

Arts and Leisure: Entertainment industry on a scavenger hunt for anything to amuse

by James Hebert

There are certain combinations of words that pose an especially high risk of inducing hives, tremors or shortness of breath. "IRS audit" is one. "Starring Madonna" is another.

But it's entirely possible that the most frightening phrase in the English language is this: "Based on."

THE NEXT BIG (NO)THING - The \$150 million 'Transformers' action thriller has a good shot at becoming a huge hit. And that should put it in good company with other films of dubious origin. CNS Photo. As in, say: "Idol: A New Musical Based on the Worship of Clay Aiken."

That's the actual title of a show coming soon to New York, inspired not by TV's "American Idol" nor even by a winner of "American Idol," but by the gooey affection for a long-ago "Idol" loser.

Nothing against the saintly Aiken, but lately the entertainment biz has seemed engaged in a competition to see who can contrive the most unlikely, esoteric or plain insane pretext for a movie or play or TV show.

Enter "Transformers," the blockbuster action film. It's based on a toy - a line of plastic robots dating from the mid-'80s. With Shia LaBeouf, the new film is only the latest incarnation of the incredibly popular toy robots. It has been a hit cartoon series and even a 1986 movie.

Despite its inauspicious inspiration, the \$150 million "Transformers" has a good shot at becoming a huge hit. And that should put it in good company with other works of dubious origins.

"Pirates of the Caribbean," based on a ride, sailed into blockbuster territory with Johnny Depp at the helm. The movie trilogy, has made more than \$1 billion in the U.S. alone.

The musical "Mamma Mia!," cobbled around a bunch of random ABBA songs, has earned twice that amount worldwide. And "You've Got Mail" became the 62nd-highest-grossing film of 1999, even though it consisted of nothing but an AOL e-mail announcement repeated continuously for 119 minutes. (At least so far as we can recall).

Of course, enterprising creative types just keep testing the limits of inspiration: Now in the works is a TV show based on the cave man characters from GEICO's insurance commercials. ABC is banking that viewers who loved the commercials will like a sitcom based on the characters.

"Could a television show on the AFLAC Duck be far behind?" asks Kirk Olson, a New York-based consumer strategist for the Iconoculture agency and a guy who ought to copyright the AFLAC idea while there's time.

There are a couple of good reasons for such strange inspirations. One goes something like this: "Hollywood - Out of Ideas!" But another is the fact that piggybacking on an existing character or toy or kitchen implement is just good for business.

"The cost of making and marketing TV shows and movies is so high," says Kim Gregson, who teaches media at Ithaca College in New York. "And there's so much clutter out there, you have to have some kind of built-in hook."

The barbs on that hook, says Olson, are those things a consumer brings to the subject at hand - fondness or nostalgia or even some vague knowledge that helps transform a gimmick into (ideally) some kind of narrative.

"These are all brands and characters that are created at a corporate level, but they're also brands that each consumer interacts with in an individual way," he says. "The consumer is able to come to the story that's being told onscreen, and tell their own stories."

Those factors, of course, don't quite explain such curiosities as the 1996 film "Feeling Minnesota," which takes its title from a single lyric in the Soundgarden song "Outshined."

In comparison, "Transformers" is a juggernaut of a brand. Not only was it a huge-selling toy, but it was a hit cartoon series and was even made into a movie once before, in 1986. At this point, as inspiration for a motion picture, it seems a little pedestrian. It needs a new twist, something that will make building a film around a toy seem as conventional as basing one on Shakespeare, or even a comic book.

Something like: "An Idol's Idol: A New Musical Based on Clay Aiken's Worship for the Transformers." There's a show we'd get in line for, unless it's been done already. Other Odd Adaptations, and a few we'd like to see

CLAIM THAT TUNE

There have been a zillion films based on songs or taking their names from song titles. These few showed extra inventiveness:

"Imagine Me & You" (2005): The title of the song is "Happy Together" by the Turtles, but this romantic comedy is named for the first line, because who listens to a whole song anyway?

"The Pompatus of Love" (1996): Four guys sit around debating the meaning of the word "pompatus" in the Steve Miller song "The Joker." Even Miller can't care that much.

"Monster Mash: The Movie" (1995): The novelty song gets played once a year at Halloween. The movie? Not so much.

"I Want Candy" (2007): Maybe all you need to know about this one (from the Strangeloves song, remade famously by Bow Wow Wow) is that Carmen Electra plays a character named Candy.

BUCKLE UP

The "Pirates" franchise is not the only one to capitalize on a theme-park ride. (Or try to, anyway.)

"The Country Bears" (2002): Based on a Disneyland attraction so wildly popular it was removed before the movie came out.

"The Haunted Mansion" (2003): Eddie Murphy starred in this film about a place where things (box-office receipts, plot logic) mysteriously disappear.

"Tower of Terror" (1997): Inspired by a Disney ride that was itself inspired by "The Twilight Zone," which might make you dizzy than the ride itself.

RAIDING THE TOY BOX

The new Transformers movie is part of an illustrious history of plaything-based cinema. Here are more projects said to be on the way:

"Bratz: The Movie" (2007): Due next month, this one showcases a line of dolls that are like Barbies as reimagined by Heidi Fleiss. Paula Abdul stars.

"Hot Wheels": Inspired by the Mattel racing cars, the movie was supposed to come out this year, although it seems to be idled at the moment.

Candy Land, Clue (a remake) and Trivial Pursuit: As Variety reported recently, all three of these Mattel

games are on the boards to be made into movies or TV shows.

INSPIRATION FOR SALE

The following projects may not have been dreamed up yet (except by us). But give them time:

"Scared by Monkey Faces": If "Feeling Minnesota" could make a movie, why not a film based on this lyric from a different Soundgarden song ("Face Pollution")? We see Adam Sandler or Jim Carrey in the lead.

"Bumper Cars: Curse of the Black Eye": The big theme-park attractions get all the glory; seems about time to honor your basic carnival attraction, preferably with a \$200 million CGI extravaganza.

"The Crazy Frog Comedy Hour": Oh wait. Somebody actually is developing a TV series based on the incredibly annoying Crazy Frog cell phone ringtone? Never mind.

"Altoids: The Curiously Pointless Motion Picture." This one'll make a mint - ba-da-bum!

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