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culture

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Risky business?

In the 1980s and '90s Tom Cruise could pack cinemas on his stardom alone – not because of a beloved franchise or a high-concept premise. Today that is rare. (Paramount Pictures)

Tom Brook investigates why the film industry appears to be suffering a shortage of young male movie stars.



By Tom Brook

15 November 2013

A recent opinion piece in [Variety](#), one of America's top entertainment industry publications, proclaims "Hollywood is in the midst of a "leading man crisis." A couple of days later, US morning TV news programme Good Morning America reported on the subject, posing the question: "Where are all the young bankable stars?"

There does appear to be a certain degree of angst in Hollywood over a relative dearth of young male leads who can consistently bring in a big audience.

Yes, you have several actors with a potent following like Daniel Radcliffe, Robert Pattinson and Ryan Gosling. But no longer are there the young stars of a few years ago – like Tom Cruise – who could always be relied upon to open a movie. In other words, however bad the picture, the film's leading man would always guarantee big box office takings on the opening weekend because hordes of followers would jam into cinemas just to see him.

"I don't know a young man who can open a movie – I wish I could name one – I don't see any on the horizon frankly," says David D'Arcy who reviews films for Screen International.

Of course there are still great A-list stars in the US – actors like Brad Pitt, Robert Downey Jr, Will Smith, Tom Hanks and Leonardo DiCaprio – but they aren't exactly youngsters.

The lack of bankable male stars under the age of 40 is being acknowledged throughout the industry – as is the reduced currency of stars in general. "Movie stars are no longer really driving cinema," says top Hollywood producer and director Brett Ratner, "even though I grew up loving movie stars and going to a movie because I wanted to see Tom Cruise's opening weekend. I think it's changed a lot because now it's about the intellectual property and the idea."

From the outside it looks like the studios are trying to fix the problem by constantly bringing in new talent in the hope a star will emerge. Everyone thought Channing Tatum might be Hollywood's saviour but then he failed to bring the blockbuster season movie *White House Down* to box office glory. His star was somewhat diminished – but many think he still has excellent potential.

Not everybody has visions of a looming disaster. Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood 2*, sees all the talk of Hollywood being crippled by a lack of young male stars as a story concocted by journalists. “I don’t think this is based in anything at all. It’s just really one more story that hacks are looking to tell,” says Miller.

But Miller does concede there is a significant shift taking place in the currency of male star power in Hollywood. “The industrial stardom that generated a long line of people – Clint Eastwood, Jack Nicholson, Tom Cruise – from the 1960s through to the 1980s, doesn’t quite seem to exist anymore,” he says. “We have less faith in bankable stars opening movies who are young, that’s certainly true. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a whole array of young men who are given chances in good roles.”

Concept is king

Young male stars have fewer opportunities in which to shine because the kinds of movies Hollywood is focusing on – mainly action-adventures that sell in the increasingly important global market – don’t rely on a single charismatic individual to bring in fans at the box office.

“The action-adventure model has moved from a very individual one to a more ensemble cast: Iron Man, even Spider-man, sees an array of important characters playing their part in the film rather than there being just one single individual who as a vigilante is the person on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving the nation or the Earth,” says Miller.

Another explanation is that many of them may be put off by intense media and fan scrutiny. This came to light with the recent decision to cast British actor Charlie Hunnam in the erotic thriller *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Hunnam pulled out and there was much speculation that part of the reason was because of the intense media coverage and barrage of very negative mail from disgruntled *Fifty Shades of Grey* fans who didn’t approve of him being cast.

“I would say that the level of fan criticism has become so intense lately that it is really sort of driving actors’ careers,” says Wheeler Winston Dixon, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The reality could also be that the studios are just backing the wrong kind of male actors – focussing perhaps too much on looks.

Where the boys are

And perhaps studios just aren’t thinking globally. The majority of Hollywood’s box office now comes from outside the US and international audiences may want young leading men who are a bit different from the commonly sought after all-American hunk with lots of white teeth and perfect abdominals.

British actor James Floyd, who has received accolades for his portrayal of a British Arab in the Sundance winner *My Brother the Devil*, thinks Hollywood has got it wrong when it comes to casting young leads. “The old stereotype of the all-American Caucasian male selling the most is no longer true,” he says. “Being of mixed ethnicity, non-Caucasian and speaking more than just English are nothing but an advantage – and Hollywood still struggles to embrace this.”

There is also agreement that the machinery that used to groom young star talent no longer exists. Nowadays top studio executives come and go so quickly that they don’t have the opportunity to invest in an actor over the long haul as their counterparts once did.

Wheeler Winston Dixon believes young male actors have to think strategically. “Younger stars need to find projects which are not franchise projects, which allow them to shine through in a really signature role in the way that, say, Robert De Niro did or even Robert Downey Jr,” he says.

Amid this the talk of a crisis, the film industry does not, at first sight, appear to be hurting. Franchises based on preexisting material and high-concept premises, both now in abundance, may be more critical for sustaining healthy box office returns. But the presence of popular leading men is considered vital if Hollywood is to retain and develop the younger audience demographic that has become its mainstay. There is, however, also the opposing view that stars may be overrated when it comes to their importance in boosting box office. “The research shows that the impact of stars on the success of Hollywood motion pictures has always been exaggerated by publicists, agents, and studio heads,” says Toby Miller.

“If you do careful analysis of the different factors in addition to the identity of stars, the identity of directors, the nature of the genre, the operation of the studio, are all factors that are extremely important in the success of movies. So-

called bankable A-list stars have plenty of failures that sink beneath the waves. They're just not written about much."

Whatever the importance of young stars to Hollywood's overall fortunes, the current doom-laden conversations could quickly shift. "Things can change overnight," says critic David D'Arcy. "In a few months we're going to have films in Sundance with lots of young talent. I think in six months we'll be talking about some actor who everyone wants to cast."

But with all the big structural changes roiling the film industry right now – from shifting demographics at the box office, to the growing importance of the foreign market and emerging forms of distribution – Hollywood needs more than just a few young, charismatic leading men to solve its problems. Even the most dynamic young male star will not be able to sell big-budget formulaic duds of which there have been quite a few in recent times. What the film industry could really benefit from is more creative risk-taking, so it is better able to engage its international audience over the long term on a higher and more satisfying level.

That could give tomorrow's leading men commercially successful, big-screen stories in which they could truly shine.

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