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Studios Rethinking Summer Strategy

BY STEVEN ZEITCHIK AND AMY KAUFMAN © 2013, Los Angeles Times

Summer moviegoing is usually about the stars, the spectacle and the sizzle. But in a trend that's mystifying Hollywood, this summer's box office is being driven by films with modest ambitions...

Call it the summer of the B-movie. Like the quickie flicks the studios used to crank out for the back end of double features, these new hits — "The Heat," "Grown Ups 2," "Despicable Me 2" and, as of this weekend, "The Conjuring" among them — are drumming up business while bigger-budgeted offerings such as "The Lone Ranger" and "Pacific Rim" struggle to sell tickets.

It's these smaller films that have helped summer box-office receipts climb by 14 percent over last year, defying the conventional wisdom that summer is the time when audiences mainly want to see movies that are big, loud and laden with costly special effects.

Several factors may be behind the turnaround, according to Hollywood analysts, including studios doing a better job of serving niche audiences and consumers experiencing blockbuster fatigue.

Everything looked watered down and the studios were left trying to distinguish their movies," said Ted Mundorff, chief executive of Landmark Theatres.

This weekend the trend seems to be hitting its apex. "R.I.P.D.," a supernatural science fiction comedy starring household names Ryan Reynolds and Jeff Bridges that cost at least \$130 million to make, is projected to take in less than \$15 million at the box office. Meanwhile, "The Conjuring," a

paranormal-themed film made for the horror faithful at one-seventh the budget, is expected to collect as much as \$35 million.

Last weekend "Pacific Rim" — a movie that received generally positive reviews but reminded some people of the "Transformers" franchise — struggled. It cost nearly \$200 million but has taken in just \$49 million so far.

"Grown Ups 2," by comparison, cost a relatively modest \$80 million and in less than a week has taken in \$66 million, virtually assuring a tidy profit. The film didn't try to build a new mythology or dazzle with effects; instead it was a light-hearted confection with recognizable jokes about bodily functions and child rearing meant to comfort more than shock — a kind of B-movie comedy for the modern age.

"In a way it's a little bit of a memory piece," director Dennis Dugan said. "Maybe it's an alternative to all the big guys blowing stuff up."

Since the summer moviegoing season began in early May, the biggest-budgeted new movie has now failed to win the weekend box office on eight occasions. In the comparable period in 2012, this happened only three times. Ditto for 2011.

Of course, moviegoers have yet to tire of superheroes — "Iron Man 3" and "Man of Steel" are the summer's top-grossing movies so far. And occasionally an expensive star-driven movie, such as Brad Pitt zombie flick "World War Z," has found an audience. But the summer has had a plethora of high-profile flops. All-audience extravaganzas such as Will Smith's science-fiction film "After Earth," Johnny Depp's Western comedy "The Lone Ranger" and Channing Tatum's D.C. action picture "White House Down" — which cost as much as \$225 million and are the closest thing

Hollywood has historically had to sure bets — all fizzled in the last month.

"There's a lot of blood in the water," said Fox distribution president Chris Aronson. "There have been more high-profile failures than normal. But it's hard to castigate the business when business is up."

One of the breakout hits is the animated sequel "Despicable Me 2," which has taken in nearly \$250 million, with a budget about half that of Pixar and DreamWorks animated features. Another is "The Heat," a cop comedy starring Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy that was aimed at a target audience; two-thirds of opening-weekend fans were women.

By shrewdly targeting a demographic in the manner of many a vintage B-picture, it has proved far more popular. "The Heat" has taken in \$40 million more than "Lone Ranger," with little hope of the western catching up. (As it did in the heyday of the B-picture, the rise of the smaller movie doesn't necessarily mean an increase in quality. For example, Adam Sandler's "Grown Ups 2" garnered a Rotten Tomatoes score barely above 0 percent.)

Producer Jason Blum, who saw his \$3.5 million-budgeted "The Purge" gross nearly 20 times that, said that he could afford to take more chances with his movie.

"If someone at a studio wants to do something unusual like put billboards over L.A. saying 'Emergency Services Suspended,'" Blum said, alluding to "The Purge's" canny outdoor-marketing campaign, "they might, but they'd have to jump through a lot of hoops. With a \$3-million movie you can much more easily take a risk." (Though financed and distributed by Universal, Blum's

movie was made largely free of studio intervention.)

Blum noted that similar sense of financial freedom helped him make satisfying choices within the movie. "I can kill my lead halfway through if the story calls for it. You could never do that with a \$100- or \$200-million movie."

Though traditionally B-movies had more self-conscious camp than these new films — think "Plan 9 From Outer Space" — this crop have many of the same hallmarks: familiar plots, escapist intentions, low budgets and high concepts. "The Purge" tells of a world in which all crime is legal for one day — and benefited from a social-media campaign that had users tweeting outrageous things they would do if a purge was real.

Hollywood responds slowly to change. But studios are beginning to react, with studio executives saying they're thinking about reducing the number of summer films. The sense is that audiences still want to see spectacle this time of year — they just don't want to see so much of it.

"It feels like it went a notch too far with the number of movies out there over \$100 million," said Rob Moore, vice-chairman of Paramount, who had one of the rare big-budget hits in "World War Z." "It felt like there was an unlimited capacity for these movies, but this summer challenged that thinking."

But new models aren't easy. With their gargantuan conglomerate-owned operations, studios, for instance, won't be able to increase the number of inexpensive genre films to create a modern day version of the B-movie factory.

"I don't see the studios suddenly getting into the microbudget game in a comprehensive way," Blum said. "They're just not built for that."

Writers

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'Wolverine' Shows His Vulnerability

BY FRANK LOVCE

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NEW YORK — In a way, Roger Ebert helped make "The Wolverine."

"Why should I care about this guy?" the film critic asked in his review of 2009's "X-Men Origins: Wolverine," the previous film starring Hugh Jackman as Marvel Comics' mutant hero with metal claws and a rapid self-healing ability. "He feels no pain and nothing can kill him," Ebert said, "so therefore he's essentially a story device for action sequences."

Director James Mangold ("Girl, Interrupted") took that to heart when prepping "The Wolverine," opening Friday as a sequel to that previous film and to the three "X-Men" movies made between 2000 and 2006. "Roger is a hero of mine, as well as a real supporter and a good friend over the years," Mangold says in a telephone interview. "He communicated with me, and I remember what he said about the first film. I think what he said was dead-on."

And so in this new film, in which Logan (aka Wolverine) goes to Japan to honor a dying man's last request, Mangold and his screenwriters removed most of that healing ability, courtesy of a villainous-mutant doctor (Svetlana Khodchenkova) and an aged technology titan (Hal Yamanouchi) who covets it. If you prick him, this Wolverine bleeds. And bleeds. And bleeds.

"If you have a hero who can't be hurt, there's only one way to create stakes or jeopardy, and that's to put people he cares about in harm's way," Mangold observes. "And, not unlike the amnesia thing, that can get tired really fast."

By "the amnesia thing," Mangold's referring to

a trope in initial screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie's early script — eventually revised by Mark Bombardieri and Scott Frank — in which Wolverine, suffering from memory loss, visits Japan in search of answers to his past. Aside from anything else, that was chronologically problematic: While the character did lose his memory at the end of "X-Men Origins: Wolverine," the events of that film take place before the events of the "X-Men" trilogy.

And besides, Mangold says, "I'm just tired of amnesia. I mean, characters who can't remember anything? There have been some excellent films about characters who can't remember who they are, but usually it's just a puzzle film. That's not my style, and I think there's so much to mine in Logan without robbing him of self-knowledge."

For one thing, there's his apparent immortality. (Although he does age, albeit slowly, in the comics, the movie characters might not yet realize this.) "What I wanted to present to the audience," Mangold says, "was, what is it like to feel a prisoner in a life you cannot escape? You accumulate pain and loss, and keep that with you as you keep on going."

Not unlike the endless struggle to bring this movie to screen. It was back in October 2010 that 20th Century Fox confirmed Darren Aronofsky, fresh off "Black Swan," as director. But he left the project five months later, saying he preferred not to be out of the country for "almost a year" working on the film, the bulk of which was eventually shot in Australia.

Fox spent two months narrowing his replacement to eight directors, including Doug Liman ("The Bourne Identity"), Antoine Fuqua ("Training Day"), Justin Lin (several "Fast & Furious" films), Gavin O'Connor ("Warrior") and Mangold, who was chosen in June 2011. Production, which

had been set to begin March 2011, got pushed to October and then November. It finally commenced July 30, 2012, and wrapped in November.

Rila Fukushima remembers auditioning for her role as Yukio — a sword-swinging mutant who can foresee people's deaths — when Aronofsky was still attached. "I went to the very first casting in New York," she says, but what with all delays — including the 2011 earthquake in Japan, where a portion of the movie would be shot — "they canceled everything, and I thought the whole film was not going to happen for a while. But a half-year later," she says, "James Mangold took over. I think he saw my old casting video and asked me to audition again."

It was worth the wait, she says, giggling. The first time she met Jackman, "it was the final audition, and after we finished a scene, he kept going. So I stayed in character and just reacted to what he was saying, like improvisation. It was challenging but so much fun, like almost arguing!" she says with a laugh. (The scene, which is in the film, has them in a car as Yukio reveals she's foreseen Wolverine's death.)

Wolverine, of course, doesn't laugh. He's too existentially anguished. And for all this movie's high-powered action scenes, including an amazing one atop a 300-mph bullet train, Mangold wanted to explore the why of that.

"What I was pitching (to the studio) was a very serious take on the film and a serious departure from what was already written," he says. "It wasn't a complete abandonment of what was there — I still love source material. But I wrote on the back of that script five words: 'Anyone I love will die.'"

And what came out of that isn't your typical superhero movie. Call it "Wolverine, Interrupted."