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BOX OFFICE

Little love this summer for A-list movie actors

Instead of igniting the box office, this season's star-studded flicks have dramatically underperformed. Hollywood's most lucrative films mostly have been those with no-name actors.

By Claudia Eller
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The stars are not twinkling bright this summer.

Hollywood's movie studios, hopeful that marquee-name actors would push their summer box-office receipts to record levels, are finding that the heavyweights aren't winning over audiences like they used to. With all but a couple of big-budget films already opened, the summer of 2009 is shaping up to be one of the worst on record for Hollywood's A-list talent.

The studios stocked this summer's release schedule with so-called star vehicles, including "Land of the Lost" with Will Ferrell, "Year One" featuring Jack Black, the comedy "Imagine That" with Eddie Murphy, and Denzel Washington and John Travolta in a remake of "The Taking of Pelham 123." But rather than igniting ticket sales, the star-studded movies have dramatically underperformed.

The brightest stars of the lucrative popcorn season -- which typically accounts for about 40% of annual ticket sales -- instead have turned out to be mostly movies with no-name actors -- or no actors at all on screen.

So far, the summer's most profitable film has been Warner Bros.' surprise hit "The Hangover," a \$35-million-budget R-rated comedy about a bachelor party in Las Vegas that boasts not a single household-name actor but has reached \$183 million in U.S. ticket sales since its June 5 opening and is expected to exceed \$200 million. Other summer hits like J.J. Abrams' "Star Trek" and Michael Bay's "Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen" showcase eye-popping visual effects along with up-and-coming talent.

And, the highest-grossing summer movie so far? Walt Disney's Co.'s "Up," the Pixar-animated movie starring the voice of . . . Ed Asner.

The studios, which for years have banked on richly paid stars to open their movies, are now witnessing a new reality: even the most reliable actors can be trumped by what Hollywood executives like to call "high concepts" (a bachelor party gone awry), movies based on brand-name products (Hasbro's Transformers toys), and reinvented franchises (not your father's "Star Trek").

"I think we're seeing a transformation in what the value of the star system represents," said Marc Shmuger, chairman of Universal Pictures, which will take a significant loss on Ferrell's "Land of the Lost," which cost \$100 million to make and tens of millions more to market and distribute. There's also an "incredible hunger among audiences for something new and different," he said.

Indeed, that was the appeal of the buddy comedy "The Hangover."

"Movie stars still hold an incredible value both creatively and financially," said "Hangover" director Todd Phillips. "But it's getting to be more about the movie and whether it delivers on the promise of its trailers and commercials."

Moreover, in the Internet age, word of mouth about movies spreads instantly.

"There used to be a free weekend where marketing departments could open a movie and if it didn't work, word didn't get out until Monday, but that's evaporated with Facebook and Twitter," Phillips said. "The water-cooler effect is much more immediate."

Even before a major movie hits the big screen, Twitter users and bloggers are weighing in -- which can help or hinder a studio opening a movie.

"The world has changed, throwing conventional wisdom out the window," said former studio marketing executive Peter Sealey. "The star-power opening is fading in importance and the marketing and releasing of movies is going into new territory where the masses are molding the opinion of a movie. People no longer say, 'It's a Tom Cruise movie, let's go see it!' With social networking, you know everything about a movie before it comes out."

Doug Belgrad, production president of Sony Pictures Entertainment, whose studio is behind "Year One" and "Pelham," said stars alone no longer can compete against the draw of franchise movies and sequels like "Transformers" and "Harry Potter" that come with a high degree of public awareness.

"Movie stars in the right films provide a certain amount of value from a marketing point of view," he said. "But there is no star power that you can throw at a movie that gives you the kind of brand awareness you get from pre-sold titles."

This summer's woes come at a time when studios are already battling the climbing cost of making and marketing movies as well as a decline in DVD sales, which have long supported the economics of the film business.

A telling test case will come this week when Johnny Depp, one of the biggest movie stars in the world, appears as 1930s gangster John Dillinger in Universal's crime saga "Public Enemies, which cost \$100 million to produce." Given the poor performances this year of dramas targeted to adults, the prospects of the Michael Mann-directed film gaining mass audience appeal appear dim.

Even before the summer movie season began in earnest during Memorial Day weekend, there were flashing yellow lights that older audiences were shunning more serious fare despite the stature of the lead actor. Universal's recent releases, "State of Play," starring Russell Crowe and Ben Affleck, and "Duplicity," with Clive Owen and Julia Roberts (who not long ago was Hollywood's most celebrated female star), bombed -- as did the Paramount-DreamWorks film "The Soloist," starring Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx.

Of course, the right star in the right movie can still lure large audiences, as evidenced by 20th Century Fox's Ben Stiller sequel "Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian" and "X-Men Origins: Wolverine," in which Hugh Jackman helped attract female moviegoers.

"The Proposal," Disney's romantic comedy starring Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds, had a strong opening two weeks ago at more than \$33 million and will be profitable since it cost only about \$40 million.

"There's something to be said for chemistry between actors, and you don't need to be a star to have chemistry," said Oren Aviv, Disney's production president, suggesting that is exactly what the casts of "Proposal," "Star Trek" and "Hangover" all have in common -- "combined with an idea that people connect with."

But for the most part, audiences aren't connecting with the stars this summer. Although it may be too early to know whether the weak reception will prompt the studios to rely less heavily on high-cost actors in big-budget movies as a linchpin of their summer strategy, some executives acknowledge they are reevaluating old nostrums.

"The star system was created from movies in the past," said Universal's Shmuger. "And clearly, we have to look forward and be aware of the shifts around us. We're seeing the supremacy of a great idea and concept well told in a fresh way -- of course that will inform our thinking."

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