

Lifestyle | Features



Photo shows visitors drinking coffee in the economy class seats in a retired Airbus 330 air-plane turned into a coffee shop.



Photo shows visitors enjoying coffee in a retired Airbus 330 air-plane turned into a coffee shop.

FOR BROADWAY ACTORS, A DISTANT STAGE RETURN RIFE WITH UNKNOWNNS

Broadway stars who once lit up New York's most bankable stages now face a reckoning over the future of the performing arts, in an industry that has bled money since the pandemic began. Like essentially all other cultural institutions, New York's famed musical theater district shut down as the city became the US epicenter of the Covid-19 outbreak in the spring. When the crisis took hold, performer Derrick Davis was set to play Martin Luther King Jr in "I Dream," to be staged in North Carolina. Suddenly, Davis—who has played major parts in "The Lion King," and was the first black person in the title role on a national tour of "The Phantom Of The Opera"—was unemployed.

As the weeks dragged on, "depression started to set in; the money started to fall through the sieve," the 41-year-

old said. With every postponement-New York actors are now hoping for a summer 2021 reopening—he pondered a return to an earlier career in real estate. "I can't sit and survive on hope," Davis said. "Many of my friends have gotten on planes and gone home... saying that they may never come back." For now, Davis is holding on, taking virtual university teaching gigs and honing his craft. "There's still that fire inside," he said. "I've worked my life to get to this level." "I can't throw in the towel just yet."

Pressure in isolation

In its 2018-2019 season, Broadway grossed \$1.83 billion, according to the Broadway League, a trade organization that says in normal times the industry supports nearly 97,000 local jobs. The pandemic financial hit absorbed by the theater district is severe, and industry



Performers Derrick Davis (left) and Chondra Profit speak during an interview with AFP.



Artists Taharqa Patterson (left) and Angela Birchett perform during an interview with AFP.

leaders say they would lose money operating at a limited capacity—unlike museums, which have started opening in New York—meaning live theater will likely be among the last sectors to return. Chondra Profit, a leading "Lion King" actor for a decade, said that while she feared burning through savings waiting to get back onstage, over the past few months she has gone into "full mother mode," caring for her energetic two-year-old. But even using the time for her family felt like a risk, the 36-year-old said, as pressure grew to use the period of isolation as fuel for new work.

"You have to create the next best play, and you have to create all this music... artists are putting out videos every other day," Profit said. "It was starting to suffocate me." Taking a step back, Profit began reading new scripts, and considering how she could feel out new pathways, such as directing or casting.

'Different consciousness'

Their professional creative outlets stifled, Profit and Davis have found soli-

arity with fellow performers they have collaborated with for "Lights Out On Broadway," an open-mic event which has been kept up online. The show started as an avenue for actors to let loose on nights when they were not performing in regular shows. They, along with the show's hosts Angela Birchett and Taharqa Patterson, have taken this time to reflect how theater's return might evolve post-pandemic—in terms of health precautions, but also given the sharp rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in recent months.

"Our culture and our people are going through a metamorphosis... our responsibility is going to be different in terms of our output," Birchett, 41, said. "Art and music are going to be a vehicle that will continue to move things forward." "We have to make that a part of our absolute obligation," Patterson, 38, agreed, saying the performing arts would be key to "healing" for both audiences and performers, who have been deprived of creative release for many stressful months. Though none of the performers could predict how

live shows would evolve post-coronavirus, Patterson was positive of one thing: "There is no going back to business as usual."

"There will be a new normal, because we're rocking with a different consciousness, a different awareness and different skills that have been sharpened and honed while we've been home," he said. Davis said he was "motivated" to keep pushing boundaries and find new ways to create, but cautioned that the pandemic had taken its toll on artists just like everyone else. At times, the depression runs deep. He recalled a moment when "I didn't even have the energy to call somebody and say hello... because of the uncertainty and because of the lack of ability to just be around people that you're normally around in a normal way." "It's a challenge," Davis said. "But as performers, we rise to that challenge, and we persevere." "Hopefully we will get to the other side." — AFP



In this file photo Signage of the Broadway play "The Phantom of the Opera" seen at Time Square in New York City.—AFP photos

Idris Elba talks US racism as 'Concrete Cowboy' rides into Toronto

Its biggest star is British, and its director is white. But "Concrete Cowboy," a critically acclaimed new film about at-risk black youths and horse owners in urban Philadelphia, offers a poignant message at a time of mass anti-racism protests in the United States, Idris Elba said Sunday. The film follows a young black man (Caleb McLaughlin of "Stranger Things") who returns to an impoverished Philadelphia ghetto. He must choose between a life of crime and the close-knit horse-rearing community of his estranged father (Elba). "It was incredibly important to us... that we tell this story of the fork in the road that you can take as a young man in this country," Elba told the Toronto film festival, when asked about US anti-black police violence in an online talk. "America didn't change overnight. These are issues that have been going on for a long time—even where I'm from in England where there's a huge knife-crime problem," added the London-born star.

Director Ricky Staub stumbled upon the story, adapted from a novel, after spying a black cowboy riding a horse and a bright-red, decked-out buggy down the street outside his Philadelphia office window. As characters in the film discuss, black cowboys were widespread but have been white-washed out of history by Hollywood, and black urban riding clubs remain a proud if little-known tradition. Lee Daniels, best known for directing the Oscar-winning "Precious," admitted he was "shocked" to learn Staub was white, and initially declined to produce the project. "For a quick minute... you had to really think about it, because I was out," he said. "And then I thought, I prayed, and I was... 'this is ridiculous, I'm in! This cat knows what he's doing.'" "And so then I opened myself up to him."



In this file photo English actor Idris Elba attends the world premiere of "Fast & Furious presents Hobbs & Shaw," at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood California.

Reportedly shot for less than \$10 million, the movie premiered in Toronto on Sunday. Reviews praised an "astounding street-level debut" for shining a light on a unique but fading subculture by using real-life "urban cowboys" as actors. Elba himself had to overcome a severe horse allergy to film the movie. "I'm hoping that as a result... people look back at their communities and respect the role that communities play in young men's lives, young people's lives," said Elba, who played a Baltimore slum drug boss to massive acclaim in television's "The Wire." "Because oftentimes it takes a village."

'Delicate'

Another film to use non-actors playing themselves—"Nomadland," about America's fleet of aging, itinerant van-dwellers, starring Frances McDormand—screened in Toronto and scooped the Venice festival's top prize earlier this weekend. Saoirse Ronan ("Lady Bird" and "Little Women") on Sunday discussed another potential Oscar contender that premiered in Toronto—"Ammonite," in which she stars



In this file photo English actor Idris Elba attends the world premiere of "Fast & Furious presents Hobbs & Shaw," at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood California.— AFP photos

opposite Academy Award winner Kate Winslet.

The film was inspired by the real life of British fossil-gathering paleontologist Mary Anning (Winslet) and depicts a lesbian relationship with a grieving mother (Ronan) in 19th-century England. The follow-up to director Francis Lee's "God's Own Country" moves at a gentle pace, but has received a number of rave reviews, with one Hollywood Reporter critic left unable to "think of a single aspect that could be improved upon."

"It takes so much time and care and patience to find the beauty in something and the strength of something—and that is what these two women sort of do for one another," said Ronan, drawing parallels between searching for ammonite and love. She added: "It's a very delicate movie." Toronto, North America's biggest film festival, is taking place mainly online this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. It runs until September 20. — AFP

Busan film festival cut back, delayed over virus

The Busan International Film Festival, Asia's biggest gathering of its kind, will be reduced to a fraction of its usual scale with several sections moved online because of the coronavirus pandemic, organizers said yesterday. The event normally sees a host of stars and industry figures from across Asia and further afield, including some from Hollywood, descend on the South Korean port city for 10 days of critical consideration and financial deal-making. But South Korea—which largely overcame an early coronavirus surge with extensive tracing and testing—has seen several clusters in recent weeks, raising concerns of a second wave and prompting authorities to tighten social distancing measures last month.

Those curbs are being temporarily eased in the greater Seoul area, officials announced at the weekend, but Busan organizers said they had no choice but to cut back on the festival—which will also be delayed by two weeks. "We agonized over whether we should go ahead with hosting the event," festival chairman Lee Yong-kwan told reporters. And he hinted that it could still be cancelled altogether if Korea's traditional Chuseok harvest festival triggers a new surge in infections. "There could be a situation in

which we won't be able to host the event," he said. Originally set for early October, organizers said it will be pushed back to October 21-30 and gave details of the cutbacks in a statement. "All outdoor events are cancelled, including the opening and closing ceremonies," they said, "in order to prevent crowds from gathering".

"There will be no international invitations, nor will there be any receptions or parties hosted to provide networking opportunities for film industry professionals." A total of 192 films from 68 countries will still be shown, but each movie will only be screened once, compared with two or three times last year. All judging for the festival's prestigious awards will take place online, as will its film and project markets, and discussion forum. The multi-director anthology "Septet: The Story of Hong Kong," which pays tribute to the territory ranging from the 1950s to the present day, will open the festival. The closing film will be Japanese director Kotaro Tamura's animated movie "Josee, the Tiger and the Fish", centered on a reclusive, disabled young woman. — AFP



This handout photo taken yesterday and provided by the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) shows the festival chairman Lee Yong-Kwan speaking during a press conference in Busan.— AFP