

# LIFE & LEISURE

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Entertainment

B1

## Debra Messing Taps Her 'Inner Latina'

LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—Debra Messing sticks out like a sore thumb in her latest movie, "Nothing Like the Holidays." But that is just fine by her.

In the comedy, which debuts in U.S. theaters on Friday, a Puerto Rican family comes together at Christmas for the first time in three years, and Messing plays a very non-Latina career-driven executive wife of the family's eldest brother, played by John Leguizamo.

"I'd never been an outsider in a film," Messing said. "I very much felt like the white Jewish girl and it was the first time I had ever been the minority on the set."

Messing tried to "access my inner Latina" by recalling her elementary school Spanish during the shoot, she said.

The 40-year-old Messing said the film marks a step forward in Hollywood because it is essentially a mainstream holiday film but one that focuses on a minority, Latino family.

"Nothing Like the Holidays" follows the Rodriguez family during a holiday gathering in Chicago that is prompted by the youngest brother's return from combat overseas.

An ensemble piece, the movie details the trials of each family mem-

ber's career or personal relationships. Messing's character, Sarah, for instance, struggles with whether to take a new, high-powered job while facing pressure from her husband and mother-in-law to start a family.

"That's not specific to the Puerto Rican culture," Messing said of the themes the movie pursues. "I could see an Italian family on screen, I could see a Jewish family on screen. You could just fill in the blank, because family is family."

At the same time, she added, "you can learn and celebrate the Puerto Rican culture, which has never really been done."

Messing, who shot to stardom on eight seasons of the NBC sitcom "Will & Grace," said she hoped "Nothing Like the Holidays" would help break down cultural barriers in Hollywood.

"It would be wonderful if this film... represents a community who is normally not represented, not written about, and often represented in stereotypes," Messing said.

She said the election of Barack Obama as U.S. president made her hopeful that Hollywood will embrace characters of different cultural backgrounds.

"There is an excitement about the



GRACE: Debra Messing and John Leguizamo in a scene from the new film "Nothing Like the Holidays."

CHUCK HODES/OVERTURE FILMS

possibility of tolerance, especially now we are going to have our first African American president," she said. "It seems like a reflection of

that, this film. And I hope it does become a trend."

Messing has appeared in several movies since the popular sit-

com "Will & Grace" wound down in 2006, including the high-society comedy "The Women" earlier this year.

Despite wanting to focus on films and plays following that show's end, however, Messing is back on television in USA Network's series "The Starter Wife," in which she plays the ex-wife of a Hollywood mogul.

"It was not in my master plan," Messing said of her latest TV stint, adding that the program's 5-month shooting schedule still gives her the flexibility she craved when "Will & Grace" ended.

"That was much more palatable being A, a mother, and B, someone who just wanted to be able to say 'I don't know what I'm going to be doing,' and to give myself some air so I could figure out what I was hungering for," Messing said.

With her time off last year, Messing shot "Nothing Like the Holidays" in five weeks. The short schedule was critical, given she has a four-year-old son at home and her husband, Daniel Zelman, also has a busy schedule as writer and producer of the cable TV show "Damages."

"It's impossibly hard," Messing said of managing the demands of both motherhood and work. "Compromises are made every month, and it just feels like 'Okay, this is the life of an adult woman in America.'"

## Miley Cyrus, Obama Items Hot Online Sellers

LOS ANGELES (Reuters)—Teen star Miley Cyrus, pop diva Madonna, "The Dark Knight," hi-tech gadgets, and Barack Obama were among America's top pop culture obsessions that turned into possessions in 2008, according to online market place eBay.

"When someone or something excites the American public, you immediately see a surge of related listings pop up on eBay," said Karen Bard, eBay's pop culture expert.

Cyrus, the 16-year-old star of Disney's "Hannah Montana" TV show, beat teen rivals like the Jonas Brothers and the cast of "High School Musical" hands down in terms of items sold on eBay, the Web site said in a survey of hot items in 2008.

Some 223,139 "Hannah Montana" related-items, ranging from buttons, to clothes and posters, exchanged hands on the Web site during the year.

Britney Spears, emerging from another year of personal woes, proved popular with eBay buyers with 32,966 items sold.

But Spears was overshadowed by "Material Girl" Madonna, who turned 50 this year. Madonna memorabilia, albums and posters saw sales



PHENOMENON: Miley Cyrus fan related memorabilia was the most popular in 2008 according to online marketplace eBay.

BRAD BARKE/GETTY IMAGES

of 96,511 items.

In a historic presidential election year, Barack Obama was the clear front-runner on eBay as well as with U.S. voters, winning the November election and to become the first U.S.

black president.

The Web site saw an active trade in Obama posters, coins, action figures and even the odd lunchbox that led to sales of 111,546 Obama-related items.

Months of Obama-fever outstripped sales of Sarah Palin items (20,712) after the Alaska governor was named Republican vice-presidential candidate in September, sparking a rush in buyers for look-alike wigs, Palin's trademark glasses, and autographed photos.

Fans went batty for "The Dark Knight," the latest Batman movie, with 60,484 related items sold—18 times more than those of "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull."

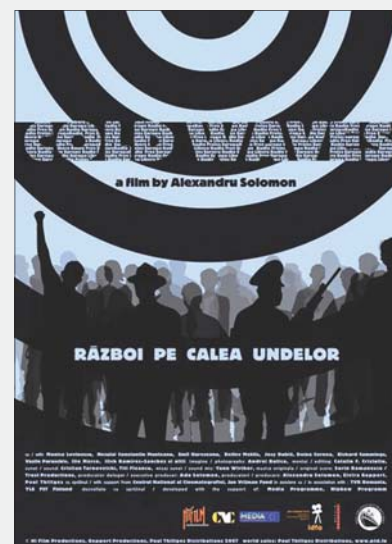
Olympic gold medal swimming champion Michael Phelps broke records in the pool and sparked a buying fever online that saw 13,350 Phelps-related items sold on eBay, the world's largest online marketplace.

But the hottest of all the pop culture trends was the Nintendo Wii, which saw a whopping 2.05 million related items including accessories and games sold on eBay, outstripping the Microsoft Xbox 360 (1.29 million items), Apple's new iPod Touch (281,361) and the iPhone 3G (212,837).

The data was based on eBay listings that included key words in the listing title across all categories from Jan 1-Oct 15, 2008.

## Documentary Film Review: 'Cold Waves'

By JOE BENDEL  
Special to The Epoch Times



COURTESY OF THE ROMANIAN FILM FESTIVAL

It was a U.S. government program that worked. How novel. Of course, Radio Free Europe (RFE) did not single-handedly win the Cold War, but it successfully built up a large audience behind the Iron Curtain. In Romania, it forged a particularly strong connection with its listeners that is documented in Alexandru Solomon's "Cold Waves," which screened at this year's Romanian Film Festival.

According to Solomon's documentary, RFE was regularly heard by a staggering 65% of all Romanians—generating moon-landing level market shares on a daily basis. Early in the film Solomon states RFE was a constant presence in his home growing up, and on the rare occasions his family turned it off, they would still hear it through the walls from the flat next door.

As in the case of VOA's beloved jazz program hosted by Willis Conover, music was a big part of RFE's popularity, but the station's news coverage during two times of crisis cemented the relationship between RFE and the Romanian people. The first incident was the disastrous earthquake of 1977. Since the Dear Leader was on a state visit to Nigeria at the time, a news blackout was imposed on government controlled media until his return, leaving a huge information vacuum for RFE to fill. The second incident was the start of the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara, which would be RFE's shining hour, much as the 1991 Russian Coup was for Radio Liberty.

It was not just average Romanians listening—the Ceaușescu government was also paying close attention, dedicating a division of the Securitate, the so-called "Ether Unit," to countering RFE. The premature deaths of three RFE Romanian section chiefs from cancer-related causes have long raised suspicions, but have yet to be substantiated with evidence. However, the film did uncover documents linking Carlos the Jackal (who was given safe harbor in Romania under Ceaușescu) and the Romanian Securitate to the

1991 bombing of RFE's Munich facility.

Solomon employs many of the conventions of documentary filmmaking, like reuniting the surviving staff of Romanian section in the old RFE building outside of Munich, as well as interviewing plenty of talking heads. However, he periodically uses a visual motif of what looks like a three part soundstage or theater backdrop, consisting of a Romanian flat, RFE studio, and Securitate office, to evoke the feeling of Cold War Romania.

In addition to the film's distinctive look, Solomon also scored some impressive interviews. We hear from many of the surviving RFE staffers and listeners, but also from some critics, including a former Ether Unit veteran and current neo-Stalinist member of parliament, who Solomon forces to listen to RFE's coverage of the attacks on the December 1989 Timișoara demonstrations. He even reached the incarcerated Carlos for a phoner (he denies everything, but says that Ceaușescu was quite the gracious host).

Scrupulously evenhanded, "Waves" is quite credible, both at recounting late twentieth century Romanian history and exposing new information about the past regime's misdeeds. It is a fascinating film that deserves theatrical distribution beyond the festival circuit.

Joe Bendel blogs on jazz and cultural issues at <http://jbspins.blogspot.com>, and coordinated the Jazz Foundation of America's instrument donation campaign for musicians displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

## Kennedy Center Recognizes Entertainment Industry

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—Rock n' roll legends, singers and stars of Hollywood and Broadway were saluted on Sunday for their lifetime contributions to American culture with a gala performance attended by President George W. Bush.

Song and screen icon Barbra Streisand, country music legend George Jones, film star Morgan Freeman, choreographer Twyla Tharp, and musicians Roger Daltrey and Pete Townshend of the British rock band "The Who" were honored with performances by friends and contemporaries.

The six artists were awarded Kennedy Center Honors, the top U.S. award for lifetime achievements in popular culture and the arts, at a reception a day earlier.

Biographical video montages and poignant personal tributes recalled their beginnings and celebrated their contributions.

Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington recounted some advice he got from Morgan Freeman when he suggested improvising a fight during a Shakespeare production in 1979.

"He said 'All right, Denzel. We click the swords three times—click, click, click. I stab you. You fall down, and you die,'" Washington said to laughter from the politicians, prominent donors and other guests at the black-tie gala.

First lady Laura Bush said she and her husband were fans of George Jones, whose origins



STALEY ENCOUNTER: Actor Morgan Freeman, and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice converse at the Kennedy Center Honors at the U.S. Department of State on December 6, in Washington, D.C. RON SACHS-POOL/GETTY IMAGES

she traced to the honky-tonk bars of East Texas and whose tunes are on the president's iPod.

Bush hugged Streisand warmly in a video of a White House reception earlier in the day,

despite her being a prominent critic of his disputed 2000 election and subsequent record in the White House.

Twyla Tharp put her mark on modern dance decades ago with shows like the Beach Boys-inspired "Deuce Coupe" of 1973. She has been celebrated recently for her work on "Movin' Out," which sets modern dance to the music of Billy Joel.

At 67, Tharp is still active. She tried to suppress a smile as Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser described her as a demanding artist who "would never compromise on quality."

The members of The Who, famed for works including the rock opera "Tommy," got a hard-driving serenade by some top rockers or more recent vintage.

Foo Fighters front-man Dave Grohl belted out "Who Are You" and Matchbox Twenty lead singer Robert Thomas sang "Baba O'Riley" as the backdrop of the stage lifted to reveal a choir of New York firefighters and police.

Townshend was visibly moved as he watched the uniformed choir whoop it up in appreciation for his and Daltrey's concert in New York shortly after the September 11 attacks.

Rhythm and Blues artist Beyonce paid tribute to Streisand by singing "The Way We Were."

The gala will be aired on CBS television on December 30.