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French actress Isabelle Huppert (center) performs during a rehearsal of Anton Tchekov's "La Cerisaie" by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues, in Avignon, southern France, ahead the 75th Festival d'Avignon.



Actors perform during a rehearsal of Anton Tchekov's 'La Cerisaie' by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues, in Avignon.



French actress Isabelle Huppert performs during a rehearsal of Anton Tchekov's "La Cerisaie" by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues, in Avignon. — AFP photos

Avignon masks up for return of feted French theatre festival

One of the world's biggest theatre festivals gets underway yesterday in the southern French city of Avignon after a year-long hiatus caused by COVID-19, with masks compulsory for audiences but organizers relishing a return to relative normality. Theatregoers and troupes have expressed excitement at being reunited for the 75th edition of the Avignon theatre festival, which rivals Edinburgh for the title of the world's biggest showcase of performing arts. "I feel euphoric, as if this is my first festival," said festival director Olivier Py, who has run the event since 2013.

Being deprived of last year's edition

had shown both the public and performers alike "how precious it is", he said. The festival opened yesterday with a hugely-anticipated production by Portuguese director Tiago Rodrigues of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard", starring French screen legend Isabelle Huppert and staged at the Papal Palace main festival venue. Rodrigues, 44, whose work at Lisbon's Dona Maria II national theatre has made him one of the most sought after directors in Europe, will take over the running of the festival from its 2023 edition, French Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot announced.

The pandemic still looms large over the three-week-long theatre extravaganza. A South African dance performance by celebrated choreographer Dada Masilo was pulled from the program on the eve of the opening night after members of the troupe tested positive for the virus or were contact cases. Avignon, a picturesque walled city which was the seat of Catholic popes in the 14th century, has put in place several measures to try prevent the festival becoming a giant cluster. Mask-wearing will be obligatory outdoors as well as in for the duration of the festival. And venues will be ventilated for 40 minutes between each performance.

'Renaissance'

Audience members will not need to show proof of vaccination or clean COVID tests to be able to take their seats—except for shows at the Papal Palace. The festival's outlook brightened further on June 30 when the government lifted capacity limits on most public spaces, meaning venues were allowed sell all their remaining seats. For Py the move, which sparked a run on tickets, spelled nothing short of a "renaissance" for the festival, which runs to 50 productions across 21 venues as well as hundreds of other shows in the even bigger "Avignon Off" fringe festival.

The fate of this year's edition of the Off festival had at one point been uncertain. With the all-clear only coming in May, this year's Off offering of street and stage theatre, mime, dance and song comes to just a little over 1,000 shows, down from nearly 1,500 in previous years. "We don't know how it is going to go off," Sebastien Benedetto, head of the association that runs the Off festival, admitted to AFP. He cited the spread of the highly infectious Delta variant in France as a threat to the festival. "But we're happy to be back in Avignon, which is where the whole French theatre world meets up," he said. — AFP

Oscar-winning Russian director Menshov dies of COVID at 81



Russia's Oscar-winning film director Vladimir Menshov died yesterday aged 81 after testing positive for coronavirus. Menshov, who won the Oscar for best foreign film in 1981, died as a result of complications from COVID-19, Moscow film studios, Mosfilm, confirmed in a statement. "We knew he was suffering from COVID-19, but in a mild form. It is absolutely horrible and unexpected," film director Vladimir Khotinenko told AFP. "His death leaves a huge vacuum in our shared cultural space," Khotinenko added. Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyanin said Menshov's death represented "a huge loss for our cinema and our culture".

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russian President Vladimir Putin

"expresses his deepest condolences". Menshov was born in 1939 in Baku, then the capital of Soviet Azerbaijan. He worked as an actor and then a director and gained international fame for his film "Moscow does not believe in tears" which won the Oscar for best foreign film in 1981. It was only one of two Soviet films to win an Oscar—the other being "War and Peace". Menshov was beloved in Russia for his comedy "Love and Pigeons", released in 1984 and still one of the most watched films on Russian television. Menshov, who directed 10 films, taught directing at VGIK. — AFP

Anti-colonialist preacher to stand over Trafalgar Square

A sculpture of African baptist preacher John Chilembwe, who led an uprising against colonial rule, will look over London's landmark Trafalgar Square for the next two years, the mayor's office said yesterday. "Antelope", by Samson Kambalu, restages a 1914 photograph of Chilembwe and European missionary John Chorley as a sculpture. In the sculpture, a larger-than-life Chilembwe is shown wearing a hat, defying a colonial rule that forbade Africans from wearing them in front of white people.

"By increasing his scale, the artist elevates Chilembwe and his story, revealing the hidden narratives of underrepresented peoples in the history of the British Empire in Africa and beyond," said the office of mayor Sadiq Khan. The "fourth plinth", which marks one corner of Trafalgar Square, is one of the most coveted art commissions in the world, and is often the source of controversy. Each work stays in



An undated handout picture received in London shows a sculpture titled 'Antelope' by Malawian artist Samson Kambalu which has been chosen to occupy the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar square in London. — AFP

place for around two years before being replaced. Kambalu's work will be unveiled in 2022, and will make way for Teresa Margolles' "850 Imprints" in 2024, which features casts of the faces of 850 transgender people from around the world. The masks will be arranged in the form of a tzompantli, a skull rack from ancient Mexican Mesoamerican civilizations. — AFP

'F9' STAYS ATOP BOX OFFICE AS UNIVERSAL MANAGES RARE HAT TRICK

Universal's "F9: The Fast Saga" remained at top speed over the weekend, earning an estimated \$23.8 million to hold its lead in North American box offices, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. That total, covering just the first three days of the four-day July 4 holiday weekend, was down sharply from the zoom-bang-bam action film's opening total of \$70 million. Still, this ninth installment in the "Fast and Furious" franchise—starring Vin Diesel, Michelle Rodriguez and John Cena—fended off two strong new challengers. In fact, Universal pulled off a rare hat trick, dominating all three top box-office spots.



In this file photo US-Taiwanese director Justin Lin arrives for the world premiere of "F9: The Fast Saga" at the TCL Chinese theatre in Hollywood. — AFP

That studio's animated sequel "The Boss Baby: Family Business" placed second, at \$17.3 million. The latest yarn about a can-do "boss baby" who energizes-or infuriates—all around him features the voices of Alec Baldwin, Eva Longoria, Jeff Goldblum, Lisa Kudrow and Jimmy Kimmel. In third was horror film "The Forever Purge," headed for a \$12.8 million take. This fifth, and purportedly last, in the "Purge" series is again set in a dystopian near-future where all crime, including murder, is made legal one day a year. Ana de la Reguera and Tenoch Huerta star. Fourth spot went to Paramount's "A Quiet Place: Part II," at \$4.2 million. This was the first weekend since the John Krasinski-directed horror film's release six weeks ago that it placed out of the top two.

And in fifth was a Lionsgate sequel, "The Hitman's Wife's Bodyguard," at \$3 million. The action comedy has Ryan Reynolds, Samuel L. Jackson and Salma Hayek reprising their roles from 2017's "The Hitman's Bodyguard." As Hollywood claws its way back from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, studios have yet to release the usual full menu of summer blockbusters. The \$70.7 million combined gross of this weekend's top 12 films was less than half the normal from past July 4 weekends. Rounding out this weekend's top 5 were:

- "Cruella" (\$2.6 million)
- "Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway" (\$2.3 million)
- "The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It" (\$1.3 million)
- "In the Heights" (\$1.3 million)
- "Zola" (\$1.2 million) — AFP

Cambodian PM orders return of defanged lion to Chinese owner

A defanged and declawed lion trafficked to an upscale neighborhood of the Cambodian capital was yesterday returned to its owner following the unlikely intervention of Prime Minister Hun Sen. The 18-month-old cub, weighing 70 kilograms (154 pounds), had been imported from overseas, officials said. It was raised by its owner, a Chinese national, who named it Hima. Authorities learned of the unlikely pet after seeing TikTok videos of Hima playing in a Phnom Penh villa.

The lion was confiscated on June 27 and brought to a wildlife rescue centre.

Wildlife Alliance, an animal rescue NGO that aided in the raid last week, had said that private residence was "inappropriate" for a wild animal, and that the owner had removed the lion's canine teeth and claws. A couple of days later, a video of the lion's owner Qi Xiao visiting Hima in the centre went viral. In the video, Hima kept nudging Qi as he fed it meat, a seemingly affectionate behavior that sparked calls on social media for them to be reunited. By Sunday evening, Hun Sen announced on his official Facebook page that Qi could have his lion back on the condition that he "build it a proper cage to ensure the safety of the people in the house and neighbors".

He also ordered authorities to reimburse any fine paid by the owner. Qi thanked the premier in a comment on the post, and also expressed gratitude to "Cambodian people for helping and supporting our Hima". "Lastly, I wish that

Cambodia and China stay strong friends forever," he wrote. The lion was transported yesterday afternoon to Qi's villa. "I feel very happy, very touched... I didn't expect to get him back," Qi told reporters as the lion and his dog wandered around his background. But not everyone was pleased by this outcome.

"(The return is) undermining legislation preventing ownership/trade in endangered wildlife, harming global efforts to tackle Illegal Wildlife Trade, to say nothing of stress & suffering of inappropriate captivity," UK ambassador to Cambodia, Tina Redshaw, said in a tweet. Cambodian authorities declined to comment on how much the owner was fined or what prompted the legal change of heart. Prime Minister Hun Sen, one of the world's longest-serving leaders, is a staunch ally of Beijing, and Cambodia receives billions of dollars in soft loans and investment from China. — AFP



A worker plays with a defanged lion and pet dog upon its controversial return back to its home.



A defanged lion approaches a worker upon its controversial return back to its home.



Members of the media take pictures and video of defanged lion upon its controversial return back to its home in Phnom Penh yesterday. — AFP photos



Qi Xiao (center), the owner of a defanged lion, strokes the big cat upon its controversial return to his home in Phnom Penh.