

Where the boys are - In theaters, watching the movies



'Ten-year-old Logan Ivester, left, and fourteen-year-old David Glassman, right, at Cine'

David Manning / Staff

'Iron Man'

'The Incredible Hulk'

'Wanted'

The success of "Mamma Mia!" could help bring more grown-up fare to theaters.

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A billionaire industrialist creates a high tech suit of armor and uses it to protect the world from evil.

A society of assassins recruits a meek cubicle dweller to learn their trade.

A scientist turns into a raving green monster whenever he gets a wee bit grumpy.

The plot lines from the summer's biggest movies are enough to make you wonder: Is Hollywood run by a legion of 12-year-old boys?

It's nothing new for multi-plexes to overflow with special-effects laden blockbusters June through August.

This year in particular, though, the box office seems to have comic book and action-adventure fare out the wazoo with "Iron Man," "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," "The Incredible Hulk," "Hancock," "Hellboy II" and "The Mummy 3."

"This summer was the worst!" said Elayne Rapping, a pop culture expert and professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo. "I usually go to summer movies. This summer I didn't even go."

Bradley Wigor, a filmmaker teaching film at Hollins University in Virginia this summer, has heard more than one movie fan tell him they don't have a reason to cruise to the local cineplex this summer. "I hear adult people say all the time, 'For the first time, there's not a movie I want to see.'"

Why does Tinsel Town show so little interest in telling stories that don't require Computer-Generated Imagery?

Because superheroes sell.

"Hollywood tends to bank more on action movies because they gross so much more," said Kevin Polowy, editor of AOL's Moviefone.com.

Rebecca Roy-Jarboe, a Beverly Hills therapist who serves many clients working in the entertainment industry, argues such movies reflect the psyches of filmmakers and studio executives (two professions still largely dominated by men). They're drawn, she said, to the subjects that interested them during a key point in their development.

"When we tap into creative processes, we usually tap into that part of our past which was most conflicted in order to derive the most conflict and hence, the most drama," she said. "Middle school is a time of great conflict for boys and girls, but boys often start to feel inadequate at this point. Girls are usually more developed and taller. Fantasies of omnipotence and power, especially over women, hold great appeal."

Other experts hold less cerebral hypotheses, arguing the interests of the movie fans who spend the most money at box office drives what kind of movies end up in theaters.

"The main movie-going demographic is still younger males and so it's not all that surprising they focus this way," said Craig Phillips, an editor and film reviewer for GreenCine.com.

Young people do go to the movies more than their older counterparts.

According to The Arbitron Cinema Advertising Study of 2007, Americans ages 12 to 24 see an average of four movies in a three-month period. Forty-three percent of adults between the ages of 18 to 29 said they went out to the movies once a month or more according to a 2006 Pew Research Center survey. Meanwhile, only 25 percent of adults aged 30 to 49 and only 21 percent of adults ages 50 to 64 claimed to go to the movies once a month or more in the same study.

"The certainty is that teenage boys go to the movies," said Wigor, whose film "Unconscious" debuted at the 2006 Palm Beach International Film Festival. "They go. They don't have to convince them to go."

A specific type of fan helps to pad the box office numbers for movies like "Hellboy II" and "The Dark Knight," Polowy argued. These are the Fanboys, aka "manchildren of all ages." They're the moviegoers who hit the Early Nerd Specials - defined by urbandictionary.com as "midnight showing on the day of release of a highly anticipated film, typically of the science-fiction/fantasy genre."

Fanboys, according to Polowy, build online buzz about movies and often buy tickets to see a movie more than once. "They help drive a ton of traffic," he said.

This leaves us with a chicken versus egg debate.

Which came first?

Did grown-ups stop going to movie theaters because studio executives stopped making grown-up movies?

Or do studio executives churn out a steady stream of comic book characters because adults quit coming to movies, making it necessary to cater to their loyal customers: tween and teenagers.

Wigor says it's the latter.

Americans have a lot of choices for entertainment these days: Cable, YouTube, WiFi, On Demand cable programming. It's become more and more expensive for movie studios to capture the public's attention. Movie executives, Wigor points out, often pay more to market a movie than they did to make it.

"Older audiences tend to be a lot more picky," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of Media By Numbers. "Takes a lot to impress them."

It's wrong, Wigor said, to think that no one in Hollywood is smart enough to make a good, adult movie. They're just catering to their clientele.

"It's not an artistic choice that's being made," he said. "It's an economic business model that's trying to be massaged."

It helps that tween and teen boys can also coax other demographics to join them at the movies.

Parents are much more likely to join their kids at "The Incredible Hulk" than they are to drag their children with them to a screening of "Then She Found Me."

"It's really the kids that are driving the market," said Rapping. "When my kids were young, I took them to good movies. It never occurred to me to let a 10-year-old decide."

Women, numerous experts agree, are more likely to see a movie with male leading characters like "Hancock" or "Iron Man" than men are to see "27 Dresses."

"Women are more willing to see male-oriented movies than men are willing to see chick flicks," Dergarabedian said. "Men think they're going to be emasculated. A woman who sees an action movie is considered cool."

It's the same thing with our younger counterparts: Boys, Dergarabedian said, don't want to see "Kit Kittredge: An American Girl," while both boys and girls will go to see "Star Wars: The Clone Wars."

Still, for adults who've become dissatisfied with the summer releases, there are other avenues in this media-rich world. Many spend their entertainment dollars on premium cable channels and become addicted to shows like "The Wire," "Big Love" and "The Tudors."

"Cable outlets have been offering a lot more fare that appeals to women, long after 'Sex and the City' even, like 'Weeds' - and shows that appeal to both men and women, like AMC's 'Mad Men,' which is smart, sexy, intriguing - more so than theatrical fare," said Phillips. "These shows have the luxury of more time to tell their story, more patient viewers and less worry about how they'll fare on opening weekend."

And there's reason to be optimistic.

While this summer's "Sex and the City" bombed with critics and many longtime fans of the show, it made \$55.7 million in its opening weekend.

And 2007's "Wild Hogs," about suburban, middle-aged bikers, along with "Enchanted," the live-action fairy tale, performed well at the box office.

If Meryl Streep's "Mamma Mia!," slated to open Friday, rakes in the dollars, future summers likely will

offer storylines about something other than superheroes.

"The more this happens, the more it will encourage Hollywood," said Dergarabedian. "I think Hollywood is going to deliver more grown-up fare."

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