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Scorsese and Netflix unveil ambitious new film 'The Irishman'

Director Martin Scorsese unveiled his new film "The Irishman" Friday, kicking off the New York film festival with the ambitious Netflix movie that was more than a decade in the making. The star-studded gangster epic had a budget of \$160 million, using 117 different filming locations to shoot 309 scenes which together add up to a run time of 3 hours 29 minutes.

Scorsese and actor Robert De Niro started planning the film adaptation of Charles Brandt's book "I Heard You Paint Houses" 12 years ago. "Things got in the way," Scorsese told journalists Friday after the world premiere screening. "We couldn't get backing — there was no way — for years," he added. "I'm just happy we all got finally to do it because it did take a long time," said De Niro. "We were lucky to get people to put up the money."

After several studios declined the project, it took Netflix's deep pockets to get the green light for "The Irishman" — the nickname of Frank Sheeran, whose account of real-life events forms the basis of the book and film. Former henchman Sheeran (played by De Niro) claimed to have killed more than 25 people on the orders of mafia boss Russell Bufalino (Joe Pesci) and truck driver union leader Jimmy

Hoffa (Al Pacino). The film uses a new technology developed by Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) — the effects firm created by George Lucas — to digitally "de-age" actors on screen. De Niro, 76, is able to play Sheeran across several decades, from a 34-year-old in 1955 to his 2003 death aged 83. Scorsese said it was necessary to "come up with a solution for a de-aging that wouldn't interfere with Bob and Joe and Al." "Talking to each other with helmets on or tennis balls in their faces — they were not going to do it," he said.

ILM eventually succeeded in developing technology which did not require fitting the actors with any devices. After an unsettling first few minutes the special effects work well, with Pacino also shedding multiple decades in some scenes. De Niro's first reaction to when he saw his younger digital self? "I could extend my career another 30 years," he joked.

Murder and morality

The movie will be released in a limited number of theaters in the United States on November 1, before it appears on Netflix on November 27. With "The Irishman" Scorsese returns to the gangster movie genre, following "Goodfellas," "Casino" and "The Departed."

But this film adheres more closely to real-life facts and characters.

It also sets a slower, calmer pace than those earlier films, taking a step back as Sheeran, as an old man, takes stock of his life in a series of flashbacks and examines the morality of each event. The movie also revolves around a key episode of his relationship with Hoffa, in 1975. "He finds himself at the most important point of his life in a moral conflict because he's basically a good man," said Scorsese.

The director also makes greater use of dialogue, in particular humor, illuminating scenes between acting giants De Niro and Pacino. Scorsese said he wanted to evoke the atmosphere of the 1960s as a violent time when it seemed like "everybody was getting shot," starting with President John F. Kennedy. Seemingly tracing a link from those events to the current day, the director described "the true dark forces that are in our nation." "It doesn't happen maybe with one gunshot," said Scorsese cryptically. "It happens on every level incrementally and before you know it, it's over." — AFP



Robert De Niro along with the cast of "The Irishman" attend the 57th New York Film Festival - "The Irishman" Intro at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center on September 27, 2019 in New York City. — AFP



This photo taken on September 6, 2019 shows performers participating a acrobatics show, Battle of Shanghai, in Shanghai. — AFP photos

'Red culture' adapts to new audiences ahead of 70th anniversary

Dressed in a blood-stained Chinese army uniform and a cap with a red star in the centre, Wang Huaifu and his comrades gesture with guns in front of a row of soldiers triumphantly waving torn scarlet flags. Wang is the lead actor in the patriotic "Battle of Shanghai" acrobatics show, a visual recreation of 1949 battles between the Communists and the Nationalists for control of Shanghai. "Today's China and Shanghai did not come to be as it is easily. It was fought for," said 35-year-old Wang, who stars as a commander.

absorb through the charm of art itself."

The historical drama "My People, My Country" — based on seven memorial moments since 1949 — draws on "narrative and production techniques more commonly associated with Hollywood", said Nicole Talmaes, China cinema scholar at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. The film "downplays the stiff didactic approaches to 'history telling' that previous anniversary films have resorted to," Talmaes said. The historical drama will roll out in almost 40 countries including the US, Canada and Australia the day

but are frowned on by the authorities for celebrating a lavish, scheming lifestyle under empirical rule. And in June, the premiere of Chinese war epic "The Eight Hundred" was cancelled after an association of retired party cadres deemed it "inappropriate" because they said it glorified the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang.

Instead, a wave of stirring artistic offers are being rolled out to "firmly grasp the correct political direction, public opinion and value orientation," the top media body said mid-September. The China Film Producers' Association has called on the cinema industry to use films to "vigorously promote patriotism as the core of the national spirit".

'Powerful tool'

Movies such as "Liberation", "My People, My Country" and "Chairman Mao 1949" are filling Chinese movie theatres. "The Bugle from Gutian", a film reflecting events that established the principle of absolute leadership of the Communist Party over the army, hit the cinemas on Army Day in August. "I was very touched," said audience member Liu Hexin, after watching it in Beijing. "There had been so many predecessors shedding their blood for the beautiful life we have today."

Since the young crew of "Battle of Shanghai" was not alive 70 years ago, Dong and other directors on the show arranged visits to cemeteries where soldiers from the Communist People's Liberation Army are buried, as well as history classes. "I think culture is the most powerful tool (for conveying messages) because literature and art works can cultivate roots and souls," said the show's chief director Li Chunyan. As streets, subways, and screens across the country turn red ahead of the October 1 anniversary, Wang said he will celebrate the PRC's 70th year on stage. "I hope to spread the positive energy and spirit to more people... so that I can be worthy of playing such a hero like the commander," he says. — AFP

'Inappropriate' entertainment

While China's entertainment industry tries to appeal to wider audiences, censors have recently whittled out and replaced shows with those that push the Communist cause. In July the National Radio and Television Administration's development research centre released a list of 86 TV programmes that "eulogize the motherland, the people and the heroes" for TV stations to play during the key political year. It also banned costume serials and dramas that have "strong entertainment elements" during the run-up to the anniversary.

Costume dramas — such as the hugely popular series "Story of Yanxi Palace", which drew 18 billion views — used to be abundant in China



From movie screens to theatre stages, China's entertainment industry has turned red ahead of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on Tuesday. China's film sector wields huge power and is expected to become the largest cinema market in the world by 2020 with strong box office growth and rising ticket prices, according to consultancy PwC. Ever since it seized power in 1949, the ruling party has used media and entertainment as propaganda tools to spread patriotism which is rooted in the core of communism ideologies.

But experts say patriotic entertainment has had to adapt to appeal to China's urbanized and cosmopolitan young adults who have become huge fans of Hollywood blockbusters. "We are not trying to proceed with the spoon-feeding, rigid type of education," said Dong Zhengzhen, scriptwriter of "Battle of Shanghai". "We should let the young people feel and consciously

Los Angeles police to boost visibility for 'Joker' opening

The Los Angeles Police Department said Friday it plans to step up its visibility around movie theaters for the opening of "Joker" because of heightened fears over the film's content. A police spokeswoman told AFP that while there have been no credible threats in the Los Angeles area, "the department will maintain high visibility around movie theaters when (the film) opens" next week.

"We encourage everyone to go out and enjoy all of the weekend leisure activities this city has to offer, however, Angelenos should remain vigilant and always be aware of your surroundings," spokeswoman Rosie Cervantes said. "As always if you see something, say something." The Warner Bros. film portrays its murderous outcast villain, played by Joaquin Phoenix, as a hero and some critics have suggested the movie could incite violence.

"Joker" is being released seven years after 12 people were killed in Aurora, Colorado, when a gunman opened fire during a screening of Batman film "The Dark Knight Rises." Earlier this week, families of some of the victims published an open letter in Hollywood trade publications expressing concern about the new film. "When we learned that Warner Bros. was releasing a movie called 'Joker' that presents the character as a protagonist with a sympathetic origin story, it gave us pause," the letter said.

Restrictions imposed

The film depicts the Joker as a severely depressed young man trying to build a

career as a stand-up comic, but who is constantly rejected and beaten down by society until taking matters into his own — extremely violent — hands. In their letter, the Aurora families noted that their real-life tragedy had been "perpetrated by a socially isolated individual who felt 'wronged' by society."

While the letter did not condemn the film, and expressed support for "free speech and free expression," it urged the Hollywood studio to use its platform to lobby for gun reform and to support victims. Warner in response denied that it sought to glorify the main character of the film or that the story line in any way endorses violence. "It is not the intention of the film, the filmmakers or the studio to hold this character up as a hero," it said in a statement.

Given the mounting controversy, the studio said Friday that it was restricting access for print and broadcast journalists on the red carpet of the "Joker" premiere this weekend at the TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. The studio said only photographers will have access to the cast and filmmakers attending the event. "A lot has been said about 'Joker,' and we just feel it's time for people to see the film," a studio spokesperson told AFP in explaining the decision. Some theaters have also banned costumes, masks and face paint at screenings of "Joker" amid concerns the film could prompt a repeat of the 2012 massacre. — AFP



A poster for the upcoming film "The Joker" is seen outside Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank, California.

Chaplin to Tarantino: Hollywood eatery Musso & Frank turns 100



(L-R) Actor Danny Trejo, Vice Chair of CA Film Commission Donelle Dadigan, Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president Rana Ghabban, COO of Musso & Frank Grill Mark Echeverria, his wife Tina Echeverria, Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, author Michael Callahan and TV host Marc Summers pose by the Musso & Frank star on the Walk of Fame celebrating the restaurant 100th anniversary in Hollywood. — AFP

Legendary Hollywood eatery Musso & Frank Grill prides itself on treating regulars like celebrities and celebrities like regulars — but made an exception when Quentin Tarantino came asking for a favor. The "Once Upon a Time in Hollywood" director wanted the restaurant sealed off for five days to shoot his homage to Tinseltown, which begins with Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt and Al Pacino discussing movie deals over whiskey sours and Bloody Marys at its iconic bar.

"We've never shut the restaurant down for any kind of movie. But when Quentin came to us and described what his vision was, it was definitely something we wanted to be part of," said Mark Echeverria, owner of the restaurant which marked its 100th anniversary Friday. "We love

Quentin to death. He's been coming in a long, long time," he told AFP.

The film was released last month to widespread acclaim and Oscar buzz, with Musso & Frank prominent among the Hollywood landmarks showcased in its pastiche celebration of the 1960s. But Tarantino is far from the first megastar to make himself at home in the old-fashioned Hollywood Boulevard institution, known for its discreet red leather booths and dark-paneled wooden walls.

Tales are legion of the restaurant's star-studded past, from Charlie Chaplin riding there on his horse to Buster Keaton shooting "Cops" on the roof in 1922. Since Hollywood's golden age, it has continued to draw stars from Humphrey Bogart and Rita Hayworth to Marilyn Monroe

and Steve McQueen. Authors such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald have all worked the restaurant — and its martinis — into their novels.

Echeverria refuses to be drawn on his favorite celebrity encounters. According to actor Danny Trejo, speaking at Friday's ceremony, Musso & Frank differs from more glamorous rival Hollywood institutions because it is not a place where stars "come to be seen." But head chef JP Amateau admits there was an occasion on which he was starstruck. "I'd say one time, Margaret Thatcher — she ordered lamb chops!" he told AFP. "She came to me and she wanted to know what chop it was, and where the lamb was from." — AFP