

SCENE STEALER

Who Threw the DVD From the Train?



Rogue Pictures

A scene from “Fighting,” to be released in April. Hollywood is banking again on so-called genre films as box-office receipts have regained importance.

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DESPITE the feverish attention on box-office results each weekend, the truth is that Hollywood stopped relying on the multiplexes to make money a long time ago. For over a decade, a motion picture’s caboose — DVD sales — has been the driver of its profitability.

The DVD money has been so big that studio decisions about whether to green-light a movie have sometimes gone like this: Is this film going to draw interest at the box office? We’re not sure? Well, if it’s only a modest success, that’s O.K. We can count on consumers to toss the DVD into their shopping carts and make us whole. Who’s up for martinis at the Hotel Bel-Air?

Now that train is reversing. Business at the multiplex is going gangbusters. Ticket sales are up 14 percent this year over the same period in 2008, according to the tracking firm Media by Numbers. Attendance is up 12 percent after falling the last two years.

But according to studios, sales for some new-release DVDs are down a jaw-dropping 40 percent, hammered by the recession, a saturated market (on sale now: the complete ninth season of “Murder, She Wrote”) and a shift to Internet downloads.

At least for the moment, Hollywood is heading back to the days when the theatrical run of a film was actually important for more reasons than serving as a marketing platform for home video.

“There is no more downside protection for producers in the video marketplace,”

said Ingo Vollkammer, a co-founder and a co-chief executive of Leomax Entertainment, an independent production and film finance company. “Movies today need to be theatrically driven.”

Studios, of course, aren’t giving up on DVDs; home video is still a huge business. But the movie capital is starting to acknowledge that it has no idea what the immediate future will look like — maybe DVD sales will perk up in a few months, or maybe high-definition Blu-ray discs will finally pop, or maybe the whole thing is kaput as video-on-demand services take root. So producers are being leaned on to come up with a different type of movie.

“Anything that can drive the audience to the theaters has an easier time getting made now,” said Kevin Misher, a former Universal and [Sony](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/companies/sony_corporation/index.html?inline=nyt-org) executive and now a leading independent producer.

In addition to big “tent pole” blockbusters, that means movies that are fun to watch in groups: at least 10 musicals are in full-steam-ahead development, including a remake of “My Fair Lady.” And it means more pictures that are pre-branded: “Monopoly” and “Candy Land,” the movies, are on the way. Most of all, it means a strong return by major studios to middle-of-the-road, genre pictures.

When executed correctly, Hollywood genre films — inexpensive movies that honor cinematic rules instead of defying them and stick to carefully defined categories — have tended to snag more than enough viewers to justify their modest cost. And lately they have been on fire. Hollywood insiders recoiled at the Sony film “Paul Blart: Mall Cop” until it started printing money at the multiplex. So far, this screwball comedy, made for \$26 million, has sold \$138 million in tickets and is still playing.

But the movie that has studios the most jealous is “Taken,” a genre film from 20th Century Fox about a former [C.I.A.](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/johnny_depp/index.html?inline=nyt-per) agent on a quest to save his kidnapped daughter. It was produced for about \$33 million and has sold \$127 million in tickets (and counting) since its release on Jan. 30.

This middle ground once represented the meat of the movie business but receded over the last decade as the industry pursued the fringes of the market — tiny specialty films and blockbusters — because of the huge DVD upside, among other things. Generally speaking, the middle just wasn’t where the smartest people wanted to play.

The pendulum shift back to the big screen is changing that. “Taken” was directed by Pierre Morel, an arty French director who is ascending rapidly on Hollywood’s hot-new-thing list. Mr. Misher is behind “Public Enemies,” a big-budget gangster movie starring [Johnny Depp](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/johnny_depp/index.html?inline=nyt-per) and [Christian Bale](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/johnny_depp/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/christian_bale/index.html?inline=nyt-per> that is set for a July release. But first he has “Fighting,” a genre film being released by Universal on April 24. It stars [Channing Tatum](#) as a young counterfeiter who is introduced to underground street fighting by a scam artist ([Terrence Howard](#)).

EVEN the high-brow Miramax (“Doubt”) and Fox Searchlight (“The Wrestler”) appear to be tilting more heavily toward the pack-’em-in middle. Miramax is about to release a teenage comedy called “Adventureland,” billed as a romp on par with “Superbad” from 2007. Fox Searchlight is rolling out “Miss March,” about a guy in search of his virginal high-school sweetheart, who has become a centerfold model.

[Marc Abraham](#) <<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/78947/Marc-Abraham?inline=nyt-per>>, the director of “Flash of Genius,” about the inventor of the intermittent windshield wiper, sees high-brow as a hard sell. “The sweat factor these days is pretty high for anything that isn’t a sure sell on screen,” he said. “Flash of Genius” was cheered by critics but not by the box office.

For now, Mr. Abraham, also a successful producer, is shelving his idea about a Hank Williams biopic. Instead, he is pursuing a prequel to “The Thing,” the 1982 [John Carpenter](#) <<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/84225/John-Carpenter?inline=nyt-per>> movie about a shape-shifting alien confronting scientists in the Antarctic. “There’s some brand potential there that the studio can tap into,” Mr. Abraham said.

In addition to coming up with a different type of movie, producers are also having to build them differently — namely, with less money. Without the DVD back end to count on, studios are recalibrating budgets, demanding leaner talent deals and asking producers to do more with less.

During a recent interview tied to his movie “Confessions of a Shopaholic,” the producer [Jerry Bruckheimer](#) <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/jerry_bruckheimer/index.html?inline=nyt-per> said: “You can set the tone for a big movie just by showing some huge vistas or something at the beginning. There are all kinds of tricks we will have to use.”

Mr. Abraham, who is also working on a remake of “Creature From the Black Lagoon,” agreed, but said he saw studios moving more into medium-size pictures rather than trying to cut back too much on behemoths like “Pirates of the Caribbean 4,” which Mr. Bruckheimer has in the works.

“Trying to change a project to fit a supposed DVD number is like hitting a trifecta,” he said. “Not something I would suggest doing.”