

Is 'Titanic' unsinkable?

by Norma Meyer

LOS ANGELES - Shiver me timbers. Eileen O'Hara saw the first two "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies "eight or nine times" at the multiplex and plans to see the new "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End" as "many times as I can until it's out of the theater."

The 42-year-old O'Hara - who was Melody Trouble Vixen, one of the Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling on the 1980s TV series - is now bonkers for all things buccaneer. For the past decade, she has donned costumes to play a doxy and a wench with a pirate theatrical troupe that does historical re-enactments.

When it comes to Disney's swashbuckling trilogy, she can't stop buying loot: Her treasure includes a talking Johnny Depp pirate doll, a "Pirates" blanket and a replica of the Aztec gold coin necklace worn by Keira Knightley.

"The characters have such charisma," O'Hara enthuses, explaining why she can rewatch Depp, Knightley, Orlando Bloom and Geoffrey Rush until she can voice their dialogue with them. "There's nonstop action. We hate schlocky swordplay, and there's none of that. And of course, there's the eye candy of Johnny."

O'Hara is among the ranks of repeat ticket buyers who hike up the box-office booty of celluloid hits. This summer is expected to be the highest grossing in history for the movie biz, due to a slew of big-budget franchises and a built-in fan base (besides "Pirates," which opened Thursday night, offerings include the already released "Spider-Man 3" and "Shrek the Third," and the upcoming "Ocean's Thirteen," "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" and "The Bourne Ultimatum").

"There are 14 sequels set for the summer," says Paul Dergarabedian, president of box-office tracker Media By Numbers. "The summer box office could exceed \$4 billion for the first time ever."

But despite the blockbuster lineup, none of the pictures is expected to come close to beating the \$600 million domestic box-office champ, 1997's "Titanic."

"Unless 'Titanic 2' is released," quipped box-office analyst Jeff Bock of Exhibitor Relations.

"Titanic was a one-time phenomenon that we may never see again in our lifetime," Bock adds. "It pulled in every demographic possible. My grandma, who hadn't been to a movie in 10 years, went to see it."

To put it in perspective, the second-place all-time domestic grosser is 1977's "Star Wars" (\$460 million), followed by 2004's "Shrek 2" (\$441 million). The 2006 sequel "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest" ranks sixth for domestic haul (\$423 million), while the original 2003 "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" is 22nd (\$305 million).

REPEAT BUSINESS

When box-office receipts soar into the multimillions, repeat viewers play a role, although there's no way of knowing how many patrons go back over and over again.

"I kind of lost track, but I think I saw the first 'Pirates' in the theater about 15 times," says Corie Lynn Mentzel, an 18-year-old "Pirates of the Caribbean" groupie who lives in Cincinnati. "I only saw 'Dead Man's Chest' six times. I plan on seeing the new one 20 or more times."

The timing and the demographics were right for "Titanic" to sail into box-office history in 1997. The Oscar-winning film's domestic gross was more than \$600 million.

That can get pricey. So Mentzel, who lays her head on a Capt. Jack Sparrow pillowcase at night and logs onto "Pirates of the Caribbean" message boards each day, applied for a job as an usher at a theater where the action-adventure is playing.

Jennifer Halpert, a recent San Diego State University grad, figures she saw the first "Pirates" movie "either 12 or 13 times in theaters." A high school student when the film was released, she credits the escapist fare with helping her get over being dumped by a boyfriend.

"That was my healing medicine. Some people eat Ben & Jerry's. I do 'Pirates of the Caribbean.'"

Although Halpert only saw the second "Pirates" twice in theaters and plans to see the latest sequel no more than that ("Tickets are like \$10 now," the 21-year-old points out), she understands how die-hards sit through them umpteen times without getting bored. "Pirates" buffs gush about the romance, comedy, fantastical fights and Depp's off-the-wall Capt. Jack.

Box-office titan "Titanic" reeled in more of the masses. An epic and a spectacle, it was based on a

well-known historical tragedy that left more than 1,500 dead and was seeped in mystery and lore. The movie featured a teen heartthrob (Leonardo DiCaprio), a cross-class love story, and a special-effects-laden disaster. (Twentieth Century Fox even built a new studio in Baja California to make the film). The public couldn't turn on the radio without hearing Celine Dion sing the haunting theme song. And less than halfway through its eight-month theatrical run, the drama nabbed 11 Oscars, including best picture.

"It was an event picture in the fullest sense of the word," says Brandon Gray, founder of movie-tracker Box Office Mojo.

Teen girls flocked back to cinemas for DiCaprio, but they weren't the only ones returning.

"It had repeat viewers across the board," Gray says.

Laura Limon says she cried all seven times she saw "Titanic" in the theater. She was 12 when it debuted.

"It was so overwhelmingly romantic," says Limon, now 22, and another recent San Diego State grad. "To this day, it's still my favorite movie."

"Titanic" also did well because it was released in mid-December and then faced little competition in the early months of the year. Although "Titanic" only snared \$28.6 million its opening weekend, the movie picked up word of mouth and remained No. 1 at the box office for an astounding 15 weeks.

In contrast, this summer's high-profile slate - the host of nonsequels includes "Transformers," "Hairspray" and "The Simpsons" - will duke it out with each other.

"It's like planes coming in for a landing. They're all lined up," Dergarabedian says.

The industry's chest-thumping contest will be for opening weekend. "Spider-Man 3" recently did a history-making \$151 million opening, shattering the \$135 million record held by "Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest," which had grabbed the distinction from the original "Spider-Man" with its \$114 million opening. The new "Pirates" could steal back the title.

"First we want to beat 'Spider-Man 3,' " Mentzel says with revenge. "Then we really want to beat 'Titanic.'"

Sorry, matey. Box-office gurus predict this third high-seas caper based on a theme park ride won't plunder the record held by a grandiose drama about a luxury liner that hit an iceberg in 1912.

"There's no picture on the horizon that looks like it could break 'Titanic's' record," Gray says.

He also notes with ticket prices adjusted for inflation, "Titanic" would sink to the sixth grossing money-maker of all time. The winner would be 1939's classic "Gone With the Wind," whose domestic box-office take of \$198 million would be worth \$1.3 billion today.

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