

Will Hollywood embrace femme pics?

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'Sex's' success may mean hope for chick flicks

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“Sex and the City” galvanized the femme aud in a way never seen before and possibly never to occur again. Women of all ages headed to the multiplex with their galpals — and, occasionally husbands — in tow, treating the return of Carrie Bradshaw & Co. as a major event.

Does all this mean studios will embrace their feminine side? Not necessarily.

Hollywood has displayed selective amnesia about femme hits in the past, tending to remember that those that don't work better than those that do.

Every time a chick pic has turned into a hit, studios have appeared stunned. There are signs this attitude may be changing — “Sex and the City” producer (<http://variety411.com/us/los-angeles/producers/>)-star Sarah Jessica Parker has credited the success of “The Devil Wears Prada” for paving the way for the bigscreen version of the HBO skein after years of struggles — but filmmakers still avoid the term “chick flick” for fear it will marginalize a project.

It's hard to argue with the numbers for “Sex.”

By the time its opening weekend was over, it had raked in \$57 million at the domestic B.O., more than double the amount “The Devil Wears Prada” opened at two summers ago. Strong weekday B.O. followed, suggesting “Sex” has legs. New Line is already exploring a sequel.

“Sex and the City” isn’t the only femme fare to perform well at the B.O.

lately: Last weekend, five of the top 10 films had strong estro-appeal.

Besides “Sex and the City,” which trumped “Indiana Jones” in its second frame, there was romantic comedy “What Happens in Vegas” in the No. 6 spot, invitro laffer “Baby Mama” at No. 8, followed by two more romantic comedies, “Made of Honor” at No. 9 and “Forgetting Sarah Marshall” in the 10th spot.

The knock on chick flicks is that they might not cross over to men, who have been known to avoid female-centered titles. Projects targeting older women (read: above 25) are considered especially problematic; even as anticipation for “Sex and the City” grew, certain analysts downplayed its potential success and dubbed it a one-quadrant movie. But its opening showed that a movie that really speaks strongly to its base will deliver boffo coin.

“When ‘X-Men’ does well and a studio decides to do ‘Iron Man,’ that’s a reasonable business decision,” says Wendy Finerman, who has produced “Prada,” “Stepmom” and “P.S. I Love You” and recently set up “I Didn’t Fancy Him Anyway” at CBS Films. “It doesn’t happen that way with films that serve the female audience.”

Writer-director Diane English spent 13 years trying to get her redo of “The Women” into production, getting turned down by one female studio topper after another along the way before Bob Berney at Picturehouse finally said yes.

“I would come in with my list,” she says, citing “The Hours” and “Steel Magnolia” as examples of similar fare that worked, only to hear studio execs dismiss each example as a fluke.

“We have to start over every time,” English says.

The “Murphy Brown” creator admits she once considered it her mission to break the barrier against femme fare, but Bette Midler, one of stars of “The Women,” advised her not to hold her breath, noting “First Wives Club” had no lasting effect. Nonetheless, English has two more femme-centric projects in the works — an adaptation of Erica Jong’s “Fear of Flying” and “The First Man,” a romantic comedy about the first man married to a U.S. president.

Warner Bros. prexy-COO Alan Horn freely gives New Line execs the credit for seeing the potential in the bigscreen “Sex” adaptation, which Warners passed on.

“It was a deal issue — we were clearly wrong,” Horn says.

When New Line was folded into Warner as a label, the studio got involved in its marketing and distribution. He admits the studio was surprised by the intensity of the response to the pic, but says “we certainly didn’t screw it up.”

Horn says New Line topper Toby Emmerich is busy exploring the possibilities for a sequel he jokingly dubs “Sex and the Suburbs.” Warners is also releasing the sequel to the younger-skewing “Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants” this summer. However, he cautions that “Sex and the City” “is an unusually big hit” and most femme projects won’t be able to match its success.

“Sex and the City,” after all, had built up a devoted following on HBO, then syndication and DVD. He notes that Warners has had mixed success with other femme fare.

“There is a lot of unknown in this business,” he says. “I think every studio wants to do the same thing — get as many quadrants as possible.”

Donna Langley, who heads production at Universal, calls the boffo opening of “Sex” “very exciting and gratifying to see” but also concedes that it’s an unusual project.

“It’s outside the norm, but I don’t think it’s a one-off,” Langley says. “It’s something to aspire to.”

U will bow the next big chick flick of the summer, “Mamma Mia,” based on the hit tuner, and recently inked a deal with romantic comedy maven Nancy Meyers on a relationship comedy.

Langley says the key to making pics that target a specific aud, like femmes, is to make sure it hits that group.

“If you’re catering to a specific demographic, you need to make sure you have all your guns blazing and reach that audience. Then maybe you can cross over, which didn’t happen with ‘Baby Mama.’”

Trying to have it both ways — putting top female stars into action roles to draw men and women — doesn’t necessarily work either, as “The Brave One” and “Invasion” demonstrated last year.

Women in Film prexy Jane Fleming, who admits she’s no big fan of chick flicks herself, is nonetheless encouraged by the latest performance of femme fare, calling it evidence that, “If you have the right product and can market it well, you can break through.”

“Hopefully what’s starting to happen,” she adds, “is these movies will keep proving the point over and over again” over their viability, and that this, in turn, will lead to “many more at bats” for femme fare.

Observers expect a rash of “Sex and the City” clones centered on female bonding, some sure to fall short, to go into production soon.

“I hope when a few of them don’t succeed studios won’t revert to old patterns,” Fleming says.

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