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Goody: Fall movies turn theaters into man caves

by **Bill Goodykoontz** - Sept. 5, 2012 09:29 AM
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It's a man's man's man's world, according to James Brown, and who knew he was a movie observer?

He could have been, at least if you're talking about this fall's schedule. "Dredd," "Killing Them Softly," "End of Watch," "Looper," "Taken 2," "Skyfall" and "Jack Reacher" put male action at the forefront. And there are some big-name male actors at work -- Brad Pitt, Bruce Willis, Liam Neeson, Tom Cruise and Daniel Craig.

Which, you know, dog bites man, right? Aren't male-dominated movies aimed at young men the coin of the realm in modern Hollywood?

- [Fall 2012 movie preview: 'Hobbit,' 'Skyfall' 'Breaking Dawn 2'](#)

Well, yes. But fall follows a spring and summer that brought us "The Hunger Games," "Snow White and the Huntsman," "Haywire" and "Brave" -- movies in which women picked up bows, swords or just used their fists and feet to make their point. "Hunger Games" and "Brave" made serious money: "Hunger Games" a whopping \$407 million and "Brave" \$229 million.

"It is par for the course," said Daniel Bernardi, chairman of the cinema department at San Francisco State University. "The major studios are returning to the action films as a vehicle to compete with television, mobile media, DVD, cable, etc. They want to fill theaters, and action films, like science-fiction, tend to create the spectra of an 'event' required for people to spend a lot of money going to a movie theater.

"And they want the ancillary markets, including DVD, cable, television, etc. Action films also do very well overseas, where the studios tend to make the most money over time."

Thelma Adams, a contributing editor for Yahoo Movies, agreed.

"Action movies play globally, and more and more, the global box office is king. And the number of male stars that can lead a movie to an international hit hugely outnumbers the women stars in that position."

That's true. Part of the appeal of Jennifer Lawrence racing around the woods in the kill-or-be-killed game in "The Hunger Games" is the sheer oddness of it (both in the story and in real life). We don't expect it. With a guy like Bruce Willis or Liam Neeson, that's not the case. This is what they do, and people want to see it.

How to explain the popularity of men beating each other up, chasing each other in souped-up cars and blowing stuff up? Perhaps it is a gross generalization, but young men like watching big, loud movies with things that go boom.

In some respects, it's an amped-up version of comfort food. Studios recognize this, which is how a movie like "The Expendables" finds life and a sequel, which topped the box office the first week of its release.

"With the 'Expendables' series, you have nearly every 1980s action star in one movie," said Rob Weiner, the popular culture/fine arts librarian at Texas Tech University who has written books on film. "What is not to like?"

When it comes to making movies, Hollywood tends to follow the path of least resistance. That may explain the popularity of male-dominated movies in general and "The Expendables" in particular.

"What's interesting is that many of the action films coming out today employ the action film stars of the 1980s and 1990s," Bernardi said. "They are middle-aged -- even elderly. Chuck Norris is in his 70s. This is part nostalgia, which is nothing new to Hollywood. Hollywood, or to be specific, studio Hollywood, tends to gravitate to formulas that have worked in the past."

Of course, to build a box-office empire like many of these movies have, it takes more than a steady stream of 17-year-old boys in Mountain Dew T-shirts. Women need to buy in at some point.

"Truth be told, it's a lot easier to get women to buy tickets to man films than it is for men to buy tickets to chick flicks," said April Masini, a popular-culture observer who runs the blog AskApril.com. "Obviously, movies depend on both boys and girls for ticket sales, but girls are more apt to see movies about boys than boys are to see movies about girls."

"This extends through adulthood, and you'll see the movie statistics support this theory. This is partly because girls are used to boy-centered movie fare, and also because there's less of an adversity from girls to (go to) boy movies than there is adversity from boys to a movie that's too 'girly.' Somehow the latter is offensive to kids in a specific way."

Whatever it is that draws people to these films, they will have plenty from which to choose this fall. And if the female-driven action and adventure movies didn't create an immediate trend -- Hollywood's wheels turn slowly -- perhaps they will pay dividends in the long run.

"What may change the playing field is that these male-driven action movies have cost increasingly more money, so that when the giants fail, they fail big," Adams said. "Think 'John Carter' and ' Battleship.' That leaves the opportunity for more bargain action fueled by women without bloated salary demands."

Of course, when studios tally up the box-office totals, things may change or change again.

"I think it was probably coincidental that this summer some real strong, good quality movies came out with female leads," said Dominic Monaghan, who produced and stars in "The Day," a recent post-apocalyptic story with plenty of mayhem perpetrated by men and women. "Hollywood follows trends. If some studio is making a big movie with a female lead, then some other studio will get word of it and they'll think, 'Well, what's our project this year with a female lead?'"

In the meantime, however, it's a testosterone-laden fall, a boys club of butt-kickers. Again.

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