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## Less hype, but not less money for unlikely movie heroes

By Scott Bowles, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Let the bad times roll.

While the rest of the country reels from the financial crisis, the film industry is enjoying one of its most profitable quarters in years, as cash-strapped consumers forgo vacations and trips to the ballpark to spend a day at the multiplex.

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And they're plunking down millions to see an unlikely slate of stars and films.

Kevin James. Liam Neeson. Tyler Perry. All are leading the charge at the box office, which is seeing low-budget comedies and thrillers becoming big-dollar hits.

"I don't think anyone could have foreseen this first quarter," says Steve Rothenberg, president of distribution for Lionsgate, which released *Tyler Perry's Madea Goes to Jail*. Despite tepid reviews, *Madea* held the No. 1 spot for two weeks and became Perry's biggest hit. "Things you would never expect to be big are huge."

Through the first nine weeks of the year, ticket sales are at \$1.9 billion, according to Media By Numbers. That's up 17% over the same period last year. Revenues typically rise every year thanks to increased ticket prices, but so far this year, attendance is up, too — 15% over 2008.

The surge has historical precedent. During the recession of 2001, ticket sales jumped 10% — even with the dramatic moviegoing dropoff after the Sept. 11 attacks. During the Great Depression, more than 60% of Americans went to the movies weekly.

"What people are doing, basically, is weighing their expenses," says Patrick Corcoran of the National Association of Theatre Owners. "When they look at going out, they look at the least expensive thing they can do that's a quality use of their time."

But there's also a psychological element behind the flock to the cineplex, says Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo.

"There's no doubt that people choose cheaper entertainment in tough times, but there's also a need to escape our lives, and movies provide that," she says. "It's even cheaper to stay at home and rent a video or watch cable. But people want to laugh, cry or get lost in action together as a group. It's comforting."

Especially if you're the one making the movies. Rothenberg says he has been surprised less by people flocking to the flicks than by what they're choosing to see.

### Steering clear of the serious

"People aren't caring that there isn't a star in (a movie) that gets a \$15 million paycheck," Rothenberg says. "People are moving toward a good idea instead of just an A-list celebrity. They're going for concept and execution."

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As long as it's nothing like the real world. A look at some of the top movies so far this year —*Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, *Taken*, *Madea*, *Watchmen* — illustrates the power of unadulterated comedy and mindless action, even with B-list casts.

"Psychologically, people don't want to be brought down by something serious; they are getting that every day of the week," says Sheila DeLoach of Fox Searchlight, which had a surprise blockbuster in the feel-good best-picture Oscar winner *Slumdog Millionaire*.

"People want to escape, and feel happy doing it," DeLoach says. "There's a reason the movies that are doing the best this year are upbeat films."

While the average cost of a movie ticket eclipsed \$7 for the first time, that's still a pittance compared with, say, a professional baseball game, which costs an average of \$25 a ticket. The average big-stadium concert ticket now runs \$62; a Broadway play is \$76, according to the theater owners' association.

#### **Movie quality isn't a factor**

"People can't afford to go to Disneyland, but they can afford Camp Crystal Lake," the setting for this year's hit remake *Friday the 13th*, says Paul Dergarabedian of Hollywood.com.

"You still have to get out of the house," he says. "You still want to have that communal experience. Other than maybe going out to dinner, there's no cheaper form of entertainment."

"And it's not like the quality of the movies is far superior to last year," adds Gitesh Pandya of BoxOfficeGuru.com. "There's certainly a good variety of movies in theaters, but I'm not sure you can say they're substantially better. This is largely due to other, external factors."

Of course, not everything at the multiplex is selling. The Jonas Brothers' 3-D concert movie may have been better left on stage; the film has pulled in a measly \$16.8 million. And the \$50 million spy film *The International* scored only \$24 million.

Moviegoers aren't paying just for tickets. Concession sales are also doing brisk business. According to Regal Entertainment, one of the nation's largest theater chains, concession sales rose 5.4% during Regal's last quarter.

And some theaters are using concessions to lure viewers. The Columbus, Ga.-based Carmike Cinemas announced a "Stimulus Tuesdays" promotion in which all 16-ounce drinks and the 46-ounce popcorn are \$1 each.

"People are looking at their checkbooks, and they're not feeling too good," says Bert Livingston, a distribution executive with 20th Century Fox, which released *Taken*. "But they're still embracing going to the movies."

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