

The male model testing gender norms in a changing Saudi Arabia

With his hot pink hair extensions and leopard print pantsuit, model Ziad Al-Mesfer was bound to turn heads during his recent public photo shoot in deeply conservative Saudi Arabia. Passers-by began sneaking pictures on their mobiles merely minutes after Mesfer emerged from his white luxury car onto the cobbled sidewalks of a high-end cafe district in Riyadh, his stylist and photographer in tow. Such appearances have helped Mesfer, 25, build a massive social media following while blazing a trail for the handful of Saudi male models brave enough to don garments widely seen as appropriate for women only—thereby pushing the boundaries of their country's famously rigid gender norms.

In the process he has endeared himself to expensive brands keen to profit from a spectacle that would have been unthinkable before Saudi Arabia embarked on a whirlwind series of social reforms ushered in by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Yet Mesfer's approach carries considerable risks. Along with ardent fans—mostly bubbly teenage girls who follow him on Snapchat—the crowd gawking at the recent Riyadh shoot included one irate middle-aged man who got out of his car to



Saudi model Ziad Al-Mesfer's stylist fixes his hair before posing for his private photographer.

denounce Mesfer as "gay", a potential capital offence in Saudi Arabia.

The desert monarchy also traditionally forbids men who "imitate women" or wear women's clothing, and vice versa. Mesfer does not identify as gay—he intends to marry a woman one day—and explains he is simply following global brands' embrace of androgynous fashion. And despite occasional harassment in-person and online, he told AFP he has no plan to leave Saudi Arabia or modify his look. "It is better for me to stay in my country and wear these

clothes," he said, "not wait for a trip abroad to go outside in a bold outfit."

Fashionable following

Born into a Riyadh-based family, the eldest of six children, Mesfer started to develop his sense of style from a young age. "I used to dress my mom, my aunts and my relatives. I used to love styling them," he said. "My mom used to consult me regarding these things, so I became more interested in women's fashion."

He only dreamed of going public with his talents after Prince Mohammed began

trying to soften the kingdom's image, including by expanding entertainment options and easing rules that required women to wear the abaya, an all-covering robe, and hijab headscarf.

Around two years ago, Mesfer started modeling outfits online using the relatively safe medium of Snapchat, which automatically deletes posts once they are viewed. Today he boasts more than two million Snapchat followers and another 200,000 on Instagram—the kind of clout that has captured the attention of brands including Prada and Dior. When Gucci opened a new boutique in Riyadh last month, staff made sure to invite Mesfer to view the inventory, said senior saleswoman Louwa Mohammed. "It's very important to invite him, because when we invite him and take a video or picture of him wearing any item, it sells directly," Mohammed said. "All Saudis—old women, young girls—all of them, they are watching him."

'A kind of artist'

Even as other male models and would-be influencers follow his lead, Mesfer remains in a class by himself. "He is number one," said a sales associate at Prada who, like others interviewed for this story, declined to be named

because of the topic's sensitivity. Yet several fashion professionals said Saudi's limited acceptance of Mesfer should not be misconstrued as a blanket endorsement of his behavior. Instead they said Mesfer, who earns money partly through online ads, enjoys protection because he works with luxury brands and mingles with local celebrities who invite him to their events.

"We see him as a model, as a kind of artist, so we can't judge him," Gucci's Mohammed said. But she added: "Sometimes the reaction is negative. Saudi is a Muslim country. I wouldn't want to see my brother doing the same thing." This conflicted perception of Mesfer is on vivid display in the comments on his Instagram page.

In response to a February post in which Mesfer paired a bright red coat with a skin-tight purple turtleneck, one user wrote "may God forgive us" while another wrote "I am deleting Instagram after seeing this." Another user, though, was encouraging: "Ziad, keep going, I love you, take care of yourself for the people who love you and do what you love, and do not care about any words."—AFP

'Fantastic Beasts' tops N American box office

"Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore" had a slightly less than fantastic North American opening this weekend, at least by Wizarding World standards, taking in an estimated \$43 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. Ticket sales for the Warner Bros. fantasy film, the third in the "Fantastic Beasts" series, were the lowest of any of the 11 films in the Wizarding World franchise, even while topping the weekend box office, industry outlet Variety said.

"Fantastic Beasts was never going to maintain Harry Potter's success," said David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. "That was a once-in-a-generation phenomenon." Some of the early Potter gloss has been lost as author J.K. Rowling faces criticism over statements on sex and gender identity. But Gross said the series remains strong overseas—as it will need to do, with Covid-inflated production costs of some \$200 million.

In second place, down sharply from last weekend's \$71 million opening, was Paramount's family friendly "Sonic the Hedgehog 2," at \$30 million. The hybrid film features Jim Carrey in a live-action role, while Ben Schwartz, Idris Elba and Colleen O'Shaughnessey voice animated characters. The original Harry Potter, likable British actor Daniel Radcliffe, has embraced the dark side as a villain in Paramount's "The Lost City," which took in \$6.5 million to place third for the Friday-through-Sunday period. Sandra Bullock and Channing Tatum also star.

Sci-fi comedy film "Everything Everywhere All at Once" from indie production company A24 came in fourth, at \$6.2 million. The movie has enjoyed strong reviews—with a 97 percent rating on the Rotten Tomatoes site—with critics lauding its originality. Its unlikely plot has Michelle Yeoh playing a woman being audited by tax authorities who learns that she must jump between versions of herself in different



multiverses to save them all.

And in the fifth spot was new Sony/Columbia Pictures release "Father Stu," at \$5.7 million. Based on a true-life story, Mark Wahlberg plays a boxer who gains religion and becomes a priest after suffering a muscular disease. The film has drawn mixed

reviews but strong audience ratings. Mel Gibson also stars. Rounding out the top 10 were: "Morbius" (\$4.7 million); "Ambulance" (\$4 million); "The Batman" (\$3.8 million); "KFG Chapter 2" (\$2.9 million); "Uncharted" (\$1.2 million).—AFP



Children watch the performance of puppeteers Anton Andriushchenko (left) and Olesandra Shlykova (right) at the metro stations of Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine.



Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan, 47 years old, performs in a bomb shelter in Kharkiv. — AFP photos

Puppets and poetry go underground in besieged city of Kharkiv

In a subterranean metro station serving as a bomb shelter in eastern Ukraine, two flamboyant puppeteers act out a tabletop fairytale for a gaggle of spell-bound children. With a cast of caricature dolls including a mustachioed king and a herd of pigs, Olesandra Shlykova and Anton Andriushchenko tell the story of how "Princesses are different", entrancing the kids and their parents.

They are also distracting them from the near constant bombardments raining down on the city of Kharkiv above them, as Russia escalates its offensive in eastern Ukraine. Using a mobile phone sound system the pair elicit giggles and gasps from their audience perched on steps lined with cardboard—an auditorium improvised

to prevent the cold and damp seeping into their bones.

"A live performance is always an emotion that is here and now," said 47-year-old Shlykova after concluding the show with a flourished bow and inviting the children to play with the puppets. "We exchange emotions and it lifts our spirits. It's hard to describe it, you have to feel it."

Underground hideout

Deep underground, the metro stations of Kharkiv are now home to residents of the eastern metropolis fearful of the battle raging above. Since pulling back from its northern offensive to capture the capital of Kyiv, the Kremlin has scaled up attacks on Ukraine's eastern flank, including Kharkiv

just 21 kilometers (13 miles) from the Russian border.

On Friday, shelling of residential areas of the city killed 10 people. On Saturday, a strike claimed two more lives. The walkways of the metro stations are now lined with bedding and mounds of belongings. The stationary carriages have been divided into makeshift homes. Toiletries line the train windows and inhabitants pry open the sliding doors to access their spaces. The main walkway smells of the soup being ladled out to those living here.

"When you watch this performance you remember the stories and you alter the way you see the world," said 37-year-old Oksana, who brought her two daughters to the show. They are living in an underground shelter nearby, and came over to this one to escape the grim tale unfolding above. "Truth and humor gives you a boost and makes you happy," said Oksana, who declined to give a surname.

Across town a poetry performance takes place in a white brickwork bunker down some narrow stairs past a ramshackle workshop. The shelter is also packed with improvised beds. Serhiy Zhadan reads out verse overlaid with melodic music in a purple neon-lit sound-proofed chamber. A small crowd follows the reading, in which Zhadan holds forth a surreal lyrical monologue detailing an assortment of animals. Zhadan describes the poem as a "brutal lullaby" based on a satire of a children's book. —AFP



Children watch puppeteer Olesandra Shlykova (left) as she performs at the metro stations of Kharkiv.

'Location, location, location': Dubrovnik cat eviction sparks storm

Thousands of people have signed a petition against the eviction of a 17-year-old stray cat from its home outside a historic palace in Croatia's tourist hotspot, Dubrovnik. Anastasia spends her days in front of the 14th-century Rector's Palace in the Old City and is a favorite with locals and tourists. Despite attempts to find her a home, she always returns to the palace so volunteers put a cardboard box for her in the palace porch.

That failed to impress the city's museum authority, which is based in the building. So an animal lover made her a mini wooden home in the style of the palace—a mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture—complete with a plaque bearing Anastasia's name.

That dwelling also got a snippy response and the cultural guardians ordered it removed. No-one, the museum authority argued, is allowed to alter Dubrovnik's "unique cultural and historic whole, especially by building shelters or dwellings". The ousting of Anastasia trig-



gered a social media storm and as of Saturday 12,000 people had signed a petition demanding her reinstatement.

"It's her home," Srdjan Kera, the architect of Anastasia's abode, said regretfully. "We're only talking about one cat, not 70 of them." Dubrovnik Mayor Mato Frankovic has backed the museum, stressing, apparently without irony, that the Pearl of the Adriatic only has fat cats and "no skinny ones". —AFP



Pictures show the stray cat Anastasia in front of the 14th century Rector's Palace in Dubrovnik. — AFP photos