

Sony re-gifts 'The Interview' in limited release

December 23 2014, by Jake Coyle



In this Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014 file photo, a worker removes poster for the movie "The Interview" from a display case at a Carmike Cinemas movie theater in Atlanta. The Alamo Drafthouse in Texas and Atlanta's Plaza Theater on Tuesday, Dec. 23, 2014 said they will begin showing "The Interview" on Christmas Day, seemingly putting the comedy back in theaters after Sony Pictures Entertainment canceled its release. The Plaza is independently owned and not part of the Carmike chain. (AP Photo/David Goldman, File)

"The Interview" was put back into theaters Thursday when Sony Pictures Entertainment announced a limited theatrical release for the comedy that provoked an international incident with North Korea and outrage over its cancelled release.

Sony Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton said Tuesday that Seth Rogen's North Korea farce "will be in a number of theaters on Christmas Day." He said Sony also is continuing its efforts to release the film to more platforms and in more theaters.

"We have never given up on releasing 'The Interview,'" Lynton said in a statement Tuesday. "While we hope this is only the first step of the film's release, we are proud to make it available to the public and to have stood up to those who attempted to suppress free speech."

For Sony, the decision was the culmination of a gradual about-face: After initially saying it had no plans to release the movie, the company began softening its position after it was broadly criticized.

Moviegoers celebrated the abrupt change in fortune for a film that appeared doomed as "The Interview" began popping up in the listings of independent theaters across the country Tuesday, from Atlanta to Los Angeles. The film is set to open in dozens of theaters on Thursday, the day it was originally set for wide release.

Sony officials aren't commenting on whether the film will also be released to video on demand—another possibility.

One of the loudest critics of the film's shelving—President Barack Obama—hailed Sony's reversal.

"The president applauds Sony's decision to authorize screenings of the film," said Obama spokesman Eric Schultz. "As the president made

clear, we are a country that believes in free speech, and the right of artistic expression. The decision made by Sony and participating theaters allows people to make their own choices about the film, and we welcome that outcome."

White House officials declined to elaborate on what role, if any, the White House played in Sony's decision to reverse itself, but pointed out that Obama had stated publicly that he believed Sony's earlier decision to cancel the release was a mistake.



In this Dec. 11, 2014 file photo, actors Seth Rogen, right, and James Franco attend the premiere of the Sony Pictures' film "The Interview" in Los Angeles. Sony Pictures Entertainment announced Tuesday a limited theatrical release of "The Interview" beginning Thursday, putting back into the theaters the comedy that prompted an international incident with North Korea and outrage over its cancelled release. Sony Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton said

Tuesday that Seth Rogen's North Korea farce "will be in a number of theaters on Christmas Day." He said Sony also is continuing its efforts to release the film on more platforms and in more theaters. (Photo by Dan Steinberg/Invision/AP, File)

Rogen, who stars in the film he co-directed with Evan Goldberg, made his first public comments in a surreal ordeal that began with hackers leaking Sony executives' emails and culminated in an ongoing confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea. The FBI has said North Korea was behind the hacking attacks.

"The people have spoken! Freedom has prevailed! Sony didn't give up!" said Rogen on Twitter.

"VICTORY!!!!!!!!!" said James Franco, who co-stars in the film. "The PEOPLE and THE PRESIDENT have spoken."

North Korea's Internet was shut down in an apparent attack Monday, and continued to be roiled by intermittent outages Tuesday. That followed President Barack Obama's vow of a response to what he called North Korea's "cyber vandalism" of Sony. The White House and State Department have declined to say whether the U.S. government was responsible for North Korea's outages.

After hackers last Wednesday threatened terrorist attacks against theaters showing the film, the nation's major multiplex chains dropped "The Interview." Sony soon thereafter canceled the film's release altogether and removed mention of it from its websites.

But that decision drew widespread criticism, including from Obama, who chastised Sony for what he deemed "a mistake" that went against American principles of free speech. George Clooney also led a chorus

pressuring for the movie's release and rallying against alleged corporate self-censorship.

The unusual release will give indie theaters a chance to debut the most talked-about movie in the country. James Wallace, creative manager for Alamo Drafthouse's Richardson, Texas, location said the Texas chain received word from Sony on Tuesday morning that Thursday's showings were a go. Among other touches, the theater will offer a patriotic menu featuring burgers, "freedom fries" and apple pie.

"You better believe it's going to be all-American," Wallace said.

Releasing "The Interview" could potentially cause a response from the hackers, who called themselves the Guardians of Peace. There have been none of the embarrassing data leaks of Sony emails since the movie's release was delayed. In a message last week to the studio, the hackers said Sony's data would be safe so long as the film was never distributed.

A limited release could potentially be followed by expansion into larger multiplex chains, a rollout that has been used in the past for controversial films including "Zero Dark Thirty." The country's top chains—Regal Cinemas, AMC Theatres and Cinemark Theatres—didn't comment Tuesday.

Independent theaters had shown a stronger appetite to screen "The Interview." Art House Convergence, which represents independent exhibitors, sent a letter Monday to Sony saying its theaters (comprising about 250 screens) wished to show the film.

In recent days, Sony has been trying to secure digital partners to help distribute "The Interview" either through streaming or video-on-demand. Such a multi-format release would be historic for Hollywood, whose studios have long protected the theatrical release window.

Sony did not immediately say how many theaters will show the film, but "The Interview" will open in far from the wide release originally planned on up to 3,000 screens.

Colby Cohen, 29, of Atlanta came to the Plaza Theatre shortly after 1 p.m. with a goal of buying 5 tickets for a Thursday showing. He said while he wanted to see the film in the first place, the circumstances "completely changes things."

"I want to see it a lot more," said Cohen. "I'm going to get to fight terrorism on Christmas Day now."

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