, which is why I think it will speak to people around the world," Niccol told Deadline. "It is an example of how we should respond when there's an attack on our fellow human beings."

Byrne's agents and FilmNation did not immediately respond to requests for comment. The report said the project would be filmed in New Zealand but did not say when.

Niccol is known for writing and directing "Gattaca" and writing "The Terminal" and "The Truman Show," for which he was nominated for an Oscar.

Byrne is known for roles in "Spy" and "Bridesmaids."

Also:

LOS ANGELES: Hollywood star Riz Ahmed has launched a new initiative meant to increase the representation of Muslims in Hollywood, both on and off the screen. While the Emmy-winning and Oscar-nominated actor is spearheading the effort, he is joined by some of Hollywood's leading Muslim professionals.

The Blueprint for Muslim Inclusion and the Pillars Artists Fellowship, in partnership with the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and the Ford Foundation, will offer select grantees an unrestricted award of \$25,000.

The effort grew out of a USC Annenberg study on the representation of Muslims in film. The study found only 9.5% of top-grossing films from 2017-2019 had an onscreen Muslim character, and less than 2% of those characters had a speaking role. Muslims make up roughly 24% of the world's population.

The survey included data from 200 films and found that not a single animated film featured a Muslim character. Furthermore, only seven of the characters were children under the age of 12.

In a series of impassioned Twitter posts, Ahmed made a case for the new program and for increased representation of Muslims in Hollywood.

Film

Variety



This image released by Paramount Plus shows Sophie Cookson in a scene from 'Infinite.' (AP)

Film

Hong Kong to censor films 'endangering national security'

Wahlberg finds he's special in 'Infinite'

By Lindsey Bahr

The new Mark Wahlberg movie "Infinite" poses an intoxicating scenario for all down-on-their-luck know-it-alls: What if you're actually a reincarnated immortal who is not just the smartest and the best at everything but also necessary to save humanity? In the world of Hollywood wish fulfillment premises, women get to discover they're secret princesses. Men get to discover they're secret geniuses who can wield a katana while riding a motorcycle in a high-speed chase. (I know, I know, there are exceptions).

This particular story is based on a book, "The Reincarnationist Papers" by D. Eric Maikranz, which the author self-published in 2009 with the goal of getting a movie adaptation made. He offered up a cash reward to a reader who could connect him with a literary agent, a publisher or a Hollywood executive. That it worked, and attracted the likes of Wahlberg and director Antoine Fuqua, is almost as far-fetched as "Infinite" itself.

And yes, "Infinite" is infinitely silly, but it's not without some pleasures, many of which come from Wahlberg delivering lines like "are you talking about reincarnation?" and "I've been analyzed in every way possible" in that way that only Mark Wahlberg can - with manic earnestness that under the right circumstances can be passed off as intentional comedy. And although this is overall a sincere endeavor, the existence of Jason Mantzoukas playing a hedonistic sadist with impeccable eyeliner and a glam rock wardrobe even invites the possibility that the filmmakers aren't asking us to take this too seriously either.

And there are some thrilling stunts with cars and motorcycles that may have Tom Cruise and Vin Diesel sending some notes to their respective "Mission: Impossible" and "Fast & Furious" producers wondering why they don't have that in their new films.

Other notes might include warnings about too much exposition, though. Building a world like this, with warring factions of Infinites (people who remember their past lives), requires a lot of voiceover and explanation woven into conversations. "Infinite" never quite figures out how to do that gracefully while building worthwhile characters and moving the story along.

As Evan, Wahlberg is attempting to be a kind of everyman here, a maitre d' for high end restaurants who is unemployable after a mental health incident and is worried about paying rent and running out of the pills that keep his mind in check. He has big questions about why he is the way he is and no answers yet: "Did you ever have a dream so real it felt like a memory? Do you ever catch yourself in the mirror and are surprised? Are there things you just know how to do... like you're remembering, not learning?"

Authentic

But the Infinites catch wind of his existence after he constructs an authentic samurai sword for a local drug dealer in exchange for meds. (Sense memory from his apparent past life as a samurai aside, where this unemployed maitre d' who can't afford to pay rent got access to the materials and space to make this item is left unexplored). It puts him on the radar of Bathurst (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a nihilist Infinite who'd like to destroy everything, and Tammy (Sophie Cookson), a believer Infinite who'd like everything to not be destroyed. From there it's a race to explain everything, get Evan to remember his past lives, stop Bathurst and save the world.

The most novel thing about "Infinite" is that it's not about teens or very young 20-somethings, but it still feels very YA-adjacent. And it's exactly the kind of big, silly, occasionally exciting spectacle that have come to define summer movie season, for better or worse. There's even an opening for a sequel.

"Infinite," a Paramount+ release available Friday, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "for sequences of strong violence, some bloody images, strong language and brief drug use." Running time: 106 minutes. Two stars out of four.

MPAA Definition of PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

Also:

HONG KONG: Hong Kong censors now have the power to ban films that endanger national security, prompting concerns that freedom of expression is being further curtailed

in a city once known for its vibrant arts and film scene.

Authorities are cracking down on criticism of Chinese Communist Party rule, arresting many pro-democracy activists in the city and implementing a sweeping national security law last year that criminalizes actions such as the calls for independence made during months of anti-government protests in 2019.

The Hong Kong government announced Friday that it has amended the guidelines for censors in the city's Film Censorship Ordinance to include vigilance against any "portrayal, depiction or treatment of any act or activity which may amount to an offense endangering national security."

Censors have the power to ban films from exhibition to "prevent or suppress any act or activity endangering national security," it said in a statement.

"The film censorship regulatory framework is built on the premise of a balance between protection of individual rights and freedoms on the one hand, and the protection of legitimate societal interests on the other," the government said.

The amended ordinance takes Hong Kong a step closer to the censorship of films on the Chinese mainland, which are closely vetted for themes and scenes critical of the Communist Party's leadership or that do not align with values that the government seeks to espouse.

On Friday, organizers of the 15th Fresh Wave International Short Film Festival canceled the screening of "Far From Home," a short about political divisions in Hong Kong following the 2019 anti-government protests, after it did not receive approval from censors.

"This film censorship system shows how freedom of expression is disappearing from Hong Kong," said Anders Hammer, director of "Do Not Split," an Oscar-nominated documentary about the 2019 protests. "In 2021 we have seen how the situation is deteriorating further where activists and pro-democracy politicians are put in prison, charged under the new draconian national security law," he said.

"And unfortunately, it looks like the local government and Beijing only want to continue with this dissolution of basic democratic rights in Hong Kong," he said. (AP)

CORNISH, NH: The widow of author J.D. Salinger wants to donate the former general store she owns in New Hampshire to the town so it can be converted into a library.

Salinger, author of "The Catcher in the Rye," spent the last nearly six decades of his life in Cornish, far removed from the public eye. He died in 2010.

Colleen O'Neill, his widow, bought the town's former general store in 2016. It reopened, but closed about 18 months later.

"A library can be that vital place that helps our community thrive," she said in a letter read aloud by a friend at Tuesday's Town Meeting, the Valley News reported. "Libraries today are more than just about books. They are about connecting us to the wider world, serving the community and creating a sense of place. What I love about this town, what I love about Cornish, is that when help is needed, this community comes together. It is what makes Cornish so amazing and so special."

The town's current library was built around 1910 and lacks off-street parking and running water, library trustee Laura Cousineau said. (AP)

MADRID: French author Emmanuel Carrere, popular for his non-fiction books in a high literary vein, has been granted this year's Spanish Princess of Asturias Literature Award.

The award is one of the eight prestigious prizes by the foundation named after the heir to the Spanish throne, Princess Leonor.

Its jury said Wednesday that Carrere, 63, was chosen among 33 candidates from 20 countries because of the ability of his works to straddle reality and fiction.

Starting with his "The Adversary" in 2000, about the murderer Jean-Claude Romand, Carrere abandoned a previous career in fiction and began to write stories narrating his own experience or the lives of others.

"His books contribute to the unmasking of the human condition and relentlessly dissect reality," the award's jury said in a statement. It added that, in doing so, "Carrere draws an incisive

portrait of today's society." The author has also worked as a screenwriter and maker of films and documentaries, including a collaboration with German filmmaker Werner Herzog. (AP)

LOS ANGELES: Sheryl Underwood of "The Talk" will host the



Underwood



Carrere

Daytime Emmy Awards. She'll preside over the 48th annual ceremony on June 25 in Los Angeles, underwood co-hosted last year's virtual show that aired on CBS with former "The Talk" colleagues Sharon Osborne, Eve, Carrie Ann Inaba and Marie Osmond. Inaba is currently on leave from

the show. CBS said Tuesday that talent will appear onstage, as well as from the studios of various shows and homes to accept their trophies. Some winners will be announced during the show via social media. Among the nominees are Alex Trebek and Larry King, both

deceased. Trebek, who died in November, will compete in the game show host category, which he most recently won in 2019 and last year for "Jeopardy!" King, who died in January, received a nod in the informative talk show host category for his eponymous Ora TV broadcast. (AP)

Features

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