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Tyler Perry to receive honorary statuette at Oscars



In this file photo Director/actor Tyler Perry poses in the press room during the 76th annual Golden Globe Awards at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California. — AFP

US filmmaker Tyler Perry will receive an honorary statuette at this year's Oscars for his humanitarian work, including efforts to get the entertainment industry safely back to work during the coronavirus pandemic, the Academy announced Thursday. The Black entertainment mogul has set up a self-contained, 330-acre (133-hectare) production "campus" at a Civil War-era Confederate military base in Atlanta, Georgia, where hundreds have been employed while Covid-19 shuts down productions in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Perry has championed greater diversity in Hollywood, produced dozens of films and TV shows starring mainly African American actors, and last year paid funeral costs for victims of police violence including George Floyd.

"Tyler's cultural influence extends far beyond his work as a filmmaker," said David Rubin, the president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. "He has quietly and steadily focused on humanitarian and social justice causes from the beginning of his career, caring for people who are most often ignored." The 51-year-old Perry—a producer, actor, writer and director—first achieved mainstream US success with his outspoken grandmother character Madea in the 2005 movie "Diary of a Mad Black Woman." A string of Madea films followed, all with Perry in drag in the role of the title character. He has also appeared in movies including "Star Trek" (2009), "Gone Girl" (2014) and "Vice" (2018).

His films, TV shows and plays have

since made him a household name in the US, especially among African Americans, and he became a billionaire last year, according to Forbes—but he remains relatively little-known abroad. Perry was separately honored at television's Emmys, which were held virtually in September. The Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award has been handed out by the Academy most years since 1957, and last went to "Thelma & Louise" star Geena Davis for her work promoting gender equality in media. Other previous winners include Angelina Jolie, Oprah Winfrey and Elizabeth Taylor. In recent years, the prize has been awarded at the Academy's separate Governors Awards ceremony, held in Los Angeles before the Oscars, but that event has been canceled this year due to the pandemic.

Perry will receive his at the 93rd Oscars, due to take place April 25, which will also see a second Jean Hersholt award handed to the Motion Picture and Television Fund. The MPTF, co-founded by silent era megastar Mary Pickford a century ago, offers financial relief and other services to struggling entertainment industry workers. The Academy changed its rules for one year only to allow an institution to receive the honor, for the first time. "The organization's contribution during the pandemic has made a significant impact on the entertainment community, providing social services support to nearly 9,000 industry members in 2020," the Academy said. — AFP

Spike Lee vows to 'delay Father Time' as Hollywood bestows honor

Spike Lee voiced hope for the "next wave" of Black filmmakers—but warned his own trail-blazing career was far from done—as he was honored by Hollywood at a virtual ceremony Thursday. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Lee accepted the prestigious American Cinematheque Award online rather than at the usual star-studded Beverly Hills gala. The prolific 63-year-

come up and keep this thing going, it makes me happy," said Lee. "The happiest people for the success of 'Black Panther' (were) you, Disney, and I was... third," he told Coogler.

Both men reflected on "Black Panther" star Chadwick Boseman, who appeared in "Da 5 Bloods" before succumbing to cancer in August. Very few actors could play the "revered" and "almost mythical" role of soldier Stormin' Norman, said Lee. "I love him and I miss him... even though he was only with us for a limited amount of time, he gave us so, so much," added Coogler. The American Cinematheque Award is a "mid-career achievement award," with previous honorees including Al Pacino, Tom Cruise and Steven Spielberg. Before accepting, Lee noted that many of his films "did not connect with the audience right away" but had been re-evaluated in recent years. Lee received an honorary Oscar in late 2015, and won his first competitive Oscar four years later with best adapted screenplay for "BlackKkKlansman." Last year, he was named the first person of black African descent to preside at the Cannes film festival. "Let's keep it going!" Lee concluded as he accepted his honor. — AFP



In this file photo Best Director nominee for "BlackKkKlansman" Spike Lee arrives for the 91st Annual Academy Awards at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

old director, who has entertained and provoked audiences with frank depictions of Black America for decades, promised he has "got some more joints to make," referring to his films. "If you love what you're doing, you can delay Father Time," he told ceremony host Jodie Foster.

The livestreamed event saw Lee heaped with praise by the likes of Foster, Angela Bassett, Rosie Perez and "Black Panther" director Ryan Coogler, who dubbed him a "trailblazer." The award was remotely presented by the cast of Lee's recent movie "Da 5 Bloods," in which elderly Black soldiers return to Vietnam decades after the war. Lee, who continues to teach film at his alma mater New York University, deflected praise onto younger Black filmmakers including Coogler. "When I see the next wave

60s icon Marianne Faithfull reveals 'long Covid' battle

British singer Marianne Faithfull has been left with fatigue and breathing problems months after being treated for Covid-19 in hospital, the Guardian newspaper reported on Friday. Faithfull, 74, said she had suffered with lingering symptoms after contracting the virus during the first wave of the pandemic in Britain in April last year. "Three things: the memory, fatigue and my lungs are still not OK—I have to have oxygen and all that stuff," she told the paper, adding that the side-effects were "strange" and "awful". A high number of Covid-19 patients have experienced lasting effects from the virus after an initial recovery with a lingering disease known as "long Covid".

Symptoms range from memory problems, shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, post-traumatic stress disorder, and in some cases patients can be left bed-ridden for months. Faithfull, a 1960s icon who was catapulted to fame at the age of just 17 singing "As Tears Go By" written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, was discharged from hospital in London on April 22. The singer said given her age, well-documented battles with drug addiction and health issues, such as an earlier hepatitis C diagnosis and emphysema, she was particularly vulnerable to Covid and came close to death. "All I know is that I was in a very dark place—presumably, it was death," she said. Faithfull said she has subsequently learned from medical notes that at one stage in hospital, doctors were only advising palliative care. Her musical collaborator, the Australian musician Warren Ellis, said her chances of survival had seemed slim. "She wasn't actually meant to make it through," Ellis said. — AFP



In this file photo English singer Marianne Faithfull performs on stage during the 23rd edition of the Cognac Blues Passion festival in Cognac. — AFP



Dustin Diamond

'Saved by the Bell' star Dustin Diamond diagnosed with cancer

The actor Dustin Diamond, best known for playing Samuel 'Screech' Powers in hit US children's TV show "Saved by the Bell", has been diagnosed with cancer, according to his representatives. His official Facebook page confirmed the news in a statement Thursday, asking fans to "respect Dustin's privacy during this difficult time." The 44-year-old's representative Roger Paul also confirmed the diagnosis to USA Today and said Diamond was undergoing treatment at a Florida hospital for stage 4 cancer. "We are still doing more tests," Paul said on Thursday. "Once we know, we will have an idea of how to approach it. Right now it is a very serious situation. I'm asking everyone for thoughts and prayers."

He did not disclose what type of cancer Diamond had. Diamond starred in "Saved by the Bell" from the late 1980s to 2000, but was not involved in a remake that premiered in November. In recent years, Diamond has worked as a stand-up comedian and appeared on several reality TV shows. In 2015, he was sentenced to four months in prison after being charged with carrying a concealed weapon and disorderly conduct during a stabbing at a bar. He was released from jail a month early in 2016 for good behavior. — AFP

'Parasite' director to head Venice film festival jury

South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, whose "Parasite" movie won the Academy Award for Best Picture last year, was named Friday as jury president of the 2021 Venice Film Festival. "I'm ready to admire and applaud all the great films selected by the festival. I'm filled with genuine hope and excitement," Bong said in a statement issued by festival organizers. Festival director Alberto Barbera said Bong would be the first South Korean jury president, and saluted him as "one of the most authentic and original voices in worldwide cinema."

"Parasite," a dark comedy about the gap between rich and poor, made history as the first non-English-language movie to win an Oscar for Best Picture. It also



In this file photo South Korean film director Bong Joon Ho poses with his engraved awards as he attends the 92nd Oscars Governors Ball at the Hollywood & Highland Center in Hollywood, California. — AFP

picked up three other statuettes at the Academy Awards for Best Director, Best International Feature and Best Original Screenplay. The Venice Film Festival is one of the most prestigious in the world, rivaling with Cannes and Berlin, and the oldest. Its 78th edition is scheduled for September 1-11, 2021. — AFP



Mountain gazelles are pictured on a hill next to a forest in the suburb of Jerusalem.

Israel studies new forest home for endangered mountain gazelle

Israel is one of the last places where the endangered mountain gazelle roams in the wild but, as development shrinks their natural savannah habitat, ecologists are studying if they can also thrive in forests. Wildlife experts hope their population can recover in woodlands like the Forest of the Martyrs west of Jerusalem, where six million trees were planted after World War II, reflecting the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust. To study how the animals are adapting to their new environment and food sources, a team at the Volcani Center, Israel's agricultural research organization, has been collecting their droppings to study the quality of their diets.

Armed with small shovels, they walked its foliage-covered paths recently which led team leader Guy Dovrat and his staff to what they call "a station", delighted to find the small dark pellets deposited by the animals. Analysis already suggests the slender herbivores can indeed adapt to the forest ecosystem, Dovrat said. Gazelles are still found in northern and southern Israel, near the coastline and in the Jerusalem area, Dovrat said, with forests now constituting "the last large open spaces where gazelles can live". The International Union for Conservation of Nature placed the mountain gazelle on its "Red List" in 2017, saying its population was declining due to poaching, road kills and habitat degradation. Endemic to the Levant, their population in Israel is now estimated at about 5,000, but falling due to urbanisation and other pressures, according to Yoram Yom-Tov of Tel Aviv University and Uri Roll of Ben Gurion University in Beersheva.

'Last stronghold'

New roads, towns and homes in Israel have reduced the animals' habitat, fragmented their territories and isolated gazelle populations, the two scientists note in an article published in Oryx, The International Journal of Conservation. The animals also face threats from cars,

predators like wolves or jackals, and even hunting, although it is prohibited in Israel. The article noted that despite Israel being the mountain gazelle's "last stronghold", populations there too are declining and not meeting their full reproductive potential.



A mountain gazelle is pictured on a hill next to a forest in the suburb of Jerusalem.

Dovrat, for his study, joined forces with the Jewish National Fund which manages the Forest of the Martyrs, planted in 1951. "We have set up this partnership to see how in the future we can use data (on gazelles) to better manage the forest," said Yahel Porat, 45, an ecologist and landscape gardener at the JNF. One way of aiding the gazelles is planting vegetation they favour, Porat said.

Dovrat's team was also installing cameras on trees to capture the movement of gazelles and to estimate their number. "It's important for us to know where there are gazelles to adapt our activity in the forest, to avoid disturbing them and to keep from pushing them towards the roads," Porat said. The JNF has recently put in place ecological bridges over roads to allow gazelles to move from forest to forest, he said. "It's one of the most important things we can do today to preserve them." — AFP

'WE NEED YOU' GERMAN TENOR KAUFMANN TELLS PANDEMIC PUBLIC

German tenor Jonas Kaufmann says not being able to perform in front of a live audience for months has been hugely detrimental for musicians who thrive on connecting with real people. "What we miss is this connection and it doesn't matter if they wear masks or whatever," the 51-year-old told AFP on Thursday after performing at Madrid's Teatro Real opera house. "I would probably feel them, sense them even if they were behind a curtain. But they are there. This is what really matters," added the tenor, whose last performance before an audience was in November in Denmark.

While many of the world's major venues are shut, Spain's main opera house has remained open—although with smaller audiences and safety measures such as the mandatory use of face masks—since July. "For me, being on tour all year round, it feels like it has been forever since I had the experience of an audience in front of me," said Kaufmann, adding he was "extremely excited and thrilled" to perform in Madrid. Some opera houses have staged full operas to empty theatres for television or online broadcast but Kaufmann said it was no substitute for a live audience. "Usually there is the applause and then you relax and start smiling at you take a bow, but if there is just this eternal silence what can you do? It's embarrassing really," he said earlier during a press conference.

"So my apologies. Audience we need you and we need you now more than ever," he added. "People needed distraction, people needed something to at least forget for a couple of hours all their sorrows. If you take that away and at the same time, when you take away pretty much everything else, I think it's a huge, huge mistake."

'High rate of suicides'

Kaufmann warned that the devastating economic impact on musicians, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet as shows are cancelled, is taking a psychological toll. "I know about a quite high rate of suicides in our family of musicians because they don't see any future and it is really, really terrible," he said. Some are "vulnerable souls" who unfortunately "don't see any other exit, which is very sad," Kaufmann said. Kaufmann, who the New York Times once called the "most important, versatile tenor of his generation", said he feels "very privileged" to still be able to perform. "There are maybe two dozen singers worldwide who are in this privileged position," he said.

Kaufmann urged the authorities to reopen concert halls and other cultural institutions and be inventive to revive the arts. "We are not the politicians... we are only voices and we need others to help" so that after the pandemic "we find a cultural landscape that is similar to what we have left when this whole crisis started," he said. "This is the first time that music is being silenced in a time of crisis," he added. — AFP



German operatic tenor Jonas Kaufmann poses after his performance at the Teatro Real in Madrid. — AFP