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Posted on Tue, Jul. 21, 2009

The best of times for Hollywood

By Carrie Rickey

Inquirer Movie Critic

Not only is *Up*, the soaring Pixar animated film, one of the most successful movies of the season - its title aptly describes the trend at the box office this year.

Despite last week's cloudy Federal Reserve forecast that unemployment might top 10 percent by December, the sun is shining on the multiplex.

According to Hollywood.com, box-office receipts through July 12 were up 11 percent over last year, from \$5.11 billion to \$5.68 billion.

"Barring catastrophe, it will be a record-breaking year," predicted Brandon Gray, president of BoxOfficeMojo.com. Some think that U.S. and Canadian box-office grosses could crack \$10 billion for the first time.

The numbers are proof, say analysts, of Hollywood's hallowed belief that movies are recession-proof.

In the Philadelphia region, grosses are up 13.1 percent over last year, according to Rentrak Theatrical, a Los Angeles media research company.

"It was like this during the Depression," said Paul Dergarabedian, who tracks box office for Hollywood.com. In fact, it was like this during five of the last seven recessions, the National Association of Theater Owners says.

With so much free content available on the Internet, though, few expected that this recession would prove such a box-office boon. And the 11 percent rise in grosses isn't due simply to a boost in ticket prices (up 17 cents, to a national average of \$7.35, which factors in lower-priced children's and seniors' tickets). Attendance is also up, 8.7 percent.

"During recessions, people like to escape," observed Josh Eliashberg, professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

They like to get away mentally, with escapist fare like *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. And also, Eliashberg noted, "by getting out of the house for a relatively inexpensive form of

entertainment."

Movie-wise, is this recession like previous recessions? Yes, and no.

"Of course, the franchises have been the bread and butter, as they always are," says Gitesh Pandya, editor of [BoxOfficeGuru.com](#). "*Transformers*, *Star Trek*, and *Harry Potter* alone will combine for nearly \$1 billion in domestic box office this summer and more than \$2.1 billion worldwide."

But it may be a combination of the recession and the mix of movies that's revving the box-office engine.

"The conventional wisdom is that youth audience drives the box office, but so far this year and summer we're seeing audiences that cross demographic lines," noted Dergarabedian. "This summer, movies are bringing in older audiences and women."

He has anecdotal evidence that the Depression-era drama *Public Enemies* is drawing youth who come for Johnny Depp's John Dillinger, as well as mature moviegoers who come for the story.

"*Up* proves the point," Dergarabedian said of the film that's made \$275 million and is playing well to audiences ranging in age from 5 to 95. "Who would have thought that Ed Asner [the voice of the film's elderly hero] would be top-lining one of the biggest movies of the summer?"

Still, the youth-oriented *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (which opened last Tuesday at midnight, and earned more than \$158 million through Sunday) and *Transformers* (\$347 million and counting), are doing spectacularly.

"Comedy is king," said Pandya, "with *The Hangover* on its way to a \$250 million score" and *The Proposal* expected to hit \$150 million.

Independent films, however, are lagging. Gray noted that the only bright spot on the indie front, apart from *Slumdog Millionaire*, is *Sunshine Cleaning*, which made \$12 million.

Philadelphia exhibitors, with their 13.1 percent bounce at the box office, are faring much better than those in the movie capital and the motor capital: In both Los Angeles and Detroit, according to Rentrak, box-office numbers are up only 7.7 percent.

There's another intriguing recession/movies correlation, one that economists might call a nonsense indicator. In five out of eight major domestic economic downturns, including this one, Hollywood has produced a *Robin Hood* movie.

Douglas Fairbanks' *Robin Hood* (1922) was released during the post-World War I slump; Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) during the Depression; the Sean Connery *Robin and Marian* (1976) during the oil crisis; the Kevin Costner *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* during the Gulf War recession of 1991; and the Russell Crowe-headlining *Robin Hood* is slated for release next year.


When money is tight, the evergreen about stealing from the rich and giving to the poor has obvious appeal.

Contact movie critic Carrie Rickey at 215-854-5402 or crickey@phillynews.com.

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