

Movies

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DEPP NO SURE THING

Even Hollywood's biggest stars can't guarantee success when they make adult dramas

As a swishy swashbuckler, Johnny Depp is worth his weight in cursed Aztec gold coins. But out of eye-liner and off the plank, can even Capt. Jack Sparrow's alter-ego lure filmgoers away from giant robots, starships and superheroes with an entirely different — and decidedly darker — bandito? We'll soon know when *Public Enemies*, starring Depp as Depression-era gangster John Dillinger, machine-guns its way into theatres Wednesday.

For Depp's Dillinger, more daunting than the prospect of swarms of federal agents is the current movie-going landscape — one in which audiences have shown little interest in adult-aimed, star-driven dramas. What once was a sure thing — the teaming of Depp with Christian Bale in a big-budget Michael Mann crime saga — now seems an iffy, even risky, proposition. Consider: while box office has been surging all year, 2009's

most profitable hits have been youth-driven: From *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* to *Fast & Furious* to *Star Trek* to *The Hangover* and *Up*. Conversely, dramas with edgier undercurrents have

disappointed, rejected by audiences who, seeking an escape from the doldrums of a recession, want simply to be entertained, favouring broad-strokes laughs and CGI spectacle over story and stars.

"It's definitely more difficult now to make a drama — even to put it together, period,"

acknowledges Oscar-winning director Sam Mendes, whose latest film is the effects-free *Away We Go*. Last December his *Revolutionary Road* grossed a paltry \$22 million despite the A-list wattage of Leonardo DiCaprio and Mendes's wife Kate Winslet. Since then, high-priced flops have included *The Soloist* with Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx (box office tally: \$30 million), *Duplicity*



Kevin
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Public Enemies



Duplicity, The Soloist, and State of Play (below) are all 2009 adult-dramas starring big-name actors ... and they all flopped. Can Johnny Depp's Public Enemies buck the trend?



with Julia Roberts and Clive Owen (\$39 million) and *State of Play* with Russell Crowe and Ben Affleck (\$40 million). Meanwhile *Fast & Furious*, the fourth film in the enduring bone-headed franchise, grossed more than \$70 million just in its first three days.

Understandably, that's grim news for filmmakers who want to traffic in more than sequels, remakes and adaptations of comic books. "I don't make movies about helicopters exploding," says director Nick Cassavetes, whose Cameron Diaz-led tear-jerker *My Sister's Keeper* opened on Friday, the same weekend as Michael Bay's sequel *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. "Mainly that's because I've never witnessed a helicopter exploding. The themes in this movie are universal — family, love, life, loss ... These are bigger problems than cars changing into robots."

Tell that, though, to studio executives who are increasingly skittish about financing dramatic fare. Among the most recent casualties? *Moneyball*, a baseball drama with Brad Pitt that Sony yanked the plug on just days before filming was set to begin.

Granted, there are always exceptions: Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, for one, proved

to be the actor-director's biggest hit ever, raking in close to \$150 million. But is even that enough to dispel the notion that bankrolling a Hasbro-based production is a safer, savvy bet if you're an executive hoping to greenlight a hit and keep your job?

"There's definitely an adult crowd that wants to see movies too," says scribe Alex Kurtzman who, with writing partner Roberto Orci, penned such blockbusters as *Star Trek* and *Transformers*.

Future of drama

But it's tough, Orci believes, for soft-sell dramas to cope amid what he calls the "blunt force trauma" of modern movie marketing.

Still, the pair is adamant there's a future for the drama, insisting they would love to write one themselves one day — without droids or aliens. "We came out to Hollywood thinking that's what we would be doing actually," says Kurtzman.

Says Orci, "The first script we read was *Sex, Lies and Videotape*."

If the drama does survive, however, it will probably do so with a cheaper pricetag. It's extremely doubtful, for instance, that Crowe will ever get another \$20 million payday to play a pudgy grungy political reporter.

(And it's no coincidence that he will next be seen as a slim, gladiatorial Robin Hood in next May's Ridley Scott-helmed action-adventure.)

Of course, some of this is culturally cyclical: The gritty films of the 1970s were shoved aside for the escapism of the 1980s, which in turn led to the indie boom of the 1990s. Presumably, the zeitgeist could shift again — this time away from mall cops and street racers. But even if *Public Enemies* performs well, it's doubtful it will be enough to coerce Hollywood brass into making a course correction. Last spring, executives at Universal, the studio behind *Frost/Nixon*, *State of Play*, *Duplicity* and *Enemies*, announced they were putting a moratorium on pricey adult dramas, instead focusing on broad comedies and so-called "event" pictures.

Not that there are any guarantees. Take, for example, the studio's *Land of the Lost*, which appeared to include all the ingredients for success: a big star (Will Ferrell), a big budget (\$100-million-plus) a high concept based on a 1970s children's TV show and plenty of computer-generated effects. The result? An abysmal \$43 million so far — and one of the summer's biggest bombs.

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Johnny Depp at his eclectic best

Long before he warbled *Yo Ho Ho* and *a Bottle of Rum*, Johnny Depp was an offbeat actor known for his eclectic choices. And he still is. Just because he's recognized these days for essentially playing a live-action Disney cartoon doesn't mean he'll forever be sailing the high seas, as Wednesday's *Public Enemies* demonstrates. Time will tell if his performance as John Dillinger registers as one of his most memorable. If so, it will join the ranks of the following five including — how could it not? — Capt. Jack Sparrow:

Edward Scissorhands (1990)

The film that in many ways defined Depp's cinematic career. At the time, he was known for the cops-in-high school TV series *21 Jump Street*, but this dark fantasy about a boy with metal blades for appendages not only announced Depp's intention to subvert the Hollywood norm, but initiated his enduring professional partnership with surrealist Tim Burton. What's most remarkable about Depp's turn as the solitary outcast Edward is how he does so much with so little, largely deprived of dialogue and buried under layers of make-up.



Ed Wood (1994)



Just because you're terrible at something doesn't mean you should forfeit your passion. And possibly no film celebrates this philosophy more endearingly than Burton's black-and-white oddity about the so-called worse director in Hollywood history: Wood, the mastermind behind the notorious "classic" *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. Rather than a cruel satire, though, Depp and Burton's movie is a love letter to Wood, no matter how awful and unwatchable his movies were, wires and all.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003)

What could have merely been a sell-out paycheck gig — aligning himself with mega-producer Jerry Bruckheimer for a Disney franchise — became something else entirely in the clutches of the ever-mischievous Depp. The actor, who once said he modeled his *Sleepy Hollow* character on a 13-year-old girl, took a standard-issue swashbuckler and turned him into Keith Richards. The resulting sun-baked buccaneer was something rarely seen in Hollywood blockbusterdom: an action-hero original.



Finding Neverland (2004) — no photo ... he looks too normal

For all the outlandishness of his better-known roles, Depp is equally effective when underplaying. Case in point: this drama concerning Peter Pan creator J.M. Barrie. Depp received an Oscar nomination for his subtle, stirring work in the underseen period piece, directed by Marc Forster (*Monster's Ball*, *Quantum of Solace*).

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (2007)



Nearly 20 years after John Waters' *Cry-Baby*, Depp underscores his versatility with a go-for-broke performance in Burton's adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's musical. As the crazed, vengeful barber who makes mincemeat (literally) out of his enemies, Depp is a gore-soaked revelation: murderously fiendish but also sad, witty, empathetic and wrenching.

—Kevin Williamson