

African audiences celebrate 'Black Panther' release

The release this week of Marvel Studios' latest superhero outing, "Black Panther", has triggered the enthusiasm of African movie fans and a sense of pride that Hollywood has finally plugged a gap. With an almost entirely black cast and a young African-American director, Ryan Coogler, the film has already won rave reviews for its stereotype-busting portrayal of Africa.

“ This is beyond a movie. This is huge ”

After all the hype, select audiences in African countries have got a sneak preview of the new blockbuster-and many agree it's an important moment in popular culture. "As I was watching the movie with friends, I remember we all felt part of history. This is beyond a movie. This is huge," said Brian Barasa, a 29-year-old Kenyan who says he has loved comic books for as long as he can remember. Set in the fictional African country of Wakanda, the film's focus on black protagonists, stories and culture sets it clearly apart from other superhero movies.

But hero T'Challa, the king of Wakanda played by Chadwick Boseman, is not the first black superhero to hit the big screen. Barasa, who co-founded the Nairobi Comic Convention in 2014,

points out that was "Blade"-a vampire with human traits portrayed by actor Wesley Snipes in the trilogy between 1998 and 2004. "But Blade was American," said Barasa. "In a conversation I had recently, somebody pointed out, 'Blade had to walk in order for Black Panther to run,'" he noted.

Cultural impact

So far "Black Panther" has generated an enthusiastic response from communities in Kenya and Nigeria that are often stereotypically represented on screen. Superhero fans also appear to appreciate the film's visual qualities, the reproduction of costumes from the original comic and the characters' accents.

"Usually in Hollywood, you're just African. They will use a Nigerian actor with a Nigerian accent to play a Kenyan character or vice versa," said Sope Aluko, one of five Nigerians in the film, at the Lagos premiere in Nigeria this week. "We knew that we had a responsibility towards Africa and the black community in general while shooting this movie," she added. "But I didn't expect anything like this, all this enthusiasm coming from the black community." Commercially, the film looks set to break some box office records.

But for some, the potential cultural impact could be its most important achievement. "It's a very important statement to the world that Marvel Studio can have a movie entirely based on African characters," said Kenyan actor Moses Oduu at the African premiere in Kisumu, a town in the west of the country. "That is so nice, it's going to turn away some of the stereotypes we have on Africans."

Afro-future

In the film, Wakanda has skillfully exploited its mineral wealth to become the most developed



Actor Chadwick Boseman arrives for the MARVEL Black Panther fashion week celebration "Welcome to Wakanda" at Industria in New York. — AFP photos



Actress Lupita Nyong'o arrives for the MARVEL Black Panther fashion week.



Actor Michael B. Jordan arrives for the MARVEL Black Panther fashion week.

and technologically advanced country in the world—a complete reverse of the run-of-mill portrayal of African nations as backward, poverty-stricken and disease-ridden. Yet, at the same time, Wakanda is also anchored in African values of community and spirit.

"I like the Afro-future description of the continent and the mix of modern and tradition. They show regular Africans working with technology," said Chiko Esire, 32, in Lagos. Others took pride in the purely commercial aspect of "Black Panther", which has already beaten "The Hunger Games" and "Beauty and the Beast" in pre-sales in the United States. "I'm not a movie fanatic, I only watch maybe three or four

movies a year," said 27-year-old James Odede, who runs an IT firm.

"But I am excited about this one because it tries to illustrate that a movie that is predominantly black-cast can still sell and do well." Kenya film-maker Jinna Mutune, 29, believes the film has achieved its aim of showing African culture in a positive light but that more black-focused movies need to be produced. "(It) is definitely filling a huge gap," she said, but added: "We need more and more and more 'Black Panthers'." —AFP

France agog as stars war over rocker Johnny Hallyday's will

France has been transfixed this week by the no-holds-barred battle over the legacy of its biggest rock star, Johnny Hallyday, with his pop star friends and one of his ex-wives being drawn into the fray. Tensions between the feuding members of the country's first family of showbiz have blown up into full-scale war, with Hallyday's biological children challenging his "rewritten" will, in which he left everything to his fourth wife Laeticia, 32 years his junior.

The fractured family was able to maintain a unified front for the funeral of the "French Elvis" in December, when hundreds of thousands of his fans thronged the centre of Paris for a "national popular tribute". But that uneasy truce exploded when details of the rocker's will became known on Monday. Not only was his daughter, actress Laura Smet, "stupefied and hurt" that she and her half-brother David Hallyday had been left nothing, with everything going to Laeticia and eventually the two Vietnamese girls she and Hallyday adopted.



This file photo shows former wife of French singer Johnny Hallyday, French singer Sylvie Vartan in Paris. — AFP

But she also seemed to confirm long-running rumours that Laeticia was jealous of Smet's relationship with her father, who died at the age of 74 after a battle with lung cancer, and prevented him from seeing her. Smet said that the woman the press had once dubbed Hallyday's "Iron Lady" had kept her from Hallyday's deathbed. "All those times when we had to hide to see and call each other," Smet wrote in an emotional open letter to her father, which she released through AFP. "It is still killing me not to have been able to say goodbye to you, Papa-do you know that at least?" she added.

In-laws and outlaws

The revelations raised questions about the hold Laeticia and her father-disgraced nightclub owner Andre Boudou seemed to have over Hallyday, whose fortune has been estimated at between 50 and 100 million euros. Laeticia met the star when she was 20 and he was 52 in her father's

Miami nightclub. Boudou—who French judges sentenced to six months in jail for tax and social security fraud in 2007 — was instrumental in persuading Hallyday to leave Universal Music in 2004, a move that cost the singer much of his back catalogue.

A Paris nightclub they had opened together folded the same year. Boudou's mother Elyette, 82 — nicknamed "Granny Rock"—heads the three companies which control Hallyday's royalties, and she also co-owns the Paris mansion in which the star died, which he had signed over to his wife four years ago. Hard-living Hallyday was notorious for his cavalier attitude to both money and taxes.

He was often spectacularly openhanded with his friends, offering one an Andy Warhol painting he had admired, and flying others across the world to parties in his homes in Los Angeles, the Swiss ski resort of Gstaad and his Caribbean bolthole of Saint Barts.

Power behind the throne

Laeticia, 42, was credited with bringing order to his household. So much so that in 2009, after he almost died on the operating table after a routine operation, Hallyday was forced to publicly deny that she was the real power behind the throne. As the years rolled by the couple spent more and more time in California, where their adopted children went to school. Unlike France, inheritance laws there also allow children to be disinherited. A fact that became shockingly apparent this week to the many Hallyday fans who railed against Laeticia on social media.

The singer's best friend, fellow French rock legend Eddy Mitchell, joined them Friday by telling AFP: "I don't understand how anyone could disinherit their children. As Laura's godfather, of course I support her." His intervention came after the leak of documents showing Hallyday made monthly payments to Laura and her half-brother, mostly to pay mortgages. Then Elyette Boudou told French television that she "didn't think much of Laura and David, they have already had their part (of Hallyday's wealth)."

But his first wife, 1960s pop star Sylvie Vartan, shot back within hours, telling AFP that she was "dismayed by the false information which is being purposely circulated" to undermine her son. She said it was her part of the marital home which she asked Hallyday to give to David as part of their divorce settlement in 1980. Vartan said she was "horrified" that her son "had been deprived of the artistic heritage of his father, which I cannot tolerate, and that is why I have broken my silence." —AFP

NY CITY BALLET ABUSE CLAIMS 'NOT CORROBORATED'

A two-month investigation has been unable to corroborate allegations of harassment and abuse that led to the retirement earlier this year of long-time New York City Ballet head, Peter Martins. The 71-year-old was reportedly accused by two dozen dancers of verbal and physical abuse as well as using his power to extort sexual favors. He denied any such misconduct. The nature of many of the allegations has not been made public.

But despite the outcome of the investigation, The New York Times reported that the ballet company and the School of American Ballet have unveiled new policies to make dancers "feel safe, respected and able to voice their opinions and concerns freely." Neither the company nor the school immediately responded to AFP requests to comment. The investigation was initiated by both institutions but conducted by outside counsel.

"I have just learned that the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet have concluded their extensive investigation of allegations of harassment and violent conduct made against me," Martins said in a statement sent to AFP on Friday by his lawyer. "I am gratified for the conclusions reached in the investigation,"

he said.

"I retired to allow those glorious institutions to move past the turmoil that resulted from these charges. It is my hope that, with the investigation concluded, they can refocus, without distraction, on their roles." The Times, which first reported that the investigation had not corroborated the allegations, quoted two former dancers as denouncing the findings. Some current and former board members have remained loyal to Martins, the newspaper said. The Dane was first accused in an anonymous letter.

A group of dancers later came forward to the Times with further allegations dating back to 1983. A former principal dancer, Martins coled the company in 1983 and became sole ballet master-in-chief in 1989. He resigned on January 1, as a sexual harassment watershed in the United States claimed the careers of a litany of powerful men, prompted by revelations—now leveled by more than 100 women—against disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. New York City Ballet has yet to name a permanent successor to Martins.—AFP



In this file photo, actress-director Jennifer Aniston and actor-director Justin Theroux attend the 64th Annual Directors Guild of America Awards cocktail reception held at the Grand Ballroom at Hollywood & Highland in Hollywood, California. — AFP

Jennifer Aniston and Justin Theroux split

Jennifer Aniston and Justin Theroux are separating after two years of marriage, they said in a statement on Thursday. The pair, who shared a mansion in the upscale Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles, met on the set of the 2008 film "Tropic Thunder" in Hawaii, and started dating in 2011. "In an effort to reduce any further speculation, we have decided to announce our separation," the former couple said in the statement released by Aniston's publicist Stephen Huvane.

"This decision was mutual and lovingly made at the end of last year. We are two best friends who have decided to part ways as a couple, but look forward to continuing our cherished friendship." The statement said the couple would have kept the arrangement private, but wanted to make sure people heard the truth, "given that the gossip industry cannot resist an opportunity to speculate and invent." —AFP

Stars of feminist Western say movies ready for new gender roles

Hollywood stars Robert Pattinson and Mia Wasikowska said the current reckoning with power abuses in the entertainment industry has opened a door to new movies that subvert traditional gender roles, as they presented the feminist Western "Damsel" Friday at the Berlin film festival. Pattinson, the "Twilight" heartthrob turned independent film actor, said the #MeToo movement against sexual misconduct felt like a watershed moment both on and off screen.



British actor Robert Pattinson and Australian actress of Polish origin Mia Wasikowska pose on the red carpet upon arrival for the premiere of the feminist western "Damsel" during the 68th Berlinale film festival in Berlin. — AFP

"I think if you feel that you've been wronged and you feel like you've been bullied into silence, it's one of the most awful feelings in the world," he told reporters after the screening of "Damsel" in competition at the 11-day event. "It's kind of amazing when any kind of dam breaks and people feel like they've got the numbers to say 'you'll be safe to say whatever's happened to you'." A lot of these kind of conversations kind of mirror what we're trying to say on the screen.

'Not how love works'

Pattinson plays Samuel, a dim-witted cowboy in the Old West who is searching for his old flame Penelope (Wasikowska), his purported fiancée who he says has been kidnapped by an old rival. Samuel hires a pastor he hopes will marry them and the pair set off on horseback to track down his heart's desire.

But as they come upon the prairie homestead where she is supposedly being held captive, Samuel instead finds a scene of domestic bliss with Penelope, far from being a damsel in distress, happily married to the other man. Samuel, first seen as a hopeless romantic and dashing saviour, is exposed as something of a bumbling stalker, while a furious, rifle-toting Penelope accuses him of destroying "the first time I've ever been happy".

"I guess with Samuel, he just has a kind of extremely skewed idea of consent. He's just completely delusional about it—obviously it's pushed to a massive extreme," he said. "When

someone has said no to you and because you think 'I'm in love with you, the only thing that matters is the fact that I love you so all of my behaviour has to be excused'. It's like 'no, that's not how love works, that's not how reality works'."

Projection of man's desires

The Polish-Australian Wasikowska, who also divides her time between big Hollywood productions such as "Alice in Wonderland", television series like "In Therapy" and smaller budget movies, said her character represented a new take on the old-fashioned Western heroine. "I just really like that we were led to believe a certain thing of this character and then halfway through the film it gets flipped on its head and all the expectations we have of this woman are very much a projection of the man's desires," she said.

"I think it's part of a growing kind of consciousness of changing the way that women are seen. The more you see empowered female characters that have a really strong voice or who know who they are or are challenging expectations that are deeply ingrained in culture, the better it is." Wasikowska said she thought her character meshed with the current zeitgeist, in which seismic shifts in sex and power dynamics are becoming palpable. "I think it's amazing—I've been in Australia for most of the last year and watching it from afar," she said. —AFP