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Spanish flamenco dancer Joaquin Cortes (left) looks at dancers during the rehearsal of his show 'Esencia' in Madrid. — AFP photos



Dancers perform during the rehearsal of his show 'Esencia' in Madrid.



Spanish flamenco dancer Joaquin Cortes (left) talks to a dancer during the rehearsal of his show.



Spanish flamenco dancer Joaquin Cortes (right) takes part in the rehearsal of his show 'Esencia' in Madrid.

FLAMENCO ARTIST'S SHOW 'A BALM' FOR PANDEMIC-WEARY SOULS

Music and dance as a healing balm for pandemic-weary souls is what Spain's Joaquin Cortes had in mind for his new show that opens this Christmas ahead of a global tour. After a year away from the stage, the legendary flamenco artist who has been dancing for nearly four decades, returns to the spotlight on December 23 when his new show debuts at Madrid's WiZink auditorium.

"Culture is both necessary and vital for everyone, and dance and music are medicine for the soul," he told AFP between rehearsals in the Spanish capital. Acutely aware of the damage caused to the arts by the pandemic which has cancelled countless shows, tours and

concerts, Cortes wants his new act to encourage people back into theatres. The idea is to show that "it's safe, that people have to get out and watch shows," said the 51-year-old who was born into a gypsy family in the southern city of Cordoba.

"Just like when you go to the supermarket or in the metro and nothing happens, it's a lot safer," he said, referring to restrictions on numbers in theatres and the mandatory use of masks. "We have to move forward, life goes on," said this UNESCO goodwill ambassador who was nominated for his support for and defense of Roma culture. Entitled "Esencia" ("Essence"), the new show

fuses flamenco with jazz dance and salsa, with music composed by Cortes and well-known flamenco musicians the Carbonell brothers.

'My fantasy world'

The idea was to fuse "everything I've learned and experienced through my global travels" over a decades-long career that began when he was admitted to Spain's National Ballet at the age of 14. "It's the maturing of an artist... your own fragrance, your own essence, your life, your way of expressing the many things you've absorbed that comes out in your dance and the way you express yourself as choreographer, as creator,"

said Cortes, known for fusing flamenco with classical and contemporary dance.

The plan is to take the show around the world starting in March or April, although he admits much will depend on the rollout of anti-Covid vaccines. Produced entirely on his own without any third-party backing, "Esencia" will see him performing alongside artists like flamenco singer Estrella Morente. "For me returning to the stage is very important, I cut my teeth on a stage. The stage is my bedroom, it's my fantasy world," he says. "I'm looking forward to getting back because for me, it's essential." — AFP

Barbara Windsor, UK star of 'Carry On' films, dies at 83

Actress Barbara Windsor, best known as the buxom, blonde-haired star of Britain's hit "Carry On" film franchise, has died at the age of 83, her husband said Friday. Windsor made nine appearances in the innuendo-laden comedy films, and later became a mainstay as pub landlady Peggy Mitchell in the popular television soap opera "EastEnders". She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2014 and campaigned for better care for those suffering with dementia and associated diseases.

Her husband, Scott Mitchell, who was at her side in the London care home when she died, said Windsor's "final weeks were typical of how she lived her life". He added she was "full of humor, drama and a fighting spirit until the end". Mitchell said he, her family and friends would remember her with "love, a smile and affection for the many years of her love, fun, friendship and brightness she brought to all our lives and the entertainment she gave to so many thousands of others during her career".

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who met Windsor at Downing Street last year to highlight concerns over dementia care and once had a cameo with her in "EastEnders", led the tributes. "So sad about Barbara Windsor, so much more than a great pub landlady & Carry On star," he tweeted. "She campaigned for the lonely and the vulnerable and cheered the world up with her own British brand of harmless sauciness & innocent scandal." Windsor-often known as "Babs"-was made a dame by Queen Elizabeth II in 2016 for her work with charities supporting the elderly and veterans, and her services to entertainment.

Born in the east London area of Shoreditch, the actress changed her



British actress Barbara Windsor

name from Barbara Deeks in 1953, taking inspiration from the queen's coronation in the same year. She made her debut in London's West End at the age of 13 but it was the "Carry On" films, which ran from the 1950s to 1970s, that made her name and turned her into a very British sex symbol. The "Carry On" humor mined a particular British tradition of saucy seaside postcards, and was rich with innuendo, double entendres and high camp.

Windsor, who never modified her Cockney accent, recalled it was a single scene in "Carry On Camping" (1969) when her bikini top flew off during an exercise scene that made her famous. But she was also a tabloid favorite, not least because of her colorful love life, which included affairs with "Carry On" co-star Sid James and marriage to Ronnie Knight. Knight, whom she later divorced after he fled to Spain while wanted in connection with a security van robbery, was an associate of notorious gangland figures Ronnie and Reggie Kray. She married Mitchell in 2009. — AFP

Chadwick role in 'Black Panther' will not be recast for sequel

There will be only one T'Challa: Disney paid tribute to the late Chadwick Boseman Thursday by announcing that his pioneering role in "Black Panther" will not be recast in the sequel, as the company set out details of its upcoming Marvel superhero films and series. Boseman died in August after a four-year battle with colon cancer, having never publicly discussed his condition, throwing the follow-up to one of the record-breaking Marvel films' most acclaimed movies into doubt.

"His portrayal of T'Challa the Black Panther is iconic and transcends any iteration of the character in any other medium from Marvel's past and it's for that reason that we will not recast the character," Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige told Disney's investor day. "His portrayal of T'Challa the Black Panther is iconic and transcends any iteration of the character in any other medium from Marvel's past and it's for that reason that we will not recast the character," Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige told Disney's investor day. "His portrayal of T'Challa the Black Panther is iconic and transcends any iteration of the character in any other medium from Marvel's past and it's for that reason that we will not recast the character," Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige told Disney's investor day.

"To honor the legacy that Chad helped us build through his portrayal of the king of Wakanda, we want to continue to explore the world of Wakanda," with returning director Ryan Coogler "hard at work on the sequel now," added Feige. The original "Black Panther," set in the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, was adored by critics and audiences, becoming the first comic book film to be nominated for best picture at the Oscars and grossing over \$1 billion worldwide.

The sequel is due in theaters in July 2022. In a packed presentation covering more than 20 upcoming Marvel films and series, Feige announced that a new "Fantastic Four" movie will be directed by Jon Watts, who helped to reinvigorate the "Spider Man" films. Disney acquired the movie rights to the "Fantastic Four" characters with its recent takeover of the rival Fox film studio, which had produced a 2015 flop based on the comic books.

Big screen return

Among other Marvel film announcements, Christian Bale joins "Thor: Love and Thunder" as the sequel's villain, with filming due to start next month. Samuel L Jackson reprises his role in the franchise for "Secret Invasion" on the Disney+ streaming service, which Feige hyped as "arguably the biggest crossover comic event in the last 20 years."

With Robert Downey Jr's popular Iron Man character having seemingly departed the Marvel films, "If Beale Street Could Talk" actress Dominique Thorne will star in new series "Ironheart" about a female genius inventor with an advanced suit of armor. Marvel films veteran Don Cheadle will reprise his role for "Armor Wars," also a Disney+ series. Amid fears Disney could emulate rival Warner Bros in sending next year's blockbusters straight to streaming, Feige confirmed the long-delayed "Black Widow" superhero movie starring Scarlett Johansson will "return to the big screen" in May.

At the start of Disney's investor day Kareem Daniel, head of the company's distribution unit, previewed plans to "release roughly 10 Marvel series, 10 'Star Wars' series" as well as 15 Disney series and 15 Disney films on Disney+ "over the next few years." Disney also set out plans for a Pixar "origin story" for popular "Toy Story" character Buzz Lightyear, and a new "Sister Act" sequel with Whoopi Goldberg returning. A new series based on the "Alien" films but set on Earth will be overseen by Noah Hawley (" Fargo") along with original director Ridley Scott, while "Hamilton" creator Lin-Manuel Miranda will pen songs for "Encanto," Disney's 60th animated film set in a Colombian world of magic realism. — AFP

RAPPER LIL WAYNE PLEADS GUILTY TO FIREARMS CHARGES

US rapper Lil Wayne pleaded guilty Friday to possession of a firearm by a convicted felon over an incident dating back to last year, US media reported - a federal offense that could see him sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. The 38-year-old artist, whose real name is Dwayne Michael Carter Jr, was found to be carrying a gun and bullets when police searched a private plane in Miami in December last year. "Your honor, I plead guilty," he reportedly told US District Judge Kathleen Williams during a virtual hearing. The Miami Herald said that Lil Wayne - who has a home in south Florida - admitted the gold-plated pistol found in his luggage was his. He told police the weapon had been given to him as a Father's Day gift.



Lil Wayne

Police also found what was believed to be cocaine, marijuana, ecstasy, heroin, painkillers and more than \$25,000 in cash, the newspaper said. But the sole federal weapons charge filed in federal court in Miami stems from the fact that Lil Wayne was convicted more than a decade ago on a separate firearms charge. Convicted felons are barred from owning firearms under federal law. The five-time Grammy winner - who more recently made headlines for meeting with and voicing support for President Donald Trump - will face sentencing on January 28. — AFP

PRAISE, CRITICISM; SOUTH KOREANS REACT TO DEATH OF DIRECTOR KIM KI-DUK

There were mixed reactions yesterday in South Korea to the death of acclaimed director Kim Ki-duk, whose cinematic legacy was tarnished by allegations of sexual assault. Kim, who won global fame with his bold portrayal of extreme violence and human brutality, died nine days shy of his 60th birthday in Latvia on Friday.



In this file photo, South Korean director Kim Ki-Duk poses with the Golden Lion for Best Film during a press conference in Seoul after he won the best film award at the Venice film festival with 'Pieta'. — AFP

He faced a number of sexual assault and abuse allegations from actresses who worked in his films as well as other staffers in recent years, all of which he denied. "Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring" directed by Kim is a masterpiece. I wish him peace in heaven," wrote one user on Naver, South Korea's biggest web portal. "I have watched many of his films. May he rest in peace," said another user. But many on social media criticized the controversial director, pointing to the abuse allegations against him.

"A big loss and grief for Korean cinema," read the headline of the report on Kim's death in South Korean daily The Financial News. Some responded to the piece saying such praise was not deserved. "Kim does not and should not represent the Korean cinema," read one comment. "Directors who respect actors on the set and entertain the audience in theatres are those who represent the industry, not Kim." Another user said: "I hope the victims of Kim's abuses overcome their struggles and live a happy life."

Coverage of his death in other South Korean media reflected the conflicting views on the director. "Kim Ki-duk: Golden Lion winner, alleged abuser and died of the coronavirus... a life filled with ups and downs," read a headline by News 1, a local news agency, referring to the top prize at the Venice Film Festival. — AFP