

Lifestyle | Features

Show goes on for **Turkish drama despite virus rules**

On a TV screen split into squares, a group of people speak on their laptops, taking turns and trying not to talk over each other. What looks like a corporate video conference is in fact a Turkish television soap opera shot in isolation during the coronavirus pandemic. Turkey is known for its obsession with TV dramas—also a massive export success—and not even virus restrictions could stop the cast of “Tutunamayanlar” from keeping the show going.

The drama, known as “The Outcasts” in English and aired by state-run TRT channel, kept viewers entertained by respecting the strict lockdown regulations throughout the pandemic even if it meant no makeup and no actors working together. The last six episodes of the season, which wrapped up this week, were shot on video-conferencing platform Zoom. Dogu Demirkol, who plays jobless man Tarik who keeps failing in life, said actors are adapting even though the virus upended how they perform.

“There’s nobody next to me. I act on my own and the others are on their own, sometimes our dialogues clash. We try to perform without breaking into each other’s roles,” Demirkol told AFP in the wooden house where the series was being shot at a set complex in Beykoz on the Asian outskirts of Istanbul. “It doesn’t feel like real life, it’s a bit artificial. I see how it is after I watch later... but still we’re having fun,” he said. The coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe forced Turkey into lockdown from mid-March, and has caused more than 4,500 deaths. The government has now

eased most of the restrictions including allowing restaurants and cafes to reopen this week.

‘No costume, no makeup’

At the set, technical team members wear their protective “spacesuits,” Demirkol said, and adjust the camera angle and settings before leaving him alone. “There is a limited number of staff here. We’re not wearing costumes, nobody takes care of our hair or makeup.” Demirkol earned international renown in 2018 for his performance in the film “The Wild Pear Tree” by top Turkish modern filmmaker Nuri Bilge Ceylan. On the set, Demirkol gazes at the remote controlled camera and delivers his lines along with fellow cast members joining him on Zoom.

The director, who is in another city, interacts with the actor also via Zoom. But the actor’s cast mates act from home. Demirkol said he preferred to work on set because he appeared in “half” of the series. “If I keep sitting then everyone in the series will be doing so” which would bore the audience, he added. “People are already bored at home. At least they see someone on the TV who moves.”

Challenging early days

Emrah Gurel, a viewer, said he spent more time in front of the television screen while he was forced to stay at home. “The series managed to make me laugh in those tough times. “I didn’t find the Zoom scenes bizarre. On the contrary, I thought it’s quite like real life because in this process, we also spoke with friends via Zoom.”

For technical staff, the first weeks of the outbreak proved challenging because it was hard to work in the protective gear, said Yener Yalcin, video assistant. “We have adjusted our script accordingly, it’s not like those we used to film. We have a different script, it’s much more adjusted to the house setting.” University student Calgan Aygun, 18, said Demirkol played a big part in keeping the viewers glued to their screens. “Dogu Demirkol’s performance is key to the laughter and making the show watchable because he’s also a stand up comedian,” he said.

‘Trademark’

Turkey’s soap operas are taking the Arab world by storm, prompting TV executives to start importing Turkish series even to Latin American countries—a region more used to exporting its own “telenovelas”. Recently, Turkish drama Resurrection: Ertugrul—the five-season series featuring the makings of the Ottoman Empire—earned praise in the Arab and Muslim world, gripping audiences and smashing television records.

Basak Aykut, art director for “The Outcasts”, said Turkish soap operas ranging from modern romances to historic dramas, filled with cliff-hanger plots and strong production, have achieved success worldwide. “Turkey’s series sector has become a trademark in the last decade and we have a major share in the world (industry),” she told AFP. “I don’t believe the current circumstances will harm the future of the sector because as long as people stay at home, they will watch television.” —AFP



Turkish actor Dogu Demirkol speaks during an interview with AFP on how TV sets work, in Beykoz, in the outskirts of Istanbul.—AFP

Prosecutors seek trial for **Kardashian jewellery heist suspects**



In this file photo Kim Kardashian-West arrives for the 2018 LACMA Art+Film Gala at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, California.—AFP

The trial of 12 men accused over a Paris heist in which reality TV star Kim Kardashian was robbed of millions of dollars’ worth of jewellery appeared one step closer after prosecutors asked for the case go to court, a source told AFP. Five members of the gang stormed the luxury residence where Kardashian was staying during Paris Fashion Week in 2016, holding the star at gunpoint and making off with a huge diamond ring and other gems worth a total of nine million euros (\$9.5 million). Prosecutors will seek to take the case to court for all 12 - who are currently at liberty but under legal supervision - charging them with armed robbery, kidnapping and criminal association, a judicial source said Wednesday.

Examining magistrates must now decide whether the case will proceed to trial, the source added, although any trial is not expected to begin until 2021. Wearing police uniforms, the gang burst into Kardashian’s apartment, gagged and bound her and locked her in a bathroom before helping themselves to gems including a 20-carat Lorraine Schwartz diamond ring worth some four million euros. One of the alleged robbers, Yunis Abbas, fleeing the scene on a bicycle, dropped a diamond-encrusted cross worth 30,000 euros, which was found by a passer-by a few hours later. It remains the only piece to be recovered from the brazen heist, the biggest jewellery theft from an individual that France has seen in more than 20 years.

The alleged mastermind, Aomar Ait Khedache was arrested after his DNA was found at the site. He told investigators he had struggled to find a buyer for the Lorraine Schwartz ring, complaining it was “too recognisable” and that he had given it to an unidentified third party.—AFP

Nigeria’s Nollywood gets creative to cope with virus crisis

As coronavirus closed businesses around the world and forced billions to stay home, Nigerian director Obi Emelonye came up with an innovative way to keep filming. Inspired by his wife’s teleconferencing calls from their isolation in Britain, he wrote and put together a short feature about a couple separated between London and Lagos. There was just one day for rehearsals and two for filming, and relatives shot the actors on mobile phones in their homes on two continents. “I said to myself, ‘What if I shoot a film remotely? I can direct my actors and produce it from home, and the cost is zero,’” the well-known 53-year-old director told AFP. “I wanted to show young people that despite the countless difficulties of our profession, despite the coronavirus, you can make a film without funding, without even a real camera.”

Inventiveness has always been a hallmark of Nigeria’s Nollywood—the second most prolific film industry on the planet—as it has risen from shaky homemade movies to slickly-produced blockbusters. But now, in the face of the coronavirus crisis that has seen social distancing rules shut down shoots and cinemas closed, the sector has needed that spirit more than ever. “We are an endangered species, we have to be innovative and to push the boundaries,” said Emelonye, whose short “Heart 2 Heart” was released for free on YouTube last month. “Things are very bad? You can make them better!”

‘Difficult times’

The Nigerian film industry is riddled with contradictions. On the surface are the red carpets, glitz and glamorous stars with millions of

Instagram followers. But underneath, much of the sector is poorly-funded, salaries are miserly and rampant piracy robs it of crucial revenues. The arrival of the virus has dealt a major blow just as producers try to focus on higher-quality movies, cinema audiences grow and giants like Netflix push to tap into the country of 200 million, the most populous in Africa. Moses Babatope watched in dismay as a government order to close saw income evaporate over the past three months at the Filmhouse, a cinema chain he co-founded in 2012. “We’ve been through other difficult times, but this crisis is even worse,” he told AFP.

Babatope estimated losses for the sector had reached over \$9 million (eight million euros) so far due to the virus. Dozens of film shoots have been put on hold or scrapped and the legion of workers in the industry—from make-up artists to technicians to ushers—are going unpaid. Netflix has suspended the filming of its first original series made in Nigeria and French media giant Vivendi has delayed the opening of its first cinema in the capital Abuja. Distributors reckon some 50,000 jobs are under threat since the sector juddered to a halt. “It’s going to take a while before it really starts up again,” Babatope said.

‘New experiences’

To navigate the current troubles the industry has begun pushing its boundaries. Producer Charles Okpaleke teamed up with two local cinema chains Genesis and Silverbird to launch open-air “Drive-in” facilities. A first screening in Abuja in late May saw all tickets sell out in just a few hours as viewers flocked to watched his film “Living in Bondage” from the comfort of their own cars. “COVID forces us to rethink our habits, but it is also an opportunity to try new experiences,” Okpaleke told AFP.

Producers and directors are also looking increasingly to the release their films on online streaming services like Netflix and its local competitor Iroko TV. And even up-and-coming industry hopefuls were given the opportunity to keep on honing their skills despite the disruptions. French start-up LAFAC has partnered with cinema school Femis and Nigerian television channel Wazobia to offer online training to would-be scriptwriters via a mobile app.—AFP