



Commentary

Could It Be? Did Hollywood Execs Get The Memo?

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By Marjorie Rosen
WeNews commentator

A bountiful crop of summer movies starring women and girls is outshining the usual male-driven action flicks. Marjorie Rosen wonders if the studios, fresh from a string of flops with male stars, are getting the message.

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--Could it be that this season will turn out to be the Summer of Women, on screen, if not on the campaign trail?

"Sex and the City," that glitzy ode to conspicuous consumption and sappy (or, shall I say, shoppy) female friendship, still has shapely box office legs, having rung up a whopping \$369 million worldwide these past six weeks, making it the ninth-largest-grossing romantic comedy since 1978.



Marjorie Rosen

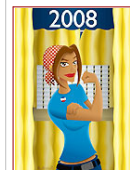
And somewhat surprisingly, the "Sex and the City" gals are suddenly in good screen company: Angelina Jolie is drawing crowds by outshooting and outkicking her male counterparts in the action picture, "Wanted," a "Matrix"-wannabe which, despite so-so reviews, took in \$176 million in a mere 17 days, largely because of her presence.

And in "Kit Kittredge: An American Girl," Abigail Breslin as Kit, the feisty 10-year-old reporter, is wowing tomorrow's feminists and shopaholics alike in this screen version adapted from stories by Valerie Tripp, which were based on an American Girl doll.

Although the movie, going into its second week of wide release, has not yet found its audience, Kit displays a plucky competence worthy of Shirley Temple (who, after all, affected peace between the Brits and militant Indians in "Wee Willie Winkie" in 1937) and far more ambition and social conscience than the moony, man-crazy women of "Sex and the City."

What's more, Meryl Streep in "Mamma Mia!" (opening July 18) and America Ferrer in "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants 2" (Aug. 8)--both written, directed and produced by women--just may help make this a female-centric summer indeed.

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Proving a Feminine Point

As a longtime critic and observer of movies, I have been waiting for a Summer of Women to happen, it seems, since before the Great Flood.

While I admit that the emergence of this season's chick flicks will not solve our health insurance crisis, shrink the gender wage gap or bring down the price of oil, their success should at least unequivocally prove to Hollywood's moguls that women's pictures are not D.O.A. And they should show the legions of craven executives with short memories--vice presidents drawing high salaries for greenlighting an endless array of cartoonish movies (read: comic book sequels) for the young boy in all of us--that stories of interest to women will lure us into movie theaters in noteworthy numbers.

Primarily, though, this box-office girl power should shut up studio heads like Jeff Robinov, who created a blizzard of ugly publicity for himself last October when that unsparing industry chronicler, Nikki Finke, reported in an LA Weekly column that Robinov, then Warner Brothers' president of production, "had made a new decree that his studio is no longer making movies with women cast as the main lead."

Immediately, Gloria Allred, the attorney and women's rights warrior, weighed in on his remarks. "This is an insult to all moviegoers and particularly women," she harrumphed, then called for a boycott of Warner films. Robinov, who was then angling for promotion when he found himself labeled Hollywood's man-who-women-loved-to-hate, backpedaled at the speed of light.

And yes, he was promoted. Now the man responsible, in varying degrees, for such male-centric movies as "The Matrix," "Swordfish" and the "Batman" franchise, is president of the new Warner Brothers Picture Group.

Painting Women Out of the Pictures

Of course, Robinov didn't really need to articulate his mandate; Hollywood has been easing women out of the big picture for years.

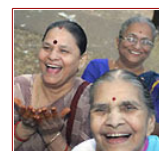
The real shift in box-office demographics may actually have begun with the advent of television: By the mid-60s the networks were gearing prime-time programming (and advertising) to females between 18 and 49, once the heart of the movie audience. And suddenly Hollywood became a haven for the male sensibility, the male "buddy" movie, and for a new generation of (male) filmmakers who, like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, were creating little-boy screen adventures at the precise moment when women's real lives were in dynamic, and perhaps confusing, flux.

But what finally doused the fire in Hollywood's proverbial belly for women's movies was the discovery that they did not spark the same billion-dollar global box office as boy stories, particularly the comic book and space adventures that were long on visual pyrotechnics and short on smart dialogue, character complexity and relationships.

Still, Robinov's comments make one wonder how conveniently the men's club of Hollywood has chosen to forget the worldwide box office rewards of such recent movies about women as "Enchanted" (\$340 million), "27 Dresses" (\$159 million), "Juno" (\$229 million) and "The Devil Wears Prada" (\$326 million).



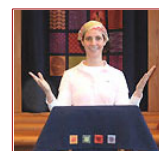
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Mulling the Male Flops

To put the situation into perspective, did any studio executive ever muse, after the shocking failure of last fall's Brad Pitt vehicle, "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" (domestic box office: \$6 million; worldwide: \$15 million), that it would be a smart idea to stop making movies featuring man-centric stories?

Did anyone have misgivings about boys-will-be-boys flicks when Wes Anderson's testosterone-drenched "The Darjeeling Limited," with Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman and the Oscar winner Adrien Brody, opened the New York Film Festival last September, then broke down before ever gathering steam (worldwide: \$15.5 million)?

And, on assessing the rotten global returns of George Clooney's "The Good German" (\$6 million), Ryan Gosling's "Lars and the Real Girl" (\$10 million) or Johnny Depp's "The Libertine" (\$11 million), did even one among the new breed of female executives dare to whisper in the ladies room of that upscale industry watering hole, the Ivy: "Nix the guy pix. And bring back the women?"

Hard to know, hard to imagine.

So here's to Kit, who could teach Carrie Bradshaw a thing or two about journalism. Here's to Jolie's villainous Fox who can smack 'em down and shoot 'em up with the worst of them. To Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, Charlotte and their Manolos, Vera Wangs and glorious closet space. And even to the Streep and Ferrer characters and their box-office promise.

Together, this summer sorority could well begin to challenge the reign of all those one-dimensional comic-book "men"-- Superman, Batman, Spiderman, X-Man and Iron Man--and go on to kindle a fire that brings women back to the movies and, eventually, movies back to women.

Marjorie Rosen, the author of "Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream," teaches journalism at Lehman College, CUNY.

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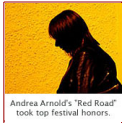
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