

Hollywood's non-tentpoles

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from Variety by Dade Hayes

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Major studios are consumed with the summer, since this is the season when they book 40% or more of annual B.O.

But purveyors of prestige fare are waiting in the wings for their own money season: the fall and holiday period.

Traditionally that's considered the time when audiences go for more "serious" titles, with Labor Day and the Telluride Film Festival marking an unofficial start to a season when specialty films get a buzz from festivals and awards.

This year, the usual fourth-quarter pressure is intensified as the calendar will be even more crowded than usual and the stakes higher, thanks to three key factors.

First, even though overall B.O. this year is up 6% over 2006, grosses are down 53% for films bowing on fewer than 300 screens, according to Rentrak Theatrical. Only "The Namesake," "The Lives of Others" and "Waitress" have really made major waves in the sector.

Second, the recent film-biz invasion by hedge funds has created a market glut in formerly low-volume months such as April. That more-is-better mentality promises to turn the year-end flood of kudos hopefuls into a tsunami.

Third, many of the specialty companies -- Focus Features, Lionsgate, the Weinstein Co. and Warner Independent -- are anxious for a few hits, hoping to rebound from a difficult fourth quarter in 2006. Continuing volatility in the acquisitions market has driven many companies toward funding their own productions, but then rising costs can squeeze the rollouts. What could have been hand-crafted rollouts risk becoming too-wide bows aimed in part at simply recouping.

The good news and the not-so-good news for all entrants in the year-end sweepstakes is that the lineup is already looking potent. Every year, studios offer year-end biggies while specialty divisions have pics that sound good on paper, but often fail to deliver -- so the vet distribs know how to deal with that level of competition.

Attendees at this year's just-concluded Cannes festival were buzzing at how strong the lineup was. And Cannes is increasingly an awards harbinger, as last year's event hosted "Babel," "Pan's Labyrinth," "Volver" and "An Inconvenient Truth," which went on to plenty of kudos attention.

"It wasn't the parties or the sales that people were talking about. Critics and other festival organizers and executives were really struck by how much good stuff is going to be coming," recalls Michael Barker, co-chief of Sony Pictures Classics.

Companies bidding for the next fourth-quarter breakout are marshalling resources for what looks to be an even more bruising gauntlet than last year's.

"I hate the fall because it's so dicey," says Bob Berney, head of Picturehouse, whose big year-end titles are Sergei Bodrov's "Mongol" and the Francois Girard-helmed "Silk." "If you wait until the end of the year, you can't fake it. You have to know that you have the goods and that your film will play."

But securing that runtime is harder than ever. Gary Faber, marketing chief of the Weinstein Co., came up through the ranks at the old Miramax and says films today cannot emulate the charmed path of 1990 hit "Cinema Paradiso," which played for nine months on no more than 126 screens en route to \$12 million domestic cume.

"You used to have a great movie and be confident that it would open with \$30,000 per screen, but not any more," Faber says. "There are just so many more titles now."

The 2007 roster is bulging with new titles from helmers such as Ang Lee, David Cronenberg, Marc Forster, the Coen brothers, Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson and Noah Baumbach. When Miramax picked up Julian Schnabel's "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" in Cannes, the immediate question everyone had was: Where will it fit? (The answer: December.)

And the Tom Cruise-Paula Wagner regime at United Artists will launch its releases with "Lions for Lambs," starring Meryl Streep, Cruise and director Robert Redford.

These pics will be competing with big adult studio draws like "Sweeney Todd," "Charlie Wilson's War" and "American Gangster" and a cavalcade of other prominent titles.

"It is a real traffic jam," Berney says. "It becomes very tough toward the end of the year because you have studio releases and specialty titles competing for the same audience. And the audience doesn't differentiate; they just want to see a good movie."

The latter weeks of 2006 threw specialty players a few curveballs, forcing them to program around major-studio entries like "Children of Men," "The Holiday" and "Blood Diamond." It didn't matter that most studio dramas fizzled; their star wattage and marketing tonnage were enough to make life difficult.

Miramax topper Daniel Battsek managed to steer "The Queen" through the maze to Oscar gold and a \$56.4 million domestic cume. "In this time of year, really, really good movies can get chunks eaten out of them," he says. "The danger area is that studios tend to spend more on advertising."

Unlike the majors, the niches need to create awareness of their pics with a combination of reviews, awards and that elusive buzz from the nation's most ardent film savants, the "early adopters" who propel pics from fest to arthouse to megaplex, as was the case with such successes as "Brokeback Mountain."

"We cannot rely on an ad buy to sell our movies," Battsek notes. "Our job instead is to create awareness however we can."

Nancy Utley, chief operating officer at Fox Searchlight, says simply releasing at the end of the year means "you get mixed in with the Oscar hype. Being in that season and people talking about whether you're an Oscar contender or not just adds another layer of anxiety and possible spending and just complicates things."

This year's prestige parade will be an especially anxious period for a few players eager to build awareness about something besides their own recent stumbles. Among them:

n Focus Features After redefining the upside of arthouse fare with "Brokeback Mountain," "The Constant Gardener" and "Pride & Prejudice" in 2005, the company endured a grueling series of misfires in 2006, such as "Catch a Fire" and "Hollywoodland."

Under James Schamus, the company has focused heavily on production and has not made an acquisition in the past year and a half. Among its hopefuls are the potentially potent quartet of Cronenberg's "Eastern Promises," Lee's "Lust, Caution," Joe Wright's "Atonement" and Terry George's "Reservation Road."

n Fox Searchlight The company had Oscar wins with Michael Arndt's screenplay for "Little Miss Sunshine" and Forest Whitaker in "The Last King of Scotland." While the former was a boxoffice home run, the latter performed modestly. Other titles last year included "Notes on a Scandal," "The History Boys" and "Fast Food Nation."

This year, the late-year titles include "La Misma Lunas" (shared with the Weinstein Co.), "Savages" and "Darjeeling Limited." The latter, from director Wes Anderson, is described as a quirky comedy that could prove to be strong counterprogramming.

- Lionsgate The company has a split personality, specializing in arthouse fare (Oscar winner "Crash") and genre films ("Saw" and "Hostel" franchises). Its fourth quarter could be rosy with the latter splatter films. But on the specialty front, it's had a harder time, ranging from the 2004 "Beyond the Sea" to last year's "Akeelah and the Bee" and "The U.S. vs. John Lennon."

This year, the company's already in the Oscar conversation with May release "Away From Her," but as far as fall stuff that won't entail severed body parts, the Russell Crowe Western "3:10 to Yuma," directed by James Mangold, is said to have both commercial and prestige power.

- Miramax The company has had an impressive winning streak in its two years under Battsek, with an Oscar win for its first acquisition, "Tsotsi," and last year with "The Queen." This fall, it's got "Diving Bell and the Butterfly,"

n Paramount Vantage "Babel's" Oscar attention and \$34 million domestic tally did not come cheap. The film, Brad Grey's first venture as Paramount topper, wasn't exactly organic to Vantage. More so was Al Gore's Sundance pickup "An Inconvenient Truth," which achieved smashingly en route to an Oscar win.

The inevitable question for John Leshner & Co.: What is the followup? Recent releases such as "Year of the Dog" and "Black Snake Moan" haven't caught fire, but the cupboard is pretty full at the end of the year. Paul Thomas Anderson's Daniel Day-Lewis starrer "There Will Be Blood" (a co-venture with Miramax, with which it is also splitting the Coens' "No

Country for Old Men") is slated for December.

September and October bring the Sean Penn-directed "Into the Wild," Baumbach's Nicole Kidman-Jack Black outing "Margot at the Wedding," and the high-profile adaptation of bestselling book "The Kite Runner."

- Sony Pictures Classics The company has five films coming up in the fourth quarter, hoping to rebound from last year's "Driving Lessons" and "The Curse of the Golden Flower."

As the outfit pushes more aggressively into broader-skewing fare like last year's "Friends With Money" or this year's "Jane Austen Book Club," SPC is still mixing in straight-ahead arthouse fare and scooped up Israeli pic "The Band's Visit" in Cannes, touting it as the next "Lives of Others."

Among the key fall titles are "Persepolis," a black-and-white animated film that competed in Cannes, the Kenneth Branagh-directed "Sleuth," and Francis Ford Coppola's "Youth Without Youth."

n Warner Independent Having switched leadership from Mark Gill to Polly Cohen about a year ago, WIP is trying to make strides toward a post-"Penguins" future. While the company scored big with "March of the Penguins" and "Good Night, and Good Luck" in 2005, the fourth quarter of 2006 saw a dip with titles like "The Science of Sleep," "Infamous" and "The Painted Veil."

The division has three key titles lined up for fall/end of year, including "In the Valley of Elah," an Iraq-themed drama written and helmed by Paul Haggis, and "Rails & Ties," a drama from Alison Eastwood, Clint's daughter, which stars Kevin Bacon and Marcia Gay Harden. Also on tap is "The 11th Hour," a Gore-esque docu-polemic presided over by Leonardo DiCaprio.

- The Weinstein Co. "Breaking and Entering" didn't cut it in 2006, but the Harvey and Bob show played well in Cannes, particularly with "Sicko," though its one late-year title, Wong Kar Wai's "My Blueberry Nights," didn't exactly blow the roof off the Palais.

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