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## Renowned French author and illustrator Tomi Ungerer dies at 87

The renowned French cartoonist, author and illustrator Tomi Ungerer, a lifelong activist who protested against racial segregation, the Vietnam war and the election of US President Donald Trump, has died at the age of 87 in Ireland, his former adviser told AFP on Saturday. "He died in the night and his wife called me this (Saturday) morning on the phone," Robert Walter, his former adviser and a friend "for 35 years" said, adding that Ungerer died at his daughter's home. "He was an all-round genius, a man who was talented in everything. He loved literature. He used to say 'I write about what I draw and I draw what I write'," he said. Originally from Alsace in eastern France, Ungerer lived in the United States and Canada before settling in Ireland.

He was obsessed with books from an early age. "For me, if there was a heaven it would be a library," he told AFP in a 2016 interview, adding that he was "brought up on reading". Ungerer's oeuvre ranged from globally celebrated children's books like *The Three Robbers* and *The Moon Man* to erotic drawings as well as satirical paintings and political posters. He wrote in three languages: English, French and German. He published over 140 books which have been translated into 30 languages.

**'Subversive'**

Ungerer's social activism and his often irreverent writings led to some of his work being branded "subversive"



In this file photo taken on October 26, 2007 French cartoonist, artist and illustrator Tomi Ungerer poses upon his arrival at the Tomi Ungerer's Museum dedicated to his work, prior to its inauguration in Strasbourg. — AFP photos



In this file photo taken on December 21, 2010 French cartoonist, artist and illustrator Tomi Ungerer poses in front of some of his drawings shown in an exhibition entitled "Politrics, le dessin politique de Tomi Ungerer" (Ungerer's political drawings) at the Ungerer museum in Strasbourg, eastern France.

by critics. Born into a family of watchmakers in 1931 in the Alsatian city of Strasbourg, Ungerer lost his father when he was three-years-old. He witnessed the annexation of Alsace by Germany during World War II and the subsequent imposition of German and Nazi ideology in schools, which he recounted later in autobiographical works.

After failing the second part of the baccalaureate exam in a school report, his headmaster described him as a "wilfully perverse and subversive individualist"—Ungerer hitchhiked to the North Cape in Norway. After the end of the war, Ungerer travelled across Europe and in 1956, he left for New York with 60 dollars in his pocket

and what he later described as a "trunk full of drawings and manuscripts".

The following year, after meeting the children's book editor Ursula Nordstrom at Harper and Row, his first children's book *The Mellops Go Flying* was published and became an immediate success. A range of works followed from the complete Mellop series to several prize-winning books and satirical works including *Horrible* and *The Underground Sketchbook*.

He then worked for *Playboy* magazine as its food editor and also did several political posters including drawings for the election campaign of former German chancellor Willy Brandt's SPD party. Ungerer donated more than 11,000 original works of art, sculptures, books and toys to a museum devoted to his work and life, which opened in 2007 in his birthplace Strasbourg.

Since then, the Tomi Ungerer Museum has been voted as one of the ten best museums in Europe by the Council of Europe. He was awarded the Legion of Honor by France in 1990 and was elevated to Commander of the Legion of Honor in 2018. — AFP

## China entertainment endures 'bitter winter' after crackdowns

Chinese film and television are reeling from what industry insiders call a "bitterly cold winter" of sharper government scrutiny that is expected to lead to more Communist Party-friendly content. The entertainment sector had blossomed in recent years, with official encouragement by a government keen to replace foreign content with home-grown fare and develop the industry as a global "soft power" asset.

But a nationwide push for more party-approved material across media, music and entertainment has combined with a clampdown on spiraling screen-star salaries to cloud the outlook. "It's been a cold winter, a bitterly cold winter," said Yu Zheng, screenwriter and producer of the hugely popular series "Story of Yanxi Palace". The period drama set amid Qing dynasty court intrigue drew 18 billion views on Chinese platform iQIYI and was the most "Googled" TV show in the world last year, due in part to popularity among the Chinese diaspora.

**Cloudy future**

The program, since concluded, was filmed at Hengdian World Studios in the eastern province of Zhejiang. Widely considered "China's Hollywood", the



In this photo tourists explore a vast film set replica of Beijing's Forbidden City at Hengdian World Studios in Dongyang. — AFP photos



Cast and crew of a Chinese TV series prepare to film a scene at Hengdian World Studios in Dongyang.



Actors film a scene for a Chinese TV series at Hengdian World Studios in Dongyang.

sprawling studio complex has around a dozen film sets including faux versions of Beijing's Forbidden City and, soon, Shanghai's Bund riverfront. Around 70 percent of China's film and television shows are shot there, Chinese newspaper *Economic Observer* reported in 2017.

But studio chairman Sang Xiaoping told AFP in an interview that Hengdian is bracing for a slowdown, particularly after tax authorities late last year targeted A-list actress Fan Bingbing in a crackdown on alleged widespread tax dodging and exorbitant pay for big-name stars. "Judging from the current situation, (the entertainment industry) will be in the process of slow recovery in 2019," Sang said.

"Some crew have postponed their shooting plans and some have even cancelled. The business operations of film and television companies were also impacted by the strengthened tax reform," Sang said he expects to see a shift to more films or TV programs focused on the revolution that brought the Communists to power in 1949, particularly as this October will mark the event's 70th anniversary.

Krypt Chen, a Shanghai-based media analyst, said: "(Government) scrutiny has been stricter year after year since 2016. It was already quite harsh last year and may be even stricter this year." China's film industry earned a record of nearly 61 billion yuan (\$9.1 billion) in box-office revenue last year, up nine percent from 2017, state-run Xinhua news agency reported, though growth slowed from the previous year. Radio and TV revenue, meanwhile, rose 20 percent in 2017.

But the tightened scrutiny has Chinese studios feeling the heat. Entertainment giant Huayi Brothers Media Corporation's share price was almost halved last year, and Hengdian stock shed more than 20 percent. President Xi Jinping is waging a campaign to sanitize media content, which has resulted in a crackdown on art forms like rap, while even tattoos are believed to have been banned from television.



Actors film a scene for a Chinese TV series at Hengdian World Studios in Dongyang.

**Investment 'bubble'**

Historical shows like "Yanxi Palace" had seemed safe as they don't deal with contentious contemporary issues. But a commentary by Beijing Daily, an official Communist Party newspaper, last month touched off a debate by criticizing period dramas for glamorizing lavish imperial lifestyles and palace intrigue instead of promoting "the core values of socialism". Since then, similar shows appear to have gone into hiatus. "Yanxi" producer Yu said he felt his show was in line with Xi's goals of promoting and exporting Chinese culture.

"I think criticism is ok. But please don't cut (all period dramas) across the board," he told AFP in a phone interview. "China finally has a TV show that has been recognized by the world... Why can't we bring out China's good, luxurious things and let foreigners pay their respects?" Hengdian chairman Sang said optimistically the newspaper commentary could result in content with more "positive energy", while Chen, the analyst, said this will mean more traditional values.

Sang said demand remains high and he expects to see a shift toward better-developed plots, finely tuned production quality, and less reliance on big-name stars. "There was excessive, bubble-like, investment," Sang said. "Now, as people become rational and have calmed down, many good companies will have the opportunity to distance themselves from competitors." — AFP



## Bollywood superstars test taboos with hip-hop blockbuster

Two of Bollywood's biggest stars have premiered "Gully Boy", a still rare female-directed blockbuster that pokes at enduring taboos, at the Berlin film festival. Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt threw their sizeable industry clout behind the tale, unveiled Saturday, of a couple yearning to break out of their Mumbai slum and traditional Muslim families to realize their dreams. "It's got commentary on the class divide, it's got commentary on choices young people make—whether they want to be stuck in something that gives them no fulfillment versus pursuing their passion," said Singh, whose character Murad has a meteoric rise after posting his first rap video online.

"I think it's got a whole variety of stuff embedded between the lines that may just have a positive social impact." Bhatt's character Safeena wears a traditional Muslim headscarf but resists her family's attempts to arrange her marriage and wants to become a surgeon. Murad and Safeena have loved each other since childhood but have to keep their relationship secret from their parents so they meet for illicit trysts.

"You can't really be so sure about who may get offended or who may not," Bhatt said of the film's touchier subjects. "My character Safeena, I don't think that she has a problem wearing her hijab and I don't think she has a problem with her culture. What she does have a problem with though is not being able to be honest with her parents."

**'Flammable and volatile'**

Singh, who does the rapping in the film inspired in part by Mumbai hip-hop stars Divine and Naezy, said it took nine months before he felt camera-ready. "I've been into rap and hip-hop since I was a little kid," he said. "I started out listening to MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice and Will Smith and graduated to a little bit harder gangsta rap like Tupac and Wu-Tang Clan and NWA then Eminem." The film sees Murad honing his talent and turning the squalor and tension of his home life into poetry until a popular local rapper convinces him to try hip-hop.

But soon Murad and his mother get kicked out of their home by his violent father, who forbids him to perform and has taken a much younger second wife. In a stunning scene, Murad's father tells his mother that she is useless in bed and she shouts back: "You have never learned to touch a woman properly." "To me, him getting married the second time is not as flammable and volatile to me as the fact that his first wife cannot afford to leave," director Zoya Akhtar told AFP.

"Because she's not fiscally empowered to leave and there's nowhere to go. That to me is the bigger problem."



Indian Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh showcases a creation of the "Love Jain" collection during the promotion of his upcoming Hindi film "Gully Boy" at the Lakmé Fashion Week (LFW) Summer Resort 2019.

"The fact is, they shouldn't be taboo subjects because they exist and it happens." Akhtar, who recently made an episode of the Netflix series "Lust Stories" exploring female sexuality, said she was a "huge fan of hip-hop" as a music of liberation.

"When I was editing my last film, my editor showed me a video of a 21-year-old kid called Naezy and he had recorded this track on a phone and it was put up on YouTube and he was singing about his life, his socio-economic space, his family and he had an insane flow, an incredible writing style and it was legit," she said. "I just realized there's an entire movement called Gully Rap—gully meaning street, lane. This urban youth is not represented in the mainstream at all and they're telling stories." "Gully Boy" culminates in a rap battle to be the opening act in Mumbai for US rapper Nas, who served as an executive producer on the film.

**'A revolution'**

Akhtar and her stars hailed a growing generation of female filmmakers in India. They also welcomed the gradual arrival in Bollywood of the #MeToo movement against sexual misconduct as well as the "Time's Up" campaign against industry sexism. "It's nothing short of a revolution and I think it's amazing. It really exploded and in that explosion there was some collateral damage," Singh said. "But I think it's a very significant point in history especially for a culture that has been patriarchal for eons." Bhatt agreed but said she feared a chilling effect in the industry.

"Maybe now a man will think not twice, maybe 15 times before even suggesting inappropriate conversations or inappropriate gestures," she said. "(But) I hope now people don't start looking at this as an excuse to not work with a woman or not give a woman a position." Akhtar said the debate, which has recently seen major names in the industry face accusations, was a "conversation that had to happen". "I think that the women that came out and spoke were very brave. They did suffer a backlash but they shifted the consciousness and I thank them for that." — AFP



Indian Bollywood actor Ranveer Singh and British actress Alia Bhatt pose on the red carpet before the premiere of the film "Gully boy" presented in the special gala section at the 69th Berlinale film festival in Berlin. — AFP photos