

NYC awaits return of international tourists

With lights back on, Times Square hopes to regain its luster

NEW YORK, Nov 21, (AP): David Cohen has been yearning for a return to the days when business boomed at his family's souvenir shop in Times Square.

While tourists have begun returning, foot traffic into Grand Slam souvenirs is still not what it was before the coronavirus pandemic, when hordes of global visitors crowded under the canopy of electric billboards just outside his door.

But the return of foreign tourists to a place popularly called the crossroads of the world may help hasten recovery for businesses like his — many of them mom-and-pop shops — that collectively employ thousands of people and serve as one of New York City's most important economic engines.

"We welcome them back with open arms," Cohen said after the US began allowing vaccinated international travelers into the country this month. "We've got a long way to go."

Times Square had long stood as an emblem of New York's hustle and bustle, but when Broadway theaters shut their doors at the height of the pandemic, 9 in 10 businesses in the area closed, according to a district civic group, The Times Square Alliance.

Three-fourths have since reopened, bit by bit, as Broadway shows began reopening to vaccinated-only audiences.

Among those hopefully restarting are businesses that don't cater directly to tourists, but are part of the city's entertainment ecosystem.

Sam Vasili's Shoe Repair reopened last month across 51st street from the Gershwin Theater, where it had operated for three decades before a long pandemic closure.

Owner Sam Smolyar was all grins on a recent afternoon as he shared the news that a Broadway production set to reopen nearby had requi-

sitioned his help. For years, he had been helping outfit the Rockettes with custom-fitted boots. "We rely on the theater, and on the businesses around here," he said.

He hopes more people buying tickets on Broadway will mean busier times. "It starts to get better," said Vasili, who employs three people at the shop.

Just before the COVID-19 outbreak, New York City had been posting record numbers of tourists — 66.6 million in 2019, including 13.5 million from outside the United States. Then the pandemic hit, prompting severe restrictions on foreign travel.

A marketing blitz has been underway for months to remind Americans that New York City is again open for business and ready for the visiting masses. Now the city is expanding its outreach to those outside the United States, who are especially coveted because they spend more time and more money during their visits.

Rebounding

While domestic travel accounted for 80% of New York visitors, foreign tourists account for about half of the city's tourism spending and typically represent half of all hotel bookings.

Tom Harris, president of the Times Square Alliance, said the district is already rebounding. Since May, he said, the number of pedestrians counted in some places has grown from 150,000 per day to as many as 250,000 — still far below the roughly 365,000 people who tramped through the grid of streets before the pandemic.

"Between the return of Broadway, the return of international tourists," Harris said, "we really expect to be at those pre-pandemic numbers sooner than most people predict."

Those returning visitors included people like Marina Galan, who soaked in Times Square from the bleachers under a cascade of lights. She and her friends flew to New York from Madrid on the first day US borders became open to vaccinated tourists.

"When you come back to New York, this is what you want to see," she said. "Everything is kind of back to normal."

Her friend Pablo Leon said he was eager to return. The group took a risk last March when they bought tickets for the Broadway musical *Hadestown*, even though uncertain about when they'd be allowed to travel to the United States.

"That was the true gamble because we bought the tickets for tonight, without any knowledge if we were going to be able to come here," Leon said.

NYC & Company, the city's tourism agency, is spending millions of dollars overseas to draw tourists back to the city. It projects 2.8 million foreign visitors by the end of the year, a sliver of the 13.5 million who visited in 2019. With borders reopened, officials hope that the number of visitors will steadily rise over the next few years and again reach record levels within the next four years.

"We're hoping to do everything we can to accelerate that timeline," said Chris Heywood, the agency's executive vice president.

The campaign is initially focused on Canada, Mexico, Brazil, South Korea and parts of Europe, but will likely expand into other countries — possibly into China, a particularly lucrative market because Chinese visitors significantly outspend other nationalities.

Chinese visitors, however, may be deciding to stay put for now because of quarantining requirements back home — at least two weeks after returning from an overseas trip.

Variety



This image released by Sony Pictures shows Finn Wolfhard, (from left), Mckenna Grace and Logan Kim in a scene from 'Ghostbusters: Afterlife.' (AP)

Film

Helen Mirren to get actors' guild Life Achievement Award

Too many old ghosts mar 'Afterlife'

'Ghostbusters: Afterlife' — the direct cinematic follow-up to the 1984 classic — is haunted, of course. But not in a good way.

Director and co-writer Jason Reitman's sequel leans so hard into his dad's original that it sometimes seems like a checklist of the megahit's touchstones, from the Ecto-1 tricked-out Cadillac, to Stay-Puft marshmallows, appearances from the surviving Ghostbusters and even the same Ray Parker Jr. theme song.

It has taken Ivan Reitman's original — which had the feel of an anarchic "Saturday Night Live" skit taken as far as it could go — too seriously. It fetishizes the ghost-trapping equipment and limps along until the original actors arrive — one cynically resurrected — to wring some sort of emotion it hasn't earned.

The film is set several decades after the events in "Ghostbusters," trading in the urban for the rural and ignoring any other sequels. It focuses on a struggling single mother Callie (Carrie Coon, treading water) and her two kids, the very, very teenage son Trevor (Finn Wolfhard) and her precocious science whiz daughter Phoebe (Mckenna Grace, also on the soundtrack with the appropriately titled "Haunted House").

After Callie's estranged father dies, the family pack up for his dilapidated farm in Summerville, Oklahoma, where the kids realize their grandfather was famed Ghostbuster Egon Spengler (the late Harold Ramis), who abandoned their mom for reasons unknown and hasn't been forgiven. "Take a little advice," mom tells the kids, "Don't go chasing ghosts."

Eerie things happen for the first hour and it's appropriate that Wolfhard of "Stranger Things" fame is here, mixing that show's vibe with an early Steven Spielberg suburban-stressed-out-parents-and-their-quirky-kids movie feel. (The family's motto:

"Don't be yourself!") Chess pieces move on their own, flashlights get used a lot and proton packs get played with.

The amount of acting talent wasted in this film is astounding, from a Slimier-esque critter named Muncher "voiced" by Josh Gad (bravo, eating noises!) and Logan Kim playing an intensely weird podcaster, to acting greats J.K. Simmons and Tracey Letts (Coon's real-life playwright-acting husband). A mom love interest is offered by Paul Rudd as a study teacher, but 2021's Sexiest Man Alive is unable to create comedic sparks due to so much slime.

Supernatural

"Ghostbusters: Afterlife" meanders along like an after-school special — kids, did you know science can be cool? — until the inevitable: Original stars Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Ernie Hudson arrive in the final 10 minutes to save the day (curiously also appearing, but sidelined, are OGs Annie Potts and Sigourney Weaver). And then comes the breaking point: Ramis heroically reappears thanks to supernatural computer work, a moment that can seem either incredibly crass or honorifically crass.

"What the hell is going on?" asks one character and she's right. Poorly edited, the film's musical queues must often signal to the viewer what they should be feeling. Poorly explained, the plot relies on the audience already knowing about the first film and especially the same villains — Gozer, the Gatekeeper and the Keymaster. Come on, at least update the baddies.

Once viewers realize this is merely a greatest hits compilation, they can settle in and anticipate the reappearance of lines like "Are you a god?" and "Who you gonna call?" After all, this is not a movie that can stand alone. It is more like half a movie, standing in the shadow of its parent. It is a film made to sell us more lunchboxes.

"Ghostbusters: Afterlife," a Sony Pictures release that hits theaters exclusively Friday is rated PG-13 for "supernatural action and some suggestive references." Running time: 124 minutes. One star out of four.

Also:

LOS ANGELES: The Screen Actors Guild has selected **Dame Helen Mirren** as their 57th Life Achievement Award Recipient, the union said Thursday.

The 76-year-old English stage and screen actor has credits spanning over 50 years and has played everything from a gangster's girlfriend in "The Long Good Friday" to **Queen Elizabeth II** in "The Queen." Mirren will be adding this latest honor to a robust collection of awards including an Oscar, a Tony, and multiple SAG, Emmy and BAFTA Awards.

"I am honored to have been chosen to receive the SAG Life Achievement Award," Mirren said in a statement. "Since I was a young actor starting out, I have always been inspired by and learned from American screen acting, so this award is particularly meaningful for me."

With 13 SAG Awards nominations and five wins, Mirren is also the most decorated SAG Life Achievement recipient, the union said.

"Dame Helen Mirren is quite simply a brilliant and luminous talent," said SAG-AFTRA President **Fran Drescher**, in a statement. "She has set the bar very high for all actors and, in role after role, she exceeds even her own extraordinary performances. I've always felt a kinship with Helen. She's the Queen of England and I'm the Queen of Queens. She won an Oscar and I'm left-hander of the year. It's uncanny."

The 28th annual SAG Awards will be broadcast live from **Santa Monica, Calif.** on Feb. 27 on TNT and TBS at 8 p.m. ET. (AP)

CARACAS, Venezuela: Thousands of Venezuelan musicians, most of them children and adolescents, have earned the title of the world's largest orchestra.

The record was set by 8,573 musicians. Guinness World Records in a video released Saturday announced that the musicians, all connected to the country's network of youth orchestras, earned the designation with a performance a week earlier of Tchaikovsky's "Slavonic March."

The musicians, ranging in age from 12 to 77, attempted the record during a patriotic concert at a military academy in the capital of Caracas. To set the record, more than 8,097 had to be tallied playing at the same time during a five-minute period of Tchaikovsky's piece.

The network of orchestras known as El Sistema, or The System, assembled some 12,000 musicians for the concert. The repertoire included "Venezuela" by **Pablo Herrero** and **Jose Luis Armenteros**, the South American country's national anthem and **Pedro Gutierrez's** "Alma Llanera," which Venezuelans consider their unofficial anthem.

More than 250 supervisors were each assigned a group of musicians to observe during the record attempt.

The previous record belonged to a Russian group that played that country's national anthem. (AP)

NEW YORK: A rare first printing of the US Constitution sold at Sotheby's in New York for \$43.2 million, a record price for a document or book sold at auction.

The buyer, hedge fund manager **Kenneth Griffin**, will loan the document to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in **Bentonville, Arkansas**, for public exhibition, Sotheby's announced Friday.

Griffin, the founder and CEO of multinational hedge fund Citadel, outbid a group of 17,000 cryptocurrency enthusiasts from around the world who crowdfunded to buy it over the last week.

"The US Constitution is a sacred document that enshrines the rights of every American and all those who aspire to be," Griffin said in a statement. "That is why I intend to ensure that this copy of our Constitution will be available for all Americans and visitors to

view and appreciate in our museums and other public spaces."

Crystal Bridges board chairperson **Olivia Walton** said, "We are honored to exhibit one of the most important documents in our nation's history from our location in the heartland of America."

The museum opened in 2011 and was founded by **Alice**



Walton



Griffin

Walton, the daughter of Walmart founder **Sam Walton**.

The document that Griffin purchased the auction was one of 13 known copies of the first printing of the Constitution and one of only two in private hands.

This printing of the Constitution was last sold in 1988, when real estate developer and collector **S.**

Howard Goldman bought it at auction for \$165,000.

Proceeds from the sale will benefit a foundation established by Goldman's widow, **Dorothy Tapper Goldman**, to further the understanding of constitutional principles.

"Tonight's sale of this exceptionally rare and important

printing of the Constitution was a monumental and historic occasion," **Selby Kiffer**, Sotheby's senior international specialist for books and manuscripts, said in a statement.

Kiffer said the auction result reflects how relevant the Constitution remains, "not only in America but for global democracy." (AP)