



The Mike Hurley Column

As the Awards season dawns, I scan the list of Best Pictures and the actor and director nominations. And, while I own two theatres, and we book a quite diverse choice of films, I'm still struck by how many interesting pictures I've either missed or else have been unable to play or view for myself. Just a few decades ago, I'd wait with anticipation as the slow parade of films unreeled. Keeping up with the best films was easy as there simply weren't as many clamouring for attention. Pictures came slowly, were seen and thought about and discussed as they receded just as slowly. In recent years, though, we've often heard the complaint: "...but they just don't make good movies anymore." That's often said to give an easy explanation as to why ticket sales have taken on a confused churn. Unfortunately, our current box office has no easy answers to explain the complexity of the situation. As Brad Pitt's character said in the 1997 IRA thriller *The Devil's Own*: "If you're not confused, [then] you obviously don't know what's going on."

There are many reasons for our changing box office. I entered Exhibition in 1994 and, just a few years later, became engulfed in a Titanic wave of theatre-going that may very well have signalled the high-water mark in a world of Cinema that was about to be turned on its head.

In the short dozen years that I've proudly presided over my silver screens, we've witnessed the advent of TIVO, DVD, video piracy, satellite TV, the cell phone, Internet with home and office-based shopping, surfing and habituating; video-gaming, Netflix, VOD, film-downloading, video projectors, e-mail, home theatre, satellite radio, much-improved television programming, giant TV screens, and no doubt a few other things I must have neglected here. All of them, taken together, might fairly be judged to have had a significant effect on the frequency of movie-going.

But actually, are 'good films' being made or not? In the Autumn 2006 issue of *screentrade*,

Bob Goodrich [Goodrich Quality Theatres] discussed "encouraging and organising exhibitors to connect with filmmakers to go direct to patrons and show the films that no one hears about after they've done the rounds of the film festival circuit and other programming". A grand idea. The rise of high-quality, low-cost video and data projectors (and not just the official high-end d-Cinema) has thrown open the doors for a mountain of material to be economically-created, distributed, and shown in our theatres. And, last month, Netflix announced that they would be negotiating distribution deals of Straight-to-DVD for films that, while acclaimed at festivals, never make it to the big screen. This means that we're all going to be seeing even more product. If that's possible.

So, can this all be happening because people genuinely feel that "no-one makes any good movies anymore"? No. Quite the opposite, in fact. There has never been such a vast choice of quality viewing. It's *too many* good films being made by talented independents and majors

alike and all of it coming at us all of the time, but with too little opportunity for people to see the films because of their busy lives and all the options that that entails. For the exhibitor, too, who has a busy line-up of films all jockeying to be seen, it's a pressure-cooker situation where you have to move things out to make way for 'the next big thing'.

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One thing's for sure, though: while the hunger for screened entertainment is not diminishing, it certainly is in a period of dynamic transformation. We actually don't have to worry about a lack of good product, we just have to figure out how to play it all. **S**

